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The application of a set of principles to safeguard student learning engagement.

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Abstract

Student engagement is a key contributor to student achievement and retention. Increasingly, international and Australasian universities are introducing a range of specific initiatives aimed at monitoring and intervening with students who are at risk of disengaging, particularly in their first year of study. A multi-site case study formed the focus of a national learning and teaching project to develop a suite of resources to guide good practice for safeguarding student learning engagement that were consistent with the notions of equity and social justice. Pivotal to the suite of resources is the Social Justice Framework and a set of social justice principles that emerged through a synthesis of existing literature and were further refined through the examination of qualitative data collected across the participating institutions. These social justice principles reflect general notions of equity and social justice, embrace the philosophical position of recognitive social justice, and are presented in an interconnected and co-dependent way within the framework. Participants will be provided with the opportunity to identify and discuss the practical applications of the principles to student engagement activities in their own institutions.

Introduction

The project *Good practice for safeguarding student learning engagement in higher education institutions* involved eight institutions across Australia and New Zealand who had either: existing first year programs and activities that monitored student learning engagement (MSLE); were in the early stages of implementing MSLE programs; or who were piloting MSLE activities. The aim of this project was to develop a suite of resources to guide good practice for MSLE that were consistent with the notions of equity and social justice, and in this way would safeguard programs and practices concerned with student learning engagement.

The key project deliverable was the design and development of a *Good Practice Guide* which reflected the expertise of personnel in existing good practice programs. The *Guide* contains a set of guiding principles within a *Social Justice Framework* for MSLE, eight institutional case studies and a set of good practice resources (examples¹ and artefacts² from the

¹ Good practice exemplars include training of student advisors (including communication methods), the development of action plans for students and protocols to engage with institutional stakeholders.

² Artefacts include: Training resources for staff (student advisors); Service Level Agreements, or equivalent, with subject coordinators; Institutional policies specific to MSLE; Phone and email scripts (for student advisors doing outreach calls and/or sending emails); Action Plans (for students); Websites that disseminate information about the program; Interactive feedback mechanisms (e.g. social media tools, online word clouds); Additional mechanisms embedded in student portals; Program evaluation materials and reporting systems.

participating institutions) to support learning and teaching policy and practice for initiatives that seek to monitor student learning engagement.

While the project was aimed specifically at MSLE initiatives, there is the opportunity to explore the application of the framework to the design and development of other first year student engagement activities, for example, institutional orientation activities or peer mentoring programs. That is the purpose of this nuts and bolts session.

Monitoring student learning engagement

Student engagement is, in the main, accepted as being a considerable contributor to student attainment and retention (Krause & Coates, 2008; Kuh, 2009; Tinto, 2010). In Australia, public policy linked to higher education funding and changes to the higher education regulatory environment in the past decade have been accompanied by related discussions about promoting student engagement and reducing attrition in higher education institutions.

Given that student engagement is well accepted as integral to student achievement and retention, many international and Australasian universities have introduced a range of specific initiatives aimed at monitoring and intervening with students who are at risk of disengaging, specifically in their first year of study.³ Monitoring student learning engagement involves the aggregation and use of existing corporate data along with a range of descriptive and academic indicators (such as attendance, assessment submission details and participation in face-to-face and online activities) to make supportive interventions with students who appear to be at risk of disengaging. In the context of this project—which sought to identify an appropriate ethical framework to guide these MSLE initiatives—good practice in retention initiatives has been described by Coley and Coley (2010) as occurring in institutions that “have determined a clear methodology to define and identify ‘at-risk’ students, to reach out to students with appropriate resources and support, and to track and monitor student engagement” (p. 6).

Intervention programs that monitor student learning engagement have become more widespread. The early intervention strategies appearing in the first year experience literature range from isolated case studies (e.g. Johnston, Quinn, Aziz & Kava, 2010; Potter & Parkinson, 2010) to institution-wide programs (e.g. Carlson & Holland, 2009; Nelson, Quinn, Marrington & Clarke, 2010, Wilson & Lizzio, 2008). Within Australasia, Auckland University of Technology (Australian Universities Quality Agency, 2007), the University of New England (Office for Learning and Teaching, 2011) and Queensland University of Technology (Office for Learning and Teaching, 2012) have been recognised nationally for their MSLE programs and are indicative of recent developments in this area. Nevertheless, such monitoring initiatives, while actively monitoring student learning engagement, need to be mindful of the diversity of the student cohort and should not make assumptions about the conditions that may lead to a student indicating as at risk (of disengaging). Thus the main thrust of this project was that MSLE activities should 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 and cultural groups currently under-represented in higher education.

³ In the project, *Good practice for safeguarding student learning engagement in higher education institutions*, we refer to these initiatives as monitoring student learning engagement (MSLE). Reports of these initiatives commonly refer to them as early intervention strategies or programs and these terms are used interchangeably.

A social justice framework for monitoring student learning engagement

In this project, defining and developing a set of social justice principles was an essential foundation for developing guidelines for sector good practice. Essentially, the framework arising from the principles needed to replicate the notions of equity and social justice, provide a tactical approach for safeguarding MSLE activities, and also be supported by resources for practice in the sector. The literature, analysed during the course of the project, focused on social justice in education, widening participation and student engagement in higher education and revealed several themes. The first set of themes included *equity, access and participation* (James, 2007, 2008) with two additional themes, *self-determination* and *rights* emerging strongly from the recognitive justice⁴ literature (Gale & Densmore, 2000; Gale & Tranter, 2011). The complete set of themes are particularly pertinent in the Australasian context when considering the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Australia), Māori and Pasifika people (Aotearoa/New Zealand) and the participation of students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Consistent with the literature, these social justice principles reflect common notions of equity and social justice, embrace a philosophical position of recognitive social justice and are presented in an interconnected and co-dependent way within the framework. The five social justice principles are defined as follows:

Self-determination

Students participate in program design, enactment and evaluation, and make informed decisions about their individual participation in the program.

Rights

MSLE initiatives should ensure that all students are treated with dignity and respect and have their individual cultural, social and knowledge systems recognised and valued.

Access

Programs are designed to serve as active and impartial conduits to the resources of the institution (e.g. curriculum, learning, academic, social, cultural, support, financial and other resources).

Equity

Programs are designed to demystify and decode dominant university cultures, processes, expectations and language for differently prepared cohorts.

Participation

MSLE programs lead to socially inclusive practices and students experience a sense of belonging and connectedness.

Good practice in retention initiatives – what does it look like?

Engagement with the eight participating institutions over the course of the project allowed for the MSLE initiative members to discuss the program/s and determine how their practice aligned (or did not align) with the set of social justice principles developed as part of the project. During project workshops, participating members were given a set of prompt questions, each associated with the social justice principles, to help elicit information about

⁴ A recognitive perspective on social justice includes positive considerations of social difference and considers the centrality of socially democratic processes in working towards the attainment of just societies. A recognitive perspective on social justice also emphasises processes and action to achieve socially just structures over the existing state and form of those structures. The philosophical position of the project, *Good practice for safeguarding student learning engagement in higher education institutions*, states: A recognitive stance values all members of society, has positive regard for social difference and is achieved through socially democratic processes that involve individuals and groups determining outcomes that impact on them (Nelson & Creagh, 2013).

their MSLE practices as well as provide examples and identify artefacts which exemplify how their MSLE practices align with the social justice framework. This qualitative data was then used to refine the principles and to produce an action-oriented framework.

The Nuts and Bolts session will provide an opportunity to examine some of the practical aspects of the social justice principles drawn from the MSLE case studies and discuss the application of the social justice framework to other student engagement activities in the first year context such as orientation, teamwork activities, and peer programs.

Introduction (10 minutes)

Participants will be provided with a brief overview of the project, the social justice principles and their articulation in the *Social Justice Framework*, and its application to MSLE.

Discussion (15 minutes)

There will be two discussion activities. In small groups, participants will be asked to:

- (a) Select a particular student engagement initiative common to their institutions and discuss the applicability of each of the social justice principles to their particular student engagement initiative, noting both the generic and institution-specific applications;
- (b) reflect on the value of a set of social justice principles to safeguard student engagement initiatives.

Conclusion (5 minutes)

Bring together ideas/discussions from participants. For example, the identification of

- generic and institution-specific applications of the principles; and
- what may be missing in their institutions approach to student engagement initiatives.

Finally, participants will be asked if they would consider applying these principles to initiatives in their institutions and what, if any, possible impediments could there be to applying the principles.

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Project website: <https://safeguardingstudentlearning.net/>

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