

Research Handbook of Student Engagement in Higher Education

Edited by Cathy Stone and Sarah O'Shea

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Reviewed by

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Student engagement remains a central concern in higher education research and practice. The 2024 *Research Handbook on Student Engagement in Higher Education*, edited by Cathy Stone and Sarah O'Shea, grapples with this concern, seeking both to interrogate theory and research and to spur practical applications. Over 27 chapters, the book dissects various perspectives on student engagement within the higher education sector.

This book is primarily aimed at academics and practitioners, intending to provide a comprehensive analysis of student engagement through a compilation of scholarly research. Its overarching frame of reference is Ella Kahu's models of student engagement (Kahu, 2013; Kahu & Nelson, 2018), which guide the thematic exploration throughout the book. Kahu provides a thought-provoking foreword to the collection, positing that student engagement is an important good in and of itself, not just as a route to another outcome. This sentiment is echoed in several later chapters.

The handbook is organised into three sections: "Part 1: Understanding Student Engagement", "Part 2: Student Engagement in the Context of Diverse Cohorts", and "Part 3: International Perspectives of Student Engagement: Case Studies in Action". The first part lays the theoretical groundwork, exploring foundational concepts and frameworks. The second part shifts focus towards engagement strategies for students from diverse backgrounds, emphasising inclusivity and adaptability. The third broadens the perspective, presenting case studies from Australia, Austria, French-speaking Canada, Korea, Rwanda, Scotland and the UK, and the USA, illustrating the diverse applications and challenges in student engagement. The presentation of the case studies includes both research on specific groups and more traditional group-, course- or institution-based cases useful for practitioners.

The book's principal strength lies in its comprehensive approach, diversity of case studies, and the inclusion of a wide array of perspectives, particularly those focusing on under-served, non-traditional, and marginalised student groups. Student engagement is complex (Trowler et al., 2022; Vuori, 2014), a refrain that runs clearly throughout this book. Although Kahu's model of engagement as the educational interface provides the framing for the book, many different perspectives on the construct are provided across the different chapters. While the diversity of perspectives is valuable, it underlines the difficulty of discussing topics where authors apply broad meanings to the same term. In this case, "engagement" encompasses interactions with peers or staff; the behavioural, emotional, and cognitive activities of students; and the interactions between students and university structures at the educational interface. Each mental model of what engagement entails leads to different theoretical and practical implications. It struck me while reading the book that while engagement is certainly complex, some of this complexity may be resolved by more theoretical maturity, consistency, and clarity from authors in how the term is used. This is itself a useful insight for researchers to consider, and a clear indication that the book achieves the goals it set itself to challenge current perceptions and offer new perspectives.

Uink et al. (Chapter 6) focus on the importance of relationality as a central principle in supporting both First Nations students and other under-served students. This point reframes and centralises the idea of the education interface even more clearly than perhaps Kahu and Nelson's (2018) model itself does, while the importance of relationality echoes through the other chapters. I was left wondering whether this chapter would have been better placed in Part 1 (Understanding student engagement) rather than Part 2 (Student engagement in the context of diverse cohorts).

Decolonising and Indigenising universities requires not just including knowledge *about* First Nations peoples in curricula but understandings *from* First Nations perspectives in both curricula and university processes and practices (with due support and recognition provided to the cultural heritage of that understanding—Janke, 2021). The importance of relationality is highlighted as central in Aboriginal culture, but that wisdom equally applies to understanding its importance in student engagement. It feels like a missed opportunity to “other” this perspective in a section devoted to diverse cohorts, rather than centre it in the section on understanding student engagement at large alongside Matthews et al.’s Chapter 3 which makes a similar point without the same cultural perspective (2024).

Despite this criticism, the *Research Handbook on Student Engagement in Higher Education* is an interesting and valuable addition to the literature. It leads the reader to critically reflect on common approaches to understanding the field and the perspectives—explicit or implicit—that are embedded in those perspectives. However, it is not without its limitations. The shadow of Covid-19 hangs heavy over the book, particularly in the first half, but there are only one or two references to generative artificial intelligence. This illustrates how quickly the higher education sector has moved over the last several years. This rapid evolution of the higher education landscape remains a key challenge for practitioners, but the importance of understanding, supporting, and developing student engagement remains clear.

This book is especially recommended for those involved in engagement research, policy-making, curriculum design, and educational practices, serving as a critical resource for navigating and enhancing student engagement in an evolving educational landscape.

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