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An exploration of factors influencing undergraduate student engagement at a UK university

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Abstract

Educational institutions have a vested interest in learners being engaged in the teaching and learning process. A significant aspect of this would appear to be attendance; however, it is clearly not the only way of being engaged. Universities are no exception to this interest and we, as a course team of an undergraduate course in the UK, have also had concerns about our students' engagement.

In the hope of discovering things that we might do to try to improve engagement, this small-scale research project worked with some of our students as co-researchers to explore student understanding of engagement and the influences on their attendance, contributions and completion of post-session extension activities.

Gathered through a series of three questionnaires and some follow-up interviews, the data revealed that, although some students felt that staying at home to complete assessments showed engagement, most believed that engagement meant attending, contributing and taking an active part in sessions.

Principal influences on engagement were found to be both external to the university: student attitude to learning, self-perception, time management, health, finances and travel arrangements; and internal: pedagogy, assessment demands, learning environment and session content.

These findings suggest that there is a need to consider carefully those influences that the university might have some control over and reflect on the way that learning environments are constructed; pedagogy is employed; student-student and staff-student relationships are developed; modules, classes and assessments are interlinked; institutional, course, staff and student expectations are shared; and student skill and attitude to learning are supported.

Key words

student engagement; student attendance; student participation; student contributions; absenteeism

Link to article

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Introduction

There has been a longstanding interest in student engagement in the learning process (Tight, 2020). Engagement is often equated with attendance, and strategies have been taken through registration and the monitoring of absence to track rates to identify areas of concern which feed into scrutiny from external agents such as Ofsted and the Office for Students (OfS) and performative measures such as league tables. The roots of this interest are deep and stem from a transmissive model of education that saw the educator as the sole source of knowledge and a belief that to develop socially, emotionally and cognitively and to achieve educationally there was a need to be in class and to be with other learners.

Universities are no exception to such interest and external pressures and are to be found exploring ways to encourage students to attend. Engagement in learning is also tracked more broadly as, for example, data on the use of the virtual learning environment and libraries becomes available.

However, as technology makes information increasingly more accessible the whole

notion of engagement perhaps needs to be reconsidered, as students who attend may not be 'engaged' and those who do not attend may well be engaged through independent study. In addition, as there are increasing pressures on student time, there is perhaps a need to explore why students may not be attending and what engagement actually means to them.

As personal tutors on an undergraduate Education degree that is based on classroom delivery, we share concerns about attendance and the impact of absenteeism and wanted to explore influences on student engagement, in particular those that were of significance to our cohort, to gain a deep understanding. These concerns have also been expressed by students themselves through course meetings and evaluations, citing the impact on course and class dynamics and personal motivation. Consequently, we sought funding from a University Teaching Fellowship project that enabled us to conduct a small-scale study with three students as co-researchers to explore the influences on our cohort's engagement and their perceptions of engagement. Working alongside one student from each year group allowed us to address any perceived power imbalance between tutors, and students, added insight during the research process and developed their research skills in the process. This was enacted through three phases of questionnaire during the teaching period, and some follow-up interviews.

The research objective was to deepen understandings of engagement and attendance and to explore influences on both in the hope of unearthing ways to improve both.

The research questions are:

What factors influence engagement?

What is students' understanding of engagement?

What factors influence student attendance in class?

What factors influence student contributions in class?

What factors influence student completion of extension activities?

Literature review

Engagement in HE

It is not uncommon in educational contexts to find reference to engagement, with educators believing it to be something that needs to be encouraged and nurtured

(Moore, 2019; Nieuwoudt, 2020). There is a common sense that engagement is linked to academic performance and success (Asghar, 2014; Hirschfield and Gasper, 2011 in Cilliers *et al.*, 2018) and yet it is evident that it is a contested term (Cunningham and Cunningham, 2023).

Like Moore (2019) our course position is that engagement involves attendance and active participation in course activities. However, Macfarlane (2013) states this is not enough and that, for example, students may not attend due to other responsibilities, but may be highly engaged. Macfarlane (2013: 370) also questions the suggestion that it is about participation and contribution, claiming that students have the 'right to reticence', while Nieuwoudt (2020) makes the point that students can be engaged quietly and reflectively.

Cilliers *et al.* (2018: 51) describe engagement as 'an on-going and positive affective-motivational state accomplished by an individual, which includes two core components, namely vigor and dedication'. They characterise vigour as high levels of energy, mental resilience, ability and enthusiasm to invest effort into studying, and dedication as involvement, motivation, enthusiasm, pride and challenge. This links back to Nymamapfene (2010) who talks of 'involvement with studies' and Fredricks *et al.* (2004: 73) who categorise engagement into three types: behavioural – positive conduct, effort, persistence, concentration, contribution; emotional – interest, boredom, anxiety; cognitive – investment in learning, development and challenge. Schlechty (2002) suggests that engagement can be considered on a continuum between authentic engagement, through strategic compliance, ritual compliance, and retreatism to rebellion.

Thomas (2012) speaks of different areas of engagement mentioning academic and social spheres and university services, while Gravett (2023: 11) proposes that engagement needs to consider inter-personal relationships as well as relationships with the environments and materials which students experience.

For the purposes of this research, engagement is conceptualised around attendance, contributions in class and completion of extension activities, but also seeks student understanding and conceptualisation of engagement.

Higher Education within the current context

It is important to recognise the current context within which Higher Education students

are engaging with universities and this section will address the wider societal contexts which impact upon the 'engaged student ideal' (Kelly, Fair and Evans, 2017: 105).

Giroux (2014) charts the influence of four decades of neoliberal policies which promote individualism and self-interest at the expense of a cooperative, socially-focussed approach. Within universities, Giroux (2014) suggests that neoliberalism has led to instrumentalism becoming predominant at the expense of creative and collaborative work between academics and students, leading to a pedagogy which engenders student passivity (Giroux, 2020). This process of the commodification of education (Maisuria and Helmes, 2019) has led to collective interest being replaced with competitive self-ambition (Ball, 2015); however, Powers and Wong (2022: 108) and Bourn (2022) provide two examples of those arguing that education settings can still be sites for contesting social inequality. In support of this perspective Sennet (2008) offers the view of education as craftsmanship, where pride is taken in educational endeavour in contrast to the consumer attitude of discarding things in search of the new, whilst Gibson and Cook-Sather (2020) propose that pedagogical partnership can find a space in Higher Education to challenge the neoliberal hegemony and support equitable student engagement.

Links between Attendance and achievement

The issue of student attendance is seen as a major concern for education institutions (Reschly and Christenson, 2012) and for universities in particular (Oldfield *et al.*, 2018) in the context of widening absenteeism (Mearman *et al.*, 2014). However, the link between attendance at sessions and achievement is unclear.

At one end of the spectrum, attendance is identified as the strongest predictor of degree outcomes (Woodfield *et al.*, 2006) and evidence links attendance, exam performance (Sund and Bignoux, 2018) and grades (Sloan *et al.*, 2020; Cecilla *et al.*, 2019). However, Martins and Walker (2006) suggest that the effect of attendance is insignificant on student outcomes and propose a better understanding of students' strategic attendance choices. Aden *et al.* (2013) identify a moderate link unless absenteeism is excessive and concur with Nieuwoudt (2020) that not just attendance, but time spent studying, including online, is significant.

It has been suggested that, although universities promote presenteeism (Macfarlane, 2013) within the context of achievement, attendance concerns might be driven by fears

relating to university reputation (St. Clair, 1999) and that absenteeism might lead to student drop-out (Pownall, 2012).

Influences on Attendance

When considering absenteeism, the focus tends to be on factors such as mental wellbeing or motivation, and Shah and Cheng (2019) identify that the most significant barriers to engagement and attendance are external to teaching and learning organisations. However, Bati *et al.* (2013) claim factors affecting absence are predominantly external to the student. Moores *et al.* (2019) highlight institutional, psychological and socio-demographic factors - recognising attendance is affected by both institutional and individual aspects (Beovich *et al.*, 2021).

Areas affecting attendance over which institutions have influence have been identified as belonging, resources, relationships with staff (Oldfield *et al.*, 2018), internet and computer access in blended learning environments (Tuiloma *et al.*, 2022), attendance monitoring (Westrick *et al.*, 2009) and pedagogies (Sloan *et al.*, 2020). Individual aspects influencing student attendance are numerous and include lack of sleep (Westrick *et al.*, 2009), socialising and illness (Sloan *et al.*, 2020), travel time to campus and students' employment status (Vlachopoulos and Shazia, 2020).

Bunce *et al.* (2017) point to the marketisation of HE and show how a higher consumer orientation correlates with poorer academic performance, including lower attendance. Oldfield *et al.* (2019) suggest that students perceive university as a service they are paying for and thus may choose to attend or not. However, the literature also identifies that absence and engagement levels are contextual within a given subject and for individual students, and that flexible approaches to learning for students may need to be considered (Mills *et al.*, 2021). This may involve online learning resources and recorded sessions to provide greater access (Nordmann *et al.*, 2018); however, such digitised approaches have been identified as influencing choices to attend (Beovich *et al.*, 2021) and what constitutes attendance may need to be reconsidered in the context of online resources.

Influence of student health and wellbeing on engagement

There is widespread concern about the mental health of young people and post-pandemic deterioration (Chen and Lucock, 2022) and the impact this might have on

engagement with learning (Boulton *et al.* 2019). Social anxiety or social phobia can also impact students' wellbeing, engagement, academic success, and outcomes at university (Cage *et al.*, 2022). Sometimes overwhelming student stress can lead to distance learning pathways as physical attendance can be too overwhelming (Archbell and Coplan, 2022). In addition, Cage *et al.* (2021) identify the challenge of transition to university life as students can struggle to adapt to make new friends, adjust to new environments and changes to learning approaches, structure and routine, pointing to the impact on student mental health and wellbeing and the need for a whole university approach to support in this area. The apparent correlation between wellbeing, engagement, and student success means universities are having to adapt their services to provide more pastoral support (OfS, 2022). In addition, Kotera *et al.* (2022) suggest that lecturers should target teaching approaches to better support student mental wellbeing and motivational factors.

Sources of motivation and subsequent influence on engagement

When considering student engagement, an important factor is motivation, the force that 'arouses and maintains behaviours over time' (Demirdag, 2021: 39). Eccles and Wang (2012) suggest that motivation may be a precursor of engagement with Russel *et al.* (2005 in Christenson *et al.*, 2012: 814) stating that motivation is the intent and engagement the action. A distinction often made is between those forces that are intrinsic and those which are extrinsic. Bartimote-Aufflick *et al.* (2016) emphasise the desirability of that force coming from within and talk of the need for self-efficacy and an internal locus of control. Janke (2020) suggests that this key difference in motivation is present on enrolment and that students who select courses based on external factors tend to have reduced study satisfaction and higher drop-out thoughts, in contrast to those whose choice was based on personal interest. This aligns with findings from King and Bunce (2020) that indicate that the marketised nature of HE leads students to increasingly view a degree instrumentally, whereby the prime motivation is to improve employment prospects. Chamberlin *et al.* (2018: 6) recognise this instrumentalist approach, identifying that grading of students encourages 'competitive and detached individualism', distracting students from personal reflection and academic interest.

In terms of other external influences, Reed and Makovec (2015) speak of problematic internet use and how motivation to study appears to decrease as a result of digital dependence. Tremblay-Wragg *et al.* (2021) comment on the impact of teaching approaches finding that originality, diversity and active teaching strategies, as opposed to theoretical and formal teaching, breaks routine, reduces student saturation and promotes learning motivation. Such active teaching strategies that encourage students to take responsibility for their learning and provide opportunity for choice and autonomy appear to encourage intrinsic motivation and link with Self-Determination theory which suggests that acting upon one's intrinsic aspirations will facilitate optimal wellbeing and growth-oriented motivation (Guay *et al.*, 2008 in Janke, 2020). Radovan and Makeover (2015) suggest the learning environment plays an influential role and can foster autonomy and self-direction, leading to greater intrinsic motivation.

Alongside the feeling of self-determination, King (2020) highlights the need for students to feel competent. Tremblay (2021) draws on expectancy-value models of motivation to show how achievement expectancies – the value that is placed on the learning and the task and perceived element of control over activity – will influence motivation. Prescott and Simpson (2004) stress the need for universities to ensure sufficient learning support is on offer as they note how students who are struggling with tasks or who doubt their competence are inclined not to mix with peers, absent themselves and/or ignore their difficulties.

Winn (2002) and Wong *et al.* (2017: 8) take a more holistic stance towards considering student motivation, drawing attention to external factors such as socio-economic status or caring responsibilities that might obstruct capacity to study and highlighting the need for universities to ensure 'academic integration, social integration and personal development are addressed to enhance and motivate students to learn and develop'.

The influence of pedagogy on student engagement

Much is said about how teaching approach impacts engagement. Grove (2019: 36) discovered that teachers with more confidence are likely to engage in a proactive and encouraging pedagogy, which in turn is likely to increase student engagement. This self-assurance enables teachers to tailor learning through more accessible instructions for different pupils which will result in a boost to their learning (Grove,

2019). However, Gravett (2023: 39) talks about the need for a relational approach and for lecturers to show vulnerability and uncertainty, which can help foster collaboration and partnership with students, increasing engagement with transformative learning processes.

With roots in critical pedagogy (see for example Freire, 1996; Hooks, 1994) theorists interested in education for social justice have advocated for student-centred provision through a relational pedagogy approach (Noddings, 2013). Vasilic (2022) identifies that the complex situations navigated by students, within the neoliberal context, can be addressed through a relational approach and Davies (2022) identifying the need for proactive relationship-building between students and staff. McIntosh (2022) argues that the wider context of the HE landscape and post-covid implications have shifted the student experience landscape, and that a relational approach to pedagogy is imperative for students.

Project Tomorrow (2010 in Taylor and Parsons, 2011) believe that pedagogy needs to change to meet the needs of the current generation within a more digital society. Ally (2019: 303) corroborates this suggesting that education needs to encourage relevant learning about future technologies. A more relevant pedagogy may better meet the needs of learners and increase the likelihood of students being engaged and less likely to be distracted (Truitt and Ku, 2018).

Oates (2019) advocates a constructivist approach to teaching, suggesting that this encourages engagement and collaboration and allows more critical-based learning to occur, whilst Brand and Moore (2011 in Oates, 2019) found it increased student attention and drive, engagement and developed autonomy.

Influence of relationships on engagement

A positive lecturer and student relationship has been identified as a highly significant factor for student learning and growth, with Calabrese *et al.* (2022) observing that a strong tutor and student relationship is a good influence on student experience and retention. Hagenauer and Volet (2014) identify the consequences of these relationships as having a direct positive impact on the quality of teaching and learning.

To develop good lecturer/student relationships, Wimpenny and Savin-Baden (2013 in Gravett, 2023) emphasise that tutors need genuineness, empathic understanding and to acknowledge students' struggles, insecurities and pain, and to recognise how their

broader lives impact on their engagement in academic spaces.

In addition, peer-to-peer relationships can exert a profound influence on students' learning engagement (Kiefer *et al.*, 2015). With support from their peers, students are more likely to feel confident in learning and increase learning engagement (Juvonen *et al.*, 2012; Geven *et al.*, 2013; Shin and Chang, 2022). Having friends is also an essential factor for student retention (Wilcox, *et al.*, 2006). However, Bassey (2020) noted as a warning that, in schools at least, peer influence can both positively and negatively affect academic performance and motivation.

Methodology

The research began within the epistemological position of seeking to gain contextual understanding of the experiences and perspectives of a community of learners. It took an interpretive approach, collecting qualitative data to capture the experiences and perceptions of students by engaging with their voices to understand their own perspectives (Silverman, 2020).

The research group comprised three experienced researchers who were also lecturers within the university, and three novice undergraduate researchers. The research was supported through the University's Teaching Fellowship scheme. In recognition of students as critical producers of knowledge (Lowe and Dent, 2021; Wallin and Aarsand, 2019), the co-research approach between students and lecturers was designed to benefit both the student experience (Jenkins and Healey, 2009) and skill development (Zou *et al.*, 2022), enhance the approach to research construction (Clark *et al.*, 2022), and provide the potential of improved access to data from the student body (Mauder *et al.*, 2013), resulting in a strong student voice through the research (Lynn *et al.*, 2021).

The co-research approach was constructed in recognition of potential challenges (Mauder *et al.*, 2013) through a formal application process and an investment of time to develop positive relationships and trust between all researchers and subsequent learning from one another during the research process (Homer *et al.*, 2023).

This explorative case study used a sequential monomethod multistrand approach (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2006), collecting data through the use of questionnaires followed by semi-structured interviews, seeking qualitative data throughout. The questionnaires were distributed three times through the academic year, followed by a

round of interviews. The interviews were conducted by the three student researchers to afford greater insights and deeper understanding of student responses (Davis and Sakr, 2021). The interview schedule was constructed to align with the research questions, seeking elaboration of the key themes identified from the questionnaire results.

Sampling

The target population consists of two interconnected degree programmes: BA (Hons) Education and BA (Hons) Education, Inclusion and SEN. During the research year of 2022-2023 the cohort size was:

Programme	Level 4 (yr. 1)	Level 5 (yr. 2)	Level 6 (yr. 3)
Education	9	20	20
Education, Inc & SEN	10	13	7
Totals	19	33	27

Ten of the entire cohort are, or are designate as, male and most are ‘traditional’ students who have come to university either directly or within a couple of years of leaving compulsory education. Many have part-time jobs, but only a few have childcare responsibilities.

The questionnaires were sent to the entire cohort and numbers who responded are:

	Level 4 Students (1st Year)	Level 5 Students (2nd Year)	Level 6 Students (Final Year)
Questionnaire 1 Autumn term	15	10	4
Questionnaire 2 Spring Term	8	8	7
Questionnaire 3 Summer Term	12	6	7

Table 1: number of questionnaire respondents

Aside from level, demographic information was not collected at this point as, due to

small numbers, there was a danger of loss of anonymity. However, in an attempt to ensure representation a stratified sample of 3 students from each level was recruited to the interviews, through the review of student attendance data. For each level, one student with each characteristic of low mean attendance, average and high participated in the interviews.

Data collection

The questionnaires, using the Google Forms platform, were distributed to the entire cohort using standard course-messaging procedures. Requests and reminders to participate were actioned by the team during taught sessions and student members of the team additionally used social media groups.

The interviews were prepared following initial analysis of the questionnaire data. Recruitment to the interviews was via direct invitation by student members of the team and were conducted by the same students. This approach reflected the team's desire to reduce the risks of the power dynamics of tutors interviewing students and the mitigating role the undergraduate researchers would fulfil. Interviews were conducted online via Teams which allowed for the automated transcription of interviews, and as a way of minimising inconvenience for participants. Transcripts were edited for accuracy prior to analysis.

The ethical approach followed the BERA guidelines (2018), and formal ethical approval was received from the University Research Ethics Panel (approval code: REC.23.16.8). Informed consent was gained following sharing of a research information sheet. Participants were signposted to university and external support services in case of any distress as a result of participation.

Data analysis

A thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was followed to analyse both questionnaires and interviews, and a combination of inductive themes and predetermined themes were identified and utilised.

In an attempt to address researcher bias and the influence of power relations, Initial coding was carried out in partnership between a lecturer and a student member of the team analysing a share of the interviews using NVivo. Reliability and intercoder agreement (O'Connor and Joffe, 2020) was developed through a subsequent review

of codes and themes by the whole research team.

Findings and discussion

Discussion around the findings is focused on each of the research questions in turn.

What factors influence engagement?

The data revealed various factors that influence engagement. Tutor pedagogy has an impact. Students expressed that they engage more when they are learning from each other, when the tutor avoids tangents and where the tutor is personal. This links to Gravett (2023) who asserts the need for a relational approach and for lecturers to show vulnerability.

A Level 5 student when asked about what influenced their engagement stated: "Depends on who the lecturer is" (Q L5). This further demonstrates the influence of relational pedagogy on an individual level. Another participant said the lecturer's style negatively impacted their engagement: "I often feel intimidated by certain lecturers and their learning style" (Q L5).

Other students thought that group work helped them learn more and to keep engaged during the session: "I say group work group work always makes me more... I don't know... I feel like I memorise and like remember when you...do group work" (Int L6 Low).

Such active teaching strategies that encourage students to take responsibility for their learning and provide opportunity for choice and autonomy, appear to encourage intrinsic motivation and link with Self-Determination theory suggesting that acting upon intrinsic aspirations facilitates optimal wellbeing and growth-oriented motivation (Guay *et al.*, 2008 in Janke, 2020: 2422). Moreover, Tremblay-Wragg *et al.* (2021) comment that originality, diversity, and active teaching strategies as opposed to theoretical and formal teaching breaks routine, reduces student saturation, and promotes learning motivation. This is supported by the data: "I engage more in the course when there are interesting class discussions that allow for me to express my thoughts and questions on the topic" (Q L5).

Peer-to-peer relationships are good to support student engagement (Kiefer *et al.*, 2015). When students can get support from their peers, they are more likely to feel confident in learning; on the other hand, when students have less support from their

peers, they are more likely to feel afraid to accomplish tasks, which lessens their learning engagement (Juvonen *et al.*, 2012; Geven *et al.*, 2013; Shin and Chang, 2022). A participant from level 4 stated that: "Give us a little task and then we'll go back and talk about it because I feel less on the spot" (Q L4). Good tutor-to-student relationships were also identified as significant with a Level 4 participant commenting that: "Lecturers feel less like teachers and more like our colleagues because we're all going into education" (Q L4).

The data also revealed the influence of the learning environment and that students felt that if they were learning from their peers through discussion they were more likely to engage. Radovan and Makeover (2015: 131) suggest 'students who perceive their learning environment as a place that fosters autonomy and self-direction and find their education to be useful and relevant are more intrinsically motivated'. However, other factors contributed to this, and they included concentration, energy levels, and travelling in. A student felt that the timing of the sessions influences their attendance: "I am not a fan of early morning lectures", while a Level 6 participant commented: "If certain people are in the classroom, I am not as confident to talk" (Int L6 Mid).

Content was another factor that influenced engagement, particularly in relation to assessments and content covered during the sessions. A Level 5 student commented, "If I know it is important, I tend to engage more" (Int L5 Low) and a Level 4 student commented, "There are modules that I have actively avoided as I don't like them" (Int L4 Low).

Attitude to learning was another significant factor, sometimes linked to prioritising work over attending the lectures. This is echoed in the literature and supported by Moore (2019) and Macfarlane (2013) as students are more likely to not attend due to taking on additional external responsibilities. Other individual aspects influencing student attendance are numerous and include lack of sleep (Westrick *et al.*, 2009), socialising and illness (Sloan *et al.*, 2020), travel time to campus and students' employment status (Vlachopoulos and Shazia, 2020). However, another student felt that being engaged in the session helped them to learn and understand new ideas which then helped them to build on their own knowledge: "During lectures I believe I am fully engaged. I put this down to my desire to learn and understand new ideas and build knowledge" (Q L6). This is supported in Learning Power theory with students becoming pilots of their own learning and teachers adopting a coaching role (Claxton, 2023)

Another element was around mental health and wellbeing, and this affected their attitude to learning. A Level 4 participant stated: "My mental health as if I'm not in the right headspace I tend to not want to engage with others" (Q L4). Another participant commented about stress and how this influenced attitude to learning: "If I'm stressed or something, I'm not gonna be engaged" (Q L6).

The data showed that some participants were confident enough to feel that their contributions were worthy, while others felt that there might be judgement if they were to contribute: "I feel like what I have to say is worth contributing" (Q L4). A Level 4 student when asked why they did not engage in sessions stated: "Not feeling as smart as others" (Int L4 Low) and another said: "Fear of judgement" (Q L4).

What do students understand by engagement?

The data showed that the main understanding of engagement from the participants was attending and participating in/contributing to sessions with a level 6 student stating they understood engagement simply as: "Attending and contributing" (Int L6 Mid).

A large proportion of participants perceived engagement as actively contributing and being involved in the session. "Participating in lectures and getting there" (Int L5 Low); "Just asking questions" (Int L5 Low); and "If not contributing, then I am not engaged" (Int L4 High).

However, a couple of minor themes noted was that despite not being present in the sessions a few students believed they were still actively engaged as they were completing their assessments: "Putting in effort and time to doing assignments" (Int L5 Mid) and that, although students stated their 'engagement' dropped slightly in term 3, they did not express obvious concern.

What factors influence attendance in class?

The findings indicate a multitude of things which influence students' attendance at lectures, some which are internal to the student and some external (Moore *et al.*, 2019). Travel and domestic circumstances align with findings from Vlachopoulos and Shazia (2020) who discuss these as individual factors for students. For example, "bus cancellations" (Q L5), "traffic" (Q L6) and "public transport" (Q L6) were all cited as reasons for not attending. Additionally, finances and the need to work for extra money (Int L5 Low), time management, inclusive of missing lectures due to sleeping through

an alarm (Q L5) and not waking up for lectures (Q L4), link to findings from Westrick *et al.* (2009).

Students commonly cited mental health and wellbeing as having impact; “illness, hospital appointments” (Q L5), also indicated by Sloan *et al.* (2020), and “I was too exhausted both mentally and physically” (Q L4), whilst others explicitly identified, “mental health” (Q L5) as their reason for a lack of attendance.

Pedagogies (Sloan *et al.*, 2020) and attitude to learning were also highlighted as common influential factors. Oldfield *et al.* (2018) suggest relationships with staff as influential, supported by comments such as “actually really needed the support of being able to vocalise my thoughts and my processes to the lecturers to be able to get feedback” (Int L6 Mid), while others suggested “self-teaching” (Q L5) to be a struggle and indicated a need for lecturer interactions. Additionally, some comments alluded to the expense of university inclusive of getting “the most out of it” (Int L4 High) and “have paid for them” (Q L4), supported by Oldfield *et al.* (2019) who suggest students perceive university as a paid-for service, thus can choose to attend on that basis.

Finally, some students reported a difference in attendance levels dependent on the term, with Term Three responses focusing more on course-related influences such as completing assignments (Q L5; Q L6), while others suggested lectures did not always help with assignment related content (Int L6 Low), thus choosing not to attend. Although this theme may not have been explicitly explored within the context of current literature, Beovich *et al.* (2021) recognise attendance is affected by both institutional and individual factors, suggesting further research into the impact of assignments may highlight further influential factors into student attendance.

What factors influence contributions in class?

Five key themes emerged as influencing students’ contributions in class: two relating to factors internal to the students themselves and three to the teaching and learning context. The internal factors were around student attitude to learning and self-perception and the external to the learning environment, content and pedagogy.

Where students took a more active approach to learning and saw themselves as partners in the process, they were more likely to contribute given that “it benefits my learning to talk through my thoughts” (Q L6). This acceptance of responsibility for learning, whereby the locus of control sits with the student and not just with the tutor

(Bartimote-Aufflick *et al.*, 2016) recognises the importance of checking understanding and sharing ideas: “It is in my best interests to run my thoughts and misconceptions past lecturers. This can benefit everyone not just myself” (Q L6).

However, a barrier to this was student confidence in speaking out and security in their own ability. The feelings expressed by one respondent (Q L4) “I didn’t contribute at all because I felt my answers would be incorrect and was nervous to share” seemed to capture a common sentiment. This resonates with King’s (2020) findings of the need for students to feel competent.

External factors play an important role in influencing student attitude to learning and self-perception. Students need to feel safe and secure in class and comfortable with each other and with the tutor: “I contribute a lot depending on how comfortable I am during the lecture” (Q L6) and “I have built a connection with my classmates so that makes me more comfortable to share as well” (Int L6 High). This supports findings from Shin and Chang (2022) as to the need for good relationships which, when supportive, help to build confidence and willingness to speak out and take ‘risks’ with expressing ideas.

The approach that the tutor takes and relationships impacts on this learning environment (Gravett 2023): “I contributed the most in xxx’s lectures because I liked the way he prompted us to contribute, and I felt I had a space where I could share my ideas” (Q L4). Findings indicate that teaching strategies that involve collaboration and creativity (Tremblay-Wragg *et al.*, 2021) and that encourage students to take responsibility for their learning (Guay *et al.*, 2008 in Janke, 2020: 2422) are beneficial, helping to develop confidence, growth-oriented motivation and autonomy,

I like it when it's like you get given input and then you go to a group and then you talk about it and then you get asked about it like as a group. After you've had the chance to talk about it and actually think about it, I think that was that definitely helps (Int L5 Low).

The remaining aspect that emerged from the findings was the content of taught sessions. Cognitive load and conceptual challenge impacted ability to maintain concentration and contribute, with a level 4 student stating they contribute “A little bit. I think that it is because sometimes some of the concepts are difficult which makes it hard to contribute” (Q L4). This links to Tremblay-Wragg *et al.*'s (2021) use of the

expectancy-value model of motivation whereby students need to value the task, but also feel that it is achievable.

What factors influence completion of extension activities?

The findings did not provide a unified perspective from participants regarding the influences upon the completion of extension activities; however, some key themes emerged.

The questionnaire responses provided some constant themes across the three terms, along with changing themes according to the time within the academic year. The impact of assessments on completion of extension activities increased through the academic year, with this being a significant factor towards the end "... because I find It's something taken away from time I could do my assessments" (Int L5 High).

It is clear that students became more focussed on assessments as the year progressed and that work towards assessments was progressively prioritised above extension activities.

Students who perceived that extension activities did not directly contribute to assessment tasks would be unlikely to tackle the tasks. The prioritisation of assessments aligns with the work of King and Bunce (2020), which identifies an instrumental approach to higher education study.

It is relevant to note that responses to the students' views of engagement did not consistently include working on assessments.

In term two, tiredness and personal motivation emerged as themes which also influenced completion of extension tasks. It may be relevant to reflect on the academic cycle and whether attitudes change according to this cycle. For many, the fact that they had not developed or maintained a habit to complete extension tasks had an ongoing influence: "...just haven't kept the habit going" (Int L4 High).

There may be further consideration needed about the importance of habit within students' completion of extension tasks, consideration of whether good study habits have been brought with students prior to enrolment (Janke, 2020), and whether tiredness and absence of habit may evidence that the vigour and dedication identified by Cilliers *et al.* (2008) is a missing part within student levels of engagement.

Having the time to complete extension activities was a key theme which was present through all three terms, as was the behaviour of forgetting to return to extension activities once the taught session had ended. Students also related that being busy is a key factor in limiting completion of extension activities: “I’ve just been busy” (Int L4 High), “There’s not really enough time. It feels like to do extra things on top of that” (Int L5 Mid).

The factors of habit, lack of time and forgetfulness can all be perceived as elements of attitude towards learning and self-perception. Indeed, it may be that Bartimote-Aufflick *et al.*’s (2006) assertions that effective intrinsic learning behaviours need self-efficacy, and an internal locus of control offers a good understanding of those factors. This links closely to the findings of Ahmed Shafi *et al.* (2018) who confirmed an internal locus of control as one of the ‘Big 5’ of academic buoyancy, and these findings may indicate lower levels of academic buoyancy.

General attitudes towards study in the course was a significant theme. In particular the level of independent study required of a student: “If you ask me to make a poster or something of everything that I’ve learned, I’ll happily do that, but I’m not going to sit down and read a chapter of a book” (Int L4 Low).

It emerges that there may be a lack of alignment between lecturer and student expectations about extension tasks and independent study. Where lecturers are expecting a particular level of independent study outside of the taught sessions, student responses indicate a desire for a more directed and lecturer-dependent approach. Examples include respondents suggesting they would be more likely to complete extension tasks if it were started in a session and led by the lecturer, “.... because then I’ve already started it, and I don’t like leaving stuff undone. So, I’ll go home and complete it, or I’ll make sure it’s completed in the lecture before I leave” (Int L4 Low), or if the task were tested at the following session, or presented a group responsibility, “And I feel I have a responsibility within the cohort to do my part and I don’t wanna let anybody else’s education down” (Int L6 Mid).

This clear evidence of a mismatch of attitude and expectation between student and tutor links to Chamberlain *et al.*’s (2018) consideration of an instrumentalist approach being at odds with academic expectations. This also aligns with Radovan and Makeover’s (2015) suggestion that intrinsic motivation is closely linked to autonomy

and self-direction. It may be that this reflects an instrumentalist school system and, therefore, students arrive at university with a dependent approach to study.

It was clear from responses that extension tasks would be impacted before attendance or contribution as a result of the need to work for money. For some participants, working for money impacted on the time, as well as energy, that students have for extension tasks: “Sometimes I might work too late and then I might not have time” (Int L6 High), “It did restrict time and Ohh the energy to be able to do extra things for lectures” (Int L5 Mid). Whilst Vlachopoulos and Shazia (2020) identify this area of influence, there is a lack of cohesion in the literature, with Dundes and Marx (2006) finding that working students had superior academic outcomes and both Lundberg (2004) and Mounsey *et al.* (2013) finding that there was little difference in academic outcomes between working and non-working students. This suggests that research into the impact of working whilst studying needs to be revisited.

Physical and mental health were other influences cited by respondents as barriers to completing extension activities: “Hardly any of the tasks were completed, I’ve had a bad mental health week” (Q L5) “I was not able to complete all of the tasks because I am feeling very fatigued and struggling to focus on work” (Q L6). This reinforces Boulton *et al.’s.* (2019) claim that higher levels of wellbeing equate to a greater likelihood of engagement.

It is important to note that both questionnaires and interviews focussed largely on the barriers to completing extension tasks. The bulk of responses, therefore focussed on the non-completion and an unbalanced perspective of student attitudes may be reflected in the results. By way of balance, the following quote identified an attitude which reflects Cilliers *et al.’s* (2018) view of engagement and of a student taking action with a sense of competence (King, 2020): “I’ve completed the large majority of my extension tasks this week to ensure I have been able to keep up with classes and be best prepared for the next lecture” (Q L4).

Overall, it appears that, while some students consider working on assignments as being engaged and that attendance was not essential, most appear to share our feeling that engagement involves attending, participating in class and completing additional tasks set.

Influences on attendance, levels of contribution in class and completion of tasks overlapped, with some being directly related to the university and course, and others to the student and their personal circumstances. The data identified a heterogeneity of students, with the significance of the key factors of influence varying for individual circumstances.

Factors related to the university include pedagogy, whereby a relational approach which encourages collaboration through group work and active learning strategies was favoured; content, which needs to be of interest, at an appropriate level and clearly linked to assessments; learning environment, which should be supportive, non-judgemental and inclusive; and expectations which need to be clearly negotiated and expressed between course team and students.

Factors related to the student include mental health and wellbeing; confidence and willingness to speak out in class and take risks; the need to take employed work, travel time, family commitments and time management skills; attitude to learning; and motivation.

Conclusion

This research project began from concern expressed by the course teaching team and through student evaluations about levels of 'engagement' shown by some students within the cohort. In an effort to find ways we might improve this, we looked to identify things that appeared to influence this engagement.

By using a student from each year group as a co-researcher, we were able to reduce the power imbalance between tutors and students and, hopefully, achieve more open and honest answers in response to a series of questionnaires and follow up interviews.

Although it is important to recognise that the findings did not represent a homogenous student perspective and a key to understanding should therefore be underpinned by the recognition of the diversity of the student population (Crabtree, 2023) key findings are:

- Although some students felt that engagement could mean completing assessment work, most seem to share the opinion that engagement was attending, contributing and being an active participant in class sessions.
- Factors that influenced attendance, contributions and completion of activities,

seemed to overlap with some being to do with the students themselves and their circumstances, while others were to do with the university and the tutors.

- The principal factors that were external to the university included student attitude to learning, self-perception, time management, health, finances and travel arrangements; related to the university were pedagogy, learning environment and session content.

Reflecting on the implications of this, while a number of these influences seem outside of the scope of the university and course team, there are a number that can be considered in an effort to improve engagement. Key factors would appear to be:

- Learning environment: creation of a learning environment in which students do not feel judged and feel able to express their thoughts and opinions freely knowing they will be listened to and respected.
- Pedagogy: use of dynamic and active teaching and learning activities that involve collaborative group work and that encourage risk-taking and the exploration of different perspectives and thereby help create a learning environment conducive to high levels of engagement.
- Relationships: employment of a relational pedagogy and regular course team-building activities that help to develop and strengthen student-student and student-tutor relationships so that students feel secure and safe, that they trust each other and the tutors and feel they belong.
- Assessments: ensure that modules, session structures and activities are clear with explicit links to learning outcomes and assessments.
- Expectations: ensure that there is transparency and congruence between institutional, course, lecturer and student expectations and needs.
- Skills and attitude to learning: provide discrete and embedded input to help students develop time management and independent learning skills, an internal locus of control and confidence in their ability to articulate thoughts and ideas and to express them in front of others.

These findings build on existing research and, although resulting from a small-scale study, hopefully serve as a reminder of good practice that will be transferable to other contexts and prove of value. They demonstrate that student understanding of engagement goes beyond presenteeism and encompasses three factors of

attendance, participation and completion of directed tasks. They also highlight the importance of the structures, approaches and expectations within a course and how these interact with the individual needs of the student cohort.

They have led us to resolve to meet as a wider course team to revisit course ethos, expectations and (consistency of) approach and pedagogy; explore ways to implement additional relationship-building activities and to look to add additional skills sessions on, for example, time management, independent learning and speaking with confidence.

We would hope, as a result, to make some changes over coming years and it would be interesting to, subsequently, conduct further research to explore impact to see if we have indeed succeeded in improving engagement.

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