# Chapter 1
# Glimpsing Student Engagement

**Abstract** There is a very large body of research on student engagement in higher education. This book summarizes and builds on that literature by exploring a new direction for student engagement. This first chapter overviews the book by introducing some of its key features. It summarizes the main ideas informing the engagement construct, identifies shortcomings with it and argues for the need of new thinking. It grapples with the thorny issue of defining student engagement, discusses theoretical assumptions supporting it and details the purposes, assumptions and structure of the book. The chapter makes clear that this is not an empirically driven 'how to do' engagement book. While it does not ignore practice, the book is developed as a result of an ongoing and in depth engagement with theory.

Student engagement is a major area of research about student success and quality learning and teaching in higher education. Maiers (2008) identified it as a hot topic; Weimer (2012) called it a popular buzz phrase; Reschly and Christensen (2012) see it as a burgeoning construct. Kuh (2009) saw engagement as pervasive in conversations about higher education policy, in research, and even in the general media. This view of engagement as ever-present in the learning and teaching literature is supported by the amount of engagement research published between, say 2000 and 2010. For example, Wimpenny and Savin-Baden (2013) found 2530 articles published on the subject in these years. Trowler (2010) identified more than 1000 items. In their review of Australasian research on the first year experience, Nelson et al. (2011) found almost 400 empirical and conceptual studies. Linda Leach and I (2010) included almost 300 research reports in our synthesis of the engagement literature. Foci and methods in these reviews varied. Wimpenny and Savin-Baden's review used qualitative studies about learners' experiences. Trowler (2010) on the other hand, excluded most qualitative and 'grey' studies as lacking robustness. Nelson et al. (2011) were interested in any studies dealing with engagement and learning that contributed to a successful first year experience. Our own review synthesized both quantitative and qualitative studies that focused on engaging teaching.



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These four literature reviews synthesize what I consider to be mainstream research on student engagement. Such research attempts to meet the world-wide higher education community's expectation of evidence based, practical and largely uncritical research into how to facilitate learning that achieves student success. Governments, institutions and teachers are keen to accept and implement its findings. They consider engagement research useful in helping higher education achieve its mission of quality learning and teaching that helps learners into productive employment. In this chapter 1 introduce some key aspects of mainstream engagement research. I first unpack some of its features and complexities before attempting to find a suitable definition. I then précis some theoretical assumptions underpinning engagement research and finally discuss the purposes, processes and content of the book.

## A Snapshot of Mainstream Engagement

Mainstream student engagement is not a simple construct. Its meaning is more glimpsed than clear-cut. It is interpreted in different ways. Fredricks et al. (2004) considered it a meta-construct, one that draws on a wide variety of intellectual traditions and views. These multiple faces are partly responsible for its widespread acceptance. In higher education research it divides into three broad strands. One, originating in the United States, focuses on learning behaviours identified and turned into quantifiable and generic indicators of engagement. Examples of such indicators are found in 'variable based' empirical research (Lawson and Lawson 2013) such as that found in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) used in the United States and its cousins in Australasia (Australia and New Zealand), China, Canada, South Africa and now the United Kingdom. In a recently revised version of the NSSE students are asked to respond to questions about five engagement measures—academic challenge, learning with peers, experiences with faculty (teachers) campus environment and participation in high impact practices (McCormick et al. 2013). Likert style questions ask students to indicate how often or how much they have engaged with, for example, reaching conclusions based on their own analysis of numerical information, or asking another student to help with an academic problem (McCormick et al. 2013). Four of the engagement measures investigate classroom behaviours. The fifth—participation in high impact practices—ask students to relate the extent of their participation in out of class activities such as learning communities, service learning, research with staff, and study abroad. The underpinning design of NSSE and similar engagement approaches conceives of engagement as identifiable and quantifiable student, teacher and institutional behaviours.

Another strand is focussed more on students' feelings of emotional belonging and agency (Thomas 2012). This view owes much to work originated by Vincent Tinto in the United States on academic and social integration (Tinto 1987). Originally associated with retention, academic and social integration have also been

linked with student engagement. Tinto (2010, p. 73) suggested that a "key concept is that of educational community and the capacity of institutions to establish supportive social and academic communities, especially in the classroom, that actively involve all students as equal members". In a project linking student engagement with success, Thomas (2012) reframed academic and social integration as students having a sense of belonging. Students who do not feel they belong are more likely to be disengaged. Bryson and Hardy (2012) offer a framework comprising influences on feelings of belonging. These include students feeling a sense of relevance in what they learn; of suitable challenges; of a balance of choice, autonomy, risk, growth and enjoyability; of appropriate trust relationships with teachers and of ongoing dialogue with them; of a strong sense of purpose and strong social networks. Trowler (2010) operationalizes this by characterizing engaged learners as co-producers of learning in the classroom while also emphasizing their involvement in structure, processes and identity building in the wider community.

A third strand, 'approaches to learning', had diverse origins in Europe, the United Kingdom, South Africa and Australia. Some may consider it a bit of a stretch to label it an approach to engagement as at first researchers employing this approach did not use the word engagement. But it investigates learners' cognitive involvement in learning and so can be included as a part of the engagement construct (Solomonides et al. 2012). Rooted in phenomenology the 'approaches to learning' strand identifies what learning means to students and how they perceive and tackle it. This change of perspective leads to learning being seen as an individual construction of meaning not as a set of behaviours (Solomonides et al. 2012). Marton and Säljö (1976) identified two approaches to learning: one deep the other more superficial. Biggs (1978) confirmed the deep and surface approaches identified by Marton and Säljö. But he considered them to be *congruent motive packages* with each package comprising a motive connected to the approach chosen. He suggested that the motives for using the surface approach were extrinsic to the real purpose of the task. The motives for students engaging in deep learning were to engage for intrinsic reasons. Meyer (1991) developed the term *study orchestration* to capture an emphasis on self-direction that "focuses on the different ways students direct their resources in specific learning contexts" (Meyer 1991, p. 67).

Overarching these mainstream strands is engagement's strong association with quality teaching and learning and student success. Krause (2012) regards engagement as a key indicator of the quality of the student experience and of teaching and institutional performance. Kuh (2009) argues that student engagement is an important predictor of retention in higher education. It is positively correlated with a range of student outcomes such as critical thinking, cognitive development, self-esteem, student satisfaction and improved grades and persistence (Pascarella et al. 2010). Engagement researchers not associated with variable-centred quantitative research also recognize the close association of engagement with quality. In their case it is often engagement developed through positive relationships and emotion (Bryson and Hand 2007; Wimpenny and Savin-Baden 2013). As noted above, engagement is also associated with student success. This comes in different guises. Outcomes such as retention, completion and productive employment often

feature as indicators of success influenced by engagement (Kuh 2009). While Hagel et al. (2011) and Krause (2012) have challenged such findings, McCormick (2009) and Kuh (2009) found some evidence that a high level of engagement predicts student success. Bryson and Hardy (2012) suggest that by engaging in a variety of educationally productive activities students can develop the foundation of skills and dispositions people need to live a productive, satisfying life after graduation.

The many versions of mainstream engagement all offer a very sunny understanding of what teaching and engaged learning can achieve. With good teaching student engagement is possible for all students. It encourages retention, assures quality learning, enables success, prepares graduates for the job market and insures that students are valued as consumers of good teaching. Such understandings reveal two underlying concerns. The first is that such attributes align student engagement with neoliberalism, the dominant ideology of our times (Carey 2013; Macfarlane 2016). Neoliberal ideas seem aligned to mainstream student engagement and student engagement seems to support a neoliberal agenda. I will argue that this affinity is what makes student engagement such a powerful influence in learning and teaching today. The second concern is that not all students are engaged. In a seminal paper Mann (2001) offers a darker glimpse of engagement from the mainstream literature. Here, engagement is a matter of compliance with externally set expectations, rules and procedures. Student success is defined by criteria set by others rather than students themselves. She suggests that this can lead to alienation, the opposite to engagement. She identifies seven reasons that can lead to alienation: needing to conform to expectations of performativity, accountability and practicality; perceiving their powerlessness with what to many are alien discourses; feeling strange in a foreign culture; needing to be compliant rather than creative; losing ownership of learning goals; being made docile by the evaluation process; and seeking safety and release from the other reasons for being alienated.

Mann (2001) does not claim that feelings of alienation are inevitable. Nor does Carey (2013) suggest that the neoliberal ideas feeding mainstream student engagement are always bad. He suggests that there is a possible nested hierarchy of engagement approaches enabling a variety of versions of student engagement to coexist. Fielding (2001) offers such a hierarchy. He suggests it has four stages: (i) students conform to expectations and make few decisions; (ii) are consulted by teachers but have no guaranteed influence; (iii) are partners in the engagement process but do not lead; and (iv) have a leadership role. Every stage is valuable in student engagement. The first two dominate the mainstream literature; the third appears occasionally; the fourth barely. To mitigate Mann's conditions for alienation requires that the third and fourth stages are represented more abundantly in the classroom. They represent another dimension of student engagement that gets much less attention. In this book I develop this dimension. I use the work of Freire, Habermas, hooks, Smith and Brameld among other to develop a critical theory of student engagement, one that impacts each of Bernstein's (1996) three educational message systems: curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation. Engagement here builds consciousness of self, others and society at large, critiques the mainstream, involves dialogue among equals, strives for communicative action, recognizes and acts to

achieve social justice for others, especially 'the other' and exercises leadership in the production of knowledge. To do this requires reader engagement with both mainstream research and critical theory in order to glimpse a different way to practice. So, this is not a 'how to do engagement' book. While it offers practical ideas, it is more focused on asking critical questions about mainstream engagement and developing alternative theoretical approaches.

## Defining Engagement?

Many researchers have tried to define this diverse and complex construct. Kuh et al. (2008, p. 542) considered engagement "both the time and energy students invest in educationally purposeful activities and the effort institutions devote to effective educational practices". Responsibility for student engagement here is bounded within the learning institution. It is achieved by the actions of learners who are supported by peers, teachers and institutions. Right behaviours by students and teachers enable engagement. This bounded view of engagement is questioned by researchers who envisage a more holistic process. For example, Fredricks et al. (2004) suggested that engagement is not only about right behaviours but also involves students' cognitive investment in and emotional commitment to their learning. Cognitive engagement points to investment in deep learning of concepts and skills, of individual construction of meaning and of transforming meanings (Marton and Säljö 1976). Emotional engagement results from feelings of psychological well-being such as a sense of belonging and security in relationships both inside and outside the classroom (Wimpenny and Savin-Baden 2013). Solomonides et al. (2012) offered a relational framework to identify some of the factors helping learners to make sense of their experiences. Engagement emerges when students gain a sense of being and transformation in mastering professional and discipline knowledge.

Such definitions generally view engagement through a classroom focused lens. Increasingly though researchers recognize the importance of external influences. Carey (2013) views engagement as an expansive idea that in addition to active student participation in learning includes a sense of identity and belonging and involvement in institutional structures and processes. Lawson and Lawson (2013) go wider still with a multi- dimensional view of engagement. They synthesize student engagement using a sociocultural ecological lens tracing student, teacher, institutional and external environment perspectives. Kahu (2013) suggested that while engagement occurs in the classroom, it has positive proximal and distal consequences for people, such as satisfaction and well-being, citizenship and personal growth, thus highlighting a connection between well-being, citizenship, education and engagement both inside and outside the classroom. Leach (2014) endorses Kahu's holistic model of engagement with the following definition:

> Student engagement is understood as the time and effort students invest in educational activities. The consequences of their engagement - their success in their study, their personal growth and the contribution they make to society through active citizenship - are affected by personal and contextual antecedents as well as the actions taken by teachers, institutions, families and friends to facilitate their engagement in an active partnership.

Such wide ranging views no longer confine engagement to higher education classroom settings, but involve engaged learners in the affairs of wider cultural, social and political community contexts. Engagement becomes part of lifewide experiences that feed into and out of the classroom environment.

Such varied and abundant attempts to grasp student engagement lead to a number of questions about the actual meaning of engagement in education. With the varied definitions offered by researchers, can we consider engagement as a single construct at all or is it a multi-hued rainbow of concepts grouped under the same label for convenience? While definitions are expected in academic work, are they useful in understanding complex and diverse constructs like engagement? Krause (2012), in discussing quality in higher education, suggested that the meaning of quality posed a 'wicked problem'. She cites Rittel as the originator of the idea of wicked problems who explains that such problems are ill defined, suffer from confusing information, are based on conflicting perspectives and are unlikely to lead to either tidy or permanent solutions. The same must be said of student engagement. In this book, answers to the two questions above would be: yes, student engagement can be treated as a single construct as purposeful and active involvement in lifewide and lifelong learning; but no, a single definition is not useful in grasping the full scope of such engagement.

With these answers I offer a perspective on, not a definition of engagement. In my view it is holistic not atomistic, inclusive not exclusive, lifewide and lifelong not confined to involvement in the tasks set by the teacher delivering a set curriculum or the agenda determined by an institution or even the government. Engagement is about agency; students are agents determining their own learning goals that will often include challenges of what is and also lead to actions for change. Certainly, a single definition cannot capture the many faceted contribution that engagement makes to our understanding of learning and teaching in higher education. Such a definition would be generic and limit engagement, have all the properties of a wicked problem, and potentially be blind to individual, contextual and historical differences. In short, a definition confines student engagement to predetermined processes and outcomes and inhibits change.

So I am reluctant to define engagement in any formal way. Yet when reading this book you are entitled to know how I understand the term. I consider engagement to be a metaphor; a prism through which we can discover diverse understandings of what can lead to effective learning and teaching. In short, the book examines effective education seen through the student engagement lens (Krause and Coates 2008) and its multiple supporting factors such as personal motivation and energy, critically reflective learning in an agentic curriculum, supportive yet challenging pedagogy, institutional and community support, affirming learning experiences in diverse communities and positive outcomes for learners. Engagement is not limited

to what occurs face-to-face in classrooms, laboratories and workshops. It includes the interactions and relationships in using new technologies. It also applies to learning in the world outside the classroom. Engaging students requires similar attributes and processes in classrooms, online learning at a distance and in communities. I do not consider that engagement in new technology is so different to other forms of teaching that special mention must be made of it. However, while we can synthesize engagement research to develop practical propositions leading to more effective learning and teaching, such propositions are not intended to be generic. They draw on specific disciplines and are shaped by different and often unique contexts. They are also developed in a specific political and intellectual climate that helps shape how engagement is perceived in different cultures and at different times.

## Theoretical Assumptions?

Kahn (2014) observed that student engagement research is weakly theorized. Certainly, given the diversity of definitions and perspectives which emphasize the 'doing' of student engagement, it is perhaps surprising that it has theoretical underpinnings at all. While I agree that extensive theoretical discussions of student engagement are hard to find, there are some overarching theoretical understandings generally shared by engagement researchers. First among these is a constructionist theory of knowledge. In this view knowledge of reality is neither given nor discovered, but constructed. Crotty (1998, p. 42) suggests that "all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context". This theory of knowledge has been applied in the work of researchers such as Piaget and Papert to children's learning (Ackerman 2004). To them knowledge and the world are both constructed and interpreted through action, and explained through the use of symbols. Knowledge, to a constructionist, is not a commodity to be transmitted, encoded, retained, and re-applied. It is gained through experience and is actively built, both individually and collectively. Similarly, the world is not just waiting to be discovered, but gets progressively shaped and formed through people's interactions (Ackerman 2004). Piaget's and especially Papert's ideas about knowledge and learning live in higher education engagement research. Krause and Coates (2008), for example, affirm that learning in higher education is constructed by individuals who actively participate in educationally purposeful activities.

The constructionist understanding of knowledge is reflected in the assumption that engagement research is learner centred. This can be illustrated by reference to the work of Barr and Tagg (1995) and adult learning theory. Barr and Tagg introduced what they called a learning paradigm. This has a focus on individual learning with the learner achieving positive outcomes for them, society and the economy. Rather than a receptacle for the words of teachers, students are

co-producers of knowledge who take shared responsibility for their learning with their teachers and institutions. This joint endeavour leads to powerful results through engagement. Theoretical assumptions from research into adult learning echo those in the learning paradigm. Rooted in humanism and pragmatism, adult learning theories emphasize self-directed, experiential and transformative learning. Self-directed learning is based on the view that adults are autonomous decision-making learners. According to Knowles (1983), self-directed learners require significant control over the learning process to achieve their own goals. Experiential learning "has been accorded a privileged place as the source of learning in a learner-centred pedagogy and at the very centre of knowledge production and knowledge acquisition" (Usher et al. 1997, p. 100). Writers such as Dewey, Lewin, Piaget and Kolb place great store in experiential learning as a "process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb 1984, p. 38). In this process people reflect on, analyze and reconstruct their experiences in order to engage with their world. It is teachers' responsibility to facilitate this process.

But this apparently straightforward interpretation of engagement research as constructionist and learner centred is misleading. Student engagement fits Krause's (2012) description of a wicked problem: ill defined, imbued with confusing information, conflicting points of view and lacking either a tidy or permanent explanation. To make sense of engagement requires a theoretical perspective that accommodates such complexity. Cohen et al. (2011) identify complexity theory as an emerging educational research paradigm that is capable of making sense of the similarities and differences embedded in engagement research through a process of emergent order. Cohen et al. describe education and engagement as complex adaptive systems that break with linear cause and effect models of research and replace these with organic, nonlinear and holistic approaches. Complexity involves many simultaneously interacting variables that enable emergence of order and understanding from feedback, adaptation, self-organization and the interactions between learners and their environments. It is an interpretative perspective and accommodates both qualitative and quantitative research designs. New understandings that emerge are generated from within the system and do not use linear cause and effect reasoning. Researching student engagement, then, relies on researchers appreciating that it is holistic, relational, dynamic, an ever changing ecosystem from which understandings about learning and teaching emerge in a nonlinear fashion.

This interpretative approach to engagement is captured by Lawson and Lawson (2013) who echo the observation that engagement is a meta-construct researched from three primary perspectives: emotional engagement, cognitive engagement, and behavioural engagement. They add a fourth to these, a socioecological perspective, which focuses on classroom, institutional and community influences shaped in a specific but possibly fleeting political climate. Lawson and Lawson's eclectic understanding of engagement methodologies derives from research in the school sector. It is supported by Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 2005) who in their stocktaking syntheses of learning research in higher education identify two primary

orientations that underpin engagement research methodologies. One orientation, they suggest, contains theories that focus on personal growth generated from within individuals. Psychological factors such as cognitive development, motivation and identity formation are examples of what interests this family of researchers. The other orientation focuses more on factors generated from without the individual. Sociological factors such as social practices associated with culture, class and politics are seen as impacting student learning. The two orientations are not completely separate though. Pascarella and Terenzini acknowledge overlaps between them when they discuss, for example, research into the impact of students' family and other background factors on learning. Such person-environment influences can be conceived as ecological.

One important methodology in engagement research focuses on motivation as a necessary but not sufficient orientation for engagement research (Wentzel 2012). There are many motivational theories. Self-determination theory, achievement goal theory, achievement motivation theory, attribution theory, self-efficacy theory, and expectancy-value theory of achievement have all been used to research motivation for engagement (Eccles and Wang 2012). Self-belief seems to be a very important motivator as Schuetz (2008) found in her attempt to construct a coherent theoretical framework for motivation in engagement. She also found that Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Ryan and Deci 2000) was an excellent fit for her research data drawn from a survey of American Community College students. Self-determination is an important feature of engagement and is enhanced where supportive social-contextual conditions exist to promote feelings of competence or self-efficacy. Such feelings in turn encourage the exercise of choice and self-direction, leading to a greater feeling of autonomy. Ryan and Deci (2000) refer to strong links between motivation and autonomy and competence. They also suggest that relatedness, at least in a distal sense, is important in motivation, particularly intrinsic motivation. This may be secure relations with others, a sense of social, cultural belonging, or identification with ideas. Self-determination enables individuals to meet such competence, autonomy and relational motivational needs. SDT is well supported by large-scale empirical studies and seems well suited to explain the motivation and agency needed for engagement. It is a valuable perspective for researching student engagement.

But the theoretical approaches used in engagement research are not restricted to the psychological. Engagement with learning happens simultaneously in a context, be it an individual or group learning activity, a classroom discussion, a climate of institutional values, culture and norms, or events involving families and communities. Engagement processes are seen as relational and dynamic; as involving ongoing relationships between individuals and their contexts (Eccles and Wang 2012). Some contexts such as classrooms are focused explicitly on learning, others are more indirectly situated in politics and policy. For example, institutions, teachers and students work in a policy context built on assumptions about student success, often understood as increasing or widening participation, achieving high levels of course completions and attaining a passport to employment with a positive attitude to lifelong learning (Yorke 2006). According to Wentzel (2012) the context

within which engagement occurs or not is just as important for understanding engagement as motivational states. But contexts are diverse and learners and teachers require social competence to engage successfully with others. According to Lawson and Lawson (2013) socially competent students collaborate with others to achieve desired group as well as individual outcomes. They establish constructive relationships with diverse peers—mature students, part-time students, economically disadvantaged students, students from ethnic minorities, students with disabilities and students with family responsibilities—as well as teachers and administrators. Socially competent students act as partners with others in research and governance of classroom and institutional structures (Janosz 2012). This more sociological dimension has become another important focus for engagement research.

The role of engagement outside formal higher education was somewhat neglected in the past. But increasingly researchers have recognized that engagement is holistic. Research designs now include family and community life as important contexts and motivators for engagement (Wentzel 2012). Two important theoretical assumptions about engagement emerge. The first depicts engagement as conceptual glue that connects students' activity in classrooms to their surrounding social contexts. The second situates engagement within the ecology of social relations (Lawson and Lawson 2013). These assumptions about ecological dimensions of engagement have been researched widely in higher education methodologies. McInnis (2003), for example, recognized a new engagement reality in higher education as students increasingly study part-time. In Australia, James et al. (2010) found that more than half the students surveyed thought that paid work interfered with their academic performance. Such students expected study to fit their lives; not fit their lives around study. McInnis (2003) suggested that engagement can no longer be assumed; it must be negotiated. Yorke and Longden (2008) found that seven factors explained disengagement and early departure. While five of these factors related mainly to institutional issues such as poor quality teaching, and to personal considerations such as choosing the wrong course, two factors originated outside the institution: problems with finance and employment; and problems with social integration into aspects of institutional life due to background. James et al. (2010) found that over half of the students in part-time employment offered family reasons for seeking employment. Some wanted to gain greater financial independence from their family; others, and this was particularly so for indigenous students, were supporting their families.

## Purposes, Structures and Processes

I came to research student engagement on the back of a longstanding interest in quality teaching in post-compulsory education. A funded research project on how to improve student retention led me to student engagement. Another funded research project led to a rich vein of data which I reported in numerous journal articles that in turn contribute to the book (see Appendix B for details). However, writing these articles led to many questions about the complex nature of student engagement:

how to characterize and then improve it; why it should have become such a diverse, complex and popular construct; and what ideas about engagement might be found beyond the current mainstream. These questions scaffold this book. They are:

- How can the rich and diverse mainstream engagement research be synthesized into manageable, verifiable and practical strategies for use by higher education teachers?
- Why have the outputs from this complex and varied body of work become a standard bearer for improving learning and teaching in higher education?
- What is missing from engagement research and how can this be addressed?

These questions are addressed within a constructionist theory of knowledge and an interpretive/subjectivist theoretical framework (Crotty 1998). They employ hermeneutic, critical and postmodern perspectives. The method used to construct my arguments in the book is relatively new and seems to have been used so far mainly in the health sciences (Walsh and Downe 2005). It is labelled 'meta-synthesis' by Schreiber et al. (1997) who consider it as a qualitative equivalent to the quantitative use of meta-analyses. Erwin et al. (2011, p. 186) describe it as

> an intentional and coherent approach to analyzing data across qualitative studies. It is a process that enables researchers to identify a specific research question and then search for, select, appraise, summarize, and combine qualitative evidence to address the research question.

Its goal is to tap into complex largely qualitative data to foster the emergence of new conceptualizations and interpretations of a research field. I use this literature to address each of the questions. I have selected the material from peer reviewed journal articles, books published by respected publishers, official reports published by named research agencies such as the British Higher Education Academy and other government agencies. Some grey media was used to inform the argument where the author of blogs or conference papers was a recognized expert in the field.

The meta-synthesis generated three propositions in response to the questions. Each proposition addresses one of the questions in a series of chapters. The propositions are:

- There is a mainstream view of student engagement that makes a considerable contribution to understanding what works in learning and teaching in higher education to enable students to achieve success in a quality focused learning environment.
- Student engagement research has achieved its importance in higher education at a time when dominant neoliberal political ideas and practices align with mainstream engagement research. While not caused by neoliberalism, student engagement has an elective affinity with it. This limits its potential.
- To reach its potential, student engagement needs to develop another dimension in research and practice. This dimension moves it away from neoliberal thinking and towards enabling learners to engage in a holistic, critical way in order to work for greater social justice.

## *Part 1: Exploring Mainstream Views of Student Engagement*

1. *Glimpsing student engagement*

This chapter sets the scene for the book by addressing the question "what is important to know about mainstream research on student engagement in higher education". It introduces some key aspects of mainstream engagement research. It unpacks some of its features and complexities before attempting to find (and avoiding) a formal definition. It then discusses key theoretical assumptions underpinning engagement research and finally explains the purposes, processes and content of the book.

2. *Mainstream perspectives and frameworks*

Underpinning this chapter is an enquiry about what research perspectives and conceptual frameworks inform research in the mainstream student engagement enterprise. It begins with a long list of diverse characteristics assigned to student engagement. It attempts to make sense of this diversity by constructing a broad sketch of student engagement research that outlines different ways engagement is conceived and investigated. It then constructs a more detailed map of the various conceptual frameworks that have been employed.

3. *Towards an emergent mainstream engagement framework*

This chapter asks how we might make sense of the complexities of student engagement revealed in Chap. 2. It uses complexity thinking as a way of identifying practical, evidence-based and useful propositions to inform learning and teaching in higher education. The chapter uses a key attribute of complexity, 'emergence', as a way of identifying 10 generic propositions for engagement that can be applied to higher education's unique contexts and students.

## *Part 2: Questioning the Mainstream View*

4. *Higher education in neoliberal times*

What is the ideological climate that informs and influences student engagement? This question focuses the chapter. It identifies neoliberalism as a hegemonic ideology that is very important in explaining the appeal of student engagement theory and practice in higher education. It examines key features of neoliberalism and a selected number of contributing policy discourses and how they impact on educational policy using a New Zealand case study before finally briefly outlining the relationship between student engagement and neoliberalism.

5. *Student engagement and neoliberalism: An elective affinity?*

This chapter turns the spotlight more specifically on student engagement and its relationship with neoliberalism. It asks whether there is a distinguishing feature to the relationship. It argues that Weber's idea of an elective affinity is suitable for understanding the relationship. This means that theory, research and practices of student engagement are allied to neoliberalism. But the chapter is careful not to suggest that student engagement is a creature of neoliberalism.

6. *A critique of mainstream student engagement*

What are the advantages and disadvantages of this elective affinity for student learning? This chapter explores how the mainstream view of student engagement might be critiqued. It questions various aspects of the four conceptual frameworks introduced in Chap. 2 and in particular questions the overwhelming positivity in engagement research, its generic reading of effective teaching and learning, its prioritizing of pedagogy over curriculum, its reliance on psychology and its elective affinity with neoliberalism.

## *Part 3: Student Engagement Beyond the Mainstream*

7. *Student engagement beyond the mainstream*

This chapter asks whether it is possible to retain mainstream conceptual frameworks and propositions while reducing the influence of neoliberalism. It answers affirmatively and acknowledges that mainstream engagement research has great value in spite of the influence of neoliberalism. This influence can be weakened by drawing on ideas from critical thinkers such as Foucault, hooks, Smith, Habermas, Freire and Brameld.

8. *Towards a critical pedagogy of engagement*

What would student engagement be like with less neoliberalism? This chapter acknowledges that while neoliberalism will retain influence, this can be offset by the more critical orientations discussed in Chap. 8. It offers a view of practice beyond the mainstream by synthesizing research from a wide variety of sources such as positive psychology, sociology and political science. An emergent holistic view suggests that student engagement must include critical and emotional dimensions.

9. *Towards a critical curriculum for engagement*

This chapter discusses one of what Bernstein considered to be three interdependent educational message systems: pedagogy, curriculum and evaluation. Chapters 1–9 focused on pedagogy. This chapter considers how curriculum can foster a critical engagement. Because pedagogy is but a subset of curriculum and therefore offers only a partial understanding of students' learning, this chapter explores how curriculum can help create a critical form of engagement.

10. *Supporting engagement through critical evaluation*

How can evaluation, the third of Bernstein's message systems, contribute to a more critical student engagement? This chapter explores how evaluation can enhance student engagement by involving students directly in accountability systems, enabling them to participate in institutional evaluations beyond filling out survey questionnaires as well as sharing decision-making powers in the way assessment processes are conducted.

11. *Through distributive leadership to critical engagement*

This chapter addresses two questions: how can critical engagement be grafted into the mainstream engagement discourse; and what might a critical engagement look like? It draws on a radical vision of distributive leadership to argue that this can graft critical engagement into the mainstream. It offers three case studies as working examples.

12. *Achieving change: opportunities, challenges and limits*

What are the opportunities for achieving the kind of changes canvassed in the book? This chapter explores opportunities and challenges for student engagement in an education system in which critical practices must coexist within a neoliberal ideology. It points out challenges to and limits of achieving change. The chapter will provide case studies of what change may look like in practice.

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