

Manchester in Partnership - A reflective evaluation of partnership activities to enhance student engagement and institutional dialogue.

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Organisational and historical context

Almost 40,000 students study at The University of Manchester, spanning three Faculties (Biology, Medicine and Health / Humanities / Science and Engineering). The population of each of these Faculties exceeds that of the entirety of some United Kingdom (UK) institutions and each School within the Faculties has an individual identity. There are over 10,000 international (non-UK/European Union) students, with a variety of modes of study (full/part time, undergraduate, postgraduate taught, postgraduate research, campus, distance learning). The University has three core goals: Research, Teaching and Learning and Social Responsibility (The University of Manchester, 2017a); any new activity needs to identify clearly how it aligns to one or more of these.

The Students' Union, vocal and well-respected on campus, is developing, within the academic learning community, a partnership role quite unlike the more mature relationships celebrated by both itself and the institution, such as those concerned with volunteering, student-led teaching awards, Halls of Residence Resident Associations/Junior Common Rooms and widening access (University of Manchester, 2017b). In addition, part of UMSU's strategy is to become experts in the lives of students studying and living at Manchester and a key aspect of this is to develop new ways of working with and for students to capture their opinion.

Central to the rationale for the REACT project was maximising feedback emerging from student-staff collaborations on the design and delivery of specific activities or projects. This was underpinned by the Union's values, which enshrine the concept of 'student-led', ensuring students are at the heart of all activity.

Understanding a single model of student engagement is challenging. The University and Students' Union continue to develop models of partnership activity to support student engagement within the learning and teaching / student experience agenda. A joint review of 'student engagement' (The University of Manchester, 2017c) proposed a definition and distinct 'spheres' of student engagement. Integral to this definition is the need for students *as well as* staff to engage in student engagement practice and processes. This led to a University and Union approach to 'Institutional Dialogue' (Ody and Carey, 2016), which identified a range of mechanisms through which students and staff can work together to inform change. It also ensures a consistent approach across our wide variety of disciplines. These mechanisms range from the conventional, such as surveying students about their course or learning experience, to the more innovative, such as co-facilitated workshops and Student Advisory Boards that ensure that the student voice informs and directs strategic projects and developments. This provided the scope for students and staff in Schools, Faculties and central teams to adapt local practices where necessary whilst maintaining a level of equity of student experience.

Defining 'hard to reach' within two themes

In building a broader Manchester community, the wider project of 'Manchester in Partnership' acknowledges not only 'hard to reach' students - including, but not exclusively, those cited in Thomas (2017) - but also 'hard to reach' staff. The project team developed its view of 'hard to reach' to include not only students who do not engage with specific services or opportunities but also both students and staff who are at the periphery of engagement,

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with an intention of drawing these groups closer into specific teaching and learning activity. Consequently, the project identified two themes of activity:

Theme 1: Those [students] who didn't click through to greater depth within the University's online student portal (*MyManchester*)

Theme 2: Those [staff and students] who were not usually 'in the room' with regard to 'teaching and learning' discussions.

The rest of this evaluative case study will separate the two themes and then chart the development, evaluation and lessons learnt within these two distinct but complementary themes.

Theme 1 - Students as Project Researchers / Consultants.

Student input has been central to the development of *MyManchester* (a one-stop, online portal for all student needs - e.g. timetables, exam results, extra-curricular opportunities, virtual learning environment, central login etc.) since its inception in 2011, instigated by the Director for the Student Experience. This input continued when a major upgrade of the portal was carried out in 2014 and a Student Advisory Board was established to provide continuing feedback into this strategic University project. The new portal was planned to provide access to all the necessary and appropriate online services (Library loans, Blackboard, Student Services, Online Skills Development workshops etc.) via a single sign-on. It was also intended as a coordinated signpost to the breadth of face-to-face opportunities and services available: Volunteering, Peer Support, Counselling, Societies, Interdisciplinary College and Sports, to name but a few.

In a pilot exercise as part of the REACT project, and in accordance with the previously-mentioned 'Institutional Dialogue' work, students as researchers (academic partners, change agents) were deployed to address questions including:

- What services/opportunities students are using and why?
- What is preventing students from making use of the services?
- How could engagement with services and opportunities be improved?

Initially, in this theme, 'hard to reach' was defined as those students who did not 'click through' in response to the opportunities presented to them via the portal and its associated communication channels, such as the regular *MyManchester* Newsletter/email. At the launch of the project with the project sponsor (Director for the Student Experience), this definition broadened to include those not opting into face-to-face engagements as well.

The activity partnered students from different discipline backgrounds to carry out research into the use of opportunities and services across campus. The aim was to gain a greater understanding of the issues surrounding student engagement with these services. The student researchers explored the levels of engagement with the different services that the University offers, (initially via *MyManchester*, but also associated face-to-face services) and were seeking to discover the reasons why some students either feel unable to, or choose not to, engage and make use of the wide range of opportunities 'behind' the initial pages of *MyManchester*. Outcomes from the project were intended to be twofold: (i) to encourage students to participate more fully in the range of opportunities and, (ii) to enhance the Researchers' personal/professional development and employability.

The timescales of the upgraded portal changed over the duration of the Student Researcher activity and it meant that all work carried out was on the old portal experience. Consequently, some of the recommendations suggested by the students were already planned in the new portal or were able to be incorporated into the finished product.

Theme 2 – “Talking about Teaching and Learning (TATL)”

TATLs are teaching and learning ‘discussion sessions’ or ‘seminars’ providing opportunities for dialogue to explore and acknowledge a range of voices and positions on shared issues. They foster a broader understanding of opinions, whilst highlighting opportunities for closer collaboration on partnership-related issues.

TATLs take the form of a series open-invite seminars for staff (academic staff and professional services) and students, from any area of the University and Union, providing dedicated time for discussion of broader topics with impact on the learning experience; they have the potential to inform opinion, position, policy and process. The topics decided upon when the series was planned included sector-wide and local matters such as ‘Learning through Research’ (The University of Manchester, 2017d), Learning Gain (HEFCE, 2017) and the Green Paper on Higher Education (BIS, 2015).

In this theme, the ‘hard to reach’ were defined as both students and staff who were ‘somewhat’ engaged in the teaching and learning agenda. The sessions were intended to provide an ‘easy route’ for further engagement and also, it was hoped, the amplification of voices not normally heard within such environments. Engaged students were often referred to as ‘usual suspects’ and, as such, the project wanted to target the ‘unusual suspects’. On reflection, there were two subtleties connected to this theme: first, targeting those individuals who might hold a valid opinion, but either shy away from, or do not see, an opportunity to contribute to discussions (unusual suspects in unusual places); second, targeting those individuals who might, because of their role or interest, be involved in the conversation, but, owing to the size of the organisation, might not be in the right place to contribute to discussions (usual suspects in unusual places).

It is worth noting that The University of Manchester has many ways for students and staff to contribute their voices to teaching, learning and student experience developments. However, these subtleties were observed through an attempt at engaging a broader range of individuals within different spaces for discussion.

Sector practice

Since project leads were very aware of and committed to the sector-wide narrative regarding student engagement (Bryson, 2014) a conscious decision was made to ensure activity aligned with, and utilised, such models, theories and principles. The project intended to cascade awareness and adoption of student engagement practice across both organisations, particularly relating to students’ collaborating on learning interventions. Previous staff involvement in activity relating to emerging student roles within pedagogical development and student-staff partnership (Freeman *et al*, 2013), Supplemental Instruction/Peer Support (Ody and Carey, 2013a) and institutional and students’ union relationships (Chapman *et al*, 2012 and Lu Guan *et al*, 2015) provided a sound basis for the project’s alignment with current commentary about sector practice.

From the outset, discussion focused upon the ‘Institutional Dialogue’ (ID) project (Ody and Carey, 2016). This project defined approaches about how the institution talks, communicates and behaves within the context of effecting change. It aimed to build momentum for both student (and staff) engagement in all areas of university life through partnered discussions on wide-ranging issues. This is achieved through a variety of methods, underpinned by a set of principles. In particular, the ID project was interested in the way in which ID is considered as a whole-approach to the engagement of student voices rather than just a set of discrete methods in specific student engagement projects and activity.

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Approaches to, and the benefits of, student engagement and partnership within HE are well documented (Dunne and Owen, 2013), as are the roles that students now play on campus and in and around the curriculum (Dunne and Zandstra, 2011 and Brand *et al*, 2013). The researchers envisaged that this body of understanding together with complementary frameworks such as the Student Engagement Partnership's Ten Principles of Student Engagement (TSEP, 2015) and the Higher Education Academy's model depicting the dimensions of student engagement (Healey *et al*, 2014) would provide a strong rationale for working towards a collaborative approach, on several levels of the institution, to engage 'hard to reach' students within a contemporary student engagement lens. In particular, the changing role and identity of students on campus (Ody and Carey, 2013b) and the functions they adopted underpinned theme one, whilst the development of a learning community (Nygard *et al*, 2013) underpinned theme two.

Benefits

It was hoped that benefits of such an approach would mirror similar initiatives impacting on a number of levels (Brand *et al*, 2013); nominally:

for staff:

1. Increasing the sense of partnership and community through increased engagement with students;
2. Enhancing communication methods, such as giving quick, relevant and instant feedback;
3. Providing an insight into the student life (and vice-versa) and a wider (sometimes new) perspective on the student experience;
4. Feedback for professional development and providing an opportunity for reflection and a 'sense check' on work.

for students:

1. The ability to effect change and have their voice heard;
2. Improving transferable skills whilst improving the student experience;
3. Providing a range of perspectives into decision-making and breaking down barriers to demonstrate effective communication;
4. Creation of a new student role on campus for future students to adopt.

for the institution and union:

1. Further evidence as to the impact and benefit of partnership working between individuals and bodies;
2. Cross-fertilisation of skills and approaches for students' benefit;
3. Enhanced decision-making with the student at the heart;
4. More relevant and accessible information as to the thoughts of students, in particular hard-to-reach students;
5. Further evidence to complement existing projects supporting students.

Implementation / internal practice

The REACT project established a cross-university and union project team, with a number of key individuals from the learning and teaching environment. It comprised:

- Education Officer – UMSU;
- Director of Student Support and Involvement – UMSU;
- Teaching and Learning Manager – UoM;
- Teaching and Learning Manager / Teaching and Learning Adviser (Student Engagement) – UoM;
- Student Engagement Graduate Intern – UoM.

This group consulted with wider university and UMSU colleagues as needed, including the student researchers from theme 1 and contributed to the University's Teaching and Learning

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Group (a group chaired by the University's Vice President Teaching, Learning and Students).

Table 1 provides a breakdown of the timeline and associated milestones of the implementation of both themes of the REACT project.

As intended, the REACT project generated a number of 'follow-on' projects within the University and Union and work has developed from the initial bid in a number of new and exciting ways, as shown in Diagram 1; these include an alumni-funded 'Students as researchers' project series, initial groundwork to develop Student Review teams within schools and faculties, continuation of work related to institutional dialogue, updating of the student charter and remodelling student representation. Ultimately, the REACT project has enabled a consolidation of previous student engagement work and acted as a catalyst for further student representation and quality assurance/enhancement work, such as a subsequent HEFCE-funded TSEP project regarding Annual Provider Reviews. It has also added to the body of evidence about student-staff partnership and institutional-union collaboration.

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	Overview	What we did	Resources	How it developed	Student Engagement Principles / Practice
<p>Theme 1: “<i>MyManchester Online Portal</i>”</p> <p>‘Hard to reach’ defined as those who don’t click further to engage with the opportunities showcased in <i>MyManchester</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>MyManchester</i> online student portal ● Showcases all services and opportunities ● Concerns some students do not ‘click through’ therefore miss out opportunities and benefits 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Advertised ‘Students as Researcher’ positions ● Recruited 12 students for 2 project teams ● Paid employment (Ambassador scale ~£7.5/hour) ● Broad project vision, aim and attributes defined ● Commissioned students to narrow focus and research as they determined appropriate ● Co-developed 11 week timeline of activity including 4 check-ins and final presentation ● Co-agreed final format 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Employment budget ● Time dedicated to workshop and briefings ● Project management from Teaching and Learning Support Office (TLSO) and University of Manchester Students’ Union (UMSU) ● Incentives for focus groups / survey respondents ● Online surveys ● Room space for workshops and catch ups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 352 students surveyed online / iPads via street teams ● 70 students via 6 focus groups/consultations ● 2 individual interviews ● Over a 12 week period a total of 370 of hours were undertaken by the core group of 11, with an average of 32 hours per person 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Co-designed parameters of research ● Student-led delivery, emphasis on the student voice leading project ● Prescribed shift of power, control and identity between staff and students ● Equal power and status between staff and students ● Student as Researcher identity being documented, formalised and promoted ● Uphold the HEA Values of Partnership (Healey <i>et al.</i>, 2014) and Institutional Dialogue project (UoM, 2017) ● Focus on product as well as process, particularly experience and impact on participants
<p>Theme 2: “<i>Talking about Teaching and Learning (TATLs)</i>”</p> <p>‘Hard to reach’ defined as those students and staff that do not normally mix or engage with T&L agenda, the ‘unusual suspects’</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Informal space for conversations outside of committee structure ● Identification of unusual suspects to attend, both staff and students ● Collaborative and discursive to shape future work ● To develop a learning community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Identified an initial ‘hot-topic’ to discuss in a semi-facilitated environment (being the Green Paper/Teaching Excellent Framework) ● Identified student and staff ‘thought leaders’ to offer perspectives ● Agreed a flexible structure to guide discussion and obtain feedback, using UoM/UMSU facilitators ● Agreed future topics of discussion of mutual interest and benefit (being Student Charter and Student Representation) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Venue space ● Facilitators ● Significant time commitment from session leads ● Input / stimulus from ‘thought leaders’ ● Hospitality for attendee ● Gatekeepers within schools, services and student groups for broader promotion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 150 staff and students engaged over 3 TATLs ● Outcomes feeding into formal Student Charter paper, development of TEF responses as well as further student representation development work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Equal voice and co-ownership between staff and students ● Development of a learning community where staff and students collaborate and produce learning in partnership ● Students feeding into institutional dialogue and policy development ● Students are able to influence change around them ● Uphold the HEA Values of Partnership (Healey <i>et al.</i>, 2014) and Institutional Dialogue project (UoM, 2017)

Table 1 - Manchester In Partnership REACT project overview

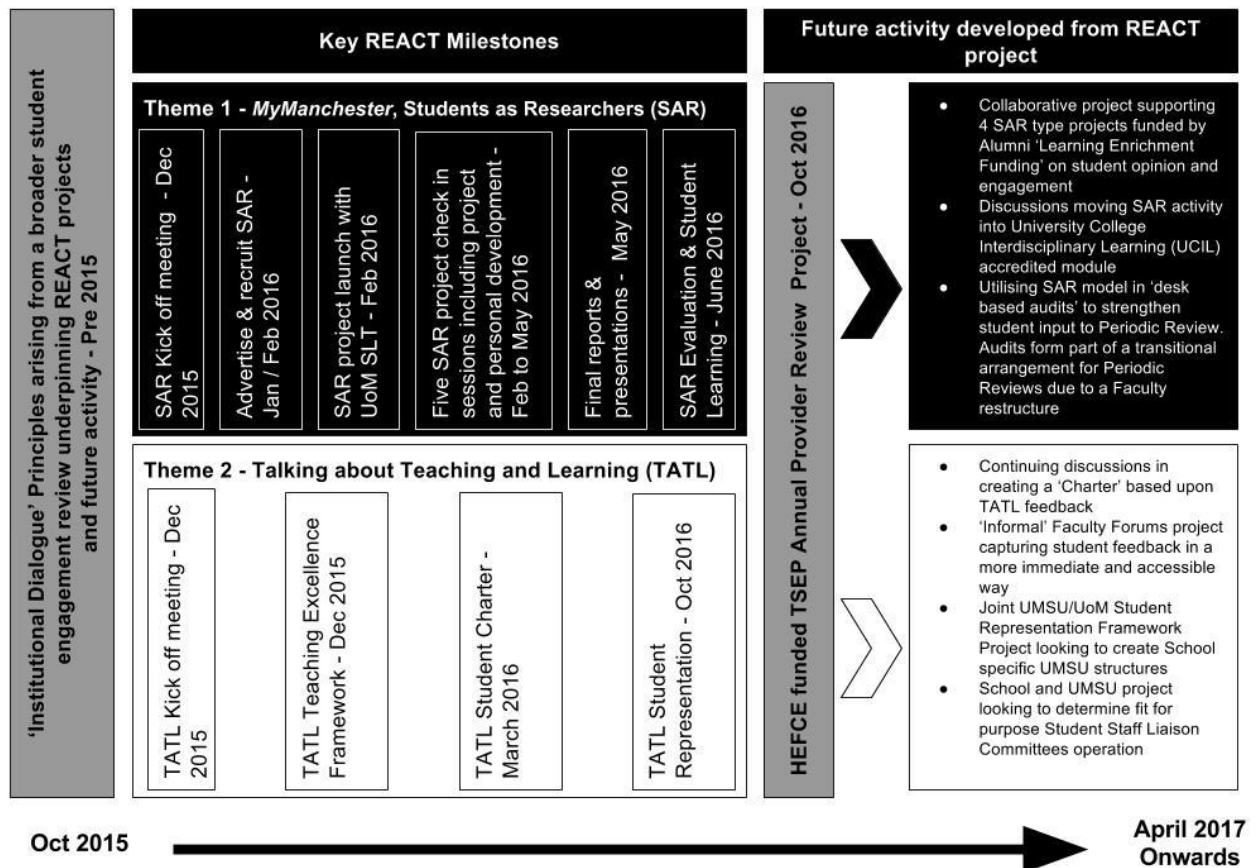


Diagram 1 – MyManchester REACT Timeline

Outcomes - Theme 1

The findings from 'What is preventing students' making use of the services?' allowed the group of student researchers to address how engagement with these opportunities could be improved and to produce recommendations to increase involvement in the future. As part of the process, the student researchers worked in two multi-disciplinary teams and reported their findings via a full project report and a presentation at an event attended by senior University and Union staff and student officers. Supported by student-generated comments from the original reports, this section will summarise the reasons why students do not appear to engage with the services and opportunities available to them outside their course, as revealed by the research. Not surprisingly, the student researchers neither found a magic bullet to 'solve' the engagement issue nor identified major issues with the *MyManchester* portal. It should be noted that this research was undertaken in relation to student involvement with the old *MyManchester*, but, as previously mentioned, the recommendations from the research findings have been incorporated into the update and re-design of the new student portal. The project research therefore served as an affirmation of the new features, content and functionality of *MyManchester* as well as of continuing work in Student Communications.

Findings and recommendations from the two project teams broadly fell into two areas: (i) practical and structural, with the site itself and (ii) relational and interpersonal, with regard to users and student types.

Practically, key areas identified included:

- unified services/location/calendar: "It would be so much easier if everything was in one place";

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- complexity of the *MyManchester* portal: it was highlighted that some students didn't access many areas of the portal because "*there were just too many tabs*";
- perception that societies are inactive / not knowing where to find a list of active societies;
- navigating a seemingly overwhelming amount of emails/information from the various services areas/opportunities across UoM/UMSU;
- a flowchart or 'bank' of activities/resources available across UoM/UMSU to support students in navigating the options available to them.

However, it was the relational aspects of engagement that, whilst not 'groundbreaking', provided the more interesting and subtle insights, relating to both specific groups of students and to a wider cohort.

- International students – there is a desire to get involved in wider activity outside their national groups. Those surveyed in the project perceived an assumption of 'sticking' with societies specific to own culture. "*They were eager to interact with home students in societies and have the opportunity to do home stays when they are not studying*". Other international [non-EU] students commented that their engagement levels decreased over time after "*realising*" a degree gained in the UK would be "*enough to give them a competitive advantage in the job market*";
- The 'power of peers' featured heavily, both in the conversations and recommendations of friends and in developing 'Engagement Advocates' who can liaise in a more informal, yet targeted role in the groups where disengagement is seen to be a problem. As one group said: "*Engaged students have friends who are disengaged, use the students who are engaged to lead engagement initiatives...students feel more comfortable talking to other students about University in general rather than a staff member.*" An example of this was using Year 2 students to run personalised introductions to services such as the '*MyManchester*' portal and Blackboard;
- Encouraging students to take 'the first step' was a key barrier to engagement, as the researchers found that a decision to engage with services was based on previous experience as well as others' recommendations. Students could identify the benefits of student engagement, but this was not enough to guarantee their involvement in university services and activities;
- The researchers were keen to highlight that good engagement is more than just beneficial for study: "*It's really good for mental health...being constantly engaged...makes you feel you are a part of something*";
- Post-graduate / Mature students did not feel that Welcome Week activities or societies and student groups were targeted to them and consequently a sense of "*not belonging*" was perpetuated;
- Post-graduate students suggested that there was an assumption that they had no time for anything other than study and so societies and events were not targeted for them and little effort was made to involve them. [Note: this is a key area of development for both the University and Students' Union, with bespoke postgraduate mentoring schemes being developed, giving specific support to student societies to develop a postgraduate engagement 'strategy'].

As participants in the project, the students involved in this project as researchers have described their experiences in an extremely positive and constructive manner, with their experience explored further in the evaluation section.

The project itself, as well as the research findings, has also benefited UoM and UMSU, with many of the recommendations being taken on board by the University. In particular, many recommendations were already in progress as part of the updated portal, including a resource bank of opportunities and services (including one-off events, online support functions and one-to-one/group workshops).

Outcomes - Theme 2

Theme two had less defined outcomes, given they were conversational in nature and specifically wanted to engineer discussion and a broad understanding of differing positions in an informal and accessible environment. That said, it was envisaged that content generated in these talks and forums would contribute to Institutional and Students' Union development of policy and process, together with complementary projects. To this end, the TATLs were successful, given the adoption of feedback and inclusion into a number of continuing projects.

From the first TATL, both the Union and Institution had a desire to seek wider opinion for inclusion into the response to, at the time, the Green Paper on Higher Education and, in particular, the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) (BIS, 2016). In mixed groups of staff and students from every level of both organisations, valuable perspectives were generated, shared and captured for analysis. A particular observation to note was an expectation that the students and students' union would, regarding the TEF, have a position and a perspective opposing those of senior managers from the university. In the discussion, it became apparent that both personal and professional positions were being shared about such a controversial topic. This facilitated the establishment of common ground and fostered mutual respect and appreciation for different roles on campus. Some student members found their perception changing with regard to the Institution's position. Equally, there was further acknowledgment of the roles students play to challenge current narrative as well as of the pressures current and future students face within education. These views accordingly highlighted the responsibility of the institution and the Students' Union to support students.

The second TATL, regarding the Student Charter, had the very clear goal of engaging a broader body to critique the current Charter and contribute to the development of a new, more relevant document. Once again, clearly evident, was a narrowing of the perceived gap between student and institution regarding the student experience and the support institutional staff have for it. The use of language was contentious, with emphasis on moving from a transactional relationship between staff and student and student and institution towards a more developmental and creative approach to collaboration, equity and mutual support. Of particular note was the group suggestion to create a 'charter' as opposed to a 'student charter', acknowledging the desire for equity, partnership and common ground regarding roles on campus. This TATL typified the theme's desire to engage the 'non-usual suspects', with one staff attendee highlighting:

"It was also a great opportunity to chat to students and staff that I have never meet before, even though I've been here for almost 10 years!" (Staff delegate feedback, Student Charter TATL, 7th March, 2016. A 'usual suspect in a usual space'.)

The Student Representation TATL focused on different perspectives and experiences of the student representative framework as a relevant, fit-for-purpose structure for schools and faculties and the university and union. Topics included: ownership of the student voice; the role of students in accessing and representing student opinion; structures that fit the culture of academic disciplines; the power balance between staff and students sitting on school-level committees; the election, support and development given to student representatives. Of particular note were discussions about how to support student representatives to articulate a credible perspective, given the size and complexity of academic programmes at Manchester. Staff became very vocal about the challenge students faced in this endeavour, which resonated with the experience of students in the room.

Furthermore, students seemed buoyed by the acknowledgement - and the University senior leadership conveyed clearly how important it was to them - of the need for student opinion to be heavily present in institutional dialogue and decision-making. Many of the ideas created were for new student-voice mechanisms, such as instant messaging software, less formal faculty forums, revised Student Staff Liaison Committees, Students as Reviewers within

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periodic reviews and Students as Researchers within desk-based audits which have all fed into the subsequent HEFCE-funded Student Engagement Partnership, Annual Provider Review (TSEP APR, see Diagram 1).

Evaluation - Theme 1

The impact of the student researchers' work relating to greater engagement in the *MyManchester* portal are still being evaluated. However, initial testing of the updated portal, which incorporated many of the project's recommendations, was carried out in August 2016, albeit outside the REACT project's remit. Student comments suggested the portal was far easier to navigate and services/opportunities more accessible. Student voice identified:

- *"It has lots of useful things that I didn't know were a part of MyManchester";*
- *"A lot better! Cleaner, clearer, less bulky";*
- *"There seems to be a lot you can do within the site...it is personal yet has general information too";*
- *"A lot easier than before- more obvious and relatively easy when you know what is on there";*
- *"You're not sent through loads of pages which is good. Just click a tab and hey presto!"*.

It is however, the impact on the student researchers' individual engagement and development that has been most profound. They valued being able to build connections and network with university staff and students from other disciplines, and stated that their confidence was 'boosted' through working on this project.

New relationships with each other and with staff were identified as a fundamental benefit to working on this project. Students valued the opportunity to network with people from other courses and with staff from the Students' Union and University. Many found it insightful, particularly in presenting findings to senior staff from across both organisations, something which was, for many, a new and unique opportunity and promoted a sense of equality of access, transparency and valuing of student feedback.

Somewhat ironically, the cross-discipline approach to the project groups provided another 'hard to reach' opportunity. One of the student researchers (who as a mature-student parent, could be defined as a 'hard to reach' student) used a group disagreement to understand better the students that s/he personally found 'hard to reach'; s/he noted that a major benefit was reflecting on her/his skills, experiences and approach to "*working with millennials*". The process illustrated individual learning with regard to engaging with student types one might not much interact with and highlighted that a student too sees a range of peers who are 'hard to reach'.

The student researchers commented:

"This project has offered me a lot more than just some bullet points on my CV. It gave me the chance to develop my research, communication and problem solving skills while working in a diverse team. In addition, I had the opportunity to meet new and interesting people, build connections within the University and gain valuable insight into student engagement."

"This project has given me the opportunity to take part in something that is very different to my course of study (Neuroscience) and has allowed me to gain some unique soft skills. I have learnt how to conduct successful focus groups in order to obtain qualitative information. I have also learnt how to approach different types of students and communicate effectively."

"This project has been incredibly interesting to me. I have learnt many new skills, such as conducting focus groups and how to undertake quantitative data, which I never have had the chance to do on my academic course (English language and screen studies). It has also taught me skills which will aid me when I go into the

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working world, for instance team-working skills and how to work on a commissioned project.”

The approach of using ‘student researchers’, as noted in Diagram 1, has already yielded ‘spin-off’ activity, hugely informed by the REACT project. Following a further successful pilot, discussions are now under way to incorporate the opportunity into a ‘University College for Interdisciplinary Learning’ academic unit. This will be one option for students to engage themselves, and others, in student experience/student-led research within a curricular setting. Equally, the feedback from students and staff has suggested that a co-curricular option is still desired and methods to deliver this are also being explored.

Evaluation - Theme 2

As expected, it was harder to provide a clear framework for evaluation and impact for TATLs, owing to their informal, discursive and conversational approach. Whilst much of the content has been captured by further projects, it is hard to determine the true impact of engaging with the ‘unusual suspects’. Anecdotally, through networks, conversations and lists of attendance, it can be seen the project engaged a broad, diverse and more unexpected group of attendees, together with a larger number of students unrelated to traditional roles seen within both organisations. However, if this has subsequently changed behaviour and understanding, to create further engagement and participation remains to be seen. There is a clear line of sight between TATLs, workshop outputs feeding into further project work; all participants provided positive feedback about making wider connections; there was a sense of ‘re-igniting’ interests, passions and creating a hook for belonging, which suggests broad support for space and forums of this kind. However, in an increasingly evidence-led and impact-necessary environment, whether this activity is clinical enough to be any more than a ‘nice-to-have-in-this-format’ remains to be seen.

Lessons learnt / next steps - Theme 1

Engaging students as ‘Project Consultants’ has long been an approach adopted by UoM and UMSU and the opportunity to develop this into a ‘Student Researcher’ model has provided further evidence of the power of partnering students and staff in this way.

In terms of engaging ‘hard to reach’ students via the *MyManchester* portal (and consequently more widely in associated services and opportunities), the project did not identify any ‘magic bullet’. On reflection, it was clear that some senior colleagues hoped the project would find this bullet and our lessons would be to manage both their and the students’ expectations slightly better. As part of their journey, the student researchers identified a range of topics for further exploration including: course experiences across different departments; extracurricular and employability opportunities/involvement; looking at categorising students into different groups; what students want to ‘get’ from the University. The student researchers suggested student engagement research could be taken further, by focusing on (dis)engagement amongst particular groups:

“I think researching student engagement is really important but I think looking at engagement amongst specific groups is necessary too, as many postgrads, students at living at home and international tended to find it more difficult to engage in university life.”

Again, the REACT project has complemented a number of these issues already in progress as part of spin-off activity.

Reflections on Theme 1 also acknowledge that even the process of engaging students in this way will have an impact on their engagement and on the engagement of those they interact with. As part of the project, student researchers developed personal relationships with each other and with staff, increasing the sense of belonging; they became more aware of services and opportunities themselves, consequently becoming informally the ‘Engagement Advocates’ they identified as part of their work and - albeit implicitly - through

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making other students more aware of the services/opportunities under consideration. In some cases, the student researchers noted that participants in their focus groups left, having contributed to the discussion, with new knowledge of a service/opportunity relevant to their needs.

Lesson learnt and next steps - Theme 2

TATLs have already started to develop at a more local level, such as the redevelopment of the meetings of a Faculty 'Staff-Student Liaison Committee' into a more conversational 'Faculty Forum'. The approach used is very similar to the institution-wide model with some broad topics and plenty of time for conversation between students/staff. This particular example addresses some of the initial engagement issues connected to the size of the University of Manchester by bringing the conversation to a more local level yet still providing opportunities for interactions not normally available on a day-to-day basis. One concern is that, without well-defined content for TATLs and, consequently, without dedication of time to their facilitation and management, they remain merely 'nice to have'. Any increase in their level of structure may risk the current ethos and philosophy underpinning the TATLs. In addition, the drive to become more evidence led and only supporting activity with clear strategic impacts and demonstrable outputs on the student experience, may provide a limited level of 'goodwill' by both organisations with a very competitive resource backdrop. That said, the intention of the project team is, at an organisational level, to increase the frequency of TATLs for the wider University/Union audience by inviting external experts to stimulate discussion. We hope to kick-start interest in activity that other institutions hold as core or good practice. Equally, there is an option to identify and cascade practice that already occurs within the University of Manchester community, but, owing to the institution's size, may get overlooked as a suitable conduit for it doesn't exist. In this way, the project hopes to continue to further broaden its reach to the a-typical 'hard-to-reach' across both a student and staff demographic.

In summary, participation in the REACT project accelerated some pilot work the University and Union were undertaking in partnership and provided an opportunity to generate new mechanisms for student/staff dialogue and evaluate them – for a particular example, Students as Researchers – thus complementing our existing partnership activity. Fundamentally, this project has helped to provide a framework around a more formal 'Students as Consultants' role. The TATLs have provided a shared space for these conversations which, for those more 'hard to reach' staff and students (unusual suspects), have drawn people into a broader teaching and learning agenda. Lastly, as collaboration and partnership in REACT have fed into the TSEP APR project, this co-ownership of student voice and engagement of students has created a joint university-union Student Engagement Sub-group of the University's Teaching and Learning Group.

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