



MEDICAL EDUCATION  
SCHOLARSHIP CENTRE

## Medical Education Scholarship Forum Proceedings

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### Student engagement in the medical school: an oxymoron or a zeitgeist?

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**Purpose:** Momentum has grown in Canada, United Kingdom and elsewhere in support of student engagement in the medical school in order to improve motivation, the curriculum, the learning environment, and active citizenship (Zepke & Leach, 2010). Standards of excellence in student engagement have been developed by the ASPIRE project [www.aspire-to-excellence.org](http://www.aspire-to-excellence.org). These standards require that student engagement occurs in four areas (1) management (structures and processes) (2) programs for education and (3) research (4) local community and service delivery. The process of preparing an application to the ASPIRE project for excellence in student engagement in the Faculty of Medicine revealed that student engagement was closer to an oxymoron than a zeitgeist. **Methods:** The application process involved listening to faculty, staff and students responding to the criteria in the application, reading background papers, minutes of committee meetings, policies, strategies and operational plans, et alia, and iteratively discussing drafts of the application with the Executive of the Medical Students Society (n=28). **Results:** Examples of student engagement in the four ASPIRE areas were identified but there were mismatches between the faculty/staff perceptions of engagement and student perceptions. There were inconsistencies in approaches to engagement within the areas, for example, the lack of response from 12 out of 36 key faculty informants. Most communications from the Faculty to the students were impersonal and there was no well-recognized, central location for communications. Policies, strategies and procedures were frequently issued without consultation and the voices of student representatives were often not taken seriously when consultations did occur despite the efforts of some individual faculty. There was a lack of transparency about sharing information and about the rationale for decisions to make changes. Some committees that included students only met once per term and some ad hoc committees did not include students. **Conclusions:** The current zeitgeist in the Faculty favours student engagement. However the concepts are misunderstood and the practices indicate student engagement is an oxymoron currently. Consistent with other research (Trowler & Trowler, 2010; Bryson, 2010) factors can be identified at the levels of the culture, society, environment and their interactions that impede effective student engagement. **Disclosure Statements:** IJR was the lead author drafting the application for the award of excellence in student engagement. EF was President of the Medical Students Society (MSS) and the MSS Executive Committee chair for the academic year of 2014/2015.