

## Feature Article—an invited paper

# A critical reflection on a research partnership

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### Abstract

*This critical reflection asks what contributions a research partnership, active between 1997 and 2014, made to knowledge about student learning in higher education. It focuses on three overarching projects. The first, on assessment, addressed ways to empower students in assessment processes and make them fairer for students from diverse backgrounds. The second, on student retention and success, identified ways for students to integrate into higher education while also advocating that institutions adapt their cultures and practices to meet the needs of students from diverse backgrounds. The third, on student engagement, attracted considerable interest for a conceptual organiser of this complex construct. It included ten proposals for action and recognised the impact of non-institutional factors on engagement. It also found that engagement is best researched within institutions. A critical reflection on the influences of the projects suggests that their impact on assessment was negligible. However, the retention and engagement projects have influenced mainstream thinking.*

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## Introduction

Researchers live and work in an environment of ideas, policies and practices. Some become so dominant in mainstream thinking that an affirming consensus about them develops. Neoliberal policies, ideas and practices form such a consensus about the 'conduct of conduct' in society. Through the years of our collaboration between 1997 and 2014 neoliberal ideas defined the 'conduct of conduct' of institutions, teachers and students in higher education. Foucault (2008) coined the word 'governmentality' to describe relations between the neoliberal state, its institutions, including higher education, and citizens as a consensus of mutual acceptance. Three key ideas underpin this consensus. First, knowledge and skills must be useful in the market place where their merit and worth are judged. Second, neoliberalism introduces the idea of performativity linking performance in higher education to success in the market place. Third, neoliberal policy creates an accountability culture that measures how well higher education performs in meeting market expectations. To be 'heard' in this environment, researchers' work must be acceptable to the state, relevant to other researchers and useful to teachers and students who are part of the neoliberal consensus. Acceptance, relevance and usefulness occur when research either progresses dominant and mainstream ideas or when it critiques them. During our years of collaboration, we worked to both further mainstream ideas, policies and practices in higher education and to critique them.

Our purpose was to support and help improve learning centred teaching in higher education. Specifically, we focused on improving students' transition to, and early experiences in, higher education. Our background in adult education inspired our interest in learning and teaching. It helped shape our work: teaching and learning of adults should promote learner autonomy; recognise prior learning experiences; encourage critical reflection; facilitate learning processes; and teach content that is relevant to learners, is

practical, collaborative and transformational. We also recognised that diversity and empowerment are important understandings and deserve investigation. We drew on these understandings to engage in three overarching projects. In the first section of this paper we discuss our first project: assessment of student work. Here we developed a critical stance on mainstream practices. The second section discusses a project about retention and completion via a literature review (Prebble, Hargraves, Leach, Naidoo, Suddaby & Zepke, 2004) and empirical research funded by the New Zealand Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI). While generally sympathetic to mainstream research, our data also revealed various critical issues. The third project researched student engagement. Also supported by TLRI funding, our findings rejected a narrow focus on what works in classrooms to embrace a more holistic view that included the influence of active citizenship, wellbeing and influences from students' past experiences as facilitators of engagement. Finally, the paper reflects critically on our work.

## Assessment and learning

For our first project we were joined by a colleague, Guyon Neutze. With him we wrote numerous papers challenging aspects of assessment theory and practice (Leach, Neutze & Zepke, 1997; 1999; 2000; 2001a; 2001b; 2003). Our papers on assessment took the form of critical reflections on case study data documenting the assessment experiences of our students. We wanted to find theoretical and practical ways to develop an assessment partnership that challenged the prevailing assessment consensus without compromising students' ability to navigate and succeed in meeting mainstream academic and workplace requirements. We accepted that assessment has a gatekeeping function and that 'society at large' (i.e. its institutions, citizens and, under neoliberalism especially, employers) had to be confident that graduates passed through the gates successfully. Consequently, we attempted to establish transparency, outcomes and evidence of

validity, objectivity and reliability in our work. Technologies such as learning outcomes, grade related criteria, internal and external moderation ensured stakeholders that our standards for success met expectations. Our overriding purpose though was to support learning through assessment. We engaged in constant dialogue with learners, commented on drafts and gave feedback at every stage of their learning. We negotiated assessment tasks, evidence, criteria and marking, and helped learners to understand the assessment process. This approach generated two lines of critique: the unequal distribution of power in mainstream assessment and its dominant view of fairness.

In Leach, Neutze and Zepke (2001a; 2001b) we argued that assessment should be an empowering process in which students, if they chose, shared in making decisions about their assessments. We noted that empowerment was a process with at least three interpretations: students making decisions about a personal course of action; addressing inequalities in assessment introduced by mainstream views of validity, reliability and objectivity; and recognising that diverse views about empowerment must be recognised and accommodated. We worked with all three interpretations in our assessment practice. We enabled learners to make decisions as individuals about their own learning, including how they were assessed. As members of a learning community they were alerted to the ways mainstream assumptions about assessment brought about inequalities between students. Empowerment in this assessment context enabled learners to make decisions about their assessment as individuals and in groups. Possible decisions included whether to assess their own work, to critique the assessment regime and that of the academic world, to negotiate practices different from proposed processes, or to accept mainstream protocols.

Our second critique proposed that validity, reliability and objectivity are facilitators of inequality and unfairness in assessment (Leach et

al., 1999, 2000). Our critique focused on mainstream understandings of validity which held that assessment based on approved official learning outcomes served as objective standards which all students must meet. Such understandings were underpinned by trust that objectivity, validity and reliability of assessment were indicators of universal fairness. Objectivity assumed a world understood through universally true statements enabling valid assessments to be unaffected by personal values and perceptions. Reliability applied objectivity to assessment by assuming that assessors could judge different students' work consistently. Our unease with these assumptions was substantiated by authors like Messick (1993), Gipps (1994) and Moss (1994) who developed the notion of consequential validity that established validity as contextual with diverse social and cultural values impacting it. Such developments in the assessment literature persuaded us to replace validity, objectivity and reliability with two understandings of fairness. The first we called *external fairness*. It conformed to mainstream views of validity and reliability. Each learner had to meet specified standards with our judgements being moderated internally and externally. External fairness met mainstream expectations about objectivity, validity and reliability by conforming to academic and political norms.

But in our view, external fairness' reliance on objectivity, validity and reliability could also be unfair as it ignored individual, cultural and contextual differences. To counter potential unfairness, we developed the notion of *internal fairness*. This required assessors to consider learners' work in relation to the contexts that produced it. Internal fairness recognised that students from diverse disciplines, cultures, socio-economic classes and ethnic groups often live and work in paradigms other than the mainstream. This could negate a universal application of fairness. Internal fairness ensured that consequential validity was recognised as an important principle of fairness in assessment. Consequently, external fairness was used where contexts of the learners involved were similar;

internal where they were not. Questions of equity determined whether internal or external fairness was privileged. Equity considered the impact of cultural, age, geographical and gender differences on assessment tasks. It also applied to exceptional work that could not be recognised by conventional means. Where no questions about equity arose, external fairness applied. Where equity was involved, internal fairness was considered. However, if using internal fairness would disadvantage students in the future, external fairness prevailed. Decisions to apply internal fairness were checked by internal and external moderators. As we encouraged students to complete assessments relevant to their own contexts, the need for internal fairness was limited (see Leach et al., 1999).

## Student retention and success

Our work on retention and outcomes was based on findings from two research projects: A Ministry of Education funded best evidence synthesis on student outcomes (Prebble et al., 2004), and a TLRI funded project on ways to improve student outcomes in their first year of tertiary study (Zepke, Leach, Prebble et al., 2005).

The genesis of our work was our identification of two discourses on retention, synthesised from 146 international studies, in the New Zealand Ministry of Education project. The first was a dominant discourse we named *integration*. Here the intention was to enable students to integrate into the existing institutional culture, its processes and expectations. In contrast, the intent within the emerging *adaptation* discourse was for institutions to adapt their policies, procedures, processes and culture to the increasingly diverse students who were attending. There was a large body of research which exemplified the dominant *integration* discourse, suggesting ways to assimilate students into existing institutional cultures - to help them transition into higher education, stay in their course, achieve, and complete. Fewer studies reflected the *adaptation* discourse. This emerging and critical view suggested that student

departure was influenced by their perceptions of how well the institution valued their cultural attributes and how well they were able to bridge the differences between their culture of origin and the institutional culture. Some used the notion of cultural capital to explain why students stay or leave: if their cultural capital is valued they are more likely to be “fish in water” (Thomas, 2002, p. 431) and achieve; if it is deemed deficient or invalidated they are more likely to experience acculturative stress and leave (Saenz, Marcoulides, Junn & Young, 1999). In our view, the *adaptation* discourse offered institutions new ways to foster retention and success - by changing their policies and practices to better meet the needs of increasingly diverse students. From our review of the literature we developed a set of 13 propositions for practice which encompassed both the *integration* and *adaptation* discourses (Prebble et al. 2004; Zepke & Leach, 2005).

We built on these findings in a TLRI project (Zepke, Leach, Prebble et al., 2005) which researched student outcomes in their first year of study. The research question reflects our interest in the more critical *adaptation* discourse: What can New Zealand tertiary education institutions and their teachers do to adapt their current processes and practices to improve retention of, persistence and completion by diverse students in their first year? Findings mirrored international studies in that 33% of the students had considered at least partial withdrawal and their reasons were similar. We focus here on four of the key findings.

First, we identified a factor we thought had been overlooked in previous studies: the moderate effect (means of between two and three on a four factor Likert scale) of non-institutional factors in retention (Zepke, Leach & Butler, 2011). In our view, institutions had been inclined to ignore these factors, arguing they were outside of institutional control. But students who withdrew or considered withdrawing reported that the major factor was ‘there was too much going on in my life’ (Zepke, Leach & Prebble, 2005). This item

was a 'catch all' for non-institutional factors so may have over-emphasised its importance, but the message was clear to us: non-institutional factors are important to retention and institutions need to find ways to ameliorate negative effects. This view was confirmed by the students who had never considered withdrawing: non-institutional factors were important in their retention. For example, factors such as their personal determination to succeed and finding ways to manage their workload were more important than institutional factors like teacher support. Our view was confirmed again in a study into the experiences of foundation learners (Zepke, Leach & Isaacs, 2008) commissioned by the Foundation Education and Training Forum of the Institutes of Technology and Polytechnics of New Zealand (ITPNZ). Consequently, we argued that teachers and institutions need to be alert to students' situations outside the institution, be aware of and support their learning outside of the classroom (Zepke & Leach, 2010b). We also took non-institutional factors into our later research on student engagement.

Non-institutional factors were also apparent in a second key finding. Students' relationships with others, outside as well as inside the institution, were a factor in retention and success. Our studies highlighted four sets of relationships students had: (1) between students; (2) between students and support/ administrative staff; (3) between students and their significant others outside of the institution; (4) between students and teachers. Families could be supporters or stumbling blocks. While institutional relationships did have negative impacts, positive relationships with peers, institutional support staff and teachers had major effects. These relationships affected their sense of belonging in the institution (Leach, Zepke & Prebble, 2006), a sense which could be the difference between students staying or leaving. This was reinforced in the ITPNZ study into the experiences of foundation learners (Zepke, Leach & Isaacs, 2008). Retained students said teachers were enthusiastic, passionate, caring, approachable, encouraging, understanding people who held

consistently positive attitudes about students and built relationships with and between the students (Zepke, Isaacs & Leach, 2009). Without doubt positive relationships were a factor in student retention.

Third, we found some support for the *adaptation* discourse although it was uneven. About 20% of the students who considered withdrawing felt alienated in the institutional culture because it did not recognise their diversity. Some teachers recognised diversity and were willing to adapt to meet students' needs; others thought fairness meant everyone should be treated the same (Zepke & Leach, 2007). There was, however, sufficient data for us to conclude that adapting to diverse students and being learning centred may increase retention (Zepke, Leach & Prebble, 2006). We critiqued our view of *integration/adaptation* when we found that teachers used the same methods and approaches to achieve both *integration* and *adaptation* goals. We then argued that the *integration/adaptation* binary should be deconstructed and the boundaries between the two recognised as porous, merged and inseparable (Zepke & Leach, 2007); that both played an important role in retention. A fourth important 'take away' we highlighted was that, while some retention challenges were shared across the seven institutions in our TLRI study, each institution also faced unique challenges. Consequently, while we offered generalised guidelines we critiqued them, arguing that institutions should research their own situation and find solutions that worked for them rather than simply rely on such guidelines (Zepke, Leach, Prebble et al., 2005).

## Student engagement

Our work on retention led us to our third overarching project which built on a general recognition in the literature that student engagement is a key facilitator of retention, persistence and success (e.g. Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges & Hayek, 2006). Our colleague, Philippa Butler, often joined us on this project. TLRI funded an extensive literature synthesis, a survey

of first year students and their teachers in nine New Zealand post-school education institutions supported by interviews with student volunteers. Our collaboration produced 13 publications (Leach & Zepke, 2011, 2012; Leach, Zepke & Butler, 2012; Zepke, Butler & Leach, 2012; Zepke, Leach & Butler, 2009, 2010a, 2010b, 2011, 2013; Zepke & Leach, 2010a, 2010b, 2011a, 2011b). These focused on four major investigations. The first tackled the meaning of student engagement. We initially adopted Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris' (2004) view that engagement incorporates behavioural, emotional, and cognitive characteristics. But we found engagement to be more complex than this. It required multiple lenses to gauge its meanings. The second investigation constructed a conceptual organiser comprising six lenses and numerous indicators for action. The third mapped the actions and interactions of institutions, teachers and students in student engagement. The final inquiry looked beyond the classroom to investigate influences on engagement from the socio-political environment outside the classroom.

In Zepke, Leach and Butler (2010a), Zepke and Leach (2011b) and Leach and Zepke (2012) we grappled with the complex issue of what student engagement means. Although many definitions had been offered, we resisted constructing a formal definition ourselves. Instead, we decided that engagement was better conceptualised through a variety of lenses. For example, some lenses saw engagement as behaviours, attitudes and thinking in classrooms. Others recognised important influences from outside the classroom as key influences on engagement. Some researchers viewed engagement through a student motivation and effort lens. Others highlighted the way educators taught and related to their students. Still other lenses were focused on institutional structures and cultures as facilitators of engagement. Yet others considered engagement through a socio-political lens in which factors such as family background and economic status were critical. In summary, student engagement was variously defined as student motivation, teacher-student interactions,

learners interacting with other learners, institutional climate and policies, socio-political factors and non-institutional influences. Such varied lenses suggested to us that an all-inclusive overarching definition was problematic. Rather than attempting such a definition, we looked at each lens as contributing independently to the meanings of student engagement.

This decision resulted in *Table 1*. It consolidated the lenses we now called 'research perspectives', into a conceptual framework to capture the complex meanings of student engagement. Simultaneously, the framework alerted institutions and teachers to practices that enhance engagement and student success (Leach & Zepke, 2011, 2012; Zepke & Leach 2010a; Zepke, Leach & Butler, 2010a). The framework was sourced from our literature synthesis and confirmed by our quantitative and qualitative survey data. By adopting a holistic conception, it diverged from the views of researchers who saw engagement as centred on classrooms.

The organiser persuaded us to investigate interactions and relationships between institutions and teachers with their students. Not surprisingly we found that some institutions were better at meeting student expectations about engagement than others (Leach, Zepke & Butler, 2012; Zepke, Leach & Butler, 2009, 2010b, 2014). Larger institutions with a diverse student body were less successful than smaller, more homogeneous ones. While Ryan and Deci's (2000) findings that feelings of competence, agency and relatedness fulfil important motivational needs were generally confirmed, student feelings of relatedness were not optimal in large and diverse institutions. These discoveries suggested that engagement is best investigated within individual institutions and even individual cohorts within institutions. We also found that students' and teachers' views both agreed and differed about engagement (Leach, Zepke & Butler, 2012; Zepke, Leach & Butler, 2013). There was significant agreement, for example, that teaching is vital in facilitating learning and that engaging teachers teach in ways that ensures learning can take

place. There were, however, significant differences about the features of productive relationships. For example, students thought that receiving constructive feedback, positive relationships and being cared for were much more important than did teachers.

The conceptual organiser pointed out two further lenses that would benefit from a closer look (see Zepke & Leach, 2011b; Zepke, Leach & Butler, 2011). First, we found reports in the engagement

literature that providing opportunities for students to be active citizens in their communities enhances engagement in formal learning (e.g. McMahon & Portelli, 2004). Our research partially supported this democratic-critical view as we found enough evidence to suggest that this lens could be important. For example, almost one-third of students thought it important to learn how to change things in society; nearly three-quarters wanted to know

**Table 1**  
***A conceptual organiser for student engagement***

Research perspectives	Proposals for action
<p><b>Motivation and agency</b></p> <p>(Engaged students are intrinsically motivated and want to exercise their agency)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enhance students' self-belief</li> <li>• Enable students to work autonomously</li> <li>• Enjoy learning relationships with others</li> <li>• Feel they are competent to achieve their own objectives</li> </ul>
<p><b>Transactional engagement</b></p> <p>(Students and teachers engage with each other)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognise that teaching and teachers are central to engagement</li> <li>• Create learning that is active, collaborative and fosters learning relationships</li> <li>• Create educational experiences for students that are challenging, enriching and extend their academic abilities</li> </ul>
<p><b>Transactional engagement</b></p> <p>(Students engage with each other)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning is active and collaborative inside and outside the classroom</li> <li>• Students have positive, constructive peer relationships</li> <li>• Students use social skills to engage with others</li> </ul>
<p><b>Institutional support</b></p> <p>(Institutions provide an environment conducive to learning)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure institutional cultures are welcoming to students from diverse backgrounds</li> <li>• Invest in a variety of support services</li> <li>• Adapt to changing student expectations</li> </ul>
<p><b>Active citizenship</b></p> <p>(Students and institutions work together to enable challenges to social beliefs and practices)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enable students to become active citizens</li> <li>• Enable students to develop their social and cultural capital</li> </ul>
<p><b>Non-institutional support</b></p> <p>(Students are supported by family and friends to engage in learning)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students' family and friends understand the demands of study</li> <li>• Students' family and friends assist with e.g. childcare, time management</li> <li>• Students' family and friends create space for study commitments</li> </ul>

how; and more than half were prepared to question teachers about their teaching methods.

The second lens revealed that external factors such as part-time employment, personal wellbeing, family and peer support had a moderate effect on engagement. For example, most thought family and peer support was very important for their engagement and provided vital support systems for them. Many coped with problems that originated outside their courses and impacted engagement. These included health, finance and relationship problems. Some younger students were distracted from learning by social pressures that impacted their engagement.

## Critical reflection

Throughout the years of our collaboration we took a critical stance on some mainstream ideas in tertiary education research and practice as well as on our work. We continue that approach in this section. Here we reflect on whether our research is linked to the neoliberal consensus and what contribution to knowledge it may have made.

At the beginning of this article we identified three of the key ideas that underpin the existing neoliberal consensus (knowledge and skills must be useful, performativity, an accountability culture) and three qualities required in researchers' work if it is to be heard (acceptability to the state, relevance to other researchers, usefulness to teachers and students). Here we take a critical look at whether our research reflects these ideas. First, to what extent did our research reflect the neoliberal consensus that knowledge and skills must be useful - to the state, other researchers, teachers and students? Much of our research was funded, albeit through a competitive process, by Government agencies such as the Ministry of Education or through research funds provided by Government and distributed through, for example, the TLRI. Most had an explicit requirement that the project would demonstrably lead to improved outcomes for learners, teachers and institutions. What was

not explicit, but can be assumed, is that, during this period of neoliberal consensus, the requirements were based on neoliberal ideas. The notion of usefulness was summarised in the catch phrase 'what works?' associated with the shift to evidence-based practice. Our research was expected to uncover ideas about 'what works' that could be used by institutions, teachers and students to improve teaching, retention, engagement, outcomes. And we bought into that requirement in most of the projects we did, for example by synthesising generic 'what works' guidelines from the findings of individual projects to make them accessible and useful to institutions, teachers and students.

Second, to what extent did our research reflect performativity and the accountability culture of neoliberalism? Not only does performativity link higher education performance to acceptability in the market place, it also concerns productivity, usually understood as outputs or outcomes of some kind, for example, higher student completion rates or number of publications. There is a strong link between performativity and the accountability culture: we are made accountable for our performance/productivity; we have targets to meet, benchmarks to achieve and we are measured on how well we meet those. Our research complied with performativity and accountability in at least two ways. First, by designing and conducting the research projects we met our personal performativity and accountability targets. For example, we performed by gaining research funding, completing projects and publishing articles. Second, we complied by conducting research which endeavoured to answer 'what works' questions and by providing useful, practical guidelines to institutions, teachers and students about what they, in turn, could do to improve their performativity and accountability. While we complied with the neoliberal consensus, played the performativity/ accountability game and made it possible for others, including the partners in our research teams, to do so, we also questioned mainstream ideas and reflected critically on our own work.



We became part of the neoliberal consensus but did our work contribute to the body of knowledge? As with any research project, we stood on the shoulders of those who had gone before us. We drew on the work of many researchers and educators, endeavouring to make a contribution to knowledge and practice. In our assessment projects we did question current thinking. But it has been revealing to realise recently that writing we did about 20 years ago still has value as little has changed in the interim. Validity, reliability and objectivity remain part of the assessment consensus; internal and external fairness have not been included as such, although some of the intentions behind the *adaptation* discourse are gaining support in assessment practices. While our publications have been cited, particularly one on empowerment (Leach, Neutze & Zepke, 2001a), and we anticipated the shift into partnership in assessment, we do not think they have contributed to significant changes in assessment theory or practice.

Our body of work on student retention has attracted more attention. One article on the *integration* and *adaptation* discourses (Zepke & Leach, 2005) has informed a considerable body of work and will have contributed to changes in practice – many tertiary educators increasingly cater for the diversity of their students. Some are working to *integrate* those students into the institutional culture, some are *adapting* their practice to better cater for the needs of individual students, and some are both *integrating* and *adapting*. Our article on how being learner centred could improve student outcomes (Zepke, Leach & Prebble, 2006) has also been cited enough for us to feel it may have had some influence on this change. Interestingly, a great deal of research continues to focus on student retention. Recent studies continue the trend to produce generic ‘what works’ guidelines, suggesting the neoliberal consensus is still strong in this field. While Biesta’s (2007) views on why ‘what works’ won’t work are well known, the consensus that evidence-based practice is best still holds sway.

The focus on student engagement as a way to address student retention issues has meant that our research into this area of tertiary learning and teaching has attracted considerable interest. Predictably perhaps, given the dominance of ‘what works’ within the neoliberal consensus, is that our most frequently cited article contains ten proposals for action (Zepke & Leach, 2010a). Generic guidelines are accessible and useful; they attract attention because they offer straight forward solutions to what is actually a complex issue, a ‘wicked problem’ in higher education. It is pleasing to see the interest generated by our research into a conceptual organiser for student engagement (Leach & Zepke, 2011), the impact of non-institutional factors on students’ capacity to engage in their studies (Zepke, Leach & Butler, 2011) and into the recognition of soft outcomes as well as hard outcomes in student success (Zepke & Leach, 2010b). We believe we have contributed to knowledge about students, their engagement and factors that influence their engagement through this work, albeit within the neoliberal consensus.

## Looking forward

Critical reflections on the past generate ideas for the future. As we are now retired, our future in research is finite and we are, perhaps, impudent to offer suggestions for future research. Nevertheless, our reflection gives rise to three suggestions. First, we think it is essential that research into learning and teaching that enhances the transition of students into higher education continues strongly; that the outcomes of such research are published in journals like [Student Success](#) and disseminated in conferences like the [STARS Conference](#); that researchers in this field are recognised and valued. Second, researching ‘what works’ will be crucial in the future. But to look beyond this will realise new possibilities for enhancing the student experience. For example, a deeper theoretical foundation will help to develop the field and raise the standing of the people who work in it. Third, to raise new possibilities for learning and teaching in higher education, researchers/teachers and students

together must become knowledgeable about the politics of higher education. They must learn to recognise, analyse and critique, where necessary, policies and practices that narrow criteria of student success to neoliberal conceptions and work actively to widen them.

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## Feature article—author biographies

**Nick Zepke** is a recently retired Associate Professor in adult education in the Institute of Education at Massey University in New Zealand. He has taught, researched and publishes on three interrelated themes: learning centred teaching with a special focus on the first-year experience in higher education, policy studies in higher education, and lifelong and life-wide education. He has published six books, more than 100 articles in international and New Zealand journals, and numerous commissioned reports on these themes. Since 2009 he has researched student engagement in higher education. He has published a book, 19 articles and book chapters on this subject, often in collaboration with Linda Leach. His most recent work focuses on the connection between politics and student engagement.

**Linda Leach** began her teaching career as a primary school teacher but was involved in tertiary learning and teaching for over 30 years. She worked in adult and community education, polytechnics and a university in learning support and academic development roles. She taught a variety of undergraduate and postgraduate courses on learning theories, how adults learn, how to teach adults and assessment. Her research and publications focused on student retention, student engagement and student outcomes but included assessment, foundation education, and adult literacy and numeracy. She often worked in collaboration with Nick Zepke on these projects. While now “officially” retired, she continues to supervise some doctoral students and has taught two postgraduate courses this semester.

