Shaping the 21st Century student experience at regional universities

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Project aim

To perform a comprehensive analysis of the student experience at regional universities, with a view to informing and shaping future higher education policy and practice.

Project stages

Stage 1: An analysis of existing national data sets and identification of gaps.

Stage 2: Eight institutional case studies to identify good practice.

Stage 3: A cross-case analysis of the case data to identify practices that enrich and strengthen the 21st Century student experience.

Case studies

110 participants (65 students and 45 staff)

» 90 hours of interactions
» 99 interviews or focus groups

1

Transcribed data sets of 7 case studies

» 390,000 words
» 3,113 codes
» 1,934 cross codes

2

Recommendations for institutions

1. Design and enact administrative practices, including admissions pathways, to ensure all students are able to participate fully in the university's formal and informal activities.

2. Intentionally design all curricula and co-curricular activities to activate student motivation, build academic skills, promote discipline and student identity and develop students' self-efficacy.

3. Design and universally implement curricula and co-curricular interventions to ensure that previous disadvantage and structural risk factors are mitigated through systematic institutional practices that privilege behavioural, cognitive and affective student engagement.

4. Assure quality in learning, teaching and student experience practices, measured by positive student learning outcomes and achievement, and high levels of student satisfaction and well-being.

5. Focus, within discipline curricula, on developing future-proof employability skills, including advanced digital literacy, enterprise skills and entrepreneurship.

6. Minimise the socio-cultural incongruence[3] between communities and higher education institutions, through sustained attention to cultural, structural and practical organisational change.

Advice for the sector

1. Provide access to information about students' movements, over time and among institutions.

2. Review the learner engagement scale in the Student Experience Survey (SES) to ensure the collection of data is aligned with contemporary understandings of student engagement.

3. Review indicators in student and graduate surveys, to ensure the collection of information about students' engagement, experience and skills is aligned with the key findings of this study.

1   Image created by Gregor Crešnar from the Noun Project
2   Image created by Arejoenah from the Noun Project
3   Devlin, M. (2011). Bridging socio-cultural incongruity: Conceptualising the success of students from low socio-economic status backgrounds in Australian higher education. *Studies in Higher Education 38*(6), 939-949. DOI:10.1080/03075079.2011.613991

Current and desired data sets

National data sets (Australian Graduate Survey (AGS)[4] , the University Experience Survey (UES)[5] and university enrolment data) and the data arising from the case studies were mapped against Kahu's (2014) model of student engagement[6] . Figure 1 below shows the differences between these data sets.
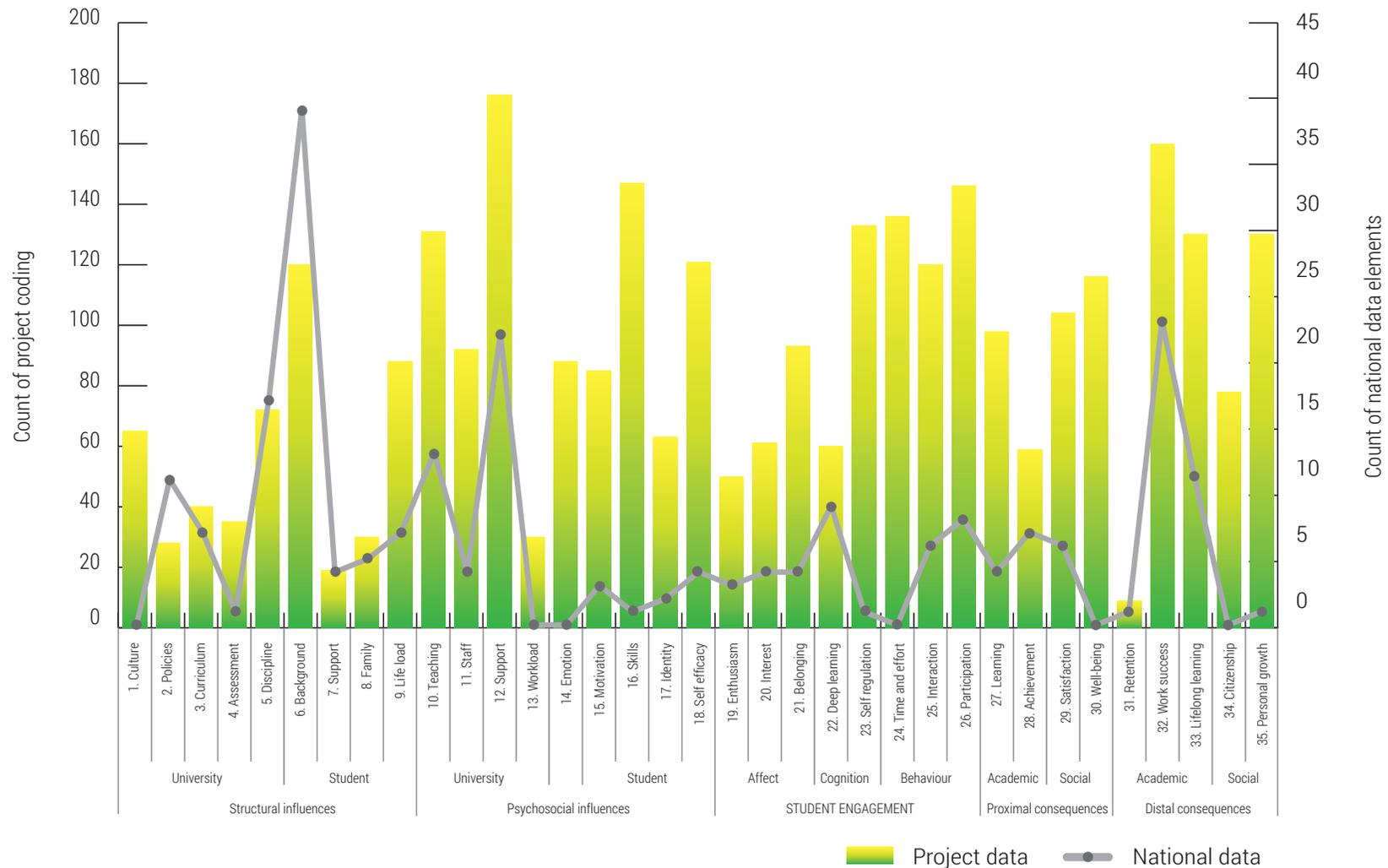

Figure 1. Counts of data items mapped against Kahu's Model of Student Engagement.

Case studies

Each of the eight project partners conducted case studies investigating the student experience of initiatives in their institutions.

Institution	Initiative context	Case study key finding	Good practice to shape the student experience
Charles Sturt University	Workplace learning (WPL) program at a regional university.	Workplace learning shapes the student experience.	Use technologies to support relationship development among students, supervisors and academics, and to strengthen work place learning experiences.
CQUniversity	Pre-enrolment interviews designed to communicate program requirements.	Early people-rich intervention improves transition and first year retention.	Begin students' transition to university with personalised two-way interaction to discuss students' needs in relation to inherent program requirements.
Federation University Australia	Centrally provided student academic and transition support services and programs (SS&Ps).	Student support promotes 21st Century student engagement in a regional context.	Select and support high-quality and enthusiastic Student Leaders to facilitate positive interactions among less experienced peers in the transition to university.
James Cook University	Peer-to-peer student mentoring program.	Peer support and advising enhance the student experience.	Promote and resource mentor programs to support new students as they negotiate the structural environment of the university.
Southern Cross University	Preparing for Success Program (non-award enabling program).	Enabling pathways lead to successful outcomes.	Orient the curriculum and teaching in formal transition programs to enable student success while supporting them to manage life-load and other structural challenges.
University of New England	New England Award Program.	Citizenship and graduate attributes enrich the student experience.	Institutionalise adaptable extra curricular programs to inspire students to engage with their communities as part of their learning.
University of Southern Queensland	Compulsory first year core courses that embed core online and university literacies.	Embedded and scaffolded course design enhances students' online learning experiences.	Commit to whole-of-program, embedded approaches to enhancing digital literacy and fluency with online teaching and learning modes.
University of the Sunshine Coast	WIL when it is not an embedded component of the program.	Work integrated learning enhances graduate capabilities, employment and career opportunities.	Work with students to design opportunities for innovative, authentic work integrated learning in programs where there is not an embedded placement component.

Key findings

Five key narratives about the student experience

Critical first encounters

When students encounter intentionally designed curriculum and support interventions, student emotion is enhanced and positive psychosocial (motivation, skills, self-efficacy and identity) responses are triggered.

What this means in practice is that curricula and co-curricular initiatives should be intentionally designed and implemented to activate motivation, skills, identity and self-efficacy.

Evidence: Of all the data collected, 46% were relevant to Critical First Encounters.

Compensatory effect

Positive psychosocial influences increase student engagement and reduce the impact of previous disadvantage and structural risk factors.

What this means in practice is that initiatives designed and implemented to strengthen student motivation, skills, identity and self efficacy, will positively influence student engagement and mitigate previous disadvantage.

Evidence: Of all the data collected, 50% were relevant to the Compensatory Effect.

Constructive cycle

Positive psychosocial responses increase student engagement, which in turn increases learning outcomes, student satisfaction and well-being.

What this means in practice is that institutions are responsible for creating environments which engage students to achieve positive learning outcomes.

Evidence: Of all the data collected, 54% were relevant to the Constructive Cycle.

Capacity building

Student engagement increases students' academic and social outcomes, and builds capacity for post-university contributions/life.

What this means in practice is that all disciplines should develop students' 21st Century skills in context.

Evidence: Of all the data collected, 54% were relevant to Capacity Building.

Cultural change

Achievement, satisfaction and retention generate enduring changes, which can break intergenerational cycles of disadvantage and therefore bridge sociocultural incongruence between under-represented groups, and university cultures and systems.

What this means in practice is that improving the outcomes for current students also redresses inherent inequalities.

Evidence: Of all the data collected, 44% were relevant to Cultural Change.