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# Barriers to Student Engagement: Why Don't University Students Engage?

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## Abstract

Student engagement (SE) is considered a 'hot topic' in many universities and extensive resources are developed within strategies to encourage students to participate in both academic and non-academic activities. However, many initiatives do not produce the intended outcomes, resulting in wasteful policies that do not enhance the student experience. Understanding the barriers that prevent students from participating in engagement is fundamental to ensure resources are used effectively for the benefit of all students.

This study investigates engagement within higher education (HE) focusing on student opinions beyond academic activities. Focus groups were undertaken (participants = 21) to investigate the role of students with regards to SE and barriers that stopped students from engagement within HE.

Results revealed that students agreed they have a role in engagement including responsibility to be pro-active and help co-create. The barriers to engagement were many, including transitioning; financial; cultural issues; and staff buy-in. Management implications suggested the need for senior leadership involvement with SE and a greater understanding of the student population.

**Keywords:** Student Engagement, Higher Education, Barriers, Role of Student, Co-Creation, Staff Buy-In

## Introduction

Do universities provide a return on investment or value for money? Such questions are often heard today with regards to higher education (HE) provision and has been the subject of extensive debate. HE and the dynamic environment that it operates within has been well documented, with many factors impacting upon the effectiveness of the sector. Changes in the funding of universities (Augar, 2019) and the introduction of student fees (Cattaneo et al., 2020) have played a role in the debate, with researchers questioning what is the function of a modern university (Hensley et al., 2013). Another major change has been the increased competition within the sector and the growth in the number of HE institutes, resulting in more students attending university (Bolton, 2020). Other policies which have led to increased numbers include the widening participation agenda (Wainwright et al., 2020); the huge growth in internationalisation within HE (HM Government, 2019); and student mobility initiatives (Castro et al., 2016).

The challenges of working in such organisations have been documented. Du and the Lapsley (2019) suggest that there are many tensions within the United Kingdom (UK) universities due to the shift in focus of them being a purely public service institute to organisations that need to be commercially able to survive. Universities now provide more than just academic services as they compete to serve a diverse student body and often other associated stakeholders too, including: accreditation bodies, local community, employees, government, local councils, overseas partners, research collaborations and funding bodies (Labanauskis & Ginevicius, 2017).

Researchers have suggested that due to the many changes identified within HE, this has inevitably had an impact upon the nature of the student body and the rise in the term of 'non-traditional students'. Jahn et al. (2017) indicate that that the rise and integration of non-traditional learners is one of the biggest challenges facing HE institutes today and more needs to be done to understand the changing nature of students and the subsequent way they engage, study and learn at university. Cotton et al. (2017) suggests that non-traditional users of university are those students who are under-represented in HE and could include "first generation students (first in family to participate in HE), mature students, disabled students, single parents, students from low-income families and minority ethnic groups" (p.63). Other changes that have been acknowledged within the student population are the rise in students studying courses part-time due to work commitments, which inevitably impacts upon their student experience (Ellis, 2019) and also the growth of international students and the impact of such cohorts within the learning environment (De Wit & Altbach, 2021).

It is clear from research that the student body's changing nature unsurprisingly has influenced how universities interact with their students and the concept of student engagement has seen a rise in its importance within HE institutes (Collaco, 2017). However, it has also been acknowledged that there has been limited research (Tight, 2020) into the effects of SE understanding if engagement initiatives impact students in different ways. Gaining a greater insight into this, is needed so that universities can effectively target engagement activities. They suggest that gaining opinions from a student perspective is crucial to fully appreciate the complex nature of student engagement.

The lack of research in this area has been highlighted and it is a vital question that HE institutions need to address, if they are to be successful in implementing SE strategies

that fulfil the aims of their universities (Quin, 2017; Crabtree et al., 2021). The research presented suggests that certain typologies of students may be at a disadvantage to uptake engagement opportunities for a variety of reasons such as socio-economic background and family commitments (Aljohani, 2016; Eriksson et al. 2017) resulting in financial and time constraints that stop them from fully engaging within their university.

Recent research by Shah and Cheng (2019) revealed many obstacles to SE, but interestingly the barriers that were reported 'most important' by the students were 'external' to the teaching and learning association. Work and family commitments, financial difficulties and mental health concerns were rated the highest, as opposed to engagement with tutors which was rated the lowest. Their findings highlighted the necessity that HE institutions should be aware that due to the changing diversity of the student body, SE strategies need to consider the needs of different student groups. Failure to do so, may result in increased attrition rates and poor academic outcomes, as well as other associated social and economic benefits to students, institutions and society, they conclude by suggesting that further research into the barriers to SE is needed.

Buckley (2013) identifies the importance of surveying students to explore their views on education, learning and engagement. However, he recognises that a lot of engagement activity does not take place in the classroom, suggesting that often such surveys do not take this into account. Tai et al. (2020) agree and suggest that often surveys relating to SE focuses solely on student success and fail to address the many other dimensions associated with engagement. Kahu and Nelson (2018), however, suggest adopting a holistic approach to enquiring about SE to explore the many facets that can impact upon individual students' relationship to engagement.

The rise of student attrition within education and the lack of engagement by students have been the topic of debate by researchers recently (Boylan & Renzulli, 2017; Beer & Lawson, 2018) who have identified the worrying rise of students not engaging and dropping out of education. Castello et al. (2017) identified many factors that can impact upon students' success and perceived barriers including: feelings of isolation, inability to socialize or create networks, passive personalities, financial barriers and the ability to balance academic work and personal life. They highlight that many of the reasons stated was often the result of universities "culture of institutional neglect" (p.1056) whereby HE institutes failed to help students integrate and transition into a university setting.

The associated "culture" within a university setting and how students "fit into" that culture has also been reported by Cena et al. (2021). They report the need for students to feel part of the university culture and if they do not feel a "sense of belonging" may be at risk of not fully engaging with university initiatives. Crabtree et al (2021) also endorse such findings and suggest that the role staff play in HE in helping students adapt and feel part of the culture is vital to overcome such barriers of isolation. Similar endorsements were echoed by Hamilton, Bailey and Phillips (2016) who suggest that factors associated with students not engaging are not fully understood. These authors suggest that often students' mental wellbeing is overlooked by HE institutes and factors (stress, anxiety depression, social dysfunction) that can potentially impact on students' ability to adapt to university life are not investigated. Freeman and Simonsen (2015) also suggest that this is an area that is under-researched, their work highlights that whilst many HE institutions implement

expensive interventions (academic strategies; behavioural strategies; attendance strategies; study skills strategies; organisational and structural changes), the systems are often not evaluated and as such, a clear understanding of whether such strategies help students is not fully understood.

The market-driven environment that HE institutions now work in have also been highlighted as a potential barrier to student engagement, with increased numbers of students at university, resulting in larger class sizes that can prohibit student interaction (Bolton, 2020). Gourlay (2015) suggests that many different contexts need to be considered, including the learning style and motivation of the individual student, the relationship between the lecturer and the student and the resources that are used for the engagement activities. The role of university staff in engaging students is supported by other scholars (Jang et al. 2016; Gray & Di Loreto, 2016) who emphasize the importance of staff interacting with their students and the ability to motivate all types of students to engage in both academic and extra-curricular activities.

The changing nature of HE and the diverse, competitive marketplace that universities now operate in has been well documented and discussed, as universities continue to go through a paradigm shift regarding funding, many HE providers are now focussing their activities on commercial practices, in particular marketing activities. In line with this view, Dollinger et al., (2018) suggest that co-creation has a vital role to play in the HE sector today, they state that co-creation is, the process of students' feedback, opinions, and other resources such as their intellectual capabilities and personalities, integrated alongside institutional resources, which can offer mutual value to both students and institutions (p.210)

They suggest that the value of co-creation can help HE institutions to work in partnership with students, in an attempt to fully engage with them resulting in more meaningful experiences for the student body. Their findings suggested that students can benefit from co-creation through: quality interactions; increased satisfaction; and improved graduate capabilities, as well as the institutions benefiting in the form of: increased student loyalty; university image; and an improved student-university identification. They agree with the research suggested that HE institutes should try and work in partnership with students and in doing so the benefits of student engagement can be expanded. For example, if students are engaging in a classroom setting, they help to co-create the learning experience and the associated advantages of that can be for other students, as well as the teaching staff. Likewise, if students are enthusiastic and engaged as student ambassadors within their university, this can help co-create a strong image and brand for the institution when potential students visit for open days. Co-creation can also take place for the wider community, if students engage in volunteering opportunities and help co-create positive outcomes through community work.

As highlighted the value of co-creation within HE and the importance placed upon SE has a major role to play in modern universities. The growing recognition of taking a holistic approach when exploring the effectiveness of SE strategies within HE is being recognised as an area that requires further research and debate. Given the importance placed upon SE and the resources that universities spend and use on such activities, gaining a greater understanding of such potential barriers is essential.

## Methodology

This study utilised a qualitative design case study to gain a greater in-depth insight (Rothwell et al. 2016) and allowing the exploration of the various dimensions of engagement. Using focus groups, allowed participants to articulate their perceptions and issues (Jones et al. 2018) in the form of group discussions (Sim & Waterfield, 2019). A semi-structured schedule was compiled which investigated the following areas: understanding of student engagement; knowledge of student engagement activities and initiatives; differences between an engaged and dis-engaged student; advantages of student engagement; barriers to student engagement; how students find out about SE initiatives; and the role of students within SE.

The focus group consisted of open-ended questions which aimed at allowing in-depth answers and discourse (Carey & Asbury, 2016). Students were asked to imagine a “typical week” in the life of two fictitious students (Billy and Jane), one who was fully engaged with university and one who was not engaged. The use of fictional characters helped aid open discussion, allowing students to freely discuss and debate the characters. They were asked to provide examples that demonstrated engagement and dis-engagement and what the barriers may be that stop students participating in engagement activities.

Participants were recruited from undergraduate students studying at a post-92 university within the UK. A convenience sampling technique was chosen, which is common in studies undertaken with students studying at university (Orcher, 2017). The students were purposively selected from a range of departments, using criterion sampling (Padgett, 2017) based upon students who were at least in their second year of study onwards. A total of twenty-one students participated in five focus groups, from various departments across the university, studying a variety of academic programmes, with most students being in their final year of study. The sample consisted of students representing different gender, ethnicity, age ranges and study mode (refer to table 1)

Following university ethical approval, potential participants were sent an email asking if they would be willing to participate. Once agreed, all respondents were sent a participant information sheet which outlined the purpose of the study, the requirements of the participants and an explanation of how the research data would be used and stored. A mutual time and date was agreed for the focus groups to take place, the location being a small, quiet teaching room located on the university campus. Before the focus groups commenced, participants were reminded of the research aims of the study and asked to complete and sign a consent form that outlined that the participant understood the requirements of the study and agreed to take part. It was also explained that all the discussions would be recorded and transcribed, with the data being anonymised.

All of the focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed to ensure an accurate report and record of the information collected. As Cyr (2016) suggests, focus group analysis allows the researcher to synthesise the findings by not only individual data, but also the group and interaction of the group, thus allowing the analysis of complex social concepts such as student engagement. Care was taken to avoid underdevelopment of the data, with the subsequent themes and patterns identified (Saldana, 2016).

| Table 1. Participant Information |                          |        |           |                    |       |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------|--------|-----------|--------------------|-------|
| Focus Group                      | Study Discipline         | Gender | Age Range | Home/International | PT/FT |
| 1                                | Psychology               | Male   | 18 - 21   | Home               | FT    |
| 1                                | Biomedical Sciences      | Female | 18 - 21   | International      | FT    |
| 1                                | Psychology               | Female | Mature    | Home               | PT    |
| 1                                | Food Science & Nutrition | Female | 18 – 21   | Home               | FT    |
| 1                                | Sport Psychology         | Male   | 18 – 21   | Home               | FT    |
| 1                                | Sport Sciences           | Male   | 18 – 21   | Home               | FT    |
| 2                                | Fine Arts                | Female | Mature    | Home               | FT    |
| 2                                | Design                   | Female | 18 – 21   | International      | FT    |
| 2                                | Sport Sciences           | Male   | 18 – 21   | Home               | FT    |
| 2                                | Sport Management         | Male   | 18 - 21   | International      | FT    |
| 2                                | Sport Coaching           | Male   | 18 – 21   | Home               | FT    |
| 3                                | Nursing                  | Male   | Mature    | Home               | FT    |
| 3                                | Nursing                  | Female | Mature    | Home               | FT    |
| 4                                | Law                      | Female | 18 – 21   | Home               | FT    |
| 4                                | Law                      | Female | 18 – 21   | Home               | FT    |
| 4                                | Law                      | Male   | 18 – 21   | Home               | FT    |
| 4                                | Law                      | Male   | 18 - 21   | Home               | FT    |
| 5                                | Psychology               | Female | Mature    | Home               | PT    |
| 5                                | Psychology               | Female | 18 – 21   | Home               | FT    |
| 5                                | Criminology              | Female | 18 – 21   | Home               | FT    |
| 5                                | Criminology              | Female | 18 – 21   | Home               | FT    |

## Results and Discussion

The results revealed two main areas of discussion, namely: the role of the student with regards SE and barriers that made it difficult or stopped HE students from participating in engagement opportunities.

### ***The Role of the Student***

When asked specifically, if students have a role to play in engagement activities, 20 respondents agreed that they do.

*‘There are so many opportunities, but it’s up to you to engage with them’.*

*‘I think it sounds really cliché, but you get out of it what you put in’.*

*‘Yeah, I think there is nothing stopping students from getting involved, there is no reason really, not to’.*

*The way I think about it, is that it depends how you consider what you want from uni. I would say if you walk in and all you want to do is turn up to the lectures and then go home and that’s it, then your student engagement is really minimal. But if you decide you’re going to join a society and be really proactive then you can grow in the society, maybe become a member or a president*

Another theme that emerged from the data related to students being proactive in joining in the additional opportunities that were offered by the university.

*'It is the whole sort of package that the university has, they have to try and engage with the student on every level, not just on information, but support on anything to do with what a student might need'.*

*'I think it's about taking part in things the university offers or hosts or organises'.*

The concept that SE was related to undertaking extra activities offered by universities was a common theme amongst respondents. Relating to academia,

*'I think it's about extra academic stuff, so not just doing the bare minimum, but also if there any extra things or maybe there is some additional reading, additional lecture drop-in sessions, engaging with every area of the course'.*

*'I think its involvement, so your attendance, your reading and sort of extra work outside of the classroom'.*

*'I think it's to what extent a student engages with whatever the space they are involved in. So the course, other students, lecturers, pre-seminar work, that kind of stuff'. 'There are also non-academic ways that you can do stuff, just being a bit imaginative and engaging on a personal level'.*

*'How much you are actually part of the university as opposed to just going to the course and then leaving, like actually staying and doing extra activities and being part of societies'.*

Similarly, respondents stated the various opportunities available to students to participate in engagement

*'there are plenty of opportunities, the societies, whether it be sport or non-sport' and 'the student union and all that sort of stuff that is extra from the work'.*

The concept that students need to act professionally and responsibly was also a theme that emerged from the data.

*'I think that students and also the university does have a role. I think students should try and help, but the downside is, we aren't professional, and we don't know what to do'. 'I think the tutors will only engage, if you're seen to be an adult coming to university, you have to show initiative and want to get engaged'.*

*There wouldn't be many opportunities, if people didn't get involved and use more experienced students. We need to run societies, volunteers need to be mentors, I think more experienced students need to be involved and show responsibility*

When the participants were asked to provide examples of SE opportunities, it was clear from the results that all of the respondents had an awareness of various initiatives that were offered by the university, both academic and non-academic (refer to Table 2).



| Table 2. Examples of How Students Engage at University |                          |                      |                          |                        |
|--|--------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|
| <b>Academically</b>                                    | Lecture Support          | Interaction in Class | Attendance               | Engaging with Feedback |
|  | Student Reps             | Student Counsellor   | Library                  | Study Support          |
|  | Career Workshops         | Open Days            | Seminar Support          | Revision Sessions      |
|  | Drop-In Sessions         | Academic Surveys     | Student Support Sessions | Induction              |
| <b>Internal to the University</b>                      | Sports Events            | Fresher's Fairs      | Student Support          | Sport Facilities       |
|  | Clubs and Societies      | Health & Wellbeing   | Counselling              | Social Facilities      |
|  | Cafes and Social Spaces  | Volunteering         | Study Abroad             | Placements             |
|  | Careers                  | Student Union        | Campaigns                | Employability          |
|  | Central Support Sessions | Occupational Health  | Student Ambassadors      | Fundraising            |
| <b>External to the University</b>                      | Outside Societies        | Volunteering         | Study Abroad             | Placements             |
|  | Outside Networks         | Guest Talks          | Job Opportunities        | External Campaigns     |

The findings highlight the variety of engagement opportunities that are offered by both academic and professional staff, as well as implying that students have a role in taking up those partnership opportunities, supporting the work of Healey, Flint and Harrington (2016). In addition, the findings support the notion that students have a role to play in SE and students should strive to be proactive learners and help co-create all elements of education (Dollinger et al. 2018), suggesting that students indeed have an important role to play in engagement and as such, HE institutes can become a joint venture to ensure that students achieve ultimate success, which in turn fulfils the aims of HE providers. However, some of the findings have indicated that this is not always the case and often partnerships are not achieved due to lack of engagement from students, as well as staff too.

## Barriers to Student Engagement

### *Transitioning*

One theme that emerged related to the difficulties students had in transitioning to university life.

*'It is hard to start at uni, when you don't really know what you are doing, or what is expected of you.'*

*'You might be far away from home, and you might be really homesick.'*

*'They might not engage with uni, cos you are really missing home, your family, familiar surroundings and people you know.'*

Similarly, respondents expressed that living at home during university can also be a barrier to engaging fully.

*'We have people on our course that live at home, so they tend to socialise with home friends and not uni classmates'.*

*'If you live at home, you don't tend to spend much time at uni, you just come in for lectures and then go straight home'.*

*'If you don't live in accommodation, you don't have the opportunities to engage with all the uni activities as much'.*

Other respondents stated that the new environment can be challenging to adapt to.

*'I think if I had half the information I know now when I was in first year, my anxiety levels would have been so much lower. You have never been in this environment before, and it can be really difficult'.*

*I feel like you just build up a picture in your head or you have these expectations. I don't know where they come from, whether it's what people have told you or have been to university before. But when you turn up and it doesn't meet those expectations, it's easy to feel like you're not enjoying it and it's not what you thought it was going to be. And I suppose you feel like it's easy to look at other people and think "oh they seem like they are really enjoying it", but they are probably feeling the same as you*

*For me it was really hard to transition to university, it was a lot harder to make friends than I realised. I was told by everyone that it would be great and easy to adapt. But it wasn't true, I found it really hard to integrate, I didn't particularly like the people that were in my halls and everything seemed difficult*

Helping students to transition into HE has been well documented by previous research (Coertjens, 2017; Holliman et al., 2018) who have highlighted the importance of students recognising this perceived difficulty and having appropriate interventions in place to help students. Ishitani (2016) emphasises the importance of universities highlighting the expectations of HE and suggests that intervention strategies that attempt to address this issues need to be mindful that all students differ.

The findings also highlight that students who reside at home or students who live in university halls, struggle with transitioning to university in different ways, some struggling to make new friends because they live at home, whilst others may be homesick. Such issues highlight the complex nature that universities face when they try to put in place strategies in helping students transition to HE life. Money et al., (2017) highlight this when they suggest that HE institutes need to address the 'expectation gap' so that all students are fully aware of what is expected of them if they enter HE, regardless of their individual background or personal circumstances.

## **Other Commitments**

12 respondents suggested that often students have other commitments that stop them from participating in SE activities, due to lack of time. These commitments included childcare, working, and caring for other family members.

*'Perhaps they have to work because they have no money. I know for me I work every Saturday at home and that means I can't see my Uni friends on a weekend'.*

*'Maybe, you can't participate because you have kid or you may be older and have to care for your parents'.*

Shah & Cheng (2019) highlight the impact that other commitments can have on students at HE, supporting the notion that caring for children is a major barrier to engagement. As has been documented, many students now entering HE are older students, who may have family to care for and hence, universities need to be aware that some engagement activities are less available to certain segments of the student population, due to such demands.

## **Financial**

Similar to reasons stated above, financial concerns were raised as a potential barrier to SE, with 9 respondents stating this reason.

*'To be able to go to university, I have to work. However, working prevents me from being able to go out and do things I want to do. Like meeting up with Uni mates, joining clubs, going to gigs'.*

*'Money is a major barrier, I know sports teams are so expensive, it puts a lot of people off. 'Could be financial issues, we have a lot of people on our course that miss lecturers because they have to work and earn money, to be here'.*

*'Finances might be a big problem, I know to join a sports club is really expensive and maybe if you are an international student, you don't have access to loans, then that will stop you'.*

The issues preventing students engaging, align with the previous research (Griffin & Gilbert, 2016) who identified that many factors and "forces" can impact upon non-engagement namely: socio-economic, financial and other commitments whilst studying. It is clear that many students that attend universities today have positions of responsibility to care for other people, whilst at the same time work for financial reasons. Andrade and Alden-Rivers (2019) acknowledge this issue and have highlighted that now, more than ever universities need to offer flexible and life-long learning opportunities for students of all ages and backgrounds to accommodate such concerns.

## **Mental Health Issues**

Whannel and Whannel (2015) identified that students 'identity' and personality may impact upon engagement. This was also reported by respondents who suggested that mental health issues and learning difficulties can also negatively impact upon SE.

*'Feeling stressed and overwhelmed is common'.*

*'Feeling of being depressed or anxious doesn't help'.*

*'Mental health, there might be something going on in their life, that affecting them'.*

*Mental health wise, to do engagement might be too much. You can't fully engage with things when you have too much on your plate and things are getting on top of you*

*I think maybe from a well-being perspective they may be struggling. They may have issues with mental health and not using the services provided by the uni and they feel alone dealing with their problems*

*I think leading on from the mental health issues, when you are at uni, you're not just doing the work, you're also living on your own, cooking for yourself, washing, those kind of things. So maybe you are overwhelmed by things, and it proves really hard to deal with the changes in your life*

Such statements correlate with the previous research by Hamilton Bailey and Phillips (2016) who have highlighted that often student's mental wellbeing is overlooked by HE institutes, even though it is a major reason for student attrition and there has been a significant increase in reported mental health issues affecting students in HE.

### **Lack of Confidence and Motivation**

Confidence and motivation issues was also another theme that emerged from the data.

*'Some people are very introvert and find it hard to join in'. 'Lack of confidence and not knowing who they can talk to doesn't help'. 'People might find it very intimidating, it can be really fearful for some people, mixing with people'. 'They may be shy; they may have low morale and lack of motivation'. I would say in first year, you feel more anxious and timid. You don't really want to talk to your tutors, as it can be quite intimidating. It's not because you don't care, it's because you feel as though you don't fit in*

*Motivation, they might just not be motivated, even if the support is there. It takes two sides to work in a way and if the university are doing all they can but at the end of the day it's just not working because the motivation is not there, then I mean you can't really do anything about this*

Whilst Payne (2019) suggests that confidence is a major 'driving force' for engagement, what her model fails to recognise is that lack of confidence can also be a 'resistant force' against engagement. Other researchers (Collie et al., 2017) have highlighted the need for universities to recognise that the student body is very diverse and hence, generic SE initiatives are not as effective. Understanding that students

are different and respond to engagement in varied ways is needed to cater for students with distinct personalities.

### **Learning Difficulties**

Two respondents commented that students may struggle to engage at university due to potential learning difficulties including dyslexia. *'Some students won't want to disclose this, but they may have a hidden problem like dyslexia, often people hide that, and this might be a reason why they don't want to engage'. 'Maybe they have a learning difficulty, it may be dyslexia or dyspraxia, something like that which stops them from turning up to lectures and participating'*. Dryer et al., (2016) agree with these findings and endorse the need that further research is needed to fully understand the impact of learning difficulties have on students entering HE. Whilst universities do address learning difficulties, particularly focusing on the impact upon academic outcomes, they fail to see if learning difficulties may stop students from engaging in other non-academic engagement activities such as undertaking an overseas placement or volunteering in the community. As has been highlighted such initiatives benefit many stakeholders but are universities fully aware if all these opportunities are achievable for all students?

### **Lack of Support**

Receiving support from family and friends was stated as a potential barrier to engagement.

*'I'm going to suggest childhood nature-nurture. If you have no positive engagement at all throughout your life from family, then you may find it hard and wonder what is the sense of it all, you have no direction from people to help'*.

*'Lack of support from family or home may stop you, I couldn't be at uni without my family support'*.

*'If you are really busy, you may lose touch with your family and if you don't have that help and advice when it's tough, you may get knocked back and start to dis-engage'*.

Stoessel et al., (2015) also agree that students who do not have support from family may be at danger of non-engagement and as such, may be more at risk of dropping out of HE. Collie et al., (2017) suggested that the student typology entitled 'at risk struggler' typified that lack of social support (home and community) was a main contributor to such students not engaging within university and achieving their goals.

### **Cultural**

Cultural differences have become an area that is increasingly being researched as a potential barrier to HE. Many researchers (Aljohani, 2016; Boylan & Renzulli, 2017) have identified that cultural variance can impact upon student success. Similar findings were reported in the data, with 5 respondents stating cultural differences could cause students not to engage including: age differences, being an international student and language barriers.

*'For international students, you may feel alone because you don't know anyone who speaks your first language or where to find things, so it could be cultural'. It might also be a different culture as well, they might know the language and know what everyone is saying, but an international student might expect one thing, but it's completely different in real life, which may impact upon them negatively*

*So just being in a new country can stop people engaging. They are an international student and see people interacting in a different language and feel quite Overwhelmed. Also, the learning might be totally different, which makes it difficult for them to join in*

Whilst many universities try to address such issues related to language and may offer academic skills for students who have not studied in a UK institution before. What is apparent is that many staff that work with students from different cultures, have limited understanding of inter-cultural awareness. Hence, it would appear that training and development of staff is needed to fully address such concerns.

### **Size of Class**

The increase in class sizes was another potential problem that could deter engagement.

*'It depends on the size of the class, we have a very large class, so meeting people and getting to know them is really difficult'.*

*'On a big course where it is mainly lectures, you are not going to mix as much or get to know the lecturers. If the course is small seminars, then there are more opportunities to engage'. Because I think at university level, there is often a blanket approach and that can sometimes be hard to engage with. So if the uni is putting on a massive event where hundreds of people are attending, you can feel like a bit of a lost person in a crowd*

The strive for universities attempting to increase the number of students for commercial purposes is evidenced (Bolton, 2020) yet the associated impact this can have upon the student body has been stated by both students and staff in the research findings. Staff have suggested that large student cohorts can be difficult to engage with and a centralised, generic approach does not work, similarly students are also suggesting that class size can impact negatively. Whilst universities in the UK HE sector struggle to balance commercial security with a diverse portfolio, it would appear imperative that they take note of the difficulties that can arise from increased student numbers and amend strategic plans that balance engagement initiatives with larger student populations.

### **Difficult to Join**

8 respondents expressed that it was often problematic trying to join extra-curricular activities such as clubs and societies, particularly if you didn't have chance to enrol at the start of the academic year.

*'Regarding the social things, if you try and join something in second or third year, people can be a bit mean, and they are like not interested in you'. 'If you miss the opportunity to join a club in week one, it doesn't mean that you don't want to join, but it is really hard then to feel part of it, you can be made to feel really awkward'. I am talking from experience here, in first year I tried to join a society around November time. I went along and I just thought everyone already knows each other, everyone is already engaging with each other and I just felt really out on a limb*

*Has anyone tried to join a society or sport group once its already started that year because it's almost impossible to get hold of them. There is no way to contact them, no email, no phone number, you just can't get in touch or join late on*

The work by Castello et al., (2017) highlights such issues identified above, with regards to size of class and students' difficulty in joining in. They refer to it as "institutional neglect" by universities, in not recognising such difficulties and failing students in helping them to adapt and succeed in a university setting. In many universities today, students are allowed to enrol often weeks after teaching has started and subsequently do not have the opportunity to have a full induction and join extra-curricular activities from the start. The findings suggest that this can potentially cause issues for students, therefore universities need to recognise this concern and have contingency plans in place to overcome the problem.

### **Staff Buy-In**

Jang et al., (2016) have highlighted the importance of the role staff play in encouraging students to engage at university. This also emerged as an important factor identified by 14 respondents.

*'We had a two-hour timetabled lecture and it lasted 20 minutes and that really riled me, the lecturer wasn't even bothered'. My lecturers change every week, so they never get to know you. I meet my personal tutor every month, but she never really notices me. There are always going to be barriers to students engaging, if staff don't seem interested and are more concerned about getting on with their work, rather than speak to us*

*Lecturers will notice that some students are engaging in certain lectures. They also should notice when they mark work, whoever is reading it will know whether the students have engaged and done the extra reading. When they get the feedback, students have chance to chat to lecturers, but if students choose not to engage, then that can leave the lecturer feeling quite frustrated*

Egalite et al., (2015) endorse the findings above and stress the importance that staff within HE, need to fully embrace and engage with students regardless of their background. They suggest that this is a crucial role of lecturers, yet often is an area that is neglected by some teaching in HE. This issue somewhat highlights the problem that universities now face in attempting to service various stakeholders in the diverse portfolio of work that academics undertake (Swartz et al., 2019). It also worryingly suggests that some academics would appear to 'neglect' the important role they play

in engaging with students and the subsequent negative consequences this can have on the student body. As documented, students now question the quality of their HE education, more than ever and demand a high level of service and return on their investment (Sim et al., 2019), failure to do this can have serious ramifications for the university. Strategic leaders in HE institutes need to be fully aware if this is the case in their university and lead from the top of the institution to address the problems identified (Di Nauta et al., 2018).

## **Conclusion and Practical Implications**

The empirical findings clearly demonstrate that HE institutions undertake many diverse engagement initiatives in attempting to fully engage with their student population, from both an academic and non-academic stance. However, it is apparent that there are many barriers that impact upon students fully immersing themselves in such activities. Recommendations for overcoming such issues include the following:

- **Senior Leadership Involvement:** SE priorities need to be led from positions of senior authority within universities to communicate the importance that is placed upon engagement strategic aims, conveying the important message that every member of staff has a role to play in engagement.
- **Student Engagement Working Group:** a team that has overall responsibility for strategically leading and coordinating all SE initiatives within the university.
- **Student Engagement Strategic Planning and Mapping of the Student Journey:** having an understanding of the student life cycle and when SE initiatives take place is vital to ensure that initiatives occur at the right time and duplication is avoided.
- **Typology of Students:** universities hold a vast amount of data on their students, using it to understand the student body and analysing the type of students a university has with regards SE is paramount, this will help with overcoming some of the potential barriers identified with certain student typologies.
- **Student Ambassadors of Engagement:** another way to raise the importance of SE and promote the benefits, is to appoint student ambassadors within programmes, department, schools, or faculties.
- **Intervention Strategies:** many intervention strategies already exist within universities regarding student support and wellbeing. However, often such interventions are not known by both academic staff and students hence, the uptake of such strategies is marginal. Raising the awareness of the additional help students can receive is imperative so that they can obtain additional advice and guidance to overcome the issues.
- **Students as Co-Creators:** if HE institutions really want to use students in all aspects of learning and teaching as co-creators, then policies should be adopted that recognise this importance. For example, how students are used as co-creators within a module can be demonstrated through the module descriptor that explains how students have been used, to what extent have they contributed to co-creation value and how will that be evaluated to ensure effectiveness within the module.

It is clear that HE institutions now invest many resources into SE initiatives, however if they want to successfully achieve the intended outcomes, it is imperative that they



recognise the diversity of their student population and implement SE strategies that address all members, so that the barriers to engagement are addressed.

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