

# RESEARCH BRIEFING

Australasian Survey of Student Engagement

Volume 3 **August 2008**

## Highlights

- *'Distributed education' involves around half of the students in Australasian higher education.*
- *Many students undertake a large proportion of their study online, which to a limited but noticeable extent appears to have substituted for campus-based provision.*
- *Just under half (43%) of all students spending less than 15 hours on campus.*
- *Two-thirds of all Australasian students participate in off-campus paid work, most often for between 11 and 15 hours per week.*
- *'Distributed learners' tend to have fairly similar engagement characteristics to the overall student population, but specific differences exist in relation to participation in active learning, enriching educational experiences and work-integrated learning.*
- *'Distributed learners' report similar outcomes to campus-based learners except for those who spent little time on campus and report lower satisfaction and a greater likelihood of early departure.*

## *Enhancing the Engagement of Distributed Learners*

For much of the twentieth century it was conventional practice to distinguish between 'on-campus' and 'external' or 'distance' forms of higher education. This distinction has blurred both in theory and practice over the last few decades, with an increase in what may be referred to as 'distributed' forms of learning and higher education.

In Australia and New Zealand today, very few students spend significant amounts of time on campus. According to results from the 2007 Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) around three-quarters (77%) report spending no more than 10 hours per week on campus outside of formal classes. Just under half (44%) report no participation in 'extracurricular activities' in the average week.

This pattern is not specific to particular institutions or students but pertains to even the most 'campus-focused' forms of higher education. The traditional campus-based university may not have died or become outmoded, as portended in the late 1990s by some proponents of virtual or corporate universities. But along with growth of the system there has been a proliferation of different forms of educational provision and of approaches to learning.

Yet institutional practices may not reflect how today's students engage in university, or even the characteristics of contemporary learners. It is important to understand learners and the environments in which they learn to effectively manage their engagement in university education. Without doing so it is difficult to design effective support processes or to challenge students to succeed.

# Enhancing the Engagement of Distributed Learners

This briefing reports insights on how students are engaging in various distributed forms of higher education. It first focuses on distinguishing specific groups of 'distributed learners'. Between them, these learners account for around 52 per cent of the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) sample, even though 83 per cent classify themselves as studying 'full time' and 'campus based'. It then explores the characteristics of distributed learners' engagement in university study.

The analysis is based on data from the AUSSE, a survey conducted for the first time in 2007 with 25 Australian and New Zealand higher education institutions. A stratified probabilistic sampling strategy is deployed to produce results for first- and later-year bachelor degree students. Post-stratification weighting is used to ensure that responses represent the target population. In 2007 a total of 9,585 responses were received from students at participating universities.

## Identifying distributed learners

Distributed learning takes many shapes, and may be embedded in administrative designs or evolve through a learners' interaction with an institution. Identifying key groups provides important insights into contemporary higher education.

A select number of specific groups are targeted for current purposes. These groups are not necessarily mutually exclusive. They include students who report:

- studying externally;
- studying part time;
- undertaking at least half of their study online;
- studying internally but spent five hours or less on campus; and
- working more than 15 hours per week off campus.

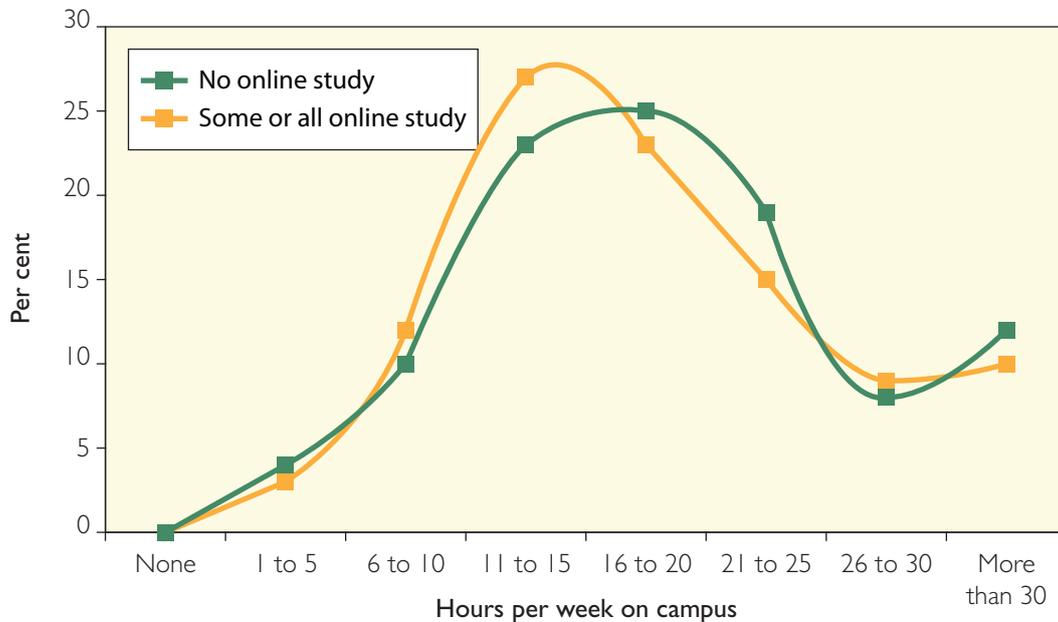
In the weighted 2007 AUSSE sample, 9 per cent of respondents reported studying externally. A slightly larger proportion of later year students were in this group. This share in the AUSSE sample is relatively similar to the overall statistics for Australian university enrolments, in 2006, 8.2 per cent of Bachelor degree enrollees were external students (DEST, 2006)

A total of 13 per cent of students reported studying part time, including 12 of first years and 14 per cent of later-year students. Australian population statistics indicate that the AUSSE sample has a slightly lower representation of part time students compared with the full student population. In 2006, 21.2 per cent of all bachelor degree students in Australia were recorded as studying part time (DEST, 2006). In the AUSSE sample the part time students were balanced across those studying externally (46 per cent) and those studying on campus (55 per cent). The DEST figures show a slightly lower proportion of external part time students (30%). The reasons for the discrepancies noted here are likely to be a definitional issue – students may see themselves as fitting a certain category, while university statistics use more strict definitions and may therefore allocate the student to a different category. It is unlikely that these discrepancies have any substantial impact on the analyses below.

For the overall AUSSE sample, 34 per cent reported doing at least half of their study online. This ranged from 67 per cent of external students to 30 per cent of students who identified themselves as studying on-campus. That is, just under a third of all campus-based students reported doing at least half of their study online. Around 31 per cent of students who reported studying mainly full time also reported doing at least half of their study online, compared with 50 per cent for students who reported studying mostly part time. In terms of year levels, 32 per cent and 36 per cent of first- and later-year students reported doing at least half of their study online.

Online learning does appear to have substituted for campus-based provision, although perhaps not to the extent portended by online learning researchers over the last few decades. Figure 1 shows the total hours per week spent on campus in terms of the proportion of study undertaken online. These figures are for students who report having a full-time and campus-based enrolment. Those who report doing no study online are most likely to spend 16 to 20 hours per week on campus. People who report doing some or all of their study online are most likely to spend 11 to 15 hours per week on campus.

Most Australasian bachelor degree students spend only a small fraction of their week around campus or in class. Figure 2 shows that it is most common for students who



**Figure 1** Online study and total hours per week on campus

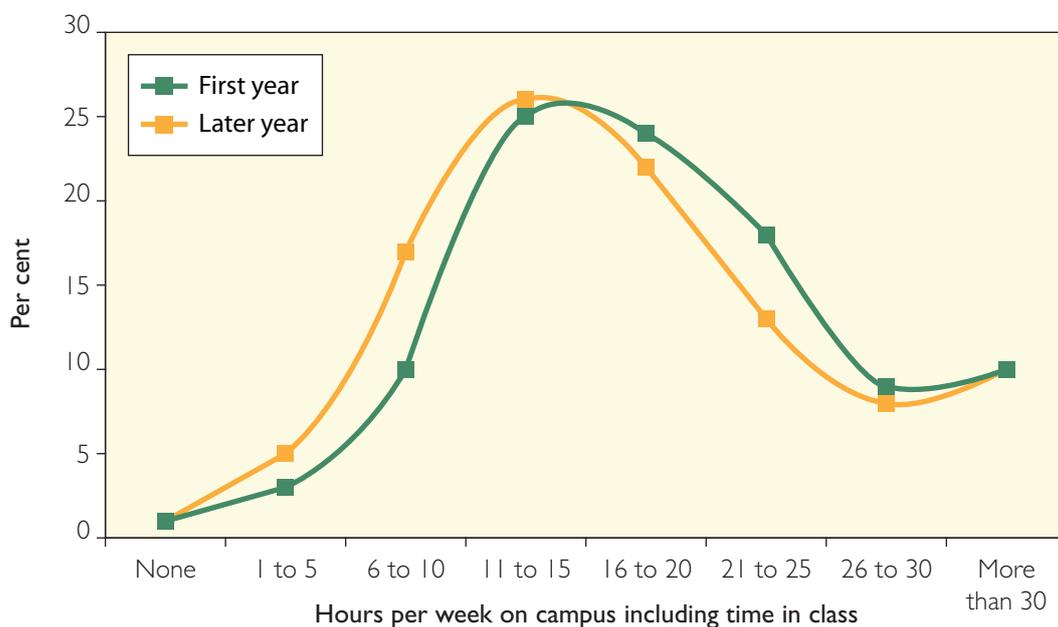
see themselves as studying internally to spend between 11 and 15 hours on campus. First-year students spent more time on campus than later-year students, and a reasonable proportion spend only between one and five hours per week on campus. Overall, 43 per cent of students spend less than 15 hours on campus.

One reason for students spending only a small amount of time on campus may be that they are engaged in paid work off campus. It seems reasonable to assume students who are undertaking more than 15 hours a week in off-campus paid work have commitments that may overlap with university study.

Table 1 shows the percentage of students undertaking varying hours of off-campus paid work per week.

Results are shown for six different groups of students, and for the whole sample.

Two-thirds (67%) of all Australasian students were engaged in off-campus paid work. Less first- than final-year students are in paid work. External students work more than on-campus students, and a high proportion (37 per cent) of external students work 30 hours or more in paid work per week. On campus students are more likely than external students to be working between one and 25 hours a week. The same pattern emerges for full-time and part-time students. Across the whole AUSSE sample, it is most common for students to work between 11 and 15 hours per week, but 31 per cent of students work more than 15 hours a week, the group analysed in this briefing.



**Figure 2** Internal students' time spent on campus

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**Table 1** Hours of off-campus paid work per week

	First year	Later year	External	On campus	Full time	Part time	Total
None	35	30	25	33	34	22	33
1 to 5	7	7	4	8	8	5	7
6 to 10	15	13	8	15	15	9	14
11 to 15	16	14	6	16	16	10	15
16 to 20	12	15	8	14	14	8	13
21 to 25	7	7	6	7	7	6	7
26 to 30	2	4	6	3	3	5	3
More than 30	6	9	37	4	4	36	8

## Broad characteristics of distributed learners' engagement

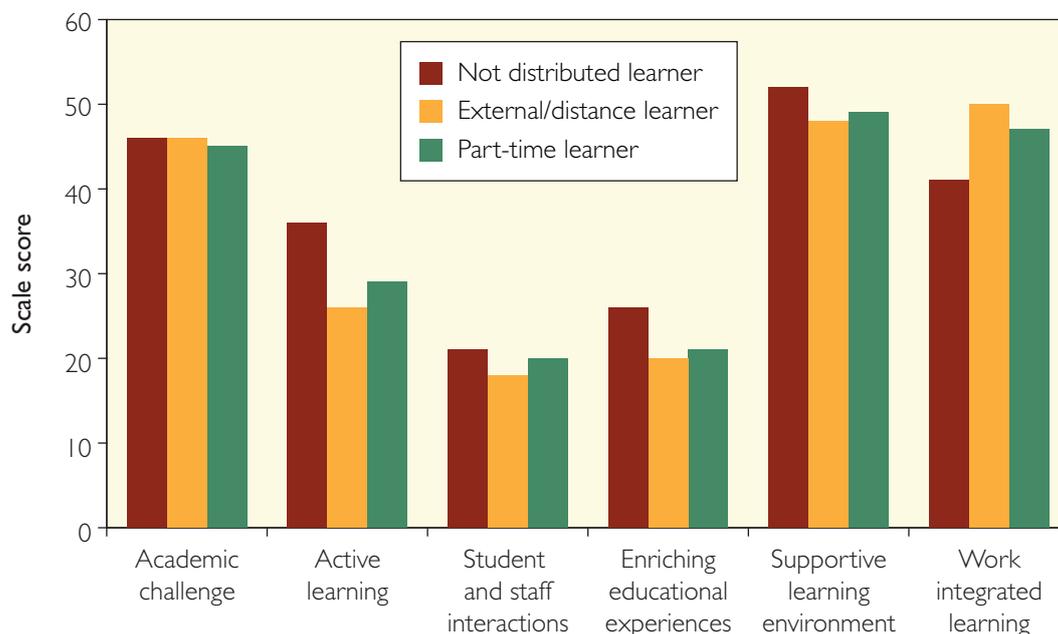
The following analysis builds a picture of how distributed learners engage in university education. It uses as a point of reference mean scores for learners who are not defined as distributed learners.

The AUSSE provides data on both learners' engagement in effective learning practices and on whether institutions have provided supports that facilitate such engagement. This briefing focuses on the following six

AUSSE scales: Academic Challenge, Active Learning, Student and Staff Interactions, Enriching Educational Experiences, Supportive Learning Environment, and Work Integrated Learning.

Benchmarked Australasian results, averaged across 25 institutions, for students who indicate that they study externally or part time are shown in Figure 2. Scale scores are reported using a metric that runs from 0 to 100. In general, a difference of five points or more reflects a meaningful educational effect.

External and part-time learners have fairly similar engagement characteristics. Results tend to be on par



**Figure 3** External and part-time learners' engagement

for many scales, indicating that while the pragmatics associated with these forms of distributed learning may differ, key learning interactions and supports remain the same.

Notable differences exist in relation to distributed learners' participation in active learning and enriching educational experiences, in which both groups mean scores are lower than the overall Australasian mean. Conversely, both groups report higher levels of participation in work-integrated forms of learning, particularly people studying externally.

Figure 3 reports on the engagement characteristics of on-campus learners who report doing more than half of their learning online, spending five hours or less per week on campus or working more than 15 hours per week off campus for pay.

High levels of online learning are not linked with different levels of engagement than for the overall student population, although online learners report slightly higher levels of work-integrated learning. The same general patterns are evident for learners who work more than 15 hours per week off campus for pay.

Internal learners who report spending less than five hours or less per week on campus show the greatest variations from the Australasian average. They indicate feeling less academic challenge and less institutional support.

In summary, while variations exist in terms of the six defined scales, in general students classified as 'distributed learners' in this analysis do not report markedly different forms of student engagement than the overall student population.



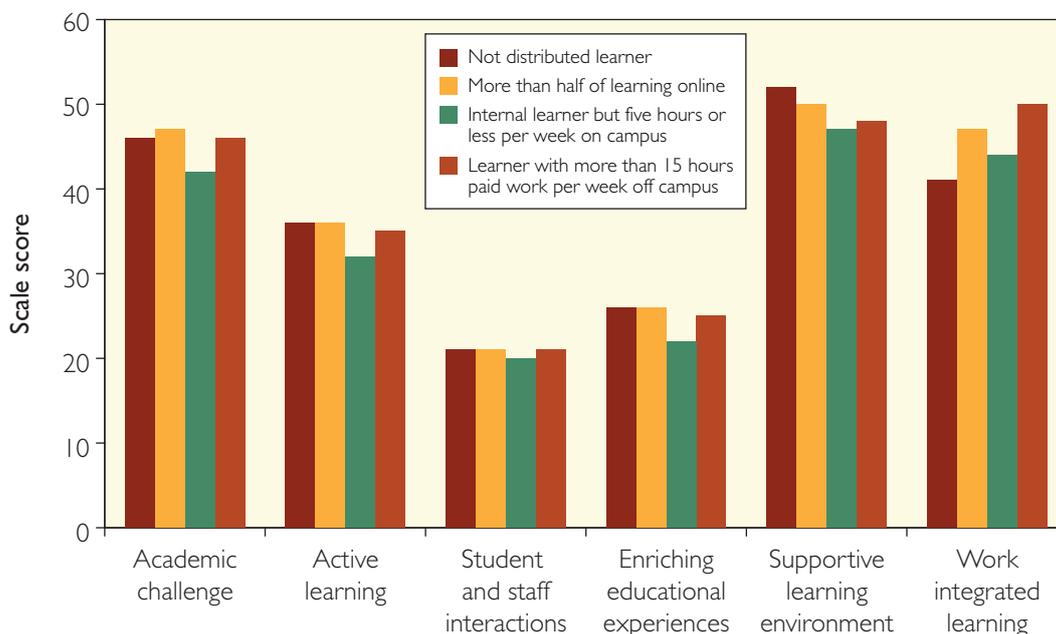
*Online units less placements as some of us currently working in nursing field more flexibility in timetable*

*– First-year nursing student*

## Specific characteristics of distributed learners' engagement

However there are differences across these groups and analysis of more specific educational factors helps tease these out. The Student Engagement Questionnaire (SEQ), the AUSSE survey instrument, includes around 100 items that measure specific educational activities and conditions.

Table 2 reports the characteristics which most distinguish the engagement of distributed learners in



**Figure 4** High online, low time on-campus and high paid-work learners' engagement

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their study. These are the areas in which distributed learners show the most positive or negative departures from the Australasian average. The differences range between three and five scale points in magnitude.

The areas where distributed learners engage less than their counterparts are mostly social in nature. The balance focus on participation in enriching educational experiences.

Conversely, the specific areas in which distributed learners report higher engagement are concentrated on work-related forms of learning. That is, they report greater involvement in forms of learning that are linked with the development of work-ready graduates.

Along with different facets of student engagement, the SEQ seeks feedback from students on several different outcomes of university study. These outcomes, each of which is reported here on scale that runs from zero to 100, include:

- overall satisfaction;
- self-reported learning and development;
- average overall grade; and
- intentions to stay at the same institution.

Figure 4 presents mean scores for these four outcome indicators for the five distributed learner groups and for all learners. In summary:

- distributed learners report lower levels of overall satisfaction, although the differences are minor except for internal students who spent little time on

campus and those who work for pay off campus for more than 15 hours per week;

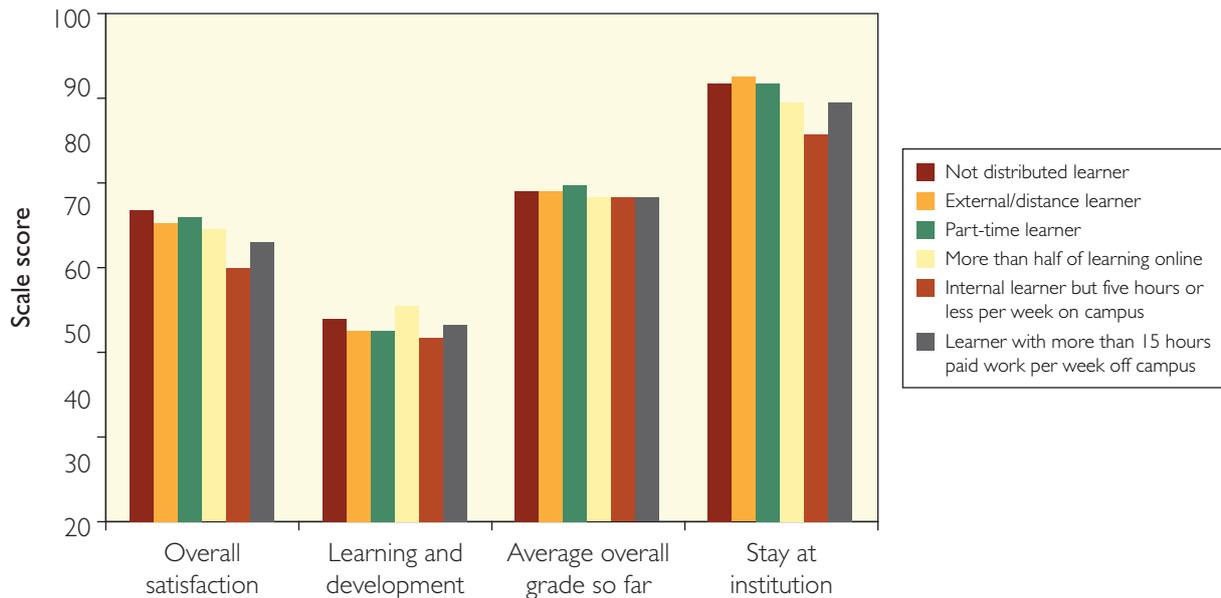
- learning and development outcomes appear consistent, although internal learners who report taking more than half of their study online have higher mean scores than other distributed learners;
- reports of average overall grades are consistent across these groups; and
- institutional change intentions are consistent across these groups, averaging around 87 per cent of learners, with the exception of internal learner who spent little time on campus, of whom only 81 per cent intend on staying at the same institution.

## Key findings

- 1 'Distributed education' which comprises varying forms of provision and learning may involve around half of the students in Australasian higher education. These learners may be studying externally, part time, online, spending less than five hours per week off campus, or working for more than 15 hours per week in off-campus paid work.
- 2 Many students undertake a large proportion of their study online, even those enrolled full time on campus. If time-on-campus provides any indication, online learning does appear to have substituted for campus-based provision, although perhaps not to the extent forecast by some commentators in the last few decades.

**Table 2** Characteristics that distinguish distributed learners

Distributed learners less likely than average to:	Distributed learners more likely than average to:
have conversations with students of different ethnic backgrounds	prepare two or more drafts of a paper
work with students outside class	use email to communicate with teaching staff
report having quality of relationships with other students	participate in an industry placement or work experience
have conversations with students who are very different	spend time managing personal business
participate in foreign language study	explore how to apply learning in the workforce
report their institution has provided the supports to succeed academically	spend time providing care for dependents
discuss ideas from classes with others	blend academic learning with workplace experience
work with students during class	work for pay off campus



**Figure 5** Distributed learners' reported outcomes

- 3 Most Australasian bachelor degree students spend only a small fraction of their week on campus or in class. It is most common for students who see themselves as studying internally to spend between 11 and 15 hours on campus. Overall, 43 per cent of students spend less than 15 hours on campus.
- 4 Two-thirds (67%) of all Australasian students were engaged in off-campus paid work. Fewer first- than final-year students are in paid work. External students work more than on-campus students, but external students tend to work 30 hours or more in paid work per week while internal students are more likely to be working between one and 25 hours a week. The same pattern emerges for full-time and part-time students. It is most common for students to work between 11 and 15 hours per week, but 31 per cent of students work more than 15 hours a week.
- 5 External and part-time learners have fairly similar engagement characteristics to the overall student population. Notable differences exist in relation to distributed learners' participation in active learning and enriching educational experiences, in which both groups mean scores are lower than the overall Australasian mean. Conversely, both groups report higher levels of participation in work-integrated forms of learning. This is particularly so for those studying externally.
- 6 High levels of online learning are not linked with different levels of engagement, although online learners report slightly higher levels of work-integrated learning than other students. The same general patterns are evident for learners who work more than 15 hours per week off campus for pay.

*More video streamed lectures for external students so we can hear discussions about topics studied*

– First-year nursing student



*More contact/information provided to external students. External students don't receive all of the little extra notes that are given in lectures.*

– First-year accounting student

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- 7 Internal learners who report spending five hours or fewer per week on campus show the greatest variations from the Australasian average. They indicate feeling less academic challenge and less institutional support.
- 8 In general, while variations exist in terms of the six defined scales, students classified as 'distributed learners' in this analysis do not report markedly different forms of student engagement than the overall student population. The specific areas where distributed learners engage less than their counterparts are mostly social in nature. Conversely, the specific areas in which distributed learners report higher engagement are concentrated on work-related forms of learning.
- 9 While their learning and development outcomes appear consistent with the total student population, distributed learners report slightly lower levels of overall satisfaction with university study, although the differences are minor except for internal students who spent little time on campus and those who are employed for more than 15 hours per week in a job off campus. Reports of average overall grades are consistent across these groups.
- 10 Intention to change institution is consistent across the groups studied. Around 87 per cent of learners indicate they plan to change institution, with the exception of internal learners who spent little time on campus, of whom only 81 per cent intend on staying at the same institution.

## Resources

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## Analytical foundations

'Student engagement', defined as students' involvement with activities and conditions likely to generate high-quality learning, is increasingly understood to be important for higher education quality. The concept provides a practical lens for assessing and responding to the significant dynamics, constraints and opportunities facing higher education institutions. It provides key insights into what students are actually doing to learn, a structure for framing conversations about quality, and a stimulus for guiding new thinking about best practice.

Student engagement is an idea specifically focused on learners and their interactions with university. The idea touches on aspects of teaching, the broader student experience, learners' lives beyond university, and institutional support. It is based on the premise that learning is influenced by how an individual participates in educationally purposeful activities. While students are seen to be responsible for constructing their knowledge, learning is also seen to depend on institutions and staff generating conditions that stimulate and encourage involvement. Learners are central to the idea of student engagement, which focuses squarely on enhancing individual learning and development.

Despite its importance, information on student engagement has not been readily available to Australasian higher education institutions. The Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE), conducted with 25 institutions for the first time in 2007, provides data that Australian and New Zealand higher education institutions can use to attract, engage and retain students. The AUSSE builds on foundations laid by the North American National Survey of Student Engagement. By providing information that is generalisable and sensitive to institutional diversity, and with multiple points of reference, the AUSSE plays an important role in helping institutions monitor and enhance the quality of education.

*More face to face workshops for external students, perhaps once a semester in high density student areas.*

*– Later-year writing student*



*My department seems largely oblivious to the fact that some students work to support themselves, have family commitments or have a life outside the department unless matters come to a crisis.*

*– Third-year visual arts and textiles student*



*More consideration for students that work full-time (sometimes 50 hours per week), provide for a family and are involved in external committees.*

*– Later-year human resources management student*

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