Student Experience and Engagement

Key Points

• Students are now at the heart of the system. It is an agenda driven, at least in part, by the changes in student fees, the need to demonstrate value for money, and the not uncontroversial re-framing of the student as customer or client.

• Student engagement is a complex, multi-faceted and evolving term. At its core are notions of involvement and empowerment, with a focus on giving students an active role in the development, management and governance of their institution, its academic programmes and their own learning experience.

• There is no single student experience, and the stereotypical view of a student as an 18 year-old embarking on a three- or four- year full-time degree course at a campus-based university is limited and limiting.

• The sheer diversity of the student body generates a multiplicity of different attitudes, expectations and aspirations in regard to each individual’s higher education experience.

• The diversity of providers offers students not only a profuse choice of entry points, pathways and destinations, but also a varied and extensive range of positive experiences.

• Many smaller and specialist institutions are able to deliver highly individualised learning and teaching in small-group settings. This is a key factor in positive student experiences and successful graduate outcomes.

• Smaller institutions are able to create a strong sense of community and belonging which can lead to higher levels of student retention.

• All institutions are seeking and developing different ways to engage with their students, whether as customers and clients or, preferably, as genuine partners and producers. If the opportunities offered to students by the diversity and choice across the sector are to be valued, then it is imperative that these factors are sustained and supported.
Student Experience and Engagement

“Student engagement has never been more important. Students will invest substantial commitment and time into getting the right qualifications and building their life pathway so it’s critical they are able to make informed choices before and during their study programmes. It’s essential that their voices are heard and not just by means of a survey at the end of their course. Education is personal and the university experience should be enhanced through radical, inclusive and transformative learning experiences.”

Megan Dunn, Vice President, Higher Education, NUS

“Is there a persuasive argument for student DIS-engagement?”

Kleiman, 2010

What is student engagement?

The concept of student engagement (and some recent variations and developments such as ‘students as partners’ and ‘students as producers’) has been around for several decades, and its meaning and manifestations have been heavily debated. It certainly has been high on the political agenda in recent years, with much talk of students being at the ‘heart of the system’. It is an agenda that is driven, at least in part, by the significant changes in student fees, the need to demonstrate value for money, and the not uncontroversial re-framing of the student as customer or client. The adoption of student engagement into the QAA’s Quality Code (QAA, 2012) has resulted in the mass creation of innovative forms of student participation across the UK.

The National Union of Student (NUS) was a natural champion and driver of the student engagement agenda, and its Manifesto for Partnership (NUS, 2012) was a powerful agent of development and change. Students’ unions everywhere seized on the opportunity to empower the student voice through participation to create change in the student interest, and the focus on student engagement acted as a catalyst to break down barriers in higher education.

Student engagement is a complex term, whose meaning has evolved over time. The term covers two separate but linked domains:

- improving the motivation of students to engage in learning and to learn independently
- the participation of students in quality enhancement and quality assurance processes, resulting in the improvement of their educational experience.

HEFCE describes student engagement as “giving students an active role in the development, management and governance of their institution, its academic programmes and their own learning experience” (HEFCE), and the QAA defines it as being “all about involving and empowering students in the process of shaping the student learning experience”. It has, and can be, applied to any of the following:

- time spent on a task
- quality of effort
- student involvement
- social and academic integration
- good practices in education
- learning outcomes.
The QAA’s list in many respects reflects many of the engagement ‘enablers’ that Alexander Astin identified several decades ago (Astin, 1999) and which have gained general acceptance, including enablers such as close contact with teachers, prompt feedback, clear and high expectations, collaborative learning and time on task. In 2013, HEFCE, NUS, the Association of Colleges and GuildHE jointly funded and supported the establishment of The Student Engagement Partnership (TSEP) to provide a unique partnership between students, NUS, students’ unions, universities and colleges, sector bodies and higher education funders. TSEP developed and published 10 Principles of Student Engagement (Webb et al., 2014):

**Learning and teaching**

1. Students are active members of a learning community
2. Students engage in setting the direction of their learning
3. Students engage in curricula content, design, delivery & organisation
4. Students engage in the enhancement of teaching, feedback and assessment practices
5. Students engage in and with their learning

**Quality assurance & enhancement processes**

6. Students are supported to fully engage in internal quality processes
7. Students effect change in a continual process of enhancement

**Decision-making, governance & strategy**

8. Students engage in the process of making decisions that affect them
9. Students engagement is given strategic leadership
10. Students engage through effective student leaders and governors

**Beyond customer satisfaction: community and intimacy**

“There is a broad emerging consensus that issues of engagement and developing a sense of belonging lie at the heart of both retention and success.”

BIS, 2014, p. 56

Just over 20 years ago, Peter Scott, in his influential article ‘The idea of the university in the 21st century’ (Scott, 1993) wrote that the abiding quality, special strength and indeed “charm” of the British higher education system was its academic and pedagogical “intimacy”. That intimacy was “subtly but powerfully” related to institutional scale. Scott was concerned that the massification of higher education was leading to the creation of mass institutions, i.e. rather than creating new institutions to meet the growth and demand for higher education – which had been the model in the 20th century – existing institutions would just increase in size, with a consequent and detrimental impact on that longstanding intimacy.

“Whatever the costs and benefits, academic intimacy, it seems, will be more difficult to maintain within the much larger institutions likely to emerge in Britain over the next decade.”

Scott, 1993, p. 20

Though ‘intimacy’ is not a word that normally appears in any institutional mission statement or strategic objectives, in 2010 – and appearing in a completely different context – IBM’s annual survey of CEOs from a wide range of companies, organisations and institutions from around the world identified ‘developing genuine customer integration and intimacy’ as one of the three key characteristics of what they termed ‘stand-out companies or organisations’ (the other two were creative leadership and operational
dexterity). ‘Customer intimacy’ is very different from ‘customer satisfaction’, as it marks a fundamental shift in the institution–student relationship. It moves away from the longstanding, standard, post-hoc question of ‘to what extent are you satisfied or not with ‘x’?’ and becomes a relationship based on partnership – a mutually beneficial, continuous feedback loop in which the institution leverages the insights gained from students to innovate, and in which students become active participants instead of passive ‘consumers’. Increased intimacy results in increased gains all round.

For the recent school-leaver or the mature adult returning to education after many years, going to university can be a very daunting experience. Different students will want different things from their experience. But students attending a smaller institution often talk about the strong sense of community and belonging that exists. In such an environment it is easier to get to know everybody by name and to feel that you are known by the institution and are a member of the institutional community. There is no doubt that the smaller the institution, the more likely it is that the student will perceive her or his experience as a more personalised one.

“The community at Leeds Trinity is so close-knit, you get to know all the staff and students really well. We actually had a day in which the Vice-Chancellor of Leeds Trinity and I actually went round and met every single student who attends the university.”

Miki Vyse, SU President, Leeds Trinity University

**Case Study 28:**
**Student academic representatives (StARS), University of Winchester**

Student academic representatives (StARs) are student volunteers who are elected by their classmates to represent their programme and year. A StAR’s role is to give feedback to the University about how their courses are running for their peers, to ensure the quality of their education. They feedback to programme and faculty committee meetings organised by the University. In these meetings, StARs have their own agenda item to feed back to lecturers and University staff about how their course is performing and what their fellow students think about it – through recommendations and commendations.
StARS are trained, administrated and motivated by Winchester Student Union, whilst their actual meetings are co-ordinated by the University. Recently, StARS activity has gone beyond course-level feedback, with feedback forums for IT services, the library and further campus departments have been organised to spread the student voice. Also, being a StAR is often the first step taken by engaged students who go on to become student fellows/revalidators or even members of the Student Union Executive Committee.

“... the main thing that sets the RVC apart... is the real community feel. There are very few places where the bond between students is greater. There is a real community spirit which extends from students to staff and even alumni of the college... There are not many universities where you can walk around campus and be greeted with smiles from so many familiar faces.”

Charlie Mays, SU President, Royal Veterinary College

Student Experience and Engagement

Case Study 29:
Visualising the student journey, St Mary's University, Twickenham, London

St Mary’s University sought to improve the student experience by exploring and improving its engagement and interaction with students, using information at key points on their journey through their chosen course and university life. This was seen as part of a holistic approach to using technology to enhance learning in the broadest sense. ‘Visualising the student journey’ also linked directly to student involvement with the HEA/Paul Hamlyn ‘What Works?’ Student Engagement, Retention and Success change project. The intention was to collect and analyse data to use in a collaborative process, mapping activity to identify problem areas and develop plans to address these to improve the student journey, student retention and overall experience. This would in turn influence the academic strategy.

St Mary’s student journey model is being used as a template for discussions held at various institutional-level committees and project groups, including the Student Experience Committee (a sub-committee of the Governing Body). What has been achieved so far is the development of a more holistic view of what it means to be a student at St Mary’s, providing a firm foundation for future work and an evidence-base on which to base strategic planning for 2015 onwards.

Student unions, of course, play a key role in the communal life of any institution, and they are as diverse as the institutions they operate in. They vary tremendously in the resources they have, the level of official engagement with the institution, and the range and type of activities that they run. However, it is worth highlighting that even though student unions in smaller institutions don’t necessarily have the same resources as some larger unions, they also have many advantages.

The sense of community within smaller institutions, highlighted above, can impact on student representation with many opportunities for informal engagement. Students know senior members of university staff and so can approach them about specific issues and there are often open-door policies in these institutions. This can also mean that student union officers often know most students across the institution and so can get high election turnouts and easily find out what large numbers of students think.

Collectively, these factors create a scenario in which the students in smaller institutions often have good student representation and a louder voice than they might in a much larger organisation.

(adapted, with permission, from The Leadership Foundation)
It is perhaps this sense of community in smaller and more specialist institutions that feeds into generally high levels of student satisfaction and low levels of non-continuation. This sense of community is likely to contribute to the feeling of being welcomed, with many smaller institutions featured in the top 10 ‘Most welcoming’ universities. For example, Harper Adams University lies in fourth place, Norwich University of the Arts in eighth and Falmouth University in ninth. Students, particularly international students, also refer to feeling safe on smaller campuses, or consciously choosing rural campuses.

Furthermore, the latest data from HESA (Figure 7) not only shows the interesting mix of institutions that comprise the top 20 for lowest levels of non-continuation, but also that nine of those institutions are small and/or specialist institutions (highlighted in blue in Figure 7). It is also worth noting that of the other institutions at the top of the table, Cambridge, Oxford, St Andrews and Durham are all organised along the college system, which also provides a strong sense of community.

**Figure 7: Non-continuation following year of entry with small/specialists highlighted in blue**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>Percent no longer in HE (%)</th>
<th>Bench-mark (%)</th>
<th>Standard deviation (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University of Cambridge</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>0.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Oxford</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>0.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Buckingham</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>1.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of St Andrews</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>0.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Royal Northern College of Music</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>1.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Royal College of Music</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>2.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Royal Central School of Speech and Drama</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>1.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservatoire for Dance and Drama</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>1.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Durham</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>0.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Exeter</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>0.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Royal Veterinary College</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>1.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Bath</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>0.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne</td>
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<td>3.4</td>
<td>0.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loughborough University</td>
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<td>4.1</td>
<td>0.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Bristol</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>0.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cardiff University</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>0.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Southampton</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>0.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guildhall School of Music and Drama</td>
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<td>5.9</td>
<td>2.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swansea University</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>0.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St Mary’s University College</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>1.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>1.53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: HESA, 2013

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As measured by the The Higher Expectations Survey conducted by YouthSight
Engaging students

“Students want to be active participants in the creation of their education and should not be relegated to passive consumers of education.”

Toni Pearce, NUS President, 2013

While being part of a social community is clearly an important factor in creating a positive student experience, perhaps of even greater significance is the development of and participation in what Ramsden (2008) describes as building a learning community.

There are, of course, many aspects to building such a learning community, but one of the key elements, as Graham Gibbs’ work demonstrates, is that class size is one of the most significant predictors of both student performance and learning gains (Gibbs, 2012). Class size was also seen as a much more significant indicator than purely the number of ‘contact hours’ that students receives.

Many smaller institutions, or more specialist providers with highly specialised courses, are able to deliver highly individualised learning and teaching in a small-group setting due to the number of students on each course. This gives students the opportunity to develop close and productive teaching and learning relationships that simply would not be possible in larger institutions or on larger courses. This smaller student cohort can also lead to informal teaching environments.

“One of the advantages of being a smaller university is that lecturers and other teaching staff can spend more time working with smaller groups and can get to know you as an individual, helping you learn, develop and achieve your goals.”

Jessica Clarke, FdSc Veterinary Nursing, Harper Adams University

Specialist and flexible provision

There are many universities and institutions that are specialist in a particular subject area. These institutions are able to bring together a large critical mass of experts who are specialised in specific areas. For example, in many history departments across the country there may be, at most, one specialist in, say, Japanese history, whereas at SOAS, University of London – which specialises in the study of Asia, Africa and the Middle East – there is an entire Japanese history department. This means that students are able to focus their studies on particular areas of interest.

This kind of environment, where there is a high concentration of specialist knowledge bringing together not only a group of experts in the field but also complementary and significant library and other resources to support the further exploration of the field, is something that is likely to be rare in less specialised institutions, especially at an undergraduate level.

There is also an expectation within specialist institutions that there will be current, industry-relevant equipment. For example, in creative and performing arts institutions, it is expected that cutting-edge, industry-standard equipment is available to use, ensuring industry-ready graduates; and this is integral to teachers being experts in their chosen industry.

Engagement is also facilitated in a number of institutions by the type of course that they offer or the way in which they deliver the course. This can be a diverse range of qualifications beyond the more traditional Bachelors, Masters and Doctorates, including many short courses for continuing professional development to Higher National Certificates or Diplomas and Foundation Degrees. Providers also vary the way in which these are delivered – whether full time, part time or even on an accelerated timescale.

This diversity of delivery enables institutions to provide more tailored approaches that are flexible to the needs of the student. A good example of this flexibility is Birkbeck, University of London, which specialises in part-time and evening higher education aimed at meeting the changing educational, cultural, personal and career needs of adults. By comparison, SAE Institute offers
fast-track degrees, with students studying for two years rather than three, achieved by having a third semester in the summer and shorter holiday periods. The Open University is perhaps the most well-known for delivering high-quality distance learning but this is increasingly becoming the norm, with many universities now offering online provision, with, for example, Rose Bruford College delivering an online BA (Hons) in Opera Studies.

**An engaging diversity**

“The provision of a positive student experience is not the domain of just one type of institution.”

John Newton, Research Manager at YouthSight

The phrases ‘student experience’ and ‘student engagement’ imply, in their singularity, that there is a single way to experience and engage with higher education. What is very clear is that, currently, there are c. 2.5m individual student experiences and forms of engagement in the UK higher education system. While no one system is able to provide a fully personalised and customised educational journey, one of the great strengths of the UK HE landscape is that its diversity offers students not only a profuse choice of entry points, pathways and destinations, but also a varied and extensive range of positive experiences. It is important to remember that although there is always room for improvement, the vast majority of students are generally satisfied with their higher education experience across that diversity.

All institutions are seeking and developing different ways to engage with their students, whether as customers and clients or, preferably, as genuine partners and co-producers. If the opportunities offered to students by the diversity and choice across the sector are to be valued, then it is imperative that these factors are sustained and supported.

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**Case Study 30:**

**Empowering dyslexic learners, Leeds College of Art**

Dyslexia is a significant issue in art education. A key area for learning development and for information and learning technologies (ILT) within the college was to overcome some of the challenges faced by dyslexic students. These learners find it hard to follow traditional academic routes of learning because of their reluctance to engage in activities that put them at a disadvantage. The aim was to use ILT to go some way towards overcoming these fears.

The use of assistive technologies, combined with mobile phones and similar devices, empowered the students and enabled them to take control of their learning and organisational skills, making it easier for them to work, to be more engaged with the academic/critical side of the course and giving them the confidence to ask for further academic support.

Adapted from the JISC RSC Excellence in Inclusivity case study