Acknowledging social justice and equity through good practice for monitoring student learning engagement in FYE

Tracy Creagh, Project Manager, Learning and Teaching Unit, Queensland University of Technology

Karen Nelson, Director, Student Success and Retention, Learning and Teaching Unit

John Clarke, Adjunct Professor, Student Success and Retention, Learning and Teaching Unit

Abstract

As higher education institutions respond to government targets to widen participation, their student populations will become increasingly diverse, and the issues around student success and retention will be more closely scrutinised. The concept of student engagement is a key factor in student achievement and retention and Australasian institutions have a range of initiatives aimed at monitoring and intervening with students who are at risk of disengaging. Within the widening participation agenda, it is absolutely critical that these initiatives are designed to enable success for all students, particularly those for whom social and cultural disadvantage have been a barrier. Consequently, for the sector, initiatives of this type must be consistent with the concept of social justice and a set of principles would provide this foundation. This session will provide an opportunity for participants to examine a draft set of principles and to discuss their potential value for the participants' institutional contexts.

Introduction

An Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) project[1] that involves eight participating Australasian universities, aims to lead the design of a suite of resources to guide good practice for monitoring student learning engagement (MSLE), which is consistent with the notions of equity and social justice. The project will build capacity within all of the institutions to lead key student engagement initiatives through the use of a participatory action research methodology and by harnessing the expertise of key personnel from eight institutions in a pilot implementation stage. Three key deliverables and associated outcomes are envisaged: (1) a set of principles for good practice in MSLE, (2) a good practice guide for the design and implementation of institutional MSLE policy and practice, and (3) a collection of resources for and exemplars of good practice to be taken up by the sector. This report and associated session focuses on a draft set of good practice principles.

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[1] Australian Learning and Teaching Council Competitive Grant CG10-1730 2010-2012: *Good practice for safeguarding student learning engagement in higher education institutions.*

Student engagement in higher education

Student engagement is a broad phenomenon that includes both the academic and non-academic activities of the student within the university experience and is a key factor in student achievement and retention (Krause & Coates, 2008; Tinto, 2010). The commitment of institutions to students is a critical factor in retention—Tinto (2010) maintains that institutions should not only take some responsibility for but also encourage student involvement, while, in a similar but more specific vein, Nelson, Kift and Clarke (2008) contend that universities need to instigate, sustain and promote student personal, social and academic engagement, particularly for those students who face the greatest challenges in transition.

In the first year space, it has been established that the potential for successful engagement involves an inclusive and intentional curriculum that engages students in their learning by having
- application to career expectations;
- well structured assessment accompanied by timely constructive feedback on learning;
- opportunities to participate in learning through social communities; and
- timely, adequate and equitable access to life and learning support services (Kift, Nelson & Clarke, 2010).

This strongly suggests that learning and the classroom experience through an inclusive and intentional curriculum are the key to first year success and engagement with recent literature reiterating the Nelson et al. (2008) contention above of the importance of an "holistic" (an integrated personal, social and academic) approach to engagement (Nelson, Smith & Clarke, in press).

Social justice and equity

In the last few years, there has been pressure on the higher education sector for wider participation and improved retention of students from currently under-represented social groups (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales , 2008). James, Krause and Jennings (2010), in their recent report on the first year experience in Australian universities, noted that these students, compared to other cohorts, are more at risk of disengaging. They conclude that "there is perhaps no greater challenge facing the sector than that of identifying and monitoring the students who are 'at risk' of attrition or poor academic progress" (p. 18). Institutions have been encouraged to address not only the issues around access but also the "inclusive participation, pedagogies and practices within them" (David, 2010). To achieve these national imperatives requires a constructive alignment between 1: policy and practice aimed at widening participation and 2: other efforts aimed at increasing the retention of these same students.

In this context, the project directly incorporates models of social justice and equity. Historically, there has been a commitment to equity in education since the beginning of the education system in Australia (Sturman, 1997). While generally the concept of social justice is not clearly defined (often mirroring the perceptions of "equal opportunity" or "equity"), the term alludes to "fairness" (Rawls, 1999; Sturman, 1997). In the Australian higher education context, principles of individual social justice have underpinned the sector's equity policy framework since the early 1990s. This framework designates that "access to higher education and success in higher education should not be determined by class, ethnicity, geographical

location or other personal characteristics" (James, 2008, p. 1). The obligation to social justice in higher education policy making is exemplified in the expansion of activities aimed at MSLE and may take the form of quality assurance systems and the application of performance indicators (Yorke & Longden, 2004).

What are institutions doing in this space?

While Australasian universities understand the significance of monitoring and measuring student engagement, some universities have actually adopted and put into practice inclusive strategies for MSLE. For example, QUT (*Student Success Program*), Auckland University of Technology (*First Year Experience Program*), University of New England (*Early Alert*) and Griffith University (*First Year Advisors Project*). These approaches are extensively implemented in their own institutional contexts. Other initiatives following the AUT/QUT model are also underway in at least five other Australian Institutions, What is required are resources to facilitate a sector-wide good practice approach to MSLE. A project designed to do that is discussed briefly next.

Good practice for safeguarding student learning engagement in higher education institutions

A current ALTC project[2] aims to lead the design and development of a suite of resources that will provide a shared foundation for good practice for MSLE in higher education. Firstly, the project aims to examine the various approaches designed to monitor student engagement in selected "good practice" Australasian universities and, in conjunction with the personnel working in these programs, develop an agreed on set of principles for MSLE. These principles should not only be consistent with the notions of equity and social justice but also be able to provide a strategic approach to that process supported by resources for good practice for the sector. It is anticipated that building this capacity to embed these principles across their institutions and through the examples and resources produced across the sector, will uncover and produce a suite of resources that has the capacity to further enhance learning and teaching policy and practices and strengthen the institution-wide partnerships necessary for ensuring quality student engagement.

To ensure the "constructive alignment," these resources need to be developed within the framework of principles of good practice in MSLE and based on a good practice guide for the design and implementation of institutional MSLE policy and practice. The relationship among these elements is summarized in Figure 1, which on the left indicates the two stages of the current project and on the right a subsequent project focused on leading the implementation of good practice in MSLE across the sector.
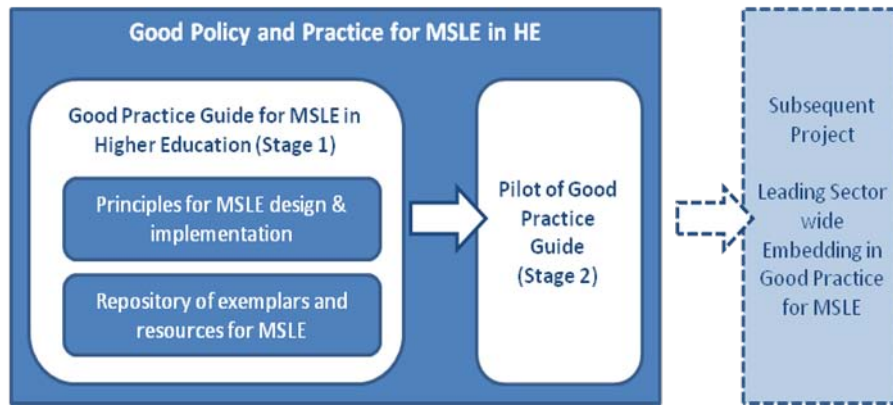
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[2] See Footnote 1

Figure 1 Good policy and practice for MSLE in higher education
Source: Queensland University of Technology (2010)

Session Plan (30 minutes)

Introduction (5 minutes)

Presenter: Participants will be introduced to the nature of social justice and equity pertinent to MSLE and the approach taken by the project team to identify draft principles for good practice in MSLE will be outlined. The draft principles will be provided to the participants.

Discussion (15 minutes)

In small groups, participants will be asked to examine the draft principles with a view to assessing
(a) their suitability as principles; and
(b) their applicability to their own institutions approach to MSLE. Participants are asked to consider their own institutional initiatives to monitor learning engagement and consider the principles.

Conclusion (10 minutes)

Bring together ideas/discussions from participants – what has been identified that may be missing in their institutions (in terms of MSLE)? Discuss whether participants would consider applying these principles to their particular initiatives.

Acknowledging social justice and equity through good practice for monitoring student learning engagement in FYE: Nuts & Bolts

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