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# **Alienation, agency and authenticity: a synthesis of the literature on student engagement**

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## **Abstract**

In recent years a number of authors have undertaken extensive reviews of the international research literature to investigate student engagement in higher education. This paper presents the findings of a study that synthesised the qualitative research literature systematically, through the use of qualitative research synthesis. The purpose of the study was not only to synthesize the literature, but also to examine and present the concepts and themes that recurred across the student engagement literature in terms of students' conceptions of engagement. The implications for enhancing student engagement practices are also considered in relation to pedagogical design decisions.

## **Introduction**

Student learning and development are the core business of the academy (Coates, 2010), and reviews of the student engagement literature provide a useful resource when examining factors that influence student engagement (Haggis, 2009; Trowler & Trowler, 2010; Zepke & Leach, 2010). As evidence-based planning, practice and quality enhancement further develop, universities are seeking more sophisticated ways of using data about education. It is argued here that synthesising qualitative studies can offer a valuable means of examining student engagement due to the more personalised perspectives and illuminative experiences that qualitative studies provide, which are often difficult to locate through analysis of national student survey data, typically reported upon within quantitative studies. This paper undertakes such a project, shifting away from quantitative forms of meta-analysis and quasi-qualitative forms of meta-synthesis, to adopt qualitative research synthesis (QRS) as the research framework (Major & Savin-Baden, 2010). In particular, this QRS focused on conceptualising how student experiences relate to the current literature on student engagement. Following Haggis (2009:389) we suggest that studies are required which do justice to students' understanding of what typically we have deemed to be 'their' learning. Such conceptualisations then have implications for learning that is designed to support engagement.

Funded by the Higher Education Academy, this paper presents the first QRS undertaken on the theme of student engagement, across higher education (HE). Detail is included on how the synthesis process was conducted. The main findings are discussed in relation to the student encounter and implications for pedagogical practices. Finally, recommendations for further research are offered.

## **Literature Review**

The literature on student engagement offers a broad phenomenon that encompasses academic as well as selected non-academic and social aspects of the student experiences, as presented in recent reviews of the student engagement literature. In Haggis' (2009) overview, consideration of the theoretical positioning of research into student learning is critiqued. Whereas Trowler and Trowler's (2010) review takes a wider, more general examination reviewing what we know about student engagement,

mainly from (quantitative) studies. Definitions of student engagement draw upon Kuh et al., (2007) and Krause and Coates (2008) by considering student engagement in terms of the extent to which students are seen to engage in activities that contribute towards desired (high-quality) learning outcomes. The definitions promote a predominantly institutional focus centred on outcomes (such as retention, success rates and acknowledging diversity). In their synthesis, Zepke and Leach (2010) similarly focus on 'high quality learning' (ACER, 2008: vi) but broaden their accepted definition to include a focus on the student's cognitive investment, active participation and emotional commitment to their learning. What the latter reviews highlight, is that responsibility for engagement is shared; some students experience engagement negatively; and engagement requires successful transition. Studies have considered what institutions and educators can do to improve engagement (and retention) including the roles of institutional structures and cultures (Porter, 2006); there is a focus on learning design and how educators practise and relate to their students (Haug, 2006); student agency and motivation is recognised (Hockings et al., 2008); as is the impact of environmental factors such as family, relationships and economic status (Miliszewska & Horwood, 2004). Furthermore, issues of student retention are viewed as a concern for all institutions (Krause, 2005; Kuh et al., 2008), set against a backdrop of widening participation (Johnson et al., 2007).

Whilst the Trowler and Trowlers' review largely excluded qualitative studies, as they did not meet the authors' criteria for robustness, one of their key recommendations highlighted the need to develop a robust body of evidence, built up through small-scale studies that speak to – 'confirm, challenge or redefine' other studies, so that rather than stand alone evidence, a more integrated picture can emerge of practice and effects (p.50). Similarly, Haggis (2009) acknowledged the need for research trends into student engagement to be prepared to focus on new perspectives to understanding what can be known. With this in mind we sought to undertake a qualitative research synthesis of the research evidence into the learners' experience of engagement.

We believed that it was important at the outset to define student engagement, with a focus on the student voice; therefore the following definition was selected;

‘[E]ngagement which can be considered to represent a connection in the context of a relationship which a student desires or expects to belong to’

(Case 2007:120).

Having established this it was then possible to create a clear research question and set of inclusion and exclusion criteria necessary for undertaking the synthesis, which we now go on to present.

## **Methodology**

Qualitative research synthesis (QRS), a methodologically grounded and scholarly approach, developed by Major and Savin-Baden, (2010) was used in this study to examine the practice and effects of student engagement. This involved analysing, synthesizing and interpreting the results of a set of qualitative studies addressing the research theme. The QRS process offers a useful means of maximising knowledge production, relevance and scientific knowledge for dissemination (Major & Savin-Baden, 2010). Furthermore, QRS provides researcher knowledge about quality issues when conducting qualitative research methodology, since only studies of accepted calibre are included.

The QRS provided opportunity to:

- Make connections between existing studies
- Complement primary empirical studies
- Complement existing meta-analysis/syntheses by providing a different perspective
- Provide ways to advance theory
- Help to identify gaps and omissions in a given body of research
- Enable dialogue and debate

### ***The qualitative research synthesis process***

The role of the synthesist is to be as transparent as possible about the process. As researchers we were aware of our own guiding philosophical stances which value inclusivity, empowerment, and reciprocal forms of expertise, all of which had bearing upon the synthesis process. Furthermore, throughout this study, we have adopted an

interpretivist stance, which, alongside the recognition of researcher stance, includes the use of thick description (Geertz, 1973) and the interpretation of subtext.

The QRS process followed the stages as detailed by Major and Savin-Baden (2010);

- 1 {
  - Identify area of research and research question
  - Identify and collate qualitative studies related to the research question across a large area of literature
  - Examine the theories and methods used in each study in-depth
- 2 {
  - Compare and analyze findings for each study
  - Synthesize the findings for each study
  - Undertake an interpretation of findings across the studies
  - Provide recommendations

### ***Research Question***

Our research question was:

What concepts, categories or themes have recurred across the student engagement literature, in particular regarding the practice and effects of student engagement?

### ***Inclusion and exclusion criteria***

Six educational data bases were selected

- ERIC
- Academic Search Complete
- ASSIA
- Open University (HEER)
- Routledge
- SAGE Journals

A broad sweep of the data bases on ‘student engagement’ and ‘higher education’ and ‘qualitative’ research, published since 2000, was adopted first. This resulted in 2,530

articles. We further narrowed articles found through using inclusion and exclusion criteria we deemed critical to our work as outlined in Table 1.

**Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria:**

*Insert here please*

The 56 papers which remained were then appraised in terms of study quality, as outlined in Table 2.

**Table 2. Criteria for evaluating studies suitable for qualitative research synthesis**

*Insert here please*

Selecting articles rated 2 or 3 in at least five of our seven categories allowed us to develop a pool of articles that we could reanalyze and reinterpret. This approach limited the number of articles which were selected as the final set. Thus nine papers remained (see Table 3) because many studies were not methodologically positioned, the description provided of the methodology and methods used were thin, and in many cases absent, and the articles lacked thick description.

**Table 3. The papers included in the synthesis**

*Insert here please*

***Analysis, synthesis and interpretation***

Each paper was read and re-read several times and a summary created to enable the studies to be compared. Reciprocal translation analysis, where studies were translated into one another where possible, and refutational analysis, which meant looking for themes which did not compare; where perspectives might compete (Noblit & Hare, 1988) was adopted. From this process the first level or overarching themes emerged as in Table 4, in which all the themes are presented.

**Table 4. Presentation of themes**

*Insert here please*

Mind maps were used to locate Level 1 themes across the studies, this involved;



- Combining themes across studies
- Expanding or redefining themes
- Re-reading data
- Developing a matrix of studies to locate cross-study themes
- Developing second order themes

The final stage of the synthesis required the development of third order interpretations; translating information to a higher level, whilst still maintaining data integrity.

### ***Issues of plausibility***

Efforts were taken to ensure the studies included had located a methodological base for the design and approaches adopted, including how data were managed and interpreted. Engaging in reflexivity, peer evaluation, maintaining data integrity and being explicit about researcher influence were also examined to ensure the included studies were plausible (Major & Savin-Baden, 2010).

## **Findings**

The findings that emerged from the synthesis of the nine papers included four overarching themes, which are first summarised below and then presented in detail.

- *Inter-relational engagement* - whereby student engagement was characterised and experienced through connection to a wide set of relationships including student to tutor, student to student, student to family, and student to career
- *Engagement as autonomy* – this related to how students shifted from unfamiliarity and self-consciousness to self-sufficiency in learning.
- *Emotional engagement* - this was illustrated by intra-personal capacity, in terms of student resilience and persistence.
- *Engagement as connection and disjunction* - there was a variety of student experience from those who made associations to those with a strong sense of disjunction

### ***Inter-relational engagement***

Across the papers student engagement was characterised as the value of connecting to a wide set of relationships including student to tutor, student to student, student to family, and student to career. Students influenced one another, for example, through reification, whereby students shared interpretations of an experience in negotiation. Students' ability to negotiate and manage relationships within and outside the academy served to highlight a range of experience from connection through to disconnection between study, student life, family and home-life and the impact of learning contexts on engagement (Case, 2007). For example, in terms of connection:

...with the students in our seminar group we all trust each other, we are all really good friends, I don't know how it's worked out that way but we all get on so well, and with our tutors we think they're so nice, I can trust each and every one of them.  
(Bryson & Hand, 2007:357)

Whilst this student acknowledged the support experienced amongst peers and tutors, it was evident, in data from other studies, that this was not necessarily expected. In the next quotation we see this student's disconnection with their peers:

I was in a [scenario discussion] group that contained two members of a team I'm currently in for [another course]. This team has never meshed well . . . it has been a terrible team experience . . . Having those two people in my scenarios group made it difficult to respond sometimes. . . . In retrospect, I think the context of the scenario might have been a good way for us to work on some of the issues that we had. But at the time, the real team problems were too immediate. It just didn't work out to be a positive way for us to talk about our own team dynamics.  
(Paulus et al., 2006:378)

Whilst the scenario exemplified above was intended to engage students in considering their own ways of working as a team, the dynamics made learning in this way unmanageable, and was a theme evident in other studies (for example, Case, 2007).

Such findings link with Mann's (2005) work on relationships in the context of the socio-cultural nature of education and experience of education for the student. Students expressed varying degrees of troublesomeness in being amongst others within learning situations, for example from anxiety at being asked to contribute, to

enjoying class discourse (Kettle, 2011), to feeling judged (Cooper, 2000). Nevertheless, for some students, behaviours exhibited in the classroom would be context-bound, with students acknowledging their actions would revert back to preferred ways of behaving once their study was complete (Kettle, 2011). This sense of performance, of having to act in order to achieve, appeared to reflect a range of approaches from both students and tutors, from falsehood, to veracity.

In terms of relationships with tutors, what was notable was students' awareness of tutor tensions between teaching and research (i.e. their approach to their work and their pressure to publish), how students were experienced as an inconvenience (Houston et al., 2008) and how this impacted upon feeling valued, as one student explained:

(University lecturers) are just too distant, and they give very little time to their students as well. It's a bit ... bleak. There's not much contact there, at all ... They don't show much emotion to their students. It's quite a scary scenario. One little ant, in a hall .... (Haggis & Pouget, 2002:330)

Further,

I went and asked him some stuff and he was really rude ... if I'd been in a lesson ... I would have walked out, because he really embarrassed me. Even though I was stood there on my own, he was awful to me. (Bryson & Hand, 2007:359)

The suggestion that tutors needed to improve their communication skills is highlighted in both the above comments. The tutors' behaviour can be seen as a conscious or unconscious means of exerting control, in turn this is seen to influence the students' sense of agency and willingness to 'engage', which the following theme now moves on to consider.

### ***Engagement as autonomy***

The studies highlighted identity shifts, and stages of transition from 'new comer' to students filtering information and (strategically) regulating their actions in light of the

conditions and power structures within which they viewed themselves as operating. For example,

My reflective journal helped me realise why I didn't want to study. When I identified what was present when I didn't want to study I tried to gradually eliminate them ... Once I identified the elements that were present when I did want to study I tried to include these all of the time ... The main element was interest ... to try and include this I tried to relate the subjects to me personally. (Haggis & Pouget, 2002:328).

In practice it was apparent that approaches to engagement had a temporal dimension, reflecting transitional agency, of not making connections between new content and worldview (Cooper, 2000) to developing awareness and insight for self and career (Case, 2007), albeit with limited application (Paulus et al., 2006). For example, students' commitment to improvement emerged, including motivation to improve on using formative feedback (Cooper, 2000), in learning academic discourse (Kettle, 2011) and improving disciplinary knowledge (Paulus et al., 2006). In other examples students' resourcefulness, to students' resistance to share work was of note (Cooper, 2000), including a fear of revealing too much of the self (Paulus et al., 2006).

Yet, engagement as autonomy also reflected student agency in terms of the need to dis-engage, to take time out (Case, 2007). Agency was also expressed as recognising power imbalance (Houston et al., 2008) and the need to develop strategies to manage the timetable, for example;

Today we had the last lecture and the last tut [tutorial] and I am so exhausted I can hardly write. It's been a long time to sustain the commitment of early morning lectures and afternoon tuts and ran out of steam long ago to keep up properly with what is happening in the course. I think like most students I'm planning a couple of days to find out what is happening before the exam. (Case et al., 2010:427)

However, there was also evidence of autonomy as disillusionment;

- of students feeling churned out through the system, none the wiser (Houston et al., 2008)

- of students expressing a diminished interest for their subject and career (due to intense engagement and work overload) (Case, 2007)
- of a student gaining good grades yet being left with a sense of 'bluffing her way through the course' (Case et al., 2010:427)

Disillusionment was also experienced due to students concern regarding tutors' responses towards their learning and growth (Bailey & Garner, 2000; Bryson & Hand, 2007). Students were seen to hold expectations of what was acceptable to them in terms of their tutors' behaviour. In another example, students experienced disillusionment regarding the paradox of being encouraged by their tutor to develop critical thought, yet within a limited western view and within strict academic practices (Kettle, 2011).

### ***Emotional engagement***

Across the studies data illustrated that students engaged emotionally in committing to and encountering their studies. Of significance were students who persisted despite the 'joyless slog' (Bryson & Hand, 2007:356), and the drudgery (Case, 2007). What became apparent was the students' resilience. Students were seen to challenge themselves to learn (Case et al., 2010), to expend effort (Haggis & Pouget, 2002), which resonates with the wider literature (e.g. Coates, 2005) as being necessary conditions required from students.

Although the studies included narratives from known populations of students who might feel overwhelmed and isolated e.g. international students (Kettle, 2011) and access students (Haggis & Pouget, 2002), evidence of student resilience and persistence was noted across the studies by all types of students. It was evident that learning was a personal and psychological matter. For example,

Realising that I didn't know something and feeling embarrassed about it was an enduring experience of this course, only occasionally relieved when I could complete a tutorial or when I passed the test (but quickly dispelled again on resumption of new lecture material). I was strongly aware of an ongoing level of anxiety that I experienced, both with regard to 'getting stuck' in problems that we

had to complete, and in fears about failing in the assessment. Sometimes it seemed that this anxiety was almost paralysing. (Case et al., 2010: 426).

Further,

I get clammy palms and my heart beats really fast because I'm putting myself out on the line and putting up new ideas that are new to me and just totally vulnerable to criticism and to attacks (Kettle, 2010:9)

What appeared to be significant was the pedagogical relationship between the student's sense of her/himself and their learning, and the experience being bounded by time. Authors such as Tinto (2007) and Ziskin et al., (2006) have considered persistence in terms of student retention and links to institutional practices, including social integration and academic integration as playing a role on students' *intent* to persist. However, they along with authors, such as Barnett (2007), highlight there is much we do not know about student persistence. What is of note across the studies examined here was the students own personal endeavour.

Whilst this theme includes those students who reported a (continued) interest and enthusiasm for their subject, for example;

It's not where you go it's what you get out of it ... I'd still do it even if I end up picking litter (Bryson & Hand, 2007:355)

I just like learning about it because I am really passionate about what I want to do. I want to know as much as I can. (Bryson & Hand, 2007:355)

Of more significance, emotional engagement related to those students across the studies for whom engagement was a continued struggle, a quest to surmount the challenge;

'The thing is, learning chem eng is not fun, it really isn't like, it's tons and tons of maths, and all you have to do is work, and it takes over your whole life'  
(Case, 2007:123)

Further,

The only sense of fulfillment related to getting it done, to completing the task  
(Case et al., 2007:123)

The persistence and resilience was marked by a variety of responses. For example, student approaches to engagement included denial of personal pleasures and serious relationships, those who maintained extracurricular activities harboured guilt. Of particular note were those who worked through awkwardness, exhaustion and disengagement to get their degree.

Trowler and Trowler (2010:5) present dimensions of engagement, drawing on Bloom (1956) and Fredricks, Blumfeld and Paris (2004: 62 – 63) identifying these as;

- Behavioural engagement
- Emotional engagement and
- Cognitive engagement

Whilst based on engagement issues with students at school level, each of these dimensions is proposed as representing a form of engagement, separated by a gulf of non-engagement (withdrawal or apathy). Emotional engagement is considered in terms of students' interest, enjoyment and sense of belonging. Further, emotional engagement is viewed along a continuum of behaviours reflecting attitude and compliance with expectations and norms to behaviour that challenges, confronts or rejects and can be obstructive and delaying. In our findings, emotional engagement is further unpacked to reveal deeper issues of resistance, resilience and emotional engagement as a 'bounded event' (time). What is of interest, is how students could simultaneously shift along the dimensions of emotion, behaviour and cognition – most striking in our study was students' persistence, this ability to engage despite dealing with alienation, lack of relevance, and the drudgery of study.

### ***Engagement as connection and disjunction***

In this final theme, students study approaches reflected an ease of connection, which served to spur them on (Cooper, 2000). Whilst for others, disjunction was more

prevalent, and experienced as a dis-connection between their world view and new material (Kettle, 2011). The very nature of disjunction means that managing it presented a challenge to the individual, which in turn may result in disjunction being seen as something negative, undesirable and as a barrier rather than a gateway to learning (Savin-Baden, 2000). Yet, disjunction did not only occur in relation to engagement that was seen by students to be relevant and meaningful; disjunction also occurred because students experienced challenges to their learning, their life-world and their current meaning systems.

In the context of disjunction, students expressed a sense of alienation, of feeling isolated within or from a group or activity to which they felt they should belong (Haggis & Pouget, 2002). Injustice was also reflected by an externalised cynicism and sense of unfairness (Houston et al., 2008). For example, one student expressed their disjunction as follows:

When I started I felt all over the place. I wasn't organised at all. I kept trying to get organised but then I fell behind the others ... I remember thinking to myself, I'm just going to get a job (laugh). I just want away, I want to get out of here ... Maybe I had got myself into something that I wasn't ready for. (Haggis & Pouget, 2002:330).

A wider literature has examined educational experiences for students, for example Hockings et al., (2008) suggests students who reflect, and make connections between ideas of their own and from others, are most deeply engaged. It was evident that connecting with peers and mentors and expectations of academic study supported engagement and tended to reduce disjunction. What was particularly poignant, was that often disjunction was seen as alienation and injustice within the system of HE. There was a variety of student experience that ranged from making connections, to those who had a more troublesome, questioning approach, experienced as a lack of relationship or separation between thought and action. For example;

- Students engaged with an acknowledged sense of being different to, not as capable as their contemporaries (Haggis & Pouget, 2002); for others there was an



imperceptible link between new content and world-view (Kettle), of feeling naïve, and unprepared (Paulus et al., 2006).

- Irrelevance – students were unable to understand the relevance and meaning regarding set tasks (Cooper, 2000), for some there developed a diminished interest for their subject area, as one student explained:

Enjoy . . . I forgot how to spell that word [laughs]. I don't exactly, I'm not exactly ecstatic. . . . I'm looking forward to graduating as a chem eng and working as a chem. eng, but whether I'm jumping up the mountains as I was doing say maybe in first year about doing chemical engineering, no. If you compare my attitude towards chemical engineering in first year or maybe when I was in matric to now, well it's changed, it's changed I promise you. (Case, 2007:124)

- Disjunction was also experienced in terms of injustice, as:
  - Not being accepted by other students; and feeling like an 'outsider', for example;

I felt as if I wasn't going to get anywhere with it ... on the access course you felt able to approach one of your tutors, and say, look, I'm really having difficulty with this ... and I don't know how to do it, and I feel like a numpty, can you help me. But, I felt as if I couldn't speak to anybody about it ... I was just one of a majority, just sitting there ... everybody sitting there, doing the same thing, listening, and trying to pay attention, and I thought, what am I sitting here for? What am I getting out of it? (Haggis & Pouget, 2002: 330)

- Disjunction also related to student concerns over tutor bias, lack of care and attention including tutors attitudes, and being made to feel like an inconvenience. For example,

...it's definitely the lecturer that can really make it interesting or can almost destroy a subject. (Bryson & Hand, 2007:357)

Lecturers rarely add any value to the knowledge available in the textbook ... . Then we are sucked out the other end, exhausted, disillusioned and sometimes none the wiser. (Houston et al., 2008:220)

Barnett (2007) has argued that being a student is to be in a state of anxiety, not only over assessment, feedback and workload pressures, but also self-doubts about personal ability, of being able to contribute, of being able to grapple with uncertainty. It has come to light here, that HE imposes a severe set of demands upon students, there is no hiding place, and disjunction is a reality for many, for which resilience is required by the student to endure and succeed. Yet, the evidence here also indicated that this alienation and injustice went beyond operational matters, which illustrated in many cases that students were aware of their ability and potential to negotiate or surmount the challenges or situations they found themselves contending with.

Having presented the four key themes and their interpretation, we now move on to discussing some of the wider implications of these findings in terms of pedagogical design.

## **Discussion**

The themes of this synthesis suggest that there are particular issues related to student engagement in the literature, which to date have largely been overlooked by those designing learning and making policy in HE. With changes in policy, practice and funding structures it would seem that there are areas which could be improved to enhance student engagement and improve learning.

Across the studies was a sense of alienation that students experienced in relation to staff responses toward them along with a sense of injustice, about being an inconvenience. Alienation extended to feelings of disaffection in relationships amongst peers and a distancing from career choice. In other examples, students felt disconnected from family members, friends and previous ways of relating. Such findings reflect perspectives from Beard et al., (2007) in that pedagogy needs to better explore the psychosocial space, climate, expression and acceptance of emotions and feelings of self and others in ways that contribute to learning.

Although in this QRS the studies highlighted include issues of autonomy, identity shifts, and transitional agency exemplified through students narratives, the notion of autonomy is not unproblematic in both the student engagement literature and HE in general. For example, Boughey (2006) questions the extent to which engagement is an autonomous skill, since the rules of engagement are formulated by academic expectations and traditions which students need to learn in order to participate in academic dialogues, processes and practices. Thus the way in which staff present a text to students locates their position in terms of the values and purpose they accord to it. Such practices can seem alien and unsettling, challenging students' expectations and beliefs about their chosen discipline. However, Barnett's perspective on supercomplexity and the suggestion of the development of curricula that equip students for an unknowable world is a useful pointer (Barnett, 2000). Perhaps it is possible to improve and change student engagement not only through the way learning is seen and structured, but also through the way in which modes of knowledge are located in the curriculum. By seeing curricula anew as learning spaces it may be possible to offer curricula that shift beyond performativity. Thus it may be possible to see curricula as striated, borderland, smooth or troublesome, as Savin-Baden (2007) has suggested. Inevitably, the distinction and the boundaries between these models collide and overlap, but perhaps they might offer different ways of seeing and structuring curricula, and help us to move away from outcome-based models.

Finally, findings from the synthesis have revealed that when students are engaged in meaningful, learning that they value, the potential for learning something new increases. The studies also exposed that engagement with learning is a subjective experience, yet consistently, the importance of tutors adequately conveying genuineness and empathic understanding to student learning, acknowledging students' struggles, and insecurities, pleasures and pains was expressed. Tutors need to support students in recognizing the ways in which aspects of their lives impact upon engagement in pedagogic spaces. A student-centred pedagogy then sees engagement through the student's exploration and discovery. Such a critically transformative pedagogy (Zyngier, 2003) supports an improved communal and social connection amongst students and tutors and can work to increase agency and reduce students' conceptions of isolation and alienation. Further, as Bernstein (1992) has argued, it is

through their experiences as students that individuals within higher education form their identities. He has suggested that identity formation may be seen as the construction of pedagogic identities, which will change according to the different relationships that occur between society, higher education and knowledge.

The findings from the literature on student engagement would therefore seem to imply that:

1. An academics style and approach can adversely affect student engagement. Tutors need to be clear about their role and level of interaction with students at the outset to manage a range of expectations.
2. The impact of learning contexts on engagement reflects a range of approaches used by students (and tutors) ranging from falsehood, to veracity
3. Agency is expressed along a continuum of behaviours reflecting attitude and compliance with expectations and norms to behaviour that challenges, confronts or rejects and can be obstructive and delaying.
4. Students may achieve institutional learning outcomes despite experiencing disjunction. More needs to be understood about intrapersonal capacity and the ways in which students persist in meeting their *own* learning goals
5. Further understanding is required about the personal and psychological responses towards engagement and students *will* to learn in HE.

### **Reflections on the methodology**

Developing a sample of studies is a critical task within the synthesis process and whilst rigorous search and quality assessment strategies have been used, we accept responsibility for decisions made over the final sample. Further, whilst the shift from first to second level themes is more straightforward, the third phase of data interpretation requires a process of critical thinking and inductive analysis which is contestable. However, we argue the plausibility of the findings can be evidenced by the use of clear data to support cross study themes.

## **Conclusion**

It could also be argued that in the wider debate about what counts as student engagement and who decides, and whether indeed it is merely a political pawn in the context of an increasingly false HE rhetoric of openness, access and inclusivity. However, many HE institutions are working to enhance and improve their student engagement process, but it is possibly worrying that a key issue in this study was that student engagement as resilience has emerged as a powerful theme. Thus we suggest, that student persistence and resilience warrants further investigation, in terms of how it resonates with current HE provision centred on institutional-focused outcomes, and how it connects with learning across the disciplines, or its links with student mobility. Student engagement as persistence and resilience is arguably a taken for granted factor of learning in HE, but we suggest here, one which deserves greater attention.

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