

Theme 2: The Shifting Context of Higher Education

Where next for Student Engagement?

Yaz El Hakim, Kortext & SEDA

A more central role within institutions and the sector

The rhetoric employed by the last two governments has indeed put 'students at the heart of the system' (BIS, 2011), but at quite some cost to those students, with tuition fees having been trebled. However, the clear growth of student engagement as a subject area and research interest has, in part, been the consequence of increased Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) support and funding. This can be evidenced through 'The Student Engagement Partnership (TSEP)ⁱ and the 'REACT' Student Engagement projectⁱⁱ, coupled with the widespread shift in the ways universities are now listening to their students' experiences. We now find ourselves in a sector where students are starting to understand their collective power, illustrated by a potential boycott of the NSS (National Student Survey) that could disrupt one of the very metrics that universities in the UK use for demonstrating their teaching 'excellence' (a concept many academics may struggle with). Importantly, the REACT project has sought to understand better the engagement of students who are 'hard to reach', but has clarified that context is key and that different institutions find different students 'hard to reach'. Although the benefits of student engagement can be enjoyed by any student, initiatives should seek to engage students beyond the super-engaged, if they are to bring about a better understanding of engagement, non-engagement and motivational antecedents (Hagger and Chatzisarantis, 2007).

A changing role from student to partner

Historically, the role of the student was perceived by staff very differently within their institutions, with a far clearer sense of hierarchy between staff and students. Such was the academics' perception of students – a group of learners to be selected to progress or to be rejected/allowed to fall by the wayside – that, for instance, when, in 2009, our Assessment and Feedback 'TESTA' Project was funded by the Higher Education Academy (www.testa.ac.uk), we could still hear such comments from participating staff as: "the first year is to separate the wheat from the chaff". Student engagement was confined therefore to an activity enshrined in historical HE tradition – the student was, simply, engaged only in reading/studying for a specific degree! By contrast, today, the retention and success of first-year students constitute one of the metrics most watched by university management teams across the UK. Heraclites said, knowingly, that 'the only thing that is constant is change'; when we consider that, in parallel with Moore's Law, we must be prepared both for more change and change at a quicker pace.

A disruption of student engagement within learning

The significantly-disrupted model of three-hour lectures and seminars, with an essay and exam, may be even more dramatically disrupted by new learning models and systems currently being developed. Student engagement within the learning process shows all the hallmarks of rapid change, with autonomous learning pathways, mastery pathways, competence-based learning models etc., all within their Personal Learning Environments/Platforms and other assisting technologies. Similarly, the reputations of universities and the league tables that perpetuate them are likely to become ever more

Theme 2: The Shifting Context of Higher Education

linked to *individual* student progress and performance through learning analytics and learning gain data. Evidence of great learning experiences and environments will become more transparent, forcing universities to reflect on how they *see* and *relate* to their students as part of a single academic community.

A research-infused curriculum and learning experiences

I believe the changes will create an institutional research environment where all staff and students are involved in the research process, from literature reviews to student-led research study groups - thus building on the staff/student partnerships and research studies we have already seen springing from student engagement initiatives. I haven't heard the phrase yet, but the term 'Research-Infused Curriculum' must surely have been coined by now? Ah yes, a quick scholarly Google search confirms that it has not only been coined but works too! Ward, Clarke and Horton (2014) showed that increased exposure to genuine research can help in an array of outcomes, including faculty and student written research articles and presentations. Very impressive, but it is clear to see that collaborative research across subject areas (and student engagement too) can only increase globally, as the most under-actualized potential in the higher-education sector – the millions of students themselves – is beginning to become activated and engaged.

Concluding predictions

Ultimately, empowering students to engage in the enhancement of other students' experiences (in partnership with staff partners) can reflect only positively on institutions and will have beneficial impact upon rankings and reputations in the future. The best institutions will be those that embrace effective and efficient structures, in order to create evidence-informed improvements, with staff and students working together in one big, happy (if challenging!), dynamic, transparent learning community that continues beyond graduation. Others will not change and maintain hierarchies of power and control - my prediction is that the former will thrive, the latter will dive ... and then change.

In summation:

1. 'Student Engagement' will continue to become more central to universities: on committees, in research, for public reputations, partnership and enhancement schemes.
2. Institutions will *listen* far better than at any other time historically and will create the most user-centred learning experiences, as reputations are now built on such user experiences.
3. Students will engage and share experiences across universities and countries, creating a more global conversation about 'Student Engagement' and 'Partnership'.
4. Some people and institutions will not change and pain will, most likely, follow.

Reference list

The Department of Business Innovation & Skills [BIS] (2011) 'Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System.' Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/higher-education-students-at-the-heart-of-the-system--2> (Accessed: 21 June 2017).

Christenson, S. L., Reschly, A. L. and Wylie, C. A. (2012) *The Handbook of Research on*

Theme 2: The Shifting Context of Higher Education

Student Engagement. New York, NY: Springer Science.

Hagger, M. and Chatzisarantis, N. (2007) *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in exercise and sport*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics Publishers.

Ward, J., Clarke, H. and Horton, J. (2014) 'Effects of a Research-Infused Botanical Curriculum on Undergraduates' Content Knowledge, STEM Competencies, and Attitudes toward Plant Sciences.' *Cell Biology Education*, 13(3), 387-396.

ⁱ The Student Engagement Partnership is a Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)-funded body that champions and develops student engagement practice in the English Higher Education (HE) sector. For further details, please see www.tsep.org.uk.

ⁱⁱ For further details of the REACT programme, see the Introduction to this issue, as well as Lowe and Dunne, and Dunne and Lowe, in this issue, or visit www.studentengagement.ac.uk.