“There are limits to being helpful”: student engagement from the perspectives of Social Scientists at a post-92 university in the UK

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Abstract

This primary research paper synthesises responses from lecturers at a post-92 university in the Midlands, UK, with existing literature on the contested concept of ‘student engagement’. Through thematic analysis, key themes include conceptualising student engagement, perceived barriers to such readings of student engagement, and potential strategies to improve it. Key findings are that the dialectical relationship between academics (providers) and students (receivers) under neoliberal conditions of Higher Education provision in the United Kingdom highly compromises enacting progressive readings of student engagement. Strategies to address this range from pedagogies of care to punitive measures, with the impact of dwindling student participation upon academics’ self-concept made apparent. This paper will be of interest to academic staff working within the Social Sciences (and wider disciplines) in the marketised context of UK HE. The paper concludes by calling for further research into academics’ self-concept and self-efficacy.

Introduction

Context and problem

In May 2024, at the end of a first-year Education Studies module that had seen very poor attendance and participation from the 40 students in the cohort, a usually equanimous colleague exclaimed in response to our attempts to foster engagement: “There are limits to being helpful!” Later that month, we recognised that our frustration was not isolated. Otte’s (2024) highly shared article in *The Guardian* presented student perspectives on plummeting rates of in-person attendance across the UK, across a variety of levels, disciplines and institutions.

A combination of decreasing attendance and participation, along with an increase in legislation (Dickinson, 2024), litigation (Morris, 2024), and student recourse to ‘reasonable adjustments’ has led to a climate of increased accountability and concern for academics, leading to a rise in burnout (Maslach, 1981; Oldenburg, 1998) and a decrease in wellbeing. Picking up from Otte (2024), this research was concerned with exploring the voices of academic staff within our disciplines, the Social Sciences, and exploring what effects these patterns of dwindling student attendance and participation were having upon them (if any). We considered academics within these disciplines to be an appropriate sample group owing to their grounding in humanistic pedagogies that satisfy the criteria outlined by Bryson (2014) and Zepke, Leach and Butler (2013) below.

In the contemporary climate, academic staff are understandably likely to become as instrumental with summative assessment points as students. As a highly experienced senior HE educational manager and consultant under the pseudonym Rondeau (2024) muses: "how can you expect engagement when crude instrumentalism abounds?" (p.187). Efficiency becomes a key aspiration over intended learning outcomes and engagement with module content. As highlighted in the original findings below, academics find it a challenge to their professional identity when students do not attempt to engage with module content that has, in some cases, been the focus of their entire careers. Enacting Chatham House rules in sessions, and attempting to cultivate an ethos of curious and engaged enquiry is laudable, but takes place amidst a pattern of "affective strategizing" (Bartram, 2014), in which students (as consumers), often expect to enjoy themselves, and at their desired level of participation, whereby 75% mandatory attendance is deemed by some to be excessive and negatively impacting their mental health (Otte, 2024).

Aims

Following from our previous research on the therapeutic turn in Higher Education [HE] (Rawdin & Dhillon, 2024) – where pastoral care and student wellbeing are at times prioritised in a manner that affects academic integrity and rigour – this paper aims to synthesise the perspectives of academics on the contested topic of 'student engagement'. The perspectives of these participants offer views of academics working with students that often satisfy widening participation criteria, and with a larger percentage of access needs (over 30%) than the average HE student population. Owing to the access needs of the student population at this HEI, there is a large emphasis placed upon academic literacies and pastoral support. In our previous research, we highlighted how, in a climate of concern over the mental health of students, many academic staff accord with a "preferred professional identity" imbued with maternalism to support students (Avis & Bathmaker, 2004). Considering the implications of the therapeutic turn, with Otte's articulation of student perspectives concerning engagement, this contribution extends the discussion by drawing upon voices of academics who may also struggle to negotiate their professional identities and mental health in a climate of dwindling student participation.

Direction of study

Engagement remains a contested concept. The literature review will explore debates surrounding it and settle upon a workable reading to structure the rest of the review and synthesis of the findings. Prominent theorists of student engagement, Trowler (2010) and Zepke (2017), whilst departing in terms of proposed strategies, agree that the literature that critiques the concept within the context of neoliberal HE is in the minority. This is where our contribution may offer insight; amidst the contemporary marketised context of HE in the UK, it is through exploring academic staffs' perspectives on what the contested concept of engagement means to them, and how it is manifest, or not, within their professional experience, and the possible strategies they employ to address potential barriers to engagement as they conceptualise it. Following the literature review to further clarify the content of the study, a methodology and methods section will

describe and justify the chosen approach of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This is followed by a combined findings and discussion section that synthesises primary data with items from the literature review. The conclusion summarises the key findings from the research:

1. Academics who participated in the study conceptualised student engagement differently, but agreed upon some features, including student attendance, communication and participation;
2. Neoliberal conditions render the student-academic partnership highly compromised;
3. An emerging negotiation of self-concept.

Literature Review

Conceptualising student engagement

Student engagement is an amorphous concept, deployed in different manners depending on the agenda (Mendes & Hammett, 2023, p.164; Trowler, 2015, p.719; McKay & Dunn, 2018; Kahu, 2013). Whilst in some instances reduced to a cognitive ability, student engagement is multifaceted and involves complex micro-practices a student undertakes in and out of formal learning environments, within a wider, neoliberal, socio-political context (Gourlay, 2015; Young, Rawlings, Smith & Hodgkin, 2024). These micro-practices may involve attendance, active participation in-person or online, responding to emails, submitting assignments and so on. Engagement is often seen as a proxy for quality teaching, and features in metrics for the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and National Student Survey (NSS) (Bokhove & Muijs, 2019). Students are largely seen as "objects of consultation" (Mendes & Hammett, 2023, p.166). Indeed, Mendes & Hammett (2023) estimate that there are 64 points over a 3-year degree course where students are asked to share their 'voice'. Such an approach is indicative of a growing trend of "learnerfication" (Biesta, 2010), which positions academics' (providers) performance subject to the judgment of their students (consumers) (Gourlay, 2017).

The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) guidance (Chapter B5) outlines seven explicit indicators of what they deem to be 'sound' practice related to student engagement (QAA, 2024). This regulatory framework, in which student engagement is defined and monitored, leads to a potentially self-regulating subjectivity whereby student engagement is gamified (concomitant with learnerfication) and measurable, promotable outcomes become more important than fidelity to pedagogically sound practices; the latter become a means to an end (Wintrup, 2017).

In grappling with the shadow of the concept of student engagement, some academics have distinguished between emotional engagement (need to 'like' learning) as well as cognitive engagement (what is learned) (Dismore, Turner & Huang, 2019, p. 235). There is a recognition of the dialectic entanglement between academic and student, and the responsibility of both parties in potential processes of learning. That notwithstanding, an uncritical uptake of student engagement – or, indeed, a critical but still uptake of student engagement as presented by the QAA – cannot help but legitimise a customer-oriented

approach to HE, solidifying the logic of a service-dominant culture (Cassidy, Sullivan & Radnor, 2021). This is the context that Zepke (2017) rails against: student engagement as all too concomitant with the tenets of neoliberalism. As the key 'stakeholder' in the HE edifice, students and their level of engagement is a measurable totem that can be leveraged.

In this manner, Trowler (2010) puts forth seven reasons why HEIs should fastidiously monitor student engagement (read as a proxy for attendance): improve achievement, improve retention rates, protect the interests of minoritised students, enhance curricula, general reputational and financial gain, promote services, and economic payback. Whilst some reasons are more laudable than others in terms of civic contribution, Zepke's (2017) concern that student engagement is a key pawn in the neoliberalisation of HE withstands scrutiny. This critique is supported by a preeminent voice in the field of student engagement in the UK, Bryson (2014), who argues against Trowler (2010) and similar, instrumental readings of the concept. Rather, Bryson (2014) focusses upon what students do, and argues that their engagement is socially (re)constructed on an ongoing basis, broader than the academic and HE context, individual, multi-dimensional, dynamic, fluid, and not possible to meaningfully, quantifiably measure (pp.16-17). Such an open-ended, qualitative reading of the concept is anathema to the neoliberal context that prefers HE providers to be able to gamify results for desired ends.

Bryson (2014) does not, however, shy from proposing a workable definition of the concept, one which helps structure the narrative of our research:

> *Student engagement (SE) is about what a student brings to Higher Education in terms of goals, aspirations, values and beliefs and how these are shaped and mediated by their experience whilst a student. SE is constructed and reconstructed through the lenses of the perceptions and identities held by students and the meaning and sense a student makes of their experiences and interactions* (p.17).

Bryon's (2014) working definition chimes with the tenets of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), in that key components of a student's engagement are their shifting attitudes towards themselves, the educator, the learning content, the learning environment and their wider socio-political context. This is helpful, especially to frame our findings below. What the literature conveyed was how students seem all too often to be pawns in a wider game of power and the economic bottom line. Within this discourse of this 'play', it was found that there was insufficient expression of the staff voice in relation to student engagement; it is vital to emphasise that student engagement is dialectically linked to *staff* engagement (Pokorny & Warren, 2016). This is the gap in the literature this research aims to fill, considering existing partnership models such as Student as Producer (Neary, 2020).

Barriers to student engagement

Combining the trends of learnerfication, gamification and instrumental participation in HE practices, students are increasingly likely to only "show up for submissions or presentations" (Otte, 2024), thereby reducing their hours down to "part-time" (Hubble &

Bolton, 2021; 2022). The contemporary highly regulated context where student satisfaction and optimising the student 'experience' is paramount results in a strategic student-citizen (Bartram, 2014), who, as noted by the 64 points of survey above, is "beset by routinised demands for engagement and participation" (Mendes & Hammett, 2023, p.175-6). Such performative, game-playing, engagement is anathema to Bryson's (2014) conceptualisation.

The Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) Student Experience Survey (2024) documented that there are more HE students than ever before in paid employment, working more hours than any previous generation. The difference in the last decade alone is stark: 56% employed compared with 36% in 2016, with those in employment working an average of 14.5 hours per week. Those in paid employment working these hours are also likely to meet a number of the following criteria: fulfilling the role of a carer, aged 26+, with 10+ mile commutes to university. Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, 2025) suggests that the percentage of students living in provider-maintained property (university halls or similar) has fallen since 2014-15, while those in parental/guardian homes have risen.

Provision strategies

Serrano et al. (2019) and Pokorny and Warren (2016) recommend consultation between academic and professional development staff and students to facilitate blended approaches which create a 'harmonious balance' between in-person and online engagement. Crabtree, Briggs and Woratschek (2021) support this notion of consultation and partnership working as key, arguing that students deem many institutionally organised student engagement activities as bland. Instead, they argue for the importance of mapping the student lifecycle, highlighting key points of transition and/or possible challenges and proactively addressing these through partnership working. Gourlay et al. (2021) also emphasise the importance of relationality. In terms of instruction, McKay and Dunn (2018) observe that student engagement appears to increase when educators employ a questioning approach (Socratic method), whilst delivering sessions in scheduled in 'blocks' of teaching (Dickinson, 2022), thereby reducing commutes.

Pedagogical strategies

In terms of a humanistic, individualised approach to student engagement, Zepke, Leach and Butler (2013) identify nine key actions academics can take to improve potential student engagement:

> *feedback to improve learning, challenging students to think, availability for discussion, teaching to enable learning, providing opportunities to promote application of learning, caring about learning, making the subject interesting and encouraging students to question and challenge lecturers* (p.237).

Similar in ethos to Zepke, Leach and Butler (2013), Bryson (2014) builds upon much earlier research by Chickering and Gamson (1987), distilling what academic staff can do

to best foster the possibility of meaningful individual student engagement as the following: ensure student-staff contact, promote active learning, develop cooperation and mutuality between students, emphasise time on task, give prompt feedback, communicate high expectations and respect diversity in talent and ways of learning (p. 3). Reflecting the dialectic relationship between academic staff and students, Bryson (2014) once again echoes the tenets of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) in posing that for students, the following factors have a key impact upon their possible engagement: aspirations, expectations and perceptions, the choice of subject and degree when they arrive and throughout their course, the balance between challenging and appropriate workloads, choice, autonomy, risk and opportunities for growth and enjoyment, trusting relationships with peers and staff, open communication, a sense of belonging and community, support networks, and opportunities for empowering activities and roles that promote ownership, self-assurance and self-efficacy (pp.8, 18 – 19).

The student-academic relationship

The suggestions above by Bryson (2014) and Zepke, Leach and Butler (2013) are grounded in progressive, humanistic pedagogies that see student collaboration as key to engagement. They would like to replace the notion of student as 'consumer' with that of student as 'producer' (Neary, 2020). A key problem observed by the researchers, and that is borne out in the findings articulated below, is that the onus and accountability lies predominantly with the academic than the student – hence the contribution of this research; as long as there is the notion of provider and recipient this power dynamic is unlikely to shift in a manner befitting the kind of partnership working advocated for by a number of proponents above. Indeed, some students have reported that non-stringent monitoring of attendance results in them lessening the importance of doing so, and that they would actually welcome punitive measures as a form of extrinsic motivation (Otte, 2024). Such behavioural strategies run counter to the humanist ethos articulated in many of the strategies noted above. We contend (in banal fashion) that the most progressive pedagogy/andragogy/heutagogy will not result in any measure of meaningful, individualised engagement if there is no actual attendance or communication from a student.

In this vein, Grove (2024) focusses upon the effects non-attendance in lecture halls across the country has had upon academics, citing organisational psychologist, Professor Briner, who shared that the phenomenon left him with feelings of "rejection, bewilderment and even professional incompetence". Briner asked that whilst academics are constantly told to consider student well-being, the effects of student non-attendance, participation, or engagement in a visible manner upon staff were not adequately considered.

The literature review found that prior research in this topic focussed on strategies that academics, professional support staff and leadership teams ought to employ to improve student engagement. Whilst looking at institutional approaches to student engagement, prior research did not sufficiently look at the perspectives of individual academics. This is the gap in the literature that "There are limits to being helpful" aims to address: what

are the perspectives of six academics in the Social Sciences at a post-92 HEI on the concept of student engagement, potential barriers to it, the effects of what they perceive to be poor student engagement upon them, and suggestions to improve it.

Methodology and methods

Context of the study

Research was conducted at a post-92 HEI in the Midlands, where the authors have worked as a senior lecturer (Author 1) and an associate lecturer (Author 2). The HEI is small (approximately 2,500 students), teaching-focused and located on a single-site campus. The university's mission statement emphasises 'positive change' and 'transformative education', reflecting an inclusive ethos. At the research setting, lectures remain central to teaching and learning, with participants all delivering modules that require in-person attendance. Reflecting a commitment to the student experience and inclusive education, the HEI was recently voted first in three categories in the annual National Student Survey awards (2025).

Sampling and participants

The six participants were selected through purposive sampling, with a focus on selecting academics who taught modules across the Social Sciences (Fugard & Potts, 2014). The sample reflects some diversity in relation to discipline, experience, age and gender (see Table 1 in the Findings and discussion section).

Data collection

Online semi-structured interviews were used to explore participants' perceptions and experiences of student engagement. This type of interview afforded some flexibility while ensuring that key topics were addressed (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). The interview guide was developed by the researchers and consisted of nine open-ended questions (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018) that were flexibly employed in a semi-structured manner:

1. What do you think effective student engagement (SE) involves?
2. Is SE a growing challenge for you and/or at your university? If so, why?
3. Are there any institutional expectations around the level of SE?
4. To what extent is SE a challenge for you in your day-to-day teaching?
5. What kinds of strategies/techniques etc., have you used as a lecturer to encourage SE?
6. Which of these have worked (if at all) and why?
7. Why do you think some learners may find engaging a challenge?
8. How do you think the challenge of SE should be addressed?
9. Is there anything else you would like to share?

These questions thus focussed upon the respondents' conceptualisation of appropriate student engagement, challenges to realising it, and strategies to encourage it.

All interviews were completed during the first semester of the 2024/25 academic year. Microsoft Teams was used to host, record and transcribe all interviews (Frey & Bloch, 2023). Transcription was quality-checked against the recording. Interviews typically lasted between 30 and 60 minutes.

Data analysis

The qualitative data gathered were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), and were largely inductive in nature. Both authors separately coded the first conducted interview and then met to discuss their initial interpretations. At this point, several overarching/substantive codes were identified, such as 'conceptualising student engagement (SE)', 'barriers to SE', and 'strategies to promote SE', which signalled a shift to a more 'open coding' approach (Byrne, 2022). Subsequent analysis utilised these broader codes. Analysis was assisted by Quirkos, in recognition of the benefits of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) (Vignato, Inman, Patsais & Conley, 2022). The researchers engaged in a reflexive discussion once all data had been coded.

Ethics

Ethical approval was granted by the ethics panel at the HEI (REC 28-24). Academics who confirmed an interest in participating were emailed a 'Participant Information Sheet' which outlined the research. Eligible participants were asked to sign and return a consent form. Transcribed interviews were anonymised by removing participant names, those of colleagues, and any other information that might identify the research setting. Each participant is referred to by a pseudonym in the findings and discussion below (Table 1). Risks of psychological and/or emotional harm were considered to be minimal, but participants were signposted toward relevant cost-free internal and external support services (Oliver, 2003).

Findings and discussion

Through an iterative approach, in which codes were deleted, merged and/or refined, three overarching themes were identified that formed the structure of the findings and discussion section below:

1. Conceptualising student engagement;
2. Explaining student engagement patterns and potential barriers;
3. Strategies employed by academic staff to encourage engagement (as they conceptualised it).

Pseudonym	Discipline	Experience	Approx. age	Gender
Alex	Sociology	2 years	20s	W
Beth	Early Childhood Studies	20+ years	60s	W
David	Education Studies	15+ years	Late 50s	M
Leah	Psychology	3 years	20s	W
Robert	Counselling	3 years	Late 40s	M
Patrick	Education Studies	15+ years	40s	M

Table 1: Participant demography

Four of the participants focussed predominantly on self-reflective strategies that they already, or may, employ in future in an attempt to better engage students. The two other participants also focussed on self-reflective strategies, but spent considerably more time and thought on the learner motivations and profiles. The findings below will be organised in a manner that follows the structure of the literature review; namely, conceptualising student engagement, explaining student engagement patterns and potential barriers, and strategies employed by academic staff to encourage engagement (as they conceptualise it).

Conceptualising student engagement

For David and Leah, student engagement is about learners working with materials that have been provided, actively listening, making notes or organising content in a manner that helps them to later return, reflect and rethink key notions. It also involves students participating at a level that they feel comfortable, with David emphasising that each learner is unique (Bokhove & Muijs, 2021; Bryson, 2014; Zepke, Leach and Butler, 2013). He also deemed student engagement to be about a learner wanting to contribute, develop skills and abilities to succeed in their course and to "get something out" of activities that have a "clear purpose or rationale".

Whilst David focused on the andragogical (Knowles, 1970) and heutagogical (Hase & Kenyon, 2013) principles of how students best learn and develop in HE, Programme Leader Robert and PhD candidate Alex focused more on the importance of attendance and participation.

Robert emphasises the notion of the HEI being a provider, and the student a fee-paying participant/consumer (Cassidy, Sullivan & Radnor, 2021; Trowler, 2010): "considering the fees of nearly £10,000, you'd think there'd be more activity in terms of attendance". An experienced Programme Leader, Patrick argues that whilst student engagement is monitored by tracking attendance and submissions (Cassidy, Sullivan & Radnor, 2021), "really *good* engagement is actually enjoying the teaching content". Patrick reflects that during his time at university in the UK in the 1980s and 1990s

> *Seminars were quite like sparring matches! You don't get so much of that now. It's not a deficit model of the learners, but I think there's a slight unwillingness to engage*

[in such debates]. But there are exceptions. Some are very willing to engage, and you get quite a good conversation going.

Demonstrating acute self-reflection throughout the interview, Patrick observed, in a social constructivist vein (Vygotsky, 1978), that he was trained to

throw learners into the pit of learning and let them climb out, and the way they climb out is a mix of the scaffolding you're giving them and dealing with concepts'. At undergraduate level you open up a sort of strange vista of a pit, and they've got to climb out using research theory, different lenses, and think of ways that they can escape from it if they want. Over the degree you should be exposing them to enough different theoretical lenses and models to enable them to 'get' it.

He argues that whilst academics would like students to be deeply engaged in thinking and reflection, the onus is on the lecturer to make content interesting:

I don't think you can just stand there and demand students be engaged because that's getting a bit SLANT [Sit Up, Listen, Ask Questions, Nod, and Track the Speaker]. If you use a dialogic approach, following Alexander (2004), the content's got to drive conversation. So engagement is very bidirectional. If you constantly see students disengaged it's probably a note to self!

An Early Career Researcher, Leah, emphasises that non-visible and difficult to track engagement is

actually probably the most important … being able to come to sessions prepared, having built on what was covered in the previous session, ensuring gaps in understanding have been addressed.

With a focus on learner agency and self-motivation, she emphasises the tenets of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) in that for her, student engagement is about "proactively participating in the degree, rather than it being something that just happens to you". Leah stresses that she is very "passionate about the student experience", and, reflecting on her own experiences as a student, hopes that university is a positive place that students should enjoy the experience of, with all the possible transformation and opportunities for growth that it potentially affords. Leah reflects that students could do "fantastically if they just engaged a bit more. Or maybe we've just not found the right way to engage them yet?"

Building upon David and Leah's responses in particular, Beth, a highly experienced Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood Studies, conceptualises student engagement as linked to lowering the affective filter (Krashen, 1982), and thus "probably making notes, considering and reacting to the comments of others, open body language, and possibly smiling when I make, or attempt to make, a humorous comment!" Similar to Patrick in terms of "visible learning" (Hattie, 2008), Beth is keen to stress that engagement is not simply performative; for example, that students be extroverted, talkative and active in the learning environment. Rather, she also considers online engagement a key measure,

through interactive discussion boards and emails (Gourlay et al., 2021). Similar to the other most experienced participant, Patrick, Beth argues that the teaching content excites her. She reflects on how the norms of engagement have shifted considerably from when she went to university four decades prior:

> *The lecturer would come into the theatre and stand at the front of a lectern with some notes and quite often just read their lecture. I'm not suggesting that we go back to that, of course I'm not, but the expectation was that the engagement would be in the students' hands; that you would want to know about the subject within the space of time that you had. So, it's very, very different now.*

Beth continues, reflecting upon a discernible pattern concomitant with the increased learnerfication (Biesta, 2010) of student participation in the neoliberal university:

> *I've seen that shift in terms of who's responsible for engagement as more towards staff: "are you engaging me?" … I think generally the concept of what being engaged is and what we see as engagement is changing.*

This shift in the power dynamic and notion of responsibility provides a segue to the second theme.

Explaining student engagement patterns and potential barriers

In an attempt to better understand what they perceive to be poor student engagement and potential barriers to it, the research participants' responses shared some common examples: access needs, outdated modes of instruction, and the wider sociopolitical context. David noted the much-researched challenge of transition (Morgan, 2012), where many students are "proto-adults", who have come from contexts where "expectations have been clearly spelled out for them for 14 or so years of their lives". The issue of expectations is exacerbated by an overproportion of students with access needs at the HEI. David observes that engaging in HE is, for some, "just a step too far at this particular moment in their learning journey". This is also borne out in issues concerning retention and progression (OfS, 2022). He speculates that there may be a "COVID-19 hangover" (Morgan, 2020), and also that the neuroscience of what smartphones and social media have done to change the brain chemistry of students is a live mass experiment. David is more confident when arguing that the "pedagogy of university education is outdated", citing a personal example:

> *The other month I had to change the switch for the window of my car, so I went on YouTube, and was able to watch as I repaired it. Instead, what we do is give students a snapshot, don't we? We say "listen to me talking at you while you're doing a task on a big bit of paper and writing stuff down". And then suddenly they're supposed to be able to memorise it and have that information forever?*

David understands the economic efficiency of existing, 'outdated' modes of instruction, but, similar to Bokhove and Muijs (2019), Bryson (2014), and Zepke, Leach and Butler (2013) argues for much more personalisation and creativity in terms of facilitation and

assessment: “The ideal way to assess a student, as Alexander would say (2004), is through dialogue”.

Robert agrees with David’s analysis in terms of having a high proportion of students with access needs, and also learner maturity and “readiness to study in HE”. He argues that much of what students do seems to be performative and strategic, and that they “boycott activities” that challenge their preferences. “There are different value systems to navigate”, Robert reflects, conscious of his role as a Programme Leader to “deliver worth” on each student’s £70,000 - £80,000 of debt (Cassidy, Sullivan & Radnor, 2021; Trowler, 2010). In line with research highlighted by Dickinson (2022), Patrick spoke mainly about domestic challenges, students’ caring responsibilities, and how, during COVID-19, “things got very messy”. Also a Programme Leader, he diverges somewhat from Robert’s perspective on having to deliver worth, arguing that

> *If going to university and getting qualifications is entirely economical, to get a competitive advantage, I think that can fall apart quite quickly if you’re finding the studies quite challenging. This goes back to when I was saying how engagement is about enjoyment.*

Linked to this notion of ‘enjoyment’, Alex found that the student lifecycle has a marked impact upon levels of student engagement, where certain assessment pressure points have a marked impact upon attendance (Crabtree, Briggs & Woratschek, 2021). Alex also recognises that whilst each individual will engage in a unique manner, there *are* patterns that emerge in terms of a lack of perceived engagement:

> *“Bad mental health”. It's difficult to unpack because obviously everyone experiences it very differently, but that is one of the biggest reasons I get via e-mail* (Otte, 2024).

Similar to findings in the literature, Alex also cites commutes being a barrier (Dickinson, 2022), but, different to Beth, laments that when the “introverts outnumber the extroverts … it’s really challenging”.

In terms of learning content tailored to the profile of learners at each stage of the student lifecycle (Crabtree, Briggs & Woratschek, 2021), Leah is careful not to “preach about what’s directly useful”. She shares that feedback from those who do attend first-year sessions, in particular, is very positive. Sympathetic to the myriad challenges students face, Leah states: “it is hard being a student, right?... There are complex needs or disabilities, caring responsibilities, childcare”. Deeming learnerfication an inevitability under the current construction, delivery and assessment modes of HE, Leah recognises that students are understandably instrumental in their engagement with learning content – “they’ve got limited time and a lot of students have other responsibilities” – but that “it is a shame” because “students struggle to see the value in content that's not summative” (Bartram, 2014). Differing from the other participants, through a previous administrative role at another HEI, Leah states that “unfortunately there are a lot of students that just go to university because their parents told them they had to”. This contributes to a “subset of students that don't and won't engage, no matter what we do”.

Contrary to Leah, Beth has received much unconstructive feedback, which chimes with David's and Robert's perspectives concerning the challenge of students becoming socialised in HE norms (Meyer & Land, 2003). For example, Beth shares that students have repeatedly reported that they find it "very unhelpful to have pre-session reading", to which she responds by stating: "Well, I'm sorry, but I'm going to carry on doing it because you have to read things!" Similar to the other participants, Beth sympathises with the myriad challenges students face, making clear

> *I really don't want to get into the rhetoric of blaming our students. I do think it's not just about them; it's the whole system that they've bought into. It's just a means to an end: "I'm doing this because I'm supposed to get a degree, but I don't really want to be here". There are some students who cite mental health needs as to why they can't come in. We've had some students who have said that they physically feel sick to come into the room.*

Empathetic to the introverts, Beth reflects that she remembers being

> *18 or 19, and absolutely terrified that I was going to get picked on by this one particular lecturer who was very demanding. I don't want students to feel that sense of discomfort. I think that reticence affects the way in which they engage.*

Similar to David, she considers the way that learning hours are scheduled and structured is a barrier to participation, with very long, "sometimes four hours" long sessions. This scheduling responds to the part-time (or sometimes full-time) work responsibilities for an increasing number of students who do not, and/or cannot, come onto campus more than one or two days per week (Dickinson, 2022; Hubble & Bolton, 2021; 2022).

The third and final section below explores some of the strategies staff employ to address the above challenges, to render potentially effective engagement between students and academics.

Strategies

Echoing literature concerning the effect of perceived poor student engagement upon one's professional identity and sense of competence (Grove, 2024), David shares that poor participation is a challenge because "you put a lot of your heart, soul and effort into trying to help people learn". For David, a perceived lack of student engagement feels "almost like a value judgement that's being placed on you as a teacher". He continues, admitting that he sometimes finds "the effect of some students' lack of engagement on other students frustrating". In terms of ways to mitigate this risk to a sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977), David reflects that cultivating a learning environment conducive to curious enquiry is key, sharing that he tries to

> *create a context for students to try to engage through the activities that we do, altering my behaviour through the kind of vocabulary that I use, the way that I interact with them, the way that I try to explain things in different ways, change tasks or reframe the learning in a slightly different way.*

He notes that “we all want to fit in; we’re social animals”, and that if there is “a critical mass of (disengaged) students in a group it changes the dynamics of the entire group”. Reading the learning environment as analogous to a chemical structure, David argues that “the atmosphere is better when certain individuals sometimes aren't around, and I know that's awful to say!” He recalls a previous colleague

> *who had a great term for this certain kind of student: “mood hoovers”. She used to say that certain students would suck all the life, energy and dynamism out of a session, and that they'd have an invisible mist that surrounded them that seemed to infect others*.

David states that he has learned to become more flexible and deviate from his teaching plans during his career. Chiming with key tenets from the literature on ‘effective’ student engagement above (Bryson, 2014; Zepke, Leach and Butler, 2013), David argues that increased personalisation of learning is often successful:

> *I have had some great conversations and tutorials that are probably far richer than the conversations I would have with a student when they're in a group setting. Sometimes I'm blown away by some of the work the students are able to produce*.

Acknowledging that greater personalisation and individualisation are, whilst desirable, economically rendered unviable in the contemporary HE context at his employer, David offers the following suggestions, which, like Patrick above, also broadly draw upon tenets of social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978):

> *Sometimes it's about proximity and just actually being with them... more often it's about restructuring a task for them; really breaking it down into steps and talking it through. I suppose one thing that we try to do is employ different types of activities. Often, it’s about providing a range of different tasks, adapting things and responding to past feedback*.

Robert agrees with David about personalised learning, but more explicitly recognises that the “university is a business; it has bills to pay as well as staff costs, so needs income from students”. As a Programme Leader for Counselling, he is cognisant of the numerous stakeholders he needs to satisfy, as well as deliver students ‘enjoyment’, whilst adhering to legislative and ethical obligations when working with vulnerable members of wider communities outside of the university. He is very accommodating to those with access needs, often organising alternative modes of assessment and signposting the various support mechanisms that the university offers in-house. However, following a more behaviourist method, he would like to see “stricter policies in place that are actionable and more easily utilised” when responding to non-attendance (Cassidy, Sullivan & Radnor, 2021; Otte, 2024). Robert has introduced greater vetting and interview procedures to filter acceptance onto the degree programmes he is responsible for, but, in line with the tenets of learnerfication and performativity, has found that someone who is able to successfully pass an interview has not necessarily resulted in a participative, engaged, and ethically professional student.

Highly experienced Programme Leader Patrick cites Moses and Knutson (2019) in terms of consistently reflecting upon his "underlying priors". Whilst keen to stress the importance of "uncomfortable knowledge" (Amsler, 2011), he muses upon how ethical it is to "pull the [ideological] rug away" from underneath students' feet. He shares that he is aware that he teaches how he would like to be taught, and cites Smith (1998) reflecting upon accelerated learning programmes: "I like chocolate, but when I go fishing, I take worms". As such, Patrick deems an effective strategy to engage students is to offer a spiral curriculum; introducing concepts in small steps. He remarks that Gattegno's (1963) "silent method of pedagogy" has inspired his own practice: "one of his big things is that you don't actually ever teach anybody anything; all you do is draw their attention to something".

Similar to David, Patrick emphasises the importance of a "welcoming, inclusive environment" in which "uncomfortable knowledge" can be drawn attention to in a considered, incremental fashion. He shares an example of how he adapted a schema from a previous role as Head Teacher of a Church of England village primary school:

> *There is an old square battery with two terminals, with a sigmoid curve between learning and creativity and going from a negative to positive climate in terms of emotion. In a negative emotional climate you're committing a lot of energy because you don't feel safe, so there's very little you can give to learning and creativity. Whereas in a positive learning environment you only need to commit a little bit to managing your emotions, with the majority of energy going into the learning event.*

Similar to Beth, Patrick is very keen to stress the importance of "lowering the affective filter" (Krashen, 1982) and creating a community of learning based upon kindness, encouragement and explicit, scaffolded instruction (Rosenshine, 2012). Cognisant of the marketisation of HE, and oft attempted reduction of complex, intermingling, sociological factors, Patrick argues that discourse concerning "'what works in education' is very toxic", and that nobody is able to find final answers; rather

> *we stand on milk crates, whereby our schemata is developed by all these little experiences we have; sometimes the crate is wobbly, sometimes someone says, "you've got to balance on one foot and pick the crate up and have a look!"*

Similar to David and Patrick, Alex is keen to stress the importance of community, inclusion and creative ways of encouraging participation and expression of thought (Crabtree, Briggs & Woratschek, 2021); for example, through quizzes and colouring tasks. A PhD candidate, having only graduated a few years prior, she considers that her age and understanding of youth culture vernacular perhaps helps her to better connect with students, or perhaps it is a non-factor. Alex consciously discloses much more about herself than the other participants, deeming it to be a potentially effective and disarming strategy to foster greater student engagement and retention; for example, about her dyslexia and personal interests outside of university. Alex also shares how she makes a point of asking students how they are when they first enter the learning environment, and

"to actually just care about them" (hooks, 1994). She factors in session time to explicitly cover students' expectations.

Continuing the theme of personalisation of learning content and modes of delivery, Alex deems that some strategies work for some, but not others, but that she feels across cohorts, "letting my guard down has only made engagement and rapport better" (Bryson, 2014). For those who do attend or communicate, Alex states that she and her team are in continuous dialogue about what they can do better. Similarly, in terms of letting one's "guard down", Leah shares that whilst she "can't speak for my teammates", she tries to employ a "mix of different activities" and modes of assessment. Like Alex, Leah works to make expectations explicit, especially concerning independent study and attendance. Similar to David and Patrick, Leah also provides scaffolding and breaks tasks down into small chunks, often attempting to personalise learning content from her discipline of Psychology: "Can you think of any examples where this might apply in your life?" (Ashton & Stone, 2018). Like many of the participants, Leah is keen to alleviate fear, increase comfort, and foster a welcoming learning environment. Unlike the other participants, Leah also makes explicit that she recognises the instrumental approach most students take to their learning, stating:

> *We've got a deal: "I'm not going to keep you here longer than necessary, I'm not going to give you some BS activity for the sake of filling time, I'm not going to ask you to do any reading outside of class if this isn't of benefit to you, I'm not going to set you homework every week if there's no point to it".*

Further recognising that summative assessment is invariably the prime concern of most of her students (Bartram, 2014), Leah shares how she has adjusted her teaching plan to consistently finish input earlier than scheduled, and offer a 20-30 minute one-to-one drop-in opportunity.

Converse to David's 'mood hoovers', Beth shares how having even "one or two who are just going for it tends to loosen up everybody else a bit more". She shares that she continually responds to ongoing student feedback – mid-module, end of module, meetings with student representatives – offering, as a result, "more interactive activities and tutorials" (Mendes & Hammett, 2023). Like Alex and Leah, Beth states that her department focusses on expectations with students and tries to make content enjoyable, breaking it down into manageable chunks. However, Beth warns that responding to feedback and spending a considerable amount of time to create interactive activities has not resulted in significantly better assessment results, "particularly around the perennial problem of academic writing, discourse and reading". As a result, Beth shares that she and her team are "constantly trying to think of ways" to assess students in less conventional academic ways (Ashton & Stone, 2018). She concluded the interview by reflecting: "I don't know what more we could do at the moment".

The concluding reflection from Beth neatly summarises a theme from across the six interviews: that of the participating academics feeling that they are continually critically reflecting in an attempt to better engage their students and that there do appear to be

“limits to being helpful”. In line with the therapeutic turn in HE, the onus on academics to perform pastoral duties alongside pedagogical innovation in a context of dwindling attendance and participation is leading to staff disillusionment.

Strengths and limitations

This small-scale research addressed a notable gap in the literature in terms of the perspectives of individual academics in the Social Sciences regarding student engagement within the marketised and increasingly regulated UK HE landscape (Dickinson, 2024; Morris, 2024). Through employing RTA, the research employed an inductive method of exploring the complex notion of ‘engagement’ beyond a checklist or ‘how to best’ approach. Instead, the research problematised any such toolkits through synthesising the voices of academics with such existing literature and guidelines. The study also benefitted from a thorough literature review for an article of this scope, factoring in socioeconomic trends as appropriate (HEPI, 2024; HESA, 2025). Limitations of the research include the small sample size of six participants, from a single, small, post-92 institution in the Midlands; the student and staff population are not typical, and thus the findings are not generalisable; for example, patterns that take place at a larger, more research-intensive setting with a much larger international student population. Lastly, the findings share perspectives of academics from different subjects within the umbrella discipline of the Social Sciences. Perspectives from academics in different disciplines are likely to differ. Future research could thus include larger, comparative samples of staff across institution types and disciplines.

Conclusion

Through the three main themes that emerged from the original findings, the research has evidenced that student engagement remains a highly contested concept; one not easily reduced to a neat ‘how-to’ approach in a manner often demanded to meet the norms of neoliberal, monitored, reporting. Challenges to possibly ‘effective’ student engagement were articulated to be student mental health crises, economic pressures and logistical factors, as well as an increased transactional approach to HE as a consumer good. The research found that the Social Science academic participants employed largely social constructivist (Vygotsky, 1978) and personalised learning strategies to confront what they deemed to be the challenges to ‘effective’ student engagement. The research highlighted a possible shift in responsibility, where the onus for engagement has tipped from student to academic, leading to an emerging crisis of self-concept and professional identity. In sum, the research argues that there are “limits to being helpful” and calls for further research into academics’ self-efficacy and self-concept to better understand the emotional labour they perhaps experience when attempting to engage their students (Grove; Otte, 2024).

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