

### **“Is it worth my time?” An investigation into the hooks, barriers and considerations of contemporary students when committing time to extra-curricular activities**

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#### **Abstract**

This paper reflects on the findings of the ‘Worth My Time’ student-staff partnership exploratory project conducted in 2017-18, which looked into the hooks, barriers and considerations students make when considering extra-curricular activities alongside their studies at the University of Winchester. The study aimed to begin to explore – through the use of various small-scale research methods and analysis – a series of recommendations of communication practice relating to students’ motivations at a university/college to become involved in extra-curricular activities alongside their studies. Previous studies have reported the benefits of engaging in extra-curricular activities, including the positive impact of the social and physical interaction for the students involved (Tymon, 2013) and related benefits post graduation, for employability in the workplace (Dunne, 2017). In addition to these positive impacts, many opportunities offered at the University of Winchester seek to enrich both the personal and the social development of the student, offering transferable skills which are deeply rooted at the core of the student experience in the wider University community (Tchibozo, 2008). Alongside the researched outcomes from student engagement in extra-curricular activities relating to student development, a discourse has emerged, stating that students are increasingly strategic with their time and prioritise those outcomes-based commitments which are related to a direct reward or payment (Sims *et al.*, 2017). It is these aspects that the study seeks to explore, investigating what it is that motivates students to engage in these activities and how they could be better marketed to reach a wider audience and attract a larger diversity of participants. As part of an institution-wide ‘students as partners’ initiative, this study was conducted by a current third-year History BA Hons student and a central services manager in partnership at this small-medium UK university.

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this small-scale research project was to explore new perspectives of – and to highlight some initial findings relating to – student perceptions of extra-curricular opportunities, considering what attracts them to, or discourages them from, committing time to these during the academic year. Students studying in higher education (HE) in the United Kingdom (UK) experience increasing pressure to perform to achieve their desired grades and graduate outcomes, in order to gain a graduate-level occupation as outlined in several recent studies (Department for Education, 2018, Unite, 2017, UUK 2017). As part of the employability agenda and, more traditionally, as part of campus recreation, higher education institutions (HEIs) offer an array of opportunities to students to provide a full student experience for agendas such as employability (Kuh, 2007). Such a situation increasingly presents something of a conundrum – to students, who must be selective with their time owing to the pressure of expensive HE study, and to staff, who are under pressure to engage high numbers of students to enhance their employability and satisfaction (Kuh, Laird and Umbach, 2004). This study aimed to address these questions by conducting two stages

of research – to investigate and assess the different ‘hooks’ that attract students to opportunities and also to explore what exactly students consider when deciding whether an opportunity is ‘worth their time’. Finally, this paper hopes to distil some recommendations for HE practitioners who coordinate such activities, by suggesting practical considerations to have in mind when recruiting for an extra-curricular activity in contemporary HE.

This project was conducted by a student-staff partnership consisting of a Bachelor of Honours final-year History student and a central services manager tasked with increasing student engagement at the University of Winchester. This partnership is supported by the Student Engagement/Students as Partners initiative, the Winchester ‘Student Fellows Scheme’, which supports students and staff to work together in partnership to enhance and/or research an aspect of the student educational experience (Sims *et al.*, 2016). The research idea came from initial discussions between the student and the staff partner, who both had a common interest in the area. The Student Fellow (partner) was interested in the area as he wished to investigate why some of his peers chose certain commitments for his time at University – such as committing to part-time employment off-campus, committing to extra-curricular activities or not committing to anything beyond their studies at all. As the staff partner had an institutional brief to raise student engagement with extra-curricular – specifically developmental – activities, there was a mutual motivation to gain further insight to the current/contemporary UK student mind-set towards time allocation and student activities.

### Literature

HE in the UK context has, in recent years, seen a considerable amount of change, which many refer to as the ‘marketization’ of the sector (Lea, 2015). These changes have included removal of the student number limits on HEI recruitment, a rise in tuition fees (from £3,250 in 2012 to £9,250 in 2017) and increased HEI performance metrics – such as the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (Office for Students, 2018) – thus transforming the general environment of universities (Frankham, 2017). In the context of extensive publicising of HEIs’ performance and a rise in the cost of HE, several recent reports have confirmed that students now attend university mainly for such graduate outcomes as a graduate-level role or higher-paid employment (Department for Education, 2018, Unite, 2017, UUK 2017). In addition, there is wider societal and governmental pressure on HEIs to produce graduates who are employer-ready for the contemporary workplace, having been fully prepared by their HE experience (Moore and Morton, 2017). Although HEIs have traditionally offered students – alongside their studies and for enrichment and/or recreational reasons – extra-curricular and developmental activities for them to engage with, staff coordinators of activities are now under increasing pressure to ensure that participating students gain benefits for employability, so that the activity is worthy of institutional investment. However, engaging students in these activities (which do hold potential skills-development benefits) can be difficult, when, as some observers hypothesise, students are becoming increasingly strategic with their time and may therefore be less willing to put their schedule at risk when they feel the pressure of so much emphasis upon the ‘success’ expected from their costly tuition.

Encouraging students to take up additional, co-curricular or extra-curricular activities has frequently been linked to their becoming employable graduates, with such researchers as Astin (1984) determining that a student with high involvement in these activities is more

employable, as well as benefiting from an enhanced student experience. There is a wealth of literature relating to the positives to be drawn from extra-curricular activities, which can be used successfully to implement general skills into HE (Nghia, 2017). Tymon (2013, p.853) also argues that student-driven activities could be one way to enhance personal attributes. Various extant studies in the literature outline the leadership and student-experience benefits of participation in sport, which builds friendships and enhances employability (Stuart *et al.*, 2009). Tchibozo (2008) demonstrated that extra-curricular activity can have a significant influence on the transition process from university to the workplace, leading to better occupational status post graduation. A recent study at Winchester repeatedly revealed that students related a 'sense of ambition' to educational extra-curricular activities (evident from responses such as "being able to make a difference" and "being elected to a committee") and associated involvement in them with personal achievement, pride and belonging in the community of the activity (Humphrey and Lowe, 2017). Stuart *et al.* (2009) say that being a student representative or council member can also build confidence; they conclude that all engagement activities hold potential advantages for student employability.

The out-of-classroom experiences that positively influence student success include developing successful and supportive interpersonal interactions, which can be translated into the 'soft skills', such as teamwork, communication and problem-solving (Hunter, Tobolowsky and Gardner, 2010, p.30). Astin (1984) also states that social aspects of the student journey are important, outlining that peer relations are critical for support, for confirmation of one's identity and for providing opportunities for socialisation and persistence; he affirms peer support to be the single most important source of influence on growth and development. Students will be more successful in the second-year transition if they are engaged in inter-curricular and co-curricular initiatives that are delivered in partnership with staff members and other students (Hunter, Tobolowsky and Gardner, *op.cit.*, p.252). However, Nghia (2017, p.35) cautions that extra-curricular activities are often treated as 'extra' and disregarded by students and other stakeholders, emphasising that university leaders must communicate to students the importance of these roles in developing general skills. The benefits of extra-curricular activities, which scholars identify as valuable for skills development, is an area of activity in HE in the UK, with the introduction of the Higher Education Achievement Record (HEAR), discussed below (HEA, 2008).

Research has been conducted into barriers to involvement for students, such as time and money, or perceptions that an opportunity may not be for them (Alison, 2017, Shaw *et al.*, 2017). Some of these barriers can affect certain student groups – e.g. commuters, mature students and students of certain background (Cook-Sather *et al.*, 2018, Thomas *et al.*, 2017). However, recent research conducted by the HEFCE-funded REACT project did find, when researching three major co-curricular activities at the Universities of Exeter, Winchester and London Metropolitan, that the students involved in these activities reflected diverse groups deemed 'Widening Participation' by the universities involved (Sims *et al.*, 2017). For these activities, which were related to benefiting students' experiences at those universities, the main motivation for participating in the extra-curricular activities was for altruistic means (Sims *et al.*, 2017). However, there is little recent research into the wider student engagement in extra-curricular activities relating to how students deem whether an opportunity is worthy of their time commitment, especially young 'Millennial' and 'Generation Z' students. This small-scale research study hopes to inform: practice at the home university

of the REACT project; future research, by adding to the discourse relating to student development and engagement in HE.

## Methodology

As this was a highly-contextual study – which would act as initial research to begin a wider discussion about student allocation of time – the student-staff partnership team wished first to reach out to a large number of students to gain data from a significant portion of the student body. The priority of this study was to identify themes in an area the University had not researched before and about which little published material existed. As the study was conducted in a short timeframe, the team's research methods had to be efficient and offer such initial insights into the area as would inspire further systematic research. The methods used in this paper are exploratory and must be taken as very contextual and not representative of the entire student body at Winchester or in HE in the UK. However, the authors hope that these findings do offer some interesting insights and consequently stimulate research into this topic by HEIs other than Winchester.

### Method Phase 1: feedback exhibition

This study was conducted in two phases, as the research team wished first to explore a sample of current students' perspectives on how they decide to allocate their time. As an alternative to running yet another online survey (commonly regarded as a cause of survey fatigue (Porter *et al*, 2004) and likely to engage only students who find the link), the team decided to run a 'feedback exhibition' – like similar surveys in student-engagement practice, but conducted in person, to gather the responses of students at the exhibition on campus or in its vicinity. For this phase of the study, the team decided on the lines of investigation provided below. The respondents were asked:

1. How many hours a week do you allocate to activities beyond your course/degree?
2. How do you plan your time? (By day/ week/ month/ semester?)
3. Why did you come to university?
4. How many hours a week do you spend on your university work?
5. Why would you attend an extra-curricular activity?
6. Can you define what would make participating in an extra-curricular activity worthwhile for you?

Questions 1 and 2 were 'closed' questions, limited by category choices that might restrict responses by participants who allocated their time across the semester in a different, individual way. Questions 3-6 were more open and offered no response categories, allowing for unlimited prose responses, which were coded by the Student Fellow and Staff Partner as outlined below. There were few environmental controls for this informal research methodology, as students could complete the questions as a group and easily see what previous participants had written – consequently influencing how they responded themselves.

### Method Phase 2: interviews with identified students

For the second phase of the research following the 'feedback exhibition', the student partner wished to enrich this study by deliberately approaching six networks of his own, student

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peers also studying at Level 6 (final year) at the institution. He identified the engagement focus of three categories of students, as follows

- engaged in university work only;
- engaged in extra-curricular activities;
- engaged in external employment.

The participants were invited to take part in an interview, during which they were asked several questions about their perception/judgement of how they allocated their time at the University and how they decided what was 'worth their time'. These interviews were conducted in line with the University's Research and Ethics Policy, with all participants able to withdraw at any time (University of Winchester, 2014). The questions asked were as follows:

1. How many hours a week do you allocate to activities beyond your course/degree and why?
2. How do you prioritise your time in university life in general and why?
3. Why did you come to university?
4. What would encourage you to attend, across your degree, an extra-curricular activity that you previously would not have joined?
5. How do you think extra-curricular activities at Winchester could be better communicated?

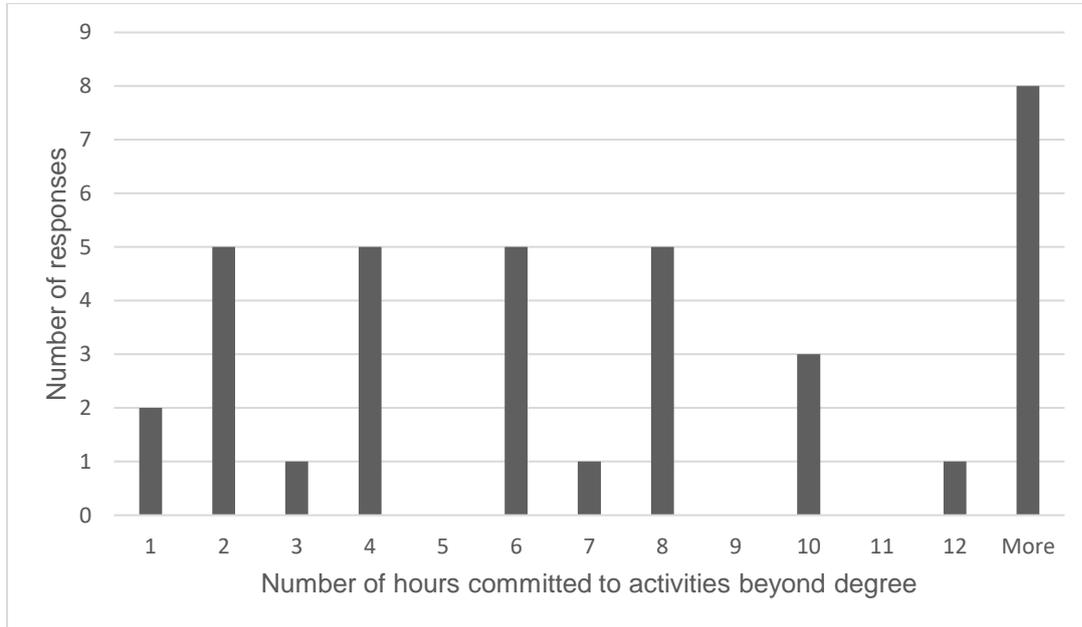
All of the above answers were transcribed by the partnership team, with all interviews conducted by the Student Fellow. These interviews were anonymised, but, as the participants had been selected and defined by the Student Fellow as belonging to one of the three categories, it should be remembered that, as stated above, this was a highly-contextual and individualised study which should be taken only as exploratory.

### Findings

For the feedback exhibition in Phase 1 of the research project, forty-nine students participated; they were attracted to the event either by an online announcement on the student Virtual Learning Environment announcement board or they were simply passing by the event. An initial limitation of this first phase worth noting is that this student group constitutes only a small sample of the wider institution (less than one per cent of the student body), yet the research team considered that a quick, on-campus drop-in research method would be the most efficient way to reach a diverse audience in a short time.

## Method Phase 1: feedback exhibition

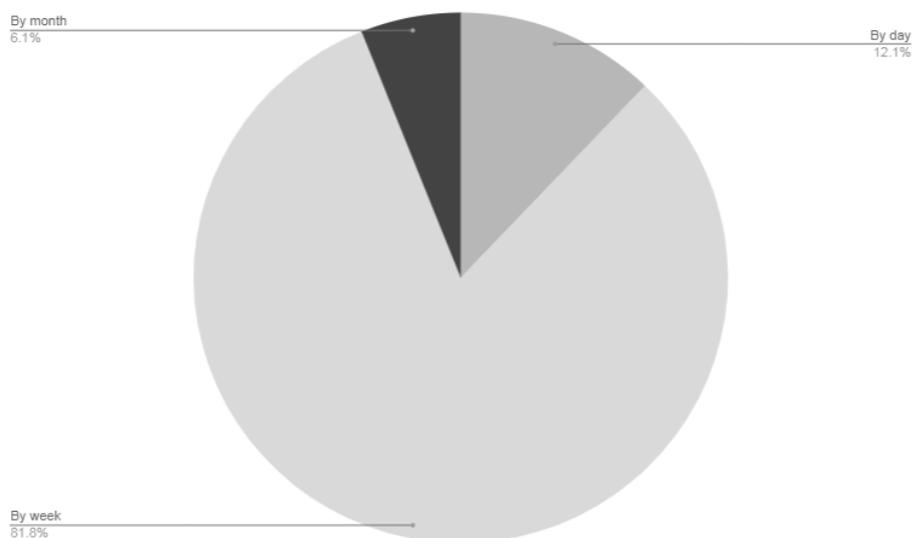
1. How many hours a week do you allocate to activities beyond your course/degree?



**Figure 1.** Number of hours committed to activities beyond degree

The data provided by asking this question indicate that the vast majority of students involved in the feedback session spend between two and eight hours a week on activities beyond their course or degree. In addition, at the highest response number here, students allocate more than twelve hours per week to activities beyond their degree – as an unclassified category with no limit.

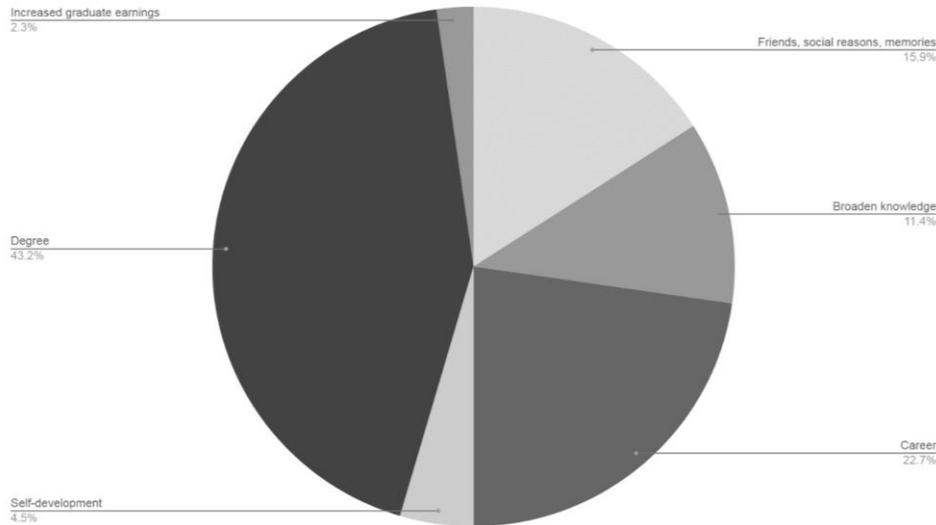
2. How do you plan your time?



**Figure 2.** Students planning of time (by semester, month, week, day)

The conclusions drawn from this data shows that a large proportion of students who participated in the survey plan their time at the University of Winchester by week; none of the respondents plans by semester. This would potentially allow for the incorporation of new events into their schedule should the need arise or an opportunity present itself.

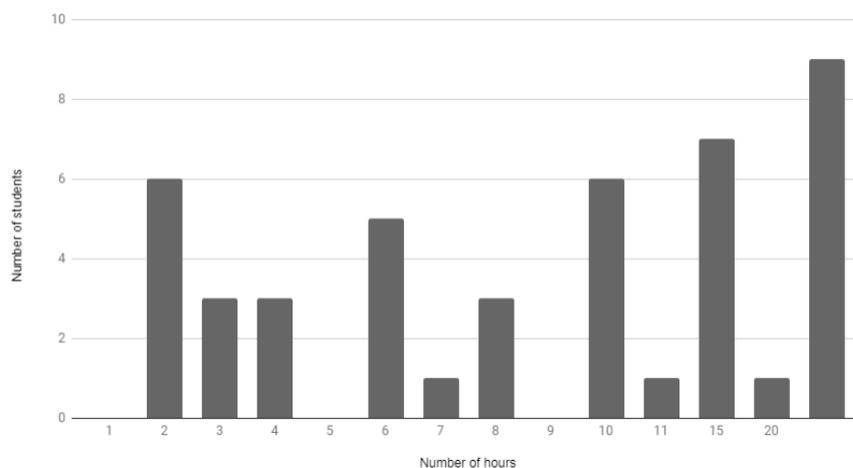
### 3. Why did you come to university?



**Figure 3.** Motivations for studying at University

The results found here show that nearly half of the people surveyed attended university: first, to gain a degree above anything else; second, to break into a particular career; third, to experience the university lifestyle (gaining friends, making memories and socialising). Aside from the social factors, the above findings align with those of recent UK studies – that students in the UK have an outcomes-focused motivation for HE study (Department for Education, 2018, Unite, 2017, UUK 2017).

### 4. How many hours a week do you spend on your University work?

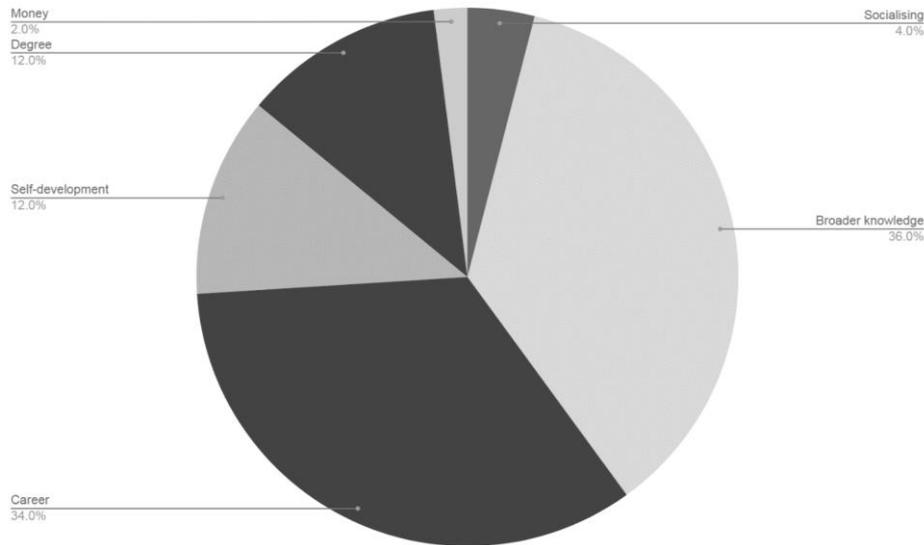


**Figure 4.** Number of hours allocated to university work per week

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The spectrum of time spent on university work in this study is broad and without consistency. This could be down to countless personal and disciplinary factors, including the variety of courses, the amount of effort an individual puts in within the allotted time or whether or not the student has additional commitments.

### 5. Why would you attend an extra-curricular activity?



**Figure 5.** Motivations for engagement in extra-curricular activities

Most participants agreed during this question that the reason for attending an extra-curricular activity was either to improve their career prospects or to increase their broader knowledge of the subject. Students also considered their self-development and impacts on their degree; social aspects and money were very low priorities for this question.

### 6. Can you define what would make participating in an extra-curricular activity worthwhile for you?

| Code Ref | Answer Given:                         | No of Responses: |
|----------|---------------------------------------|------------------|
| 1        | An effective use of time              | 4                |
| 2        | An enjoyable or meaningful experience | 12               |
| 3        | Beneficial for development            | 12               |
| 4        | A feeling of accomplishment           | 6                |
| 5        | Promise of material or financial gain | 2                |
| 6        | Furthering of academic progress       | 6                |
| 7        | Enhancement of future job prospects   | 7                |

**Figure 6.** Definitions for worthwhile extra-curricular activities

From the sample, these students defined an extra-curricular activity as worthwhile when it was enjoyable and when they perceived it to be beneficial to their development by its relation to their chosen course or current work. In addition, seven students responded that it was worth their time when their future job prospects were enhanced by the activity's provision of experience or transferable skills, or when they felt a feeling of accomplishment afterwards or when it in some way furthered their academic progress. Finally, only a small proportion of students categorised were motivated simply by financial gain in the form of financial benefit or vouchers.

### Method Phase 2: interviews with identified students

For the purpose of the next phase of the project, the partnership team outlined that it would be useful to field varied participants for interviews about their perceptions of how students allocate their time. The student partner identified six participants who, he observed, made up two of each of the categories identified by the Student Fellow (partner). The findings from the transcribed interview responses are below:

| Participants | Identified Category of Involvement     |
|--------------|--|
| 2 (1 & 5)    | university work only                   |
| 2 (2 & 3)    | engaged in extra-curricular activities |
| 2 (4 & 6)    | engaged in external employment         |

### Time allocated to activities beyond their degree and why

In the feedback exhibition, 50.3% of participants reported that they allocated ten or more hours a week to their university and an average spread between two and eight hours a week to extra-curricular or other activities beyond their degree. The two participants who were 'engaged in extra-curricular activities' were able to offer more information - one student reported spending two hours on a set peer-mentoring activity and the other spoke about how the amount of time varied "*week to week*", depending on what development events were on. Of the students who were identified as 'engaged in university work', one was "*mainly focussing on university work*" and the other committed to no extra-curricular activities weekly, though sometimes might do if "*something does pop up*". One of the participants who was 'engaged in external employment' spent all of the time working so "*never [had] time to go out or do anything fun*". The other, however, did answer "*ten hours*" to this question when there were "*gaps*" but did not mention to which activity this time was allocated.

## Prioritising time

The research team was interested in investigating further how students prioritised their time at university in general and why. In Phase 1 of the research project, 53.3% of students stated that they allocated at least ten hours a week to their degree studies and 81.1% of participants allocated their time by week, rather than day, month or semester. In Phase 2, those participants 'engaged in extra-curricular activities' stated that "*the foremost thing is academic study*", but generally "*a few hours over a day*", which could include a day off or occur during one or two evenings a week, which was the same for both participants. As for the two students defined as 'engaged in external employment', both reported that they conducted tasks related to their studies around their work, which itself could get in the way. One participant's comments included: "*hardly get it covered*"; "*need the money so it takes priority*". The other participant who prioritised external work said that the job "*gets in my way, I can't really do anything about it*". The two participants who were identified as 'engaged in their university work only' were able to give clear, planned and direct answers to this question, showing their organisation and commitment to study. For example, one responded: "*couple of hours in the library each day, some in the afternoon, chill out in the evening and then work some Sundays and have Saturday free*"; and the other: "*spend the days doing uni work then give myself the evening free and then weekend tends to be dissertation*". This clear response accords with the defined category of these students and highlights their central focus on their programme of study, whereas the other four participants were not able to provide the same level of detail.

## Motivation for HE study

As stated in the literature and recent sector reports, there is a growing emphasis on an outcomes-based motivation for studying at HE in the UK. In the first phase of this research project, 29.5% of participants identified with an outcomes-based motivation to study at HE (money, career, self-development) and, if the 'attaining a degree' answer is included (43.2%), the outcome-based motivation of the first phase equals a majority of 72.7%. Phase 2 follows this trend, with five out of six participants referencing outcomes-based motivations, including "*better job prospects*" and with half (three out six) referencing financial gains in future life, explaining that they did a degree "*to make money*". Only one participant, who actually fell into the 'university work only' category, came to University because the discipline was a personal "*passion...to have more of a social life and make friends*". So, in Phase 2, motivations for university do not follow a particular trend in comparisons between those 'engaged in university work only', those 'engaged in external employment' and those 'engaged in extra-curricular activities'.

## Hooks for new opportunities

In Phase 2, the participants were asked what would encourage them to attend an extra-curricular activity that they previously would not have joined. The staff partner was especially interested in this question, having his portfolio for raising overall student engagement in extra-curricular and developmental opportunities at the institution. When a similar question was asked in Phase 1, concerning motivations for opportunities, only 4% of participants specified that they would join an opportunity for social reasons or to make friends, while the remaining 96% stated reasons such as gaining broader knowledge (36%), complementing their degree (34%), career development (12%) and self-development (12%). Together, these

four categories alone, equating to 94%, suggest that a perceived outcome was core to the value of an extra-curricular opportunity, yet, interestingly, only 2% stated financial incentive. In Phase 2, two out of six of the participants, who were both in the 'engaged in extra-curricular activities' group, valued an opportunity which: they "*gain something from*", will "*make my CV better*" and "*helps with careers*", all following the trend of Phase 1. However, the other participants, two of whom were in the category 'engaged in external employment', stated that financial reasons were motivating factors. One participant would be interested if it "*didn't cost anything*" and the other stated that "*it [the activity] would have to be really significant or well paid*", suggesting that financial matters were a consideration for those in work. In the 'university work only' category, by contrast, one participant said that a benefit would be "*meeting people*" and the other would become involved in a new activity if "*sure that it's not going to impact on time*". Many universities, inspired by the private customer-focused sector, have started to place students in labelled groups known as 'tribes', at which marketing may be targeted with appropriate hooks (Loughborough Student Union, 2018).

### **Enhancing communication of extra-curricular activities at Winchester**

The research team found in Phase 1 that tangible steps for communicating extra-curricular activities were not identified beyond language, so it posed a question to students about communication steps. All six participants mentioned a desire for more visual material in on-campus posters, in lectures and on social media: "*then you can actually see, like you have actual images of what's going on*". Some said that they often deleted emails without reading them. Three out of six participants referred to problems with communicating by email only and suggested more traditional methods of communication, such as pin boards and simple lists of opportunities. Across the six participants, there were no clear variations or parallels between the three identified student groups.

### **Final considerations and recommendations**

This research paper began by seeking to investigate the hooks, barriers and considerations a sample of students consider when committing time to extra-curricular activities. Initially, the authors looked at those trends relating to students entering HE as had been identified in recent reports, which overwhelmingly stated that students favour such outcomes as graduate-level employment roles (Department for Education, 2018, Unite, 2017, UUK 2017). Both investigative phases of this project corroborated these identified trends. The outcomes-based motivation for student engagement in extra-curricular activities is evident in the study, as part of what students consider in allocating time to additional activities, for students said that they would get involved if it benefited their portfolio. However, it must be recognised that both phases of this research are unreliable as the number of participants is too small to be representative of institutional voice. Nevertheless, some of the team's findings may be helpful to student engagement/development practitioners, who might, for example, usefully deploy visual promotion methods to attract students, at the same time 1) ensuring that advertised opportunity outcomes are made explicit and 2) conveying to students that the activity has been carefully considered in the context of such competing priorities as students' university studies and external paid employment. From the two phases of the research and reflections of the student-staff partnership research team come the following recommendations for colleagues or student leaders wishing to engage students:

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- Outline the benefits to the participant from the beginning (e.g. enjoyment, skill development, reward);
- Specify relevance to future careers, future job applications and portfolio;
- Be aware that students have, for various reasons, limited time available (external employment, university studies, caring responsibilities etc.); therefore, make opportunities tailored or flexible to different audiences;
- Funding or similar financial inducements could be made to offer to people who need to work to fund their degree;
- Relevance to the chosen degree or pathway can help to appeal to specific students who may be more focused on their discipline/studies;
- Many students plan their time by week and so need enough notice – but not months of notice;
- Consider traditional, easily-absorbed promotional methods – such as leaflets or other simple publicity materials – for every opportunity/activity, to identify items of interest to individuals.

The research team valued this small-scale research project which has begun to inform practice and wider discussion at the University of Winchester. Since this project has been conducted, the University has sought to achieve greater clarity about student opportunities by such methods as creating simple list-style publicity materials and/or web pages, where students can browse extra-curricular opportunities at their leisure and email if they wish to find out more. The Centre for Student Engagement has also disseminated this research at an internal conference relating to educational development to inform other practitioners of the above recommendations. The student-staff partnership research team in this project enabled a successful project with mixed, mutually-enriching perspectives. The staff partner reflected that, since his own time as a student in HE, student motivations for involvement – and even HE itself – have shifted and now place great emphasis on outcomes. This observation emphasises the need for continuing research and reflection to ensure that opportunities/activities are worded appropriately, so as to engage current students in a university setting.

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