Embedding research on student engagement in learning: lessons from the First Welsh Collaborative Enhancement Project

Davies and Lowe
Student Engagement: a Collaborative Enhancement Theme

Wales-wide collaborative approach

Undeb (Bangor SU) Student Futures Commissions: lack of social interaction impacting on learning.

BU internal group: effects of off-campus teaching, cohorts and underrepresented groups

Bangor Digest: active participation and interaction, proportion of well-designed studies - less than 2%.

Disciplinary differences

GIIIM – retention

In May 2021, funding from QAA Cymru.

Rationale:

The definition of student Engagement is cloudy
Establishing what works to meet what need is difficult!

This study helps us determine:

- Factors that drive student engagement
- Students’ experiences of group and individual learning
- What defines high quality interventions
Method:

• **Profiling...**
  the engagement of students in in-person and online timetabled events. The use of resources using business reporting and attendance monitoring. Orientation and assessment drive engagement.

• **Developing...**
  a definition of ‘good-quality’ reviewing reports of well-designed interventions.

• **Conducting...**
  focus groups across all three colleges at BU and in GLIM:
  Thirty-two (32) participants years 2 and 3.
  Five groups in each of 3 Bangor Colleges and a follow-up, 1 group at GLIM
  Mostly White (N = 27), Gender balanced.
Orientation, understanding and testing ideas

• “When you’re starting a module, it can be a bit much and comparing notes really helps you get over that.”

• “It might just be a couple of minutes, but you really want to be asking, “does this make sense” and it's much harder if you’re not walking to lectures together”

• Whatsapp: “Sometimes you see people posting about an idea they’ve got for their essay. We’re a small class (fine art) but people like to talk about it. Sometimes the idea changes quite a lot and is a lot better, I think.”
Making sense of assessment and feedback

• “When you walk out of an exam and you think you’re bombed it but when you talk to someone in your class, you can see what you’ve done right too”.

• “Feedback can be hard to understand. I’d rather talk to someone in my class first before going to a see a lecturer.”

• “if you’ve got the same feedback, it can help to talk it through”
Instigating Social Learning

- **Study spaces:** “It’s when you meet people from your course almost accidentally. Not your friends and you get talking about this lecture or that. That’s what keeps me going”.

- **“If I’m feeling a bit unmotivated, I go to our whasapp group. It always makes me feel like I’ve got something to say.”**

- **Mix of staff and students:** ‘It’s paramount. You’ve got to have the right people in the right place in the institution or you don’t have that level of motivation among students’.”
Literature review

• Terms including higher education, student engagement and aspects of engagement such as attainment, active learning, retention, belonging and learning style and synonyms

• Databases, biographies of major UK pedagogical institutions and references from key papers.

• A total of 956 items were initially collected.
  • After applying the exclusion and quality criteria, 118 items were selected.
  • Removing: review and theory-focused papers: 60

Evans’ criteria [1]

• Clarity of the pedagogical approach
• Clear information on methods, including sample and measures of success
• Good research design and coherence
• Clear reporting of data
• Explicit implications and recommendations
• Transferability of the findings

• We added impact factor of more than 1.0 and since 2001.

Good quality interventions

**Lecturer-instigated interventions e.g.** participative approaches, assessment and feedback techniques, active learning interventions, group work, technologically enhanced learning, flipped lecturers and simulations.

The primary outcome measure: improved **student performance**. Changes in **student perception** were widely reported and behavioural and attitudinal changes.

Some interventions targeted at **risk groups or minorities**.

**Peer to peer learning** was used as part of other interventions.
Social Learning and EDI

- Parallel with ours, an English CEP was exploring experiences of blended learning using an ethnically-stratified sample (N=900).
- Black, Arab and some Asian groups had a better learning experience off-campus in 2020/21 while White students had a poorer one.
- Major factor, loss of peer interaction.
- Is peer learning better for White students?

EDI and Research

Staff mentoring successful for underrepresented group [3-4]. Early intervention & formative feedback works for at-risk minority students [5].

**Peer or social learning:** Among students whose first language isn’t the language of study, social learning was curtailed [6].

How does peer to peer learning work? Is this different for ethnic or cultural minorities/int students? In-depth work (Ethnography, diaries, photos).

5. Espinoza, P. & Genna, GM. Hi, I Want to Talk to You About Your Progress: A Large Course Intervention for At-Risk College Students. Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice 2021, 23(1) 2–27.
Embedding and Use

• Findings presented to the University
  - Presented at multiple levels including to the University’s main T&L forum

• Estates strategy development
  - A new estates strategy is being developed, the key findings will help give a student focus

• Further Research from the SU
  - Building on this work the SU ran a survey and focus groups collecting further student feedback

• Proposals for peer-peer learning research
  - Structure and impetus to do the work, to disseminate it and to build a network across the institution, Wales and the UK.
Study spaces survey

**Scope**

Open for 1 month to all students
Promoted via social media and an all students email

524 respondents
77% of whom use University study spaces
Key Findings

- Lack of quiet study spaces
- Lack of charging ports
- Out of hours provision needed
- Different spaces for quiet/silent/group study
- Equipment to heat food and get drinks needed
- Lack of disabled access/accessible desks
Study spaces survey

Solutions

• University task and End group to focus on improvements

• Short term fixes to estates (i.e. More plug sockets)

• Development of new study area in Pontio

• Separating space use: Silent, Quiet, Social
Considerations for future work

Where have students come from?
Culture, social background, friends and family, disability, identity

What major external stressors are affecting students?
Cost of Living, Degree value, Strikes

What courses are students on?
Expectations, mindset, method

Distance leaners/ on or off campus?
Access to resources, social opportunities, online/ in person
Conclusions

Peer-Peer learning
Essential to student engagement
Enhancements targeted around student engagement should account for this

- Wales wide project: deliberative stakeholder discussion, relevant questions
- Funding and reporting duties of project provided the structure and impetus to do the work, to disseminate it and build network.
- Discussions led to the study spaces survey
- Findings fed into new strategy group and conversations around Estates.
- Short term and long-term changes planned collaboratively between the University and the SU for social and study spaces
Join us!

There is a lot of further work that can be done across the UK around peer-peer learning

• Further **research** peer-peer learning

• **Sharing** data and key enhancements amongst institutions

• Finding creative and **alternative methods** to boost engagement in:

  Teaching
  Assessment practice
  Feedback collection

• **Toolbox of illustrative interventions:**
  [https://sites.google.com/view/v4student-engagement/home](https://sites.google.com/view/v4student-engagement/home)
Diolch yn fawr!

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