

Setting the scene for the REACT programme: aims, challenges and the way ahead

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Introduction

At the core of the REACT programme have been three highly-successful student-engagement initiatives: The University of Exeter has gained worldwide recognition for its ground-breaking 'Students as Change Agents' initiative, which has been developing since 1997; the University of Winchester has a newer, partnership-focused scheme that has gained national recognition; London Metropolitan University has been piloting a successful, university-wide, peer-led study scheme, empowering students as 'Success Coaches'.

This article first outlines these three initiatives and then lays out the aims and ambitions of the REACT programme, along with the numerous challenges, especially those related to the two fundamental, underpinning concepts of the project: 'student engagement'; 'hard-to-reach' students. Finally, it describes the three key programme strands (designed specifically to satisfy the requirements of the programme aims): the 'Collaborative Development Programme', involving sixteen English universities; the 'REACT Research Project', looking at student engagement outcomes; 'Raising Awareness' through dissemination. These strands were obviously of importance to planning, but they have also heavily influenced programme outcomes and hence the content of much of this issue of the *Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change* (JEIPC).

The three core 'student engagement' initiatives

Three universities were at the heart of the REACT project, bringing experience of good practice and expertise together to create a solid core from which to expand further initiatives across the wider developmental programme.

Students as Change Agents, the University of Exeter - Over the last ten years, the University of Exeter has developed an innovative, student-led, action-research initiative that enables students to act as change agents in their educational environment. Students negotiate a topic of concern or interest and lead a small research project, often supported by staff. They then take responsibility for suggesting possible solutions to identified needs, making recommendations for implementation and putting their proposals into practice. To date, hundreds of change agents' projects (125 in 2014-15 alone) have promoted some important developments in curriculum delivery and employability activity in many subject areas across the University and/or have had positive impact upon decision-making processes, a good example of which would be the provision of furniture for the new Exeter Forum (now the hub of the Streatham campus). Students run Careers Fairs and Module Fairs, a buddy scheme for year-abroad students; they have developed resources – for mental health and well-being, to engage international students, to highlight sustainability, to improve seminar teaching; they have demonstrated the need for more support for mature students, and technology in teaching. Change Agents have also run an annual Staff Learning and Teaching Conference, to great acclaim. Students are not paid for their involvement, but many students claim a sense of increased pride and a sense of belonging through their engagement with the scheme. Dozens of these projects are either run by, or have impact on and are of benefit to, those students who might be categorised as 'hard to reach'. (For further detail of this practice, see Dunne and Zandstra, 2011).

Student Success Coaches, London Metropolitan University - The 'Peer Assisted Student Success' (PASS) initiative at London Metropolitan University, established during

2014/15 via a pilot initiative, is now an integral part of the University's Strategic Plan as a mechanism to support students' transition at entry level, enhance their learning achievement and reduce attainment gaps. The scheme is implemented in the form of a course-embedded model in all undergraduate degree programmes, to boost the academic success of students and promote cohort-bonding. It is a non-remedial, peer-led approach to learning, whereby trained and paid second- and third-year student mentors (Success Coaches) provide academic coaching to first-year students. Success Coaches work in a semi-professional role in small-group sessions that are scheduled regularly and designed to supplement existing learning opportunities. Their role is not to re-teach content, but rather to draw on coaching techniques and their own experience as successful students in their subject area to facilitate first-year students' development as independent learners. Compulsory PASS training for new and returning Success Coaches is provided by specially-trained student peers, under staff supervision, and the coaches demonstrate considerable commitment to their role and responsibilities. (For further detail of this practice, see Warren and Luebsen, 2017).

Student Fellows, the University of Winchester - The purpose of the 'Student Fellows Scheme' (SFS) - a cross-University scheme, started in 2013/14 - is to enable students to work, in partnership with academics and professional staff, on targeted educational development projects. Students are recruited through applications and interviews and those who are successful are given training to support their role as a Student Fellow. The main purpose of the scheme is to change or enhance an aspect of the University that will lead to an improved experience for students. This could be related to a specific module, a programme, a professional service or a cross institutional project. Example projects undertaken have included: evaluations of feedback on assignments across the Psychology Department; research into student perceptions of employability and student engagement; development of new initiatives that address a range of broad topics, such as commuting student identity and support on campus. Each student receives a bursary of £600, given in four instalments across the academic year, and subject to the completion of progress review stages, which include presentations, written reports and dissemination through the 'Winchester Student Fellows Scheme Conference'. The SFS, notably, is managed in by a partnership of the University's Academic Quality and Development Department and the Student Union's Vice President, Education. To further echo partnership throughout its structure, the SFS is also co-funded by the Student Academic Council and the University's Senior Management Team. It is thereby ensured that the SFS remains, in both the students' and the University's interests, a partnership scheme on every level, ensuring relevance to strategy and staff/student motivations throughout. (For further detail of this practice, see Sims et al 2014).

Although all three initiatives had at their centre the desire to engage students in their learning and with their university, they do have significant differences: Winchester and Exeter's initiatives are so designed that a comparatively small number of self-selecting students from across the institution will take a leading role in projects (exemplifying what Bryson, 2017, calls '*selective*' partnership), although the impact of a project may extend to many more students and staff. In contrast, London Metropolitan's initiative is designed to reach out to every first-year student in the University (what Bryson calls '*universal*' partnership). Each of these initiatives, with their associated staff expertise from the three institutions, offered a strong starting point for the REACT programme by offering three alternative models of good practice that could influence and guide the implementation of student engagement in the thirteen additional Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) that became members of the wider collaborative programme.ⁱ

The aims of the REACT programme

The aims of the REACT programme were ambitious and, though few in number, were

complex and multi-layered. They also needed a considerable amount of 'unpicking' and 'unravelling' to ensure that the initiative progressed in a purposeful way that would enable the capturing of student-engagement practices and the support of institutional change. The aims are highlighted below, along with an outline of the many challenges to their implementation.

- Aim 1 To enable a thorough investigation of student engagement in the case of 'hard-to-reach' students, looking into key areas such as retention and attainment.
- Aim 2 To gain understanding of what works, and how and why, through quantitative and qualitative research, with staff and student voices and in-depth case studies.
- Aim 3 To ensure a variety of outcomes that improve practice and benefit students, academics, student unions, academic developers and institutions as a whole.
- Aim 4 To share best practice nationally and enable institutions to learn with and from each other, by developing and sharing open resources and highlighting strategies, tools and frameworks and acting as a supportive community of practice.

Challenges to the implementation of aims

An educational development programme such as REACT is always challenging in the early stages. Whereas applications for funding tend to lay out the background and rationale for any initiative or innovation, along with the aims and anticipated outcomes, they also tend to be less detailed when it comes to how these aims and outcomes might be achieved. This was certainly the case with the REACT programme. In principle, and on paper, the programme aims were apparently reasonable and they were certainly appropriate in setting out the need for more explicit attention to the potential outcomes of student engagement. However, in practice, the aims proved quite problematic. To start with, there were considerable difficulties in defining the terms 'student engagement' and 'hard to reach', both of which were concepts fundamental to the project. There were also challenges raised by the short - two-year - timeframe of the project. It can take several years to establish a baseline against which progress can be evaluated and this was not going to be achieved in the eighteen months of implementation time available. Further problems related to the scale of anticipated change in view of the large number of very different universities to be involved, as well as of the difficulty of providing evidence for a direct relationship of retention and attainment to student engagement.

'Student engagement' has many meanings and is interpreted in multiple ways (Bryson, 2014; Dunne, 2016). Although the REACT Programme was designed to take a particular interest in co-curricular activities related to enhancing the student experience, the thirteen collaborative partner institutions involved had their own interpretations of 'student engagement', which led to a wide range of different activities and projects that could all still come under the broad umbrella term 'student engagement' (as evidenced by this issue of JEIPC).

It soon became clear that the majority of the thirteen institutions had little collective idea of who their 'hard-to-reach' students were: some were aware of the literature; some had hunches about who hard-to-reach students might be in their particular context. Only very few of the institutions expressed any certainty that they could find sound evidence to justify their identification of particular students as 'hard to reach'. Even where a broad and well-used classification such as 'widening participation' was used as a proxy for 'hard to reach', the term did not have the same meaning in every university involved. Hence, addressing Aim 1 ('to enable a thorough investigation of student engagement in the case of 'hard-to-reach' students') was immediately more difficult to achieve than it might have at first seemed. Given their importance, these two concepts are further explored later in this article.

The project aims were further complicated by the second part of Aim 1: 'looking into key

areas such as retention and attainment'. Although 'student engagement' has gained significant attention in the literature and in government policy during the last decade (BIS, 2011; QAA, 2012; NUS, 2013; TSEP, 2014), there is little existing evidence of the relationship between student-engagement activities (or co-curricular activity, or partnership activity) and retention and attainment. A connection may be widely assumed between these concepts, but, in terms of REACT, it may take several years to establish a baseline against which progress may be evaluated; this was not going to be achieved in the eighteen months of implementation time available.

The second aim, 'to gain understanding of what works, and how and why through quantitative and qualitative research' also proved challenging. Those involved in student engagement seem to be involved mainly with qualitative research and evaluation, as can be seen in the many hundreds of case studies on 'student engagement' now available (Cook-Sather et al 2014; Bryson 2014, Dunne and Owen, 2013; Solomonides, 2013). However, there is apparently less quantitative research into 'student engagement', especially in the UK, for which the reason is not entirely clear. In the USA, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)ⁱⁱ surveys have collected many years of data on specific aspects of 'student engagement' in the curriculum, whereas, in the UK, the National Student Survey (NSS)ⁱⁱⁱ has not, until very recently, considered this aspect of university education. Hence, it may not be clear to researchers exactly what 'student engagement' is and there is a lack of baseline data against which progress can be measured. Furthermore, many of those involved in student engagement tend to be teaching staff, professional service 'practitioners' of student activities or associated professionals rather than researchers and so may not consider they have sufficient research expertise or time beyond offering qualitative accounts of their own work.

The third aim, 'to ensure a variety of outcomes that improve practice and benefit students, academics, student unions, academic developers and institutions as a whole', was clearly an appropriate aim for REACT. It was important to gain a broad base of involved stakeholders rather than a lone champion or two; however, time constraints again meant that broad institutional change was an ambitious target for most of the institutions engaged in REACT.

A further slight difficulty lay in the model of change that seemed to underpin the REACT bid: that successful practice can be directly transmitted or directly translated within new contexts. The intention was that REACT should distil practices from the three core engagement initiatives and spread these proven approaches; the success of REACT was expected to be measured by the number of institutions adopting the core models. It was recognised in the bid that the three models could be adapted and contextualised in different university settings; however, in practice, REACT has been founded on an approach by which the three core initiatives, ideas and practices have only loosely informed institutional change elsewhere. They may have provided interest, motivation for change or even excitement at possibilities, but they have not strictly served as exemplars. As can be seen in this issue of JEIPC, projects have tended to grow organically from their particular institutional starting points, with institutions' making use of the expertise of the REACT team, but rarely emulating the original practices of the three core universities. In many ways, approaches could be seen to resonate more closely with a 'bricolage' model of change (Trowler et al 2003:7), with REACT supporting people on the ground to look at ways to 'do better' in their particular context, working with institutional communities of practice to champion and to take ownership of their change and collaborating with universities to explore ways of resolving central problems. REACT was therefore focused more on engaging with institutions to recognise their issues in relation to 'hard-to-reach' students and to find their own means of solving problems, than on requiring them to follow set models of good practice.

Problematic concepts: 'Student Engagement' and 'Hard to Reach'

Given that they were the central focus of the REACT programme and given that they are problematic concepts, the topics of 'student engagement' and 'hard-to-reach' students are addressed in more detail below.

Student Engagement

There can be little doubt that 'student engagement' is currently 'all the rage'. This may have, in part, stemmed from a growing UK national concern, a decade ago, about conceptualising students as customers or consumers – a concept that had long been discussed in the USA, but was comparatively new elsewhere. This concern was widely taken to relate to the potential impact on attitudes, engagement and identity in higher education, for students and staff alike: *"If students are envisioned only or primarily as consumers, then educators assume the role of panderers, devoted more to immediate satisfaction than to offering the challenge of intellectual independence"* (Schwartzman, 1995:220). Furedi (2009) claimed that encouraging students to think of themselves as customers has fostered an unfortunate mood in which education is regarded as a commodity that must represent value for money. Most recently, McGhee (2017) suggests that calling students customers *"superficially appears to empower students, but in fact it disempowers them by restricting how we treat them and discuss them, and how they perceive themselves."* Greatrix (2011) argued that what the student-as-consumer concept *"fails to capture is the essence of what really makes a high quality education for students"*. New metaphors also began to provide a different set of concepts with a greater focus on learning and student input in the curriculum and wider student experience, such as co-production, collaboration and partnership. For example, co-production is described as requiring active engagement with the entire learning process on the part of the student and sees the student as an active participant (McCulloch, 2009). Ramsden (2009:16) also argued that students are *"responsible partners who are able to take ownership of quality enhancement with staff and engage with them in dialogue about improving assessment, curriculum and teaching"*. This latter rhetoric sounds more attractive to those who are concerned with students as learners, as recently outlined by O'Brien (2017): *"In our commercial world, HE needs to remain something that can't be bought, where the principle of learning, hard work and personal achievement is kept pristine. That means creating the right kind of culture and attitudes to HE, entirely separate from other 'services' and distancing the sector from the idea of the consumer, rather than the learner."* It has been suggested (Anganwe, 2011) that *"growing interest around student engagement was motivated by an attempt to find an antidote to the 'students as consumers' philosophy"*. Whether this is true or not, the concept of 'student engagement', unfortunately, has not turned out to be simple, as further considered below.

In 2010, Trowler explained why 'student engagement' is so *"beguiling"*. Making use of the research of many experts in the field over a long period of time (Astin, 1993 and 1984; Berger and Milem, 1999; Chickering and Gamson, 1987; Goodsell, Maher and Tinto, 1992; Kuh, 1995; Kuh et al 2005; Kuh and Vesper, 1997; Pace, 1995; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991, 2005), she argues: *"It is not difficult to understand why [student engagement is beguiling]: a sound body of literature has established robust correlations between student involvement in a subset of 'educationally purposive activities', and positive outcomes of student success and development, including satisfaction, persistence, academic achievement and social engagement"* (Trowler, 2010:2). The kinds of student engagement being measured and reported here, and their strong link to a range of key student outcomes, are highly important and reassuringly positive. However, these findings are based solely on research in the USA and necessarily require some translation into a UK context, where the conceptualisation of 'student engagement' is generally very different. Trowler also suggested that much of the writing on 'student engagement' in the UK is based on anecdotal evidence and is full of generalisations and assumptions, rather than evidence gained through robust

research approaches. Part of this problem may lie in the difficulty of knowing exactly what 'student engagement' really is, either theoretically or in practice, and what its purpose might be.

In the 'student engagement' work from the USA in the 1990s, Astin described the highly-involved student as one who "*devotes considerable energy to studying, spends much time on campus, participates actively in student organisations, and interacts frequently with faculty members and other students*" (Astin 1984; 518). Since then, student-engagement literature has continued to grow, although with the problem that 'student engagement' has come to have multiple meanings and as many associated practices. Trowler's definition in 2010, with its complex piling up of ideas in a single sentence, did little to clarify: "*Student engagement is concerned with the interaction between the time, effort and other relevant resources invested by both students and their institutions intended to optimise the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students and the performance, and reputation of the institution*" (Trowler, 2010:3). Indeed, the earlier definition by Kuh *et al* (2009: 683) was perhaps more to the point: "*Student engagement represents both the time and energy students invest in educationally purposeful activities and the effort institutions devote to using effective educational practices*". HEFCE (2008), focusing more on student empowerment, described 'student engagement' as "*the process whereby institutions and sector bodies make deliberate attempts to involve and empower students in the process of shaping the learning experience*". Importantly, these definitions highlighted both the student and the institutional role in student engagement. However, in 2001, Finn and Zimmer claimed: "*We could define student engagement in any way we want*" (2001: 137) and, eleven years later, despite the continually-growing interest, it was still described as "*an enigmatic phenomenon*" (Solomonides *et al* 2012:7). At the same time, Baron and Corbin (2012:759), writing from an Australian perspective, claimed that "*ideas about student engagement in the university context are often fragmented, contradictory and confused. Even the meaning of the term 'student engagement' is uncertain*"; and Vuori, writing in the context of the USA, asked whether a *buzzword* had actually become a "*fuzzword*" (2014: 509).

The examples and permutations of 'student engagement' appear to be endless. Were we to consider just those student-engagement initiatives where students take a key role, take responsibility, or engage with change processes or curriculum development and renewal, we should soon discover that there are dozens of different practices and that many different names are given to initiatives. It is almost impossible to know, simply from the titles of projects and terminology employed, to what extent there is overlap in thinking, or whether there is any commonality of meaning (Dunne, 2016). To list a few of these different terms that have become interchangeable with 'student engagement' (including some that have emanated from the REACT programme's institutional projects) is to confirm the point: 'Student Interns', 'Students as Partners', 'Student-Staff Partnerships', 'Students as Researchers', 'Students as Co-Researchers', 'Students as Learning and Teaching Consultants', 'Students as Change Agents', 'Students as Change Makers', 'Student Fellows', 'Student Colleagues', 'Students as Producers/Co-Producers', 'Students as Co-creators', 'Students as Co-constructors of Knowledge', 'Students as Champions'. This list is by no means complete and is constantly growing. Clarity in 'student engagement' discourse remains elusive.

Buckley (2014) argues that 'student engagement' is perceived by practitioners in dramatically different ways: as 'pedagogy' or as 'politics' - as a mainstream solution to common challenges, or as a radical approach involving a fundamental change to the structures and values of higher education. Buckley (2014:3) emphasises: "*... the fact that student engagement can coherently be thought of as both underpinning and undermining a quasi-market model of HE should make clear the lack of conceptual clarity; a clear conceptualisation of student engagement would not permit it to be both mainstream and*

radical in these ways". He further claims that "*it is testament to the current level of confusion that both of these positions have been coherently presented*" (Buckley, 2014:2). Most recently, Shaw and Lowe (2017) have taken a different, less political standpoint, suggesting that, for the sake of simplicity, a practical distinction could be perceived as between: i) what has traditionally been seen as the main purpose of higher education - that is, engagement with subject-based learning; and ii) engagement with broader institutional activity, such as representation, societies or volunteering. Unlike Buckley's (2014) distinctions (above), the focus on the intentions or values enshrined within different student-engagement practices is no longer explicitly apparent in these latter descriptors. This is significant if 'student engagement' is perceived as something that can drive fundamental change in approaches to learning and teaching and to the student-teacher relationship. Furthermore, although having easy-to-grasp categorisation is helpful as a starting point, it tends not to capture the broader and more convoluted permutations and complexities of meaning and practice.

Gibbs (2016) recently argued that 'student engagement' in the UK now falls into six categories: students' engagement with their studies, with their institution's campus, in quality assurance, with teaching enhancement, with teaching and with research. Gibbs' critical analysis is useful, though these terms are complex in the multiple ways they are interpreted in practice. They also may not be discrete, as in the case of students who undertake research into technology, with the purpose of enhancing teaching methods across the whole campus in order to provide a better learning environment and hence improved engagement with subject study. Gibbs has demonstrated a grounded approach by highlighting what is happening in practice and how 'student engagement' relates both to individual student development and to what any student can bring to her/his institutional context, but again the sense of 'intention' is lacking: several, or all, of these six categories may have the promotion of change and of new ways of working at their heart, but neither is apparent from the labels used. This is where names such as 'Students as Co-Researchers', 'Students as Learning and Teaching Consultants', 'Students as Change Agents' or 'Students as Change Makers' (as listed above) may actually be more powerful as descriptors, especially when change is the focus of any student-led initiative. They enshrine a sense of new approaches, new ways of working, different relationships with both knowledge-acquisition and people; of student empowerment and of students' collaborating in, or leading change.

These descriptors also link well with a more recent and fast-growing interest in partnership, or 'Students as Partners', where again the intention for change is clear, and are inherent within the fundamental changes in relationship required between the learner and the teacher. The Healey *et al* (2014) report for the Higher Education Academy on 'Students as Partners' outlines four key areas for student-staff partnership: learning, teaching and assessment; subject-based research and inquiry; scholarship of teaching and learning; curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy. Bryson has published extensively on the topic, based on experience of implementing partnership in a UK Russell Group institution, and has reflected, in particular, on the boundaries and practicalities of 'genuine' and 'equal' partnership as well as cautioned against the misuse of practice, or 'pseudo' partnership (Bryson, 2017, Bryson, 2014). There is now evidence that numerous partnership schemes have been created in the UK - such as the Winchester 'Student Fellows Scheme' (Sims *et al* 2014) and the Birmingham City 'Students Academic Partners' Initiative (Freeman *et al* 2014) - in order to empower students and staff to work in partnership. However, there is also continuing discussion about how representative these schemes may, or may not, be of the broad student body (Bols, 2017, Bryson, 2017, Sims *et al* 2017). Such discussions highlight just some of the complexities of defining 'student engagement'; more in-depth information can be found in Bryson, 2014, who provides a highly-detailed review of the term and its many shifting meanings.

It might be argued that a lack of firm definition of 'student engagement' is a strength in some ways. Perhaps what is most important is: that each university takes responsibility for

providing activities that engage students and knows what the term 'student engagement' means to the students themselves; that staff and students can be explicit in their own context. In the words of Zepke (2013:1): "...so many of the ideas produced by engagement researchers are generic. It is up to teachers and institutions to interpret and shape such ideas for specific and unique contexts, subjects and, most importantly, learners". On the other hand, as Buckley (2014: 2) argues: "lack of conceptual clarity carries a number of risks. If we are not clear about what student engagement is, then our ability to improve, increase, support and encourage it through well-designed interventions will be severely diminished." In the case of REACT, each of the three core universities had different student-engagement initiatives, but all three supported student-led, co-curricular activity with a specific focus on enhancement and change, both directly for the individual and, more generally, for the institution. Although the term 'student engagement' may not have been explicitly defined in words in each of these contexts, it could be argued that it was well defined through the implementation of specific practices designed to engage students in very particular ways - ways that required deep-rooted change in conceptualisation of the higher-education experience.

'Hard to reach'

Despite all the attention on student engagement in recent years, there has been comparatively little focus on those who participate less in the broader life of higher education: those who are not engaged; those who are perceived to be less engaged or less involved in institutional initiatives or in their own learning; those, in other words, who might be considered 'hard to reach'^{iv}. Bryson (2014) suggested that the literature on 'student engagement' has been typically normative and claimed that only a single paper (Krause, 2005) has, to any extent, engaged critically with the concept. Much of the literature demonstrates, he argues, reductionist or essentialised views of '*the student*', with assumptions about sameness among 'Y Generation' students or ethnic minority students or older students, as distinct from some essentialised view of '*the traditional student*'. Harper and Quayle (2009) similarly noted how students with, for example, disabilities or those from ethnic minorities might be treated in patronising ways. To ameliorate such situations, Trowler (2010:50) called for exploration of the concept of 'student engagement' from the perspective of the student, including '*problematizing*' the student role and identity in changing contexts (such as part-time students, students who return to interrupted studies, working students and students with family responsibilities).

The NUS (2013) suggests that the proportion of active participants in student union activities, which might to some extent be regarded as a proxy for student engagement, is only 16 per cent of students overall. A recent report (Kandiko and Mawer, 2013) indicated possible reasons for this low figure, suggesting that some students were tentative about associating with the Student Union and described their unions as 'impenetrable', 'intimidating' and 'run by an exclusive clique' (NUS, 2013). In addition, variations in participation rates in student-union activity have been shown to occur between: commuting students and those who are resident; mature students and those under twenty-five; students with parental or caring responsibilities and those without; students who did not move from home and those who did; part-time students and full-time students – in other words, between 'hard-to-reach' students and those who are not hard to reach. Mature students, postgraduates, disabled students, students with dependants and international students also highlighted barriers to involvement (NUS, 2013).

With particular reference to those students who might be considered 'hard to reach', or those most likely to underperform or drop out, recommendations from the '*What Works? Student Retention and Success*' programme (Thomas, 2012) indicated that student engagement in the academic sphere is vital to high levels of success for students. Stevenson, in a study of

black and minority ethnic student degree retention and attainment, concluded in a similar vein: ‘*All students should be viewed as partners in the educational journey and systematically involved in the design and implementation of inclusive learning, teaching and assessment activities*’ (Stevenson, 2012:19).

At the commencement of the REACT programme, it became immediately apparent – if the project were to go on to make any useful contributions to the national picture – that there was a considerable need for further exploration of what is meant by ‘hard to reach’ and at what ‘hard to reach’ students might look like in a variety of different contexts and of whether they fitted an expected pattern. For example, it was suggested through feedback from peers early on in the REACT programme that ‘all engineering’ or ‘all humanities’ students engage less in a particular contexts. Conversely, there was also evidence of so-called ‘hard-to-reach’ students who were fully engaged with their institutions through partnership and change initiatives. To complicate matters further, an important distinction was suggested between those who are ‘hard to reach’ and those who are ‘hard to engage’, the latter perhaps presenting a more difficult problem for universities: some students may be easily reached, but are, whatever their background, lacking in confidence and therefore not easy to engage; some may be carers or commuters or working long hours and therefore just do not have the time to engage, even if they might want to; some may feel that opportunities provided are not suitable; some may simply not wish to engage beyond their academic work.

Above all, ‘hard to reach’ as a term is often criticised as it is perceived as suggesting that the student is somehow doing something to make themselves unavailable; in other words, the term puts the onus on the *student* to reach out. Coates (2005:26) is clear that, if students are to take advantage of engagement opportunities, institutions are required to provide the “*conditions, opportunities and expectations to become involved*”. This is essential if Krause’s (2005) description is to be heeded, wherein engagement in the university experience can be more like a conflict in a world that is uninviting or even alienating. Indeed, Mann (2001) goes as far as to contrast ‘*engagement*’ with ‘*alienation*’, suggesting also that ‘*disengagement*’ may represent an active detachment, whereas simply ‘*doing nothing*’ is different and relates more closely to the idea of ‘*inertia*’. Both ‘disengagement’ and ‘doing nothing’ are important to note, since Kuh (2003) suggests that what students bring to higher education, or where they study, matters less to their success and development than what they do during their time as a student. Hence, consideration of the barriers to participation and engagement was an issue of high significance to the REACT programme.

The REACT Approach

In order to satisfy the REACT aims, and taking note of the complexities and issues explored above, the programme was designed to cover three key strands of activity:

1. The Collaborative Development Programme
2. The Research Project
3. Dissemination

These three areas are briefly outlined below and are also addressed more extensively later in this issue of JEIPC’.

1. The Collaborative Development Programme

In comparison to some of the difficulties and complexities outlined above, one aspect of Aim 4 – “*acting as a supportive community of practice*” - seemed comparatively straightforward. This was in part because the development of a community was highly desirable, as well as to some extent being within the control of both the core REACT team and all the

collaborative partners. A supportive community could be created, sustained and shaped to ensure that it grew as envisaged by all involved. As part of the overall initiative, the REACT team devised a 'Collaborative Development Programme' to include all the sixteen universities involved so that they could collaborate on the design and implementation of change. This programme was led by the REACT team but all partners were expected to work both independently and collaboratively by:

- developing their own projects aimed at enhancing student engagement and engaging their 'hard-to-reach' students;
- attending two mandatory workshop-style events: a 'Development Day' – as an introduction to the programme and to other participants – followed up eight months later by a 'Discussion Day' to check progress and share issues;
- deciding on the topic and organisation of at least one bespoke consultancy visit from members of the REACT team to help them drive projects forward, to progress research and evaluation, to help resolve issues or to talk to a broader institutional group.

There was also an invitation to take part in the peer-review process for this journal, especially for those who wanted to gain experience of peer review. The development of these more community-based ways of working are described in detail in a following article, which outlines the development and implementation of the REACT programme (see Dunne and Lowe, this issue).

2. The REACT Research Project

The research strand of the REACT programme was designed with three main purposes:

- to provide a systematic review of the literature on 'hard-to-reach' students, along with a set of descriptors of those considered as 'hard to reach' in the fifteen universities involved in REACT;
- to gain qualitative data from those students who were involved with student engagement initiatives (the focus, in particular, was to gain a better understanding of the individual 'engaged' student and her/his background, her/his individual characteristics and motivations, and what s/he perceived s/he gained from engaging with her/his university);
- to gather quantitative data from at least five of the participant universities in REACT to illustrate the links between 'student engagement', however defined, and retention and attainment.

In addition, some background information was gained through a series of 'checkpoints' completed at the Collaborative Development Days. Research support and consultancy were made available to those of the collaborative partners who required it. Details from this research can be seen in particular in Sims *et al* and Shaw *et al* (this issue).

3. Raising Awareness

Given that one of the purposes of REACT was to identify and then share best practice to advance student engagement nationally, the creation of a practical and informative website^{vi} has been central to: building awareness of the work being conducted; providing open-source activities, ideas, frameworks, strategies, case studies, models, evaluation tools and 'how-to' user-guides; including both the staff and the student voice. Sharing short case studies of student engagement has the potential to enable greater understanding of what works, how and why and to provide resources so designed that institutions may learn from - and with - each other. In terms of wider dissemination, this journal is a key way in which the aims,

processes and outcomes of REACT may be shared, and even further than did the flagship end-of-programme conference, which highlighted progress made by all collaborative partners.

Significantly, fifteen partner institutions were involved in both the final conference and in the writing for this Special Issue, demonstrating widespread commitment to disseminating their student-engagement projects and to sharing even more widely the lessons learned from the programme as a whole.

To Conclude

It may be that engagement with co-curricular initiatives and other activity beyond degree-based learning is not wanted by all students, and students should not be perceived as behaving inappropriately for not engaging in activities they find irrelevant or uninteresting. Coates (2005) argues that individual learners are ultimately the agents in discussions of engagement. On the other hand, if universities are not providing appropriate opportunities or not ensuring that particular groups are drawn in, then they may continue to have students who do not engage or who cannot find the time, space or confidence to engage. Furthermore, if universities do not know who their 'hard to reach' are, they will not know if they are making sure that opportunities are made available to all student groups. This is where REACT serves to raise awareness and influence practice by highlighting key issues.

Kuh (2003) suggests that, if student engagement can deliver on its promises, it could hold a 'magic wand' for the improvement of the student experience. A key challenge for REACT was to see whether there really could be such a magic wand. Could the very different contexts and understandings about 'student engagement' in the UK actually be shown to lead to positive results for students amongst the REACT cohort of universities? Would it be possible to demonstrate positive student engagement outcomes both quantitatively and qualitatively within the programme? Would the collective partnership of fifteen universities be able to give greater meaning to 'student engagement' by narrowing the focus to the 'hard to reach'? One of the most important aspects to remember about REACT is that at its heart is a consideration of *every* individual student, however s/he may be categorised and however many different categories s/he may fit. Whatever the reason for students' being hard to reach or to engage, the most important factor is that each and every student is unique (cf. Bryson, 2014; Trowler, 2010) and we must ensure that we provide opportunities for all to engage.

So, despite the difficulties inherent in the REACT aims and the complex characterisation of fundamental concepts, the words of Felten *et al* were heeded: "*Our advice is not to get bogged down... but to get the ball rolling right away. Small, sustained actions often build momentum. First, you must begin*" (Felten et al 2016:175). The rest of this issue tells the story of those actions and confirms the contribution of each and every one of the collaborative partner institutions to get the ball rolling and build momentum.

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ⁱ See the Introduction to this issue for the full list of collaborative partners.

ⁱⁱ The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) is a survey mechanism used to measure the level of student participation at universities and colleges in Canada and the United States as it relates to learning and engagement.

ⁱⁱⁱ The National Student Survey (NSS) is a high-profile annual census of nearly half a million students across the UK. Conducted annually since 2005, it is an established survey and produces useful data to help institutions and students' unions to identify areas of success and areas for enhancement.

^{iv} See Shaw, Humphrey and Sims, this issue, for a systematic literature review on the term 'hard to reach'.

^v See Dunne and Lowe, this issue, for a description of the REACT Collaborative Development Programme and Sims et al this issue, for detail of the REACT Research Project.

^{vi} www.studentengagement.ac.uk