



The CHE Research Colloquium

Theme: Enhancing Student Engagement for Good Decision-Making and Governance in Higher Education Institutions

Background

Student engagement is a very broad concept with many meanings¹, but in this document its meaning is limited to the involvement of students in decision-making processes in relation to governance and management, quality assurance, and teaching and learning in higher education institutions.² Its goal is to optimise the experience of students, enhance their learning outcomes as well as the overall performance and reputation of their respective institutions, and foster their development towards becoming active and responsible citizens.³ Student engagement focuses on inclusivity, and it is about creating a conducive environment where academics, management staff, and students can exchange ideas on, and engage in discourses about academic, student governance and welfare-related issues.

The process of student engagement recognises students as active and equal participants who, like other stakeholders such as academics and management of institutions, have an important role to play in finding solutions to challenges facing higher education. Importantly, there is mounting body of evidence highlighting the benefits of

¹ Ashwin P., McVitty D. (2015) The Meanings of Student Engagement: Implications for Policies and Practices. In: Curaj A., Matei L., Pricopie R., Salmi J., Scott P. (eds) *The European Higher Education Area: Between Critical Reflections and Future Policies*. Springer, Cham

² Working Group on Student Engagement in Ireland (2016) *Enhancing Student Engagement in Decision-Making*. Dublin: Higher Education Authority of Ireland

³ Trowler, V. & Trowler, P. (2011) *Student Engagement Toolkit for Leaders*. London: Leadership Foundation for Higher Education

effective student engagement for the enhancement of quality and standards in higher education institutions, and for the personal development and employability of students.⁴

There are two ideological paradigms that inform models of student engagement practices. One is the neo-liberal free market paradigm which is concerned with the ways in which higher education institutions produce products of economic value, and tend to position the student as a discerning consumer.⁵ Under this paradigm, students are engaged as consumers of the educational services that institutions offer in a supposedly market setting. The students, as consumers, see and regard academics and management staff in institutions as their employees, and make demands that they meet their educational needs and wants. In turn academics and management staff in institutions work to ensure that they listen to the consumers and offer them the services and/or products that they desire, believing in the maxim that the 'consumer or customer is King or Queen, and is always right'.⁶

An alternative paradigm aims to position students as 'partners' in higher education, working alongside academics and management staff to understand and develop learning and teaching, and the mission and purpose of higher education institutions.⁷ Under this paradigm, students have rights and responsibilities as 'higher education citizens', and they strive to contribute to the success of their respective institutions as 'co-creators' of knowledge and 'co-facilitators' of their own learning. It is more about providing students the opportunity to explore areas that they believe to be significant, to recommend solutions, and to bring about the required changes in the institutions.⁸

⁴ Department of Education and Training (2018) *Student Engagement in University Decision-Making and Governance: Towards a more Systematically Inclusive Student Voice: 2015 – 2016*. Final Report, Canberra: Australian Government

⁵ Naidoo, R., Shankar, A. & Veer, E., 2011. The consumerist turn in higher education: Policy aspirations and outcomes. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 27(11-12), pp.1142–1162.

⁶ Bruce, L., Baird, A., & Jones, S. E. (2017) The student-as-consumer approach in higher education and its effects on academic performance, *Studies in Higher Education* 42(11): 1858 - 1878

⁷ Cook Sather, A., Bovill, C. & Felten, P. (2014). *Engaging Students as Partners in Learning and Teaching: A Guide for Faculty*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

⁸ Healey, M., Flint, A & Harrington, K. (2014) *Engagement through Partnerships: Students as Partners in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education*. York: The Higher Education Academy

In reality, the practices of student engagement rarely fit in only one of the two paradigms alluded to above. In this regard, McVitty⁹ contends that closer attention should be paid to the meanings of student engagement *in situ* rather than at the conceptual level, enabling a focus on the specifics of the socio-political context, the educational and cultural expectations, and the beliefs and structures that may be in place relating to students' appropriate role and access to power. It should also allow for teasing out answers to questions such as, of which forms of engagement are legitimised and which ones are marginalised within different institutional cultures; and which students may be enabled to engage or prevented from engaging?

At a more practical level the Working Group on Student Engagement of Higher Education Authority of Ireland identifies different levels of student engagement along a continuum or 'ladder' of participation from, for example, informing (non-participation); consultation (tokenism) to delegated power and learner-control (learner empowerment). Similarly, the levels of engagement can be determined at institutional level, depending on how open and enabling the higher education institution is towards facilitating students' involvement at different levels.¹⁰

In the wake of the widespread student protests at university campuses during the period 2014 to 2019 in South Africa, researchers and other stakeholders have called for the higher education institutions to enhance student engagement as a mechanism for enabling students to play a purposeful role in the development and governance of their respective institutions, in the creation of knowledge, and in facilitating their own learning experiences,¹¹ and ultimately in their development as good citizens of the country. It has further been emphasised that the engagement should be meaningful, and should include authentic inclusion of student views in the operations of the higher education

⁹ McVitty, D (2014) Student engagement as the promise of agency: frames, domains and technologies of student agency in institutional learning and teaching strategies. Online, www.srhe.ac.uk/conference2015/abstracts/0202.pdf. Accessed on 16 May 2019

¹⁰ Working Group on Student Engagement in Ireland (2016) *Enhancing Student Engagement in Decision-Making*. Dublin: Higher Education Authority of Ireland

¹¹ South African Survey of Student Engagement (2016) *Engaging the Student # Student Voice: Annual Report*. Bloemfontein: University of the Free State

institutions, through both formal and informal mechanisms, including representative structures.

The CHE Research Colloquium

It is against the background presented above that the CHE is convening a Research Colloquium on student engagement to be held on **31 July 2019** in Gauteng. The actual venue will be confirmed in due course.

The theme of the Research Colloquium is: *'Enhancing Student Engagement for Good Decision-Making and Governance in Higher Education Institutions'*

The aim of the Research Colloquium is to provide a platform at which professionals and students involved in research and practice of student engagement can take stock of the current research in, and good practice models of student engagement. It is also intended to serve as a forum at which the professionals and students involved in research and practice of student engagement can engage one another on matters relating to research ideas, methodologies and findings with a view towards shaping a future research agenda on enhancing student engagement in the country. The Research Colloquium will further offer opportunity for student engagement practitioners and researchers to showcase practice and research, and take part in lively discussion about the impact of student engagement on decision-making and governance in higher education institutions.

The objectives of the Research Colloquium are to:

- Take stock of current research in, and good practice models of student engagement for good decision-making and governance in higher education institutions in South Africa;
- Engage in discourses on ideological underpinnings of student engagement, and their influence on the models of student engagement that are popular or are gaining traction in higher education institutions in South Africa;
- Identify and interrogate key success factors for student engagement, and examine the prospects and challenges of using these to enhance the models of

student engagement that are popular or are gaining traction in higher education institutions in South Africa; and

- Share insights into the conceptual, methodological and other process issues regarding research and scholarship on enhancing student engagement for good decision-making and governance in higher education institutions.

Target Participants

Those who are expected to take part in the Research Colloquium include, but not exclusively, the following:

- Researchers with interest in student engagement;
- Student leaders at various levels: department, faculty, institutional and national;
- Registrars or Deputy Registrars responsible for student administration;
- Deans of Students or Directors of Student Affairs;
- Deans of Faculties and Head of Academic Departments or Schools;
- Academic Development Directors/Managers or Practitioners;
- Officials from the Department of Higher Education;
- Officials from Non-Governmental Organisations operating in higher education space;
- Representative of Universities South Africa (USAf); and
- Representatives of the South Africa Private Higher Education Association (SAPHE).

Structure of the Research Colloquium

The Research Colloquium will take the structure of presentations and discussions. The presentations will include a keynote address by one of the prominent researchers in the area of student engagement in South Africa.

Call for Abstracts

Student engagement researchers and practitioners, students and others who are interested in presenting their research or practice models and case studies at the Research Colloquium are encouraged to submit abstracts on topics that are related to the theme: '*Enhancing Student Engagement for Good Decision-Making and Governance in Higher Education Institutions*'.

Submission should be by email and addressed to Mayepu.N@che.ac.za (cc Bhengu.N@che.ac.za). The closing date for the submission of abstracts is **27 June 2019**.

An abstract should not exceed 350 words in length and should include the following:

- Title of presentation;
- Name(s) of author(s);
- Institutional or organisational affiliation of the author(s);
- Email address of the corresponding author;
- Body of the abstract; and
- Five (5) key words.

A maximum of eight (8) abstracts will be selected for presentation at the Research Colloquium. Those whose abstracts get selected will be accordingly informed by no later than **28 June 2019**.

Publication of Research Colloquium Papers

After the Research Colloquium, the authors will be afforded up to two (2) months of time to work on their papers for publication in the CHE's Research Journal: **Kagisano**. The papers will undergo peer evaluation, and only those that make the cut after the peer evaluation process will be published.

Authors will be sent the guidelines for preparing the papers for publication in the CHE's Research Journal, **Kagisano**, soon after the Research Colloquium.

Assistance to Presenters in Relation to Travel and Accommodation

The CHE will make travel and accommodation arrangements for those whose abstracts are accepted for presentation at the Research Colloquium, and also cover the cost.

Registration

Those interested to take part in this exciting Research Colloquium should complete the registration form which can be accessed by clicking [here](#).

Participation in the Research Colloquium is for free, and thus participants would not be required to pay registration fee.

The last day for accepting registrations will be **12 July 2019**. However, the CHE retains the right to close the registration process before that date, without notice, as soon as the target number of participants is reached.

Enquiries

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