

The challenge of student engagement
Keynote address by Professor Don Markwell,
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Colleagues -

It is a very great pleasure to be with you today, as we discuss the vitally important challenge of student engagement. The fact that I am one of its newest members of staff does not deter me from adding my voice to Allan's and Jane's in welcoming colleagues from other universities most warmly to the University of Western Australia.

The fact that we are meeting here in this Teaching and Learning Forum reflects not only the co-operation between the five universities in Western Australia, but also the increased focus in recent years in universities nationally and internationally on enhancing the quality of learning and teaching. This focus – more accurately, this renewed focus - is overdue, and highly desirable.

As you know, in the literature on enhancing teaching and learning there has been growing attention given to student engagement, including the measurement of student engagement - most prominently through NSSE, the US National Survey of Student Engagement – and factors working against it, and how to encourage it.

'Student engagement' is indeed one of the buzzwords, or buzz phrases, of today. Like many buzzwords, it points us to something vitally important, but also means different things to different people.

So first of all, I would like briefly to discuss the question 'what is student engagement?', then to consider why it is important, how it connects with some of the other trends in higher education, and just what is necessary in the university

environment to promote student engagement, and finally to leave you with several questions – challenges, even provocations – for further reflection. It will, I hope, be obvious that none of my discussion represents the last word on any aspect of this important and wide-ranging topic. It will also be obvious that many of the issues I will touch on fleetingly will be referred to in greater depth and specificity in many of the paper presentations and workshops, which I am sure will reflect the excellent work which I know so many colleagues are doing.

What is student engagement?

In my mind, student engagement is the extent to which students are actively engaged in – actively committed to and actively involved in – their own learning. It seems to me that this is at the heart of any worthwhile notion of ‘student engagement’.

Many elements make up or contribute to student engagement, some of which are sometimes treated as synonymous with student engagement. These elements include:

- Attendance at and active participation in classes,
- Hours of personal study, be it alone or in a group, and the degree and effectiveness of active study,
- Something which is sometimes overlooked - engagement with the discipline or disciplines the student is studying – the extent to which the student of history or physics, say, feels and acts as a historian or physicist in the making, engaged with that disciplinary community,
- Collaborative and more informal interaction with fellow students, or ‘peer engagement’,
- Interaction with academic staff, particularly interactions which focus on an individual’s learning and development,
- Interaction with other support staff, such as student affairs staff,
- Participation in extra-curricular activities,
- Engagement with and through a range of available learning resources, including online media and the like,

- Sense of belonging to a learning community, perhaps a study group, a tutorial group, a faculty, and also
- Sense of belonging to the university or college as an institution.

Each one of these elements is very important for the contribution they make to the engagement of students in their own learning. Many involve students working actively to enhance their learning and development. Others involve staff and institutions putting in place simultaneously challenging and supportive environments which are likely to promote student involvement. All place students at the centre of learning and development, where they should be encouraged to be active, involved, passionate, and curious.

‘Motivation’ and ‘engagement’ seem sometimes to be treated as synonyms also, but it seems to me that they are different but closely related: the more motivated a student, the more likely they are to become engaged; and their active engagement can reinforce their motivation.

Student engagement manifests itself in different ways at different stages of the student experience. It varies over time – the engagement of an Honours student is usually very different from that of a first-year undergraduate, for example - and depends on the individual, the institution, the nature of the cohort and the learning community, the curriculum, and so on. It seems to me important that our discussions of student engagement and how to foster it pay regard to these variations.

Why is student engagement important?

The current focus on student engagement appears to reflect growing or renewed recognition

- that to be effective learning must be an active process by the individual,
- that learning takes place best when it is *interactive*, including interaction between students and their teachers, and amongst students themselves,

- that learning outside the classroom can be as important as – indeed more important than – learning within the classroom, and
- that the most effective learning takes place within a learning *community*, something every educational institution should in my view aspire to be.

All these factors point unmistakably to the importance of students engaging actively in their own learning, engaging with each other, engaging with those who teach them, engaging with and through a range of available learning resources, and engaging in extra-curricular activities – all this within an academic community to which they have some real sense of belonging.

In short, student engagement is important because it enhances - one might say is essential to - the quality of the student learning experience. The Australian evidence - for example, that assembled by Kerri-Lee Krause and colleagues at Melbourne's Centre for the Study of Higher Education – concurs with US and other overseas evidence that more engaged students report higher satisfaction and higher achievement and academic success, and are less likely to drop out, than less engaged students.¹

This vision of student engagement is, alas, still too rare amongst students and even among staff in our universities. Our first challenge, in my view, is to reinstate this vision of student engagement – a point to which I will return.

Note that many of these elements of student engagement are possible in online and other distance education as well as in on-campus education, and are possible for part-time as well as full-time students, and across all age groups and year levels.²

Nevertheless, as I have already implied, student engagement may look different and manifest itself in different ways in each of these contexts. It is important to acknowledge and plan for the multidimensional nature of student engagement. I am not suggesting that campus-based learning or full-time study are the only models. But I believe that it is certainly the case that campus-based learning creates far more

¹ E.g., Kerri-Lee Krause, 'Evaluating and Enhancing Student Engagement in Learning', seminar paper at Quality Enhancement Meeting 11, Wellington, NZ, 28-29 September 2006.

² See, e.g. Hamish Coates, *Student Engagement in Campus-based and Online Education: University connections*, Taylor and Francis, London, 2006.

opportunities for student engagement than even the best distance modes, and full-time more than part-time; and that residential education – which is of course at the heart of what the very top British and American universities and colleges offer – provides the greatest opportunities of all for student engagement.

This reference to the leading universities of Britain and the US reminds us that there is in fact nothing particularly new about these ideas. The importance of active and interactive learning, beyond as well as within the classroom, and within a broader learning community, are ideas which have long underpinned the tutorial and collegiate systems of Cambridge and Oxford, and of many institutions – including many of the leading institutions of the United States – which have been influenced by their heritage. This is not to say that those institutions are perfect – a former Dean of Harvard College, Harry R. Lewis, has indeed written a somewhat hyperbolic book arguing that Harvard ‘forgot education’³ - but I would argue that they nonetheless present models of the highest quality learning environment, from which I believe we have much to learn.

It is important for us in Australia to recognise that other countries are learning some at least of the lessons provided by the top US and UK institutions, and that if we do not also learn them, we risk the quality of our university education being overtaken by other countries – ultimately to our great national detriment. To give one example: Fudan University, one of the leading universities in China, has explicitly drawn on Yale, especially, in its creation of Fudan College, which provides a first-year program of general or liberal education, with students living together on campus, and with staff mentoring of students, including helping to guide their later subject choices.

Ideas focussed on student engagement have received renewed and wider recognition far beyond these institutions, including through research undertaken in the increasingly professionalised study of higher education within universities, independent research and policy institutes, and agencies designed to enhance the quality of teaching and learning such as Australia’s Carrick Institute and Britain’s Higher Education Academy. The issues and trends are strikingly similar between such

³ Harry R. Lewis, *Excellence Without a Soul: How a Great University Forgot Education*, Public Affairs, New York, 2006.

countries as Australia, Britain, and the United States, and we can learn from, as well as contribute to, research and discussion internationally. It may be also that we in universities are learning, and can learn more, from the experience with student engagement and its importance and challenges in the school sector, along with implications for supporting a more engaged transition process from school to university – also the subject of much research and discussion.

Certainly research on the university student experience has drawn our attention afresh to the importance to student learning of student engagement – of students being engaged with their own learning in a learning community. For example, Richard Light's book, *Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds*, reporting on the Harvard Assessment Project, was based on lengthy interviews with over 1600 students at Harvard and other leading American universities and colleges. The first of its key findings was described by the author this way:⁴

I assumed that most important and memorable academic learning goes on inside the classroom, while outside activities provide a useful but modest supplement. The evidence shows that the opposite is true: learning outside of classes, especially in residential settings and extracurricular activities such as the arts, is vital. When we asked students to think of a specific, critical incident or moment that had changed them profoundly, four-fifths of them chose a situation or event outside of the classroom.

Four-fifths of students chose a situation or event outside the classroom as their most profound learning experience! No wonder such 'beyond-class' experiences are crucially important in the idea of student engagement, which emphasises the 'holistic student perspective' rather than distinctions between the formal academic and broader dimensions of university life.

⁴ Richard Light, *Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds*, Harvard University Press, 2001, p. 8.

Derek Bok, the former and current President of Harvard, in his important book *Our Underachieving Colleges: A Candid Look at How Much Students Learn and Why They Should Be Learning More*, refers to this striking finding, and adds:⁵

Unlike regular classes, moreover, these extracurricular experiences and chance encounters cannot be programmed through television or the Internet. Ironically, therefore, although they are neglected by the faculty, they offer the strongest reason why pundits are wrong when they claim that modern technology has made the traditional residential college [or, more generally, what we might call the campus experience] a costly relic that will eventually go the way of the dinosaur.

Another finding of the Harvard Assessment Project which also points strongly in the direction of student engagement, and is reported in Light's *Making the Most of College*, is about the importance of study groups. Quote: ⁶

...a particular study habit shared by almost all students who are struggling academically [is that] they always study alone. Students point out that those who always study alone are isolating themselves from a key benefit of college – the opportunity to learn from fellow students.

Light encourages students to study in groups, and academics and student advisers to encourage such study groups, including designing homework assignments so that they must be undertaken in a group. The Harvard Assessment Project suggests that 'small groups appear to be even more important for the sciences than for courses in any other field'. In the context of a US four-year liberal arts degree, where students undertake wide-ranging general education before concentrating on their particular interests, the Harvard Assessment Project suggests that 'whether or not students work together in small study groups outside of class is the single best predictor of how many classes in science they take. Those who do work in small groups take more science courses.'⁷

⁵ Derek Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges: A Candid Look at How Much Students Learn and Why They Should Be Learning More*, Princeton University Press, 2006, pp. 352-3.

⁶ Light, p. 40.

⁷ Light, p. 74.

I should add that the benefits of students studying in social contexts with the support of peers has been widely supported by other research, such as that of Pascarella and Terenzini,⁸ and Tinto.⁹

A third crucially important finding of the Harvard Assessment Project is the importance of good mentoring and advising. This resonates with the higher education research literature which almost unequivocally extols the virtues of students' contact with academic staff. In a context where every student will meet with an academic adviser – a faculty member whom they will expect to get to know well - Richard Light writes:¹⁰

Good advising may be the single most underestimated characteristic of a successful college experience. Graduating seniors report that certain kinds of advising, often described as asking unexpected questions, were critical for their success.

As well as identifying other things an adviser can do – such as challenging students to think about the relationship of their academic work to their personal lives, encouraging them to keep a time log and discussing their use of time with them, assisting students with their writing skills, encouraging them to get involved in group activities, urging them to work collegially - Light describes 'the single most important bit of advice [he] can possibly give to new advisees': 'Your job', he tells them, 'is to get to know one faculty member reasonably well this semester, and also to have that faculty member get to know you reasonably well.'¹¹ I would add that good mentors should challenge students to think about their own strengths, weaknesses, and passions, and how their education, and the choices they make each year and each semester, can contribute to their becoming the person they want to be – in five years, ten years, even in twenty-five years time.

⁸ E. T. Pascarella & P. T. Terenzini, *How college affects students: Vol. 2. A third decade of research*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 2005.

⁹ E.g. Vincent Tinto, 'Educational Communities and Student Success in the First Year of University', Proceedings of the Transition from Secondary School to University conference, Monash University, Melbourne, 29 November 1995.

¹⁰ Light, p. 81.

¹¹ Light, p. 86.

And so we have both the importance of academic mentoring or advising, and the importance of students and academics getting to know each other. My experience is that this is very distant from the reality experienced by the vast majority of students in Australian universities. I have, for example, repeatedly been struck that students with impressive academic transcripts applying for post-graduate scholarships tell me that there is no academic staff member, or almost none, who they think knows them well enough to write them a reference. Resource constraints are likely to set tight boundaries on what is possible, and yet the American – and I might say British – experience presents a challenge to us: how can we in Australian universities expose our students to high-quality and consistent mentoring or advising, and how can we create a situation in which all students get to know and be known by academic staff? And how can we make those mentoring, advising, and teaching relationships simultaneously challenging and supportive? At the very least, how do we even get students to knock on staff doors when they are confused or need assistance? And how can we make more opportunities for more of the beyond-class and broadly intellectual interactions which are known to be key ingredients in student learning and development?

In short, the importance of out-of-classroom activities, studying in groups, and of good mentoring and advising are three findings of research on university-level learning that point us afresh to the importance of student engagement.

The recent focus on student engagement also seems to me to reflect concerns – entirely legitimate concerns – that in many institutions in recent decades there has been insufficient thought given to the notion of student engagement; that the sense of the institution as a learning community has been weakened, even to the point where I have heard it said that the phrase ‘learning community’ is now seen by many as a meaningless platitude; and that various factors have been powerfully reducing the degree of student engagement.

I do not want to suggest that there was once some golden age which we simply need to restore. The past is far more complex, and more imperfect, than that. In 1945, Sir John Medley, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Melbourne, arguing that ‘our proper role’ is ‘fostering the fusion of the technical and humane viewpoints’, wrote

that 'our staffs are overburdened by routine work and cannot devote the time that many of them would willingly give to the extra-curricular activities upon which humane studies for the ordinary student must largely depend'.¹²

The work of Kerri-Lee Krause and colleagues, and especially their work on the first year experience, is important to our understanding of the level of student engagement and trends in it within Australia.¹³ Although Dr Krause does stress that there is much positive student engagement in our universities, and improvements in some aspects, such as engagement with academic staff, her data nonetheless shows, for first year students,

- a decline in contact hours over the last decade,
- an increase in students expressing lack of interest in extra-curricular activities, and
- a decline in students working with other students on coursework problems or getting together with other students to discuss subjects.

In the 2004 survey, only 51% of first year students said they 'feel they belong to the university community', a third were not confident that any academic knew their name, and 27% said that they kept to themselves when they 'visited' the university campus.

Some at least of the claims made about the factors working against student engagement are controversial, but among them are said by some to be

- the increase in the proportion of students undertaking paid work, and – more contentiously – the claimed increase in the number of hours of paid work students undertake during semester,
- the increased pressures on academics to undertake research and to publish,
- the fragmentation of curriculum,

¹² J. D. G. Medley, *The Present and Future of Australian Universities*, Melbourne University Press for the University of Queensland, 1945, p. 11.

¹³ Krause, 'Evaluating and Enhancing Student Engagement in Learning'.

- the deterioration in the student:staff ratio, so that there are many more students per academic staff member than, say, fifteen years ago, and less scope for small group learning and individual staff:student interaction,
- the ‘multi-tasking’ ethos of Generation Y, given – it is said - to treating university as just another appointment in their diaries,¹⁴ perhaps intensified by the growth of what Derek Bok rather contentiously calls the ‘addictive distractions’ of ‘improved computer games, iPods’, and the like,¹⁵
- the long-term growth in the size of institutions, so that there is a reduced sense of community and belonging, and a greater risk of anonymity and alienation,
- the increased diversity of the student body – welcome though it is – that has contributed to a complex heterogeneity of students’ background experiences, pathways through university, and aspirations – heterogeneity which institutions have not necessarily responded to as creatively and effectively as is needed to support students of diverse backgrounds, and
- the increased number of sessional staff who typically teach in tutorial or lab settings, but do not have a sustained presence in the lives of students.

It is a sad irony that it is at the very time when, in higher education, and partly at the initiative of government, there is renewed focus on teaching and learning, and within that renewed focus on the importance of student engagement, actions are taken in the pursuit of so-called ‘voluntary student unionism’ that make it harder rather than easier to support and maintain student activities on campus.

And yet I think that we should be pleased to be part of the renewed focus on teaching and learning, and within that on student engagement, which seem to me both welcome and important.

The current and, I very much hope, future focus on student engagement relates closely to several other major developments or trends in university education. Let me mention seven.

¹⁴ Krause, p. 5.

¹⁵ Bok, pp. 112-3.

First, there appears to be a growing sense that generic or transferable skills – skills such as critical and creative thinking, clear communication, the capacity to work in teams as well as independently, leadership, and inter-cultural competence – are as important as, even more important than, the mastering or accumulation of particular bodies of knowledge. The actively engaged student is likely to develop these far more readily and fully than the inert or disengaged student. Derek Bok sums up the research:¹⁶

Most studies show that improvement in critical thinking varies directly with the time students spend studying, the extent to which they participate actively in class, and the amount of discussion they have on intellectual matters outside class, both with faculty and with classmates, especially those with views and backgrounds different from their own.

He also writes with reference to the American experience of extra-curricular activities, of which we also in Australia have many excellent examples. Bok writes:¹⁷

Common sense suggests why extracurricular activities often do more than coursework to stimulate several important forms of personal growth. Students are much more likely to learn about working effectively with others from playing on an athletic team, acting in a college play, or even belonging to a fraternity than from the solitary experience of attending classes and studying in the library. Many of them will gain a better understanding of people of different races and religions from living and working within a diverse student body than from taking courses on cultural differences or race relations. ... Preparing undergraduates for citizenship in a democracy – one of the oldest aims of education – occurs not only in courses on political science or ... history but also in student government, dormitory elections, young Democrat and Republican clubs, and many other extracurricular settings. Learning to think carefully and precisely about ethical questions can take place both in classes on moral reasoning and on athletic teams, community service projects, and honor code committees.

¹⁶ Bok, p. 144.

¹⁷ Bok, pp. 52-3.

The language and examples are American, but – as I have said - we know that there are many such activities – including what may be an increasing number of community service activities - that enrich the lives of many, but still too few, Australian students.

My second point is related. We are increasingly conscious of the importance of a capacity and motivation for lifelong learning – including the capacity to master new bodies of knowledge, and to apply that knowledge to new problems, as knowledge grows and changes with apparently ever-increasing speed. The engaged student is surely more likely to develop both this capacity and this motivation than the unengaged.

Third, it is likely that active student engagement will contribute to students developing solid social networks and resilience which may help them to avoid mental health problems, ranging from depression to suicide, and may increase the chances of their seeking and getting assistance with mental health problems, including from student health and counselling services. All this seems to me enormously important.

Fourth, the development of new information and communication technologies has presented challenges to and opportunities for the traditional campus university, including raising such issues as these:

- how can IT be used to create a greater sense of engagement within a university - for example, through clever use of portals as the electronic embodiment of the all-round educational offering of the institution, communicating to students and staff alike the richness of what is on offer and what they can engage with on campus?
- how can IT, including learning management systems, be used to provide learning materials in a way which increases rather than reduces students' engagement with the material and with their classes, and how can classes be taught engagingly when students can find most of the information they need to learn on the web?

- where universities engage in online distance education, how can a sense of engagement and of community be fostered for online students?¹⁸

Fifth - and without neglecting the needs of Australian students from rural and isolated communities, from economically disadvantaged backgrounds who may be the first in their family to attend university, and other under-represented groups – it is relevant to stress that particular issues of engagement arise for international students, who are faced with multiple adjustments, including moving from one culture to another; from a socially supportive home environment to one that all too often does not feel especially supportive, and can be very isolating; and often needing to adjust their learning style. For example, the adjustment from a Confucian tradition of respect and humility to a Socratic tradition of scepticism and questioning can be very difficult. The difficulty of engaging with Australian students, and the temptation to stick with fellow overseas students, can be very strong. It is not clear that all our universities do enough to prepare and assist international students through these transitions, and to help them to engage. The very phrase ‘international students’ itself emphasises differentness, rather than inclusion. Yet I believe that the growth of international student numbers, and the evident limits on the interaction between Australian and international students, has helped to highlight for us the importance of efforts to encourage student engagement – including bringing to our attention the very real benefits that can flow to students of all backgrounds and cultures when they actually do interact positively with fellow students of other backgrounds.

Sixth, there is at present a growing focus, partly driven by government, on so-called ‘knowledge transfer’ – of universities engaging with and serving their communities through sharing knowledge with them, including through public events, the commercialisation of research, and the engagement of academics in public debate. In this context, there may be special benefits in co-curricular activities that involve students in knowledge transfer from the classroom to the community, for example through community-based research projects, and vice versa as they take their learning back to the classroom. Civic engagement and service learning, in collaboration with fellow students and as integrated parts of the curriculum, are powerful means of

¹⁸ See, e.g. Coates (2006).

engaging students. This has been an important element in curriculum reform in some places – Amherst College is one important international example – and I believe it will feature increasingly prominently in discussions of curriculum transformation in Australia as well as overseas.

Seventh and finally, at a time when universities and colleges are increasingly focussed on the importance of outreach to alumni and other potential friends of the institution for the purpose of greatly increasing philanthropic support for higher education, it is becoming more widely recognised, I think, that how engaged students are and feel themselves to be during their student years will have a great bearing on how connected and supportive towards the institution they are likely to be in later years. One form of student engagement which some institutions have found works well is involving students in their alumni outreach and fundraising activities – for example, students thanking donors, in letters or phone calls, for their donations to the institution. This may be thought of as a particular form of involvement of students in community service activities, something I think we should and will see happening far more frequently.

What is necessary for student engagement?

Many factors are necessary for us to encourage student engagement. Let me touch briefly on these under five broad headings.

First and foremost, in my view, as I have already suggested, we need to put in front of students and staff alike a vision of student – *and staff* – engagement within a wider vision of an academic community. We need to make the case for what I have already described as active and interactive learning in a learning community rich with co-curricular and extra-curricular activities. Too few students, and too few academic and general staff, approach university life with this vision in mind. Presenting a compelling and exciting vision of what university life can be like, and of the great benefits that flow from it, may not be sufficient but it is surely necessary for making substantial progress. It is, in my view, a considerable but exciting challenge.

Second, we need actively to encourage, with deeds as well as words, student activities that reflect and promote student engagement – including a rich array of extra-curricular activities. Where these are activities that connect directly with studies – be they in music or languages, within the community or on exploratory expeditions, or much else besides – so much the better; but history shows that the full gamut of student activities, from sport to student politics, are likely to contribute much to the educational development of those who take part in them.

One factor which I think is important in this is creating a sense of cohort – the sense that students belong to a particular cohort or group sharing, with their own individual variations, the same learning journey together. It seems to me that creating the sense that we are ‘the class of 2010’ or whatever it may be can be immensely powerful in this; and anything that risks reducing the sense of cohort, of shared student experience, needs to be watched very closely. This is one reason why I have always been cautious about ideas of year-round teaching, with students entering and leaving at different points through the year. It is very desirable that there be interaction between, and a sense of cohort among, students of diverse academic disciplines and backgrounds. This can be enormously enriching of students’ educational and life experience, compared with what can be a narrow experience for students who restrict themselves to mixing only with students from their own faculty or discipline. The sense of cohort that exists in some cases among students of a particular discipline should, where possible, be opened out into a more diverse cohort.

We also need to be mindful that students need to learn, and should be encouraged and assisted to learn, to manage their time in a way that gives full weight to their formal academic studies alongside active extra-curricular engagement. The Harvard Assessment Project is again instructive: the big difference between second year students – all of them highly talented - who had done very well in their first year and second year students who had struggled in first year was whether they focused on managing their time, or perhaps even thought of time allocation at all.

Of course it will be argued that many, perhaps most, students need to engage in substantial part-time work to pay their way through university, and this limits student engagement. I think we need to approach these propositions with some care. Even if

they are true, and the evidence and arguments on this are mixed, I would ask: what arrangements for student finance – both nationally and within individual institutions – can we achieve that will enable students, regardless of their families' means, to undertake their university studies without needing to work so much that it interferes with their capacity actually to have a high-quality university education? Coherent and co-ordinated national and institutional programs of student finance – including scholarships and financial assistance, student employment, and loans – which are desirable on access and equity grounds, could also help make possible a major improvement in student engagement.

We also need to remember that many students gain valuable skills and experience from their paid work, which can provide a valuable complement to study, particularly when work hours are limited appropriately and the work itself is in some ways related to the students' academic study. Work that enables students to put theory into practice in the workplace can make a major difference to their understanding and their engagement. There is a challenge to us to consider how curriculum and assessment might be reshaped to capitalise more effectively on the skills students are developing out of class, including in the workplace. There is also an opportunity for institutions to think about what valuable work opportunities can be opened up for students on campus – something far more common in the United States than here. This is just one example of the reciprocal responsibility for student engagement – the responsibility of students to engage, and the responsibility of those who teach and of the institutions to help to create opportunities, reasons, encouragement, and support for that engagement.

Student extra-curricular activities should be within the context of a broader rich campus life – with student-run activities taking place alongside all manner of other activities involving a wider audience, ideally from the broader community as well as within the university community. Such activities would include guest lecturers and visiting speakers, public debates (I am tempted to say, the more controversial the better), concerts and plays and other performances, artistic exhibitions and installations, and more. Our campuses should be alive, if not 24/7, then pretty close to it. Some at least of our universities are rich in these activities. But do they actually engage our students? Do we do enough to encourage students to take part in official

activities that perhaps too often seem far removed from student life? Do we bring students, staff, alumni, other members of the community, distinguished and even undistinguished visitors into contact with each other nearly enough? I realise that there are obstacles to this: but can we do better?

Third, and related to this, we need to encourage and assist staff, academic and general staff alike, to do those things which will best encourage student engagement – lecturers finding ways to encourage interaction in large classes as well as in small, and encouraging, even requiring, students to study in groups, and using feedback to encourage engagement; academics finding ways to urge and to stimulate students to work to master thoroughly the material they are studying – to understand the fundamental principles, and not simply to memorise the details; academics finding ways that will engage and excite students through connecting their research with their teaching; staff taking part in the wider student life of the university, supporting extracurricular activities; and so on. Professional development activities, such as this forum, which focus on student engagement and which help staff identify specific strategies they can adopt, or adapt, will be profoundly important.

This means, of course, that student engagement requires staff engagement. There are undoubtedly real problems that constrain staff engagement – problems such as too high a student:staff ratio, of promotional carrots and sticks still heavily biased towards research, and the fear of being thought eccentric or even accused of worse because of being engaged with student activities. Each of these, it seems to me, is an obstacle to be overcome, not a reason to do nothing. For example, in my view, we best make the case for greater levels of resources for universities – be it from public or private sources – if we focus on factors that incontrovertibly show that we need to do better; and the fact that the typical Australian university has around three times the number of students per academic staff member compared with the top American universities seems to me to be one of those most crucial pieces of evidence.

But, although there are resource constraints, there is also much that can be done. In some cases, it is a matter of thinking about how we teach and what we choose to say to students in all those moments we have to influence them, and also learning from our own experience and the experience and the research of others. It is also possible

that the structure of our courses and our curriculum can have a real impact on the degree of student engagement. For example:

- Do the number and highly specialised nature of many of the degrees our universities offer militate against the cohort experience that can be so valuable to student engagement?
- Would having a research project as a ‘capstone’ for every coursework degree, if this were practical, encourage student engagement?
- Would building in to degree courses a greater focus on relevant community service activities, or other practical work connected with that subject, encourage student engagement? How can students be engaged in so-called ‘knowledge transfer’ to their benefit as well as to the community’s?
- How does encouragement to students to undertake Study Abroad connect with their engagement?
- Would having a general first-year for all undergraduates across a university, or at least some subjects that every student is required to undertake, contribute to the sense of cohort and shared experience?

Fourth, we need always to be mindful of the importance of creating an inclusive environment – one in which women and men of all cultural, national, socio-economic and other backgrounds will, so far as possible, feel able to engage on equal terms. This is a real challenge, perhaps most especially, for students who come from overseas, and for students whose family background makes them less comfortable with the university environment than many of their fellow students. Indeed, Kerri-Lee Krause rightly emphasises that for some students – those ‘for whom the culture of the institution is foreign and at times alienating and uninviting’ – ‘engagement with the university experience is like engaging in a battle, a conflict’.¹⁹ Supporting such students seems to me especially important.

Fifth, given the large size of most of our universities, we need to think actively about how we can encourage student engagement – which in my view is more likely to thrive in small communities – within our mass institutions. Perhaps a little ironically,

¹⁹ Krause, p. 6.

this means that we must continue to build into the management processes of our universities, and into planning and accountability processes at every level, attention to student engagement. As Hamish Coates and others have been arguing,²⁰ we need to continue focussing on what measures of student engagement will be most accurate and most useful to us – be it NSSE, or a specific student engagement questionnaire, or aspects of CEQ, or some other measures. We need not only to use these tools to help diagnose problems but to help us think through possible solutions. We need to encourage and reward those sections of our institutions, and those staff members, who develop positive ways to encourage and support student engagement. And we need continually to reiterate to students and staff alike its importance to the quality of student learning.

Conclusion and challenges

This, then, is our challenge – to identify, to implement, to evaluate, and to improve those strategies – from the actions of individual staff members within the classroom or with individual students, through to institution-wide policies and administration – which will best encourage positive student engagement in an individual learning experience within a learning community. The challenge is demanding, and in some respects at least may be getting harder – but the importance of the task, for enhancing the quality of education we offer, has surely never been greater nor, I would like to think, more obvious.

It is, of course, always easier to talk about student engagement, and generally about best practice in teaching and learning, than it is to put the key principles and research results into practice. To put the ideas I have been talking about today into practice requires us to consider some key questions, which I would like to put to you for reflection:

- First, what strategies can individual teaching staff adopt to encourage student engagement?

²⁰ E.g., Hamish Coates, 'Engage the entire experience', *The Australian*, 26 July 2006, p. 28.

- Second, and closely related, how can we - within the realities of our resource-constrained and large universities - enable mentoring and advising, and one-to-one staff:student interaction, and make it worth having?
- Third, in what ways can the structure of our courses and our curriculum encourage student engagement?
- Fourth, what strategies can student support staff and administrative staff adopt to encourage student engagement? And how can student affairs staff work hand-in-hand with academic staff to enhance the whole student experience?

In other words, how do we achieve a whole-of-institution focus on enhancing student engagement?

- Fifth, how can IT be used to encourage, and not to undermine, student engagement?
- Sixth, how do we best help students for whom the university environment is foreign and even alienating?
- Finally, but far from least important, how do we ensure that there is a rich extra-curricular campus community life, and how do we encourage both students and staff to engage in that campus life?

If we can devise, and put into practice, answers to these questions, we will enhance, perhaps even transform, the education of our students. The rewards of that may be beyond measure – and not least among them, the knowledge that each of us has done something immensely worthwhile.