

The Principles of Student Engagement

**The Student Engagement
Conversation**

Summer - Autumn 2014

www.tsep.org.uk/TheConversation

the student
engagement
partnership

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Introduction

About TSEP

The Student Engagement Partnership is a joint initiative between HEFCE, the National Union of Students and the higher education sector in England. Along with other funding partners; QAA, GuildHE and the Association of Colleges, our work is guided by a Steering Group, which is chaired by Sir Alan Langlands and comprised of representatives of higher education sector organisations in England and practitioners from institutions and students' unions. Our work is undertaken by a team of staff, led by the Director of The Student Engagement Partnership, Liam Jarnecki. You can find out more about us by visiting: www.tsep.org.uk/aboutus



Introduction, Liam Jarnecki

Join the Conversation:

The Conversation Website

www.tsep.org.uk/TheConversation

Throughout the conversation we will be publishing a series of short articles which we have commissioned regarding student engagement on our website. The website will also host online discussions and will feed in views which are collected through facebook:

www.facebook.com/TSEPartnership

and tweets:

[@TSEPartnership](https://twitter.com/TSEPartnership)

as well as through participants filling out the student engagement survey we have devised.

In order to maximise engagement with *The Conversation* we have organised a series of regional events which are free to attend, including a lunch, and will feature successful practitioners and guest speakers as well as facilitated workshops regarding the themes raised here in this documents.

Conversation Event – Leeds University

16th September, 11am – 4pm

Conversation Event – Birmingham City SU

17th September, 11am – 4pm

Conversation Event – NUS HQ, London

18th September, 11am – 4pm

Conversation Event – University of Bath

19th September, 11am – 4pm

Whether it be through one of our online platforms or at one of our events, we hope you will join the conversation!

About The Conversation

We have taken note of current and upcoming work by sector organisations on student engagement, such as the Higher Education Academy's publication; *Engagement through partnership: students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education* and the upcoming review of Chapter B5 of the UK Quality Code. Through our Steering Group, we have worked with HEA, the Quality Assurance Agency and other organisations to avoid duplication and maximise the benefits of this conversation.

The conversation represents TSEP's first major sector-wide communication and has been designed to:

- * Gather and disseminate good practice from institutions and students' unions on their student engagement practices
- * Connect with individuals and existing groups and organisations that support stakeholders operating in the student engagement landscape in order to understand your priorities, perspectives and the barriers you face
- * Gain a more evidenced picture of how The Student Engagement Partnership can add value to individuals, institutions and the sector through our work

In order to frame the conversation, we have drafted a set of "Principles of Student Engagement". These principles have been created through a review of literature on student engagement since 2010, including documented examples of current practice and with the guidance of our Steering Group.

We hope that participants will also gain a great deal from taking part in the conversation. We will be actively seeking participation from individuals and networks across the higher education sector. If you participate in, think about, research, deliver or lead student engagement, this conversation is for you!

A Culture of Partnership

[where] student engagement is highly developed, pervading institution culture and clearly recognised by staff and student alike, these institutions tended to be those where related features of good practice were found.

QAA, 2014, 18

It is notable that for an institution to do well in engaging students it needs to work in partnership with the representative student body.

QAA, 2012a, 22

A Culture of Partnership

Defining Student Engagement?

It is fair to say that 'engagement' is one of many terms used herein for which there is no fixed, universal definition, indeed it is often concluded that there is an intrinsically subjective and moreover context-anchored element to 'what student engagement is'. To this end, the principles are not intended to *define* student engagement or partnership but rather to draw out the dimensions that constitute, and the principles which underpin student engagement and partnership.

It is increasingly evident that 'partnership' should not be seen as a set of discrete exercises or engagement mechanisms, but rather a way of framing the culture of the community that exists within a higher education provider.

Using the headings: 'learning & teaching', 'quality assurance & enhancement processes' and 'decision making, governance & strategy' we have attempted to capture those principles which might underpin the culture in an HE community where partnership exists and to give some explanation of them.

The principles in their current form are intended to be iterative in nature, under constant review in the light of content created through the conversation exercise and our wider work with the sector.

Belonging is critical to student retention and success, [evidence] firmly points to the importance of students having a strong sense of belonging in HE, which is the result of engagement.

Thomas, 2012, 12

More than the sum of its parts

Partnership is something that is more than the sum of its parts. The principles put forward here have been observed to together reinforce and uphold a culture of partnership but may not in themselves *create* a culture – it is not a tick box exercise; rather partnership should be the motivation for the set of processes and engagement mechanisms, some of which we set out here.

At the heart of this lies the factor that ties all members of a higher education community together: the shared purpose of higher education itself. Reinforcing that are a set of values from which behaviours such as a mutuality of respect, support & understanding, co-operation, professionalism and collegiality (to name a few) all arise.

A higher education community with a strong culture of partnership promotes a sense of belonging and connectedness within and between all of the community's membership; various studies such as the HEA and Paul Hamlyn Foundation's 2012 report: *What Works*, have shown that this positively affects retention, success and satisfaction. Numerous challenges arise when considering issues of 'belonging' to a community, most notably with respect to the risk of marginalisation of those who do not or cannot identify with a 'mainstream' focussed engagement strategy.

A trend that can be observed in both literature and practice illustrates that whilst mechanisms of student engagement are widely varying, where they are most successful, there is a clear partnership approach between the student(s) (individually and collectively) and the institution.

It is our contention that student engagement practices, carried out with the motivation of creating a culture of partnership together with its associated benefits, represent the approach to this agenda which best fits successful, meaningful and sustainable results.

Challenges to a Partnership Culture

Students and academic staff have different expertise to bring to the process, and there will be times when staff may appropriately have more voice, and other times when students may appropriately have more voice. Co-creation is not about giving students complete control, nor is it about staff maintaining complete control...the relative levels of control over decision making and appropriate levels of partnership are likely to depend upon the context, the level of study, the relative experience levels of the students and the staff, the attitudes of students and staff, what is being discussed, and the level of influence of professional bodies over the curriculum.

Bovill 2013, 464

Challenges to a Partnership Culture

Whose Community is it anyway?

With respect to all of the principles herein, there are some cross cutting challenges which have been identified, and the *Conversation* exercise aims to gather contributions from the sector as to the range of challenges faced at institutions and approaches that have been made towards overcoming them.

It is fair to say that whilst much that is written about partnership and engagement regards the “university” and “students” as the main players, the true nature of a higher education community is more complex and diverse than those two arbitrary categories. In order for a culture of partnership to encompass the entire community the many behavioural interactions within that community have to be taken into account including those internal to the body of staff.

Taking into account the challenge of navigating the subtle hierarchies, complex management arrangements and competing priorities that exist within that staff community, there is also the complexity of the relationships and behaviours between staff and students. One amongst numerous challenges to a successful staff : student culture, is the risk of ‘deference dynamics’ more akin to the relationship between teacher and pupil in compulsory education.

Partnership is essentially a process of engagement, not a product. It is a way of doing things, rather than an outcome in itself. All partnership is student engagement, but not all student engagement is partnership.

Healey, Flint & Harrington 2014, 7

In addition to this, the concept of a university as a single location campus with a student body made up of full time students living locally is the exception rather than the rule. Furthermore, large elements of higher education communities are transient and due to the nature of the academic year some students may only interact with that community for around nine months, whilst others stay much longer. It is fair to say it is a near impossible task to ensure every student contributing feedback is informed of how that feedback has or has not affected change. It is clear however that it is highly important that students identify that their voice is heard even if the affects may only be ‘felt’ once their own time with the institution is over. This is often referred to as ‘closing the feedback loop’ and successful institutions have embedded a strategy for continual feedback to the student body.

Dislocated campuses and ‘local’ variances across an institution present a particular challenge, with ‘inconsistency’ in terms of policy and practice being a commonly reported concern. In addition, it is often seen that whilst ‘pockets’ of good practice exist within small groupings/structures such as departments, there is a challenge in translating that ‘upwards’ to reflect a positive level of engagement at the faculty or school level of the institution.

There is the issue of the diversity of, in particular, the student body to take into account. Students take a broad range of approaches to their courses including distance and work based learning as well other flexible routes. Also the diversity of the background, culture, identity and access needs of students mean that all aspects of engagement strategies have to be broadly inclusive of a wide range of concerns.

The Principles: A. Learning & Teaching

There is abundant evidence that the most effective higher education environments are ones in which the students are diligently involved as part of a community of learners. As part of this engagement, they work together with academics to enhance teaching, assure quality and maintain standards. In these contexts, they understand themselves as active partners with academic staff in a process of continual improvement of the learning experience.

Ramsden, 2008, 16

Learning & Teaching

1. Students are active members of a learning community

Integral to the culture of partnership is the space for students to learn from one another and to support one another, and indeed for educators and students to learn from one another. These reciprocal relationships build learning communities, with mutual benefit. The HEA's model of 'partnership learning communities' (Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014) describes this in detail.

2. Students engage in setting the direction of their learning

This principle concerns the ways in which an institution can empower students to shape their own and future learners' experiences. Examples of this can be seen in initiatives to integrate greater amounts of interdisciplinary flexibility within the pathways and elective options students can take, chosen with appropriate guidance. This could also involve students and staff undertaking research to diagnose and solve shared problems relating to teaching and learning.

We...need to look at the extent to which the educational process maximises how students could gain from one another, for example through collaborative learning.

Gibbs, 2010, 18

3. Students engage in curricula content, design, delivery & organisation

With leadership and guidance provided by academics/course leaders, there is a growing diversity of approaches to student involvement in these processes and activities, which represent a high impact, transformative pedagogical approach, likely leading to educational enhancements.

4. Students engage in the enhancement of teaching, feedback and assessment practices

Many cases of good practice in enhancement have been driven through student engagement. Some interesting examples of this can be seen in student led teaching award initiatives, innovations in technology enhanced learning techniques and student engagement in developing authentic assessment strategies.

5. Students engage in and with their learning

There are many ways an institution can motivate and support students with their responsibility to engage in their learning, to create engaged, critical, reflective learners. Some examples of this include the development of high impact, flexible pedagogical approaches; embedding standards of high quality timely feedback mechanisms, and creating internal processes to support and reward the development of excellence in teaching.

B. Quality Assurance & Enhancement Processes

[Partnership] goes far beyond the mere consultation, involvement, or representation of students in decision-making. Where partnership exists, students not only identify areas for enhancement, but they help to identify ways to carry out that enhancement, as well as helping to facilitate implementation where possible.

Williamson, 2013, 8

Quality Assurance & Enhancement Processes

6. Students are supported to fully engage in internal quality processes

It is now the norm for students to be part of quality processes in institutions in a number of different ways. However activities with respect to this principle might include the development of a functioning and highly effective student representative system embedded within the institution's committee structure and processes, training for students and staff involved in student engagement in quality assurance, student surveys, focus groups and many more innovative initiatives.

7. Students effect change in a continual process of enhancement

This could involve students being actively involved in an institution's processes for identifying and implementing enhancement activities. Allied to that would be ensuring that those (potentially future) students not involved in the identification process are made aware of the student role in bringing such enhancements about in order to ensure a continual process of student feedback and empowerment.

All students should have the opportunity to be involved in quality enhancement and assurance processes in a manner and at a level appropriate to them. In considering approaches it is important that higher education providers create a culture and environment where students are encouraged to take up the opportunities on offer.

Chapter B5, QAA Quality Code

C. Decision Making, Governance & Strategy

Student engagement in University governance benefits student representatives...the institution... and society more broadly.

Trowler & Trowler, 2010, 10

The higher education institution can gain immensely by actively engaging students' union representatives on key institutional decision making bodies. To maximise the benefits of their involvement, it is important to ensure that students' union reps are provided with a thorough induction and given the support needed to become active participants able to contribute fully to the meetings.

CUC & NUS, 2011, 2

Decision Making, Governance & Strategy

8. Students engage in the process of making decisions that affect them

In an institution with a positive culture of partnership engagement, it would be clear where decisions are made and how, if appropriate, each member of that community can contribute to that decision being made. Consultation, for example, would be conducted in order to assist the formation of a decision rather than to judge a decision already made.

Students are active partners and change agents in supporting institutional improvements.

Ramsden, 2013

9. Students engagement is given strategic leadership

It is clear that where student engagement has already become embedded in the culture of an institution, strong leadership is provided by senior staff of an institution and its student representative body - championing policies, agendas and processes. Furthermore a strategic approach to enhancement and dissemination of activities is a key feature.

10. Students engage through effective student leaders and governors

Student leaders (such as student, course, department or faculty representatives, sabbatical officers of students' unions etc) and student members of institution governing bodies are an essential part of the university community. Appropriate mechanisms to nurture, train and support these individuals are crucial to their success and to the committees they serve.

Join the conversation.

Having read our *Principles* paper, we would like to invite you to join the conversation by either attending one of our events or by taking the short survey online at:

www.tsep.org.uk/TheConversation

We look forward to hearing from you.

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www.tsep.org.uk/our-steering-group

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FOR ENGLAND

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