Queen Mary
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Understanding student engagement in the online learning era

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Executive Summary

Overview

During the 2020-21 academic year, I conducted a three-stage analysis of student engagement in the School of Politics and International Relations at Queen Mary University of London. I identified clear links between available measures of student engagement and student attainment, and noted that apparent demographic attainment gaps in fact appeared to reflect differential engagement rates. Through surveys and focus groups, I identified a series of key drivers of student engagement. Students engaged better when they felt more confident, more supported and more interested in both the subject matter they were studying and the ways in which they were studying it. Those who felt able to ask for help – from staff, but also from their fellow students – were generally able to overcome challenges and to balance competing demands on their time. Those who felt confident about their skills and knowledge experienced a virtuous cycle of mutually-reinforcing engagement and mastery. Those who felt less confident tended to respond by disengaging further, triggering a vicious cycle of mutually-reinforcing disengagement and difficulty.

Summary of findings

Statistical analysis: Whole population

- SPIR has a particular issue with attainment among the 7.9% of its student population whose entry qualifications are BTECs. These students are significantly less engaged than their classmates with other entry qualifications. Moreover, they achieve significantly worse outcomes *even when they engage at the same rate*.

- SPIR has potential issues with attendance among students taking Politics and Sociology and Politics with Business.

- SPIR has issues with differential attendance rates among students of different demographic backgrounds. Although there are no significant differences in attainment between students of different demographics once we control for entry qualifications, programme, year of study and engagement, these differential engagement rates lead to worse outcomes among these groups.

- In other words, to the extent SPIR has a problem with differential outcomes between demographic groups, this appears primarily to be a problem of differential engagement rates rather than a problem of lower attainment among groups with similar engagement rates. Students with BTEC qualifications are the main exception to this general finding.

- None of this means SPIR doesn't have demographic issues to worry about. It does. But the key question seems to be how we get students into classrooms and keep them there, rather than what happens once they are there, or how we assess students' work.

Statistical analysis: Survey Respondents

- Respondents who have higher attendance levels achieve higher average module marks. Respondents who log in to QMPlus more frequently, or who complete more activities while logged in, also achieve higher module marks, though these effects are not statistically significant when we control for seminar attendance.

- Respondents who report spending more time on their studies, or having sought advice from other students, have higher attendance levels.

- Respondents who report having ever missed a class due to a clash with paid employment or caring responsibilities have lower overall attendance levels and therefore lower average module marks.

- Respondents who attended more induction events or who reported that their modules increased their confidence achieve higher module marks, even after controlling for attendance.

- Respondents who report spending more time attending medical treatment or who state that they would spend more time studying if they had fewer other commitments achieve lower module marks, even after controlling for attendance.

Qualitative insights

- Confidence matters. Confident students not only do better, they feel more able to ask for help when they struggle. Staff can help to build confidence by creating a positive, supportive classroom environment; by making clear how students can and should contact them for advice; by designing learning activities that enable students to practice and ultimately master new knowledge and skills; and by offering simple, clear, consistent guidance on what students are expected to do, and when. This should extend to offering straightforward guidance on when and how students may ask for individual accommodations – including but not limited to the Extenuating Circumstances process for assessments.

- When students talk about 'support' they mean 'pro-active support' – the kind that comes to them rather than them needing to seek it out. This observations raises challenging questions for SPIR. We believe, I think rightly, that part of students taking responsibility for their own learning involves their taking responsibility for asking for advice and guidance when they need it. At the same time, we need to address the fact that some students do not feel entitled to ask for help no matter how often we tell them to do so; that those students appear to be disproportionately likely to come from under-privileged backgrounds and historically under-represented demographic groups; and that for a significant proportion of our students this approach differs radically from their prior educational experiences. We may want to consider ways of making the transition from the more pro-active support model our students will have experienced in their pre-university education, and the more reactive model that is typical at university level.

- Students have a reasonable sense of what constitutes a 'good' education. There is relatively little evidence of widespread instrumentalization of the relationship between teaching, learning and assessment – the key exception to this being the desire for more contact hours. In particular, there is widespread acceptance that studying means being challenged, and that sometimes students will have to do things they find difficult or uninteresting. The challenge for us as educators is to guide students through these challenges in ways that encourage them and build their confidence rather than alienating them. Both the survey respondents and the focus group participants identified a number of useful learning strategies that appeared to them to do this – combining classic and contemporary texts, mixing up different formats, varying independent study and seminar activities from week to week, and building in time for reflection and for interaction in both small and large-group sessions.

Recommendations

General

SPIR should:

- Prioritise work to improve student engagement, and in particular student attendance at taught classes, recognising that improving engagement rates should both improve attainment and reduce attainment gaps between different demographic groups.

- Continue to monitor data on student engagement and attainment, both to track the impact of specific interventions and to support future exercises such as this.

Admissions and Induction

SPIR should:

- Ensure potential students – including those who enter via Clearing – have a range of opportunities to speak to current SPIR students as part of the admissions process.

- Consider monitoring attendance at Welcome Week induction events and offering support to students who attend relatively few events.

- Discuss with new students during Welcome Week the differences between pre-university and university education. We should be frank about our expectations in terms of independent study and critical thinking, while emphasising that we are available for advice and support.

- Ask academic advisors to help new students to draw up a study timetable for Semester A, identifying when they will be able to dedicated sufficient time to completing independent study and assessment tasks ahead of taught seminars and submission deadlines.

- Consider raising entry requirements for students whose previous qualifications were not A-Levels.

Teaching and learning

SPIR should:

- Inform students of the relationship between attendance and outcomes, making clear that students who attend taught classes regularly generally achieve better outcomes than those who do not.

- Remind students who may be experiencing ill health to seek advice and support from the Disability and Dyslexia Service in the first instance, and continue to encourage the University to invest further in such support services.

- Consider introducing and regularly promulgating a formal policy on whether and under what circumstances students who are unable to attend a taught seminar due to an unexpected clash with outside responsibilities may temporarily attend another session on the same module.

- Continue to promote best pedagogic practices to module convenors and seminar tutors.
  - Module convenors should, in particular, consider how to align classroom activities, independent study tasks and assessments, and how best to combine synchronous and asynchronous activities, and online and face-to-face provision, in order to deliver content, encourage independent learning and support students to engage with and understand material.
  - Module convenors should also consider how to combine different types of independent learning activity, and different types of text, to avoid stagnation and to ensure the accessibility of more complex material.
  - Module convenors should, finally, clearly communicate their expectations in terms of independent study tasks and assessments, ideally providing guidance not only on *what* students should do in order to succeed, but *when*. Where this involves specific sessions on how to approach assessments, module convenors should consider holding these at least two weeks before the relevant deadline, or splitting them over two weeks.
  - Seminar tutors should encourage students to develop positive peer relationships, and to discuss classroom material outside of synchronous taught sessions. This might involve repeatedly setting aside classroom time for students to get to know each other, or supporting students to set up independent study groups.
  - Seminar tutors should take steps to make their classrooms 'safe' for students to test out and develop their ideas. They should encourage students to experiment and recognise effort as well

as accuracy. They should be mindful that some students need to 'warm up' to the idea of speaking in front of an entire seminar group, and should for example combine small-group and whole-group activities to get students talking early in a session and to ensure that everyone has something they can talk about to the group as a whole. They should recognise that students sometimes fail to prepare adequately for seminar discussions – that in cases where students have failed to manage their time properly, they are usually aware of that failure, while in cases where outside circumstances have intervened to prevent them preparing properly, they may already be under considerable pressure. Seminar tutors should strongly encourage students to prepare fully for taught classes; but there are few additional benefits and some clear costs associated with calling out those who fail to do so.

- Continue to engage students in the development of new modules, module content and classroom activities.

Advice and student support

SPIR should:

- Encourage students to seek out advice and support from their academic advisors, tutors and peers, clearly communicating that the differences between pre-university study and university study mean many students need additional advice at some point, that support is available with both module-specific and general concerns, and that it is their responsibility to seek it out.

- Consider ways of making our support for less-engaged students more pro-active. This might involve asking academic advisors or module convenors to use LEA data to identify less-engaged students on a regular basis and contacting them to offer advice and support. In some cases students who are beginning to disengage need only to find out that someone has noticed them in order to re-engage, and that students who lack confidence in a higher education setting are less likely to ask for help when they need it.

- Expand our use of peer-support initiatives, with a particular focus on supporting first year students and students from historically under-represented backgrounds. We should consider both general mentoring initiatives that help new students understand and navigate the university experience, and module-specific initiatives such as peer-led team learning.

- Engage with the ongoing development of QM's LEA system, considering for example whether to pilot recording attendance at large-group as well as small-group teaching sessions, and whether to use Reading Lists Online to enable tracking of engagement with reading list materials.

Long-term aspirations

SPIR should:

- Encourage students to reflect on their long-term aspirations, and on the role their SPIR education can play in helping them achieve their goals, including through conversations with academic advisors, seminar tutors and peers.

- Encourage students to engage early and regularly with the QM Careers Service.

- Encourage module convenors to think about how to relate module content to students' long-term aspirations. In some cases, that might mean direct discussion of career options linked to specific topics of study. In others it might involve identifying and promoting opportunities to develop transferable professional skills, such as written, oral and visual communication, quantitative and qualitative analysis,

- Work with internal colleagues and external stakeholders to expand the range of opportunities available to SPIR students to gain work experience as they study. This might involve expanding our use of Student Ambassadors or further investment in undergraduate research assistantships alongside the development of new external partnerships.

Contents

Introduction

During the 2020-21 academic year, I led a study analysing the drivers of student engagement in the School of Politics and International Relations (SPIR) at Queen Mary University of London (QMUL). My goal in launching this study was simple. To identify what resources helped students to engage with their studies, and to understand how the presence or absence of those resources affected individual students' experiences.

We knew that 2020-21 would be an unusual year. At the outset we hoped to return to face-to-face teaching at some point; in the event the wider public health situation made that impossible. Instead, with the exception of a relatively small number of face-to-face enrichment activities in Semester A (face-to-face activities were prohibited by law during Semester B), we spent the bulk of the year teaching online. I wanted to ask specifically about students' experiences of online learning, recognising the drive to make greater use of technology embodied in QMUL's 2030 Strategy. But I also asked about students' experiences more generally, recognising that, at some point, we were likely to return to physical classrooms.

I conducted this study in three parts. First, I analysed data held within QMUL on all 968 students registered for an undergraduate programme of study in SPIR at the start of the 2020-21 academic year. I summarise and discuss my findings below, but I do not reproduce the data for the simple reason that GDPR only permits the use of such data internally, and this report is likely to be disseminated externally. Second, with the support of Javier Sajuria and Pedro Rubio Teres, I designed and fielded a large survey over the 2020-21 Christmas vacation. I remain incredibly grateful to the 208 students who took the time to respond, generating a vast wealth of quantitative and qualitative insights into their experiences. Finally, in June and July 2021, I held four online focus groups with sixteen survey respondents. These discussions enabled me to drill down more deeply into the survey results, and to add qualitative detail to my initial quantitative findings.

Acknowledgements

This study received ethical approval from the Queen Mary Ethics of Research Committee (QMERC2020.001).

Relating this study to existing work

Internal analyses

In addition to the 2019 Education Conversation, this study builds on work completed by Dr Daniel Hartley of QM Engagement, Retention and Success in January 2019[1], by the Education Quality and Standards Board Student Engagement Working Group Report of July 2020[2] and by Thomas Loya Consulting Ltd in August 2020[3].

Building on in-depth qualitative interviews with students, Dr Hartley's report identified possible problems with students' sense of 'belonging' in SPIR. Focusing on 'key moments' in the student journey – pre-entry, transition, formal learning, assessment and feedback, and support – the interviews elicited responses that suggested SPIR students felt they did not 'fit in' to what they perceived as a majority white, middle class, elite space. Their counterparts in Science and Engineering schools experienced the opposite phenomenon, regarding their schools as highly demographically diverse. Interestingly, these perceptions held up despite the fact that, at the time of these interviews, less than 50% of SPIR students were white British. Crucially, the interview respondents suggested that a sense of community belonging was especially important to SPIR students, given the nature of the field of study, with its emphasis on social, political and economic relations.

Bringing together a large working group of academics, QMSU officers and professional services staff, the EQSB Student Engagement Working Group identified a list of 23 potential barriers to student engagement (such as paid employment and caring commitments, commuting, financial pressures, perceived benefits of and anxiety about engagement, and a lack of sense of belonging). Focusing on key themes – timetabling, strategic decisions by students, community relations between students and staff, assessment, estates and programme content – this report proposed a series of 36 possible interventions that might help address or reduce those barriers. Helpfully, the report sought to prioritise possible interventions with reference to the number of potential barriers each could address. It argued that the key policy priorities were: training staff on student-centred and inclusive educational approaches; improving programme and module organisation; changing the timetabling process; increasing the use of lecture capture and improving the integration of learning and assessment.

Combining analysis of SPIR NSS scores with comparisons across comparable schools and departments within QM and at other institutions, Dr Loya's report identified a number of key trends within SPIR's NSS scores that had not been picked up in earlier analyses. In particular, Dr Loya recommended that QM shift away from monitoring the percentage of respondents agreeing with each NSS statement to instead look at average scores, and that SPIR pay greater attention to apparent programme-level variations. Dr Loya also noted that students' perceptions of 'Organisation and Management' and of 'Teaching on the Course' had much greater impacts on their overall satisfaction levels than their views on 'Assessment and Feedback', 'Academic Support' and 'Learning Resources'.

Pedagogic literature

More generally, this report draws on a range of earlier studies looking at student engagement in higher education. Admissions and transition, definitions, career objectives, relationship with outcomes, cultural ease, response biases, methods for improving engagement

[1] Hartley, Daniel (2019) "Belonging at Queen Mary: Understanding 'Gaps' in BME Students' Academic Attainment", *QMUL Education, Retention and Success*.
[2] Akter, Shamima and Michael, Tony (2020) "EQSB Student Engagement Working Group Report", *QMUL Education Quality and Standards Board.*
[3] Loya, Thomas (2020) "Toward Understanding and Improving NSS Performance: Unpacking NSS Results and Building SPIR Options for Changes in Practice and Improved NSS Performance", *Thomas Loya Consulting Ltd.*

Defining 'engagement'

A first strand of the literature concerns the definition of 'engagement'. Most studies agree on the *subject* of analysis; we are interested in what our students do, not in what we do or in what other people our students interact with do. Greater variation emerges when we consider the different possible definitions of what engagement is – including approaches focused on student behaviour, on student psychology, on culture and political context and on combinations of each[4].

Some studies frame 'engagement' as the opposite of 'alienation' – a state in which students continue to study, but do so in a surface fashion without deep learning as a result of feeling disconnected from both the material and the learning environment[5]. Others contrast 'engagement' with 'completion', focusing on whether students stay in a programme of study to its conclusion[6] and reflecting on what this means for the quality of an institution[7]. Some look at engagement with what we might call 'services', including teachers and academic support professionals such as librarians[8]. Others consider a wider range of possible engagements, including with online material, with other independent study tasks, with peers and with teaching staff[9], and in university policymaking and governance[10].

A particular challenge for SPIR – hinted at by the Hartley study referenced above – is the apparent relationship between student engagement, students' democratic ownership of their studies, and the relationship between higher education and broader socio-economic discourses. Students themselves vary massively in terms of how far they have internalised the neoliberal model of higher education – in which the purpose of university study is to develop practical skills and to acquire qualifications that will in turn deliver financial returns[11].

Inputs and outputs

A second strand of the literature looks at the relationship between student goals, engagement and outcomes. Generally speaking, this literature suggests that engagement leads to positive learning outcomes, including the development of critical thinking skills and improved performance in assessments[12] as well as greater lifetime earnings[13].

Students who perceive a clear relationship between desired goals, engagement and outcomes are more likely to focus, to adopt deep learning strategies, to put in greater levels of effort and to persist in the face of setbacks than

[4] Kahu, E. (2013) 'Framing student engagement in higher education', Studies in Higher Education, 38 (5), 758-773.

[5] Mann, S. J. (2001) 'Alternative Perspectives on the Student Experience: Alienation and engagement', Studies in Higher Education, 26(1), 7–19; Jones, C. (2001) Barriers to Student Engagement in HE: revisiting concepts of alienation. Manchester Metropolitan University: Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching.

[6] Sinclair, M. F., Christenson, S. L., Lehr, C. A., & Anderson, A. R. (2003) 'Facilitating Student Engagement: Lessons Learned from Check & Connect Longitudinal Studies', The California School Psychologist, 8(1), 29–41.

[7] Axelson, R. D. & Flick, A. (2010) 'Defining Student Engagement', Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning, 43(1), 38-43.

[8] Kuh, G. D. & Gonyea, R. M. (2003) 'The Role of the Academic Library in Promoting Student Engagement in Learning', College & Research Libraries, 64(4), 256–282.

[9] Krause, K. & Coates, H. (2008) 'Students' engagement in first-year university', Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 33(5), 493–505.

[10] Carey, P. (2013). Student engagement in university decision-making: Policies, processes and the student voice (Doctoral). Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK.

[11] Zepke, N. (2017) 'Student engagement in neo-liberal times: what is missing?', Higher Education Research & Development, 37 (2), 433-446

[12] Greenwood, C. R., Horton, B. T. & Utley, C. A. (2002) 'Academic Engagement: Current Perspectives on Research and Practice', School Psychology Review, 31(3), 328-349; Kuh, G. D., Cruce, T. M., Shoup, R., Kinzie, J. & Gonyea, R. M. (2008) 'Unmasking the Effects of Student Engagement on First-Year College Grades and Persistence', The Journal of Higher Education, 79(5), 540–563.

[13] Blundell, R., Dearden, L. & Sianesi, B. (2005) 'Evaluating the effect of education on earnings: models, methods and results from the National Child Development Survey', Journal of the Royal Statistical Society: Series A (Statistics in Society), 168 (3): 473–512; Crawford, C. & Vignoles, A. (2014) Heterogeneity in graduate earnings by socio-economic background. London: Institute of Fiscal Studies.

those who do not[14]. This is problematic, however, in that students from less privileged backgrounds tend to have less clear goals when they approach higher education, and so to be less able to perceive the relationship between engagement, outcomes, and meeting those goals[15].

Students who engage in active classroom behaviours – such as reading aloud or contributing to discussions – achieve better outcomes than those who do not[16]. Students who feel high levels of family support for their studies generally engage more than those who do not[17] - a phenomenon that may interact with the question of whether they have university-educated parents or other close family members. Students who come from more privileged backgrounds out-perform less privileged classmates, though students who do relatively well at under-performing schools tend to do better at university than their grades at entry might predict[18] - a finding that cautions us against a simplistic assumption that better-qualified students will out-perform their less well-qualified peers.

One driver of this is students' need to undertake paid work alongside their studies; students undertaking more than 20 hours of paid employment per week are notably more likely to fail to complete their studies than classmates, including those who work up to (but less than) 20 hours per week[19]. Another is the importance of social 'ease' in facilitating student-staff engagement; students from less privileged backgrounds feel less comfortable approaching staff for help compared to more privileged classmates. As a result, they miss out on both opportunities for assistance and to stretch their learning, as well as from the psychological validation associated with interacting with academic staff, who they perceive as having high levels of expertise and social status[20].

Related to this is the phenomenon of self-doubt, whereby students from non-traditional or less-privileged backgrounds approach their studies in the expectation that they will struggle; an expectation that can breed resilience in the face of setbacks (since these are anticipated) but that can also engender helplessness (since failure appears inevitable)[21]

Observing engagement

A third strand of the literature discusses the challenges involved in trying to study student engagement.

Students at different levels engage in different ways, which suggests that it is important to disaggregate studies like this one by cohort[22]. There are differences in terms of how students engage with their studies in a fully-online setting

[14] Miller, R. B., Greene, B. A., Montalvo, G. P., Ravindran, B., & Nichols, J. D. (1996) 'Engagement in Academic Work: The Role of Learning Goals, Future Consequences, Pleasing Others, and Perceived Ability', Contemporary Educational Psychology, 21(4), 388–422.

[15] Allen, R., Parameshwaran, M. & Thomson, D. (2016) Social and ethnic inequalities in choice available and choices made at age 16. London: Social Mobility Commission.

[16] Greenwood, C. R., Horton, B. T. & Utley, C. A. (2002) 'Academic Engagement: Current Perspectives on Research and Practice', School Psychology Review, 31(3), 328-349.

[17] Perna, L. & Titus, M. (2005) 'The Relationship Between Parental Involvement as Social Capital and College Enrolment: An examination of racial/ethnic group differences', Journal of Higher Education, 76 (5), 485–518.

[18] Crawford, C. (2014) Socio-economic differences in university outcomes in the UK: drop-out, degree completion and degree class. IFS Working Paper. London: Institute of Fiscal Studies

[19] Hovdhaugen, E. (2015) 'Working while studying: the impact of term-time employment on dropout rates', Journal of Education and Work, 28 (6), 631-651.

[20] Jack, A. (2016) '(No) Harm in Asking: Class, Acquired Cultural Capital, and Academic Engagement at an Elite University', Sociology of Education, 89 (1), 1–19.

[21] Thiele, T., Pope, D., Singleton, A., Snape, D. & Stanistreet, D. (2017) 'Experience of disadvantage: The influence of identity on engagement in working class students' educational trajectories to an elite university, Br Educ Res J, 43, 49-67.

[22] Carini, R. M., Kuh, G. D., & Klein, S. P. (2006) 'Student Engagement and Student Learning: Testing the Linkages', Research in Higher Education, 47(1), 1–32.

versus a campus setting[23]. Some studies rely on student self-reporting, on random sampling, and on various measures of (perceived) teaching quality, each of which has distinct strengths and weaknesses[24] - for which reason this study adopts a mixed-methods approach. Several studies struggle to distinguish adequately between measures of engagement, drivers of engagement, and the consequences of engagement[25]. Others point out that the factors these things inevitably interact – that students who possess more of the resources that support engagement in higher education will also benefit from these resources in terms of apparent outcomes such as graduate employment and earnings[26].

The biggest challenge, though, is a simple one – less engaged students tend to respond less frequently to studies aimed at understanding engagement than their more engaged classmates[27]. This is a critical point for this study. At times I will suggest reading *against* the evidence, recognizing that it tells us the most about the students we are least concerned about.

Improving engagement

A fourth strand of the literature considers methods for improving student engagement.

Several studies emphasise the need for a range of different approaches targeting different aspects of the student experience, while also noting the cross-cutting importance of a focus on student wellbeing and flexibility in response to challenges emerging from other parts of students' lives[28].

Students from less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds perform better on tasks framed in terms of effort and learning than on tasks perceived as measures of innate intellectual ability relative to more privileged classmates[29]. Institutions that treat engagement as a problem generated by and requiring solutions at the level of academic departments wind up causing more problems than they solve – a 'whole institution' approach is needed in order to take account of the impact of students' experiences outside of the classroom on their engagement levels[30].

Linking back to the ideas of democracy and student ownership mentioned above, helping students to develop and deploy their own engagement metrics can help both boost engagement and deliver more accurate insights into what students themselves think and feel[31].

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[23] Robinson, C. & Hullinger, H. (2008) 'New Benchmarks in Higher Education: Student Engagement in Online Learning', Journal of Education for Business, 84 (2), 101-109

[24] Fredricks J.A. & McColskey W. (2012) The Measurement of Student Engagement: A Comparative Analysis of Various Methods and Student Self-report Instruments. In: Christenson S., Reschly A., Wylie C. (eds) Handbook of Research on Student Engagement. Springer, Boston, MA.

[25] Kahu, E. (2013) 'Framing student engagement in higher education', Studies in Higher Education, 38 (5), 758-773.

[26] Crawford, C. & Vignoles, A. (2014) Heterogeneity in graduate earnings by socio-economic background. London: Institute of Fiscal Studies; Friedman, S., Laurison, D. & Macmillan, L. (2017) Social Mobility, the Class Pay Gap and Intergenerational Worklessness: New Insights from The Labour Force Survey. London: Social Mobility Commission.

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[28] Zepke, N. (2013) 'Student engagement: A complex business supporting the first year experience in tertiary education', The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education, 4(2), 1-14.

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[31] Whitley, C. T. & Dietz, T. (2018) 'Turking Statistics: Student-generated Surveys Increase Student Engagement and Performance', Teaching Sociology, 46(1), 44–53; Dragseth, M. (2019) 'Building Student Engagement Through Social Media', Journal of Political Science Education, 16 (2), 243-256.

Research design

Measuring engagement

The existing literature raises two fundamental points; engagement is multi-faceted, and it both reflects and affects students' experiences at different stages of their higher education journey.

To reflect its multi-faceted nature, this study will consider a range of 'hard' and 'soft' measures of engagement. On the 'hard' side, it uses data derived from QM's Learner Engagement Analytics (LEA) system QEngage, covering seminar attendance, engagement with the QMPlus Virtual Learning Environment, and assignment marks (provisional in the case of first year students), together with (for survey respondents) data on self-reported study hours. On the 'soft' side, it uses students' self-reported satisfaction with various aspects of their studies, both in general and specifically in the online learning era.

To reflect the ways in which engagement reflects and affects students' experiences at different stages of their education, this study will consider application and admissions, transition to university, learning in 'normal' times, learning online, completion of assessments, seeking advice, and planning for life after university.

Hypotheses

Building on earlier research, I identified a series of hypotheses about possible drivers of student engagement:

H_1: Students whose expectations of studying in SPIR better match the reality will be more engaged.

H_2: Students with fewer outside demands on their time will be more engaged.

H_3: Students who feel more positive about their learning experiences in SPIR will be more engaged.

H_4: Students with better access to appropriate study space (physical and digital) will be more engaged.

H_5: Students who feel better able to access support will be more engaged.

H_6: Students who perceive a stronger relationship between their studies and their future objectives will be more engaged.

Controls

I also identified a set of plausible control variables for the initial statistical analysis:

1. Demographics: Age, ethnicity, gender.

2. Mode of study: Name of programme, year of programme, fee status.

3. Prior education: Type of entry qualification, UCAS tariff points, entry route.

Statistical analysis

Whole population

In the first phase of this project, I used data on the entire SPIR student cohort registered at the start of the 2020/21 academic year (n = 968) to identify whether any clear patterns emerged from the information we routinely collect about our students.

Descriptive observations

On the basis of the raw descriptive statistics, I identified the following general observations:

1. Male students have markedly lower attendance and survey response rates than female students, and somewhat lower QMPlus engagement and average module marks.

2. Students whose entry qualifications were BTECs have much lower attendance rates, survey response rates and average marks than their classmates, although students with 'other' UK qualifications (including access and foundation routes) also have relatively low attendance rates and module marks.

3. Students studying Politics and Sociology, and Politics with Business, have markedly lower attendance rates, module marks and survey response rates than their classmates on other programmes. In the case of Politics and Sociology, this is likely to be related to the fact that this programme ran for the first time in 2020-21, meaning all students were first year students (whose module marks tend to be lower). In the case of Politics with Business, this may partially reflect the fact that male students and students who have taken BTECs are relatively over-represented on that programme.

4. POC students have lower average module marks than white students, and Arab, Asian and (in particular) Black students have lower attendance rates.

5. It is unclear whether there is an association between UCAS tariff points and module marks, but there does appear to be an association between higher tariff scores and higher attendance rates.

6. Students recruited through clearing have lower attendance rates and module marks than their classmates recruited through the main UCAS cycle.

Inferential analysis

In order to identify which of these apparent associations reflected genuine trends rather than spurious associations, I conducted a series of regression analyses using different outcome variables of interest.

I began by considering the relationship between different descriptive data points and students' average module mark, which I used as a proxy for our key outcomes of interest – progression and attainment (model 1). I then introduced three control variables derived from QEngage data, looking at seminar attendance (model 2), frequency of QMPlus logins (model 3), and overall QMPlus activity (model 4). Finally, I combined each of these variables into a single model (model 5).

Model 1 proved of limited value. It explained only a small proportion of the observed variation in average module mark (R^2 = 0.07), and two of the key findings (students in earlier years of study have lower average module marks, and students taking Politics with Sociology have lower average module marks) are likely spurious. First year students had not had the chance to resit any assessments they might have missed at the point at which I captured

the data. They had also, in some cases, only completed one assignment. Since Politics with Sociology was running for the first time in 2020-21, meanwhile, all students on this programme were first year students.

That said, Model 1 did offer some useful findings. First, there was no statistically significant association between demographics and average module mark, once we controlled for programme, cohort, entry route and prior qualifications. Students with higher entry tariffs achieved higher module marks, and students whose main entry qualifications were BTECs or equivalents achieved lower module marks. But there were no significant differences between the average marks achieved by students of different genders or ethnicities but similar prior qualifications.

Models 2-4 proved much more powerful than Model 1, with R^2 of 0.287, 0.268 and 0.216 respectively. Of particular interest was the fact that each of the three engagement metrics was independently significantly associated with average module mark. Students who had higher attendance rates, who logged into QMPlus more frequently, or who completed more activities within QMPlus, achieved higher module marks than their classmates.

Model 5 (R^2 = 0.333), which combined the three engagement metrics, was more powerful still. Each of the three engagement metrics remained independently positively correlated with average module marks; for example, students who scored higher on QMPlus login frequency or QMPlus activity level achieved on average higher module marks than classmates with lower scores on those metrics but the same prior qualifications and seminar attendance rate. Seminar attendance was the most powerful predictor of module mark, but all three engagement metrics had a significant effect.

When all three independent variables were included in the model, only two control variables continued to be significantly associated with average module marks; year of study, and BTEC entry qualifications.

These initial models consequently suggest that, *with the exception of those with BTEC entry qualifications*, there are no significant differences in average mark between different demographic groups of students in the SPIR population *once we control for prior attainment and available measures of engagement*.

That observation naturally leads to the question of whether there are any significant differences in engagement between those groups. For this reason, I ran three further models looking at associations between the descriptive data we hold on students, and seminar attendance (Model 6), QMPlus login frequency (Model 7) and QMPlus activity levels (Model 8). None of these models proved especially powerful; Model 6 (R^2 = 0.099) showed that background data explained approximately 10% of the observed variation in seminar attendance. Models 7 and 8 were much weaker.

Three findings of interest emerged from these models:

1. Male students and black students were significantly less engaged, controlling for programme, entry qualifications and year of study, than female and white students. This suggests that, while there are no significant differences in outcomes between demographic groups *once we control for engagement*, there may still be differences driven by differential engagement levels.

2. Students whose main entry qualifications were BTECs or equivalent were significantly less engaged than their classmates. This is an especially concerning finding, since it suggests that students with BTEC qualifications not only engage at much lower rates than classmates with other entry qualifications, but they *also achieve lower marks even when they engage at the same rate*.

3. Students taking Politics and Sociology or Politics with Business had significantly lower engagement rates than classmates on other programmes. The former finding probably reflects the fact that this programme ran for the first time in 2020-21. The latter may be associated with the particularly high concentration of students with BTEC qualifications on this programme.

Initial conclusions

In sum, this initial analysis suggests the following conclusions:

- **SPIR has a particular issue with attainment among the 7.9% of its student population whose entry qualifications are BTECs. These students are significantly less engaged than their classmates with other entry qualifications. Moreover, they achieve significantly worse outcomes *even when they engage at the same rate*.**

- **SPIR has potential issues with attendance among students taking Politics and Sociology and Politics with Business.**

- **SPIR has issues with differential attendance rates among students of different demographic backgrounds. Although there are no significant differences in attainment between students of different demographics once we control for entry qualifications, programme, year of study and engagement, these differential engagement rates lead to worse outcomes among these groups.**

- **In other words, to the extent SPIR has a problem with differential outcomes between demographic groups, this appears primarily to be a problem of differential engagement rates rather than a problem of lower attainment among groups with similar engagement rates. Students with BTEC qualifications are the main exception to this general finding.**

- **None of this means SPIR doesn't have demographic issues to worry about. It does. We clearly should be concerned that male students and students of colour appear systematically less engaged with their studies than their female and white classmates. But the key question seems to be how we get these students into classrooms and keep them there, rather than, for example, how we assess their work.**

Survey respondents

We received 208 survey responses. Generally speaking, and in keeping with previous research on student engagement, our respondents tended to be more engaged than their classmates. The average survey respondent had a seminar attendance rate of 79.8% and an average module mark of 63.25. The average non-respondent had an attendance rate of 66.5% and an average module mark of 57.56. We received markedly fewer responses from students in particular groups of concern (Politics and Sociology and Politics with Business students, Male students, Black students, and students who entered with BTEC qualifications) than we did from students in other groups.

These differential response rates inevitably limit how far we can generalise from our response group to the population as a whole. At the same time, however, we did receive at least some responses from every group of interest, and even among survey respondents we still see the same relationships visible that appeared in the whole population. For example, the average attendance rate of a survey respondent taking Politics and IR was 79.1% compared to 72.7% for a survey respondent taking Politics with Business.

H_1: Expectations versus reality

H_1 holds that students whose expectations of studying in SPIR better match the reality will be more engaged in their studies.

In order to test H_1 statistically, we used the following variables, selected because they should, theoretically, represent the relationship between students' expectations of life in SPIR and the reality:

a. Entry_First_Choice, which indicates whether the respondent stated that SPIR was their first choice of place to study.

b. Expectations_Met, which indicates whether the respondent stated that their experience of studying in SPIR matched their expectations.

c. Application_Advice_Sources, which indicates the number of different possible sources of advice respondents consulted before applying to SPIR.

d. Induction_Events, which indicates the number of induction events respondents attended at the start of their studies in SPIR.

Table 1: Regression analyses for H_1: Expectations versus reality

	Attendance		QMPlus Login		QMPlus Activity		Mark		Mark	
(Constant)	68.352	***	46.537	***	44.887	***	58.639	***	47.752	***
Entry_First_Choice	0.515		-6.598		2.420		-0.386		-0.261	
Expectations_Met	11.204		25.463	**	23.074	**	4.157		1.012	
Application_Advice_Sources	-0.428		0.743		-0.542		-0.647		-0.612	
Induction_Events	1.476	*	1.001		0.383		1.109	***	0.897	***
Attendance									0.105	***
QMPlus_Login									0.042	
QMPlus_Activity									0.039	
R^2	0.035		0.060		0.028		0.100		0.256	

Table 1 reports the results of regression analyses using these variables:

a. There is a significant positive association between the number of induction events a respondent attended and both seminar attendance and average module mark. The latter association holds up even after controlling for attendance, indicating having attended induction events is correlated with both seminar attendance and average mark independently.

b. There is a significant positive association between a respondent's expectations of life in SPIR having been met and their QMPlus login and activity scores, but not with their attendance scores or marks.

c. There is no significant association between whether SPIR was a respondent's first choice of place to study, or the number of sources of advice they consulted before applying, and their engagement, controlling for the other variables.

There is consequently partial support for H_1. Respondents who felt their expectations had been met did have higher engagement scores than those who did not, as did those who had attended the largest number of induction events. But there was no apparent relationship between whether SPIR was a student's first choice of study destination, or the number of sources of advice they consulted (a metric that also captures whether students knew university-educated people prior to coming to study in SPIR), and engagement or outcomes.

H_2: External time commitments

H_2 hold that students with fewer outside demands on their time will be more engaged in their studies.

In order to test H_2 statistically, we will use the following variables:

a. Time_Study, Time_Employment, Time_Care, Time_Volunteering, Time_Medical, Time_Sport and Time_Society, a set of variables which indicate the number of hours per week the respondent reported spending on studying, paid employment, caring responsibilities, volunteering, attending medical appointments, participating in sport, and working with student societies.

b. Time_Under_Studying, which indicates whether respondents reported that they would spend more time on their studies if they had fewer outside commitments.

c. Accommodation_Commute, which indicates the length of time respondents report spending commuting from their term-time residence to the QM campus.

d. Absent_Caring, Absent_Employment, Absent_Health, Absent_Transport, Absent_Interest and Absent_Online, a set of variables that indicate whether respondents reported ever having missed a taught class due to caring responsibilities, paid employment, illness or disability, issues with transportation, a lack of interest in the material or online connectivity.

e. Deadline_Workload, Deadline_Employment, Deadline_Caring, Deadline_Health and Deadline_Other, a set of variables that indicate whether respondents reported ever having missed a deadline due to academic workload, paid employment, caring responsibilities, illness or disability, or other reasons.

Table 2: Regression analyses for H2: External Time Commitments

	Attendance		QMPlus Login		QMPlus Activity		Mark		Mark	
(Constant)	77.501	***	43.628	***	42.871	***	57.188	***	44.236	***
Time_Study	0.453	*	1.116	***	1.052	**	0.344	***	0.201	*
Time_Employment	-0.049		-0.222		-0.095		0.124		0.144	*
Time_Care	0.410	*	0.169		0.113		-0.012		-0.075	
Time_Volunteering	-0.475		-0.324		-0.059		-0.049		0.028	
Time_Medical	-0.591		-0.377		0.166		-0.758	**	-0.670	**
Time_Sport	-0.035		-0.086		-0.443		0.025		0.045	
Time_Society	1.275	**	1.222	*	0.172		0.256		0.030	
Time_Under_Studying	-1.811		-0.325		-6.118		-3.264	**	-2.865	*
Accommodation_Commute	-0.032		0.020		0.020		-0.044		-0.041	
Absent_Employment	-8.216	*	0.633		-1.787		-3.828	*	-2.807	
Absent_Caring	-11.041	**	-16.610	**	-8.081		-2.281		0.169	
Absent_Health	-1.367		1.215		3.456		0.449		0.462	
Absent_Transport	1.219		0.105		-0.588		-0.262		-0.402	
Absent_Interest	-1.578		6.284		6.642		1.067		0.753	
Absent_Online	-5.511	*	-5.916		-2.623		0.699		1.759	
Deadline_Workload	-0.208		-4.030		-7.857		-2.051		-1.606	
Deadline_Employment	-7.441		-4.700		-7.712		2.030		3.395	
Deadline_Caring	-9.142		-16.122	*	-9.149		1.068		3.286	
Deadline_Health	-2.218		-4.825		-6.385		0.636		1.332	
Deadline_Other	-1.043		-3.467		-1.301		-1.141		-0.795	
Attendance									0.123	***
QMPlus_Login									0.053	
QMPlus_Activity									0.026	
R^2	0.185		0.246		0.122		0.14		0.270	

Table 2 reports the results of regression analyses using these variables:

a. There is a consistent positive association between self-reported weekly study hours, all of the engagement variables, and average module mark. Moreover, this association remains even after controlling for engagement, suggesting it captures engagement not otherwise visible to us. This, of course, makes sense. QM's Learner Engagement Analytics system cannot currently capture data on whether students are accessing assigned readings, analysing and reflecting on their arguments, and preparing for seminar discussions – the independent study activities that we would consider most important in our discipline.

b. There only two significant associations between time spent on external commitments and seminar attendance, and both are positive. Respondents who reported spending more time each week fulfilling caring responsibilities and participating in student societies had higher average attendance rates.

c. This may however reflect the fact that the models control for whether respondents reported ever having missed a seminar due to outside commitments. There was a negative association between having ever missed a seminar due to work, caring responsibilities or internet connectivity issues and seminar attendance. This suggests that, for students with external commitments, *the issue is not so much the absolute amount of time those commitments require, but the fact they sometimes clash with taught classes.*

d. There were significant negative associations between having ever missed a seminar or a coursework deadline due to caring responsibilities and QMPlus login scores. This goes against the suggestion that students with such responsibilities find other ways to study. No doubt some do find other ways of keeping on top of their studies other than attending seminars. But this is not the norm.

e. Controlling for the engagement variables, there is a positive association between self-reported weekly hours of paid employment and average mark, suggesting that students who have paid jobs achieve better marks than classmates who do not *provided they are able to attend at the same rate* – which in turn seems to depend on the extent to which their employment commitments clash with their classroom commitments.

f. Controlling for the engagement variables, there is a negative association between weekly hours spent receiving medical treatment and average mark. This is the only type of outside time commitment that appears to negatively affect how well students perform in assessments in this way. Given there is no significant association between this variable and attendance, it suggest that there are students experiencing ill health who manage to attend timetabled classes, complete QMPlus activities and submit coursework, but who nevertheless achieve lower average marks than classmates who otherwise appear similar in the data.

g. There is also a negative association between average mark and whether a respondent reports that they would spend more time studying if they had fewer outside commitments. Again, this variable is not significantly associated with attendance or QMPlus login or activity scores, suggesting it points to students struggling to dedicate sufficient time to independent study activities not otherwise visible in QEngage data.

There is thus strong support for H$_2$, though the actual results are nuanced. In particular, the evidence suggests that *the key question is not how many hours students spend on outside activities, but the extent to which their external commitments throw up unexpected or inflexible demands that sometimes prevent them attending specific taught classes*.

The results also suggest that there are students who would ideally like to spend more time on their studies but who do not look disengaged according to the engagement metrics used here. This likely reflects students who are managing to attend and to access tasks via QMPlus but who are not committing as much time to completing those tasks as they would like. This finding is especially useful for QMUL's ongoing work to improve its use of Learner Engagement Analytics, as it underlines the limitations of available metrics while pointing towards additional metrics that might help address these – asking students to self-report whether they think they are studying enough, for example.

H$_3$: Attitudes to learning experiences.

H$_3$ holds that students who feel more positive about their learning experiences in SPIR will be more engaged. We have two sets of variables available to help test this hypothesis; one referring to students' impressions of their learning experience overall, and one looking specifically at their experiences of online learning.

In order to test H$_3$ statistically, we used the following variables:

a. Modules_Stimulating, Modules_Interesting, Modules_Challenging, Modules_Materials, Modules_Confidence, Modules_Criteria, Modules_Marking, Modules_Feedback_Timely, Modules_Feedback_Useful, Modules_Feedback_Teaching and Modules_Community, which indicate respondents' satisfaction with different aspects of their learning experience across their time at QM.

b. Online_Decision, Online_QMPlus, Online_Recorded_Lectures, Online_Live_Lectures and Online_Webinars which indicate respondents' satisfaction with different aspects of their online learning experience during 2020-21.

Table 3: Regression analyses for H3: Attitudes to Learning Experiences

	Mark		Mark	
(Constant)	55.544	***	44.593	***
Modules_Stimulating	0.077		-0.103	
Modules_Interesting	-0.549		-0.948	
Modules_Challenging	0.768		0.993	
Modules_Materials	-0.378		-0.349	
Modules_Confidence	1.765	**	1.315	*
Modules_Criteria	0.675		0.627	
Modules_Marking	1.228		1.304	
Modules_Feedback_Timely	-0.252		-0.461	
Modules_Feedback_Useful	-0.204		-0.152	
Modules_Feedback_Teaching	0.633		0.483	
Modules_Community	-0.28		-0.221	
Online_Decision	1.138	*	1.313	**
Online_QMPlus	-0.699		-0.563	
Online_Recorded_Lectures	0.135		-0.103	
Online_Live_Lectures	-0.995		-0.878	
Online_Webinars	-0.889		-1.118	
Attendance			0.134	***
QMPlus_Login			0.028	
QMPlus_Activity			0.037	
R^2	0.058		0.244	

Table 3 reports two regression models based on these variables, using average module mark as the dependent variable. No models are provided for attendance or either QMPlus measure because there were no significant associations between any of the independent variables and these measures.

Table 3 reports significant positive associations between respondents feeling that their experiences in the classroom had boosted their confidence, and believing that QM made the right decision to teach online in 2020-21, and average mark. Both associations remain significant after controlling for the three engagement variables.

These results suggest there is no direct link between student satisfaction and engagement, with the exception being the apparent relationship between agreeing with the decision to teach online and average marks. H$_3$ is thus largely not supported. The finding about the relationship between confidence and engagement is interesting, however, and will come back into consideration in the discussion of the focus groups below.

H$_4$: Access to appropriate study space

H$_4$ holds that students with better access to appropriate study space (physical and digital) will be more engaged.

In order to test H$_4$ statistically, we used the following variables:

a. Online_Workspace, which indicates whether respondents report having adequate physical space available to access online classes. We used this instead of Accommodation_Space as the two variables are correlated and Online_Workspace is more relevant to 2020-21.

b. Online_Device and Online_Internet, which indicate whether respondents report having access to a suitable device and a suitable internet connection to access online classes.

c. Absent_Online, which indicates whether respondents report ever having missed a taught class due to issues with internet connectivity.

Table 4: Regression Analyses for H4: Access to appropriate study space						
	Attendance		QMPlus Login	Mark		Mark
(Constant)	71.07		67.083	60.265		46.177
Online_Workspace	2.847	*	2.477	1.478	*	0.972
Online_Device	0.654		-1.54	-0.589		-0.551
Online_Internet	-0.467		0.055	-0.131		-0.102
Absent_Online	-4.048		-7.285	1.114		2.128
Attendance						0.121 ***
QMPlus Login						0.05
QMPlus Activity						0.035
R^2	0.039		0.022	0.019		0.213

Table 4 reports a significant positive association between having adequate workspace available at home to attend online classes and both attendance and average mark. The latter association disappears when we control for attendance, indicating that it does not have an independent effect on outcomes. This offers partial support for H4, in that it indicates that the extent to which SPIR students are able to access online learning varies in ways that affect student engagement.

It is also worth noting in this regard that some *two thirds* of survey respondents (who are themselves more engaged on average than their classmates) reporting having missed at least one taught class during 2020-21 due to a lack of adequate internet access at home. One reason why this variable was not significantly associated with any of the outcome measures was simply that such a large proportion of respondents indicated that they had struggled at some point. This finding played a key role in SPIR's decision to maximise face-to-face provision in 2021-22, as it indicated that *a majority of our students are unable to access online learning on a consistent or reliable basis*.

H5: Access to advice and support

H5 holds that students who feel better able to access support will be more engaged. In order to test H5 statistically, we used the following variables:

a. Advice_Advisor, Advice_Teacher, Advice_Library_SU, Advice_SSO, Advice_Language, Advice_Students, Advice_Other, a set of metrics which report whether students have ever accessed particular sources of advice.

b. Advice_All, which indicates the total number of sources of advice that respondents report having accessed.

c. Online_Advice, Online_Supported_Staff and Online_Supported_Students which indicate whether respondents knew how to access advice during online learning, and whether they felt supported by staff and fellow students.

Table 5 reports a strong positive association between respondents reporting they had sought advice from classmates and attendance, between having sought advice from students and QMPlus login score, between knowing where to seek advice online and both QMPlus scores, and between feeling supported by staff online and having sought advice from the library or the SU and average module mark.

Controlling for the engagement variables, respondents who felt supported by staff during online learning had higher average marks than those who did not, suggesting that there is a direct link between a general sense of being

supported and student outcomes. Moreover, respondents who felt supported by their fellow students had *much* higher attendance rates – which matters because attendance is also strongly positively correlated with average marks in this model. H_5 is thus supported.

Table 5: Regression analyses for H5: Access to advice and support

Dependent variable	Attendance		QMPlus Login		QMPlus Activity		Mark		Mark	
(Constant)	63.264	***	41.375	***	36.022	***	56.901	***	45.454	***
Online_Advice	2.685		5.252	**	4.321	*	-0.133		-0.894	
Online_Supported_Staff	1.245		-2.328		0.366		1.371	*	1.349	*
Online_Supported_Students	-1.711		0.671		1.774		0.442		0.584	
Advice_Teacher	7.838		11.551	*	10.197		2.903		0.967	
Advice_Library_SU	2.414		9.689		9.822		4.587	*	3.472	
Advice_SSO	-4.001		-2.879		2.153		0.882		1.531	
Advice_Language	1.827		-12.101		-19.348		0.971		1.886	
Advice_Students	12.056	**	2.509		3.302		2.647		0.873	
Advice_Other	2.287		-15.357		-7.794		1.845		2.666	
Advice_All	-0.645		0.351		-4.124		-1.719		-1.573	
Attendance									0.129	***
QMPlus_Login									0.062	
QMPlus_Activity									0.021	
R^2	0.134		0.079		0.04		0.016		0.203	

H_6: Aspirations

H_6 holds that students who perceive a stronger relationship between their studies and their future objectives will be more engaged. To test H_6, we asked a wide range of questions about students' aspirations and plans for post-QMUL life. In order to test this hypothesis, we used the following variables:

a. Career_Skills_Gained and Career_Capabilities_Gained, which indicate whether respondents believed they had gained useful skills and capabilities from their studies that would help them in their career.

b. Career_Studies_Helped and Career_Supported, which indicate whether respondents perceived a direct positive relationship between their studies and their career goals.

Table 6: Regression analyses for H6: Aspirations

Dependent variable	Attendance		QMPlus Login		Mark		Mark	
(Constant)	66.501	***	54.47	***	57.529	***	45.277	***
Career_Skills_Gained	-2.865		-0.999		-1.413		-1.022	
Career_Capabilities_Gained	3.473		-0.159		1.817	*	1.374	
Career_Supported	2.766		4.032		0.98		0.385	
Attendance							0.112	***
QMPlus Login							0.053	
QMPlus Activity							0.04	
R^2	0.02		0.004		0.022		0.214	

Table 6 reports a positive association between whether respondents believed they had gained transferrable career-related capabilities from their studies and average mark. None of the other variables were correlated with engagement, and once we control for the engagement variables there was no correlation between careers-related variables and average mark. H_6 is therefore largely not supported.

All variables

As with the whole population, attendance consistently predicts average mark among survey respondents. Understanding the drivers of attendance is therefore crucial.

Across the different hypotheses, the following variables were significantly associated with attendance: induction_events, time_study, time_care, time_society, absent_employment, absent_caring, absent_online, modules_confidence, online_decision, and advice_students.

Table 7 uses these variables to construct a more focused model looking at the drivers of seminar attendance. It shows that, controlling for the other variables, respondents who reported spending more time studying and having sought advice from their fellow students had significantly higher attendance rates, while those who reported ever having missed a taught session due to caring or employment responsibilities had significantly lower attendance rates.

Table 7: Regression model for Attendance		
	Attendance	
(Constant)	57.154	
Induction_Events	0.646	
Time_Study	0.579	**
Time_Care	0.226	
Time_Society	0.77	
Absent_Caring	-11.331	**
Absent_Employment	-7.976	**
Absent_Online	-4.358	
Modules_Confidence	1.761	
Online_Decision	-0.109	
Advice_Students	9.024	***
R^2	0.249	

This model offers the clearest indication so far of what factors really affect student engagement, reinforcing the points made in the discussion of H_2 and H_5 above that *what most affects student attendance is not the total volume of outside commitments they face, but the relative inflexibility of those commitments relative to their class timetable* at QM. Those students who feel part of a strong community with their peers, conversely, are less likely to miss classes, a finding that is consistent with previous work by Daniel Hartley and Tom Loya.

In addition the following variables were independently correlated with average module mark: induction_events, time_study, time_medical, time_under_studying, absent_employment, modules_confidence, online_decision, online_supported_staff, advice_library_SU and career_capabilities_gained.

Table 8 presents a series of models aimed at assessing the extent to which these apparent correlations hold up when subject to a more focused set of controls.

Table 8: Regression models for Average Module Mark							
	Mark		Mark		Mark		Mark	
(Constant)	50.559		43.978		44.486		45.107	
Induction_Events	0.625	*	0.546	*	0.58	*	0.619	**
Time_Study	0.241	**	0.156		0.088		0.094	
Time_Medical	-0.424	*	-0.384		-0.382	*	-0.395	*
Time_Under_Studying	-3.769	**	-3.263	**	-2.898	**	-2.918	**
Absent_Employment	-1.672		-0.195		-0.191			
Modules_Confidence	1.24	*	1.019	*	0.931		0.923	*
Online_Decision	-0.025		0.183		0.247			
Online_Supported_Staff	0.025		-0.052		-0.121			
Advice_Library_SU	0.637		0.741		0.561			
Career_Capabilities_Gained	0.485		0.079		0.075			
Attendance			0.131	***	0.096	**	0.096	**
QMPlus_Login					0.037		0.039	
QMPlus_Activity					0.03		0.028	
R^2	0.196		0.271		0.291		0.307	

Table 8 shows that, controlling for attendance, QMPlus login and QMPlus activity scores, there is a significant positive association between the number of induction events a respondent attended and how much confidence their modules have given them and average marks, and a significant negative association between the amount of time they spend receiving medical treatment and whether or not they think they should spend more time studying, and module mark.

Conclusions

What, then, has this statistical analysis shown? The following conclusions seem the most pertinent:

- **Respondents who have higher attendance levels achieve higher average module marks. Respondents with higher QMPlus Login and QMPlus Activity scores also achieve higher module marks, though these effects are not statistically significant when we control for seminar attendance.**

- **Respondents who report spending more time on their studies, or having sought advice from other students, have higher attendance levels.**

- **Respondents who report having ever missed a class due to a clash with paid employment or caring responsibilities have lower overall attendance levels and therefore lower average module marks.**

- **Respondents who attended more induction events or who reported that their modules increased their confidence achieve higher module marks, even after controlling for attendance.**

- **Respondents who report spending more time attending medical treatment or who state that they would spend more time studying if they had fewer other commitments achieve lower module marks, even after controlling for attendance.**

Qualitative insights

This study generated two sets of qualitative data capable of supporting the interpretation of the statistical findings described above. First, the survey asked a series of free-text questions inviting students to reflect on different aspects of their studies. Second, the focus group discussions explored the emerging themes of the statistical analysis in more detail. For the sake of consistency, the following sections are again organised around the six hypotheses set out above.

Survey insights

In total, the 208 survey respondents provided nearly 60,000 words of free-text comments. In the following discussion I have attempted to identify and interpret the key themes emerging from these comments.

H$_1$: Expectations versus reality

Several respondents commented on the differences between pre-university and university-level study. In particular, they noted the shift in the balance of responsibility away from a teacher-led model to a student-led model, and in the object of study, away from a model based around mastering a clearly-defined body of knowledge to one in which they were expected to develop and exercise independent critical judgement in the face of a potentially unlimited body of knowledge.

On a positive note, respondents commented favourably on the attitude and approachability of SPIR teaching staff. Concerningly, some respondents reported having been warned by pre-university teachers that university teachers would not be available to them on a routine basis, and that they should not expect to be able to approach university staff for help and advice. This, clearly, is a key misconception that SPIR will need to pre-empt and address. Those respondents who had overcome the initial expectation that SPIR staff would be remote and aloof reported having been pleasantly surprised by the interest and attention shown to them. It is at least a potential problem, however, if some of our students begin their studies with the impression that we are not available to them – and it is a problem that we can realistically expect to most directly affect those students with the least prior experience of higher education.

Indeed, there were some signs in the free-text responses of a relationship between these observations. At least some respondents reported having been surprised and overwhelmed by the differences between pre-university and university education, and then on top of that not having felt confident asking staff for help because of a prior belief that university staff were not willing to offer such help. The most frequent point respondents made when asked what advice they would give their younger self about starting their studies in SPIR was to make greater use of staff advice and feedback hours. SPIR might respond to this observation by asking current students to make this point to applicants and incoming first years as part of our induction activities. Across the board, the survey respondents indicated that they found speaking to current students especially helpful in ensuring they knew what to expect when they arrived.

On a more negative note, a large proportion of respondents criticised what they considered to be the low number of direct contact hours provided in SPIR. This is an interesting finding, in that SPIR's actual weekly contact hours (8-10 hours per week depending on the modules taken and the year of study) is entirely in line with both the information we provide to applicants and normal practices at other institutions. In some cases, respondents made unfavourable but accurate comparisons between SPIR and their friends' experiences in other fields of study – such as Science and Engineering or Medicine and Dentistry – where the standard pedagogic model involves higher levels of classroom instruction and lower levels of independent learning. In other cases, respondents made poorly informed comparisons between SPIR and similar departments at other institutions. It is not, as a point of fact, true

that SPIR students have fewer weekly contact hours than Politics and IR students at other Russell Group institutions. It may be a problem, however, that some of our student believe that it is true.

H$_2$: External time commitments

The free-text comments indicated that there are some SPIR students attempting (with great difficulty) to balance a full-time programme of study with full-time employment. This does not, however, appear to be a common experience. Instead, and in keeping with the statistical findings, the key issue appears to be the extent to which students feel able to reschedule either their external commitments or their taught classroom sessions in response to unexpected timetabling clashes.

For this reason, respondents commented favourably on the perceived flexibility offered by online learning. In particular, they broadly welcomed the use of pre-recorded videos to provide instruction, noting that pre-recorded videos could be paused and replayed at a students' preferred pace, and watched at a time that fit around other commitments. Some respondents also commented positively on the relative flexibility offered by online seminars and advice and feedback hours. The latter proved especially popular; many respondents reported that they were more likely to make use of online advice and feedback hours, since doing so did not require them to travel specifically to campus for a 10-15 minute appointment. The former were less popular. Students appreciated being able to access seminars without taking time to locate and travel to physical rooms on campus (and, in some cases, without needing to get out of bed or get dressed). But they generally did not consider that these advantages outweighed the disadvantages associated with attending seminars online (discussed in more detail in relation to H$_3$ below).

One additional point worth noting in terms of the free-text comments in this area relates to respondents' understanding of the relationship between external time commitments and their studies. In many cases, respondents appeared to under-estimate the amount of time that they should routinely dedicate to independent study; a finding also reflected in their self-reported weekly study hours. A majority of respondents reported spending less than 30 hours per week on their degree programme (including taught classes), which means *a majority of respondents were spending less than the minimum recommended number of weekly study hours on their degree*. Several respondents reported feeling like they did not have sufficient time available to complete required independent study tasks. In some case this clearly reflected under-developed time management skills. But it also clearly reflected respondents' having under-estimated the time commitment expected of them. It is hardly surprising if students are struggling to complete tasks designed to take six hours if they are only allocating three hours to them.

H$_3$: Attitudes to learning experiences.

The free-text comments in this area offered a range of interesting insights into respondents' experiences of and attitudes to SPIR's teaching and learning activities. These ranged across both online and face-to-face activities, and shed some initial light on possible pedagogic drivers of differential engagement rates.

Online learning

As the discussion of H$_2$ above indicates, many respondents appreciated the flexibility of online learning. At the same time, however, the free text comments made clear that respondents would not welcome a reduction in face-to-face contact hours; they appreciated recorded videos as an *additional* learning resource, especially when combined with more interactive large-group face-to-face sessions. But they did not regard pre-recorded videos as an acceptable *substitute* for traditional face-to-face teaching.

The lessons to be learned from SPIR's experience of online learning in 2020-21 seem fairly clear. There are opportunities to use online content and activities to make our education more flexible and more accessible. But our students would welcome this only if it meant *additional* provision. They already believe that they receive relatively little face-to-face contact; reducing face-to-face teaching and replacing it with online provision would not go down well. In an ideal world, SPIR would have sufficient resources available to supplement face-to-face teaching with additional online content. Indeed, SPIR should look at ways to do this over the coming years, in line with QMUL's 2030 strategy. But if a choice has to be made between putting resource into online material, and putting it into classroom teaching, the evidence clearly supports a focus on maximising face-to-face contact.

General experiences of learning

Respondents offered a rich range of reflections on their classroom experiences in SPIR, demonstrating an impressive ability to identify what kinds of activities worked for them personally and for their classmates. They also demonstrated a level of sanguineness about the need for SPIR to cater for preferences and abilities that might differ to their own. Most respondents reported that they preferred some topics and some learning activities to others. But they generally acknowledged that studying in SPIR would (and should) sometimes mean stepping out of their comfort zone.

Respondents identified a number of what we might call 'teacher behaviours' that they found helpful. In particular, they talked about the importance of lecturers and seminar tutors demonstrating knowledge of and enthusiasm for their subject matter, and understanding of and empathy towards students' emotional reactions to the seminar environment. For example, several respondents reported having sometimes failed to prepare adequately for taught sessions; as discussed at H_2 above, this partly reflected under-developed time management skills, and partly the unavoidable or unanticipated encroachment of external commitments into study time. They appreciated when teachers made clear what level of preparation was expected, but also signalled understanding that sometimes students would fail to prepare adequately for reasons not entirely within their control.

Without using the language of pedagogic scholarship, survey respondents often in practice reflected a constructivist understanding of what learning looks like; they felt most enthused by, and most likely to engage with, learning activities that visibly deepened their internal understanding of module subject matter. They also appreciated clear alignment between classroom activities, independent study tasks, and assessments. They felt alienated by study tasks that did not have a clear rationale linked to module learning objectives and assessment practices. They also felt alienated by unfamiliar tasks *to the extent these were not clearly explained*, and by perceived inconsistencies between modules and seminar tutors.

A significant proportion of respondents commented negatively on SPIR's assessment practices, a finding that reflects other measures of student satisfaction such as the National Student Survey. There were clear signs that the introduction of a revised standard assessment rubric during 2019-20 had had a positive effect; respondents who had only known that rubric reported much higher satisfaction levels than those who had known the previous rubric. There were also ongoing issues largely relating to variation between modules and tutors in terms of how clearly staff articulated the relationship between these standard criteria and module and assignment-specific criteria. Both the perceived lack of specific guidance in some cases, and the perceived unfairness of variation between modules and tutors in terms of the level of specific guidance offered, prompted negative comment.

SPIR has already taken steps in response to these findings, reiterating the importance of the standard assessment criteria to both students and staff, encouraging staff to discuss openly with students the relationship between these standard criteria and module and assignment-specific criteria, and reminding both students and staff to engage with the self-reflection component of the SPIR assignment cover sheet. We are also continuing to work to manage

expectations around the nature and timeliness of feedback, with steps to improve consistency within and between modules, and to advertise expected feedback turnaround times in advance.

H$_4$: Access to appropriate study space

A significant number of respondents reported having struggled to access online seminars. Many lacked access to suitable study spaces at home, reporting that they shared living areas with multiple flatmates or family members, that their accommodation was noisy or that they did not have access to a desk. Several felt self-conscious about appearing on screen in their home environment, noting for example that they were only able to log in to seminars from their bedroom. This widespread self-consciousness triggered an additional knock-on effect, with respondents reporting unwillingness to appear on camera when others in their seminar group were not on camera. The result of this was that, notwithstanding efforts by colleagues across SPIR to co-create seminar camera policies, the majority of respondents reported not having appeared on screen in seminars, and feeling alienated by the fact that their classmates did not appear on screen either.

By contrast, respondents were generally satisfied with the provision of study space on campus. Some suggested that more physical space could have been made available on campus during Covid-19 restrictions, and some suggested a greater need for "social study" spaces, in which the expectation was that students would be working but where they were permitted to interact with each other. Overall however there was relatively little evidence to support one of our initial intuitions – that students might fail to attend taught sessions because they were unable to find appropriate space on campus to use between session scheduled at different times of day.

H$_5$: Access to advice and support

Most of the free-text comments under this heading repeated insights mentioned above. In particular, it was clear that those respondents who felt confident approaching SPIR staff for advice felt satisfied with the support they received, and that at least some respondents did not feel confident asking for help in the first place.

Some students commented negatively on the perceived under-resourcing of SPIR's professional services team (during 2020 SPIR had 1.5 FTE Student Support Officers (SSOs) responsible for 968 undergraduate students). Despite this, those who had engaged with the SSOs commented (very) favourably on their experiences.

The main suggestion that respondents raised under this heading was, however, that staff should be more pro-active in checking in with students on a regular basis, rather than waiting for students to approach them. Staff will inevitably raise questions about how realistic this suggestion is, given the typical SPIR advisor has over 50 advisees in addition to the students they directly teach. But it is clearly something that at least some students expect.

Respondents also commented on the extent to which they felt a sense of community within SPIR. Here the most interesting observations related to SPIR's size and scale. Several respondents commented that it was perfectly possible for a third year student to walk into a seminar room at the start of a new module and not have previously spoken to any of the other students in the room. SPIR staff should take this observation into account, noting that in. many cases the seminar tutor is the only person in the room who knows the name of everyone else in the room, and the fact that respondents repeatedly made clear they felt most happy about attending and participating in taught sessions when they felt a personal connection to their classmates. Time spent building social bonds among seminar groups would appear to be time well spent, in terms of learning outcomes.

H$_6$: Aspirations

Respondents generally commented favourably on the relationship between their studies in SPIR and their long-term aspirations. There was considerable appetite for additional practical experience, with respondents commenting

favourably on the parliamentary and civil society internship schemes already offered to third-year students, and expressing an interest in seeing more careers activities embedded in classroom learning.

Respondents also reported being interested in getting involved in staff research, both as a way of furthering their own intellectual interests, and as a way of developing relevant professional skills. Finally, respondents commented favourably on classroom activities that enabled them to develop transferrable workplace skills, such as team working, different types of written communication, and oral presentation skills – despite also expressing some anxieties about the perceived challenges of each.

Focus groups

I deliberately selected focus group participants on the basis of their responses to the survey questions. One group comprised respondents who reported that they lacked confidence in their ability to speak up in class, one comprised respondents who reported having sometimes missed taught classes due to clashes with external commitments, and one comprised respondents who reported that they would like to spend more time on their studies but were prevented from doing so by other commitments. A fourth group combined respondents from each of these three categories.

H$_1$: Expectations versus reality

There was considerable variation between participants in terms of how well their previous studies had prepared them for university study.

Some reported that their Sixth Form expected them to work independently, and to write what we would recognise as 'university-style' essays. Others reported having been largely or entirely supervised in their pre-university studies, and having no writing experience other than A-Level style "balanced" essays. These differences were replicated for international students, and cut across prior qualification types; e.g. some participants reported having been heavily supervised during A-Level studies, while some participants with other qualifications reported having been expected to work independently. International students had, in general, experienced higher levels of active supervision both in pre-university and university settings than was typical at a UK university.

Participants reported positive experiences of individual induction activities, but also that they had some difficulty seeing the wood for the trees. Several indicated that they would have appreciated more guidance about how a typical week should look during term time, and how to think about planning their work over a semester. They suggested, for example, that SPIR might use its initial advisor meetings to help students draw up a study schedule, looking at how to carve out sufficient time to prepare for weekly seminars and for assessment deadlines.

H$_2$: External time commitments

Generally speaking, the Focus Group participants had much higher attendance rates than the average, so this is an example where I believe the right approach is to read against the evidence.

The key finding in this regard was that participants reported feeling empowered to ask permission to attend a different seminar group in the event that they encountered an irreconcilable clash with outside responsibilities. The most common reason that participants reported for needing to miss a seminar was a last-minute change of shift allocation at work. Some had also experienced needing to take charge of caring for siblings at short notice.

Interestingly, participants reported variation between modules in terms of whether convenors would advertise the possibility of attending a different seminar session, or give permission to do so. Given we can reasonably infer that at least some SPIR students will not feel confident asking for accommodations that have not previously been

advertised to them, here the key finding is that SPIR should at least consider establishing a school-wide policy on whether and when students may attend a seminar other than the one to which they are assigned on their timetable, and ensuring that this is widely communicated by teaching staff.

H₃: Attitudes to learning experiences.

We discussed participants' experiences of teaching and learning at some length, with a particular focus on what aspects of our teaching practices most encouraged student attendance and engagement.

For lectures, participants' comments focused on the lecturer's *attitude*. In particular, they felt less inclined to miss lectures when they felt that the lecturer did a good job of communicating their interest in and enthusiasm for the subject matter. Participants also mentioned a desire for greater guidance on how to approach independent study tasks, especially those involving complex theory texts, and for at least some interactive elements even in large settings (ideally using tools such as Mentimeter which do not require students to speak up in front of their entire cohort).

For both seminars and independent study activities, participants talked about the importance of variety in terms of session structure, activity type and study material:

Participants recognised the value of deep engagement with 'classic' texts, but felt most enthusiastic about doing this when it was combined with other formats. Examples raised included pairing contemporary and classical scholarship, or traditional sources with mixed media such as YouTube videos, blogs and podcasts.

Participants spoke fondly of colleagues who varied the format of seminar sessions, especially when they combined variation with clear and consistent communication about what would be expected from one week to the next.

Participants suggested that SPIR might offer timetabled supervised independent study sessions, especially in the first year, in which students could work on particular tasks either individually or in groups under the supervision of a member of staff, who would answer questions but would not be expected to 'teach'.

Participants also emphasised the importance of feeling "safe" in a seminar setting. This was much less about specific tasks or ideas (there was no sign of so-called 'snowflake' behaviour, in which students refuse to engage with ideas that contradict their own existing beliefs, for example), and much more about creating an atmosphere in which students feel able to try things out and make mistakes. Participants talked fondly of colleagues who praised effort as well as accuracy, who showed warmth and compassion towards them, and who structured discussions without straightjacketing them too tightly. Participants recognised the value of encouraging students to speak up early in a semester, but generally did not like being "put on the spot" without prior warning. They noted that asking students to speak to each other in a small group before reporting their discussions to a wider group made participation easier

Participants particularly appreciated seminar activities that encouraged debates among students. This might involve assigning different groups to put different sides of an argument, or asking students to make the opposite argument to their personal preference.

In keeping with the free-text survey responses, the focus group participants reported that they felt more comfortable speaking up in front of classmates they felt they knew. They again emphasised that the size of the School meant that even third year students might not have spoken to anyone in their seminar group before the start of a semester. Participants who felt on good terms with their classmates were also less likely to skip seminars and felt more comfortable seeking advice and support from peers.

Participants appreciated clear signs of alignment between lectures, seminars, independent study tasks and assessment. They reported making strategic judgements about which sessions to attend on the basis of their perceptions of this alignment.

Both the focus group participants and the survey respondents reported uncertainty about marking criteria. In part this reflected an unfounded belief that referencing is the primary marking criterion. In part it (correctly) reflected variations in expectations and approaches between modules and individual teaching staff. SPIR should continue to emphasise that such variation is an inevitable consequence of the variety of approaches to study that exist within the broad fields of Politics and IR – and that mastering different approaches (and learning to live with varying expectations) is an important professional skill.

Partly in response to variation between modules, participants sought more guidance about how to complete individual assessments, and for this to be provided at an early stage in a module in order to help them make these judgements. In particular, they suggested that "how to complete your assignment" workshops should take place at least *two weeks* before deadlines, or should be spread across two weeks to enable discussion of approach and execution.

H4: Access to appropriate study space
Participants largely echoed what we would already expect. They generally preferred to have taught classes compressed into two or three days per week rather than spread over all five, and to minimise on-campus downtime between classes.

Interestingly, several participants indicated that their key issue with on-campus downtime was *not* a lack of appropriate study space, but rather that they struggled to switch focus between modules and between classroom and independent study activities. Again, the ability to shift between topics and tasks is a key professional skill. SPIR should consider emphasising this.

To an extent, participants benefitted from feeling empowered to use whatever spaces they found available on campus.

They did note the relative paucity of spaces intended for 'noisy' study, such as group work or participation in webinars. Generally they felt that the Library lacked space for noisy activities, and that other spaces such as the SU building or the catering outlets were noisy but not suited for study.

H5: Access to advice and support
Perhaps the most important finding of the focus groups was a tentative definition of "support".

Participants generally felt empowered to seek out advice and feedback when they needed it, though some reported that it had taken them some time to work out when that was. But what they really wanted was for us to be more pro-active about contacting them. In particular, they praised colleagues who periodically wrote to them (either as their advisor or as a seminar tutor or module convenor) to ask if they were ok. They also suggested introducing scheduled advisor meetings at the start of Semester B, noting that few students actively sought contact with their advisor outside of formally scheduled meetings.

Beyond these suggestions, participants also talked about ways of building peer relationships. They generally liked Coffee and Politics and would welcome more such sessions, especially if linked to taught modules. They preferred smaller groups over, e.g., whole-cohort WhatsApp groups, which at least some participants considered more harmful than useful due to the tendency of classmates to engage in uninformed speculation.

Conclusions

The qualitative components of this study highlighted a number of useful additional insights, building on the quantitative findings discussed in above.

- **Confidence matters. Confident students not only do better, they feel more able to ask for help when they struggle. Staff can help to build confidence by creating a positive, supportive classroom environment; by making clear how students can and should contact them for advice; by designing learning activities that enable students to practice and ultimately master new knowledge and skills; and by offering simple, clear, consistent guidance on what students are expected to do, and when. This should extend to offering straightforward guidance on when and how students may ask for individual accommodations – including but not limited to the Extenuating Circumstances process for assessments.**

- **When students talk about 'support' they mean 'pro-active support' – the kind that comes to them rather than them needing to seek it out. This observations raises challenging questions for SPIR. We believe, I think rightly, that part of students taking responsibility for their own learning involves their taking responsibility for asking for advice and guidance when they need it. At the same time, we need to address the fact that some students do not feel entitled to ask for help no matter how often we tell them to do so; that those students appear to be disproportionately likely to come from under-privileged backgrounds and historically under-represented demographic groups; and that for a significant proportion of our students this approach differs radically from their prior educational experiences. We may want to consider ways of making the transition from the more pro-active support model our students will have experienced in their pre-university education, and the more reactive model that is typical at university level.**

- **Students have a reasonable sense of what constitutes a 'good' education. There is relatively little evidence of widespread instrumentalization of the relationship between teaching, learning and assessment – the key exception to this being the desire for more contact hours. In particular, there is widespread acceptance that studying means being challenged, and that sometimes students will have to do things they find difficult or uninteresting. The challenge for us as educators is to guide students through these challenges in ways that encourage them and build their confidence rather than alienating them. Both the survey respondents and the focus group participants identified a number of useful learning strategies that appeared to them to do this – combining classic and contemporary texts, mixing up different formats, varying independent study and seminar activities from week to week, and building in time for reflection and for interaction in both small and large-group sessions.**

Recommendations

General

SPIR should:

● Prioritise work to improve student engagement, and in particular student attendance at taught classes, recognising that improving engagement rates should both improve attainment and reduce attainment gaps between different demographic groups.

● Continue to monitor data on student engagement and attainment, both to track the impact of specific interventions and to support future exercises such as this.

Admissions and Induction

SPIR should:

● Ensure potential students – including those who enter via Clearing – have a range of opportunities to speak to current SPIR students as part of the admissions process.

● Consider monitoring attendance at Welcome Week induction events and offering support to students who attend relatively few events.

● Discuss with new students during Welcome Week the differences between pre-university and university education. We should be frank about our expectations in terms of independent study and critical thinking, while emphasising that we are available for advice and support.

● Ask academic advisors to help new students to draw up a study timetable for Semester A, identifying when they will be able to dedicated sufficient time to completing independent study and assessment tasks ahead of taught seminars and submission deadlines.

● Consider raising entry requirements for students whose previous qualifications were not A-Levels.

Teaching and learning

SPIR should:

● Inform students of the relationship between attendance and outcomes, making clear that students who attend taught classes regularly generally achieve better outcomes than those who do not.

● Remind students who may be experiencing ill health to seek advice and support from the Disability and Dyslexia Service in the first instance, and continue to encourage the University to invest further in such support services.

● Consider introducing and regularly promulgating a formal policy on whether and under what circumstances students who are unable to attend a taught seminar due to an unexpected clash with outside responsibilities may temporarily attend another session on the same module.

● Continue to promote best pedagogic practices to module convenors and seminar tutors.
   o Module convenors should, in particular, consider how to align classroom activities, independent study tasks and assessments, and how best to combine synchronous and asynchronous activities, and online and face-to-face provision, in order to deliver content, encourage independent learning and support students to engage with and understand material.
   o Module convenors should also consider how to combine different types of independent learning activity, and different types of text, to avoid stagnation and to ensure the accessibility of more complex material.

    o   Module convenors should, finally, clearly communicate their expectations in terms of independent study tasks and assessments, ideally providing guidance not only on *what* students should do in order to succeed, but *when.* Where this involves specific sessions on how to approach assessments, module convenors should consider holding these at least two weeks before the relevant deadline, or splitting them over two weeks.

    o   Seminar tutors should encourage students to develop positive peer relationships, and to discuss classroom material outside of synchronous taught sessions. This might involve repeatedly setting aside classroom time for students to get to know each other, or supporting students to set up independent study groups.

    o   Seminar tutors should take steps to make their classrooms 'safe' for students to test out and develop their ideas. They should encourage students to experiment and recognise effort as well as accuracy. They should be mindful that some students need to 'warm up' to the idea of speaking in front of an entire seminar group, and should for example combine small-group and whole-group activities to get students talking early in a session and to ensure that everyone has something they can talk about to the group as a whole. They should recognise that students sometimes fail to prepare adequately for seminar discussions – that in cases where students have failed to manage their time properly, they are usually aware of that failure, while in cases where outside circumstances have intervened to prevent them preparing properly, they may already be under considerable pressure. Seminar tutors should strongly encourage students to prepare fully for taught classes; but there are few additional benefits and some clear costs associated with calling out those who fail to do so.

● Continue to engage students in the development of new modules, module content and classroom activities.

Advice and student support

SPIR should:

● Encourage students to seek out advice and support from their academic advisors, tutors and peers, clearly communicating that the differences between pre-university study and university study mean many students need additional advice at some point, that support is available with both module-specific and general concerns, and that it is their responsibility to seek it out.

● Consider ways of making our support for less-engaged students more pro-active. This might involve asking academic advisors or module convenors to use LEA data to identify less-engaged students on a regular basis and contacting them to offer advice and support. In some cases students who are beginning to disengage need only to find out that someone has noticed them in order to re-engage, and that students who lack confidence in a higher education setting are less likely to ask for help when they need it.

● Expand our use of peer-support initiatives, with a particular focus on supporting first year students and students from historically under-represented backgrounds. We should consider both general mentoring initiatives that help new students understand and navigate the university experience, and module-specific initiatives such as peer-led team learning.

● Engage with the ongoing development of QM's LEA system, considering for example whether to pilot recording attendance at large-group as well as small-group teaching sessions, and whether to use Reading Lists Online to enable tracking of engagement with reading list materials.

Long-term aspirations

SPIR should:

● Encourage students to reflect on their long-term aspirations, and on the role their SPIR education can play in helping them achieve their goals, including through conversations with academic advisors, seminar tutors and peers.

- Encourage students to engage early and regularly with the QM Careers Service.

- Encourage module convenors to think about how to relate module content to students' long-term aspirations. In some cases, that might mean direct discussion of career options linked to specific topics of study. In others it might involve identifying and promoting opportunities to develop transferable professional skills, such as written, oral and visual communication, quantitative and qualitative analysis,

- Work with internal colleagues and external stakeholders to expand the range of opportunities available to SPIR students to gain work experience as they study. This might involve expanding our use of Student Ambassadors or further investment in undergraduate research assistantships alongside the development of new external partnerships.

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