

Implementing an Engagement Strategy

What do we mean?

Engaging with different types of learners can prove challenging, however it is necessary to truly achieve a culture of meaningful partnership.

The first step is to establish which learners or demographics are engaged and which are not. Monitoring this will help to target which groups require more attention, enabling you to tailor your support effectively. You also need to find out why.

Establishing the fundamental reasons behind learners not engaging will be key to tackling these inequalities.

Once you have gathered information, you will need to adopt different methods to successfully engage with these groups of learners. This will not be a one-size-fits-all approach, but the result will mean a more representative learner voice.

Why an engagement strategy?

Engaging with all of your learner groups equally can have huge effects on both the students and the institution itself.

Students

- Better engagement means feeling empowered to be involved and making a change
- Better representation across the college
- More involvement with learner voice initiatives, such as course reps

Institution

- Demonstrable engagement with all groups of learners can improve student satisfaction
- Better attendance at events

Where to start

There are two main steps to be taken: monitoring engagement, and improving engagement with different types of learners.

Monitoring Engagement

There are a range of ways you can monitor the engagement of your learners, depending on what you are trying to find out. Make sure you tailor your methods to account for this. **Do not write a survey just for the sake of it** – keep in mind what it is you are wanting to monitor, and adopt the most appropriate method.

If possible, you could ask for the demographics of those learners who are engaged with certain activities from whomever holds the data at your institution. This is not always possible, however, so other actions can be taken.



Tailor your monitoring methods to account for your needs.

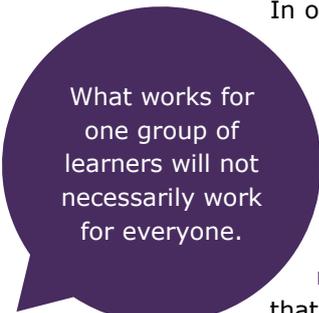
Surveys are one way of trying to monitor engagement, however you might find that even engagement with the survey is skewed, therefore creating data which is not truly representative. It depends on how you conduct your survey, and what you are trying to find out. Surveys are effective in collecting data on the numbers of learners involved with activities (if it cannot be ascertained any other way, such as registers or sign-up data), but also in establishing the reasoning behind a lack of engagement. They can be used to target specific audiences, or they can be rolled out to the entire student body. Decide what it is you want to research, and work back from there.

Focus groups are also a good way of monitoring engagement, as long as you have attendance from a diverse range of learners. This in itself may prove to be a challenge, but even the attendance can prove to be a good indicator of overall engagement.

The key to an effective focus group is to make sure it has a clear and defined purpose. Having learners in the room is a very valuable resource and can usually provide more detailed insight into the barriers to engagement than a simple survey, so utilise the time well. Have questions prepared which should help you get to the bottom of why some learners are engaged and others are not, or to find out what activities and initiatives might help to improve engagement.

Once you have conducted your research into engagement and established the areas for improvement, it is time to adopt a strategy to help tackle these.

Engagement Strategy



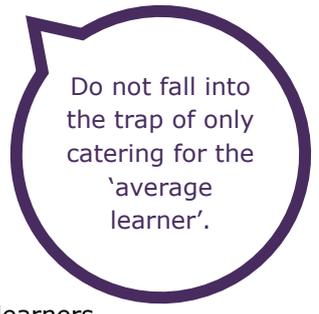
What works for one group of learners will not necessarily work for everyone.

In order to successfully engage with all of your learners, from part-time and mature students, apprentices and ACLs, to BME and international students, you will need to adopt different methods. What works for one group will not necessarily work for everyone. It is easy to fall into the trap of only catering for the 'average learner' and forgetting about the true diversity of the student body.

Engaging with these groups can prove challenging, but that does not mean they should be ignored. It is simply about finding the method that works for your institution. Below are a few suggestions from other colleges and universities. Try to use these to inspire your own solutions – and let us know how they worked!

Grŵp Llandrillo Menai – apprentices and HE learners

At GLLM, they have ensured that access to surveys that are conducted with learners are made available on mobiles for their apprentices. This makes it easier for them to participate. Assessors are also asked to pass on relevant notices and information to apprentices on their visits. This simple adjustment means apprentices are given more opportunities to get involved and engage with the college and its activities.



Do not fall into the trap of only catering for the 'average learner'.

There are also taster days such as 'Looking forward to HE' days for learners returning to HE study. These are important first engagements with this group, promoting their role within the institution.

Adult Learning Wales – overall engagement

Adult Learning Wales has been trialing a number of new initiatives to improve learner involvement. These include sending learners forms asking, "Are there any issues?" – a proactive approach to capturing learner concerns or dissatisfaction, that will also serve to encourage less confident learners to feedback.

Another trial taking place is the 'My Learning Journey' scheme, designed to capture soft skills and progress made, which is a good way of monitoring the impact education is having on individual learners and can be used to build learner confidence.

University of Manchester Students' Union – distance learners

At Manchester, there are a number of off-campus students, so steps were taken to engage with them in particular. The first was to work in partnership with the University to create a new staff position – the Off-Campus Students' Project Coordinator. This member leads on work to engage with distance learners.

Initiatives they have taken on board include:

- Hosting social, welcome and support activities.
- Supporting an active Society (meet and greets, quizzes, meals, etc).
- Day Tripper projects – local students act as a guide for students who aren't familiar with the city, accompanying them to events such as low league football matches and community fairs.
- Campaigning for cheaper transport fares for students commuting to campus.

Although these may not apply directly to learners at colleges who do not tend to live on campus, some of these ideas can be applied in other ways. For example, having active societies is an effective way of helping to increase engagement with learners. The Day Tripper project could also be changed slightly to allow second year learners help to welcome in new students.

Gower College Swansea – ILS

At Gower College, tutors on work-placement and ILS courses are specifically targeted in order to advertise the student council and other opportunities to participate to these currently under-represented groups. This is again a very simple step to take to try and offer opportunities to all learners equally.

General Tips

Here are some more general tips that you can apply to all learner types.

- **Give your learners choice.** Recruit a large number of learners to a panel, and give them the option to opt in to particular methods of engagement (e.g. surveys, online focus groups, telephone interviews, usability testing). Learners who have opted in (to online focus groups, for example) are then contacted each time a focus group is planned, asking if they would like to participate. This method allows learners to participate in activities that suit their preferences and availability.
- A **centralised student feedback team** means learners can direct all their comments or concerns to one place, and a staff member then direct these to the relevant departments for a response and/or follow-up action. Comments can also be submitted anonymously, which stops lack of confidence from being a barrier.
- In successfully engaging one group of learners, **do not forget about any other minorities within your institution.** Your long-term aim should be to engage with a range of student groups, not just one.
- **Remember that engagement is continuous.** Do not conduct one survey one year and think that the results will last a lifetime. It is important to always reassess your engagement strategy so that it continues to benefit learners over the course of the term, year, and beyond.

Summary

Engaging with students is not an easy task. If you conduct some research and implement a strategy, you will find that small changes can make a big difference. Learner involvement is a necessary aspect of partnership, so engaging with the greatest number and variety of learners is a really important step to take.

If you have any questions, do not hesitate to contact Wise Wales (details below).

Resources

- [Learner Engagement Strategy, Aberdeen College \(2012\)](#)
- [Student Engagement Strategy, Milton Keynes College \(2016\)](#)
- [Learner Engagement: A review of learner voice initiatives across the UK's education sectors \(Walker and Logan, 2008\)](#)



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