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Quality in context – embedding improvement

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Karena Maguire is Head of System Quality Projects in Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI). She has been involved in the quality assurance (QA) of higher education and training for over twenty-three years working with national and international agencies, quality networks and consortiums. Karena is a member of the Board of Management of the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning and a member of the Steering Group for the Irish National Student Survey (INSS). She has recently been invited to join the Board of Trustees of an international Accreditation Council. Enhancing student engagement is a key aspect of the work programme for QQI in the context of a new suite of quality assurance guidelines launched recently and embracing the student centred European Standards and Guidelines, 2015.



Proposal

Title: Embedding Improvement through Student Engagement

Abstract:

Student satisfaction is important not only for improving learning outcomes but also for improving retention, progression and completion rates. Raising student satisfaction is strongly correlated to high student engagement in the evaluation and development of pedagogy and in the governance and management of learning institutions. Learning is enhanced when students become active *partners*, as opposed to *consumers*, within a continuously evolving learning environment. This research presents a study of student engagement for enhancing student participation and learning outcomes. A collaborative research team comprising academic and student leaders, a national quality assurance and qualifications agency and a national funding authority, conducted the research. Research included site visits to a number of HEI's that included focus groups and consultations with key stakeholders. The research led to the development of key *principles* and sample *practices* that all HEI's can use for strengthening their student engagement policies and for embedding improvement at the heart of the institution.

The paper is based on: Research

Text of paper:

Introduction

Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) now face significant challenges improving student satisfaction and learning outcomes and improving retention, progression and completion rates. Attracting international students for example is now an essential revenue stream for supporting research activity in most HEIs. Poor retention, progression and completion rates erode essential revenues and also damage institutional reputation. Research has shown that high student satisfaction is strongly correlated to various forms of student engagement that not only positively impacts on these key performance indicators but that also unleashes new ideas that raise learning standards (Carini et al, 2006). Most HEI's have various student engagement practices from course and programme evaluations to committee involvement. However, a survey of academics and students as part of this research has found that many of these practices are poorly implemented, inconsistently applied across a HEI sector and some remain hidden within leading institutions that realise the benefits of high engagement. The purpose of this research is to present an approach for HEIs to assess their current practice and then develop an ambitious policy for student engagement underpinned by key principles and practices. This paper begins with a summary of an extensive review of literature. The literature survey is followed by a presentation of the requirements gathered by key stakeholders and a set of key principles and sample practices.



Literature Survey

Student engagement with all aspects of HEI life is now understood to be a two-way process (Klemenčič, 2015). Students need both the agentic possibility (*power*) and agentic orientation (*will*) to have meaningful engagement. While students are ultimately responsible for their own learning and level of engagement, student engagement is also dependent on institutions generating conditions, policies, and culture that enable and empower students to engage (Coates *et al.* 2014). Student engagement is defined as: “*The investment of time, effort and other relevant resources by both students and their institutions intended to optimise the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students, and the performance and reputation of the institution*” (Trowler, 2011). Three strands of student engagement have been identified from Trowler (2010): (i) Student engagement in Individual Learning; (ii) Student engagement with Structure and Process and; (iii) Student engagement with Identity. Students engage in their own learning through their own studies and also through evaluations of their experiences with a view to enhancement. Students engage in structures and processes by participating in decision making bodies that develop and implement policy and evaluate overall quality and performance. Finally, students engage identity by being part of the culture of engagement with the institution and later as future ambassadors and advocates for the institution.

Student engagement culture is influenced by two competing ideological positions - the so called *market* model that gives students the rights of the *consumer*, but also places them as outside purchasers of a future ‘more-educated’ version of themselves (HEA, 2010). In contrast, the *developmental* model identifies students as *partners* in a learning community that have both the rights and the responsibilities of citizens. The developmental model fosters a continuously evolving community with students contributing to the success of their institution as co-creators and democratic citizens of their own learning (Fielding, 2012).

Three drivers influence the establishment of a developmental culture of engagement that benefits both the student and the institution:

Democratic citizenship: HEI’s plays a vital role in building and maintaining a democratic culture and democratic institutions (Fielding, 2012; Bergen, 2015; Klemenčič, 2015). If students are to become strong contributors in wider democratic society, then notions of citizenship and responsibility will determine the nature of their engagement with that community. HEI’s and student leaders have a responsibility in fostering a sense of civic responsibility among the wider student body.

Learning community: If genuine, conscientious student involvement is to exist, “*students need to feel a certain degree of ‘loyalty’, defined as a strong feeling of allegiance and attachment to one’s (HEI)*” (Carey, 2013). If such loyalty is fostered, students can voluntarily seek to improve structures within the institution for all students, present and future.

Critical institution: Academic freedom is enshrined in various Government acts as an essential principle of higher education institutions. Academics and universities have traditionally prided themselves on their ability, and duty, to speak truth to power. However, within HEIs there is a power imbalance between the student and the lecturer. HEI institutions need to ensure that all members are facilitated in offering open and constructive criticism in order to develop the institution and its members.

Student participation in higher education governance in Europe is also well developed. European Ministers welcome the role of students as, “*competent, active and constructive partners*” through the Bologna Process, and who should be treated as “*full members of the*



higher education community” (Klemenčič & Bergan (2015). The European Student Union (ESU) is also committed to the notion of students as partners (ESU; 2016) and student involvement in internal quality review processes has been an integral element of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ESG) since 2005 (ESG 2015).

These European-wide initiatives have led and informed to a wide range of national and sectorial initiatives. In Scotland for example, the Student Partnership in Quality Scotland (sparqs, 2015) has led to a range of practices where students are placed at the centre of governance. In England, the student engagement model at Birmingham City University (BCU, 2015) views students as democratic citizens within a continuously improving learning community. In Ireland, which is reasonably similar to many respects to other European HEI’s, student engagement, participation and representation at the highest levels of governance is enshrined in law through a series of Government acts (Acts, 2016) and through national quality assurance guidelines. Ireland also like many HEI jurisdictions has a national student engagement survey called the Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE, 2016) managed as a collaborative partnership between HEI’s, Student Unions and Government agencies.

Research Goals and Method

While student engagement is widely acknowledged as essential and various common practices are in place in most HEI’s, there is a need to strengthen guidelines in the way key principles and practices of student engagement are put into operation locally within HEI’s. Committee membership and student evaluation of teaching alone, for example, does not necessarily equate to high levels of engagement. Issues such as short terms of office for student leaders and lack of training and experience means students are not able to contribute fully. Representation is also just one strand of student engagement. Both formal and informal norms, attitudes and behaviours need to be nurtured as well as ‘parity of esteem’ between student representatives and staff. There is also a lack of consistency in interpreting and operationalizing student engagement across HEI’s. Progressive practices present in some HEI’s or disciplines are not always evident across the sector. The goals of this research were to review empirical research around student engagement, survey and identify best practices and bring forward *principles* and *practices* that can be used by all HEIs for deepening the culture of student engagement that can lead to greater student satisfaction and learning outcomes.

A research team was established comprising academics from a number of HEI’s, experts from the national quality assurance and qualifications agency (QQI) and student leaders to explore best practice and propose principles for adoption by the HEI sector in Ireland. The study was supported by the Higher Education Authority of Ireland and took one year to complete. A qualitative, inductive, multiple case study approach was adopted as the chosen methodology. A case study approach was deemed appropriate as it allowed the research team to investigate best practices including practices that failed to deliver deep engagement. The methodology included an extensive review of empirical research, two case studies, a series of focus group meetings among staff and students at a number of HEIs and widespread consultation with academic and students leaders within HEI, the QQI and national Governance bodies.



Research Results

The results of this research study are presented in three sections below. The first deals with observations from the various stakeholder groups. The next section presents ten principles identified by the research team and that can be adopted by HEI's when strengthening student engagement. The final section presents examples of practices that can be adopted by HEIs for enhancing student engagement.

Observations from Stakeholders

Stakeholders from various organisations were organized into focus groups that were used to highlight a number of issues in relation to the practice of student engagement. Consistency of practice was a recurring issue raised, i.e. good practices existed, but are not consistently applied across institutions. Stakeholders demonstrated a requirement for a set of principles, which would provide guidance for the consistent assessment and enhancement of student engagement. Some commendable practices and initiatives were noted in some HEIs and these are highlighted later. The key issues emerging from the stakeholder analysis are summarised below:

Feedback loop: Students are routinely invited to provide feedback and evaluation of teaching. Some students who were not provided evidence that their feedback led to changes were more likely to be frustrated, and to disengage from other forms of student engagement. It was repeatedly suggested that formative or mid term evaluations should be conducted that allows students to see the fruits of their engagement effort.

Communication: The importance of transparency of communication was emphasised. The transparency surrounding decision-making also has an impact on the culture of the institution. Staff and students can have different perspectives and expectations. Open engagement ensures that communication barriers can be overcome earlier.

Consistency: Consistency of practice was a recurring issue. Good practices exist, but, as stated, there were marked inconsistencies within and between institutions. The sharing of good practice was emphasised.

Representation: The importance of both formal and informal representation and engagement was stressed. The challenge for student members on governing bodies was highlighted since they are required to act as members of the governing body with collective responsibility rather than exclusively as the student voice with their own demands.

Power dynamic: The unequal power dynamic between staff and students was repeatedly emphasised. Academics clearly have responsibility for course development and assessment but some role other than student evaluation needs to be explored to allow students also take 'ownership' for their area of study.

Student development: Students in their early years of college were rarely found to take an active role in engagement practices. The valuable activities of clubs and societies was also emphasised to prepare students for other leadership roles. Formal training for both student



leadership and class representatives was emphasised. Chairpersons and other staff members must also ensure that students are mentored and facilitated at meetings.

Memory Transfer: Student memory transfer was seen as a major challenge due to the short term of office for most student leaders. Specific measures including insuring overlap between job rotations were suggested.

Other issues that arose during stakeholder analysis included willingness and ability of academic staff to engage with students and the importance of every member of the learning community to feel valued. The physical spaces used by an institution for staff-student activities were also deemed important for fostering engagement. Some institutions have campuses that allows 'collisions' and ad hoc meetings between staff and students to occur. Physical space extends to designing learning spaces that fosters small group learning and project based learning.

Principles of Student Engagement

The research team derived ten principles of student engagement. This approach can be traced to work by Boyer (1990) and is also used in a number of HEI sectors for example in the UK (NUS, 2016). The ten principles are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Student Engagement Principles

Principle	Description
Democracy:	The institution and student union will adhere to democratic principles, and will encourage these principles in their staff and student bodies, and in wider society.
Student as partner:	Students being viewed, and viewing themselves, as partners is key in moving beyond legal compliance to embed a culture of engagement throughout the institution.
Inclusivity and diversity:	Institutions will actively seek to gain insights and contributions for all sectors of the academic community in their governance and decision-making processes. This will go beyond the formal legislative requirements.
Transparency:	Institutions will be transparent in the life-cycle of their decision-making processes, while student unions will be transparent in their internal lines of governance, and in the relationship between elected officers and permanent staff.
Students as co-creators:	Students have responsibility for their own learning. Irish HEIs will embrace innovative learning techniques that incorporate the student as creator of their own learning.
Collegiality and parity of esteem:	Encroaching consumerism is eroding collegiality and open creativity between staff and students. Greater collegiality builds trust and enhances the assessment and enhancement of pedagogy.
Professionalism and support:	Students and their representatives will contribute fully and act in a professional manner when they are involved in the structures and processes of the HEI. This professionalism is the joint responsibility of the institution and student union, and all responsibility cannot be placed on the individual student.
Feedback:	Institutions will welcome and encourage open and prompt feedback from students. Suitable measures will be put in place across the institution to ensure that students are facilitated in



	providing feedback on modules and the institution in a safe and valued manner.
Self-criticism and enhancement:	Student unions and institutions will continue to be self-critical of their student engagement practices.
Consistency of values:	Institutions and student unions will ensure that consistent values are in place across the institution, and may put procedures in place to allow departments to share good practice measures.

Practices of Student Engagement

During the research a number of practices were documented. Practices can be divided by location, degree of formality, and the depth of the engagement opportunity offered (sparqs, 2004; Elassy, 2013). Table 2 divides practices into a number of levels beginning with the behaviour of a single individual student up to a student representative's role in international developments. Also indicated are the three stands of student engagement affected as defined by Trowler (2010).

Conclusions

Student engagement means student involvement in governance and management, quality assurance, and teaching and learning within HEI's. This research has found that students must be centrally involved in decision-making processes in HEI's. While students are ultimately responsible for their own learning, effective student engagement depends on institutional conditions - policies and culture. This research promotes a *developmental* model, that views students as *partners* in a learning community with both the rights and responsibilities of democratic citizenship. The benefits of effective student engagement can include better retention rates, higher levels of satisfaction and better student/staff relationships. Achieving successful student engagement is not about compliance; it is about building up a meaningful culture and two-way communications between an HEI and its students. An effective culture of engagement incorporates all staff and students, and reflects the full diversity of the staff/student body.

The principles and practices of student engagement reported in this paper underpin and enhance existing engagement practices. The interpretation and implementation of value-based principles will clearly differ between HEI's and will be effected by the ability of individual institutions, student unions, students and staff members to act. The list of practices will help in interpreting these principles but clearly many practices have been omitted and others will evolve over time. In developing a culture of student engagement many different organisations will also need to be involved in particular quality assurance and qualifications agencies.

In enhancing student engagement the authors recommend that each HEI complete a co-led (staff and student) self-evaluation of their formal and informal engagement practices and opportunities at each level within the institution. Arising from this activity, institutions and students should co-author a student engagement *policy* that will place the ten principles presented in this paper, at the heart of institution. Institutions should be supported in this endeavour that should provide oversight for a national training and capacity-building programme. The effectiveness of these HEI policies will also require periodic and independent peer review and subsequent enhancement over time. The role of national quality assurance and qualifications agencies in first providing guidelines for the development of policy and subsequently providing oversight of the peer review process will

be essential. Figure 1 below presents a graphical roadmap for Student Engagement presented as part of a report to the Irish HEI sector (HEA, 2016).

Table 2: Student Engagement Practices

Level of Practice	Examples of Practice	Structure and Process	Individual Learning	Identity
Individual	Student employed as tutor, disability support, library assistant, etc.	*	*	*
	Academic engagement		*	
	Developing research or teaching projects with staff	*	*	
	Vote in student elections	*		
	Sports Clubs and Societies committee membership	*		*
	Student journalist in student union media		*	*
	Engagement with teaching evaluations and national surveys	*		
Course/ Programme	Representation on course-development and quality review committees	*		
	Act as elected class/programme representative	*		*
	Community based assignments and projects	*	*	*
	Provide/ co-design course and programme feedback	*		
	Peer assessment	*	*	
	Working with staff member in curriculum design	*	*	
	Project based learning and capstone projects		*	
	Internships		*	*
Department/ School	Representation on school-level committees and quality-reviews	*	*	*
	Representation on student council	*	*	
	Representation on staff-student liaison committee	*	*	*
	Train other student representatives	*	*	
	Organise events within the school	*		
	Effective gender and equality training and culture	*		*
	Interdisciplinary teaching and research opportunities	*	*	
College/ Faculty	Student employed as tutor, disability support, library assistant, etc.	*		
	Design training for students, peer-support tutors etc.	*		
	Developing research or teaching projects with staff		*	
	Sports Clubs and Societies committee membership	*	*	
	Student journalist in student union media		*	
	Student volunteering	*	*	
	Recognition and rewards for student engagement	*	*	*



Institution	Representation on governing authority etc.	*	*	*
	Design training for students, peer-support tutors etc.	*		
	Work with relevant committees	*		
	Develop policy and procedures with staff	*		
	Student leadership training and development	*	*	*
	Visible social responsibility and recognition	*		*
	Broadcast innovative and effective outcomes	*	*	*
National	Representation on national student bodies	*		*
	Design training for students, peer-support tutors etc. (NStEP)	*		
	Participation in/design national student surveys	*		
	Representation on national education bodies	*		*
	Participation in peer review of other HEIs	*		*
International	Participation in policy development teams	*		*
	Representation on European student bodies	*		*
	Representation on EU education bodies	*		*
	Participation in peer review of Intl. HEIs	*		*
	Participation in EU policy development teams	*		*

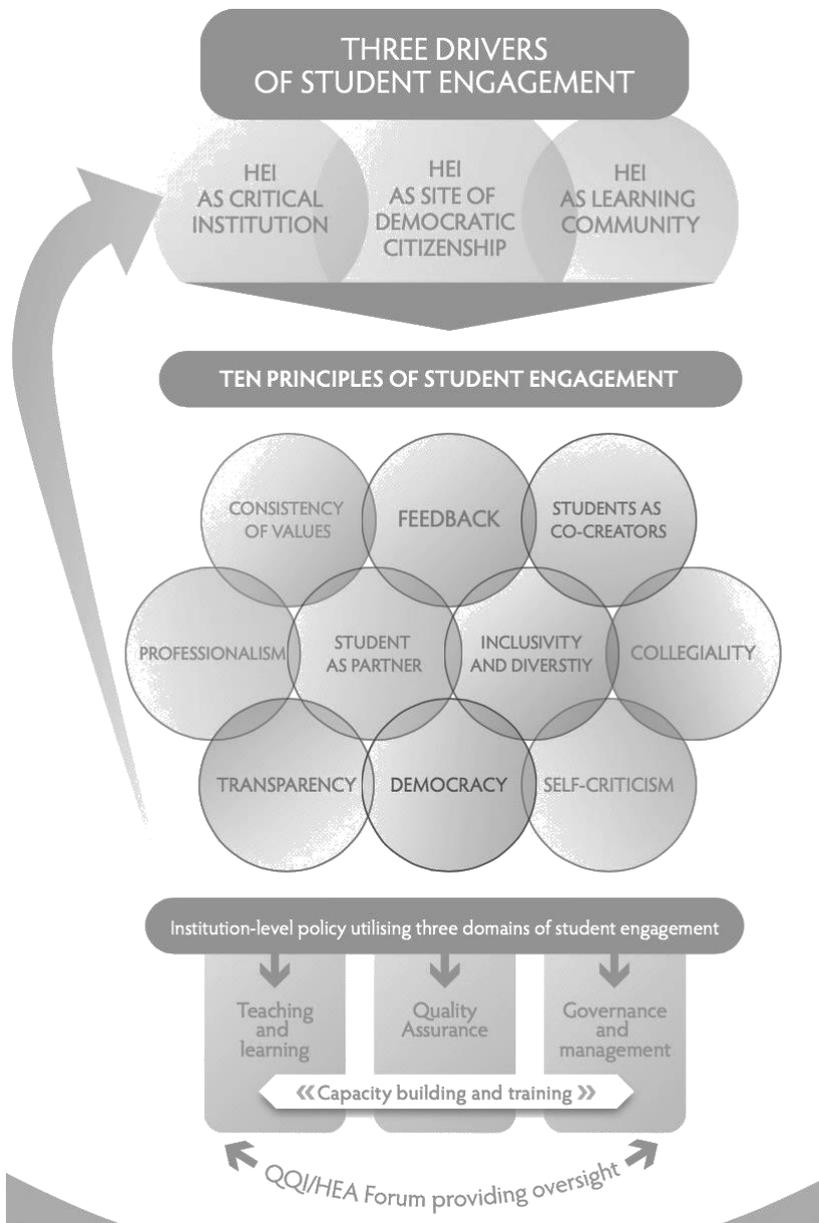


Figure 1: Roadmap for Embedding the Principles for Student Engagement



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Expected learning outcomes for participants:

- Value of effective student engagement
- Principles that underpin effective student engagement
- Practices of student engagement at various levels in an HEI and nationally