

# A NECESSARY CULTURAL SHIFT FOR LEARNING

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## **Abstract, Global context**

Higher education in the UK and Ireland has seen dramatic changes over, particularly, the last two decades. The current Higher Education context is a world-wide one in which universities across the world now profess to be, or aspire to be, “world class universities” although this is often determined through research indices. A search using “Google” will illustrate many universities using this description in their promotional material. What makes a university “world-class” has a variety of interpretations with emphasis placed on different university goals. Nevertheless, universities are now competing in a world market and need to be aware of advances in higher education across the world. The Times Higher Education QS World University Rankings for 2007 which, although dominated by US and UK universities with Harvard at number 1, Cambridge at number 2, Oxford at number 3 and Yale at number 4, indicate the strength of the international competition. It is notable on the home front that University College Dublin joined Trinity College Dublin in the top two hundred. This paper takes the position that to be world class, student learning should be at the forefront of a university’s mission and that educational advancements should be maintained at the cutting-edge.

This study is based on evidence collected from two “different” universities; one a long-established, red-brick, Russell Group institution; and the other a more recently established university that was formerly a polytechnic. Student engagement has increasingly become an issue in both institutions. It is a common issue amongst many universities. There are a variety of causes of non-engagement. This paper argues that the higher education system and policies, rather than personal student attitude, tend to promote non-engagement. The study compares student traits in the two universities and, using evidence obtained from participant observation, documents, conversations with academic tutors and student focus groups, determines common reasons for non-engagement and suggests ways to improve student engagement.

**Key words:** student engagement, reasons, HE system, HE policy

## **Introduction**

The stimulus for constructing this paper came from an unusual source. I had just gone for a swim in my local leisure centre and was sitting relaxing in the steam room and got involved in a conversation of complaint about some fitness classes that had been cancelled. The essence of the discussion was that the classes had a significant impact on the fitness levels of the participants, and that they were unable to achieve the same sense of accomplishment by doing the same thing on their own in the gym. There was general agreement that the classes were of great benefit and that if the classes stopped, they might review their membership. For example, one person related his own experience, with which everyone agreed. He said something along the lines of the following:

“I spent 3 years using this gym myself. Then I joined the Bodypump class and the Spin class and within a few weeks found an incredible difference.”

The discussion caused me to think of university classes and prompted me to make the analogy with learning in higher education. I jotted down a few notes from memory in the changing room of key comments that were made in relation to the use of classes:

“It really takes a good instructor to structure the session and you work really hard, but the time flies...”

“It’s hard to get booked in because the classes fill up so quickly...”

“It’s good to be able to work out with others and compare your progress...”

“Others remark if they’ve had a good session and we all encourage each other...”

The role of the instructor was further mentioned. There was consensus that their usual instructor was great because he “really drives you”; but they referred to an occasional instructor who stood-in from time to time and said:

“Joe (a pseudonym) doesn’t drive you. It’s hard to put all your effort into it, and I find I’m constantly looking at my watch...”

It struck me that there was a resonance with learning in higher education. Universities emphasise student-centred learning using the explanation and justification that students should take responsibility for their own learning. However, at the extreme, this can lead to solitary study that lacks drive, motivation and enthusiasm on the part of the student and

where there is an absence of encouragement and adequate, educative feedback from tutors and the education system. The role of the tutor can affect the approach to learning of the student in a profound and significant way. Enthusiasm for learning and inspiration to study can be nurtured by careful, designed teaching and a resonant curriculum.

### **The Context**

Higher education in the UK and Ireland has seen dramatic changes over, particularly, the last two decades. Higher Education is set in a global context, one in which universities across the world now profess to be, or aspire to be, “world class universities”. A quick search using “Google” will illustrate many universities using this description in their promotional material. What makes a university “world-class” has a variety of interpretations with emphasis placed on different university goals. Often the judgment is made on research output such as research income and number of Nobel prize winners and not on the quality of student learning or ‘education value added’ to the student. Nevertheless, universities are now competing in a world market and need to be aware of advances in higher education across the world. The Times Higher Education QS World University Rankings for 2007 which, although dominated by US and UK universities with Harvard at number 1, Cambridge at number 2, Oxford at number 3 and Yale at number 4, indicate the strength of the international competition. It is notable on the home front that University College Dublin joined Trinity College Dublin in the top two hundred. This paper takes the position that to be world class, student learning should be at the forefront of a university’s mission and that educational advancements should be maintained at the cutting-edge.

### **Evidence Base**

This paper has been constructed with the intention of stimulating debate rather than leading to evidence-based conclusions. It contains ideas and criticisms. The bases of the propositions put forward in the paper emanate from previous studies by the authors, from a larger study by one of the authors, which explored the link between assessment and learning using formal qualitative and quantitative methods, and from experiential practice. This study is based on evidence collected from two “different” universities; one

a long-established, red-brick, Russell Group institution; and the other a more recently established university that was formerly a polytechnic. Student engagement has increasingly become an issue in both institutions and central policies are being developed at both locations to improve engagement and student retention. It is a common issue amongst many universities. There are a variety of reasons why some students do not fully engage with their studies. The paper argues that the higher education system and policies, rather than personal student attitude, tend to be the dominant factors in the tendency toward disengagement and non-engagement. The study compares student traits in the two universities and, using evidential sources of debate obtained from participant observation, documents, interviews and conversations with academic tutors and with student focus groups, determines common reasons for lack of engagement and suggests ways to improve student engagement.

### **Reasons for lack of engagement**

In recent years there has been concerned recognition in universities of two key related factors that encompass the issue of student engagement with their studies:

1. Student transition from school or college to university and the concomitant expectations and skills of school leavers to study independently.
2. Retention of students in higher education. There is a non-completion rate that suggests that there is something wrong. Dropping-out represents a waste of individual potential. It also causes a loss of revenue to the institution and contributes negatively to the economy of the nation.

The STAR project (University of Ulster, 2008) recognised that:

“There is widespread evidence and agreement that, in particular, the transfer from schools, FE Institutions or other HE Institutions into university, even internally between courses, can be a difficult time for students. Therefore in these transition periods there needs to be adequate support for these students and additional support for those most affected by the change in their academic and social lives.”

It continued to say that: “The critical points to consider in the transition process are:

- Adapting to changes in academic teaching and expectations.

- Adapting to changes in social lives, living more independently, a new circle of peers.”

Whilst universities exist to educate students in their chosen field of study, they also must assist students with their personal development. Human beings are sociable creatures and enjoy companionship, discussion and interaction. One of the factors to which there is continual reference in studies of the student experience is that of making friends. It is important to students to socialise. A sense of belonging to the programme of study and / or the institution provides the student with a sense of identity in the academic world, assists with the formation of friendships amongst this community and helps to avoid the feeling of isolation. It is suggested that the institution and the programme should proactively and emphatically provide extra-curricular activities and encourage group participation within the academic timetable.

Student engagement manifests itself through a variety of practices and traits that include: non-attendance at scheduled classes; lack of participation in the learning environment; only doing that which is assessed; a reluctance to read; and a tendency to expect the award regardless of personal commitment and input. Perhaps the most noticeable indicator of inadequate engagement with studies is non-attendance at scheduled classes. Whilst there are university rules that purportedly regulate student attendance, it is a rarity for proceedings to be instigated or for sanctions to be applied in respect of non-attendance by students.

From focus group discussions with students, from less formal large group discussions with students and from individual discussions with students, it is clear that there is a variety of reasons why students do not attend scheduled classes. Whilst there are a few students who drop out of their studies and find other distractions, there are some pragmatic reasons for some students not to attend some classes, such as:

- They have jobs that conflict with the academic timetable;
- They travel a distance and determine that it is not worth the journey for one or two timetabled hours;
- It's too expensive to travel every day.

- It is perceived to be more time efficient to copy or share lecture notes

There are reasons more related to the programme and the system such as:

- “It’s a waste of time coming to that lecture... with so many students you can’t concentrate... and there’s no room to take notes”.
- “I can download the Powerpoint slides for those lectures so I don’t need to go...”.

In a recent small group discussion with first-year students, there was a seemingly lighthearted comment from one student but which led to some comments with a more pointed undertone:

“(Tutor X) spends more time talking about skiing than anything else...”

which provoked a remark from another student:

“...yes and it’s our fees that are paying for (tutor X’s) ski holidays...”.

Yorke (1999) found that: the quality and organisation of the teaching, the difficulty of the programme and the lack of preparedness of students to cope with it, and a poor choice of programme including a lack of vocational relevance, were significant academic reasons for dropping-out of the higher education experience. On the basis of his review of the literature on the student experience, Yorke (2008) suggested a number of broad areas of institutional activity through which the chances of student success can be enhanced:

- An institutional commitment to student learning, and hence to student engagement
- Proactive management of student transition
- Treating the curriculum as an academic milieu, and also one in which social engagement is fostered
- Choosing curricular structures that increase the chances of student success
- Placing an emphasis on the first year experience (including the provision of resources)
- Systematically monitoring and evaluating student achievement, and acting on the evidence thereby collected
- Academic leadership (although, Yorke states, in some of the cited sources this is implicit rather than explicit)

**How can things be improved? Ten suggested recommendations.**

### **1. Matching intake qualifications to the demands of the programme; or vice versa.**

There is evidence to suggest that the expectations of students in relation to their chosen course sometimes do not match and lead to a lack of engagement with their studies. This is apparent at examination board meetings when students have withdrawn and have been coded as 'course not suitable'. Similarly, entry qualifications of students may impact on engagement with and performance on the course. Whilst we are not claiming that the following example is academically robust, it serves as an illustration. For several years, students who did not have the requisite entry points were accepted on to a programme. During the same period, the programme team had recommended that the points requirement for entry to the programme should be increased because they found that a significant number of students were experiencing difficulties in the first year of the programme and were either withdrawing from it, or failing. Three years ago, the entry points were raised from 240 to 280. There was a remarkable, significant improvement in performance which continued into the later years. One year ago, the entry level was increased to 300. There were only two failures at the end of this year amongst those 54 students demonstrating a further significant improvement in outcome. The programme team is convinced that the underlying reason for this improvement is that those students with the higher entry level are more able to study in the higher education environment and engage significantly better with the programme requirements.

### **2. Reorganise the academic year**

Begin the higher education academic year in January to allow students to give more and later consideration to their choice of career and to apply to university programmes on the basis of their actual entry qualifications.

### **3. Rethink modularisation and semesterisation.**

Modularisation and semesterisation greatly facilitate the management and administration of the education process. Students tend to like the system because learning is divided into chunks of a defined size and with a defined time-frame for completion. Academic tutors, on the whole, find the modularised and semesterised system to be efficient. However,

there is an underlying suspicion that learning is compromised because of the compartmentalisation that comes with modularisation and semesterisation. The university semester is of fifteen weeks and comprises twelve weeks teaching followed by a three week assessment period. The three week assessment period accommodates the taking of assessments by the students as well as the subsequent reporting by the assessing tutors. The first week of the semester is generally a settling-in period and the final week is generally discounted by students in terms of meaningful engagement. The effect of such occurrences as well as illness on the part of the student or the tutor may reduce the effective teaching period for a module to nine or ten weeks. In one of the two institutions in the study, there have been particular representations made to abolish semesterisation to allow more time for reflection and consolidation of the learning, and to give longer opportunity for more effective, educative assessment methods. University regulations have been amended to allow a proportion of modules on a programme to be studied over two semesters. Many programmes have taken the opportunity incorporate this structure; however, for such modules, there is a six-week period over the Christmas vacation and subsequent examination period during which the student may be disconnected from study in such a structured module. There is now more flexibility in Modularised courses than there was originally. The system can allow for a variety of sizes of modules in terms of credit points, although this brings with it additional administration. Modularisation was introduced to allow for, *inter alia*, credit accumulation and transfer. However, the credit accumulation and transfer scheme has not been implemented to the extent that students commonly obtain degrees through the accumulation of credit from different institutions. The main argument against modularisation is the disconnection of learning. Modules are studied and assessed as discrete units.

Ensor (2004) set out a good argument of disciplinary discourse versus credit accumulation and transfer discourse. She describes the responses of universities in South Africa to a policy designed to reshape higher education curricula in the mid 1990's, to react to pressures of globalisation and the local challenges of reconstruction and redevelopment. The situation is analogous to that in the UK at about the same period and which continues to resonate through UK higher education policy and practice. It is a tension between what Ensor terms the 'disciplinary discourse' and the 'credit

accumulation and transfer discourse'. Ensor quotes from the report of the National Commission of Higher Education (NCEE, 1996, P77) to define disciplinary discourse as:

'the traditional currency of courses and qualifications, based on long-standing academic propositions about the need for sequential learning within defined disciplines' and [which] refers to a discourse that advocates the induction of students into sequential learning paths within disciplines to ensure "cognitive coherence";

That is the same as the 'traditional' format of the HE curriculum in the UK prior to modularisation. The 'credit accumulation and transfer discourse' or 'credit exchange discourse' refers to the curriculum as changed to accommodate credit accumulation and transfer; the same as happened in the UK. The central argument of Ensor's study is that these two curriculum structures have different and opposing philosophies. The underlying theme of the paper is a recognition that the disciplinary discourse is the better curriculum structure for educational reasons which have been tried and tested over a long period of time, whereas the credit exchange discourse has been introduced for 'other' reasons which are government-led political agendas and argued to be a necessary contemporary change to accommodate modern societal requirements.

#### **4. Timetabling to suit the student.**

This has been used successfully in many Masters programmes which are designed to suit those students coming in from industry or who need to focus studies to one or two very full weeks in a semester. Existing undergraduate student timetables are not particularly densely timetabled with some days of the week having only 1 or 2 timetabled contact hours.

#### **5. Inverting the curriculum.**

This idea is one that suggests that the context of a programme of study only becomes apparent in the final year. McLernon & Hughes (2005) proposed that student learning is a function of: Instruction / Knowledge Acquisition; *Contextualisation*; Application and Reflection; Assessment (by self and others). Ideally, these factors should intermingle and integrate to optimise the learning outcomes. Full-time undergraduate students experience difficulties in relating theory to practice owing to the lack of practical experience.

Placing final year modules in the first year could add *context* to the theory and illuminate the learning through contextualisation. It may also facilitate the development of the important pool of tacit knowledge of the student that is a function of experience, maturity and age.

## **6. Teaching innovation**

Provide studio teaching and appropriate accommodation and learning environment to allow for interaction, to promote imagination and creativity and to share ideas. This is particularly difficult to achieve with the large numbers now attending University courses and the drive for 50% of school leavers to move into higher university education.

## **7. Small group teaching**

Student engages better with learning through debate and discussion in smaller groups. Whilst this option is resource intensive recent institutional drivers are encouraging small group teaching incorporating regular pastoral tutorial groups with favourable outcomes.

## **8. Problem-based learning and more learning by doing.**

Evidence strongly suggests that student engagement and motivation is improved through the use of problem based learning.

## **9. Course design**

Curriculum design that encompasses tacit knowledge development alongside the development of the necessary declarative knowledge.

## **10. Regular informal, educative feedback**

Appropriate assessment designed for learning in years one and two with final grading assessment in final year

## **Finally**

Universities are about education and research. Research receives what is arguably a disproportionate amount of kudos. We would argue that research stems from a desire and an ability to find out things. This desire should be fostered and encouraged through the

education system and the ability honed through undergraduate and postgraduate education. The globalization of higher education policy, the increasing justification of knowledge-based economies, and the advances in ICT are causing a leveling of institutional educational provision with increased competition from higher education institutions on a global scale that may lead to the 'MacDonald-isation' of higher education. Deem et al (2008), in their conclusion, warn that:

“The quest for world-class status in higher education is clearly not going to disappear but we should not underestimate the social and political costs of higher education's engagement in globalised policy copying.”

There is an opportunity to excel in teaching and learning. Teaching and learning is at the heart of higher education and efforts must be made to make the process enjoyable and one with which students engage enthusiastically.

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