



Factors that encourage student engagement: insights from a case study of “first time” students in a New Zealand university

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Abstract

This case study considered data on student engagement gathered from students in a large university and represents a vertical study within the larger Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI) project. The programmes are delivered through a range of modes and media to students of widely differing ages and a range of ethnicities. The focus of the case study involved four phases: an extensive review and synthesis of literature shared among all nine participants of the project, a survey of students by questionnaire, interviews with selected students to elaborate on key findings identified in the student survey, and data gathered from lecturers in the university through a questionnaire.

There were 173 student responses to the questionnaire. Ten students were chosen to be interviewed from those who had volunteered. The interviews were semi-structured, with predominantly open-ended questions, based initially on collated questionnaire responses but allowing the interviewer to ask further questions to clarify points made by the participants. The 10 interviewees included seven extramural students of non-traditional age, including two who had already gained a tertiary qualification elsewhere; and three internal students who were under 20 years of age. In the teacher survey, 193 lecturer responses were received including 67 who made additional comments to all or some of the four questions in the second part of the questionnaire.

We acknowledge that the 14 percent response rates from the student questionnaire and 14.8 percent response rate from the teacher survey for this case study were disappointingly low. As a result, it was difficult to draw definitive conclusions. However, by triangulating the student data, using the conceptual framework developed by Zepke and Leach (2008), some useful insights worthy of reporting and of investigating in future studies were identified. This also enabled us to make comparisons between student and lecturer perceptions in the fourth phase of the study, in order to identify commonality or difference. These insights suggested areas of policy and practice that might be developed to improve the quality of student engagement. They also provided points of discussion and debate on this important concept.

A number of commonalities were identified. The findings from the student data showed that supportive teachers aid learning, that students need to feel competent and that active, meaningful learning that has relevance to “real life” is highly valued. These factors were rated highly by both students and their lecturers. Lecturers too reiterate that good teaching is a high priority, that teachers—and what they do—matter! The data also demonstrated that engaged students are intrinsically motivated and need to feel able to work autonomously and to achieve success. Lecturer comments suggest

that they do indeed recognise that these competencies are valued highly by, and are motivational to, students.

The data showed some areas of difference relating to student and lecturer perceptions of the effect of changing demographics, financial factors, and other external factors upon students' ability and/or desire to engage with their studies. While the differences were not huge, they were significant. Students perceived that having to continue to work to support their studies, or travelling long distances to attend classes, or, for many older students, the demands of family life had an important effect on their engagement. In contrast, lecturers tended to rate these factors as of lower importance. Indeed some comments suggested that it was the students "problem" and they should plan and manage their life better if these factors impinged negatively upon their studies. An interesting difference was related to cultural awareness. Here the lecturers rated the need to "respect students cultural background" much more highly than the students did.

A number of institutional factors such as large classes, financial restrictions on resourcing, and changing demographics were identified by lecturers as having a negative effect on student engagement and on their own motivation and enthusiasm. We suggest that there is a need to reduce class sizes to increase the opportunities for lecturers' meaningful interaction with students. While this might be an "idealistic" recommendation, it is clearly important to lecturers, and we suggest that ways be found of integrating meaningful and supportive lecturer/student, student/student and small group interactions within large classes.

Finally, the study indicated that the strand of "active citizenship" needs further research. This strand was given low priority by the participants in this case study; this appeared to be because students have a narrower focus on the achievement of their immediate academic and transactional goals and lecturers may not have the time to explore the "wider purposes" of engagement with learning. However, some aspect of citizenship is almost always articulated in one form or another in both university mission statements and expected graduate profiles. We recommend that future engagement research could profitably focus on tracking this aspect, identifying relevant teaching and learning strategies and further refining the concept.

Introduction

There have been a considerable number of studies that examine the experiences of students in tertiary institutions. During a decade of high attrition rates these experiences, and especially student perceptions of their time studying, have been of particular interest to policy makers and practitioners alike (Tertiary Education Commission, 2005, 2007, 2009). Many studies have focused on the first year experience with the aim of identifying factors that students perceive as contributing to persistence and motivation (Zepke & Leach, 2005) and which are likely to lead to

engagement with their chosen programme. “Engagement” has, therefore, become a term frequently used to describe a compendium of behaviours characterising students who are said to be more involved with their university community than their “less engaged” peers (Krause, 2005), with the assumption that such engagement involves “activities and conditions likely to generate high quality learning” (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2008, p. 6).

This paper examines the perceptions of a group of students enrolled for the first time in a university. The case study university is large by New Zealand standards and operates at a number of locations. It has a multi-discipline profile, offers distance learning programmes, is research based and community focused. The university has a commitment to the enrichment of New Zealand's bicultural heritage and national identity but also seeks an international role and recognition through research, programme outreach, and the recruitment of an appropriate proportion of international students. This paper seeks to discover how this group of students engage with their learning. Rich international research suggests that while student engagement is a complex construct, not easily defined, it can nevertheless be a useful mechanism for interpreting the relationship between students and institutions and the qualities and dynamics of attending university (Coates, 2006). The research reported here was funded by the Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI) and is part of a larger project involving eight other tertiary institutions in New Zealand.

Literature review

Research approaches “engagement” from different perspectives with both qualitative and quantitative research called for in order that in-depth understanding of reasons for engagement might be established (Krause & Coates, 2008). Zepke et al. (2008) summarised the content of more than 90 research items. Zepke and Leach (2008) developed an initial conceptual framework (Table 1) with two features; one identifying four main strands from the engagement literature and the other identifying possible indicators that illuminate these strands.

Table 1 **A conceptual framework for student engagement**

Lenses of engagement	Chosen indicators
<p>Motivation and agency Engaged students are intrinsically motivated and want to exercise their agency</p>	<p>A learner feels able to work autonomously A learner feels they have a relationship with others A learner feels competent to achieve success</p>
<p>Transactional engagement Learners and teachers engage with each other</p>	<p>Students experience academic challenge Learning is active and collaborative in and out of the classroom Students and teachers interact constructively Students have enriching educational experiences</p>
<p>Institutional support Institutions provide an environment conducive to learning</p>	<p>There is a strong focus on student success There are high expectations of students There is investment in a variety of support services Diversity is valued Institutions continuously improve</p>
<p>Active citizenship Students and institutions work together to enable challenges to social beliefs and practices</p>	<p>Students are able to make legitimate knowledge claims Students can engage effectively with others including the “other” Students are able to live successfully in the world Students have a firm sense of themselves Learning is participatory, dialogic, active and critical</p>

Motivation and agency

Motivation is considered a key factor in students’ level of interaction with their studies and perceptions of self-efficacy. Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) maintains that a consideration of innate psychological needs—for example, for competence, autonomy, and relatedness—is important in understanding human motivation. Environments that provide satisfaction of these basic needs are said to encourage natural growth processes including intrinsically motivated behaviour. Situations where these needs are not met are associated with poorer motivation, performance and wellbeing (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Fazey and Fazey (2001) suggest that students arrive at university with the potential to be autonomous in their learning and argue that it is the responsibility of those who organise the learning environment to nurture this potential if the autonomous behaviour is to be realised.

Feeling competent is also a basic human need (Deci & Ryan, 2000); the desire to acquire mastery and to display competence is likely to be a strong motivator in the learning situation (Taylor, 2008). Consequently it is important for university staff to offer beginning students opportunities to increase their perceptions of their academic competence at an early stage in their studies (Fazey & Fazey, 2001). Another aspect of students’ physiological need for competence is the ability to feel competent to achieve their goals. Yorke (2006) suggests that, in order to meet this need, many students engage in what he calls a process of “satisficing”; they make choices in their study that will allow them to achieve their goals. A “satisficing” learner comes close to being a strategic

learner or “cue-seeker” (Salyo, 1975)—one who may adopt both deep learning and surface learning strategies in order to achieve performance goals and learning goals.

A third indicator identified in the conceptual framework (Zepke & Leach, 2008) is that of “belonging”, or the need to have relationships with others, a concept akin to what Tinto (1987, 1993) called social integration. Deci and Ryan (2000) suggest that the need for relatedness is innate and reflects a deep design feature of social organisms that is part of social functioning. They believe that where the learning circumstances are optimal the needs for autonomy and relatedness are complementary but where the circumstances are less than optimal, at times “the need for relatedness can compete or conflict with ... the need for autonomy” (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 253). Calder (2004) found that first-time students were more likely to feel they belonged in an educational institution where there were specific strategies to encourage positive peer, mentor and lecturer interactions.

Transactional engagement

The relationship between students and teachers is an important lens through which to view student engagement. Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005) found that teacher’s beliefs and attitudes had a significant effect upon the learning environment they created. In the American National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), Kuh and others found that effective teaching and institutional support enhanced student engagement (Hu & Kuh, 2002; Kuh, 2001), as do good student/teacher relationships (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2008; Community College Survey of Student Engagement, 2006). The relationship students develop with their teachers is thus a significant theme in the literature. When teachers are enthusiastic, well prepared, approachable and have positive beliefs and attitudes towards learning, their interactions with students tend to be supportive, then positive relationships develop (Mearns, Meyer, & Bharadwaj, 2007; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005).

Affective and co-operative learning relationships among students are also important both in students’ perceptions of belonging and in promoting effective learning. Some studies (Calder, 2004; Moran & Gonyea, 2003) have examined the role of co-operative or collaborative learning in encouraging deep rather than surface learning and positive inter-student relationships have been shown to promote motivation, increase feelings of self-efficacy and encourage persistence (Farrell & Farrell, 2008; Russell, 2007; Moran & Gonyea, 2003).

Institutional support

The experiences students have during their first year in a particular educational environment shape their perceptions of that environment, with student engagement more likely where the institution is supportive of new students, and has an effective organisational culture (Pittaway & Moss, 2006; Reason, Terenzini, & Domingo, 2006). Such a culture would welcome and respect students from diverse backgrounds, provide a wide range of appropriate support services and be

willing to adapt to the changing needs of students (Porter, 2006; McInnis, 2003; Yorke, 2006). Policies and practices used to enhance student engagement, in diverse institutions, are likely to show benefits to student learning and educational effectiveness when appropriate support structures are provided (Kuh et al., 2005; Kuh & Gonyea, 2003).

Active citizenship

Kezar and Kinzie (2006), in examining the role of “mission” in student engagement, suggest that educational institutions that acknowledge and foster active citizenship qualities in their students demonstrate a positive relationship between the institution’s sense of mission and the enriching experiences and level of educational challenge provided. Zepke and Leach (2008) suggest that active citizenship involves the ability to challenge social beliefs and practices. It can be argued that students, who demonstrate legitimate knowledge, engage effectively with others and live successfully in the world, might be said to be active citizens; such students are likely to have a positive self-image and demonstrate considerable efficacy in their approach to learning.

Yorke (2006) argues that self-belief, efficacy and appropriate personal qualities together with the metacognitive attributes of thinking, learning and problem solving are probably the most important features of engagement. A strong sense of self is also identified as an indicator. Barnett and Coate (2005) argue that active engagement goes beyond “operational” to “ontological” engagement—a deep, personal and inner involvement in learning—while Butler-Kisber and Portelli (2003) suggest that a “critical-transformative” perspective engages students through a challenge to rethink experiences in the interest of creating a more just and democratic community. Students, they say, need to be in communities that actively encourage power sharing because when they feel their voice is heard, disengagement diminishes.

Method

Zepke, Leach, and Butler (2008) have described fully the methodology used in this project. Here, a summary of the methods used to obtain the data reported in this case study suffices. The paper describes and analyses data from two sources. The first was a questionnaire distributed either online or as a paper copy, to a sample of first-time enrolled students, representative of gender, age and ethnicity. The questionnaire contained five sections, the first four with Likert scales approximately relating to the strands of engagement conceptualised by Zepke and Leach (2008) and one detailing demographics. Question 1, relating to motivation and agency, used 24 items divided into three clusters: competence, agency and belonging. Question 2 used 26 items relating to transactional engagement and surveyed teacher and student interactions with a subscale asking how well these interactions were carried out. Question 3 had 12 items relating to social and environmental factors and a subscale surveying how these factors were perceived to affect students’ success. Question 4 had 10 items relating to autonomy, democratic engagement and social interaction.

The second set of data were gathered in interviews conducted, either on campus or by telephone, with 10 students chosen randomly from those who had volunteered. Interviews were semi-structured, with predominantly open-ended questions, based initially on collated questionnaire responses but allowing the interviewer to ask further questions to clarify points made by the participants. Interviewees were also encouraged to add further information they felt relevant. Interviews lasted 20 to 40 minutes. The 10 interviewees included seven extramural students of non-traditional age, including two who had already gained a tertiary qualification elsewhere. Three interviewees were under 20 and were internal students. Student comments were further examined to see how they related to the conceptual framework of student engagement suggested by Zepke and Leach (2008).

A total of 173 students responded to the questionnaire. Respondents were asked to indicate if they were willing to take part in a follow-up interview. In the following discussion, the term student/s refers specifically to those students in this institution who responded to the questionnaire (including those who took part in the follow-up interviews). Percentages used relate to the 173 students who responded to the questionnaire. For analytical purposes, responses of “very important” and “important” are combined; similarly, where applicable, responses of “little” and “no” importance are also combined. However, another category, “not applicable”, when used, was analysed separately again. Interviewees have been indicated numerically to preserve anonymity.

Finally, ideas from the literature were combined with insights from both the survey and interview data to develop an integrated picture within this framework. It must be acknowledged that the 14 percent response rate from the questionnaire for this case study is disappointingly low. As a result no definitive conclusions can be drawn; however the analysis of data from all three phases, limited though it is, has provided some useful insights that are worthy of reporting and perhaps of investigating in future studies. At the very least they provide points of discussion and debate around this currently important concept.

Results and discussion

In order to draw insights from the study, the three sources of collected data have been analysed by employing the four strands of the conceptual framework developed by Zepke and Leach (2008, see Table 1). This conceptual framework is also used to structure the discussion.

Motivation and agency

Question 1 in the survey asked students to respond to 24 items, rating how they perceived each of these as affecting their engagement with their studies. Unsurprisingly, responses suggest that students value the ability to act for themselves in effecting their learning/studies. Ten statements received high ratings (above 80 percent), all related either to competency or agency. Almost all students (99 percent) responded that knowing how to achieve their goals was important to them.

Having high standards, being responsible for their learning and knowing how to apply learning also rated highly as motivational factors. The interviews confirmed this data:

I make sure I go and do what I have to do ... I don't allow interruptions ... we actually moved so I wouldn't be interrupted. (2)

This student perceived herself as highly capable, highly motivated and was prepared to remove herself from an environment with too many extended family distractions. Another compared her situation at university with that of being in high school (from which she had dropped out) suggesting that now:

Everything is under my control ... everything is up to me, I'm not going to get hounded for something I am not doing, and in a way it motivates me. (6)

For one of the interviewees, financial cost provided the impetus needed to take control of her learning and for it to benefit her in her work situation,:

If I'm going to spend this money, I might as well make the most of it and get as much out of it as I can and relate it back to work. (9)

“Belonging” or relatedness is an important aspect or indicator of motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Four of the five statements in the group of items that received between 70 percent and 80 percent of responses related to belonging suggesting that for these students “belonging”, while still important, is less important to their success than autonomy and competence. Statements linked to belonging that were rated more highly than others had more to do with being valued (80 percent) and feeling accepted (79 percent) rather than, for example, with working co-operatively with other students. Interviews suggested that sometimes respondents were not sure why they felt they belonged, just that they did:

I haven't got the ... T shirt and all that but it's good, I feel part of it and I can't explain why. (3)

I feel very much part of [the university]. I tell people I go to ... [this university] and the lecturers have been really good ... I get emails from [the university] telling me what is going on. (6)

Interestingly, in the interviews, while most respondents saw competence and autonomy as important they only referred to these indicators briefly or by inference. In contrast most respondents talked at some length about the importance of belonging. It may be that this different emphasis arose as a result of students being more able to elaborate upon personal affective responses in a one-to-one interview than when merely allocating ratings.

Most interviewees spoke affirmatively about working in groups but some suggested that this was most beneficial when the members had things in common such as similar ages, interests or ability:

Working together on a task is ... up there on a 9.9 out of 10 scale. (4)

I study a lot in groups. ... Having someone to bounce ideas off ... so you are not just looking at yourself and your ideas. (7)

However some also expressed negative perceptions of working in a co-operative or collaborative group when such a group was selected arbitrarily by a lecturer rather than by personal choice:

We have been made to work in groups ... but you don't select them yourself ... you end up working with people you wouldn't ordinarily have chosen ... we just sat there ... and I would be the one talking ... I would have been gone in a flash if we could have swapped. (6)

For distance students, working with others was not usually an option, although some indicated that they had attended contact courses; of these, most felt that such courses had been supportive of their learning because of the interactions with staff and other students. In some instances online "learning groups" of students had developed from these courses. Informal "buddy" pairs or groups initiated by the students themselves were also highly valued:

We discuss everything. I know people's life stories. ... A lot of people I'm talking to are grandparents ... you can see how they have been learning for the last twenty years and you get tips from them and how they approach their learning. (6)

Transactional engagement

Question 2 on the questionnaire listed 26 statements relating to transactional relationships; students were asked to rate each statement in terms of its importance to them. Of the 12 statements ranked above 90 percent, seven include teacher attributes. Students, for example, rate both prompt teacher feedback and feedback that improves learning as being highly important (both 97 percent). Teacher enthusiasm (95 percent) and availability (94 percent) are also highly rated, as are having access to necessary resources (96 percent), challenging content (92 percent) and being able to apply what they are learning in practice (90 percent). These results would support findings (Hu & Kuh, 2002; Kuh, 2001; Mearns et al., 2007; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005) that students perceive transactions between teachers and students as a significant factor in effective learning and engagement.

However the results suggest that, for this institution, students are somewhat less satisfied with how well these things are being done; only teacher enthusiasm (91 percent) and being challenged in their learning (88 percent) come close to matching student expectations. It may be that the number of distance students who responded to the questionnaire influenced the discrepancy between these results as such students would only have opportunities to relate to teachers and other students face-to-face if their programme of study included a contact course. For the distance students interviewed, contact courses, when available, were useful in meeting lecturers face-to-face and most indicated that such courses were a positive experience. A distance student who had already gained an engineering degree elsewhere, for example, found the contact course:

Absolutely brilliant as an extramural student ... to get the lecturing that we received was really good. (3)

Another said:

The contact course I found brilliant ... the whole delivery was wonderful, the explanation of policy and theory was really helpful. (8)

Being able to contact lecturers, particularly online, was also helpful:

If I had any problems I could email him or ask him after class and he was very willing to answer questions. (10)

A lecturer ... would put on their website the class notes that she had for the internal students ... so we had a bit more feedback to work on. You could interact without meeting them ... all the lecturers this year have been positive in comments on the website, in discussion pages and chat rooms. (9)

As transactional relationships are identified as one of the major themes affecting student engagement (Zepke & Leach, 2008), it is not surprising that compensating for this potential deficit in distance study can be a challenge. Certainly at this university the emphasis on online learning development has been one of the “solutions” frequently endorsed by the interviewees.

Interviews yielded further information affirming the importance of student/lecturer relationships, both positive and negative:

I would always have at the back of my mind that you couldn't speak frankly because of the effect at the end of the day when you are having assessments. (1)

In response to a statement relating to what teachers do to help students learn, two responses were:

Giving preparatory material and apart from that not a lot. (2)

Over and above the block course very little apart from having a forum on the internet. (4)

However others found their lecturers very approachable and the feedback useful and affirming:

On one of my papers the marker is awesome, they give me the best feedback ... it can be harsh but it can also be, well you have done this right ... and so for the following assignments I get better and better. (6)

However, when one experienced student could not contact lecturers when she urgently needed help, the frustration and distress was evident in her comments. It was clear that this disjunction in the student/lecturer relationship was sabotaging her previously established confidence and motivation to the extent that, had she been a less experienced student, she would already have been “lost” to university education. This student's experience reinforces the critical importance of transactional engagement, especially between teachers and learners, even when those learners are apparently autonomous, competent and highly motivated.

Institutional support

This research suggests that to aid retention and encourage a sense of “belonging” there is a need for tertiary institutions to provide adequate learning support and pastoral care. A number of

questions throughout the questionnaire and interviews asked students how important they considered the institutional support offered by the university to be and how well such support was carried out.

While question 1 focused mainly on motivation and agency, some statements with an organisational focus, such as “feeling I belong here” “knowing how the systems work”, “knowing where to get help”, knowing how to “use the library” or “access learning support” and “joining in social occasions”, elicited information about what areas of institutional support might be valued by students. Supports that could be said to directly relate to learning (library, learning support, understanding the “systems”, getting “help”) were all rated highly (80 percent to 96 percent). Belongingness, was considered of slightly less importance (76 percent) and “joining in social occasions” was valued by fewer than half the respondents (36 percent). Clearly students want to know about the core support systems a university provides (implying also that they support this provision) but are less concerned with aspects perhaps seen as more peripheral.

A group of statements relating directly to institutional support mechanisms also were included in question 2. Respondents were asked how important they perceived these to be and also how well the university is seen as achieving these mechanisms. Here, support related directly to learning and to fostering familiarity with institutional “systems”, seems to be most valued. Most students felt the university either did “very well” or “quite well” in providing these support systems but statements were not rated as highly as those relating to the importance of these systems. For example, 96 percent valued “having access to the learning resources needed” but only 81 percent perceived it as done well. “Knowing how to contact people to get help” received a 92 percent rating but only achieved 80 percent in terms of being done well. These figures suggest students may be disappointed in the quality of service provided, or that the service does not meet their expectations. Alternatively, the relative closeness of the two figures may reflect the fact that the respondents are students who have been “retained” and so have probably found their way around the system. Such discrepancies provide a first step in alerting us to potential gaps, issues and other problems; the questionnaire data analysed against literature information also provided the basis for exploring further.

Responses from question 2 further suggested that these students placed little value on organised university activities. Given the importance placed on organisational support in the literature (Hu & Kuh, 2002; Kuh, 2001), this was surprising. Probing further in the interviews, however, gave some important insights and possible explanations. The interviewees were mostly part-time, distance students and older than the “traditional” school leaver; they represent a significant “voice” in the “lifelong learning” context, especially at this university. The stereotype of the hard-partying and socialising first-year student certainly was not borne out by this group, even among the younger ones. For all of them “time management” was a central issue. For the older students, family and work commitments had to be balanced carefully but even for the younger students, study was no longer the only priority as many needed to work part-time. The choice to access formal support services, such as study skills tuition, involves an investment of time that has to be

weighed against other priorities. In these circumstances it is not surprising that extra support services receive so little endorsement.

The use of acronyms was identified by some interviewees as creating problems in locating relevant services; others suggested that they could live without university-provided facilities but when lecturer support was not forthcoming when needed they perceived their studies to be seriously undermined. One interviewee, who had tried in vain to get help from teaching staff, expressed this strongly:

I have tried the support staff, the support through the department, support through “learning services” which has been beneficial to a certain degree but because I’m part Maori, I went through the Maori support services and they were much more helpful but again its limited because you are dealing with staff who are not in ... [this] ... field, so they can’t necessarily relate to your topic. (2)

The nature and effect of external factors on student engagement was addressed in question 3, so statements were less directly related to the institutional support theme, although the responses do provide insights into which areas of support might be most fruitful to address. Most students have family support (89 percent) with relatively high family expectations of them (74 percent) and 89 percent also agree that they organise themselves to “succeed in my study”. While less than 50 percent rated clubs, friends, health, religion, “cultural commitments” and “bosses” as highly important, about half (53 percent) admit to social activities interfering in their studies. Finances (55 percent) and work commitments (51 percent) make it hard for some to engage fully in their study. While there is a lower correlation with these as to how much respondents perceive they affect study success (39 percent, 51 percent and 43 percent respectively) these are, nevertheless, areas in which institutional support/advice might be needed beyond what is currently provided. A useful insight came from an interviewee enjoying a funded year from a government agency to enable her to study after having had to leave school prematurely through pregnancy:

This year has been a total free-ride that has helped my motivation. So I’ve had a full year to build up my confidence, so next year even though I will have a student loan, it won’t be such a big deal. (6)

While organised activities may not be particularly valued by students, then, we perhaps should not underestimate the effect of real practical support on students’ ability to fully engage actively in their studies.

Finally, in question 4, respondents were asked how often they undertook certain activities and how important these were for them. Somewhat surprisingly, a fairly high percentage indicated that they never attended “cultural” (81 percent), “sporting” (73 percent) and “social” (60 percent), events run by this institution. They did, however, “make social contacts with other students” at least once a month (68 percent) with two-thirds of these at least once a day. Moreover while organised activities have low importance or are even seen as “not applicable” by many, this informal contact with other students, which might include everything from chatting, sharing

coffee or going out to parties, is not only frequent but also valued by most. It seems, then, that organised social occasions have little value compared with informal activities.

It is interesting to note that 77 percent of students “actively seek help” at least once a month. While this is likely to include help from lecturers on particular learning matters, it does signal, perhaps, that institutional learning support may also still be welcomed, especially as 74 percent also rank “seeking help” as important—but knowing how to access this support is sometimes problematic; a graduate “first timer” in this institution felt that poor support structures at the university could be a factor in the dropout rates of students who were struggling:

I am a high achiever, I am a capable student, I have significant strategies but this year has just about killed me, I would hate to be a struggling student in the ... extramural system. (2)

An area of support, valued by a number of interview participants, was the nationally organised society for distance students. This organisation provides a number of services such as textbook sales, shared travel, a newsletter, study skills workshops and networks around the country. This “service” was often identified as valued “institutional support” in contrast to that provided by the university itself. Essential services directly related to learning, such as the library and online learning, as opposed to “pastoral care” services, also received positive endorsement. This insight affirms what the survey suggested, that services as part of courses and directly related to learning, as well as “self-initiated” (and thus “controlled”) activities were more valued than those provided by the “kind of very off-putting [university] bureaucracy” (3).

Active citizenship

During the review and synthesis of the research literature relevant to this study an unanticipated theme emerged around the area identified as “active citizenship”. For universities in particular, this theme, relating to the advanced critical and innovative attributes our graduates are expected to exhibit, represents a primary focus that is not addressed adequately with the other themes. Yet citizenship is a concept that provides an insight into what can be gained from engagement with learning. Kezar and Kinzie (2006) suggest that educational institutions that acknowledge and foster active citizenship qualities in their students demonstrate a positive relationship between the institution’s sense of mission and the enriching experiences and level of educational challenge provided

Although they had to be distilled from the other topics there were a number of statements that could be said to relate to the notion of “active citizenship” and how important this is perceived to be by first-time enrollees. Encouragingly, given the number of younger students, most students rate “citizenship” factors such as “knowing how to apply learning”, “drawing attention to what needs changing”, “being challenged in learning” and “talking to others with different views” as important, though not perhaps at the advanced levels we might want, and expect to see, by graduation. Questions that had a likely “citizenship” flavour, such as: “I question teachers” and “I take a leadership role” deserve unpacking further. While two-thirds of the students in this survey

question (and value questioning) teachers at least once a month, just what form this takes is, of course, difficult to ascertain from a questionnaire. It could mean just clarifying something rather than the challenging of ideas. Certainly in the interviews students appeared most focused on the pragmatic aspects of applying learning to work and life situations although one student studying for “personal development” clearly revelled in opportunities where:

Every corner you turn there is something. It’s interesting, something valid, something controversial—it gets you thinking. (3)

I’m learning stuff that I just didn’t think about. You just do stuff day to day and don’t realise why you are doing it. (1)

Just having someone there to bounce ideas off, just another example of a way to do something, so you are not just looking at yourself and your ideas. (7)

While “leadership” clearly relates to active citizenship, almost two-thirds of respondents indicate that they never take on a leadership role (nor is it valued by more than 30 percent) but this is perhaps not surprising given the “newness” of the group to the institution and the limited number of leadership roles “available”. The interviews elicited very little useful follow-up discussion about leadership (except narrowly within learning groups) suggesting that such issues do not yet register in “first-time” consciousness. Tracking the growth of citizenship awareness through university study programmes, however, would make a worthwhile and original future study of this important aspect of student engagement.

Summary and suggestions

The survey response rates prevent the drawing of definitive conclusions from the data collected; nevertheless this triangulated study provides some useful insights into many features of university student engagement. Much of what we have learned in this study may seem to be commonsensical; for example, that supportive teachers aid learning, that students need to feel competent or that active, meaningful learning that has relevance to “real life” is highly valued. However, in a climate of financial cuts and where the primacy of research sometimes appears to be gaining ground at the expense of quality teaching the “obviousness” of insights from research such as this bear repeating (Tarver, 2007).

Under the strand of motivation and agency, Zepke and Leach (2008) suggest that engaged students are usually intrinsically motivated and need to feel competent to work autonomously and to achieve success. The data from this case study indicate that these are indeed competencies that are valued highly by, and are motivational to, the group of students surveyed. Perhaps the most striking insight from this case study is that while centralised learning-related services have some value to some students, the institutional and transactional support (Zepke & Leach, 2008) valued most highly is that incorporated into the courses themselves. More than anything, it is the teachers—and what they do—that matter! Friendly, interesting lecturers who are reasonably

available, who challenge and who themselves engage in a teaching–learning dialogue with their students, foster the engagement of those learners in their university study. A reduction in class sizes to increase the opportunities for lecturers’ meaningful interaction with students is an idealistic solution that, at this point in time, is unlikely to happen so it is clearly important that lecturers find ways of integrating meaningful and supportive lecturer/student, student/student and small-group interactions within large classes.

Importantly, responses relating to support groups that are self-chosen, either within or without the institution, would suggest that such groups do make a positive contribution to engagement. Consequently the considerable effort made by this institution to develop tutor, mentor or whānau groups during orientation might not be justifiable given the low level of importance accorded such arbitrarily organised groups. We would suggest that the current initiatives be re-examined to ascertain how maximum advantage can be gained for learners, especially if lecturers are finding less time to put into transactional teaching.

Some responses from students of minority ethnic groups suggest that some institutional support fits the dominant culture of New Zealand rather than that of many minority cultures represented within the student body. Looking more closely at the minority voices that do endorse the importance of some institutional support mechanisms could highlight target areas for future consideration. It is important that support at the organisational level should help to fill in the gaps that are created for some students whose cultural capital, widely defined, is not activated in this dominant system rather than mainly support the majority of motivated, competent learners able to exercise autonomous agency in a way that fits the dominant culture. While individual teaching staff may feel unable to offer additional support themselves beyond good practice, we recommend that university-based institutional support provisions be reviewed to see what enhanced supports can be provided. As Devlin, Brocket, and Nichols (2009) point out, “there are particular, and significant, challenges in engaging a student body that is diverse and increasingly off campus” (p. 114).

Finally, the strand of “active citizenship” (Zepke & Leach, 2008) calls for greater consideration. This strand was given low priority by the participants in this case study; this appears to be because students have a narrower focus on the achievement of their immediate academic and transactional goals, especially at this early stage as first-time enrolees in the institution. However this goal is almost always articulated in one form or another in both university mission statements and expected graduate profiles. The triangulation of this case study indicates a discrepancy in emphasis on this strand, which nevertheless underpins a defining characteristic of higher education (Walters & Watters, 2001). In the introduction, it was suggested that “engagement” is a difficult concept to define beyond specifying that the process must generate “high quality learning” (Australian Council of Educational Research, 2008). As a result of this study, we suggest an added refinement on the “test” of “engagement” in university education, in “mapping” exercises (Devlin et al., 2009). Such mapping must include active citizenship features for without this aspect, student engagement in higher learning cannot be said to be fully accomplished. We

recommend that future engagement research could profitably focus on tracking this aspect, identifying relevant teaching and learning strategies and further refining the concept.

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