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Development of a good practice guide to safeguard student learning engagement

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Abstract

This paper reports on the development of a good practice guide that will offer the higher education sector a framework for safeguarding student learning engagement. The good practice guide and framework are underpinned by a set of principles initially identified as themes in the social justice literature which were refined following the consolidation of data collected from eight selected “good practice” Australasian universities and feedback gathered at various forums and presentations. The good practice guide will provide the sector with examples of institutional wide efforts which respond to national priorities for student retention and will also provide exemplars of institutional practices for each principle to facilitate the uptake of sector-wide good practice. Participants will be provided with the opportunity to discuss the social justice principles, the draft good practice guide and identify the practical applications of the guide within individual institutions.

Introduction

Across Australia, higher education institutions are responding to imperatives to widen participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people and people from low socio-economic backgrounds. These imperatives include performance funding based on retention of disadvantaged groups as an indicator of equitable student experience and attainment. Similarly, the focus in Aotearoa (New Zealand) has been on realigning the higher education sector with the current economic and social policy with similar initiatives around widening participation (Nelson, Kift, Clarke & Creagh, 2011). Some Australasian institutions are addressing student retention by monitoring student learning engagement (MSLE) through data obtained from corporate systems and by focussing on students and cohorts identified as being at-risk of academic disengagement. Examples of these programs include, but are not limited to, Queensland University of Technology’s (QUT) *Student Success Program* (Nelson, Smith & Clarke, 2011), the University of New England’s *Early Alert* program (University of New England, 2011) and Auckland University of Technology’s *First Year Experience Program* (Australian Universities Quality Agency, 2007).

The purpose of this project, funded by the Office for Learning and Teaching¹, is to lead the design of a collection of resources and of a good practice guide for *safeguarding the practice* of monitoring student learning engagement.

In summary, the key objectives of the project are to:

¹ The funding for this research was originally provided by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council Competitive Grant Scheme. The research is now overseen by the Office for Learning and Teaching within the federal Department Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education
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- design and develop a set of guiding principles for safeguarding MSLE, which will support the institutional leader’s implementation strategy by describing and explaining examples of good practice and making available a set of resources to support learning and teaching policy and practice for monitoring student engagement.
- design and develop a good practice guide for safeguarding MSLE that reflect the expertise of personnel in existing good practice programs; and based on these principles.

Central to this project is consideration of the notions of equity and social justice and how they manifest in the higher education sector and within various institutions. The good practice guide is therefore underpinned by a set of social justice principles and a framework that presents guidelines and resources to exemplify and provide examples of the principles in practice, using MSLE programs as the foci.

Safeguarding student learning engagement

Student engagement is a broad phenomenon that includes both the academic and non-academic activities of the student within the university experience and is a key factor in student achievement and retention (Krause & Coates, 2008; Tinto, 2010). While many of the factors influencing student engagement are related to individual student attributes—for example, how students finance their studies and their personal commitment to study (Yorke, 2006; Yorke & Longden, 2008)—the responsibility for student retention and engagement does not reside solely with commencing students: institutions and their teaching and support staff have an obligation to provide the necessary “conditions, opportunities and expectations” for such engagement to occur (Coates, 2005, p. 26). Tinto (2010) maintains that institutions should not only take some responsibility for, but also encourage student involvement.

If engagement is the cornerstone of student success and retention, institutions should monitor and measure the extent of student engagement—particularly in the first year—and most importantly intervene with students exhibiting signs of disengaging from their studies. Importantly for the widening participation agenda, it will be critical that these initiatives are consistent with the concept of social justice, do not problematise individual students or cohorts, and desist from making assumptions about why disengagement may be indicated.

According to Nelson (Queensland University of Technology, 2010), activities designed to engender student support and to monitor student engagement must be founded on a philosophy of social justice and equity, particularly given the pressures on the sector for wider participation and improved retention of students from social groups currently under-represented in the higher education sector. Nelson adds:

To be consistent with these national imperatives requires constructive alignment between on the one hand policy and practice aimed at widening participation and on the other efforts aimed at increasing the retention of these same students
(p. 4).

Approach to developing the Social Justice Framework

Identifying social justice principles

Principles often provide the basis for a strategic approach to a process that supports good practice. The benefit of identifying quality principles has previously been advocated by Nicol (2007, p.2) who developed a set of principles for assessment and feedback in higher education. Describing what he believed to be the qualities of principles, Nicol noted that principles should capture research evidence to support implementation; that the principle should be broad enough and flexible to guide a practitioner; that if in a set they should be ‘defined independently’ and be synergistic when operationalised and they should assist with evaluation. Following Nichol’s work on assessment other examples of the higher education sector employing a set of principles as benchmarks for good practice can be found in *Good Practice Principles for English language proficiency for international students in Australian universities* (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2008); and the recently released *National Best Practice Framework for Indigenous Cultural Competency in Australian Universities* (Universities Australia, 2011) which elaborates on a set of five guiding principles for Indigenous cultural competency in Australian universities.

In this project defining and developing a set of social justice principles was an essential foundation for developing the sector guidelines for good practice. The framework arising from the principles needed to

- reflect the notions of equity and social justice;
- provide a *strategic* approach for safeguarding MSLE activities; and
- be supported by resources for practice in the sector.

Examination of themes in the social justice literature and its applications in education, and research and practice about widening participation and student engagement in the higher education sector enabled an initial conceptualisation of a set of five principles: *Equity, Participation, Rights, Self-determination* and *Access*. Each principle was then defined and accompanied by a rationale and descriptions of the implications of the principle for practice.

Verifying the principles

Early work with project representatives from each of the eight participating institutions (the project *Working Party*) explored the social justice principles in relation to their own institutional MSLE activities and considered possible alignments and critical considerations when applying the principles. A draft social justice framework was developed and direct feedback was solicited from both academic and professional staff participating in project-related activities and forums and by gathering qualitative data through a series of workshops in the participating institutions (the project *Working Groups*). The project asked these institutional working groups to consider the principles in terms of institution-specific activities and programs that monitor student learning engagement and discuss their potential value within the participants’ institutional contexts. These discussions considered each principle and adhered to specific questions such as:

Which of these principles do you see are a part of your institution/program?
Which of these principles do you think your program could / should aspire to?

The existing conceptualisation of the principles was considered in light of any new or conflicting data and the principles were further refined. As a result the principle *Equitable and Inclusive Participation* was repositioned as an outcome of safeguarding MSLE within of the framework. Figure 1 indicates the current conceptual model for the principles.

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Figure 1: Social justice framework for good practice – Conceptual model

The principles, therefore, illustrate the philosophical stance of a social justice framework and ultimately the good practice guidelines.

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Piloting the good practice guide involved re-visiting the participating institutions (the Working Groups) and exploring how each principle and the social justice framework applied to their particular initiative. This activity also assisted in identifying and unpacking the various artefacts (resources and tools) used in the particular program and assisted in the identification of good practice examples. The good practice guide is therefore documentation of the various MSLE initiatives currently in place across the sector.

Session Plan (30 minutes)

The Nuts and Bolts session provides an opportunity to examine the good practice guide in its current iteration and discuss the value of the guide for the sector as well as identifying the practical applications of the guide within individual institutions

Introduction (10 minutes)

Participants will be provided with an overview of the project and specifically the approach taken by the project team to identify social justice principles for good practice in MSLE and the development of the guide.

Discussion (15 minutes)

In small groups, participants will be asked to examine the current guide with a view to assessing

- (a) the value of the guide for the sector; and
- (b) the applicability of the guide to their own institutions approach to MSLE.

Conclusion (5 minutes)

Bring together ideas/discussions from participants – what has been identified that may be missing in their institutions (in terms of MSLE)? Discuss whether participants would consider applying these guidelines to their particular initiatives.

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