

## Theme 2: The Shifting Context of Higher Education

### Reframing 'hard to reach' student engagement

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*"A critique does not consist in saying that things aren't good the way they are. It consists in seeing on just what type of assumptions, of familiar notions, of established and unexamined ways of thinking the accepted practices are based [...] To do criticism is to make harder those acts which are now too easy". (Foucault, 2003:170-173)*

This piece aims to share some ruminations from the collective brain of The Student Engagement Partnership (TSEP), as we've been observing the shifting sands of English HE and the new (and old) student engagement challenges being faced by sector practitioners, particularly the engagement of so-called 'hard to reach' groups.

In line with the epigraph to this piece, let us start with a critical reflection on the term 'hard to reach', which has gained considerable currency in recent years. Indeed, if you search 'engaging hard to reach groups' online, you will find over 1,000,000 different web-pages of organisations, campaigns, policy groups, education providers and governments trying and trying to make ground with this theme. But what do we mean when we say X group of students is 'hard to reach'? A series of implicit assumptions are entangled within these three short words and it's worth pausing over each of them in turn.

Firstly, 'hard to reach' suggests by its absent yet lurking 'er', that a comparison will be made, between those who are inherently 'reachable' and those who are not. This means a value-judgement is being made (as much as we might like to think it isn't), between the norm - 'reachable', engaged students - and those with whom engagement is *hard*. This means that students who fall into the 'hard to reach' denomination are always already being thought of in comparison to other types of students, rather than as distinct students with individual experiences in their own right. This often leads to looking at existing engagement practices and tweaking them here and there, rather than going back to the drawing board to tailor-make something better suited to the unique needs of the local student population. Innovations (such as using video conferencing, to enable the participation – in meetings, for example - of those students who can't be on campus owing to caring responsibilities) are to be welcomed, but what would it mean to step back and rethink, in committee structures, with the barriers faced by students in mind from the outset, the very nature of student engagement and how it could be done differently?

This leads to the second point: *Why* is it hard? Is it hard because the way higher education (and wider society) has been structured is ultimately disadvantageous to these types of students? Is it because the way we expect student engagement to happen is not in line with what these students prioritise in terms of their learning experience? It is essential to consider these questions before one can start trying to engage these students successfully. In our recent study, 'Student Engagement in the Context of Commuter Students' (Thomas and Jones, 2017), we found that higher education providers often organised themselves via a set of priorities and strategies that risked being disadvantageous to commuter students, who often typify, and intersect with, different 'hard to reach' groups. For example, providers' desire to maximise the use of their estates through their timetabling and income-generation in food outlets, along with a reluctance to use technology to support independent learning (e.g. lecture capture), presents a series of structural barriers which limits commuter students' capacity to engage actively in the ways we would expect them to want to (Thomas and Jones, 2017:51). It is easy to see how the differences in expectations between providers and their students can lead to unintentional barriers for students who tend to be presented as 'hard to reach'.

## Theme 2: The Shifting Context of Higher Education

Moreover, our report also found that there is a difference in the perceived value of student engagement between commuter students themselves and the staff trying to engage them:

*“A few aspects of academic engagement, some types of enhancement activities and most social activities are seen [by commuter students] as not particularly useful. Thus, lower rates of engagement in these activities is not generally viewed negatively by the students themselves [...]. Amongst staff however there is ‘a concern that many of these students do not see the value of participating in many of the engagement opportunities’ available within and through higher education institutions (Thomas and Jones 2017:51).*

There are interesting parallels here with the experiences of postgraduate researchers, who are also often defined as ‘hard to reach’ through their desire to prioritise their academic learning over broader engagement activities. Indeed, there is nothing inherently ‘wrong’ in a student’s choosing this path, but something we should of course consider in reflecting on this is whether these students would feel differently had there not been barriers in place (e.g. if there were more day-time/postgraduate-specific events organised by societies, would students in these groups be more likely to participate and therefore feel such activities had value?). In addition, we found that providers were not always clear about what constitutes ‘student engagement’ and that, when they were, their understanding, between and across providers and their unions, varied. As a sector, we need to be clear about how we define and understand student engagement so that its benefit and purpose (for students and for providers) can be communicated broadly and with intent.

Arguably, our oft-used phrase also attributes to the students the responsibility for their being ‘hard to reach’. We are doing student engagement well in other places, so it must be, as mentioned earlier, that *those students* are just more difficult, rather than that we, as engagers, need to rethink engagement structurally and how we could develop inclusive engagement practices. A practice that TSEP would advocate is to step back, pause and try to think from the viewpoint of those students, which we have referred to in our report as *‘the commuter student lens’*. What then becomes the central focus of this endeavour is the notion of empathy, considering truly and deeply the experiences of those upon whom this engagement should be centred.

We, as practitioners, need also to start to talk about engagement based on areas of activity rather than one large umbrella term which means many things to many people in many contexts. TSEP would suggest breaking engagement down into the following themes, and applying the ‘hard to reach student lens’ to each one in turn:

- 1) Academic: engagement in learning;
- 2) Enhancement: engagement in co-curricular and enhancement activities (including representation and other participatory roles);
- 3) Social: engagement in formal and informal sport, social and leisure activities alongside other higher education peers.

Separating our understanding of engagement in this way enables a more nuanced reflection on the different experiences of different students; postgraduate researchers thus become high academic engagers who may also be undertaking enhancement activities such as teaching, rather than only being ‘hard to reach’.

This approach will become ever more important now that the English Higher Education and Research Bill (2016-17) has been passed into law, with its sidelining of deep and meaningful engagement practices in favour of shallow metrics and reporting on graduate outcomes.<sup>1</sup> If providers (and, arguably, their unions/guilds/associations too) inadvertently step away from meaningful engagement in the face of sector pressure to ‘chase the metrics’, then it is

## Theme 2: The Shifting Context of Higher Education

possible that it is our 'hard to reach' students who lose out on support, visibility and, potentially, even student places.

As a sector, we need to think critically and constructively about these political changes and identify how and where we can bring benefit to the 'yet to be reached' members of our student communities. If there has to be a homogenising term that encompasses a set of intersecting groups, then TSEP feels that 'yet to be reached' places accountability for reaching out to these students on staff as engagers. It accepts responsibility, and acknowledges that these students have historically been marginalised by our practices and our structures. It also denotes possibility – they may not be engaged 'yet', but, with reflection, resource and a reframing of engagement, we know that this could change. We must remember the values of partnership and reflection that underpin effective student engagement, for all students, but particularly for those we are yet to reach. As Foucault's epigraph reminds us, this will not be easy, but with our student lenses we can achieve real change.

### Reference list

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<sup>i</sup> The Higher Education and Research Act has been described as 'the most significant sector legislation in 25 years to further a market approach in England' (Times Higher Education 2017), owing to: its proposals to make it easier for new providers to gain degree-awarding powers; its attempts to link 'teaching excellence' to the ability to charge higher fee rates; the introduction of the Office for Students as the single regulatory body. Whilst there are intentions within the Act to encourage providers to expand their offer for widening participation students, there are also concerns in the sector that, because the metrics being used to assess 'teaching excellence' include measures such as graduate outcomes, students who are historically less likely to gain a graduate job following their study will be less likely to win university places.