

Student engagement in the UK: Defining, distilling and critiquing partnership (0003)

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Abstract

Student engagement provides an instructive focus for enhancing learning, teaching and the student experience. This paper is grounded in a comparative analysis of how student engagement and related notions of partnership are construed in the UK, and implications of this within institutional settings. Three different yet overlapping aspects of student engagement will be considered: student feedback, student engagement in governance, and direct student engagement with institutional enhancement activities.

This research stems from testing survey items on partnership as part of a Higher Education Academy (HEA) project piloting a student engagement survey in the UK. Testing was required to evaluate the robustness and validity of the student engagement items. This paper provides an evaluation of students' understanding of notions partnership, and provides a critique of overstated, representational and exceptional notions of partnership.

Introduction

Recent work has stressed the important links between educational gain and the pedagogical practices undertaken within institutions (Gibbs 2010, 2012). This led to a pilot Higher Education Academy (HEA) project exploring the viability of using items derived from the US-based National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) in the UK. NSSE aims to evaluate student engagement with activities likely to enhance their learning outcomes (Kuh 2001). An initial pilot HEA project made modifications to the NSSE items to reflect the different context, developing into the UK Engagement Survey (UKES). This paper provides an evaluation of developing and piloting items based on partnership.

A number of questions were tested relating to partnership, for possible inclusion in the 2015 administration of UKES. The development of the scale was proposed due to the increasing emphasis on staff working in partnership with students in UK Higher Education (Dunne, 2013; NUS 2013; Healey et al. 2014). The intention of the scale was to capture activities associated with a 'partnership ethos', and the purpose of the interviewing was to test which of these could be distilled into practices and how these were understood by students. Given that a large proportion of students do not ever speak to an academic member of staff outside of class, the need for the questions to be relevant to a wide range of students meant not focusing on activities (such as curriculum co-design), that are relevant for only very small numbers of students - although such activities may be transformational for students involved.

Methodology

Developing the partnership items was done through reviewing the literature, soliciting expert views and discussions with students. Amendments to other international adoptions of US-based engagement surveys were also explored (Coates 2010; Coates & McCormick 2014).

Sites included a variety of institutional types, representing a diverse range of students. A total of 42 students were interviewed from 11 institutions. There was a mix of first, second, third, fourth and fifth year students interviewed. About a quarter were first year students, half of the students had just completed their second year of study and the rest were a mix of final year students (comprising third, fourth and fifth year students due to the nature of the Scottish higher education system and students on longer degree courses such as Medicine). The students were drawn from 28 subjects: Accounting and Finance; Applied Nursing and Social Work; Biological Sciences/Biochemistry; Business; Business and IT; Business and Management; Business Management with Sports; Management; Childhood Studies; Choreography and Dance with History; English & French Law; English and Drama; English Literature; European Studies and Spanish; Forensic Science; History; Law; Liberal Arts; Mathematics; Medicine; Microbiology; Pharmacology; Politics and Sociology; Primary Education; Public Policy; Social Policy; Social Work; and Sociology and Law.

There was 60/40 female/male gender representation (similar to respondents to the 2014 pilot). Three-quarters of participants were domiciled in the UK, with equal numbers of European Union (EU) and international (non-European Union) students. One in eight students lived in Halls, another eighth lived in their own home and the rest lived in rental accommodation. Half of the sample was in the 19-21 age range; another quarter was 22-24; and the rest ranged from 25-42. The sample included a number of mature students and five students studying via distance.

Protocol

Individual interviews with students were conducted. Interviews followed in the tradition of Tourangeau (1984), judging: comprehension of the question; retrieval from memory of relevant information; decision processes; and response processes. The 'think-aloud' method (Willis et al 1999) was used, which directs students to 'think aloud' as they respond to the question, with little interference from the interviewer. This was followed by using verbal prompts. In an iterative process, the data was analysed exploring five potential problems (Conrad & Blair, 1996): language problems; inclusion and exclusion problems; temporal problems; logical problems; and computational problems. Survey items were iteratively updated and tested in subsequent interviews.

Findings

Ten items were tested through various iterations, with different root questions and response answers. A selection is presented below:

The first item tested was:

During the current academic year, how much has your institution emphasised the following activities? 1. 'You providing feedback about how you think the course is going' (Response categories: *Very much / Quite a bit / Some / Very little*).

Some institutions had very clear policies and procedures for collecting student feedback on modules and end-of-year surveys. Students were much more likely to refer to filling out module evaluation forms than institution-wide surveys. Other institutions seemed to have sporadic opportunities for students to feedback. Students said they were much more likely to feedback when it was something done in a class setting compared to on-line opportunities.

Another item was:

'You taking responsibility for your learning'

Students almost universally referred to this as the 'opposite of spoon-feeding'. Students felt confident this was an essential part of higher education, and often what differentiated it from A-level schooling or college. Generally students were positive about this question, feeling that taking responsibility for their learning was part of succeeding in higher education. A few students noted a negative connotation, feeling that the reason a student needed to take responsibility was because institutions did not provide enough support to students. However, few students saw this as related to partnership, rather they saw it as an individual development, fostered as part of their course.

Conclusions

Most students reported very little experience working in partnership with their institutions. Many students struggled to think of examples of speaking with staff outside of class settings, better yet working with staff on enhancement activities. Most students did not see partnership activities as an integral part of their educational experience, and furthermore questioned why they would. Although partnership ways of working may be developing in representational governance and decision-making, notions of partnership do not seem to have widely pervaded general student practices.

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