

## Theme 2: The Shifting Context of Higher Education

### Do Graduates Need an Understanding of Change?

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During my internship on the REACT programme, I have observed that change within Higher Education (HE) is a topic which is constantly being discussed. This is certainly the case at national and local levels, but I think it also relates to me, at a personal level. In this reflective piece, I outline the need for undergraduates to develop an awareness of change, both on academic courses and through extra-curricular activities, in order to be well-prepared for graduate employment. In addition, an internship in REACT has allowed for deeper understanding of the changing priorities of HE.

One important element of the HE journey relates to employability, especially when it comes to looking at the journey from undergraduate to graduate employment. Whilst, in the past, graduates were largely only expected to possess subject specific knowledge, it is now widely recognised that prospective employers expect candidates to summarise how they have used their university experience to change themselves as a whole (Trupia, 2017). This provides an example of individual-centred change, in which reflecting upon the HE experience can potentially lead to changes within areas such as life goals, lifestyles and future career opportunities. Students may have unique objectives to achieve from their HE experience (Pulka and Niemivirta, 2013), but any goals are susceptible to change because students encounter different problems, and develop new solutions, whilst they are studying. Hence, individual change and development is an important part of studying and learning at university. However, the attributes, skills and knowledge which tend to be most useful for employment are still not usually taught directly to the student by academic staff, nor are they assessed, especially perhaps in arts and humanities subjects. In my experience, they are gained largely by the carrying-out of extra tasks and from participation in extra-curricular activities. By combining the skills learnt within their subject area with experience beyond their degree - for example, volunteering within the local community, competing within sports groups and participating within societies (Stuart *et al*, 2009) - it is possible for students to acquire a set of transferable skills that are a good start for employment. Yet a specific focus on the importance of being responsive to change may still not be encountered by a student.

After graduating, I worked as the Graduate Intern for the REACT project and in this role I have used my degree knowledge about educational theory to work with colleagues across the HE sector. My greatest ambition has been to help enact change on both a personal and sector-wide scale and I have been able to help achieve this through being involved in both group consultancy and through engaging in individual tasks. As outlined throughout this Journal, the REACT project aims to enhance the experience of 'hard to reach' students within the HE community. Consequently, the project has provided me with a real-life application of my Education Studies and English degree, because there has been a focus on critically reflecting upon pedagogy and literature in order to enhance practice. One thing I particularly noticed is that HE language can be complex and with complicated acronyms (from pedagogy, to widening participation, to the Russell Group). Hence I set about developing a jargon buster which could be used by all staff and students who attended the REACT conference (which I was involved in organising). As a result, this enabled delegates - and especially students - who were not used to the language of the sector to be more engaged. Not only did this allow me to feel that I had helped to demonstrate an involvement in change through engaging with a vocabulary which some individuals found difficult to understand, but it also enabled me to practise subject-specific knowledge within a real-life problem. This seems to me to be one of the most important aspects of employability – the translation of the theory of a degree course into practical action.

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There have been recent developments within the HE sector over the last few years which have provided a new basis for student engagement. These have included the redevelopment of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) (BIS, 2016). This latter, in particular, has the potential to transform the content which students engage with on their degree; there is also a hope that it will transform the way in which students are taught and how they are assessed (NUS, 2012). From working as REACT Graduate Intern, I feel that I have become far more responsive to developments within the HE sector than ever would have been possible for me as an undergraduate; I can now understand why people think change is needed. In the early stages of my internship, I realised that it was important to become immersed in some of these new developments, so as to enhance the effectiveness of my interactions with my colleagues during meetings and discussions. Whilst I am expected to achieve the set objectives laid out within my work contract, throughout the project I have also aspired to develop skills which will help me to seek further employment when my Internship comes to an end. Although the Education Studies half of my degree taught me to think critically about the role of Education within HE, it did not teach or allow me to enhance acquired skills or deploy them in a practical way. Whilst employed on the project, however, I have had to produce conference papers, write a journal article, co-organise a conference and maintain a diary, all of which have provided me not only with challenge, but also with opportunity to acquire skills of flexibility and adaptability, since every situation has been susceptible to alteration because of ongoing shifts in priorities. From engaging with Pontius and Harper's (2006) concept of alteration, I recognise now just how important it is to be open to the concept of change when working within any career, not solely within student engagement.

Student Engagement over the past decade has become one of the fastest developing areas in HE and, within this, exploring the concept of 'hard to reach' was for me an exciting venture, as I was going to be able to focus on conceptualising accessibility and inclusivity within an educational community, exactly what I wanted to do. A turning point within my university journey was being elected to work in two separate institutions, both focused on the area of 'hard to reach' students. Two roles - working as the Chair of the Disability Equality Interest Group (DEIG) for the University and as the Equality and Diversity Officer for the Student Union - influenced the theoretical and practical experiences which I have tried to bring to the role of REACT Graduate Intern. When it comes to encountering problems, I can rely not only on theoretical works studied on my degree, but also on personal experience when dealing with sensitive issues, such as discussing matters within the Black Minority and Ethnic (BME) communities of HE. Furthermore, it has been a mission of mine to enhance the learning and social experience of student learners; I supported them whilst studying at university – for example, helping out on the Winchester Student Fellows Scheme (Sims *et al*, 2014), wherein, when two students wished to receive feedback about accessibility around the University of Winchester campus, we used the setup of a feedback exhibition to generate a large volume of opinion about this subject. Thus, working for a project which aims to increase retention and attainment levels for 'hard to reach' students has been an ideal extension of my previous interests and an excellent transition towards a career which engages with the principles of equity and fairness.

In conclusion, as an intern within REACT, I have been able to move from being a somewhat disorganised student to a semi-professional staff member within an HE setting, thereby preparing myself for future employment. I can now show evidence of the real-life application of skills and degree knowledge. In addition, I am aware that I have the capacity and desire to adapt and change at a personal level, and also to adapt to the environment I am working in, which is likely to be susceptible to rapid and uncertain alteration. We are all surrounded by change in our personal and workplace lives. Change is a part of every educational context and graduates and undergraduates should be given opportunities to recognise it and to deal with it effectively so that they are better prepared for employment.

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### Reference list

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