The intricacies of Student Engagement in Higher Education after the pandemic: Academic and Central Services staff views and experiences

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on research which captured the voices of academic and central services staff at a UK Higher Education institution on the intricacies of student engagement in the post-pandemic era. Participants (n=23) took part in semi-structured interviews across the academic year 2023-24. This research contributes to the field of Higher Education by bringing additional insights to the ongoing debate of student engagement, including the tangible and intangible aspects. It identifies that students are tactically engaging as they cope with economic, political, and social challenges post pandemic. It found that students can be in attendance but disengaged, or not in attendance but engaging online, which directly challenges student engagement monitoring methods. Recommendations are that social and relational teaching practice is embedded into the heart of HE delivery, with academics given time and space to deliver these practices, particularly for institutions with high numbers of students from non-traditional student demographics. Further research is needed to review barriers to student engagement post-pandemic to capture student voice and to examine the conflicts of students not being able to attend despite being committed, and those who do attend and appear to be less committed.

Key Words: Student Engagement, Higher Education, Post-Pandemic, Barriers to Student Engagement

INTRODUCTION

This research was undertaken in a post-92 Higher Education institution (HEI) in the UK and captured the views of academic staff from one faculty and central services staff providing services across the entire 40,000 plus student population. The student population being largely from the widening participation, commuter, or first-generation demographics, namely from non-traditional backgrounds. The Social Mobility Commission (2019; 2024) identifies that students from these non-traditional backgrounds are more likely to drop-out, affecting their ability to access or end up in high skilled jobs. This points to issues with retention, achievement and onward success for these student groups and highlights the justification for further evidenced-based research to address the challenges of student engagement (SE).

In 2024 we undertook a systematic literature review into the pressures that Higher Education (HE) students are experiencing post-pandemic (Jones and Bell, 2024). We identified a lack of post-pandemic empirical research analysing the impact of Covid-19 on SE. This paper addresses this shortcoming by examining the understanding of academic and central services staff of SE in practice. We investigate staff perceptions of student behaviours that indicate disengagement, report on barriers to SE post-pandemic and make recommendations for strategies to increase SE (Dunne and Owen, 2013; Jones and Bell, 2024). Our research is underpinned by the following research questions:

1. How do staff understand and define SE in practice?
2. What HEI student behaviours indicate disengagement?
3. What are the main barriers to SE post-pandemic?
4. What practical strategies do staff feel would help to increase SE post-pandemic?

Dismore, Turner and Huang (2019) acknowledge that there is international interest in SE across HE. In our recent literature review (Jones and Bell, 2024) we found few studies of SE which capture the voices of staff working closely with students (Dunne and Owen, 2013). Therefore, this research provides further insight by capturing the

voices of academic and central services staff exploring the intricacies of the notion of SE in practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

HE is experiencing post-pandemic challenges which have increased pressure on students in complex and intersecting ways (Jones and Bell, 2024; Jones and Sweeney, 2025). Specifically, student mental health and wellbeing has been affected by the crisis in the cost-of-living and various educational lockdown periods and interruptions to social development opportunities post-pandemic (Chen and Lubock, 2022; Defeyter et al., 2021; McGiven and Shepherd, 2022; Nunn et al., 2021). All these contribute to increased barriers to SE post-pandemic, with HEI's reporting falling attendance rates and increased attrition, particularly for non-traditional students (Social Mobility Commission, 2024). Therefore, understanding barriers to SE in greater detail is valuable for deeper understanding of time and place.

Good SE is inextricably linked to retention, attainment and satisfaction, so it has been a topic of interest for many years and there is extensive literature in this field (Advance HE, 2019; Bond and Bedenlier, 2019; Denovan et al, 2020; Kahu, 2013; Leach, 2016; QAA 2018; Thomas, 2019; Trowler, 2010; Trowler and Trowler, 2010; Wimpenny and Savin-Baden, 2013; Zepke, 2015).

> The major reason underlying the growing interest in researching the student experience is the realization that, in an increasingly competitive higher education sector, higher education institutions, departments and academics need to be aware of, and responsive to, their students' feelings and situations (Tight, 2019a, p52).

This, coupled with the measurability of neoliberal academic marketisation practices, and the impact of Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and National Student Survey (NSS) scores, makes SE a worthy topic of examination (del Cerro Santamaria, 2020; OfS, 2024; McCabe and Bhardwa, 2023; Snijders, Wijnia, Rikers, and Lovens, 2020; Troiani and Dutson, 2021). Buckley (2017) explores the ideology of SE research, suggesting that student voice is also aligned to SE and contests neoliberal positions.

Student voice is not a focus of the research presented in our paper, but it is important to acknowledge its eminence in HE practice (Brooman, Darwent and Pimor, 2014; Canning, 2016). Dunne and Owen (2013) explored the implications of consumerism, supplyism and collegial values, which appear to be ongoing issues within the HE sector almost 11 years later and continue to contribute to the debate around SE.

Dismore, Turner and Huang (2019), reviewed SE from the perspective of new lecturers, reporting that SE is both a cognitive and emotional construct, with tensions between the two contributing to barriers to SE. They also recognise that SE takes time to build and is inextricably linked to relationships (Tinto, 1993; 1997), linking with the focus of this research. Bokhove and Muijs (2019) explored the variances of SE models at student level highlighting links between student demographics and characteristics, another driver for the research reported in our paper. Cassidy, Sullivan, and Radnor, (2021, p1191) report a failure to involve 'front line employees effectively in either the design or delivery' of SE practices aligned to concepts of engagement and measurement. Macfarlane and Tomlinson (2017) critique SE policy in HE, recommending that SE be considered more broadly across economic and political landscapes, and to consider the ethical implications of SE; our findings add insight on the post-pandemic context. Similarly, Robertson, Cleaver and Smart (2019) identify tangible and intangible aspects to SE and propose a framework that encompasses both elements, although it is not clear if this has been absorbed into practice.

The literature highlights the complexities of SE but also the importance of the notion of SE in HE. However, SE is complex with multiple meanings aligned to the needs of the individual student, the HE institution, or governing practices. The concepts of SE that are most relevant to the results in this article align with institutional expectations of attendance monitoring, and the impact of economic, political challenges post-pandemic. We debate both tangible and intangible aspects such as social and relational practice and subsequent post-pandemic challenges. This research brings to the forefront the powerful voices of staff participants presenting their experiences of SE in practice post-Covid context.

METHODS

The study was based in a UK HEI and ethical approval was obtained in September 2023. Data collected was stored, managed, and disposed of in line with institutional requirements, GDPR and the Data Protection Act (2018).

The design and methodology of our research was essentially phenomenological (Crotty, 1998; Tight, 2019), located within interpretivist, qualitative research traditions. We were specifically searching for the 'unlit foreground of [a] phenomenon' (Somekh and Lewin, 2011, p123). Participants' reflections of their subjective experiences enabled the researchers to examine between the lines of their conversations and reflections (Somekh and Lewin, 2011).

The research took place across the academic year 2023/24. We used an initial purposive sampling strategy, and some natural snowballing took place (Gray, 2011; Daniel and Harland, 2018). For example, at the end of each interview or focus group, participants were asked if there were any other key staff members they would recommend taking part based on knowledge of the phenomena and research intention (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey, 2020). In total, 10 academic staff members from one faculty and 13 central services staff participated, totalling n=23. In terms of phenomenology as a theoretical framework, it is recommended that the sample size be between 20-30 participants for the study to be viable and manageable (Tight, 2019).

The investigating researchers were from two different departments within one faculty of the participating HEI and to aid reduction of potential for researcher bias during the data analysis process, each transcript was read closely by both researchers (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey, 2020). We identified key themes that were discussed and checked for variation, and then further cross-checked during interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Braun and Clarke, 2013) meetings (Hennik, Hutter and Bailey, 2020; Tight, 2019). These methods helped the investigators to consider their own positionality within the subjectivity of the research (Bergin, 2018). This included consideration of the relationships with participating staff and again during the writing-up process, where the researchers were also able to discuss their own thoughts and feelings connected to the phenomena (Cresswell, 2009).

The data analysis process followed several stages of filtering to determine repetition of responses (Gaudet and Robert, 2018), enabling us to develop key themes based on IPA (Braun and Clarke, 2013). The focus was on how the participants perceived and talked about their experiences of SE student behaviours post-pandemic (Bergin, 2018; Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2013; Järvinen, and Mik-Meyer, 2020). A digital evidence trail of the stages of IPA analysis for this dataset enhanced the trustworthiness and credibility of our results (Daniel and Harland, 2018; Silverman, 2020). These results have additionally been triangulated with key literature in the field of HE reviewed to examine and interrogate the data further (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011).

Data was collected via semi-structured interviews or focus groups; participants were offered the option to choose which method suited them, e.g. some small teams of central services staff found it helpful to take part in a focus group so they could share expertise, whilst other staff members preferred to be interviewed singly (Cohen, Manion, Morrison, 2011; Gray, 2011; Opie and Brown, 2019). Each interview/focus group took 30-60 minutes depending on how many participants there were. Some interviews/focus groups took place via online meetings, and some took place face-to-face (Cresswell, 2009), depending on participant preference. Examples of interview questions are included in the results below.

We found that staff from both academic and central services were keen to take part. Once staff from key roles in central services had taken part it was felt that this category of participant had achieved a natural saturation. There was scope to interview more academic staff, but we preferred narrow and deep data over wide and shallow. This contributes to validation, credibility, and reliability as it diminished the risk of the data becoming unmanageable (Tight, 2019).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section we present our thematic analysis of the data, with example research and interview questions to aid clarity. Gaudet and Roberts (2018, p47) explain that 'researchers write a narrative that expresses the essential components and meanings

of the phenomena' which have been determined following stringent analysis processes as outlined earlier, aiding validity of the data process (Bergin, 2018; Hennik, Hutter and Bailey, 2020). Responses are identified as coming from AS (academic staff) and CS (central services staff), but to prevent potential identification, a possibility given the relatively small population available to us, we do not provide any details beyond this.

The main themes and sub-themes we identified were:

1. Understanding SE in practice
    a. Tangible and intangible elements of SE
    b. Tactical student engagement
    c. Institutional differences
2. Student behaviours indicating disengagement
3. Barriers to student engagement post-pandemic
    a. Cost of living
    b. Mental health
    c. Social relationships
4. Strategies to improve SE

UNDERSTANDING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN PRACTICE

Academic staff and central services staff were asked questions around their understanding of SE *eg. How would you define SE and what does SE mean for you?* This was to establish some clarity in terms of understanding across the two different participant groups.

a) Tangible and intangible elements of SE

HEIs typically measure SE via the attendance data or digital footprint data gathered from students accessing online pedagogic resources. These methods are quantifiable and, therefore, tangible aspects of SE, which are easily measured (Robertson, Cleaver and Smart, 2019). However, although academic staff clearly recognise that attendance is important, it appears that they struggle with the assumption that attendance is

always a clear sign of engagement. Central services staff tended to link SE to student fees and referred to SE as a 'series of data-driven triggers, which fire an email out' (CS), demonstrating an understanding of SE aligned to HEI processes rather than as a notion with multiple meanings (Buckley, 2017).

Academic staff specifically identified that SE is not just about attendance and 'bums on seats or IT clicks' (AS). They feel that SE is more about identity and students being agentic (Robertson, Cleaver and Smart, 2019; Stenalt and Lassesen, 2021). They also reported a feeling that the concept of SE is shifting over time, and especially post-pandemic, as students juggle competing pressures and identities due to other challenges such as the cost-of-living crisis (Jones and Bell, 2024; Jones and Bell, 2025). University is not necessarily their main identity as was the case in the past. For example, a participant among the academic staff noted that,

> When I was an undergrad, I was mostly a student. I was also a daughter and a girlfriend and all those things, but really I was a student. I was either in the pub or in the lecture theatre, that's what I did. It's so different now (AS).

As such, academic staff reported SE as being much more subjective and less quantifiable, aligning with the results reported by Robertson et al. (2019). They mainly talked about students being present in the moment and contributing to the learning environment as less tangible or measurable aspects of SE (Buckley, 2017). Student agency within those interactions was mentioned repeatedly (Stenalt and Lassesen, 2021); for example, students as producers (self-organising, proactive, reflecting and self-regulating) as well as products of their learning environments (Stenalt and Lassesen, 2021).

Academic staff explored the complexities of SE in practice. For example, one noted that:

> [Student engagement] is a very big term... Is it about students tapping in, students submitting work as well as them being present? They can be physically present but not engaged and not participating. Is it about accessing

the materials and resources? For example, students can be on-site but not engaged or they could be online and very engaged (AS).

I think it means much more than just…going on moodle [digital platforms] and that kind of thing. Attendance is crucial (AS).

Does engagement mean being quite vocal in class – no. It can mean listening, it can mean having conversations in smaller groups (AS).

For me, SE is them actually being present there in the classroom and not just communicating with me but communicating with others around them as well (AS).

Academic staff agreed that SE is about students listening, contributing, and interacting during their lectures and seminars, going beyond just being physically in the room, again demonstrating student agency (Stenalt and Lassesen, 2021). There was a sense that SE is about students being present in the classroom and communicating, not just with the teacher but with others around them, completing readings and set tasks and being involved in teaching and learning in mind and body. Academics reported feeling that SE is about students contributing to their learning; this was not necessarily just about physical signs of engagement such as putting their hand up or answering a question, but also included intangible expressions of engagement such as how they demonstrate they are processing the material in front of them:

To me it [engagement] represents a situation where a student is interested, and they actually want to be a part of that environment. So that can be subject matter, wanting to be with friends, wanting to be in that room at that time. It's about feeling comfortable, feeling alert and being curious. Enjoying connecting what you learn about in university with your own life and bringing your own ideas and feeling relaxed about that, so you don't feel it's distant or disconnected from yourself (AS).

It's about immersion in the holistic sense, not just academically, but in the broader community. You feel like you have got friends, you feel like you get on

with your tutor, you are enjoying your studies, not necessarily all the time, but generally feeling ok and connected, feeling good about what you're doing – that's engagement for me (AS).

Academic staff described engagement as students being fully present, being connected, invested, and focused on the people present. Not looking at anything else, looking at each other and being focused and agentic in what is taking place in those spaces (Stenalt and Lassesen, 2021). This suggests staff value that SE is deeply rooted in in-person social (Tinto, 1993; 1997) and relational teaching interactions (Bingham and Sidorkin 2004; Bell 2022; Bovill 2020; Jones and Nangah 2020; Jones 2021; 2023), and is dependent on students being active/agentic in that process (Stenalt and Lassesen, 2021). Interestingly, they did not comment on online social interactions suggesting that in-person methods are potentially prioritised over online methods.

Central services staff identified that if the academic/personal tutor staff are 'on the ball' (CS), then the centralised engagement trigger systems can work well to aid re-engagement for students. But these trigger systems can be put at risk for those working frontline with large student groups due to restricted time available for relationship-building (Gravett, Taylor, and Fairchild, 2021). They also added that SE is about time and resources, and they were unclear whether the responsibility should sit with academic staff or support staff. For example, if a student was not engaging, they were unsure whether the student would know their academic team. This perspective on SE shifts the focus away from the rich, social and relational understanding of academic staff, towards a more instrumental approach.

CS participants recognised that disengagement may carry a significant penalty for students; one noted that 'It's always struck me as odd that students [would] pay ten grand a year and then just chuck that away'. This appears to assume that students take a 'value for money' approach to their university programme; however, students may perceive that they are never going to earn enough to start repaying their student loan, so 'value for money' is not something they will need to worry about. This view could influence their decision-making in terms of engagement.

b) Tactical student engagement

Whilst academic staff value face-to-face interactions with students to aid relationship building, they also recognise that some students strategically do not attend, but still consistently engage with online resources and submit work of a suitable standard. However, they also noted that when students do this, they miss out on small interactions with staff and peers, the impromptu conversations that aid relationship building (Bokhove and Muijs, 2019; Jones and Nangah, 2020; Jones and Bell, 2024). In addition, these students miss out on key teaching and learning content that cannot be picked up online. This 'tactical engagement' is probably linked to students juggling competing priorities such as family, work, health, and other influences, and as a phenomenon has evolved more prominently post-pandemic (Jones and Bell, 2025). Academic staff recognised its logical attraction to students:

> If they think they can get the same result by carefully reading off moodle [digital platforms], they might think that they don't need to turn up for lectures. Or if they don't like group work with other people, but they can read through the resources but don't actually need to be there, why wouldn't you do that? That's the time efficient way of doing it and then you've got time for the rest of your life (AS).

Most participants were aware that partly engaged students may be doing their best to balance competing responsibilities such as childcare, work, caring, and most acknowledged that while many of the challenges students face are not new, they are much more prominent post-pandemic. One commented that students were

> …seeking alternative modes of study…. and that will impact on attendance and physical attendance of being on campus. But again, I think that's linked to their experience on campus and also that they absolutely need to work and earn money (CS).

Additionally, participants demonstrated considerable empathy towards students, especially post-pandemic (Jones and Bell, 2024). They suggested that staff perceptions of SE have changed post-pandemic, that they have become less

judgemental and more empathetic and understanding towards students, because they have a stronger understanding of student lives and the difficulties students experience. All participants acknowledged that many of the challenges students are facing have always been in existence, however, they reported that these challenges are much more prominent post-pandemic.

c) *Institutional differences*

Academic staff considered that SE could also be different for different types of universities, e.g. universities with a high proportion of non-traditional students, who are seeking vocational qualifications (e.g. in nursing or teaching). Academic staff recognised that this would likely be the student's main focus and motivation. They contrasted this with the type of engagement of students from more privileged backgrounds, who may have the opportunity to be more involved with the wider university offering, if they have less pressure to work and fewer family responsibilities.

Under this theme, the voices of the academic staff came through more strongly in developing some wider understanding of the intangible aspects of SE and highlight the woolliness of the notion of SE more broadly across HEI teams (Robertson, Cleaver and Smart, 2019). Our findings suggest that SE appears to mean different things to different members or departments of HE staff, and these different understandings can be valid in different contexts and for differing purposes. For example, academic staff tend to conceptualise SE around intangible aspects: agency, participation, being present and in the moment, and taking part in teaching and learning activities and teaching and learning expectations (Stenalt and Lassesen, 2021). However, central services staff often understood SE via tangible, quantifiable aspects such as attendance and digital engagement, which can be measured and tracked (Robertson, Cleaver and Smart, 2019). It is not clear how far either conceptualisation of SE is accurate or useful for understanding tactical engagement.

Academic staff also recognised that SE is deeply rooted within social and relational pedagogy, more so for those students from non-traditional demographics (Bokhove and Muijs, 2019; Jones and Nangah, 2020; Jones and Bell, 2024), and they felt that deeper empathy and understanding of additional student life pressures was needed.

Academic and central services staff were asked questions such as '*what types of student behaviours flag up when a student is starting to disengage or has disengaged from their studies/academic environment? What do you think the main reasons are for this?* Examples of participant responses are:

> When students disengage, it indicates a massive problem of some type somewhere (CS).

> When they stop coming into the classroom. Classroom management is becoming more of an issue brought on by large class sizes (AS).

When probed for further clarification of the term 'classroom management', this participant explained the shift post-pandemic related mainly to the challenges of managing increased class sizes. She suggested these larger class sizes of over 50/60+ students as opposed to pre-pandemic class sizes which were capped at 25 students for seminars are affecting the quality of the experience for the students but also increasing challenges for staff.

We also asked: *Have you noticed an increase in students disengaging from their studies or withdrawing from their studies since the pandemic?*

Academic staff acknowledged that even if a student has not been to class, they can be engaging in other ways, although they recognise this as a concern due to the way that teaching and learning is designed. This is because more context is provided for the in-person seminars meaning that students who do not attend can miss out on vital elements that are not represented fully in online materials. Although they tended to agree that non-attendance is the strongest evidence of disengagement, they also recognise that some non-attenders, often those students who are vulnerable (Jones and Nangah, 2020) catch up online. They reported that this has increased post-pandemic, and whilst they always encourage attendance, they feel less confident making a robust attendance statement in the wake of Covid-19. One academic added:

I wonder if staff back off more in terms of expectations and ability to insist on student attendance, especially post-Covid and with more understanding of wider challenges for students. I'm careful of that exchange now, [although] I find some students very open and honest about admitting if they are going home early, as there is a greater understanding from staff. I have experienced a lot more mentions of feelings of anxiety about coming in from students than pre-Covid times (AS).

Academic staff also explained that post-pandemic they were much more cautious in making judgements about SE in class activities, revealing that they have a stronger understanding of student needs, especially for students with Special Educational Needs (SEN). An academic participant carefully outlined the difficulties and shades of interpretation required:

When you stop seeing them in seminars and when you don't get an immediate response [to email], that usually indicates that they have disengaged. But if you email them asking if they are ok, you generally get a nice response back as they have appreciated that they have been absent. This usually leads to finding out that there is something else going on in the life of that student and they have found it difficult to discuss, but by opening the door it can help them to disclose if they need support. (AS).

Most other participants acknowledged that it is the lack of attendance and not accessing digital platforms which are triggers for reaching out to students, as these are measurable indicators and, therefore, easier to monitor (Robertson, Cleaver and Smart, 2019). However, they reported that it is difficult if you do not receive responses from the student. They also reported that there are those students who attend but who are constantly chatting or on their phones and not paying attention, looking bored, taking photos of themselves, and talking about other topics, adding that that can be difficult to manage (Whitsed et al, 2024). They feel that this lack of care or engagement from students is driven by the belief that they have paid money and can do what they want. One participant gave a concise summary of the resulting frustration (Whitsed et al,2024; Dunne and Owen, 2013):

I accept that there will always be a number of students not interested at all and are not going to be engaged, maybe just want to mess around and they just kind of turn up. I always think, why are you doing this? And how can you do this for three years and not really care, but I have to accept that this is the case, otherwise I'd feel really angry. I suppose change what you can and try to influence the students where you can but accept that there are always a number of students who you'll never make a difference to (AS).

Academic staff also acknowledged some students struggled to reacclimatise back into the classroom and reported concerns around decreased student concentration levels post-pandemic, issues anecdotally experienced widely across teaching teams (Whitsed et al, 2024). Our academic participants also reported wider issues around classroom dynamics, student behaviours and expectations post-pandemic as being a concern for some Covid cohorts affecting SE.

Academics report that not knowing students well enough has increased post-pandemic, mainly due to large cohort sizes. Furthermore, academic staff highlight that social pedagogy and discussions with staff and peers during seminars and activities is important for SE not just academically but socially too:

The student might not necessarily be disengaging academically but they could be disengaging from the wider university offer and interactions with staff and students (AS).

Central services staff reported frustrations with institutional engagement monitoring systems, with inadequate monitoring of SE reported. Academic staff confirm that, they 'find central systems can be a bit random' (AS) in relation to flagging up attendance issues (Robertson, Cleaver and Smart, 2019).

Academic staff described a mixed picture with some noticing more withdrawals and students disengaging since Covid-19, whilst others felt that building consistency across the staff team was helping to minimise disengagement and build trusting relationships (Kahu, 2013; Jones and Nangah, 2020; Jones 2021; Jones 2023). They

felt that the cohort who were taking their GCSEs during Covid-19 may have benefited from the college/FE experience, helping to make a difference at HE level. Other academic staff reported a pattern of alternating attendance and non-attendance, with the latter sometimes so lengthy that it was assumed the student(s) had left the university.

Both staffing groups recognised that disengagement is mainly indicated when students stop attending, although academic staff identified that students could be engaging in other ways such as digitally or online. They reported that it was mainly vulnerable students or those with competing priorities e.g. work, family, health struggles who, although still committed to their courses, are struggling to attend in-person (Jones and Bell, 2024). Academic staff reported a post-Covid confidence shift in insisting on attendance, as they empathise with students' busy lives and the increased challenges they face (Jones and Bell, 2024). They also reported a stronger understanding of student needs e.g. SEN. Other student behaviours which indicate disengagement beyond attendance were not replying to email communications, not taking part during in-class group activities and not submitting draft work.

Academic staff feel that some student groups have struggled to reacclimatise back into the classroom post-pandemic, and reported issues with concentration levels, classroom dynamics, and student behaviours in class which are affecting SE. Large class sizes post pandemic have reduced the ability of academic staff to build relationships with students, which negatively affects social and relational pedagogy and therefore, ultimately, SE. It was also reported that students could be engaged in their taught programme but disengaged from wider university offerings. Some participants suggested that, as a consequence of the marketisation of HE, disengaging behaviours could be linked to consumerist attitudes among some students (del Cerro Santamaria, 2020; Snijders, Wijnia, Rikers, and Lovens, 2020; OfS, 2024; McCabe and Bhardwa, 2023; Troiani and Dutson, 2021). In addition, HEI engagement monitoring systems for both academic and central staff seem inconsistent.

*A*cademic staff and Central services staff were asked questions relating to barriers to engagement *e.g. What do you think may be contributing to barriers to student engagement in the post-Covid context? Are these different to pre-Covid times?*

a) Cost of living

Academic and central services staff reported that the cost-of-living crisis and the associated impact on mental health since Covid-19 are affecting SE (Jones and Bell, 2024; Macfarlane and Tomlinson, 2017). They also recognise additional financial barriers for those students from non-traditional student populations. There was a sense that students do not have the time to take part in wider university extra-curricular activities because they focus on their studies and then go on to their jobs, as they balance these priorities. They reported that post-pandemic students are having to work, rather than choosing to work as in pre-pandemic years, affecting their abilities to take part in or engage with anything outside of their studies. A central services participant summarised the situation like this:

> So [students are] lost. When we've got students that have families that are commuting and that may be leaving multigenerational households and all those factors, actually university is sometimes [a] quite small part of their lives. We talk about universities being the central point of focus for students, but actually that is often the [reverse] of the reality. What we were finding [was], it was those students that were looked to be the financial stability in the household. And because suddenly family members were out of work or on zero hours, contracts weren't fulfilled and things like that. So, it's not just their own personal responsibility and personal circumstances. It is actually the expectations of the wider family network, and those kind of responsibilities. I think there's quite a complex layering of some of that and I think that intersectionality [is] really key in terms of who the students are and what they bring to the situation, because I'd agree, I don't think commitment's the issue. I think they all only want to succeed and do well at degree. But actually, it's that juggling thing and it is that

actually, you know, if it's food on the table or going to that lecture, which one do I pick (CS)?

I think that's a definite sort of thing that came out of Covid. A lot more students are working a lot. Before there'd be, you know, a good proportion. But now, now it's practically everyone that I've ever spoken to that are working. And then the knock-on effect of that is that they're not going back to engagement in anything outside of their studies (CS).

Despite recognising the difficult decisions that students are having to make, participants felt strongly that students were not less engaged with their studies *per se*, but that they are seeking alternative modes of study that reduce physical attendance on-campus. It was felt that despite these challenges for students, they remain committed to their studies. A participant added:

What I think they're looking for is that, you know, value. So actually, when I come onto campus, whether I use a student services or whether I attend an academic lecture, it's got to be absolutely worth it and worth me spending the money to do it (CS).

Academic staff are clearly aware of issues relating to external pressures that are outside of the students' control as also acting as a barrier to SE (Jones and Bell, 2024), for example:

Family pressures, stuff outside the university that they can't control directly, [for example] illness, bereavement, siblings looking after siblings, being carers, feeling financially obliged to work more hours and do jobs to get by and make ends meet, distance, travel, housing (CS).

b) Mental Health

Both academic and central services staff reported that there is a mental health crisis post-pandemic which is contributing to barriers to SE with significantly higher numbers

of students presenting with mental health needs post-pandemic (Jones and Bell, 2024). The impact of this on indices of engagement is clear:

> I've had students who come into uni[versity] but once they get to the door, they physically can't do it, they couldn't get themselves further into the classroom (AS).

All staff talked about students experiencing social anxiety post-pandemic due to undergoing educational lockdowns and interruptions to social development during these periods, which have affected their confidence levels. Academic staff also recognised that even when students can attend, mental health issues are affecting their ability to concentrate and be fully present in teaching and learning. This affects engagement in the classrooms. Central services staff added that:

> You know, somebody's asking you to do something but you, you know, you're massively anxious and I think we're seeing an increase in [student] anxiety. …it's very hard to be fully present when you're worrying … or you're more anxious (CS).

Academic and central services staff also recognised that some students find it challenging to be able to reach out to services in the first place, and that the impact of this can spiral:

> They bury their heads in the sand because they're dealing with something quite big. They won't trigger the systems if they keep saying they won't be in and we put all the engagement checks in place, meaning that all the systems being in place doesn't necessarily work effectively, some can go under the radar (CS).

It seems clear there are a higher number of students suffering from anxiety who are not accessing mental health or support services. It also seems likely that there are issues with students accessing and seeking the support they need (Jones and Bell, 2024). Boulton et al. (2015) claim that the relationship between SE and student wellbeing/mental health is indeed lacking in understanding and our participants appear to agree.

Both academic and central services staff pointed out that mental health solutions seem to have become at least partly the responsibility of universities, and whilst they acknowledge that universities can be part of the solution, they feel that there are limits to what they can do. They felt that under-resourced National Health Service (NHS) mental health services are also a factor, getting appointments is a considerable challenge for students who need medical support (Deahl, 2023; CQC 2024).

Academic staff also reported transition to HE as a challenge for students affected by lockdowns. They identified that during the pandemic there was a lot more scaffolding provided, which has since been withdrawn.

> I think young people are having a really challenging time around mental health as well for all sorts of intersecting reasons around the media, around pressures in general. It feels as if barriers to engagement are quite significant now potentially. Not just classroom barriers, worldwide events e.g. the wars. So much has happened globally. It feels particularly hard for students (AS).

Academic staff also report that after Covid-19, students need more reassurance and direction. This creates barriers particularly for students undertaking the type of independent research tasks expected in HE. They feel that students need support to develop their soft skills, for example, 'things like being able to pick up the phone and talk to a [placement] setting' (AS).

There is some uncertainty over the precise extent and nature of universities' legal duty of care towards students' (HC Research Briefing 2024, pp.8-30), but it seems clear that (a) universities do bear some responsibility to respond to student mental health issues, and to provide appropriate support and make reasonable adjustments for them once they are known; and (b) while universities are very aware of their responsibilities and are taking steps to respond supportively to the problems, they are themselves neither specialists in providing mental health support nor able to effectively ameliorate the external societal pressures facing HE students. The potential costs to universities of the mental health crisis can be measured in terms of provision of both specialist provision (e.g. university counselling services) and non-specialist support (e.g. that

provided by personal tutors and other academic colleagues), in reduced levels of student completion and satisfaction, attrition rates and, in some cases, in reputational damage.

c) Social Relationships

Academic staff recognised the increased pressures for student's post-pandemic such as struggling to form friendship groups and feeling homesick, and not just for first years (Kahu, 2013; Jones and Bell, 2024). They also reported that students getting involved in class activities and working with peers has changed post-pandemic, with students finding these experiences a challenge. Staff also stated that students experience difficulties with SE when there are disruptions to the relationships that they have built with staff through, for example, changes in personal tutors or teaching staff (Kahu, 2013).

Central services staff talked about the additional services and events that are put on for students. Increased counselling, wellbeing and mental health support post-pandemic have a positive impact on students. They noted that wider university activities that focus on building and making friendships are increasingly popular and well-attended, which suggests that students are prepared to engage with precisely those services which support engagement, that they may help students with feelings of isolation or loneliness and thus increase engagement.

Academic staff talked about students' feelings of sense of belonging as a barrier in the classroom for some students in relation to inclusive practice. A participant noted that:

> [T]eachers are really important to make the students feel welcomed, encouraging the students to learn and to encourage [use of] digital student networks, e.g. WhatsApp, so they can stay connected. I want them to feel, not judged [but] welcome to come in late whether it's because they could only afford the later train or they had a hospital appointment or maybe they were having to do the nursery drop off. Just try to make a nice welcoming atmosphere for them to learn in (AS).

It is without question that the cost -of-living crisis post pandemic is a significant barrier for SE as this creates interruptions to students being able to attend, even if they want to. In addition, mental health post pandemic is also a significant barrier for SE with increased student support needed especially with social anxiety and relationship building. It was identified that sense of belonging is important for SE and inclusive practice driven by a welcoming and caring teaching, social and relational pedagogy.

STRATEGIES TO INCREASE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Academic and central services staff were asked questions such as:

- *What will your team/colleagues/managers need to do in the longer term to minimise barriers to student engagement and impact on student outcomes/progression/success?*
- *What student engagement activities do you adopt in practice to support students? Which ones do you find most successful?*

Academic staff reported approaches that resemble pedagogy of care (Motta and Bennett, 2018) as helping to reduce barriers to SE. However, this is labour intensive for staff and can become unmanageable when having responsibility for large student groups, which makes it difficult to say 'no' to some students once you have said 'yes' to others. Building confidence and trust also aids engagement but additionally there is an emotional labour cost for staff (Nyanjom and Naylor, 2021; Rickett and Morris, 2021; Sutton, 2017; Jones and Nangah, 2020; Jones 2021). Some academic staff feel pressure to respond to students or to take actions immediately. Whilst they recognise that this is not strictly a formal university policy, in the post-pandemic era it is an unofficial increased pressure to increase engagement. This further adds to the intricacies of the notion of SE for example, the institution views SE as students turning up and logging on, however, staff recognise SE as being more rooted in social and relational aspects of human interactions and confirm that there is lack of workload time to support these practices.

Furthermore, academic staff talked about the need for smaller tutorial group sizes of maximum 15 students to enable relationship building. They also recognised the need to stay with student groups throughout their academic journey. Some staff explained that these methods have resulted in 100% attendance. This allows staff to really get to know the students leading to increased openness and honesty in terms of feedback and relationship building. Staff are better able to recognise and read the student's limits, and frailties leading to encouraging support and critical feedback. An academic participant made clear that class size was critical in maintaining engagement:

> I've never had 100% attendance for anything, but I had 100% attendance for that [course] and you could really build up that relationship because there weren't that many. [You] know when to take a harsher or softer approach with [them] to encourage development and improvement but you have got to know them really well (AS).

Academic staff highlighted that staff turnover and staff sickness has increased the class sizes as many staff have not been replaced, meaning that teaching across small groups has reduced opportunities to implement relational pedagogy (Dismore, Turner and Huang, 2019). They recommend that staff replacement is something that needs addressing to improve engagement and sense of belonging (Robertson, Cleaver and Smart, 2019). Staff cannot easily do extra engagement-focused activities with large teaching groups. Some academic staff felt that having spaces around the building for *ad hoc* support meetings with students when needed would benefit effective contact (Dismore, Turner and Huang, 2019).

A variety of assessment types which appeal to different learning styles and skill sets would aid SE by opening up opportunities for students to succeed and gain additional skills from different assessment methods. An academic participant provided four key suggestions:

> One, variety of assessments. Two, group work. Three, [improving] the timetable. Four, online resources so they don't have to buy books. I would probably have a mixture of online and face to face as well. I would probably bring back some online teaching because actually, if you think about it, that's

quite important, but there's loads of training, webinars and that sort of thing. So being able to keep people's attention online [is] actually quite important (AS).

Furthermore, academic staff highlighted that there are issues with academic timetables, which often feel disorganised.

It is better when you also get to teach your personal tutees together in smaller groups. Currently I'm not timetabled to see personal tutees which has a dire consequence for engagement. This makes me feel completely powerless and disconnected and if they don't know who you are, they will go to other staff members as we haven't built a relationship, it feels like they don't trust me (AS).

Central services staff talked about 'trapped time' in student timetables as a particular concern:

So don't put something [a class] at 9:00 o'clock and 5:00 o'clock and nothing in between because the likelihood of them turning up for the 9:00 o'clock or the 5:00 o'clock you know, they potentially go to the 5:00 o'clock after a day's work, or they go to a 9:00 o'clock and miss the 5:00 o'clock because they'll work. So trapped time, planning of timetables, [is] really important for them as well (CS).

Several academic staff referred to the importance of relational teaching, getting to know students, using digital platforms and post-it note activities to gain anonymous feedback from students; they find activities like these effective in maintaining engagement. They also stressed the importance of recognising that students can be using their phones for work purposes. It was also felt that the type of 'fun' activities typical of induction week can help personalise relationships and enable students to talk about their background. This is important so students can see what they themselves can bring to the degree programme (Kahu, 2013). Although some staff are not in favour of attendance monitoring, there was a general acknowledgement that it at least demonstrates to students that they were missed and provides an opportunity to check that absentees are ok (Dismore, Turner and Huang, 2019). There was a widespread acceptance that it is important to make students feel it is worth their time to attend, and to show that staff enjoy their work with students (Whitsed et al, 2024).

The dilemma being if a student is one of those who does not have much agency over what they can attend or not, or if what they are missing is really worth their while.

Academic staff talked about using a conversational, discussion-based approach to classroom activities, to encourage students to speak. However, this is challenging in classes with large numbers. Some staff try to make sure that they go round all the tables and speak to the students individually at their tables, as this creates less pressure for the students when in larger group sizes, for example by reducing the need to answer whole class questions.

Pedagogy of care, building trusting relationships based on social and relational pedagogy aid SE (Motta and Bennett, 2018), although challenges to this are large unmanageable cohort sizes particularly for academic staff. Consistent smaller personal tutor groups across the degree programmes may enable trust building based on social and relational pedagogy. High turnover of staff and staff sickness interrupts relationship building, consistency and trust building.

These results have also revealed further research is needed into student classroom behaviours post-pandemic and the implications on SE, the marketisation of HE. Further studies into student attitudes to their learning may also needs closer inspection.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

In light of our findings, in the following sections we make recommendations which seem at least potentially to be capable of improving SE. We acknowledge that some of these may be obvious, and that some may be considered wishful thinking in the current difficult economic climate (Griffiths and Wheeler, 2024); we also understand that if students' commitments outside university are serious enough, they can effectively *force* students to tactically (dis)engage, and there is very little HEIs can do to change these structural factors. However, given that SE is central to how a HEI is evaluated by students, its staff and monitoring regimes outside the institution, it seems essential to not lose hope. The recommendations below are therefore presented in a hopeful, forward-facing spirit.

- Plan and workload for consistent smaller personal tutor and teaching groups across degree programmes to enable trust building based on social and relational pedagogy to increase SE.

- Reduce turnover of staff and staff sickness which interrupts relationship building and thus affects SE.

- Provide students and staff with meeting spaces and time to allow them to hold ad hoc, impromptu meetings and to support the development and maintenance of the types of relations and dialogues that underpin understanding, belonging and engagement. Academic and personal tutorial staff need appropriate time built into workloads and timetables.

- Revise timetables for students to consider their needs, particularly those from vulnerable or non-traditional backgrounds. Having well-balanced, well-considered and inclusive timetabling, with adjustments to understandings of 'attendance', for example. Enable students to attend in multiple self-selected modes (in person, online synchronous and asynchronous). Although this would entail increased costs; if properly framed and managed, they need not and would impact 'engagement' KPIs, and they may, under the same conditions, improve other indices of success such as student feedback, completion rates, progression rates.

- Offer a variety of assessment types and styles for students to gain skills in a range of different areas, to aid confidence building and employability, alongside group work activities and online learning. A mixed delivery mode maybe particularly relevant for those students from non-traditional demographics and in response to post-Covid challenges such as the cost of living and increased mental health issues.

- It is key to understand that SE can be and is conceptualised in different ways by students and staff in different roles inside a university. These interpretations

should feed into a wider, holistic understanding of what student engagement actually is; an understanding which informs every aspect of university thinking from the highest levels of strategic planning to quotidian activities such as preparing activities to prepare for a class.

CONCLUSIONS

This small scale phenomenological qualitative empirical study has brought insights into the complexities of the challenges of SE in HE (Robertson, Cleaver and Smart, 2019), in the post-pandemic context. Whilst the sample was small, it was not insignificant and has brought the voices of academic staff and central service staff to the forefront, leading to key recommendations for practice. Following the data analysis the links between consumerism, supplyism and collegial values (Dunne and Owen, 2013) have now been exacerbated by time and place, and specifically the impact of the political and economic status post pandemic, further demonstrating the importance of bringing new insights to the field of HE.

In addition, this research recognises that social and relational teaching practices rooted at the heart of HE delivery, can have a profound impact on SE, particularly for non-traditional student populations. It might be that both staff and students would prefer these teaching practices. That said, with more than a third of UK universities currently facing financial difficulties, and many universities looking at cutting jobs and courses (Griffiths and Wheeler, 2024), embedding social and relational teaching practices and reducing class sizes will be challenging.

Our research adds to the body of understandings into the tangible and intangible aspects of SE. It suggests that, in the experiences of staff, students are increasingly engaged in 'tactical engagement' as they cope with economic, political, and social challenges post pandemic. Student behaviours demonstrating disengagement have exacerbated post pandemic, recognising that students can be in attendance but disengaged, or not in attendance but engaging online, directly challenging common methods of engagement monitoring. This research contributes to the complex discussions about the intricacies of SE and its multiple meanings. However, further

research is needed to capture the voice of students themselves, to gain additional comprehension into the notion of SE post-pandemic.

Finally, the results, discussions and recommendations from the empirical study presented in this article would be of interest to the HE and HEI community and those, particularly who have a keen interest in developing their knowledge and understanding of the complexity of SE in HE in the post pandemic context.

Data Availability Statement

All literature used to support the data collection for this empirical journal article has been appropriately cited in the reference list and clearly marked. All the literature is accessible via academic databases or through open access databases as stated.

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