**Realising Engagement through Active Culture Transformation:
An Introduction to the REACT Programme**

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The Purpose of REACT

The REACT programme was designed to make a significant impact on student engagement and the student experience in the Higher Education (HE) sector in England and Wales over a two-year period, from July 2015 to July 2017. The focus, in particular, was on the engagement of so-called 'hard to reach' students, and the programme included: investigation into the term 'hard to reach' and a consideration of which students are characterised in this way; a formal research project looking at links between student engagement, retention and attainment; and a development programme as a collaboration between fifteen UK universities. Outcomes from each of these were disseminated at a final conference at the University of Winchester in May 2017, where practice and findings from the programme as a whole were shared. The programme also included the creation of a website of case studies and tools for use by the sector. The programme was funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and was formally evaluated by an external team from GuildHE[i].

This introduction to the REACT programme briefly outlines some background information relating to student engagement and the 'hard to reach', as well as highlighting the purpose of both the REACT programme and this issue of JEIPC. The sixteen universities involved as collaborative partners are listed, along with some institutional data to highlight the variety in this sample of universities that volunteered to engage with REACT.

In general, REACT has been about collecting ideas and practices, narrowing the lens on student engagement by focusing on a single theme at the same time as opening out the discussion to all who want to be involved. It has been a starting point, allowing us to enter discussion better prepared and better informed, with both qualitative and quantitative evidence as backing, and enabling movement towards a critical mass of practitioners and universities engaging with this field.

Currently, student engagement is perceived as a key driver for many aspects of a student's university experience, and has been linked to factors such as student achievement, persistence and satisfaction (Trowler, 2010), although evidence of this link comes largely from the context of the USA. The term 'student engagement' also serves, especially in the UK, as a generic label for a multitude of different practices, from engagement with curriculum-based learning to learning that is beyond the curriculum. Such engagement is assumed to enhance the student experience in general (see, for example, evidence highlighted by Bryson, 2016; Dunne and Owen, 2013; Trowler, 2010; and many others). In some cases, it is also seen as supporting institutional change or as fundamental to the growing trend for partnership between students and staff (for example, Cook-Sather *et al*, 2014; Healey *et al*, 2014; Bovill *et al*, 2011; Dunne and Zandstra, 2011)[ii].

Students who are perceived or categorised as 'hard to reach' have been shown to struggle to participate fully in university life and may be less successful than others in higher education, For example, Broecke and Nicholls (2007) describe the entrenched issue of underperformance of ethnic minority students in HE, and many such issues have continuously been outlined over the last decade by, for example, McDuff and Barefoot (2016), Stevenson (2012), Hockings (2010) and the Higher Education Academy and Equality

Challenge Unit (2008)[iii]. Increasing or widening accessibility to student engagement activities is a priority of many institutions in an effort to enhance the student experience for all students and to improve retention - of particular interest in the context of the new Teaching Excellence Framework (BIS, 2016). Hence HEFCE's funding of a project with a focus on both student engagement and 'hard to reach' students has been timely and it seems logical that initiatives to help such students participate more fully could reduce factors such as dissatisfaction, poor retention and low attainment, and could better support all students in achieving a fulfilling university experience.

This might sound reasonably straightforward, but the link between student engagement and a positive and fruitful learning experience is not that clear or simple, nor is it well researched in the UK. The REACT programme has been exploring complexities in areas such as: What exactly does student engagement mean? Is there any link between student engagement (whatever the definition) and retention or attainment? How much do we know about this kind of linkage? To what extent are there institutional differences? How important is the role of context and differing student bodies? Most important of all have been the questions: Do we actually know who the 'hard to reach' are in any given context? Why are students categorised in this way? And is there a more appropriate term for describing students who are less likely to engage? Such questions are central to opening up conversations wherein value is given to every student and their particular higher education journey.

The Purpose of this Journal

This Special Issue of the Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change represents the culmination of the REACT initiative. It reports on the journey of the REACT programme over the last two years and responds to some of the issues highlighted above. Summary articles highlight the many and varied outcomes to date from the fifteen universities involved, all with a specific focus on student engagement and the 'hard to reach'. These summaries form the core of the Journal content and take the form of research and evaluation alongside more practical case studies. In addition, a number of invited opinion pieces (from those either within the REACT programme team or who engage elsewhere with similar issues) give a rich picture from those who take an interest in student engagement and in ensuring that all students have opportunities to engage meaningfully with their university life. Overall, the many views, ideas and practical descriptions are intended to inform the practice of others and support continued developments.

Throughout the programme, REACT has been producing a set of tools, including activities, models, brief institutional case studies, evaluation tools and 'how-to' user-guides, designed to support student engagement. These resources complement the Journal and are housed on an open source website[iv]. In conjunction with other networks[v], the resources and the Journal itself have the potential to consolidate and focus student engagement activity nationally, always with the aim of specifically improving the student learning experience for so-called 'hard to reach' students across the sector. However, a focus on such students is likely also to improve the learning environment for all students by drawing attention to best practice as well as to the issues and problems of student engagement and by informing discussion, practice and policy into the future.

Higher Education Institutions Participating in the REACT Project

The REACT programme brought together a collaborative team, including the University of Winchester, the University of Exeter and London Metropolitan University. The hub of the REACT team was based at the University of Winchester, with other team staff located at Exeter and London Metropolitan Universities (see Table 1 below for details). These three universities created the core of the programme, each having been involved in sector-leading

student engagement activity before the beginning of REACT and each having experience in empowering students to make change (as outlined by HEFCE, 2008). Hence the programme was led by student engagement practitioners who were experienced in the field, and who were in a good position to work together with further interested practitioners from across the UK. These three universities were also specifically selected for being very different, for example having different missions, different-sized student populations and different national rankings.

Core Universities			
University	**Student numbers (2016/17)**	**NSS ranking (2016)**	**University Group and Broad Programmes Delivered**
The University of Exeter	21,670	Rank: =11 Score: 91%	Russell Group[vi]: Business; Humanities; Life and Environmental Sciences; Medicine; Engineering, Mathematics and Physical Sciences; Social Sciences and International Studies
London Metropolitan University	12,865	Rank: =138 Score: 81%	Million+[vii]: Business, Law, Computing, Media, Human Sciences, Social Professions, Art, Architecture and Design
The University of Winchester	7,540	Rank: =60 Score: 87%	Guild HE[viii]: Education; Humanities; Social Sciences; Business; Law; Sport

Table 1: Core Universities involved in the REACT Programme

The additional partner universities (see Table 2) were also selected to represent a wide range of different kinds of institution, from large Russell Group to small teaching-focused universities from largely White British and European intakes to more regional intakes with diverse student demographics and ethnic minority communities. Also, these universities represent both high and low performers in terms of National Student Survey (NSS) rankings from across England, from Newcastle to Brighton via Birmingham and London, and with one additional University in Scotland. All these universities are listed in Table 2 below, along with a very brief description of some key institutional factors in order to highlight their diversity. Student numbers in the table were taken from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) (2017), and the National Student Survey (NSS) Rankings come from Minsky (2016).

Partner Universities			
University	**Student numbers (2015/16)***	**NSS ranking (2016)****	**University Group and Broad Programmes Delivered**
Aston University	12,495	Rank: =51 Score: 88%	Business, Medicine, Engineering; Applied Science; Social Sciences; Health; Languages.
The University of Brighton	21,135	Rank: =145 Score: 80%	University Alliance[ix]: Arts and Design; Humanities; Life Health and Physical Sciences; Social; Sciences; Education
The University of Bristol	21,905	Rank: =76 Score: 86%	Russell Group: Arts; Biomedical Sciences; Engineering; Health Sciences; Science; Social Sciences and Law
Buckinghamshire New University	8,580	Rank: =129 Score: 82%	Guild HE: Business; Creative Arts; Humanities; Marketing; Professional

			Programmes; Sports; Technology Studies
Canterbury Christ Church University	16,055	Rank: =102 Score: 84%	Million+: Arts and Humanities; Education; Health and Wellbeing & Social and Applied Sciences
Edinburgh Napier University	12,585	Rank: =102 Score: 84%	Million+: Arts and Creative Industries; Business; Life and Social Sciences; Nursing; Computing and Engineering
The University of Greenwich	20,645	Rank: =116 Score: 83%	University Alliance: Science; Engineering; Pharmacy; Maths; Humanities; Business; Computing; Design; Architecture; Health and Education
The University of Manchester	39,700	Rank: =87 Score: 85%	Russell Group: Science; Technology; Business; Medicine; Education; Humanities and Health Sciences
Newcastle University	23,795	Rank: =20 Score: 90%	Russell Group: Sport Sciences; Sociology; Humanities; Politics; Arts; Media; Medicine; Marketing; Combined Honours
Newman University	2,810	Rank: =87 Score: 85%	Guild HE: Humanities; Education; Health; Social and Community Disciplines
Sheffield Hallam University	31,485	Rank: =102 Score: 84%	University Alliance: Arts; Computing; Engineering and Sciences; Development and Society; Health and Wellbeing; Sheffield Business School
The University of Southampton	24,875	Rank: =76 Score: 86%	Russell Group: Sciences; Engineering; Medicine; Arts; Humanities
University College London (UCL)	37,135	Rank: =102 Score: 84%	Russell Group: Arts and Humanities; Built Environment; Brain Sciences; Engineering Sciences; Education; Laws, Life Sciences; Mathematical and Physical Sciences; Medical Sciences; Population Health Sciences; Social and Historical Sciences

Table 2: Partner Universities involved in the REACT Programme

The REACT Team

The REACT team[x], shown in Table 3, was drawn from the three core Universities, drawing on those with prior expertise in enacting and evaluating student engagement practices and directing and managing other large scale research and development projects related to learning and teaching, Student Union activity and the wider student experience.

Name	REACT Role
Elisabeth Dunne	Director, University of Winchester
Tom Lowe	Project Manager, University of Winchester
Stuart Sims	Lead Researcher, University of Winchester
Wilko Luebsen	Research Consultant
Chris Guggiari-Peel	Research Officer, University of Exeter
Cassie Shaw	Research Officer
Jack Hancock	Graduate Intern
Owen Humphrey	Research Assistant
Lauren Heasman	Marketing Intern
Rebecca Street	Administrative Assistant

Rebecca Manley	Content Marketing Coordinator

Table 3: The REACT team

In addition, Tansy Jessop [xi]and Yaz El Hakim[xii], at that time both working at The University of Winchester, were responsible for writing the initial bid. Both also played an active role in supporting the REACT programme through its Steering Group, which comprised key student and staff figures from the three core universities and from national bodies interested in student engagement.

The work of the REACT programme is highlighted throughout this edition of JEIPC, with staff from the collaborative partner universities writing an account of their thinking, practices and outcomes in relation to 'hard to reach' students.

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[i] GuildHE: http://www.guildhe.ac.uk/about/

[ii] 'Student engagement' is further discussed in Lowe and Dunne, this edition of JEICP

[iii] 'Hard to reach' is also more fully discussed in Lowe and Dunne, this edition of JEIPC

[iv] REACT website: www.studentengagement.ac.uk

[v] For example, The Higher Education Academy (HEA); JISC; The National Union of Students (NUS); and The Student Engagement Partnership (TSEP)

[vi] The Russell Group represents 24 leading research universities

[vii] The Million+ Group is a public policy think tank made up of universities; it focuses on research and shaping public policy

[viii] GuildHE is an official voice especially for smaller universities and colleges with a tradition of learning, research and innovation in industries and professions

[ix] The University Alliance is an association of British universities formed for Non-Aligned Universities

[x] Beyond the Project Manager; all roles were part-time

[xi] Tansy Jessop is currently Professor of Research Informed Teaching at Southampton Solent University

[xii] Yaz El Hakim is now education strategy and communications director for kortext