

# Re-centring Student Partnership in Contemporary Higher Education

Stuart Sims, Arden University, [ssims@arden.ac.uk](mailto:ssims@arden.ac.uk)  
Kiu Sum, London Metropolitan University, [k.sum@londonmet.ac.uk](mailto:k.sum@londonmet.ac.uk)

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

This edition of *Student Engagement in Higher Education* brings together scholarship that approaches student engagement not as a fixed or easily measurable outcome, but as a contested, relational, and deeply political practice. Collectively, these papers invite readers to reconsider how engagement is conceptualised, who defines it, and whose knowledge is legitimised within higher education.

Reda advances a provocative re-reading of student engagement through a techno-humanistic lens. Drawing on humanistic traditions of self-actualisation, care, and relational learning, the piece argues that contemporary engagement is increasingly mediated through digital environments in ways that reshape how agency, collaboration, and responsibility are enacted. Central to this perspective is a call for multiple forms of reflexivity: human reflexivity in how students and educators understand their roles and purposes; technological reflexivity in recognising how platforms, algorithms, and AI shape interaction; and ethical reflexivity in attending to questions of equity, inclusion, and care. In this framing, engagement emerges as a contextually mediated and ethically situated practice.

Questions of power, responsibility, and constraint are examined from a different perspective in Dhillon and Rawdin's exploration of student engagement through the voices of social science lecturers at a post-92 UK university. Situated within the pressures of a marketised sector, their study highlights tensions between aspirational, care-oriented pedagogies and the realities of attendance, participation, and academic self-efficacy. Here, engagement emerges as a negotiated practice shaped by staff wellbeing, student circumstances, and institutional expectations—fragile, dynamic, and deeply intertwined with labour conditions and emotional work.

Further contributions turn to the integrated of affective and communal dimensions of student engagement, foregrounding wellbeing, partnership, and confidence rather than peripheral to learning and teaching in higher education. SEHEJ's own Kiu Sum, alongside Tamara Reid and Ana Souto, offer a reflective and human-centred account of participation in the RAISE Buddy Scheme. Their collaborative autoethnography and a professional initiative foregrounds the importance of emotional support, identity, and connection—factors often overlooked in formal engagement frameworks.

Harder-Collins et al.'s case study similarly emphasise partnership and representation through a trilateral approach to revitalising student voice through collaboration between a university, its students' union, and students themselves. By reworking policy, refreshing the Student Charter, and piloting innovative partnership schemes, the authors illustrate how formal structures can enable more inclusive, meaningful engagement during times of sector-wide uncertainty. Pezzino and Hollenberg further explore partnership through their analysis of students as partners in peer review of teaching, highlighting how collaboration between academic staff, student reviewers, and students' unions can enhance teaching practice and foster cultural change. Finally, Winfield illustrates how flexible assessment design can support confidence and shift students from coping to meaningful engagement. Through a case study of undergraduate assessment reform, the paper highlights how trust, choice, and transparent design can reduce anxiety and foster student agency,

Across the Higher Education (HE) landscape, the question is no longer whether student engagement matters, but what forms of engagement meaningfully transform learning, professional readiness, and institutional cultures. The 'theory to practice' from four papers within this issue highlights a broad shift: student engagement is moving from models that treat students as recipients of educational design toward approaches that recognise students as co-interpreters, co-designers, and co-producers of their learning environments. In this context, partnership becomes a structuring principle rather than an aspiration.

Shah et al.'s decade-long case study of the Global Health Case Competition (GHCC) demonstrates what a sustained, well-designed student partnership can achieve. The GHCC is a fully student-led system in which participants develop real-world proposals for external organisations. The authors demonstrate how authentic responsibility, interdisciplinarity, external collaboration, and robust institutional scaffolding create conditions for transformative engagement. The competition's real-world outputs, which have shaped decisions within global health organisations, demonstrating the power of student leadership when it is structurally enabled and meaningfully supported.

Amici-Dargan et al. move from extracurricular engagement to the core site where learning is formalised. Using the Equity, Agency, and Transparency (EAT) Framework, the authors identify significant discrepancies between staff and student perceptions of clarity, fairness, and coherence in assessment. By involving student researchers in the redesign of assessment processes and employing exemplar-based interventions, they demonstrate measurable improvements in first-year students' confidence and

evaluative judgement. This study reinforces assessment as a potential site of empowerment rather than a source of disengagement through a research informed framework.

Providing substantial empirical evidence from a context under-represented in engagement discussions, Sharma and Garg share a large-scale quantitative study of student engagement in Indian higher education. Analysing data from over 500 students, their findings highlight the limited influence of most demographic variables, while underscoring the significantly greater predictive strength of institutional factors, including modes of curriculum transaction and organisational culture. This study reinforces the central role of institutional practices in shaping student experiences and offers a valuable evidence base for targeted, context-sensitive interventions.

Finally, Koppitsch's longitudinal study of the Inverted Classroom Model (ICM) in English for Specific Purposes provides a rich example of theory translated into iterative pedagogic practice. Through a design-based research study, the study demonstrates consistently high levels of cognitive, behavioural, emotional, and especially social engagement among engineering students, who, traditionally, are a group reporting anxiety and disengagement in language learning. While in-class engagement was consistently high, pre-class engagement—especially among part-time students—remained challenging. The findings highlight that successful flipped learning depends not only on structure but also on relational pedagogy, teacher modelling, and supportive scaffolding for self-regulation.

The theme “theory to practice” therefore serves as an orientation for the sector. The studies demonstrate that partnership is most effective not when it is celebrated rhetorically but when it is embedded structurally in curriculum design, assessment processes, extracurricular experiences, and classroom pedagogies. They further show that meaningful engagement - whether through GenAI integration, inverted classrooms, case competitions, assessment co-design, or curriculum transformation - can be achieved. Additionally, evidence suggests that meaningful engagement will lead to higher confidence, deeper learning, clearer professional identity, stronger belonging, and more democratic educational environments.

Collectively, the contributions in this issue reaffirm the importance of relational, wellbeing-informed, and partnership-based approaches in creating conditions where student engagement can be sustained, meaningful, and transformative.