Exploring student engagement through the use of diaries

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Forty-seven psychology undergraduates volunteered to complete diaries outlining their daily academic and non-academic routine, covering semester one of their first year at a post-1992 university. The aim of the research was to investigate whether diaries were an appropriate method for exploring student engagement; also we wanted to measure whether the themes found through thematic analysis corresponded with those reported in previous research or whether new themes would emerge, not previously explored.

In the course of the research we found themes that related to student engagement, disengagement, withdrawal concerns, and more general concerns regarding course choice, and university choice.

We also found evidence which suggested that for some students there is a conflict between what is expected of them from the institution, in regards to the amount of time they could devote to their studies and the pressure from external forces which may take them away from studying, such as social commitments and paid work.

We conclude with a discussion around the relationship between these themes, and the use of diaries as a research tool.

Keywords: *word; diary study, engagement; student attrition; psychology.*

THE FIRST few weeks/months at university are a time of substantial transition and adjustment for new students (Rowley, Hartley & Larkin, 2008). It is during these first few weeks/months that university students are at the greatest risk of withdrawal, and it has been reported (Ozga & Sukhanandan, 1997) that most students who leave do so within their first year at university have withdrawn by the end of semester one. Research has also found that students decide to leave university for any number of reasons, ranging from academic difficulties, problems adjusting to university life, (Tinto, 1987), financial concerns (Callendar & Kemp, 2000), family pressure, or lack of commitment to the course (York, 1999) even lack of social integration (Chandler & McKnight, 2009). Predictive models of student attrition have shown to be largely unreliable, however one consistent predictor of risk is the students' prior academic achievement (Harrison, 2006). Johnes (1990) however, states that a more precise predictor of non-completion (at degree level) can be achieved by using the end of

year grades, their findings suggest that lower than average grades tend to generate into high levels of attrition.

More than a fifth of all students drop out of university (22 per cent) within their first year in England and Wales, and according to The Public Accounts Committee (a Government body which examines public expenditure) 28,000 full-time and 87,000 part-time students who started their first degree course in 2004–2005 were no longer in higher education a year later. The report also states that students from non-traditional backgrounds who enter higher education are at the greatest risk of dropping out, and are less likely to change course than the more traditional entry students.

There are social and academic pressures on students to conform to particular expectations. Often these expectations are formed long before the student reaches university (Rowley et al., 2008). Research (Rowley et al., 2008) has shown that there can be a mismatch between these expectations and the reality of life as a university student. In some instances this mismatch can lead to disen-

gagement and ultimately total withdrawal from the university (Bank, Biddle & Slavings, 1992; Cook & Leckey, 1999).

Although much of the research has been concerned with student attrition and withdrawal (see, for example, Harvey, Drew & Smith, 2006) there is also an increasing body of research that has explored students who persist in higher education but either never fully engage or disengage from the academic process very early on. The notion of engagement is, according to Carini, Kuh and Klein (2006) self-evident, the more time a student studies and practices a subject the greater their chances of gaining high grades. They suggest that students who reported drafting multiple essays before the deadline; completed readings before lectures; had a good relationship with faculty members and those who had a good record of attendance subsequently gained higher than average grades. What is not clear from these studies is why students often persist with their studies when they have apparently disengaged from the academic process, measured by the non-submission of coursework or having a poor attendance record. There is evidence that attendance at lectures and seminars is a crucial component for both social integration (Chandler & McKnight, 2009) and academic success (Woodfield, Jessop & McMillan, 2006). Woodfield et al. (2006) found that students who regularly attended lectures and seminars gained significantly higher degree classifications than those who had a poor attendance record. They report that attendance was a better predictor of grades than cognitive ability, and personality traits, and even A-level grades.

In the present study we focused upon psychology students' engagement/disengagement in a post-1992 English university which has embraced the culture of widening participation. We were interested in the relationship between students who indicated a pattern of engagement (reading-writing) and those students who we labelled as disengaged who divided the majority of their time between non-academic pursuits.

In the present study we employed both quantitative and qualitative methods (questionnaire and diary). Both methods were used to explore academic expectations, in relation to how much time students devoted to their degree. We also set out to investigate the external pressures which may take students away from their studies such as paid employment, social life and/or university-related sports activities, etc.

Paid employment

The profile of the student body has changed over the last several decades or so, and for most universities there has been an increase in non-traditional, mature and part-time students and this according to Cook and Leckey (1999) is likely to have led to an increase in non-completion rates. Another significant change has taken place in the way students pay a component of their tuition fees, and living costs are in the form of subsidised loans. The impact of this has been to increase financial pressure on students, which has led many to seek part-time employment (Lansdown, 2009). Callendar and Kemp (2000) suggest that 60 per cent of students take on part-time employment during term time, and as much as 80 per cent during holiday periods. Curtis and Sham (2002) however, point out that time engaged in paid employment during term time may be beneficial in terms of development skills and confidence. On the other hand, Callendar and Kemp (2000) reveal that paid employment was a major contributory factor in student withdrawal, more as a consequence of financial pressure than academic failure. Then again Wilkie and Jones (1994) suggest there is no clear relationship between paid work and student attrition. They suggest that students who worked part-time for an average of eight hours per week were less likely to withdraw and more likely to achieve higher overall grades than their non-working colleagues. This all suggests that taking on a small amount of paid employment may not necessarily have a detrimental effect on students' academic

performance. Lansdown (2009) however, found that paid term time employment can have both positive and negative consequences. In a positive way students may be exposed to other life choices and opportunities they would ordinarily not have had, however they were more likely to miss out of the 'student experience' and were more likely to have a reduced commitment to their course.

Student drift
Quinn et al. (2005) described what they termed as 'student drift', they suggest that some students gradually disengage from the academic process over time, which they attribute to lack of early formative feedback: UCAS (2002) however, attributed this phenomena to non-traditional students who do not have qualifications at A-level, and as such lack the skills to cope with the high demand of undertaking (reading for) a degree in a topic for which they had not necessarily had prior experience. Forsyth and Furlong (2003) go much further and suggest that all non-traditional students are at the greatest risk of gradual disengagement, because they lack the social support that traditional entry students have.

Forsyth and Furlong (2003) suggest that a number of middle-class students who disengage do so for different reasons to their non-traditional counterpart's .They suggest that university choice is secondary to the desire to live a lively student life, choosing the university with a 'party' reputation rather than one with good academic credentials. Harrison (2006) however, reports that he found no such division within this subset of students based on entry route or the students background, and that the slow progressive disengagement can be attributed to the loss of direction in just one module of an undergraduate programme. Nevertheless Rowley et al. (2008) report that students who study psychology at degree level, and who had previously obtained an A-level in psychology report being more prepared for their degree than those with no A-level psychology, and this level of preparedness is maintained as they progress through their degree (Rowley et al., 2008; Rowley, Larkin & Hartley, 2009).

Wrong university – wrong course
Among any cohort of students a small number will disengage from the academic process, because of early experiences at university that cause them to question their career path (Harrison, 2006). Harrison (2006) states that these early experiences may factor heavily in the student's inability to cope with the demands of their chosen degree choice. Furthermore, they could find the level of independent learning too challenging, because an element of their degree was not anticipated, or imagined would be difficult. Many psychology students find the statistical element of their degree demanding or they are surprised by emphasis that is put on research methods, and often this is cited as the reason for their disengagement or attrition (Rowley et al., 2008; Ruggeri et al., 2009; Sizemore & Lewandoski, 2009). Harrison (2006) states, however, that if these students totally disengage early enough and decide to leave university because they now believe it is taking them along the wrong career path, they are very likely to return to university at a later stage often with a different career goal in mind.

In the present study, we were thus interested to see how first-year psychology students responded to the demands of the first semester at university. As described above we wanted to explore whether our participant's differed in their willingness/desire to spend time reading/studying for their degree (as an essential part of academic engagement), and we wanted to see whether non-academic pursuits such as paid employment or social activities had a positive or negative effect on module grades.

Methodology
Participants
A total of 47 (of a total cohort of 73) single honours psychology first-year students (40 female: seven male; mean age 22.8, range 18 to 46) studying at a post-1992

university in the north-west of England volunteered to take part in this study.

All students had achieved the minimum entry requirement (or equivalent) for the course of three A-levels (240 UCAS points plus GCSE math). Typically students live within 20 miles of campus; local industry is characteristically light industrial manufacturing. A typical student might be the first in their family to enter higher education. Twenty-nine (57.1 per cent) of the students had an A-level qualification in psychology, and 18 (42.9 per cent) had no prior experience of academic psychology. Eight students had atypical pre-university qualifications such as Access and International Baccalaureate. Additional demographic and course-related information were recorded and will be reported later. Of the 47 who initially consented to take part 21 returned a completed or part-completed Stage 2 diary element of the research (18 females, three males, mean age 20.47, range 18 to 32). The data shown in Table 1 indicates that the distribution of participants who returned a completed diary is essentially representative of the target sample. None of the students received course credit or any other incentive to participate.

Table 1; Distribution of participants who submitted a completed diary set against qualification – prior experience of academic psychology – age and gender.

Diary	Qualification Type	Prior Experience of Psychology	Age	Gender
1	Access	Yes	32	Female
2	IB*	Yes	28	Female
3	A-level	No	19	Female
4	A-level	Yes	18	Male
5	A-level	No	18	Female
6	A-level	No	18	Female
7	A-level	Yes	18	Female
8	A-level	No	18	Female
9	A-level	Yes	20	Female
10	Access	Yes	30	Female
11	A-level	Yes	18	Female
12	A-level	No	19	Male
13	A-level	Yes	18	Female
14	A-level	Yes	18	Female
15	Access	Yes	24	Female
16	A-level	Yes	18	Female
17	A-level	No	18	Female
18	A-level	Yes	18	Female
19	A-level	Yes	18	Female
20	Access	Yes	23	Male
21	A-level	No	19	Female

* International Baccarat

Materials

At Stage 1 the volunteers were asked to complete a short structured questionnaire of nine questions; in addition to demographic information we asked participants a number of questions about their own expectations of how they plan to study. Questions related to anticipated time spent studying; future goals; and possible entry into postgraduate studies. We also asked whether they had, or planned to gain employment whilst undertaking their degree.

Stage 2 consisted of the diary element. The diary was a standard A3 academic diary. Each page represented seven days (Monday to Sunday) with space for additional 'Homework' information. There was one caveat pointed out to the participants; if they reported sensitive personal information this would be read as a sign of requesting help and may lead to them being directed to student services. Other than this extreme circumstance all information was kept strictly confidential. Two participants did use this opportunity to report personal issues, and were consequently given additional support.

Participants were explicitly asked to record their academic routine, for example, how many hours they read for each day, and how many hours they spent studying each day (specifically how many hours they spent writing assignments), they were also asked to record time spent in non-academic pursuits such as paid work and leisure activities. We did not, however, constrain participants to only include these activities, but stressed that we wanted a full picture of their daily routine. We asked participants to complete their diaries at regular intervals, preferably daily but at least once a week, and to be relativity assiduous in their entries. The study lasted for 16 weeks, the entire first semester.

Procedure

Stage 1: Questionnaire was administered in the first week of teaching at the beginning of the 2008–2009 academic year. Stage 2: Diaries were distributed following the completion of Stage 1 on the same day. Participants were asked to complete the diary each day/week detailing their daily (24 hour) routine with regards to how much time during each day they engaged with an aspect of their degree; for example, how much time would be spent reading for lectures/seminar, writing assessments, revising for exams and so forth. They were also encouraged to detail aspects of their daily routine where they engaged in non-academic pursuits.

Research was carried out in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the British Psychological Society.

Results

Stage 1: Questionnaire data

One of the questions we asked was 'How much time (in hours) do you anticipate studying outside of lecture/seminar times each week?'

Data from this question illustrated in Table 2, appears to show that the vast majority of students (74.4 per cent) anticipated studying for five to six or more hours per week, with only eight students expecting to study for more than eight hours per week. It should be noted that prior to the start of data collection students had been present at an induction lecture. During this lecture students were informed that a full-time degree requires a full-time commitment often exceeding 40 hours per week; this piece of information was stressed on a number of occasions. Surprisingly, therefore, is the fact that 12 students (17.1 per cent) acknowledged they anticipated spending only five or less hours per week reading, working on assignments or revising outside of lectures and seminars sessions.

This could be used as an early indication of either an unrealistic notion of what is required of a degree level student or that even within these first few days a significant minority of students are showing early signs of disengagement or student drift.

We additionally asked participants whether they already had paid work and 26 (53 per cent) acknowledged working at least 15 hours per week; anecdotally many

Table 2: Number of hours participants anticipate spending actively engaged with their studies outside lecture and seminar sessions.

	All of Questionnaires		Returned Questionnaires	
Anticipated Study	*Number of Participants*	*Percentage*	*Number of Participants*	*Percentage*
0 hours	2	4.3	2	9.5
2–3 hours	2	4.3	–	–
3–4 hours	4	8.5	2	9.5
4–5 hours	4	8.5	1	4.8
5–6 hours	12	25.5	6	28.6
6–7 hours	9	19.1	3	14.3
7–8 hours	6	12.8	4	19
8+ hours	8	17	3	14.3

reported holding down jobs that required more than 15 hours per week. Of the 21 (44.7 per cent), who were not employed 12 (57.1 per cent) acknowledged they would be seeking paid employment during their degree. This figure of 15 hours paid work per week goes way beyond the eight hours that Wilkie and Jones (1994) suggest is beneficial to academic performance and retention.

Stage 2: Diary data

The data collected was, for the most part, extremely rich in detail, with most participants giving a very detailed picture of life as an undergraduate. A number of participants opted for bullet-pointed entries, whereas others gave fully structured sentences. All had given some indication of the hours spent working towards their degree, and non-academic pursuits.

Twenty-one diaries out of 47 that were distributed were returned at the end of semester one; this amounts to an attrition rate of 55.3 per cent, this indicates that more than half of our participants disengaged from the project before completion. Of those who did complete a diary, there was still a significant sample (nearly 24 per cent) who failed to identify the importance of additional study time outside of lectures/ seminars (see Table 2). This should be con-

trasted with the finding that 30 participants (63.8 per cent) reported wanting to pursue a postgraduate degree/career in psychology.

Diary data were analysed in a number of ways; initially we took a quantitative approach in order to gain an overall picture of the data, and calculated the number of hours spent in each activity.

Table 3 illustrates the number of hours participants reported an activity. In order to gain a more complete picture of these data we ran a hierarchical regression analysis. This method of analysis enables the modelling and evaluation of several variables set against a known dependent variable. In this study we wanted to investigate whether engagement or disengagement had a positive or negative impact on overall grades. We measured engagement as time (hours) spent reading and working on assignments and disengagement as time (hours) spent in leisure and paid work. We conducted a hierarchical regression with reading and working on assignments as the first predictor and leisure and paid work as the second predictor (see Table 4). Although there was a small sample size there were enough participants for a sufficiently powerful analysis. Post-hoc statistical analysis gave an observed power for this study of .86 (see Cohen et al.& Aiken, 2003).

Table 3: Total number of hour's participants reported spending time on an activity.

Diary	Reading	Assignment	Revision	Leisure	Paid Work	Other Activities	Grade**	
1	9	36	3	43	19	7	51	(2:2)
2	9	23	7	2	0	0	60	(2:1)
3	50	60	11	25	11	6	68	(2:1)
4	1	0	0	0	0	0	60	(2:1)
5	17	40	0	14	27	0	52	(2:2)
6	17	49	0	6	0	2	48	(3)
7	10	21	6	5	28	13	60	(2:1)
8	8	14	0	0	0	0	55	(2:2)
9	23	46	6	5	47	1	65	(2:1)
10	7	22	0	0	0	1	58	(2:2)
11	15	21	4	49	0	19	57	(2:2)
12	3	8	0	3	18	4	53	(2:2)
13	4	40	0	10	15	12	55	(2:2)
14	5	40	0	45	32	0	51	(2:2)
15	15	23	0	3	32	9	60	(2:1)
16	14	25	0	13	19	0	56	(2:2)
17	10	44	9	2	4	12*	46	(3)
18	1	1	0	2	0	2	39	(Fail)
19	9	27	0	26	4	20	*	*
20	0	1	0	0	0	0	43	(3)
21	8	35	0	27	21	13	*	*
Mean	11.2	27.4	2.2	13.3	13.2	5.8		

* Participants did not gain a final grade due to omitted course work or exam.
** Final mean grade for the three modules undertaken as part of the first–year psychology degree.

These data strongly indicate that an extra hour spent reading within the topic equates to a possible increase in the end of year grade by more than five per cent, whereas hours spent in leisure or paid work, are not significant predictors of the final grade. There is, however, a significant negative correlation between hours spent writing the essay/report and the final grade. These points will be explored in more depth in the discussion.

In exploring the qualitative data contained in the diaries we used thematic analysis (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). The advantage of this method is that in many respects it has the potential to reveal a great amount of detailed information about an individual's behaviours, emotional state and general psychological health. Braun and Clarke (2006) state that thematic analysis is an accessible and theoretically flexible approach, which can be used when analysing qualitative data. In coding the data we initially anonymised each diary from D1 to D21, and for each statement we added year, month, and day, as such a quote taken from participant No 2, on the 23 October 2008 will be expressed as D2:081023.

Table 4: The results of a hierarchal regression analysis for time spend (in hours) reading, working on assignment, leisure time and paid work.

	B	*SE b*	β
Step 1			
Constant	55.60	2.63	
Reading for Study	0.51	0.12	.96**
Working on Assignment		0.96	-.54*
Step 2			
Constant	54.54	2.60	
Reading for Study	5.20	0.18	.97**
Working on Assignments	–0.23	0.09	–.57*
Leisure Time	–0.04	0.61	ns
Paid Work	0.13	0.07	ns

Note: R^2=.57 for Step 1, ΔR^2=.11 for Step 2 (*p*<.001); *p*<.05; **p*<.001

Engagement

The indication from the questionnaire data was that 74.4 per cent of our participants expressed a willingness to engage in their degree. This attitude of 'engagement' was measured by the anticipated time spent reading, and working on assignments. This response was most commonly justified, within the diaries, with reference to wanting to get the best out of their degree, and feelings of satisfaction. *'Time is precious if we all want to get the best degrees'* (D3:081110). *'Finding it hard to make sense of a couple of things, but still working at it'* (D17:081213). *'Feeling satisfied… understood a lot feeling quite calm, really enjoying being at university… learning so much'* (D8:081120). *'I have a tendency to work even when I take time away'* (D17:081213)

Another measure of engagement was also expressed when participants articulated a need to either catch up on missed work, even when illness may have prevented the student's attendance at lectures and seminars. *'Didn't attend today… too ill, Work to catch up on though for missed lessons… but I don't want to fall behind'* (D8:081013). *'I may be off sick but doesn't mean being bone idle'* (D2:081017). *'Revision not going well, too ill… but do not want to drop out… I am enjoying the whole thing too much'* (D9:090106).

Within a number of diaries participants made reference to being overwhelmed by an aspect or aspects of their degree, but expressed a desire to work through these feelings, and continue with their studies, in spite of the added complication of illness. *'Couldn't go in was too ill. Worried about missing work'* (D8:081017). *'Still not well so wasn't in. Panicking about workload missed… I will need to make up for the time I've missed'* (D8:081020). This student clearly shows a commitment to their studies and their degree. However, other participants showed clear signs of student drift, seemingly disengaging at a slow progressive rate. Comments expressed appear to show that many students acknowledged a need to stay ahead of topics taught in lectures and seminars, and they also acknowledge a desire to start course work and revision early. However, having acknowledged these crucial aspects of student academic life most prioritised non-academic pursuits. This is a theme that is revisited many times within the diary data, students appear to be aware of what is expected of them, but for numerous reasons appear to adopt a laissez-faire approach to their studies. There appears to be a mismatch between effort and result, and possibly a misconception regarding how importantly the institution takes autonomous learning, a skill

the institution promotes very early on in semester one. Pokorny and Pokorny (2005) argue that the institution needs to prepare students to become autonomous learners, and that students need help, and guidance to become more effective at managing their time and workload. It is argued that this process helps equip students with the skills to meet the demands of higher education (Fazey & Fazey, 2001).

Disengagement

The notion of a disengaged student or one that is drifting into disengagement is illustrated below. Two types of comments were apparent; the first describes a disconnection with the necessity to attend lectures and the second with an apparent disconnection with the assessment process. *'I missed the intro to assessment – my group have ditched me – sod um… was absent [also] again today, spoke to [student name] he said [there] was nothing I needed to know…'* (D12:081027). *'Printed assignment, it's a load of pants, it might scrape through, it's going to be handed in as it is'* (D12:081207).

These remarks were reported within a few weeks of the student starting their degree, and appear to show a disconnection from the degree process, but it is not clear from what has been written as to why this student is seemingly starting to disengage. Some might argue (Wright, 1996) that this student has certain attributes that might explain this process, such as being poorly prepared for higher education (see Rowley et al., 2008) or that they lack motivation (see Assiter & Gibbs, 2007). Others might suggest (see Blythman & Orr, 2002) that the university is to blame for not supporting students adequately enough, or that the culture or workings of the university are at fault. The fact remains that this particular student did not fail the year or leave their studies, however, this student was one of only a handful of male students in this year cohort, which may lead to a lack of social integration thus the despondency (Porter & Swing, 2006; Woodfield et al., 2006).

For the most part participants provided a very detailed account of their daily/weekly activity in their diaries; a small number, however, provided rather scant detail. The participants who provided minimal information coincidently reported some of the lowest end of year grades. *'Had forgotten to write, got loads of work to do but haven't got around to it'* (D20:081009). *'Received this diary'* (D4:080902) (no further entries)

Earwaker (1992) suggests that the start of year one is a particularly vulnerable time of the year for new students. Tinto (1982) suggests that for some students the inability to adapt to a new environment of university often leads to not only withdrawal but can lead to lower academic achievement. *'Did not do any work today. Feel really down and homesick'* (D6:081005). *'Feel down again today- spent all day in my pyjamas – unsure why'* (D1:081002).

It is clear from these statements that the institution needs also to be aware of the student's emotional wellbeing as well as their general health. Szulecka, Springett and De Pauw (1987) found a link between student health and the increased likelihood of student attrition. Wolf et al. (1991) even found that students were more psychosocially unhealthy at the end of their first year than at the beginning, and suggests that the institutions should teach students how to cope with stress, that may cause ill health.

Withdrawal concerns

Within several diaries references were made to instances in which participants referred to being so unhappy they expressed a desire to leave university, or change course. *'…Made me want to QUIT? Really not happy right now, wondering if sociology is more me?'* (D2:081114). *'Can't do it, nothing is going right. Hate it all, think I made a mistake'* (D2:081205). We have taken comments from this participant previously, in which they clearly showed early signs of disengagement, this student however did not decide to leave university and attained a 2:1 grade for the year. This particular student had not previously studied in the UK, and as Bruce Johnstone, d'Ambrosio and Yakoboski (2010) point out these students are under unique pressures, away from

home and all that is familiar. However, withdrawal concerns also affected UK-based students *'lots of us feel stressed/overwhelmed, lack of direction… a lot of us feel like giving up entirely… this is a major life change'* (D3:081103). *'Saw [tutor's name] today told her that I feel overwhelmed, she said go away and read! Fat lot of good that's going to do'* (D1:081030). *'Very tired now, esp starting p/t job & trying to balance work/assignments'* (D3:081208).

Although only a handful of participants confirm this feeling, it is not possible to assess if this was indeed a common concern or feeling among the student population from these diary entries. *'For first time questioning whether doing the right course for me and where I learn the most'* (D3:081107). *'Feel made major life change, getting into debt and wondering if chosen best subject'* (D3:081110).

From these comments it is clear that even the most committed student can express the desire to withdraw. *'De-motivated and very hard to study, read, write… wondering if done right thing leaving full-time employment, getting in debt or if picked wrong course…'* (D3:081124). It is apparent from these statements that some students became despondent with the university as a whole, and had the propensity to drift into disengagement. Other comments appeared to go much further, to where the student would actively give a time scale to possible withdrawal. *'…Brought to tears as we felt we were trying to find our way in the dark… so many talking of leaving or changing courses…'* (D3:090119). *'At an all time low. Giving it 'till after xmas then see how I feel. If the same [then] uni isn't for me'* (D9:081207).

Student support
Participants made a number of references to learning support, and the interaction with teaching staff and dedicated learning support staff. *'…four of us in the meeting, spent an hour going over the results section, asking questions, feel a little better about it…'* (D2:081114). Even with the best intensions in the world, some students still feel nervous approaching teaching staff, and instead seek out the help from fellow students. *'Asked fellow students –*

Not sure so will ask mentors for guidance' (D3:081011). *'…arranged to meet with peer mentor for some advice'* (D8:081027) *'[Mentor's name] was very helpful – supported idea…'* (D3:081016).

Some seemingly well motivated students commented on the desire to form student lead study groups. *'Spoke to other students about a study group as concerned may fall behind'* (D3:081208). *'…going to start study group next week'* (D3:090126). *'Came in to see peer mentor, got a couple of worries, was meant to see personal tutor but have spoken to her instead'* (D17:081106).

Many universities have students support uppermost in the minds, which can be a costly enterprise in terms of time and money, but within our sample no reference was made to seeking out this expensive additional support. It would appear from our data that un-motivated students seek neither support from teaching staff or fellow students, whereas the motivated students main source of learning support are fellow students.

University issues
Due to the largely independent learning environment of any university some students can find it hard to move from the 'handheld' dependent nature of high school and college. *'Wondering if chosen best uni as heard about how other students benefit from more direction/teaching time at uni, etc. Speaking to other students – seems to be a common concern'* (D3:081110). *'…feel more guidance especially first year so we know what to do and how best to do it would be great…'* (D3:081110).

The transition from guided to autonomous learners can sometimes be problematic for some students (Harvey et al., 2006). According to Harvey et al. (2006) being prepared for university is a fine balance between being informed, having realistic expectations and being motivated. Rickinson and Rutherford (1995) conducted a survey of red-brick universities in the UK and found that the reasons for withdrawal were very diverse, but the most frequent reasons were wrong course or

disappointed with the content of the course. In a survey of six higher education institutions, York (1999) found that dissatisfaction with the student experience and inability to cope with the demands of the course, were high on the list of reasons for student attrition. Both of these studies were conducted before replacement of student grants to the introduction of tuition fees. Within the present study we found that many students took the need to find paid work as a natural ingredient to being a student.

Paid employment

For many students paid employment was a major issue with almost 270 comments in the diaries, the majority related to seeking paid employment, or trying to make the choice between financial stability and academic success. *'Have decided to hand in notice – financially stable plus I need time for study'* (D1:081006)

Many more comments however simply stated fact; the vast majority stated they had paid employment, and how many hours they worked. This may have been a consequence of the nature of the study or it might just reflect the changing nature of the student body. It would seem from this study students take paid employment as a parallel practice alongside their academic studies. Ozga and Sukhanandan (1997) and Heinz Housel and Harvey (2010) noted that financial hardship has an impact on student attrition, and that students from low socio-economic groups are at the greatest risk of early withdrawal. Broadbridge and Swanson (2005) studied the connection between earning and learning, and found that students in paid employment tended to do poorly in their studies, were socially excluded, and had poorer psychological wellbeing. This is in spite of the findings reported by Curtis and Sham (2002) that employed student's developed specific skills and confidence. The pattern from the present study, however, was the way in which our participants assumed that student life inevitably meant paid employment, and the balance between earning or learning.

Summary and discussion

In this study we were interested in discovering whether diaries were an appropriate method for exploring student engagement. We also wished to investigate whether the themes found using thematic analysis corresponded with those reported in previous research or whether new themes would emerge.

In using the mixed methods approach this research was able to produce a reasonably clear picture of the first semester – first-year student activity both academically and socially. New to this research we found that reflections made from the qualitative analysis revealed that student's appear to fall into a small number of sub-sets; those who engaged and remained engaged; those who initially were engaged but slowly drifted into non-engagement, and those who never really engaged. However, behaviours and experiences were not as fixed as initially expected; respondents often displayed both elements of engagement and disengagement, nevertheless, the engaged participants showed a more complete pattern of engagement, whereas the less engaged participants displayed a fragmented pattern of engagement.

As one element of the present study we asked participants to record their daily activity (both academically and socially), the resulting data show that reading is a significant predictor of the end of year grade, and that an extra hour spent reading within their topic could increase the end of year grade by as much as five per cent, whereas time spent writing the assignments is negatively correlated with the end of year grade, while paid work and leisure time did not appear to predict this grade. This finding needs to be more closely explored with regards to reading and writing. Taken at face value these data appear to show that reading (but not writing) predicts the end of year grade. It is feasible that in recording their daily routine participants combined both reading and writing into one entry (but recorded it as reading alone or writing alone); however participants were explicitly asked to record reading and writing

as separate entries. We prefer to be extremely cautious and interpret these data as showing trends rather than predictions of the interplay between reading – writing and final grades. Given the nature of the study participants may not have been as assiduous in recording their daily routines as we might have hoped. Nevertheless, one trend does imply that more time reading rather than writing, paid work or leisure time could lead to a higher end of year grade.

The qualitative analysis appears to reveal a number of potential conflicts which students are increasingly faced with. There appears to be an inconsistency between social and academic commitments; a clash between paid employment and academic study, and finally there appears to be a more fundamental disagreement between what the institution expects of the student in terms of engagement, and what the student expects of the institution in terms of academic support.

Via the use of thematic analysis we identified a number of themes; engagement – disengagement – withdrawal concerns – student support – university issues and paid employment. We found that in many instances participants we had confidence in initially labelling as engaged, would confound this preliminary assessment by writing in their diaries wishes, for example, to either leave the course or university. We found a similar pattern in a small number of participants who we initially labelled as disengaged; these participants left comments that expressed a wish to spend more time reading, for example. However, we found that on the whole students who we labelled as engaged expressed themselves in much more positive terms than the disengaged students. For example, an engaged student may express a desire to improve on previous grades and or express how much they enjoyed a topic, whereas the disengaged may articulate submitting work they know is substandard.

We also reported findings related to students' term-time employment. Lansdown (2009) recently commented that student's perception towards employment is contradictory in terms of the positive and negative implications it has on the student. We have seen within our data that students appear unconcerned by the prospect of managing paid employment and a university career. This perception is likely to be vastly different from the traditional model common among the student body prior to the 1990s with low numbers choosing to take on part-time paid employment (Lansdown, 2009).

The diary method of collecting data also found now familiar themes, student illness (Stewart-Brown et al., 2000) course and module choice (Rowley et al., 2008, 2009) and in this regards validates this method but we also were able to pinpoint other previously unexplored themes of potential conflicts. It is beyond the scope of this current paper to comment further on how or whether HE institutions wish to confront these issues, further research and maybe consultation between institutions and students is needed.

There were a small number of concerns regarding our methodology which we feel need to be explored. We chose to ask participants to record the number of hours spent reading – writing – paid work and leisure. We are cautious as to how fastidious participants were in this particular task. We have every confidence that participants were honest in their assessment of the hours spent in each pursuit, but we feel that there are better ways to gather quantitative data other than in diary form. We do nevertheless have every confidence that diaries are a perfect source for qualitative data collection, as we have shown.

The points above raise a number of questions with regards to higher education; how the institution is perceived by the student; how the institution perceives the student, and the complex interplay between social, academic and paid work commitments. As we have shown many students manage this complex academic dance, nevertheless many do not cope as well.

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