

‘Bubbles of Perspective’: A reflection on Higher Education and the REACT Project

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As a student, my first experiences of ‘student engagement’ mainly came about from running for office at Winchester Student Union. Having been through three years as an undergraduate Drama student, I understood that engaging your audience is the most important thing to get yourself heard. Running for an elected position within Winchester Student Union scratched that particular itch; however, this veered strongly away from traditional performances in that I had to put *myself*, rather than a character, out there and there was no stage to separate me from my ‘audience’. In a slightly more academic sense, I also spent my undergraduate time as a Student Academic Representative (Student Rep) for my course. On numerous occasions, I was able to speak with my peers about their issues and then relay those to our lecturers to ensure that improvements were always being made. It felt good to be the ‘go-to person’ and I always took pride in my role as a Student Rep. However, that was just a drop in the pond compared to the work that must be put in when one is the Vice-President, Education (VP, Ed), and representing the academic judgement for over 7000 students.

When I was first introduced to REACT (Realising Engagement through Active Culture Transformation), I was intrigued as to what the project was all about. The thought “It’s been government funded, so it must be important.” led me to do my own research into the project. I delved into the programme I had been given in order to find out what the team had been working on. But it wasn’t until I met with the first REACT Steering Group in early September, 2016 that I was, admittedly, overwhelmed by the sheer scale of the project. However, the team made me feel very welcome and it did not take me long to feel comfortable and, more specifically, able to give my views openly.

On reflection, I believe this is where the seeds of this piece were sown, as I started to think about my place in the wider environment of Higher Education and what I wanted to bring to it. As part of my position as VP, Ed, I have had the opportunity to attend a number of conferences run by the National Union of Students (NUS), Guild Higher Education (Guild HE) and others. I have always felt that my place there was one of a reflective one. Throughout, I have looked at discussions regarding the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) (BIS, 2016) and the continued efforts to pass the Higher Education Bill of the present Minister of State for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation, Jo Johnson. When the TEF (BIS, 2016) was announced, there were debates within the NUS about whether to boycott or sabotage the National Student Survey (NSS) and I wrote an article in my first few months in office stating that we would not encourage either action. This involved discussions with our Vice Chancellor and attending working groups within the NUS.

And then there is the matter of internal politics within the environment of Winchester. Discussions with a colleague have led me to adopt the phrase ‘The Winchester Bubble.’ This looks at how many individuals, staff and students alike, take the environment we are in to be the be-all and end-all. I would argue that one’s perspective whilst in this ‘bubble’ can sometimes skew our way of looking at the world. I would also argue that this is not the only bubble to exist. In fact I believe there could be at least five of these bubbles:

‘The Personal Bubble’

This bubble concerns itself with an individual’s immediate area, friendships, housemates, relationships. This bubble has the closest relationship with...

‘The Winchester Bubble’ / ‘The University Bubble’

As stated before, this concerns itself mainly with the events and issues within Winchester and, in particular, the University. This is where I most try to focus my attention, whilst at the same time keeping in mind the final bubble (see ‘World Bubble’). Furthermore, this bubble can be a part of many within the university environment. It is difficult to look outside this particular bubble, sometimes, as it is an important part of people’s lives. It can, however, change a person’s perspective when looking the following.

‘The NUS / Higher Education Bubble’

Many people will not have any contact with this particular bubble, but, as a part of the NUS myself - via Winchester Student Union’s affiliation - and simply being part of the world of higher education, this is extremely important to me and to many of my colleagues. When looking at this bubble, many can forget about the previous two. I found myself questioning some discussions that other Education officers had, for they seemed to be forgetting about the implications this would have for the university they had come from or even for other officers. It felt, in some instances, that some Sabbatical officers did not think about the wider implications and that others could not follow suit in their line of thinking.

‘The REACT Bubble’

Within these bubbles there can be any number of off-shoots, particularly when they begin to grow in size. I put REACT in the NUS/Higher Education section because it deals with Higher Education not only in a broad sense, but also very specifically, owing to the project’s concentration on ‘hard to reach’ students. Because of my previous argument that many people do not have contact with the ‘University’ bubble, I believe that this may be a contributing factor as to why many students fall into the ‘hard to reach’ category.

‘The Country/Government Bubble’

This bubble looks at the wider issues facing the country such as Brexit, but also government policy that either directly or indirectly relates to universities and students such the Higher Education and Research Act and the Teaching Excellence Framework. Of course, elements of this bubble crossover with or influence the previously listed bubbles. Those within this bubble are usually higher up within particular institutions or those who are looking to take a further career in politics or governmental work. I would argue that many students do not take a firm look at this bubble, but have at least a vague knowledge and understanding of it.

‘The World Bubble’

The final and, some could argue, most accessible bubble. This looks at the world: global politics, the lives of all of us as human beings. It is closest to the personal bubble, as it does not concern itself with the intricacies of politics, policies and politicians, but, rather, what will be best for the world that we inhabit?

Many of these bubbles intersect and intertwine; for example, one may be thinking about one’s own ‘Personal Bubble’ but will actually have the ‘World Bubble’ in mind without realising. Furthermore, this is a brief and personal view as to the perspectives that we take when looking at the world and ones that I tried to think about when discussing how REACT could take its work forward. How can we improve the lives of ‘hard to reach’ students when looking through each of these perspectives? How can we take advantage of each of them and ensure that we don’t forget how our actions can affect the others?

Theme 1: Introduction

To conclude, I most certainly do not have the answer to the previous questions, but I would always advise those who are reading to remember this: always remember your own perspective and what 'bubble' that may land in; consider what will be best for what you want and what someone else may want and, if there is a way by which it can be beneficial for both, then do that. My time as a VP, Ed has been an incredibly informative. I have, however, always tried to remain present and not jump around all of these 'bubbles'. Having a coherent perspective is necessary for someone in my position and I pride myself on being able to use a strong and calm perspective to get this for the students here at Winchester. To that end, it is imperative that we give students more avenues, like REACT, so that they can seek help, and prevent them becoming 'hard to reach'. Allowing those from each of the bubbles of perspective to be on the lookout and accessible to those who are 'hard to reach' would allow them to receive the help they need. This may require those in each of the bubbles to work together in order to ensure that this happens.

Reference list

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2016) *Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice*. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/523546/bis-16-265-success-as-a-knowledge-economy-web.pdf (Accessed: 13 June 2017).