Teaching and Learning Strategies to Improve Student Engagement

February 2018
Background

Student disengagement in teaching and learning

In 2017, TALQAC formed a working group to examine reasons for students’ disengagement with their courses and with the university. The Improving Student Engagement Working Group was established in response to committee members’ concerns about findings from the 2015 Student Experience Survey. For the first time, ‘health or stress’ was the top reason cited by students – both by University of Melbourne students and by students from 40 universities nationally – as the main reason for considering leaving their course. However, with respect to the next cited reasons for intention to leave, there were differences between the University of Melbourne rankings and the national ranking:

- career prospects: 2nd at Melbourne; 10th nationally,
- boredom/lack of interest: 3rd at Melbourne; 8th nationally,
- expectations not met: 4th at Melbourne; 9th nationally.¹

The University of Melbourne results suggest a general sense of student disengagement. There appears to be a gap between students’ expectations of the university experience and their lived experiences. This could be the result of a number of variables, including connectedness, collegiality or a sense of cohort. When these findings were discussed in a 2016 TALQAC meeting, academic members reported students’ low attendance rates in class and student anxiety contributing to requests for extensions and special consideration. Student members reported students feeling that academics do not know the students and many students had never spoken to an academic outside of class.

The first aim of the working group was to gain a better understanding of students’ perspectives of their connectedness with their course, other students, their lecturers and the university. While there is a body of work on student disengagement², we wanted to have a better understanding of the issue at the University of Melbourne, including identifying the cohorts of students that were particularly disengaged. We took into consideration students who were enrolled in courses that were less likely to provide them with a cohort experience such as Arts students, students enrolled in smaller graduate programs, international students, and some post-graduate students who may not spend a lot of time on campus. To this end, we were assisted by Mr Bill Jones from Business Intelligence, who provided more detailed data from the Student Experience Survey. The student education officer from The University of Melbourne Student Union (UMSU) also provided advice on the cohorts of students that reported disengagement with their courses. Three focus

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¹ Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching. 2015 Student Experience Survey National Report.
groups were conducted with a total of 29 students.

The second aim was to identify innovative activities and strategies implemented by academics across the university to engage students with learning, their course, each other and the university.

For a description of the working group’s approach, the interview questions, and our participants, see Appendix A.

What causes student disengagement?

The academic respondents cited a range of factors including student expectations not being met, not finding lectures engaging and anxiety.

Student participants reported a range of broad factors such as cost of living, distance lived from campus, and work commitments as barriers to coming to class and feeling engaged. Some also cited ‘boring’ lectures and off-putting teaching styles, e.g. some students resented being asked questions or being put on the spot in seminars and lectures. Some postgraduate students cited poor facilities as a reason for not wanting to be on campus.

Causes

“The biggest issue surrounding student performance is anxiety. It’s at epidemic levels ....” (Academic, Arts)

It has been suggested that academics should try to respond to this type of concern by normalising the feeling that first year students have – there is nothing wrong with feeling lost and disorientated in a large environment where it’s easy to feel anonymous. This could be through case studies, anecdotes, vignettes, past student narratives, etc.

How students express disengagement

“Students leave class early, show up late, cough loudly. This usually happens around 3-4 weeks in and it signals that ‘I no longer identify with the university. No-one talks to me.’ Such behaviour is a form of resistance that helps students to re-affirm their identity.” (Academic, Arts)

“I want to read better essays! It is also about my research and topics I find fascinating.” (Academic, Arts)

What do students want?

Students wanted smaller group style learning, discussion in small groups and not large format discussions, lectures recorded, and flexibility with lecture timetables. From a social perspective, students valued a cohort experience, with a landscape management student stating that the small group “makes me want to come to class”. A social connection such as having friends in the course was an important reason to engage more with the course.

For the academics in the working group, the student responses made for troubling reading. There seemed to be a gulf between the students’ expectations and what academics can reasonably offer in their teaching, considering class sizes, workloads and existing infrastructure. From the focus group participants, there were no references to academics’ initiatives to engage students.

Why were the academic respondents motivated to engage students?

Several respondents drew on their experiences from studying or teaching overseas, where engaging in ‘University Life’ was the norm rather than the exception. Students came to the university all day – leaving their world and stepping into a ‘new world’. Their ‘Uni World’ had structures and traditions that helped create a genuine sense of community.
What are academics doing to engage students? Initiatives within and beyond the classroom

Academics reported initiatives and practices at the individual tutor, course, school, and faculty level. There was a genuine desire among many academics for their students’ experiences to be as positive as possible. The initiatives at the school or faculty level were usually responses to concerns about students’ academic performance to improve the cohort experience for student retention and future recruitment.

Many of these noteworthy activities were both academic and social in focus. In several instances, the social cohort building activities had a learning dimension. Even those activities that seem to be social in focus reportedly had significant tangential outcomes, with students making connections with their classmates and teacher, ultimately leading to the creation of a supportive, caring learning community.

As suggested by a TALQAC member from Psychology, creating opportunities for extension activities within a subject, such as a film night that is relevant to the lecture content but not compulsory or assessable, provides a good bridge between something purely social and purely academic.

International students

Engaging and integrating international students

“The UMSU international student member in 2015 (who was Chinese) said to get a Chinese student engaged with anything out of class, it needs to be curriculum related because these students want to put things on their CVs.” (Academic, Engineering)

Regarding group work: “More successful was designing the project so that the project site was in China. Some of the references were in Chinese so the Chinese students had the cultural capital. The Australian/English speakers needed their help with the maps, literature etc.…” “Australian students need to have access to Chinese students and vice-versa – it will benefit both in their learning.” (Academic, Engineering)

Academics from schools with a large number of international students reported system level initiatives. For these initiatives to be sustainable, evidence of student buy-in was needed as well as a champion in the department such as the head of school. By way of example, the School of Culture and Communication appointed an EFT 0.2 International Education Tutor in 2014, whose role ensures a continuous connection for the many Chinese students in the school. That person provides information about orientation, seminars on approaches to study at Masters level, individual support with academic skills, as well as a broad suite of social opportunities for cohort building, including international film screenings.

The use of team based work, and regularly mixing up the groups of students to make them as diverse as possible is a good way of connecting students to their course; the friendships they develop can help provide the support to see them through difficult times.

There were reported potential benefits for all students when international students were well integrated into a cohort’s experiences. For example, engineering academics emphasised to all their students that there are employment opportunities in China. They have designed assessment tasks that are truly international in flavour and scope. Ensuring inclusivity in curriculum and assessment design, where all voices are valued, is critical to helping students from diverse backgrounds feel part of their learning communities and, ultimately, engaged with their programs.
One academic in the Melbourne Business School noted ways in which students’ identities and culture can be celebrated – for example, creating ‘national weeks’ or days, where the food, dress and music of particular backgrounds can be highlighted and shared with their classmates. Running international food festivals at course or program levels would meet the same objective - making the university a place students, academics, and professional staff enjoy attending. Modest adaptations of UMSU international’s highly successful Night Market could provide inspiration for this type of event.

Making connections with students

An Engineering academic offered the following advice to fellow colleagues. “Be approachable and support students; make an effort to know students’ names, say hello on campus and connect with them. Write students references and gives them advice about making course choices etc.”

In Law, one academic has expressed a similar philosophy, employing similarly effective strategies. To make a connection to her students, she arrives at class early; stays during breaks; wanders around getting to know her students – their interests, backgrounds. In class, students’ comments are always validated and used to add to conversations, with the teacher drawing out different experiences, so that everyone feels like a valued contributor. This is all part of a mindset in which open channels of communication and genuine accessibility and passion for teaching is evident. When the lecturer knows of a student’s particular interests, she sends her or him notices of relevant events hosted by the Law School. She and her students shared morning tea together each day during an intensive subject. At the end of subsequent semesters, she wrote to her class to wish them well in their exams, showing that she had not forgotten them and is interested in how they fare on their journey through their degree; and showing them that their connections did not end with the end of that early subject. Upon completion of their assessment, her class sent a photo of all of them at dinner together—celebrating the end of a challenging year of studies and the strong friendships they had developed, facilitated by a truly engaged and passionate teacher, genuinely interested in their progress and wellbeing.

Being approachable

“Not everyone will want to be as approachable. Schools need to make sure that they have academics who can and will take on this role. ...One person needs to be the approachable lecturer. ...We need to spend time with our students to know them”. (Academic, Engineering)
Offer personalised and approachable assistance

One arts academic offers "personalised direct help" in which one-to-one discussions in 15-minute slots are conducted with all students in her subject after they completed their mini essay and before they start on their research essay. She also walked them through the online subject guide prepared by the librarian and guided students through the different resources, particularly the relevant archive guides and databases. Students were told to email her with any questions that they might have. The 65 students who met with their teacher reportedly wrote better quality essays, compared to the 10 who did not.

Create innovative and fun activities

An arts academic has set up treasure hunts where groups of students must collaborate to solve clues and post photos of the group in front of the location they have found. Students who have a photo of themselves with other students at a university landmark seem to have an emotional connection to the university.

In engineering, in the first tutorial for the semester, one academic employs a team based game involving building a 27cm tower made from paddle pop sticks that can take 1kg of weight. The task relates to commissioning projects: they need to be safe (not collapse) and cost effective. This is an effective team building exercise, which has a clear learning focus, so students see it as relevant as well as good fun.

One law academic uses photos to help memorize names as part of an ice-breaker activity in which students tell one another about how they relax and enjoy themselves – this activity helps her to remember the names. It also provides an accessible and enjoyable way of students getting to know one another while also highlighting the need to sustain wellbeing, with time away from study.

Teacher-led initiatives in large classes

It is particularly challenging engaging students when the setting is large classes, and additionally, it is more difficult to determine connectedness of students with their studies. One physiology lecturer uses a number of ways to reach out to students to demonstrate he cares. For example, by monitoring completion and results of online quizzes early in semester, the lecturer is able to identify those students who fail the quizzes or do not complete the quizzes, and invites them to come in for a chat.

Simple but effective approaches include strategies to create interactive class time for 500+ students, e.g. by encouraging all students to engage in discussions with each other during lecture sessions (think, pair, share), using live polling systems or asking for student volunteers to help illustrate principles that are being taught.

A different approach that can be used in large class settings to engage students with their studies is to purposely link their subjects with post-degree or professional employment. Events such as career information nights help students identify their 'purpose' for their studies and foster completion.

Structural changes that can help engage students with their courses

‘Top down’ initiatives can address student disengagement. These involve changes to course delivery modes and attempted changes to the environment/facilities. For example, prior to 2012, students in the
Errors and other minutiae. It is possible to focus feedback on the structure and impact of students’ work rather than on grammatical.

The conclusion didn’t have the impact it could have. Perhaps you comments (‘I couldn’t get a clear understanding of your focus of your ideas in last week’s tutorial Priya’) followed by critical personalised comment (‘it was great to see you talking about your ideas in last week’s tutorial Priya’) followed by critical comments (‘I couldn’t get a clear understanding of the focus of your argument from your introduction and this meant your conclusion didn’t have the impact it could have. Perhaps you could …’) and concluding with another personalised reference. (‘See you at the exhibition next week’.) make it possible to focus feedback on the structure and impact of students’ work rather than on grammatical errors and other minutiae.

Mentorship programs

The development of mentorship programs, with alumni and small groups of first year students, is encouraged. One model involves small groups of 5-10 students meeting with an academic, not long after orientation and a few times during semester for a coffee, just for a chat to talk about aspirations, experiences, backgrounds, feelings. The group can then see how their feelings have changed (if at all) as the semester wears on. Coffee vouchers can be provided to improve student engagement.

Another mentorship model could involve
two or three later year students and an academic not teaching in first year meeting with a group of about 15 first year students to discuss academic matters and socialise a few times each semester. Involving all staff would help counter the effects of increased casualisation of ‘front-line’ teaching staff. This also allows later year students who are very engaged to share their experiences and strategies with those first or early year students who may be disengaged.

### Student clubs and competitions

Student clubs are important for engagement, but sometimes these are not part of the school’s fabric, and they are disconnected from the academics as well as from the students they are trying to reach. We should be connecting with the student clubs more and connecting the student clubs in the schools/faculty to each other. Student clubs that are aligned to disciplines and then aligned to faculties are an excellent model for engaging students and developing relationships with the department and with industry. In engineering, one academic regularly attended student club events in the school, providing a channel of communication between the school and student club.

Well-designed competitions can integrate several objectives: Engineering’s ‘case competition’ develops communication skills, enhances industry connections, and leads to possible recruitment into employment as well as connectedness to the course.

### Recognition and valuing academics’ efforts

It was suggested by one of our participants that staff who make themselves ‘human to students’ and who work imaginatively to support students to connect with each other and the university should be properly recognised, in tangible ways, for their efforts (ARTS). This sentiment has been operationalised in the Faculty of Business and Economics (FBE) where a culture of sharing teaching expertise and innovation is being fostered. Staff have been asked to nominate someone or self-nominate to share experiences that involve engaging students. Those who are nominated must be willing to share their ideas and resource tips with others. The inaugural FBE teaching and learning symposium was held in October 2017 where excellent teaching and learning initiatives were showcased.

### Conclusion and next steps

A recurrent challenge at an organisation as large and complex as the University of Melbourne involves discovering and then sharing good teaching practices. All practices identified through our working group
address a serious issue: how to enhance student engagement; and are doable, sustainable, creative, effective initiatives that have been used or currently being used across the University in a range of contexts. None is onerous. Enhancing the approachability of academic staff is critical.

To further progress this work, the following steps have taken place and/or will occur:

1. Amending the TALQAC/Provost Course Review Self-Assessment Report to more directly raise issues of student engagement. These changes were approved by TALQAC and Academic Board in 2017. Extracts follow:

**Quality of student learning and experience**

Core question: In what ways does your approach to student engagement encourage positive learning outcomes?

In framing your response, consider how you: ...

*Promote inclusion, belonging and student engagement with your course*

- incorporate cultural diversity, including Indigenous knowledge, values and cultures into teaching and the curriculum;
- define and provide appropriate internationalisation of the curriculum ...;
- ensure that a culturally diverse experience ... is encouraged and fostered ...;
- demonstrate awareness of students’ diverse needs and interests both in the classroom and department/faculty extra-curricular activities.

*Encourage positive relationships and student engagement with your course*

- encourage and develop a strong cohort experience, and the processes by which this is monitored and improved;
- foster and encourage mutual respect among students and as between students and staff;
- facilitate student-faculty and peer social interactions;
- foster collaborative (not competitive) learning;
- express interest in and care and concern for others;
- foster communication and collaboration with faculty student societies;
- identify and share best practices among the teaching staff within your course, as well as those practices used elsewhere in the University or at other institutions;
- develop structures that support and reward best teaching practices with respect to engaging students. ...

2. Conducting a workshop / forum in the first half of 2018 in conjunction with the Melbourne Centre for the Study of Higher Education, exploring issues of student engagement and offering examples of effective, creative practices.

3. After the workshop, circulating further examples of good practices that emerge at the workshop / forum.

We urge all programs to kickstart new initiatives to engage our student body, with a view to making students feel they are valuable members of a vibrant learning community. Having a highly engaged student cohort has several important, positive flow-on effects, including fewer students taking leave of absence, lower attrition rates and fewer students finding themselves ‘at risk’.
Appendix A: Working Group Method

1. Objectives
   • Gain a better understanding of student disengagement in the context of teaching and learning,
   • Identify creative practices at the subject, course, school and faculty level that address student disengagement,
   • Identify creative practices that tutors, lectures, course coordinators and Heads of Schools have adopted to engage students in their courses, provide students with a cohort experience, and connect them to the University.

2. Methods: scoping, qualitative approach
   • Focus group discussions with students led by the student representatives. Students were recruited via notices around the University and given a $30 incentive in acknowledgment of their time, funded by UMSU.
   • Interviews with academics of all levels who have implemented innovated strategies at course, school, and faculty level to engage and connect with students. For recruitment, we sought input from TALQAC members to identify academics (tutors, lecturers, heads of schools, heads of teaching and learning units). We sought where possible responses from a range of teaching contexts (large classes, large number of international students, from Arts as UMSU representative reported concerns from Arts students).
   • Interviews and focus groups were undertaken from July to September and analysed for content and themes.

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<th>Student focus group outline</th>
<th>Outline of questions for academics</th>
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<td>“So firstly, I’m going to ask you to spend the next few minutes quickly jotting down the top five issues that you see as being barriers to student engagement (from the academic side of life – your course, subjects). It doesn’t necessarily need to make you drop out of uni altogether, but it might make you feel less connected to your studies”.</td>
<td>Recognising disengagement/ lack of connectedness:</td>
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<td>Discuss the top picks.</td>
<td>• How do you know when students aren’t feeling connected with the course/ with others in the course?</td>
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<td>Other questions: When you first started uni, what were your expectations, and how did it go?</td>
<td>• What are your experiences of student disengagement/lack of connectedness?</td>
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<td>Have you ever felt disconnected from uni? How?/Why?/ Why not? What about connected to your tutors/ teachers.</td>
<td>Connecting students through teaching and learning approaches:</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• What has motivated you to address this?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• How have you addressed this in your teaching?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Can you comment on how successful you think this/these interventions have been?</td>
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<td>• How sustainable are these innovations in your opinion?</td>
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3. Participants

**Students:** the student members conducted 3 focus groups: (i) 8 STEMM participants both UG and PG; (ii) 10 Arts students UG and 3 international students; (iii) 8 international students, UG, range of faculties.

**Academics:** Ten academics were interviewed by the TALQAC working group members.

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<th>Faculty/ School</th>
<th>Interviewees</th>
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<td>Chemical and Biomedical Engineering</td>
<td>Professor Sandra Kentish</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chemical and Biomedical Engineering</td>
<td>Dr Chris Honig</td>
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<tr>
<td>Faculty of Business and Economics</td>
<td>Professor Angela Paladino</td>
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<tr>
<td>Arts/ Historical and Philosophical Studies</td>
<td>Dr Una McIlvenna</td>
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<tr>
<td>Arts/ Languages and Linguistics</td>
<td>Assoc Professor Paul Gruba</td>
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<td>Arts/Culture and Communication</td>
<td>Ms Alex Ellem, Dr Wendy Haslem</td>
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<tr>
<td>Melbourne Business School/ Marketing</td>
<td>Professor Jill Klein</td>
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<td>MDHS/ Physiology</td>
<td>Dr Charles Sevigny</td>
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<td>Law</td>
<td>Ms Paula O’Brien</td>
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