

Enhancing interactions between students and staff

This AUSSE Enhancement Guide considers opportunities for extending interactions between staff and students outside class time.



Engaging students outside classes

Many academic and professional staff are generous with the time they commit to interacting with students.

The 2007 AUSSE results show that 21 per cent of students had worked with teaching staff on activities other than coursework. Some 44 per cent of students report talking about career plans with teaching staff or advisors.

The reverse of these figures, of course, is that 79 per cent of students hadn't worked with staff on activities other than coursework, and 56 per cent of students had not discussed career plans with teaching staff or advisors. Yet the evidence suggests that high levels of student-staff interactions have positive effects on learning, motivation, persistence – on engagement.

Use AUSSE data to target wider engagement

When considering how to promote greater staff-student interaction it's important to go beyond preconceptions that limit thinking and action.

A common preconception is that many, or even most, students are rarely on campus. The presumed corollary is that because students are absent they have no time to interact with staff outside of class time. AUSSE data can provide a check on the veracity of opinions like these.

The 2007 AUSSE data indicate that around 22 per cent of domestic students, and 36 per cent of international students, spend more than 10 hours a week on campus outside class time. Students are on campus – indeed, 12 per cent of domestic students, and 22 per cent of international students, spend more than 15 hours on campus outside of class time.

The AUSSE's Student and Staff Interactions Scale comprises six items. Your university's AUSSE report will provide you with data on the scale and each item, and with a breakdown of the data for first-year students and later-year students. Data are also reported for other variables like broad discipline areas, for domestic and international students, and study mode (part time, full time, distance). You can use these data to establish, for example, how many hours outside class time your later-year international students studying information technology are on campus.

It can help to compare your data with national AUSSE outcomes, and with benchmarking partners. The comparison might lead you to set a formal target for improving the outcome on the Staff and Student Interaction Scale. Equally, you can approach the task incrementally – try something new and see what strategies make a difference, then expand the ones that work.

Use AUSSE data to review existing strategies

Often the challenge is to make existing engagement strategies work more effectively.

It may be that 30 per cent of your first year students in management and commerce answered either 'often' or 'very often' to the item 'Discussed your grades or assignments with teaching staff'. You need to decide if that percentage is a good outcome, or too low. You might investigate further and find that though all lecturers and tutors have scheduled hours for student consultations, very few students make use of the opportunity. You may find that first year students feel uncomfortable about taking up the opportunity – they may not know anyone else who has done so, they may be uncertain what happens during a consultation, they may be unsure about the benefits of a consultation. You can then begin to think about specific actions that might encourage students to take advantage of the opportunity by lessening anxiety. A description provided in a lecture or tutorial perhaps, or a testimonial report from students who have scheduled a consultation, or email to all students a video clip of a consultation accessible on the university's learning management system.

Developing informal engagement strategies

Student-staff interactions are often thought of in formal terms like scheduled consultations about assessment tasks mentioned above. Such opportunities are fundamental to good learning.

It's also useful to consider how informal interactions can become a larger part of the student experience. Opportunities for informal interactions open up social possibilities for conversation across a wide range of topics, introduce students to previously unexplored ways of engaging with their subjects and disciplines, and place the learning project in a relaxed context which supports engagement.

Informal opportunities can be as straightforward as having coffee with a small group of students now and then, and guiding conversation towards the career options your discipline leads to. You might invite three or four students to a lunch with a visiting scholar who has expertise in the topic for their team project. You could run a late afternoon revision session in the week before the first year physiology exam, and end the session with delivered pizzas. If you are going to a book launch at a nearby bookshop, tell the students in your lecture or tutorial that you will meet them on campus just beforehand and walk with them to the bookshop. You may have three companions, or twenty – it's not a numbers game, it's an engagement opportunity.

It is common to think of student-staff interactions that promote student engagement as taking place between academic staff and students. Professional staff can also play a role well beyond offering a scheduled learning support activity, or dealing with students on a formal, transactional and administrative basis about things like enrolment, special consideration or course advice. Finding ways to include professional staff in student-staff interactions can produce a sense of 'us' rather than 'me and them'.

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.