Factors Influencing Student Engagement in Higher Education Institutions: Central to Sustainability and Progression of the Institution

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Abstract: Competitiveness and sustainability top the agenda in the midst of education communities in Malaysia's education sector. Many higher education institutions (HEIs) are faced with the pressure to improve the quality of university education. The basis of these pressures might come from competition on the market of higher education services, national ingenuities for quality assurance and accreditation, and the ever-changing requisites of employers and businesses. The higher education (HE) sector in Malaysia is getting more competitive with 47 private universities, 37 private university colleges, 20 public universities, 10 foreign university branch campuses as well as numerous other private institutions of higher learning competing for the same pool of the local, regional as well as international students, along with Singapore, Philippines, Hong Kong and Indonesia. Sustainability is, therefore, critical to all the higher educational institutions (HEIs) at the present juncture as well as in the near future. In view of that, student engagement becomes a crucial indicator of the quality of student experience in these institutions. The centrality of student engagement is thus critical to the success of HEIs as issues relating to student retention remain high on the agendas of HEIs all over. The purpose of this paper is to assess and outline major factors influencing student engagement in the context of HEIs.

Keywords: Student Engagement; Factors Influencing Student Engagement; Student Retention

1. INTRODUCTION

The educational policies, practice and experience related to student engagement in developed countries, particularly North America, Australasia and the United Kingdom (Trowler 2010; Krause 2015), have greatly influenced the educational policies and practices of developing countries.

In Malaysia, education as a leading industry plays a rather significant role in the nation's development. Competition is escalating in the HE in both public and public institutions. HEIs in Malaysia is increasingly being measured nationally and internationally by the growing number of global ranking scales. The Rating System for Malaysian Higher Education Institutions known as SETARA, assessing Malaysia's higher educational institutions in teaching, research and services, was developed to promote institutional excellence as well

as to recognise the diversity among Malaysian universities. It emphasises the significance of understanding students' satisfaction.

The positive development in higher education shows the magnitude of understanding student satisfaction, which is a short-term attitude resulting from the evaluation of a student's experience with regard to the education services rendered (Elliot and Healy 2001). As indicated by Alves and Raposo (2009), identifying the factors that influence student satisfaction is critical for educational institutions.

Student engagement matters because more and more HEIs are facing increased financial challenges, numerous global competition for students, strenuous in retaining students and to increase students' success rates, developing student engagement strategies should therefore be the uppermost priority for the HEIs.

2. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW AND DEFINITIONS OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

In education, student engagement refers to the amount of responsiveness, inquisitiveness, interest, buoyancy, and fervour that students show when they are learning or being coached, which extends to an enriched level of which they have to learn and progress in their education. Student engagement is commonly defined as "the product of motivation and active learning. It is a product rather than a sum because it will not occur if either elements is missing" (Barkley 2010)

While most definitions of engagement still include students' investment in learning activities as a key component of engagement, current definitions of student engagement have expanded to include interrelated cognitive and affective components (Mandernach 2015). Emphasizing that cognitive engagement involves not only a behavioural investment of time, but also requires investment of attention and intellectual vigour, (Astin 1984) defines engagement as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience." By integrating the affective components of the learning experience, (Skinner & Belmont 1993) define student engagement as "sustained behavioural involvement in learning activities accompanied by positive emotional tone."

A more pivotal perspective of student engagement can be found in the definition of Barnett & Coates (2005) The authors asserted that "student engagement indicates an identity, to a significant degree, between the student and the act of learning". Further, "the involvement of individuals with phenomena that are relevant to and instrumental for their learning" (Coates 2006). In general, student engagement implies a series of theoretical commitments, teaching strategies and developmental orientation which are expected by students. However, determining which aspects of the university experience are essential for students and the degree to which they impact student satisfaction are subjects of continuous analysis, as very often, student satisfaction with university experience is a rather complex and manifold occurrence, and a compromise regarding the most satisfactory way to define and measure it is often not in place.

3. FACTORS AFFECTING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

The concept of academic student engagement, which is closely related to students' active involvement as well as taking charge of their learning, was introduced in higher education with the intention of changing from mere "imparting knowledge" to "teaching proficiencies" and because of the disconnection between what was taught in classes and what was required in the industry. The effort and time students invest in their studies as well as the degree of

interest in their courses of study are some of the ostensible traits of academic student engagement.

Recent research works on student engagement have been dominated by studies that focus on institutional (e.g. college) activities which place university policies and practices related to college students as the focal point (Burch et al. 2015). In this context, student engagement is concerned with the dealings between the time, effort and other relevant resources invested by both students and their institutions intended to fine-tune the student experience and enrich the learning outcomes and development of students and the performance, and reputation of the institution. However, multiple factors are involved for student engagement to be relevant and effective, for instance, staff, students and institutions.

Students

For students to harvest the benefits of engagement, they "must invest time and effort into academic activities and practices … that correlate highly with positive educational outcomes". Bensimon (2009)

This rationale is explained by Kuh (2003) as a process whereby the more students study, the more they learn about the subject matter. Kuh further contended that the more students practice and get feedback on their writing, analyzing, or problem solving, the more adept they become As though it is not enough, Coates (2005) also outlined the much needed conditions from students themselves for the realisation of the benefits of engagement when he contended on the significance to interact with these conditions and activities in ways that will lead to productive learning.

In what Deci and Ryan (1985, 2002) asserted as intrinsic motivation, it is pivotal for students to be self-motivated which is seen as one of the branches established in their Self-determination Theory (SDT). This specific branch refers to the inclination of students in doing something (learning engagement) because it is inherently enjoyable and interesting to do so.

External reinforcement can be a powerful motivator for some students but true engagement only happens when students discover that learning is a personal endeavor. When students cross the threshold of true engagement, they would come to the realization that these tasks are worthwhile because they help students to achieve personal goals which students have set for themselves instead of the teacher's goals (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). This will lead the discussion to the next factor, which is teaching academics as this factor contributes momentously in engaging students.

Teaching Academics

Teaching academics do matters when it comes to student engagement where the educational context produced by faculty behaviours and approaches have significant impact on students' productive learning. According to Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005), institutions where faculty that emphasize effective educational practices encourage students to actively participate in their learning and positively improve their undergraduate experience.
Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005) argued that teacher-student interactions are perhaps the most important factor in encouraging student learning and seemed to challenge teachers and institutions to place a higher value on this particular role. There is a strong pattern in the literature researched, which proposes that student-teacher interactions are a crucial factor in rallying student engagement. These literature works asserted that student engagement is encouraged by teachers who are enthusiastic and passionate about what they are professionally indulged in (Bryson & Hand 2007; Russell & Slater 2011).

Apart from that, other crucial personas of the teachers include well preparedness, (Zepke & Leach 2010), approachable (Russell & Slater 2011), willingness to engage with students in class and on a one to one basis (Case 2007), and making themselves freely available to discuss students' progression (Bryson & Hand 2007; Krause & Coates 2008).

Institutions

Coates (2005) noted that it is crucial for institutions to provide students with the right resources as well as opportunities to enable students to be given a special kind of conducive environment for interactions. This sort of environment could stem from the effort of the institution in providing facilities such as student lounge, study areas, library, interactive classrooms, lecture theatre and digital labs. These facilities enable students to work collaboratively in the curricula and assessments that affect certain standards of performance or activities around campus that prompt students to reflect on the ethics and praxis of learning.

This notion is further supported by Kuh et al. (2007) where the authors contended that student engagement is about how the institution deploys its resources and organises the curriculum, other learning opportunities and support services to induce students to participate in activities that lead to the experiences and desired outcomes such as persistence, satisfaction, learning and graduation.

Future bearing of student engagement

Teaching aid has been evolving with time, over the exponentially growing technology. From the initial chalk and blackboard to today's digital classroom aids. One thing for sure, what is being regarded as the latest technology today may become outdated or even obsolete a year or two later. Internet of Things or 5G network might be a thing in the past faster than anyone could have fathomed.

To keep the future generation engaged, we might not be able to gauge with the current, limited vision and mind as to what sort of technology they will be interested in engaging. The golden rule is to keep education relevant and appropriate to the current time, meeting the market demand. Of course, not forgetting staying in touch with the latest and most recent technology.

We therefore need to probe on what are the universal principles of introducing student engagement that apply across students, disciplines, and institutional settings? If so, do these principles correspondingly or distinctively affect the spheres of doing, feeling, and thinking? Once students become engaged, what are the most effective methods of keeping them engaged throughout the rest of their university years in terms of doing, feeling, and thinking?

In order to remain relevant and sustainable, HEIs must adopt new approaches in order to move engagement from the margin to the mainstream of research, teaching and service. This will see engagement to be fully embedded into the central core of the institution, cutting across the missions of teaching, research and service in order to embrace the process and values of civil democracy (Bringle & Hatcher 2011).

The task now for university lecturers, staff, and administrators is to rise to the challenge of deepening and lengthening the understanding of student engagement in ways that further enhance its positive impact on students' well-being as reflected in their dexterity, emotional

well-being, and thinking facilities, thus encouraging greater retention and progression for the HEIs.

4. CONCLUSION

It has to be noted that engagement is not the necessary, desired outcome of intercessions at any one level alone; rather, it relies on the contributions and efforts of players at multiple levels. Harper and Quaye (2009) argued that both students and institutions must be involved. The authors stated that students should not be primarily responsible for engaging themselves, instead, administrators and educators must foster the conditions that enable varied populations of students to be engaged.

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