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Authors: Mark Langan; Nicola Whitton

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Understanding Learner Disengagement: Why do students pay £9,000 a year not to attend lectures?

Mark Langan and Nicola Whitton

Abstract

The Understanding Learner Disengagement project used learner interviews, undertaken by student researchers, to gain insights into the reasons that students chose not to engage with available learning opportunities. The study discusses the complexity of the term 'engagement', and its antithesis disengagement, before exploring the current perspectives of the students who took part in the study. In total, 47 semi-structured interviews were carried out with students in three areas of the university, selected due to their size and ranges of different types of learner. The findings suggest some core areas of the student experience were associated with non-participation in classes, particularly the perceived value of the learning experience, conflicting priorities, peer influence, and the accessibility of the class. The messages were found to be consistent with the literature and some initial recommendations are made, with the caveat that solutions should be designed at a local level to fit the needs of particular student cohorts.

Introduction

Recent changes in the ways in which universities are funded, moving the onus of finance from the state to the student (Browne, 2010), have led to growing discourses of 'student as customer' and 'value for money' in Higher Education. However, despite the growing cost of a university education, many students still elect not to engage with the range of learning opportunities on offer, with evidence suggesting that nationally around 9% of scheduled contact time is missed by students (Soilemetzidis, Bennett, Buckley, Hillman, & Stoakes, 2014).

The *Understanding Learner Disengagement* project, which ran from 2014-15, aimed to gain insights into the reasons that students chose not to engage with available learning opportunities, and consider

strategies for addressing disengagement and improving the learner experience. In the context of this study, the idea of *disengagement* is based on lack of active participation in learning activities and opportunities (face-to-face and online, formal and informal), as well as a lack of commitment to the process, and appreciation of the value, of learning in Higher Education.

This paper presents the results of interviews with 47 students studying in three areas of Manchester Metropolitan University: psychology, business, and students based at the Cheshire campus. In particular, two questions are considered:

1. Why do learners elect not to take part in learning opportunities and what factors influence these decisions?
2. What strategies could be adopted to address learner disengagement?

The following section provides an overview of the literature on engagement in higher education, and its relationship to learning. This is followed by a more detailed discussion of the research approach used in this project, before the results of the analysis are presented and discussed. The paper concludes by discussing strategies that could be used to support learner engagement.

Background

The notion of learner engagement is common in recent Higher Education policy documents and academic literatures, however the term is ambiguous and used in many ways from student attendance to psychological immersion to fundamental changes in identity (Whitton & Moseley, 2014). Learner engagement is a concept regularly referred to by researchers, practitioners and policy-makers in education at all levels from Early Years to Lifelong Learning. Institutions use it as an indicator of performance, student experience, quality of education, and as a guide to influence pedagogy, practice and policy. However, as a concept it is problematic: it is ambiguous, has different disciplinary nuances, and is difficult to define and measure. There are contrasting discourses of educational engagement, including notions of school and student engagement (Appleton, Christenson, Kim, & Reschly, 2006; Chapman, 2003; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Trowler, 2010) and the concept of engagement for quality enhancement (QAA, 2012). Moreover,

researchers often use engagement as an approximation of learning (as distinct from attainment), because there is an intuitive connection between these two concepts. However, there is little robust evidence for this assertion and the relationship between engagement and learning is not well understood (Iacovides, Aczel, Scanlon, Taylor, & Woods, 2011). Kahu (2013) provides a framework based on an holistic view of student engagement, suggesting distinct (yet overlapping) behavioural, psychological, and psychosocial domains that have been described in the literature. This highlights the complexity of the notional concept of engagement by identifying a perceived lack of distinction between the state of engagement, its antecedents and its consequences.

When engagement is constructed in its behavioural sense (i.e. participation and behaviour) there is a strong link between engagement and student achievement (Parsons & Taylor, 2011), and there is evidence that engagement in the sense of 'time on task' and 'participation' has a positive influence on learning (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2010). However, this is evidence of correlation and not a causal effect; for example, levels of motivation may affect both attendance and attainment, rather than attendance in itself influencing attainment. Engagement, as described by behavioural and affective identification with school, has also been shown to contribute significantly to the academic performance of African American students (Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2004).

There is evidence that there is a relationship between scores in the American National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2014) and learner outcomes (Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006; LaNasa, Olson, & Alleman, 2007; Pascarella, Seifert, & Blaich, 2010). However, that instrument was developed by first identifying process variables that influence learning gains, which are already used as indicators of quality in many institutions (Gibbs, 2010) so any relationship is not surprising. Evidence of a link between other constructions of engagement and learning is limited.

Hockings and colleagues (2008) highlight how students who are 'academically engaged' are often intellectually, socially and personally involved in learning and adopt 'deep' approaches to learning. Behaviours in taught sessions such as reflection, questioning and conjecturing are used to help the learner to make connections between concepts in the context of the learner's

previous knowledge/experiences, backgrounds and identities (see Marton & Säljö, 1976). 'Disengaged' students are suggested to take 'surface' approaches to learning (e.g. copying out notes, focusing on fragmented facts and jumping to conclusions) which can be associated with behaviours such as distancing/ isolating themselves from the learning community and activities.

Student engagement is 'increasingly understood to be important for higher education quality' (AUSSE, 2008, p. 8) to the extent that Trowler and Trowler (2010) suggested that 'the value of engagement is no longer questioned' (p. 9). Engagement is regarded as a key factor in student achievement and retention (Kahu, 2013; Krause & Coates, 2008) and a successful student 'experience' appears to be strongly linked to student engagement. An ultimate effect of disengagement is the withdrawal of a student from his or her course.

There have been many investigations of factors that are associated with student withdrawal and retention, most commonly focusing on academic, psychosocial, cognitive and demographic predictors (e.g. Yorke, 2006). Published studies are often based on metrics such as educational qualifications and often focus on particular courses or demographics, and have become increasingly focused on online delivery. However, there is increasing value placed on psychological and sociological factors (McKenzie, Schweitzer, Vallmuur, & Schweitzer, 2001). Tinto's (1975) seminal work on retention in Higher Education has stemmed a large body of literature about student withdrawal and retention. Despite a body of evidence of measurable predictors of withdrawal and retention, there is evidence that in US tertiary education this has not led to significantly increased retention in higher education (Tinto, 2010). Findings highlight the complexity of factors that lead to withdrawal of any given individual such as personal characteristics, including motivation, entry qualifications, age on entry, socioeconomic status, parental experience of higher education, disability, ethnicity, employment during studies, and a range of institutional factors (e.g. Yorke & Longden, 2008). Greater numbers and diversity of learners in the higher education sector has inevitably led to greater complexity in the factors that underpin student success in their tertiary studies (McKendry, Wright, & Stevenson, 2014).

It is evident that the concept of learner engagement is complex, nuanced and contentious. Therefore, to avoid becoming immersed in

the definitional issues surrounding engagement, this project elected to focus on *disengagement* instead, defined here as a lack of active participation in, commitment to, and appreciation of learning activities and opportunities. The reasons for learner disengagement have not yet been fully explored, and Dean and Jolly (2012) highlight that student engagement literature 'fails to fully appreciate the psychosocial aspect of learning, especially the process of opting out of learning opportunities' (p228). Disengagement is not simply an on-off state of mind or being (Hockings et al., 2008) and students show varying degrees of disengagement over different time periods (Bryson & Hand, 2007). There may be multiple causes of, and reasons for, disengagement (Read, Archer, & Leathwood, 2003) that may emanate from factors inside and outside the classroom.

Research approach

In order to investigate the perspectives of Higher Education students regarding the reasons they chose to disengage a series of semi-structured interviews ($n=47$) were carried out with students in three areas of the university: psychology ($n=16$) and business ($n=16$) based at the Manchester Campus, and students ($n=15$) based at the Cheshire Campus, in Crewe. These three courses were selected because they were large, thus offering a large number of students to interview, and because they represented a range of different types of learner.

The research described in this paper focuses primarily on students' perceptions of their personal learning experiences; thus a constructivist qualitative research methodology was appropriate. Underpinning this approach are assumptions that the nature of reality is a social construction and a belief that knowledge of the world cannot be truly objective, but that individuals construct personal meaning and shared understandings developed through discussion with others (Cooper, 1993). Within this paradigm it is the role of the researcher to make sense of these multiple perspectives through interpretive analysis, in order to reach a subjective understanding of the phenomena under study. In this case thematic analysis was used to draw out the key features and similarities of the body of interview data, because it is an approach that is flexible, accessible and can

usefully create a 'think description' of a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The research process took place with five student co-researchers who were involved throughout the project. The aim of working with students was to embed a learner perspective throughout the project and it was felt that learner responses would be more authentic when disclosed to peers rather than to researchers. Each interview was based around a set of open-ended core questions, which were designed in conjunction with the student researchers, with opportunities for the discussion to move in a variety of ways depending on the directions the conversations took. The five student researchers conducted all of the interviews between them, and the interview length was approximately 30 minutes. Participants received a small payment for their time, and were recruited through course leaders and ad hoc approaches by the student researchers. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed in full for analysis. Transcripts were coded iteratively into themes using the NVivo qualitative data analysis software.

Of the 16 student participants studying in the department of Psychology, eight were male and eight female, with ages ranging from 18 to 40 years with a mean of 22 years. Of the 16 participants studying in the business school nine were male and seven female, with ages ranging from 18 to 35 years with a mean of 23 years. The 15 students studying on the Cheshire Campus (who were studying a variety of combined honours, business, and sports science degrees) comprised a different demographic mix from the other groups, with ages ranging from 17 to 50 with an average of 30 years; there were nine males and six females included in the sample.

A full ethical and risk analysis of the project was undertaken, and the project was approved by the institution's ethics committee before commencement.

Results and discussion

For many of the students interviewed, particularly mature students and those studying for a higher degree, the idea of electing to miss learning opportunities was problematic. However, the majority of students admitted to missing classes, for a variety of different reasons, and these are discussed here. An analysis of the interview data highlighted four key themes that explore reasons for

disengagement in learning opportunities. These are: 1) the perceived value of the learning opportunity; 2) conflicting priorities; 3) the influence of peers; and 4) the accessibility of the learning experience. These are discussed in more detail in the following sub-sections.

Perceived value

A key factor that influences attendance is the perceived value of the learning experience by the student. Students highlighted three aspects of the experience, which they generally saw as lowering its value. First, if the experience offers little more than presentation of information on slides, which can easily accessed online. Second, if the learning experience has no perceived link to the assessment for the course. Third, if students think that the content of the lecture or tutorial is too easy or they feel they have already covered it previously.

In the data, there were many examples of students who said that they elected not to attend lectures because they offered little more than the lecturer reading from a presentation.

‘I’m not going there because he’s just boring. He reads off the lecture.’

‘There’s one teacher I have at the moment for my lecture and the tutorial for this unit, and he’s just reads off the slides – he doesn’t give any other knowledge, like he doesn’t give us any other information. Obviously, he’s reading off the slides, and the slides are on Moodle – I might as well read them myself.’

There were also many examples when students highlighted the importance of perceiving that the learning experience was relevant to the assessment.

‘If I know there’s going to be a guest speaker I miss the lecture because I just don’t see it being useful for me at all.’

‘It depends on the content. If it was relevant to the exam then I’ll definitely attend, but if it’s not then that’s not really important.’

The content and level of the lecture or tutorial was also seen as important in making a decision whether to attend. Particularly if students felt that they had already covered topics or if they would be too easy or boring.

'Before I go to a lecture I look up what subject it is and if to be honest I find it, if it looks boring or if it looks like something I've already done then I probably won't attend.'

'If it's something relatively simple that I think I can grasp by just going over the Power Points and doing like further reading ... I am slightly less likely to turn up to a lecture like that.'

Related to all three of these aspects is the limited time that many students have for studying, particularly when assessment deadlines come around, and how these influence their decisions about whether to attend lectures and seminars.

Conflicting priorities

There were many examples in the interviews when students had to, sometimes reluctantly, make choices between attending lectures and other priorities. There were three conflicting priorities that were prevalent throughout the interviews; the first, and most common, being pressure of assessment, particularly when multiple assessments were due at the same time. The second factor was conflicting work schedules, with many students being under increasing pressure to work long part-time hours in jobs to order to manage their finances. The third reason was family or caring commitments, or unavoidable 'emergencies' such as illness, bad weather, or lack of childcare.

Many students gave examples of how they would prioritise their assessments over attendance at lectures and tutorials.

'I always attend my timetabled classes unless I've got like a looming essay.'

'You've got to prioritise. And when things aren't related to your outcome of a degree at this point you just don't go. Like last week we had two guest lecturers, and if that hadn't been the week of my dissertation I would have gone – but I had to prioritise finishing my dissertation obviously, and unfortunately I didn't go.'

There were also many examples of students who worked part-time, often long hours and often in the evenings, who had little choice financially but to prioritise work over attendance at university.

'I'm working as well, because I work part time ... so sometimes my shifts – they change all the time, so sometimes I have to be at work and I can't come here.'

'If I've been offered a shift at work for example and I need the money and I'm supposed to go to university, I might go to work instead.'

Many students, particularly mature students and those living at home also had family or caring responsibilities. For some, this was a key issue in whether they were able to attend.

'The only thing that stops me attending my timetabled classes is my children. If one of them is poorly and my other half is at work or he's away working it's up to me.'

Some of the issues discussed here, particularly in relation to assessment, may stem from poor time-management but pressure of work and other responsibilities is a key reason for many learners not to attend their classes.

Peer influence

For many students, particularly those who were older, or in later years of their studies, there was little influence from their peers about whether or not they attended classes. However, for many younger students this appeared to be a significant factor in their attendance decisions. This influence manifested itself in two ways: first, students often discussed not being motivated to attend classes if their friends were not attending because they were embarrassed or shy to go alone. Second, other students reported intending to go to a lecture but being influenced by peers who were not attending. The easy access to social media communication meant that students were able to make last-minute decisions about attendance, making choices based on peer influence even when already on campus.

For example, some students said that they did not like to attend classes without their friends.

'If nobody else is in I probably won't go as well. I won't go and sit on my own.'

'I feel uncomfortable. Like I don't mind going and sitting on my own, but I feel better with them there. You don't look as much of a loner.'

While others reported the negative influence of their friends when making attendance decisions.

'If they turn round to me and say I'm going to leave early then it kind of makes me think well there's no point in me being here then.'

Accessibility

The final reason for students to make the decision not to attend learning activities was related to the accessibility of the activities, both in terms of the timing, and the physical location. This was only an issue for a small number of the students interviewed, but it was significant for those students and limited their abilities to participate.

For example, sessions first thing in the morning or late in the afternoon caused problems for some.

'If it's 9 in the morning, coming in like early morning traffic is so much effort and you've got to leave like an hour earlier and you just can't be bothered.'

'Some seminars I can't really make it to them because like one seminar that I have is 4 til 5 and by the time I finish it's like 5.30 and then by the time I get home it's like 7, so that's why I can't really make it to that one.'

In other cases, it is the physical proximity of classrooms to other facilities that causes problems.

'There's no prayer room in this building ... just between lectures you have to run all the way [to another building] and it takes about ten minutes to go, come back, and it's like you miss the whole lecture because you have to pray and then come back again.'

While for some students the timing of, and physical access to, classes was an issue, there were also many examples in the data of students who said they often chose not to attend classes, even when there were already working on campus close by. In these situations, perceived value, conflicting priorities and peer influence appeared to be stronger motivators than convenience. Accessibility is clearly critical to some but not a driving aspect for many.

Conclusions

The notion of engaging all students in all aspects of higher education is, to say the least, extremely challenging in a mass education system. Tinto (1975) demonstrated that for a century, the completion rates of university students were remarkably consistent, at around 60% of those who started degrees. This figure has risen in the years since Tinto's study, but the complexity of the composition of students in modern universities complicates this issue, together with a growing discourse of consumerism in the sector. Significant educational reforms in recent history have influenced the way we teach, the way in which higher education is funded, and the increasing diversity of student prior experience and attainment. These changes have created a dynamic challenge to educators to attract, support, engage, and satisfy their students on their journeys to successful completion. There is a growing need for higher education to prepare students for the challenges of how they will be expected to learn and to manage their expectations throughout the process. Greater emphasis on the 'student voice' (for example through student surveys) provides opportunities to respond at a local level, in a timely fashion and in a manner befitting the subject area and the particular cohort of students. Individuals vary in their wants, needs, expectations and assumptions, as well as their personal circumstances, and the challenge is to create systems that benefit all learners.

Despite its complexity and nuances, there are some core messages from this research that might be reflected on in relation to the modern higher education sector. The most notable is the perceived value of attending learning sessions. It was clear that students expected more than a lecturer reading slides to them didactically, and this was one of the most frequently mentioned themes in the data. This is backed up by research by from the student academic experience survey (Soilemetzidis et al., 2014), which cites the most common reasons for absences as a perception that lectures are not useful and that the lecture notes are available online.

Large lectures, which enable students to be anonymous, and make interactive teaching a challenge, were seen by many students in this study as not being a worthwhile use of time, particularly when they felt that they could catch up online and that the lecturer did little more than talk to the slides. One strategy that could help to address

student disengagement is by providing space, time, and support for lecturers to consider how best to 'add value' to their lectures beyond what students perceive they could gain from simply reading lecture slides online. Making lectures and other learning opportunities perceived as worthwhile is at the heart of learner engagement, and might be achieved, for example, through consideration of the design of sessions, participation of students through interactive teaching methods, ways of creating a sense of belonging in the classroom and a sense of achievement by attending, such as progressing work towards assessment.

Above all, there is also a need for a recognition that the lives of students, and their motivations for attending university, may be different from previous generations. Students often have conflicting academic, financial, personal, and social commitments, and will inevitably have to make choices and determine priorities. It is important that institutions understand the varying needs of students, and a second strategy to addressing learner disengagement is to consider flexible and innovative approaches to providing opportunities for learning and assessment in alternative ways. The focus must be on engaging learners while also being aware of their complex and diverse situations, and increasing choice about how and when to attend the range of learning opportunities available.

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