

# How can the academic program coordinators advance student engagement?

This AUSSE Enhancement Guide makes suggestions about how academic program coordinators can enhance student engagement.



## You make student engagement happen

Academic program coordinators are a pivot point for successful student engagement. They have a definitive influence over how student engagement is integrated into program design, and how it is reflected in teaching practice. They influence how the program actively links its students to learning skills support, student services and the wider life of the university. They influence the development of policy and processes so that they promote high quality learning outcomes for their students.

## Put student engagement on the agenda when you review your program

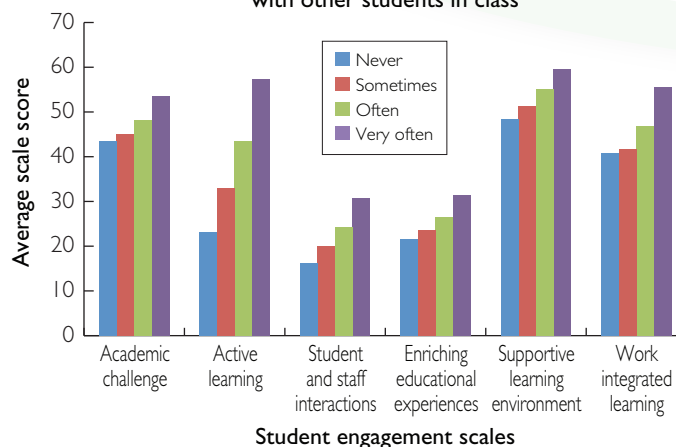
Program and course or unit reviews are great opportunities for shaping curriculum in ways that promote student engagement. Because so much learning goes on outside the classroom, a key area for focus may well be to influence the kind of learning that takes place outside the lecture, the tutorial or the laboratory. The AUSSE measures the occurrence of this kind of learning in several ways. The results for Australian and New Zealand students generally are low. For example, later year US students are twice as likely as Australasian students to do community service or volunteer work. These activities can be built in to learning and assessment designs. Only a third of Australasian students – whether in first year or in later years – report that they frequently prepare drafts of assessments. Preparing drafts can be integrated into tutorial work and group work, or made the focus of undergraduate seminars.

## Support sessional staff to work with student engagement principles

Tutorials and laboratory sessions often rely on sessional teachers who may have limited knowledge of the principles that underpin student engagement. Yet sessional teachers are the academic staff with whom most students have the greatest level of interaction. Program coordinators can ensure that induction and professional learning opportunities for sessional teachers include reference to student engagement research and to the way in which student engagement principles are embedded in unit learning and assessment designs. They can ensure that sessional staff are introduced to ideas about how to promote student engagement in small group learning environments.

Tutorials provide ideal opportunities for structured peer learning activities which have additional benefits beyond the tutorial. Properly managed, they can foster beyond-classroom study groups, friendships and informal networks by bringing together students who may not know each other. Both peer learning and connectedness increase student engagement. This is evident in the graph here which uses the Australasian data from the 2008 AUSSE to show the relationship between the frequency with which students work with others during class and student engagement outcomes.

Student engagement by frequency of working with other students in class



## Identify opportunities for staff-student interaction beyond the classroom

Creating opportunities for interaction between teachers and students is especially important for sustaining student engagement. Students value formal and informal interactions outside the classroom. Such interactions can reinforce motivation, a sense of purpose, a sense of connection. They contribute to student persistence and better academic performance.

Part of the challenge is to establish opportunities for frequent interaction with teachers. The evidence is that student-staff interactions have a significant impact on high quality learning. It is disconcerting that only one in five first year Australasian students, and one in four later year students, report meaningful and frequent interactions with teachers outside the classroom. Teachers see this differently. The Staff Student Engagement Survey – which investigates staff views on student engagement – shows that two in five staff believe they have meaningful and frequent interactions with students beyond the classroom. Exploring these perspectives with students and staff may clarify what is at the heart of such divergent views and provide a platform for insightful change.

The teaching-research nexus may be a fertile area for exploration. Only 2.2 per cent of Australasian first year students report working on a research project with a staff member outside coursework requirements. Is it possible to set a target for your program that would lift this to, say, 15 per cent? If there is no student organisation to which students in your program would readily belong – a microbiology students society or an international relations society – is it possible to actively support the establishment and maintenance of a student association? If there is such a society, how actively is it supported by teachers in your program, by the faculty, by student services? A student organisation may provide the structured opportunity for students to discuss research with academic staff, or to discuss their career aspirations.

## About this guide

This AUSSE Enhancement Guide forms part of the suite of resources developed by ACER and the broader AUSSE community to enhance students' engagement in effective educational practices. Visit [www.acer.edu.au/ausse](http://www.acer.edu.au/ausse) for further information about the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement.