

Student engagement: a marriage made in heaven?

*Understanding and Developing Student Engagement* by Colin Bryson (Ed.), The Staff and Educational Development Series, James Wisdom (series Ed.). ISBN 978-0-415-84339-3, Routledge, 286 pp., 2014.

Reviewed by Carroll Graham

Improving the student experience, especially student engagement, has become a hot topic in higher education. This topic, along with how universities can provide value to students, is especially significant at this time in the context of increasingly burdensome student fees. Student engagement is often seen as a panacea, underpinning success in priority areas such as student retention, widening participation and improving student outcomes. Yet there is a plethora of confusing and, at times, contradictory conceptualisations of what student engagement entails.

*Understanding and Developing Student Engagement* seeks to clarify the concept of student engagement, and to provide illustrations of student engagement in action. The first chapter critiques a diverse range of interpretations of the nature of student engagement. Bryson comments that ideas presented in this introductory chapter have been chosen for their insightfulness, not because they ‘fit neatly into a coherent framework’ (2014, p. 1). Through a discussion of the literature, Bryson acknowledges that the concept of student engagement is complex and multi-faceted. Indeed, it is the compound-dualistic nature of student engagement — it encompasses what both students and institutions do, and it is both a process and an outcome — which makes the concept of student engagement inherently complex.

Despite this complexity, Bryson (2014, p. 17) presents a relatively succinct definition:

Student engagement is about what a student brings to Higher Education in terms of goals, aspirations, values and beliefs and how these are shaped and mediated by their experience whilst a student. SE [student engagement] is constructed and reconstructed through the lenses of the perceptions and identities held by students and the meaning and sense a student makes of their experiences and interactions.

Following the introduction, the core of *Understanding and Developing Student Engagement* is split into three parts, written by three distinct categories of authors. Three chapters, ‘Students engaging: perspectives from researchers’, are based on three different longitudinal studies of students in three different institutions. Part II, ‘Students engaging: perspectives from students’, contains eight chapters, which have significant input from students themselves, with five chapters written solely by students. The third section, ‘Engaging students’, comprises five chapters written by student engagement staff, both academic and professional. Finally, Bryson reflects on the earlier chapters, and projects a way forward for student engagement.

Although the students in the three research studies in Part I were diverse — in age, background and field of study — one evident common theme is that social networks and peer support are crucial to persistence and success. The networks revealed in these studies were not formal, institution-supported networks but rather those that students developed for themselves. In contrast, two student-written chapters in Part II focus on the benefits the authors gained from leadership roles in networks or peer support programs that were initiated and/or supported by their institution. Another student focuses almost entirely on the importance of informal social networks in a poignantly entitled chapter ‘People can make or break student engagement’. A subsequent chapter also focuses on the importance of people to student engagement; in this case, tutors, using data from a student survey for teaching awards. Presenting an eclectic mix of accounts, students reflect on their personal transformations

using methods as diverse as video, autoethnographic writing, and reflections on involvement in a research project. In Part III, student engagement practitioner staff present their experiences and views on student engagement. Emerging from these practitioner accounts is a common theme of the importance of the transition from secondary education to first-year university, and the transformations that take place in the students during their first year of higher education. First-year university is more about learning how to learn than learning new knowledge; however, academic staff tend to view an engaged student as someone who shares ‘their own intense interest in and passion for the subject’ (Sambell & Graham 2014, p. 216). The last chapter in this section explores the challenge of engaging both students and staff in the student experience, highlighting, as did the first chapter of Part I, the importance of student–staff interactions. This leads into Bryson’s proposal that the way forward for student engagement is through partnerships between students and staff. One partnership model is the co-production knowledge through undergraduate research, while others are based on inquiry-based learning or student involvement in curriculum design.

Although based on research and experiences in the UK, *Understanding and Developing Student Engagement* has much to offer readers of the *Australian Universities’ Review*. Student engagement ‘is much more than just about *doing*. *Being* and *becoming* are critical’ (Bryson 2014, p. 17). In the words of one student author ‘I feel that I changed and developed dramatically from a student into a mature adult’ (Chadwick 2014, p. 118). As tertiary education staff we can have significant impact — positive or negative — on the students who pass through the doors of our institutions. While there are many challenges to practising partnership, by working in partnership with students the impact of staff can be increasingly positive.

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#### References

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