Understanding student engagement in the online learning era

Dr James Strong

Hypotheses

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.

Method

Engagement defined as seminar attendance and QMPlus usage. Data gathered from QEngage.

Stage One (Christmas 2020): A large online survey fielded to all 968 undergraduate students registered in SPIR, which generated 208 responses (21.5% response rate) and a range of both quantitative and qualitative data.

Stage Two (July 2021): Follow-up focus groups with 16 survey respondents based on responses correlated with engagement, which generated further qualitative data.

Results

H_1: Respondents whose **expectations** of studying in SPIR better matched the reality were more engaged with QMPlus but no more engaged with taught classes.

H_2: Respondents with fewer outside demands on their **time** were no more engaged, but respondents with more flexible outside demands were more engaged.

H_3: Respondents who felt more positive about their online learning **experiences** in SPIR were no more engaged, but did achieve better outcomes.

H_4: Respondents with good access to appropriate study **space** for online learning were more engaged. They were also in the minority. Two thirds of respondents had missed online classes due to a lack of good internet access, appropriate physical space, or both.

H_5: Respondents who felt better able to access **support** from their fellow students were more engaged.

H_6: No correlations detected between respondents' **future objectives** and engagement.

Regression – all hypotheses

	DV: Attendance
(Constant)	57.154
Induction events attended	0.646
Hours per week spent studying	0.579 **
Hours per week spent caring	0.226
Hours per week spent on student societies	0.77
Ever missed class due to caring	-11.331 **
Ever missed class due to employment	-7.976 **
Ever missed class due to internet issues	-4.358
Gained confidence in classroom	1.761
Supported decision to teach online	-0.109
Felt supported by fellow students	9.024 ***
R^2	0.249

Analysis and recommendations

The most striking result – illustrated in the regression model covering all six hypotheses – was that students whose caring and employment responsibilities **occasionally** forced them to miss taught classes were significantly less engaged overall than their classmates.

This matters because there was a strong positive association between **engagement** (especially webinar attendance) **and outcomes.** Across the SPIR population as a whole, controlling for attendance and prior qualifications **eliminated** ethnicity and gender-based attainment gaps.

In other words, across the whole population, students with similar qualifications who attend at similar rates achieve **similar outcomes** regardless of demographic characteristics.

That suggests we should target our efforts on **improving engagement** – especially seminar attendance – and not, for example, on changing our assessment practices.

What would that look like? Drawing on both the statistical analysis of the survey results and the qualitative evidence generated through the focus groups, we can identify some initial **recommendations**:

First, we should **inform** students that there is a link between attendance and attainment, to support them in making good strategic judgements about how to use their time.

Second, we should **facilitate** alternative arrangements for students whose outside commitments sometimes cause them to miss taught classes.

Third, we should promote clear **alignment** of classroom, independent study and assessment activities, to ensure students see the value of each aspect of their education.

Fourth, we should prioritise efforts to develop strong **peer relationships** and individual **confidence** through both classroom and independent study activities.

Finally, we should make greater use of **student ambassadors** and **peer mentors** in both student recruitment and student support.