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Understanding engagement in intensive learning: From fuzzy chaotic indigestion to eupeptic clarity

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Understanding engagement in intensive learning: From fuzzy chaotic indigestion to eupeptic clarity

Abstract

This paper is framed by Nick Zepke's, Vicki Trowler's, and Paul Trowler's concept of student engagement being "chaotic", suffering from "indigestion" and "fuzziness". This study was conducted at a UK higher education institution that recently moved to a "block and blend" delivery approach. We investigated what students and staff think engagement looks like in an intensive block and blend learning context. Data were gathered from students and staff via an online survey, which consisted of both scaled and open-ended questions. Findings are synthesised in an elemental map, providing a comparison of students and staff perceptions of engagement. Specifically, students and staff thought engagement in an intensive block and blend context entailed participation and active learning; a mindset that included enthusiasm, interest, focus, and enjoyment; timely completion of assessments; relationships with peers and tutors; doing more than required, such as completing extra readings; and accessing help and support. Participants also identified attendance as an indicator of student engagement and determined that the university has a responsibility to create learning environments to foster student engagement. Overall, the study findings point to elements of student engagement that may be designed into intensive block and blend learning environments. These approaches are also relevant to other similar intensive learning contexts.

Practitioner Notes

1. We argue that the adoption of intensive learning environments results in higher levels of students' self-reported engagement levels compared to traditional semester modules.
2. Prioritise fostering a positive mindset among students, as this appears to be significantly more influential to their engagement.
3. Promote peer interactions and collaborations, as students seem to emphasise peer relationships over tutor relationships for their learning experience.
4. Consider integrating intensive learning with blended flipped classrooms to meet all elements of student engagement within the course and module design, except "personal factors", which may not be within the university's control.
5. Implement the flipped classroom method, especially in block and blend settings, as this encourages both visible and invisible forms of participation and active learning, which remain a cornerstone of student engagement.

Keywords

participation, student engagement, intensive learning, block and blend

Introduction

Nick Zepke (2018) said of the field of study of student engagement that "it suffers from conceptual complexity and uncertainty, even indigestion" (p. 434). Vicki Trowler (2015) and Paul Trowler (2015) describe the concept as "chaotic". Vuori (2014) goes so far as to use the term "fuzzword", indicating the "fuzziness" of the concept of student engagement. The term "student engagement" has become so widely used that it can mean almost anything to anyone in the higher education sector and can therefore be used for almost any purpose (Buckley, 2018; Groccia, 2018; Taylor, 2012, p. 112; Tight, 2020, p. 696; P. Trowler, 2015, p. 335).

Axelson and Flick posed an important challenge to thinking around student engagement in 2010:

> *Do we really consider the following a recipe for engagement: 15-week courses meeting for two hours twice a week with one professor, focussed on a discrete but arbitrary subject upon which students are examined in a high-stakes final exam? … We need to test more of our assumptions and define and use our terms with greater precision. The current definitions of engagement are too abstract, the relationship between engagement and learning too poorly understood, to fully guide us.* (p. 43)

In this paper, we respond to this challenge and posit that a "block and blend" model of intentional intensive learning adopted by one UK university may offer an alternative to the traditional academic structure described in the quote above that addresses these problems of chaos, fuzziness, and indigestion. Block is a form of intensive learning environment where students study one module at a time, and blend is a form of flipped classroom with a rich online learning experience that complements the intensive face-to-face learning. We use triangulated data to identify the most prominent and relevant aspects of student engagement and map them against the block and blend design, thus providing a *practical design* alternative for achieving student engagement rather than *theoretical/abstract models*.

Our research questions were as follows:

1. How do students, staff, institutions, and academic literature conceptualise "engagement"?
2. Could intensive modes of learning such as block and blend more efficiently achieve and deliver this student-driven concept of engagement?

Although we know student engagement remains an important aspect of higher education, institutions, practitioners, and policymakers could benefit from clarity on what engagement means from a student perspective, and how that concept can be realistically operationalised in a progressive and innovative model of learning and teaching. We hope that in exploring both our understanding and operationalisation of student engagement in block and blend we can provide the foundations for a successful model for higher education institutions, practitioners, and

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policymakers that overcome the critiques of the current literature, incorporate student perspectives, and offer an effective and practical mode of operationalisation.

Literature

The Emergence of Student Engagement

Student engagement as an academic and sector construct emerged in the 1980s (Gao et al., 2022). However, components of student engagement date as far back as the 1960s. In those early days, retention as the indicator of engagement was solely conceptualised as a student-controlled factor. In the 1980s, when the specific term “engagement” emerged and our modern concepts were cultivated, theorists developed a shared responsibility model, identifying the role of both the student and the institution (Axelson & Flick, 2010; Gao et al., 2022). Now, there is a perceptible shift that places more and more emphasis on institutional responsibilities, perhaps loosely based on the consumer model (Gao et al., 2022; Zepke et al., 2014).

Kuh’s work published in 2009 lays the groundwork for modern-day notions, highlighting the centrality of “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). From there, one of the most accepted or used definitions of student engagement was developed by Vicki Trowler in 2010, using this key concept of the interaction between time, effort, and resources:

> *Student engagement is concerned with the interaction between the time, effort and other relevant resources invested by both students and their institutions intended to optimise the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students and the performance, and reputation of the institution.* (p. 3)

As the field grew, so did the models. Kahu (2013) developed a widely used construction that attempted to draw together the many aspects of engagement in an overarching “meta-construct”. Kahu’s work built on the lack of temporal distinctions in preceding work that failed to recognise that engagement and its factors change over time. Kahu therefore described *four* approaches: behavioural, psychological, socio-cultural, and holistic. Kahu and Nelson developed their framework even more in 2018 with a concept map that incorporated the educational interface. Interesting as it is, with 35 different aspects, five temporal stages, two areas of influence, four interfaces, and two areas of outcomes, it’s a bit complex for those at the coalface. It is also in this period that Vuori (2014) called student engagement a fuzzword.

The centrality of both the student perspective and the social factors became more prevalent in this period (Kahn, 2014; Leach, 2016). Of note, with this new focus on social interactions as a core driver of engagement, intensive learning design began to emerge as a positive development in engagement: Intensive forms of education offer good scope for social relations, whereby proximity to others is enhanced through residential arrangements, cohesiveness of student cohorts or through use of technology. (Kahn, 2014, p. 1015)

In most recent advances, Zepke (2021, p. 1) continued to develop his models, eventually incorporating psychological, psycho-social, socio-cultural, socio-ecological, and socio-political research perspectives. In this new model, Zepke attempted to recognise the micro, meso, and

macro while considering fluidity and dynamic movement. In 2021, with the moves to these more holistic understandings, Bowden et al. (2021) continued to build up a comprehensive conceptual framework, describing their model as a "tapestry" (p. 1218), which illustrates their thinking, but, as with Kahu, Nelson, and Zepke, the significant complexification of engagement continues.

This brings us to the current position, where student engagement, we argue, is in a state of fuzzy chaotic indigestion.

Study Context

In this study, we used a convergent parallel mixed methods case study with triangulated data to find intersections and diversions in concepts of student engagement, which were then mapped onto the block and blend model of learning and teaching (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The University of Suffolk has introduced a new method of learning and teaching, block and blend, using intensive learning models with best practice in blended design (Buck & Tyrrell, 2022). At the time of this study, approximately half the University of Suffolk had transitioned to block and blend, with the other half still using semesterised or year-long teaching.

The study received ethical approval from the University Research Ethics Committee in March 2022 (RETH-S-21-038).

Methods

The first dataset came from frontline perspectives of staff and students as part of an annual university-wide survey on several topics, of which engagement was one. Students and staff were sent a link to the online survey and participation was anonymous and voluntary. The student responses were disaggregated to look at similarities and differences between students learning in block and blend and students in conventional (non-block) modules. Qualitative data was coded and disaggregated to determine how much overlap exists between staff and student perspectives and definitions. This study provides a unique contribution to existing literature in that, rather than measuring engagement using existing concepts and frameworks or probing what *leads* to engagement, this study wanted to know what students and staff think engagement itself is (Baron & Corbin, 2012; Dyment et al., 2020; Henrie et al., 2015; Zepke et al., 2012, 2014). Responses were analysed in Atlas.ti using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Additional information on study design is available in the supplemental material, which accompanies this paper.

Table 1 presents the demographics of the respondents. These are broadly representative of the university's overall population.

Table 1

Respondents

Students	***N* = 178**	**%**
Full-time	153	86%
Part-time	25	14%
Self-reported		
Mature	136	76%
Ethnic minority	20	11%
Disability	46	26%
Specific learning disability	22	
Mental health condition	14	
Physical disability	17	
Other	8	
Level of study		
L3 (foundation)	1	1%
L4 (first year)	52	29%
L5 (second year)	56	31%
L6 (third year)	50	28%
L7 (postgraduate)	19	11%
School of study		
Engineering, Arts, Science, and Technology	38	21%
Health and Sports Science	72	40%
Social Sciences and Humanities	59	33%
Business Studies	9	5%
Mode of study		
Block and blend	103	58%
Semesterised	74	42%
Staff	***N* = 43**	

Note. One student's responses were excluded from the mode of study part of the study.

The second dataset came from the literature, primarily exploring whether academic perspectives match frontline understandings. Fifty-seven articles were included, based on an initial search for student engagement, followed by snowballing, and cross-referencing. Literature was also analysed using Atlas.ti to compare codes and themes.

The third small data source came from the university's policies on student engagement, reflecting the wider higher education policy environment.

Therefore, this is a convergent parallel mixed methods study in which we analysed quantitative data from the survey and qualitative data from the survey, following Creswell and Plano Clark's (2018) interactive level of interaction between the strands of data. Triangulation was achieved through exploring frontline perspectives from (a) staff and students, (b) academic literature, and (c) policy documents.

Results

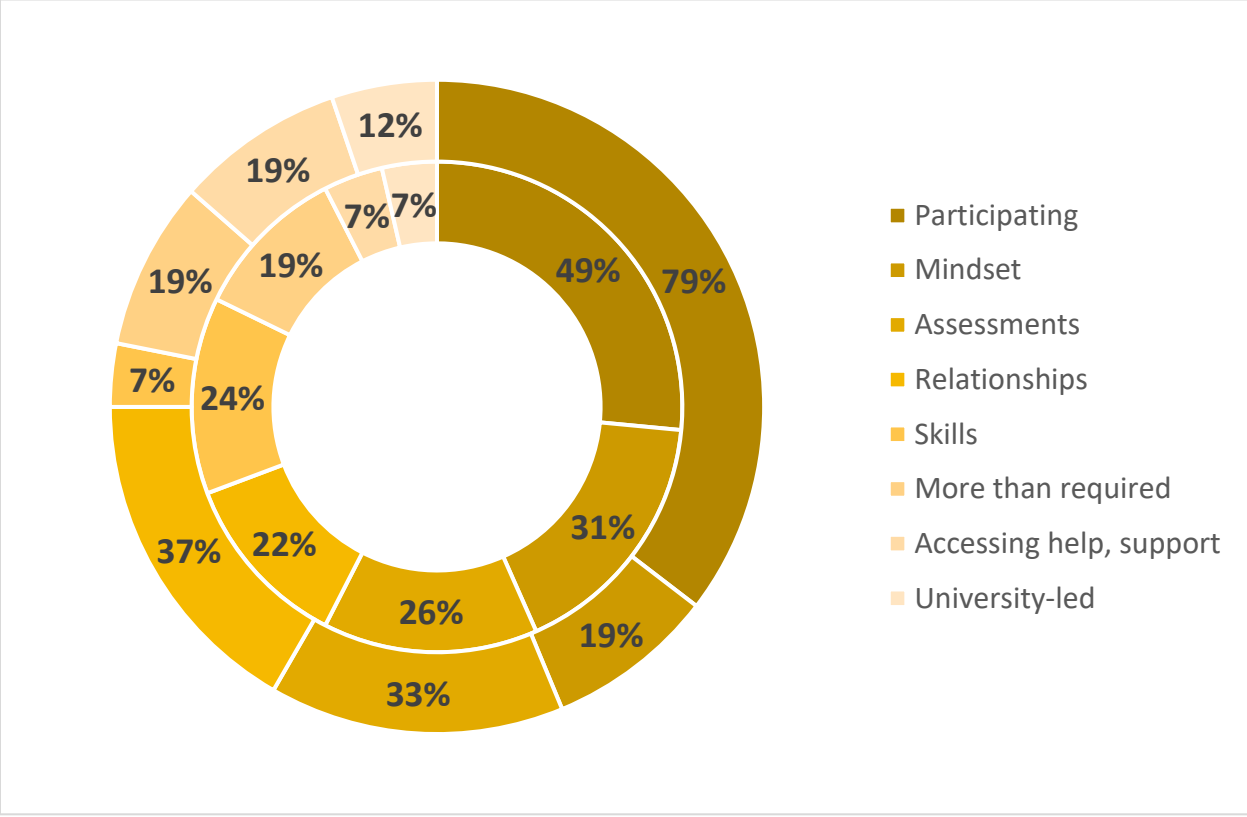
This section presents the different themes that emerged from this research, organised by student priorities. The key themes that emerged are participation/active learning, most prevalent for students and staff, mindset, more prevalent for students than staff, assessments/outcomes, relationships, skills, doing more than required, accessing help and/or support, university-led responsibilities, and attendance.

Defining Engagement

Figure 1 shows the differences between staff and student responses (> 10%). The inner circle represents student responses, and the outer circle shows staff responses to defining engagement. Less than 10% of students and staff included communication, engagement, or applying knowledge in their responses.

Figure 1

Comparing Student (N = 178) to Staff (N = 43) Definitions of Engagement



Note. Responses often included more than one definition; the total is therefore >100%.

Thematic Findings

1. Participation/active learning - most prevalent for students and staff

Nearly half of all student responses included some element of participation, while nearly 80% of staff mentioned some form of participation as being key to engagement. This reflects the behavioural dimensions found in the literature (Bowden et al., 2021; Kahu, 2013; Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Zepke, 2014). Mature students, students self-reporting a disability, and students self-identifying as an ethnic minority tended to place more emphasis on participation. In all three groups, there was at least a 10% increase in the prevalence of this aspect in the open-ended responses. This also reflects the current literature (see, for example, Rabourn et al., 2018). Of note, there was no significant difference between those studying in block and blend and those in non-block learning environments. Across the board, students in block and blend, students in non-block, and staff all associate engagement with some form of visible participation (Gourlay, 2017).

Ten per cent of block and blend students referred to some aspect of online learning or blended materials as part of engagement, but only one non-block student included blended materials in their definition of engagement:

> *Being fully active in discussion, complete all online work set and attending all face to face sessions.* (First-year student, full-time, mature)

Looking at responses based on levels of self-viewed engagement also shows some differences. Students who reported they are very engaged or moderately engaged placed high emphasis on visible forms of participation as evidence of engagement. Sixty-five per cent of those who are very engaged used participation to define engagement, while 42% of those reporting moderate levels of engagement used participation. However, on the opposite end of the engagement spectrum, definitions change. Those who feel they are extremely engaged and those who feel they are slightly engaged or not engaged at all placed less clear emphasis on participation as a benchmark indicator of engagement.

Some of the responses in this category included notions similar to student voice, such as giving feedback on the course:

> *This engagement could include governance, feedback, quality assurance, peer support, mentoring or any other activities beyond the immediate scope of a student's studies.* (Second-year student, full-time, self-reported mature and ethnic minority)

This is a notable aspect of the literature, which in recent years has placed a heavy emphasis on the importance of student voice as an aspect of student engagement (Ramsden, 2008; Robinson, 2012; Taylor, 2012; Vuori, 2014). Some of the literature introduces the importance of co-production in engagement, mirroring some of the student perspectives in this study (Bowden, 2022, p. 1008; Robinson, 2012). However, the literature features aspects of students' involvement in university-wide decision-making quite heavily, which was not found in the student or staff perspectives in this study. This could be because the students and staff saw student engagement at a more individual level, as opposed to literature that may look more to institutional or sector-wide aspects (Bowden et al., 2021, p. 1218; Taylor, 2012; Zepke, 2021).

Of note, some academics point to the opportunities blended learning provides for capturing less visible forms of participation as engagement, overcoming important barriers in traditional learning

environments (Alebrahim & Ku, 2020; Gilboy et al., 2015; Gourlay, 2017; Henrie et al., 2015; Rabourn et al., 2018; Robinson, 2012).

2. Mindset - more prevalent for students than staff

This category presents contemplative findings. Overall, 31% of students mentioned mindset in their definition, but only 19% of staff. “Mindset” included responses such as enthusiasm, interest in the subject, focus, enjoyment, a desire to learn, among others, and loosely tracks the emotional dimensions in the literature (Bowden et al., 2021; Kahu, 2013; Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Zepke, 2014). Having a positive mindset was much more prevalent in student responses than staff, providing important insight into the differences in perceptions of engagement. Mindset is far less visible compared to participation, perhaps explaining why it is more frequently mentioned by students than staff. Also noteworthy is that mindset was a more common response for students studying in block and blend than non-block. This may indicate that students studying in intensive learning environments have pushed themselves beyond the visible, arguably surface-level indicators of engagement linked to participation and include the more nuanced and “deep learning” aspects of having a positive mindset to their engagement.

Digging a bit deeper, students who identify as an ethnic minority placed even more importance on mindset, as well as students who see themselves as extremely engaged. Those students who also reported higher levels of satisfaction with teaching and/or learning opportunities were also more likely to include some element of mindset in their definitions of student engagement. In fact, there was an almost linear relationship between levels of satisfaction and percentage of students including positive mindset in their conceptualisation of engagement.

When asked to define what engagement is, one student simply put:

> *Enthusiasm and experimentation.* (Second-year student, full-time, self-reported disability and mature)

Another student wrote:

> *When students are learning or being taught, they show a high level of attention, curiosity, enthusiasm, optimism, and passion, which extends to their drive to study and develop in their education.* (Second-year student, full-time, self-reported mature and ethnic minority)

Having a positive mindset towards their learning is clearly of the utmost importance to students, yet perhaps its “invisibility” renders it less prominent in staff perceptions and modes of measurement of engagement.

Emotional aspects of engagement are not uncommon in the literature (Bowden, 2022; Kahu et al., 2017; Zepke, 2014). One study found a feedback loop where increasing engagement improved performance, which in turn uplifted wellbeing, which then increased engagement, underscoring the importance of the emotional or mindset component of engagement (Boulton et al., 2019). It is interesting to note that this was prevalent in student perspectives and academic literature, but not in staff or policy perspectives. Pushing beyond, Gourlay (2017) explores the tension inherent in many models of student engagement, where the “emphasis is on the collective and the social, but the onus is on the individual to demonstrate engagement through these activities” (p. 25), linking to concerns over emphasising visible forms of engagement described earlier.

3. Assessments/outcomes

Contrary to much of the literature, nearly a third of student and staff responses included some reference to assessments or outcomes in their conceptualisation of student engagement. Forty-one responses included simply "completing assignments" as a marker of engagement (making this the most common sub-response in the whole study). This may indicate a fairly basic approach, but perhaps to many at the frontline in higher education, the focus on assessments as a measurement of engagement still bears consideration. For example, one student's response was merely "Do enough to pass" (third-year, full-time student). Much of the literature looks at engagement as something beyond the basics, yet the survey responses paint a different picture. This student saw a correlation between engagement and improvement in grades:

> *Attendance, improvement in grades.* (Second-year student, full-time)

Students studying in traditional (i.e., non-block) learning environments placed slightly more emphasis on assessments than those studying in block and blend. As students in block and blend have only one assessment at a time, this is a welcome result. Perhaps this means that assessments are less of a stressful focal point for students in intensive learning environments, which is likely a positive outcome. This follows on from studies of block learning, which found that assessment becomes less of a focal challenge point for students given that they have only one subject at a time (Thi Thao Trinh et al., 2022). Similar studies have also found that block tends to be associated with improved levels of attainment and knowledge retention (Buck & Tyrrell, 2022).

Academic theories and models have included the importance of learning outcomes in their models of engagement, thus there is some synchronism on this point (Gunuc & Kuzu, 2015).

4. Relationships

Relationships included both peer relationships (between students) and relationships with tutors, and link somewhat to the socio-cultural or social aspects of the definitions in the literature (Bowden et al., 2021; Kahu, 2013; Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Zepke, 2014). In this survey, students placed emphasis on peer relationships (11.8% compared to 7% of staff), whereas staff placed more emphasis on tutor relationships (18.6% compared to 10.1% of students). Twenty-four responses included peer relationships and 26 responses included tutor relationships. Mature students were more likely to include relationships in their definitions of student engagement than non-mature students. There was no difference between students studying in block and blend and those in non-block. Some staff felt that block teaching was a challenge to relationship building:

> *Getting to know your students, earning their trust, inspiring their enthusiasm and getting them to attend and learn because they want to and can see all the options. It is an organic and dynamic process which grows over time and with familiarity. Hindered by block teaching.*

The literature, however, highlighted how block teaching provides opportunities for enhanced relationship building:

> *[Block mode teaching] implementation projects at universities provide students with the opportunity to make friends and enhance the relationship with lecturers due to long-hour but smaller size classes.* (Thi Thao Trinh et al., 2022, p. 9)

An interesting association emerged between students who want to improve their understanding of module material and relationships, perhaps underscoring the positive outcomes that students associated with both peer and tutor relationships. Equally interesting, those students who felt that their strength was working with and supporting others did not tend to place more emphasis on relationships than other aspects of engagement:

> *Give and take from student and lecturer.* (Third-year student, full-time, self-reported mature)

> *Engagement is where both the student and the lecture engage and share experiences and take advice from the lecturers.* (Second-year student, full-time, self-reported disability, mature, ethnic minority)

5. Skills

There was a marked difference between students and staff in this code category – 24% of student responses included a reference to skills or skills development as part of engagement, yet only 7% of staff responses referenced skills. Those who were slightly engaged or not engaged at all defined engagement as having or exhibiting particular skills. Part-time students placed more emphasis on practical aspects – applying knowledge, participating, and specific skill allocation. There were no other notable differences between sub-groups. Examples of the skills noted are organisation, reflection, structured with time, and study skills, among others, as evidenced by this student's response:

> *I constantly engage with my studies by organizing my information, going over notes/rewriting them at times, applying the knowledge to my projects.* (Second-year, full-time, self-reported mature)

This specific aspect of engagement was largely absent from the literature that we read and analysed.

6. Doing more than required

Although this is perhaps what most people think of when they think of student engagement, when asked to actually define it, doing more than required was not a prevalent theme. This theme can be broken down into three sub-codes: completing extra reading, partaking in extracurricular activities, or simply going "above minimum requirements". Nineteen per cent of students and 19% of staff included one of these sub-codes in their responses. Again, there was a linear-like relationship between levels of engagement and satisfaction and inclusion of this concept of engagement – those students who are more engaged and/or more satisfied tend to see this as more of an element of student engagement than those who are less engaged and/or less satisfied. There were no differences in any of the other categories, including block and blend/non-block.

This student notes that there are different levels of engagement based on this theme:

> *Being engaged with studies is when you frequently engage with the weekly readings and complete all the required tasks. You can also be very engaged if you research further outside of the readings and tasks.* (First-year student, full-time)

A large proportion of these responses included extra reading and research (beyond the required readings). Thirty-three responses noted some reference to extra reading or solitary, private work

above and beyond what is required. The literature agrees that this is an important aspect of engagement; however, it is very difficult to measure and thus does not tend to be reflected in current models of measuring student engagement (Dyment et al., 2020; Gourlay, 2017).

7. Accessing help and/or support

Staff tended to include a reference to accessing help and/or support in their understanding of student engagement more than students (19% compared to 7%):

> *Attendance, committment* [sic]*, positive response to constructive feedback, self-starting, reflective, asks for help earlier.* (Staff)

Of the students who did see this as part of engagement, those studying in non-block modules placed more emphasis on seeking help or support than those in block and blend; however, of the students who completed this survey, more students in block and blend had actually accessed services than those in non-block (47% compared to 39%). This presents an interesting paradox. Students studying in traditional learning environments place more importance on services as a part of engagement, but then actually take up the services less. This may mean that accessing services and/or support is more part and parcel of learning for block and blend students, whereas engagement is something more closely linked to their learning experience.

This specific aspect of the frontline perspective did not feature much in the literature that we read and analysed, although perhaps that is because it is inherently understood as a part of engagement without being specifically denoted (Crabtree et al., 2021).

8. University-led responsibilities

Although not a particularly prevalent code, this area bears analysis for its insight and importance. In total, 17 responses included some aspect of engagement being the responsibility of the university and the lecturers. In other words, engagement can only happen if the teaching is engaging or if the university creates an engaging learning environment. However, this response tended to have a *reverse* (negative) scale with self-reports of engagement and levels of satisfaction. In other words, students who felt less engaged or not engaged saw engagement as a responsibility of the provider. Those who define themselves as less engaged view “engagement” more as the responsibility of the university, whereas those who see themselves as more engaged define engagement as more of a personal responsibility. Students who were less satisfied with learning opportunities and/or the teaching on their course also tended to see engagement as the duty or obligation of the lecturers or university as a whole.

Also of note, students learning in block and blend were less likely to see engagement as a university-led concept compared to students learning in non-block modules:

> *The engagement with studies is not effective, more programmes and activities to engage the students within the lectures or seminars.* (Third-year student, part-time, self-reported mature and ethnic minority)

> *Engagement for me would be having support available that is easy to access. Having resources that are understandable and up to date. Have lectures that are not just white noise, they need to be more engaging.* (Second-year student, full-time, self-reported mature)

Conversely, a staff member defined engagement purely as a student responsibility:

> *Student engagement is entering into, and understanding, the concerns of the current module; taking seriously one's responsibility as a student in relation to one's peers (i.e., turning up to seminars, having done preparation, and willing to engage with others) but also one's responsibility regarding the quality of individual work expected. At the least, this means a good pattern of attendance, engagement with Brightspace, and additional reading.*

The university's policy on engagement, although heavily weighting student responsibility, does recognise the role of the lecturer:

> *Academic staff are responsible for encouraging a culture of student attendance/engagement, including providing information, advice and guidance to students at Induction and key points throughout their programme of study.* (Pennie, 2020, para. 21)

The literature places much more emphasis on the role of the lecturer and the academic staff in creating learning environments that foster student engagement (Zweekhorst & Maas, 2015). Studies showed the importance of university policies and practices that do just that (or do not, as the case may be; Bokhove & Muijs, 2019; Groccia, 2018). At this university, the argument is developing that the move to block and blend is the kind of institutional practice that will elevate student engagement by design.

9. Attendance - most prevalent in policy

Attendance was mentioned 91 times in the responses to defining student engagement, with 71 mentions across 44 pieces of academic literature. Fifty-eight per cent of staff responses and 39% of student responses included attendance. However, staff mentioned attendance 30% more than students. Those students studying in block and blend tended to place more emphasis on attendance than those in traditional learning environments. Additionally, students who felt that attendance was a strength saw engagement as strongly associated with visible forms of participation.

One student simply defined engagement as:

> *Going to lectures.* (Third-year student, full-time, non-block)

The university's policy is titled Student Attendance and Engagement Monitoring Policy (Pennie, 2020). From the outset, the policy inextricably links attendance and engagement, making an explicit connection to retention and completion. Both are defined separately:

> *Attendance is understood to mean student attendance at live or time-specific events, whether these are held online (within a virtual classroom, video or audio-conferencing call) or in-person.*
>
> *Engagement is understood to reflect a wider evaluation of a student's uptake and participation in a range of learning activities including but not limited to, self-directed study, undertaking activities or tasks in the online learning environment, contribution to discussion forums, and undertaking assessments. Satisfactory engagement will be informed by the course requirements (see paragraph 4) considered using a combination of data drawn from attendance monitoring systems and online platforms.* (para. 10)

With these definitions, engagement is partially defined by attendance in how it is monitored. From there, there are no specific measurements or indicators used or mentioned to monitor engagement, other than attendance. Later in the policy, engagement becomes interchangeable with attendance:

> *unsatisfactory attendance/engagement (whether in-person or virtually) is deemed to be when a student does not attend any scheduled sessions for a period of fourteen consecutive days, and does not have valid reasons for non-attendance.* (para 24)

The policy does then specify that action should be taken after 14 consecutive days of "non-attendance" OR "non-engagement", but there are no measures specified other than attendance registers.

Looking at student and staff perspectives against the university policy, there is still a clear emphasis on attendance as a proxy measure for engagement. The literature continues to use attendance as a proxy measurement for engagement, although not without recognising the challenge this poses (see, e.g., Baron & Corbin, 2012). For example, some studies have noted the lack of association between attendance and engagement (Büchele, 2021; Rodgers, 2002).

10. Personal factors - prevalent in the literature

The literature includes the importance of personal aspects, some of which happen before students even get to university, and all of which happen outside the classroom (Zepke, 2015, p. 1316). Kahu and Nelson (2018) similarly highlight the importance of personal circumstances in their model. However, apart from two mentions of achieving a work-life balance, there was very little evidence of this aspect of engagement in student or staff perspectives.

As stated by one final year student:

> *Knowing when to stop including addressing work/family/study life balance.* (Third-year student, full-time, self-reported mature)

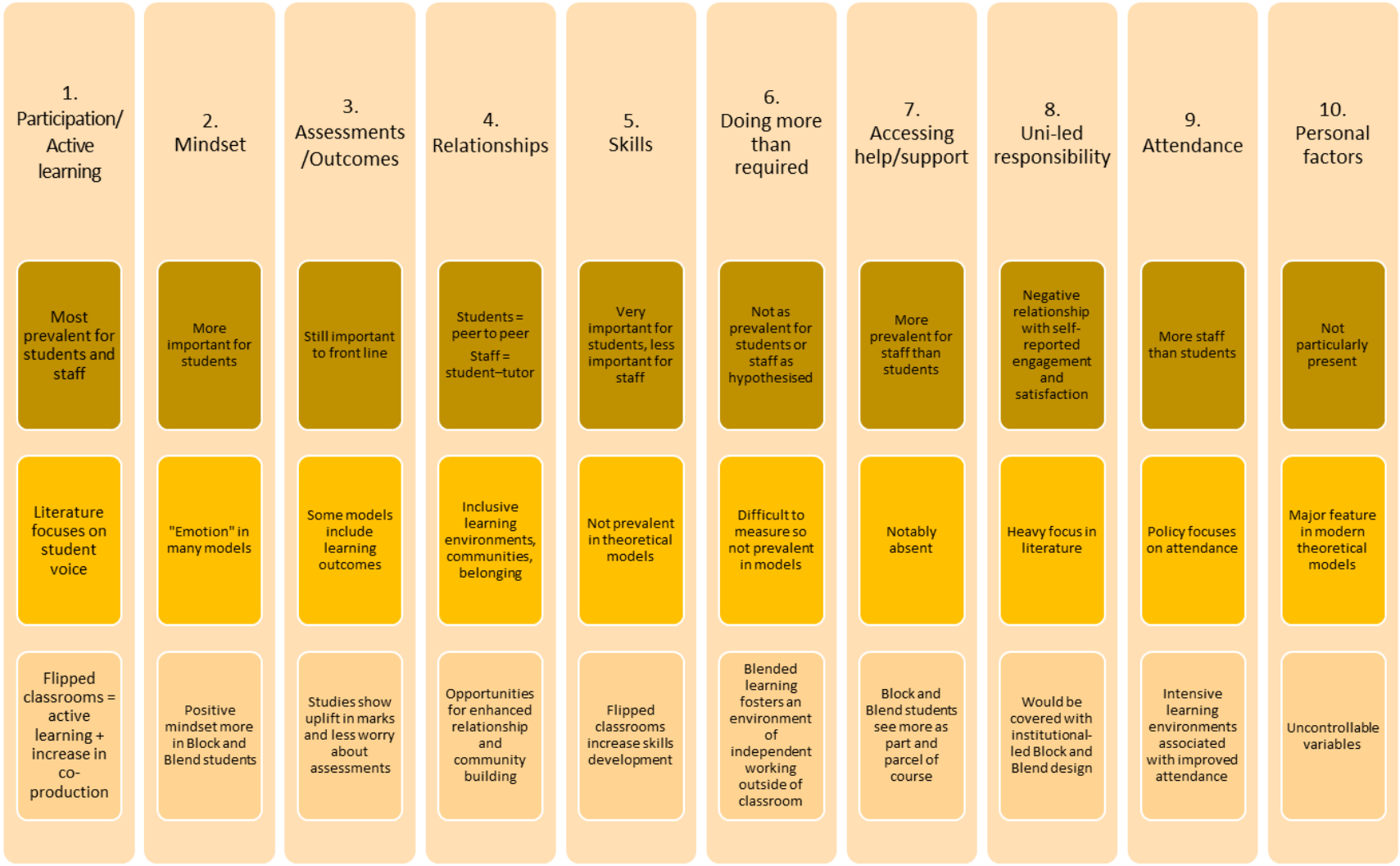
Discussion

Elemental Mapping

To synthesise our findings, we have created an elemental map shown in Figure 2, drawing together student and staff perspectives, policy, literature, and, as the point of discussion, elements of the block and blend approach adopted by the university in this study. The dark brown tiles in the first row show student and staff frontline perspectives (Data Source 1), and the middle yellow tiles present evidence from the literature (Data Source 2) and/or policy environment (Data Source 3). The bottom beige tiles demonstrate how the aspect of student engagement presented in one or more of our three data sources can be met with the block and blend model of intensive learning adopted in the case study.

Figure 2

Elemental Map



In Figure 2, the elemental mapping synthesises the findings of this study and demonstrates how, by design, the block and blend model adopted by the institution in this study facilitates the elements of student engagement present in frontline perspectives, literature, and policies. The intensive learning environment (block) combined with blended flipped classrooms (blend) presents opportunities to ensure that all the elements of student engagement are met within the course and module design, with the one exception of personal factors, which may have occurred long before or long outside of university. We posit that this model of learning design is more practical and effective than the overly complex theoretical models presented in the academic literature reviewed earlier in this paper. In this way, this study aims to provide a simpler model for practitioners to achieve desired levels of student engagement. This evidence indicates that student engagement could be enhanced and possibly achieved in adopting the block and blend mode of learning and teaching delivery with intentional design as opposed to lift and shift.

1. Participation

Visible forms of participation have been a cornerstone of academic understanding of student engagement for many years. Often now included in the behavioural dimensions of theoretical models, the idea of students actively and visibly demonstrating their engagement through forms of participation is a basic tenet. Our frontline findings confirmed that both students and staff, some of whom have most likely never read an academic paper on student engagement, also associate visible forms of participation with engagement. It is therefore clear that a successful model of learning design must facilitate student participation. The flipped classroom used in block and blend encourages both visible and invisible forms of participation and active learning, which remain a cornerstone of student engagement. Reflecting both frontline perspectives and theories, well-designed block and blend can also offer important opportunities for co-production, where the face-to-face activities are given more freedom with a blended learning approach.

2. Mindset

More recent theoretical models presented in academic literature shift some focus to emotional aspects of student engagement; however, the tension is noted between collective evidence of engagement and individual demonstrations. We conceptualise positive mindset as part of the less visible forms of engagement, like invisible forms of participation. Although difficult to measure and evaluate, there seems to be agreement between the literature and our frontline perspectives that a positive mindset and attitude towards learning can and should be a core component of a successful model of student engagement.

This connection between mindset and engagement was more prevalent among block and blend students. Block and blend fosters deep learning, transcending surface-level or passive teaching, and inherently taps into attitudes toward learning. Although this model of intensive learning may be an effective tool in supporting students with a positive mindset, our findings suggest that staff might benefit from recognising and harnessing positive mindset as a component of engagement, especially when following a block and blend mode of delivery.

3. Assessments

In this theme, we found a contradiction between the literature and the frontline perspectives. The most recent theoretical models of student engagement have moved somewhat far away from assessments, marks, or grades as a component of engagement. Achieving good marks remained at the forefront of many students' conceptualisations of engagement. Internal as yet unreleased data at the institution studied here have begun to show an uplift in marks in block and blend, and there is certainly less of a pressure point for students in block and blend who take only one assessment at a time. This model of learning and teaching therefore assists students in achieving this aspect of engagement while relieving some of the challenging aspects of a continued focus on assessments, such as students' mental health. Having just one assessment at a time in the intensive learning model creates a more responsive system, which feeds forward more successfully than a traditional model of semester or year-end assessments. Although the literature tended to shift focus away from assessment-based models, it clearly remains important to both students and staff.

4. Relationships

The literature teems with the importance of relationships in achieving positive student engagement. Often conceptualised as socio-cultural or social aspects of the models, the idea that individual engagement is dependent on networks and relations with peers, tutors, and the university is prevalent. Inclusivity is central to current academic and policy work on engagement.

Our findings underscored this concept. Students tended to include peer relationships in their definitions of engagement, whereas staff tended to include tutor relationships. The literature included both. Developing relationships with both peers and tutors is therefore a nexus point of achieving student engagement. The intensive model in this study also facilitates relationship building as tutors and students spend more time together in a compressed time frame. Again, here we see that an intensive learning environment has this aspect of engagement built into the model.

5. Skills

This aspect is largely absent from the academic literature and theoretical models, yet was prevalent in students' definitions of engagement. Students very much saw the development and deployment of study skills as a component and indicator of their engagement, manifesting a highly practical conceptualisation. This demonstrates how critical it is to ensure that students' perspectives are central to definitions of engagement. If our learning design tracks what students want (in this case, skills), the likelihood of achieving engagement is enhanced.

Flipped classrooms very much focus on practical skills development and application of knowledge, thus embedding this concrete aspect of engagement in the course design. The block and blend intentional design prioritises skills development, thus operationalising another prominent aspect of engagement from the students' perspective.

6. Doing More Than Required

Although not as common as some of the other concepts, engagement is still somewhat associated with doing more than the baseline requirements. The literature does tend to recognise that this is an important aspect of engagement; however, the difficulty in measuring tangible forms or outcomes makes it perhaps harder to operationalise as an aspect of engagement.

To the staff and students in our case study, doing more than what is required tended to be either extra reading or partaking in extracurricular activities. The block and blend model again fosters an environment of independent working outside of the classroom, particularly through the flipped classroom model and the materials made available to students to explore independently. Although any model of learning design would allow for extra work, the focus on independence in block and blend enhances these opportunities.

7. Accessing Help/Support

Also absent from the literature that we read and analysed but present in the frontline study was accessing help and/or support. Although this was not seen as engagement from those studying in block and blend, we did find an actual increase in uptake of support on offer from those in block and blend. We posit that this indicates that students see support as a core part of the block and blend model and are thus benefitting from this uptake.

8. University-Led Responsibilities

Academic and theoretical perspectives have slowly moved from a model that was solely focused on student responsibilities to models that not only recognise but also, in some cases, prioritise the responsibility of the institution itself in achieving both individual and collective student engagement.

Seeing engagement as a responsibility of the university and its agents was prominent in the literature and indeed present in our study, though arguably more from students who felt dissatisfied or disengaged. Rolling out a university-wide institutional model of teaching and learning in block and blend meets this responsibility as conceived in both the literature and by students. It is an institutionally led model of engagement, providing the opportunities and environment students desire.

9. Attendance

Attendance remains a recurring theme in discussions about student engagement, echoing prominently in both frontline perspectives and academic literature. However, its significance in the traditional sense is challenged by block and blend. For instance, in the flipped classroom approach, participation takes centre stage, emphasising activities, discussions, and interactions, which go beyond attending a lecture and focus more on actively participating in it. Additionally, the digital facets of online learning environments allow educators to track online interactions, offering a broader view of student involvement.

As some policies and literature suggest, equating attendance with engagement can be overly simplistic, and attendance, although undeniably important, should be one of many instruments in an educator’s toolkit, not the sole one. Therefore, the move towards block and blend offers a

promising approach to embed more nuanced components of engagement in a course's model, enhancing engagement from the onset.

10. Personal Factors

Finally, though hardly factoring into the frontline perspective, the literature does capture the socio-cultural or psycho-social dimensions of the student experience, recognising the many variables along a temporal line that may affect or even determine student engagement. No learning design can control these variables, but block and blend can lead to more inclusive learning environments, which may provide opportunities to overcome previously insurmountable barriers.

Study Limitations

We recognise that this study was limited to one institution and to responses gathered via an online questionnaire that was designed to achieve several different institutional research goals. To further test these findings, it is necessary to probe student responses in in-depth qualitative interviews or focus groups. It would also be beneficial to ask similar questions at other higher education institutions to see if student and staff perspectives on engagement differ based on the study context.

Conclusion

In this mixed methods case study, we have attempted to respond to calls in the literature for more student-focused and open-ended research into student engagement. We used triangulated data to create a map of student engagement that reflects frontline perspectives from students and staff, academic thinking in current literature, and, to some extent, the higher education policy environment. We then explored how well the block and blend model of intensive learning adopted by the University of Suffolk incorporated or facilitated the different components of engagement. We argue that the block and blend is a practical, effective, and efficient mode of teaching and learning that could more simply lead to achieving student engagement than the overly complex and difficult to operationalise theoretical models in the literature. We encourage other institutions, practitioners, and policymakers to consider block and blend as a potential model for overcoming the "fuzziness" of student engagement, which provides clarity of concept and clear pathways for realistic implementation.

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Conflict of Interest

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Appendix A

Table 3

Summary of Engagement Models and Theories

Author	Year	Basic tenets	Strength	Weakness
Carini et al.	2006	Engagement covers academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student–faculty interaction, enriching educational experiences, supportive campus environment, reading and writing, quality of relationships, institutional emphasis on good practices, higher order thinking, student–faculty interaction regarding coursework (i.e., feedback), integration of diversity	Early empirical work	"Bucket" approach
Zepke & Leach	2010	Identifies 10 proposals for action emerging from current literature for providers to more fully engage students	Rooted in a systematic review	"Bucket" approach
Kuh	2009	"The meaning and applications of this definition of student engagement have evolved over time to represent increasingly complex understandings of the relationships between desired outcomes of college and the amount of time and effort students invest in their studies and	Links students' time and effort with end goals	Somewhat opaque

		other educationally purposeful activities." (p. 683)		
V. Trowler	2010	"Student engagement is concerned with the interaction between the time, effort, and other relevant resources invested by both students and their institutions intended to optimise the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students and the performance, and reputation of the institution." (p. 3)	Vastly comprehensive	78 pages of information to digest and implement
Taylor	2012	Three-strand definition specific to the UK higher education context, which includes a means to improve learning and teaching, national policy and institutional arrangements, and participatory dialogue practice	Recognises multiple levels that influence engagement	Works on the level of paradigms rather than practicalities
Baron & Corbin	2012	"Behavioural engagement includes positive conduct, following rules, adhering to conventions, involvement in the task at hand, persistence, participation, attention and effort and participation in school- or university-related activities.	Important step in introducing behavioural, emotional, and cognitive strands	Beginning to overcomplicate for staff and students

		Emotional engagement includes affective reactions to the classroom setting (such as interest, boredom or anxiety), to the institution and to the teacher. Cognitive engagement includes investment in learning, intrinsic motivation and self-regulation." (p. 72)		
Zepke	2014	"The fusion of behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement indicators with multiple facilitators of engagement offers a useful framework for thinking about student engagement." (p. 698)	Continues to develop a comprehensive framework; includes temporal, hierarchical, behavioural/emotional/cognitive dimensions	In critiquing an otherwise under-critiqued area (according to Zepke), the framework begins to look potentially unwieldy
Kahu	2013	Meta-construct of 4 approaches: behavioural, psychological, socio-cultural, and holistic	Continues to develop and push our understanding of engagement framework and brings more critical aspect into the model	In attempting to have a more comprehensive framework, it is becoming more complex
Kahu & Nelson	2018	35 different aspects, five temporal stages, two areas of influence, four interfaces, and two areas of outcomes	Incredibly comprehensive, clearly building on previous work and attempting to collate into one workable model	Far too complex to realistically operationalise
Kahn Leach	2014 2016	More focus on student perspectives and social factors	Recognises that engagement in higher education is influenced by factors outside of the institution; begins to recognise the role of intensive learning environments	
Gunuc & Kuzu	2015	"The quality and quantity of students' psychological,	Attempts to synthesise multiple theories and frameworks	Back to the problem of

		cognitive, emotional and behavioural reactions to the learning process, as well as to in-class/out-of-class academic and social activities, to achieve successful learning outcomes." (p. 588)		complexity and abstraction
Zepke	2021	Maps engagement at macro, meso, and micro levels	Recognises the tension between different actors and structures	Again, while this is a heroic mapping, it feels unachievable for most
Bowden et al.	2021	Uses a tapestry approach to weave multiple factors together	Looks at interactions as part of a dynamic process	Same as above

Appendix B

Table 4

Questionnaire (Relevant Items Only)

Questions	Response options
Students	
What do you think are your strongest qualities as a learner?	Open text
What do you think are your areas for improvement?	Open text
How do you define “engagement” with your studies? What does being engaged with your studies look like for you?	Open text
How “engaged” do you consider yourself to be with your course?	Not engaged at all Slightly engaged Moderately engaged Very engaged Extremely engaged
Staff	
As part of ongoing APP [widening participation] research, we are also exploring what we mean by “engagement”. What does “student engagement” look like to you and/or your course?	Open text

Appendix C

Table 5

Selections From Code Book

Code group	Code	Number
ENGAGE		466
Assessments	ENGAGE: acting on feedback	6
	ENGAGE: completing assignments/meeting deadlines	41
	ENGAGE: effort in assessments	3
	ENGAGE: good marks	4
	ENGAGE: meet learning outcomes	2
	ENGAGE: pass	2
	ENGAGE: progress	2
	ENGAGE: starting assessments early	1
Mindset	ENGAGE: commitment	2
	ENGAGE: dedication	1
	ENGAGE: desire to learn	13
	ENGAGE: driven to succeed	1
	ENGAGE: enjoyment	5
	ENGAGE: enthusiasm	5
	ENGAGE: experimentation	1
	ENGAGE: focus	3
	ENGAGE: hardworking	1
	ENGAGE: immersion	3
	ENGAGE: interest in subject	20
	ENGAGE: investment	1
	ENGAGE: motivation	3
	ENGAGE: open to learning	2
	ENGAGE: optimism	1
	ENGAGE: prioritise studies	1
	ENGAGE: willingness	1
More than required	ENGAGE: above minimum requirements	1
	ENGAGE: extra reading, etc.	33
	ENGAGE: extracurriculars	8
Participating (i.e., more than showing up)	ENGAGE: active learning	12
	ENGAGE: attention in lectures	10
	ENGAGE: giving feedback on course	3
	ENGAGE: having an opinion	2
	ENGAGE: interaction with online materials	19
	ENGAGE: involved	11
	ENGAGE: participate in discussions	21
	ENGAGE: participation	40

	ENGAGE: sharing ideas	3
Relationships	ENGAGE: belonging	1
	ENGAGE: communities	4
	ENGAGE: peer relationship	24
	ENGAGE: tutor relationship	23
Skills	ENGAGE: learning, researching, and studying	1
	ENGAGE: organisation	1
	ENGAGE: reading	22
	ENGAGE: reflection	3
	ENGAGE: structured with time	9
	ENGAGE: study skills	2
	ENGAGE: understanding	7
	ENGAGE: work-life balance	2
University led	ENGAGE: uni-led activities	13
	ENGAGE: well supported	4