Student engagement: What is stopping our international students from getting it?

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Within Australian tertiary institutions, student engagement has received much attention in recent times, despite the obscurity in its meaning. The term ‘engagement’ has become synonymous with student ‘involvement’ and ‘active participation’, suggesting that international students are accountable for their lack of engagement. However, this fails to acknowledge the pivotal role of lecturers and course structure. Students are encouraged to communicate and collaborate with peers as a way of negotiating and constructing knowledge, though lecturers do little to foster a participative learning environment. This article considers the difficulties international students face in achieving success at a satellite campus in Sydney following the research conducted on student engagement. The article suggests that in order to increase the level of international student engagement, communication, assessments and the lecturer’s pedagogy need to be addressed.

Keywords: student engagement, international students, teacher and student responsibility

Introduction

Universities within the Australian context have strongly advocated a student-centred educational environment, cultivating the learning skills of their students and encouraging student engagement. Within the context of the classroom, local and international students are brought together to construct knowledge and partake in learning practices which have become paramount to the students’ educational development and success (Krause & Coates, 2008). For many educators, the belief that discussion is important in assisting students to construct knowledge is well understood (Bretag, 2007; Chanock, 2010; Krause & Coates, 2008) and through this discussion, students are able to engage with the subject content.

However, for students to be engaged with their studies, current and traditional teaching practices are required to change. Lecturers require more than an allocated time slot to present information and students are expected to do more than simply attend classes. Within the discourse of teaching and learning, there is a repertoire of instrumental factors discerning the extent of student engagement and success. In fact, “the instructors’ approach, class and assignment structure, learning support and other personal factors” (Errey & Wood, 2011, p. 21) are all influential in the level of engagement students attain.

Amongst the current literature, there fails to be consensus regarding the definition of student engagement, particularly when the various aspects of engagement are not all considered. Ultimately, the question which resonates is, if we are unsure about what student engagement
is, then how are we able to measure it? A compilation of various definitions include the terms ‘commitment’, ‘involvement’ and the ‘active participation’ students demonstrate in their learning environment (Australian Council for Educational Research [ACER], 2010; Chapman, 2003; Edwards, 2008; Kuh, 2007). It is understood that this commitment students display to their learning is responsible for their perseverance with their studies (impacting significantly on the university’s retention rate) and ultimately their success at university (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006).

Admittedly, engaging students within the learning environment can be a complex task, particularly when there are several facets that influence the extent of engagement. Leach and Zepke (2011) have categorised these engaging factors into four distinct avenues: “motivation, transactional engagement, institutional support and active citizenship” (p. 200) while Kahu (2011) refers to the ‘behavioural’, ‘psychological’, ‘socio-cultural’ and ‘holistic’ perspectives. What becomes evident in the literature is the lack of research which encompasses all areas of student engagement, instead, acknowledgement is given to the complexity of this construct and several avenues are better understood without renouncing the existence of others.

Whilst some students excel or exhibit high levels of these ‘engaging’ characteristics, many students do not and success seems to be a little out of reach. Student engagement, however, is gaining prominence in higher education (Edwards, 2008; Kahu, 2011) and with ever growing numbers of international students enrolled in accounting courses, improving engagement within international student cohort is clearly important and a priority (Edwards, 2008; Radloff & Coates, 2010). As a way of better understanding these contributing factors and acknowledging the broad spectrum of student engagement, this article will consider the role students, lecturers and courses may have in hindering student success at university by drawing upon the data yielded in our research.

The contributing role of the student

International students make up a large percentage of present-day university classrooms (Birrell & Healy, 2008) with varying degrees of knowledge and expertise. As a consequence, many universities adopt group or pair work during tutorial or lecture time, particularly when lecturers are faced with large classes sometimes in excess of seventy students. For the international Asian students, collaborating in a group is a preferred learning strategy (Ramburuth & McCormick, 2001) though should this experience be troublesome, students are less likely to be engaged in future groupwork assignments (Errey & Wood, 2011).

During this process of groupwork, international and domestic students are encouraged to engage with others, share their perspectives and opinions and relate this to the topic (Krause & Coates, 2008; Lawrie, Matthews, & Gahan, 2010). Though, with little student interaction and involvement, engagement with the content (and therefore the subject) may be a difficult task, predominantly when the student cohort is from the same country of origin, limiting the use of English communication among peers (Duff, 2007; Stratilas, 2011).

For collaboration amongst peers to function effectively and achieve its purpose, students’ perceptions, attitudes and values are all contributing factors (Lawrie, Matthews, & Gahan, 2010). Unfortunately, due to ease and efficiency, many students nominate their own group and could quite possibly complete a term without speaking a word of English, though this is often not addressed nor acknowledged in institutions. Both international and local students have much to gain from classroom discussions where students’ knowledge, perspectives and opinions are
seen to be a valuable source of input (Bretag, 2007; Campbell, 2010; Krause & Coates, 2008). Further to this, lecturers assume that by collaborating with peers and being active participants in discussions, students are able to form a deeper understanding of concepts and constructs (Suda, 2008). However, this approach to a negotiated learning outcome presumes:

- students understand the topic or concept discussed in the lecture;
- students have unique and insightful experiences to share;
- students are able to communicate and articulate opinions within this forum;
- cultural and educational differences existing amongst the student cohort would be valued and respected; and
- lecturers would be willing to dedicate time for students to equally contribute to the discussion and be present to value their contributions.

There is no doubt that English language proficiency is an instrumental factor in determining the extent and understanding of collaborative discussions in class (Birrell & Healy, 2008), although this is not the only influential aspect (Bartlett & Chanock, 2003). For many of our international students, their levels of anxiety peak when asked to partake in improvised discussions (Brown, 2008) and this can be quite a daunting experience. It is not uncommon for students to decline in contributing to discussions due to their lack of confidence (Robertson, Line, Jones, & Thomas, 2000; Sawir, 2005). During the span of five minutes they are asked to process the information discussed by the lecturer, formulate a response and communicate well in a second language (Cammish, 1997). As a result, students often prefer to associate with peers from similar cultural backgrounds in order to avoid the possible stress and anxiety of communicating in a foreign language (Brown, 2008).

With limited participation in pair or group tasks advocated by the lecturer, students risk being deficient in engaging with the topic and grasping the practical aspect of the concepts as shared by other members in class. With a limited understanding of the topics raised, communicating certain concepts and theories in written tasks could therefore prove to be difficult, making students susceptible to failing the module and possibly the course.

The role of lecturers and courses

From the outset of any course, difficulties for international students become evident and transferring knowledge into written form complicates the issue further. Students are expected to possess the skills of researching and accessing relevant information via the library database and developing a critical argument (Horstmanshof & Brownie, 2011) when compiling an assignment, whilst all the while articulating in a second or foreign language. These academic skills may not necessarily be innate for some international students, though nonetheless this is assumed by some lecturers (Carroll & Appleton, 2007; Stratilas, 2011) and often not explicitly dealt with in class. It is assumed that students acquire certain academic skills through teaching, assessments, the institution and social interaction within the university context (Campbell, 2010).

With the acquisition of academic skills, students are in a better position to engage with course content and over time become more engaged learners (Edwards, 2008). Though it is worth acknowledging that amongst the many influential factors impacting on student engagement and success, the lecturers’ approach to teaching maintains a significant part (Bartram, 2008). In fact, Ning and Downing (2011) place great emphasis on this stating that teaching “plays an important role in higher education in that students were more likely to feel motivated towards
study and perform better in tests and exams when the teacher is perceived as encouraging and supportive.” (p.774).

Larger class sizes and changing work conditions, however, mean that academics are often indifferent to the needs of international students (Ryan & Louie, 2007) and their frustration towards students’ lack of academic attainment is often echoed in their work. Very few attempts are made to approach the deficiencies that may exist in their classroom, as academics believe it is the students’ responsibility to address their deficiencies and students believe it is the lecturer’s role to teach them the necessary skills in order to succeed (Shackleford & Blickem, 2007; Star & Hammer, 2008). While there is no right answer, it seems futile to pass the responsibility, particularly when lecturers are in the best position to encourage a supportive, contributing and engaging learning environment (Bartram, 2008; Errey & Wood, 2011, p. 23), despite the challenges that they may face.

Lecturers are responsible for guiding students throughout the course and providing clear direction to stimulate active involvement (Edwards, 2008). Unfortunately, this is not always the case. An indication of this is given in course assessments, whereby instructions and information relating to assignments are not always clearly articulated by the lecturers (Chung, Kelliher, & Smith, 2006) and students are often confused when asked to interpret a written task. With the marking criteria as a guideline, students (both domestic and international) are often left to their own devices in determining the format of the assignment, integrating scholarly literature to support their claims, developing an argument and referencing information appropriately.

Lecturers (through the use of assignments) rely on the students to adopt various academic skills in order to meet the course and assessment criteria (Campbell, 2010; McClellan, 2011), many of which are not taught in class. Quite often, many international students are not adequately prepared to deal with “the large volume of reading, the research-based nature of written assignment work, the need for critical thinking, especially the abilities to evaluate and speculate” (Davies & Maldoni, 2004, p.2). The evident gap existing amongst lecturers’ expectations and student commitment can be seen in the work that is produced by both parties. With minimal direction from some lecturers, students are likely to struggle in producing work that achieves the course requirements and thus their engagement in class.

Many academics assume that the sole purpose for student failure is the barrier to language (Sawir, 2005) with some academics giving little consideration to their own pedagogy and the forms of assessment employed in their courses (Errey & Wood, 2011). Within the course, efforts to encourage student participation are often futile as many academics are reluctant to alter their style of teaching or introduce new technology in their classroom (Quinn, Duff, Johnston, & Gursansky, 2007; Walsh, Lemon, Black, Mangan, & Collin, 2011). Lectures, where academics provide a monologue and powerpoints, are often not conducive to an active learning environment, limiting the students’ engagement with the content.

Methodology

In view of the fluctuating trends in higher education and the literature surrounding student engagement, the project focussed on the curriculum and delivery of a postgraduate course offered at a regional university in NSW. Initially, the aim was to assess the curriculum of the Master of Professional Accounting (MPA) course after being granted ethics approval. However, subsequent reform triggered by the misalignment of assessments and course outcomes to the graduate attributes generated the university-wide study.
The study invited all enrolled MPA students (121) to partake in the survey, including those who graduated one month prior to August 2010. Seventy percent of the students (i.e. 71 students) who were enrolled completed the survey (refer to table 1) with a large percentage (86%) of international students. This paper however, focuses on the data collated from the international students (i.e. 60 participants) which generally comprised young Chinese students with limited work experience, as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1: Participant characteristics (N= 71)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>% of Respondents</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>21-25 years</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>26 + years</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationality</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Language</td>
<td>Not English</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Experience</td>
<td>0-2 Years</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area of Previous Qualification</td>
<td>Accounting or Business</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest Qualification</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Diploma/other</td>
<td>19</td>
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The survey instrument used for the project was an adaptation of the Postgraduate Survey of Student Engagement (POSSE) and the Australasian Universities Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) resulting in a 41 item survey. As the “largest educationally focused cross-institutional survey of current students in Australasia” (Coates, 2010, p. 3), the AUSSE was chosen due to its reliability and its close correlation to the aims of this research. Together with the POSSE, the combination of the two surveys allowed for constructive feedback from anonymous participants relating to students background, learning experiences, off-campus experience, general university experience, and post-graduate intentions.

By using the Management and Commerce POSSE data set as comparison, the benchmark was set for our research and we were able to form a better understanding of the limitations and strengths of our students. The pitfalls of this approach, however, were that data from our students were compared to a body of unknown domestic and international participants (Coates, 2010) with various characteristics and possibly few similarities. Whilst the comparison between these two cohorts seemed ideal as a starting point, the variables involved were immense.

Additionally, “surveys have the problems…of limiting the participant’s voices and failing to capture the dynamic nature of engagement” (Kahu, 2011, p. 5). Nonetheless, the survey was made available online for students for three weeks in which time, an email was sent as a reminder to students. Hardcopy surveys were also made available during MPA classes. Due to the large amount of data collated, the article focuses solely on the learning experience data and compares this with 2010 POSSE survey involving 47,614 student responses from 15 institutions within Australia and New Zealand (ACER, 2011).
**Findings and discussion**

From the data collected, the students’ ‘commitment’ to their studies can be seen in Table 2. Their ‘active participation’ and ‘involvement’ with class discussions, leaves a lot to be desired. In fact, the low figures presented in items 1-3 suggest a weakness in oral and communication skills supporting the claim that international students suffer from a lack of confidence (Sawir, 2005) when expected to exhibit their English speaking skills. With heightened levels of stress and anxiety when asked to be articulate (Brown, 2008), limitations are most likely to occur in class discussions limiting student engagement and the construction of knowledge. While participation and discussion assist students in forming a better understanding of subject content (James, McInnis, & Devlin, 2002), it should be noted that student participation in classroom discussions is not necessarily indicative of their engagement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2: Learning activities for class and assessments (N = 60)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>How often do you do each of the following?</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Ask questions or contribute to discussions in class or online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Seek advice from academic staff</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Make a class or online presentation</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Prepare drafts of an assignment before handing it in</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Use library resources on campus or online</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Use student learning support services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Come to class having completed readings or assignments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Keep up to date with your studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Work with other students to prepare assignments</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Use ideas or concepts from different courses when completing assignments</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. Use email to communicate with teaching staff</td>
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<tr>
<td>12. Discuss grades or assignments with teaching staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Discuss ideas from your readings or classes with others outside class</td>
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</table>

Unfortunately, student participation in some classes are assessed and therefore penalised when they do not perform according to the assessment criteria. It is possible that the underlying assumption of some of these lecturers is that students, particularly from Confucius-heritage cultures, are not ‘learning’ and “do not naturally take part in critical thinking because they do not overtly participate in classroom discussion” (Lun, Fischer, & Ward, 2010, p.1). With such an emphasis on discussion and communication in the course, lecturers should provide time and effort to develop these assessed skills further within smaller groups.

With limited opportunities for learning to take place via discussion, students are compelled to draw upon other resources, as was indicative of our research. Our findings show that a large percentage (75%) of students were relying heavily on textbooks as their main source
of learning. Thus, content information and learning new formulae involved students reading and referring to the textbook. As such, students are predominantly asked to recall information rather than apply their understanding through case studies, discussions and simulation of real-life scenarios. Incidentally, students likewise seem to appreciate class exercise (75%) as their most preferred teaching method, followed closely by lectures (72%), implying that students are content in listening to the lecture rather than engaging in the course material through application and deeper learning strategies. It is not surprising then that Ning and Downing (2011) confirm students’ use of ‘deep learning’ strategies when they are inspired by lecturers in the course, and one could assume the course itself.

However, the course structure and assessments employed in the MPA provide a possible hindrance to the level of student engagement. The results from the study indicated that examinations and multiple choice questions comprise 49% of the assessment type in the program, often taking place mid semester or end of the year. This reiterates the above mentioned point whereby many forms of assessments often rely on the students’ skill to recall information or formulae to reach the correct solution. There appears to be little encouragement and opportunity to discuss or collaborate with peers to develop a deeper understanding of new taught concepts (Leask, 2011) when exams are heavily dependent on the students’ ability to remember rather than apply.

The field of accounting seems to be restricted in regards to the approaches of teaching formulaic equations, ratios and the like and the professional requirements. This could provide the explanation why levels of engagement within this field are quite low in comparison to other disciplines (Edwards, 2008). Despite the possible limitations of teaching within this field, “disparate student outcomes often arise from institutional practices, not from student deficiencies (Bensimon as cited in Kezar, Glenn, Lester, & Nakamoto, 2008, p. 126). Thus the onus is ultimately on the lectures and their approach in providing a supportive learning environment, as well as their delivery of the course content.

Given the importance of student engagement in Australian universities, for both the students and the institutions, it comes as a surprise that this accounting course (amidst the competitive nature of higher education) employs assessments and practices that may not be conducive to learning. Local and international students with varying degrees of experience and education can offer not only an interesting perspective when collaborating in a discussion (Bell, Vrazalic, Smith, 2008), but a differing view in constructing meaning. Through active participation and collaboration, students are likely to succeed (Kuh, 2007) and gain more from their learning experience. Tasks involving deep learning strategies and critical application encourage students to appreciate the importance of learning and content. Though only by better understanding student engagement, is the quality of education and learning outcomes likely to improve.

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References


