Concluding thoughts on the REACT Programme

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Introduction

REACT, in many ways, has been about diversity: of type of institution; of students' setting and intake; of current level of activity in relation to student engagement; of approaches to change, of roles and expertise of partner staff; of the particular purpose and activity of the 'hard to reach' engagement project undertaken and the stakeholders involved. As a consequence, and because the authors for this issue were encouraged to write in ways they considered appropriate rather than being given a standard template, the content and style of every paper are very different and each needs to be read for its own individual story. There are three agendas, however, which are fundamental to the REACT programme and outcomes. Each of these is discussed in turn: building evidence through a culture of evaluation and research; 'hard to reach' students and the notion of 'reaching out'; the management of change in the context of REACT. The discussion reflects the learning of the REACT team, gained from working alongside the collaborative partner institutions, and includes comments from the independent evaluation undertaken by GuildHE[i] to support points made.

Before addressing each of the three agendas, it is interesting briefly to place REACT in a broader educational context. Published in 1963, the ground-breaking Robbins Report claimed that about four in every 100 people entered university full-time. Just one per cent of working-class girls and three per cent of working-class boys went on to full-time degree level courses. However, Robbins argued that, *"…Higher Education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so"* (Robbins, 1963:8). The careful statistical analysis and detailed research that contributed to the report was used to challenge the idea that only a tiny minority were capable of benefiting from Higher Education (HE). There was, however, considerable concern at the time that '*more means worse*' (Barr and Glennerster, 2013). Subsequent continued expansion (in recent years, over forty per cent of young people have enrolled in UK universities), changes to funding and the ever-shifting landscape of higher education have all contributed to an undoubted increase in the complexity of universities. Globalisation, along with declining sources of income and rising costs are creating pressure on Higher Education (Brown *et al,* 2010). University rankings will no doubt continue to have more influence on positioning institutions in the national and international market. To compound this, student background, ethnicity, gender or prior education is considerably broader than in the Robbins era, and students are becoming increasingly consumer-oriented as well as concerned about their careers.

This is an important backdrop to REACT and to so-called 'hard-to-reach' students, or those who engage little or fail to engage with the multiple opportunities available to them at university. In this pressurised context, it does seem as if '*more*' potentially does mean '*worse*' for some particular groups of students, at least in terms of their being less successful than the majority in HE today. Lowe and Dunne (this issue) discuss this issue in more detail. However, one example serves to give an idea of the problem here. In data from 2011, 67.9 percent of white students received a first or upper-second class Honours degree, whereas only 49.2 percent of black and minority ethnic (BME) students achieved this (ECU, 2011) and, as highlighted by some of the REACT projects, this seems to be a continuing problem.

Building evidence through a culture of evaluation and research

As highlighted throughout this issue, 'student engagement' is not easy to define. A further concern is the lack of rigorous evaluation or data demonstrating that student engagement has a positive impact on students. This is somewhat surprising, given the emphasis on 'student engagement' across the UK. From a major survey of student engagement in 2010, Trowler called for: *"…the development of a robust body of evidence built up through small-scale local studies that speak to - to confirm, challenge or redefine - other studies, so that instead of a collection of stand-alone, almost anecdotal, evidence, a more integrated and rigorous picture can emerge of practice and effects*" (Trowler, 2010:50).

The REACT pieces in this issue of JEIPC demonstrate varied problems and perspectives on 'student engagement' and 'hard-to-reach' students and they have highlighted different kinds of complexity. Some are stories of individuals or groups of students and what a focus on 'hard to reach' has meant for them personally; some address institutional issues; others are just beginning to recognise who the 'hard-to-reach' students are in their institution. Projects are at various stages of development, from completed to 'still in the early stages', dependent on their purposes, complexities, breadth of vision and timescale adopted. They are undoubtedly eclectic in their approach. However, the power of the REACT programme has been the comparative narrowness of focus on 'hard-to-reach' students in these multiple and differing contexts. This has allowed the building up of a related series of studies all shedding light on the same theme, thereby providing a comparatively coherent body of thinking and evidence. REACT has also been very much a developmental programme and those involved have been encouraged to share a practical, qualitative picture of their experiences at whatever stage they have reached and with whatever amount of success they have achieved. Bovill, in her Preface to this issue of JEPC, states: "… *despite … the ongoing overly-generalised dismissal of much student engagement work on the basis of its small scale, qualitative approaches and lack of theoretical basis … we would be foolish to overlook the value of the work highlighted in this volume…"*. The positive nature of such work is also emphasised by the authors of the external evaluation[ii], who stated, "*The REACT project has made a valuable contribution to the student engagement* landscape and the lessons learned should be widely disseminated".

REACT has also, in part, been an attempt to develop a more rigorous quantitative picture of existing practice in this area. Universities currently collect large amounts of data on students. However, as several staff from amongst the collaborative partners found when wishing to use this data for the purposes of REACT, it was retained centrally in any institution for very specific requirements, such as for reporting on national figures for retention, degree outcome or widening-participation activity. The data is neither easy to obtain for alternative purposes, nor easy to translate into new contexts. Furthermore, amongst the REACT partner institutions, little data had previously been collected on 'student engagement' per se and, where it existed, ethical and data protection matters were (rightly) of paramount concern to institutions. However, where data was available for analysis, the findings are convincingly positive and clearly important, in that student engagement can be seen to relate strongly to enhanced retention, attainment and employment outcomes for *all* students, including so-called 'hard-to-reach' groups. The external evaluation highlights the importance of REACT in having pursued the gathering and analysis of data, especially within the three core universities (Winchester, Exeter and London Metropolitan), stating: "*Without the REACT project this data may have continued to go unanalysed.*"

Prior to REACT, there was no existing picture in the UK of such a relationship. Most of those participating in REACT believed there to be a connection, especially in relation to a lack of engagement by disengaged and disenchanted students, but there was no real evidence for a positive relationship. In providing such evidence, the programme has made a start, but there is still much further to go in producing a consistent and consolidated picture of positive

outcomes. Together with the REACT team, the external evaluators call for analysis of institutional data to continue: "…*institutions need to build robust data collecting/evaluating processes when developing student engagement initiatives and will need to consider ethical and data protection issues as part of this*". They also suggest that a link with projects on the theme of '*learning gain*' (a topic which is currently growing in popularity in the UK) might be appropriate, given the potential relationship between co-curricular activity and attainment (McGrath *et al,* 2015). This could be important in drawing together and reinforcing outcomes from different but potentially-related national agendas. However, unless there is an emphasis in universities on data collection that relates student engagement to areas such as retention, attainment, employment outcomes and other factors such as the student experience and satisfaction, the "*more integrated and rigorous picture*" as advocated by Trowler (2011) will never emerge. In this case, institutions may remain unaware of the power of their student-engagement activities in terms of either student or institutional development and performance. In times of economic pressure, it seems likely, on the one hand, that obtaining funding for such quests will be increasingly difficult; on the other, good news stories such as those emanating from REACT may provide the much-needed justifications for institutions to invest resources in both student-engagement initiatives and their formal evaluation. Hard data can be powerful in articulating the case for change as well as attracting 'buy-in' and future champions for change. The independent evaluation confirms that, amongst REACT partners, "*Demonstrating the impact on 'hard to reach' students was seen as key to getting senior management buy-in to student engagement activities".*

This kind of data collection and analysis may become increasingly important in the UK in the era of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and a heightened emphasis on metrics (BIS, 2016). It was again evident from the independent evaluation that REACT participants from the partner universities were keen to collect more quantitative data, with the caution that projects need to run for a suitable length of time before analysing the data in too much depth, ensuring that any engagement scheme has widened out beyond just the early adopters. Developing a research-and-evaluation culture may also be helped by the move towards using 'learning analytics' or 'big data' in HE, although multiple reservations have been expressed, especially in relation to ethical considerations and the purposes for which the data will be used. It is also important that the personal stories should not be lost in the quest for data-driven institutional understandings, as highlighted by the student voices that are so powerful in this issue.

'Hard-to-reach' students and 'Reaching out'

'Hard to reach' has been a useful term in allowing those involved in REACT to have a shared focus of attention, even if there is currently no shared definition. However, despite appearing frequently in educational literature, 'hard to reach' has not been a popular term amongst either university staff or students and there have been concerns by institutions involved in the programme that it has negative connotations or could be used as a derogatory label for students. Marie *et al* (this issue), whilst acknowledging the limitations of the term, highlight that it might still be helpful in ensuring an understanding of how to make institutions inclusive and recognising the overlapping nature of different groupings of students.

In most ways, it may be the concept that matters more than the words themselves, so long as the words are not used bluntly to categorise or label students. What has become apparent from REACT is that the kinds of student who may be 'hard to reach' come from much broader characterisations than previously thought and that they are also highly dependent on the intake and context of any particular university.

The independent evaluation of partner universities outlined that there is *"greater clarity"* within institutions as an outcome of being involved in the REACT project. It also highlighted that "…*definitions ranged quite significantly within institutions. Most cited mature, part-time,*

BME and distance learners as their 'hard to reach' students. Some interviewees conflated 'hard to reach' with the widening participation priority groups of their institution, while others stressed those students who did not participate in student engagement activities. There was clearly a recognition that each of the three partner institutions would have different 'hard to reach' students. One of the outcomes of REACT should be the acknowledgement that each institution will need to define 'hard to reach' within their own context". Seven institutions indicated that they did not have a definition of 'hard-to-reach' students and three that they were working towards one. Interviewee comments included: "*we should not try and define 'hard to reach' as a group but, rather, they are sets of individuals. There can be a danger of trying to over-prescribe this group …There are strategies that will work for different groups at different times at different points".* Another interviewee highlighted the *"very complex and contextual"* nature of 'hard to reach'.

'*Reaching out'* is a theme throughout REACT. Proposals in this issue for '*yet to be reached*' and '*reciprocal reaching across*' may give a better sense of meaning, though each phrase has different connotations. The first implies laying responsibility on the institution or staff to 'reach out' to students, whereas the second term implies adopting a more partnership-based model where the responsibility is reciprocal and shared between the students and institution or staff members. 'Reaching out' is also addressed in this issue in relation to technology as a reaching-out tool which, though not necessarily as effective as might be thought, can be extremely powerful if students take up opportunities provided. It is also notable that it is not just to students who are 'hard to reach', but also staff who are difficult to reach, who show indifference to change or do not wish to get involved.

Suggestions from the REACT partner institutions and picked up by the evaluation highlight that 'reaching out' to as wide a group as possible, through developing a range of student-engagement schemes and opportunities, is likely to engage different groups of students, as will variation in the kinds of communications that are sent. Similarly, the evaluators suggested that: "*Institutions should track the participation of their widening participation students and also identify whether there are particular subsets of students that do not engage".* REACT has illustrated that knowledge of patterns and trends in engagement, even trying to understand the mind-sets of students, and finding the appropriate environments and language, may be essential, rather than assuming that student groups or individuals are alike or that categories of 'hard to reach' apply universally. Better information in turn leads to the ability to tailor information, activities, schemes and opportunities to particular groups. However, as reported by REACT partners, effective understanding and practice is unlikely unless there is a '*whole university approach*' with effective institutional conversation and communication and a drawing together of different stakeholders to work towards the same ends and ensure '*institutional readiness'* for the implementation of change.

However, '*Whose responsibility?*' to reach out remains a problematic question. Harper and Quaye (2009: 6) argue that both students and institutions must be involved: "*... students should not be chiefly responsible for engaging themselves ... but instead administrators and educators must foster the conditions that enable diverse populations of students to be engage".* Zepke (2013:1) states that …"*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".* Such quotes emphasise the learning environment provided as key to engagement. Others emphasise the role of the student. For example, Felten *et al* (2016:20) insist: "Students are responsible for their own learning… If students fail to do the things they need to do to learn, that is largely their fault. Institutions are off the hook". Substitute 'engagement' for 'learning' and the same message may apply. However, as Felten *et al* also highlight, students need to make an effort, and institutions need to give detailed attention to the learning environment and to aligning that environment and the culture of the university with the particular student population they serve.

Management of change in the context of REACT

What this issue of JEIPC is about, principally, is not new ideas for student engagement, nor even about novel ways of engaging 'hard-to-reach' students - although particular learning environments, appropriate opportunities and partnership models are discussed within the papers. Essentially, it is about the management of institutional change. Scott (2003), as Professor and Director of Planning and Quality at the University of Technology outlines some key insights on effective change management in HE. Although created in the context of digital learning, they apply equally well to the REACT context and provide a useful framework, in an adapted form, to highlight some of the messages emanating from the REACT programme.

1. Change is a mix of external forces and individual action

As highlighted in the introductory paper to this issue of JEIPC, the meaning of the term 'student engagement' is uncertain and, as argued by Baron and Corbin (2012), ideas about student engagement in the university context are often "fragmented, contradictory and confused". External forces such as massification, large class size, a more managerial approach to HE and cuts in funding all may mean that some students find themselves in a context where they are 'harder to reach'. The student body has become heterogeneous (Caldwell *et al*, 2005) and universities have had to adapt quickly to ensure inclusive provision. Furthermore, whilst government and universities urge attention to student engagement, many of their actions - it could be argued - have contributed to greater student disengagement. There have certainly been repercussions from the changes and 'hard-to-reach' students may be a consequence of these, or other, aspects of HE. Caldwell *et al* (2006) claim that the student body has fragmented and Quinn *et al* (2005) suggest that students are at risk of alienation.

It is at this point that individual action has become necessary in the change process to make new expectations for HE provision work on the ground. Change is inevitable: "Without the ability to adapt continuously, organisations cannot thrive" (RBSGroup); yet, without understanding which students in any given context of this changing world are 'hard to reach' for whatever reason, it is difficult to know how to target them more effectively. Individual action (which can mean anything from individual universities to individual teams or people) is what can ensure that change is sustainable and that students are not disadvantaged. Throughout REACT, it has been evident that individual learning and the willingness and motivation of individuals to learn have been paramount. Learning about student engagement and about 'hard-to-reach' students has been continuous, both as an outcome of the REACT-provided development and consultancy days and also through the institutional research and evaluation undertaken and then fed back into organisational learning, influencing strategic or practical developments that are well-informed and underpinned by evidence. In this way, individual learning and institutional learning are inextricably linked.

Of interest is the finding, highlighted by the independent evaluation, that outcomes from the REACT programme have influenced recent Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) submissions. In this case individual action is feeding into an external force or driver, thereby reinforcing the relevance and benefit of student engagement for all.

2. Change does not just happen – it must be led

That change does not just happen may sound trite, but the leading of change is of especial relevance to REACT, because, in many cases, change is being driven by student-engagement champions (often from professional services groups), Student Union staff, and

students, rather than by university managers. The importance of this is that almost anyone can be a leader of change in their university and can influence the direction of change in their own area of expertise although, without the interest, backing or support of institutional managers, fundamental shifts are unlikely to happen on a long-term basis or in an embedded way. One of the problems of unembedded change is that when enthusiasts or change leaders leave an organisation, the motivation for associated change is likely to decline or disappear entirely. This was the case for REACT, with the departure of a senior manager from one institution and a member of a learning and teaching team from another. In both cases, the planned projects collapsed.

Leading also means having a vision of what is needed or what is possible (cf. Kotter, 2012, in the context of large organisational change, and Dunne and Zandstra (2011), in the context of student engagement). Each of the REACT projects was based on a vision for change and for what would look different if the changes were successful. In some cases, the vision was relatively simple, but this simplicity can be deceptive, since visions are generally ultimately dependent on detailed planning, strategies and budgets. In other cases, the vision was complex, involving the co-ordination of multiple institutional partners.

3.   It is important to look outside as well as inside for viable change ideas and solutions

In many ways, the power of REACT lay in its collaborative design. At a time when universities are more competitive than ever before, and with fears that any competitive advantages may be lost through 'sharing', REACT was deliberately premised on collaboration, openness in sharing highs and lows and the quest for collaboratively-discussed solutions to problems. That this was the case meant that viable change ideas were articulated on several occasions with others from the partner universities and that change ideas were being distilled from conversations with those 'outside'. That the REACT team also came from three core REACT institutions (Winchester, Exeter and London Metropolitan University) meant that 'outsiders' were in regular contact with each of the REACT partners. The independent evaluation highlighted the importance of this: "*The staff of the REACT programme were seen as the most valued resource by practitioners and were therefore the most used aspect of the project's resources. The ability of the REACT staff to build on their own experiences and amass a wealth of knowledge in the field and then tailor that advice to specific institutional settings was highly valued*".

4. There are far more options for improvement than time or resources to address them

One of the aspects of REACT that was built into the design of the programme was that institutional champions should have the time to discuss a range of ideas before refining them. This refining then took place in collaboration with those from across the multiple universities engaged with REACT, the consultants from the REACT team or selected groups of staff from a particular institution, in, for example, workshops or whole-day conferences. In some cases, this meant coming up with as many ideas as possible through formal and informal discussions, sharing of practices, listening to multiple views or engaging in round-table debates, but always with the intention of picking out the best ideas and refining them. Indeed, much of the consultancy time was put into this process of refinement and addressing the most practical solutions or ways of working. The REACT process was often, therefore, a case of broadening out and then refining down, with continued discussions taking place within the institutions.

Although this may be seen as a slightly slow way of working, it meant that project expectations, implementation and outcomes were carefully decided upon and likely to be more effective in the long run.

5. The most successful changes are the result of a team effort in which people learn together

Collaborative cultures, as was the case with the REACT programme, also need to be worked at and do not just happen. The REACT partner universities posed no problems of commitment or determination, since all involved had volunteered to engage with the programme and all were enthusiastic about student engagement and making inroads into the problem of 'hard-to-reach' students. Nevertheless, the activities provided and the discussion of issues that were common to many were deliberately designed to make participants feel relaxed, unthreatened and enabled to work in partnership.

'Partnership' has recently become a buzzword, especially in relation to staff and students working together (Healey *et al*, 2014, Cook-Sather *et al*, 2014). Such partnership is being developed in several of the REACT projects, but it has also been central to the programme throughout – not just partnership between students and staff, but also a shared sense of connection between the collaborative partner institutions that encourages openness, honesty and mutual support, even if only on an occasional basis. Further partnerships, loosely defined, have been recognised between universities and their Student Union, or between different teams of professional services staff. Again, as highlighted by the evaluators: "*Some participants commented that having an opportunity to share best practice within this core group of institutions was particularly useful, and that this contributed to creating a network of peers within the sector.*" Such partnerships fall readily into the concept of a community of practice, famously described by Lave and Wenger (1991) as a group of people who come together to share common interests and goals, with the aim of sharing information, developing knowledge and developing themselves both personally and professionally. This definition was refined by Wenger (1998: 184) as: "*… the ability to take part in meaningful activities and interactions, in the production of sharable artefacts, in community-building conversations, and in the negotiations of new situations. It implies a sustained intensity and relations of mutuality*". This, in particular, seems to sum up the REACT approach, with participants working within an authentic community.

6. Change is not an event but is a complex and subjective learning/un-learning process for all concerned

As highlighted by Scott, there is a profound difference between 'change' and 'progress'. Progress emphasises that change is continuous, perhaps more like a series of many mini-events until institutional mindsets or cultures can be perceived as different.   For REACT, the focus throughout has been on the practicalities of progress and how to achieve the most fruitful gains. 'Progress' refers to whether any change is useful or desirable, is making the hoped-for difference to stakeholders, or is having appropriate impact. Progress may be difficult to achieve and this, again, has been central to some of the REACT projects, as can be seen in the open and honest accounts of progress and associated difficulties in this issue.

In response to being asked who their 'hard-to-reach' students were, one interviewee replied to the evaluators: T*hat's the $64,000 question!"* This is not an uninformed or flippant response, but means that the reply to this question had become more complex than anticipated, and more complex as time went on. The response reflected progress. As an example, the widening participation students who were thought 'hard to reach' in one institution were actually found to be fully engaged and profiting from this engagement – a really significant and positive finding in itself, but not one which clarified who the 'hard-to-reach' students really are. It signified a moment of 'un-learning' for that institution. Where problems are thoroughly entrenched, or where approaches have been unsuccessful, un-learning may be the only way ahead, sometimes with the requirement that intransigent institutional members be challenged to look at issues in new ways.

Un-learning may also link to not being afraid of openness and of being challenged. Bovill, in her Preface to this issue of JEIPC, states that "…admitting where we get things wrong or where things need to change" is part of an essential critical process, and she believes that it is acceptable to share real experiences so we can all (un)learn from them. Apparent 'failure' may be disappointing but, as shown by some of the studies in this issue, approaches that are not as successful as hoped for are part of a learning process which, in the long run, enables better understanding and allows for more context-sensitive approaches.

7. The change process is cyclical, not linear

In 1960, the seminal educationalist, Bruner, wrote of the concept of the spiral curriculum in schooling, premised on the idea that each encounter with a specific area of learning should - over time - increase in complexity and reinforce previous learning. Similarly, effective change in HE can be seen as a process of designing, implementing, evaluating, re-designing – in the light of continuous learning and understanding – and continually building on that process of action learning. In the current environment, this may be seen as a luxury with regard to change, with senior managers needing to push for change that happens faster in accordance to constantly-shifting HE agendas. On occasion, in REACT, this impatience was commented on, with staff feeling pressured to bring about change rapidly even when an institution was not well prepared for it. REACT has been in a position to stand back and encourage time and attention to be given to a narrow area of practice. It is important to note that a two-year period has not been enough time for some of the projects to implement a full cycle of change, but also that what might be perceived as slow progress by some has led to deep learning about the context and about students, thereby enabling more apposite and purposeful interventions.

Scott argues that change is learning, and learning is change**.** Throughout the REACT programme, institutional projects have enabled considerable learning about student engagement and 'hard-to-reach' students. This enhanced knowledge and understanding have in turn influenced how change has had to be addressed, and the 'spiral' of change continues.

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Overall, the REACT team hope that this special issue of JEIPC provides a significant contribution to the 'student engagement' literature and, in the words of the independent evaluators, "*will result in a legacy long beyond the end of the project*". A focus on 'hard-to-reach' students has raised fundamental questions about the sorts of community that universities, or individual institutions, want to be. There has been continuing concern over the past decade or more that the growth and the commercialisation of HE mean that traditional values are lost. REACT has been concerned with "a Higher Education for all with the desire and ability to benefit from it" (the principle attributed to Robbins), not just those enabled by their social capital, ethnic or cultural privilege, or their personal circumstances, to succeed at university and to take advantage of the multiple opportunities available. However, expecting student engagement to happen of its own accord has been described as 'magical thinking' (Chang *et al*, 2005: 10-11), and the same should be said of the engagement of 'hard-to-reach' students. At the core of REACT has been the putting of the student at the centre of everything we do and making sure that every single student has the chance of success. This requires a commitment and focus that, as a community, we cannot allow to be eroded, whatever the time or economic constraints or the competing agendas.

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[i] GuildHE was commissioned to undertake an external evaluation for presentation to the REACT funders – HEFCE. The independent evaluators spoke to three different people in each of the three core universities: a representative of the project; a representative from the university management; and a representative from the students' union. In addition, a survey of the 13 partner universities - of which 11 responded - was followed with four in-depth interviews and stakeholder interviews with representatives from QAA and JISC. Authors of the evaluation report are Bols and Turhan (2017).