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# Student engagement in the UK: politics, pedagogy and surveys

Dr Alex Buckley

Student Engagement: From research to practice

9 September 2015



WHAT THE NICE REPORT LIKES



## The National Student Survey

“The CEQ is based on a theory of university teaching and learning in which students' perceptions of curriculum, instruction and assessment are regarded as key determinants of their approaches to learning and the quality of their learning outcomes”

(Wilson et al 1997)

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“Since 2005, the NSS has helped over two million students make their voices heard about the things that matter to them.”

<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/nss/>

# UK

# Engagement

# Survey



2013 – 9 institutions, 8,500 responses

2014 – 32 institutions, 25,500 responses

2015 – c.30institutions, c.25,000 Responses

Based on National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)

Focuses on a) amount and quality of effort that students invest in their studies, and b) how the course and institution encourages them to engage

Asks about:

- Critical thinking
- Collaborative learning
- Staff-student interaction
- Reflective and integrative learning
- Course challenge
- Engagement with research and inquiry (optional)
- Staff-student partnership (optional)
- Skills development (optional)
- How time is spent (optional)

## **NSS vs UKES**

**NSS:** Staff are enthusiastic about what they are teaching

**UKES:** How often have you discussed ideas from your course with teaching staff outside taught sessions?

**NSS:** Staff have made the subject interesting

**UKES:** How much has your course emphasised analysing ideas or theories in depth?

**NSS:** I have received detailed comments on my work

**UKES:** How often have you made significant changes to your work based on feedback?

[www.heacademy.ac.uk/ukes](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ukes)



## National Survey of Student Engagement



Started in US in 2000: 1.5k institutions, 4.5 million students

Voluntary, no league tables

Used nationally in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Ireland

- Student involvement (Astin 1984)
- Deep vs surface approaches to learning (Marton and Saljo 1976)
- Quality of effort (Pace 1984)
- Seven principles of good practice (Chickering and Gamson 1987)

“College is basically a voluntary activity... This is why the quality of effort, which one might also think of as quality of initiative, is so important at the college level... [C]ollege can't give you an education; but if you go to college, and fully use the facilities and opportunities it provides, you can get an education”

(Pace 1982)



2. Student experience in the UK

## Student engagement in the UK

“In this Chapter, we look at how higher education institutions can create a learning community where engagement of students is encouraged, their feedback valued and complaints resolved transparently and as soon as possible.” (BIS 2011)

**“We...present a wider argument for a model of engagement in which students, despite the putatively incontestable machinations of political and economic forces, are able to resist the powerless subject position of ‘consumer’ and are enabled to become creators and producers of ideas, knowledge and meaningful outputs.” (Taylor et al 2012)**

“Student engagement has been widely hailed as the solution to all that ails higher education but there is little agreement on the meaning or ambit of the term.” (Trowler 2015)

## Why is that a problem?

“Student voice and student involvement have become increasingly vogue issues, yet we remain a good deal less clear about what is meant by them than we ought to be and, equally worrying, even less clear whose purposes are served by their current valorization” (Fielding 2001)

**“Conceiving student engagement chaotically allows for the term to be reduced or expanded to encompass whatever an agency, an institution, or a policy might wish, without the need for explicit recognition” (Trowler 2015)**

## Student engagement in the UK

Examples of student engagement:

- Work-integrated learning (Coates, 2010)
- Student involvement in research (Taylor et al. 2012)
- The use of student surveys (Little et al. 2009)
- Interactions of students with each other and with staff (Kuh, 2009)
- Student representation (Carey, 2012)
- Feeling a sense of belonging to a course or institution (Baron and Corbin, 2012)
- Student involvement in curriculum design (Bovill et al. 2011a)
- Deep approaches to learning (Nelson Laird et al. 2005)
- Development of active citizenship (Zepke and Leach, 2010)
- Student-led riots (Taylor et al. 2012).

What do these things have in common?

## **Aspects of student engagement (from the QAA)**

Domain 1: “improving the motivation of students to engage in learning and to learn independently”

Domain 2: “the participation of students in quality enhancement and quality assurance processes, resulting in the improvement of their educational experience.”

(QAA 2012)

# Geographical differences

## US

“Student engagement...is the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other educationally purposeful activities [and] how the institution deploys its resources and organizes the curriculum and other learning opportunities to get students to participate in activities that decades of research studies show are linked to student learning”

(<http://nsse.indiana.edu/html/about.cfm>)

## UK

“[T]he study was concerned with institutional and student union (SU) processes and practices, such as those relating to student representation and student feedback, that seek to inform and enhance the collective student learning experience” (Little et al 2009)

“The value of engagement is no longer questioned.”  
(Trowler and Trowler 2010)

“Engagement seems to escape serious critique.”  
(Zepke 2014)

## Benefits of student engagement: Domain 1

Domain 1: “improving the motivation of students to engage in learning and to learn independently”

“In essence...student engagement is concerned with the extent to which students are engaging in a range of educational activities that research has shown as likely to lead to high quality learning.” (Coates 2005)

E.g. (Trowler and Trowler 2010):

- Critical thinking
- Cognitive development
- Self-esteem
- Moral and ethical development
- Improved grades
- Persistence



## Benefits of student engagement: Domain 2

Domain 2: “the participation of students in quality enhancement and quality assurance processes, resulting in the improvement of their educational experience.”

Benefits to individual:

- Autonomy (Freeman et al. 2013)
- Metacognition (Robinson 2012)
- Leadership skills (Zuo and Ratsoy 1999)
- Skills and confidence (Lizzio and Wilson 2009)
- Citizenship skills (Menon 2003)

Benefits to course/institution:

- Improved decision-making (Van der Velden 2012)

“[S]tudent voice is premised on the notions that students have a unique perspective on teaching and learning and that they should be invited to share their insights, which **warrant** not only the attention but also the response of educators” (Bovill et al 2011b, emphasis added)

## Benefits of student engagement: Domain 2

Domain 2: “the participation of students in quality enhancement and quality assurance processes, resulting in the improvement of their educational experience.”

Political benefits:

“ [M]aking decision-making processes in universities more representative of internal constituencies such as students.” (Luescher-Mamashela 2013)

“[A]s 'consumers' of education, students are entitled to participatory rights in managerial processes and practices at their institutions.” (Menon 2005)

“Students in higher education are adults. Treating them as adults involves... shared responsibilities and the participation of students in educational organisations” (Visser et al 1998)

## Benefits of student engagement: Domain 2

Pedagogical benefits vs political (ethical) benefits:

- “Students should be involved in governance to the extent that they contribute to the quality of decisions and the overall performance of the campus.” (Carnegie 1973)
- “[I]t is both unwise and inherently wrong to be unconcerned about [students’] reactions and wishes.” (Carnegie 1972)

“Participatory approaches risk unquestioningly reifying the views of the less powerful – in this case students. This can lead to an uncritical value being placed on students’ views, irrespective of the nature of these views.”  
(Bovill et al 2011b)

## Benefits of student engagement

- Improvement of students' learning and development
- Political reconfiguration of higher education

2. Part 4

## Student engagement and surveys

What should a student engagement survey look like?

Pedagogical benefits:

“As a survey NSSE annually assesses the extent to which students are participating in educational practices that are strongly associated with high levels of learning and personal development” (Kuh 2001)

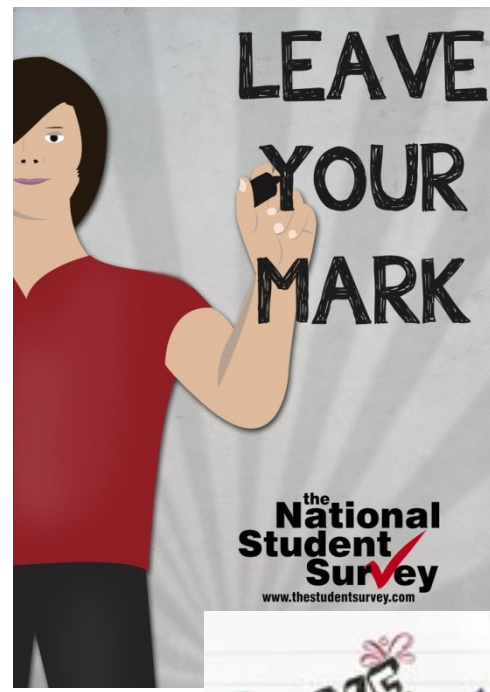
Political benefits:

“The NSS put the student voice firmly on the agenda of every higher education institution, and has prompted radical changes in how students are taught and treated in institutions up and down the country.” (NUS 2013)

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A LITTLE  
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POWER TO  
THE STUDENTS

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Do you want  
your opinions on your  
student\* experience to be heard?

Take part in the National Student Survey.  
It's quick to complete and you'll be helping  
prospective students make the right choices of where  
and what to study.

\*You are eligible for the NSSS if you are a final year undergraduate or are on a flexible post-16 programme. If your final year cannot be easily predicted, you will be assessed during your fourth year of study. If you were due to be in your final year in 2016, you cannot participate in any repeating your penultimate year, you are also eligible to take part.



## **Student engagement vs student engagement**

“Educational thinkers are reluctant to involve students in the setting of the aims of higher education. ... Consequently students are expected to adopt and act out a vision of higher education that is not their own.” (Menon 2003)

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