Student Engagement: A Multiple Layer Phenomenon

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Abstract Universities are seeking to actively and strategically manage student engagement through providing opportunities for students to interact and engage with the institution on a range of levels and in different ways. However, this increasingly complex and multi-layered nature of student engagement within a tertiary education environment is not well understood. Through qualitative focus groups and a series of interviews with undergraduate and postgraduate students, this study explores and articulates the cognitive, emotional, behavioural and social dimensions of engagement that depict the nature of student engagement. This is one of the first studies that considers social engagement as a dimension of the broader engagement construct and provides an illustration of social engagement at different levels within a tertiary education setting. Further, we demonstrate that engagement occurs with three key focal objects (or levels) embedded within the university structure; the lecturer, course and the institution itself. Hence, this paper contributes to the literature by providing a multi-layered consideration of student engagement and demonstrating the nested nature of engagement across the broad service system (the university), the narrow service system (the course), and the individual dyadic level of engagement (the student-lecturer interaction). These findings could be further considered and empirically tested in other engagement contexts (e.g. employee engagement, customer engagement).

Keywords Student engagement · Social engagement · Tertiary education · Service system · Students

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Introduction

With Professor Pascale Quester as Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic), the University of Adelaide developed and implemented a $41.8 million student learning hub that brought together informal learning and social spaces, university facilities, and retail services spaces for student use on campus. This flexible space was designed and co-created with students, in response to trends that were seeing students retreat off campus as soon as formal classes had finished (Quester et al. 2014). Given the demand-driven nature of the education sector in Australia and the University's strategic focus on becoming more student-centric (Quester et al. 2014), there was a recognised need to improve student engagement both among the student body and between students and the university. This large-scale investment demonstrated a serious commitment to making a difference in student engagement at the University of Adelaide.

Student engagement has become an increasingly important notion for educators because of its demonstrated impact on student's educational outcomes (Bravo et al. 2014) as well as retention and completion rates at tertiary institutions (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2001; Quaye and Harper 2014). Current educational thinking recognises that students are not passive recipients of their education, but rather are co-creators of their learning experience (Taylor et al. 2011). However, in today's environment, large class sizes, time poor students (Stafford 2011), access to technology, and the role that technology plays in people's lives (Northey et al. 2015) have changed the way both students and institutions seek to engage with each other. Universities are implementing initiatives such as flipped classroom, online courses, and enhanced facilities such as those described in the opening scenario, but the impact on student engagement is not fully understood (Taylor et al. 2011). A greater understanding of how student's engage with tertiary institutions is required to enable universities to deploy resources, organise curriculum, and provide support services to effectively facilitate student engagement (Kuh et al. 2011).

Within contemporary student engagement literature there is general consensus that engagement manifests as cognitive, affective and behavioural dimensions (Bryson and Hand 2007). There is also limited recognition that engagement occurs at the personal, situational and institutional level (London et al. 2009). However, extant studies typically consider engagement at one of these levels and there are few studies that consider engagement with multiple touch-points or at multiple embedded levels within the institution. While it is recognised that students interact with lecturers, course materials, other students, and university staff and facilities to co-create learning outcomes (Harrison 2013), there is a lack of understanding of how engagement with each of these focal objects combine within an institutional paradigm. This research will investigate the multiple focal objects with which students engage within a tertiary institutional environment and hence will further explicate the holistic perspective of student engagement in this setting.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the complex and multi-layered nature of student engagement within a tertiary education environment. Firstly, through

qualitative focus groups and a series of interviews with undergraduate and post-graduate students, we identify the presence of social engagement as a dimension of student engagement rarely discussed in educational literature. Further, we demonstrate that engagement occurs with three key focal objects that are embedded within each other (i.e. the lecturer, course and institution). Hence, this paper contributes to the literature by providing a multi-layered consideration of student engagement. It demonstrates nested engagement with the broad service system (the university), the narrow service system (the course), and the individual dyadic level of engagement (the lecturer), which can be considered for other engagement settings (e.g. customer engagement). Further, we provide examples of the cognitive, emotional, behavioural and social engagement that occurs at each of these levels of engagement. Given these findings, we argue for the need for future research to adopt and further investigate this multi-layered approach to engagement.

The remainder of this chapter is organised as follows. The next section provides a brief discussion of the dimensions and levels of student engagement in higher education. An explanation of the research method follows, which leads to a discussion of the results. The paper concludes with theoretical and educational implications as well as an outline of future research directions.

Student Engagement

While the terms 'student engagement' and 'institutional engagement' have been previously coined in the literature (e.g. London et al. 2007), there is a lack of consensus regarding the concepts' definition and scope with confusion surrounding the focal engagement subject and object of interest. While some authors propose the student as the focal engagement subject, and a particular task, course of study, or lecturer as the focal engagement object (London et al. 2009), others cite the institution as the focal engagement subject and the broader community as the focal engagement object (e.g. Keener 1999). In our study, consistent with London et al. (2009), the student is viewed as the focal engagement subject and this study seeks to further understand details regarding the focal object with which students engage through their learning experiences.

In general, student engagement requires an intrinsic motivation from students to invest effort into interactions related to their studies and/or the educational institution (Kuh 2003). It reflects the students' effort and absorption in initiating and sustaining learning activities (Furrer and Skinner 2003). It is argued that the effects of student engagement are enduring, and the broader psychological connection and sense of belonging toward their institution may endure for a period of time after their completion of their university courses and degrees (London et al. 2009). For the purposes of this study, we define student engagement as:

> A student's willingness to invest their own cognitive, emotional and behavioural effort to interact with resources related to their education experience.

Recent scholarly discussion has seen student engagement manifest as three dimensions; cognitive engagement, affective engagement and behavioural engagement (Lam et al. 2014). *Cognitive engagement* reflects a student's level of concentration and mental focus given to their education experience (Northey et al. 2015; Scott and Craig-Lees 2010). Indicators of cognitive engagement could include activities that reflect the students' cognitive strategies and approaches to learning, such as self-regulated learning (Lam et al. 2014). *Affective engagement* reveals the level of positive emotion toward a focal engagement object (Northey et al. 2015) and hence how students feel about their education experience. The notion of affective engagement often is strongly associated with aspects such as a sense of belonging, identification with the institution, and commitment (London et al. 2007; Lam et al. 2014). It reflects the students' attitudes toward learning (Skinner and Belmont 1993) and the institution they attend (Voelkl 1997). *Behavioural engagement* focuses more on interactions for task achievement and has historically included measures of class participation, attendance, participation in extra-curricular activities, and task completion (Finn et al. 1995; London et al. 2007; Lam et al. 2014). For the purpose of this study, behavioural engagement is considered a student's willingness to spend energy and time on their educational experience.

While many studies recognise the multi-dimensional nature of student engagement, very few recognise that students may engage with multiple touch-points within a tertiary institution. Most studies will focus on only one of these focal levels of engagement. As an exception, London et al. (2009) recognise that there are layers of engagement, at the personal, situational and institutional level. Several studies recognise the importance of the student-teacher interactions for facilitating student engagement (e.g. Skinner and Belmont 1993; Klem and Connell 2004). Recently, Pianta et al. (2012) posit that these personal interactions are so critical to student engagement that teachers need better knowledge and training of how to facilitate engagement and should receive personalised feedback about their interactive behaviours. Taylor et al. (2011) concentrated on engagement at the course-level and examined the motivations behind course-level engagement. While it is argued that few research studies have examined course-level engagement (Taylor et al. 2011), there are several studies which examine the effects of educational approaches (e.g. team-based learning; Chad 2012) and technological tools (e.g. asynchronous learning through Facebook; Northey et al. 2015) on student engagement, which are set in course-based situational settings. It is reasonable to assert that overall student engagement with the total educational experience is at least a partial function of student engagement at the component level (e.g. individual classes) (Taylor et al. 2011).

Baron and Corbin (2012) argue that the student experience as a whole is the key to engagement and, thus, a 'whole-of-university' approach is necessary to re-engage students. A focussed approach that aligns the university mission and engagement initiatives and reflects the campus environment and student cohort is required (Harper and Quaye 2009; Baron and Corbin 2012). To achieve this, a greater understanding of the overall learning experience from the perspective of the student is necessary. This will facilitate a better fit between the resources of the student and

the resources of the University and enable a clear understanding of the meaning of engagement in the higher education sector to emerge.

In line with the theoretical grounding of service-dominant logic (Vargo and Lusch 2008), engaged students are interactive and co-create their learning experiences within the university (Brodie et al. 2011). As a co-creator of the learning experience, students integrate resources though interactions with other students, lecturers, course materials and university services for the purpose of obtaining a valued outcome (Díaz-Méndez and Gummesson 2012). Without the students' interaction in the experience, no value is derived from the resources of the lecturer, course-related resources, or other resources deployed by the university (Diaz-Méndez and Gummesson 2012; Vargo and Lusch 2008). Hence, an understanding of where and how students engage with the resources of the university is important for not only facilitating engagement, but also for driving value outcomes for students and the university. This perspective does not relinquish authority or control to students (e.g. McCulloch 2009), but rather identifies students as active contributors (rather than passive consumers) that significantly shape their education experiences and value perceptions associated with the usage of university resources. However, given the increasingly limited resources available to universities, being able to utilise them effectively is critically important. Indeed, universities can benefit from embracing a co-creation perspective by becoming the preferred education institution through better student-centered and meaningful education experiences. Hence, further research is required to understand how students engage with the university, and at what level is the focal object of engagement (i.e. lecturer, course, or university).

Research Method

This study was conducted in a large Australian University and respondents were drawn from all year levels of undergraduate and postgraduate students, across a cross-section of predominantly business departments, including accounting, design, entrepreneurship, marketing, and logistics. As the main objective of this study was to investigate the nature and interrelationship of student engagement, an exploratory, qualitative approach was adopted to enable rich insights and begin to understand the complexities and nuances of this domain. Thereby semi-structured interviews and focus groups were pursued (Smith 1995), enabling data triangulation (Coffey and Atkinson 1999). Specifically, we undertook four focus groups (between 6 and 10 participants each) and eleven subsequent in-depth interviews with students. We selected students who were involved in university-related activities beyond the classroom (e.g. student club memberships and associations) and/or who had parallel work-placement activities. These students could draw on a greater variety of university-related interactions and thus offer thick descriptions of their experiences. The sample size for this research was data-driven and data collection discontinued when saturation was reached; that is, where few new insights were

gleaned from additional data (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Each interview ranged from 60–90 min in duration. The data were audio-recorded (Morgan and Spanish 1984) and transcribed by the researcher (Boland 1995), generating a total of over 361 pages of single spaced text. NVIVO 9 was utilised to support the data coding and analysis. Based on the Gioia et al. (2013) approach, we began with identifying and noting first-order incidents, which in this case represent different manifestations of engagement. These incidents were then clustered and aggregated to create second-order themes. The themes included for example different dimensions of engagement and engagement reference objects. In a final step we then investigated the links between these themes to better understand the potential interdependent nature of different levels of student engagement.

Results

The following results will provide overall insights into students' reference points with regards to their university-related engagement. That is, the qualitative study shows that engagement manifests in different forms (e.g. cognitive, emotional and behavioural) and across different levels of touchpoints and experiences (e.g. that are associated with a lecturer or course). These individual engagement levels likely contribute to overall engagement perceptions. While we show illustrative quotes in text with de-identified and hypothetical student names to support the emerging theorising, we further present additional quotes to enrich the empirical data upon which our findings rest.

An overarching theme to emerge from the student interviews was a general consensus that throughout their encounters at the university, students engaged with the university, the university community, and their learning experience. Students widely acknowledged their own personal involvement and interaction within the service system and the learning process and didn't consider themselves as passive recipients of a service delivery process.

> We get more of an opportunity to share our experiences with other students or maybe inform them about things that they aren't aware of and vice versa. We can become informed about things that we might not necessarily be aware of and just kind of knowledge share. I'd really love an approach to learning that is similar to like the experience of working at Google, or something like that, where there's like really open environment, discussion is encouraged because it's kind of built into the physical structure of the Google premise, like there's areas for people to congregate and meet. (Greg, male)

Students make use of a variety of resources that have the potential to become important engagement objects. Thereby the nature of engagement was routinely seen to be interactive and required an ongoing, active involvement from both parties. Without this reciprocated interaction, the level of engagement would drop off or would cease all together.

> If you make an effort but you don't get that same response back, you just don't care, you just don't bother (Lea, female)

Social Engagement Dimension

The thematic coding of our data to understand the concept of engagement in an educational context illustrated a dimension of engagement not often depicted or characterised in literature on student engagement. We found strong evidence of the students' willingness to interact with lecturers and other students on a personal level and through social exchanges for a stronger sense of engagement with the university at different levels. Consequently, we depict the notion of social engagement, which complements the dimensions of cognitive, emotional and behavioural engagement in the broader concept of student engagement. We define this social engagement dimension as:

> A student's willingness to invest effort in social interactions and personal exchanges with the resources of other actors (e.g. lecturers, peers) in relation to their education experience.

Although the notion of social engagement is not prevalent in the student engagement literature, the importance of social networks and teamwork is well recognised (Chad 2012). However, this literature focuses predominantly on the teamwork processes required to enhance learning performance (e.g. Bravo et al. 2014), and does not consider the social nature of the peer-to-peer (or peer-to-lecturer) engagement and its existence across different levels of engagement. While marketing literature has cursorily considered social engagement (e.g. Calder et al. 2009; Vivek et al. 2012), there has not yet been any substantive recognition of the need to engage students on a social level.

Many respondents articulated that having a personal connection and social interaction with the lecturer, not only ensured they felt more engaged at an individual level, but it also enhanced their learning experience.

> I think it's about connecting with somebody on a social basis as opposed to a professional basis, you know like anybody can really go in there and talk about accounting and it's all very professional… It's just that, you don't get the same connection from just talking about course work, it is a very kind of teacher-student relationship when it's just course work, whereas if you bring social aspects in you can still have the professional teacher/student relationship but there's something extra that just comes into it. (Helga, female)

In addition, the sense of engagement that arises from social interactions among student peers builds a community and network of support throughout the learning experience.

> If you have that similar experience that other people are going through, you can kind of help them through it or they can help you through it, you know, there's an understanding of where you currently are and where you're going to. And I suppose it's good if your peers are all experiencing the same thing and it's all something that you're equally passionate about, then you're going to get more out of the experience. (Greg, male)

This type of social comfort and support may arise naturally or spontaneously through social interaction and bonding, but it might also be professionally facilitated by the university. For example, students might be part of mentoring or advisory networks and thereby combine social support with educational support.

This semester I think was definitely a highlight. Just starting SLAMS [student learning advisory mentors] and working with other students, mentoring in the subject that I did well in and that I actually really enjoyed; it's rewarding to know that you're helping students get through a time where they're struggling and because I've been there I know exactly what they're going through. (Lisa, female)

Given that the cognitive, emotional and behavioural dimensions are well identified and discussed in the literature, they will not be specifically explicated again here. The focus in the next sections will focus on the three focal institutional sub-objects that were uncovered through the interviews and subsequent analysis. That is, it was identified that students discriminate between and engage primarily with the lecturer, the course and the aggregate level of the institution (university). The initial engagement with the lecturer is a personal, dyadic relationship, whereas engagement at the course and university level represents engagement with a service system and is more multi-faceted. The nature of engagement with each focal object (lecturer, course and university) will be discussed in turn, followed by a discussion of the interaction between the levels of engagement. The cognitive, emotional, behavioural and social dimensions that manifest at each of those levels are further illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1 Illustrative quotes—student engagement levels and dimensions

	Cognitive engagement	Affective engagement	Behavioural engagement	Social engagement
Individual dyadic (lecturer)	"The teachers and the lecturers are there as resources but students have to do their own work and they have to apply themselves and motivate themselves." (Helga, female)	"I know I can't expect every teacher to take the time to meet with the student, but it made me feel really comfortable to be in their class knowing that they actually know who I am and that I'm not just you know someone who's just paying to listen to them, so that's also something that made me feel quite good." (Lisa, female)	"He'll (the lecturer) ask us a few questions and the whole lecture theatre is silent. The whole tutorial is silent. He goes 'OK well I'm not moving on until you answer my question. He sits there for five minutes and that is fair enough because nobody is answering the question." (Student, focus group 1)	"I can feel that the lecturer/tutor is actually trying to teach us something. And because they are telling us a little bit about their personal selves, basically then that relationship goes from a teacher/student perspective, to more acquaintances, so you sort of get like a more personal type level. And that … then from that you can then be free to open up, to generate discussions, ask questions" (Harry, male)

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

	Cognitive engagement	Affective engagement	Behavioural engagement	Social engagement
Narrow service system (course)	"I think you have to be interested about it, the subject and if you're not interested in it, you make it interesting somehow. […] like you're actually looking forward to coming home and working on this project. It's in your head constantly, you're constantly thinking about '*How can I do this*', '*How can I change it*', it become an obsession almost." (Thomas, male)	"I will go to a lecture that engages me, like even though I might not know the answer but I still want to participate, I love to have the feeling. And if University A can have that, I think it's good enough." (Lars, male)	"The best subject that I've got the most out of has been this Work Integrated Learning subject, where this company came to us and said, here's my problem, help me out. Solve it. For me that's the subject that I've done the best in because it's like this is my project, this is about me, and me showing my skills" (Student, focus group 1)	"…those friendship circles. I couldn't see myself being where I am today having done it on my own. As I said University A has given that… in the first trimester you are forced to work in groups, so you're having an interaction with five people at one time and you can say okay I get along with this person, this person not so much…. subsequently when you have to work on your own and have to build your own team, that's where it really comes into play. (Ralf, male)
Larger service system (University)	"It would be the applied learning and personal growth, I think is what University A stands for. I think, again the independent kind of growing as a professional growing as an individual and being ready for whatever career you set out to do, I think that's what	"I am very happy to be a University A student. I'm very proud to call myself that because of the positive experiences I've had through the mentoring programs that I've had, through being employed by University A, through my interactions with my teachers. So I	"I don't actually feel like I've really taken advantage of what the university offers you until this last semester of university when I became a mentor […] that wakened me up to kind of the opportunities within the university." (Lisa, female)	"I've recognised that interacting with people at the university is really important too and I've had a lot of fun in that, like doing side projects for the university or just having lunch with some people on campus instead of just studying alone". (Helga, female)

Table 1 (continued)

	Cognitive engagement	Affective engagement	Behavioural engagement	Social engagement
	University A represents." (Helga, female)	think, you know, overall I'm very proud to be a University A student." (Harry, male)		

Individual Engagement (Lecturer)

A common focal object of engagement identified by students was the personal engagement they had with the lecturer. Students recognised the interaction between themselves and the lecturer both in relation to the course content and their learning experience, as well as on a personal level. Students often spoke of how their confidence to interact and engage with both the learning materials and other students emerged from the trust and confidence built through engaging with the lecturer.

> And so with the teachers, if they can sort of explain the question to you with personal examples, then you can see how it applies, I can see how it relates to me. Then you can see, okay, I really want to work it out because now I understand this actually and want to find out the solution. So … that's how you basically engage and interact with the students. (Harry, male)

The lecturer was seen as a pivotal engagement point. When engagement between the student and the lecturer is minimal or non-existent, it often has an impact on the broader engagement. Our findings suggest that the interaction with the lecturer has the potential to shape the holistic education experience and thereby engagement levels with the university overall. Although specific resources can act as reference points (or objects) of engagement, it is likely that these different resources and engagement levels mutually influence each other. The following quote highlights how one specific resource or experience element can significantly affect other experience elements, even to their perceived detriment.

> And I just felt kind of … ripped off by the teaching staff and the way that the course was done, because you know, if the teacher gets things wrong, then what sort of hope do we have? (Harry, male)

It should be noted that the above illustration depicts a low degree of engagement, or even negative engagement with the lecturer. Engagement has been recognised to vary in degrees of intensity in consumer contexts (Vivek et al. 2012; Bryson and Hand 2007), and also in its positive or negative valence (Hollebeek and Chen 2014). However, an understanding of the impact of the degree of intensity and valence in engagement has rarely been discussed in an educational context. Although this is beyond the scope of discussion in this study, our findings reflect this variation in engagement.

Engagement with the Narrow Service System (Course)

The classroom environment is often considered the primary vehicle for student engagement from an educational perspective (e.g. Taylor et al. 2011). We define this classroom and course experience as the narrow service system with a specific educational purpose (i.e. reflective of the content of the class). All enrolled students, lecturers and educational materials and activities designed for the class reflect this narrow service system. Consistent with this, students recognised the interaction and engagement at the course level was an essential part of their engagement in the learning experience. Within the narrow service system of the course undertaken by the student, engagement occurs as evidenced in the following quotes:

> I love the class. Maybe, I was really lucky, because I heard quite a number of horror stories about [the course]. … I was lucky in the sense that it wasn't just my group mates that were really awesome, it was everyone in the class, and everyone was participative … Best tutorial class in my opinion, because it really gets the students to engage and couple of games, and it was fun (Lars, male)

This quote also highlights again the participatory and contributory role that students play in shaping their own education experiences and outcomes. Consistent with a service-dominant logic perspective (Vargo and Lusch 2008), classroom interaction as manifestations of co-created value directly shape engagement levels. In this case, all four elements of cognitive engagement (the game challenge), emotional engagement (the fun part), social engagement (the personal exchanges), and behavioural engagement (everyone participated) surfaced. Although students that were engaged with a course routinely reported higher levels of motivation and participation, regular participation itself was not akin to being engaged per se in the course. This supports the notion in the literature that engagement is beyond a behavioural concept and requires an accompanying psychological connection to the focal object, as is highlighted in the following example with low engagement intensity.

> Well with the subject you just want to get something done, you know, like you do the research, you reference, you start writing, but there's not always a real passion for what you're completing, you know. Like sometimes it's like okay, it's part of the coursework, it's a requirement, but it's not necessarily something that I would do on my own accord. (Greg, male)

Engagement with the Broad Service System (University)

Engagement at the institutional level is not only an aggregate of engagement with the multiple touch-points within it, but manifests as a direct engagement between the student and the institution itself. Akin to the notion of engagement, students spoke about their participation in activities at an institutional level and the emotional bond with the institution that arose from that interaction.

> You don't want to just feel like a number, you want to feel like you really are part of the University and … I haven't felt like that until my last semester, where I've actually started to get involved with the University and to receive some recognition for that. (Lisa, female)

Students also expected that the institution, at an aggregate level, would seek to engage with them as an individual reflective of the interactive aspect of engagement.

> They again see students as individuals who are achieving things as opposed to just a number to attend class. It kind of … it seemed like University A had a real pride in their students and was really motivated to get them noticed by you know if not industry then other contacts, I think, so the recognition I think was really important for me. (Helga, female)

A key theme identified at all levels of engagement, but most prevalent at the institutional level, was the recognition of the resources that were provided with which the student could interact to achieve their learning outcomes. Students often spoke about the institutional facilities and support services which assisted their endeavours to engage.

> I think University A has to know that, has to know that some students don't have the initiative to start off with… and through university, you know, student skills and initiatives should slowly be built up […] I think initiative stems from being comfortable in your own environment, and if you can … make it more comfortable for students, having those resources, having say, you know, counselling services where students can go … and classrooms where students feel comfortable in, then they'll start to engage (Harry, male)I think the thing that changed for me was at the Village it was very easy to do work because there were so many silent zones and all this kind of stuff,… I don't know, I still don't use the computer labs, but I don't know it's just … it feels like a bit more of a … like a learning supporting environment. And nothing changed except my attitude I suppose towards Uni. (Nerea, female)

Consistent with the resource-centeredness of service-dominant logic, students clearly leveraged resources to create better university experiences. The resources provided by the university create opportunities for learning experiences and value perceptions to emerge. Through these resources and subsequent experiences, engagement levels are both enacted and impacted.

Interdependence of the Engagement Layers

Preliminary evidence suggests that the layers of engagement are interdependent, with engagement at the personal level and within the narrow service system (the course) building to a greater sense of institutional level engagement. Thereby some resources or reference objects can be more important than others, but ultimately all have the potential to contribute to overall engagement. Indeed, due to the embedded nature of the focal objects (i.e. the lecturer is employed by and part of the institution), engagement at one level will partially build engagement at the broader

level. This can be achieved without direct referral to the broader engagement level, as described below.

> I think when you had a good tutor or a good lecturer that really made a connection… When you got a personal relationship with one of those, either the tutor or the lecturer, by extension you felt a bit more a part of University A. (Helga, female)

Similarly, students speak of emotional engaging with the course, and as a consequence slowly building this into a greater sense of engagement across the institution.

> University's not just for the teaching, it's also for fun and enjoyment …., slowly that translates then into the classroom, into your learning experiences and then you slowly get a lot more out of Uni because you want to be there as well. (Harry, male)

In the following example, the student speaks to how increased engagement with the lecturer led to enhanced engagement with the broader institution. However, in this instance the connection between the engagement layers was more explicit, with the lecturer directing the student as to how he could engage at the broader service system level.

> I could actually speak to my lecturers and tutors outside of class that I didn't realise that you could do in the first year, so I think the fact that I could get more out of them kind of made me feel a little bit more comfortable at university because I was getting a bit more than these three or four years … those three or four hours a week that you would normally get. And then, they pointed me in the direction to this function and then to that… I didn't know these things were an option. (Helga, female)

These quotes are indicative of the interdependent nature of the engagement layers identified in our thematic analysis. The embedded nature of the lecturer and course within the institutional service system gives rise to the interdependence of the engagement objects. However, there was also evidence of clear referral and transference between and among the layers of engagement. The interplay between the engagement foci in this setting requires further exploration.

Table 1 provides further illustrative respondent quotes reflecting the levels of engagement within the institution identified from our analysis. This table also considers the cognitive, emotional and behavioural dimensions reflected within each levels of engagement, consistent with the multi-dimensional nature of engagement in the marketing and educational literature.

Theoretical and Educational Implications

Theoretical Implications

Our findings build on and advance conceptual engagement understandings recognised in extant literature. The student respondents identified several focal objects within an educational context with which they engage including the lecturer,

aspects of the course, and the broader institutional, or university, level. We thus shed significant insights on engagement as a multi-level phenomenon that varies in depth and breadth across focal objects. Our data demonstrates that single-level considerations might provide theoretical frameworks that are too simplistic in terms of their potential to account for the complexities underlying the engagement phenomenon.

We also find initial support that these levels of focal engagement objects are interrelated with lecturers nested within courses, and courses nested within the university service system. This contributes to the literature on student engagement as previous studies have focussed on only one level of engagement and have not explored the interrelated effects of engagement of different, nested, focal objects. A multi-layered consideration of student engagement provides a richer theoretical model and points towards challenges that need to be considered by both academic coordinators and University administrators when allocating resources for student engagement at all levels.

Consistent with recent literature in educational, organisational and marketing literature, which has conceptualised engagement as a multidimensional concept, we identified cognitive, affective and behavioural dimensions of engagement within the institutional environment. However, our data clearly identifies a fourth dimension: social engagement. The identification of social engagement extends the engagement construct to capture the students' willingness to engage in personal interactions and social exchanges with their peers and their lecturer. Hence, we propose an updated definition of student engagement with captures this important and distinct dimension:

> A student's willingness to invest their own cognitive, emotional, social and behavioural effort to interact with resources related to their education experience.

Importantly, our findings demonstrate a four-dimensional conceptualisation of student engagement is consistently identified at each level of engagement within the institution, providing further support for its relevance and applicability within the student engagement literature.

Educational Implications

Universities need to be cognisant of engaging students through all touch-points in the learning experience. Academic staff should be knowledgeable about how to facilitate effective student interactions and engagement and receive feedback on this aspect of their performance. Particularly the awareness and understanding of the need to facilitate cognitive, emotional, behavioural and social engagement components as an individual and also within their service system (i.e. the course and its content) seems crucial. Course designs may adopt more active learning pedagogies and/or the use of technologies to foster increased personalisation and interaction; however, this should be dependent on the student cohort and educational content. In

addition, given the prevalence of social engagement identified in this data, educators should further consider the role this plays in determining value in the students' learning experience.

At an institutional level, consideration needs to be given to the facilities (much like was introduced by Professor Quester at the University of Adelaide), supporting services, and extra-curricular activities of the university. Indeed, all touch-points across the university seemingly contribute to a student's engagement with the institution and their learning experience and hence strategies to enhance student engagement need to be holistic and implemented at a senior level within universities. For universities it is important to design engagement environments that facilitate meaningful experiences across resources and service system contexts. Ideally, the different engagement reference objects positively reinforce each other in terms shaping and triggering individual and overall engagement levels.

Future Research Directions

While this study provides important conceptual and qualitative insights, practice (i.e. lecturers, university managers etc.) and theory would be benefit from further quantitative analysis. For example, researchers could study whether the engagement dimensions (cognitive, affective, behavioural and social) discriminate within a university context and whether students are able to discriminate in quantitative research between different engagement levels. This in turn would require further operationalisation of some of the engagement constructs at each of the identified levels.

Further exploration of the interconnected nature of the levels of engagement is also warranted. The influence and combined effect of engagement at each level and their interconnectedness deserves empirical investigation. Does the magnitude and intensity of engagement differ through each focal object and how does the level of engagement at each level influence engagement across other levels and in aggregate? Longitudinal effects of individual and narrow service system engagement should be explored and the impact on the broader service system depicted.

In addition, consideration should be given to the nomological network of student engagement; with mutual and independent antecedents and consequences of engagement at each level considered and the interdependence and mutual development among the engagement levels considered. Attention should also be given to the nature of student dis-engagement, its causes, and the pathway to establish re-engagement.

In contexts where there is an established national or institutional mandate for student engagement assessment, the effect of these programs on engagement policies, engagement strategies and their related outcomes should be examined at an institutional and aggregate level.

These findings provide educators and university administrators with a greater understanding of the notion of student engagement, which will hopefully make a difference to the students' educational experience.

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