



Student engagement at the Southern Institute of Technology: A case study

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Abstract

Student engagement has largely remained unexplored at the Southern Institute of Technology. In order to improve outcomes for students, teaching staff and the institution as a whole, research was undertaken to investigate various facets regarding student engagement. This case study was one of nine undertaken within tertiary institutions in New Zealand exploring student engagement with their learning. The project, entitled “Learning Environment and Student Engagement with Learning in Tertiary Settings”, was funded by the Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI). All nine institutions used the same research tools for the study. The research question posed was, “How does institutional and non-institutional learning environments influence student engagement with learning in diverse tertiary settings?” Student engagement is a complex concept which required research input both from students and teaching staff. The data from the case study reported in this paper were both quantitative, in the form of student and staff surveys, and qualitative, in the form of student interviews and staff comments. A disappointing total of 54 responses were received from the student survey and 10 in-depth student interviews were also conducted. Nineteen teaching staff responded to the staff survey. In order to give greater depth to the findings, literature related to student engagement was interwoven with the data from the surveys and interviews in the final report.

The case study focused on transactions within the institution. While analysing the data for this case study, it was decided to compare the results of the student and staff data as similar themes became apparent from the data analysis. Feedback to students was an important element that derived from the data analysis of both surveys. Two other important facets relating to improving student engagement were the accessibility of teaching staff to students and that student engagement is a shared responsibility between the student and teachers. The major recommendations include that teaching staff make it a priority to give prompt and constructive feedback, that teaching staff create an environment where students feel comfortable to seek advice and support, and that “good teaching” principles are reflected upon and practised.

The findings from this study are limited as the numbers responding to the surveys were small. Also findings are specific to the institution, although the results reflect what has been written in the literature related to improving student engagement. The results and recommendations can act as a framework for the institution to consider how best to implement a successful student engagement policy. This research adds to the growing body of literature on student engagement in the New Zealand context.

Introduction

The case study presented in this paper examined student engagement at the Southern Institute of Technology, whose main campus is located in Invercargill. There are also smaller campuses in Gore, Queenstown and Christchurch. For almost 40 years, the institute has provided vocational education and training at a variety of levels. Today, it offers qualifications which range from certificate to postgraduate level. Many of the current programmes provide a “staircase” to higher level qualifications, both at this institution and at other institutions. The institute offers flexible mixed-mode delivery programmes. These use a combination of educational television, internet access and specialised hard copy workbooks. For the past 10 years, the institute has had a zero fee scheme in which New Zealand students are required to pay the costs of materials, but not tuition fees. The institute’s philosophy is reflected in its *Annual Report* (Southern Institute of Technology, 2009). Its Statement of Purpose “acknowledges its primary commitment to its student base, by providing well-trained and competent graduates from its programmes. The institute also supports the industries and professions that provide ongoing and future employment” (p. 1).

The case study is one of nine about student engagement undertaken within tertiary institutions in New Zealand as part of a two-year project funded by the Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI), entitled “Learning Environments and Student Engagement with Learning in Tertiary Settings”. Those nine tertiary institutions included two universities, four polytechnics, a wānanga, one private training provider and one community provider. The research question was: “How do institutional and non-institutional learning environments influence student engagement with learning in diverse tertiary settings?”

The data for the case study are specific to the Southern Institute of Technology. The results are based on student and teaching staff surveys, staff comments, student interviews, and literature related to teaching for engagement. The paper samples aspects of the literature that underpin teaching for engagement, provides a brief overview of the methods used to gather data, reports results from questionnaires and interviews with students enrolling for the first time in their subject, and interviews with teaching staff. It concludes with a range of findings and recommendations.

Literature snapshots

Student engagement in tertiary education has been well researched since the 1990s. In New Zealand, team members of this TLRI project have published an extensive review of some 90 research reports (Zepke et al., 2008), as well as a synthesis of the 90 reports (Zepke & Leach, 2010). This synthesis shows that student engagement is not a simple concept. Student engagement focuses on students’ cognitive investment in, active participation in and emotional commitment to their learning (Chapman, 2003). The literature discussed in this paper relates mainly to one facet of engagement, teaching for engagement, the focus of the paper. Yorke (2006) notes that

institutions need a philosophy within that helps to foster students' engagement with their learning. He states that "if the culture is not manifestly supportive of student learning, then students may not be as successful as they could be and they may abandon their studies" (p. 12). Kezar and Kinzie (2006) concur, arguing that an institutional commitment to fostering student engagement is important if that engagement is going to be successful.

A recurring theme in the literature is that teaching staff make a difference to student engagement. They play an ever increasing role in student success (Reason, Terenzini, & Domingo, 2006). As Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005) observe, "course related interactions appear to be positively related with students engagement ... college campuses where faculty employ active and collaborative teaching techniques have students who are more engaged" (p. 163). Teaching staff that are deemed to be approachable and sensitive to the needs of the students are more likely to engage students with their learning (McMahon, 2003; Mearns, Meyer, & Bharadwaj, 2007). McClenney (2004) reports that students who have more contact with teaching staff and are well supported are more likely to be engaged with both their learning and the institution. Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005) further noted that "campuses where faculty challenges their students were more likely to engage their students" (p. 163). This challenging of students in their subject area should be a focus of teaching staff if the goal is to get increased student engagement (Ahlfeldt, Mehta, & Sellnow, 2005). Ramsden (2003) states that "good teaching encourages high-quality student learning" (p. 84). Good teaching strategies could include encouraging quality learning, making the subject interesting, giving high quality feedback, caring about the students and their learning, challenging students to strive for high quality learning and understanding of the course material (Ramsden, 2003). Similar teaching behaviours engage e-learners. Laird and Kuh (2005), for example, found engagement with information technology is positively associated with academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, and deep learning experiences.

Feedback is helpful for students in developing good academic skills for their educational pursuits (Yorke & Knight, 2004). Lambert, Terenzini, and Lattuca (2007) also note the importance of interaction and student feedback as crucial facets in students being engaged with their learning. The importance of feedback should not be underestimated. McKeachie (1999) notes that, "providing feedback is more important than assigning a grade" (p. 109). Silverman and Casazza (2000) reiterate this point when they observe that "what a teacher says to a student can have powerful positive or negative effects" (p. 105). Ramsden (2003) puts the importance of feedback very distinctly when he states "it is impossible to overstate the role of effective comments on students' progress in any discussion of effective teaching and assessments" (p. 187). Ramsden observes that effective feedback can take the form of students meeting with teaching staff to discuss their progress, informal class assessments, and written comments on student assessments that are helpful for the student and their learning.

Teachers who engage their students are aware of their students' challenges outside the classroom. Teaching staff must have an awareness of the multiple roles that students need to consider as they pursue their educational goals (Kift, 2004). Krause (2005) makes an interesting point when she

notes the correlation between the amount of time spent on campus and the degree of engagement. Students who spend more of their time on campus are more likely to have a higher degree of engagement. Hockings, Cooke, and Bowl (2007) emphasise the importance of having an awareness of the role that money and debt play in the students' engagement processes. Krause (2005) highlights how paid work affects students' studies. She noted that students who work are more likely to withdraw from their course of study and spend less time on campus. These factors can affect their degree of engagement.

Method

Zepke, Leach, and Butler (2009) have described fully the methodology used in this TLRI project. Here, a summary of the methods used to obtain the data suffices. Two surveys were involved, one of students enrolled for the first time in a subject, the other of teaching staff. The student survey was supplemented by interviews, the staff survey encouraged comments from participants. The student questionnaire contained four scales¹: motivation and agency; transactions within the institutional setting; external factors; and demographics. The transactions within the institutional setting, the scale analysed in this case study, included 26 Likert-type items divided into three clusters: items surveying relational interactions between teachers and learners in classrooms and programmes; items exploring learning interactions within the wider institution; and items investigating effects of teaching and environment on student learning. Each item had two subscales: one asking students how important the transaction is for their learning; the other asking how well it is done at their institution. The teaching staff questionnaire had three scales asking the following questions: "In principle, what priority do you think each of the items should have in teaching?" "How important do you think the following items are to your students?" and "What priority do the following items have in YOUR teaching practice?" For reasons of space, only the second and third questions are analysed in this paper. The teaching staff survey mirrored the student survey, using the same 26 Likert-type questions, adapted for teachers.

For the student survey, online questionnaires were sent to 995 students via student email, with a total return rate of 54 and a response rate of 5.5 percent. The survey was distributed to first-time enrolled students. Ten students were interviewed. These students had agreed to be interviewed on their online questionnaire. For the staff survey, online questionnaires were sent to 148 teaching staff with a total return of 19 surveys with a response rate of 13 percent. While the response rates were disappointing, precluding generalisation to be made, the data nevertheless paint a useful picture of the state of engagement within the institutions. It provides food for thought rather than evidence for action.

¹ The conceptual organiser used for this project was developed from reviews of literature over time. Consequently it has evolved in terms of the number of lenses/strands used and terminology used. The evolving nature of the project explains the differences in the way the organiser is presented from the overview papers.

Findings

The student survey

Table 1 brings together three different data sets. The first shows how important each of the 26 items was to students. “Importance” is divided into three frequency bands. The first band, identified as “H” in the table, shows items that more than 80 percent of respondents thought to be important or very important. The second, designated as “M” or of medium importance, identifies items that between 50 percent and 79 percent of respondents thought were important or very important. The third band, dubbed “L”, singles out items supported by fewer than 50 percent of respondents as important or very important.

The second data set answers the question “How well are the 26 items performed in the institution?” The differences between the scores for importance and performance were calculated. Where percentages for the “how well things were done” response exceeded the percentage response for “importance”, student expectations could be said to have been met. Where respondents scored items more highly on importance than on how well things were done, student expectations were not met. The third data set shows the extent these differences could be due to chance using the *t*-test for dependent means in which the mean scores of importance and performance are correlated to produce an indicator of significance. Where the *t*-test indicated that the probability of differences being due to chance was less than 5 percent ($p < .05$) the difference was considered to be significant. Plus (+) and minus (-) signs are used in Table 1 to show where the differences were significant. The minus (-) signs indicate where importance scores exceeded performance scores significantly; the plus (+) signs show where institutions’ performance exceeded importance significantly.

Eighteen items of the 26 showed significant differences between importance and performance. These differences showed performance did not meet expectations on 17 of the 18 items; 14 of these were considered of high importance. On one item of medium importance, “teachers encouraging me to work with other students”, the institute exceeded expectations.

Table 1 'How important' and 'how well done' responses to items

		SIT
1: Teachers providing prompt feedback	Importance How well	H -
2: Teachers providing feedback that improves my learning	Importance How well	H -
3: Teachers challenging me in helpful ways	Importance How well	H -
4: Teaching making themselves available to discuss my learning	Importance How well	H -
5: Teachers teaching in ways that enable me to learn	Importance How well	H -
6: Teachers making the subject really interesting	Importance How well	H -
7: Teachers valuing my prior knowledge	Importance How well	M
8: Teachers being enthusiastic about their subject	Importance How well	H -
9: Teachers encouraging me to work independently	Importance How well	M
10: Teachers encouraging me to work with other students	Importance How well	L +
11: Teachers recognising that I am employed	Importance How well	M -
12: Teachers recognising that I have family and community responsibilities	Importance How well	M -
13: Learning support services being available at the times I need them	Importance How well	H -
14: Receiving helpful guidance and advice about my study	Importance How well	H -
15: Knowing how to find my way around	Importance How well	M
16: Teachers providing opportunities to apply my learning	Importance How well	H -
17: Being given information on how systems work	Importance How well	H -
18: Knowing how to contact people to get help	Importance How well	H -
19: Being challenged by the subject I am learning	Importance How well	H
20: Having access to the learning resources I need	Importance How well	H -
21: Having my cultural background respected	Importance How well	M
22: Teachers caring about my learning	Importance How well	H
23: Learning to effect change in the community/society	Importance How well	M -
24: Being encouraged to question teachers' practice	Importance How well	M
25: Staff creating a pleasant learning environment	Importance How well	M
26: Learning to use subject knowledge in practice	Importance How well	H -

Student interviews

As identified by the students (Table 1) and the literature, feedback is an important element in relation to student engagement with their learning. The following quotations from students help to illustrate the importance of feedback.

The two tutors I went to were great and I wasn't the first person who had come to them like this. It happens every year in the subject and they were 100% supportive – they give you other learning methods, they give you the bigger picture of everything and they are good to talk to, open minded people and educated people.

The next student comments about how immediate feedback from the tutor is important for her learning. She notes the positive aspects of tutor feedback:

One [tutor] that takes the time to actually explain and help if you have a problem. Generally is interested in what we are learning. I think too it's part of the different papers they are teaching. If you are on clinical placement and your tutor is more one on one and you are getting feedback straight away you are going to feel confident. Whereas with the other papers, they are not working with you one on one and you do build up a rapport but it's different.

Not all feedback situations are positive for students. In one case the student was not satisfied with the feedback from the tutor. She comments:

He was not an interactive person at all but I think he has been in a learning institution for such a long time and he goes through the rote [learning] of what he is teaching, he is very knowledgeable on what he teaches but you never get your question answered and he is never available.

Another student comments on the amount of time it took to get feedback from some assignments and what effect this had on her learning. She observes:

It took us 3 months to get assignments back and that was our first academic writing. Our first big assignment and we handed it in 3 months ago. If the tutors are overworked and underpaid and short staffed it's not our fault. So we started asking when we could get them back ... until eventually we got – don't ask. That is not OK since it was handed in when it was supposed to be and in order to better yourself you need to know where you are going wrong. And that didn't happen. It's not acceptable; we're not allowed to hand stuff in 3 months late.

Besides feedback, other aspects of teaching can encourage student engagement with their learning. Examples of what Ramsden (2003) referred to as “good teaching” is encapsulated in the following student quotations:

In my previous course I didn't understand how differentials in a car worked and my tutor took me over to a differential in a workshop that was cut away and showed me all the workings and explained how it works.

When a tutor gets up there you can tell there is a passion for a subject and that is contagious. I have had two tutors in both courses that you could tell they were so passionate about it and you know if you are not grasping a particular subject they will take extra time to explain it another way.

Being really welcoming with my questions, making time, little things like that.

Students' experiences in the classroom are not always positive as is demonstrated in the following quotation.

The tutors being disorganised, not being on time and sometimes not showing up. They demand excellence from us ... they drum it into you how important your role as a [degree] student and God forbid you muck up. Do as I say, not as I do and we have come here to get this degree at SIT and excellence is not being met on behalf of the tutors and they are demanding it from us and I don't like hypocrites and I found the faculty is like that.

The teaching staff survey

The teacher survey used an adapted 26 items from the “transactions within institutional settings” scale of the student questionnaire to gather information from teaching staff about (1) “In principle, what priority do you think each of the items should have in teaching?”, (2) “How important do you think the following items are to your students?”, and (3) “What priority do the following items have in YOUR teaching practice?” The purpose of the questionnaire was to find out how, in comparison with students' views, teachers saw student engagement. In particular there was interest in finding out three things: how well teachers understood their students' views on engagement; how their own priorities matched students' priorities and the priority teachers gave to items for which students did not think the institute met expectations. Table 2 offers three data sets. It first uses the same frequency bands used in Table 1 to show whether an item was of high priority (H), of medium priority (M) or of low priority (L). Second, it shows whether teachers' own teaching practice mirrored what they thought students wanted by using the symbol “♦” to show where they rated students' beliefs on an item differently to items against their own practice. Thirdly, the symbol “#” next to an item shows where students felt that the institute did not meet expectations.

On 20 of the 26 items, teachers' ratings were in the same frequency band for both questions—“How important do you think the following items are to your students?” and “What priority do the following items have in YOUR teaching practice?” Seventeen of these items were rated H on both questions (high importance/priority), two were rated M (medium importance/priority) and one L (low importance/priority). There were only six items where teachers rated “what students want” and “the way I teach” differently. On four such items, teachers rated the way they thought students would rate the item more highly than they rated the item in their own practice; these items did not fall into the H band. On two items, teachers rated their own priority more highly than they thought students would; in each case they rated their priority H but their views on what students thought was rated M.

Students had indicated that on 17 of the 26 items, the institute did not meet expectations (see Table 1). Teachers thought 16 of these items had high importance/priority when answering the questions “How important do you think the following items are to your students?” and “What priority do the following items have in YOUR teaching practice?” The only exception was “being given information on how systems work” which teachers thought were of low importance/priority but students thought had high importance.

Table 2 **Teachers' views of what was important to students and priority areas in their own teaching**

		SIT
1: Teachers providing prompt feedback #	Importance to students Teachers' own practice	H H
2: Teachers providing feedback that improves my learning#	Importance to students Teachers' own practice	H H
3: Teachers challenging me in helpful ways#	Importance to students Teachers' own practice	H H
4: Teaching making themselves available to discuss my learning#	Importance to students Teachers' own practice	H H
5: Teachers teaching in ways that enable me to learn#	Importance to students Teachers' own practice	H H
6: Teachers making the subject really interesting#	Importance to students Teachers' own practice	H H
7: Teachers valuing my prior knowledge	Importance to students Teachers' own practice	H H
8: Teachers being enthusiastic about their subject#	Importance to students Teachers' own practice	H H
9: Teachers encouraging me to work independently	Importance to students Teachers' own practice	M H
10: Teachers encouraging me to work with other students	Importance to students Teachers' own practice	M M
11: Teachers recognising that I am employed	Importance to students Teachers' own practice	M L
12: Teachers recognising that I have family and community responsibilities	Importance to students Teachers' own practice	M L
13: Learning support services being available at the times I need them#	Importance to students Teachers' own practice	H H
14: Receiving helpful guidance and advice about my study#	Importance to students Teachers' own practice	H H
15: Knowing how to find my way around	Importance to students Teachers' own practice	M L
16: Teachers providing opportunities to apply my learning#	Importance to students Teachers' own practice	H H
17: Being given information on how systems work#	Importance to students Teachers' own practice	L L
18: Knowing how to contact people to get help#	Importance to students Teachers' own practice	H H
19: Being challenged by the subject I am learning	Importance to students Teachers' own practice	M H
20: Having access to the learning resources I need#	Importance to students Teachers' own practice	H H
21: Having my cultural background respected	Importance to students Teachers' own practice	H H
22: Teachers caring about my learning	Importance to students Teachers' own practice	H H
23: Learning to effect change in the community/society	Importance to students Teachers' own practice	M L
24: Being encouraged to question teachers' practice	Importance to students Teachers' own practice	M M
25: Staff creating a pleasant learning environment	Importance to students Teachers' own practice	H H
26: Learning to use subject knowledge in practice#	Importance to students Teachers' own practice	H H

Teacher comments

Teachers had the opportunity to offer comments on their understanding of student engagement. There were a variety of views on what engaged students or disengaged them. Some commented on student motivation and its influence on engagement. For example:

Societal/personal attitudes that they bring to class. Some students are in class because they have to be somewhere and they get paid to train. Some have gone to tertiary to escape secondary. Others will learn regardless of what the trainer/tutor does in class. They have a goal and will achieve it.

Individual commitment to learning. Those that really want to succeed, will. Previous experience is very relevant/beneficial to the subject I teach. Language has been a barrier. Outside commitments have been detrimental. Access to teaching resources has been difficult for the subject I teach

Others offered practical ideas about ways of engaging students. These ranged from very practical teaching tips to suggestions for improving the institution's infrastructure.

Positive outcomes from various assessments encourage students to proceed with the next step. Personal support in challenging areas. One to one support. Negative support often comes from peers who are not achieving in areas where individual needs help. Another negative aspect is when students are absent from class and do not contact tutors on return – so lost information occurs leading to student missing significant knowledge

I think that emphasising the relevance of the material to be learnt to the chosen career of the student impacts positively. I think that the inclusion of a little humour impacts positively. I think that being distracted by other students, noise, discomfort, being hungry and/or thirsty, even needing nicotine, impacts negatively on student engagement with learning.

I believe that it's important in my teaching to share my experiences in a relevant way to challenge the students to think about who they are for themselves, the people around them and the society they inhabit.

One area where engagement could be improved is if we had a students association.

A number of teaching staff commented on the nature and distribution of responsibility for engaging students. In the main, teachers agreed that responsibility for engagement was a responsibility shared by teacher and student.

It is a two way street really. The teachers should be able to provide a range of pedagogy. Sometimes however a student will come presenting gaps in their learning and getting them up to speed can hinder the others in the class.

This is a combined responsibility – each of us requires the other to make any progress. A two way street.

Some tried to assign responsibilities in a more definitive way.

A teacher's responsibility is in the classroom setting and a student's responsibility is outside the classroom.

Both tutor and student. I think the tutor needs to make an effort to engage the students initially then the student needs to show commitment and engagement with the learning. Tutor needs to show on-going responsibility to those who have shown commitment.

Tutor and student. Tutor to provide interest, relevant subject matter, good resources and timely feedback. Student to provide interest, willingness and attendance.

On what is provided by the institute to engage students, teachers had quite a lot to say. Some listed the range of facilities and services provided.

Provides online discussion, workbooks and online support.

Provides support services, training for new teaching staff.

They supply student support services, and in class support; such as reader writers.

Provision of suitable facilities, research/workshop materials, learning workbooks. Time for regular tutor training. Regular tutor interaction to get ideas. Provide opportunities to upgrade equipment, teaching resources and changes to curriculum documents to accommodate changes in our subject areas. Feedback on students' perceptions of their learning experience

Others were critical and listed factors they thought inhibited their attempts to engage student.

Not as much as I think they should. The classes are too large, the hours allocated for student interaction are too small and the facilities provided for student comfort are often inadequate. The institution does provide me with some good resources such as anatomical models, an environment which is usually warm. The institution provides me with good computing resources which allow me to provide the students with learning resources that they can access in their own time and at their own pace.

Lack of time is always an issue when providing pastoral care for students. There isn't always enough time to engage with students who need more than the usual support.

I think that I could engage students in learning better if I had more time to better prepare for my classes. Things always seem to be too rushed and I usually wish I had more time to perfect my presentations.

Both the enthusiasm for the job and the issues raised by the job of teaching were evident in some comments. For example:

Watching the "light bulb" go on is the best reward. The actual job of being a part time tutor is more of a community contribution as the time required for preparation and being available outside of the classroom do not get compensated for financially. Bright and enthusiastic learners are what keeps you going.

Discussion

The data offer the institute food for thought. Even though the responses to this survey from students were not necessarily representative of students generally at the institute, they offer ideas about where and how it could do better on engaging its students. Students thought that the

institute was not doing as well as they wanted it to on 17 of 26 items; 14 of these items students considered to be of high importance. Of these items, 10 were about teaching and teachers and four were about policies and services under the control of the institute. That many of the other case study institutions obtained similar results (Zepke et al., 2009), shows the extent to which teaching and systems need to be enhanced. The literature is highly supportive of this. Ramsden (2003, p. 84), for example, states that “good teaching encourages high-quality student learning”. Good teaching strategies could include encouraging quality learning, making the subject interesting, giving high quality feedback, caring about the students and their learning, challenging students to strive for high quality learning and understanding of the course material. Feedback, an important issue raised by the students in the interviews, is helpful for students in developing good academic skills for their educational pursuits (Yorke & Knight, 2004).

The teacher survey results suggest that teachers in this sample have a good handle on what students expect from teaching and institutional services. Indeed, the results suggest that the teachers in this sample were accurately aware of student needs and wants and wished to meet them. Thus, there was considerable agreement between items thought to be important by students and items teachers thought were important for students. Moreover, 16 of the 17 items rated as being of high importance by students were judged to be of high importance by teachers on both “How important do you think the following items are to your students?” and “What priority do the following items have in YOUR teaching practice?” This agreement between teachers and students was amplified when the differences between teachers’ views of what students want and the way they prefer to teach are compared. There were only six items where teachers rated the questions differently. On four items teachers rated the way they thought students would rate the item more highly than they rated the item in their own practice; none of these items fell into the H band. On two items teachers rated their own priority more highly than they thought students would; in each case they rated their priority H but their views on what students thought was rated M. In their comments, teachers often mirrored students’ views gleaned from interviews. Teacher comments similarly revealed a strong awareness of student interests. They saw, for example, a shared responsibility between themselves and students for enhancing engagement. While they recognised that the institute provided many tools for developing engagement such as facilities, services and online learning, they also commented that in some ways it could better support student engagement as some classes were too large, the hours allocated for student interaction were often too small and the facilities provided for student comfort were sometimes inadequate.

While engagement in online learning was not specifically addressed in any of the questionnaires, a number of teachers mentioned it as requiring considerable support for learners. Engaging for learning online is an important aspect for this institution as approximately 47 percent of respondents do some part of their course by distance. The institute runs a number of different courses using various modalities. These include face-to-face, online and blended (both face-to-face with some online components). It seems appropriate to follow up on teachers’ interest in online learning support. Taylor (2006) makes an important assertion about online courses when he notes that the “need for effective learning skills is very high in first year students especially those

studying at a distance, yet in the audit of first year courses few appear to have developed strategies to fill the need in the area” (p. 5). One strategy that could be developed further for online study is collaborative learning as this has been recognised as an important element to help promote student engagement for online study (Jung, Choi, Lim, & Leem, 2002; Laird & Kuh, 2005) and students in the questionnaire thought the institution exceeded expectations on the item “Teachers encouraging me to work with other students”. According to Fox and Brown (2007), student engagement can be fostered for online learning by the amalgamation of online reading material with online learning environments. Students can then develop associations between the materials that help to promote increased online engagement.

Findings

Despite the small sample, a clear picture of engagement at this institution emerges from these data sets.

- Students engage better with their learning where the institution provides a suitable learning culture and where there is competent teaching.
- In this case study, students rated a large proportion of items in the questionnaire as of importance to their engagement.
- On 17 of the 26 items, students thought that expectations were not met; 14 of these 17 were items students thought had high importance.
- Students and teaching staff views of the importance of items for engagement were remarkably similar. Teachers thought 16 of the 17 items for which students expectations had not been met, had high importance and priority.
- The responses of teachers to the two questions in the teachers’ survey analysed in this paper were remarkably similar as well. On 20 of the 26 items in the questionnaire, teachers’ ratings were in the same band for “How important do you think the following items are to your students?” and “What priority do the following items have in YOUR teaching practice?”
- Evidence from the literature is able to inform teaching staff participants in the survey that teaching skills needed in online courses are not dissimilar to skills needed to teach in face-to-face situations.

Recommendations

It is possible to distil from these findings the following recommendations: that the Southern Institute of Technology:

- makes a commitment to continue to enhance student engagement
- makes a commitment to continue in its drive to improve student feedback

- with teaching staff, periodically surveys students on how they engage, making any necessary changes to policies and practice as a result of surveys
- considers the formation of a Teaching and Learning Unit
- continues to ensure that teaching staff are able to develop their skills as teachers
- for online learning environments, builds in the ability for students to connect with other students so there is a sense of a community of learners.

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