

Evolving student engagement

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Introduction

Student engagement in learning has many times been linked to high-quality learning, the development of critical-thinking skills and student retention (Buckley, 2014; 1994 Group, 2007). At the University of Exeter, student engagement has for many years been a constant and core element of our Education Strategy, but this hasn't always been true of the higher education (HE) sector as a whole. In 2008, Aaron Porter, then President of the National Union of Students, made an impassioned plea for 'new ways to engage students in their learning' (Porter, 2008).

Now, ten years later, student engagement is a key ingredient of the sector's agenda. This can be only good news for students, for an engaged and skilled workforce of the future and for the success of UK HE. This piece reflects upon the context for evolving and supporting student engagement, current practices for working in partnership with students and the next frontier in engagement.

The context for student engagement

Recent developments in the HE sector provide a context for the growth of partnership work with students. Changes to student fees in 2012 led directly to the commercialisation of the relationship between students and their university, with students as consumers rather than partners. This brief think-piece suggests that, for the benefit of students and their academic experience and outcomes, we should move, at the very least, to a 'co-consumer' relationship, in which students as 'customers' are heavily involved in their own experience. A natural consequence of this is a focus on high-quality learning and meaningful student engagement.

The Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) prompts us to concentrate on student engagement. The TEF makes a direct link between teaching quality and student engagement. The descriptor of a 'Gold' institution includes the 'highest levels of engagement and active commitment to learning and study from students' (DfE, 2017). Student engagement and co-creation was one of the key characteristics of Gold-rated providers in year two of the TEF, as TEF Panel Chair Professor Chris Husbands has highlighted, and institutions are encouraged to engage with students in developing and producing their written submissions.

The new regulatory framework for the sector, launched by the Office for Students (OfS) in February 2018, also recognises the importance of student engagement. Actively engaging students in the quality of their educational experience is one of the new compliance indicators and student engagement with governance is a key principle. The OfS is reflecting this in its own governance practices – through the creation of its own student panel (OfS, 2018) – although not without controversy.

The sector awaits the final piece of the landscape to support high-quality student learning in the form of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Quality Code. However, we can expect that

this too will continue to place importance on high-quality student engagement, given that the current Quality Code dedicates a chapter to student engagement.

The UK Engagement Survey (UKES) indicates that there remains a gap in student engagement. The 2017 survey results showed that, though engagement has grown over the past three years, the deepest forms of engagement – such as ‘staff-student partnership’ and working with members of staff – remain the lowest categories of engagement: 42% and 36% respectively (UKES, 2017). These are missed opportunities. With student engagement being recognised and promoted as an essential ingredient of excellent learning and teaching, the context is right for growth, innovation and continued evolution in student engagement.

Practices in student engagement

Student engagement is not one-dimensional: it exists on many levels and can be viewed as a spectrum of activities. The definitions and forms of student engagement vary and engagement may be variously described as student partnership, student voice, co-creation and student representation. Student engagement is also the subject of much academic discourse and the development of different models to conceptualise engagement (Kay, Dunne and Hutchinson, 2010; Buckley, 2014). The plethora of different routes to student engagement constitutes an important part of the mainstreaming of student engagement and of its evolution. An institution which puts student engagement at its heart should have a range of practices in student partnership and some of these are highlighted in the examples below.

Students as change agents

In 2009, at Exeter, the Students’ Guild and University of Exeter, in partnership, created the Students as Change Agents (SACA) programme. The aim of this student-led initiative is to support students in developing and leading research projects to effect change in their programmes and to explore the impact of their learning. This methodology places learning at the heart of University practice – learning about, with and from students – through research on teaching and learning. The scheme gives students agency and encourages them to be co-creators in their learning. As such, it is an example of student engagement at its deepest level.

Nine years on, the success of this model of engagement is clear – several hundred SACA projects have taken place, including: student-run careers and module fairs; a buddy scheme for year-abroad students; resources for mental health; support for international students; and improved delivery of seminar teaching (University of Exeter, Year 2 TEF Submission). Comments from students highlight their enthusiasm for the projects (“*a fantastic and innovative opportunity*”) and their ability to bring about change: “*Making recommendations to the School with research support and the hope that this can make the uni a better place for students*” (Kay *et al.*, 2010).

Student Involvement in decision-making

A HEPI review of TEF provider submissions highlighted that student involvement in decision-making was a theme within Gold-provider submissions (HEPI, 2017). Student engagement or engagement with their representatives is viewed as demonstrating an “*embedded culture of student engagement*”. HEPI cites examples of student participation in key institutional

projects, such as the development of the library facility at the University of Nottingham. At Exeter, student engagement guides our business operation and decision-making. Our annual planning process incorporates the student-set priorities of our two students' unions and the CEO of the Students' Guild is a full member of the group which leads the University's financial and budgetary processes. The presidents of both unions are full members of our University Council and play a key role in our annual Senior Management Group planning meeting.

Institutional structures for student engagement

At the University of Exeter, student engagement is a key part of our University Strategy and Education Strategy. Some institutions are taking a specific strategic and structural approach to prompting student engagement and ensuring that this is embedded within their practices. The University of Lincoln was one of the first to develop an institutional strategy to promote student engagement, through its 'Students as Producers and Student Engagement Strategy'.

The University of Winchester is an example of a different structural approach. Its Centre for Student Engagement, established in 2017, is designed to support – and research – the field of student engagement and to promote engagement practices. In 2018, it announced the launch of a Postgraduate Certificate in Student Engagement in Higher Education, for practitioners to develop their theory and practice in student engagement.

The next frontier of student engagement

There are already many varied practices and models of student engagement. The regulatory landscape is now in place to incentivise and promote work in partnership and, indeed, to enable institutional competition on this measure. With greater student engagement, we are better able to tailor programmes of study to their needs, including supporting employability, career-mentoring and coaching. So, where next for student engagement?

Measuring engagement

We must learn from the many forms of student engagement by evidencing impact, so that we can evolve the most effective methods. We must have robust methods to measure impact, including learner analytics. However, measurement is not always straightforward. The TEF subject-level pilot is examining the use of measures of teaching intensity as part of future exercises. Any teaching-intensity measure could be only part of the broader picture of student engagement painted by the institutional submission, through involving and listening to its students. As a sector, we must develop quantitative and qualitative measures of the impact of student engagement to evolve our practices.

Embedded engagement

At a conference in November 2017, Professor Chris Husbands, Chair of the TEF Panel, shared his view that there are no short-cuts to a culture of genuine student engagement. This means that student engagement must be an element of all our institutional activities; we must also embed engagement across the breadth of our activities, by means of comprehensive and varied kinds of engagement. As the UKES data highlighted, fewer than half of respondents considered that there was staff-student partnership in their institution.

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As a sector and as individual institutions, we can do more to engage students in the very fundamentals of their learning, including governance and management of their academic study (including examination boards, classification and other kinds of Quality Assurance), as well as curriculum content and the delivery of their programmes.

Integrated engagement

Students studying in the UK are committed and dedicated. They frequently volunteer, are often in paid employment and participate in student societies and sport alongside their studies. We must be careful that student engagement is not an 'add-on' or an additional burden, but fully integrated within their whole experience. This is equally true as we explore, across the sector, such new provision as Degree Apprenticeships, two-year degrees, transnational education and online learning, where engagement may need to look and feel different.

Conclusion

After many years of calls for greater engagement with students as part of their learning, student partnership now has the recognition it deserves and the infrastructure to promote its development. The onus is now on us, sector-wide, as HE institutions and as individual practitioners, to take this opportunity to involve our students and to grow, innovate and evolve student engagement for the benefit of the next generation.

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