



the student
engagement
partnership

The Principles of Student Engagement

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About TSEP

The Student Engagement Partnership supports, develops and promotes student engagement activity in the higher education sector in England.

A strategic partnership across the English HE sector agencies and representative bodies.

An NUS-hosted staff unit delivering projects, research and practitioner support.



Firstly, let me tell you a bit about The Student Engagement Partnership. TSEP supports, develops and promotes student engagement activity in the higher education sector in England, which includes colleges that deliver higher education provision.

We are funded by the Higher Education Funding Council, GuildHE and the Association of Colleges, with additional project funding from the Quality Assurance Agency. Our work is directed by a sector wide Steering Group made up of sector agencies, representative bodies and practitioners from institutions and students' unions, such as Paul Chapman who will be co-facilitating the interactive exercise with me later this morning. So we act as a strategic partnership across the English HE sector agencies and representative bodies.

We're also an NUS-hosted staff unit delivering projects, research and practitioner support. We'll be re-launching our website soon, with the aim of it becoming a central resource for people like you to access insight and resources and share your ideas.

When TSEP was established we decided we needed to have a conversation with the sector in order 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.

Developing the principles

Many articles, conference papers and chapters on student engagement do not contain an explicit definition of engagement, making the (erroneous) assumption that their understanding is a shared, universal one. (Trowler, 2010, 17)



So we developed the principles of student engagement, based on a literature review from 2010 onwards, using the Trowler's Student Engagement Literature Review as a starting point, and detailed discussions with our Steering Group. Rather than *defining* student engagement we have drawn out the dimensions that constitute, and the principles which underpin it.

I'm going to spend the rest of my time with you discussing some of the different dimensions of student engagement and the concept of students as partners, as well as some of the challenges to achieving the principles and how these might be overcome. And I'm really looking forward to hearing your thoughts during the interactive exercise afterwards.

Lots of concepts have clustered around the term student engagement, such as co-creators, co-producers, active participants, students as collaborators, students as agents for change and students as partners. It's a term that's used simultaneously in a regulatory, conceptual, academic, practical and strategic contexts.

Question

Is there a shared understanding of the term
'student engagement' at your institution?

A= Yes

B= No

C= Not sure



So, tell me- is there a shared understanding of the term 'student engagement' at your institution?

Defining student engagement



No definitions = no shared framework for action and enhancement

Without one you might end up going in opposite directions...
...or round in circles

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I ask because even though there isn't a universal understanding of the meaning of student engagement, doesn't mean you shouldn't be seeking to define it locally. Without definitions, students' unions and senior leaders, and students and staff will probably struggle to create a shared framework for action. The way you define student engagement will affect the way you seek to improve it.

Tiddely-Pom

"It is more fun to talk with someone who doesn't use long, difficult words but rather short, easy words like "What about lunch?"

~ Winnie the Pooh



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Talking about what we mean by student engagement is also a way to de-mystify the concept and the complicated language that might have built up around it. As Winnie the Pooh says, 'It is more fun to talk to someone who doesn't use long, difficult words but rather short, easy words like 'What about lunch'?

I'm not saying that it's easy. Student engagement can feel simultaneously exciting and difficult. And that's probably because it's deeply political. It's values driven, a contested space, there's no 'right' answer and there are different levels of power and people exerting their influence. Power relationships, different value frameworks and context are all in play when seeking to define student engagement.

There are various definitions of student engagement you could make yourselves aware of, such as Chapter B5 of the UK Quality Code, what is measured by student surveys and various working definitions and frameworks from researchers. I can't cover them all today unfortunately, but I will circulate a recording of a webinar where my colleague discusses some of them in detail. However, I do want to spend a moment talking about the distinction between student engagement in learning, and students shaping their academic community.

Student engagement in the UK

- Lots of work on student engagement in learning, but also a focus on student voice embedded in processes and structures and the idea of students as partners.
- Articulating the values associated with student influence, why we think it matters and what less tangible outcomes we think it delivers
- Student engagement practices are not new ...but student engagement as a policy priority is relatively recent.
- Moving beyond systems and instead describing concepts e.g. potential of individuals to influence their environment.

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In the UK there is a lot of work carried out on student engagement in learning, but there is also a focus on embedding student voice in institutional processes, structures and decision-making.

It'll come as no surprise to you that students who are stimulated by and invested in their learning, will learn better. Research has shown that there are strong correlations between engagement in the sense of students taking an active role in their own learning, and favourable outcomes in areas such as performance, persistence and satisfaction. This means that students who are more strongly engaged with their course will get better marks, will try harder and say they are more satisfied with the course. All of this is excellent evidence that universities are taking on board to improve teaching and learning practices.

What is less clear is that there is an evidence base associated with the value of students actually shaping their academic community. That isn't to say it doesn't have value, but assertions from institutional managers and national organisations about the value and necessity of hearing the student voice is often something that is taken on trust.

It can be argued that an institution that invests in supporting its students to be influential in decision-making also sends positive messages about the other side of student engagement, about valuing and investing in learning.

However, the types of values that underpin the prevalent perception that student influence is a 'good thing' are usually associated with redressing power imbalances, accountability and creating democratic, participative institutions. Therefore it follows that the intended ends of this form of engagement are not precisely or necessarily learning outcomes, but what we might call civic outcomes like democratic

Partnership

Partnership is about students and staff working together to improve education.

More than the sum of its parts.

Culture of a higher education community. "A way of doing things, rather than an outcome in itself".



There's not a one-size all approach to partnership, but we can probably be agree that at its heart, partnership is about students and staff working together to improve education. It's about investing students with the power to co-create not just knowledge or learning, but the institution itself.

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. Partnership is something that is more than the sum of its parts. Our principles of student engagement 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 in the principles. To quote from the Higher Education Academy's publication *Engagement through partnership: students as partners in learning and teaching in higher 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".

Where partnership and student engagement is treated as a tick-box exercise, it is usually to do with a lack of understanding and buy-in about the value of student engagement at a senior level. As a result, there may be a lack of support and development for practitioners to overcome challenges in relation to student engagement.

The Principles

Intended to be iterative and a starting point for conversations.

Teaching & Learning

Quality Assurance & Enhancement

Governance, Decision Making & Strategy



Let me return now to the principles so we can explore them in more detail. 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.

They were the starting point for our national strategic conversation, which I'll talk more about later, but they could also be used for conversations between students' unions and institutions and staff and students locally. In the next few weeks we're going to be publishing an updated version of the principles of student engagement publication, which will include tips on using the principles to support local conversations.

Learning & Teaching

1. Students are active members of a learning community
2. Students engage in setting the direction of their learning
3. Students engage in curricula content, design, delivery & organisation
4. Students engage in the enhancement of teaching feedback and assessment practices
5. Students engage in and with their learning



These are the principles in the section on Teaching & Learning:

1. Students are active members of a learning community- which could involve creating spaces for students to learn from one another and to support one another, and indeed for educators and students to learn from one another.
2. Students engage in setting the direction of their learning
3. Students engage in curricula content, design, delivery & organisation
4. Students engage in the enhancement of teaching feedback and assessment practices
5. Students engage in and with their learning- which is concerned with how an institution can motivate and support students with their responsibility to engage in their learning, to create engaged, critical, reflective learners.

Question

Do you have a mechanism for students to recognise and reward excellent teaching at your institution?

Yes= A

B= No

C= Not sure



In relation to Principle 4, 'students engage in the enhancement of teaching feedback and assessment practices' can you tell me whether you have a mechanism for students to recognise and reward excellent teaching at your institution?

Through mechanisms such as Student Led Teaching Awards, students' unions and institutions are supporting students to recognise and reward excellent teaching. Some are also finding ways for these schemes to meaningfully contribute to the enhancement of teaching practices. The skills and mindset of exchanging constructive feedback in support of reflection and improvement can have a professional value to both student and teacher, so incorporating student engagement into CPD for staff could be another dimension of this principle, but not something we have seen much of yet.

Quality Assurance & Enhancement

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

7. Students effect change in a continual process of enhancement



These are the principles in the section on Quality Assurance & Enhancement:

6. Students are supported to fully engage in internal quality processes- which could include involvement in processes such as annual monitoring, periodic review and validation.

7. Students effect change in a continual process of enhancement

There are some really great examples out there of engaging students in quality processes. However, we have also heard concerns that supporting students to engage effectively in these quality management processes can be challenging and time consuming. Student involvement in committees is often cited as an example of where processes have not been reformed to the extent that allows the full and meaningful participation of students. Examples of progress in this area usually seem to involve a significant shift in process or dynamic, such as introducing student chairs of committees. At Liverpool Hope for example, every course representative was given a voucher to take their lecturer out for a coffee to help kick-start meaningful conversations.

Supporting students to engage effectively is a theme that runs throughout the principles- so much so that every principle could probably start with the phrase 'Students are supported to do' XYZ! Students need to be inducted into a community of practice and not expected to automatically adopt engaged behaviors, particularly given being a partner should include responsibilities, as well as rights and benefits.

NUS' Manifesto for Partnership discusses the apprenticeship model of learning as a concept that needs to be reimagined. This is the idea that a student attends university in order to gain mastery of a particular subject area. Students spend time with experts in order to become closer to expertise themselves. Advocates of this

Decision Making, Governance & Strategy

8. Students engage in the process of making decisions that affect them
9. Student engagement is given strategic leadership
10. Students engage through effective student leaders and governors



These are the principles in the section on Decision Making, Strategy & Governance:

8. Students engage in the process of making decisions that affect them
9. Student engagement is given strategic leadership
10. Students engage through effective student leaders and governors

Question

Student leaders (e.g. elected representatives) are an essential part of the community at my institution?

A= Yes

B= No

C= Not sure



So, are student leaders considered an essential part of the community at your institution?

An important dimension of student engagement is allowing students to organise around issues they care about and develop independent judgements as a basis for prioritising and tackling issues. A holistic view of the student experience recognises the role of students' unions in affording student opportunities for co- and extra-curricular engagement, independent academic advice and personal and leadership development.

Returning to the apprenticeship model of learning- advocates of this approach are often wary of the idea of students as partners because it can imply a level of equality. NUS argues that 'equality' is as much about respecting each other's views and approaching discussions in good faith, as it is about having similar levels of knowledge. Students provide a very clear sense of what is in the student interest. But, this takes leadership - the ability to assess where the student interest lies and argue for it and the ability to listen to various constituencies to ensure their concerns are understood and that they are informing the debate.

Concerns about the capacity of some students' unions to effectively represent the full diversity of the student body and engage effectively as partners with their institutions can be legitimate. However, this should not be considered an insurmountable challenge, but a starting point on a journey to improving student engagement in which the principles of autonomy and representation are amongst those being strived for and upheld.

Next steps

An updated version of the principles of student engagement:

- Tips on using the principles to support local conversations
- Re-organising the principles based on feedback from The Conversation
- Sign-posting to examples of good practice



Through the conversation we had with the sector about the principles, which included a series of events and a call for evidence, we surfaced numerous examples of good practice, as well as existing challenges to the principles being achieved. As I mentioned, in the next few weeks we're going to be publishing an updated version of the principles of student engagement publication, which will include tips on using the principles to support local conversations. The guide will also sign-post you to examples of good practice and we're going to be re-organising the principles to incorporate feedback we received through The Conversation.

This will include emphasising co and extra-curricular activities as dimensions of student engagement, so I'm interested in hearing your views on this now.

Question

Do you think participating in co-curricular activities mean students are more or less likely to be engaged with their academic studies?

A= More likely

B= Less likely

C= Not sure

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Question

Do you think participating in extra-curricular activities mean students are more or less likely to be engaged with their academic studies?

A= More likely

B= Less likely

C= Not sure



We'll discuss those questions in more detail during the interactive exercise. Before I finish, I'd like to spend a few moments looking at some of the challenges that were identified through The Conversation and how TSEP is planning to help tackle them.

Challenges

- **Engaging the less engaged and hard to reach student groups**
- Addressing power imbalances between staff & students and institutions & students' unions
- **Applying and adapting student engagement models across diverse contexts**
- Understanding and influencing institutional change
- Understanding industry practice and working with awarding bodies



We're addressing hard to reach student groups by building on insight from the Changing the Learning Landscape Programme to explore how digital technology can enhance student engagement. Your insights during the interactive exercise on how technology could be used to support the principles will be really helpful in shaping this work. We're also going to focus on enhancing understanding of engagement in the postgraduate researcher context.

On applying and adapting models across diverse contexts, we have been working with a group of College Higher Education providers to improve understanding of barriers to engagement and help develop local approaches and we will be publishing case studies and a toolkit aimed at these providers in June.

Challenges

- **A need for more high-quality local and national training**
- Insight on supporting student governors
- Challenges associated with low resource availability (time, budget)
- **Avoiding tick-box or superficial engagement activities**
- **Developing student representative systems**



We currently have an online programme available for practitioners, which is being delivered in partnership with the Quality Assurance Agency. We will also be creating some pilot development opportunities for staff that support representative systems in order to enhance the training and support they provide.

Through the creation of a toolkit aimed at College HE providers, we will also be working with QAA on how all institutions can use Chapter B5 of the UK Quality Code as an effective tool for auditing and enhancing their student engagement practice.

These are just some of the ways that TSEP will be tackling shared sector challenges in the coming months. If you're interested in getting involved in any of these opportunities or finding out more about the work we're doing, please do not hesitate to contact me or visit our website.

I'll leave you with one final thought. The kinds of change projects you are involved in are at the forefront of innovation in student engagement. I'm sure Paul will talk about this in more detail in a moment, but Birmingham City's Students as Academic Partners initiative is just one example where these projects are clearly situated in a broader approach and the outcomes feed into a continual process to embed student engagement across the institution. Where these projects you are involved in have grown out of pockets of innovation within your institutions, it is important that they are considered part of a whole institution approach and clearly feed into quality assurance and enhancement mechanisms in order to fully realise their effectiveness and influence local practice and culture.

You're going to leave this conference buzzing with ideas and actions and I really hope one of them is to shout louder about what you're doing within your institutions. And when you've got people's attention, then make sure you ask lots of questions about

Get involved, stay in touch

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