



## Perspectives on University Student Engagement in England

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### Abstract

While national quantitative research has been conducted that measured satisfaction and engagement of undergraduate students in England, fewer qualitative studies exist that focused on the needs of students and their perceptions of the totality of their university experiences. This study examined the multifaceted phenomena of student engagement in a non-US setting to explore student attitudes and needs that contribute to retention and engaged decisions at an English university. Findings suggested that US research has applicability in the English university context. As is the case in the US, English student engagement in academics and societies was affected by factors associated with stress, belonging, career aspirations, support, and social involvement.

*Keywords:* student engagement, student involvement, student success, student integration, English higher education.

### **Perspectives on University Student Engagement in England**

Increasingly universities around the globe are being challenged to improve the quality of the higher education experience and the success rates of students. Both the United States (US) and United Kingdom (UK) have been leaders in fostering student success, not only at their selective enrollment institutions but also at those institutions dedicated to access and widening participation. In 2015, the US higher education system, serving 17 million students annually, had a retention rate of 81% (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, 2016); at the same time, UK higher education, serving two million students, had a retention rate of 93% (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2016). Both countries are striving to improve graduation rates across their sectors and are increasing efforts to optimize student engagement.

In the UK there are two primary mechanisms used to examine components of student satisfaction and response to the experience of undergraduate study. The National Student Survey (2018) examines the satisfaction of full time and part-time students, with the organization, management, and delivery of their course of study and related satisfaction with learning resources and support. The Student Experience Survey (SES) captures data on the experience of roughly one-fifth of the full-time undergraduates belonging to the Youth Sight Opinion Panel (Youth Sight, 2018). The SES examines the academic experience and the students' experiences with university facilities, accommodations, security, social, and work-related experiences. Both quantitative measurement tools provide for between-university comparisons but fail to examine the attitudes and needs of students that contribute to their stated judgments. This study, grounded in knowledge gleaned from US research, addresses a gap in understanding of the nature of English students' satisfaction with the totality of their university experience and explores factors that contribute to students' predilections toward academic and co-curricular engagement.

#### **Importance of Engagement**

Bryson and Hand (2007) concluded that, in the UK context, student engagement is a multi-dimensional concept and thus a multi-faceted approach to engagement processes is needed. They argued that inherent within the university environments are alienating factors that must be countered if student engagement is to flourish. Lester (2013) argued similar assertions from a US lens, suggesting that student engagement is a highly complex phenomenon that is influenced by teaching methods, classroom learning environments, campus culture, social interactions, as well as co-curricular activities and programs.

Interest in the phenomena of student engagement will continue to grow, as the acknowledged correlation to student learning and educational outcomes strengthens (Lester, 2013). Student engagement is a shared responsibility between students and members of the university community. Faculty and student affairs staff play an important role in encouraging full engagement of students. The term engagement has been continually redefined by campuses as new research has been conducted for specific populations and purposes, making the elements of student engagement better understood and the approaches to reaching it more customized (Lester, 2013). Student engagement represents the time and effort students devote to activities that are connected to desired outcomes of universities and what institutions do to augment student participation in these activities (Kuh, 2009b).

In considering practices that resulted in student engagement, Pascarella (1991) stated that the real quality in undergraduate education resided more in what professionals did programmatically than in what resources they had. Kuh (2009a) similarly cautioned that simply offering programs that are engaging in nature does not guarantee student success; engagement programs and strategies must be customized to fit the needs of the intended campus culture.

To build effective student engagement tactics, research has shown it was vital to construct processes that were responsive to the diverse needs of students. Many educators were persuaded by the sheer amount of empirical evidence that confirmed strategizing ways to increase engagement of various student populations was worthwhile (Axelson & Flick, 2011). Research has shown that engagement that is educationally purposeful led to the production of beneficial outcomes in cognitive and intellectual development, college adjustment, moral and ethical development, practical competence, accrual of social capital, as well as psychological development and positive images of self (Axelson & Flick, 2011).

### **Feelings and Affinity**

For the past 20 years, US higher education scholars have worked to understand the complex factors that contribute to student engagement. Student engagement is characterized as the participation in educationally effective practices that take place both the classroom and beyond (Axelson & Flick, 2011). A substantial body of evidence exists to support assertions that individual student engagement in educationally purposive activities leads to more favorable educational outcomes (Astin, 1984). Astin's (1984) seminal input-environment-output model of student involvement stated that both the quantity and quality of interactions directly influence a

student's level of learning and development. For engagement to be productive students must be afforded the opportunity to develop positive feelings about the institution. Experiencing positive feelings fostered a sense of connectedness and belonging and increased the likelihood that students who experience them would pursue opportunities for learning and development (Bensimon, 2009).

True engagement required a successful transition of students from novitiates to an integral part of the fabric of the university. The process of developing a sense of belonging to the university community was an important pre-requisite for successful engagement (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Students struggling with transitions needed to develop relationships within the campus community, connect to the administration, and engage in activities that promoted learning and development to manifest a sense of belonging and realize a positive student identity (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999).

### **Support**

US research has shown that students who departed from their institutions reported being more dissatisfied with their social lives and reported having formed no connection to their institutions (Kelly, LaVergne, Boone, & Boone, 2012). It was found that feelings of connection to the university can be increased for students if they perceive they have meaningful social support. Additionally, positive relationships with professors was reported to influence a student's perception of connection to the university (Kelly et al., 2012). A perception of greater social support was reported to decrease emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, while increasing feelings of personal accomplishment.

According to social support theory, social support provided by others increased students' capacity to adapt to stressful situations, decreased the perceived threat of stressors, and improved coping skills (Cohen, Mermelstein, Kamarck, & Hoberman, 1985). Notably, students that lived with a colleague or belonged to a club or social organization were less likely to suffer from depression or anxiety (Mahmoud, Staten, Lennie, & Hall, 2015). This demonstrated that social involvement and connection to everyday student activities could foster student retention (Kelly et al., 2012).

### **Involvement and Community**

Other studies found that social involvement and belonging created connections between students, faculty, and staff and allowed individuals to recognize their innate self-worth

(Schlossberg, 1989). When a student experienced a new transition, such as enrolling in college, the potential for feeling apart from the mainstream or marginal often arose. New students were not aware of how to transition from their former role to their new role as a university student (Schlossberg, 1989). The more sizable this difference was, the more marginal a person potentially felt. Feeling marginal elicited feelings regarding mattering to others and affected the student's sense of value in the larger environment (Schlossberg, 1989). Feeling marginal led a student to believe that they do not matter. Initial involvement with new groups often evoked these feelings and it took time for students to feel central to or important in any group setting. The establishment of environments that indicated to all students that they mattered encouraged them to seek greater involvement and, in turn, promoted the quality of the larger community (Schlossberg, 1989).

### **Anxiety and Doubt**

Literature has demonstrated that undergraduate college students were increasingly experiencing anxiety (Mahmoud et al., 2015). The American College Health Association reported that anxiety and depression ranked in the top three health conditions that college students faced each year (Mahmoud et al., 2015). Despite the plethora of theory-based attempts to remedy student anxiety in higher education, high anxiety levels of college students have remained a prevalent problem (Mahmoud et al., 2015). The increased level of anxiety in young adults may be due to higher achievement expectations for them in both levels of education attainment and in the pursuit of careers. Many students studied faced developmental, psychological, and academic challenges that compounded their concerns and increased their levels of experienced anxiety (Mahmoud et al., 2015). While college aged students have the highest prevalence of felt anxiety, they were the least likely to reach out to professionals and seek support (Suvisaari et al., 2008).

Most stress and anxiety experienced by undergraduates emanated from the transition to a new college life; a time that required them to develop new skills, maintain independence, manage new tasks, and maintain relationships (Zirkel, 1992). The failure to accomplish transition-related tasks and develop deep relationships was associated with reactive depression (Galambos, Barker, & Krahn, 2006). Young adults in college tended to delay building intimate relationships to achieve higher level needs such as self-esteem and self-actualization (Twenge, 2006). The failure to develop important and sustained relationships has been linked with

loneliness, isolation, and lack of a social support network (Cohen & McKay, 1984).

This qualitative research study was designed to elicit an understanding of the applicability of US-based studies on college student engagement to the English college student experience. It was bound by participants at a single English research university, studying across seven categories of majors, on one of two major university campuses. The purpose of this study was to explore student attitudes and needs that contributed to decisions about engagement at the university.

## Methodology

### Participants

This study was conducted at a large, public university in England. Eighty undergraduate students participated in the qualitative research program. Students provided open-ended responses about their gender identity, race/ethnicity, age, self-classification of their student type, their year in school, and the academic major/specialization. Table 1 presents a demographic profile of the participants.

Table 1

#### *Self-reported Responses to Open-ended Demographic Questions*

Category	Subcategory	Number	Percent
<b>Gender Identity</b>	Male	48	60
	Female	31	39
	Non-binary	1	1
	Total	80	
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	White/British	25	31
	White	17	21
	British	8	10
	Black	2	2
	International	18	23
	Other	7	9
	No Response	3	4
	Total	80	
<b>Age</b>	18-24	64	80
	25-39	14	18
	40-60	1	1
	Unknown	1	1
	Total	80	

Category	Subcategory	Number	Percent
<b>Self-classification</b> (all that apply)	Traditional	39	NA
	Mature	27	NA
	Commuting	9	NA
	Clearing <sup>a</sup>	11	NA
	First Generation	11	NA
	Caring Responsibilities	5	NA
<b>Year in School</b>	1	28	35
	2	20	25
	3	21	26
	4	1	1
	Masters	3	4
	Other/Unknown	7	9
	Total	80	
<b>Major/Specialization</b>	Business Management Leadership and Laws	21	26
	Arts and Creative Courses	24	30
	Computing and Technology	2	2
	Health, Social Care, Medical Innovation	5	6
	Psychology	4	5
	Social Sciences and Humanities	9	11
	Life Sciences	15	19
	Total	80	

**Note:** <sup>a</sup> Clearing student is defined as a student who is unable to secure an offer from a UK university of choice and is then offered a place at another institution.

## Procedure

Four US research assistants surveyed 80 English university students who agreed to participate anonymously in a study of college student engagement. A convenience sample of willing participants congregated in common areas throughout the university was surveyed over the course of one week. Informed by a review of the US student engagement literature, a qualitative research tool was developed. The survey items developed consisted primarily of open-ended questions to enable participants to express thoughts most relevant to them. A qualitative approach was chosen to capture a diversity of student responses related to engagement and establish meaningful variations within this population (Jansen, 2010).

Qualitative research is a preferred vehicle for the study of social relations to delve into ever-changing social contexts and perspectives within populations; locally limited narratives have become essential in solving major issues (Flick, 1998). Qualitative referenced items were built around topics such as expectations and hopes, social involvement, and support and satisfaction to examine many of the components of student engagement discussed in the US-

based literature. The resultant survey consisted of 15 items, with seven of those capturing demographic data and eight research questions formatted as open-ended prompts relating to varying aspects of student engagement (Appendix A).

### **Analysis**

This research was organized around the interpretive framework of social constructivism (Creswell, 2013). A qualitative content analysis was selected for use in the study. One member of the research team transcribed the data and entered it onto an Excel spreadsheet. Responses were analyzed by two researchers, independently, using open coding. Resultant codes were categorized into overarching themes with inter-coder reliability  $>.90$ .

### **Results**

Five predominant themes emerged from the qualitative data. These themes dealt with stress, students' need for a sense of belonging, their career aspirations, their need for support, and their need for social interaction.

#### **Stress**

Many students in the study articulated concern surrounding personal stress. Thirty-nine of the 80 participants mentioned feeling stressed. Fourteen of the 39 described concerns over anxiety, fear and nerves. One participant expressed concern by saying, "I was petrified and so nervous as I was very shy." Another expressed social concern by saying, "The fear of meeting new people always makes me nervous." Thirteen of the 39 described stress over workload. As one student stated, "It's very hard and stressful as there is so much to do in a short time."

#### **Need for a Sense of Belonging**

Nearly half of the students in the study had concerns over developing a sense of belonging. Of the 36 students who described the importance of belonging, 23 stated that their need to feel a part of the university had eventually been met. As one student said about the university, "I loved the ability to make friends with international students."

Conversely, 11 of the students felt their needs to belong to the greater university were still unmet. In the words of one student, [I'm now feeling] "not bad but even not good, a bit bored and quiet, lonely and self-centered." These findings appear consistent with Mahmoud et al.'s (2015) research on US university students' challenges associated with anxiety and depression.

### **Career Aspirations**

The next most frequently referenced theme surrounded career aspirations. Twenty-seven of the participants expressed interest in advancing their career capacity by expressing intent for the following: getting more skills to manage and communicate; “advancing [my] skill set”; and “creating a network and having in-depth knowledge of my area of study.” The US literature reflects the increased career-related priorities of undergraduates (Mahmoud et al., 2015).

### **Need for Support**

The fourth theme that emerged involved support. Twenty-three students shared their views regarding the importance of receiving support from the university. Fourteen participants who valued this support indicated their needs were being met. One participant expressed their view by saying, “It’s a friendly, warm place [with] supportive, caring staff.” In the words of another, “Lots of support from staff, nice atmosphere around the campus.” Eight participants did not believe support levels to be adequate. In the words of one student, [supportive service is] “still very disorganized, also too much automation that does not work.” Another stated, “Overall satisfied but being a worker, I need more support and flexibility for extra classes and activities.” This theme is consistent with Kuh’s (2009b) emphasis on relationships and engagement.

### **Need for Social Interaction**

The fifth theme that emerged from the data involved participants expressed need for social interaction. Eighteen participants referred to their need for social connectivity. Ten of those 18 specifically expressed interest in meeting people, and related interest in attending more university functions, activities, and events that would make it possible to form new interpersonal connections. One student expressed interest in “any activity where people have fun and learn,” while another expressed interest in social activity that “gives me experience in leadership.” The importance of social connectivity in fostering student engagement is understood in many US-based studies (Schlossberg, 1989).

## **Discussion**

This research suggested that a multiplicity of engagement needs existed among the English undergraduate students studied. Research participants appeared candid in anonymously expressing their needs to research assistants not associated with their university or culture. Though English undergraduate students received regular opportunities to provide their university quantitative survey feedback, that feedback largely occurred in the form of satisfaction with

academics and the student services offered and was not formatted to provide in-depth expression. Anecdotal comments from participants led the researchers to conclude that participants felt more comfortable expressing their views to individuals from outside their home university.

Because previous studies demonstrated that a high percentage of US undergraduates experience anxiety, it was not surprising to find that English study participants were similarly affected. The English university participants experienced anxiety around issues of acceptance, success, and integration into the university community like their counterparts in the US (Mahmoud et al., 2015).

Such things as fear of failure, concerns over workload, pressure to “figure things out,” concern over fitting in, and overall life stressors contributed to heightened discomfort with self and the university experience for English university study participants. These are common themes in US-based studies (Mahmoud et al., 2015).

Though most participants who referenced the importance of belonging felt welcomed by their university community, a sizable minority expressed views to the contrary. Like their US counterparts (Kelly et al., 2012), this group hoped to make more friends and form more connections than they had since they matriculated.

Roughly one-third of the respondents referenced interest in engaging with the university around their career aspirations. They expressed interest in programs that would advance their professional knowledge and skills and in establishing an early career network. They appeared to be under the same kind of pressures that US students experience to find academic majors that foster career success (Mahmoud et al., 2015).

While slightly less than one-third of the participants referenced the importance of support in fostering engagement, most participants felt that the support they received met their needs. Yet, slightly more than one-third of these participants were not satisfied with the level of support available. They suggested that more and different support, more flexibly, and personally provided, was desired.

Less than one-fourth of study participants described social interaction as integral to their sense of engagement. Most of these participants described meeting people as a vital aspect of their sense of connectedness. They also expressed interest in socializing and in events with professional purpose. They expressed interest in engaging through university speakers, networking events, or other programs that were stimulating intellectually or emotionally. Of the

participants who wished to socially engage, the remainder expressed interest in clubs, societies and in opportunities to have fun with others. These results were consistent with findings of Alexson and Flick (2011) about the importance of social connections in fostering student engagement.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The results of this study demonstrated that English undergraduates, like their US counterparts, appeared to experience stressors associated with their university lives. Like students in the US, they wanted to feel a part of the university in which they study. They defined their engagement not only through careers and academics, but by the people with whom they connected and the acceptance and assistance that they received. In an era of increasing use of technology, they have interest in more programs and practices that foster the development of greater personal connections. Studies such as this are imperative for student affairs professionals and their academic affairs colleagues to adapt programs, facilities, and processes to align more closely with expressed student needs. Without qualitative data to elucidate student sentiments, many university systems may remain unchanged, rather than evolving to positively impact student success.

Additional research is recommended to more fully understand the nature of the emergent themes of stress, need for belonging, career aspiration, need for support, and need for social interaction, and their relevance to successful engagement in the English higher education environment. The open-ended race-ethnicity question used in this study did not enable the researchers to clearly classify research participants by ethnicity nor analyze response patterns by ethnicity. Future studies should adopt a multiple-choice format for demographic data to make this analysis possible. Lastly, exploration of the effectiveness of strategies and interventions to alleviate students' fear, provide needed support, form meaningful connections, foster greater belonging and enhance career capacity of English students is recommended.

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## Appendix A

## Survey: Perspectives on University Student Engagement

**Demographics**

- A. Gender Identity: \_\_\_\_\_
- B. Age: \_\_\_\_\_
- C. Year in school: \_\_\_\_\_
- D. Race/Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_
- E. Which of the following demographics describes you as a student: (Select all that apply)
- Traditional
  - Mature
  - Commuting
  - Clearing
  - First generation
  - Students with caring responsibility (children, another adult)
  - International
- F. Major/specialization/course: \_\_\_\_\_
- G. Campus:
- City
  - Country

**Please take some time to thoughtfully respond to the following questions.**

Why do you choose to participate in Events, Societies, Recreation, etc. at the level that you do?

What expectations did you have of this university as an incoming student?  
How were those expectations met or not met?

What type of feelings did you have entering the institution?  
How have your feelings changed, if at all?

If you spend time on campus while not in class, where can you be found and why?

What thoughts do you experience whenever you leave campus?

What type of responsibilities do you have aside from being a student?

How would you describe your ideal event or activity?

Overall what are your feelings and thoughts regarding your experience at this university?