

# IS STUDENT ENGAGEMENT THE MAGIC WAND TO CREATE A TRANSFORMATIVE MARKETING CURRICULUM?



Academy of Marketing Research Initiative 2015  
FINAL REPORT

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## Introduction

Research suggests that engaging students effectively can improve the outcomes that they achieve. Indeed the Annual Results report of the US National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2013 p1) suggests “Authentic, extensive student engagement is essential for both quality and the scale required for widespread, affordable attainment”. There is however less agreement as to the best strategy to achieve student engagement.

Student engagement has been defined as “the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities” Kuh (2009, p. 683). While higher education (HE) providers are advised to ‘take deliberate steps to engage all students, individually and collectively as partners in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience,’ by the Quality Assurance Authority (QAA, 2013 p3). Reviewing the extant literature Trowler & Trowler (2010, p4) observed that there ‘are a diversity of understandings of the term “student engagement”’ and identified three dimensions of student engagement: - in individual learning, in structure and process, and in identity.

The aim of this research is to: - Understand the distinctive nature of student engagement within the undergraduate Marketing Curriculum.

## Literature Review

What a student does during their time as at university has been demonstrated to be crucial to becoming a successful and productive citizen (Kuh, 2003). Student engagement has been described as the ‘magic wand’ which could lead to this transformation (Trowler & Trowler, 2010). In the UK the National Student Survey now in its 10th year has focused institutional attention on the importance of positive student engagement. Indeed Yorke (2013, p1) suggests that a revised NSS may include ‘engagement’ terms. The extant student engagement literature is dominated by US & Australian research with only a small proportion from the UK (Trowler & Trowler, 2010).

Early work on student engagement in the UK focused on the use of feedback questionnaires to engage (Little, Locke, Scesa & Williams 2009). This then progressed to a focus on retention with a multi-organisational three year study titled ‘What Works?’ (Thomas, 2012). A key observation from this study is ‘the importance of students having a strong sense of belonging in HE, which is the result of engagement, and that this is most effectively nurtured through mainstream activities with an overt academic purpose that all students participate in’ (Thomas, 2012 p 5).

Buckley (2013) carried out an HEA funded pilot student engagement survey across multiple institutions whereas previous research was only in single institutions. However, this survey did not include student engagement practices such as partnership, empowerment and student representation (Ibid). This has now developing into the UK Engagement Survey (UKES) and the first as a full-scale survey of 24 institutions with a 17% response rate. Buckley (2015) suggests “For the development of both hard and soft skills, the biggest contribution was made by the engagement scales focused on critical thinking and course challenge, engagement with research, and reflective and integrative learning.” This year has also included in a new pilot scale based on the work of (Healey et al, 2013) on engaging students as partners in their learning experiences.

Students as change agents is a University of Exeter initiative to empower students to undertake projects to enhance their learning experience (Exeter, 2013). The Peer-assisted Student Success (PASS) Scheme London Metropolitan University supports transition at entry level for students by having specially trained Success Tutors (Londonmet, 2013).

From the Business/Marketing perspective there has been increasing use of technology within the curriculum initially due to virtual learning environments (VLE's) and more recently due to social media. Research in student engagement has focused on asynchronous learning and use of blended and collaborative learning to increase engagement (Vaughan, 2014). Vos & Brennan (2010) demonstrated that simulation games engaged students in the learning process as well as being able to skills development. It was not until 2015 when there was a Special Issue of the Journal of Marketing Education on digital and social media influences on student engagement (Crittenden & Crittenden, 2015). Therefore the potential for student engagement to be influenced by digital & social media is an area which appears to be under researched within the UK.

Student engagement may also be negative for certain groups including international students (Anderson, Carmichael, Harper & Huang 2009). Perhaps this is something that needs to be considered when student engagement is being evaluated. Mandernach, (2015p11) suggests "student engagement cannot be effectively defined or measured by a singular assessment strategy". This raises issues about the efficacy of the use of surveys only for evaluation. Students as partners; a research project in the Psychology discipline highlighted issues of concern as to how the focus on survey methods such as NSS impact on pedagogy, "Emphasis on quantifiable outcomes, particularly those thought to signal 'good value-for-money', is antithetical to the value partnership places on experiential discovery and engagement with a creative process where outcomes may be unpredictable or difficult to measure" (Pauli et al 2016p10). It is recommended that formal and informal indicators at programme and module level are used which consider the target level of analysis, variability in purposes of engagement data and the range of interactive engagement components (Mandernach, 2015). Hence a survey cannot give the longitudinal perspective that this approach requires.

An interesting finding from Pauli et al (2016, p31) were five distinct learner types: -

Engagement through feedback, Purposeful, engaged learning in a social context, Learning through immersion - value - orientated learners", seeking confidence through learning experience, and Instrumental learning - making it as easy as possible. As this work is in the Psychology discipline: it may not be directly transferable to Marketing. Recently it has been observed that there are different disciplinary outcomes (Craig, 2015). Therefore, there also appears to be a need to understand the distinctive nature of student engagement within the Marketing curriculum.

The need to understand the distinctive nature of student engagement in the UK has been identified (Buckley, 2013) as well as a need to include the student voice (Trowler, 2010). However, research to date (see below) has been cross disciplinary rather than focused on Marketing as a discipline. Therefore this research addresses these issues by focusing on undergraduate Marketing student engagement across both Pre & Post 1992 universities.

## Methodology

**Aim** – Understanding the distinctive nature of student engagement within the undergraduate Marketing Curriculum

**Objectives:-**

1. To understand Marketing students perceptions and attitudes towards student engagement
2. To understand Marketing academics current student engagement practices and how these link to the Marketing curriculum
3. To undertake a multi-institutional study across Pre & Post 1992 universities

4. To consider if student engagement has a role in developing a distinctive Transformative Marketing Curriculum
5. To make recommendations for improving engagement with undergraduate Marketing students

A mixed methods approach has been used to design the project. The target groups were UK Marketing academics on Marketing or Business with Marketing or similar programmes at undergraduate level and final year students on these programmes. Initially qualitative research is planned including interviews with Programme Directors or equivalent. These interviews follow the long interview approach of McCracken (1988) to allow rich data to be collected that will help inform the survey. The researchers aimed to undertake six interviews and focus groups dependent upon if saturation had been achieved. Final year undergraduates were contacted through the Programme Leader for focus groups of 2-5 students. The discussion guides for interviews and focus groups were designed based on the extant literature. All sessions were recorded with permission and transcribed. These were then coded manually and key themes identified.

An online questionnaire was developed based on feedback from the staff interviews, Programme Handbooks supplied and the extant literature. Existing scales were used where appropriate. The survey was targeted at academics only. The framework of the survey was: - Introduction, Module related questions, Programme related questions linked to curriculum design, Years 1-3/4 and About you – profile information. It was sent through the Academy of Marketing newsletter and social media.

This research received ethical approval from both The University of Sunderland and The University of Northumbria.

## Results

The qualitative research will be reviewed first followed by the quantitative research. Key findings are used due to large amount of data collected.

### Qualitative Research

#### *Staff Interviews*

Five interviews were carried out with staff that were either Programme Leaders or staff that were actively involved either in leadership roles or as stage leaders. Some universities no longer have the Programme Leader role. Some staff had additional roles such as External Engagement. Student engagement was a priority for everyone not necessarily because they had a particular problem but rather it was now on the institutional radar. Three were from Pre 1992 institutions and two from Post 1992 institutions. There was one Scottish University and four English universities. What does student engagement mean to you?

‘Attendance, engaging with materials, assessment, debating, challenging, questioning, developing real world ability to apply’ Pre 1992

‘Basic level attendance, preparation, reading – spectrum is interest in subjects before getting involved, following companies, engaging with professional bodies, guest speakers – placements etc.’ Post 1992

These first two comments appear to see student engagement as a process where as the comment below looks outside the classroom.

‘I think of being involved in other opportunities beside programme; competitions, sport or internship/placement’ Post 1992

Another comment raised an interesting paradox that 'Students may attend and not be engaged but may be engaged through VLE or library.' Post 1992

### **Curriculum issues**

Four year degree in Scotland compared to three years in England and this appeared to allow more time for students to mature. The Scottish university also had direct funding to the department so they could decide their spending priorities within limits. Interestingly there was no placement year at the Scottish university but optional placement & Study Abroad years at the English universities.

Contact hours lower – doesn't mean less engaged more time to do other things (extracurricular activities?) – Scots Pre 1992

'There is a strong sense of reading for a degree – outrageous!' Pre 1992

Partnership with companies – teaching on courses (we fund this)

Scots Pre 1992

'Creativity in Marketing' modules in final year – both Pre 1992 universities

Staff on student perspective of engagement – some would like more contact, more direction while others like flexibility.

### **Students**

There were three focus groups one from a Pre-1992 university and two from Post 1992 universities. The research team were conscious that the students taking part in focus groups may tend to be more engaged.

Students were more focused on what happened during the course in modules until asked about other activities. A Post 1992 focus group said there was less pressure in first and second year as there was a lack of examinations. Other students reflected on the change from school to lecture style format, where there could be disturbances. They also thought doing group work for the first time was 'scary' and some activities appeared random.

Stage 2 saw a progression to more specific modules and there was quite '*a big step up*' in the work involved. '*More practical assignments where had to do own research*'. '*Having too much group work could be frustrating*'.

One focus group (pre1992) specifically mentioned that they liked the challenge in final year and felt there could be more challenge earlier in the course. Students at both Pre 1992 focus groups students mentioned a third year module 'Creativity in Marketing', which was popular. They also discussed being unfamiliar with lecturers and their teaching styles. Also self-reflection being included in more modules.

They all mentioned placements, internships and extra-curricular activities when prompted about other activities. Although the majority of students in one focus group had taken placements they raised lots of interesting issues:-

Placements hard to get for those without connections. Big companies - up against the best - very competitive - better to look at smaller companies 'It didn't occur to me until later to look at smaller companies' ... 'I didn't get a placement but went on Study Abroad instead so I wasn't left out'. Post 1992 focus group

Overall staff had mixed perceptions of student engagement across different levels while students focused more on class centred activities as being about engagement. Therefore it was decided in designing the survey to staff it was important to look at both programme (across years/level) and module level perspectives.

## Quantitative Research

### Staff Survey

Overall the qualitative research showed staff had mixed perceptions of student engagement across different levels while students focused more on class centred activities as being about engagement. Therefore it was decided in designing the survey to staff it was important to look at both programme (across years/level) and module level perspectives.

There were a total of 61 questionnaires submitted of which n = 50. This was slightly lower than we were aiming for. This may be the time of year we collected the data or may reflect the focus of staff at that particular time. 50% were module leaders of dedicated Marketing degrees while the others worked on degrees where marketing was only part of the overall degree. Over 60% of module leaders had designed their module. All participants had at least 5 years, experience with the most experienced having 20 years or more experience. This is reflected by the fact that the majority were affiliated or fellows of the HEA, Senior Fellow being the highest level. There were more women than men and a peak age range from 44-64 years. Brennan, Kuznesof & Dobson (2009) reported a similar skew in age range when they used the Academy mailing list for a survey. 63% of respondents had a doctoral qualification while the rest held Masters Degrees. 71% came from post 1992 universities. This does mean we were not collecting data for new academics within 5 years of having started. It does mean the respondent base have at least five years or more experience and therefore are qualified to answer the survey questions.

Table 1 Modules mentioned

Strategic Marketing Intelligence
Advanced Consumer Behaviour
Understanding Markets
Foundations of Marketing
Consumer Behaviour
Branding
Digital and direct marketing
Integrated Marketing Communications
Brands and Consumer lifestyles
Principles of Marketing
DSC and Media Planning
Fashion Promotions
Strategic Public Relations
Intro to Marketing
Brands and branding
Planning a New Venture
Relationship marketing
Managing Marketing
Branding
Retail marketing Planning
Digital Tools & Techniques

## Module Leader focus on student engagement

The module leader focus was primarily on what was happening in their class rooms. One point that was made was students elect to take the module. This raises the question do engagement levels vary between core and optional modules? When asked what created engagement in their module a number of key themes emerged:-

1. The role of the module leader – descriptions such as ‘enthusiasm’ ‘passionate’, and ‘engaged’ as well as a belief in student engagement.
2. Action based learning/interactivity – examples included seminar activities, use of software
3. Contemporary/relevant examples be they a real-life brief (IMC module) case studies/news items etc.
4. Links to assessment and/or placement e.g. formative assessment and project work ( individual not just group) were mentioned
5. Presence and participation by students
6. Guest lectures

The first three items were the most mentioned. Other aspects mentioned included allowing students to be creative, application of research theory to data driven practice, collaborative academic/student experience, relevance to student’s future career, and production of a short video.

Some module leaders (18%) had experience a decline in student engagement. One suggestion was that the new fee regime had led to a decline in engagement, another that lecture format was unpopular.

*‘Students seeing themselves increasingly as ‘passive customers’’*

50% of module leaders said student engagement in their module had improved or stayed the same. Others had seen improvements to student engagement after redesigning modules to move away from a team teaching approach, or linking to a learning platform from a publisher. Theme 4 Linking lectures more closely to the assessment was one popular solution including: - spreading continuous assessment through online and in-class assessments on a weekly basis, more opportunities for formative feedback and support with projects.

*‘We building project reviews and formative feedback opportunities to keep them engaged’*

This potentially could be criticised as assessment led-teaching. Increasing interaction, more tutorial style, independent research and discussion were other approaches but may be dependent upon the size of the cohort.

## Good Practice

To a certain extent comments tended to mirror above including relating to students, knowing names etc. The key examples were:

1. ‘Student-led Seminars encourage the students to prepare material for their peers on a given topic’. Also student-led problem based learning approach mentioned.
2. Numerous mini assignments spreads the risk for students, gives the many opportunities to improve and guide their engagement.
3. Formative feedback - at mid project stage I review all students' work in class, giving them individual verbal feedback, and then collate the 'Frequently Asked Questions' into a

document which is circulated to all students. This has been very effective at keeping them on task with the project work.

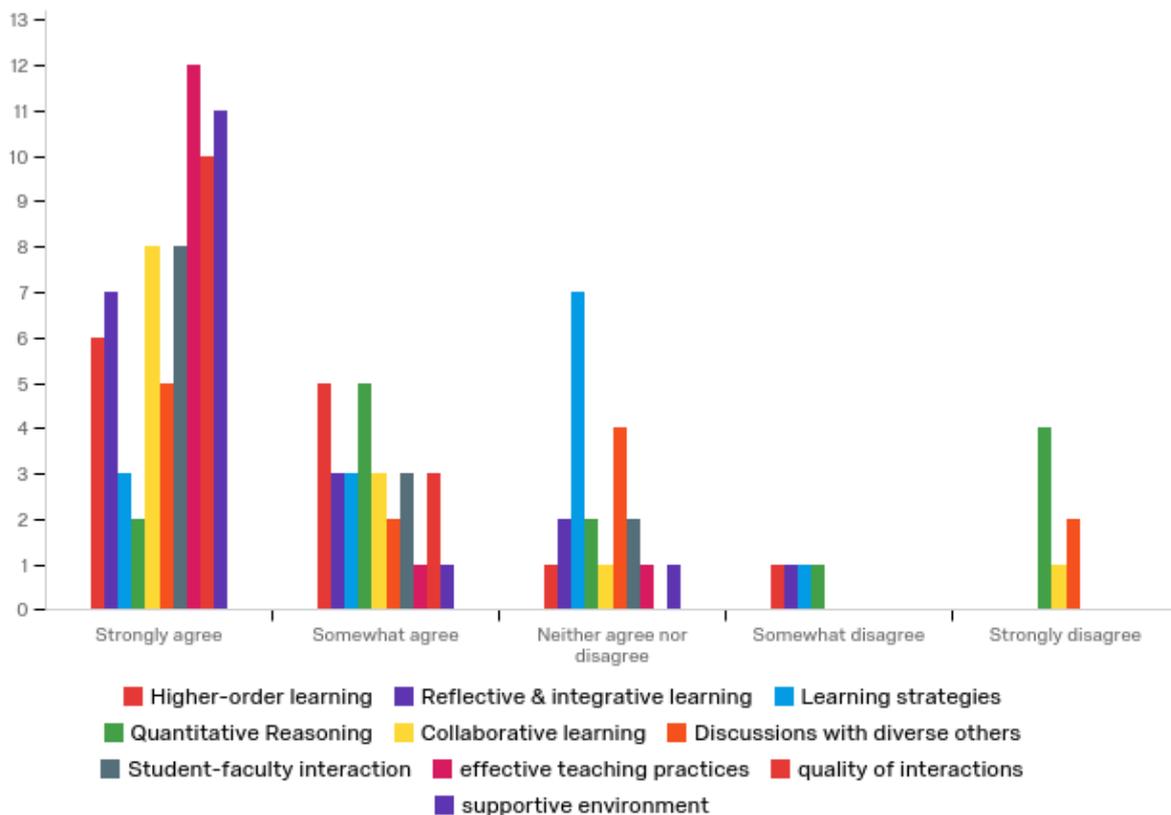
4. Always beginning each seminar with weekly retail news and its influence in macro environment
5. Use image based lectures with fewer words on slides to create discussion and more intent listening to the lecture.

Relating students, know their names, be in their listening, use image based lectures with fewer words on slides to create discussion and more intent listening to the lecture.

### Scale Questions

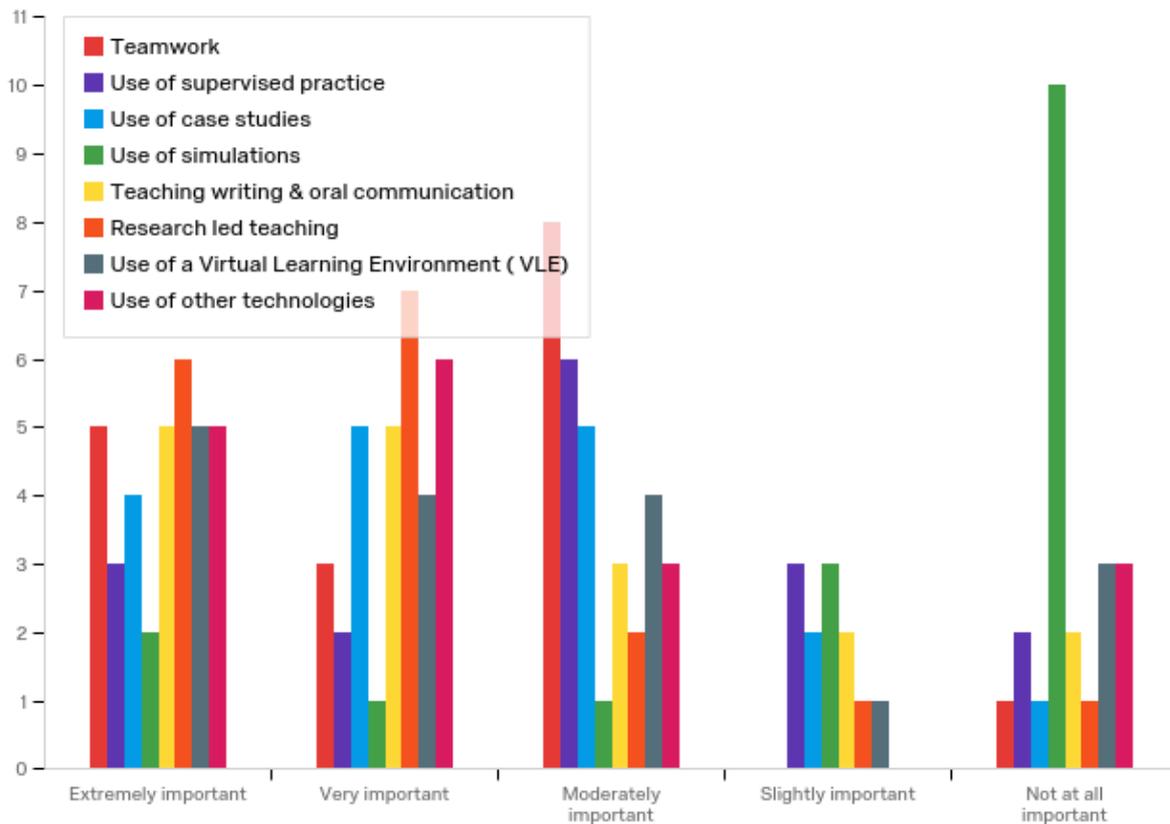
These questions compared different constructs which have been identified from the extant literature. Three questions are used to illustrate the feedback.

Q2.10 - Do activities related to these aspects contribute to student engagement within this particular module?



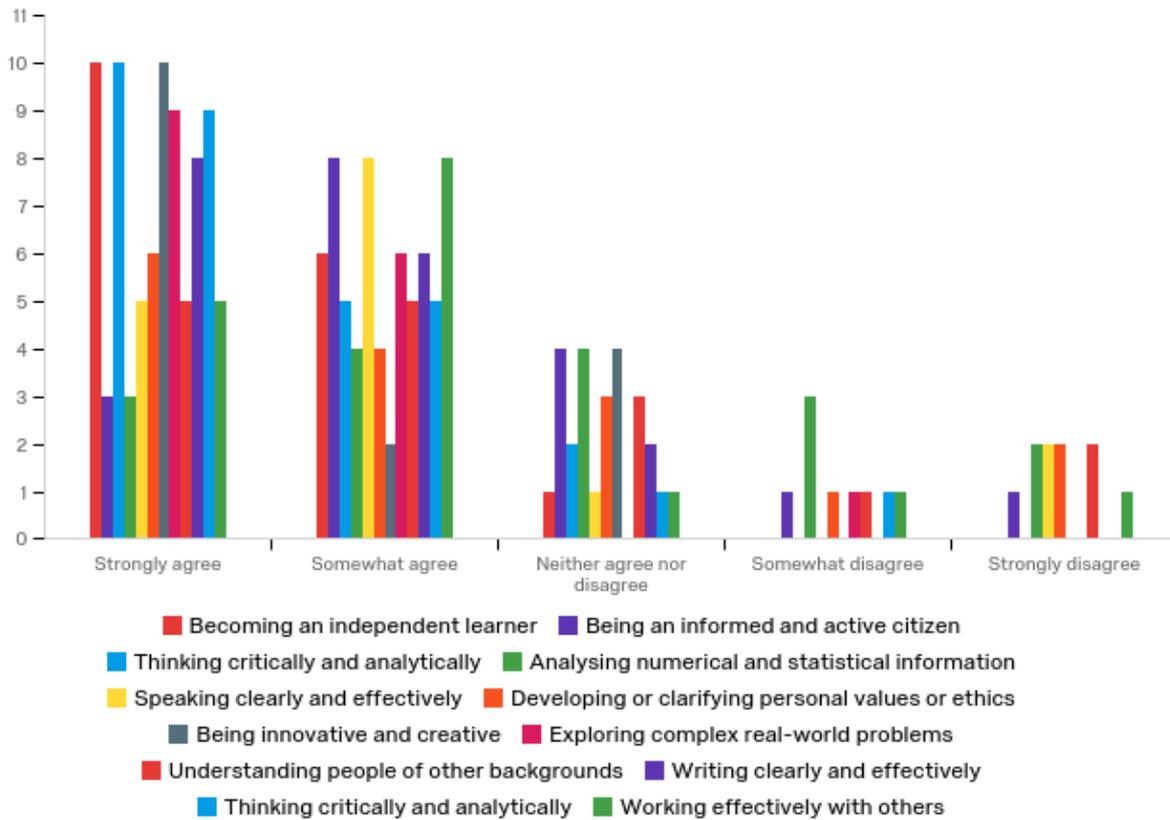
Effective teaching practices, supportive environment and quality of interactives are the top three answers that were strongly agreed with. These seem to reflect the themes we have identified earlier. Quantitative reasoning was in strongly disagree but suggest there were fewer modules requiring this skill.

Q2.8 - How important were the inclusion of the following factors in the design of the module?



Here research-led teaching was seen as extremely important or very important by 50% of module leaders. Interestingly this was not mentioned in the earlier comments as important to student engagement. Teamwork, writing & oral communication, VLE and use of other technologies were all ranked extremely important. There will be variation due to the nature of specific modules. One striking result was that 'use of simulations' was seen as 'not at all important' by over 35% of module leaders.

Q2.9 - Do activities specific to each of these knowledge skills or personal development outcomes contribute to student engagement within this particular module?



The top 'strongly agree items' were: - becoming an independent learner, thinking critically and analytically and being innovative and creative. Interestingly in the 'somewhat agree' Being an informed and active citizen, speaking clearly and effectively and working effectively with others were top. Only creativity appears to directly link with the earlier comments.

As a cross check later in the survey respondents were asked how important these issues were in their modules: - critical thinking, course challenge, collaborative learning, academic-student interaction and research-led teaching. 87% of respondents thought academic-student interaction was extremely or very important, followed by 81% collaborative learning and 66% course challenge. Research-led teaching was bottom of the list. So while it was seen as important in the course design its role in student engagement is unclear. This is another interesting area for further research.

There was some scepticism towards technology and the technology related questions had less respondents. The only strong agreement was on the importance of VLE's. This may link to the fact there were only two digital related modules or that the majority of respondents were not so technology literate but there is insufficient evidence to draw any overall conclusion about this.

Overall there seems a mismatch between what is happening in the classroom and the areas the academic literature are discussing. This is an important issue for further study.

#### Programme leader perspective

There were substantially less programme leaders that responded and as such the response was much lower within this section. Therefore we can only analyse this from a qualitative perspective. There were differences in focus at the different stages for example at stage 1 these seemed to be the activities from recruitment to develop a sense of belonging. While stage 2 seemed more about

the curriculum and specialisation. Some course had a placement year or Study Abroad in year three before a final year.

#### Developing a Distinctive Marketing Curriculum

The range of modules seems to suggest there is not a distinctive Marketing curriculum as such at present. While interactivity was highlighted by lecturers students did raise concerns about too much group work. Therefore there seems to be a balance to be met within individual programmes. Certainly the Creativity in marketing modules seemed to be one approach to creating a more distinctive curriculum. Also courses being taught in partnership with companies may be an emerging trend.

Academics did highlight the advantage Marketers have with topical issues and the ability to use real-life briefs etc. There are also a growing number of competitions hosted by major brands to potentially link in to.

The use of Placements did highlight an issue between Pre-1992 and Post 1992 universities. Students highlighted that in Post 1992 students did not have the family connections that some students in Pre-1992 universities may have. This suggests there is a role to aid in developing these networks for example by the use of Business Clinics.

#### Key findings

1. An interesting finding from the qualitative research was that the Programme Leader role was now apparently disappearing at some institutions. It appears that due to the increasing importance of the National Student Survey that student engagement may be becoming an institutional level issue? This echoes concerns already raised in the literature on the potential effect of The National Student Survey on Pedagogy.
2. Academic perspectives on student engagement are influenced by the primary role of the academics involved. For example an academic with an External Engagement role may focus on internships, a Programme Leader may focus on recruitment and retention, while the module leader focus is predominantly what happens within the classroom. Potentially this could lead to 'pitch wars' when a more holistic approach to student engagement may be more appropriate.
3. The student perspective of student engagement was largely about what happened within the classroom. This has issues for academics as the student perception of what creates engagement may be different to the lecturer's perspective. Indeed lecturers may find they are increasingly challenged about the teaching methods used within the classroom. When asked about other activities placements, internships, study abroad etc., were mentioned but did not seem to be the main focus of the students.
4. Both students and academics could clearly identify different issues influencing student engagement as students progressed during the different stages/years of the undergraduate degree.
5. Good practice identified included
  - a. Student-led seminars/problem based learning ( individual or team based)
  - b. Image based presentations
  - c. Use of formative assessment and mini/continuous assessment

d. Topical news items relevant to the module

There is much evidence across disciplines - that 'experiential learning', 'problem based learning', better engages the student and enhances them for graduate employment. These examples also link to some of the learning styles identified by Pauli et al, (2016) including engagement through feedback and learning through immersion.

6. When prompted academics identified effective teaching practices, supportive environment and quality of interactives as the top three classroom activities encouraging student engagement. This echoes what students have experienced when study at school for 'A' levels and they want this to continue as they move into HE. When based on knowledge outcomes the top 'strongly agree items' were: - becoming an independent learner, thinking critically and analytically and being innovative and creative. Children are naturally creative and innovative when young but as they progress through traditional schooling this is discouraged and as they progress through GCSE & 'A' levels. HE needs to rekindle creativity and innovation this will then encourage / stimulate independent learning and critical thinking.
7. Research-led teaching was seen as extremely important or very important by 50% of module leaders in the design of their module. Although interestingly this was not mentioned in the earlier comments as important to student engagement. Academics and their institutions believe that is what UG students should want but does the UG student (increasingly seeing themselves as a consumer of HE) try to discriminate in terms of; is the 'research' relevant / applied to the 'real world' / job market that they will be entering?
8. There was very little mention of extant pedagogy literature by respondents to the survey. Perhaps this is an area where The Academy of Marketing and Marketing Pedagogy SIG could take a lead and present current and new pedagogy findings briefings for academics.
9. Overall future research needs to should consider how a cohort can be followed through their undergraduate 'customer journey', creating longitudinal research and evaluation. We propose themes of belong, becoming, being as potential underpinnings for a holistic model of undergraduate student engagement.
10. A Web site will help disseminate these activities further along with potential student engagement seminars/mini-conference linked with the Marketing Pedagogy SIG.

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