

A Higher Education rid of our Rich Engagements: Reflecting on student engagement during COVID-19.

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The global pandemic of COVID-19 created chaos for student engagement in higher education (HE). The vast majority of traditional university systems worldwide were forced to move to online learning and teaching, drastically restrict in person activities, and limit student interactions on campus and across countries as part of government restrictions to prevent transmission. A virus that spread through social interactions automatically limited the majority of HE provision, a provision that has traditionally relied upon such student-student, and student-staff, engagement, bringing people together from across nations and the wider world to campuses of learning, discussion, activity and socialising. Situated within this context, this paper explores the shift away from the common student experience of travelling to the location of study and the effect this has had on many of the student engagement opportunities that occur in our locations of learning. These student engagements are what this paper will term the “rich engagements” of higher education and it is these “rich engagements” to which this paper will now turn.

Student engagement continues to be a dominant sector focus for academics, professional services, managers and policy makers, to support and ensure student success during and following higher education. Through several decades of research, it has been argued and evidenced that students engaged in educational and complementary extra-curricular activity benefit student outcomes (retention, achievement and employability), a sense of belonging (socialisation, friendships and support) and an increased satisfaction experience in a University setting (Astin, 1984; Kuh, 2005; Thomas, 2012, for example). Additionally, the social, community and cultural integration have been cited as central to student engagement retention and success (Kahu and Nelson, 2018; Strayhorn, 2008). These student engagement activities are often understood as being linked to attendance and participation in the curriculum, immersion into social activities, and involvement in HE related activities such as campus sport, excursions and exchanges and students as partners initiatives. These activities are well known by those who research student engagement as the engagements that lead to students truly flourishing, becoming inspired, feeling at home and excited about knowledge, their studies and their future career. I wish to define many of these inter-personal engagements as “rich engagements”, which are many of the activities that contribute towards making our HE transformative and, in particular, define campus-based HE experiences.

The UK higher education sector was faced with three major lockdowns, which led to a great deal of degree provision being taught online. Alongside the taught curriculum, many other university services moved online too and almost all in-person extra-curricular and social activities were banned alongside national closures of sport facilities and social venues such as public houses. Even beyond these major lockdowns, higher education operating during COVID-19 was full of rules to limit social contact, such as social distancing, mask wearing, reduced face to face teaching, and limitations on how much student residences could mix. Many refer to their time at

university as some of the best times in their life, but what if the HE of COVID-19 is one without those rich engagement opportunities and the serendipitous experiences that naturally come from these: the memories, the laughter, the inspirations and the insightful debates that follow? Students have reported making fewer friends, not knowing their cohort or their lecturers, or even never having visited campus (Busby, 2020). Across the UK, universities actively limited student visits to campus, drastically reduced face to face teaching (to as low as one session every three weeks) and chose, even outside of imposed lockdowns restrictions, to go fully online due to the associated health risks of having any face to face teaching on campus.

In line with these shifts in learning style, cognitive student engagement opportunities remained during COVID-19 through mostly online learning and teaching. Accompanied by online support and service delivery, most of the previous face to face campus-based students become distance learners. Prior to the pandemic, distance (or off site perhaps historically) learning has steadily increased, particularly following mass digital literacy and access to Information Technologies from the 1990s, however, face to face education has remained in the majority of HE provision.

Student engagement online during the pandemic became something of a mystery, where even academic programmes that had attendance requirements left many academics wondering whether students were engaging or not. Technology platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams allow students to show their faces (through turning their cameras on), yet across the sector, the normative student behaviour has been to keep themselves muted and screens off. Why is this? Well, perhaps it is because students have not wanted to show themselves on video to their course mates (Castelli and Sarvary, 2021). Or, that their WiFi connection is weak due to several housemates, parents and siblings also engaging in online activity or work at the same time (Castelli and Sarvary, 2021). This has led many to become concerned about student engagement, particularly with the only tools available to measure engagement being online data analytics on virtual learning environments. There are many benefits to data analytics in HE, such as monitoring attendance, reaching out to students at risk who are no longer engaging, as well as evaluating which resources students find most useful. Yet there are many limitations, such as the data only measuring behavioural engagements, which are often based on clicks, hours spent on certain web pages and downloads of resources. These give no indication of a student's emotional or cognitive engagement with learning, nor an indication of their sense of belonging, nor an indication of retention. Many students argue that this is not the education they were expecting or hoping to experience; one without the 'rich engagement' opportunities discussed above (Hall, 2021).

On a positive note, the mass move to online learning has educated an entire sector and generation of students in the practice of online learning and distance education. Online learning and teaching has been referred to as more accessible in some circumstances, where learning can take place at the student's own pace and at times that work for their busy lives. This has also increased student attendance at one-to-ones with services such as Careers and Wellbeing Services at the University of Winchester in 2020-21. So, in 2022 as many look beyond the pandemic, with mass vaccinations and HE being in a better position to proactively plan rather than react

without previous experience, questions around what new practices to keep are being tabled. We ask ourselves, what are the student engagements we wish to prioritise in the future? Which methods of delivery are more effective? The temptation stands to continue certain online elements, which I argue is now a greater stream for HE to utilise, but caution against fully replacing prior practice without critical reflection, and would suggest we instead work toward complementing practice with these new methods.

Technology supported student engagement has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, growing perhaps far faster in two years than it would have in three-five years. Like the growth in consumer purchasing, online student engagement has grown in the student engagement 'market share' of the university experience. Additionally, these technology-supported student engagements were previously in the minority of HE provision, yet now have been experienced by the majority as an entire generation experienced online learning. However, we must take time to study and research these new platforms of engagement, as if we over emphasise online forms of student engagement for accessibility and convenience reasons, we risk losing some of the great 'rich engagement' opportunities celebrated by our students and staff of higher education. Therefore, we must use this stream of engagement to complement practice, but not to go without the benefits of in person, which have been shown to be the central opportunities for belonging, inspiration, support, and transformation. Conversations about the future of student engagement in the post-pandemic university are exciting, where technology enhanced learning innovation should continue to develop and adapt to suit the students' needs. However, we must also remember the 'rich engagement' benefits that were plentiful in the pre-pandemic university, to work with them and the new technologies available to provide opportunities with greater accessibility and that lead to success for all our students.

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