

Reimagining Student Engagement: Identity, Inclusion, and Innovation in Higher Education

Stuart Sims, University of Greenwich, S.A.Sims@greenwich.ac.uk
Kiu Sum, London Metropolitan University, k.sum@londonmet.ac.uk

Student Engagement in Higher Education Journal Co-Editors-in-Chief

It is an honour to take over from Dr Rachel Forsyth as Co-Editors-In-Chief of *the Student Engagement in Higher Education Journal* (SEHEJ). We are deeply grateful for Rachel's contributions over the past eight years, having built this journal from its inception into a valuable and impactful platform for the student engagement community. Her work has enabled many colleagues to share their research and practice in higher education. We also warmly welcome Dr Ella Dyer, who joins us in succeeding Dr Katrina Ingram in supporting the journal's operations. As a newly formed editorial team, we are excited to build on the strong foundations laid by Rachel and Katrina, and to further develop the journal with new initiatives, including the expansion and reorganisation of the SEHEJ Board. We look forward to shaping the journal's future and advancing student engagement conversations both nationally and internationally.

In this issue, we are pleased to feature 14 papers comprising research articles and case studies, focusing on four key areas: understanding student engagement and identity, inclusive curriculum and structural challenges, pedagogical innovation and engagement strategies, and partnership, collaboration, and feedback. Together, these papers offer rich insights into how engagement is cultivated, disrupted, and reimagined across diverse HE contexts.

Highlighting the importance of identity formation and engagement, which is especially fragile yet foundational to higher education, De Carvalho's research article investigates how first-year students perceive their academic and social integration despite supportive relationships with staff and peers. Students indicated that they also face common transitional challenges, such as time management and assessment pressures, suggesting that the importance of understanding engagement extends beyond just being a metric to encompass a lived experience shaped by institutional culture and student agency. Bäckman, a colleague from Finland, shares the lens on the pedagogical lens on engagement using different learning models on how this affects student motivation during emergency remote teaching in today's post-pandemic learning environment, where hybrid models continue to evolve, indicating the common shared challenges that higher education faces regardless of which country we are based in. Switching to a qualitative research paper, Pattinson turns the authors' attention to identity within the Early Childhood sector, revealing how students' perceptions of the "ideal" student shift from academic excellence to vocational purpose. Importantly, the study reflects on the role of academic staff in shaping these identities, raising critical questions about how marginalisation is perpetuated both within and beyond the university.

Addressing broader systemic issues, such as curriculum decolonisation, housing security, and peer inclusion, the inclusive curriculum and structural challenges were highlighted as a theme in this journal issue. A research paper by Dias identifies barriers and proposes a three-stage roadmap for inclusive curriculum reform, serving as a timely reminder that decolonisation is

not just a theoretical exercise but a practical, student-informed approach toward justice and relevance. Awcock further discussed the impactful issues of student homelessness and housing security in their research article, and its significance to the foundation of wellbeing, academic engagement and belonging. Thus, findings call for institutional responses in supporting vulnerable students and ensuring that engagement is not dependent on basic survival in HE. One example of this is the case study from Hyde-Clark, which presents an optimistic intervention to resolve isolation and foster peer connection, with results highlighting how inclusive academic spaces can enhance student wellbeing and engagement. Even with small structural changes, colleagues have identified the meaningful impacts on student experiences.

Gamification and creative pedagogical design emerge strongly across this set of contributions, demonstrating how rethinking traditional teaching practices can foster deeper student engagement. Warikoo's research article on gamification highlights the promise of points, badges, and narratives to enrich student motivation, particularly within STEM disciplines, while also recognising the need for scalable, evidence-based approaches. Ibrahim's case study on Lego-based learning echoes this theme of innovation, showing how tangible, playful methods can transform complex mechanical concepts into inclusive and community-building experiences for foundation year engineering students. Both studies remind us that engagement is not only about cognitive investment but also about cultivating motivation, belonging, and joy in learning.

Questions of collaboration, partnership, and dialogue come to the fore across several contributions, highlighting both the promise and complexity of student-staff relationships in higher education. Decelles, Bovill, and Lundmark examine the shared experiences of students and teachers within a Norwegian co-creation initiative, revealing that while partnerships can strengthen relationships and reduce uncertainty for staff, they may simultaneously generate new uncertainties for students as they navigate shifting roles and expectations. This tension reminds us that partnership is not a panacea but a dynamic process requiring ongoing support and negotiation. Furenes Klippen and colleagues extend this conversation by providing a systematic scoping review of collaborative learning and student engagement. Synthesising 485 studies, they show that while collaboration among students is well-documented, less attention has been paid to forms such as co-design or co-production, or to collaboration that involves external stakeholders. Their review highlights significant gaps in how engagement is conceptualised and measured, urging the field to develop more robust approaches that can capture the multidimensional nature of collaborative learning.

Finally, assessment practices form a significant part of this volume, with multi-faceted approaches to involving students explored across a number of the papers featured. McDowell's *SkillSense for Assessment Mastery* programme underscores the role of structured support in building assessment literacy and confidence among first-year students. By combining workshops, peer review, and reflective practice, the initiative demonstrates how assessment can move beyond being a source of anxiety to become a driver of belonging and academic identity. Similarly, Pike and colleagues' *Feedback Café* offers a practical intervention that brings students and staff together in informal, low-stakes settings to interpret and act on feedback. Their findings underline the value of dialogue in assessment, not only in making feedback usable but also in building a culture of shared responsibility for learning. Complementing this, Skoglund's case study on peer assessment in psychology explores how

novice students experience evaluating one another's work. While students valued the insights gained, the study also highlights the practical challenges of workload and perceptions, prompting important conversations about sustaining positive student engagement with peer-led assessment. Finally, a scoping review by Josiah's adds much wider context, exploring evidence of how students engage with assessment tasks themselves, noting the limitations of current measurement approaches and the need for mixed-methods research to understand these processes more fully. Taken together, these contributions underline the centrality of partnership, collaboration, and dialogue — whether in classrooms, assessment, or co-creation — as essential drivers of meaningful student engagement.