

Developing institution-wide approaches to student engagement

This AUSSE Enhancement Guide considers how institutions might approach the development of institution-wide approaches to student engagement.



Responding to student needs

Building successful student engagement means building student perspectives into the way your institution organises to meet student needs. The starting point is students rather than institutional structures and procedures.

Student engagement rests, first, on the idea that students are independent learners with responsibility for managing their own learning. Second, it rests on the idea that a university has a responsibility to create an environment that supports and encourages students to manage their learning effectively. The selection of student engagement strategies is informed by considering how to allocate institutional resources so that creative and productive relationships are established between students, their learning journeys and the institution.

A key characteristic of effective student engagement is an integrated web of supportive institutional practices and functions. Establishing and maintaining that web involves identifying the potential for creative and productive links between practices and functions as diverse as career and employment services, student unions, course advice, learning support, study abroad, peer tutoring, faculty/department academic strategies for student engagement, the use of diagnostic assessment designs in the early part of semester, cafeteria hours – and so on.

Developing responsive strategies

The selection and development of strategies that promote such links will depend to a considerable extent on:

- academic and professional staff understanding the student engagement evidence base
- a close appreciation of data that will help guide the crafting of your strategies, including AUSSE data
- a recognition that students are not homogenous – different strategies may be needed for different groups of students
- a recognition that institution-wide strategies cannot substitute for student engagement strategies at the discipline level.

Understanding student engagement

Student engagement has a deep evidence base built up over several decades. Academic and professional staff are more likely to accept that strategies for student engagement should have some priority if they have the opportunity to understand the evidence base for student engagement and the principles that are drawn from it. This matters because all staff are busy and all have priorities. Adopting new strategies necessarily means that existing workloads and priorities may have to be reconsidered to make room for those strategies. Sometimes adopting new student engagement strategies will require incremental changes to existing practices. Sometimes new strategies will require more than adaptive change – they will require adoption of new ways of working.

An understanding of the principles of student engagement can act as a filter and a guide for academic and professional staff who are planning and reviewing, or making minor adjustments to, academic programs, assessment practice, teaching designs, student learning and other support services, orientation programs, open days, career services, or

approaches to supporting peer-to-peer interactions in both academic and social contexts.

The best means of securing a deeper understanding of student engagement will differ between and within universities. Specific professional development activity about student engagement may be necessary. It may assist if other professional development activities incorporate student engagement perspectives. Task specific support may help – targeted and knowledgeable input on student engagement could be offered to a teaching team renewing first-year engineering subjects, or a group charged with developing a capstone subject in international development, or faculty course advisors evaluating the effectiveness of their service delivery over the past year.

Understanding student engagement data

Analysis and interpretation of AUSSE data will be instructive and influential if the principles of student engagement are widely shared. AUSSE data can be a key input to selecting strategies, and to their planning, monitoring and review.

Student engagement is a complex phenomenon. You will have access to other data that will support your inquiry and strategy selection – the AUSSE data of your benchmarking partners, retention data, student evaluations of teaching, perhaps you have data from a survey you conducted or focus groups on orientation activities or a work integrated learning program. Your AUSSE data is a valuable resource that offers a particular and important perspective, but it will be one resource among many.

AUSSE data is particularly helpful in identifying how different groups of students evaluate their experience. These differences allow you to identify institution-wide strategies that address shortfalls in student engagement for particular groups such as first year students or international students.

If 25 per cent of your first year students report using student learning support services often or very often, a general strategy may be required to promote greater use of those services. A closer look at the AUSSE data may reveal that 40 per cent of first year international students make use of these services, but only 20 per cent of domestic students do so. This might suggest that targeted strategies are required.

Responding locally

Institution-wide strategies cannot substitute for localised strategies when they are needed.

Perhaps 25 per cent of your first year students in humanities fields of study report working with other students on projects during class. Yet you note that 40-60 per cent of students in other fields of study report working with other students on projects during class. These data might suggest that a particular focus is needed in some faculties or departments to consider how tutorials are delivered or how assessments are designed.

Responding across the institution

While a localised response may be required in the example just mentioned, local responses have a much better chance of success if there is a supportive institution-wide approach to student engagement.

It is likely that an institution-wide approach will be needed to the analysis and reporting of AUSSE data, to support monitoring and evaluation of changed practice, and to explain the evidence base and the principles of student engagement to specific groups of academic and professional staff. You may wish to undertake an institution-wide audit of existing practices against key principles of student engagement. You could establish specific and regular reporting mechanisms like annual student engagement reports. Student engagement could become a standing item on appropriate academic, management and business committees. Other options, which have both symbolic and practical impacts, include establishing:

- a university office for student engagement – already established at several institutions
- institutional awards for student engagement
- a fund for developing student engagement practices, or for pursuing research on aspects of student engagement.

About this guide

This AUSSE Enhancement Guide forms part of the suite of resources developed by ACER to assist institutions to enhance their students' engagement in effective educational practices. Visit www.acer.edu.au/ausse for further information about the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement.