ERGA 2011 Workshop Proposal

Applying a social justice framework to ensure good practice in monitoring student learning engagement

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Abstract

A current Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) funded action research project aims to provide a set of practical resources founded on a social justice framework, to guide good practice for monitoring student learning engagement (MSLE) in higher education. The project involves ten Australasian institutions, eight of which are engaged in various MSLE type projects. A draft framework, consisting of six social justice principles which emerged from the literature has been examined with reference to the eight institutional approaches for MSLE in conjunction with the personnel working on these initiatives during the first action research cycle. The cycle will examine the strategic and operational implications of the framework in each of the participating institutions. Cycle 2 will also build capacity to embed the principles within the institutional MSLE program and will identify and collect examples and resources that exemplify the principles in practice. The final cycle will seek to pilot the framework to guide new MSLE initiatives.

In its entirety, the project will deliver significant resources to the sector in the form of a social justice framework for MSLE, guidelines and sector exemplars for MSLE. As well as increasing the awareness amongst staff around the criticality of transition to university (thereby preventing attrition) and the significance of the learning and teaching agenda in enhancing student engagement, the project will build leadership capacity within the participating institutions and provide a knowledge base and institutional capacity for the Australasian HE sector to deploy the deliverables that will safeguard student learning engagement

At this early stage of the project the workshop session provides an opportunity to discuss and examine the draft set of social justice principles and to discuss their potential value for the participants' institutional contexts. Specifically, the workshop will explore critical questions associated with the principles.

Introduction

A current Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) funded action research project[1] aims to provide a set of practical resources founded on a social justice framework, to guide good practice for monitoring student learning engagement (MSLE) in higher education. The project involves ten Australasian institutions, eight of which are engaged in various MSLE type projects. A draft framework, consisting of six social justice principles which emerged from the literature has been examined with reference to the eight institutional approaches for MSLE in conjunction with the personnel working on these initiatives during the first action research cycle. The cycle will examine the strategic and operational implications of the framework in each of the participating institutions. Cycle 2 will also build capacity to embed the principles within the institutional MSLE program and will identify and collect examples and resources that exemplify the principles in practice. The final cycle will seek to pilot the framework to guide new MSLE initiatives. The framework and resources will be made available to the sector to enhance learning and teaching policy and practices and to strengthen the social justice foundation that informs good practice in MSLE.

Monitoring student learning engagement

Student engagement in higher education is broadly viewed as a phenomenon that includes both the academic and non-academic activities of the student within the university environment and is proposed as a key factor in student achievement and retention (Krause & Coates, 2008; Tinto, 2010). Interest in student engagement is exemplified for Australasia by annual reporting (AUSSE, 2011) and longitudinal studies focused on the student experience (James, Krause & Jennings, 2010). The commitment of institutions to student engagement is deemed as a key factor in the retention of students. Nelson, Kift and Clarke (2008) argue that universities need to instigate, sustain and promote student personal, social and academic engagement, particularly for those students who face the greatest challenges in the first year of academia. In line with Tinto (2008) and Kift and Nelson (2005) Gale (2009) positions student support as coming from the centre – within the curriculum. Gale's notion of a "southern theory of higher education" also requires the embodiment of their social and cultural knowledges:

It is about how we structure the student learning experience in ways that open it up and make it possible for students to contribute from who they are and what they know. It is about an enriched learning experience for all students.

(Gale, p. 12, 2009)

While most Australasian universities understand the significance of monitoring and measuring student engagement, some universities have adopted and put into practice inclusive strategies for MSLE[2]. These strategies and initiatives proactively identify students identified as being at risk of disengaging from their studies and provide support via direct contact (or 'outreach') to the students.

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[1] Australian Learning and Teaching Council Competitive Grant CG10-1730 2010-2012: *Good practice for safeguarding student learning engagement in higher education institutions.*

[2] Current MSLE examples include QUT's *Student Success Program* (Nelson, Quinn, Marrington & Clarke, 2011), Auckland University of Technology's *First Year Experience Program* (AUQA, 2011) and the University of New England's *Early Alert* (ALTC, 2011).

Social justice and higher education and the development of a set of principles

There has been a commitment to equity in education since the beginning of the education system in Australia (Sturman, 1997). Generally the concept of social justice is not well defined, often mirroring perceptions of equal opportunity or equity; however the term implies fairness for all (Rawls, 1999; Sturman, 1997). In the Australian higher education context, principles of individual social justice have underpinned the sector's equity policy framework since the early 1990s. The equity framework designates that "access to higher education and success in higher education should not be determined by class, ethnicity, geographical location or other personal characteristics" (James, 2008, p. 1). The obligation to social justice in higher education policy making is exemplified in the expansion of activities aimed at MSLE and may take the form of quality assurance systems and the application of performance indicators (Yorke & Longden, 2004).

Recently, Gale and Tranter (2011) provided a comprehensive review of social justice in Australian higher education policy from post-World War Two through to the 2008 *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008). Gales and Tranter's account examines the existing views of distributive and retributive justice and proposes that recognitive justice, which includes the element of self-determination as third and preferred view for higher education (p.29).

This workshop session provides an opportunity to discuss and examine the draft set of principles and to discuss their potential value for the participants' institutional contexts. Specifically, the workshop will explore critical questions associated with the principles:

Critical Questions:

How do the draft social justice principles relate to the Higher Education context?

What perspectives of social justice should underpin MSLE activities?

What are the institutional implications for adopting a set of social justice principles?

Which of these principles will be of most benefit to individual institutions?

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SELF-DETERMINATION: Programs embrace democratic processes, self identification and case management through students 'opting-in'.		
Rationale: Self identification is a means for participation. Students have the right for information they supply to be used in the way they intended. Membership of an equity group alone does not assume participation is necessary.	*Practical implications* The program should 'relay' the information pertinent to the student – in a timely, conscious manner	*Challenges* How to engage students in determining the shape of the program.
EQUITY: The provision of support and services takes into account the hidden curriculum of institutions and individuals educational, cultural and social backgrounds.		
Rationale: Access to support and services should be based on performance and factors known to increase likelihood of early disengagement, not necessarily targeted at named "equity cohorts". A student-centric, single system, that is inclusive of all students and offers differentially beneficial outcomes.	*Practical implications:* System, data & analytics is necessary to provide evidence rather than assumptions for intervention.	*Challenges* Need to set the at-risk indicators in ways that are not in appropriately high or low.
ACCESS: Universities must ensure that systems and structures are in place to actively identify and intervene with students at risk of disengaging to ensure access to services and support for those students who require it.		
Rationale: Access includes access to the hidden curriculum of university language, practices and social mores. Proactive brokering rather than reactive facilitation to ensure non-learning issues do not impede access to support. Facilitate access to knowing what is important through multiple points / routes of access, e.g. social media, face to face, person to person, peer to peer, student to educator; educator to student.	*Practical implications:* Standing in others shoes. Simplifying complex systems. Making public the rules of the game.	*Challenges:* Maintaining academic challenge whilst not advantaging those who commence with dominant paradigm knowledge.
PARTICIPATION: The program should actively enable and promote participation in university life and should improve the quality of engagement and the quantity of connections.		
Rationale: Programs need to encourage the social glue – that connects peers, students, staff with significant others. Programs value learning partnerships and communities of learners.	*Practical implications:* Involvement of family, peers and significant others.	*Challenges:* Professional boundaries
RIGHTS: All students have the right to be treated with dignity and respect and to have their individual cultural and social backgrounds valued.		
Rationale: All students have the right to know what is expected of them and to have the attributes of successful participation made explicit. Students have the right to information that describes these expectations in ways that are appropriate to their individual circumstances. Institutions have an obligation to make information about expectations available and a reasonable right to expect compliance with institutional policies.	*Practical implications:* Communication language and model needs to be inclusive. Reciprocal relationship.	*Challenges:* Reconciling policy written from uni-dimensional perspective with the needs of individuals.

Appendix 1: Social Justice draft principles (rights, responsibilities and obligations) for monitoring student learning engagement