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The UK Engagement Survey: 2014 findings and implications

Buckley Alex, *The Higher Education Academy, UK*

Student engagement surveys are widely used throughout the English-speaking world (Coates and McCormick 2014). The founding survey for these international efforts is the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), developed in the US and first implemented in 2000 (Kuh et al 2001). The survey draws on a range of research illuminating the factors that contribute to effective learning, including student involvement (Astin 1984), approaches to learning (Marton and Saljo 1976), quality of effort (Pace 1982) and the seven 'good practices in undergraduate education' (Chickering and Gamson 1987). The survey asks students to judge their level of participation in a range of important educational activities, as well as the support and encouragement provided by their course and institution, and their development in a range of areas.[1]

The UK has been slower to adopt the NSSE, perhaps due to the distracting presence of our own National Student Survey and the focus in this country on student engagement in quality enhancement and assurance (Little et al 2009) rather than student' engagement in their own learning. One of the challenges of this UK variant of student engagement is a tendency towards small-scale activities with limited reach within the student body. Student engagement in learning, on the other hand, has the potential to provide a more far-reaching transformation of higher education and involve every single UK student. Evidence from the US suggests that engagement is particularly beneficial for 'underprepared' and lower ability students (Kuh et al 2007); this is crucial in the context of the UK's increasingly diverse student body.

There has been isolated work by individual UK institutions in adapting and implementing the NSSE or its derivatives (e.g. Creighton et al 2008). However, the first multi-institution use of an engagement survey in the UK was in 2013, when the Higher Education Academy worked with nine institutions to administer 14 modified items from the NSSE, as the UK Engagement Survey (UKES). The selected items focused on higher-order learning, academic challenge, collaborative learning and academic integration.

Analysis of the survey results broadly supported the validity and reliability of the items. Substantial differences were also found between levels and years of study, and between disciplines (Buckley 2013). Qualitative research on the items was also undertaken (Kandiko and Matos 2013).

The survey has been repeated in 2014, with a much greater number of participating institutions (36 in total) and a wider range of survey items. In addition to the items used in 2013, items were added that focused on reflective and integrative learning, skills development and the time spent on different activities. Items were also developed on students' engagement with research. This is an area of particular interest in the UK, and the new items were developed from recent research on the benefits of engaging students in research and inquiry-based learning (Healey and Jenkins 2009, Levy and Petrulis 2012). 2015

1 http://nsse.iub.edu/

will see a repeat of the survey, in a more formalised way following on from the pilot phases in 2013 and 2014.

This presentation will describe the theoretical background to the survey, and present the findings from the 2014 administration of the survey. Discussion of the findings will focus in particular on how the results reflect and illuminate pedagogical differences in two areas:

- The 2013 results from UKES revealed marked differences between disciplines. For example, maths students were markedly less likely than history students to feel that their course emphasised the evaluation of information. These kinds of disciplinary differences have also been observed in other national contexts, and raise interesting questions about the impact of disciplinary pedagogies and discourses on students perception of their own engagement. Drawing on a larger number of responses, the 2014 results from UKES will allow a more robust and in-depth exploration of disciplinary differences.
- UKES 2013 suggested interesting differences between UK HE and the other nations that have used NSSE-derived surveys. However, the limited number and highly self-selected nature of the participating institutions in 2013 limit the extent to which the results can be taken to reflect the nature of UK HE generally. The 2014 results, drawing on 36 institutions, will permit a more robust comparison of the engagement of students in the UK, North America, Australasia, Ireland and other national contexts. The results from 2013 suggested that our students' engagement has more in common with that of students from Australasia than students from North America. The 2014 results will allow further exploration, and more confident inferences to be drawn.

In addition to the discussion of the survey findings, the presentation will also briefly explore the value of student engagement surveys for institutional efforts to enhance learning and teaching. The main focus of the UKES project has been to provide the participating institutions with engagement data that they can use to understand and improve their students' active participation in educational activities. For a sector more used to satisfaction data, this poses a range of challenges, not least the indirect nature of institutions' influence over their students' engagement.

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