ASPIRE Recognition of Excellence in Student Engagement in a Medical, Dental and Veterinary School
An Introduction

Introduction

In higher education there is growing interest in student engagement, in the 'student voice' and in staff working in partnership with students to deliver the education programme and to facilitate change. Many perceived benefits are often highlighted for students, such as improving student experience and achievement, and for institutions as an indicator of success, quality assurance and competitive advantage. However, understandings of what 'student engagement' is vary between individuals, their disciplines, institutions and countries. This paper will provide a brief overview of the topic of student engagement before outlining a definition and approach for the ASPIRE recognition of excellence in student engagement in a medical, dental or veterinary school.

Background to student engagement

The term 'social engagement' can be traced to debates about student involvement, and is a term in common use particularly in North America and Australasia where annual large-scale student engagement surveys have been conducted for a number of years (Trowler, 2010).   These surveys, the US National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Australian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE), comprise of self-rating questionnaires completed by students based on indicators of best practice: academic challenge; active and collaborative learning; student-faculty interaction; enriching educational experiences; supportive campus environment; and work-integrated learning (AUSSE only). An argued drawback of this approach is that by using a survey method, the issues of engagement has become focused on what students are doing, and any assessment of student's perceptions or expectations of their experience has been lost (Hand and Bryson 2008).

 The term has traditionally been less commonly used in Europe and the UK but has been associated with debates regarding student feedback, student representation and student approaches to learning (Trowler, 2010). However, student engagement has been a significant part of education policy for a number of years. For example student-centred learning in higher education '*characterised by innovative methods of teaching that involve students as active participants in their*

own learning' is a commitment of the EHEA Bologna Process (2012:2). Indeed one of the Bologna Process priorities for 2012-2015 is to

> *Establish conditions that foster student-centred learning, innovative teaching methods and a supportive and inspiring working and learning environment, while continuing to involve students and staff in governance structures at all levels **(EHEA 2012:5)***

In addition recent research conducted into curriculum trends as part of the MEDINE2 (Medical Education in Europe) project identified the empowerment of students to take responsibility for their own learning and student involvement in curriculum planning committees as major current trends that it was hoped would develop further in the future (Kennedy et al. 2013).

Defining social engagement

Whilst all agree student engagement is important there is considerable disagreement about what it means. As Kahu (2013) notes,

> *A key problem is a lack of distinction between the state of engagement, its antecedents and its consequences (2013:758).*

She identifies four relatively distinct approaches to engagement:

1. Behavioural, focussing on student behaviour and effective teaching practice;

2. Psychological, focusing on the internal individual process of engagement, including behaviour, cognition, emotion and conation (the will to succeed);

3. Social-cultural, focusing on the impact of the broader social, cultural and political context;

4. Holistic which attempts to combine the strands together.

Using this classification the approach taken to student engagement in the NSSE and AUSSE surveys can be located in the behavioural approach, and traditionally approaches to student engagement have emphasised the behavioural and psychological approaches.

Others have drawn a distinction between market and developmental approaches to student engagement. The market model is based on neo-liberal thinking and identifies students as consumers, and approaches engagement from a consumer rights and institutional market position. In contrast the developmental model is based on constructivist concept of learning and identifies students as partners in a learning community. The emphasis here is on student development and quality of learning (HEA 2010:3).

However, the rapidly changing nature of higher education and of student's lives has led several authors to highlight the importance of the broader social, cultural and political context. Baron and Corbin (2012) note that despite the policy push to adopt practices that enhance engagement, what is implemented is often fragmented and contradictory. They argue that whilst student engagement is seen as positive by governments, universities and individual academics, many of their practices

may have had the opposite effect. They highlight reduced support for student social activities, performance-orientated university cultures and larger class sizes and reduced contact time, in addition to the increasing marketization of higher education and the shift in the perception of students to being consumers and commodities. Fundamental change in the relationship between students and institutions has led to renewed efforts by institutions to ensure students voices are heard and acted upon (Little et al., 2009). Thus student engagement has become a quality control indicator (Baron and Corbin 2012:765).

Research has suggested a strong link between academic and social engagement, with a sense of belonging aiding student learning (Bok 2006). The importance of student engagement in extracurricular activities and voluntary service has been highlighted. However, the demanding and intensive nature of medical school curricula can often leave little space for personal development and engagement within the academic community, and social isolation, burnout and depression are common among medical students (Bicket et al. 2010). In addition, the demands placed on students in their lives outside of studying have also been increasing. For example James et al. (2010) reporting on research conducted in Australia note that in 2009 61% of first-year full-time students were in paid employment of around 13 hours a week. The need to balance work and study is leading students to adopt a 'time-savvy' approach to learning, making calculated decisions about how best to use their time (Tarrant, 2006).

Each of the approaches to student engagement has strengths and limitations, and Kahu (2013) presents a conceptual framework which seeks to combine all elements and present student engagement as,

> *A psycho-social process, influenced by institutional and personal factors, and embedded within a wider social context, integrates the social-cultural perspective with the psychological and behavioural (2013:768).*

Frameworks for engagement

Hand and Bryson (2008) following their review of student engagement identified four important messages for those wishing to enhance the student experience:

1. There is a gap in expectations between staff and students as to where the responsibility for engagement lies;

2. It is important that engagement occurs early in university life, and attention to the establishment of relationships (social and academic) between staff and students is vital;

3. Individual staff can make a difference but for significant gains it is important that an institutional approach is adopted;

4. There is a need for engagement with purpose: engaging learning experiences that provide opportunities for autonomy, personal growth and change (2008:31).

Similarly Baron and Corbin (2012) argue that,

Student engagement cannot be successfully pursued at the level of the individual teacher, school or faculty but must be pursued holistically in a 'whole-of-university' approach and with a common understanding of what it is the institution seeks to achieve (2012:760).

A range of frameworks for measuring student engagement exist. The UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) highlights student engagement as relating to two core areas: improving student motivation to engage in learning and independent learning; and promoting student participation in quality assurance and enhancement processes (QAA 2012:2). They note the positive influence student involvement can have on the development and delivery of all aspects of educational experience from admissions and induction, through curriculum design and teaching delivery to learning opportunities and assessment. The Quality Code (2012) highlights the requirement of higher education providers to meet the following expectation:

Higher education providers take deliberate steps to engage all students, individually and collectively, as partners in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience (2012:12).

Seven indicators of sound practice are also identified:

1. Define and promote opportunities for any student to engage in educational enhancement and quality assurance;

2. Create and maintain an environment within which students and staff engage in discussions about demonstrable enhancement of the educational experience;

3. Arrangements for the effective representation of the collective student voice at all organisational levels;

4. Student representatives and staff have access to training and on-going support to equip them to fulfil their roles in educational enhancement and quality assurance effectively;

5. Students and staff engage in evidence –based discussions based on the mutual sharing of information;

6. Staff and students to disseminate and jointly recognise the enhancements made to the student educational experience, and the efforts of students in achieving these successes;

7. The effectiveness of student engagement is monitored and reviewed at least annually, and policies and processes enhanced where required.

Sparqs (Student Participation in Quality Scotland) along with the key higher education agencies in Scotland have developed and agreed a framework for Scotland based on five key elements:

1. Students feeling part of a supportive institution;

2. Students engaging in their own learning;

3. Students working with their institution in shaping the direction of learning;

4. Formal mechanisms for quality and governance; and

5. Influencing the student experience at a national level.

The framework also identifies six features of effective student engagement:

1. A culture of engagement;

2. Students as partners;

3. Responding to diversity;

4. Valuing the student contribution;

5. Focus on enhancement and change;

6. Appropriate resources and support (sparqs 2012).

ASPIRE Award for Excellence in Student Engagement

The ASPIRE Award for excellence in student engagement recognises the different approaches and means of assessing student engagement and sought to synthesise them in a way that can be operationalized and assessed.

For a school to be regarded as achieving excellence in student engagement in a medical, dental or veterinary school, there must be evidence that students contribute to the academic community and that they take an active role and are consulted, involved and participate in shaping the teaching and learning experience. Four spheres of engagement can be recognised:

1. Student engagement with the management of the school, including matters of policy and the mission and vision of the school. *(Student engagement with the structures and processes)*

2. Student engagement in the provision of the school's education programme. (*Student engagement with the delivery of teaching and assessment*)

3. Student engagement in the academic community. (*Student's engagement in the school's research programme and participation in meetings*)

4. Student engagement in the local community and the service delivery.

For each of the four spheres of student engagement, more detailed criteria are described (see *ASPIRE Recognition of Excellence in Student Engagement in a Medical, Dental and Veterinary School – Criteria*)

The notion of excellence embodies the active engagement with scholarship and a desire to seek continuous improvement in the area of student engagement.

It is recognised that cultural, social and other issues are likely to have an influence on the engagement of students in a school and that how student engagement manifests itself will vary from school to school. Excellence may be found in institutions with limited access to resources just as much as in wealthier institutions. The way in which institutions demonstrate cost effectiveness and context appropriateness will be taken into account by the panel when reviewing individual submissions.

Further guidance relating to the criteria can be found in:
- *ASPIRE Recognition of Excellence in Student Engagement in a Medical, Dental and Veterinary School – Criteria* and
- *ASPIRE Student Engagement Application: Guidelines for Submitters.*

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