This booklet has been put together by the Learning and Teaching Unit to provide staff with information and ideas about engaging students.

Many of the examples in this booklet have been taken from the online and fully-searchable Good Practice Database, the URL for which is opposite. The Database brings together ideas, innovations, and examples of good practice from across the University, and now includes a user rating system.

Why produce a booklet on engaging students? As the President of the Students’ Union explains in his foreword, engaging students is an institutional and national priority. Increasingly, universities are fighting for the attention of their students, competing with other priorities and pressures such as part-time work. However, the term ‘student engagement’ is extremely broad – such a short booklet cannot aim to chart anything other than the tip of the iceberg. The needs and motivations of students are also specific to time and space; they are not static. University staff need to attune themselves to this, and have a repertoire of strategies for engaging different groups of learners at different times. Taking this as its organising principle, this booklet identifies some of the areas where engagement can be targeted and suggests ways it might be improved.

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When we talk about engagement, we’re talking about stimulating students, encouraging them to say what they think, and empowering them to go out and pursue the academic experience they most want and need.

There are some threats to engagement that we can do very little about: the majority of students now have to work part-time, and the average student in a part-time job works fourteen hours a week; since the introduction of top-up fees we have seen a change in student behaviour, with more demands placed on them than ever before, not just to achieve academically, but to gain the transferable skills they need to ensure they are employable when they leave. These pressures make demands on a student’s time that will understandably affect them in the classroom.

However, there are other threats to student engagement that the University has greater control over: sufficient contact time; interesting curriculum content; stimulating teaching and learning methods; strong community culture and ethos; supportive networks; not to mention consulting with students over what and how they learn. There are many more.

In the Students’ Union, we encourage students to make the most of their time at University to engage in their study, interests, sports, hobbies – everything. University is about more than a degree: it is a whole experience, with many different facets, all of them important. We endorse this booklet as a tool for spreading ideas and generating discussion among staff. It offers solutions to common issues that can be classified under the broad term of ‘student engagement’ and to this end we hope you can make the time to read it, and ultimately find it useful.

The SU is committed to working with departments and central units to provide the best and most supportive learning experience possible for our students; to ensure they can get the most out of every moment at Essex. Our sincerest thanks for the quality of your teaching and your dedication. We continue to be proud of you.

Ibby Mehmet, October 2009

www.essex.ac.uk/goodpractice
Six ways to encourage engagement

■ Make participation in research compulsory

The Department of Psychology has developed a system that has the dual benefit of providing first-year undergraduates with valuable research experience while also providing staff and student-researchers with a convenient pool of participants for their experiments. The system requires first years to be research subjects in departmental experiments. The formal expectation for participation is a minimum of 8 hours of research. Students are issued with a card to record the experiments in which they have participated.

■ Get students to set essay questions or produce marking criteria

Role reversal can be an effective way to improve student understanding of marking criteria. One way to do this is to provide students with a set of learning outcomes and ask them, in pairs or small groups, to write an essay/assignment question that would assess them against the relevant marking criteria; another way is to get them to set the criteria itself.

■ Set problem-based learning (PBL) tasks

Exploring different teaching and learning methodologies is one way to boost student engagement in the curriculum. The School of Health and Human Sciences uses problem-based learning (PBL) throughout its programmes of study. PBL describes a range of pedagogic approaches that encourage students to learn through exploring a research problem in a structured and supported way. Students work in small self-directed groups to undertake and evaluate research tasks which are often a ‘real life’ problem. The teacher plays a peripheral role, acting as facilitator, consultant and general resource.

■ Start a student journal

There are now a number of departmental academic student journals. This year has also seen the launch of the University’s multidisciplinary journal, Estro (www.essex.ac.uk/journals/estro). The Economics Society helps to run one of the earliest student journals, the Essex Economics Student Journal, which publishes the best term papers and projects submitted by students. The Journal makes a substantial contribution to student engagement by incentivising and showcasing academic excellence, one of the Department’s primary aims. The Departments of Art History and Theory and Sociology also have their own student journals, so there are plenty of models for starting up new journals available on campus.

■ Provide an online space for collaborative work

The Centre for Psychoanalytic Studies uses Microsoft SharePoint to host a dynamic online workspace for its research students. The
workspace allows students to post work for peers to review and provide feedback on, and is particularly good for involving distance learners and off-campus students. The same workspace features a blog facility, news feeds, and discussion forums. The Departments of Language and Linguistics and History also use SharePoint to create special areas for specific contingents of students with varying levels of access available.

- **Devise weekly online assessments to accompany lectures**

The Centre for Sports and Exercise Science has created large banks of online formative multiple choice questions relating to the curricula of core first-year modules. The questions are automatically released on a particular week and are also set at three difficulty levels. Students begin by accessing the most basic level of questions, on completion of which they receive detailed feedback on their answers, as well as the assessment as a whole. If the student has performed well, they are directed to a more difficult level of assessment; if the student has performed less well, they have to retake the assessment. As a result of the weekly tests, summative marks and engagement have improved significantly. The Department of History has recently developed its own online assessments.
How to engage students and support them towards independence

**Martin Sellens – Centre for Sports and Exercise Science**

Since its inception, the Centre for Sports and Exercise Science has actively sought new ways to support students towards becoming independent learners, integrating a range of techniques to appeal to different learning styles in order to develop experience over the course of programmes of study.

The emphasis in the undergraduate first year is on engaging students with subject content and providing as much support as possible through continuous weekly formative assessments, opportunities for formative feedback, and tutorial support. Great importance is also placed on maximising engagement in lectures. Some of the techniques used include: attendance monitoring and evaluation of learning using the Personal Response System (PRS; see page 10); practice formative assessments between lectures (see page 5); and skeleton/incomplete lecture notes (see page 7). Hands on training in professional and research skills is provided in structured practical classes that provide the foundation for the development of research-led learning in subsequent years. Towards the end of the first year, students have their first opportunity for in-depth independent learning through the week-long summer school that links group research projects to activities such as orienteering, go-karting, and touch-rugby.

In the second and third years, students continue to take weekly assessments for many of the modules. Feedback is provided in a variety of ways including the use of MP3 audio files. Problem based learning (PBL, see page 4) and research-led teaching become increasingly important. As an example of PBL, students explore problems such as how performance might be optimised in an ultra-marathon in Death Valley. As an example of research-led teaching, second-year students complete a mini-research project in preparation for their third-year project.

The third-year independent research project, which all students are required to undertake, is in many ways the culmination of undergraduate work.
Developing student motivation on large undergraduate modules

Patrick Hitchen – Essex Business School

As module leader for three large undergraduate modules, each with upwards of 120 students, I am always looking for ways to maximise engagement and participation. I incorporate a number of interactive methods and techniques into my teaching, some of which you might like to try:

Interactive handouts – While research suggests that some students are more inclined to miss lectures if they can obtain notes and handouts before the lecture I nonetheless provide them. I reason that the positive advantages to the students that do attend, many of whom have English as their second language, outweigh the negative ones. What I do try to do however is provide the notes in a state of partial completion – only in the lecture itself are students given the relevant information with which to fill in the blanks.

Online Worksheets – Research indicates that student learning and retention of information increases if the period between delivery and assessment is reduced. With this in mind, I have used QuestionMark Perception software to devise weekly online tests consisting of ten multiple-choice questions that focus on the lecture topic of that week. The tests become available immediately after every lecture. Students must complete the test a minimum of two days before the next lecture. This gives me the opportunity to analyse the test results and provide specific feedback in the following lecture. This a great way to test understanding and identify where students might be having problems with specific concepts.

Tip: Making the tests part of the summative assessment can significantly increase the participation mark.

Problem-solving – A practical problem is presented on screen in the lecture. Students work as individuals or in pairs. They get a break from the lecture (and so do I).

In addition to the above, I have also used the following to good effect in classes:

Line-ups – If the space is available, one good way of generating debate is to get students to organise themselves into a physical continuum – a ‘line-up’ – in accordance with (for example) how much they agree or disagree with a statement or theory.

Cross-over – Debate is facilitated by small-group discussion. Groups are then mixed up. And mixed up again. This is especially good for opening up cliques and getting students talking.
Four key areas to target for engagement

There are many ways to engage students, and many areas that could be prioritised depending on your particular teaching responsibilities or the focus of the department. The four areas below are intended to break down this complex issue and make thinking about engagement easier. It may be helpful to focus on the single most relevant area.

Ideas for how engagement might be improved in each area are highlighted in italics. As well as considering all student groups (non-traditional students, international students, mature students, off-campus students, as well as home students) one of the most challenging things for academic teaching staff is to respond to trends and interests, keeping material and delivery fresh and relevant to students.

1. Design

Try designing opportunities for small group work, maximum participation, discussion, varied assessment and delivery (see below), and activities that appeal to as many different learning styles as possible.

2. Delivery

Try some of the following: set problem-based learning tasks (see page 4); use Personal Response Systems (see page 10); allow students to negotiate their learning (more in the style of third-year projects and dissertations); try setting team- and group-working activities; more collaborative work; role-play; use VLEs and online learning environments to support module material, especially if the numbers of off-campus users are high.

3. Assessment

Try some of the following: integrate as many varied assessment types as possible; set regular, supported assessments to provide timely, formative feedback; vary assessments to appeal to a broad range of learners.

4. Other areas

Encourage involvement in societies, the departmental society (ie Law Society), professional bodies, student journals, peer support schemes (ie buddying), etc.
Amanda Flather – Department of History

Over the last few years, the Department of History has redesigned its compulsory first-year module, Society, Culture and Politics in Europe 1500-1750 (HR111) to include more activities to develop key academic skills that are specific to historians and more elements of Personal Development Planning (PDP). Having recognised that many University entrants are ill-equipped with the necessary skills for academic success, the Department focused on HR111 as the best means of providing blanket coverage to all undergraduates as early in their University lives as possible.

The most important skills were identified and then mapped onto existing module curricula, with the emphasis on research skills, critical analysis, constructing and communicating ideas and arguments in verbal and written form, group work, and taking a reflective approach to learning.

Beginning in 2009, the module will be assessed through students’ portfolios, comprising skills audits, research, writing and reflective exercises, and longer written assignments. Students will also be asked to self-assess their written work to improve their ability to identify expected qualities and make improvements. A module forum will offer the opportunity to post comments, questions and materials relating to the module.

The three tenets that underpinned the redevelopment of the module were: (i) skills need to be taught in a subject-specific way; (ii) skills development must be assessed for students to take it seriously; and (iii) skills must not detract from the main substantive aims of the course.

The module is heavily supported by online resources, including a dedicated History website for first years which brings crucial information and a number of significant resources together in a single online space. The website features the following:

- Information about study, module aims and objectives, lectures and seminars, assessment, submission, late submission, and introductory reading;
- Module outlines and information;
- Study guides to reading primary sources, reading secondary sources, seminar participation, writing essays, improving learning, research resources, the interpretation of images, and use of internet sources;
- Compulsory tasks and Personal Development Planning (PDP) activities.

This model of provision encourages students to see their development as historians and the process of acquiring skills as one and the same. Skills are assessed, but as processes rather than products. They are deeply rooted in the discipline, so relevance is immediate, and they do not detract from the substantive element of the modules.
mySkills
www.essex.ac.uk/myskills

The University’s academic skills website is a growing resource of guidance material and exercises for students to be used independently or as part of a module or course. The majority of the content can be easily adapted for use in classes and seminars.

There is a subsection of the website dedicated to each of the following key academic skills areas: studying; lectures; seminars; presentations; feedback; research; reading; writing; language; referencing. Most sections include activities and interactive guidance, including short films of students expressing their opinions about the specific areas.

Encourage your students to use mySkills. Email Richard Yates (ryates@essex.ac.uk) if you would like to contribute to or comment on the website.

Good Practice Database
www.essex.ac.uk/goodpractice

As mentioned at the beginning of this leaflet, the University has launched a new searchable online Good Practice Database, which has a section dedicated to student engagement. It is home to many ideas, innovations, and examples of good practice that have been collected from across the University, which are also available in PDF format as Smart Guides such as this one. Visit the Learning and Teaching Unit website, www.essex.ac.uk/ltu/resources.

The examples that feature are neither definitive nor prescriptive. The database is a tool to facilitate continuous update and improvement; to assist in the exchange of dialogue about good practice across the whole University. To this end, both criticism of existing examples and contributions of new examples are welcomed.

Personal Response Systems (PRS)

A number of departments are starting to use a learning technology that is based on the ‘Ask the Audience’ feature of Who Wants to be a Millionaire? to engage students and provide them with instant feedback on questions posed in lectures with large numbers. The technology is called PRS. Students have responded positively to the system and enjoy using it. The University now has a large number of PRS handsets that can be used by anyone. If you are interested, contact the Learning Technology Team (ltt@essex.ac.uk) in the first instance for more information.
Bibliography

You may find the following articles and resources interesting. Copies can be obtained from the Learning and Teaching Unit:


**myLife**

myLife is the University’s ePortfolio system and is both a central resource where institutional or departmental PDP tasks, activities, documents and resources can be placed as well as an individual private space where students can record and monitor their academic, personal and career development.

Training in using the myLife ePortfolio system is provided by the Learning Technology Team, ltt@essex.ac.uk
External resources

There have been a number of major national projects on student engagement that have produced interesting findings and useful resources. The following two projects were funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England’s Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning (FDTL):

- **Scholarship of Engagement for Politics**
  University of Warwick
  [www.politicsinaction.ac.uk](http://www.politicsinaction.ac.uk)

- **Cognitive Learning Strategies for Students**
  Universities of Northumbria, Teesside and Westminster
  [www.uclan.ac.uk/facs/science/psychol/fdtl/index.htm](http://www.uclan.ac.uk/facs/science/psychol/fdtl/index.htm)

There are also a number of Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs) that may provide useful information and ideas on engaging students. Staff at CETLs can be contacted for expert advice and are available to run sessions (the Learning and Teaching Unit often advertise sessions with guest presenters from CETLs, so look out for forthcoming events):

- **Enabling Achievement within a Diverse Student Body**
  University of Wolverhampton
  [www.wlv.ac.uk/CETL](http://www.wlv.ac.uk/CETL)

- **CPLA (Centre for Promoting Learner Autonomy)**
  Sheffield Hallam University
  [http://extra.shu.ac.uk/cetl/cplahome.html](http://extra.shu.ac.uk/cetl/cplahome.html)

If you are interested in finding out more about Enquiry Based Learning, a new website has been developed by the University of Glasgow. Visit the web link below and click on ‘Good practice resources’:

[www.gla.ac.uk/learn/](http://www.gla.ac.uk/learn/)