

Theme 7: Reaching, Whose Responsibility

Staff Perceptions of 'hard to reach'

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Introduction

This case study of staff perspectives on 'hard-to-reach' students at University College London (UCL) considers the benefits and disadvantages of this way of looking at students in terms of being inclusive, as well as who the 'hard-to-reach' students are, what barriers they face and how we can best engage them. It is vital to understand staff perceptions if we are to engage staff in the process of lowering barriers and making provision more inclusive for all students. Whilst staff views may be very different in other institutions, this case study does raise important issues for any initiative intended to engage 'hard to reach' students in general, such as how best to prioritise and approach engaging these groups of students.

UCL is a research-intensive university based in London. It has a range of halls of residence nearby; it is not, however, considered a campus university because students who live in the nearest halls have to cross a main, busy road to access the campus. Additionally, there is very little free space for students to meet and work collaboratively. UCL is a comprehensive university which teaches a range of subjects across the arts and sciences. Whilst a range of professional subjects, such as architecture, engineering and project management, are taught, the focus is on academic rather than vocational subjects. UCL has grown into a large university, with close to 40,000 students, the majority of whom are studying postgraduate degrees.

Methodology

The study was undertaken by a group of four staff working in professional services teams to support learning and teaching and digital literacy. An interpretivist approach to the case study was taken, conducting semi-structured interviews with ten key staff from across the institution. The majority of staff were selected because we expected them to have key insights into student engagement from different perspectives: academic, support, student union activities or volunteering. They are all senior members of the institution, with the power to influence practice on a wide scale. A few volunteered themselves or others when they heard about the study. However, focusing on different areas of student engagement together was important for considering whether some groups of students face barriers in multiple areas of university life and whether a different range of students faces different barriers to some aspect of university life.

Semi-structured interviews were used to allow us to explore staff perspectives deeply, whilst also allowing more time for their individual views to be expressed and explored. The interviews were audio-recorded, professionally transcribed and then analysed thematically by means of descriptive coding of the scripts. All names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

The definition of 'hard to reach' used in this paper refers to any group of students who found it hard to engage with an aspect of university life; thus, they were less engaged, although not through choice.

Findings

1. 'Hard to Reach'

Several critiques were offered of the term 'hard to reach'. Three interviewees felt the term shifted blame to the students, when the University should take responsibility for failures in engagement. They stated the focus should be on the institution: "*We don't make ourselves available to them, we don't provide attractive services to them, we don't kind of nuance our marketing and our kind of ways of engaging to make it suitable for them*" (Robert). Another interviewee said: "*...until we change the way we think about these students, we will always find it difficult to engage with them*" (James). James also argued that some 'hard to reach' student groups are very large at UCL. "*6,000 [Post Graduate Research [PGR]] students is not hard to reach – they're everywhere...*" (James)

Some staff were concerned about the risk of assuming that students were unengaged on the basis of their membership of a particular group. One argued it was dangerous to assume that there *were* categories of 'hard to reach' students. As a different interviewee argued, there is always an individual story behind disengagement.

Another interviewee was worried that some of his colleagues incorrectly aggregated 'hard to reach' students with those who struggled academically.

2. The Importance of addressing 'Hard to Reach'

Staff who participated in these semi-structured interviews believed that it is important to engage all 'hard-to-reach' students, perceiving it as a means of increasing retention of widening participation (WP) students and regarding it as important from a social mobility/justice perspective. One interviewee said that 'hard-to-reach' students are usually the ones who would benefit most from engaging with the additional opportunities on offer. Moreover, engaging all students was considered important for ensuring that the University would be able to make good decisions by taking account of varied perspectives. Nevertheless, one interviewee cautioned that we must remember that the University has expectations too. "*I worry that sometimes we don't, we're not having that conversation properly. We're trying too much to come from the student perspective.*" (Emily)

3. Who are the 'hard-to-reach' students?

The interviewees identified twenty-four different student groups that could be considered 'hard to reach' at UCL; some of the groups overlap and all students are covered by one descriptor or another, though some groups are so wide that they have little meaning. The number in brackets indicates how many interviewees identified the group as 'hard to reach':

1. Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students (3)
2. mature students (4)
3. men (2)
4. women (1)
5. LGBT+ (2)
6. liberation groups (1)
7. disabled students (2)
8. students with mental health problems (1)
9. international students (5 – see below)

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10. first generation going to university (2)
11. widening participation students (3)
12. working class students (1)
13. students with complicated family lives (1)
14. students in private accommodation (1)
15. students with commitments beyond their studies (4)
16. students who are working (4)
17. students with caring commitments (3)
18. part-time students (7)
19. students on flexible modes of study (1)
20. postgraduate students (3)
21. postgraduate taught students (2)
22. postgraduate research students (1)
23. students who study off campus (2)
24. commuter students (2)

Whether international students were 'hard to reach' at UCL was disputed. Two members of staff said that they had seen no evidence of it, whilst another said that more international students engage with volunteering than their proportion at UCL would suggest. However, there were concerns that they might have to disengage if there were family issues back home, and they might face culture shock or feel alienated from white, Anglo-centric programmes.

One interviewee pointed out that more state-school, BME, international and self-declared disabled students engaged with the voluntary services unit than one would expect from their proportions at UCL, so traditional categories of 'hard to reach' do not apply universally.

4. What are the barriers to engagement?

A range of barriers to engagement were identified: the institution's excluding the students, practical difficulties and emotional barriers.

It was felt that UCL could exclude students by the timing, style and structure of the activities on offer and that this occurred because staff had the power to determine these:

"...if we arrange a meeting that is convenient to us in a location that is convenient to us, covering topics that are of interest to us, that is when you get to the age of the disengaged and the unengaged students, ...because we have the power and the control." (James)

It is impossible to escape the fact that the culture of the institution affects both staff and student behaviours. Students may be marginalised by a variety of different aspects: language, communications, the range of activities available and the methods by which students can engage.

These problems are particularly acute for postgraduate students. One interviewee said postgraduate students do not see the Student Union as being for them. Others saw this as a wider problem: it was suggested that the University replicates the student-engagement structures it has for undergraduates and postgraduate taught students, which alienates postgraduate research students because they no longer think of themselves as students. He continued:

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"I don't think universities have quite found the language and the environments that makes them [PGR students] feel comfortable to engage." (James)

Students could also face such internal barriers as having no-one to talk to, or not wanting to ask for help. They could also be more hesitant to engage when they were unfamiliar with the activity's location.

UCL faces a number of challenges in engaging students. With close to 40,000 students it is difficult for staff to check on everyone and easy for students to feel anonymous. The scale makes it hard to build a community of students; students tend to feel a greater sense of belonging to localised areas (departments, programmes etc.) but engagement is also challenging at these levels:

"We're still using the mechanisms that worked well for 40 students and trying to do it with 130 ... and they just don't work... that student hasn't appeared for a couple of sessions, they go unnoticed and the things get much further down the line before the interventions start taking place."
(Peter)

UCL was also described as fragmented and devolved, a context inimical to the creation of a culture of student engagement across the whole institution.

That UCL is a non-campus university in London, expensive and with a noisy environment, was felt to constitute further challenge. UCL's status as a Russell Group university can make it hard to engage working-class students, especially when many staff focus on research.

5. Engaging 'hard-to-reach' students

The major ideas suggested for engaging the 'hard to reach' revolved around monitoring engagement, supporting students, educating students, educating staff, changing our practices, embedding 'optional' activities into the curriculum, trying different approaches, prioritising students and putting them at the centre of what we do.

Monitoring individual engagement allows staff to identify individuals who are disengaging early and open dialogue with them about the barriers they face. Monitoring the engagement of groups enables services to identify those whom they are not reaching and consider what barriers there might be to such students' accessing what is on offer.

Staff also believed that we could improve the support that we offer students through personal tutors and mentors. Providing this support at both a personal level (such as visiting halls of residence) and a departmental level would allow for 'hard-to-reach' students to access this support. It was also considered important to normalise the use of support services and to create a culture where it is ok to admit to struggling. Staff suggested creating more social opportunities and societies for groups of 'hard-to-reach' students, e.g. commuter students or those working part time. For academic engagement, they emphasised the importance of seminar time, the use of learning agreements and finding creative ways within the regulations to allow students to continue their studies.

Induction was thought to be important, as were helping students with study skills and appreciating what it means to be a university student. Students need to understand why it is important to engage and the difference they can make.

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“...initiatives like the ChangeMakers and so on at UCL is really important... other students will start to see students like them doing and delivering a solution and they’ll feel empowered by it.” (James)

A traffic-light system for dealing with issues raised by students was also thought to be helpful for monitoring the progress being made.

Overall, the University and its staff need to become better educated about student engagement. The interviewees called for more dialogue with students, the better to understand the barriers and the more helpfully to intervene. It is important to understand the patterns of engagement of students as individuals, rather than to adopt a generalised and stereotypical view of them as merely ‘undergraduates’. Interviewees also discussed the need for the University to get better at understanding itself, its identity and how this affects students. Having gained this understanding, the institution then needs to be up front about it to students and to ensure *“that we have the right kind of staff trained up, willing to do this work and willing to take the time that it takes to engage with the students”* (Emily). Emily continued to say that neither enough best practice in the engagement of students nor evidence from related research is shared University-wide.

The interviewees believed that staff need to change their practices, ensuring that they use accessible language and going to locations that are popular and convenient for students rather than always expecting students to come to them. The interviewees advocated tailored communications, particularly to students at different levels. They thought that staff needed to break things down, rather than overwhelm students with documentation, and that it is really important to create different tiers of engagement, including both longer-term and one-off opportunities. Two of the academic staff also spoke of embedding ‘optional’ activities into the curriculum:

“...actually find space for them within the curriculum. At least so that the students can start seeing that they are not... extracurricular things... Now it’s hard to find room to do huge amounts of that, so in a way it’s about sort of signposting to them when you’ve got them as a captive audience that these things are available.” (Peter)

Interviewees felt that UCL needs to focus on postgraduate widening participation, just as it does for undergraduates. One member of staff thought that less might be being done to engage widening participation students because they are harder to identify; another argued that the University assumes they will be all right, merely because they have met the entry criteria.

One member of staff advocated trying different things and being prepared to fail at first. Another said that if we don’t prioritise the ‘hard-to-reach’ groups we shall fail to improve anything for anyone, because all the groups have distinct needs. He also stated that the most important thing is putting the student at the centre of everything we do.

A number of the interviewees also spoke about preventing students from becoming ‘hard to reach’ by encouraging them to report problems early and setting a tone for student engagement at the outset:

“...when a student first applies to a university, what kind of communications they get and what things we ask kind of set a tone a little bit, so if the concentration is around kind of finances and how you’re going to fund your studies and what fees you need to pay, what your

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instalment plan is, then you get into a more transactional kind of I'm buying, you're selling." (Joe)

Another member of staff spoke of the need for a group to look at how students can influence the way they are assessed or at how assessment may be made more flexible. She feared that if we do not create inclusive assessments, students may become alienated, particularly if their marks are lower than they expect.

Conclusion

The interviews raise the question of whether the term 'hard to reach' puts the focus on the wrong place. Should it be on the groups who face barriers to participation or on the institution and its practices? We argue elsewhere in this issue of JEIPC (Marie *et al*, 2017) that it should be on both. We must also remember that, though members of these groups face barriers to participation, they may nevertheless be engaged and they certainly should not be considered any less capable than any other student.

Another key question that is raised is: 'Are all students 'hard to reach'?' The suggestion that men, women and liberation groups are all 'hard to reach' leads to the logical deduction that, in some contexts, we can all be 'hard to reach'. We need to prioritise groups to focus on, with the recognition that addressing barriers for them is likely to improve the experience for all (Porter, 2013:185). Choosing which to prioritise may be based on research into the 'hard to reach' groups for particular types of activity or the University may also elect to prioritise groups that are 'hard to reach' for multiple areas, as is the case for part-time students at UCL. Since the 'hard-to-reach' groups inevitably overlap in terms of membership, we also need to consider how barriers similarly interact and how facing multiple barriers changes the experience students have of them (Crenshaw, 1989).

The major groups of 'hard to reach' at UCL are those who have other commitments in their lives – and therefore lack the time to engage – and those who are alienated by the provision on offer, whether because they have outgrown it or find that it does not speak to them.

The interviewees gave many suggestions for tackling barriers, but it is important that we do so from a perspective of student partnership, not consumerism. As Emily said, universities have expectations too and we need to engage students in dialogue about our respective viewpoints and barriers (some of which are shared) to engaging with each other. Whilst we agree with James that, at the moment, the power dynamic is with staff and that meetings tend to be set at times and locations convenient to us, making everything convenient to students risks disengaging staff, particularly at a research-intensive institution. It therefore seems important to consider student and staff engagement at the same time.

Reference list

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