

HE Student engagement: What insights into the concerns around issues of student engagement can be provided by taking a new approach and investigating student engagement through (adapted) models of employee engagement? (0193)

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Undergraduate student engagement is increasingly on the agendas of Universities, with widening participation placing more pressure in terms of applicant volume and the expectations, skills and attributes of a broader student demographic. Rates of student non-engagement¹ have caused concern for many years and much research has been carried out to determine causes and solutions. Most disengagement occurs within the first half of the first semester of the first year, so research has focused on how to encourage engagement during this time.

The UK Government agenda regarding the purpose of university² has prompted the use of practitioner-based models to shed new light upon the issues by coming from a different perspective. A conceptual framework will be built from traditional student engagement models and employee engagement models.

‘Engagement’:

The Oxford English Dictionary (2002) defines ‘engage’ as “to participate or become involved in”, which involves action on the part of the person engaging. Taylor and Wilding (2009) view ‘engagement’ as both student commitment and belonging. Towers Perrin’s workplace definition involves both emotional³ and rational⁴ factors, which can transfer into the student engagement debate. ‘Engagement’ refers to attitudes, behaviours and outcomes: “There is a virtuous circle when the pre-conditions of engagement are met when these three aspects of engagement trigger and reinforce one another” (MacLeod, 2009, p9)

Engaged individuals have “a sense of personal attachment to their work and organisation: they are motivated and able to give of their best to help it succeed – and from that flows a series of tangible benefits for organisation and individual alike” (MacLeod, 2009, p7)

¹ Drop-out

² employability skills agenda

³ personal satisfaction, inspiration and affirmation

⁴ understanding of role in organisation

Engagement is necessary for students to perform well in higher education (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Pace, 1980). For Newman (1992), engagement occurs when students make a psychological investment in learning. Engaged students are involved in their work, persist despite challenges and obstacles, and delight in accomplishing their work (Schlechty, 1994).

Student engagement is increasingly seen as contributing to retention and success. CHERI's report to HEFCE (Little et al, 2009, p.4) indicated that UK universities view the student "more as a consumer than a partner in a learning community". CHERI is concerned that the increasingly diverse student population caused by the widening participation strategy increases the number of issues that will affect student engagement.

UK Government:

Stakeholders in the Higher Education process are: the Government⁵; the Universities⁶; the employers⁷ and the students.⁸ Universities must make efficiency cuts while budgets are reduced; to improve standards of teaching and research; to increase the diversity of courses; to build partnerships with FE colleges, employers and schools; and to improve graduate employability skills. Students demand value for money and employers will continue to want graduates who will add value from the start of their working lives.

Employers demand to have graduate students equipped with work-related skills and knowledge (CHERI, 2008), while the business world is questioning whether Universities are adequately preparing their students: "The international economic downturn has made the acquisition of employability⁹ skills both more important and more difficult." (CBI, 2009, p.10) Employability skills are a key Government objective, with employers as major stakeholders in business education. Lord Mandelson¹⁰, (2010) wants HE to become more "demand-led", with a "greater emphasis on work based learning..to ensure that Britain has the skills it needs to succeed in the decades ahead" and to help people "develop the skills and capabilities to find work and build the businesses and industries of the future." The CBI wants UK

⁵ Government's stated aims and objectives for Higher Education in the UK

⁶ Universities recognition of the necessary skills and knowledge, along with their delivery of the courses

⁷ the employability skills and knowledge that employers have identified as necessary or desirable;

⁸ Students' perspective on the extent and importance of preparation for the world of work.

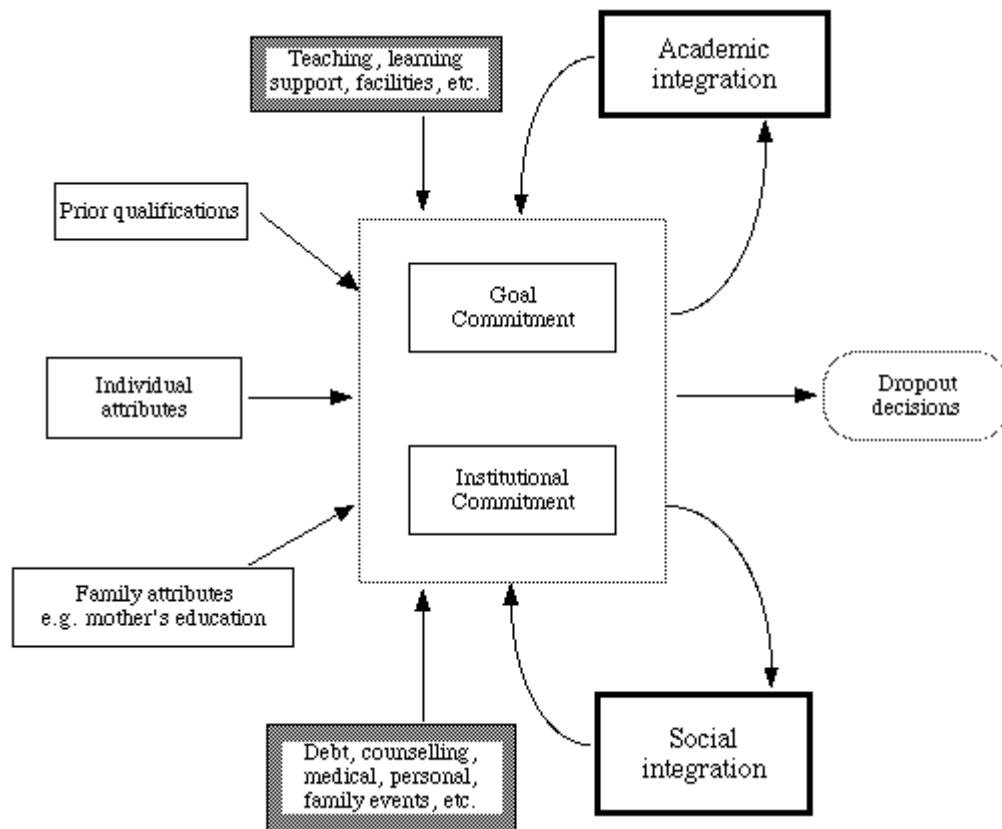
⁹) 'Employability' is defined by the CBI as "a set of attributes that all labour market participants should possess in ensure that they have the capability of being effective in the workplace – to the benefit of themselves, their employer and the wider economy." (CBI, 2009, p.8)

¹⁰ The Secretary of State for Business Innovation and Skills

universities to equip students with the skills necessary to succeed in the job market – to “educate practitioners (people with work-related skills) and to create knowledge through research” (Bennis and O’Toole, 2005, p. 1)

Student engagement models:

Current student engagement programmes and interventions are on the whole developed using Tinto’s model ((1975; 1993), refined from earlier theories of engagement (Spady, 1970):



Tinto used American students, while Yorke did similar research with UK students in the 1990s. The table below summarises their work, with the drivers of student engagement identified by this author:

Tinto (1993) has identified 7 reasons for withdrawal: (based on students in USA)	Yorke (2000): factors for non-engagement: based on UK students	<u>Drivers of student engagement (extrapolated by Baily, 2010):</u>
<p><u>Academic integration:</u> academic difficulties (@ 35%)</p> <p><u>Social integration:</u> adjustment difficulties (social maturity) unclear, narrow, changing goals weak and external commitment to HE financial inadequacies lack of 'fit' (social or academic) isolation (particularly in first year)</p>	<p><u>Academic integration:</u> inability to cope with the demands of the study programme (academic) wrong choice of study programme</p> <p><u>Social integration:</u> poor quality of student experience dissatisfaction with aspects of institutional provision unhappiness with the social environment matters related to financial need</p>	<p>academic integration 'settling in' Challenging, rewarding, and consistent goals ('Satisfaction?') Commitment to HE</p> <p>Sufficient finance 'fitting in' Having friends/being known</p>

Non-academic problems are the largest factor for withdrawal and also the most wide-ranging and complex in nature to address (Johnston, 1995) "Research indicates that a student's decision to study in higher education is influenced by a range of complex social and psychological factors pertaining to the individual." (Gorrard et al, p.46).

Criticisms of this established view of student engagement are increasing:

1. Tinto's model expects the student to change their expectations to meet the institution's expectastions, which can cause drop-out, (Kerka, 1995).
2. Malcolm (2010) suggests that students are involved in multiple, on-going transition adjustments, and so levels of engagement are changing continuously.
3. Student engagement is active, participative, relational and meaningful. (Thomas, 2010), not static.

Employee Engagement models

For Government, university is a key part of preparing students for working life and enhancing the quality of their contribution, “universities prepare students with skill sets closely aligned to employer needs” (Johnston, 2010, p13) If university is a preparation for a life in an information-rich, knowledge-based economy, (Arnold, 1997), using models of employee engagement will be able to shed a different light on student engagement. MacLeod’s (2009) model of employee engagement - of understanding what the employees want, what motivates them in the workplace and how to build on these understandings - can be translated into the student HE experience.

In their study, Robinson, et al, (2004), identify the key drivers of engagement from their model (below) are job satisfaction¹¹ and a feeling valued and involved.¹²



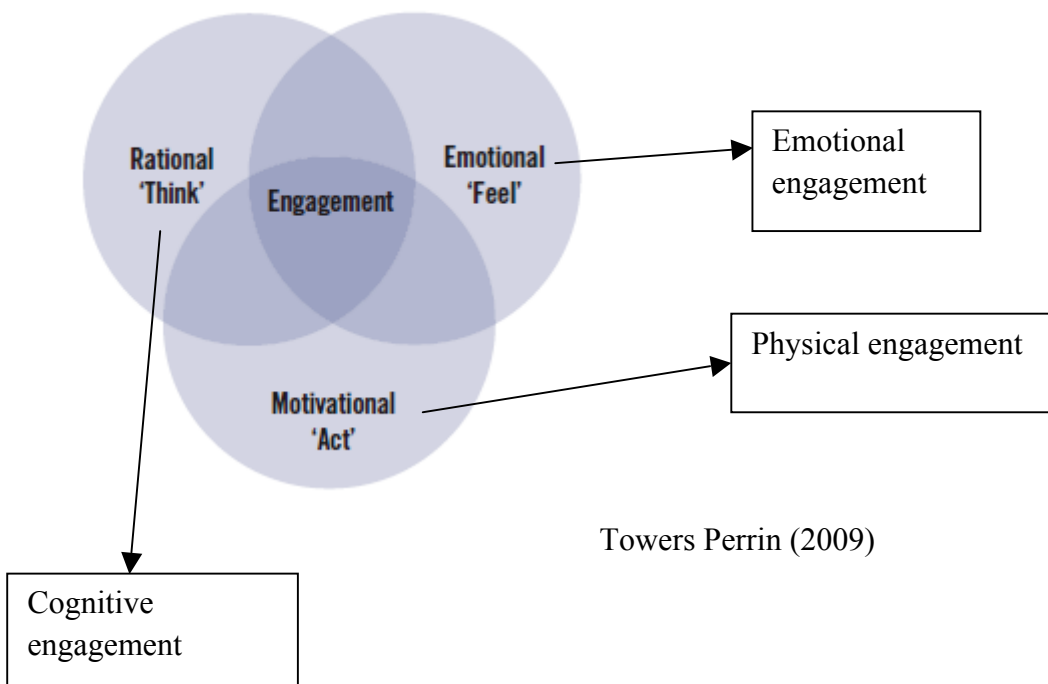
Source: IES Engagement Survey, 2005

Most drivers of employee engagement are non-financial in nature (Markos and Sridevi, 2009), which facilitates adapting the models to study student engagement. Research for the CIPD in 2006¹³ found that there are three types of engagement: emotional feel; rational think; motivational act:

¹¹ academic achievement

¹² social integration

¹³ by Kingston University



All of this employee engagement theory can be translated into a student context with little distortion of meaning. It is expected that using this adapted model will provide new insights into how to respond to concerns that are current about the levels of non-engagement in HE.

Conceptual framework:

Reasons for student non-engagement (Tinto, 1993):
 academic difficulties (@ 35%)
 adjustment difficulties (social maturity)
 unclear, narrow, changing goals
 weak and external commitment to HE
 financial inadequacies
 lack of 'fit' (social or academic)
 isolation (particularly in first year)

Drivers of student engagement (extrapolated by Baily, 2010):
 Academic integration
 'settling in'
 Challenging, rewarding, and consistent goals ('Satisfaction?')
 Commitment to HE
 Sufficient finance
 'fitting in'
 Having friends/being known



Student engagement drivers: challenging, rewarding, and consistent goals' (‘Satisfaction’?)	Equate to Employee engagement drivers ‘Job satisfaction (academic integration)
Integration (academic and social), ‘fitting in’, having friends/being known	feeling valued and involved (social integration)

This action-based research will be a qualitative, longitudinal study, testing the conceptual framework through student focus groups and questionnaires, using first year business management students as the response group. It is expected that the results from the research will be able to feed into course design and delivery from a very early stage, thus enhancing the student experience and improving retention rates through higher engagement.

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