

Theme 4: Engagement, Belonging and Identity

Developing an understanding of why students do not engage

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Introduction

Buckinghamshire (Bucks) New University is a modern university, which was awarded full university status in 2007. Focused on creative and professional education and with strong links with industry and local enterprise, we operate across four physical sites within a fifteen-mile radius: High Wycombe (our main campus), Uxbridge, Aylesbury and Great Missenden. Our institution is highly focused on widening participation (WP); it is an institution with nearly 60% of its students with one or more indicators of WP. We offer traditional full-time higher education at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, but also have a considerable number of students engaged in part-time, flexible and on-line learning. In 2015-16, we had 9651 students at the university and in UK-based partner institutions (Bucks New University, 2016). Working with a network of partner colleges in the UK and internationally enables us to reach students from communities that would not normally access provision on our main sites.

Background to the project

Bucks New University engaged with the REACT programme in order to address the historical precedent of apparent student disengagement, attendance and attrition. Our view was that our 'hard to reach' students were, by definition, the ones more likely not to engage and to withdraw. We wanted to investigate the impact of curricular and co-curricular activities on the student experience and explore strategies for enhancing student engagement, attendance and retention.

Our REACT action-research project aims to create a shared vision about what engagement is, in the broader sense. We aim to achieve this by working in partnership with students to share engagement data, collating evidence about who is engaged and how, and who is not and why. We wanted to work, with the students as partners, to deliver short- and long-term strategic initiatives to develop and deliver a flexible learning strategy and establish a stronger culture of student engagement across four domains: learning, academic communities, quality assurance/enhancement and extra-curricular activities.

The REACT team visited Bucks New University for an initial scoping visit in March 2016. The visit, themed '*Perspectives on student engagement*', allowed us to identify attendees beliefs about who our 'hard to reach' students are. Throughout the day, there were challenges to our assumptions: that widening participation students, particularly those in paid employment, study part time and/or at distance or are long-distance commuters; those with family or caring commitments are 'hard to reach'. We also explored the diverse range, from across the sector, of strategies that foster re-engagement and we evaluated the impact and success of these strategies on student engagement. The aim was to develop a better understanding of what 'reach' means and redefine what it means to be an 'engaged' student.

The Bucks New University REACT Project

The Bucks project is based on action research involving three action-research cycles, employing a pragmatic mixed-methods approach with collection, analysis and interpretation of both quantitative and qualitative data. Each action-research cycle consists of four stages: planning, acting, observing and reflecting (McNiff, 1992).

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The first cycle (see **Error! Not a valid bookmark self-reference.**, below) involved setting up the project team and collecting and analysing quantitative data relating to student engagement activity across the institution. Ethical approval for the project was granted through the University Ethics committee in May 2016.

Stage	Activity
Planning	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Setting up and meeting of the project team 2. Identifying and communicating with all staff involved in the project and discussion of activities 3. Gaining access to information required for phase 1
Acting	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Seeking ethical approval from the Bucks New University Ethics Committee. 2. Preparing project schedule (action plan) 3. Presenting project plan to SMT sponsor (PVC, Learning and Teaching) 4. Conduct quantitative data gathering
Observing	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Critical reflexivity discussion from the project team
Reflecting	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Analyse data 2. Seek peer validation (REACT team)

Table 1. Cycle 1: Initial quantitative data collecting and analysis

The project team gathered data from a range of sources (see Table 2) and was joined by the REACT team in July 2016 to provide criticality and peer validation of the approach taken to data selection and analysis.

Source	Data sets
Timetabling	Attendance data
National Student Survey	Participation data
Student Union	SU activity, societies, programme reps
Planning & Intelligence	Progressions stats; Module evaluation data; Attrition
Open for Learning	VLE activity
Careers	DLHE stats
Learning & Teaching	Student support from central services, e.g. Learning Development Unit

Table 2. Institutional data sources and data sets

The day opened with the dilemma of how to begin the analysis of such a large amount of data. We needed to ensure that data sets used were consistent, in terms of type and year. For example, we had participation statistics for the National Student Survey (NSS) 2016, but only satisfaction scores for 2015. To ensure consistency was applied to the data analysis, we used data from 2015, as we have reliable data from all sources for this period. The decision was made to pick NSS participation as the one complete data set with which to determine how to focus our consideration of the rest of the data. To ensure that the sample was manageable the decision was taken to use the top five courses and the bottom five courses for participation in the NSS 2015. This having been done, it was observed that these courses had relatively small cohort sizes. To address the potential bias that this might offer and to broaden the scope of the investigation, we also included the five most populous courses, whatever their NSS participation rates.

	NSS Participation (%)	NSS Q22 (%)	UG Progression (% of cohort)	Top degree (% of cohort)	Withdrawals (% of cohort)
Top five	100	71.4	92	55	6
Bottom five	55.4	80.6	80	42	17
Most populous	67.2	87.4	93	55	5

Table 3. Snapshot of data sets for top five, bottom five and the five most populous courses for 2015-16 (averages)

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It is difficult to draw firm conclusions from a single snapshot of such complex and disparate data sets and we shall certainly be carrying out a similar exercise for the year 2016-17 to see if any longitudinal patterns emerge. However, there seems to be an indication that the less engaged (measured by NSS participation) were less likely to progress in their degree courses and receive a 'top' (First or Upper Second Class) degree and were more likely to withdraw from their courses than the top five and most populous courses. Question 22 in the NSS measures 'overall satisfaction' and rates student satisfaction with the quality of their course as a whole. Interestingly, NSS participation rates did not seem to correlate with responses to this measure (see), indicating that high NSS participation may result as much from students' dissatisfaction with aspects of their courses as from satisfaction. We nevertheless consider this a healthy indication of student engagement with the processes of the university.

When other data was considered alongside that in Table 3, including Student Union Society and Student Representation activity and engagement with the Learning Development Unit (see Table 2), a more compelling picture arose. Students in the lower group, for example, were much less likely to have been involved in Students' Union activities and societies, or to have engaged in the student representation system, and were less likely to have made use of the university's Learning Development Unit for academic support. Interestingly, the programmes in this lower group contained some modules which had not been evaluated in accordance with the university's quality assurance processes, which would seem to underline the link between student disengagement and staff and institutional processes (Trowler, 2010).

Cycle 2 (see below) of our research activity aimed to explore further the experiences of students on the basis of the picture that was emerging from Cycle 1. It had been planned to conduct focus groups with students from the least-engaged group (see), but, having discovered that the 'hard to reach' live up to their name, we struggled to recruit sufficient numbers and an alternative approach was adopted. Instead, an online questionnaire was developed that was circulated via email to students from both top (n=81), bottom (n=236) and most populous (n=481) groups. The questionnaire sought to establish what students understood by the term 'engagement', what engagement activities they were involved in and what acted as either enabling factors or barriers to their engagement. Participants were also asked what they felt the university could do to improve opportunities for students to engage. Questions relating to belonging and identity were also included. The questions were predominantly open-ended to encourage more meaningful qualitative data.

The initial round of collection via the questionnaire yielded a relatively small number of responses (n=13), almost all of which were from students in the top or most populous grouping. The qualitative data collection is continuing, with the aim of achieving a 10% (n=79) response rate.

Stage	Activity
Planning	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Understanding students/groups for further investigation 2. Gaining access to students/groups 3. Engaging the SU in preparing for the focus groups 4. Preparing the questions for the focus groups
Acting	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Supporting the SU in focus groups 2. Preparing project schedule (action plan) for the focus groups 3. Conducting focus groups 4. Conduct data gathering
Observing	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Critical reflexivity discussion from the project team
Reflecting	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Analyse data 2. Undertake thematic analysis 3. Seek peer validation

Table 4. Cycle 2: Deeper qualitative analysis

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Analysis of initial results reveals an understanding of 'engagement' to mean participation with the university in the broadest sense, whilst 'university life' was associated with social aspects and with the students' union and clubs, although it was also often combined with the importance of academic engagement with lecturers, classes and subjects. Around half of the participants identified participating in university quality assurance processes (module evaluations, validation events and review panels) as the principal means by which they engaged with the university beyond their academic studies, whilst around a third indicated engaging with students' union activities. Participation in sports at the university, both informally and as part of university teams, was also identified as a main engagement activity. The key enabling factor for engagement with quality assurance processes was direct email. It was interesting that only one student explicitly indicated an altruistic motivation, to 'help future students'. Precedent established by peers who had also engaged in activities was also a motivating factor, as was joining in to 'enhance [their] CV'.

Practicalities such as geographical proximity and timetabling were important factors in determining students' ability to participate in extra-curricular activities, with some frustration evident at clashes between academic timetabling and other engagement opportunities. Related to this, some students stated that attending what they perceived to be a secondary campus meant that they did not feel they were part of the main university and had access only to a reduced offer of activities. One participant bemoaned the lack of opportunities of relevance to mature and older students, requesting that mature students be made to feel: 'as much a part of the uni as the younger students', stating that they never felt 'like they fitted in.'

Enhanced communication and advertising of events and activities, involving students in decisions as to what could be offered and highlighting benefits to participation as part of advertising were also cited by students as factors that could improve engagement, as were greater choice and frequency of events.

Other barriers to engagement frequently related to 'life', which included 'personal affairs' and family commitments, often exacerbated by distance and the need to travel to the campus. Equally, for a self-identifying commuter student, engagement in existing local sports meant that they had little time to participate in sport at the university. Lack of time and 'heavy workload' were also mentioned, although it is not clear whether this referred to academic work or paid employment. Cost also featured as a barrier. The *Bucks Big Deal* initiative (Bucks Students' Union, 2017) means that all students' union activities are free, although some equipment and uniforms do require a financial contribution from students. As an inverse to the motivational aspect of peer engagement in encouraging participation, one student outlined at length how they felt that engagement had been impeded by the poor behaviour and attitudes of fellow students.

Of the small group of participants in the survey, around 60% felt that they 'belonged' or 'partly belonged' to the university and around 45% felt that being a student at the university informed or partly informed their sense of identity. Welcoming, committed staff and a 'sense of community' with fellow students were factors which were felt to promote belonging. Participation in university teams and wearing a branded uniform on placement were also strongly linked with belonging, as was seeing that feedback in quality assurance processes had been listened to and acted upon. Distance from the university, the sense of being peripheral at an underserved secondary campus and inflexible institutional practices that were felt to conspire against 'non-standard' students (for example, those who were on placement) were cited as barriers to belonging and identity development. Given the small number who responded to the questionnaire, it is perhaps telling, although in keeping with current concerns with regard to the instances of mental health issues in higher education students (Universities UK, 2015), that two respondents mentioned having to deal with the

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challenge of mental health issues. In these cases, distance from the institution and sources of support and aspects of their course were cited as exacerbating factors.

To generate further data, a consultation was held with fourteen students at a student representative conference. Student representatives act as points of contact for fellow students on course-related issues which they feed back to the university in a range of forums, meetings and panels, as part of institutional monitoring and quality assurance processes. A small consideration of £100 is paid to students who fulfil their responsibilities over the course of the academic year, but they are, in essence, volunteers. As such, they can be considered 'super-engaged'. Many of their general comments were in keeping with those gathered via the questionnaire, pointing to the barriers of timetabling and other commitments, including family, work and outside interests. Lack of engagement by other students, and staff who were perceived to be under-engaged, were also seen as demotivating factors. The importance of academic engagement, as well as social, was also cited. However, in contrast to the questionnaire results, much emphasis was given to the benefits of engagement in terms of what they got out of their experience. This was seen in extrinsic terms, such as enhancing employability, 'looking good' on their CVs and developing skills and, intrinsically, in terms of personal 'reward', 'making change', and wanting to get as much from their university experience as possible. Perhaps unsurprisingly, though, their comments were dominated by a preoccupation with the university processes with which they were so closely involved. A common theme arising from the consultation, vociferously expressed, was the importance of the university's properly valuing students' engagement with quality assurance processes by responding and being seen to respond to feedback from students. Failure by the university to engage in this way was seen as a major factor in disengagement and a consequent sense that the institution was insufficiently transparent and accountable to the student body.

Lessons learnt so far and next steps

As we are still involved in Cycle 2 and developing further rounds of data collection, it is difficult to draw firm conclusions at this stage. However, we do propose tentatively that high levels of engagement appear to correlate with lower rates of attrition and higher levels of attainment and retention, which would seem to validate findings in wider sector research (Thomas et al., 2017). Our findings to date have also already pointed to possible enhancements that may be useful to pursue as part of Cycle 3 (enhancements for engagement). These relate to the importance of effective communication and the fostering of a culture of meaningful engagement institutionally.

A key point that arose from our initial analysis was the importance of direct communication with students about opportunities of engagement, along with clear links to the benefits of engaging, both in relation to their personal development and enhancing their employability and related skills. Unsurprisingly, students seem increasingly likely to ask themselves 'What's in it for me?' when considering whether to invest their limited time and energies into activities that do not relate directly to their courses. Information about opportunities for involvement in such activities should, therefore, be accompanied by explicit mention of the potential positive impacts of engagement and the opportunities for development they provide, both in intrinsic and extrinsic terms.

In terms of fostering a culture of engagement, our findings point to the importance of making more visible the results of student-derived feedback into quality processes. Students seem more than willing to engage in such activities, particularly where their engagement is facilitated by direct communication and links, for example, to relevant forms. However, where change is effected on the basis of such engagement, this needs to be clearly and explicitly communicated to students. The institution needs not only to be responsive to

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student feedback: it is also important that it is seen to be responsive in meaningful terms. A failure to make the impact of student engagement visible in this way would seem to be a major factor in increasing disengagement from such processes.

In conclusion, a message that seems to emerge from all data collection to date is that student engagement is not simply an issue that depends upon students. Rather, it involves the active, meaningful and visible engagement of the university at all levels. Where students feel they have been insufficiently catered for, it is clear that these constituencies must be taken into account when opportunities for engagement are made available and communicated to the student body. In addition to this, however, universities must be seen not only to encourage student engagement in their institutional processes, but also to respond to that engagement in a way that makes it clear that student feedback is valued and acted upon.

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