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Student Engagement: Key to Retaining Students

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Introduction

The chapter addresses three questions: (i) how are student *retention, success and engagement* understood in higher education? (ii) is student engagement key to retaining students? (iii) what conceptual and practical insights do reflections on international engagement research yield about engagement's influence on retention and success? An answer to the first question is that retention and success have overlapping but distinct meanings. Retention is chiefly concerned with institutions' completion and continuation rates. Success also considers students' own goals and desired outcomes. Student engagement is complex with varied understandings. For example, some researchers consider engagement to be an individual student's psychosocial state: their behavioural, emotional and cognitive connection to their learning (e.g. Fredricks et al., 2004). Others argue that it is more and includes ecological and political dimensions (e.g.

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M. Shah et al. (eds.), *Student Retention and Success in Higher Education*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-80045-1_4

Lawson & Lawson, 2013). Thousands of engagement studies have been published with evidence to address the second question (Evans et al., 2015). Four overarching international research projects offer conceptual and empirical evidence that engagement is key to retention and success: (i) the large National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) in the USA; (ii) Transition Pedagogy (TP) in Australia; (iii) the What Works? student retention and success project from the UK; and (iv) retention and engagement projects from New Zealand. These projects are used to mine much of the evidence to support the arguments in this chapter. A critical reflection on the case studies and evidence from other research addresses the third question.

Understanding Retention, Success and Engagement

The meanings of retention, success and engagement are contested. Each construct has been widely researched and described but still lacks a universally accepted definition. Together, these terms fit Krause's (2012) account of a wicked problem: ill defined, imbued with conflicting points of view and lacking either a tidy or permanent explanation. To make sense of such terms we must recognise them as complex. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) identified complexity theory as an educational research paradigm that gives meaning to complex constructs. Student retention, success and engagement are complex because they are constructed from both similar and different but interacting variables, avoid simple linear cause and effect explanations and replace them with organic, non-linear and holistic understandings. They provide emergent, context-specific conceptions of learning and teaching that draw on feedback loops, adaptations, self-organisation and interactions between learners and their environments within an ever-changing ecosystem.

Their complexity becomes visible when we examine the constructs more closely. Three distinct yet interweaving influences shape them. One focuses on personal growth within individuals. Factors such as cognitive development, motivation and identity formation are examples (Kahu,

2013; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Another focuses on how classroom-related factors such as teaching, institutional practices, societal and ecological influences impact student learning. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) synthesised a large body of research about the importance of teachers and teaching and the influence of institutional environments on learning. In addition to teaching and institutional environments they found students' families, genders or cultural backgrounds impacted learning. This provided a third influence in student retention, success and engagement. Such person–environment understandings draw on psychology and sociology but also on analytic science, critical pedagogy, phenomenology, post-structuralism, political economy and cultural studies while simultaneously looking for connections and differences between them. An integrative view of retention, success and engagement emerges with emotions, thinking, behaviours and agency impacted by different social, cultural, ecological and political influences (Buckley, 2018; Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Zepke, 2019). This third and emergent holistic perspective underpins how I understand student engagement, retention and success.

Student Retention and Success

Student retention is easier to pin down than success. It is understood as students completing a course of study or continuing it after passing through check points such as assessments or enrolment periods. According to Tinto (2017), retention has mainly been connected to institutional performance: the proportion of students completing their courses and the rates at which they are retained. A major focus of retention research is to understand what institutions can do to improve retention rates. Multiple explanations exist (Nelson et al., 2014). In the main, they focus on integrating students into an institution's existing culture. Pre-eminent here is Tinto's longitudinal interactionist model of student departure (1975; 1993). He theorises that when students enrol in higher education, they leave their original culture to enter a different, an academic culture. Students who leave early have not succeeded in integrating into this new culture. Institutions, therefore, must act to ease the transition, help students to integrate, and thereby optimise their retention and success. His

1993 model has six progressive phases, including two that focus on students' social and academic integration. Much student retention research focuses on these phases. Empirical studies have tested and often validated them (Braxton & Lien, 2000).

Although dominant, the integration discourse, has been questioned. Research has shown that students from families unfamiliar with higher education culture, such as those from minority backgrounds, can find it difficult to integrate. Such students can feel they don't belong in university (K. Thomas, 2019). To fix this, universities have adopted various retention strategies such as teaching study-skills to 'fill students up' with required cultural capital (Thomas, 2002). This view from the integration discourse positions students from minority cultures as culturally deficient. To counter this deficiency view, its critics use Bourdieu's (1973) idea of cultural capital to improve retention. Cultural capital theorises a university of norms, values and practices such as habits, manners, language, educational credentials and culturally specific learning tools that advantage holders of such capital. L. Thomas (2002) suggests students with cultural capital fitting university culture are like 'fish in water' and likely to persist; those without are like 'fish out of water' and likely to leave early. Students, who by virtue of their ethnicity, age, gender, socioeconomic status, lifestyle and beliefs, do not hold necessary cultural capital, are at risk of experiencing cultural alienation and early departure. Zepke and Leach (2007) suggest that institutional cultures that adapt traditional norms, values and practices more to fit students' diverse cultural experiences have better chances of retaining them.

Tinto (2017) observed that both retention discourses are focused on what universities can/should do to improve retention rates. But, as he argues, students don't seek to be retained. They want to persist to succeed in achieving their own goals. Student and institutional success objectives connect but are not the same. While the institution's interest is to increase the proportion of students who succeed by graduating and gaining employment, students want to succeed by meeting their own goals and these may be more complex than passing courses or gaining qualifications. Their goals are constantly changing with contextual influences, such as their perceptions of belonging, their judgement of the quality of teaching and the curriculum and the state of their health, finances,

relationships and life outside the institution affecting them (Cvetkovski et al., 2018; Tinto, 2017). According to Cvetkovski and colleagues, success is more than mere retention brought about by policies of integration that enable the success of students who fit traditional academic culture or who have appropriate prior educational qualifications, origins or states of health. Consequently, Osberg's (2015) idea appeals that a student's transition to engagement in learning is more helpful to understanding student success than is retention, as it offers a better account of the complexities of a learning journey than retention.

Student Engagement

Student engagement has featured in educational research since the 1980s and has enjoyed ever increasing prominence since the mid-1990s (Trowler, 2010). Recently, Tomlinson (2017) suggested that student engagement is pre-eminent in higher education (HE) due to its presence at all levels of its ecosystem. At a macro-level, engagement aligns with policies supporting the market-driven political economy of neoliberalism. At this level government policy goals want higher education to provide a quality student experience that ensures student success, enhances engagement of students from diverse backgrounds, achieves high levels of course completions and secures passports to employment with positive attitudes to lifelong learning (Yorke, 2006). At a meso-level institutions implement policies from the macro-level by privileging curricula that are practical and economically useful; creating a climate of performativity in which engagement and success are measured; and abiding by an accountability regime that monitors and publicises how well performance standards are met (Zepke, 2017). At a micro-level engagement promotes student-university learning relationships by informing and guiding students' lived pedagogical experiences in an educational interface (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Kahu et al., 2020). Here learners engage by building self-efficacy, positive emotions, feelings of belonging and well-being. But student engagement seems more than a psychological construct focusing on the emotional, cognitive and behavioural engagement of individual students. Its impact is also socio-ecological and includes classroom,

institutional, community and political influences shaped in a specific cultural and political climate (Lawson & Lawson, 2013).

Possibly because of this widespread reach, student engagement suffers from conceptual fuzziness that hampers development of a universally accepted definition. Ramsden and Callender (2015) capture this by describing student engagement as a convenient expression of almost any appealing form of teaching for student success. Greater clarity would be achieved by viewing engagement not as a unitary definable construct, but as distinct yet overlapping meaning and practice perspectives. One such perspective draws mainly on behaviourist psychology. It highlights behaviours that motivate students to deep and active learning at the micro-level of the HE ecosystem (Ryan & Deci, 2017). An example is the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) which measures engagement by how deeply students invest in purposeful learning and the effort institutions devote to enabling it (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh et al., 2005). A second offers a psycho-social perspective at the micro- and meso-levels. It synthesises insights from both psychology and sociology (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Engagement grows by learners' own effort but is supported by social systems such as found in institutions, curricula and teaching. A third perspective employs a socio-cultural lens at micro- and meso-levels. It recognises engagement as holistic and life-wide (Barnett, 2011), offering students a sense of belonging in HE regardless of background, prior study, work and life experiences. The fourth perspective is socio-political and impacts all levels. Here students achieve success as active citizens (Zepke, 2017) who question ideological domination, develop critical consciousness, foster empowerment and act to change society (Brookfield & Holst, 2011).

Evidence: Student Engagement Is Key to Retention and Success

These four meaning perspectives about student engagement have been well theorised and researched (e.g. Buckley, 2014; Fredricks et al., 2004; Nelson et al., 2012; Trowler, 2010; Zepke, 2019). Such authors agree

that, when considered as a generic construct, student engagement is key to student retention and success. They concur that variables such as students' active learning behaviours, motivation, deep thinking, self and cultural awareness, emotional commitment, social background and support from families, institutions, and teachers are key contributors to retention and success. But they also differ by choosing which of the many variables are the most important. This division of opinion demonstrates engagement's complexity and helps to explain the emergence of the different meaning perspectives which also helped to generate an active empirical research programme. Evidence from four such projects is now used to provide support for why student engagement is key to retention and success: the NSSE in the US (Kuh et al., 2008; McCormick et al. 2013); Transition Pedagogy in the first-year in Australia (Kift, 2009, 2015; Kift & Nelson, 2005); What Works? in the UK (Thomas, 2012); and Active Citizenship in New Zealand (Zepke, 2017). Together, these projects cover all four meaning and practice perspectives and all levels of the HE ecosystem. But they use different methodologies and methods, have diverse theoretical orientations and highlight different features of the engagement construct.

The NSSE surveyed about 1.6 million undergraduates in 1500 HE institutions between 2000 and 2013 (McCormick et al., 2013). Its roots are found in diverse research projects conducted prior to 2000 with mainly a behavioural focus such as the importance of student and institutional effort. NSSE was refreshed in 2013 after a lengthy review. Changes made to the original survey offer a number of new items and reframe the original five benchmarks into ten engagement indicators nested in five themes: academic challenge; learning with peers; experience with faculty (teachers); campus environment; participation in high impact practices. Both versions understood engagement as student and institutional behaviours at the micro- and meso-levels of the ecosystem but also noted the supportive political forces operating at the macro-level. NSSE has been evaluated extensively for its effectiveness in improving student outcomes such as retention and student success. According to Kuh et al. (2008) correlational research shows that

> student engagement in educationally purposeful activities during the first year of college had a positive, statistically significant effect on persistence, even after controlling for background characteristics, other college experiences during the first college year, academic achievement, and financial aid. This is another piece of evidence consistent with the large body of research indicating that engagement matters to student success in college (p. 551).

Transition Pedagogy (TP) is an Australian whole-of-student, whole-of-institution approach to facilitate the retention and success of students from diverse cultural, social, geographical and class backgrounds during their first year of study (Kift, 2009, 2015; Kift & Nelson, 2005). TP developed alongside a large national quinquennial survey of the student experience conducted between 1995 and 2010 (James et al., 2010) as well as other research into student retention, success and engagement in their first year of study (e.g. Gale & Parker, 2011; Krause & Coates, 2008; Lizzio & Wilson, 2004). TP focused on the meso- and micro-levels of the education ecosystem but acknowledges the political will at the macro-level to improve the first-year experience. It views engagement largely from a psycho-social perspective where students from diverse backgrounds can succeed within a supportive environment. Its main point of difference from the other studies is its emphasis on the curriculum. TP concentrated on six curriculum principles to achieve student success: transition, diversity, design, engagement, assessment/evaluation and monitoring. From institutional case study research across Australia, Kift (2015) confirmed the curriculum as the organising device, the glue, that holds the First Year Experience (FYE) together. She found that engagement in the curriculum is key to creating the conditions for learning success. It is within the first-year curriculum that commencing students must be engaged and supported to realise success such as persistence, positive learning relationships, respect, trust, connectedness and feelings of belonging.

In the UK, the What works? Student Retention and Success research generated an evidence base for achieving high retention and completion rates through seven projects involving 22 higher education institutions over three years. Mixed methods such as student surveys, qualitative investigations and institutional data supported the findings, which

provide 'powerful evidence of the importance of student engagement and belonging to improve student retention and success' (L. Thomas, 2012, p. 9). It offered a point of difference to the other studies by highlighting the importance of students believing they belong in higher education and can work in partnership with teachers. Bourdieu's (1973) writings on cultural capital and habitus helped underpin this understanding. The What Works? projects arguably used a socio-cultural perspective to identify ways to advance student retention and success. The project team focused on the micro- and meso-levels of the education ecosystem, but was aware of, and referred to, macropolicy contexts (Thomas et al., 2017). Findings showed student engagement is key to retention and success by facilitating belonging through supportive peer relations, positive relationships with teachers and administrators, successful knowledge acquisition, self-confidence as successful learners and experiences that help advance their interests and future goals (Andrews et al., 2012).

In New Zealand, Zepke and colleagues conducted funded mixed-method studies with first-time enrolled students and their teachers into student retention, engagement and learning centred pedagogies. Operating from a socio-political perspective, the studies found that macro-, meso- and micro-levels of the education ecosystem were all key to understanding engagement's impact on retention, and success (e.g. Zepke, 2019; Zepke & Leach, 2007; Zepke et al., 2005). Many of their findings agreed with those in other studies. A conceptual organiser revealed these similarities: the importance of motivation to meet students' own goals; positive interactions with teachers and other students; institutional support such as a good library and internet access; and managing impacts on study from outside the academy (Leach & Zepke, 2011). A major point of difference was the inclusion of active citizenship into the conceptual organiser. This recognised that education's effects were life-wide and expected students to participate actively in their institution and their communities. This led to a critique of student engagement as uncritically aligned with neoliberalism particularly at the macro- and meso-levels of the education ecosystem (e.g. Zepke, 2017); a view shared by others (e.g. Buckley 2018; Carey 2013; Macfarlane & Tomlinson, 2017).

These case studies offer four similar yet also different readings of student engagement. They are similar in providing evidence for improving the student experience and success. They offer practical and generic ideas for what works to improve engagement in learning for students from diverse backgrounds. They agree that to be engaged, students must believe they belong in HE; that both student agency and supportive institutional structures are needed for students to succeed; that relationships matter; and that engaged students, their peers and teachers work as partners to succeed. However, the studies used different methodologies, meaning perspectives and focused attention on different levels of the education ecosystem. They offered distinct points of difference in how they synthesised and weighted their findings. For example, NSSE emphasised active learning, TP an engaging curriculum, 'What Works' belonging and partnership, the New Zealand studies active citizenship. Together, these studies provide strong evidence in support of the proposition that engagement is key to student retention and success. In the next section I critically reflect on why these and a selection of literally thousands of other engagement studies have been so influential in mapping pathways to increase retention and student success (Evans et al., 2015).

Why Engagement Is Key to Retention and Success: A Critical Reflection

Student engagement research provides convincing quantitative and qualitative evidence to show HE administrators and teachers its key role in achieving desired student outcomes (Kimbark et al., 2017). However, acceptability in HE is not only due to research evidence and its approval by stakeholders. The ascendancy of neoliberal ideology since the 1980s has forged student engagement into an HE powerhouse. Neoliberalism prioritises standardisation and control of quality, high stakes accountability, a curriculum of economically useful knowledge and corporate style management (Fuller & Stevenson, 2019). These priorities create an audit culture driven by accountability systems to assure the quality of students' educational experiences, particularly first-year students from diverse

backgrounds (Shah & Richardson, 2016). Engagement research supports the audit culture by providing evidence for one-size-fits-all understandings of quality using generic indicators of what works in any learning situation, nationally and internationally. This enables national and institutional policymakers to benchmark and compare, reward and punish institutional and individual performances. The four case studies and an avalanche of other engagement research alert governments to engagement's potential for benchmarking high-quality student experiences, student retention and success. This has cemented engagement's key role in the emerging quality discourse (Lubicz-Nawrocka & Bunting, 2019).

The term 'governmentality' further explains why people inside and outside the academy see engagement as key to retention and success. According to Foucault (2008) governmentality describes the process by which the conduct of conduct is shaped through accepted norms within a framework of set ideas, strategies, policies and technologies that shape people's views and behaviours. Norms about HE, moulded by neoliberal priorities and research evidence, fashioned policymakers, academics and students into champions of student engagement. This enabled governments across the globe to use norms about quality to promote student experiences that emphasise engagement, retention and success. Engagement researchers were aware that the goals of neoliberal governance and engagement research were symbiotic. Kuh and colleagues, for example, observed that the NSSE survey instrument supports neoliberal policy orientations and that neoliberal policy in turn supports the NSSE (Kuh et al., 2006). Indeed, the NSSE has become a key quality performance technology in the USA as well as in other countries. While Kuh and colleagues seemed to welcome the reciprocal relationship between neoliberalism and student engagement, other engagement researchers, while recognising the mutuality, are critical (e.g. Buckley, 2018; Carey, 2013; O'Leary & Wood, 2019; Zepke, 2017) as I will discuss later in the chapter.

Reflecting on the Interdependence of Research and Politics

The interdependence of engagement research and politics enables governments to standardise and control HE. They develop accountability frameworks consisting of generic quality indicators to measure and shape university behaviours and, in particular, the student experience. At the macro-level governments use a range of overlapping and at times confusing quality frameworks which are often similar across countries but not the same (Ball, 2019). In most countries, institutions must gather and publish student opinions from satisfaction surveys. Governments use them to assess and assure quality provision in institutions. Many countries, for example the UK, use centrally designed quality teaching frameworks to assess levels of excellence in teaching, understood as achieving successful outcomes such as retention (O'Leary & Wood, 2019). Other governments, for example New Zealand, use regular subject, departmental and institutional audits. Panels of internal and external stakeholders inspect documents and conduct interviews with students, academics and interested parties in the community to evaluate quality of provision. Published reports subsequently commend and critique performance. Some, like Australia, reward with performance-based funding. Yet approaches to measuring and publicising quality can differ. For example, Australia introduced performance-based funding in 2004; the UK did not (Shah & Richardson, 2016). But as Lubicz-Nawrocka and Bunting (2019) observed, most macro-level quality frameworks recognise student engagement as crucial to assuring quality in the student experience.

At the meso-level institutions are expected to implement ideas, systems and policies required by governments at the macro-level. The interdependence of neoliberalism and research is clear. For example, quality performance measures of the student experience used at the macro-level are widely used to publicise institutional performance to attract students, particularly those from diverse backgrounds who are prone to depart early. Although specific accountability measures can differ, student surveys, quality audits and league tables are often employed. Many of the findings in the four case studies are present in quality frameworks in their

own and other countries. In Australia, for example, Shah and Richardson (2016) examined the strategic plans of 33 Australian universities about the importance placed on the student experience. They found that 27 (or 81%) of the universities highlighted the student experience as outlined in TP in their own plans. Five repeating strategic priorities addressed the quality of the student experience; quality learning experiences; students feeling supported and included; rankings and performance assessment, and the teaching-research nexus. The quality of student engagement, retention and achievement in the first year featured consistently. Many institutions recognised the value of university-wide student engagement plans that offered students high-impact learning experiences resulting in retention and successful graduate outcomes. While not directly or causally connected, the affinity between institutional strategies and the four case studies is clear.

Examples of such affinities abound. TP's curriculum focuses on engagement, its just-in-time, just-for-me support, and its encouragement of a critical sense of academic and social belonging often feature in institutional strategies. The notion of 'belonging' found in the 'What Works' and TP projects is similarly present in many policy frameworks. According to K. Thomas (2019), 'belonging' can be equated with student engagement, the quality indicator of choice in many institutional quality frameworks around the world. Results from the NSSE in the USA have influenced world-wide pursuits of institutional quality. In researching the practices of 20 successful higher education institutions, Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh et al. (2005) found that NSSE results provided high quality student experiences, featured student engagement and success, foregrounded learning, established high expectations among students, aimed for continuous improvement, invested in support services, asserted the importance of diversity and difference and prepared students for learning in higher education. In New Zealand, Zepke and colleagues (e.g. Leach & Zepke, 2011) found that institutional quality processes were vital promoters of student engagement, retention and success. They suggested that student success was more likely where institutional systems focus on high expectations, invest in a variety of support services, value diversity, and seek continuous improvement.

The interdependence between engagement research and neoliberal priorities is less obvious at the micro-level. At this level teachers probably think more about their students' learning needs than their accountability to institutional or national quality systems. Nevertheless, we work in an accountability-driven era and cannot escape the demands from the macro- and meso-levels. Assessment, for example, has become a key indicator in quality teaching accountability frameworks. Australia and the UK have implemented similar but not the same quality frameworks measuring teaching. Australia's Higher Education Standards Framework and England's Teaching Excellence Framework use metrics from student surveys about, for example, course design, course structure, assessment and relationships with and engagement of students (Gardner, 2018; O'Leary & Wood, 2019). The USA and New Zealand don't have compulsory national quality teaching frameworks. In the USA, divided federal and state responsibilities inhibit such frameworks. However, both the Spelling Commission (2006) and sundry researchers (e.g. Deeming & Figlio, 2016) recommended that existing surveys such as NSSE were suitable substitutes. New Zealand has long debated the introduction of a teaching quality framework without results (Suddaby, 2019). However, a voluntary teacher award system operates, and periodic audits include items such as the student experience, engagement and academic performance (Universities New Zealand, 2018).

Enriching Engagement Practices at the Micro-Level

Using the case studies and other engagement research I now discuss three practices common in the case studies and wider literature that enrich student engagement and promote retention and success at the micro-level of the HE ecological system. The case studies suggest that positive student relationships with teachers, peers and the curriculum are essential for student engagement, retention and success. Student self-belief that they belong in HE underpins such relationships and engagement. Student agency and collaboration also contribute to self-belief and feelings of belonging. Such findings are echoed and expanded in 'Appreciative Inquiry' (AI), a strengths-based approach to engaging learning (Bushe,

2013). AI promotes students' belief that they bring cultural, educational and personal strengths to their learning. Bushe identified five practices that strengthen self-belief, relationships, student engagement and success. The first holds that self-belief is nurtured when students co-construct knowledge in partnership with teachers, peers and significant others. The second proposes that when students learn to reflect on their own experiences, they increase their understanding of how they learn and engage. The third holds that public stories about their successes increase students' self-belief and engagement. The fourth suggests that when teachers and significant others encourage students to develop and follow positive future visions and goals, they assist engagement. The final practice emphasises constructive and timely feedback. In short, AI suggests that when students themselves, teachers and significant others appreciate their own and others' strengths, greater engagement in learning, retention and success follow.

The case studies also show that learning partnerships between students, their teachers and their peers offer direct pathways to engagement and success. Partnership goes beyond students being consulted about, and participating in, learning activities with teachers. It involves collaboration, joint decision-making and shared ownership of what happens in the classroom (Kift, 2015; Snelling et al., 2019; Thomas, 2012). Research into teaching–learning partnerships thrives in many parts of the world. Healey et al. (2014) found that partnership is positively linked with learning gain and transformation. They suggest four possibly interlinked partnership formats: (i) planning and conducting learning, teaching and assessment; (ii) curriculum design and course feedback; (iii) students advising teachers (and institutions) about suitable pedagogic practices; and (iv) participating in collaborative subject-based research and inquiry. Examples of successful teacher-student partnerships abound. Bryson (2016), along with teacher and student colleagues, facilitates RAISE (Advancing and Inspiring Student Engagement). RAISE, hosted in the UK, is an international network promoting partnerships for engagement. Buckley (2018) argues that such partnerships support student agency, engagement, success and democracy. But Zepke (2019) cautions that student engagement, like all higher education, works within political

constraints and the application of partnership pedagogy is only as democratic as the neoliberal state and its institutions allow.

TP (e.g. Kift, 2015) explicitly focuses on six curriculum principles that enable student success. While the other case studies do not foreground curriculum principles in the same way, they do prioritise curriculum content. For example, NSSE emphasises academic challenge (McCormick et al., 2013). L. Thomas (2012) foregrounds successful knowledge acquisition; Zepke (2017) highlights the engaging power of discipline knowledge because students enrol in courses to gain knowledge and skills that achieve life goals. Achieving these requires teaching that can satisfy simultaneously a tacit demand for content, for understanding content, for relevance and application of that content. Finding evidence for ways to engage students deeply with discipline knowledge in large classes has become a major focus for researchers (e.g. Kinsella et al., 2017; Walkington, 2015). Often found to be engaging is the 'flipped classroom'. Planned content is made available before formal lectures so that they are freed up for questions, discussion and further investigation. Case studies exploring complex knowledge using study questions are often used. Increasingly teachers and students share the production of knowledge as collaborative outputs that are published in books, journals and research reports (e.g. Nygaard et al., 2013; Snelling et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2012). The use of technology such as clickers, smartphones and tablets are similarly found to engage students in large classes with course content.

Limits of Engagement: A Critique

Yes, the evidence is strong that student engagement is key to retention and success. However, its influence has limits and engagement as presented in much of the literature is not beyond criticism (McMahon & Portelli, 2012). They and others (e.g. Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Tight, 2019; Zepke, 2017) suggest that the idea of engagement occurring primarily in specific educational interfaces such as classrooms limits its key role as enabler of student retention and success. For example, some researchers (e.g. Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Kinsella et al., 2017) recognise

that student background affects engagement and that classroom learning has life-wide consequences. But for them engagement happens in the interface. This limits its ability to support retention and success. Outside factors such as money worries, dependants' needs, emotional difficulties, health problems and part-time employment influence engagement every moment a student is in the classroom. Hence student engagement, retention and success are hindered by personal, community and political circumstances unrelated to classroom experiences. While the four case studies don't exclude outside influences on engagement, they position the classroom as central to engagement and success. They largely see belonging and co-production (e.g. L. Thomas, 2012), an engaging curriculum (e.g. Kift, 2015); purposeful activity (e.g. Kuh et al., 2006) as located in classrooms and institutions. However, the New Zealand case study found that retention and engagement are influenced strongly by experiences outside the classroom. 'Too much going on in my life' was the top reason for students considering leaving early (Zepke et al., 2005).

Another factor diminishing the effect of student engagement is the influence of neoliberal policies and practices on engagement. Kuh et al. (2006) defined student engagement as a combination of student effort (agency) and institutional support (structure). Neoliberalism has tilted the balance towards structure (Kahn, 2014). In their critique of neoliberalism's impact on engagement, Macfarlane and Tomlinson (2017) identified six negative influences: performativity, marketing, infantilisation, surveillance, gamification and opposition. All, but particularly performativity and surveillance, are structural and lead to a narrow and compliant understanding of engagement managed at the meso- and macro-levels of the HE system (McMahon & Portelli, 2012). Fixed and generic engagement frameworks enable compliant students to persist, improve achievement, graduation and employment. But this diminishes their engagement by reducing learning and teaching to a technical operation leading to specified outcomes that inhibit critical learning. Teaching is packed into atomised policy frameworks based on surveys such as NSSE. According to Howie and Bagnall (2013), the enthusiasm for such frameworks suggests that their purpose is to create a normative paradigm that confirms existing ideas about student engagement, retention and success and inhibits the emergence of divergent ones.

Both critiques seem credible and persuasive. They enrich and help develop our understanding and practice of engagement. But they don't diminish student engagement's key role in retention and success. To succeed, students must engage with learning regardless of whether it is framed as occurring in a classroom or as a life-wide experience; whether it embraces neoliberalism or opposes it. For example, developing student relationships with learning, fostering students as partners in the curriculum and valuing critique and active citizenship add life-wide and lifelong dimensions to engagement that can include or exclude neoliberal influence (e.g. Bovill, 2017; Buckley, 2018; Peters & Mathias, 2018; Zepke, 2017).

Conclusion

The four case studies chosen to assess the evidence support the proposition that student engagement is key to retention and success. Many of the other engagement and retention studies consulted for this chapter to check case study findings are similarly supportive. Critiques of engagement – its interdependence with neoliberalism; its confinement to classrooms; and the lack of an agreed definition, for example – do not diminish its key role in student retention and success, whether these are understood as institutional quality performance or progress to achieving personal goals. Moreover, this finding also is common sense as it is difficult to imagine students succeeding without being engaged with their learning. However, agreeing that retention and success require student engagement does not address or resolve all the questions about this complex construct. Many questions remain. Should the influence of neoliberal ideology in learning and teaching be challenged more directly? Is there a case for constructing an alternative theoretical foundation such as critical theory? Instead of confining engagement ever more closely to the classroom, should students' life-wide and lifelong learning be a stronger influence on how engagement is understood? Of most interest to me is whether student engagement is just an appealing metaphor for effective learning and teaching and, if this is so, how will it evolve from here? This question is particularly relevant now when COVID-19 is forcing major

changes in social, political, and educational structures and cultures (Watermeyer et al., 2021). Change could include the way learning and teaching approaches to student engagement, retention, and success are understood in a post-COVID-19 world.

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