

### Exploring the role of co-curricular student engagement in relation to student retention, attainment and improving inclusivity

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#### Background

Research conducted over a number of years has indicated a link between a student's educational involvement and positive outcomes (Astin, 1984; Chickering and Gamson, 1987; Kuh, 2005; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005), particularly academic achievement, satisfaction, success and retention (Thomas, 2012). Whilst the term 'student engagement' can have many meanings, Dunne (2016) has noted an expansion of student roles related to change or enhancement.

The UK's National Union of Students (NUS) claims that participation varies significantly across universities and that only 16% of students are active participants in Students' Union- (SU-) related activities (NUS, 2013). It further shows uneven participation rates between students with different characteristics and commitments. This is most apparent when comparing such groups as: commuter and resident students; mature and under-twenty-five-year-olds; those with or without caring responsibilities; disabled and able-bodied students (NUS, 2013). Some groups and individual students might experience barriers or lack motivation to participate, owing to the nature of initiatives on offer; this is perhaps because SU-focused engagement activities are linked mostly to processes and practices that aim to enhance and inform the *collective* student learning experience (Little *et al*, 2009) and not primarily a student's *personal* attainment and study objectives.

The uneven participation of students in SU activities presents a significant challenge to student engagement. That there is a serious challenge to be addressed is nowhere more apparent than in the contrast between the respective benefit gain of the actively-involved student and "the passive, reticent, or unprepared student" (Astin, 1999, 526). The most compelling driver for prioritising student engagement is evidence that "engagement increases the odds that any student – educational and social background notwithstanding – will attain his or her educational and personal objectives, acquire the skills and competencies demanded by the challenges of the twenty-first century, and enjoy the intellectual and monetary advantages associated" (Kuh, 2009). Focusing on initiatives which help to enhance both the personal and collective educational experience might, logically, be more attractive to a wider body of students able to share these benefits more widely - for example, student engagement initiatives which involve academic engagement, which have been shown to be a vital element in high levels of success academic (Thomas, 2012).

Any co-curricular activities that place a central focus on student-led enhancements must be inclusive, particularly of 'hard-to-reach' students – not only because institutions have an obligation to provide the best opportunities for all their students, but also because any enhancement-driven activity must be representative of and accessible to every student if it is to offer enhancement for the whole student cohort. When developing co-curricular activities, inclusivity is crucial in leading to benefits for students, universities and unions.

This paper will describe aspects of a research project which has been carried out as part of the wider REACT project (see Dunne and Lowe, 2017, in this issue for more information on the REACT project). This research explored the relationship between participation in co-curricular activities (CCAs) and various indicators of student success, with particular focus upon attainment and retention. The discussion, supported by research

## Theme 3: Retention and Attainment

evidence, will explore the motivations of students for participating in such activities in order to understand better how this form of student engagement may be made more inclusive and representative. This research has focused on the following questions:

1. Is there a relationship between participating in co-curricular activities, attainment and retention?
2. What motivates students to get involved in co-curricular activities?
3. How can understanding motivations illuminate the nature of any relationship between co-curricular activities, attainment and retention?

The study was conducted at three different universities which are all running a form of co-curricular participation related to enhancing the student experience. The universities and their initiatives were selected to form the core of REACT because behind the broad similarities between the student engagement focus/agenda of each, they offer some potentially informative contrasts between their respective contexts and organisational responses to the challenge of engaging students.’ offer a similar focus and agenda around student engagement, but that has been organised differently in very different contexts. Their initiatives include in common an active role for students and assume a level of responsibility for the student involved.

### *The University of Winchester - Student Fellows Scheme*

Becoming a university in 2005, Winchester is a relatively small, ‘values-driven’ institution with around 7500 students and a focus on the Arts, Humanities, Business and Education. Winchester has pioneered a range of successful Widening Participation (WP) initiatives in recent years and tends to recruit above the sector benchmark in terms of students from state schools, low participation neighbourhoods and students with disabilities. The University also has both a good track record of retaining students with protected characteristics in the UK Equality Act (Equality Act, 2010) and high proportions of students who achieve a ‘good’ degree. Perhaps representative of its high level of recruitment from the local area, Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students make up only a small proportion of the population (8.4% in 2014/15).

In 2013, Winchester founded the Student Fellows Scheme (SFS), in partnership with Winchester Student Union. This initiative provides students with a bursary of £600 to work in partnership with a member of University or Student Union staff to complete an educational enhancement project. Projects can be developed by students or staff and they run across the academic year; they have covered a wide range of topics, including enhancing the experience of commuter students, enhancing module feedback processes and evaluating the SFS itself (see El-Hakim *et al*, 2016). This is a flexible, accessible scheme, which actively aims to recruit students who are representative of the diversity of the wider student body. Few restrictions, therefore, are placed on who can be a Student Fellow, the only criteria being the feasibility of the project and the capacity of the student to complete it (i.e. balancing the workload with her/his studies). Previous evaluations of the scheme have confirmed its success in recruiting a wide range of students who might be considered ‘hard to reach’. In spite of the payment, SFS is not treated like a job either by the students involved or those organising it. The bursary is always portrayed as a way of thanking students for their contribution to enhancing the institution and to facilitating the engagement of people who might otherwise be unable to take part because of personal barriers.

### *London Metropolitan University - Peer-Assisted Student Success Scheme*

London Metropolitan University (LMU) is a post-92, inner-city university, with around 13,000 students and a long-standing commitment to social responsibility and social justice, exemplified by its focus on enabling access to higher education (Office for Fair Access 2016). The institution is one of the most diverse and socially-inclusive universities in the UK, characterised by a student profile of almost 50% “non-traditional” students (Blagburn and

## Theme 3: Retention and Attainment

Clutterbuck, 2011). The majority of students are from working-class backgrounds, have multiple commitments - including work and family - in their lives and are often mature. Many students are the first in their families to enter higher education and/or are from Black and Minority Ethnic communities. The fact that many learners not only have busy lives but are also characterised by mixed abilities, motivations and expectations (Abegglen *et al.* 2016) presents particular challenges to the organising of co-curricular activities.

Various student-engagement initiatives and projects have been institutionally embedded and prioritised to accommodate the diverse needs of the student population and they have the common aim of creating a greater sense of belonging, academic participation and success. In order to support these developments strategically, the Peer-Assisted Student Success (PASS) scheme has been implemented, in the form of a course-embedded model in all undergraduate degree programmes (courses), to boost the academic success of students and cohort-bonding. It is a non-remedial, peer-led approach to learning, whereby trained and paid second- and third-year student mentors (Success Coaches) provide academic coaching to first-year students. These Success Coaches have a clear function – to support the learning experience of students and to facilitate their transition into Higher Education – but they themselves simultaneously benefit from the personal acquisition, whilst carrying out their role, of a range of skills and competencies. This is therefore a semi-professional role – akin to paid employment in its structure – which also provides a direct opportunity to enhance learning and the educational experience.

### *The University of Exeter - Change Agents*

The University of Exeter, a research-intensive institution, has around 20,000 students over four campuses in Devon and Cornwall. Exeter has, over the last decade, consistently achieved top-10 rankings in the National Student Survey (NSS) and boasts a) a high proportion of students who graduate with 'good' honours degrees and b) a very low withdrawal rate. Although traditionally, the University attracted relatively low proportions of WP students such as BME and those in the lowest socio-economic classifications, it has endeavoured to improve its inclusivity and now has close to 40% of students from WP backgrounds. As well as encouraging a higher diversity of students to take up courses there, Exeter has expended great efforts on offering to *all* its students during their time at the University a wide range of engagement opportunities.

Change Agents pioneered student-led change initiatives at Exeter and in the UK. Over the last nine years, Exeter has developed a student-led, action-research initiative that enables students to act as change agents in their educational environment. Students negotiate a topic of concern or interest and engage in a small research project. They then take responsibility for providing recommendations and solutions and putting them into practice. To date, hundreds of Change Agents' projects have promoted some important developments in curriculum delivery and employability activity in many subject areas across the University. Students do not receive any tangible incentives, but participate for the opportunity to have real influence at Exeter and to improve things for their fellow students.

For more information about the three institutions and their CCAs, please see Dunne and Lowe (2017) elsewhere in this issue.

### **Methodology**

This research had two different foci: 1) understanding the motivations or experience of students who are Success Coaches, Student Fellows or Change Agents and 2) using this to understand better the relationship between CCA participation, retention and attainment. To achieve this, it was necessary to collect a mixture of primary data, through a survey of Student Engagement (SE) participants in each institution, and secondary data more broadly relating to our institutions.

## Theme 3: Retention and Attainment

### *Secondary data*

The first strand of this research has consisted of analysing secondary data from the three institutions. The purpose of this has been to contextualise the impact of participating in CCAs when compared with the wider institutional cohort. These data have been drawn from various internal sources, as well as UK-wide data from organisations including the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA 2017) and the Office for Fair Access (OFFA 2017). These data provide an institutional overview for the attainment and retention of the student body. This has been an integral part of the wider REACT research project that is beyond the scope of this journal.

### *Survey*

Data was gathered twice, in two years (2015 and 2016), through a questionnaire which asked students demographic and experience-based questions, inclusion of which was not intended to pre-determine 'hard to reach' categories of students, but to develop a rich understanding of who was being reached and what methods might be used to engage different groups. This was contingent on a good response rate to the survey to give an accurate picture of who was participating and what motivated them. Table 1 shows the number of respondents across the two years at each institution. Because the different university schemes have different timelines, a specific week in December was selected for data collection in all three universities in 2015 and 2016. Given the diversity of activities being surveyed, different methods of data collection were chosen for each scheme including both paper and online distribution of the questionnaire. Owing to the way Change Agents is organised, the sample population was available only for the whole year, which is larger than the targeted December response rate, and thus the response rate is underestimated.

<b>University</b>	<b>Number of Responses</b>	<b>Sample Population</b>	<b>Response rate</b>
Winchester	97	113	85.8%
LMU	99	279	35.5%
Exeter	25	126	19.8%

**Table 1.** Survey Response Rate

Understanding why students participate in CCAs can allow for the development of targeted interventions to make accessing such schemes more inclusive and give a better understanding of the barriers students face (whether actual or perceived). Participants were asked to rate the importance of different motivations in their decision to join their university's CCA. The motivations presented in the survey were based on student-engagement literature, input from the REACT steering group and the experiences of the co-ordinators of these initiatives (for a full list of motivations, please see the Appendix). The questionnaire was distributed to CCA participants mid-way through working in their particular roles.

### *Data Analysis*

To analyse the questionnaire data, we looked at the three biggest differences between motivations of students who were members of particular groupings that might be considered 'hard to reach'. In the results section, we present a range of different student characteristics, divided into different groupings (e.g. for ethnicity, the groupings are 'White British' and 'BME British') so enabling comparison of the contrasting motivations for each group. This means the analysis will be necessarily broad, with the purpose of descriptively outlining key differences which can inform enhancement of CCA initiatives. All of these are student groups that can be seen as 'hard to reach' (as explained below).

### Theme 3: Retention and Attainment

- *Mode of study*

Part-time students are often considered a 'hard-to-reach' group for universities, because they are often physically off campus and tend to be mature students with such varied other commitments as employment or caring (Frith and Wilson, 2014). Owing to the nature of their experience, communications, information and support for part-time students can often be inadequate or absent (Butcher, 2015). Because of the multiple commitments and lower levels of contact time, part-time students may be at greater risk of withdrawal. Any CCA attempting to be inclusive and representative must consider accessibility to part-time students. This analysis will draw distinctions between the motivations for being involved in a CCA. The groups explored here are part-time and full-time students.
- *Commuters*

Commuter students' engagement with university life may be limited, owing to conflicting demands on their attention and also to their being time poor as a consequence of their commuting (Jacoby, 2000). In addition, many aspects of campus culture are inherently challenging to commuters. Kuh (2001) identifies the importance, to educational attainment and a satisfying commuter experience, of enriching 'educational experiences' and 'supportive campus environments'. Evidence from the US National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) indicates that the further away from campus a student lives, the bigger the negative impact this has upon achievement. This can reflect students' priorities, with many choosing to focus purely on academic studies rather than on developing relationships. The respondents were asked to rate how long they spend per week commuting to campus. For the purpose of this discussion, this study has drawn a distinction between those who commute more or less than five hours per week, based upon categories devised for the UK Engagement Survey (Buckley 2014).
- *First generation*

There is a wealth of research that suggests first-generation students (those who come from families with no prior participation in higher education) experience lower attainment (Pascarella *et al*, 2004; Sirin, 2005), something often thought to be on account of cultural factors. (Reay *et al*, 2010). Given the increased sense of belonging that results from engagement in co-curricular activities (Bensimon, 2009; Kuh, 2009; McRae, 2007), some inferences can be drawn from the motivations of first-generation students engaged in the CCA schemes. This group is divided by whether the respondent has a parent or guardian who attended university.
- *International students*

Students who come to the UK from overseas to study can face a range of cultural and language barriers to engagement (Benzie, 2010). With greater numbers of international students entering UK higher education, understanding the extent to which they are accessing CCAs is vital to ensure their relevancy. With only a small number of responses from students beyond the European Union (EU), this analysis will focus on the differences in motivations between UK and EU students.
- *Gender*

The issue of gender and attainment is a long and storied one, if there is consensus, it is often suggested that women broadly do better than men, but with a reasonable amount of variance by subject area (Richardson and Woodley, 2003). In response to the survey, only one student reported personal gender as 'non-binary'; whether this suggests that either the schemes or the survey need to be more inclusive to such

## Theme 3: Retention and Attainment

students is unclear. Consequently, the analysis will explore only differences between male and female students.

- *Black and Minority Ethnic*  
Understanding the experience of students who are black or from a minority ethnic group has been at the core of a number of widening access and research projects for a substantial period of time (e.g. ECU, 2011). There continue to be differences in attainment and retention related to ethnicity (Cotton *et al*, 2016, Richardson, 2015). In spite of evidence that BME students' access to higher education is still limited to specific areas and institutions (ECU, 2014), there has been relative success in widening access. This means it is even more significant that there is equality of access to opportunities which can have positive links with attainment, retention and success. For the benefits of this analysis, only UK home students were included to be consistent with reporting from bodies such as HESA. This analysis will discuss the motivations of students who are either 'White British' or 'BME British'.
- *Age*  
Given the likelihood for mature students to have other responsibilities (Smith, 2008) or to be studying a course related to their career (Pollard *et al*, 2008), they are often seen as 'hard to reach'. Mature students are often regarded as taking an instrumental approach to their education, leading to lower levels of social engagement (Thomas, 2012). However, the numbers of mature students are increasing (NUS, 2012). Therefore, to be truly inclusive, any CCA would have to attract a representative range of ages and include flexibility to accommodate their needs. The analysis will discuss differences between students who self-identified as 'mature students' and those who did not.
- *Learning difficulty*  
Mortimore and Crozier (2006) identified the risks of withdrawal and struggles with academic studies experienced by students with learning difficulties in a range of different contexts. Whilst there is often a wealth of support for such students, often this support is not used and students experience a 'glass wall' (Madriaga, 2007). For an institution to have a truly inclusive environment, the voices of students with learning difficulties must be heard and access to co-curricular opportunities must be assured. The analysis will show differences in motivation based upon students who self-identified as having a 'Specific Learning Difficulty' and those who did not.

### *Limitations*

With the data available, it will not be possible to determine the exact nature of the link between CCA participation and attainment and retention or any causality. These are areas which will be explored in more depth with further study. The data discussed here enable us to suggest relationships between these variables, with the survey providing some contextual understanding.

While these three university CCA initiatives were chosen because there was prior acknowledgement of their inclusivity, there were certain groups who were under-represented in the questionnaire responses; thus, from this survey, a discussion about the motivations of students with a physical disability or care leavers will not be possible.

One limitation of our 'snap-shot' strategy was that while Student Fellows and Success Coaches are in place all year, there is a 'rolling' nature of student involvement in the Change Agents programme at Exeter. Consequently, the sample population was smaller at Exeter than at the other two institutions. Whilst this reflects the number of students participating at this time, it is a much smaller number than participate across the year.

## Theme 3: Retention and Attainment

This paper reports broadly on quantitative data, in order to illustrate and understand better the contextual processes of student engagement in CCAs. In spite of the use of quantitative data, this research was conducted with the intention of enriching understanding and identifying broad trends, more akin to qualitative research. The data should not, therefore, be viewed as proving any connections, but rather as deepening understanding and suggesting new directions of study. This paper ends with highlighted issues, from which lessons may be learned that can lead to future research and enhancements to practice for similar schemes.

### Results - Secondary Data

#### *Attainment*

In terms of exploring a link between attainment and participation in co-curricular activities, Table 2 outlines the percentage of student participants who achieved a First Class or Upper Second Class degree who graduated in the year 2014/15.

University	Co-curricular participant attainment (1 <sup>st</sup> or 2.1)	Institutional attainment (1 <sup>st</sup> or 2:1)
Winchester	91%	77%
LMU	84%	53%
Exeter	100%	86%

**Table 2.** Attainment by institution

Given the diversity of focus and experience that each initiative offers, it is notable that the students participating in each CCA have higher levels of attainment than the institutional average. Both Winchester and Exeter see a 14% increase in overall attainment for CCA participants. Exeter has the highest overall attainment, but it is still notable that every student who was a Change Agent and graduated that year achieved a 'good' honours degree. The largest increase between institutional and CCA attainment is at LMU, where there is 31% increase in the number of 'good' degrees. A likely explanation for this is that it is a pre-requisite for Success Coaches to be high achievers so that they can successfully fulfil their support role of other students. Though these data are not intended to demonstrate a direct causal relationship, this is a compelling picture of the attainment of those participating in these CCA activities.

#### *Retention*

Being able to keep your students is obviously one of the fundamental functions of a university. 'Drop-out' figures are often scrutinised in the media as a way of assessing the health of the higher-education sector and individual institutions (Williams, 2016). Consequently, the issue of retention has been investigated in great depth (Thomas, 2012; Christie *et al*, 2005). Kuh (2009) has made the link between a student's level of engagement and persistence, and there is evidence that extra-curricular activities increase engagement. Whilst the data presented in Table 3 does not prove that involvement in CCAs improves retention, a clear relationship emerges.

University	Co-curricular participant withdrawal	Institutional withdrawal*
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## Theme 3: Retention and Attainment

Winchester	0%	5.7%
LMU	0%	18.3%
Exeter	0%	2.7%

\*HESA non-continuation rates 2014/15

**Table 3.** Withdrawal rates

This comparison is only illustrative, as the HESA statistics are based on students dropping out after the first year of study, whereas the co-curricular participant data is across all years. However, they do provide an insightful comparison and the fact that no CCA participants across the three institutions withdrew is striking in and of itself. Whether such activities encourage students to remain at their institution, or such activities attract those more likely to stay is unclear. Either way, these data do underline the importance of making such schemes inclusive.

### Results - Questionnaire data

This section will draw upon results from the survey exploring the importance of different types of motivation for different groups of students (see Appendix for full list). The intention behind understanding these motivations is to better contextualise the findings about the relationship between attainment, retention and CCA participation and to shed light on what might increase the 'reach' of CCAs. This section will draw out the three motivations within which there were the greatest disparities amongst those who rated the scale as 'very important'. This can be used to highlight a range of ways schemes can be organised or communicated in order to benefit or attract different students.

#### *Mode of study*

Motivation	FT	PT	Difference
To broaden my horizons	46.7%	21.4%	25.8%
Make a difference to my programme, for others	53.8%	78.6%	24.8%
To enhance my understanding of my area of study	47.2%	28.8%	18.4%

**Table 4.** Motivations with the greatest disparity rated 'very important' by mode of study

Most of the motivations which participants were asked about were rated similarly, irrespective of whether a student was full- or part-time. However, as Table 4 shows, a few distinct differences in motivation emerged from this group. It appears that there is a more altruistic motivation for co-curricular participation among part-time students, who are nearly a quarter more likely to be motivated by changing things for others and less motivated by their own development and understanding. Whilst part-time students made up only 7.9% of the total respondents, this is a broadly representative proportion of part-time students in the wider student body across the institutions.

#### *Commuters*

### Theme 3: Retention and Attainment

Motivation	0-5 hours per week commute	More than 5 hours per week commute	Difference
Make a difference to my programme, for me	36.3%	55.6%	19.3%
To develop my project management skills	60.6%	41.7%	18.6%
Make a difference to my programme, for others	51.9%	64.4%	12.5%

**Table 5.** Motivations with the greatest disparity rated 'very important' by length of commute

Table 5 indicates that those with longer commutes are more motivated by making changes than by their personal development. This is further supported by the fact that the motivation most commonly rated as 'very important' by those with longer commutes was 'Because I wanted to Help' (66.7%). Those who commuted fewer than five hours per week most commonly recorded the motivation 'To develop my project management skills' as very important (60.6%), which, as the table shows, is markedly different for those with longer commutes. That being said, the majority of the motivations showed very little difference by length of commute.

#### *First Generation*

Motivation	Parents attended university	Parents did not attend University	Difference
Make a difference to my university for the sake of the university	20.4%	38.5%	18.1%
To develop my project management skills	66.7%	54.2%	12.5%
To add further experience to my CV	54.1%	43.2%	10.9%

**Table 6.** Motivations with the greatest disparity rated 'very important' by whether respondents parents attended university

As with part-time students, Table 6 seems to indicate that first-generation students are more likely to be motivated by improving things for others, but there is also a clearer focus on personal development as a key motivator. The motivation rated 'very important' most by first-generation students was 'Because I want to help' (61.9% rated this very important). A possible explanation is that students who have fewer expectations or preconceptions about their experience, are more likely to enter an environment that does not suit their needs. That being said, in most areas there were only small differences between these groups (less than 10% difference).

#### *International Students*

### Theme 3: Retention and Attainment

Motivation	UK Student	EU Student	Difference
To gain a broader university experience	43.1%	71.9%	28.8%
To broaden my horizons	36.8%	63.2%	26.5%
Make a difference to my programme for me	31.9%	54.4%	22.5%

**Table 7.** Motivations with the greatest disparity rated 'very important' by whether respondents are from the UK or other EU countries

Table 7 indicates that there were consistent differences in motivations between UK and EU students. In all but two motivations, EU students were more likely to rate something as 'very important'. These two motivations were 'Make a difference to my university for me' and 'Make a difference to my university for the sake of the university', but, even in these areas, there was almost parity between EU and UK students. Where there are gaps, they are quite large and these differences seem to show EU students more motivated about making changes to their own experience or for their own personal development. The motivation most commonly rated as 'very important' by EU students was 'To gain a broader university experience' (71.9%) and 'To develop my project management skills' for UK students (54.8%).

#### Gender

Motivation	Male	Female	Difference
To represent fellow students	27.9%	41.6%	13.7%
To become more involved in the university	36.8%	49.3%	12.5%
Because I wanted to help	50.7%	61.5%	10.8%

**Table 8.** Motivations with the greatest disparity rated 'very important' by gender

Broadly speaking, gender does not seem to be a major factor in determining motivations, as differences in most motivations were smaller than 10%. Table 8 shows that where there are differences, it would appear that female participants tended to be more 'other-directed' or altruistic. The motivation most commonly rated as 'very important' was 'Because I wanted to help' (61.5%) for female students and 'To develop my project management skills' for male students (59.5%).

#### Black and Minority Ethnic Students

Motivation	White British	BME British	Difference
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### Theme 3: Retention and Attainment

To enhance my general employability skills	40.4%	67%	26.6%
Make a difference to my programme, for me	31.3%	53.6%	22.3%
Make a difference to my programme, for others	48.5%	66%	17.5%

**Table 9.** Motivations with the greatest disparity rated 'very important' by ethnicity

Table 9 shows some major differences between the motivations of BME British and White British participants. The most striking difference is that a much larger proportion of BME British students are motivated by enhancing their employability. Other motivations where there were large differences were in areas around personal development and what could broadly be considered 'involvement' (e.g. 'To become more involved in the university' - 53.1%). The motivation most commonly rated as 'very important' by both White British (55.8%) and BME British students (70%) was 'To develop my project management skills'.

#### Age

Motivation	'Mature'	'Young'	Difference
Make a difference to my programme, for me	49.5%	32.4%	17.1%
To develop my project management skills	51.4%	62.1%	10.7%
To gain a broader university experience	57.9%	48.6%	9.3%

**Table 10.** Motivations with the greatest disparity rated 'very important' by age

Across all the motivations our respondents rated, there were only small differences between the importance as rated by those who self-reported as mature students and those who did not. As Table 10 shows, the biggest difference relates to mature students' being motivated by making changes to enhance their own experience. Contrary to this, the motivation most commonly rated as 'very important' by mature students was 'Because I wanted to help' (62.6%) while the most commonly highly-rated motivation for younger students was 'To develop my project management skills' (62.1%).

#### Learning Difficulty

Motivation	Learning difficulty	No known	Difference
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### Theme 3: Retention and Attainment

		learning difficulty	
Make a difference to my university for the sake of the university	48.3%	29%	19.3%
To develop my research skills	56.7%	41.3%	15.4%
To gain a broader university experience	40%	54.3%	14.3%

**Table 11.** Motivations with the greatest disparity rated 'very important' by whether respondent has a known Learning Difficulty

The data in Table 11 indicate a range of different motivations, although the fact that a whole-university focus is the greatest disparity is perhaps indicative of a desire for institutional change in the way students with learning difficulties are engaged. The motivation most commonly rated as 'very important' by students diagnosed with learning difficulties is 'To develop my project management skills' (65.2%), which, when coupled with the difference in favour of developing research skills, suggests that personal development is a priority for this group. For those without a known learning difficulty, the motivation most commonly rated 'very important' was 'Because I wanted to help' (57.8%).

#### *Motivations by institution*

	Winchester	LMU	Exeter
Make a difference to my programme for other students	51.5%	59.8%	56%
Develop my project management skills	56.7%	68%	59%
Because I wanted to help	53.1%	64.6%	52%

**Table 12.** Motivations rated as 'very important' by a majority of respondents by institution

Table 12 shows, perhaps unsurprisingly, that the motivations most commonly rated as 'very important' are those that appear throughout the rest of the groups of different characteristics. There is a mixture of those focused on personal development and more other-directed change-focused motivations.

### Theme 3: Retention and Attainment

	Motivation	Percent
Winchester	Make a difference to my University for other students	57.7%
LMU	Develop my project management skills	68%
Exeter	Make a difference to my University for other students	64%

**Table 13.** Motivation most commonly rated 'very important' by institution

Finally, Table 13 reveals that both Exeter and Winchester have altruistic change-based motivations as their most commonly reported 'very important' motivation. This is a good fit with the ethos and promotion of the schemes. The response from LMU students is intriguing for the opposite reason, namely that project management is not a skill or element of the PASS scheme in the same way it would be in SFS or Change Agents. It is unclear from the data presented here what the biggest factors are in determining a student's involvement in CCAs. However, it appears that either the institution attended or the initiative in question is a large contributing factor. This strengthens the need for more qualitative, contextual research in order to enhance understanding where such activities are happening.

### Discussion

Whilst not suggesting any causal links between them, this research has demonstrated that, in three different higher education contexts and with three different forms of activity, a relationship exists between participation, attainment and retention. None of the students who participated in these schemes in 2014/15 subsequently withdrew from university and an even higher proportion graduated with 'good' degrees, compared to their wider institutional cohort. There are three possible explanations for these figures: First, CCAs attract high-achieving students; second, students who participate develop in a way that benefits their academic achievement; third, (probably the most likely) a combination of both explanations. These areas will require further study to account for prior attainment and engagement, but this work has been a useful indicator of where future attention should be focused.

Given that participants seem more likely to stay at university and achieve well, such initiatives must be inclusive in order to ensure these potential benefits are shared by all students. There is a wealth of evidence that there are still differences in attainment and retention across the higher-education sector for specific groups, including, but not limited to, BME students, disabled students and mature students. This increases the imperative to ensure groups who are systemically disadvantaged in higher education have access to co-curricular opportunities. These findings have indicated a range of areas which could be developed to make schemes more inclusive or attractive to a range of student groups. Broadly speaking, integrating or highlighting personal development and altruistic elements of CCAs are likely to have the broadest appeal.

Based on the findings from the survey, the following recommendations emerge for practitioners who are seeking to develop or enhance co-curricular activities and make them more inclusive for all students:

- Create promotional material that appeals to a wide variety of students, depending on institutional context;
- Evaluate the composition of student participants in CCAs regarding protected characteristics, to be able to identify gaps in the context of the wider institution;

### Theme 3: Retention and Attainment

- Communicate/illustrate the wide-ranging benefits and potential impact and outcomes of active participation in CCAs;
- Ensure that personal development is a well-supported central focus;
- Focus on any altruistic elements within different forms of engagement;
- It is of paramount importance to understand your context and align this with the purpose of any CCA.

In reviewing a wealth of literature in the area, Trowler (2010:16) claimed that a definition of student engagement “often contains assumptions about who carries the responsibility for student engagement, and thus who can – or should – be tasked with the accountability”. Whilst this article has made reference to ‘hard-to-reach’ students, this label tends to put responsibility onto the students for being reached. In many ways, this research has revealed that recruitment is very successful for these CCAs in terms of particular ‘types’ or ‘groups’ of students. What is missing from this analysis is a more nuanced, individual understanding or participation. In spite of our recommendations for practitioners for how to enhance their initiatives, it is the responsibility of all stakeholders, including academic staff, professional service staff and students to develop initiatives which benefit and are accessible to all students.

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## Appendix

Motivations rated in the questionnaire. Because alternative formats were used at the different institutions, this list highlights the motivations in lieu of reproducing the various versions of the questionnaire.

- To add further experience to my CV
- To enhance my general employability skills
- Make a difference to my programme, for me
- Make a difference to my programme, for others
- Make a difference to my programme, for the sake of the university
- Make a difference to my university for me
- Make a difference to my university for other students
- Make a difference to my university for the sake of the university
- Make a specific change to the change to the way things are run
- To represent fellow students
- Because I wanted to help
- To broaden my horizons
- To gain a broader university experience
- To develop my research skills
- To develop my project management skills
- To enhance my understanding of my area of study
- In order to work with a staff member
- To become more involved in the university