

## **PhD Studentship Solent University**

### **Project**

**Project title:** Learner engagement and success in higher education – concepts, metrics, interventions

### **Short description of project**

We propose a PhD project that investigates the relationship between learner engagement and learner success. This is highly relevant against a backdrop of sector-wide declines in student satisfaction (Office for Students, 2022) and student engagement (Holden 2022) and increasing concerns about widening participation gaps (Government UK 2022) for learners in the UK, most notably due to shifts in pace, pressure to adapt to new forms of delivery and unequal technological capabilities caused by the Covid-19 pandemic (Khan, 2021). Additionally, research initiatives are highlighting the need for sector-wide strategic initiatives and interventions that systematically improve learner engagement and learner success in a post-Covid world (QAA 2022).

However, while such initiatives are admirable, questions remain whether a shared understanding of learner engagement exists. Kahu (2013) suggests that definitions of learner engagement are often poor and lacking a distinction between the state of learner engagement, its consequences and the factors that influence it. Learner engagement is, therefore, often linked to a magnitude of concepts and themes, including scores on formative assessment completion (Veerasingam et al. 2022), learners' attitudes on openness, connectedness and participation (Faloughi and Herman, 2021) and their sense of belonging and identity (Thomas 2012; Trowler, 2010). The National Survey of Student Engagement (2021), mostly within the US context, suggests ten engagement indicators across themes such as academic challenge, learning with peers, experiences with faculty and the campus environment, while collaborative research in the UK suggests assessment submission, asking questions, attendance and independent research are highly valued by learners as indicators of engagement (QAA 2023). Hence, with a plethora of concepts and definitions in place, a major objective of this project is to conduct an extensive and systematic review of the literature and of good practices within the UK higher education sector to develop definitions of learner engagement and learner success that take into account views from a range of stakeholders such learners, academic educators, student support staff, the government and society.

Once these are understood, this PhD project should move to the development of a robust framework that theorises the relationship(s) between learner engagement and success. While previous research suggests that student engagement can have a positive impact on selected learner success metrics (Kuh et al. 2008), the comprehensive nature of this relationship is not fully known. This project, therefore, shall aim for an empirical investigation that offers explorative and/or explanatory insights to the relationship(s) between learner engagement and learner success. Such investigation may be of deductive, inductive or abductive nature, and suitable data may be qualitative or quantitative, or ideally, both.

Findings from this project shall form the basis for determining how targeted initiatives and interventions can manage and influence learner engagement and positively influence learner success. This will be particularly relevant because existing research suggests that learner engagement is incredibly complex. For example, the impact of engagement on learners' success may depend on their very different needs for belonging (Thomas 2012), while it may also have compensatory effects for traditionally underrepresented groups of learners (Kuh et al. 2008). The PhD studentship will, therefore, offer theoretical and practical insights for teaching teams and those involved in creating excellent student experiences, closing awarding gaps and making curricula more inclusive.

### **Original contribution to knowledge**

This project makes an original contribution to knowledge and scholarship in pedagogy and higher education by extending existing frameworks, while clearly differentiating between definitions, factors and consequences of learner engagement. The project is also novel in exploring potential biases in existing definitions and metrics of learner engagement that may be rooted in different views, experiences or backgrounds, with potential to explore the antecedents for engagement and success of learners in higher education who come from historically underrepresented groups and/or lower participation areas. For example, stakeholders such as educators and learners may have different views on what makes an 'engaged' and 'successful' learner (Zepke et al. 2014) – where do these come from, why do they exist and how can we address them? Furthermore, an empirical investigation will offer original insights into the relationship between learner engagement and success. Findings will be valuable locally to inform Solent University's ongoing learning and teaching strategies and nationally to contribute evidence to ongoing conversations around improving chances of success for all students and reducing inequalities in our societies (Strydom 2017).

### **Alignment with strategic objectives**

The project is aligned with several strategic objectives such as those of the Office for Students' [UK Engagement Survey](#) (UKES), AdvanceHE's [Race Equality Charter](#), and [the QAA UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#). The project is also aligned with Solent University's strategic priority to deliver teaching excellence by reflecting its Inclusive Real-World Curriculum, Learning Design Framework and [Access and Participation Plan](#), which impact all aspects of its learning, teaching and assessment practices. This will allow Solent University to make evidence-based decisions and devise and evaluate strategies that address institutional challenges and barriers associated with learner engagement and student success.

**Anticipated start date of studentship:** September 2023

### **Supervisory team**

Professor Sabrina Vieth will be the primary supervisor and Professor Karen Heard-Laureote will be the secondary supervisor. This project also provides a valuable development opportunity for Solent Learning and Teaching Institute.

## Funding

The studentship will be funded for 3 years, including a stipend.

## Prospective Student

The preferred student should be a UK domicile student (paying home fees) with experience in theory development, strong empirical skills and a passion for using those skills to investigate the relationship between learner engagement and success. We particularly encourage applicants from racially minoritised backgrounds and/or lower participation areas to apply. The student will spend each year at Solent University, with a particular focus on data collection in year two. The prospective student will be enrolled in the PhD in Higher Education and PGCert in Research Methods programmes at Solent University.

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