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Title	Doctoral students' engagement with institutional research cultures: expectations and experiences
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Background

Student engagement has become a mainstay of Higher Education policy internationally; UK policy, for example, proposed students should be positioned "at the heart of the system" (BIS, 2011). Satisfaction has become the benchmark for national and international comparisons (Barefoot et al, 2016), and students increasingly expect to operate as partners in various aspects of their university experience (Healey et al, 2014).

However, such policies typically focus on formal curricula, with surveys relying on simplistic proxy measures for 'engagement' such as contact hours (Barefoot et al, 2016). The idea of 'engagement' remains weakly theorised, primarily understood in terms of observable interactions or interlocution, ignoring private activities such as reading and writing (Gourlay, 2017).

In addition, little of this work has addressed the experience of doctoral students. The studies that do exist show that engagement with research activities is significant in predicting overall satisfaction with programmes (Bagaka's et al, 2015) and students' self-efficacy (Lambie et al, 2014). It has also drawn attention to the 'fractured subjectivity' students may face as they seek to incorporate a developing doctoral identity into their personal, family or professional lives (Barnacle & Mewburn, 2010). It is also worth noting that this sense of engagement remains a challenge for early career academics (Smith, 2017) and even supervisors (Brabazon, 2016).

Drawing from this work, the following indicators may be useful in understanding doctoral students' engagement with research culture:

- The support of supervisors and of peers (Bagaka's et al, 2015), academically and socially.

- Writing for academic publication (Lambie et al, 2014) – although importantly, this must be framed in ways that develop students, not simply benefit their supervisors (Brabazon, 2016).

- Being able to enter, work with and move between specialist places, including libraries, offices, homes and public transport (Barnacle & Mewburn, 2010).

Similar indicators are visible in the UK's Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES), although this focuses on benchmarking institutions rather than

developing a better account of doctoral engagement. The PRES includes four items about the opportunities and infrastructure provided for doctoral students that might support their engagement with the institution's research culture – where 'culture' is explained only in terms of "departmental community and research ambience", and 'engagement' is not defined at all (see, e.g., Turner, 2015: 3). Other survey items also relate to culture, as understood in the studies above – for example, in relation to writing or the use of space. However, these are not linked to discussions of culture in analysis of the survey.

Consequently, there remains a need to develop a better account of what constitutes doctoral students' engagement with the research culture. This is important not only to ensure that institutions support this adequately, but also so that students' expectations in relation to this can be made explicit and engaged with (Brabazon, 2016).

Methodology

To develop a better understanding of students' expectations and experiences of engagement with research culture, a study was undertaken at a primarily postgraduate UK institution, in a faculty with a large doctoral cohort (over 800 doctoral students).

This work involved three elements:

A survey explored students' use of physical study spaces (i.e., library, graduate reading rooms), social spaces (i.e., students' union) and their sense of personal engagement with and in various elements the institutions' research culture (i.e., supervisor research, co-publishing).

Focus groups, conducted in-person and online, explored students' expectations of, and perceived access points into, the research culture, how they built networks during their studies, and what elements of doctoral school they found integral to fostering a sense of engagement with their work and school community.

Interviews were undertaken with staff who have formal responsibility for doctoral students' experiences, or individuals with experience of supporting students' engagement. Each interview lasted up to one hour, was transcribed and analysed thematically.

All participants provided informed consent, and were guaranteed anonymity, confidentiality and the right to withdraw from the study. The project received institutional ethical approval.

Findings

Thematic analysis of the focus groups and interviews, along with statistical analysis of the survey data, led to the identification of several experiences that helped define students' sense of engagement with their institutional research culture.

Supervisors remain an important 'anchor' for many students' perceptions of research – but this experience can be good or bad, depending on the opportunities that individual provides. Supervisors appear to vary in the level of self-interest they show in dealing with the student and their work.

Events, similarly, are important as sites of engagement. Many of the issues identified here are practical, particularly for students registered part-time or studying at a distance. Earlier notice, for example, was felt to make planning for participation easier, as would support for coordinating meetings with peers. For those who were able to participate, however, such events were often felt to be positive and important.

Spaces were an ongoing challenge – particularly the need for social spaces. Interestingly, the challenges here sometimes related to being made to feel unwelcome by other students.

Responsibility for these experiences was distributed, with some students blaming themselves for their lack of involvement. However, informal discussions led some students to conclude that particular supervisors were "better" than others, because of the opportunities that they provided. Interestingly, there seemed to be tensions between having a strong departmental research culture (e.g. through a strong seminar programme) and engagement beyond the department or institution. Students who are less satisfied with their department or supervisor appear to try harder to find other ways to get involved. This included use of a range of small, informal groups organised on social media platforms including WhatsApp and Facebook. These can be understood as examples of the 'penumbra' of informal and peer support structures that doctoral students draw upon (Robinson, Wisker & Bengtsen, 2016).

Conclusions

Doctoral students' engagement with the institution's research culture is an important part of their programme – but it is a part that has remained relatively under-theorized. This study has identified ways in which people, spaces and processes can contribute to engagement, both positively and negatively.

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