

Editorial

The REACT team

This special issue of *The Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change* is slightly different from previous issues in that it focuses on a particular programme, known as 'REACT', funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). 'Realising Engagement Through Active Culture Transformation', or REACT, looks closely at the engagement of so-called 'hard-to-reach' students in Higher Education (HE), and this issue of the journal provides a kaleidoscope of views and standpoints, starting points and conclusions, through both qualitative descriptions and reporting of quantitative data. It is not a 'recipe book' for 'student engagement'. There is no clear-cut, neat picture of what 'student engagement' is, nor of what characterises a 'hard-to-reach' student. However, overall, it gives a rich picture of the many complexities of engaging with students who are less likely to engage, and of the many ways in which universities are working to understand the issues and consequences and to engage all students more effectively.

In all, forty-four contributions make up this issue, in the form of research articles, case studies and opinion pieces. Much has already been written on the topic of 'student engagement', but the importance of this particular set of pieces is that they narrow the focus of 'student engagement' by concentrating specifically on 'hard-to-reach' students. This does not mean narrowing or 'closing down' any aspect of discussion on the topic, but it provides a particular lens with the potential to inform wider debates.

Given the large number of contributions, this issue of JEIPC has also been set out slightly differently from usual, making use of thematic headings to organise the papers. Although the nature of students' engagement means there is considerable cross-over between themes (and, indeed, some papers could fit under several themes), it is hoped that this organisational framework will make the content more coherent and accessible for the reader. Each of the themes is highlighted below.

In particular, we are delighted that Cathy Bovill - Senior Lecturer in Student Engagement at the University of Edinburgh and well-known for her interest and expertise in 'student engagement' and 'partnership' - has written the Preface to this issue. She addresses the central issue of REACT in her statement: "*Questioning the use of the term 'hard to reach' highlights that it may be staff and HE institutions that actively disengage students by not responding to the diversity of student voices effectively*". Bovill further highlights issues and sets the scene for REACT by considering both the work of Sarah Mann on student alienation and how students can often be alienated within and by HE.

Theme 1: Introduction

The three introductory papers, as might be expected, outline the background, aims, ambitions, approaches and activities that underpinned the REACT programme, with the first, through a general introductory overview and outline of the programme. The second paper highlights, in particular, the difficulties associated with two key terms - 'student engagement' and 'hard to reach'. Then the third focuses on the REACT team's development of highly-collaborative ways of working with the wider group of universities involved – the team created a 'Collaborative Development Programme', with Development Days and Discussion Days (for all the institutions to play an active role, to share issues and to support each other in working through difficulties) and with considerable collaboration in outcomes such as a final REACT conference and the production of this issue of JEIPC.

The first three introductory papers are followed by a summary of the systematic literature review undertaken by members of the REACT team. This has been important to the team in terms of our own knowledge and expertise, ensuring we know as much as possible about all the available literature and underpinning research. The findings are in some ways disappointing, given the paucity of research and often the lack of precision and commonality in the creation of definitions and the limited detail about actions. This may, above all, reflect the fact that the term has not as yet been widely used in HE and that too narrow a focus on the term 'hard to reach' may, inadvertently, exclude consideration of similar concepts (and discussion about them) because they have a different name - such as 'retention' or 'non-typical' student groups. Nonetheless, the review highlights 101 papers in detail, with twenty-eight different descriptions of 'hard to reach'. This section concludes with a short opinion piece written by the outgoing president of the Winchester Student Union, describing the student experience as an engulfing series of 'bubbles' that represent different perspectives and means for engaging.

Theme 2: The shifting context of Higher Education

The second section of this issue of JEIPC focuses on new developments and perspectives in the HE sector, with five opinion pieces and an article. Some of these are explicitly inspired by the REACT project and others reflect shifts in the management, language and technology of HE. The first piece addresses the shifting context of HE's engagement with a topic close to the heart of the REACT project: the effort to reconceptualise 'hard to reach'. The paper's author, representing The Student Engagement Partnership (TSEP), attempts so to re-position the responsibility implied by the phrase 'hard to reach' that practitioners are seen as responsible for 'reaching' students; this paper thus challenges the converse (and patently more dangerous) allocation of responsibility to the students themselves, marginalising and blaming them for their lack of engagement. The second opinion piece looks at the broader context, with reflections on the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), (which at the time of writing was still forthcoming) and has a clear focus on REACT's core concern: 'hard-to-reach' students. This paper makes an impassioned but grounded call for conceptualising how practitioners will need to develop and shift their perspectives, so as to provide excellent teaching for all students in the light of the greater scrutiny that the TEF requires.

The theme then features the first contribution from a REACT partner institution - Canterbury Christ Church University - with a welcome acknowledgement of the role REACT and others have played in shifting to a more data-driven way of understanding 'student engagement'. This argument makes a strong case for using 'hard' data, though always ensuring that this supports the needs of students. A pragmatic, methodological pluralism emerges, that advocates transcending differences of 'stats' versus 'understanding' to focus on how any evaluation should be used to enhance. This is followed by a timely discussion along a similar thread, in an opinion piece from the University of Exeter, addressing some critical issues related to the use of Learning Analytics. This piece addresses some critical issues about Learning Analytics, a data scrutiny approach with potentially profound impact upon the way universities operate, and suggests how a nuanced application of this, to empower rather than objectivise students, could and should work. The next opinion paper is a contribution from within the REACT team and reflects upon the nature of change and what this means to students, graduates and the sector as a whole; tracking the part played by change through various roles and positions around the University of Winchester, this piece gives a unique perspective on the significance to working with students of a change-led focus.

We also welcome an article from GuildHE, researching into one of the foundational student-engagement initiatives: student representation. Since this is growing significantly within UK universities, the paper emphasises its key and unique role there. Becoming more aware of 'hard-to-reach' students and their needs is crucial, so that representatives are able to represent effectively the needs of all university cohorts. Concluding this theme and the

discussions about new trends and shifting lenses, the final paper grapples with an issue at the heart of many of the papers featured throughout this special issue: 'Where next for student engagement?' This paper, outlining the shift towards truly putting students at the heart of universities, makes bold predictions about how 'student engagement' may be taken forward, particularly in the creation of a more global approach to staff/student partnership.

All of these papers, though eclectic and emanating from diverse sets of expertise, provide a valuable insight into the issues that staff and students face in the changing landscape of HE; together, they set an interesting tone for this issue as a whole and for reflecting on the REACT programme and the HE sector more broadly.

Theme 3: Retention and Attainment

Each of the five pieces contributing to this theme offers a methodology linking retention and attainment with co-curricular student-engagement initiatives that engage 'hard-to-reach' students. Each paper disseminates ground-breaking work that those involved in the REACT project have undertaken in order to provide a deeper understanding of this area.

The section opens with a collaborative research piece from the three core Universities of the REACT programme – Winchester, Exeter and London Metropolitan University (LMU) – highlighting their co-curricular projects. It outlines an evaluation of the co-curricular student-engagement activities at these three Universities - 'Student Fellows', 'Change Agents' and 'Peer-Assisted Student Success' respectively. It then continues to explore whether these activities breed inclusivity and, in turn, influence the attainment and retention of their 'hard-to-reach' students - while purposely avoiding the trap of categorising them.

This is followed by an in-depth look at the retention and attainment of institution-defined 'hard-to-reach' students at the University of Exeter. This paper examines whether there is an academic benefit to 'student engagement', alongside previously researched social benefits at the university. This research study utilised current and historic data, ranging back to the 2008/09 academic year, to evaluate whether certain 'hard-to-reach' groups which engage with at least one of four long-standing student-engagement activities actually benefit within the academic sphere and, subsequently, whether this affects attainment and retention levels at this institution. This impressive piece of work adds rare methodological rigour to a critical issue: 'Does student engagement actually make a difference?'

The section then turns to the importance and impact of the TESTA assessment scheme at the University of Greenwich in relation to improving the experience of its 'hard-to-reach' students. This article looks into whether an assessment and feedback enhancement project can positively affect student engagement, retention and attainment. The authors endeavour to understand whether 'Transforming the Experience of Students through Assessment' (TESTA) has a positive effect on the attainment and retention of students involved in the process, while comparing the results to those of a course that does not utilise this methodology. Following this, contributors from Newman University in Birmingham ask the question, 'To engage or not to engage?' while drawing on student perceptions at a university with a particularly demographic. They report on a student-led research project, across a two-year process, comparing engaged students' perceptions of what 'student engagement' means. The aim of their project was not only to perceive 'engagement' from a student's viewpoint, but also to understand how to make it more visible to their 'hard-to-reach', 'non-traditional' students, with the intention that this should influence retention and attainment. The final paper under this theme profoundly investigates the Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) attainment gap at Sheffield Hallam University. The authors employ a mixed methodology, collating varying sets of data, in an attempt to enhance and improve the confidence of and 'belonging' for BME students and, consequently, their retention and

attainment levels. They further investigate how the attainment gap has become a 'wicked problem' which, without identification, would run the risk of becoming unsolvable.

Theme 4: 'Engagement', 'Belonging' and 'Identity'

Theme 4 pulls together six opinion pieces and articles that investigate and attest to the links between how much a student feels at home at university and to what extent s/he is engaged. As well as explaining the importance of 'belonging', the pieces explore different methods that have been used to reach out to many different types of student, as well as investigating why some are less likely to engage.

The first article details the personal story of a University of Winchester student who self-identifies as 'hard to reach', being both a commuting and a mature student. At times, higher-education onlookers can focus too much on grades and quantitative data, neglecting the importance of an individual's story. This paper gives a heartfelt and honest description of how, through single-minded determination to be a part of university life, a student can progress from feelings of isolation to happiness and, eventually, achieve academic success. This section also offers the *Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change's* first media piece, which is a comic book-style art piece from LMU. As this journal pushes the boundaries on dissemination, see this piece for a visualised student perspective of the challenges to and complexities of measures to improve student outcomes.

Contextualised in the changing student-engagement landscape of HE, the next paper offers the perspective of University of Winchester students who undertook activities designed to identify the specific points in their university career at which they felt a 'sense of belonging' and what triggered this feeling; the paper investigates differences between on- and off-campus students. The themes of 'engagement' and 'belonging' give an illuminating insight into the student journey at Winchester, but also open up many more questions for future investigation. This research article is followed by an opinion piece from Elon University in the United States of America (USA), offering a strong critique of current attitudes towards 'hard-to-reach' students, particularly those who are disabled. The argument for a re-framing of how staff and institutions cater for and appreciate students with perceived 'disadvantages' is refreshing and provides a perspective unlike that of any other piece in this issue, as well as a different dimension to the phrase 'hard to reach'. Examples of good practice at US institutions are also given, to illustrate what institutions can do to celebrate and encourage, rather than 'cope with', students with different needs.

One of the benefits to students who are highly-engaged can be improved employability. At the University of Southampton, a project is offering the institution's Humanities students the opportunity to take a proactive role in developing their employability skills. This paper explains how such opportunities help students in multiple ways, as well as demonstrating the importance of using digital media in student engagement. Finally, a very different account is given by Buckinghamshire New University, where an ambitious project has been instigated to review student engagement and 'hard-to-reach' students across the whole institution. This includes: analysis of current quantitative data to discover any potential link between engagement, a sense of belonging and attainment; the use of qualitative methods to explore the reasons behind the findings; consolidation of the outputs to evaluate the institution's current practices. Owing to the scale and timeframe of the project, the research team are currently only on the second stage of four, but its initial findings are intriguing, suggesting that the less-engaged students have higher levels of attrition and lower attainment outcomes.

Theme 5: Partnership approaches

This section comprises seven papers, each highlighting a different approach to 'partnership' and each tailored to its own institutional context. Each has particular purposes, but all aim to enhance the collaborative aspect of student engagement, to connect different stakeholders and to bring together staff and students in a variety of ways. Of interest is that partnership processes are not necessarily easy to implement and are not always as successful as their designers hoped. However, these honest accounts will enable others to learn from them and, potentially, allow those wishing to implement partnership projects to predict possible difficulties and hence work to alleviate them.

The first case study describes a collaborative effort between the University of Manchester and their Students' Union to provide an overview of the wide range of engagement initiatives and projects available to students. Here, the ultimate objective is strategically to embed opportunities to engage students in a more meaningful way, by means of collaborative student/staff relationships; these are to be realised by the adoption of initiatives intended to narrow the existing gap between students and staff, for to do so may well lead to such a transformational relationship that students will find themselves engaged - in a plethora of partnership approaches. The second paper, from Newcastle, describes a novel way to enhance student/staff collaboration, with the aim of nurturing inter-disciplinary partnership. Here, a forum has been designed to counteract the traditional power dynamic and structures between students and staff. In this study, the author examines whether the creation of a safe space can eliminate barriers to student engagement for the so-called 'hard-to-reach' students by using innovative methods to break up traditional structures. The challenges experienced are also highlighted.

A paper from the University of Brighton describes a unique, cross-institution approach to embedding 'student engagement', with the intention of linking disciplines together and increasing opportunities for students, again by means of approaches designed to ensure wide ownership and to have positive impact on student/staff partnerships. Another, from the University of Southampton, demonstrates how partnership is facilitated by iChamps and the use of Open Badges, as mechanisms to develop digital literacy amongst both students and staff. This case study emphasises how Southampton's approach can, through collaboration, nurture student engagement and also support staff and student skills development. The fifth contribution to this section, from the University of Winchester, discusses a student/staff partnership approach, orchestrated by the Student Fellows Scheme, that aims to integrate technology into learning and teaching. This study also describes the challenges experienced and illustrates how aspects of this collaboration led to critical reflection upon possible wider application - together with the attendant difficulties - of student/staff partnership to the whole institution.

The last two case studies in this theme come from LMU and the University of Southampton. LMU's describes how colleagues explore methods to foster academic writing skills, looking beyond deficit models of needing to 'fix' student skills and seeking out ways of creating free spaces to embed academic writing 'exercises'; it is strongly argued that these interventions need to be accessible to all students, at different levels, if the students are to engage successfully. The other, Southampton's second contribution within this theme, has a different perspective on partnership - this time in the context of Healthcare education - involving, as core aspects, the co-creation of content, a working together to connect, a questioning of the status quo and the building of communities.

Theme 6: Peer-learning communities

The four papers under this theme highlight the importance of fostering environments for students to learn together and to support each other's learning and development. Mutually-

supportive environments, especially during transition into HE, can enable students to grow both intellectually and socially by offering a more flexible and less intimidating community, which may well have specific benefits for those who are likely to be amongst the 'hard to reach'.

A stimulating opinion piece from St John's University, New York, emphasises the sense of community that is generated by means of the integration of social learning into the curriculum. The piece suggests that Student Learning Communities make learning meaningful by addressing the emotional and social needs of students as well as their intellectual needs. Our next case study, from LMU, similarly highlights the positive effects on transition that a community of peer learners can have on a student's university experience. Using a unique format, it shows how transformative the Peer-Assisted Student Success scheme has been for LMU students, as they demonstrate how students who might be considered 'hard to reach' have developed from uncertainty to confidence and how instrumental such a scheme can be in supporting their academic achievement. Giving a different perspective on learning together, a technology review of 'Facebook for educational purposes' focuses on the social aspect of the student community. This contribution suggests the use of Facebook in HE is advantageous for engaging students, especially those who are 'hard to reach', because it can create a positive environment for *all* types of students to engage in their learning community. The fourth paper here, an opinion piece from the University of Exeter, shows the importance of Peer Support Programmes for providing an environment that allows students to feel comfortable posing questions which they would otherwise not ask. It is argued that students need reaching out to and that there should be bespoke activities for different groups, but the paper makes clear that it can be hard work to find out which students would benefit most from peer support and where they are in the university. This leads well into the next section on whose responsibility it is to 'reach out' and how it can be achieved.

Theme 7: Reaching, whose responsibility?

Theme seven brings together a collection of seven papers which report on findings from studies addressing the engagement of certain 'hard-to-reach' groups, as well as asking a key question: "Whose responsibility it is to engage 'hard-to-reach' student groups and how can it be achieved?"

The section first of all features a case study from Sheffield Hallam University, reporting on a project seeking to engage black and ethnic minority (BME) students as academic partners. The project set out to gain evidence-based insights into the use of co-design and peer-learning as conduits of confidence-building for and 'belonging' of BME students. However, the team found, along the way, multiple barriers to *staff* engagement, despite the fact that evidence initially offered to staff of the benefits of such approaches was compelling. This paper offers a well-documented account of the challenges of change, together with transferable lessons which are valuable for any university working in this area. The first of two papers in this section from University College London (UCL) importantly reflects on the staff/faculty perceptions of 'hard to reach'. 'With *whom* does the responsibility of engagement lie?' is a common and fair question and one which is commented on here. Discussing the difference between 'unengaged' and 'hard to reach', as well as the balance of framing inclusive practice at the individual and institutional levels, this article argues for new opportunities to be developed in partnership with UCL's 'hard-to-reach' students.

This is followed by two further opinion pieces with a further focus on technology. The first of these asks whether an institution that uses lecture capture can support the reaching-out process and help to engage 'hard-to-reach' students. The paper considers the implementation of lecture capture and its associated benefits for 'engagement', but does not pretend that 'reaching out' is easy, even when there is a will to achieve it, and openly

presents the issues and policy barriers encountered. The second piece comes from Sheffield Hallam, asking whether 'all' students are 'hard to reach' in a digital HE context. In a digital age, when students arrive at university with high levels of digital capability, it might be assumed that all students would be reachable through technology and would gain from technology-enhanced learning. However, this paper gives an account of a pedagogical challenge in needing to re-frame digital capability for *all* learners new to HE. Again, the 'reaching-out' process is seen to be complex.

The REACT team also welcomes a contribution from Bryn Mawr College, USA, offering reflections on the phrase 'hard to reach' and its single-sided perspective, often from a central institutional position. The authors (a student in partnership with an academic) argue for 'reaching across' rather than 'reaching out', viewing the 'reaching' context as more fluid, rather than a fixed point. They offer a call to shift perspective and take hold of new spaces to foster staff-student partnerships which may be flexible in 'location' but always have the intention of working together.

Our second paper from UCL in this section is an opinion piece arguing that, to get a full picture of how to make HE practice inclusive across the board, universities and colleagues need to consider both the characteristics of students and the provision that can make them 'hard to reach'. This insightful piece was first presented at the REACT Conference in May 2017 and used the analogy of a 'lens' of inclusivity to address new perspectives in considering whom provision is designed for and how it may disengage others.

Finally, this theme is rounded off with a research article from Bristol Students' Union, featuring a study investigating barriers and benefits to 'working-class' students in Student Union activities at an elite, research-driven university. Working-class students, as a group, are a longstanding widening participation target group, often associated with struggling with retention and attainment. This piece draws on a Bourdieusian conception of class to demonstrate how working-class students are disadvantaged in terms of participating in their Students' Union. It is argued that, when the economic and social barriers to participation are removed, participation in Students' Union activities can have dramatic impact upon students' wellbeing and personal development.

Theme 8: Some conclusions, and where next?

The final section raises some topics for discussion, including evaluation feedback on REACT that highlights the perceived outcomes of the collaborative programme. This is important, since the overall learning for many individuals and institutions has been great and since numerous activities undertaken have been perceived as significant and valuable – and are contributing to change – but they may not have happened without REACT. This has in part been owing to the nature of the programme's collaborative ways of engaging with change, and this kind of partnership may represent a way of working that should be emulated in future, but only if there is critical analysis of how such a project might be managed to the best effect. Furthermore, some of the key learning from the many projects undertaken has been reflected on, and key messages drawn out, to support practitioners and institutional managers in ensuring that all students can be given equal opportunities to engage. Somewhat ironically, the 'hard-to-reach' students are, per se, those who - for whatever reason - are most difficult to engage and the least likely to respond... and it can be difficult in some cases to change this.

It seems fitting to conclude this editorial with the words of a student from Winchester, one who would almost certainly fit into usual categorisations of 'hard to reach', but who, in fact, has been fully involved in REACT from beginning to end.

I have enjoyed watching this project grow and flourish, and the efforts to collaborate by all concerned have been amazing. For me, the project has always been about inclusivity and I have always been afraid that simply by the act of creating this programme, REACT would take away the necessary focus on the individual experience. To this end, one of the things I have really enjoyed as a Steering Group member is the fact that although I am a student and very often trailing behind in my understanding of things, the group have always taken my comments on this matter seriously and not made me feel like I don't know what I'm talking about! I think the project has been amazing!

REACT has probably raised as many issues as it has resolved; the way has not always been easy going, but the project represents the activities of many people who strongly believe that all students should be reached out to and that every one of them should be seen as an individual worthy of attention.

Special thanks

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