

# **Student Engagement From Beyond the US: Increasing Resonance Through Reframing the Construct**

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## **Abstract**

Student engagement offers many useful ways of thinking about student and institutional success. This article argues that more research and theorizing are required to make the construct relevant to living and learning communities, students and institutions beyond the USA. Four pointers are discussed to expand and deepen the construct and to improve resonance across the world.

The Student Engagement construct has gained considerable traction in the last two decades, with its value no longer questioned (Strydom, Kuh & Loots, 2017; Trowler & Trowler, 2010). Its pedigree has been well-substantiated by a burgeoning body of large-scale quantitative studies, mostly emanating from North American and Australasia, which evidence correlations between indicators of Student Engagement and positive student outcomes, such as persistence and success as measured by academic progression and graduation.

The trajectory followed elsewhere is somewhat different: in the UK, early studies of student engagement focused on student representation (e.g., Little et al., 2009), with later contributions drawing on small, single case studies (often appearing as conference presentations) focusing on the use of a teaching tool or technique. In mainland Europe, the focus of student engagement has historically been on student representation and student governance (Klemenčič, Bergan, & Primožič, 2015).

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The underlying premise shared by almost all researchers is that engagement arises through the combination of the student's and the institution's efforts (time and quality on task, engagement with faculty and peers, and involvement and integration into the higher education context). There are, however, regional differences in emphasis, which are reflected in the definitions that find most traction in each location, and the associated missions attached to these.

For example, the USA literature predominantly uses George Kuh's (2009) definitions of engagement as the "time and energy students devote to educationally purposeful activities *and* the institutional effort to offer opportunities for engagement and to entice students to engage with the institution" p. 315). Kuh (2009) suggested that Student Engagement is an "organizing construct for institutional assessment, accountability, and improvement efforts" (p. 5).

More than a decade of research on student engagement in South Africa, led by Strydom and colleagues (2017) at the University of the Free State, South Africa, concluded that student engagement research offers actionable data for the improvement of undergraduate education outcomes. Student engagement is focused on "supporting and developing the talented students of South Africa through the use of evidence" via "deeply contextualised measures that were globally benchmarked" (p. xiii).

In Australia, a common view is reflected in the definition of *student engagement* as "the extent to which students are engaging in activities that higher education research has shown to be linked with high-quality learning outcomes," and its associated purpose as "a cogent means of guiding higher education research policy and practice" (Krause & Coates, 2008, p. 493).

Despite these different trajectories, there has been a growing convergence of focus on individual student learning across most of these regions, with a secondary focus on student

representation and student governance. By contrast, in mainland Europe, student engagement tends to be understood more in terms of the German and French meaning of “engagement,” which foregrounds civic responsibility, the political involvement of students and students’ participation in institutional management.

The variegation of the concept is evident in the diverse ways in which the term has been utilized and employed. The term has been located within the individual student (Bryson & Hardy, 2011; Kahu & Nelson, 2018), or within the relationship between the students and their university (Coates, 2005; Kuh, 2009; Trowler, 2010;). Student engagement has been subject to terminology inflation, for instance, in the UK higher education discourse, where “student partnership” is an added and newly introduced concept, focusing on the process of engaged partnership “rather than on the outcome in itself” (HEA, 2014, p. 2). Another example includes the addition of, for instance, “student agency” (Klemenčič, 2015) or the expansion into the work-integrated learning domain in Australia (Coates, 2007).

At the same time, the concept of student engagement has undergone some disaggregation into component parts, such as student voice (Trowler et al., 2018), and co-construction of the curriculum (see, for example, Bovill et al., 2016). Student engagement has simultaneously been attached to both progressive projects (e.g., Bryson & Hand, 2007) and been cited as aligned to the neoliberal agenda (Zepke, 2014a, 2014b). Numerous typologies have been produced (e.g., Coates, 2007; Payne, 2019), while others portray student engagement as dynamic and multi-faceted (e.g., Trowler, 2017—see Table 1 below).

Because of the variegated and expansive nature of the construct, it has been domesticated in different contexts to serve local purposes and agendas, whether these are marketing of universities in terms of success and attractiveness constructs (NSSE, 2009) or seeking equitable outcomes for marginalized groups (Harper & Quaye, 2009). It is evident that this construct has been stretched and mutated, and many seek clarification not only for

their unique local context, application, and community of practice, but also so that more comparative and conceptual analysis is possible (Bryson & Hardy, 2011; HEA, 2014).

### *Limitations of the Construct*

Despite the many uses of the term, the construct has also been subject to more critical review, with authors describing it as “vague” (Ashwin & McVitty, 2014, p. 343), a “fuzzword” (Vuori, 2014, p. 509), “chaotically conceptualised” (Trowler, 2015, p. 295), and “nebulous and contentious” (Macfarlane & Tomlinson, 2017, p. 5). Some have criticized the focus on visible, performative, and extra-mural behaviors and activities (Gourlay, 2015; Schreiber, 2020), while others (such as Zepke 2014a, 2014b) have decried the classroom-centric focus and lamented its instrumentalist alignment with neo-liberal agendas. Research and discourse around student engagement are critiqued for its unexamined alignment with outcomes and value-add, focusing on success, retention, employability, and institutional ranking, guided by causality thinking and permeated by values of effectiveness, efficiency, and tangible outcomes (Macfarlane & Tomlinson, 2017; Schreiber, 2020).

Thomas (2020), writing in the UK context, observed that engagement is more difficult for some groups of students than others, including students identified as male, as belonging to a minoritized or marginalized ethnicity, as disadvantaged by circumstances such as having caring responsibilities, lacking a quiet place to study, and having a lengthy travel time to their place of study. These students have been observed (Maguire & Morris, 2018) to be oftentimes first-generation to attend university, from less wealthy backgrounds, to be mature students and from a minoritized or marginalized ethnicity, often experiencing intersectional disadvantage. Given the positive correlation between student engagement and student success (Trowler & Trowler, 2010) and the finding that, while all students benefit from student

engagement, students from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit disproportionately (Kuh, 2009), the relative challenges that these students face in engaging presents itself as a vicious circle and helps explain the persistence of what has been termed in the UK context “the attainment gap” (where students identified as being from Black, Asian, or minoritized ethnicity backgrounds are 13% (as of 2017/18) less likely to attain a first class or upper second class degree classification on graduation).

Challenges have also been observed and highlighted by Jackson (2010) and Carolissen (2014) who emphasized that inclusion or engagement in mainstream “pro-academic” activities may potentially advantage minorities in improving academic outcomes, but these advantages may involve unchallenged hegemonic dominance of those mainstream practices (see also Nenga et al., in Lee & LaDousa, 2015, in this regard). Some of the engagement practices may thus be assimilationist. This results in some engagement practices, while promoting academic outcomes, paradoxically alienating minorities.

Aspects of the Student Engagement indicators pose particular challenges in diverse and multi-cultural settings, such as South Africa (Schreiber, 2020). For example, the indicator on “discussions with diverse others” assesses the frequency of contact across difference, using race, economic status, religion, and political background as criteria. This question is premised on a reductionist notion of “difference,” essentializing the markers of difference. One could ask conversely: Are peers of the same race the same? Are peers of a different race different? These are complex questions that are not easily answered in a pluralist, multi-cultural and complex university context as one finds in, for instance, South Africa (Schreiber, 2020). Markers of race or religious or political views are not homogenous categories, or fixed or binary, but shift and change, and while difference may be a feature in one context, similarity and commonality may be much more pronounced in another context. For instance, being “Black African” is a simplistic descriptor of multiple cultures and identities, and

reduces the relevance of language and rurality. Being “White” may not be a “common” or “shared” identity, language, culture, or history. These are simplistic notions which do not reflect the nuanced understanding of difference or diversity that prevails in South Africa. In addition, measuring the frequency of contact with an ostensibly “different” peer may not give much indication of depth, impact, or meaning of this particular context. This is an example of Student Engagement indicators measuring a moment, a skill, a behavior, rather than exploring engagement with a pluralist milieu (Schreiber, 2020).

It is suggested here that in some contexts beyond the USA the quantification of the contact across difference is a simplistic measure of the depth of experience of living in a pluralist, multicultural society. Researchers emphasize the importance of interpretation and meaning-making in diverse contexts and of dialogue about the complexity of diversity rather than the measurement of points of contacts (Leibowitz, Rohleder, Bozalek, Carolissen & Swartz, 2007).

### ***Towards Reframing: Expanding Beyond Student Engagement in the USA***

This article argues that the Student Engagement construct would find greater universal traction if it expands and deepens four key areas which so far have not been extensively researched or conceptualized.

**One** is the institution-centric conceptualization of student engagement. There appears an implicit assumption that it is the engagement *in* or *by* the institutionally regulated, initiated, and guided activities that would impact the benefits for students. Little space is created to enable a consideration for life-wide (Jackson, 2010) engagement and how life-wide engagement would impact student learning and development. Jackson (2010) highlighted the relevance and value of life-wide experience in learning, and we argue that this life-wide

engagement, beyond the institution, may also be conceptualized as student engagement. This contrasts with the more mainstream view (e.g., Krause & Coates, 2008, p. 502) that positions such experiences as “competing forces” against student engagement.

This is particularly relevant for higher education contexts that serve and are attended by “non-traditional” students, that is, students who may be working alongside their studies, students who may be caring for family members, or students who are otherwise engaged, perhaps in similar terms as the engagement indicators, but not *on* university soil. For instance, across Germany, 63.3% of students are supplementing their study finances with part-time work (Statistica.de) and a lot of this work is not “at university.” Similarly, a disproportionately large percentage of students in Sub-Saharan Africa have family and sibling care responsibilities (Meinck et al., 2017), and yet, it remains to be researched how this kind of engagement might impact student success positively.

The question that is posed here is how engagement off-campus and in life-wide contexts beyond the university impacts student persistence and student outcomes in positive, rather than only negative, ways. This question not only addresses the importance of a complex student life, which might involve care for family members, work to sustain the family, and studies or participation in local governance issues, but it also locates the student centrally in the student’s life, rather than the university as a key contributor and facilitator to student success.

**Two**, a concern is voiced here which focuses on the implicit assumption that the “engaged” student is a student who has time, space, and resources to engage in and with campus life. This implicit assumption communicates a disregard of the students who face challenges engaging *on* campus. In countries and contexts where students are required to work gainfully, perhaps care for an ailing family member, have child care duties, or are staying off-campus in challenging, perhaps distant, contexts, it is extremely difficult to

engage in university-driven activities *at university on campus*, regardless of how well designed and academically aligned these are with the students' overall goals for success (see also Thomas, 2020).

**Three**, it is suggested to review some of the indicators' implicit assumptions, such as for instance the "discussion with diverse others," as an indicator of engagement (NSSE.indiana.edu). The constructs underpinning this indicator appear simplistic and categorical, using binary and reductionist descriptors of race, religion, politics, and economic class. Such absolute and homogenizing descriptors are ill-fitting in a pluralist and multi-faceted context, such as, for instance, South Africa. Categories of "Black" are simplistic and neglect culture, language, and rurality and many other aspects that a diverse and textured group of "Black" engaged students may reflect (Schreiber, 2020). Meaning-making of such diversity is much more useful than the measurement of contact across coarse categories of difference (Leibowitz et al., 2007).

**Four**, mainstream literature has focused only on student engagement that is congruent with the aims of the institution or program. Understandings of what student engagement is are often contrasted by illustrations of what it is not. This has variously been described as non-engagement (Trowler, 2010), or in terms of "inertia, apathy, disillusionment or engagement in other activities" (Krause, 2005, p. 4) or alienation (Mann, 2001). Trowler (2010) distinguished between passive responses to alienation (e.g., withdrawal) and active responses (e.g., conflict), deeming the latter a form of engagement, albeit oppositional (see Table 1 below). Thus, student protest action would be considered a form of oppositional engagement by Trowler, but a form of alienation and non-engagement by Mann. This is a particularly useful conceptualization because higher education has recently seen much student protest, for instance, in South Africa during 2016-2018, in Germany (leading to the abolition of fees in 2013), in Chile in 2018, in the UK in 2010, and elsewhere.



While Altbach (1991, p. 253) observed that student activists were typically among the most moral and best performing academically (see Nenga et al., in Lee & LaDousa, 2015), Luescher-Mamashela (2015, p. 45) noted that more recent trends to the formal inclusion of students in higher education decision-making structures have commoditized and depoliticized student politics—resulting in students specializing in either formal student leadership activities or informal student activism (Luescher-Mamashela et al., 2011). The former activity is more likely to represent a congruent form of student engagement (Trowler, 2010, p. 9) and the latter, an oppositional form. Luescher (2017) described the need to move “from student enragement to student engagement”—from oppositional to congruent forms of engagement, in Trowler’s terms—in the South African university context, where injustices of distribution (embodied in the continued material inequalities in SA society) and recognition (reflected in “colonial” curricula, and institutional cultures perceived to be hostile and alienating to Black students) gave rise to the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall (and associated) movements, respectively.

Students participating in oppositional engagement activities are typically constructed as “deviant” (Macfarlane, 2016), a positioning which may place them at risk of negative sanction—even exclusion and/or criminalization. If these students are indeed among the most able, this represents not only a risk of personalized loss to individuals, but also a broader risk as students with much to contribute to society are obstructed or prevented from doing so. Expanding understandings of student engagement to embrace oppositional, as well as congruent, expressions of student engagement would serve to mitigate these risks.

Table 1: Facets of student engagement with examples of practice (from Trowler, 2017)

	Congruent Engagement	Non-Engagement	Oppositional Engagement
Affective <i>What the student feels</i>	Interest, enthusiasm	Boredom, lack of interest	Rejection, repudiation
Behavioural <i>What the student does</i>	Attends lectures, participates with enthusiasm	Skips lectures without excuse	Boycotts, pickets or disrupts lectures
Cognitive <i>What the student thinks</i>	Meets or exceeds assignment requirements	Assignments late, rushed or absent	Redefines parameters for assignments
Critical <i>How the student thinks (orientation)</i>	Holds own views in dynamic tension with “received” views	Reproduction, “regurgitation”	Engages from a contradictory paradigm
Political <i>How the student acts (agency)</i>	Assumes agency toward construction of knowledge	Passive consumer of knowledge	Challenges assumptions about what constitutes “knowledge”
Socio-cultural <i>How the student feels (values)</i>	Observes protocols of referencing and citation	Plagiarises	“Steals”, “borrows”, or “samples”, in the hip hop tradition because “knowledge wants to be free”

For the Student Engagement construct to gain traction in useful and useable ways in contexts beyond the comfortable assumptions of the developed world, student engagement researchers and policy makers need to expand their understanding of what is deemed engagement, and move beyond considering engagement only in congruently-aligned, university-driven, on-campus activities. Embracing a life-wide, multi-dimensional and multi-local conception of student engagement that is located in the real-world contexts in which

students live and study will allow the recognition of a wider spectrum of students' engagement, and lay the groundwork for an easier transition between oppositional and congruent expressions of student engagement to reduce the risks of student attrition or needless alienation and criminalization.

While surveys and definitions of student engagement have attempted to reflect local contexts, more needs to be done to capture the complexity, without simply accumulating more terms under the banner of an already swollen construct. Higher education students live textured lives which have a multitude of meanings to students and their communities, which are, according to our view, currently not sufficiently reflected or researched in the mainstream student engagement discourse.

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