

Engaging



learners in higher and vocational education



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*Understanding student engagement is the key to enhancing higher and vocational education. **Hamish Coates** explains how ACER research is helping providers improve learning processes and student outcomes.*

Understanding and effectively managing students' engagement in education plays a significant role in enhancing learning processes and outcomes. ACER projects are underway to develop resources and insights for understanding and enhancing student engagement in higher and vocational education.

Contemporary perspectives on student engagement define it as students' involvement with activities and conditions that are linked with high quality learning. Current work builds on decades of empirical research, much of it longitudinal, that have identified the characteristics of effective learning.

Fundamentally, engagement is based on the assumption that learning is influenced by how an individual participates in educationally purposeful activities. Interest is focused on the extent to which students participate in active learning, interactions with staff, enriching activities and collaborative work.

While students are responsible for constructing their knowledge, learning also depends on institutions and staff generating conditions which stimulate and encourage involvement. Thus student engagement surveys also measure perceptions of learning support, academic challenge, and teaching quality.

Engaging learners in higher education

ACER is working with Australian and New Zealand universities to conduct the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE). The AUSSE is being run for the first time in 2007 in collaboration with 25 Australian and New Zealand higher education institutions.

The aim of the AUSSE is to stimulate evidence-based conversations about student engagement in university education. By providing information which is generalisable and sensitive to institutional diversity, and with international points of reference, the AUSSE will play a very important role in helping institutions monitor and enhance the quality of education.

The AUSSE was developed to bring together existing work in the area, and leverage benefits from a collaborative, multi-institutional approach. It's critical that surveys involve valid instruments and processes so that they provide the kind of high-quality data which can be used to improve practice. It's also critical to have meaningful points of reference to get most value from reports, along with well-tested strategies for embedding results into practice.

The AUSSE has introduced new psychometric approaches and advanced survey methodologies into Australasian higher education. It involves administration of a state-of-the-art Student Engagement Questionnaire (SEQ) to a representative sample of first-year and later-year students at each institution. The survey is managed by ACER, with input by participating institutions. A robust and efficient survey process has been developed with inbuilt quality controls.

The SEQ provides measurement of six scales. These include students' participation in active learning, student and staff interactions, enriching educational experiences and work integrated learning. It measures students' perceptions of academic challenge, and the supportiveness of their learning environment.

The AUSSE has formative links with the United States National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), a collection developed in the mid 1990s and run annually at around 750 US and Canadian higher education institutions. AUSSE results can be benchmarked with NSSE results, providing valuable points of reference for internationally focused higher education institutions.

The first AUSSE results will be reported to participating institutions in November 2007, providing foundations for a suite of development and enhancement activities. A suite of resources and workshops will be developed to support the use of the data in quality enhancement and improvement activities. As part of this, ACER will work with universities to enhance the AUSSE resources and methods.

Engaging learners in vocational education and training

In a separate but conceptually related development, ACER is working on behalf of the National Quality Council (NQC) to produce a suite of survey resources to help Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) across Australia capture, analyse and use information on the quality of vocational education and training.

The Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) 2007 provides for information to be gathered against specified quality indicators. AQTF 2007 is the national set of standards which assures nationally consistent, high-quality training and assessment services for the clients of Australia's vocational education and training system.

To support RTOs, a Learner Questionnaire (LQ) is being developed to monitor learner engagement. As with the AUSSE SEQ, the LQ is designed for administration to currently enrolled learners in less than 15 minutes in online or paper form. The same LQ form is used for learners enrolled in all forms of training, including apprenticeships and traineeships.

The LQ is designed to measure several facets of education and training. Key aspects include: learners' engagement; the quality of training; learners' work readiness and competency development; perceptions of relevance and quality of resources and assessment; and the general supports provided to learners.

A Survey Management and Reporting Tool (SMART) has been developed to assist RTOs enter, analyse and report their survey

results in ways that are likely to be of most use in quality management activities.

It is envisaged that this information will provide a valuable source of data for RTOs to gauge how well they are meeting client needs, develop relationships with stakeholders, and manage internal quality improvement activities. The information may also contribute to a registering body's risk assessment of an RTO's quality, and inform decisions concerning the frequency and targeting of audits.

New perspectives on higher and vocational education

Understanding and effectively managing learners' engagement in education plays a significant role in enhancing educational processes and outcomes. Information on student engagement provides coincident ('real-time') insights on learning processes. These insights can help institutions identify how to attract and, importantly, retain students, and manage resources, and monitor programs and services. They offer the most reliable proxy measures of learning outcomes and provide excellent diagnostic measures for enhancement activities. Comparison over time or across groups provides a means identifying the 'value added' by an educational experience.

Together, the AUSSE and AQTF developments seek to stimulate new conversations about attracting, engaging and retaining students in higher and vocational education. They provide a basis for learner-focused quality enhancement activities, the development of enhancement resources, and a range of evidence-based collaborations. ■