Defining student engagement in practice: individual understandings and motivations (0036)

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Student engagement is a high profile topic in higher education, with multiple drivers. These include the influence of national and institutional policy discourse (for example, the UK Quality Code for HE and in the debate around teaching excellence) alignment with personal ideology/politics rooted in ideas of empowerment and emancipation, and alignment with particular pedagogic theories and approaches (e.g. active learning). These drivers and alignment with underlying pedagogic and/or political beliefs are not always acknowledged or clearly articulated, leading to a lack of clarity around the term and misunderstandings of its purpose. It has recently been described as a 'fuzzword' (Vuori, 2014) and a 'slippery term' (Gibbs, 2016). In its broadest sense, student engagement in the UK is used to refer to both student engagement in their learning experiences, and student engagement with quality enhancement, governance and change within higher education. Even when focusing on one part of this – student engagement with their learning – the picture is complex. For example, Kahu's (2013) synthesis highlighted psychological, behavioural and socio-cultural perspectives on student engagement, each with their own underpinning scholarship and approaches to practice. Also implicit in the discourse around student engagement are different perceptions of students' positioning as, for example: consumers (Molesworth, Nixon and Scullion, 2009), producers (Neary, 2012), partners (Healey, Flint and Harrington, 2014; Wenstone, 2012), and co-creators (Bovill, Cook-Sather and Felton, 2011).

The different models of student engagement have generally been developed by pedagogic researchers and those already engaged in the field. It is unclear how the majority of academic staff, who work directly with students, understand 'student engagement' and their motivations for dedicating time and effort to activities formally labelled as 'student engagement'. There is a sense that the student engagement debate is maturing. In recent years, the discourse has moved from one of enthusiastic advocacy of engagement initiatives, to a more critical and scholarly debate about the situated nature of engagement and qualitative differences between forms or types of student engagement. This rigorous critical approach is crucial to establishing student engagement as a valid field of academic inquiry and development. Part of this critical approach can involve what Fielding (2004) refers to as 'deconstructing the present': unpicking the assumptions and perceptions that may be part of internal structures that influence the way in which notions like student engagement are interpreted and enacted through practice. This research aimed to explore how individuals structure this concept and whether that played a part in their pedagogic and professional decision making processes. As the majority of pedagogic and professional decisions taken by staff are individual decisions, this research

focused on unpicking individual staff perceptions. Indeed many staff are effectively engaging students with their learning outside of institutional initiatives and agendas. An additional benefit of this research is to better understand why staff chose to/chose not to engage with educational development activities around 'student engagement'.

The research was qualitative, involving ten semi-structured interviews with academics from a range of disciplines. Although not intended to be representative, it was hoped this spread would open the possibility of discovering diverse individual experiences and perceptions of student engagement as well as identifying common themes across disciplines. Whilst we recognise that many staff play an active role in student engagement, we focused specifically on academic teaching staff as a group which often have significant learning and teaching relationships with students.

During the interview, participants were asked to draw individual concept maps responding to the question "What does student engagement mean to you, in your practice?" Concept map mediated interviews have been used to explore students' expectations and perceptions of their experience (Kandiko and Mawer,2013) and offer a complementary visual alternative to traditional narrative based methods to qualitative research, potentially enabling participant generated themes to inform analysis of the data (Wheeldon and Faubert, 2009) (Kinchin, Streatfield and Hay, 2010). The maps produced were rich and varied in content and structure, and we felt they gave a participant-led focus to the first part of the interview: allowing respondents time to reflect on and think deeply about student engagement before the main body of the interview began.

The transcripts from the interviews were coded and analysed through close reading alongside using the concept maps as a "graphic and participant-centric means to ground data within theory" (Wheeldon and Faubert, 2009: 68). The analysis focused on participants' lived experiences of their practice, and how their orientation to student engagement may inform and influence individual professional and pedagogic decision-making.

By providing greater insight into the different rationales and conceptual understandings held by staff, we suggest that the findings have implications for the development of student engagement agendas within the institution concerned, and contribute to the further development of theoretical models of student engagement in the pedagogic research literature. We hope that the research findings will also be relevant to the broader debate around student engagement in the context of teaching excellence.

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