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Student engagement: Buzzword or fuzzword?

Abstract

Global interest in the value of student engagement in higher education has led to question whether the use of term is clear and consistent. Through an analysis of qualitative data this paper investigates the construction of the term student engagement at three US universities. Whereas a shared understanding of the concept was found on one campus, the perception of the term on another campus was split to multiple directions. On the third campus the term of student engagement had not become popular and was replaced with alternative concepts. Aiming at contributing to the discussion on student engagement on institutional level this study revealed different patterns of bottom-up and top-down mechanisms affected the spread of the concept on campus.

Keywords: student engagement, administrative staff, bottom-up initiatives, institutional approaches, high impact practises

Introduction

There is ever-increasing global interest in the concept of student engagement and its proclaimed value to higher education. In the US it has been a fashionable term for over a decade, denoting overall institutional quality and performance (Axelson & Flick, 2012; Kuh, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c; Lawson & Lawson, 2013; McCormick, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2013). The use of the term has spread to Australia (Baron & Corbin, 2012; Coates, 2010; Devlin, Brockett, & Nichols, 2009), to the UK (Little et al., 2009; Robinson, 2012; Trowler, 2010; Wimpenny & Savin-Baden, 2013), and now the worldwide use of the concept seems unstoppable (e.g. Ross, Cen & Zhou, 2011; Wawrzynski, Heck & Remley, 2012). This trendy term it has many functions: governments use it to refer to university efficiency; universities believe it is a key to gaining

competitive advantage; administrators use it to emphasise educational excellence; while practitioners refer to it when justifying new approaches to teaching (Baron & Corbin, 2012). Kuh (2009a, p. 313) promotes it as one of the occasionally emerging ideas 'that clarifies complicated matters and suggests approaches for managing fundamental problems in higher education'.

At the same time it has become evident that the use of the concept is ambiguous, tangled and even misleading (Axelson, & Flick, 2013; Baron & Corbin, 2012; Kahu, 2013; Trowler, 2010; Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009). The multiple interpretations of the concept have lately attracted the interest of educational researchers, who have recently provided different categorisations for the use of the term (Kahu, 2013; Klemenčič, 2013; Leach & Zepke, 2011; Trowler, 2010; Wimpenny & Savin-Baden, 2013). Despite the recent theoretical interest, there are remarkably few empirical studies which illustrate the multiple uses of this concept in higher education institution practices. While previous studies have provided valuable information on the mechanisms of increasing student engagement on campus by examining the role of institutional mission (Kinzie & Kezar, 2006), the impact of institutional size (Kezar, 2006), the influence of culture (van der Velden, 2013), wider conditions on campus (Kuh et al., 2005, 2010), and student engagement projects (Devlin, Brockett & Nichols, 2009) they shed very little light on the ambiguous use of the term and tend to adopt a uniform definition of student engagement as a starting point. This recent attention may provide a reason to question if the uniform understanding of the concept of student engagement by all campus stakeholders can be taken for granted. Has student engagement become a 'fuzzword' that in its fashionability conceals even contradicting goals of different stakeholders?

Based on the interviews and documentary material collected, this study contributes to the discussion of multiple understandings of the concept of student engagement by investigating how informants representing administrative functions at three U.S. higher education institutions

conceived its meaning. The research questions that directed the analysis were: 1) how did the informants construct the meaning of the concept of student engagement and 2) what kind of mechanisms did either promote or hinder the adoption of the term on campus?

This paper proceeds as follows. First, the conceptual categorisations presented in the previous literature are reviewed. Second, the data gathering and analysis processes are explained and third, the interpretations of findings from three case study institutions are presented.

Categorisations of student engagement definitions

Table 1. below illustrates the wide scope of the use of term student engagement by listing categorisations presented in five recent reviews.

Table 1. Classifications of student engagement definitions

Kahu (2013)	Klemenčič (2013)	Leach & Zepke (2011)	Trowler (2010)	Wimpenny & Savin-Baden (2013)
Behavioural perspective	Learning, teaching, research	Motivation and agency	Individual student learning	Inter-relational engagement
Psychological perspective	Student involvement in institutional governance and student representation	Transactional engagement (with teachers)	Structure and process	Engagement as autonomy
Socio-cultural perspective	Student involvement in student affairs/services	Transactional engagement (with other students)	Identity	Emotional engagement
Holistic perspective	Political involvement on campus, extracurricular activities and outside campus, involvement for a greater good	Institutional support		Engagement as connection or disjunction
	Student values, attitudes, cultural capital, class/race/ethnicity, religion, gender	Active citizenship		

		Non-institutional support		

Kahu (2013) distinguishes four perspectives to student engagement. The first perspective encapsulates the definitions which accentuate student engagement as behaviour taking both students' and institutions' actions into account. This perspective is well portrayed in Kuh's (2009b, p. 683) definition: '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'(emphasis in the original). The widely used National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE) in Northern America and the closely related Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) are based on behavioural definition (Coates, 2010; Kuh, 2009c; McGormick, Kinzie & Gonyea, 2013).

The second perspective in Kahu's (2013) categorisation emphasises student engagement as a psycho-social process by focusing not only on behaviour but also on the cognitive and affective dimensions of an individual. Kahu's (2013) third perspective comprises definitions which search for socio-political explanations for student engagement and alienation by emphasising the role of institutional culture and wider contextual issues. The fourth perspective combines three other perspectives in its intention to offer holistic understanding of student engagement by defining it both as a process which has been designed by the institution and as an outcome which results from students' efforts, motivations and expectations.

Based on a literature review and an empirical survey Leach and Zepke (2011) offer a six-part conceptual organiser for student engagement that differs significantly from Kahu's (2013) classification. The first group in Leach and Zepke's conceptual organiser refers to student engagement as a concept for examining student motivation and agency to learn (Table 1). The second and third categories focus on transactional engagement between students and teaching

staff as well as between students and other students. The fourth group refers to the institutional activities in creating conditions that support student engagement while the fifth group emphasises the participatory and dialogic nature of student engagement accentuating it as a pathway to active citizenship. The sixth category in Leach and Zepke's (2011) conceptual organiser includes perspectives which highlight non-institutional support provided by students' families and friends.

Wimpenny and Savin-Baden's (2013) offer yet another kind of classification of student engagement concept. The classification is based on reviewing qualitative research on student engagement. They distinguish four themes (Table 1). The first theme 'inter-relational engagement' refers to student engagement when examined through students' relationships between teachers, peers, family and employers. The second theme encompasses studies which accentuate student autonomy as the outcome of student engagement. The third theme refers to student's emotional engagement and focuses on student engagement as the mechanism for student persistence and resilience. Finally the fourth theme focuses on engagement either as a connection or a disjunction between students' worldviews and their studies.

While recognizing the use of the term student engagement in connection with learning, identity construction, autonomy or as a route to active citizenship, the above mentioned classifications do not distinguish the use of the concept to discuss student representation and participation in university governance (e.g. Carey, 2013; Devlin, Brockett & Nichols, 2009; Robinson, 2012; van der Velden, 2012). The use of term in this meaning, however, is included the classifications of Trowler (2010) and Klemenčič (2013). Trowler (2010) sees that in addition to referring to student learning and identity, literature recognizes student engagement as a concept relating to institutional structure and processes by emphasising student representation and participation within university governance and quality assurance (Table 1). Klemenčič (2013) offers a more fine-tuned classification (Table 1). In addition to recognising

the use of the term in connection with learning and students' involvement in institutional governance she recognises its use in reference to students' involvement in student affairs and services. Moreover, according to Klemenčič (2013) the concept is used to highlight students' political involvement and their involvement for a greater good.

Although the literature indicates that the behavioural perspective using the definition offered by Kuh (2009a) tends to dominate the North-American higher education literature, the emotional perspective is most strongly portrayed in the school literature (Kahu, 2013) and the perspective pointing out to the student representation and student voice is clearly emerging in recent British discussion (e.g. Carey, 2013; Robinson, 2012), it is evident that the fashionable term of student engagement has many overlapping meanings and as pointed out by Wolf-Wendel, Ward and Kinzie (2009) is in practice constantly mixed with the concepts of integration (Tinto, 1987) and involvement (Astin, 1984). Moreover, McGormick, Kinzie and Goneya (2013) notice that the concept of student engagement is often mixed up with student's civic or community engagement when discussing service learning, for example. The authors argue that although students might be engaged through a community engagement project, these concepts should be treated separately.

Methods

This study is a multiple case study based on interview and documentary material of three public universities in a Midwestern state in the U.S. All universities belong to Carnegie class 'Master colleges and universities' and have a high undergraduate enrolment profile. The sample of three institutions was selected based on maximum variety in regards to student body, location and size. Two case institutions are large, one primarily residential in a rural environment, the other primarily non-residential in an urban setting. The third institution is a medium-size rural university with a primarily residential student body. All institutions have participated regularly in the NSSE survey.

The selection of information-rich key informants was organised through a liaison person at one institution and using the snowball method at two other institutions where the first informants were approached based on information presented on institutional websites using student engagement as a search term and hen granting interviews these informants gave suggestions for other information-rich informants on campus. This strategy lead to scheduling interviews with 16 informants during academic year 2012–2013. The majority informants (n=11) had full-time senior administrative positions, such as director for institutional research or director for teaching and learning development, four combined academic staff role with administrative tasks, such as directors of honours and general education programmes. One informant was a graduate student with a junior administrative role.

Because the goal for the interviews was to find out how interviewees construct their own meaning for student engagement they were planned to follow the guidelines of Rubin and Rubin's (2005) responsive interview strategy which underlines the uniqueness of each informant's sensemaking and researcher's role as a conversational partner giving incentives for the interviewees to elaborate on the subject. The themes for the interviews were sent to informants beforehand and were: 1) student engagement concept, 2) processes, projects or activities that enhance student engagement 3) obstacles for student engagement. The interview questions that prompted the informants to share how they made sense of student engagement were: how would you explain the meaning of student engagement, describe your own experiences of student engagement as a student and teacher (if appropriate), when did you hear the term for the first time, is it a term you use often and why? At no point researcher's own definition for student engagement was offered. In order to lead the informants to reflect their experiences on campus (themes 2 and 3) the interview guide included questions: do you hear the term often on campus, is it related to your strategy, do people have a shared understanding of the term, describe activities that enhance student engagement and what has hindered their

success? Nine interviews were one-to-one interviews with the researcher, two were conducted as pair interviews and one arranged as a group interview of four informants. Altogether seven informants were interviewed on campus A, five on campus B (one informant twice) and four on campus C. The interviews lasted 45–83 minutes and were fully transcribed. The documentary material consisted publicly available institutional strategic plans and related memorandums as well as self-study reports in the most recent institution-wide accreditation. Field memos on observations on campuses, texts on institutional websites and brochures of different programmes were used as background material.

The analysis method was qualitative theme analysis. Coding started with a deductive coding using a coding chart which was created as a synthesis of the concept categorizations presented above: student engagement a) as a behavioural concept related to learning activities of the student or organized by the university, b) as a psychological concept related to motivation to learn, c) as an identity concept related to becoming one's true self, d) as a concept relating to establishing a connection with the university d) as a concept relating to being an active citizen or e) as a concept referring to student participation in the institutional governance or quality assurance.

This round of coding revealed overlapping themes and no references to student participation in institutional governance or quality assurance. Therefore, coding proceeded inductively by comparing the informants' definitions with each other and with the documentary material in an attempt to create a model on concept construction and to distinguish patterns that either accelerated or hindered shared understanding. Findings of the three case studies are presented in the following. Case A presents a shared, case B a divided and case C a scattered construction of the student engagement concept on campus.

Campus A: bottom-up activities leading to shared understanding
The informants on campus A offered remarkably uniform definitions of student engagement.

Student engagement in their view is a concept which support each other: active learning, connection with the university and involvement in the community. The value of student engagement was perceived in its ability to create a university experience through which a student may better oneself and become one's authentic self, 'fostering that student's sense of what that student wants to become' (*Informant A1)*. The informants' conception of active learning was explained as 'you actually go out and do these things' (*Informant A3)*, 'doing what you are learning' (*Informant A3*) and delving into disciplinary contents:

> … you really get kind of hold of something you start rating other material of it, you start talking to other people how they are doing it so that is the key for me, how do we get outside of just kind of rogue passive learning so that people get fired up getting involved in and engaged with the material. *Informant A6*

In addition to active learning, student engagement was perceived as a mechanism to connect students with the campus community: 'the feeling that I am part of the university' (*Informant A4*). Connection with the university was also seen important for student persistence.

> …and it is not just students coming to this university going to the class, it is the other peripheral ancillary things going on campus that will help them connect and give them sense of culture here with this institution so that they can identify with the students that are here and identify with something with the institution in the hopes that it will eventually lead them into their professional careers and endeavours. *Informant A7*

> ..for you to feel like a member of a community makes you glad that you are in a university and you enjoy being in this university and maybe you will stay long enough to graduate and not drop out and go somewhere else. *Informant A4*

Involvement with community was perceived an important value for the whole campus community, the informants themselves included, providing them opportunities to be proud of their own work. Working with community partners was seen as a 'two-way street' (*Informant A3*) bringing benefits both for the university and the community partners. Moreover, it was considered as a path to active citizenship:

> ...in democracy we should all feel that we are part of community that you can make important things happen, and you know that is what I hear you say, you part of that. Because we want to grow up citizens in a democracy who move society forward in the future, people who think that they can make a difference and are going to do that. *Informant A2*

> ..it is nice to recognize what people are doing in the classroom but there are students who go beyond that, they come part of the community. *Informant A3*

Not only did the informants of university A offer remarkably comparable definitions for student engagement but they also provided similar accounts of how the spread of the idea started from bottom-up. The informants described the start as like-minded people finding themselves talking with each other and establishing 'a bunch of programs or initiatives that seemed to make sense' (*Informant A5*) and succeeding in funding them.

> I did not know that it had a name, I just liked to do that sort of thing until x [names] had a community meeting one day and said we are going to talk about engaged learning, well I'll go to that, what the heck, and learned that there is a term, oh my goodness, there is a word for that. *Informant A3*

> …but we came up with this program, that was just created here and we had a great committee and the president at that time heard about it and liked it and was hundred percent behind us and found the money so that we could start it. *Informant A5*

The narrative of student engagement spreading on campus through bottom-up activities is supported by the documentary material. It includes hardly any references to student engagement and its value on campus. The strategic plan limits its scope of examination to community engagement while the self-evaluation report discusses 'purposeful learning activities'. Moreover, although having participated in the NSSE-surveys for 10 years, the dissemination of the results was considered a 'weakness' (*Informant A6*) and had not accelerated institution-wide discussion on student engagement. Despite the lack of top-down steering, initiatives to enhance student engagement on campus were blooming and had recently received national recognition. Through the chain of these events, student engagement had, as if by accident, become an opportunity for the university to distinguish itself from other universities:

> I think that [student engagement] is the word I start using more because I think that hits on it, it is engagement with the social, the extra-curricular, the academic is the big link what differentiates [university A] experience maybe from [a state research university]. *Informant A1*

Campus B: active buzzing to multiple directions

On campus B student engagement was a vogue concept: 'a buzzword, we use it all the time' (*Informant B1*). It was powerfully promoted from top-down: 'administration on this campus, they talk about that as much as possible' *(Informant B5)*. This was also reflected in the documentary material which included multiple references to student engagement. University B had also received national recognition for its student engagement initiatives. Contrary to university A, university B had been successful in communicating NSSE results across campus. The definitions the informants provided for student engagement in the interviews, however, indicated that the understanding of the concept was split.

Two informants offered definitions which can easily be traced to Kuh's (2009b) behavioural definition. They explained student engagement as 'positive activities both inside and outside the classroom that can help student learn and improve' (*Informant B1*), 'how do we motivate and inspire students to spend more time and energy on educationally purposeful activities inside and outside the classroom' (*Informant B4*).

Other two informants, however, placed the concept in the practical learning activities outside classroom only.

> …the students are engaging with the community with the understanding that it has some kind of an academic focus it is going to support their own academic learning in a particular discipline. *Informant B5*

> …sort of diffusing this ivory tower higher education students with cultural capital and community and moving beyond and figuring out and how to have students learn in much more practical and applied ways. *Informant B2*

To these informants the concept was also relevant to discuss individual students' connection

with campus. The construction of student engagement as establishing connection with the university was also emphasised by a third informant, who did not situate the concept either inside or outside of classroom. . Establishing a connection with the university was considered to be especially important because university's mainly non-residential students, who 'spend a lot of time in their car' *(Informant B4)* and have many other obligations than university in their lives.

> …an ability to establish a deeper relationship with someone else on campus, and it could be student to student, it could be students with their faculty in their discipline, or perhaps their housing staff, or their dining staff or someone who is a staff member, an advisor, someone like that who they trust. *Informant B5*

> …the ways students are effectively engaged, kind of depends on the student, is based on what they need in order to connect to the university, and in order to be encouraged to continue to pursue their education I guess one important factor that we do not often think about is the fact that students' past experiences there the baggage and the background the things that they bring to college *Informant B3*

> …that they have an access point they have a place and there is space for them here. *Informant B2*

The data would thus indicate that although student engagement is a vogue concept that is supported powerfully through initiatives and talk by institutional management on campus B, there is a possibility that campus community through its split meaning constructions is 'describing parts of the elephant, rather than the whole' (Baron & Corbin, 2012, p. 763) when discussing it. However, despite the split interpretations the concept was empowering and in a similar way to campus A, created purpose for individuals in their own work.

Campus C: Scattered and disguised, potential yet to be seen

Contrary to campuses A and B, student engagement as a term had not received community-wide popularity on campus C. Even though the institutional strategy and the self-evaluation report reflected commitment to enhancing student engagement and the university was nationally recognized for some of its student engagement initiatives the interviews indicated

that the term was not resonating with the academic staff. *Informant C3*, who was in charge of a large across-campus change effort, for example, chose not to use the concept with academic staff because it would not 'help my cause', and *Informant C1* remarked:

> I think it is one of those terms or those phrases that some people think does not mean anything. Of course students are engaged, mean they are in college, right?

The informants on campus C offered very similar definitions for student engagement reflecting the behavioural definition of Kuh (2009b) accentuating the role of the institution in organising programmes and evaluation systems for student engagement. However, the uniform understanding of the concept across campus was questioned:

> …I could picture several occasions during the last three months or so where I heard different people talking about student engagement where I could perceive a difference in what they mean from each other.., *Informant C4*.

Instead of using the term student engagement university B preferred alternative vocabulary such as 'student success' or 'high impact practises' (Kuh, 2008) in labelling student engagement initiatives. In addition, locally created expressions 'in the student language' *(Informant C2)* or titles which were considered 'more accessible' (*Informant C1*) to academic staff, such as 'critical thinking' (*Informant C1*) or 'mimicking work life' (*Informant C3*) were preferred. The alternative terminology, however, was only a part of the picture. The reason for student engagement being problematic for the academic stuff may be more profound:

> I do not even think that there is an agreement on this campus that student engagement is a faculty problem, that faculty would have a role in engaging students. *Informant C1*

> … how do we find those champions in higher education that will know the literature of student success and overlay it to chemistry students' success… *Informant C2*

The acknowledgment of these challenges, however, also created sense of purpose for the informants' administrative roles in the university. Willing to promote student engagement they

wanted to 'nurture internal collaboration' *(Informant C2)* and did not mind 'repeating the message over and over again' (*Informant C1).*

Conclusion

This study illustrated three different pathways of fostering student engagement on campus. On campus A the concept had become 'enacted mission' (Kuh et al., 2005; 2010) through success of multiple bottom-up activities. Not only empowering community members it also offered an opportunity for the university to gain competitive edge. On campus B the concept was fashionable and regarded valuable both for giving top-down direction and providing meaning to community members. The meaning of the concept, however, was split, making it possible for the community members to use it for different purposes. The description of campus C offered a glimpse to campus life where student engagement as a term had not, despite continuous efforts of the administration, yet become popular among the academic staff.

These findings are in line with the suggestions that the use of student engagement concept are ambiguous and give a reason to argue that the concept of student engagement is fuzzy (Axelsson & Flick, 2013, Baron & Corbin, 2012; Kahu, 2013; Trowler, 2010; Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009). The findings suggest particular blurring between the concepts of community engagement and student engagement (McGormick, Kinzie and Goneya, 2013) and reveal that the concept is easily mixed with student involvement concept (Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009). Moreover, as could have been anticipated, that this U.S. data did not contain any references to the use of student engagement concept referring to student participation in governance or quality assurance (cf. Trowler, 2010; Klemenčič, 2013). The findings also highlighted that student engagement may resonate with the personal values with university community members and contribute to their sense of purpose in their own work.

The results of qualitative research are useful if they are able to give deeper insight of the studied phenomenon, which in this case was multiple meanings of a popular higher education concept. This study described the tangled, blurred and split interpretations of student engagement among practitioners and illustrated how the concept had become a buzzword at two campuses through remarkably different patterns whereas the spread of the very same idea in another comparable environment seemed to be more difficult despite the managerial support. Further empirical studies collected on other campuses or countries, possibly comparing the administrative perceptions of student engagement with those of academic staff would give further insight to the use of the concept and explain further contextual driven patterns of the spread of this and other vogue higher education concepts.

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