

From disengaged to super engaged: my student journey

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I have always loved learning. As a child I thrived at Primary School; every Parent's Evening my mam and dad attended was filled with glowing remarks regarding my attitude in class and towards the other kids. I joined the school council in my junior years and grew more confident still when I continued my role at Secondary School. I was always involved in after school clubs and enjoyed talking to teachers as much as I did people my own age. I was young, loud and a bit of a show-off. It wasn't until I moved on to sixth-form, and to a new school without the company of my friends, that I realised how lucky I had been. I didn't feel as though I fitted in at the sixth-form centre. For the first time in my life I found it difficult to make friends and the work was exponentially harder. My confidence definitely took a knock. I thought that there must be something odd about me, something that I ought to change to fit in. I can see now that that's nonsense, that things which used to be easy become confusing or difficult at that age – for anyone, not just me. So, after a couple of questionable grades in my Psychology AS-level (which I then had to give up studying as a subject), I threw myself into my other subjects and developed a work ethic I had not realised I was capable of. And that's how I arrived at university: as a studious but reclusive home student studying across academic schools as part of my combined programme. After my experience at sixth-form I was determined to treat university as one big classroom, rather than a social event. And perhaps in other Higher Education institutions around the country my identity as a home student and as a Combined Honours (CH) student would have been a recipe for total detachment from the social side of university.

From day one, however, the CH community of staff and students managed to foil my plans somewhat. As part of the induction day I met my mentor group. My mentor was a kind second year student who laughed at my awkward jokes on the first day, which was nice. In just a couple of weeks we had developed a friendship and I went to her if I had any issues or questions about my course. The other freshers in our group were also fantastic people. We all had subjects in common and grew to be close. The pressures of being away from home weighed on them heavily, so I often brought my mam's homemade quiche to our Philosophy lectures so that they could at least taste something homely, and suggested nice places to visit and places to avoid. It was a total one-eighty from sixth-form. First year passed as a happy blur. The mentor scheme made me feel very welcome and comfortable... maybe a little too comfortable. I had settled in and was content with my handful of friends that I had met the first day. I didn't look to meet anyone else or join any societies. I spent my weekends working at my part-time job and evenings with my friends from home. I looked forward to lectures and seminars where I was guaranteed to meet at least one smiling face.

But then second year arrived. The girls in my mentor group started getting involved with the student-led schemes Combined had to offer. My mentor became a senior mentor and President of the Combined Honours Society; two of my fellow mentees became new mentors themselves, one of them went on to win Mentor of the Year in CH and join the Student-Staff Committee, the other signed up to a CH module, where she would get academic credit for her mentoring role and joined the university's dance and cheerleading teams; the last member of my mentor group worked for the students union, wrote articles for *The Courier*, Newcastle University's student newspaper, and even started her own Feminist Society (which won the Outstanding Societies Award). I couldn't help feeling that I was missing out, but I certainly did not have a lot of free time on my hands. As the year progressed I started to panic. I realised that these opportunities would soon pass me by. My time at university was already halfway up.

I decided to get involved. My motivation was in seeing how well my friends had done, how they still managed all of their assignments despite their extra commitments and hearing their stories about the new people they had met and helped. I was motivated by the fun they had and not with the goal of improving my CV, although that was the spin I put on it when I approached my parents about my decision to quit my part-time job. And it was necessary for me to leave my job behind when I realised just how involved I was going to be. I had decided to apply to become a PASS Advisor (Peer-Assisted Study Support) because I had always loved to read and write. The then-current PASS team was made up of final year students who were about to graduate and second year language students who were preparing to take their intercalating year abroad. So it was obvious that the new PASS team would be completely new, with no returning members. After my interview I was approached by the PASS Coordinator and asked if I would chair the scheme. I jumped at the chance: I had a whole year to make up for not being as involved as my friends.

Around the same time, CH advertised a summer internship for any student who had a project idea they wanted to implement that would either create a new student scheme in CH or improve an existing one. By that time, after hearing all of my friends' experiences about leading mentor groups, I knew that not all mentees jelled as well as we had. It is not realistic, when you think about it. I was lucky that all of my fellow mentees had the same sense of humour and values. Other people did not have the same experience. I wanted everyone to have the chance to meet like-minded people in the CH community outside of their mentor groups. Therefore, I designed a new layer to the mentoring scheme so that it would incorporate five larger groups. These groups would have 'Family' events, designed specifically so that first year students had the opportunity to mingle outside of their immediate mentor group. My idea was well received and I was offered the internship. I spent the summer working alongside CH's two staff Student Engagement Coordinators and other students. I learned so much, not just about PASS and the mentoring scheme, but also about how the university works and what is expected of the staff from their seniors and what the staff expect from their students, too. I got involved in way more things than I had expected. I represented the degree programme at open days, welcomed new students at their induction event and worked alongside the head of the university's Writing Development Centre to design new training workshops for the PASS team. In the space of ten weeks I had gone from being totally disengaged

to super engaged. I not only became a part of the CH community, I moulded it.

My final year was full of PASS sessions, meetings, conferences, open days, presentations and one of the final year CH modules, which allowed me to do further research on what students look to gain from HE. My experience reflected my project's findings: most students want more than their lectures and seminars. They look for social opportunities, such as societies and peer support networks. But more than that, they look to become a part of a community, which has to go beyond peer networking, it has to involve the staff as well. The concept of student-staff partnership is what has made my time at Newcastle so successful. It started the summer before my final year when I worked closely with the Student Engagement Coordinators to understand my role and theirs'. Their role was to support me, not to tell me what to do and what not to do. They gave me advice which I valued massively, as they were both recent graduates and had been peer advisors themselves. Their help was instrumental: not only did they assist with the running of the PASS scheme, but they also changed the way I viewed the other staff members around me. This shift of thinking improved the quality of my experience in my final year and it also boosted my grade average. I became confident in discussing ideas with staff from around the university. As soon as I started valuing myself and what I had to offer, the staff started to converse with me as an equal, too.

It has to be said, however, that not all staff in the different academic schools practised partnership. This seemed to be because they were either: uncomfortable with the concept and lacked confidence in their students' abilities, or simply because they were emulating their predecessors who had more conservative and frankly old-fashioned views of what student-staff relationships should look like. Then, there were some academics who completely misunderstood what it means from a student perspective to be engaged. I have taken modules which have assessed 'student engagement' out of ten! As a side-note I received 9/10 for 'student engagement' in the stage one and two modules which assessed it and I think it's pretty clear that in my first two years I couldn't have been further from engaged. In reality, being engaged is not about being outspoken in seminars or asking questions in front of a full lecture theatre, which a lot of people would find rude or intimidating. Student engagement is feeling a sense of belonging, of acceptance and of mutual respect. I realise as I write this that I may have made student engagement seem more complicated, more emotional, less easily measured and perhaps harder to achieve. However, CH at Newcastle manages to create and further develop a welcoming and dynamic student-staff community every year. It is successful because it is emotive and genuine. This can only be possible in an environment which practises student-staff partnership. And due to the nature of the already existing relationship between students and staff, staff must open the dialogue. Just as in my case, once students start to feel as though they are valued, not just as a student but as an equal, and that they are listened to, not passively but with their opinions and ideas acted upon, they will spread the community ethos themselves. The excitement and joy that comes along with being a part of such a community catches, swallowing up new starters, lost and disengaged individuals and homesick students, giving them a support network, life-long friendships and, most importantly, a home.