Student engagement in knowledge exchange: A conceptual framework based on established student engagement practice in educational development.

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Abstract

Student engagement remains a prevalent theme in United Kingdom (UK) Higher Education (HE) with specific emphasis placed upon engaging students in the curriculum, quality assurance and student voice activities in educational developments (Austen, 2020; Bryson, 2014; Gvaramadze, 2011). As UK HE becomes an increasingly outcomes-focused sector, a new measure has emerged to assess the transfer of knowledge by providers – the Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF)[i]. As the KEF builds traction in UK HE as a driver of accountability, and therefore strategic attention and activity, the question of what student engagement in knowledge exchange looks like, becomes increasingly important. This paper sets out a framework with four conceptual models based on established student engagement theory from published works on student engagement in the curriculum, educational development and employability development as a support for wider conversations at and between institutions internationally.

Keywords: Student Engagement; Knowledge Exchange; Policy; Impact; Higher Education

A focus on student engagement remains a prevalent theme in United Kingdom (UK) Higher Education (HE) with specific emphasis placed upon engaging students in the curriculum, quality assurance and student voice activities in educational developments (Austen, 2020; Bryson, 2014; Gvaramadze, 2011). As the UK HE sector becomes steadily more outcomes-focused with performance metrics for all of its core areas of activity driven particularly by the Office for Students in England, a new mechanism has emerged to assess the transfer of knowledge by each provider – the Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF)[ii]. The KEF follows the sibling measures of providers' impact on their localities; the Research Excellence Framework (REF)[iii], assessing the impact of academics' published research, and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)[iv], assessing the outcomes of teaching through metrics measuring the satisfaction, retention and destinations of undergraduate students. As the KEF builds traction in UK HE as a core area of university accountability, and so strategic attention and activity, the question of what student engagement in knowledge exchange looks

like becomes increasingly important. This paper proposes a framework for characterising student engagement (SE) in KE based on established theory from published works on SE in the curriculum, educational development and employability development to enhance the quality of wider conversations at institutions internationally.

From the conceptualisation of the KEF in 2018, perspectives on what 'counts' or is measurable in this area of university activity began to be questioned (Coiffait, 2019). The exchange of knowledge can occur through a simple conversation, but it has quickly emerged that measured engagements would be those which demonstrated impact through financial payments, impact on policy or innovation, for example (Johnson, 2020). A profusion of information flows throughout HE providers and is applied in myriad ways, so questions emerged that led Research England, the sector lead for KEF, to outline tangible measures of KE, which are summarised below (See Research England, 2020 for more detail). The KEF adopts a metrics-based framework with an accompanying narrative organised within the seven categories below, similar to the TEF, to provide context for a whole provider (Research England, 2020). The findings of the KEF will enable potential partners, businesses and the wider sector to gain an insight into the "*university strengths*" of each provider (Research England, 2020).

Seven categories of activity measured in the Knowledge Exchange Framework:

1. *Research Partnerships:* Including cash contributions to research as a proportion of public funding and co-authorship of research with non-academic partners.

2. *Working with Business:* Research income with SME (Small-Medium Enterprises) partners, income from estates and facilities, and consultancy.

3. *Working with the public and third sector:* Research income and consultancy with/from public and third sector.

4. *Skills, enterprise and entrepreneurship:* General HE provider income and delivered learning days/events.

5. *Local growth and regeneration:* Regeneration and development income.

6. *Intellectual Property (IP) and Commercialisation:* Investment in spin-out companies, and licensing and other IP income proportion.

7. *Public and Community Engagement:* Scored self-assessment included in narrative.

(Research England, 2020, 7-8)

The authors of this paper are both experienced in engaging students in educational development activity, which pre-2010 was still quite rare in UK HE, and in engaging students in widening participation and community engagement. These areas of practice have highlighted that students can and wish to be engaged in wider activities beyond what might be considered their primary engagement with HE, namely the core curriculum and recreational extra-curricular activities such as sport and clubs. Establishing student engagement in student voice activities has been welcomed sector-wide in a time of enhanced support by students' unions (Bols, 2020), with students also taking on responsibilities in university committees and as members of

quality assurance panels (Owen, 2013). Students now support each other as peer mentors, peer assisted learners (PALs) and success coaches in employability as a way of giving back and sharing skills/knowledge (Warren and Luebsen, 2017; Collings, Swanson, and Watkins, 2016). In educational developments, students are engaged as partners in pedagogical development projects to work with staff partners to innovate practice (Becker, Collier, and Setter, 2018; Freeman, Millard, Brand, and Chapman, 2014). Finally, the role of the student has also been emphasised as a producer of knowledge, rather than the 'consumer' of a marketised education sector (Neary, 2012).

A framework for reflection and action

Students are as much an asset to universities as their staff. They are active, creative, and motivated to contribute to universities' missions and activity. As the Office for Students and Research England recently launched major funding for SE in KE[v], this paper proposes a guiding framework to characterise SE in KE and support both reflection on and action to enhance SE in KE for the sector. The framework adopts four characterisations of SE in KE, which differ in regard to the relationships they describe between the students and different A) types of engagement, B) types of knowledge, and C) types of exchange. These four models of SE in KE draw on a decade of innovative activity in student engagement in education design, student voice, quality assurance and development. It is hoped this framework will help guide and enhance reflection and action when embarking on new, or developments to existing, SE and or KE initiatives in research and innovation centres in UK HE.

Students as Entrepreneurs: (KEF categories 4 and 6)

Students as entrepreneurs is an established concept and has been widely developed in UK HE through setting up enterprise and innovation centres on campuses offering grants, spaces to work and training for students/graduates who wish to start their own businesses. Providers are quick to promote stories of success in which graduate enterprises have become high-profit and/or high-profile businesses. This area of work also has the advantage of enhancing employability per se, especially when embedded beyond business and related curricula where it may be thought to fit most naturally (Owens, and Tibby, 2014; Matlay, Rae, Martin, Antcliff, and Hannon, 2012) and has been celebrated as a key area of careers and employability practice in HE. HE staff are also involved in innovations and spin-out business to which students can add value in entry-level and consulting roles whether connected to formally assessed curriculum or extra-curricular opportunities.

Students as Partners (KEF categories 1, 2 and 3)

Students as partners with academic staff in pedagogical enhancement activities has proved successful in diverse contexts with varied aims (Marie and Azuma, 2018; El-Hakim, King, Sims, and Lowe, 2016; Matthews, 2016). These practices see students working alongside staff from conceptualisation to execution of research projects, consultancy, innovation and improvement projects, often, but not exclusively, focused on issues with a direct relevance to and impact on students themselves. The benefits of working with students as partners include adding 'end-user' perspectives to conversations about education, new insights for staff partners and a transformative experience for all involved (Matthews, Dwyer, Russell, and Enright, 2019; Lubicz-

Nawrocka, 2018). These practices could be simply replicated for the purposes of knowledge exchange, partnering students with staff on external activities.

Students as Producers: (KEF category 5, 6 and 7)

Students are critical producers of knowledge and as fundamental as staff to the development of knowledge in HE (Neary, 2012). As producers, rather than consumers, students engage with academics in the production of knowledge and their own learning (McCullouch, 2009) through diverse opportunities including community service, authentic learning and service learning through the curriculum, where the practice of students working in the community through consultancy and live briefs is established (Butin, 2010). Examples include Marketing students drawing up social media plans for local charities, History students conducting research for local government, and Psychology students conducting marketing research for SMEs. There is potential for this area of work to be expanded, especially if aligned with the curriculum and as part of assessment.

Students as Agents: (KEF category categories 5 and 7)

Students are agents in university communities, but they are also citizens and neighbours in the geographical communities in which they live. Students want to make change, to have impact and to share their passions for their disciplines and interests. Universities can support this model, in partnership with their Students' Unions/Associations, to empower students with the funding, facilities, guidance and support to have impact in their communities. This can be Performing Arts students running a community theatre or performances, Sports students running a charity competition, or Law students giving drop-in free legal advice. Students have the will, but providers act as catalysts for the translation of will into action. They provide guidance in raising funds, they broker relationships with community partners and carry out due diligence with regards health and safety and the wellbeing of students.

Discussion

The framework above offers a first step in considering the role of students and the character of their engagement, the knowledge and the exchange when embarking on work to develop and embed SE in KE. Institutions must be challenged to reflect on their motivations for SE in KE, so that activities can transcend the transactional benefits of part-time employment and notions of enhanced employability and make space for students to take a central, generative rather than peripheral and passive role at every stage of the process of knowledge production and application. Students have demonstrated considerable potential to engage in diverse ways to enhance HE communities and rethinking the status of students in relationship to universities' KE priorities opens up wide possibilities and yet-to-be-discovered approaches to SE in KE. As co-agents, students add value to a knowledge commons for the university and wider community with creativity, motivation and dispositions that can catalyse a shared work, enhance practice and create greater impact for the communities of which they, with universities, are key constituents.

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