

# How can the university's senior leaders advance student engagement?

This AUSSE Enhancement Guide makes suggestions about how those in institutional leadership positions can enhance student engagement.



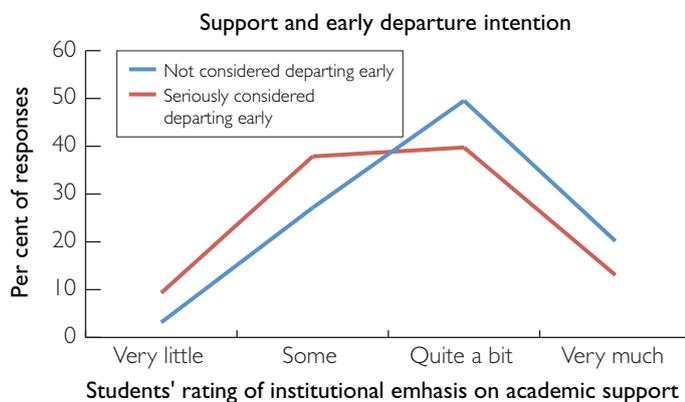
## Student engagement is a strategic choice

Adopting student engagement as a primary attribute of a university is a strategic choice. It has significant influences on formulating and implementing strategy in many areas: curriculum design, resource allocation, structure of student services, teaching-research nexus, load planning, library services, industry and community engagement, among others.

## Promoting values that support student engagement

Student engagement has institution-wide impacts. Advancing student engagement relies on your leadership. The manner in which the values and principles of student engagement are embodied in institutional practice must vary in response to the characteristics of the student body which differ from university to university, and from campus to campus. Leadership is always practiced in context – student engagement is all about context.

Student engagement research tells us students are more likely to persist, and to improve their academic performance, when the institution supports learning through enhanced and integrated relationships with peers, academics, student services and the broad intellectual and social domains of university life. This is highlighted by the graph below which uses Australasian data from the 2008 AUSSE to show the relationship between students' feelings of academic support and whether they have considered departing university. These kinds of relationships prosper when the institution privileges values that focus on the pursuit of high quality learning. University leaders have a central role in promoting those values and embedding them in practice.



The 2008 Australasian Student Engagement Report discusses the role that university culture has in promoting student engagement. Using Graham Little's typology of four university learning climates (see Little's book, *Faces on Campus*, 1975), the report distinguishes the characteristics of each learning climate through the prism of the AUSSE data. Cultivating climates build student engagement. Neglecting, training and indulging climates diminish student engagement. Leaders are best

placed to assess what the prevailing values of the institution are, and what the consistency of value sets is across the institution. Leaders are best placed to prompt necessary changes in policy and practice so that the predominant values are those that produce a cultivating climate.

## Using AUSSE data to support evidence-based decision-making

The characteristics of any university's learning community are always evolving. The pace of evolution is likely to quicken. Many institutions are contemplating changes in the profile of their student bodies as expanded opportunities for access and participation inform policy objectives, funding models and institutional strategy. Changing student characteristics will require frequent review of student engagement practices to ensure that those practices continue to be responsive and constructive. For leaders, this means sensitising academic and professional staff to the need for ongoing change.

AUSSE data is a crucial input to effective review: it supports continuous improvement. Leaders can convey the importance of AUSSE data by referring to it in formal and informal contexts, by drawing on it as an aid in decision-making, by asking academic and professional staff to investigate it in support of their own decision-making, and in their monitoring and review processes.

## Working across institutional boundaries

The nature of senior leadership roles in organisations as complex as universities inevitably involves boundary-spanning activity in pursuit of strategic objectives. Advancing student engagement requires just that: working across divisional and disciplinary boundaries and communicating direction. Good student engagement practice requires that academic and general staff take a joined-up approach to learning, student support and student services.

An example of this joined up approach can be found in the way that the university supports students to explore and define their career aspirations and options. Some 60.8 per cent of first year Australasian students, and 46.0 per cent of later year students, report never talking about their career plans with either teachers or advisors. This is despite the continuing emphasis on work integrated learning, rapidly changing employment roles and opportunities, and the longstanding role of universities in professional education.

In circumstances like these, university leaders are best-placed to explore what impediments there are to these discussions occurring, given that student engagement research underlines the importance of students interacting purposefully with teachers and professional staff on matters like their future careers. It is likely that the most productive response will range across matters like curriculum design, teaching practice, links between academic programs and careers and student advisers, support for student associations, and industry engagement.

## 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.