



# Student engagement literature review

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## I Introduction

While ‘student engagement’ has enjoyed considerable attention in the literature since the mid-1990s, its beginnings can substantively be seen a decade previously, seminally in Alexander Astin’s work on student involvement (Astin 1984). Following on from ‘the student experience’ and ‘research-led teaching’ before it, ‘student engagement’ has become the latest focus of attention among those aiming to enhance learning and teaching in higher education, headlining meeting agendas and theming conferences in campuses around the world.

It is not difficult to understand why: a sound body of literature has established robust correlations between student involvement in a subset of ‘educationally purposive activities’, and positive outcomes of student success and development, including satisfaction, persistence, academic achievement and social engagement (Astin, 1984, 1993; Berger and Milem, 1999; Chickering and Gamson, 1987; Goodsell, Maher and Tinto, 1992; Kuh, 1995; Kuh *et al.*, 2005; Kuh and Vesper, 1997; Pace, 1995; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991, 2005).

With higher education institutions facing increasingly straitened economic conditions, attracting and retaining students, satisfying and developing them and ensuring they graduate to become successful, productive citizens matters more than ever. Kuh (2003) demonstrates that what students bring to higher education, or where they study, matters less to their success and development than what they do during their time as a student. If student engagement can deliver on its promises, it could hold the magic wand making all of this possible.

## 2 Scope of the review:

Our understanding of the term ‘student engagement’, based on definitions in the literature and the discussion of the character of engagement and its alternatives, summarised below, is as follows:

*Student engagement is concerned with the interaction between the time, effort and other relevant resources invested 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.*

The term ‘student engagement’ has its historic roots in a body of work concerned with student involvement, enjoying widespread currency particularly in North America and Australasia, where it has been firmly entrenched through annual large scale national surveys. The most prolific authors (in particular, George Kuh and Hamish Coates) have affiliations with the organisations that have developed, implemented and supported these national surveys of student engagement, located variously within universities or private companies.

By way of contrast, the body of work produced in the UK which could be said to address student engagement traces its roots back to other traditions, such as student feedback, student representation and student approaches to learning, and is less likely to be tagged as ‘student engagement’ in the authors’ keywords. Because of this, the literature flagged as ‘student engagement’ is heavily skewed towards the North American/Australasian tradition, with the exception of an emerging body of ‘grey’ literature from the UK concerned mainly with small, single case studies.

A more holistic picture would thus require a full review of areas potentially related to student engagement as defined above (including, but not restricted to, student feedback, student representation, student approaches to learning, institutional organisation, learning spaces, architectural design, and learning development) as well as the literature flagged as ‘student engagement’. This, however, was beyond the remit of this project and would be an enormous project. This review therefore confines its attention to those works flagged as concerning student engagement by their authors rather than any publication which substantively addresses issues under our definition.

### 3 Understanding engagement

In seeking to understand what is meant by ‘engagement’, some authors have considered its antithesis – if a student is not engaged, then what are they?

Mann (2001, 7) contrasted engagement with *alienation*, proposing the engagement–alienation dyad as a more useful framework to understand students’ relationships to their learning than the surface–strategic–deep triad (Marton and Säljö, 1976), since both ‘surface’ and ‘strategic’ approaches to learning are responses to alienation from the content and the process of study.

Krause (2005, 4) lists “inertia, apathy, disillusionment or engagement in other pursuits” as alternatives to engagement for the student. She describes (ibid., 7) this as follows:

*Physicists use the term ‘inertia’ to describe the tendency of matter to retain its state of rest or of uniform motion in a straight line. In the case of some students ... inertia is a germane term to describe their attitude to university and their role in it. In this context I favour the term ‘inertia’ over disengagement. The latter suggests an active detachment or separation, whereas the former is more suggestive of doing nothing, which aptly depicts the state of being for a group of students who do not actively pursue opportunities to engage in their learning community. For some students, the interlocking of individual and institutional interests, goals and aspirations never occurs. They do not choose or see the need to waver from their familiar path to engage with people, activities or opportunities in the learning community.*

As well as the active, positive understanding of engagement typically found in the literature, Krause (ibid., 9) identifies two other interpretations of the concept. The first of these is the use analogous to ‘appointment’, as in the phrase “I have an engagement at two o’clock tomorrow afternoon”, suggesting that engagement with their studies was simply something to slot into their calendars. The second connotation was less neutral:

*For some students, engagement with the university experience is like engaging in a battle, a conflict. These are the students for whom the culture of the university is foreign and at times alienating and uninviting.*

This view of a ‘dark’, hostile form of engagement stands in contrast to Mann’s view of alienation as the diametric opposite of engagement, a conceptual conflict that we

resolve through separating the passive response to alienation ('withdrawal', or 'apathy') from the active ('conflict'), which is itself a form of engagement. We expand on this view, below.

### Dimensions of engagement

Engagement is more than involvement or participation – it requires feelings and sense-making as well as activity (see Harper and Quaye, 2009a, 5). Acting without feeling engaged is just involvement or even compliance; feeling engaged without acting is dissociation. Although focusing on engagement at a school level, Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004, 62-63), drawing on Bloom (1956), usefully identify three dimensions to student engagement, as discussed below:

1. Behavioural engagement  
Students who are behaviourally engaged would typically comply with behavioural norms, such as attendance and involvement, and would demonstrate the absence of disruptive or negative behaviour.
2. Emotional engagement  
Students who engage emotionally would experience affective reactions such as interest, enjoyment, or a sense of belonging.
3. Cognitive engagement  
Cognitively engaged students would be invested in their learning, would seek to go beyond the requirements, and would relish challenge.

We propose that each of these dimensions can have both a 'positive' and a 'negative' pole, each of which represents a form of engagement, separated by a gulf of non-engagement (withdrawal, or apathy). (The terms 'positive' and 'negative' are used here not to denote value judgment, but rather to reflect the attitude implied in much of the literature that compliance with expectations and norms indicates internalisation and approval, and is thus seen to be productive, whereas behaviour that challenges, confronts or rejects can be disruptive, delaying or obstructive, thus seen to be counter-productive. This is not to deny that, for individual academics, evidence of critical engagement among their students is viewed as a positive indicator of success.) Thus, one can engage either positively or negatively along the behavioural, emotional or cognitive dimensions. This is illustrated in the table below.

Table 1: Examples of positive and negative engagement

	Positive engagement	Non-engagement	Negative engagement
Behavioural	Attends lectures, participates with enthusiasm	Skips lectures without excuse	Boycotts, pickets or disrupts lectures
Emotional	Interest	Boredom	Rejection
Cognitive	Meets or exceeds assignment requirements	Assignments late, rushed or absent	Redefines parameters for assignments

It would be perfectly conceivable for a student to engage positively along one or more dimensions while engaging negatively along one or more, or to engage positively or negatively along one or more while not engaging along another/others. An example might be a feminist student who attends all lectures and complies positively with all behavioural engagement norms, while engaging cognitively in a negative fashion by rejecting a ‘phallogentric’ social science and submitting assignments on a topic she defined according to her own epistemology.



## 4 Defining student engagement

Student engagement has been defined as “participation in educationally effective practices, both inside and outside the classroom, which leads to a range of measurable outcomes” (Kuh *et al.*, 2007), and as “the extent to which students are engaging in activities that higher education research has shown to be linked with high-quality learning outcomes” (Krause and Coates, 2008, 493) Similarly, Hu and Kuh (2001, 3) define engagement as “the quality of effort students themselves devote to educationally purposeful activities that contribute directly to desired outcomes”.

By way of contrast, others have defined engagement as “the process whereby institutions and sector bodies make deliberate attempts to involve and empower students in the process of shaping the learning experience” (HEFCE, 2008).

Combining these two perspectives, Kuh (2009a, 683) has defined student engagement as “the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college *and* what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities (Kuh, 2001, 2003, 2009a)” (emphasis in original).

Coates (2007, 122) describes engagement as “a broad construct intended to encompass salient academic as well as certain non-academic aspects of the student experience”, comprising the following:

- active and collaborative learning;
- participation in challenging academic activities;
- formative communication with academic staff;
- involvement in enriching educational experiences;
- feeling legitimated and supported by university learning communities.

These five facets form the basis of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), the annual survey conducted among public and private higher education institutions in the US and Canada, and have been modified with the addition of a sixth aspect into the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE), which defines student engagement as “students’ involvement with activities and conditions likely to generate high-quality learning” (Coates, 2009), measured along six engagement scales:

- academic challenge (extent to which expectations and assessments challenge students to learn);
- active learning (students’ efforts to actively construct their knowledge);

- student and staff interactions (level and nature of students' contact with teaching staff);
- enriching educational experiences (participation in broadening educational activities);
- supportive learning environment (feelings of legitimation within the university community);
- work-integrated learning (integration of employment-focused work experience into study). *This factor is not present in the North American NSSE.*

## 5 Depicting the engagement literature

The literature on student engagement is a mixed bag. Aside from wide-ranging understandings of the term – covering anything from alienated involvement to active identification – there is considerable variation in the nature and type of the work. The unit of analysis varies between individual student, minority group, or institutional level, and the scale ranges from small, intimate studies to national and international surveys. Levels of complexity range from uncritical, vague use of the term in an evaluation study to complicated multiple regressions of interwoven, related aspects seeking to understand correlation and robustness of terms and concepts.

The literature often has a normative<sup>1</sup> agenda, characterised by discussions of gains and benefits while ignoring possible downsides, and at times a reductionist<sup>2</sup> approach, such as suggesting that students with disabilities or ethnic minority students share their opinions about architecture or artwork for the walls of buildings (see Harper and Quaye, 2009a, 9). While methodologically rigorous work in well-regarded journals can be found in the literature, grey literature is disproportionately present, in the form of project reports, unpublished conference papers, practitioner presentations and discussion documents, as well as e-journals. There are a small number of ‘big names’ in the field such as George Kuh, Hamish Coates and Kerri-Lee Krause, but because it is so wide there are others with particular specialisms and a widely dispersed hinterland of authors.

Three distinct foci of student engagement can be identified in the literature, which can be represented by way of a three-dimensional graph with each focus being represented along one axis. Individual studies can be located at various points along each of these axes, as is illustrated in the example below. This is intended as an illustration of a method of visualising individual examples from the literature, rather than attempting to represent the entire body (in excess of 1 000 examples) of literature on engagement..

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1 Reflecting the assumption that engagement is necessarily positive and promoting this attitude uncritically.

2 Simplifying the complexity/range of variation thereby minimising, obscuring or distorting the concept under discussion.

## Foci of engagement

### Axis 1: Individual student learning

This axis represents a continuum along which individual works can be located according to their concern, or perspective, on the individual student learning dimension of student engagement. The overwhelming majority of literature surveyed was expressly concerned with this focus. Along this axis, a paper that had no patent concern with individual student learning would be located at 0, with way points along this axis including:

- student attention in learning;
- student interest in learning;
- student involvement in learning;
- student (active) participation in learning;
- ‘student-centredness’ – student involvement in the design, delivery and assessment of their learning.

### Axis 2: Structure and process

The second axis focuses on issues of structure and process, including student representation, students’ role within governance, student feedback processes, and other such matters. Location along this axis at the 0 point would denote that the work had no patent concern with the collective structural or process role of student engagement, while way points along this axis would include:

- ‘representation as consultation’, such as tokenistic student membership of committees or panels to obviate the need for formal consultation with students;
- students in an observer role on committees;
- students as representatives on committees (‘delegate’ role);
- students as full members of committees (‘trustee’ role);
- integrated and articulated student representation at course, department, faculty, SRC/SU or NUS level – not ad hoc or piecemeal.

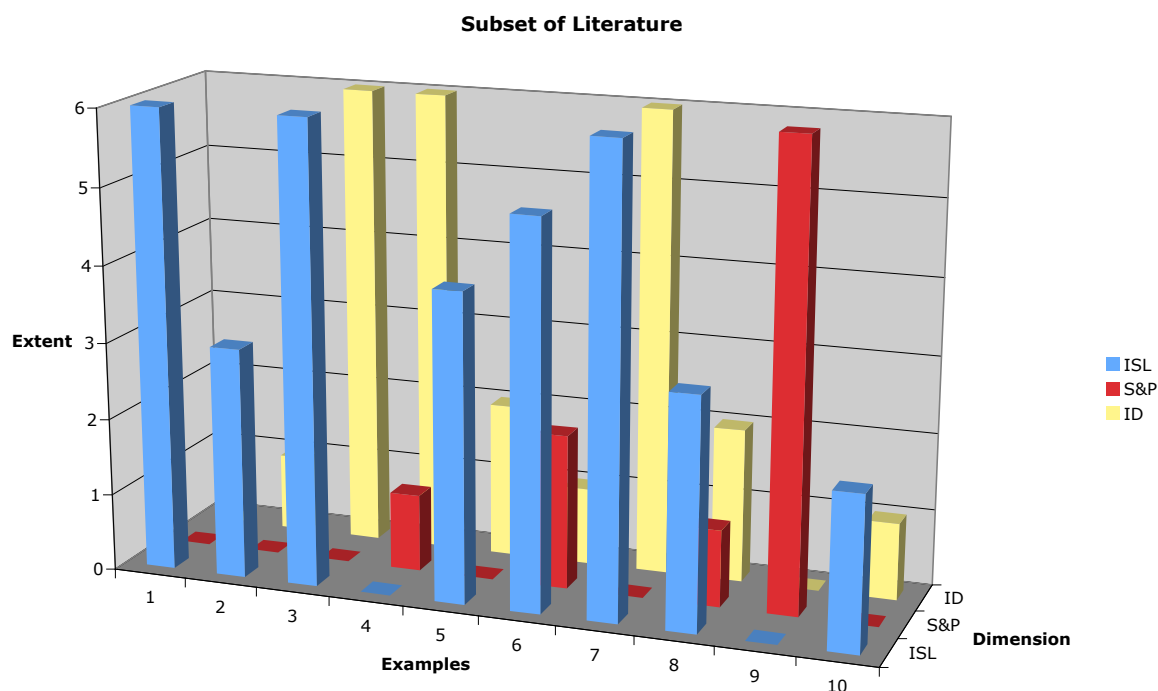
### Axis 3: Identity

The third axis focuses on issues of identity. This can range from concerns about how to generate a sense of belonging for individual students, to concerns about how to engage specific groups of students – particularly those deemed ‘marginal’ with midpoints including issues concerning the role of representation in conferring identity. Examples of way points along this axis include:

- engagement towards individual student ‘belonging’;
- identity attached to representation (module/course/discipline/institution/‘student’ role);
- engagement of groups such as ‘non-traditional’ students.

Figure 1 illustrates these differences graphically. ‘ISL’ represents individual student learning, ‘S&P’ is structure and processes, while ID stands for identity. The ‘examples’ listed along the bottom are random examples taken from the literature –example 1 is a conference paper focusing on ‘student-centred’ individual student learning, but silent on aspects of structure and process or on identity issues, while example 10 is a paper concerned with individual student interest in (a particular aspect of) learning among a particular subset of students.

Figure 1: Foci of engagement represented in the literature



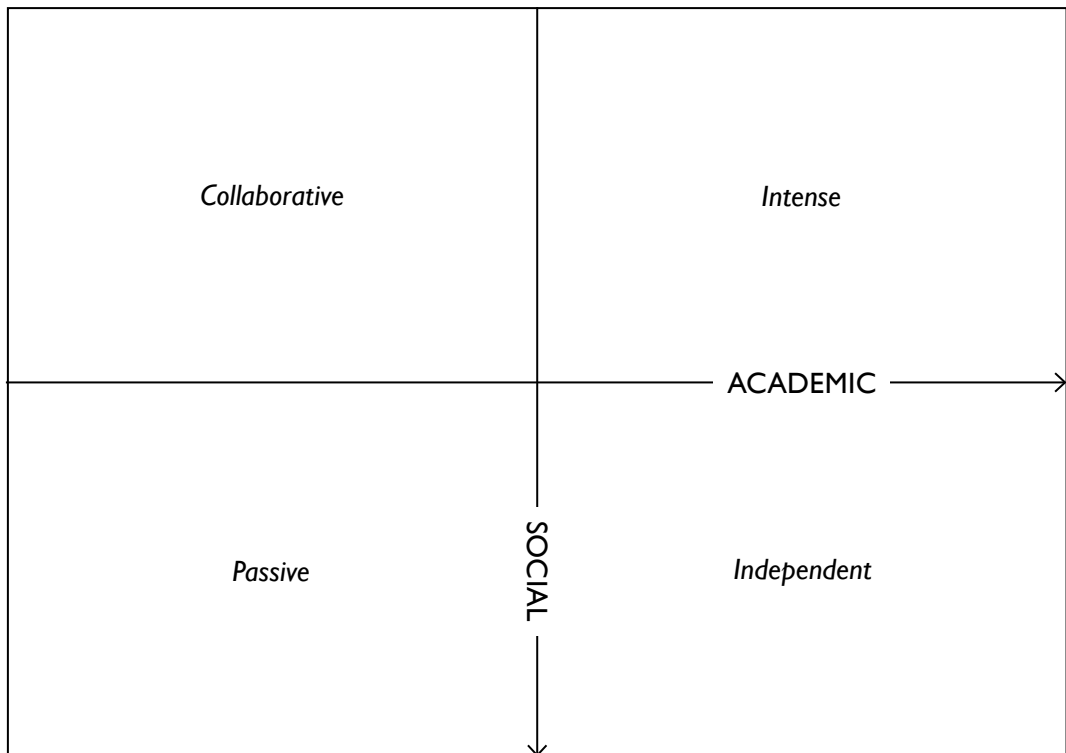
## 6 Typologies of engagement

Various authors have produced typologies of engagement that can assist in understanding types of engagement.

### 6.1 Student engagement styles

Coates (2007) proposed a typology of student engagement styles located along two axes, social and academic. This is shown in Figure 2 with each style described in turn below:

Figure 2: Student engagement styles (Coates, 2007)



## Intense

*“Students reporting an intense form of engagement are highly involved with their university study ... They tend to see teaching staff as approachable, and to see their learning environment as responsive, supportive and challenging.”* (—Coates, 2007, 132-133)

## Independent

*“An independent style of engagement is characterised by a more academically and less socially orientated approach to study ... Students reporting an independent style of study see themselves as participants in a supportive learning community. They see staff as being approachable, as responsive to student needs, and as encouraging and legitimating student reflection, and feedback. These students tend to be less likely, however, to work collaboratively with other students within or beyond class, or to be involved in enriching events and activities around campus.”* (—Coates, 2007, 133-134)

## Collaborative

*“Students reporting a collaborative style of engagement tend to favour the social aspects of university life and work, as opposed to the more purely cognitive or individualistic forms of interaction ... High levels of general collaborative engagement reflect students feeling validated within their university communities, particularly by participating in broad beyond-class talent development activities and interacting with staff and other students.”* (—Coates, 2007, 134)

## Passive

*“It is likely that students whose response styles indicate passive styles of engagement rarely participate in the only or general activities and conditions linked to productive learning.”* (—Coates, 2007, 134)

Coates cautions that these “styles of engagement refer to *transient states* rather than student traits or types. It is not supposed, for instance, that these are enduring qualities that are sustained within individuals over time or across contexts” (Coates, 2007, 132).

## 6.2 Institutional engagement types

Pike and Kuh (2005, 202) distilled seven types of engaging institutions from NSSE results, based around six factors. No institution ranked universally high or low across all measures of engagement, suggesting that not only do institutions differ in how they engage students, but that this may perhaps not be the result of conscious strategy. Pike and Kuh's seven types are as follows:

1. **Diverse, but interpersonally fragmented**  
Students at these colleges have numerous experiences with diversity and tend to use technology, but do not view the institution as supporting their academic or social needs nor are their peers viewed as supportive or encouraging. All in all, not a very easy place to live and learn it seems.
2. **Homogeneous and interpersonally cohesive**  
Students at these colleges have relatively few experiences with diversity, but view the institution and their peers as supportive. These institutions are the mirror image of the first engagement type.
3. **Intellectually stimulating**  
Students at these colleges are engaged in a variety of academic activities and have a great deal of interaction with faculty inside and outside the classroom. They also tend to engage in higher-order thinking and work with their peers on academic matters (i.e. collaborative learning).
4. **Interpersonally supportive**  
Students attending these institutions report high frequency of diversity experiences and view their peers and the campus as supportive of their efforts. Students also have a reasonable amount of contact with faculty members inside and outside the classroom.
5. **High-tech, low-touch**  
Information technology rules at these universities to the point of muting other types of interactions. There is a sense of stark individualism as little collaboration occurs, academic challenge is low, and the interpersonal environment is not a distinguishing feature of the campus.

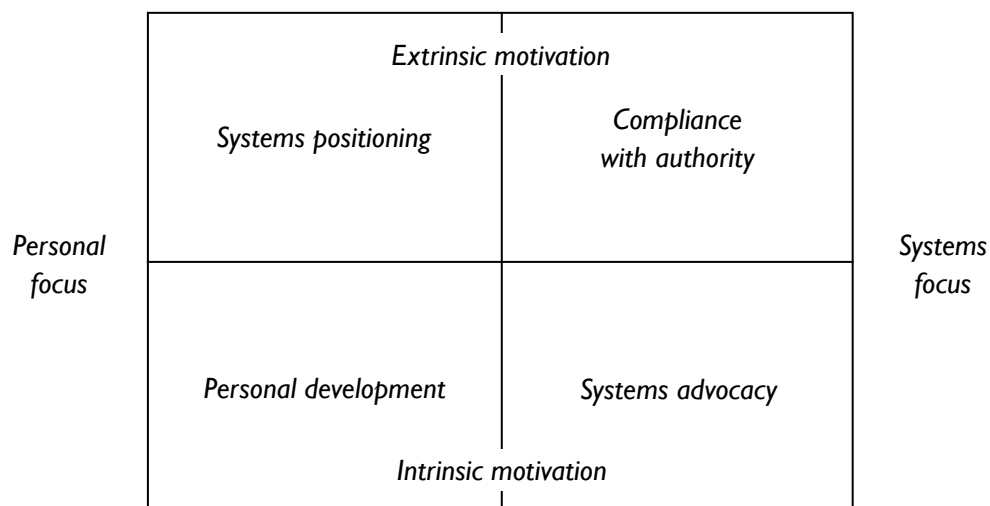


6. **Academically challenging and supportive**  
Faculty set high expectations and emphasise higher-order thinking in traditional ways. Little active and collaborative learning is required. At the same time, students support one another and view the campus as supportive. A generally friendly and congenial place to be an undergraduate interested in learning.
7. **Collaborative**  
Peers rely on and are generally supportive of one another for learning, mediated somewhat by technology. Although there are few opportunities for experiences with diversity, students have a reasonable amount of contact with faculty, who along with other dimensions of the campus climate, are viewed as supportive.

### 6.3 Student representatives' motivations

Lizzio and Wilson (2009, 73-74) identified four clusters of motivations given by students for undertaking student representative roles, predicated along two intersecting axes: motivation (intrinsic or extrinsic) and focus (personal or systems). This gives rise to four quadrants, as illustrated below:

Figure 3: Motivation for engagement in student governance (Lizzio and Wilson, 2009)



## 7 Responsibility

The definition of ‘student engagement’ an author, manager or representative uses often contains assumptions about who carries the responsibility for student engagement, and thus who can – or should – be tasked with the accountability.

We have suggested that student engagement is the responsibility of both students and their institutions, but various authors have suggested otherwise.

HEFCE’s definition of engagement as “the process whereby *institutions and sector bodies make deliberate attempts* to involve and empower students in the process of shaping the learning experience” (HEFCE, 2008, emphasis added) suggests that the responsibility lies with institutions and sector bodies. Expanding on that view, the CHERI study of student engagement was focused on “*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, as distinct from specific teaching, learning and assessment activities that are designed to enhance individual students’ engagement with their own learning” (Little *et al.*, 2009, emphasis added), suggesting that institutions and students collectively, through Students’ Unions, bear crucial responsibility for engagement.

By contrast, Krause and Coates argue that “student engagement focuses on the extent to which *students are engaging* in activities that higher education research has shown to be linked with high-quality learning outcomes...” (2008, 493, emphasis added), and Hu and Kuh define engagement as “the quality of effort *students themselves devote* to educationally purposeful activities that contribute directly to desired outcomes” (2001, 3, emphasis added), placing the onus for engagement on the individual student.

Kuh’s later view, that “student engagement represents the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college *and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities*” (Kuh, 2009a, 683), shifts the responsibility to both individual students and their institutions. This view is neatly encapsulated in the extended quote from Coates (2005, 26) below:

*The concept of student engagement is based on the constructivist assumption that learning is influenced by how an individual participates in educationally purposeful activities. Learning is seen as a ‘joint proposition’... however, which also depends on institutions and staff providing students with the conditions, opportunities and expectations to become involved. However, individual learners are ultimately the agents in discussions of engagement.*

## 8 Engagement with what?

Many articles, conference papers and chapters on student engagement do not contain explicit definitions of engagement, making the (erroneous) assumption that their understanding is a shared, universal one. In addition, studies tend to measure that which is measurable, leading to a diversity of unstated proxies for engagement recurring in the literature, and a wide range of exactly what is being engaged with under the mantle of 'student engagement'.

### Targets of engagement

#### 8.1 Specific student learning aspects/processes

These works tend to be small-scale studies of particular aspects of the learning process, looking at the effects of an intervention on student engagement. The unit of analysis is typically individual students, with outcomes most often measured either by improved quality of work or by reported satisfaction of participants.

Examples of areas studied include: *action learning groups* – “the paper focuses on the interplay between participants’ engagement with Action Learning Groups (ALGs), their identities and the contexts in which they take place” (Rush and Balamoutsou, 2006); *distance education* – “This research examines students’ engagement with distance education offered by a traditional university and focuses particularly on their induction experiences as distance learners” (Forrester *et al.*, 2004, 1); and *feedback* – “The quality of revision after feedback on error has also been examined and it has been suggested that feedback on error can improved students’ writing in the short-term” (Hyland, 2003, 219).

#### 8.2 Learning design

Student engagement *in* learning design most commonly occurs in the literature in the form of small-scale studies of a particular teaching and learning intervention with a particular group of students, often presented as a paper at a conference. An example of this is a paper on *assessment*: “... students’ engagement in developing criteria [for assessment] should be regarded as an integrated part of the learning process” (Haug, 2006, 1).

By contrast, the use of student engagement data *for* learning design is typically cited in papers reporting on large-scale surveys of student engagement, as a potential by-product of the data collection exercise, as in this example from Coates (2007, 136):

*Teaching staff might take a specific approach to communicate with students, for instance, where the students have reported collaborative online and academic general forms of engagement ... With knowledge of student engagement characteristics, pedagogical approaches could be developed to enhance the involvement of those students reporting more passive styles of engagement.*

### 8.3 Tools for online/classroom-based learning

Many papers have looked at particular tools and technologies to improve engagement either in the classroom or online. These tend to be a mix of conference papers and journal articles, usually with the course or module as the unit of analysis, sometimes including a longitudinal or comparative element (if only discursively). Examples include *online/virtual learning environments* (Dale and Lane, 2007, 101):

*The use of virtual learning environments (VLEs) has become a significant feature of higher education, with the majority of institutions now incorporating this technology into their wider learning and teaching strategies ... Thus the model of learner engagement has changed significantly in recent years, with opportunities being created which offer more stimulating learner experiences and Audience Response Systems, commonly known as 'clickers'*

—Graham et al. 2007, 235–237

*Criticism of the low student participation in traditional lecture formats in higher education has spurred interest in understanding pedagogical implications of [Audience Response Systems] ... A common rationale for using ARSs has been to engage students who are shy or reluctant to take the risk of public failure.*

### 8.4 Extra-curricular activities

These works tend to take a normative position ('enriching educational experiences' are 'good'; paid work off-campus unrelated to study is 'bad').

Both the NSSE and AUSSE benchmark 'enriching educational experiences' among their "more powerful contributors to learning and personal development", including: "complementary learning opportunities in- and out-of-class augment academic programs. Diversity experiences teach students valuable things about themselves and others. Technology facilitates collaboration between peers and instructors. Internships, community service, and senior capstone courses provide opportunities to integrate and apply knowledge" (Kuh, 2009a, 700–701).

These extra-curricular activities can be campus-based, as described below (Kuh, 2009a, 698):

*In addition to the high-impact activities identified [elsewhere]..., students do other things during college that likely confer similar benefits – writing for the student newspaper, working in an office or program on campus, participating in an honors program, being a leader for a student organization or campus committee, and playing intercollegiate athletics to name a few.*

or located in the world beyond the campus, such as that described by Slocum and Rhoads (2008, 102):

*By focusing this study on UBA [University of Buenos Aires] faculty and students actively engaged in anti-neoliberal social movements, we offer a counter-narrative to the notion of the university as economic tool or academic haven. This counter-narrative provides a vision of the university as a vehicle for social transformation, whereby part of the university community is engaged in something other than the pursuit of immediate economic returns. Rather, they are directly involved in creating a vision of society based on more democratic economic practices and a politically engaged citizenry.*

Krause (2005, 8), commenting on the results of a study of student engagement among first-year Australasian students, noted that:

*... the evidence points to first year undergraduates who are occupied in various pursuits beyond those of study. It seems that for an increasing number of student workers, there is a danger that university engagement will be interpreted as a noun rather than a verb [engagement as an appointment in a diary rather than being engaged]. For the multitasking Y Generation students, not to mention the X Generation or even baby boomers returning to study, university study runs the risk of becoming another appointment or engagement in the daily diary, along with paid work and a range of other commitments beyond the campus. In this context, 'engagement' takes on a whole new meaning.*

However, these findings are disputed by Kuh (2009a, 693-694) who argued that:

*... although students who worked more hours tended to spend less time preparing for class, working on or off campus did not seem to negatively affect other forms of engagement. In fact, working students reported higher levels of active and collaborative learning, perhaps because their jobs provided them with opportunities to apply what they were learning... (T)hese studies suggest that some of the shibboleths and conclusions about the negative effects of work on student achievement from earlier studies may no longer hold. Indeed, employment may provide opportunities for students to practice and become more competent in collaboration and teamwork, skills that are needed to function effectively in the twenty-first century work environment.*

## 8.5 Institutional governance

There was very little focus in the student engagement literature on student engagement with institutional governance, and what there was tended to be found in grey rather than peer-reviewed literature. Journal articles on the role of students in institutional governance tend to be tagged with keywords other than 'student engagement', suggesting a different discursive orientation.

Lizzio and Wilson (2009, 70) observe that:

*... the value of actively involving students [in university governance] is generally described from one of three perspectives: functional (how does it benefit the university?), developmental (how does it benefit the student?) and social (how does it benefit society?)*

Kezar (2005, 2) comments that:

*Students bring an essential perspective for creating a success-orientated learning environment. No wonder that high-performing schools include students in policymaking and on committees, task forces, and governance groups, often in leadership roles.*

While Magolda (2005, 2) describes institutions where:

*... students are actively engaged in a variety of campus committees and provide meaningful input to decision making groups. Large numbers of students take*

*responsibility for their learning and are involved in teaching and working with other students in educationally purposeful ways as tutors and peer mentors in campus residences and student organizations.*

Here in the UK, Little et al., (2009, 32) describe how:

*... in another university, the involvement of student union officers in 'away-days' for governors is viewed as a further positive route for student voices to be heard by those responsible for the overall governance of the institution.*

However, student engagement in governance is not always unproblematic. Magolda (op. cit., 1) describes how, in some universities:

*... in addition to ... personal benefits, student leaders can contribute much to the quality of the learning environment, the experiences of their peers, and the larger campus community. Unfortunately, too often these potentially positive effects are not fully realized. Student governments get sidetracked on trivial issues. Social organizations inadvertently discourage participation by students from diverse backgrounds. Service clubs touch in relevant ways only a small fraction of those who need assistance. Established campus governance structures ignore or limit active, meaningful involvement by students.*

## 9 Engagement for what?

Just as a definition of student engagement is often assumed rather than stated, and the focus on the targets of engagement varies widely in the literature, so too is there a wide range of perspectives on the aims and purposes of engagement.

The discourse of engagement also tends to make manifest some issues and functions of engagement, while obscuring other more latent functions that may seem less noble.

### Reasons to engage

#### 9.1 Engagement to improve learning

The majority of literature on student engagement is concerned directly or indirectly with improving student learning. For Coates (2005, 26), this is fundamental:

*The concept of student engagement is based on the constructivist assumption that learning is influenced by how an individual participates in educationally purposeful activities ... In essence, therefore, 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.*

While for Graham *et al.* (2007, 233-234), the centrality of improving student learning through engagement is not a new-fangled idea introduced with the concept of student engagement, but one with a long history:

*The idea that students must be actively engaged in the learning process in order for it to be effective is not new. The roots for active learning reach back in the literature to John Dewey... A diverse body of educational research has shown that academic achievement is positively influenced by the amount of active participation in the learning process.*

Improved outcomes – of which student learning and development are key – are the ultimate goal of both national and international student surveys of student engagement, as alluded to by Pascarella, Seifert and Blaich (2010, 20):



*Our findings suggest that increases on institutional NSSE scores can be considered as reasonable proxies for student growth and learning across a range of important educational outcomes. Thus, if an institution can only afford to focus on the 'process' of undergraduate education as measured by the NSSE benchmarks, this nevertheless seems likely to have implications for the 'product'.*

## 9.2 Engagement to improve throughput rates and retention

Student retention and throughput rates are of concern to all institutions, at least in part because of the financial penalties attached to drop-out or unreasonably length of time to complete. Since, as Kuh *et al.* (2008, 555) say:

*... student engagement in educationally purposeful activities is positively related to academic outcomes as represented by first-year student grades and by persistence between first and second year of college,*

it makes sense for institutions to be concerned about student engagement, or its absence, as Krause argues (2005, 8):

*... we should be most concerned when students who should otherwise be receiving targeted assistance in the form of student support, course advice from academics, or peer support are not receiving this because they failed to engage when the opportunities were available. These are the students for whom inertia and failure to act may ultimately result in failure to persist and succeed ... (W)e should be concerned about the inertia apparent in some of the first year students in the national study ... because it is closely aligned with student dissatisfaction and potential withdrawal from study.*

## 9.3 Engagement for equality/social justice

With the significance of the widening participation mission of UK universities given impetus by the Dearing Report, focus has also shifted to 'non-traditional' students of various flavours (including mature students, part-time students, economically disadvantaged students, students from ethnic minorities, students with disabilities and students with family responsibilities) and how best to ensure that they have an equal chance of success. Krause outlines the effects on diversity of the conversion of higher education to a mass system (2005, 3):

*Mass higher education has meant that university campuses are now characterised by diversity of all kinds, including diversity of ability, age groups and educational backgrounds. Institutions are keen to know how they can engage students from diverse backgrounds and with such diverse needs. Related to this has been a concerted effort to enhance access to and monitor the experience of under-represented and disadvantaged students in higher education.*

Kuh (2009a, 685) argues that:

*... engagement has compensatory effects on grades and persistence for students who most need a boost to performance because they are not adequately prepared academically when they start college...*

while:

*... engaging in educationally purposeful activities helps to level the playing field, especially for students from low-income family backgrounds and others who have been historically underserved. (ibid., 689)*

According to Harper and Quaye (2009a, 3):

*We are persuaded by a large volume of empirical evidence that confirms that strategizing ways to increase the engagement of various student populations, especially those for whom engagement is known to be problematic, is a worthwhile endeavour. The gains and outcomes are too robust to leave to chance, and social justice is unlikely to ensue if some students come to enjoy the beneficial by-products of engagement but others do not.*

Krause (2005, 10) highlights that some subgroups of students (such as 20-24-year-olds, students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and foreign students) perceive their success at engagement with the university negatively:

*Regardless of the explanations for these findings, they nevertheless point to the need to challenge old paradigms which depict engagement solely in positive terms. The international subgroup is a case in point. As a group, international students score high on the usual measures of engagement. They spend more time on campus and in class than*

*their domestic peers. They engage in online study far more than domestic students and devote relatively little time to paid employment. Nevertheless, they are having difficulty engaging with study and learning and are feeling overwhelmed by all they have to do. The finding points to the need for multiple indicators of engagement and a theorizing of the concept which allows for multiple perspectives. To understand engagement is to understand that for some it is a battle when they encounter teaching practices which are foreign to them, procedures which are difficult to understand, and a 'language' which is alien. Some students actively engage with the battle and lose – what do we do for them?*

While Krause's view may at first reading appear critical of the limitations of engagement for these marginalised groups of students, on closer inspection it is apparent that she is simply calling for an expansion of the range of measures, to pick up other facets not currently reported on (such as the 'coping and comprehension' scale that identified these struggling groups), and a broader theorising of the concept to allow for these multiple perspectives.

#### 9.4 Engagement for curricular relevance

The engagement of students in learning design, as discussed earlier, can lead to students perceiving improvements in curricular relevance. However, improvements in curricular relevance can also be attained through implementation of strategies informed by student engagement data, such as that illustrated by NSSE (2009b, 10):

*... Viterbo faculty members have increased the use of active learning strategies and technologies to create a learner-centered classroom ... NSSE results from both 2006 and 2007 reinforce the effectiveness of active learning strategies at Viterbo – students' responses indicated that they learn more when they are intensely involved in their education, asked to think about what they are learning in different settings, and collaborate with faculty and other students on projects.*

#### 9.5 Engagement for institutional benefit

Institutional benefit from student engagement can be both reputational and financial. Coates (2005, 32) argues that student engagement data have a valuable role to play in quality assurance, providing useful information for higher education managers:

*Student engagement data provides a means for determining the productivity of university education. Johnstone (1993) argued that the most significant and*

*sustainable productivity advances in education will result from enhancing learning outputs rather than through further manipulation of structural factors or cost side productivity ... (T)imely data on student engagement could be used diagnostically to fine tune the management of student learning and also to provide information for making summative judgements about such productivity.*

Since “student engagement comes close to providing necessary and sufficient information about student learning” (Coates, 2005, 32), engagement is a reliable proxy for learning; actual learning is a good indicator of quality; hence, engagement data are useful in determining quality. This is supported by Kuh (2009a, 685):

*What the institution does to foster student engagement can be thought of as a margin of educational quality – sometimes called value added – and something a college or university can directly influence to some degree.*

and Pascarella, Seifert and Blaich (2010, 21):

*The NSSE benchmark scales were designed specifically to provide another gauge of academic quality – students’ participation in academic and non-academic experiences that lead to learning ... Since your findings suggest the dimension of the undergraduate experience measured by NSSE benchmarks are correlated with important educational outcomes, they arguably constitute a more valid conception of quality in undergraduate education than U.S. News’s [ranking scale].*

A more immediate financial benefit can be that described by Markwell (2007, 15):

*... at a time when universities and colleges are increasingly focused on the importance of outreach to alumni and other potential friends of the institution for the purpose of greatly increasing philanthropic support for higher education, it is becoming more widely recognised, I think, that how engaged students are and feel themselves to be during their student years will have a great bearing on how connected and supportive towards the institution they are likely to be in later years. One form of student engagement which some institutions have found works well is involving students in their alumni outreach and fundraising activities – for example, students thanking donors, in letters or phone calls, for their donations to the institution. This may be thought of as a particular form of involvement of*

*students in community service activities, something I think we should and will see happening more frequently.*

#### 9.6 Engagement as marketing

Since, as argued above, an engaging university is a quality university, it would make sense for universities to use their success at engaging students as a marketing device. They do (NSSE, 2009b, 13):

*For decades, Hastings College (HC) has been telling potential students that its students are engaged, they learn, and they are satisfied. Faculty and administrators at the institution felt confident in this statement based on personal feedback from students but, until recently, there had been no evidence to support their assertions.*

#### 9.7 Economics of engagement

As noted by Ryan (2005, 236):

*Concurrent with the rising interest in student engagement, resource management and the effective use of financial resources represent another broad area of concern for policymakers, the public, and college administrators. Data ... suggests real increases in expenditures in recent years at colleges and universities, most notably in the institutional support (administrative) category.... With heightened concerns about college costs, access, and the impact of these pressures on students and society, a closer examination of the potential links between institutional expenditures and student engagement represents an opportunity to enhance our understanding of the relationship between institutional characteristics and student engagement.*

In the current economic climate, concerns about ‘value for money’ – both from public funding bodies and from fee-paying students – are more pressing than ever. Yet very few studies have been conducted to uncover possible links between institutional expenditure and student engagement, and those few have produced conflicting results.

Ryan (2005, 245) found that “administrative expenditures had a negative and significant relationship with student engagement” in a study limited by a small, non-randomised sample, inconsistently reported financial data and a limited subset of engagement variables.

Pike *et al.* (2006, 868) found “very complex” relationships between expenditure and student engagement, contingent on a number of factors including institutional

control (public vs. private institutions), students' seniority, and type of engagement measure, although:

*... the findings from this study seem to suggest that ... instruction, followed closely by academic [including library, academic computing, academic administration, staff development and curriculum development] and institutional support [including general administration, executive planning, legal and fiscal operations, public relations and development], have the strongest positive relationships with the five NSSE measures of student engagement and educational effectiveness.*

Elsewhere, Kuh (2009a, 695) calls for studies to examine the cost/benefit ratios of “high-impact” practices, taking into account the probability of enhanced persistence and success of students who participate in these activities:

*The additional revenues realised from tuition and other fees from students who stay in school could offset what may be marginally higher costs of some of these practices, such as making available a small writing- or inquiry-intensive first-year seminar for every student and subsidising study away experiences. Knowing the costs of high-impact practices and student success interventions such as mentoring programs and early warning systems could help institutional decision makers to decide whether to reallocate resources and invest in them.*

## 10 Engagement for whom?

The assumed or stated definition of engagement often varies with understandings of targets of engagement and reasons for engagement, as well as intended beneficiaries of engagement.

### Beneficiaries of engagement

#### 10.1 Students – as individuals, and collectively

Students are the obvious beneficiaries of engagement, by design – as summarised by Kuh (2009a, 698):

*...engagement increases the odds that any student – educational and social background notwithstanding – will attain his or her educational and personal objectives, acquire the skills and competencies demanded by the challenges of the twenty-first century, and enjoy the intellectual and monetary advantages associated with the completion of the baccalaureate degree.*

However, individual students are not the only beneficiaries of engagement. Where students engage, a climate of co-operation and collaboration can be created, leading to a greater voice for students generally, as illustrated by Magolda (2005, 2):

*For example, the University of Kansas expects students to have a voice in campus governance. Indeed, the University requires that all policy committees (with the exception of personnel committees) have a minimum of twenty percent of their members be students. As one student senate officer commented, ‘Students are on an equal playing field with faculty and others in terms of governance.’ Clearly, students and their ‘voices’ are very important at the University.*

#### 10.2 Managers

Information about student engagement can be a useful tool for managers, as suggested by Coates (2010, 13):

*By monitoring student engagement and outcomes, institutions can identify areas of good practice as well as those areas in need of improvement. Institutions can*

*also allocate expensive teaching and support resources in a strategic fashion, and report the results of such actions in ways that demonstrate the efficacy of the feedback cycle.*

and echoed by Kuh (2009a, 685):

*The argument was that credible, actionable information about how students spent their time and what institutions emphasized in terms of student performance could tell an accurate comprehensive story of students' educational experiences and be a powerful lever for institutional improvement.*

Elsewhere, Coates (2005, 32) has noted that:

*Data on student engagement has the advantage of providing information on what students are actually doing. While this may appear self-evident, it has a broader significance for the management of institutions, students and academic programmes. Rather than work from assumptions or partial anecdotal reports about student activities, institutions can make decisions based on more objective information. Information about student activities would provide institutions with valuable information for marketing and recruitment and help them become more responsive to student learning needs. Only with accurate and reliable information on what students are actually doing can institutions move beyond taking student activities for granted.*

and Krause and Coates (2008, 495) observe that:

*... [engagement] data have the potential to inform understanding of many aspects of university life, such as student affairs, pedagogical quality, recruitment and selection, attrition and retention, equity, and student learning processes.*

Addressing specifically student engagement in institutional governance, Lizzio and Wilson (2009, 70) note that there are functional benefits (to the university):

*Sabin and Daniels (2001), writing from a functional perspective, identify enhanced accountability (in terms of transparency of policy and decisions), evident deliberation (in terms of appropriate consideration of stakeholder views) and organisational learning (in terms of learning from experience) as benefits of participative processes.*



*In this regard, there is little doubt that students have access to experiences and information that can improve the quality and accountability of decision making.*

These benefits can extend to institutional culture too, as Pascarella, Seifert and Blaich (2010, 21) argue:

*In a dynamic context grounded in an institution's commitment to improvement, an institutional culture may arise that continuously strives to engage students in effective educational practices and experiences, thereby increasing the likelihood of improved institutional effectiveness and increased student learning and development.*

### 10.3 The 'engagement industry'

The 'engagement industry' exists metaphorically in the form of academics who may spot it as a career opportunity – by positioning themselves as having expertise in an arena that is popular, they can signal that “this is the most important thing in education, and I'm the expert”. Such academics – or consultants, should they step outside the formal constraints of academia – represent only one incarnation of the 'industry'; those organisations which have been spawned to develop, implement and support the administration of national and international surveys of student engagement are a further manifestation; while another is the commercial industry represented by entities such as YawnBuster ([www.yawnbuster.com](http://www.yawnbuster.com)), which promises to “Transform Classroom Activities Into Engaging Interactive Sessions”, in all their capitalised splendour!

### 10.4 The higher education system

The focus on engagement has benefited the HE system both through making data available for measuring and monitoring, and also through the use of this data (and the applications of the principles of engagement, more generally) for continuous improvement across the sector, as Krause illustrates (2005, 3-4):

*Engagement has become a pivotal focus of attention as institutions locate themselves in an increasingly marketised and competitive higher education environment. Meanwhile, the quality assurance mandate has drawn attention to the need for universities to demonstrate that they add value and enhance the quality of the student experience through monitoring and evaluation cycles of continuous improvement. The focus on engagement has also been provoked by growing awareness of a new Y Generation of university enrollees ... who enter higher*

*education with a unique mindset and expectations which distinguish them from their baby-boomer and X Generation predecessors. Given this complex interplay of factors, researchers, practitioners, administrators and policy makers have come to recognise the imperative to devise ways of better understanding, monitoring and promoting student engagement in their institutions.*

While the literature has little to say about the benefits to *individual academics*, rather than the sector as a whole, implied (if unstated) benefits are evident from the outcomes of engagement (see discussion of “Effects”, below). These would include greater connectedness between academics and their students (Bensimon 2009, xxii – xxiii); increased interaction on substantive matters with their students (Kuh 2009 a, 684); and sharing values and approaches to learning with their students (Rush and Balamoutsou 2006, 4) – in addition to the increased job satisfaction of teaching responsive students.

## 10.5 Society

Lizzio and Wilson (2009, 70), commenting on the value of student participation in university governance, note that there are social (as well as functional and developmental) benefits to this engagement:

*Student participation [in university governance] can also be understood as part of the emerging and related discourses of education for democracy (Teune 2001) and ‘universities as sites of citizenship’ (Colby et al. 2003) ... Associated with this discourse is an underlying concern that a decline in civic participation generally is undermining democratic institutions.... It is argued that, if universities expect students to develop the skills and attitudes for effective citizenship, then it is incumbent upon them to exemplify and support these through policies and practices.*

Thus, student engagement in university governance both exposes students to democratic practice and empowers them to participate as informed citizens, and bolsters democracy by providing further incarnations of democracy in action.

## II Effects of engagement

Definitions of engagement often contain stated or unstated assumptions about aims and intended outcomes ('engagement for what') or beneficiaries ('engagement for whom'), but these may vary from the actual observed effects of engagement on students, institutions and the higher education sector more broadly. The discussion below focuses on *actual observed effects*, rather than the intended outcomes and beneficiaries discussed in the preceding sections.

### Observed effects of engagement

Engagement allows students to develop in important ways, as noted by Bensimon (2009, xxii-xxiii):

*... productive engagement is an important means by which students develop feelings about their peers, professors, and institutions that give them a sense of connectedness, affiliation, and belonging, while simultaneously offering rich opportunities for learning and development.*

and Kuh (2009a, 684):

*... students gained more from their studies and other aspects of the college experience when they devoted more time and energy to certain tasks that required more effort than others – studying, interacting with their peers and teachers about substantive matters, applying their learning to concrete situations and tasks in different contexts, and so forth.*

while Lizzio and Wilson (2009, 81) observed that:

*Students reported, on average, moderate to high levels of learning and development as a result of undertaking the representative role ... The types of personal benefits they described generally reflected their motivations for originally accepting the role (i.e. developing skills and confidence, making contacts, helping fellow students). This suggests that the representative role is potentially a rich context for learning across a number of different skill and attitudinal domains.*

Effects of engagement listed by Rush and Balamoutsou (2006, 4) include that:

*Engaged students ... share the values and approaches to learning of their lecturers; spend time and energy on educationally meaningful tasks; learn with others inside and outside the classroom; actively explore ideas confidently with others; and learn to value perspectives other than their own. When students are part of a learning community ... they are: positive about their identity as a member of a group; focused on learning; ask questions in class; feel comfortable contributing to class discussions; spend time on campus; have made a few friends; and are motivated in some extra curricular activity.*

Beyond these observations, robust relationships have been established over time between students' investment of time, effort and interest in a range of educationally-orientated activities, and favourable outcomes such as increased performance, persistence and satisfaction.

Following Astin's 1984 paper which dealt with student involvement in their own learning, the concept that was subsequently expanded to incorporate earlier aspects such as "quality of effort" (Pace 1980, 1984) and "time-on-task" (Merwin 1969), with later work (Pace 1990, Chickering & Gamson 1987) on effective practices in teaching and learning, being incorporated into the concept which emerged as "student engagement" (Kuh *et al.* 1991, 1997; Kuh 2004, 2008a; Pascarella & Terenzini 1991, 2005; Ewell & Jones 1996; Pace 1995; Tinto 1993; Coates 2006).

Specific aspects of engagement, such as involvement, time on task, and quality of effort, have repeatedly been linked to positive outcomes (see Astin 1994, 1999; Braxton, Milem & Sullivan 2000; Goodsell, Maher & Tinto 1992; Feldman & Newcomb 1969; Kuh 1995; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh & Whitt 2005; Kuh, Pace & Vesper 1997; Kuh, Whitt & Strange 1989; LaNasa, Cabrera & Trangsrud 2009; Pace 1990, 1995; Pascarella 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini 1991, 2005; Pike 2006a, 2006b; Tinto 1987, 1993). Chickering & Gamson (1987) summarised the evidence into seven effective practices in undergraduate teaching & learning, viz. student-staff contact, active learning, prompt feedback, time on task, high expectations, respect for diverse learning styles, and cooperation among students.

Academic challenge is central to the engagement construct (NSSE 2002, 10) and some disciplines are experienced as more challenging than others (see Pascarella participating in a learning 2001, Coates & Ainley 2007; Marks & Coates 2007). Interacting with staff has been shown to have a powerful impact on learning (Pascarella & Terenzini 1991, 2005; Astin 1993; Kuh & Hu 2001; Hausmann *et al.* 2007; Cuseo 2007) especially

when it takes place outside of the classroom and responds to individual student needs (Kuh & Hu 2001; Chickering & Reisser 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini 1991). Participation in extra-curricular activities has also been shown to be positively correlated to improved outcomes (Pascarella & Terenzini 1991; McInnis *et al.* 2001, 2005; Scott 2006).

Living on campus has been positively correlated to engagement (Chickering 1975; Pike & Kuh 2005; Terenzini *et al.* 1996) and community has been linked to substantial increases in engagement (Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research 2002; Pike 1999; Pike *et al.* 1997; Zhao & Ku 2004). Interactions with diverse peers (in and out of the classroom) has been positively correlated with a range of positive outcomes, both personal and social (antonio *et al.* 2004; Chang, Astin & Kim 2004; Chang, Denson, Saenz & Misa 2006; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado & Gurin 2002; Harper & antonio 2008; Hu & Kuh 2003; Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn & Terenzini 1996; Villalpando 2002).

Additionally, studies have consistently shown correlations between engagement and improvements in specific desirable outcomes, including:

- general abilities and critical thinking (Endo & Harpel 1982; Gellin 2003; Kuh 2003; Kuh, Hu & Vesper 1997; Pascarella, Duby, Terenzini & Iverson 1983; Pascarella *et al.* 1996; Pike 1999, 2000; Pike & Killian 2001; Pike, Kuh & Gonyea 2003; Shulman 2002; Terenzini, Pascarella & Bliming 1996);
- practical competence and skills transferability (Kuh 1993, 1995);
- cognitive development (Anaya 1996; Astin 1993; Baxter Magolda 1992; Kuh 1993, 1995; Pascarella, Seifert & Blaich 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini 2005);
- self-esteem, psychosocial development, productive racial and gender identity formation (Bandura, Peluso, Ortman & Millard 2000; Chickering & Reisser 1993; Evans, Forney & Guido-DiBrito 1998; Harper 2004; Harper & Quayle 2007; Torres, Howard-Hamilton & Cooper 2003);
- moral & ethical development (Evans 1987; Jones & Watt, 1999; Liddell & Davis 1996; Rest 1993);
- student satisfaction (Kuh & Vesper 1997; Kuh *et al.* 2005; Kuh *et al.* 2007);
- accrual of social capital (Harper 2008);
- improved grades (Astin 1977, 1993; Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research 2002; Pike, Schroeder & Berry 1997; Tross, Harper Osher & Kneidinger 2000);
- persistence (Astin 1975, 1985 1993; Bean 2005; Berger & Milem 1999; Braxton, Milem & Sullivan 2000; Bridges, Cambridge, Kuh & Leegwater 2005; Milem & Berger 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini 2005; Peltier, Laden & Matranga 1999; Pike *et al.* 1997; Stage & Hossler 2000; Swail, Redd & Perna 2003; Tinto 1993, 2000, 2005).

## 12 Critical success factors for engagement

Expecting student engagement to happen of its own accord has been described as ‘magical thinking’ (Chang, Chang and Ledesma, 2005, 10-11) – it doesn’t happen by magic:

*[This] rationale provides no guidance for campuses on assembling the appropriate means to create environments conducive to realization of the benefits of diversity or on employing the methods necessary to facilitate the educational process to achieve those benefits.*

Indeed, Strange and Banning (2001, 201) call for campuses that are “intentionally designed to offer opportunities, incentives, and reinforcements for growth and development”.

### Critical success factors for engagement at different levels

This section outlines the prerequisites for student engagement at different levels, as described by the literature on student engagement. While a substantive body of literature details critical success factors on related issues, such as the successful use of student feedback, that falls outside of the scope of this Literature Review (see “Scope of the Review”, above).

#### 12.1 Students

For students to reap the benefits of engagement, argues Bensimon (2009, xxiii), they “must invest time and effort into academic activities and practices ... that correlate highly with positive educational outcomes”. The logic is explained by Kuh (2003, 25):

*The engagement premise is deceptively simple, even self-evident: The more students study a subject, the more they learn about it. Likewise, the more students practice and get feedback on their writing, analyzing, or problem solving, the more adept they become. The very act of being engaged also adds to the foundation of skills and dispositions that is essential to live a productive, satisfying life after college. That is, students who are involved in educationally productive activities in college are developing habits of the mind and heart that enlarge their capacity for continuous learning and personal development.*

Coates (2005, 27) outlines the necessary conditions from students for the realisation of the benefits of engagement:

*Students also need to interact with these [optimal] conditions and activities in ways that will lead to productive learning. Students need to expend a certain 'quality of effort'... , to challenge themselves to learn, to interact with new ideas and practices and to practice the communication, organisational and reflective skills that should help them learn and will form an important part of what they take from university education.*

## 12.2 Staff

Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005, 173) conclude from their study that academic staff have a role to play in student engagement:

*Our findings suggest that faculty do matter. The educational context created by faculty behaviours and attitudes has a dramatic effect on student learning and engagement. Institutions where faculty create an environment that emphasizes effective educational practices have students who are active participants in their learning and perceive greater gains from their undergraduate experience.*

While students have responsibilities for their own engagement, there are important ways in which staff can contribute to the facilitation (or – conversely – to the frustration!) of engagement. These can range from Coates's (2005, 26) suggestion of academic staff "making themselves available for consultation outside class time" to Hu and Kuh's (2002, 570) suggestion that "faculty members can make concrete links between what students are reading and discussing and other aspects of their lives", to Markwell's (2007, 18) suggestions of:

*Lecturers finding ways to encourage interaction in large classes as well as in small, and encouraging, even requiring, students to study in groups, and using feedback to encourage engagement; academics finding ways to urge and to stimulate students to work to master thoroughly the material they are studying – to understand fundamental principles, and not simply to memorise the details; academics finding ways that will engage and excite students through connecting their research with their teaching; staff taking part in the wider student life of the university, supporting extracurricular activities and so on ... This means, of course, that student engagement requires staff engagement.*

Yet, as Hu and Kuh (2002, 570-571) note, other staff can also have a role to play:

*In addition, faculty members, academic administrators, and student affairs professionals can influence the extent to which students perceive that the institutional environment values scholarship and intellectual activity by communicating high expectations.*

The role such staff can play is picked up elsewhere by Kuh (2009a, 697):

*At high performing colleges and universities, student affairs staff collaborate with others to periodically review data about the effectiveness of policies and practices with an eye towards ensuring that what is enacted is of acceptable quality and consistent with the institutions espoused priorities and values.*

### 12.3 Local context

Engagement issues may vary by discipline, and so engagement plans may need to be nuanced. In their study of the subject engagement of UK Sociology students, Jary and Lebeau (2009, 697) found a “greater commonality of experience and outcome across institutions than the extreme polarisation of institutional experiences and outcomes sometimes suggest”, with a “stronger ... disciplinary framing of the curriculum,” and later (ibid., 711) note that:

*... we would expect to find stronger personal projects in business studies and biosciences and somewhat greater integration for bioscience and subjects where class contact hours are high.*

Local variation can also occur at the programme level, particularly where implementation effectiveness may vary, as discussed by Kuh (2009a, 697):

*Another critical step is making sure the programs that research shows to be ... high impact ... are actually having the desired effects. One of the reasons so many college impact studies show equivocal or mixed findings is because the program or practice being evaluated was not implemented effectively.*



## 12.4 Institutions

If students are to take advantage of engagement opportunities, institutions are required to provide them, as noted by Coates (2005, 26-27):

*... institutions ... need to provide students with the appropriate resources and opportunities to make possible and promote specific kinds of interactions. This may involve ... campus libraries having sufficient space for students to work collaboratively, curricula and assessment that compel certain standards of performance or activities around campus that prompt students to reflect on the ethics and practices of their learning.*

This is supported by Kuh et al. (2007, 44):

*The second component of student engagement is how the institution deploys its resources and organizes the curriculum, other learning opportunities and support services to induce students to participate in activities that lead to the experiences and desired outcomes such as persistence, satisfaction, learning and graduation.*

Pike and Kuh (2005, 187) argue that:

*The most important institutional factors are thought to be the policies and practices adopted by institutions to increase student engagement ... [Engaging] institutions were marked by an unshakeable focus on student learning emphasized in their missions and operating philosophies. They also adapted their physical campus properties and took advantage of the surrounding environment in ways that enriched students' learning opportunities. Put another way, aspects of the institutional cultures appeared to explain more of what mattered to student success at these schools than variables typically examined in studies of institutional and student performance.*

An example of this is Kuh et al.'s (1991, 369) claim that "Involving Colleges are committed to pluralism in all its forms", a view supported by Markwell's (2007, 19) reminder that:

*... we need always to be mindful of the importance of creating an inclusive environment – one in which women and men of all cultural, national, socio-economic and other backgrounds will, so far as possible, feel able to engage on equal terms.*

The institution's duty to provide an engaging environment is a moral, rather than just an instrumental, one, as Kuh (2009b, 316) argues:

*... it behoves faculty and staff to create opportunities for all students to participate in what research from NSSE and other quarters indicate are 'high impact' practices ... These include learning communities, student-faculty research, service learning, internships, study abroad, and capstone seminars or other culminating experiences.*

This passion is supported by Markwell (2007, 15), who argues that:

*... we need to put in front of students and staff alike a vision of student – and staff – engagement within a wider vision of an academic community ... Presenting a compelling and exciting vision of what university life can be like, and of the great benefits that flow from it may not be sufficient but it is surely necessary for making substantial progress.*

Providing an engaging environment is not just the wise thing to do, they claim – it is also the *right* thing to do.

## 12.5 Educational ideology:

As noted by Coates (2005, 26):

*The concept of student engagement is based on the constructivist assumption that learning is influenced by how an individual participates in educationally purposeful activities.*

While constructivism is a theory (or philosophy) of learning, it is usually held as part of a broader set of understandings about the nature of teaching and learning, of students, and of the purposes of higher education generally. Differing orientations to such issues are best described as *educational ideologies*, which we define as alternative frameworks of theories, beliefs and values about the nature, distribution and ordering of educational arrangements at both national and local levels, which provide a guide and justification for behaviour in educational contexts. They provide discourses and conceptual tools that individuals draw on in thinking, talking and practising.

Differing educational ideologies have implications for the way in which student engagement was understood and implemented or emphasised in an institution, as well

as its significance and purpose, as illustrated in the table below (adapted from Trowler and Wareham (2008, 36), with the categorisation of ideologies drawn from Trowler’s literature review (1998)):

**Table 2: Conceptions of teaching as ideological and implications for engagement**

Ideological perspective	Educational ideology in relation to teaching	Role of students	Implications for engagement
Traditionalism	Teaching is about transmitting information, induction into the discipline. Information transfer/ teacher-focused approach	Learning through absorbing information provided to them.	Students need to be interested in the content. Students participate through attending lectures and complying with behavioural norms.
Progressivism	Teaching is about developing students’ minds so they can better appreciate the world, about making them autonomous. Conceptual change/ student-focused approach	Learning through co-construction of knowledge	Students need to be engaged in, and with, learning – both in and out of the classroom.
Social reconstructionism	Teaching is about empowering students to see the inequities and structured nature of advantage and disadvantage in the world, and to change it.	Learning through questioning, challenging and ‘speaking truth to power’, and effecting change.	Students need to be engaged with the world beyond the classroom, challenging and changing structural inequity.
Enterprise	Teaching is about giving students the skills to thrive in their careers and to contribute to the economy.	Learning through application of knowledge across disciplinary boundaries to real-life practical problems	Students need to be engaged in work-based/ vocational learning

## 12.6 National policy

While none of the literature specifically addressed the issue of national policy, policy levers such as funding frameworks, systemic assessment schemes and quality frameworks could have a significant impact on encouraging, or discouraging, an emphasis on student engagement at an institutional level. For example, policy that

framed 'quality' in relation to learning rather than teaching would require institutions to focus on what students are actually doing, rather than on what the institutions are providing for them to do or not do, as they wish; while funding being contingent on engagement rather than cruder measures of throughput rates and retention would allow funders a more nuanced view of value for money than the binary 'graduated' vs. 'dropped out' model.

## 12.7 Linking the levels

As argued above, engagement is not the necessary outcome of interventions at any one level alone; rather, it relies on the contributions and efforts of players at many levels. Harper and Quaye (2009a, 6) argue that both students and institutions must be involved:

*... students should not be chiefly responsible for engaging themselves ... but instead administrators and educators must foster the conditions that enable diverse populations of students to be engaged.*

An example is cited (Harper and Quaye, 2009a, 6) of staff neglecting to incorporate multicultural perspectives into their discussions and assigned materials, thus placing the onus on students from minority groups to find materials that resonate with their perspectives, or to raise issues related to race in class discussions.

## 13 Strategies for engagement

Strategies for engagement hinge on one's understanding and definition of engagement, as well as notions of what would constitute appropriate targets, goals and beneficiaries for engagement strategies. The effects and effectiveness of these strategies are impacted by the critical success factors outlined above. A useful collection of strategy guides directed at various stakeholders, distilled from 'best practice' at participating colleges and informed by NSSE data can be found at: [http://nsse.iub.edu/institute/index.cfm?view=deep/publications&ptab=DEEP\\_Practice\\_Briefs](http://nsse.iub.edu/institute/index.cfm?view=deep/publications&ptab=DEEP_Practice_Briefs).

### 13.1 Institutional strategies

#### 13.1.1 Involving blended professionals

Blended professionals are "individuals who draw their identity from both professional and academic domains, and are, in effect, developing new forms of space between the two" (Whitchurch, 2009: 2). These staff typically have mixed portfolios and work in a fluid space between and among academic and professional domains, developing a network of relationships while being contained within formal reporting hierarchies (*ibid.*: 3). Examples of 'blended professionals' include learning developers, student affairs professionals, educational developers and quality enhancement professionals.

Institutions who involve blended professionals in their student engagement strategies demonstrate a united approach to engaging students, as illustrated by Kuh (2009a, 698):

*Another way student affairs professionals can enhance student engagement and success is by championing and themselves consistently using what the research shows are effective educational practices ... Student affairs could take the lead in monitoring students participating in these and other effective educational activities ... and work with academic administrators and faculty colleagues to find ways to scale them up to create enough opportunities so that every student has a real chance to participate.*

#### 13.1.2 Institutional engagement plans

Coates (2010, 14) notes that:

*... students' interactions with their institution do not necessarily align with organisational structures. Building student engagement means building processes and*

*structures that are designed around and responsive to increasingly diverse student needs. As institutions have demonstrated in recent years, this may involve forming institution-wide action groups, appointing people to manage student engagement initiatives, making funds available for engagement-focused developments, building learning spaces that support student participation, or enhancing the capacity of teaching staff to challenge students to learn.*

Jankowska and Atlay (2008) discuss the use of “creative space” to enhance students’ engagement with the learning process, capitalising on a sense of “novelty and surprise” to enhance collaboration and interactivity.

Krause (2005, 12-14) lists ten ‘working principles’ to enhance student engagement:

1. Create and maintain a stimulating intellectual environment
  - Give students good reasons to be part of the learning community.
  - Provide a coherent and current course structure.
  - Stimulate discussion and debate, exploration and discovery.
2. Value academic work and high standards
  - Actively encourage commitment to study by attaching importance to studying and spending time on academic work.
  - This may need to be modelled for students in first year so that they learn how to balance the different dimensions of their lives.
3. Monitor and respond to demographic subgroup differences and their impact on engagement
  - Make it a priority to get to know your students, their needs, aspirations and motivations.
  - Monitor the subgroup differences and develop targeted strategies for engaging students according to their needs and background experiences.
  - This provides a powerful platform for supporting and teaching students in a responsive way so as to maximise the possibilities for engagement.
4. Ensure expectations are explicit and responsive
  - Communicate expectations clearly and consistently across the institution and within faculties and departments.
  - Reiterate expectations at appropriate times through the semester and in

different settings – before semester begins, and before and during peak stress times in the semester.

- Include students in the expectation-building exercise. Listen to their expectations. Be responsive where appropriate. Ensure that they know you have listened to their views, but be sure to shape expectations so that the highest standards of learning and teaching are maintained. Do not be driven by unrealistic expectations.

#### 5. Foster social connections

- *In small groups:* When students have many off-campus commitments, the value of in-class time should be maximised. Opportunities for active and collaborative learning are particularly important. Encourage problem-solving activities, small group discussion of reading and class materials, and provide intellectual stimulation and challenge.
- *In large lectures:* Even here, student interaction can be fostered through question-answer sessions and a range of interactive activities that help to break down the potentially alienating barriers created by the large group anonymity syndrome.
- *Online:* Provide for online discussion, collaboration and interaction.
- Create opportunities for civic engagement with communities beyond the campus.

#### 6. Acknowledge the challenges

- Let students know that you/your department/unit/institution understand and are aware of some of the pressures they face.
- Acknowledge that a large proportion of students will be juggling work and study commitments throughout the semester. This may be done in reading guides, lectures or tutorials.
- Be explicit and proactive in dealing with issues and challenges that potentially jeopardise student engagement.

#### 7. Provide targeted self-management strategies

- Seek to develop self-regulated learners who drive their own engagement behaviours.
- Discuss strategies for time management and maintaining motivation, particularly during stressful times of semester.
- Identify the various sources of help early in the semester and at key moments through semester so that students are prepared ahead of time. They need to know that they are not alone in facing the challenges and they also need to know where to go for help.

8. Use assessment to shape the student experience and encourage engagement
  - Provide feedback and continuous assessment tasks early and often.
  - Use assessment in creative ways to bring peers together both in and out of the classroom
  - Engage students in self-assessment and peer assessment so that the focus is increasingly on their responsibility for becoming and remaining engaged in the learning process.
  
9. Manage online learning experiences with care
  - *Online resources:* Placing lecture notes or audio streaming on the web is not a substitute for effective lecturing. Students indicate that even when all lecture notes are on the web, they will attend lectures if the lecture is interesting and presented well. Contact with academics and their peers is crucial.
  - *Student involvement:* When lecture material is presented online, academics need to develop strategies for encouraging student involvement during lectures. For example, integrate activities into the lecture timeslot.
  - In online learning environments, capitalise on the community-building capacities of online discussion forums to connect students to each other and to the learning community (see Krause, 2005).
  
10. Recognise the complex nature of engagement in your policy and practice
  - Engagement is a binding of students to each other, to meaningful learning activities, and to the institution.
  - Engagement is also a battle for some students that creates conflict and turmoil.
  - Engagement is an appointment for some who see university as one of many engagements in their daily calendar of activities.
  - It should be a promise and a pledge that brings with it reciprocal rights and responsibilities.
  - Engagement should be an interlocking and a 'fastening' of students to learning and university learning communities in an engagement relationship that is mutually beneficial and continues well beyond graduation.
  - The nature of students' engagement changes over time – monitor the changes from one year level to the next in transitions to and through the institution. Be responsive in supporting different forms of engagement throughout their experience.



### 13.2 Individual staff interventions

Mann (2001, 17) outlines several ‘responses’ that teaching staff can make to help alienated students to become more engaged. These include:

- solidarity – dissolving the estrangement through empathy and removing the separation between lecturers and students;
- hospitality – welcoming new members to the academic community by, for example, making discourse more accessible;
- safety – providing safe spaces where creativity is nurtured;
- redistribution of power – allowing students to exercise power over their own learning and development;
- criticality – developing awareness of the conditions in which we work, and of the responses we make to those, to allow questioning and examination.

### 13.3 Frameworks for action

Proposals for strategies for engagement are presented in the accompanying frameworks for action<sup>3</sup>.

Frameworks for action are conceptually based lenses offered to leaders to help them act in a more informed and theoretically illuminated way (see Bamber *et al.*, 2009, for examples). They aim to get beyond the usual kinds of advice that textbooks and articles usually give: these are often devoid of explicit theory, are conceptually malnourished and are not usually connected to the daily reality of those in HE. Often such advice consists of little more than truisms that fail the ‘reversal test’ – if you reverse them, they say nothing beyond the obvious. Fullan and Scott (2009), for example, tell leaders they should “listen, link and lead”, that they should be decisive, committed and empathising. Reversing that advice for guidance on what not to do sounds ridiculous.

Just as one needs to try to avoid truisms, it is also important to avoid simplistic notions of ‘evidence-based practice’ purportedly applicable regardless of context. Here the problem is a kind of atheoretical, context-blind empiricism: “abstracted empiricism” as Mills called it (1959). Donald Schön warned about the alluring but deceptively simple link between evidence and practices in 1983, making a compelling argument for the

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3 *Framework for action: enhancing student engagement at the institutional level* (2010) York: Higher Education Academy  
*Framework for action: guidance for policy makers on student engagement* (2010) York: Higher Education Academy

necessity of cognitive work at the ground level by reflective practitioners. However, to do this work they need tools for thinking. Fullan and Scott (2009) talk about action based on evidence, but as important is interpretation of that evidence based on good theory. Action for change needs to be both evidentially and theoretically informed.

So, any framework for action by change agents should be theoretically and conceptually robust as well as informed by data: 'evidence'. Such frameworks should stimulate the reflective practitioner to think about their own context, about the nature of the innovation being considered and about how the two things fit together. Abstracted truisms and dangerous generalisations can then, hopefully, be avoided and at the same time the 'bipolar division' between abstract theory and detailed instances of events on the ground can be bridged (Warde, 2005).

Frameworks for action have four elements:

- data from practice on the ground;
- theory;
- associated concepts;
- and finally, questions for practitioner.

Theory and data interact with each other: data informs and refines theory; theory shapes the interpretation of data. Concepts are crystallised out of that interaction and themselves are applied to the situation on the ground. Finally, reflective questions are formulated on the basis of those processes.

## 14 Conclusion

A literature search on ‘student engagement’ produced a body of some 1,000 results, including articles in peer-reviewed journals (both print and online), books, monographs, project reports, syllabi, conference papers (both published, refereed conference proceedings and ‘raw’ presentations), evaluation reports, pamphlets, action guides, and speeches.

The bulk of the literature is concentrated in the US and Australia, where the implementation of national surveys of student engagement have added impetus to a growing body of work with its roots in the 1980s work on student involvement, aimed at demonstrating the robustness of the concept and its validity and reliability, as well as its potential uses for those tasked with various roles in higher education delivery and management.

Literature originating from the UK has a rather different character. It is overwhelmingly focused on particular aspects of individual student learning, often on tools (such as virtual learning environments) or techniques (such as a particular type of feedback) or approaches to a particular situation (such as induction of distance learners). Sample sizes tend to be small, often covering the experience of a single class in a single year doing a particular module, and most often rely on measures of student perception (how much they claim to have benefited when surveyed). The UK literature formed a very small proportion of the overall body of literature found.

The literature was typically normative, with a single paper (Krause’s 2005 paper) engaging to any extent critically with the concept. Much of the literature demonstrated reductionist or essentialised views of ‘the student’, with assumptions about sameness among ‘Y Generation’ students or ethnic minority students or older students as distinct from some essentialised view of ‘the traditional student’. Additionally, ideological perspectives were predominantly progressivist and enterprise, with the poles of traditionalism and social reconstructivism under-represented. While the relative absence of traditionalism is unsurprising in literature on student engagement, the paucity of works from a social reconstructivist perspective was striking.

There was very little literature on student engagement in governance – and very little of the student governance literature was concerned with student engagement. The CHERI study focused exclusively on this aspect of student engagement but at a systems-level view; an aggregated picture of how many HEIs do what and how happy the institutions, as opposed to the student bodies, are with these mechanisms is a

useful starting point, but reveals little of the nature and texture of student engagement within those institutions.

While most of the literature discussed – or assumed – the benefits of student engagement, a striking absence was the student voice in the literature on student engagement. Instead, literature was written about students for managers, policy makers, researchers, funders or teachers, with occasional briefing guides for student leaders, by other managers, policy makers, researchers or teachers. Where student voices appeared, it was as data in the form of quotes to illustrate arguments being made by others about them.

This leads to a few recommendations for future research:

- comparative studies akin to NSSE, AUSSE or the nascent SASSE (based on NSSE, being piloted in South Africa) or Chinese version (currently under development) to develop a national picture of student engagement in the UK;
- finer-grained studies on student engagement in structures and practices, including student governance, student voices in curriculum-shaping and the perennial problem of ‘closing the feedback loop’;
- exploration of the concept of ‘student engagement’ from the student perspective, including problematising the student role and identity in changing contexts (such as part-time students, students who return to interrupted studies, working students and students with family responsibilities);
- a locally grounded but internationally validated conceptualisation of student engagement, which can be operationalised, tested and improved in classrooms, halls of residence and student societies;
- the development of a robust body of evidence built up through small-scale local studies that speak to – to confirm, challenge or redefine – other studies, so that instead of a collection of stand-alone, almost anecdotal, evidence, a more integrated and rigorous picture can emerge of practice and effects;

AUSSE	Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (Australia and New Zealand)
NSSE	National Survey of Student Engagement (US and Canada)
SASSE	South African Survey of Student Engagement (pilot phase)

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