



Enhancing Inclusive Student Engagement in Higher Education

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QAA Collaborative Enhancement Project:

*Standing Out in the Crowd: A Best Practice Framework for
Inclusive and Effective Student Engagement*

Report:

Enhancing Inclusive Student Engagement in Higher Education: Literature Review

Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Participating higher education institutions | 2 |
| Authors and contact details | 3 |
| 1. Defining Student Engagement | 5 |
| 2. Key Elements of Engagement | 7 |
| 3. Barriers to Engagement | 9 |
| 4. Inclusive Ways of Engaging | 12 |
| 5. References | 16 |
| 6. Acknowledgements | 22 |

1. Defining Student Engagement



Student engagement is a multifaceted and complex concept that has garnered significant attention across various perspectives, yet no universal definition exists (Krause, 2005; Tight, 2020; Wimpenny and Savin-Baden, 2013; Wilson et al., 2019; Lester, 2013; Gourlay, 2015; Macfarlane, 2015; Brickhill et al., 2024). Aside from the fact that there is no consistently accepted understanding of student engagement, there is also no meta-theory to integrate engagement's diverse and complex concepts, nor does the literature identify a clear process of engagement triggering events (Zepke, 2024).

Prior studies attempt to provide clarification on the term or concept of 'student engagement' (Bryson, 2015; Evans et al., 2015; Macfarlane and Tomlinson, 2017). Zepke (2024) identified five perspectives on student engagement: psychological (behavioural, motivational, and deep learning strands), psycho-social (does student agency or institutional structure regulate engagement?), socio-cultural (learners' ability to access social and cultural capital to succeed), socio-ecological (understanding engagement as occurring within an ecology of learning), and socio-political (teaching that meets learners' needs and supportive institutional cultures as enablers of success). Fredricks et al. (2004) developed a three-dimension framework to explain student engagement, emphasising behavioural, psychological, and socio-cultural factors. Trowler (2010), Kahu (2013), and Evans et al. (2015) extended this framework to define student engagement in the following dimensions: behaviour (i.e., 'time, effort and other relevant resources'), and links with



both cognition (i.e. 'learning outcomes and development of students') and institutional efficiency ('performance, and reputation of the institution') and the affect ('interest, enthusiasm and belonging'), cognition ('deep learning, self-regulation') and behaviour ('time and effort, interaction, participation') respectively. Kahu and Nelson (2018) examined the complex interaction between students and institutions in terms of student engagement and reported self-efficacy, emotions, belonging, and well-being as dimensions for student engagement. Bowden et al. (2021) reported four dimensions (affective, social, cognitive and behavioural) of engagement which impact students' outcomes in the areas of well-being, transformative learning, self-efficacy, self-esteem, and institutional reputation.

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Thus, the above literature demonstrates certain specific areas which are important in defining student engagement, such as behavioural, cognitive, psychological, socio-cultural, and institutional aspects. Student engagement is a multifaceted concept to which all stakeholders in the learning process (students, staff, and the institution) have a contribution to make. In addressing the inclusivity barriers, Gibbs et al. (2021) caution that inclusivity is much more than solely students' participation. Given the growing importance of understanding engagement from both academic and industry perspectives (Macfarlane and Tomlinson, 2017; Shahjahan et al., 2022; Tight, 2024; Shahjahan et al., 2024), it is crucial to analyse the key elements of engagement.

2. Key Elements of Engagement



Understanding student engagement starts from the learning environment. Most existing studies have proxied student engagement with activities and interactions that occur between educators and learners within and outside of the classroom (Kahu, 2013). Such interactions and activities have been linked to completion rates (Thomas, 2012), better retention (Brooman and Darwent, 2014; McGrath et al., 2015), stimulating interactions with content, enhancing students' motivation (Xiong et al., 2015), and improvement in content knowledge and competence development (Wilson et al., 2019). This highlights the importance of the interactions between educators and learners, their mutual responsibilities in the process, as well as the investment students make in their learning which shape their learning experiences (Christie and Morris, 2021).

Kandiko (2012) made a clear distinction between 'engagement' and 'experience'. While 'experience' refers to the activities and opportunities provided to students, 'engagement' typically assumes students actively participating and taking responsibility for their learning. It is about moving beyond being passive recipients to being active contributors in the educational process. Leslie (2020) proposed that engagement requires a Trifecta of Student Engagement which occurs when a student engages with their course content, with their peers and with their instructor, creating a more complex environment for educators to manage. In addition to student capabilities being a requirement to enhance student engagement, motivation (Barkley, 2010), trust in oneself and others, a sense of belonging, and social capital are critical factors for effective engagement (Zepke, 2015).

While student participation in both classroom and extracurricular activities is essential for effective engagement (Oseghale et al., 2023), the responsibility for engagement

does not rest solely on students or staff in the classroom. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) must provide interaction opportunities by designing curricula and activities that foster engagement, taking into account student characteristics and the teaching and learning context (Bryson, 2015; Conrad and Openo, 2018; Adesina et al., 2023). Such interactions foster critical life-long learning skills essential for the workplace (Malan, 2020; Ainsworth, 2021). Moreover, Matheson and Sutcliffe (2018) argue that the curriculum should be centered around empowering students.

A student-centered approach to engagement emphasises active participation and co-creation of knowledge. This can be achieved through, for example, flipped classroom models, where students engage with course materials before class and use class time

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for interactive, hands-on activities. Such approaches encourage students to take ownership of their learning, foster deeper engagement, and motivate students to be active participants and co-creators of new knowledge (O'Flaherty and Phillips, 2015; DeLozier and Rhodes,

2017; Steen-Utheim and Foldnes, 2018). Spanjaard et al. (2023) contend that engagement activities (e.g., digital storytelling) promote student learning and satisfaction.

Effective student engagement involves creating an environment where students are motivated, feel a sense of belonging, and can participate in their learning process. Students, staff, and HEIs have their role to play in creating such learning experiences. By focusing on these key elements, institutions can enhance the overall educational experience and prepare students for successful careers.

3. Barriers to Engagement



Prior literature highlights several typical barriers to student engagement, an understanding of which is necessary for creating effective strategies to enhance learning experiences. Many barriers can be far outside the classroom (Glessmer, 2024). For example, extracurricular activities may not be accessible to students with caring responsibilities or may not take into account different religions and beliefs. These barriers can be viewed through both positive and negative lenses, which significantly affect students' willingness and ability to engage in learning.

First, language barriers and prior educational experiences are significant obstacles, particularly for international students (Huang et al., 2020). These students often face challenges in adapting to new learning environments and may struggle with understanding and integrating into the academic culture of their host country. Al-Nimer and Mustafa (2022) uncovered that demographical background, including nationality and linguistics significantly impact student engagement.

Second, mental barriers play a crucial role in student engagement. For example, D'Errico et al. (2016) highlighted that negative emotions such as anger, anxiety, and frustration can significantly impede students' inclination to engage. These emotions can create a mental barrier that prevents students from fully participating in their educational journey.

Third, barriers of cultural sensitivity are related to engagement being culturally and cross-culturally sensitive. Student engagement is highly sensitive to cultural contexts and is significantly impacted by social and emotional

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competencies (Santos et al., 2023; Guo et al., 2024). Research by Santos et al. (2023) across higher-degree institutions in nine countries found that students in developing countries demonstrated higher engagement and social capabilities compared to their peers in developed countries. Cultural background and socio-demographic factors play a crucial role in shaping engagement levels.

Fourth, the type of classroom mode, whether virtual or face-to-face, also affects engagement levels. From the student perspective, Meade and Parthasarathy (2024) concurred that students regard the use of ICT as an integral part of teaching and learning since they perceive that digital tools enhance their engagement. However, lack of IT skills, unreliable internet connection, social isolation, and distraction are among many obstacles of engagement in online learning (Ren, 2024; Wang, 2022). Some students perceived that the virtual mode of teaching diminishes student engagement and in turn negatively impacts their academic performance (Meade and Parthasarathy, 2024). Champion and Gunnlaugson (2017) believe this challenge can be overcome through 'transformative engagement', which necessitates educators to engage in robust dialogues on the topic and incorporate emerging technology not only in the classroom but their entire lives.

From the faculty perspective, the absence of educator competence in utilising active teaching methods and a deficit in institutional investment to improve teaching experience and quality, for example, by investments in the effective use of ICT resources, can negatively affect engagement (Almarghani and Mijatovic, 2021).



4. Inclusive Ways of Engaging



Fostering an inclusive environment is essential for effective student engagement and ensuring that all students have equal opportunities to succeed. Hence, maintaining inclusivity is a shared responsibility among students and educators (Walstra and Chukwuma, 2023), which should be obtained through inclusive ways of engaging. Educators can promote engagement by how they structure the classroom (e.g., discussion classes), individualisation (e.g., knowing student names and keeping class sizes small), and educator support in the form of being responsive to student questions, encouraging students to seek assistance, and assigning effective aids to learning (Miller, 2016).

4.1. Inclusivity

Inclusivity has become an increasingly important concept in twenty first century classrooms (Everett and Oswald, 2018; Gibbs et al., 2021). Bishop-Monroe and Garcia (2023) define 'inclusion' as a culture in which all students feel welcome, comfortable and confident sharing ideas and participating in the educational process. Walstra and Chukwuma (2023) reconceptualised the understanding of diversity to promote a more inclusive environment where students with disabilities felt welcomed and included through creating an inclusive learning environment and experience for all students. Considering inclusion should be a continuous and intentional process of creating a supportive learning environment (Bishop-Monroe and Garcia, 2023). Challenges of inclusive student engagement exist due to so-called 'silent' factors that are capable of excluding students (Vallee, 2017). Examples of exclusion include racial and gender factors, social and economic inequity, diverse sexualities and genders, linguistic bases, religious differences, and disabilities (Vallee, 2017; Moore, 2023). It also extends to taking in to consideration social issues for students within the classroom and beyond (Bishop-Monroe and Garcia, 2023).

Students from marginalised backgrounds have voiced dissatisfaction with barriers related to inclusivity which they believe limit their social and economic progression potential (Moore,

2023). One way to bridge the inclusivity gaps and silent exclusion of students from marginalised socio-economic backgrounds and historically excluded or -disadvantaged students is to enhance student engagement by directing additional effort toward these groups of students through rigorous management of the classroom and increasing effort of one-on-one student engagement (Vallee, 2017; Erasmus and Fourie, 2018).

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Collins-Warfield et al. (2023) advocate that HEIs have a responsibility to meet the specific educational needs of students from marginalised backgrounds and historically excluded or disadvantaged groups from low-income backgrounds, and students of colour by enhancing their higher education readiness through personalised initiatives. Moreover, inclusivity in the classroom can be enhanced through educators demonstrating more empathy and care for students (Collins-Warfield et al., 2023). Pedagogical tools of effective student engagement should foster self-confidence and self-discipline, and teach students how to practically apply knowledge.

4.2. Curriculum design

Internationalisation of the curriculum is an intentional act of integrating global and intercultural facets into national educational curriculums of HEIs to enhance quality (Phan et al., 2018; Trinh and Conner, 2019) which can enhance student engagement. Based on a comparative study of student perspectives amongst developed versus developing countries, Phan et al. (2018) indicate that regardless of country background, students proactively direct effort towards self-learning and self-development as a result of internationalisation of the curriculum. Their findings highlight that students at institutions that 'import' curricula require greater student

interaction, which was later affirmed by Trinh and Conner (2019) who concluded student participation or partnership in teaching and learning is critical in enhancing the efficacy of an internationalised curriculum.

Therefore, increasing student engagement is a key challenge in higher education today. Research suggests that active learning, value and expectations are important factors that determine student engagement. Some of these factors can be indirectly influenced by the faculty and course designers (Spruit and Joosten, 2019). Offering opportunities for flexible learning works towards the promotion of inclusivity and removal of barriers to learning and adheres to the QAA Subject Benchmark Statement on the need for “flexible educational approaches” (Hulene et al., 2023), which stresses the importance of considering inclusivity in student engagement.

4.3. Engagement and outcomes

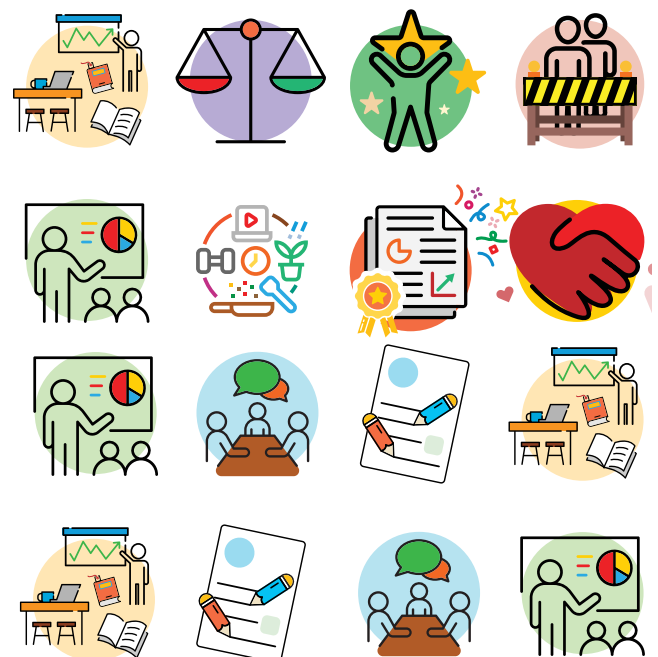
Prior literature demonstrate the linkages between student engagement programmes, frameworks and interventions, and student outcomes including academic performance (Mountain et al., 2022; Northey et al., 2015; Walsh and Jaquet, 2023; Chan and Chen, 2023; Green, 2019; Thomas, 2017; Michie et al., 2011).

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Studies evidence the positive impact of student engagement on, for example, class attendance (Dollinger et al., 2008), grades (Northey et al., 2015; Öz and Boyacı, 2021), retention statistics (Khademi Ashkzari et al., 2018), lifelong learning (Artess et al., 2017), qualification completion rates, and the number of post-graduate job entries (Kahu and Nelson, 2018). Several studies show that students who are more engaged are likely to be more successful. For example, Cheng

and Ding (2021) found that online review exercises increase student engagement as students spend a significant amount of time in preparing for online review exercises. However, Xerri et al. (2017) noted that the factors that influence the level of engagement in academic activities are still unclear. In a study of student engagement in e-learning, Krasodomska and Godawska (2021) revealed that socio-cultural differences inherent to student nationality and linguistic factors as top contributors to student engagement and learning outcomes. James et al. (2024) and Dragomir and Dumitru (2023) found inconclusive evidence of whether engagement activities improve student academic performance. Erasmus and Fourie (2018) highlighted that academic performance is affected by the socio-economic backgrounds of students, where students from marginalised backgrounds perform poorer than their counterparts from more affluent socio-economic backgrounds.

The aforementioned literature demonstrates the complexity surrounding the notion of student engagement. Educators should implement effective methods to increase inclusivity in the aim of addressing barriers to engagement. This requires further research and exploration. Adopting flexible learning approaches (Elkington et al., 2024) and learning from student voices are among key ways forward (Kazamia et al., 2024).





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