



THE QUIET EROSION

Developmental Consequences Of
Disengagement In Higher Education

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NOTHING FAILED ON PAPER

NO FAILED ASSESSMENT

NO FORMAL COMPLAINT

NO DISAPPEARANCE

NO OBVIOUS CRISIS

A student can still be present, still participate, and still be disengaging.

What happens when disengagement becomes visible only after it has become normal?



DISENGAGEMENT

Participation can remain while engagement *erodes*.

WHAT THE SYSTEM COULD SEE

- Absence & Attendance
- Submission & Non-submission
- Progression & Stagnation
- Refusal & Participation

QUIET DISENGAGEMENT

- Compliance
- Reduced Ownership
- Reduced Risk
- Reduced Investment
- Narrowing Choices
- Loss Of Confidence



ATTENTION



MOTIVATION



SIGNIFICANCE

ENGAGEMENT AS ALIGNMENT

Participation ≠ Engagement

Participation may be an outcome or observable expression of engagement, but it does tell us what is happening psychologically.

“To be engaged, people must be invited to influence the goal”

- John Smythe



RECOGNISING THE FIRST SIGNS

Disengagement is not always a decision to leave

Disengagement can begin as a changing relationship with the activity

From:		To:
"I think we should try X "	—————▶	"Whatever everyone else wants"
"I'd like to experiment"	—————▶	"I'll do the safe option"
"This isn't working"	—————▶	"It's fine"
"We should do our best"	—————▶	"I'll do whatever I'm assigned"

"It's fine"

COMPLIANCE

"I'll just do what the group wants"

OWNERSHIP

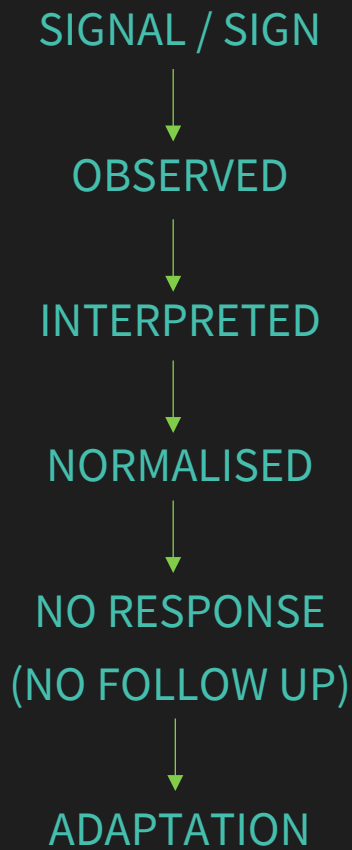
"I won't suggest that"

RISK



RECOGNITION GAP

Educators may notice the behavior but interpret its meaning differently.



OBSERVED

POSSIBLE INTERPRETATION

Quiet compliance

Independence

Reduced Contribution

Preference

Avoid Risk

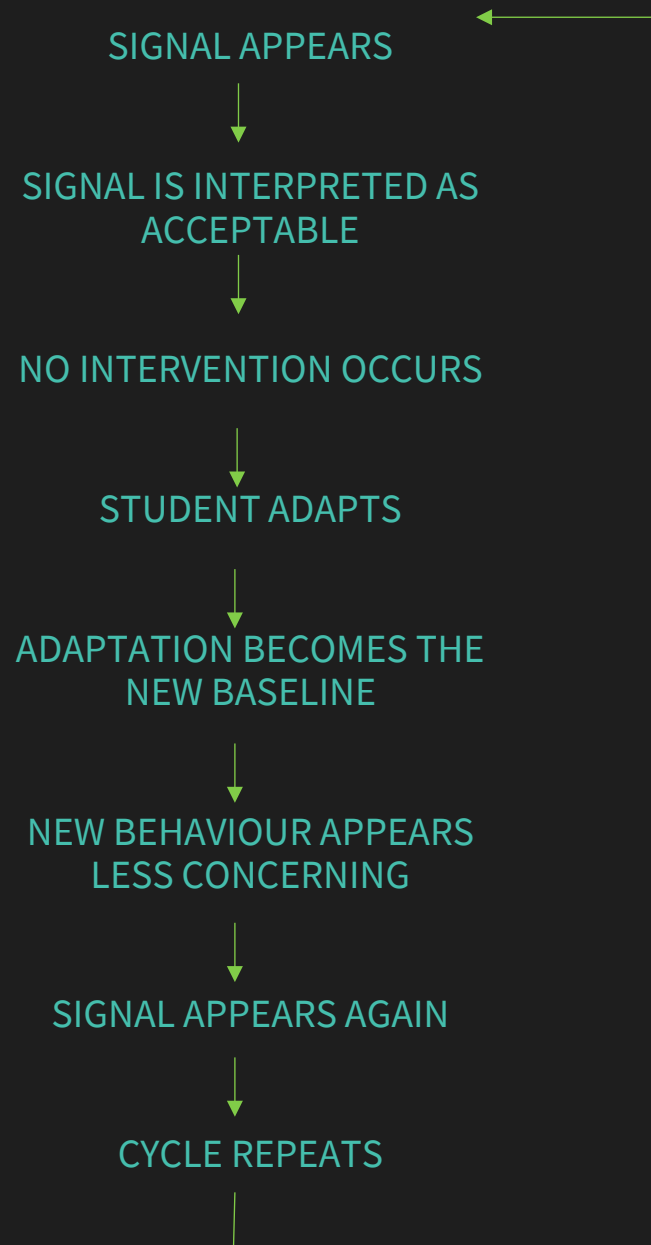
Maturity/ pragmatism

Letting others decide

Cooperation

Reduced challenge

Realistic self-management



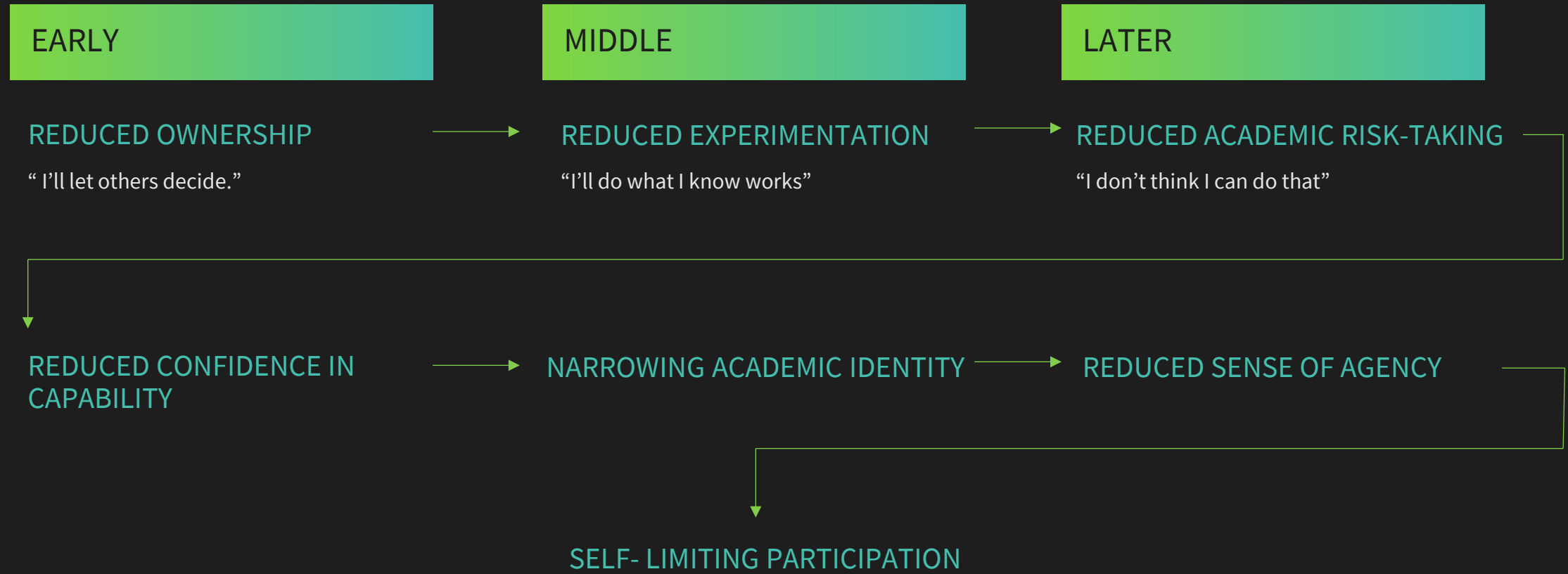
THE NORMALIZATION CYCLE

The absence of crisis becomes evidence that nothing is wrong.

If the student isn't failing, fighting, withdrawing, complaining, the system receives little pressure to intervene.



DEVELOPMENTAL SHIFT





WHEN ADAPTATION BECOMES IDENTITY

BEHAVIOR → HABIT → EXPECTATION → IDENTITY

“I don’t want to”



“I will let someone else decide”



“I’m not very good at this”



“That’s just not something I do”

Repeated disengagement can become incorporated into their understanding of what kind of student they are.

“I’m not a leader”

“I’m not creative”

“I’m bad at presenting.”

“I’m not good academically.”

“I work better when someone tells me what to do”

SYSTEMIC FAILURE

The signs were clear

Staff was informed and issue was raised

Appropriate measures were not taken

Quiet
quitting



**RECOGNISE THE
TEAM DYNAMIC**

INTERJECT

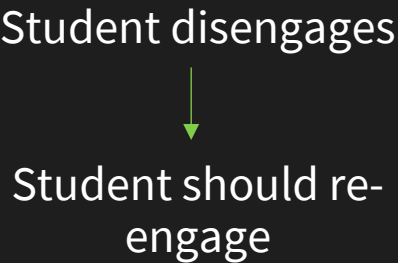
**GUIDE
SUPPORT
EDUCATE**



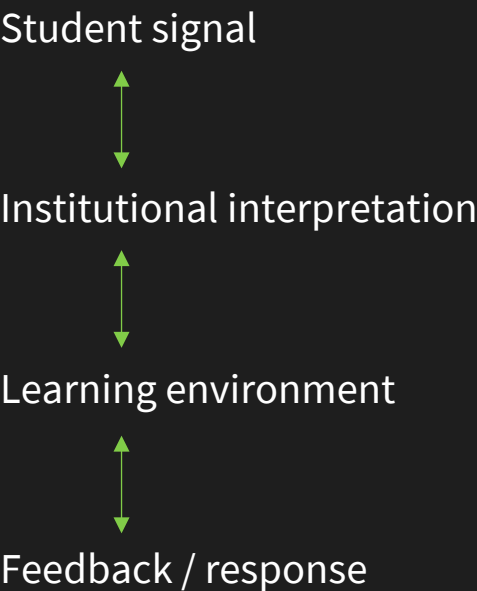
WHO OWNS THE RECOGNITION?

Engagement may be experienced by the student, but recognition of its erosion is not solely the student's responsibility.

TRADITIONAL FRAMING

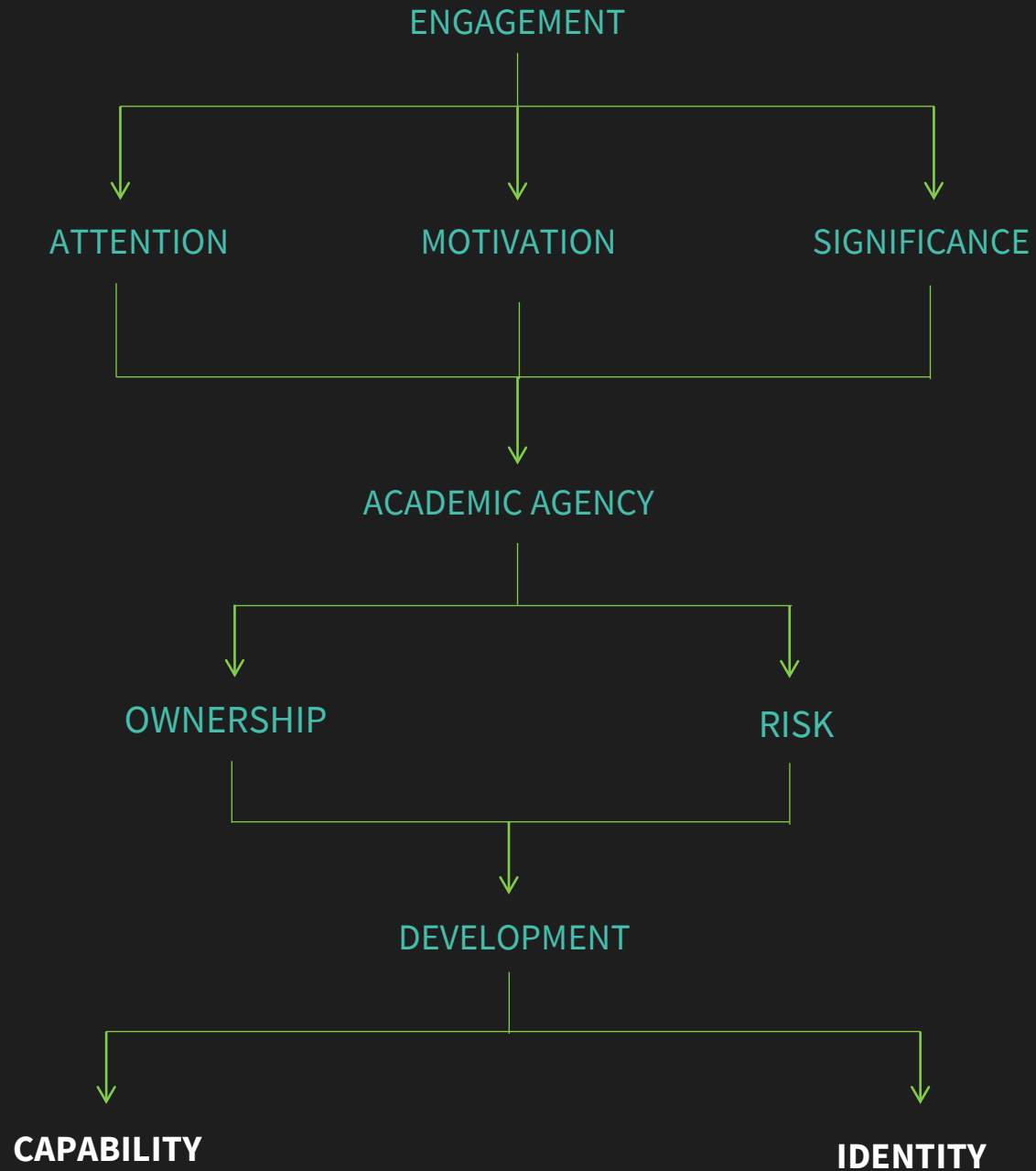


NEW FRAMING:



Institutions have responsibility for:

- recognising meaningful changes
- creating opportunities for agency
- questioning apparently successful compliance
- responding before disengagement becomes entrenched



SUSTAINING ENGAGEMENT

Understand the drivers of engagement

Build an environment that supports personal development through personal ownership and risk

Sustaining engagement means creating space for students to make those choices and grow through them.



1

HAS OWNERSHIP CHANGED?

Is the student still making
meaningful choices?

2

HAS ACADEMIC RISK CHANGED?

Are they still experimenting,
questioning and attempting
things they might fail at?

3

HAS SIGNIFICANCE CHANGED?

Does the student still
appear to see what they
are doing as meaningful?

PUBLIC

WHAT SHOULD WE LOOK FOR?

Don't only ask:

“Are they
participating?”

Ask:

“What kind of
participation are we
seeing?”

The background of the slide is a photograph of a classroom with students at their desks. A semi-transparent green filter is applied over the entire image. In the foreground, a young woman with curly hair and glasses is resting her head on her hand, looking tired. Behind her, a young man with glasses is looking forward. To the right, another young woman is looking down at a book. In the far right, a young man is looking at a laptop. The overall mood is one of disengagement or fatigue.

THE QUIET EROSION

Disengagement does not always begin when a student leaves.

It can begin when they stop choosing.

Recognise the change before the adaptation becomes identity.