Please cite the Published Version
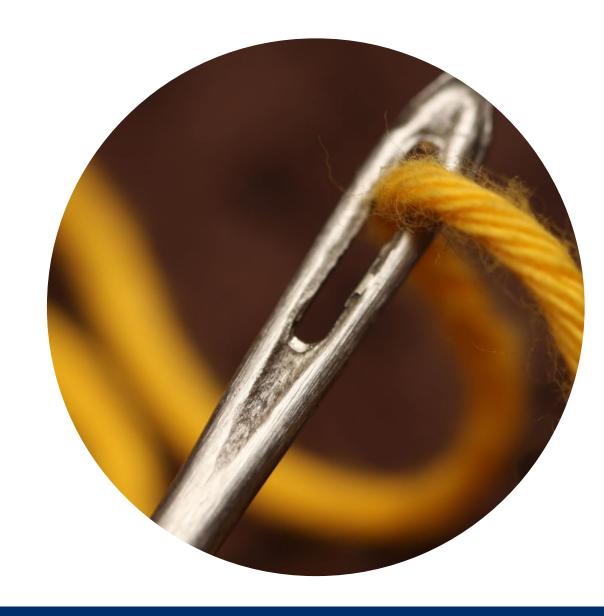
Version: Presentation

From high expectations to huge disconnections: how can personal tutoring deal with a problem like student disengagement?

Vicky Martin, Senior Lecturer

Catherine Shephard, Reader

Manchester Law School

Manchester Metropolitan University

Background

- Shephard, C., Burns, N., Martin, V., Regan, M., Wilson, P. (2023) ''**We're not in Kansas anymore': identifying our 'New Normal' in Legal Education**.' *In Annual Conference of the Socio-Legal Studies Association 2023*. Ulster University, 4/4/2023 - 6/4/2023.

- Two x 2yr Developing Educational Excellence projects (Boyer, 1990)
  - Transitions (Shephard)
  - Personal Tutoring (Martin)
  - Outcomes impactful on:
    - Transition, student experience, graduate outcomes
    - WP/ HE policy agendas

- Manchester Met
  - Large, popular
  - Home, 1st Gen, POLAR, BAME, Vocational, Foundation
  - Centralised student services (Picton and Kahu, 2022)

New Normal?

Manchester Metropolitan University

- Attendance
- **Engagement**
- Confidence
- Connection
- Wellbeing
- Mental health

- HR
- Technology
- Assessment
- Grade inflation
- Academic Misconduct
- AI
- Attainment gaps
- Deregulation
- Widening Participation
- CLE

- Cost of living
- Internationalisation
- Globalisation

Findings from Shephard, C., Burns, N., Martin, V., Regan, M., Wilson, P. (2023) ''We're not in Kansas anymore': identifying our 'New Normal' in Legal Education.' *In Annual Conference of the Socio-Legal Studies Association 2023.* Ulster University, 4/4/2023 - 6/4/2023.

What is disengagement?

- Not as simple as non–attendance, students can be attending and still be disengaging

- Often non-attendance is the most overt symptom

- Can also include: not participating in sessions or the course as a whole; not engaging with course material; not reading emails; not submitting assessments

- These later factors tend to be a better indicator of disengagement than simple attendance data

Manchester Metropolitan University

Barriers to student engagement: why do students disengage?

- Disengagement is multi-faceted and intersectional

- Can look at individual psychological, sociological, psychosocial issues and academic trust (Kharouf 2015, Jones 2021)

- Any of these can lead to alienation and then disengagement

- It can be argued that massification and marketisation have led to more instances that lead to alienation and disengagement

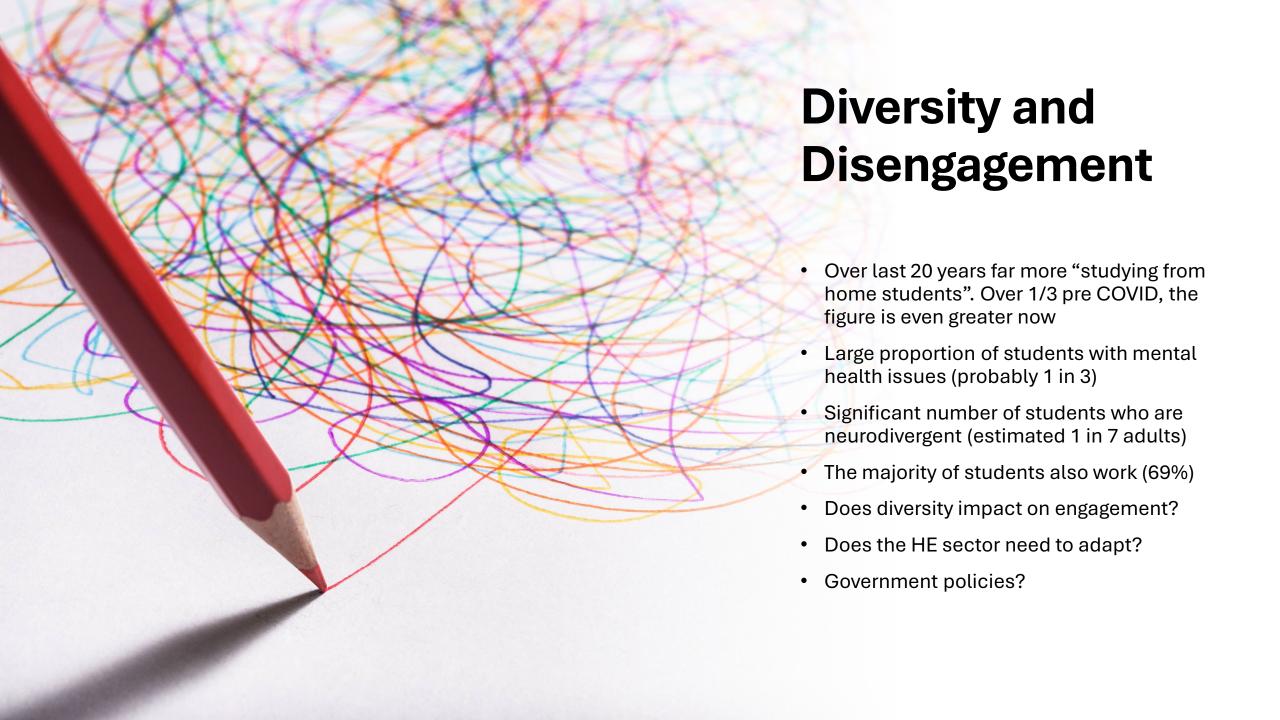# Factors increasing the likelihood of disengagement

External Factors

- Massification and marketisation (Smith 2025, Marginson 2024, Saito 2011)

- Success of the widening participation agenda

- COVID (Shephard, Martin et al 2023)

- Ongoing financial crisis

Internal Factors: Student perception

- Feeling unseen and not valued (Adigun 2024)

- Feeling they do not fit in never mind belong

- Feeling they are disconnected to their course or university

Manchester
Metropolitan
University

Diversity and Disengagement

- Over last 20 years far more "studying from home students". Over 1/3 pre COVID, the figure is even greater now

- Large proportion of students with mental health issues (probably 1 in 3)

- Significant number of students who are neurodivergent (estimated 1 in 7 adults)

- The majority of students also work (69%)

- Does diversity impact on engagement?

- Does the HE sector need to adapt?
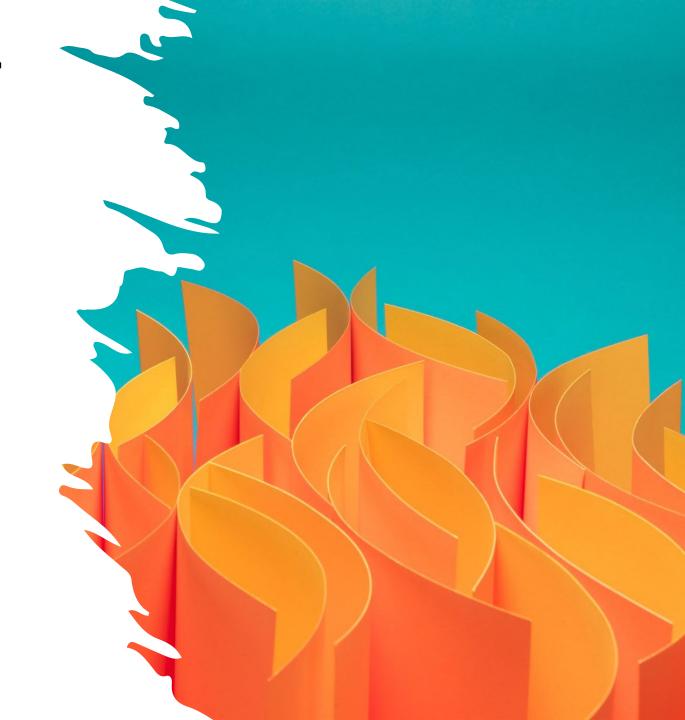
- Government policies?

What is the solution?

- A multi-faceted problem requires a multi-faceted response

- Personal tutoring should be at the front line of that response

- Research shows students want to feel connected to their course and that they belong

- They want more personal contact (Stephen et al., 2008)

- Personal tutoring is the way to do that

Caring, community or connection, and priority

- These are key themes in the literature around disengagement and around effective personal tutoring

- My research confirms these as crucial to engagement and effective personal tutoring

- There is a dichotomy for students: they want to connect and be part of a community, but many have competing priorities

- (Transitions project considering interventions to support good decision making)

Metrics and Data

- Manchester Law School has approximately 70 staff and over 1500 students on its undergraduate and postgraduate professional and academic programmes

- The survey and semi structured interviews used to collect data in this project was open to all current staff and students

- 285 students completed the survey

- 50 staff completed the survey

- 10 students took part in the semi-structured interviews

- 10 members of staff took part in the semi–structured interviews

Common issues for staff and students

- <mark>Yellow</mark> -need to have a system that allows for consistency and to be able to build a meaningful personal relationship

- <mark>Green</mark> – systemic/ organisation issues that prevent effective provision such as lack of recognition/ undervalued/ lack of resource/ workloading/ time/ timetabling (some overlap with above re size of groups)

- <mark>Blue</mark> – clear that the role is about lots of aspects of support, both staff and students agree the role encompasses academic and professional advice as well as pastoral, wellbeing and career related support

- <mark>Red</mark> – lack of engagement (Staff said this about students, but students also raised this about staff. There is a symbiotic relationship. If the personal tutor is not engaged and motivated, students will disconnect)

Individual stakeholder issues

Individual Staff issue

<mark>Grey</mark> - lack of confidence: the need for greater support and training around managing expectations, managing boundaries and the needs of a changing student body

Individual Student Issue

<mark>Purple</mark> – students need to feel safe, seen and valued. They want to feel they are part of a community and have someone on their side who cares about them, will look out for and check in with them (Staff did identify some of this as well)

Institutional factors causing disengagement

Students

- Timetabling that does not fit in with other responsibilities

- Last minute changes

- Feeling unseen or unheard

- Feeling that they do not belong here nor fit in

- Fear of being judged/ that they are not good enough

Staff

- Unrealistic workloading

- Lack of time

- Lack of resources

- Lack of confidence/ training

- Lack of support

- The work is not valued/ academic housework (Järvinen and Mik-Meyer 2025)

Manchester
Metropolitan
University

Key findings from my research

- Staff and students want the same thing: a personal connection between tutor and tutee with effective, purposeful provision

- There is a symbiotic relationship: if staff are not engaged then students will disconnect

- Student expectations of personal tutoring are actually quite low

- Staff identify some issues that prevent them being effective: confidence and training are key, these need addressing to support staff engagement

Manchester
Metropolitan
University

What can we do as personal tutors to build connections and reduce disengagement?

Key issues that students described as essential to be an effective personal tutor:

- *"a support network like your first point of contact for any type of support or question"*

- *"Just someone to listen and to point me in the right direction"*

- *"Just being available and responding to emails"*

- *"Being checked in on as well by tutors, not having to go to them...tutors reaching out to see if I'm OK"*

- *"You can just ask them pretty much anything and they will point you in the right direction. That sort of thing. So, first port of call."*

- *"Someone to talk to, to be the first port of call"*

- *"Having someone to email/go to when you're now sure what department to go to regarding needing further help etc."*

All link to **connection, being seen and heard**

All are basic – there is **not a high expectation from students**

Manchester Metropolitan University

Enhancing that sense of connection to enhance engagement

We need to build and nurture connection and trusting personal relationships

- One to one meetings

- Also need group sessions to build connections with peers

- Make meetings and sessions relevant and purposeful

- Work with students to co-create what they want: further building the relationship and connection

- Try coaching and mentoring approaches: particularly useful to encourage self-efficacy (Bleasdale and Humphries, 2019)

Manchester Metropolitan University

Questions?

Vicky Martin v.martin@mmu.ac.uk

Catherine Shephard
c.shephard@mmu.ac.uk

References

ADIGUN, O. B. 2024. Conceptualization and measurement of adolescent students' psychological need thwarting based on the student–teacher relationship. *Learning Environments Research,* 27**,** 217-239.

BLEASDALE, L. & HUMPHRIES, S. 2019. Identity, well-being and law students. *Educating for well-being in law: positive professional identities and practice.* Routledge.

BOYER, E. L. 1990. *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*, The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

JÄRVINEN, M. & MIK-MEYER, N. 2025. Giving and receiving: Gendered service work in academia. *Current Sociology*.

JONES, C. S. 2021. An investigation into barriers to student engagement in Higher Education: Evidence supporting 'the psychosocial and academic trust alienation theory'. *Advances in Educational Research and Evaluation journal*.

KHAROUF, H., SEKHON, H. & ROY, S. K. 2015. The components of trustworthiness for higher education: a transnational perspective.

MARGINSON, S. 2024. Higher education faces a more fragile and contested future. *University World News*, 24 February 2024.

PICTON, C. & AND KAHU, E. R. 2022. 'I knew I had the support from them': understanding student support through a student engagement lens. *Higher Education Research & Development,* 41**,** 2034-2047.

SAITO, H. 2011. An actor-network theory of cosmopolitanism. *Sociological Theory,* 29**,** 124-149.

SHEPHARD, C., BURNS, N., MARTIN, V., REGAN, M. & WILSON, P. 2023. 'We're not in Kansas anymore': identifying our 'New Normal' in Legal Education. *Annual Conference of the Scocio-Legal Studies Association 2023, Ulster University, 5 April 2023*.

SMITH, B., D. F. & COLPITTS, M. D. 2025. Japan's pursuit of meritocracy, cosmopolitanism, and global rankings in higher education: a Bourdieusian interpretation.

STEPHEN, D., O'CONNELL, P. & HALL, M. 2008. 'Going the extra mile', 'fire-fighting', or laissez-faire? Re-evaluating personal tutoring relationships within mass higher education1. *Teaching in Higher Education*.