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A Study on improving student engagement with Ten proposals for action

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Abstract: Since the 1980s an extensive research literature has investigated how to improve student success in higher education focusing on student outcomes such as retention, completion and employability. A parallel research programme has focused on how students engage with their studies and what they, institutions and educators can do to enhance their engagement, and hence success. This article reports on two syntheses of research literature on student engagement and how this can be enhanced. It first synthesizes 93 research studies from ten countries to develop a conceptual organizer for student engagement that consists of four perspectives identified in the research: student motivation; transactions between teachers and students; institutional support; and engagement for active citizenship. Secondly, the article synthesizes findings from these perspectives as ten propositions for improving student engagement in higher education. It concludes by identifying some limitations with the conceptual organizer and one suggestion for developing a more integrated approach to student engagement.

Keywords: Conceptual organizer, literature review, post-compulsory education, student engagement.

I. INTRODUCTION

Institutions, educators and students in higher education are increasingly challenged by govern-ments to contribute to national economic achievement. One aspect of this challenge is a drive to improve student success, understood as increasing or widening participation, achieving high levels of course completion and attaining a passport to employment with a positive attitude to lifelong learning. How students engage with their studies and what they, institutions and educators can do to improve engagement has been well researched since the 1990s. Approaches to engagement research have varied. Some researchers focus on student agency and motivation as factors in engagement. Others highlight the way educators practise and relate to their students and the roles of institutional structures and cultures. Yet others spotlight the socio-political context in which education and engagement take place and the impact on students of environmental factors such as family background and economic status.

II. METHOD

Our search used a variety of databases: the Web of Science, PsycINFO, ERIC, A+Education, Google Scholar, Academic Search Elite, General OneFile and Index New Zealand. We initially conducted a broad sweep of the databases on 'student engagement' and 'higher education', 'further education', 'post-compulsory education', 'college'. We later refined the search by following up search terms revealed in the first sweep. Initially we mined abstracts of 283 items. Most were research articles but there were also a number of books and dissertations. We reduced the 283 items to 151 by eliminating those that did not fit our definitions of student engagement. Each of the 151 items was reviewed by two members of the project team who used both

content and process criteria to include or exclude items. Of the 151 items, 93 met both content and process criteria and were used in the review. Items selected for inclusion were summarized on a template and used as a basic reference.

III. FINDING

The four research perspectives we identified are testimony to the complexity of engagement. To make sense of this complexity, we developed a conceptual organizer with two features. One identi-fies the main research perspectives in the engagement literature; the other identifies ten proposals for action that emerged from the synthesis of the literature (see Table 1).

Table 1. A conceptual organizer for student engagement

Research perspectives	Proposals for action
Motivation and agency	1. Enhance students' self-belief
	2. Enable students to work autonomously, enjoy learning
(Engaged students are intrinsically	relationships with others and feel they are competent to achieve their own objectives
motivated and want to exercise their agency)	
	3. Recognize that teaching and teachers are central toengagement
Transactional engagement (Students and teachers engage with each other)	
	4. Create learning that is active, collaborative and fosters learning relationships
	5. Create educational experiences for students that are challenging, enriching and extend their academic abilities
	6. Ensure institutional cultures are welcoming to students from diverse backgrounds
Institutional support (Institutions provide an environment conducive to learning)	
	7. Invest in a variety of support services
	8. Adapt to changing student expectations
Active citizenship	9. Enable students to become active citizens
	10.Enable students to develop their social and cultural capital
(Students and institutions work together to enable challenges to social beliefs and practices)	

1. Enhance students' self-belief

We found no unanimity about what motivates learners to engage. Dominant, however, is a con-structivist view that education is about students constructing their own knowledge. This assumes that students are their own learning agents, able to achieve their goals. Self-belief is reported as a key attribute in motivation.

2. Enable students to work autonomously, enjoy learning relationships with others and feel they are competent to achieve their own objectives

Intrinsic motivation assists self-determination but only some forms of extrinsic motivation do. Self-determination is enhanced where supportive social-contextual conditions exist to promote feelings of competence or self-efficacy. Such feelings in turn encourage the exercise of choice and self-direction, leading to a greater feeling of autonomy. They also suggest that relatedness, at least in a distal sense, is important in motivation, particularly intrinsic motivation. When institutions provide opportunities for students to learn both autonomously and with others, and to develop their sense of competence, students are more likely to be motivated, to engage and succeed.

3. Recognize that teaching and teachers are central to engagement

If the teacher is perceived to be approachable, well prepared and sensitive to student needs, students are committed to work harder, get more out of the session and are more willing to express their own opinion. Students are more likely to engage if they are supported by teachers who establish inviting learning environments, demand high standards, challenge, and make themselves freely available to discuss academic progress.

4. *Create learning that is active, collaborative and fosters learning relationships*

Findings acknowledge that active learning in groups, peer relationships and social skills are important in engaging learners. In a study examining the extent to which student–teacher interaction, quality of student effort and peer interaction contributed to students' perception of engagement, found that peer interaction had the strongest predictive capacity for engagement and outcomes.

5. *Create educational experiences for students that are challenging, enriching and extend their academic abilities*

As noted above, the evidence is compelling that enriching experiences and academic challenge are successful in engaging students. Teachers can, for example, expect high academic standards, sup-port students to achieve these standards, challenge students to 'stretch further than they think they can'. They use assessment as one way to challenge students. This finding suggest that students who reflect, question, conjecture, evaluate and make connections between ideas whilst drawing on the ideas, experiences and knowl-edge of others are most deeply engaged. Teachers need to create rich educational experiences that challenge students' ideas and stretch them as far as they can go.

6. *Ensure institutional cultures are welcoming to students from diverse backgrounds*

Institutional cultures are key to student engagement. Findings suggest that students must feel that they are accepted and affirmed, that they belong. Students labelled 'non-traditional' often do not have that sense of belonging; they feel disengaged or alienated. As the student body diversifies and socio-cultural contexts change, Institutions need to change and do more to create cultures that welcome and adapt to diversity. Institutions need to adapt their cultures to meet the needs of students from diverse backgrounds These findings found that 'non-traditional' students often feel uncomfortable in traditional institutions. Students experienced stress and dis-comfort and a low sense of academic control in their courses, they were significantly more likely to experience a lowered sense of well-being, and reduced feelings of academic enjoyment and motivation. The message is clear: institutions need to be adaptable, developing a culture that is welcoming to all students.

7. *Invest in a variety of support services*

While support services are expensive to set up and do not always attract the number of students expected, the evidence is that they are very important. But even more important than the money spent on support services is the institutional culture – it must emphasize the support of learning. A number of researchers investigated specific approaches to pro-viding support for engagement. The orientation processes were important in helping students settle into academic life as they helped students to connect socially with peers, mentors and staff, to gain familiarity with the campus and to clarify expectations of academic study.

8. *Adapt to changing student expectations*

Institutions successful in engaging students are never satisfied with their own performance. They do not hesitate to change practices if the evidence suggests they should. Students appear to be less engaged as they increasingly study part-time. The proportion of students in paid employment increased from 51% to 55% in five years; 57% said paid work inter-fered with their academic performance; paid workers were more likely to consider withdrawing and spent less time on campus. Such students expect study to fit their lives; they do not want to fit their lives to institutional expectations.

9. *Enable students to become active citizens*

Some researchers consider the engagement discourse to be too focused on operational engagement, its purpose confined to helping learners become work ready. This research perspective emerges from critiques of the way engagement is generally constructed in the literature. Conservative views interpret engagement as psychological dispositions and academic achievement leading to learning that lacks social context. While student-centred conceptions of engagement do recognize context, require engagement by teachers as well as learners and are nested in the relationships they share, this view too is narrowly focused on operational matters. What is needed is a democratic–critical conception of engagement that goes beyond strategies, techniques or behaviours, a conception in which engagement is participatory, dialogic and leads not only to academic achievement but to success as an active citizen.

10. Enable students to develop their social and cultural capital

'Minority' students in particular need help to build the social and cultural capital necessary for engagement and success in and beyond the mainstream classroom. Social and cultural capital is won with a sense of belonging, with active relationships with others, with knowing how things work around here. Education can foster such feelings and offer learning that is useful beyond the workplace. To help build social and cultural capital of 'minority' students institutions must adapt to the ways, knowledge and ontologies of other than mainstream groups.

IV. CONCLUSION

We have synthesized findings from four dominant research perspectives that illuminate student engagement in higher education, which is one indicator of student success. The synthesis has taken the form of ten proposals drawn from these research perspectives. Together the proposals identify actions that teachers and institutions can take to improve engagement.

However, we acknowledge that there are limitations to what we have done.

- First, the four per-spectives focus on aspects of engagement that fall within institutions' ability to influence. They do not take into account a variety of non-institutional factors that impact on students' willingness and ability to engage, for example, health, childcare, family support and community responsibilities.

- Second, the propositions we have identified for each perspective are not the only ones; others could be added, particularly for specific, even unique institutional contexts.

- Third, research areas outside the engagement field could suggest actions to improve student engagement. The literature on tran-sitions into higher education and the extensive retention literature are examples.

- Fourth, engagement is complex; it includes many factors that interact in multiple ways to enhance engagement or trigger disengagement. Such interactions need to be taken into account.

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