

## Proposal for 2010 SRHE Conference

Forms part of symposium on student engagement

### Title

# Reaching a common understanding of the meaning of student engagement

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The purpose of this paper is to seek clarity about student engagement (SE) and to seek to map conceptually what SE is. Establishing this will also facilitate the provision of a set of principles about fruitful ways of fostering SE which may be used to underpin policy development and enhancement of practice.

SE is very topical currently. It has been the theme of many recent conferences and now features as an important objective in the strategies of many Higher Education and other bodies. However in the UK the concept of student engagement is relatively underdeveloped. Therefore the term is frequently used, but infrequently defined or explored. HEFCE commissioned a report from CHERI (2008) to examine student engagement. This report emphasised enhancing the student voice through representation and partnership. This is about participation and collective engagement. However although this may contribute to enhancing engagement it underplays the point that engagement is centred in the individual and we need consider all students. There is ample evidence that engagement by the individual is essential for both persistence with study and good learning to occur at university (Hand and Bryson, 2008). This is centred in the sense of being the student has and how they perceive their experience (Bryson and Hand, 2007). Educators can foster this sense through their approaches and by creating an appropriate culture and environment. There is an overlap with other agendas about improving retention and persistence, inclusivity, transitions into, through and out of HE and academic success and achievement.

A network of those interested in SE has recently been established in the UK and also includes colleagues based abroad. This is RAISE (Researching, Advancing and

Inspiring Student Engagement). A key goal of this group is to reach a shared understanding of the nature and meaning of SE and this underpins this paper. The process of drafting draws on the recent inaugural meeting of the group and will be refined by consultation of all members (initially 40 colleagues from the UK and Australia). This process is incomplete at this point but the paper will draw from:

There is a major strand of work in the USA which has defined engagement as a measurable property that can be evaluated through a survey instrument. In 1998 the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) was developed and has subsequently been used to gather responses from over three million students in some thousand plus colleges. Kuh (2006) and other proponents of this approach acknowledge that there are several dimensions to engagement, drawing on Chickering and Gamson (1987) who espoused seven principles of good teaching and learning. This focus on the student draws on earlier work by Pace (1993) and Astin (1982). There are over one hundred publications based on this survey. This approach can be critiqued because the distillation of the concepts into a survey has forced a focus on how SE is manifest i.e. through behaviour, and underplays its complex and dynamic nature. This survey has been replicated in Australia and now South Africa. The work of Tinto has been hugely influential. His notion of how social and academic integration contributes to persistence (Tinto, 1993) led to recognition of the importance of 'involvement' which Tinto (2006) later notes is synonymous with SE. The metastudies of Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) provide insights.

There is large body of research in Australia that has investigated such issues as 'connectedness' (McInnis and James, 1995), an index of 'Institutional Belongingness, Social Involvement and Alienation' (Williams, 1982) and 'negotiated engagement' (McInnis, 2001). McInnis (ibid; Krause et al 2005) has particularly emphasised the salience of the transition into higher education – the first year experience – in establishing good levels of engagement. These findings are based on large scale studies on the first year. He notes that there are more challenges to engagement from student diversity, the changing nature of student courses, e-learning and distance learning options, as well the decreased centrality of campus life, which makes integration more difficult (ibid). Horstmannoff and Zimitat (2003) discuss how such changes have affected the construction of student identities, where the 'student self' has to compete with other selves. Kift (2009) has drawn on all this work to advocate the notion of a 'transition pedagogy' to foster engagement. Reid and Solomonides (2008) have sought to locate SE in an ontological model which includes professional formation, and assimilation into a discipline inter alia. In New Zealand, Leach and Zepke (2009) have created a 'concept organiser for SE'.

Kember et al (2001) have explored the nature of 'belonging' in part-time students in Hong Kong – a related concept to SE. Dubet (1994), based on sociological studies of French students has argued that there are three key issues influencing "ways of being a student"; the nature of the personal project – the meaning that students get out of doing their degree; the degree of integration into university life and the level of

intellectual engagement with the subject. Mann (2001) has explored the theoretical basis of alienating forces on students – the opposite of SE. Barnett's concept (2007) of the 'will to learn' to learn is salient. McCune (2009) has explored L&T influences on students' 'willingness to engage'. Case (2007) has explored influences on SE from broader university life or issues entirely divorced from university. The holistic concept of SE advocated by Bryson and Hand (2007) is grounded in what the students say themselves about SE and the meaning they make of their experiences.

What emerges from these studies is that SE is complex and multi-faceted. It appears to be socially constructed and is therefore dynamic and individual – it is located in the *being* of the student and *becoming* (Fromm, 1977). It has many dimensions and may be influenced at many levels – what or who are students engaging with?

Deriving a clear conceptual map of student engagement is challenging but will aid the development of mutual agenda. However we do have good evidence of what seems to work in fostering SE. Placing SE at the heart of what university staff do appears to pay excellent dividends.

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### 150 word summary

This paper seeks to map student engagement conceptually and to articulate the key principles that underpin it. This outcome will facilitate policy development and enhancing practice The paper draws on both the literature and on a discussion process with colleagues across the world about meanings of engagement. The latter process is being undertaken through the agency of the RAISE network (Researching, Advancing and Inspiring Student Engagement) - the authors are founder members.

It is argued that a holistic conception of engagement needs to recognise it is located in the being of students and how they make sense of their university experience, it is dynamic multi-faceted and complex and it is individual, i.e, each student brings and reconstructs a unique perspective on their experience.

The paper draws on leading work from the US, Australia and elsewhere together with work in the UK that informs conceptualisation and articulation of student engagement.