



# REACT 2015/7

Jane Beniston, Deborah Harris,  
Emma Cotton and Rhenu Bhagotra

# The REACT Team



# Newman University

- Newman University is a Catholic University located within a suburb of Birmingham.
- Currently there are 2500 students with 75% attending on a full -time basis, and 25% on a part time basis.
- 75% of students are female, and 25% are male. In terms of ethnicity, 62% are white, 10% black, 21% Asian.
- Over twice as many students declare themselves to be Muslims as declare themselves to be Catholic.
- An overwhelming majority of students are from low to very low geographical areas which have the lowest participation in Higher Education.
- 93% of students are classed as commuter students, having the same term time address as their permanent address

# Aims of the project

Newman's project:

Aim: To explore how student engagement could be developed

Subsidiary questions:

1. What is meant by student engagement?
2. How do we engage 'hard to reach' students?
3. How do we make student engagement more visible?



# Student Engagement

Lack of clarity around a shared understanding of the concept of student engagement is still evident within literature and we would argue, amongst stakeholders in Higher Education Institutions, possibly due to the dualistic nature of student engagement in terms of what do students *and* institutions have to do?

(Bryson 2014: 17)

# Student Engagement

This lack of clarity around student engagement is not helpful and as Buckley (2014: 2) states 'if we are not clear about what student engagement is, then our ability to improve, increase, support and encourage it... will be severely diminished.'

# Methodology

- An a-pragmatic paradigm, mixed methods approach to the study.
- An a-pragmatic paradigm approach (Patton 2002) was utilised as it was felt that philosophical assumptions in research are useful tools but that they should not drive the decisions about the design and method of the study.
- It was decided to embark on an inclusive philosophical framework within which multiple assumptions could comfortably reside.

# Research Method

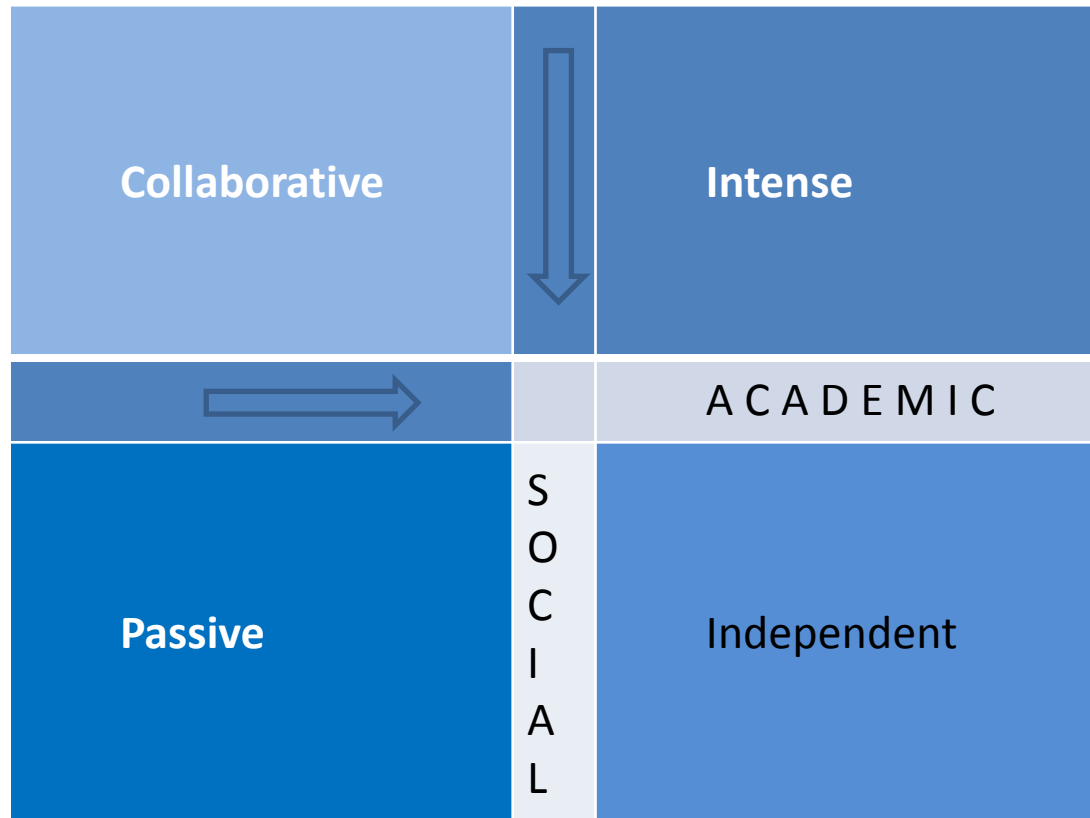
- Questionnaires were designed to facilitate both qualitative and qualitative responses around the comparing and contrasting definitions of engagement from students.
- This main research tool was therefore designed to include some standardised structured data collection and opportunities for participants to respond in an individualised manner.



# Ethical Issues

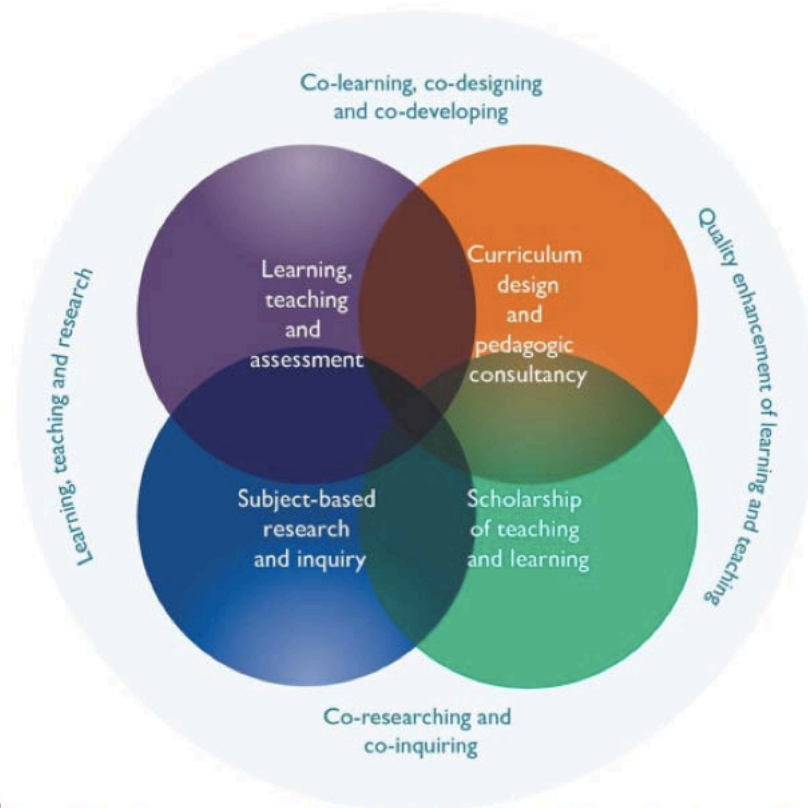
- Ethical procedures were followed in line with the Institution's policy.
- Consideration of 'Insider Research' (Mercer 2007)
- Students designed and piloted questionnaires
- Students were responsible for distribution of questionnaires and informing participants of aims research.

# Model of Student Engagement



*Student engagement styles (Coates 2005)*

# Models of Student Engagement: Students as Co Producers



Healey et al,  
2014

Figure 1. Students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education model  
(Image taken from: [https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Engagement\\_through\\_partnership.pdf](https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Engagement_through_partnership.pdf))

# Four key aspects

- Engagement with academic course or study
- Engagement with social events at university
- Engagement with extracurricular activities
- Institutional engagement

# Data collection

Questionnaires administered within lectures by students in the research team.

A total of 235 questionnaires were administered covering 11 different subject areas within the university, covering 9.4% of the total population.



# Key findings

- The dominant discourse arising from the data clearly identified that students consider engagement as being related to some aspect of their studies or course, 51% students alluded to this Academic Engagement
- Two key terms did emerge which were 'participation' 43% and 'involvement' 32%.

# Key findings

- When attempting to define 'student engagement', 30% of questionnaires referred to a definition that *potentially* had some link to social engagement.
- Barriers were identified as time, distance, work and knowledge.
- 93.2% of students across all programmes are employed, with a majority of students employed on a part time basis
- Poor communication around knowing about social events was evident within the data

## Other themes:

- There was a lack of data around students identifying that they felt a 'sense of belonging'
- No student indicated that student engagement was about feeling that they 'belonged' to the university.

# Conclusions:

- A majority of students perceive **engagement in relation to involvement and participation in their programme** which was identified through comments around attendance, participation in dialogue, questioning, and peer collaboration.
- We did not identify 'hard to reach' students, however we did establish that **lack of communication made it difficult for our students to access wider engagement opportunities.**
- We need to move beyond the idea of 'involvement' and 'participation' to **consider how knowledge and understanding of wider student engagement can be developed.**

# Barriers

From this initial study it would appear that there are certain barriers to students engaging more widely within the institution.

These concern lack of communication about opportunities, work commitments, and within this institution, being a commuter student.



## Ways forward:

- Examples of good practice around engaging students' needs to be more widely disseminated and opportunities for wider engagement could be made more visible to improve communication around opportunities for engagement.
- We also need to consider the unique identity of students at our institution.

## Further research:

- Further research needs to be undertaken with different groups of students to explore the concept of 'belonging' further.
- The definition of student engagement across the institution still remains elusive and further research is needed to investigate definitions from other stakeholders.
- Questionnaires for staff are currently being piloted and will be distributed to staff.

# Any Questions?

# References

Bryson, C. (2014). 'Clarifying student engagement.' in Bryson, C. (ed.) *Understanding and developing student engagement*. London: Routledge, 19.

Buckley, A. (2014). 'How radical is student engagement? (And what is it for?).' *Student Engagement and Experience Journal*, 3 (2),  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.7190/seej.v3i2.95>

Coates, H. (2005). 'The value of student engagement for higher education quality assurance.' *Quality in Higher Education*, 11 (1) ,25-36. DOI:10./13538320500074915

Healey, M. Flint, A. Harrington, K. (2014) *Engagement through partnership: Students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education* York: Higher Education Academy

Mercer, J. (2007) The challenges of insider research in educational institutions: wielding a double-edged sword and resolving delicate dilemmas *Oxford Review of Education*, 2007, 33 (1), pp. 1-17. London: Taylor Francis

Patton, M.Q. (2015) *Qualitative research & Evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice*. London: Sage