

Who They Are and How to Engage Them: A Summary of the REACT Systematic Literature Review of the 'Hard to Reach' in Higher Education

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Introduction

The term 'hard to reach' has gained increasing traction amongst practitioners and policy makers in higher education in recent years. The HEFCE-funded REACT project was developed to address specifically the issue of how better to engage 'hard to reach' students, to make various practices more inclusive, to enhance student engagement practices and to explore barriers students might face in accessing new opportunities¹. However, the term 'hard to reach' is not without controversy (McVitty, 2015) and experience of working with the REACT collaborative partners has shown that confusion over the term is often compounded by the way it can be used interchangeably with other concepts (e.g. widening participation) or in an apparently uncontentious way - which could mask any imbalances of power implicit in the term. To more critically to assess 'hard to reach' and to attempt to bring some clarity to the use of the term, members of the REACT team conducted a systematic review of literature making use of the term in higher education, so as to add empirical rigour and much-needed context to discussion in this area. The review also explores methods that have been used to engage explicitly the 'hard to reach', thereby providing a developing resource for practitioners who are working to increase inclusivity or better engage their students. This article presents a summary of the findings of the review, a more detailed literature review is published on the REACT website (www.studentengagement.ac.uk).

The Systematic Review Methodology

In order to capture the range of literature surrounding 'hard to reach' students in higher education, a range of search terms were used in conjunction with our key terms, 'hard to reach' and 'hard-to-reach', as both were prevalent in the literature. The search terms we used alongside 'hard to reach', were appropriate to the higher education sector context of the literature review. These combinations are shown below in Figure 1. These terms were searched on various search engine platforms (also shown in Figure 1), to further ensure that the literature review covered a broad set of data from various institutional levels as well as from international sources. This approach ensured that we located literature from a wide range of outputs in order to gather a holistic view of what is being described as a 'hard to reach' student in higher education.

'Hard-to-reach' search terms	'Higher Education' search terms	Search Engines and Journals
'Hard-to-reach' 'Hard to reach'	'Student' 'Higher education' 'Engagement' 'University' 'Student Engagement' <i>'Tertiary Education'</i> <i>'Post-Secondary Education'</i> <i>'Higher Education Institution'</i> <i>'Higher Education Provider'</i> <i>'Higher Education Institution'</i> <i>'Higher Education Provider'</i> <i>'Attainment'</i> <i>'Retention'</i> <i>'Attrition'</i> <i>'Co-curricular'</i>	SEARCH ENGINES Google Scholar ERIC database EPPI Centre JOURNALS Higher Education Research & Development Journal of Higher Education Review of Higher Education Quality in Higher Education International Journal of Educational Research Studies in Higher Education Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change

Figure 1: Table of Literature Review Search Terms:

The above combinations were searched and the literature items that had titles and abstracts related directly to 'hard to reach' students and to higher education were saved. At this stage, the literature review produced 284 articles that had relevant abstracts and titles. These were further scrutinised to finalise the literature directly relevant to our review. Any literature that fell outside the inclusion criteria, i.e. that it discusses both higher education and 'hard to reach' students, were discounted. The total number of articles included at this stage is 101. Of the 284 articles that were found through the search terms, there were 57 pieces of literature that we could not access. Therefore, the final total of literature read was 227, of which 126 were further discounted because they did not discuss 'hard to reach' in the context of higher education students. After we subtracted the articles that could not be accessed and those that were discounted, there were 101 texts that provide the foundation of this literature review. The included literature items were then qualitatively and quantitatively recorded to i) pull out the description of 'hard to reach' students; and ii) draw out whether the text suggested any methods to engage these students. The resulting key findings from these data are discussed below.

Key Findings

In total, the team recorded 101 pieces of literature, which offer 41 different descriptions of 'hard to reach' students and 34 different methods to engage them. These descriptions of 'hard to reach' were then coded into broader key themes (e.g. 'Speaking English as a second language' were recorded under 'Cultural Minorities' and 'black' under 'BME'). After this re-coding, the 41 individual descriptions produced a total of 28 different descriptor codes for 'hard to reach' students (see Figure 2 below). In addition, the original 34 different methods to engage 'hard to reach' were coded into 14 different key themes (see Figure 3). Some of the literature items reference more than one description of 'hard to reach' students; hence there are occasions where one article fits into two or more different themes and has therefore been referred to more than onceⁱⁱ. Such occasions were particularly prevalent with the category described as 'young+', discussed below (see Figure 3).

Descriptors of 'hard to reach' students

The key findings from the common descriptions of 'hard to reach' are outlined below (Figure 2), along with some examples to illustrate each.

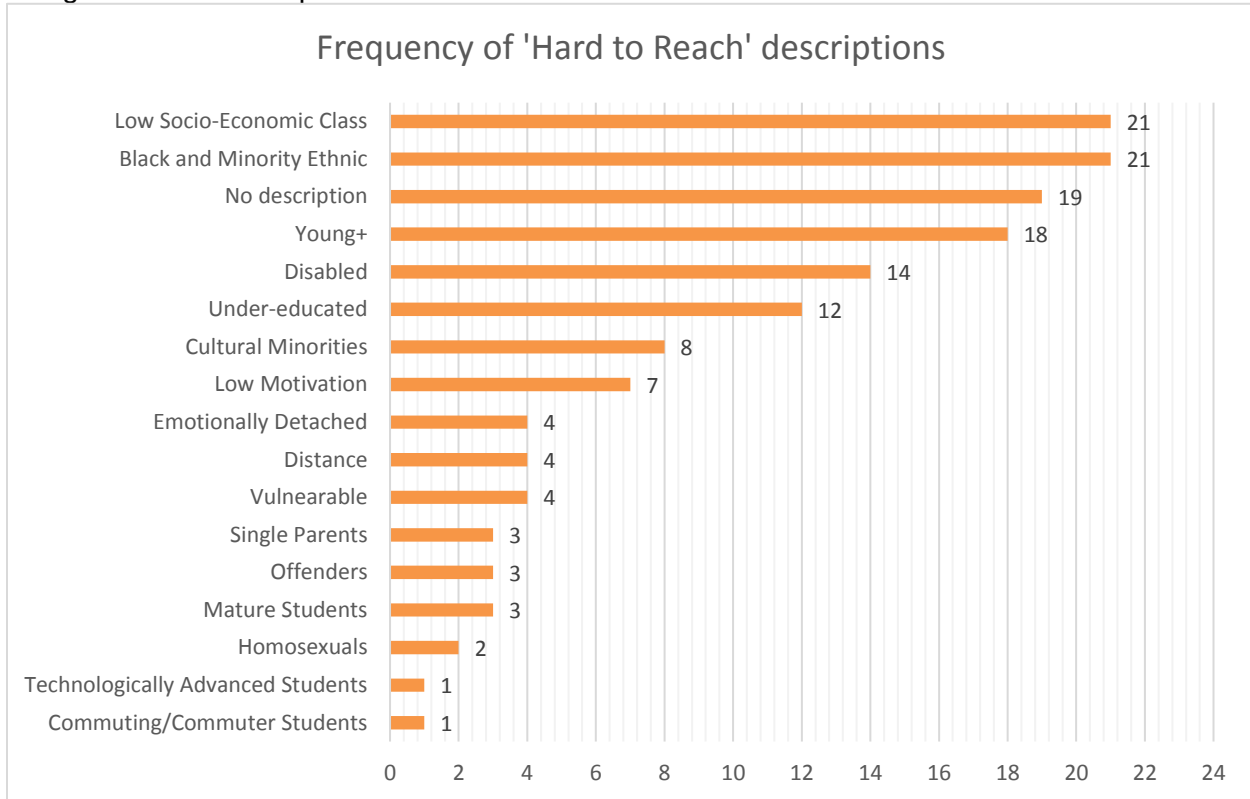


Figure 2: Frequency of Descriptions of 'Hard to Reach'

As in Figure 2, the characteristics of 'hard to reach' students are represented in sequence below, from those descriptors with the most mentions to those with the least.

No Description

Of the 101 articles reviewed, there were 19 that offered no description of who 'hard to reach' students are. This raises significant issues about the use of the term 'hard to reach', as it is frequently being used in a blanket approach to describe students based on presumed shared understanding, without any further specification to which students are being described. Of the 30 articles that contained no description of 'hard to reach' students, three also offered no method to engage 'hard to reach' students (Sebold, 2008; Bemak, 2005; and Frerichs and Adeleman, 1974).

Black and Minority Ethnic Groups

Excluding articles that provided no description for the term 'hard to reach', black and minority ethnic (BME) groups are described as 'hard to reach' most frequently, appearing in 21 of the 101 articles. For instance, Bhattachary *et al* (2003) suggest "particular attention" is given to minority ethnic groups through special provisions for 'hard to reach' groups. Wishart and Green (2010) explore how to engage 'hard to reach' learners from the "multi-ethnic Southampton Community", whilst Wagg (2013: 5) suggests 'hard to reach' may include minority ethnic people as well as a range of other groups within his description.

Low Socio-Economic Class

The second most frequent category described as 'hard to reach' are those from low socio-economic classes, referred to in 21 of the 101 articles. These articles explore young people growing up in some of 'England's poorest neighbourhoods' (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2007; Brooks-Wilson and Snell, 2012). Milbourne (2002) also draws on the links between 'hard to reach' and the experiences of low income, lack of employment, low skills, low self-esteem, poor health and housing conditions and even those living in high-crime environments. Additionally, drawing on Milbourne's descriptions of 'hard to reach' crime also features within a number of articles as an aspect of 'hard to reach', whereby in six of the texts crime and 'young offenders' or 'ex-offenders' were described as 'hard to reach' (Wagg, 2013; Ntloedibe-Kuswani, 2008; Mackenzie-Robb, 2007; Brener and Wilson, 2001; Broadhurst *et al*, 2005; Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2002).

Young+

As with the above example, the term 'young' was used in conjunction with a variety of other descriptors for 'hard to reach' and therefore the category young+ was developed, where the term 'young' is used alongside another descriptor. The breakdown of this category is shown below in Figure 3. For example, Eccleston (2004) explores young mothers and young people, Izekor (2007) investigates young black people and Ntloedibe-Kuswani (2008) highlights young offenders as 'hard to reach'. The term 'young' was used, alongside other categories, in fourteen articles. Despite this, 'young' was never used as a singular description for what makes a student 'hard to reach'.

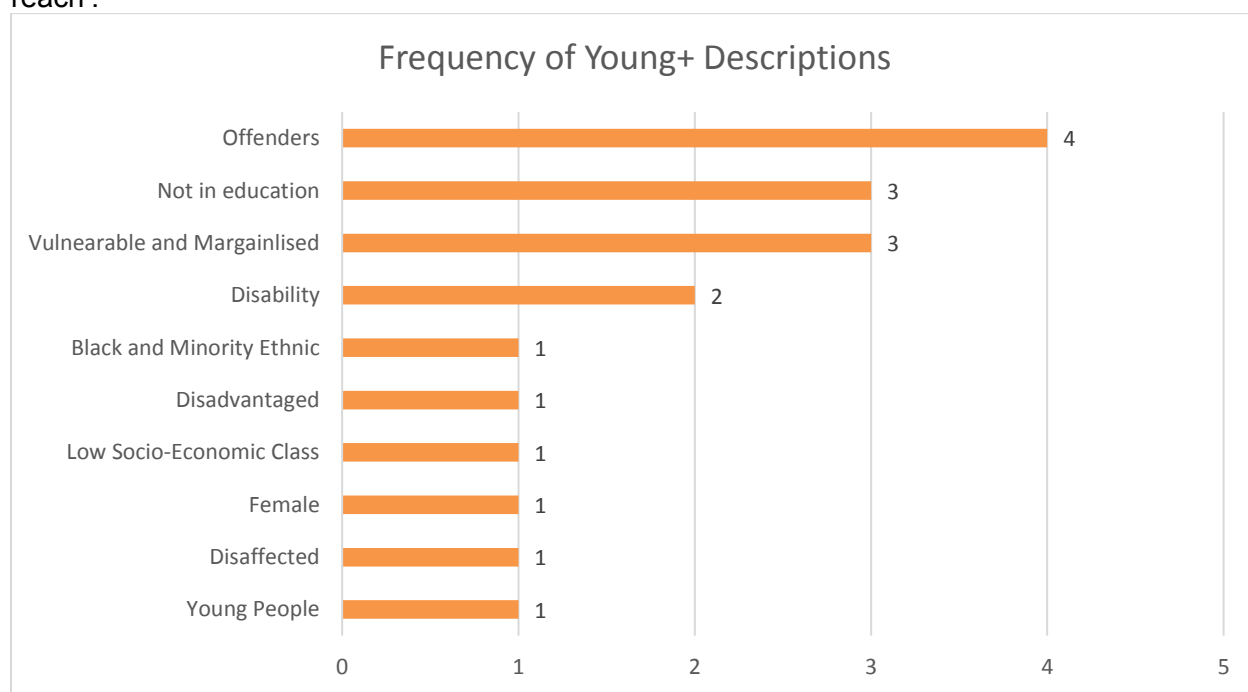


Figure 3: Frequency of Young+ Descriptions of 'Hard to Reach' Students

Disability

'Hard to reach' was described as a result of disability in fourteen articles. In codifying the data, and in line with the Equality Act 2010 and requirement for Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) in the UK, specific learning difficulties, mental health conditions and long-term health conditions were included in the definition of disability (Equality Act, 2010). Kellet (2004), through exploring how to reach the 'hard to reach' through interactive pedagogy, describes those with severe and

complex learning difficulties whilst Mackenzie-Robb (2007) draws attention to mental illnesses and learning difficulties in defining 'hard to reach'.

Undereducated

The category of 'undereducated' appeared in twelve of the 101 articles explored, with Knox (1983) describing undereducated adults as a prime example of people whom service providers want to serve but who are 'hard to reach'. Butcher *et al* (2010) also include underachievers and 'scrapers' within this category. Butcher *et al* (2010) use the term 'scrapers' to describe students who had achieved 50% of their marks at D grade and highlight that this term consisted of people from BME communities as well as non A level entrants with declared dyslexia and young men under the age of 21. This literature provides multiple descriptions of 'hard to reach' and has therefore been placed in multiple categories including 'BME', 'disability', 'young+' and 'male'. Additionally, this was also the only article to include 'male' or 'men' in its description of 'hard to reach', without reference to another gender. Similarly, the description of 'women' was used on its own in only 1 of the 101 articles with Mitchell *et al* (2015) exploring female students' disinterest in physical education.

Cultural Minorities

'Cultural minorities' was another code that repeatedly came up in the literature, featuring eight times out of the 101 texts. This category includes articles that discuss learners who have English as a second language such as Wishart and Green (2010), Milbourne (2002), Kelley *et al* (2010) and Brooks-Wilson (2012). Furthermore, other examples of what constitutes cultural minorities are groups that constitute a minority in their society, such as African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanics and Alaskan Natives (Carciun and Associates, 1991), people who do not participate based on their background (Knox, 1987), immigrants (Rudd and Zacharia, 1998) and traveller communities (Ntloedibe-Kuswani, 2008). Interestingly, various methods were offered to engage these 'hard to reach' cultural minorities.

Mature, distance and commuting students

Mature, distance and commuting students were also described as being 'hard to reach' in a combined total of eight articles, with distance learners appearing in four, mature students in two and commuting students in one. For example, Chapman *et al* (2007) highlight the large market of mature students but cite their differing priorities and requirement for flexibility as a cause of their being 'hard to reach'. Additionally, Kirkwood (2015) explores whether there needs to be a 'joining-up' of blended and distance education to reach these 'hard to reach' student groups. Parke and Tracy-Mumford (2002) also examine how certain states in the United States are influencing online learning to reach these 'hard to reach' distance learners, whilst Jameson (1998) looks at how commuting students are termed 'hard to reach', owing to their lack of contact time on campus, and how institutions can alter their strategies to bring the campus to 'hard to reach' students.

Vulnerable and marginalised

Vulnerable and marginalised populations were described as 'hard to reach' in a total of four articles whereby no extended definition or outlining of what is meant by 'vulnerable' or 'marginalised' was given. The term vulnerable was often used alongside the term 'hard to reach' rather than as a description of the term. Smith (2010) highlights the benefits of research into 'vulnerable and hard to reach' groups. As well as being used in conjunction with the term 'hard to reach', 'vulnerable' was also used alongside the term 'at risk'; Ecclestone (2004) explores programmes targeted at 'at risk', 'non-traditional' and 'vulnerable' groups.

Low motivation

Low motivation was used as a descriptor for the term 'hard to reach' in seven of the 101 articles. Sternberg (2002) describes those with motivational problems as 'hard to reach' in an article aimed at exploring how to raise the achievement of all students. The phrase 'emotionally detached' was used to describe 'hard to reach' in three articles, with Boone *et al* (2011) highlighting the need to get 'out of the counselling center', in order to serve the 'hard to reach' students who do not seek counselling. Protheroe (2005) also describes an emotional aspect of 'hard to reach' students by referring to them as 'emotionally distant'.

Single parents

Single parents were categorised as 'hard to reach' in three articles. Cormack and Konidari (2007) outline single parents alongside disabled students and those from minority ethnic communities in describing 'hard to reach', whilst Craciun and Associates (1991) provide a definition of 'hard to reach' that includes cultural minorities, ethnic minorities, individuals experiencing disabilities, homosexuals and single parents.

Methods to Engage 'Hard to Reach' Students

After discerning the descriptions of 'hard to reach' from the 101 core articles, we also looked at whether they offered any methods for reaching out to 'hard to reach' students. The articles offered many different approaches adopted in attempts to engage 'hard to reach' students, as outlined below in Figure 4.

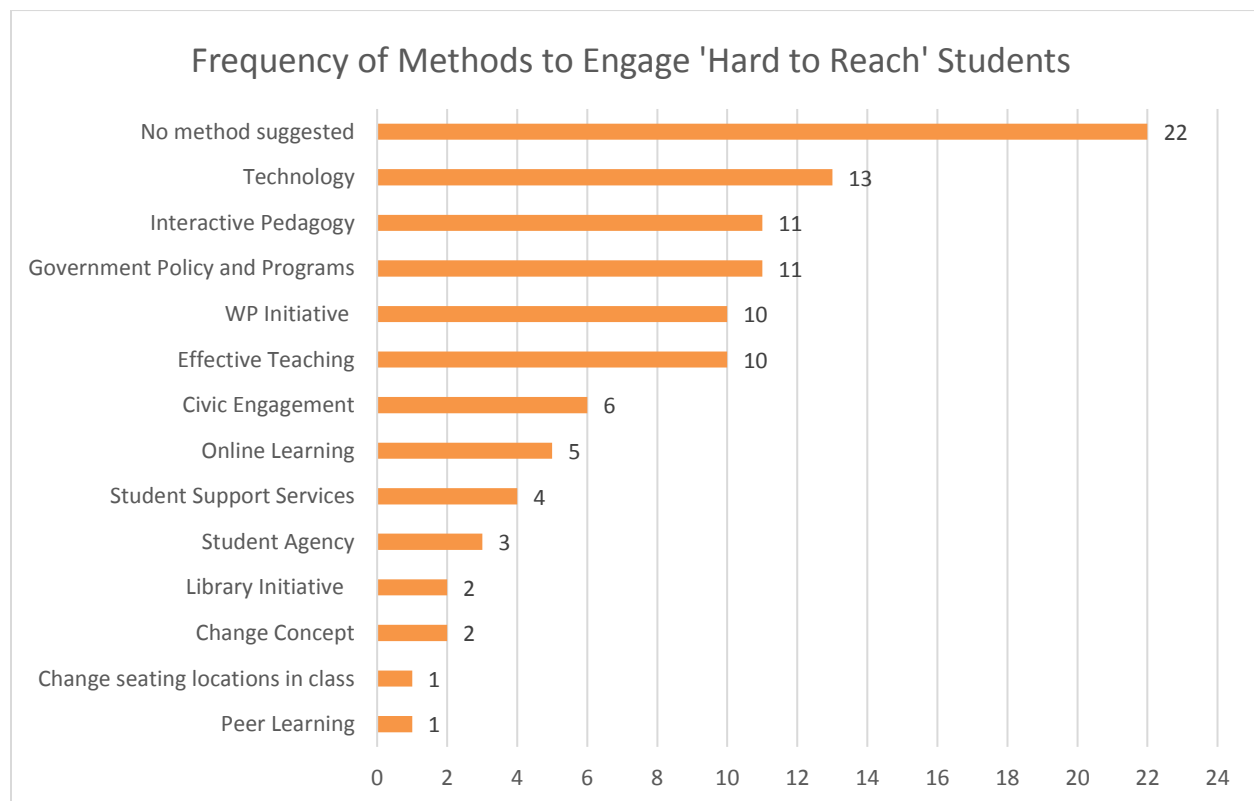


Figure 4: Frequency of Methods to Engage 'Hard to Reach' Students

From the 101 articles, 22 of them offered no method for how to engage the 'hard to reach' students. This highlights another significant issue in the use of the term 'hard to reach'. Articles

frequently discuss 'hard to reach' students, with or without a definition of who these students are, without suggesting a method of to how reach these students.

Widening participation Initiatives

Widening participation initiatives featured ten times as a method to engage 'hard to reach' students. Interestingly, the literature did not use 'widening participation' as a definition of 'hard to reach', but used it as a method to engage these students. These ten pieces of literature explained that an increase in these initiatives were key to reaching out to the 'hard to reach' students. Chapman *et al* (2007) examines how widening participation initiatives such as greater collaboration between further and higher education, for example 'top up degrees' and access courses, could be used to reach 'mature students'. Similarly, Sharp (2011) notes the importance of further education colleges embedding themselves within their communities in being able to reach disadvantaged young adults. The remaining twelve articles that mentioned widening participation, as a method to reach the 'hard to reach', offered different approaches, including: improving instruction, programmes for at-risk students (Calabrese *et al*, 2007) and developing new ways of teaching 'hard to reach' students in Alaska (Carciun and Associates, 1991).

Online Learning

Another method that was suggested was to use online learning to engage the 'hard to reach' which occurred five times throughout the literature. Some pieces discussed developing a range of online learning e-resources, which could be utilised in reaching different groups of 'hard to reach' students. Parke and Tracy-Mumford (2000) believe that 'hard to reach' groups, such as distance learners, could be reached through developing strong online resources. Similarly, Barcelona (2009) believes that online learning could be used to reach older adults.

Some articles referred to the use of both online learning, as discussed above, and technology as a means to engage the 'hard to reach'. Ntloedibe-Kuswani (2008) believes that a combination between technology and online learning would lead to reaching young offenders and community minorities. Technology emerged as one of the review codes as it was referred to in thirteen of the articles and was the most popular after those articles that offered no method. The use of technology varied across a broad spectrum of applications that included SMS messaging (Wishart and Green, 2010) to reach students with English as a second language. Hillier (2009) believes that technology was the key in engaging young students, such as through virtual learning environments, multimedia hardware and software and social networking in vocational education and training.

Interactive Pedagogy

The third most popular method found within the literature was that of interactive pedagogy, which was referred to eleven times. Interactive pedagogy was explicitly used by Vicars (2011) in utilising art-based pedagogies to reach low socio-economic groups and BME students, and by Kellet (2004), in connecting with students who suffer from disabilities. Additionally, interactive pedagogy also included such methods as game-based learning (Cassar and Jang, 2010) and playful learning (Peter, 2009) for reaching similar 'hard to reach' groups. A method that allowed students to engage further with their learning interactively was peer-learning, which was mentioned just once. The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (2002) investigated the importance of peer-learning in supporting students with Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse (AODA) problems.

Effective Teaching

Effective teaching was suggested ten times in the articles as a means of engaging 'hard to reach' students. Two of the articles (Kilgore *et al*, 2002; Tally, 1972) did not offer a description of who 'hard to reach' students are. However, Protheroe (2005) argues that teachers who take the time

to build relationships with their students can be a means of reaching those students who have low motivation, especially those who are described as emotionally distant from their studies. Similarly, Sternberg (2002) proposes that teachers should undertake a psychological approach to teaching, specifically in relation to theories of successful intelligence. Successful intelligence suggests teachers should begin to understand and appreciate the differences between the knowledge of school and the knowledge that can be demonstrated in everyday life. Knox (1987) described a more outward-looking approach to effective teaching. He considers how teachers need to look out across the world and take ideas that have been implemented in other international institutions and inform their own teaching in order to reach the 'hard to reach'. On the other hand, one text from the literature review suggests that students who sit at the back of the classroom become 'hard to reach', which suggests that the onus should be on the student to be within "reaching distance", rather than upon the teacher to alter her/his technique (Shernoff *et al*, 2016).

Student Support Services and Library Initiatives

Another means suggested to engage the 'hard to reach' was the involvement of student support services, this method being mentioned four times out of the 101 articles. Student support services ranged from study skills support (Payne and Lyman, 1996) to improved counselling support and advice (Boone *et al*, 2011). Furthermore, student support services included the introduction of a faculty-based student support co-ordinator to reach those students who are failing modules, not attending or not submitting work (Sharpe *et al*, 2013). Another internal mechanism for supporting students has been categorised as the development of library initiatives in reaching the 'hard to reach', mentioned twice in the literature. Black and Blakeship (2010) argue that library initiatives focused on helping students find research methods and access face-to-face assistance would greatly benefit distance learners. Knox (1983) also echoed this statement about the importance of library initiatives to reach under-educated adults.

Civic Engagement

Civic engagement was another method offered by six of the 101 articles in reaching the 'hard to reach'. Orme *et al* (2007) and Kagan and Duggan (2011) believe that community projects should be utilised to integrate 'hard to reach' students in their communities, which would allow this method to reach marginalised groups and low socio-economic classes. Colby *et al* (2003) state that moral and civic issues must be integrated into the curriculum to reach 'hard to reach' students, as it could motivate them to engage with the wider community, even though they do not specifically describe who these students are. Similarly, Foskett (2003) states that the fact that there are 'hard to reach' students is because of a non-engaging curriculum and, therefore, the curriculum in Higher Education needs to change. Additionally, there were ten other occasions that highlighted how government policy and programmes can reach the 'hard to reach'. For example, Peterson and Strasler (1986) examine how dropping mandatory school ages for children in South Carolina could trickle into improving these students' chances at accessing and succeeding in Higher Education in the State.

Student Agency

A different method offered was that of increasing student agency. There were three occasions throughout the articles that mentioned or alluded to types of student agency. McCombs (2002) explains that, by giving students control and choice, it was possible to reach the 'hard to reach' students. Furthermore, Sander (2013) explains that an increase of dialogue in educational settings would allow students from low socio-economic backgrounds to become easier to 'reach'.

Implications of Findings

The systematic literature review of 'hard to reach' students in higher education has raised some key issues and thoughts for future use of the term. In setting up the study, a decision was made to focus quite specifically on this one term. The review therefore does not touch on the many other related sources of literature that are likely to discuss similar groups of students, such as in relation to equality and diversity, equity, multi-culturalism, widening participation or specific targets such as BME, commuting or disabled students.

The major challenge we faced in this literature review is that, where 'hard to reach' has been ill-defined, if at all, students are classified as a generic group, without specification of who these students are, and the literature review has shown how frequently the term 'hard to reach student' is being used without due consideration to the type of students being described. Even when defined, the term is also troubling owing to implicit power structures contained within the definition that suggest there is an element of responsibility on the behalf of the student to be within better reach. There was one interesting method of reaching 'hard to reach' students that was offered, which differs greatly from the others discussed above. It involves questioning the very nature of the terminology. Brooks-Wilson and Snell (2012) argue that it is imperative that we change the terminology in order to reach 'hard to reach' students. Additionally, Loveday (2015) argues that the term itself makes students 'hard to reach', owing to the negative connotations that are attached to it. This critique of 'hard to reach' seems to be gaining increasing traction amongst practitioners (Goddard, 2017). Whilst 'hard to reach' may have practical uses as a term for some cases, it should show awareness of particular student groups, context and complexity. Until that point is reached, empirical evidence on the 'hard to reach' can be of little value, as comparisons cannot be made and coherent messages cannot be drawn out.

Conclusion

This article has presented a summary of the findings of the review, a more detailed literature review is published on the REACT website (www.studentengagement.ac.uk). The REACT systematic literature review of 'hard to reach' has highlighted how complex and varied the landscape is for the use of this term. The review has demonstrated how the phrase 'hard to reach' is applicable to many different groups of students in many different contexts. The term has shown resistance to being ultimately defined as describing one group of students. Throughout the work of the REACT project, discussions have often implied the phrase is synonymous with widening participation (WP). There are similarities within the WP categories and some of the groups that have been described as 'hard to reach', but the two terms are not inseparably intertwined. WP initiatives, however, were suggested as a method to engage 'hard to reach' students, which could suggest these initiatives could be expanded to include more students. From the literature in this review, 'hard to reach' has been used diversely and liberally to describe students who are disengaged, disenfranchised and detached from their educational experience. Some of the literature suggested methods to alleviate this aspect of the student experience. Methods in the literature focus mostly around delivery of content, pedagogical style, technological applications, or, changing the curriculum to reenergise these students to engage them with their education. From the literature in this search, and other papers within this journalⁱⁱⁱ, there seems to be a need to redirect energies towards reshaping the definition and application of 'hard to reach', shifting towards a term that would eliminate any implicit power structure.

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ⁱ For further details of the REACT programme, see the Introduction to this Journal, as well as Lowe and Dunne, and Dunne and Lowe, this Journal

ⁱⁱ Where these occasions occur the figures attached to the categories are not representative of the amount of literature in the review, but the amount of descriptions attached to 'hard to reach' within the text.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Cook-Sather and Porte, as well as Goddard in this Journal.