What helps students to engage with the academic environment?

Samantha Rhianne Linton, University of California, Davis, slinton@ucdavis.edu
Jessica Bailey, University of Sheffield, j.baily@sheffield.ac.uk
Emma Nagouse, University of Sheffield, e.nagouse@sheffield.ac.uk
Helen Williams, University of Sheffield, helen.williams@sheffield.ac.uk

Introduction

Participation rates in Higher Education in the UK have continued to rise in recent years, with government figures showing that almost half of all young people in England (aged 17 to 30) went on to Higher Education in 2015/16 (Department for Education, 2017). As a result, Universities are now supporting students from a diverse range of backgrounds, including mature, Black and Minority Ethnic (BME), and international students (McVitty & Morris, 2012). So far, the majority of research that has examined the success of these groups of students has been focused on student retention and attainment (e.g., Hewitt & Rose-Adams, 2013; Roberts, 2011; Stevenson & Whelan, 2013; Thomas, 2012; Yorke & Thomas, 2003). However, this provides only a partial insight into the student experience. Understanding the range of experiences of students from diverse backgrounds is important, as part of an approach to widening participation that focuses on supporting all students throughout their studies and not just at the point of access (Department for Education, 2016). Research shows that students' engagement and sense of belonging at University are significant in promoting student retention and success (Meeuwisse, Severiens, & Born, 2010; O'Keeffe, 2013; Thomas, 2012). Therefore, understanding what helps students to engage with the academic environment is a crucial aspect of widening participation research and practice. Recently research has begun to bring together concerns about student engagement and inclusivity (Bovill, Cook-Sather, Felten, Millard, & Moore-Cherry, 2016; Matthews, Groenendijk, & Chunduri, 2017). This study builds on previous research to identify factors that facilitate or present barriers to student engagement in academic life, for a diverse group of students at a traditional UK university.

Evidence suggests that students from under-represented groups may experience more difficulties in engaging with all aspects of academic life, may struggle to develop strong learner identities and may experience lower student satisfaction. For example, Crosling, Heagney, and Thomas (2009) argue that students from non-traditional groups experience the academic curriculum differently, with formal timetabled class sessions forming the majority of their university experience. The authors argued that this may be because non-traditional groups are more likely to live off-campus, work part-time, or have other responsibilities, which limits their ability to engage with other aspects of academic life that are key to student retention and success. This is supported by reports from on-campus working class students across two Higher Education institutions that suggested these students experienced unique challenges (Crozier & Reay, 2011; Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2010). Specifically, it was argued that working class students struggled to develop strong learner identities in universities where class attendance was not compulsory, and where contact hours with personal tutors could be requested but were not formally timetabled (Reay et al., 2010). As a result, working class students felt unclear about what was expected of them and reported experiencing significant challenges and

difficulties in their first year of university (Crozier & Reay, 2011). Additional work examining widening participation (WP) groups has shown lower satisfaction in students from ethnic minority groups compared to white students, as reported by the National Student Survey (HEFCE, 2011). In support of this evidence, the National Union of Students (2011) produced a report based on the information gained from surveys and focus groups of black students and were able to identify numerous barriers that affect student engagement in teaching and learning, including poor communication, social exclusion, institutional racism, financial pressure, and insufficient access to information, advice, and guidance. In line with work from Davies and Garrett (2013), the majority of respondents (87%) believed that their academic institution promoted a welcoming and diverse culture. However, a significant minority of respondents viewed their teaching and learning environment negatively, with 23% describing it as “cliquey” and 17% describing it as “isolating”. Despite such reports, past research examining the individual experiences of this diverse range of students’ engagement with academic life, including a discussion on specific barriers and facilitating factors as identified by the students themselves, is missing.

Student engagement is a broad and contested term. A review by Trowler (2010) illustrates the multidimensional nature of the concept, with engagement encompassing behavioural, emotional and cognitive dimensions. The focus of student engagement can also vary, from students’ engagement with their own learning, to ‘involvement in the design, delivery and assessment of their learning’, and involvement with structures and processes such as student feedback, student representation and participation in University governance (Trowler, 2010, p.10). Meanwhile, Thomas (2012) highlights the importance for students of engaging in the academic sphere, the social sphere and with University services. We have deliberately used a broad conception of engagement to allow students’ own definitions of engagement to emerge through the research. The purpose of this research was to better understand why students may or may not engage in academic life at their University. To that end, the current study aimed to conduct interviews with students from a diverse range of backgrounds, in order to identify a set of key barriers and facilitating factors that may impact student engagement in academic life.

Methods

Research design

In 2013/14, we conducted a mapping exercise (currently unpublished) to identify existing student engagement activities in a research-intensive Northern red brick, UK University, via a survey sent out to academic departments. This survey gave a picture of engagement activities across areas such as student involvement in learning & teaching development, quality assurance, representation, the intellectual community and independent learning. It also highlighted some of the challenges involved in this kind of work, which included non-engagement on the part of students, sometimes construed as apathy. However, what was missing from this survey was the student voice, so we decided to carry out a second phase of research to get a student perspective on student engagement activities. This developed into a joint research project between the University and Students’ Union

conducted in 2015. The research consisted of a small qualitative study which aimed to understand students' own perspectives of student engagement generally and of their own engagement with academic life.

Participants

Initially, we conducted a comprehensive review of the literature to identify any student groups who have been identified in previous studies as being less likely to engage in academic life (see Trowler, 2010, and Thomas 2012 for further discussions). Following this, we decided to focus our study on the following groups: part-time students, BME students, mature students, postgraduate students, and widening participation students (defined as those from low participation neighbourhoods identified by home postcode, using POLAR 3 classifications[1]).

In order to select potential participants to take part, we implemented a targeted sampling approach. Using the university's student records system, a member of the research team used a random number generator to select 12 of the university's registered UK/EU students from each of our five selected target groups (outlined above). An additional 20 university-registered UK/EU students were selected completely at random, giving us a total of 80 students. This recruitment process ensured that we included at least some students from each of our target groups (with some students falling into more than one group), and we also aimed to get a good mixture of students in terms of gender and subject area. The first 40 students were contacted by their university email address on the first day of recruitment, and the second 40 students were emailed on the second day of recruitment. The email specified that potential participants had five days to register their interest in the study, and a second follow-up email was sent out to students who had not yet responded. From this pool of potential participants, a total of 15 participants were recruited to participate in the interviews. Full demographic details of the sample are available in Appendix 1.

Students were initially recruited via email and were provided with an information sheet outlining the purpose and aims of the study, and were provided with an opportunity to ask the researcher any questions. Participants then gave their full informed consent using a signed consent form. Once the interview had ended, participants were given a £10 Amazon voucher as compensation for their time. The University's Student Services ethics review process approved this study.

Procedure

Following the email invitation, participants attended an individual interview, which ranged from 20-50 minutes. All interviews were carried out by members of the research team (authors of this paper: University and Students' Union staff and an

[1] The participation of local areas (POLAR) system was created to classify areas across the UK depending on how many young people (aged 18-19 years) from a specific area went on to higher education. The POLAR system consists of five key quintiles, where quintile one reflects the lowest rate of participation and quintile five reflects the highest rate of participation.

employed student researcher). Students were first asked to complete a questionnaire to provide us with demographic details such as class background, sexual orientation, and ethnic identity. Some participants may have felt uncomfortable providing their personal information in the demographic questionnaire. However, prior to obtaining consent participants were made aware of the discussion topics and content of the questionnaire in advance and were given an information sheet which outlined that they did not have to answer any questions if they did not want to. The interviews were guided by an interview schedule (Appendix 2), beginning with questions about the student's typical week during term time, and moving into their own perceptions about how engaged they are with academic life. These discussions were focused on students' life at University and their perception of their engagement with the academic environment, their interactions with other students and staff, their sense of community, and their interaction with the Students' Union and student representation structures. In between these topics, we would ask follow-up questions depending on the detail of the responses we received, in order to get a full understanding of each individual student's experiences and perceptions of their own engagement with academic life.

In our interviews, we refrained from supplying students with a definition of engagement but tried to find out how students themselves understood the term. We did, however, provide students with a definition of academic life:

> *Academic life refers to anything to do with learning and education at the University, e.g. your classes, interactions with course mates, lecturers, personal tutor, additional activities connected to your course or education e.g. student representation, educational projects, optional lectures, departmental societies. It doesn't include other activities not connected to education e.g. sports / voluntary activities / paid work / social activities that aren't connected to your course or your education.*

Data analysis

The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then analysed using an inductive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) in NVivo 10. Initially, two members of the research team (Linton & Williams) familiarised themselves with the data and developed some initial codes and overarching themes. The data analysis then followed an iterative process of theme identification and labelling the relevant text in NVivo as new themes began to emerge from the transcripts. Once the analysis had been completed, a consistency check was performed across both coders by running a coding comparison query in NVivo. This query examined the inter-rater reliability of both coders by calculating their percentage of agreement when highlighting and labelling the relevant text. The results of this query were reviewed by all authors and demonstrated a high level of consistency across a random sample of transcripts.

Results and Discussion

Overall, students discussed a wide range of themes in relation to their engagement in academic life (See Table 1 for overview of all themes and sub-themes).

Table 1: An overview of the key themes and sub-themes that emerged from the individual interviews.

Theme	Summary of sub-themes	
Barriers to engagement	- Confidence (this could include 'Not wanting to "bother" staff with their problems'). - Hierarchical structures. - Other commitments (work, family etc.). - Course mates. - Academic identity (identity with course, faculty etc.). - Departmental support. - Departmental information.	- Finance. - Personal identity (e.g., demographic information). - Learning and teaching (including L&T style, large lecture, lectures not engaging/interesting, language barrier between staff and students during classes etc.). - Drinking culture. - Welfare (including physical/mental health). - Demographics (Sex, age, class etc.).
Facilitators of engagement	- Physical spaces. - Confidence. - Community (includes "More interaction with others/wider interaction than just with people on course"). - Technology. - Contact hours. - Active student societies. - Part-time work for the University. - Departmental size.	- Learning and Teaching (includes interactive/collaborative and other teaching styles, departmental size and culture). - Departmental support (including helpful and approachable staff, encouraging students to care, developing confidence, encouraging a sense of community etc.). - Seeing the positive outcomes of giving feedback. - Free electives. - Incentives (e.g. financial). - Social life/friends.
Deeper understanding of why students do or do not engage	- Not feeling empowered to make or contribute to change. - Feeling empowered to make or contribute to change. - Not knowing a better alternative to a current problem. - Having motivation/lack of motivation. - Complacency. - Overall, societies less helpful in terms of increasing SE.	- Wanting more contact time with staff. - Feeling less engaged with the Union (Often seen as a source for nights out and drinking socials). - Engagement inside/outside department (e.g. Medicine and Architecture have very strong internal sense of community but students may not engage outside of their Department - does a strong departmental community create a barrier to engaging with the wider University?) - Academic Representatives.

Community building and instilling a sense of belonging

The majority of the students in our sample (n = 13) discussed the positive impact of community building. Most stated that they feel part of a community albeit on different levels: some refer to feeling part of a community within their course or subject area, some within their Department, some within their School or Faculty and some feel part of a wider University community. This sense of community can begin with informal chatting amongst people on the same course, which then leads to help with coursework and working together during exams and deadlines. Developing a community and instilling a sense of belonging has been argued to facilitate successful transition experiences from school to University (Krause & Coates, 2008), is a strong indicator of increased engagement among students who are engaged in other commitments (e.g. part time work) whilst at University (Krause et al., 2005), and may be critical to the success of non-traditional students who may be at risk of non-completion (O'Keeffe, 2013). In a previous study, Tinto (2003) reported that when students were part of a learning community they were more actively involved in classroom learning, engaged more academically and socially, and demonstrated greater persistence than students not part of a learning community, which demonstrates the benefits of community building.

For some, the community feel is fostered overtly through formal mechanisms, such as pairing new students with students from older years. For others, community is fostered by collaboration on academic work which can result from physical space (e.g. architecture studios) or as a result of learning and teaching methods (e.g. group work): *"Architecture's one of those courses where - I don't know how to describe it - it's a bit similar to what I found with a lot of the medics I know, because it's a school within the university, there is quite a strong fellowship with the other students from your subject".* Fostering this sense of community in the classroom environment could be particularly beneficial to students who may live off-campus and therefore have less opportunity to engage socially with other students.

However, the ability to foster a sense of community amongst students is reduced in those from non-traditional groups, who reportedly often feel a sense of both social and academic non-belonging when they first arrive at university (Barnett & Felten, 2016). This was true for three of the mature students in our sample, who felt an obvious age gap between themselves and other students, which made it harder to feel part of a community on their courses: *"The people within my degree seem a bit more immature. They probably are and they just seem like that and so I don't really get too involved".* Read, Archer, and Leathwood (2003) discuss an expectation of first year undergraduate students as being school-leavers with little to no familial responsibilities, which can increase mature students' sense of not belonging.

However, our findings suggest that engagement with other "like-minded" mature students may be beneficial to community building, by helping individuals to increase their sense of belonging. For example, one mature student spoke highly of other mature students, and appeared to identify strongly with them as a group. Similar findings were observed in universities which have a larger proportion of mature students (Read et al., 2003), enabling mature students to feel a much greater sense of belonging than they would experience at other institutions. However, as peer support is particularly important for the success of mature students (Heagney &

Benson, 2017), if mature students are able to engage with younger students, it can increase their confidence when attempting to seek help from teaching staff: *"I guess my friends, as well, because they were straight from school and they were used to kind of having that close dialogue with teachers, that I think they were quicker to go and seek help and stuff. So I think, just seeing how successful they were with their meetings, just inspired me to go for it and not be embarrassed by what I'm interested in".*

Not only can community-building lead to increased engagement in academic life and strengthen a student's sense of belonging, our findings suggest that it can also help students to develop stronger academic identities. The strength of the identity appears to vary according to the discipline, with students in Architecture and Medicine reporting a stronger sense of community and group identity overall. Students from other departments can identify much less as a group: *"Department wise I only ever go to lectures and stuff like tutorials. I've not that many friends on my course and everyone else is on other courses, I don't really like interacting with the lecturers"*. One student discussed how their lack of academic identity resulted from not having an end goal with regards to their course: *"It didn't really matter, I didn't see the point in it. I found it interesting, but not something I was going to do as like a career, so I sort of didn't see the point".* One student described having a weaker academic identity because of their part-time student status: *"Because obviously I am part-time I think I find it a bit more, I'm a bit more removed from the department because I just don't have as many lectures, seminars"*. This finding mirrors that reported by the Higher Education Academy (Thomas, 2012) who interviewed a much larger sample of part-time students and found many to completely lack any sense of student identity, and as a result did not feel part of the student community.

Overall, the students in our sample have highlighted the need for community-building at a lower institutional level in order to increase peer interactions, a sense of belonging and stronger academic identities whilst at university. However, the mature students in our sample highlighted specific issues in relation to their sense of community and belonging, which also had a negative impact on their peer relationships. We believe that universities should seek to reduce the impact of these issues where possible, by ensuring mature students receive adequate representation, be it at departmental level or across the wider university community, and to seek to foster a sense of community amongst all students as soon as they arrive on campus. Research suggests that this might be best achieved as soon as possible in semester one (Kane, Chalcraft, & Volpe, 2014), and could be helped by early contact with personal tutors (Vinson et al., 2010).

The effect of learning and teaching practices

Our interviewees spoke positively of anything that encouraged interaction with others, including group work, small seminars, pub quizzes organised for the tutorial group, and clinics. Specifically, interactive or collaborative teaching methods such as studio teaching were found to build relationships between staff and students and amongst students: "*[In the studio] you're in a sort of environment where there's lots of other people working on stuff, so there is quite a lot collaboration and just asking*

people for their opinions, and chatting about, "Okay, what are you working on?" You know, pinning things up on the wall, and people talking about what each other have done". These forms of cooperative learning have been shown previously to result in higher achievement (Wichadee, 2010), increased engagement and peer group discussion (Li, Liu & Steckelberg, 2010), and were particularly important for the less confident students in our sample, some of whom found it easier to get to know other students through structured activities: "*We're just put in a group and they say just work with the people that you have. And I quite like that it makes you closer to the people that you'd probably never speak to so that's quite good*". These findings are in line with Thomas (2012), who found that University staff can play an important role in facilitating and encouraging peer relationships and a sense of belonging through academic activities. Their studies suggested that icebreakers, team building activities in class, as well as assessed and non-assessed group work in and out of class can nurture these peer relationships.

However, students also cited a number of potential barriers within learning and teaching in their academic environment. Firstly, fewer contact hours per week adversely affects interaction with other students and staff and affects learning. Secondly, students cited a number of issues in relation to language barriers between students and staff or between students that could make it difficult to engage with the learning environment: *"My attendance is not that great, but that's due to my lecturers not, I would go, but I don't think they're very good lecturers. I can teach myself better, I have good grades, I still get a first but I don't see the point, like some of them don't really speak that much English, or they speak English but not so I can understand".* Indeed, Gupta and Saks (2013) reported that 87% of their medical student sample cited lecturer-related reasons, such as poor delivery of the material, for non-attendance in class.

Thirdly, a lack of appropriate learning materials such as lecture notes, or the inclusion of "inappropriate" learning materials such as video lectures in place of face-to-face teaching can impact students' engagement with their course materials. One student expressed their frustration with the learning materials not being uploaded on time: *"The one who didn't put the power point on…she still hasn't yet and it's like ruined my week because I was going to do that like the day after the, the day of the lecture, like afterwards and because she didn't put it on I don't know when I'm going to do it".*

Finally, class size and teaching method is important in terms of interactions with staff and other students. Large lectures can be a barrier to building relationships: *"no-one is going to really notice that your particular face is missing"*. However, lectures remain a most common form of teaching at University-level. Students often express a desire to work as part of smaller groups (Thomas, 2012), and research has shown that smaller classes are well received by the students themselves (Harfitt & Tsui, 2015), and can result in greater classmate supportiveness, student preparedness, and class participation when compared with larger classes (Bai & Chang, 2016). However, with an ever-increasing student population smaller classes become difficult to implement. Bligh (1998) argued that lectures worked best for teaching facts, and that more active teaching strategies could be implemented for other types of learning (e.g. critical thinking). Again, the views of the students in our sample suggest that a more varied approach to learning and teaching may be needed, that does not

dismiss the utility of traditional teaching methods but that also seeks to engage students in group-based interactions and that can vary contact time as and when it is needed.

Departmental support

Departmental support was discussed at length amongst our sample of students, and could be broken down into a number of key areas. Firstly, support could be in the form of staff actively encouraging students to engage by sending out information and promoting opportunities. Secondly, formal structures that facilitate support can enable students to be a part of the community, and participate in university life. For example, some participants refer to a 'go-to' person in their department, such as within their Departmental Office. The best examples of departmental support appear to depend on the approachability of key staff members, so that students feel they can ask for help or voice their opinions: "*The staff are really, really helpful and friendly for the most part. There are some who just can't do enough for you and that's terrific because you feel okay to email them and I've always felt really well supported by them*". Extensive work with Australian undergraduates has shown that those who reported greater engagement with peers, academic staff and the institution reported higher levels of achievement and greater persistence in their studies compared to those without such support structures (Krause et al., 2005)

Previous research has suggested that insufficient academic support can be a barrier to student success (Enriquez, Baker, Lipe, & Price, 2017), with departmental support becoming particularly crucial when students experience personal problems that may affect their ability to study. One student reported how their mental health difficulties led to deep feelings of isolation, which led to reduced engagement in their studies: *"I think people who suffer from social anxiety and ADHD and all of those sort of mental difficulties and mental health issues they need time and they need a lot of support to be able to feel confident enough to spread out and be involved in the experience*". However, a positive relationship with her personal tutor made a huge difference to her wellbeing: *"Yeah my personal tutor was essential really to me getting through the year. She was like, she was more than my personal tutor, she was like my coach, like she coached me through it and everything. She was great"*. Building a solid support structure was said to be essential in preventing this student's health from deteriorating.

A selection of our interviewees discussed not wanting to bother staff with their problems and suggested that this might be why they have not yet approached staff for support: "*I don't bother them because, you know, I'm sure they've got many more important things to do than respond to me*", and one student felt too embarrassed to seek help. We interpreted these comments as coming from students who may lack confidence in approaching academic staff. Buddy systems, effective personal tutoring, and having a go-to person in the department could be useful for students who are struggling and unsure of who to turn to for support.

Our interviews also identified specific groups of students who may require greater support from their departments. For example, when mature students felt supported by their academic departments, they were much more likely to show increased engagement in academic life: "*They're quite considerate to different peoples'*

schedules and timetables, and people who have got kids and stuff. So they're quite responsive to people who have lives outside of university as well, but who still want to be involved". In particular, one mature student discussed how support from a personal tutor reduced the stresses of their course and tailored some aspects of the course to suit his/her needs. Similar findings were reported in a separate study, which suggested that mature students appreciated additional moral support from academic staff members (Heagney & Benson, 2017). So it appears that departmental support is particularly important for mature students, who want staff to be aware of their individual circumstances to increase their chances of success in the academic environment.

Moreover, staff attitudes towards disability can affect students' engagement and confidence in their studies. A student in our sample discussed their Chronic Fatigue and how it affected their studies, including a significant interaction with a tutor: *"I thought I had failed it so when I saw I got a 2:2 I was actually really relieved and he was like 'You should be aiming for a first' even though I had just told him why I was so relieved, that I had been so ill. Were you listening? Do you have no feeling? Human emotion?".* Some of the difficulties associated with disability can be reduced by appropriate support from teaching staff. For example, one student reported receiving an overwhelming level of support from her dissertation supervisor, and another student described how support from disability services prevented them from dropping out of university: *"This university I can't thank anymore for helping me in that regard because the disability services have just been really, really good and any time I've ever asked for help they've just bent over backwards and I just think, had it not been for that I wouldn't, I probably would've dropped out last year I think because it was just too much".* Thus, support from staff members can help to alleviate some of the additional stress felt by these students.

However, a number of students with a disability would often use terms such as "resilient", "push" and "difficult" in relation to seeking additional departmental support. This may prevent less confident students from seeking help when they need it. One student reported having to nag staff to post lecture materials in advance to reduce the impact of his/her dyslexia when attending the lecture. Having to push to receive adequate materials from staff is likely to reduce opportunities for students to engage with their studies.

Feelings of empowerment

Empowerment has been described as a transformational process that increases ownership and control of the learning process (Piper, 2006), so giving students more autonomy in their own learning can lead to greater feelings of empowerment and motivation (Chan, 2001). Self-empowerment has been linked to student success, as students are able to seek academic and support services when needed and also feel more able to first try to solve problems on their own (Martin, Galentino, & Townsend, 2014). Furthermore, previous work with undergraduate and graduate nursing students has shown academic success to be significantly related to empowerment, spiritual well-being, and resilience, suggesting that feelings of empowerment may lead to a stronger ability to persist through challenging courses (Beauvais, Stewart, DeNisco, & Beauvais, 2013).

In the current study, when students saw the positive outcomes of giving feedback about their experiences, this facilitated a feeling of empowerment in their own ability to make change. The students in our study appeared much more likely to report a problem if they already knew who they could approach, and some students seemed to find it easier to raise issues about their experiences at University when they felt a sense of community or belonging: *"When they started to close it [the department] down and we all had to, well we all felt we had to go and bang a drum for them to keep it going"*. However, students are less likely to feel empowered to give feedback when they fear the repercussions of giving feedback: *"I wrote it all down with a view to seeing the man, but the trouble was he was lecturing me in the next course as well, and I was just, even though I'm a big grown up, I was afraid that he'd take against me",* and also when they believe that nothing will change.

Hierarchical relationships between staff and students can affect student empowerment and act as a barrier to building communities and can discourage students from seeking support: *"When I first started I was quite apprehensive of [staff] and they were a little bit difficult to reach and not really willing to reply a load of times. But I think it's improved over time, I'm not sure whether they've improved and started to reply or I'm just more intent on getting the reply".* This links to the transition to University and different expectations about how staff and students should interact: "*I think they're not as approachable as you'd want them to be, but I suppose that is because university is so different from sixth form, it's not as easy*." The presence of hierarchical structures also puts pressure on students who wish to give negative feedback on teaching: "*Because he was still lecturing me, I didn't want to be sitting there in the lecture theatre with him sending hate waves across the audience to me. No, I just didn't want any unpleasantness which is feeble really*". This finding is similar to that reported by Thomas (2012), who also found that students struggled to approach academic members of staff, but that staff approachability was strongly valued among students.

Compared to our female interviewees, our male interviewees reported being unlikely to approach teaching staff: *"I don't really like interacting with the lecturers. It puts you to sleep to be honest"*. Whilst they also reported finding lecturers to be unapproachable, they were much more accepting of the hierarchical structure than female interviewees: *"They're the lecturer they know what they're doing, like what should work"*. This unwillingness to challenge lecturers when they need additional support could leave some students vulnerable. This could be linked to a lack of confidence in some of our male interviewees: *"I remember last year, I should have asked some stuff, but I didn't know… I was probably too embarrassed to ask it, in case they thought, "this guy's not very clever" or whatever".* This general lack of confidence was coupled with the male interviewees being much less likely to discuss issues regarding their welfare or personal identity. Female interviewees reported more instances in which they wanted to challenge these hierarchical structures and have more in-depth discussions with academics: *"It's still good to actually be able to talk to these academics, they know so much more about, not just the subject but just life in general, advice on writing essays and stuff and actually it would be really good to have more contact with them".* Despite these differences between males and females, there were fewer males in our sample (n = 5), and so this difference would need to be followed up further in future work.

Mature students appear to struggle more when working within strong hierarchical structures and two mature students reported feeling patronised by teaching staff: *"I think they sometimes forget there is older people there who are actually are professional and do have a background and aren't students that are up all night drinking or doing whatever".* These mature students wish to be taken more seriously and believe this would improve their academic environments.

Feeling motivated

Students described how feeling passionate about the course, being challenged and seeing an end goal is valuable to being engaged in their studies: *"In my third year, I then had a purpose, so I was doing this… in order to come on to the medicine course… [I] cared a bit more in third year, I think, because I had a reason to care",* with a number of students identifying their own self-motivation as being a crucial factor to engagement: *"When you come to university there is no-one there to tell you how to work… if you don't do it no-one will really care".* This is consistent with previous work showing that academic self-efficacy (i.e. a person's belief in their ability to achieve their goals) may result in greater self-motivation and lead to greater academic achievement (Adeyemo, 2007). This self-motivation is particularly useful for students with fewer contact hours: *"I think in arts subjects, you have to push yourself more".*

We observed some gender differences regarding feelings of motivation and how it influences students' work. Overall, males reported difficulties when attempting to motivate themselves to engage with course materials, particularly due to the change in learning and teaching methods from A-level to undergraduate study: *"When you come to university there is no-one there to tell you how to work, like a teacher".* In contrast, the females in our sample reported many more instances of self-motivation with regards to their own courses.

Student societies and social life

The What Works? Programme (Thomas, 2012) highlights the importance of social engagement and friendship for student retention and success. Seven of our interviewees described themselves as being actively involved in student societies. The majority of these students suggest that societies are good for meeting people, as illustrated by a student who discussed the importance of sports societies for making new friends: "*Because I thought, when you first go like just talking to someone it can be quite hard for some people, but when you're playing some sports like talk about the game and then you make relationships*". Previous research has suggested that an increase in social capital is associated with a greater sense of belonging and academic engagement in working class students who initially report less social capital than their peers when starting university (Soria, Krista, & Stebleton, 2013).

However, one student reported that their departmental society focuses their social events around drinking alcohol, which tends to be a criticism of larger student societies in general. Additionally, these events are normally late-night socials, which can make it difficult for students with disabilities to attend, as one student with Chronic Fatigue commented: *"Obviously they are on in the evening because of*

lectures during the day but some of them don't start until 8 PM and if they started at 6 PM, seven-ish, that would be much better for me but when it starts at 8 PM I just can't do it".

British drinking culture can also act as a barrier for students from different cultural backgrounds, who wish to be part of the student community. One student commented that one of the few occasions they feel isolated is during evening socials with friends, because they don't drink alcohol: *"Rather than going to the pub, I'd prefer to go for a meal".* Because of this social difference, this student believes they have fewer opportunities to socialise with course mates: *"I'd say everyone in my group, when you mention socialising, it is pretty much going out for a night out".* This could cause concern for students new to the university who are looking to make friends with others on their course. Drinking culture makes it difficult to engage with course mates, which can profoundly affect engagement with academic life in general.

Commitments outside of academic life

One of the key themes that emerged from our interviews with students relates to other commitments that can, at times, interfere with their engagement in academic life. These commitments include part-time paid work, family and childcare arrangements, commuting to University, and making time for friends and social activities. It has been suggested that additional commitments such as part-time work may lead to decreased opportunity to engage with the academic learning community compared to students without such commitments (Krause et al., 2005)

In particular, mature students discuss a much wider range of additional commitments that they deal with in conjunction with their studies. All of the mature students in our sample appear to be more involved with part-time work and/or caring responsibilities than younger students – which can have adverse effects on engagement in academic life: *"I've found it quite tricky this year, I am retired, but I do work part time and of course I've got family and I do a lot of other things as well. So, it's been more of a push this year to fit everything in".* These students also report missing out on additional opportunities to engage, because such opportunities happen when they are at work, or they just cannot spare the time to become more involved: *"I don't have any more time or energy to do any more than I already do".* However, one mature student was willing to become much more engaged in order to represent other mature students: *"I mean, I've signed up to be - I don't know what the word is - elected to be like a welfare officer for the mature students in next year […] You know, I don't mind the mature students, so much, because I think they really need representation, so, yes, I want to be a little bit more involved next year".*

In addition to mature students, the majority of our sample who defined themselves as working/lower middle class described their need to work part-time to support themselves whilst studying at university. Part-time work was described by one student as increasing their engagement with peers, because they could now afford to socialise with them. However, students have also described difficult periods of their university careers when they have been working more than the recommended number of part-time working hours: *"Last year when I first started I was working at a supermarket and that was like four days a week nine hours a day and it was quite*

taxing because we had classes like every day. And I had to quit in the end because they wouldn't give me any time off for my exams and stuff, so it was quite, I was just tired all the time". This can be particularly problematic for working class students who may initially struggle to navigate their way through University life, with a student in our sample describing feeling overwhelmed when they first arrived at University: *"The initial first couple of weeks in September, thinking, I can't do this, I can't do this, this is too much",* in reference to their attempts to balance their course load whilst working part-time.

However, a report from the National Union of Students (2008) has suggested that an increasing number of students are taking on part-time paid employment to cover their costs whilst at university. Specifically, this report outlined the results of a large quantitative survey of student experiences, suggesting as many as 3 in 4 respondents were working part-time in addition to full-time study. These respondents expressed a variety of reasons for working part-time, ranging from a need to cover the basic living costs which exceed their loans to an attempt to maintain the quality of life they had enjoyed prior to becoming a student. Interestingly, our interviewees discussed the utility of part-time work for the University compared to external job opportunities. Four respondents have been coded as working for the University, either part-time, or as an intern. All four discuss how valuable the experience has been for meeting people that they wouldn't usually interact with. They all also mention how helpful it has been having an employer that is understanding about pressures of deadlines: ***"****My boss is really, really flexible, so if I say, "I've got a tutorial at 10am," sometimes I can work 7.30am until 10am, or something, if it's in the same building, or I'll just say what days I can work, and what days I can't. It's completely flexible, she understands that work comes first".* It could be that part-time work for the University overcomes a key barrier to student engagement by offering students more flexibility in their working hours, resulting in students feeling less pressure from the conflict between work and study reported elsewhere in the literature (Watts & Pickering, 2000).

In addition to this, one working class student discusses how she greatly benefitted from a paid summer internship, funded by the university: "*I did an internship with my now dissertation supervisor, which was great because I was getting paid and I got a head start on my dissertation project so I got paid to start gathering some of my data which was a big relief, lots of stress out of the way*". Such internships act as a strong facilitating factor for engagement in academic life, particularly for students from working class backgrounds, who often need to support themselves financially with part-time work. Such schemes enable students to earn money whilst contributing to their final year studies. This notion is supported by past research suggesting that academically-relevant internships enable students from non-traditional groups to build academic capital (Enriquez, Baker Lipe, & Price, 2017), and may increase student self-efficacy for academic success at university (Enriquez et al., 2013). This shows the value of Universities offering paid work and internship opportunities for students.

Practical Implications

Based on the results of our study, we have devised a series of suggested practices based on each of the themes that emerged from our interviews with students.

Community building and instilling a sense of belonging

- Universities could seek to foster a sense of community amongst all students through the creation of learner communities within each of their academic courses, as soon as students arrive on campus.
- Mature students may find community building more difficult. Such difficulties might be alleviated by ensuring mature students receive adequate representation, be it at departmental level or across the wider university community.

The effect of learning and teaching practices

- Universities should seek to nurture peer relationships within learning and teaching practices. This could be achieved through icebreakers, team building activities in class, as well as assessed and non-assessed group work.
- Traditional teaching methods (e.g., lectures and seminars) may be combined with other more interactive methods (e.g., studio teaching) to better engage students in group-based interactions.

Departmental support

- Buddy systems, effective personal tutoring, and having a go-to person in the department could be useful for students who are struggling and unsure of who to turn to for support.
- Departmental support appeared to be particularly important for mature students, who want staff to be aware of their individual circumstances to increase their chances of success in the academic environment.
- We should ensure all staff have acceptable attitudes and training when interacting with students with physical and/or mental disabilities. Our findings describe how supportive staff have directly prevented student drop-outs, but have also shown how a lack of perceived support from staff can leave students feeling frustrated.

Feelings of empowerment and motivation

- Self-empowerment has been linked to student success. Empowerment could be encouraged through active and transparent student feedback processes that allow individuals to become engaged in their own learning and teaching practices and take ownership of their studies. This may also help to facilitate a sense of self-motivation among students, particularly those with few contact hours, which may encourage greater academic engagement.
- Academic institutions may wish to consider taking steps to reduce hierarchical relationships between students and staff in order to increase students' confidence in seeking feedback and support.

Student societies

- Student societies should seek to offer a wide variety of events beyond late-night drinking socials that consider the needs of all students.

Commitments outside of academic life

- Teaching staff should be aware of the necessity of part-time work for many students to support their studies, but issues with working long hours should be highlighted when students begin their courses to allow them to consider their options effectively.
- In light of the positive comments made by those who have on-campus jobs, students who need to work part-time could be encouraged to consider working for the university.
- University bursary schemes that allow students to act as paid interns whilst contributing to their studies are an invaluable source of part-time work for working/lower middle-class students, and many more would benefit from greater investment into such schemes.

Conclusions

Overall, we have found further evidence to suggest that engagement with academic life was best facilitated by fostering of a strong sense of community and belonging (within their course, department, faculty or wider university community), interactive or collaborative teaching methods and group work, supportive departments who communicate regularly with students, and active student societies. If students were working part-time to support their studies, working for the university was found to be beneficial, as students found their managers to be considerate of assignment deadlines and they did not feel pressured to work additional hours.

Students also discussed a number of potential barriers to engagement in academic life, such as strict hierarchical structures between students and staff, a lack of academic identity or a lack of empowerment to bring about change. The sense of empowerment felt by students varied across our sample, which can determine whether a student seeks help or raises issues about their experiences at University, whilst self-motivation was found to be a crucial factor to engagement. In terms of learning and teaching methods, students also discussed how too few contact hours, course structures based solely on large lectures and a lack of confidence to seek help when necessary can also reduce their ability to engage in academic life. Furthermore, a number of students from specific groups, such as mature or disabled students, have expressed unique challenges and difficulties that have further impacted on their ability to engage in academic life.

A number of limitations should be considered in light of our findings. First, for the purposes of this study, a smaller sample size was advantageous, as it enabled a rich and fine-grained analysis of each individual's responses. However, the level of the subgroups within our sample (e.g. mature students, disabled students, male versus female students) were much smaller, and so potential differences in the experiences

of these groups of individuals would need to be examined further in future work. Second, our study was limited to UK students, so the experiences of international students are missing from this research piece. International students represent an ever-growing percentage of the University population, so it is important that their views and experiences are also considered in future work.

Overall, students' needs and experiences varied significantly. These findings suggest that institutions need to adopt a flexible and inclusive approach to fostering student engagement. A focus on community-building, both amongst students and between students and staff, could be a productive way to approach this. We have also identified a number of specific practices which may help students to engage in the academic environment, such as provision of paid work opportunities on campus, effective and accessible support mechanisms within academic departments (with a particular emphasis on the approachability of staff), and collaborative and interactive learning experiences that foster a strong sense of academic community and identity.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Demographic information about the sample of students interviewed

	Number of students (n = 15)
Mature student:	
Yes	8
No	6
Prefer not to say	
Unanswered	1
Fees purposes:	
EU student	
International student	
UK student	15
Level of study:	
Unanswered	1
Undergraduate	11
Postgraduate	3
Home postcode before starting University:	
1	7
2	2
3	2
4	1
5	3
Moved house when starting University:	
Unanswered	1
Yes	8
No	5
No (with comment)	1 (‘but did leave home when pursuing my first degree’)
Gender identity:	
Female	10
Male	5
Ethnic identity:	
Mixed white and Afro-Caribbean	1
White British	5
White	1
British	1
Asian-Indian	1
Indian/Asian British	1
British Indian	1
British Pakistani	1
White Polish	1
White/Asian	1
Somali	1
Class background:	
Working class	5
Middle class	4
Lower middle class	3
N/A	1

Unanswered	2
Sexual orientation:	
Gay	1
Homosexual	1
Bisexual	1
Heterosexual	5
Straight	6
Lesbian	1
Disability:	
Yes	3
No	10
Prefer not to say	2
First generation:	
Yes	2
No	13
Prefer not to say	
Caring responsibilities:	
Yes	1
No	14
Prefer not to say	

Course	**Number of students**	**Department**	**Faculty**
Medicine with Foundation Year	1	Medical School	MDH
Psychology	1	Psychology	Science
BMedSci Health and Human Sciences	1	Nursing and Midwifery	MDH
Architecture	1	Architecture	Social Sciences
Law	1	Law	Social Sciences
BSc Economics	2	Economics	Social Sciences
Philosophy with Foundation year	1	Philosophy	AH
BSc Natural and Human Environments	1	Archaeology	AH
Biomedical Science	1	Biomedical Science	Science
BA English Literature	1	English	AH
Dentistry	1	Dentistry	MDH
LPC- Legal Practice Law	1	Law	Social Sciences
Accounting and Financial Management	1	Management	Social Sciences
MA International Relations	1	Politics	Social Sciences

Appendix 2: The interview questions**.**

1. Talk through responses to the questionnaire. Do you want to elaborate on, or discuss, any of the questions or responses in the questionnaire?
2. Tell us about a typical week for you during term time.
3. On a scale of 1-10 (where 1= 'I just attend lectures and then go home' and 10 = 'I am involved in everything'), how engaged are you with academic life? Please explain why you picked that number.

4. NB: *The numbers don't actually mean anything they are just to prompt discussion*. (follow-up for discussion - what do you think a really engaged student does? And a really disengaged student?)
5. [Academic life refers to anything to do with learning and education at the University, e.g. your classes, interactions with course mates, lecturers, personal tutor, additional activities connected to your course or education e.g. student representation, educational projects, optional lectures, departmental societies. It doesn't include other activities not connected to education e.g. sports / voluntary activities / paid work / social activities that aren't connected to your course or your education].
6. Tell us about your interactions with other students in your department (follow-up - what about other year groups? Other courses? student societies?)
7. Tell us about your interactions with staff in your department.
8. Do you feel part of a community in your department / faculty? (possible follow-up - ask about transition to University and any changes over time as they have progressed through their degree)
9. Where do you go to find out about academic life? (follow up - How do you find out about activities at the University/in your department? Where do you look for information? How would you like to find out about opportunities?)
10. Where would you go if you had a question or issue about your course that you wanted to discuss? (follow-up - would you approach a tutor / friend / academic rep / etc? Have you heard of academic reps? Do you know who your rep is? Have you had any contact with the Students' Union?)
11. Have you ever wanted to change something on your course? (follow up - have you acted on this? what did you do?)

Appendix 3: An overview of the key themes that emerged from the individual interviews, and a summary of key points and sub-themes.

Theme	Summary of key points and sub-themes
Barriers to engagement	-Confidence (this could include 'Not wanting to "bother" staff with their problems'). -Hierarchical structures. -Other commitments (work, family etc.) -Course mates -Academic identity (identity with course, faculty etc.) -Departmental support -Departmental information -Finance -Personal identity (e.g demographic information) -Learning and teaching (including L&T style, large lecture, lectures not engaging/interesting, language barrier between staff and students during classes etc.) -Drinking culture -Welfare (including physical/mental health) -Demographics (Sex, age, class etc.)
Facilitators of engagement	-Physical spaces -Confidence -Community (includes "More interaction with others/wider interaction than just with people on course") -Technology -Contact hours -Active student societies -Part-time work for the University -Departmental support (including helpful and approachable staff, encouraging students to care, developing confidence, encouraging a sense of community etc.) -Social life/friends? -Learning and Teaching (includes interactive/collaborative and other teaching styles, departmental size and culture) -Departmental size -Seeing the positive outcomes of giving feedback -Free electives -Incentives (e.g. financial)

Deeper understanding of why students do or do not engage	-Not feeling empowered to make or contribute to change -Feeling empowered to make or contribute to change -Not knowing a better alternative to a current problem -Having motivation/lack of motivation -Complacency -Overall, societies less helpful in terms of increasing SE -Wanting more contact time with staff -Feeling less engaged with the Union (Often seen as a source for nights out and drinking socials) -Engagement inside/outside department (e.g. Medicine and Architecture have very strong internal sense of community but students may not engage outside of their Department - does a strong departmental community create a barrier to engaging with the wider University?) -Academic Representatives