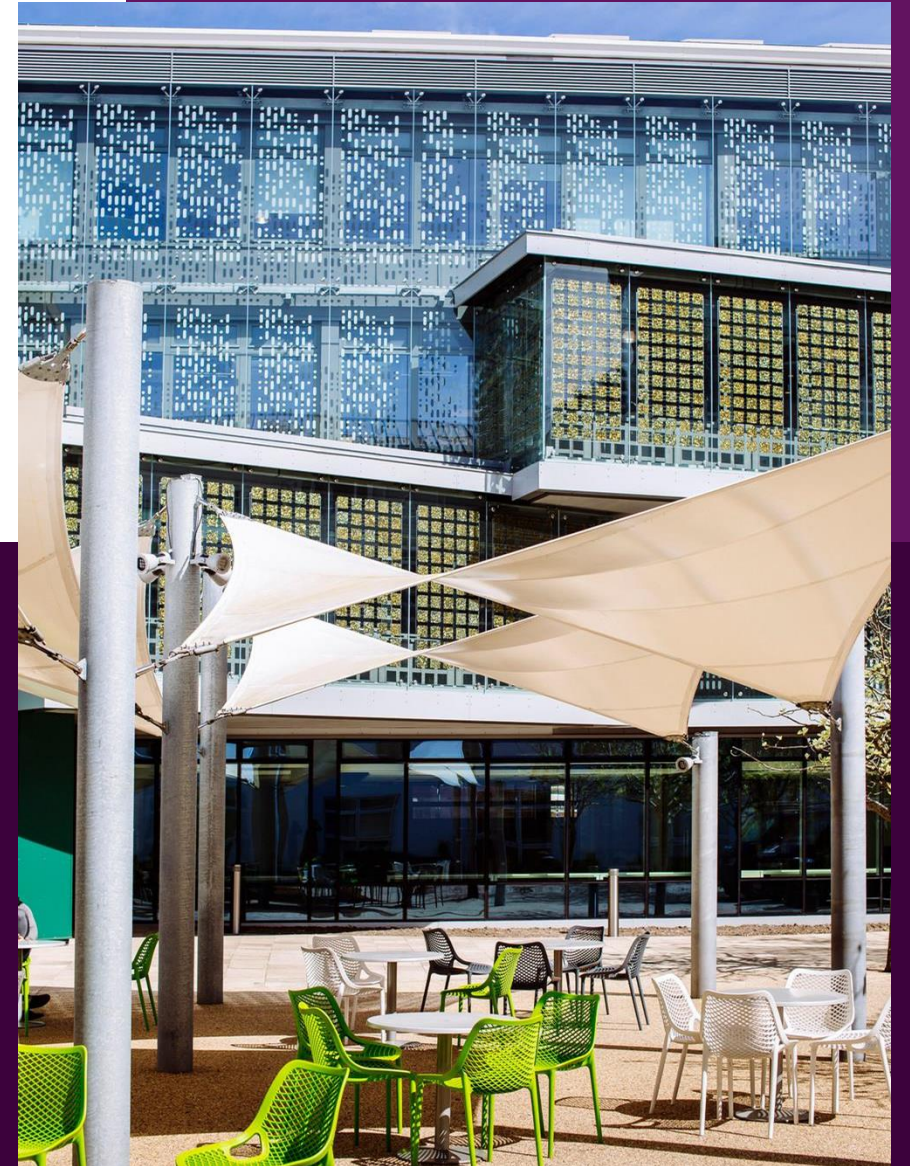**UNIVERSITY OF PORTSMOUTH**

Creating Higher Education Communities that Foster Student Engagement and Success
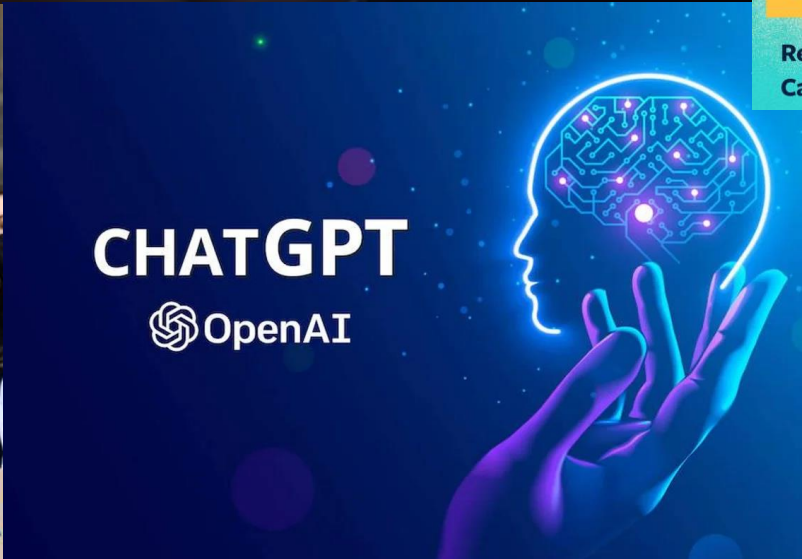
Tom Lowe
18th June 2024

Student Success in Higher Education

A challenge for all of us in higher education, then, is how we might develop additional opportunities for students and faculty to take shared responsibility for student success (Cook-Sather, 2018, 15)

Yet, 'success' is an amorphous term that means distinctive things to various stakeholders in any educational undertaking. (O'Shea and Delahunty, 2018, 1062)

# Challenges in higher education

Introductions

1. Who are you? (Academic/Professional Service/Manager/SU/Marketing)

2. How do you define a Successful Student?

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Tom Lowe

- Senior Lecturer in Higher Education at the University of Portsmouth

- Chair of RAISE Network for Student Engagement

- CPD lead for Student Engagement & Embedding Employability into the Curriculum
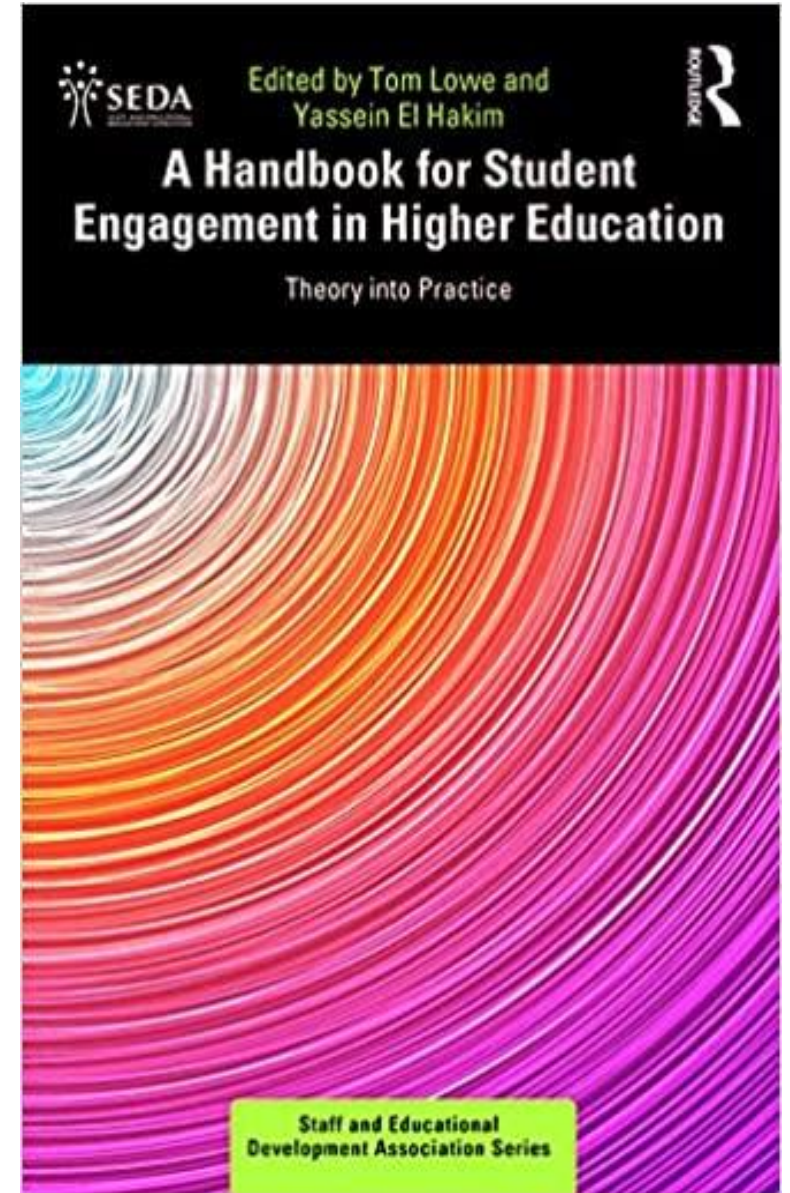
The Context of English Higher Education

Office for Students: "all students, from all backgrounds, and with the ability and desire to undertake HE and are supported to access, succeed in, and progress from, Higher Education (Office for Students, 2018, 14)

In the Higher Education Act, success is defined simply as completing the degree programme (Higher Education Act, 2017)

Key stakeholders are 1) students, 2) institutions and 3) government (Yorke and Longden, 2004)

Defining Student Success

Several definitions such as:

- Earning a degree

- Obtaining a graduate job

- Enjoyment

- Gaining a certification grade

- Satisfaction

- Personal Development of Skills (writing; speaking etc)

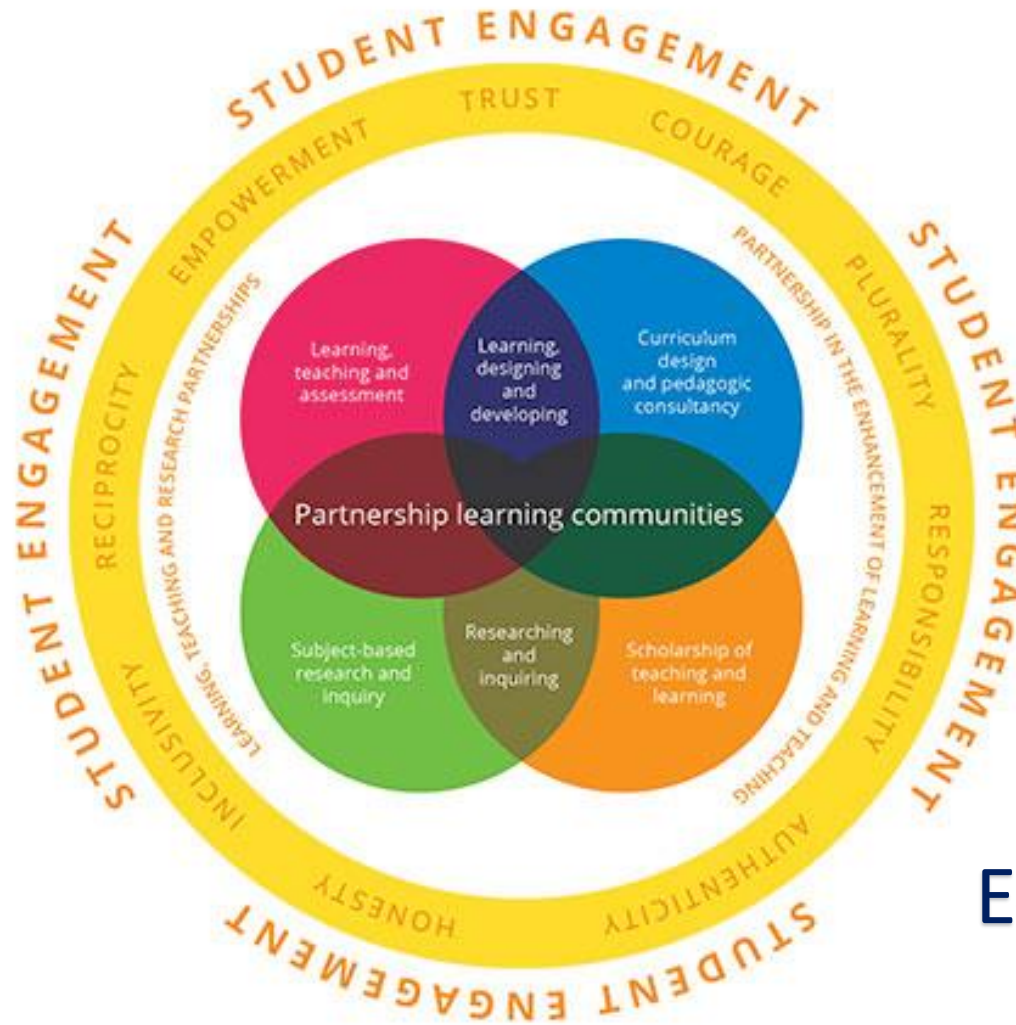(Kuh et al. 2011)

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Student Success & Student Engagement

Push Factors

OUTCOMES

Pull Factors

Enhancement

Sense of Belonging

Learning

Transforming Lives

Accessibility

Equitable Opportunities

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Student Success as a dominant theme

Retention has historically featured as a major area of enhancement in USA HE– home of the phrase "College Drop Out" and a heavily marketized education system (Finn and Zimmer, 2012; Kuh, 2001; Astin, 1983).

Focus also on academic achievement, such as increasing grades in low performance areas (Pitts and Johnson, 2017; Evenback and Kahn, 2001).

"Many are managerially orientated … [where] … a managerial perspective trends to lose sight of the student perspective that can be seen in 'persistence', 'completion' and 'success' (Yorke and Longden, 2004, 1)

We can locate retention, completion and success in their political contexts (Yorke and Longden, 2004)

Student engagement is widely recognised as critical – simply put, students who are engaged with their studies are more likely to be successful (Kahu and Nelson, 2018, 2)

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The successful engaged student

Student engagement is described to represent both the time and energy students invest in educationally purposeful activities and the effort institutions devote to using effective educational practices (Kuh, 2001)

Students who are highly engaged in education-related activities are more likely to progress through and succeed in HE (Tschibozo, 2008; Tinto, 2006; Astin, 1984)

Investing in student engagement can benefit student outcomes (Thomas and Allen, 2022; Schnitzler et al., 2021; Snijders et al 2020)

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Discussion 1: How do you define student engagement in your context?

1. Alone first

2. Then in partners

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The Context of English Higher Education

- 23 years of tuition fees

- 10 years of 9K+ fees

- 7 years of "value for money"

  And students still come...and want:

- Excellent services; world leading teaching; welfare support; careers and opportunities; lifestyle; remote support; organised courses; life experiences & freedom to explore!

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Outcomes pressure of English Higher Ed

- Office for Students: "all students, from all backgrounds, and with the ability and desire to undertake HE and are supported to access, succeed in, and progress from, Higher Education (Office for Students, 2018, 14)

- In the Higher Education Act, success is defined simply as completing the degree programme (Higher Education Act, 2017)

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How do we define Student Engagement?

'Student engagement' has many meanings and is interpreted in multiple ways (Bryson, 2014; Dunne, 2016).

Literally the term could refer to students...

participating

listening

Paying attention

ASKING Qs

TAKING NOTES

interacting

Becoming involved

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How do we define Student Engagement?

In our higher education sector, the term also refers to….

Getting involved

Working with your SU

Student Surveys

Retention

SSLCs

Student Voice

Accessing the VLE

Employability

Belonging

student success

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A focus on Student Engagement

Emotional	Cognitive	Behavioural

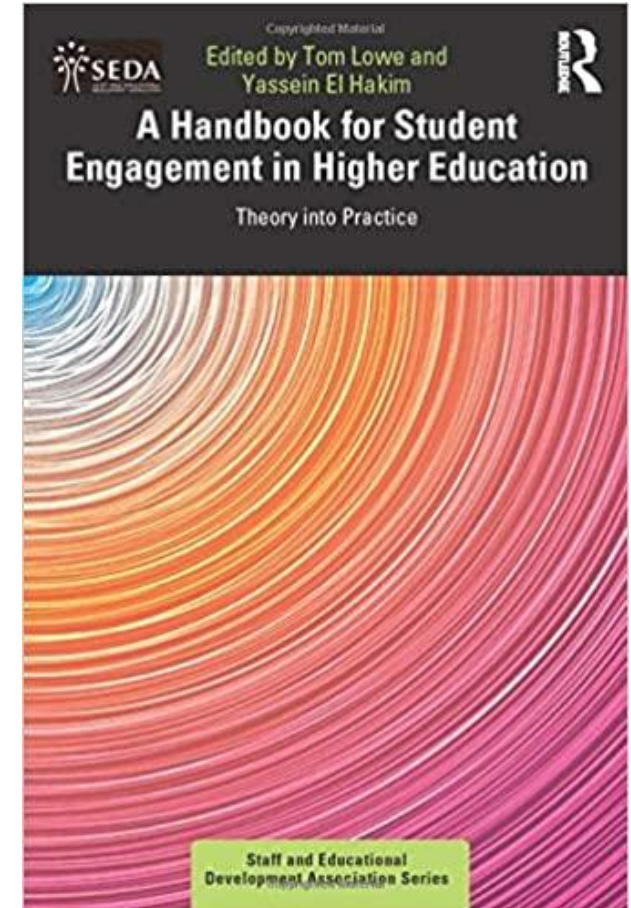(Trowler, 2010)

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A focus on Student Engagement

Emotional	Cognitive	Behavioural	Educational Developments

(Lowe, 2023)

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Be clear from the start (Lowe & El Hakim, 2020)

- "We could define student engagement in any way we want" (Finn and Zimmer , 2001: 137) – a strength or weakness?

- Caution that the buzzword becomes a "fuzzword" (Vuori, 2014: 509).

- "…so many of the ideas produced by engagement researchers are generic. It is up to teachers and institutions to interpret and shape such ideas for specific and unique contexts, subjects and, most importantly, learners" (Zepke, 2013:1):

- The "lack of conceptual clarity carries a number of risks. If we are not clear about what student engagement is, then our ability to improve, increase, support and encourage it through well-designed interventions will be severely diminished." (Buckley, 2014: 2)

SEDA

Edited by Tom Lowe and Yassein El Hakim

R Routledge

A Handbook for Student Engagement in Higher Education

Theory into Practice

Staff and Educational Development Association Series

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The Course - Discussion 2

Why do you think students are attending timetabled sessions less post-COVID-19?

Initial Findings:

Exploratory focus groups with student representatives at three post-92 Universities

𝕏 @TomLowe_

The catalyst of COVID-19's impact on HE

- 18 months of social distancing

- Far less social secondary & further education experience

- Mental health and isolation increases

- Mixed home education setting

- Eager to return to normal but worried about the next steps

- Innovation online with curriculum and services

- Mixture of expectations of a Higher Education

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Getting by, by engaging enough

"I guess just like for attending classes, I think, especially after Covid, it came out more apparent that you don't necessarily have to come to class to be somewhat successful if you can get a decent enough grade, especially if you're not interested in continuing on education. If you just need the degree. And that's it. I think it's been made. It's just, people know. Now, like, I don't really need to come […] Okay on the assignments they always give you a good description of what you're supposed to do."

"Considering that they never attended so the GCSE lessons, for example. So what's difference between not attending GCSE. Lectures or lessons at school? So attending a one off lecture sort of in the week. So maybe it's a kind of what's the point. I can just find it online type of feeling"

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Sector studies on retention & attendance

A study of 640 university students highlights **social integration** and **academic integration** decreased significantly during the lockdown period in the beginning of 2020 (Resch et al. 2023)

Three-quarters (76 per cent) of staff have seen **lower numbers of students turning up** to lectures despite Covid-19 restrictions easing across the world" (Williams, 2022).

49% of undergraduate students who responded have **missed a lecture**, seminar or workshop since September to do paid work (Johnson, 2023).

Almost **one in five** students said that they had considered dropping out of university because of cost of living increases (Office for Students, 2023).

Students part time work average per week has **increased from 13.5 to 23 hours** (Wright, Lowe & Wilding, 2024).

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Students' Cost of Living Crisis

- **1 in 4** students regularly go without food

- Financial pressures are affecting students' studies, with over **half (54%)** of students reporting their academic performance has suffered because of the crisis

- **18%** considering dropping out due to financial reasons

Russell Group Students' Unions, comprising of a survey with a sample of 8,800 students across 14 Russell Group universities carried out between January and February 2023.

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"The new pandemic of the cost of living"

"So if you are having to work to afford rent, which I know people are, and food, and your employer sort of says, I need you to work this day, you are not going upset them, you are going to go and work even if you have got a lecture"

"I think some people like they study in a more flexible way. So they like, look at the lectures during a later time, maybe, and then they go to work to actually being able to afford the student life, because obviously, with the cost of living crisis, and all of that. I think a lot of people just prioritize that."

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Barriers to in-person attendance

- **Illness/Health issues** (both physical and mental – e.g., feeling ill, migraine, mental health, depression)

- **Other course demands** (e.g., busy with coursework, revision, focusing on assignments, deadlines, timetable clashes)

- **Convenience/Online availability** (e.g., online easier, classes accessible online, watching recordings)

- **Personal circumstances** (e.g., family issues, relocation, finances, childcare, bereavement)

- **Lack of motivation/Interest** (e.g., no interest, lack of passion, dissatisfaction with course)

- **Course-related issues** (e.g., lecture quality, relevance to assessments, poor teaching)

- **Travel/Commuting** (e.g., distance, train strikes, weather, expense)

- **Anxiety/Stress** (e.g., nervousness in seminars, social anxiety, stress from workload)

- **External commitments** (e.g., work, meetings, personal appointments)

- **Timetabling** (e.g., early morning classes, back-to-back classes)

(1,600 students, Dickinson, 2023)

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Digital Generation Z

1) Google Generation:
- Instant answers
- Fast consumption of information

2) Netflix Generation:
- Vast sums of content from home
- Watch when suits you, not when the TV states (Lowe, 2022)

3) AI Chat GPT Generation:
- Perhaps it can even write for us?

4) Experienced in distance learning

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Not 100% happy with habits

"I reckon they view it as I will just miss an hour or two, and then it sounds like piled up as everything an hour to a week."

"I also feel like online teaching did make people not as engaged. If that makes sense. I feel like not a lot of people in my course, are engaged and if we given the opportunity to not go because it's easy or because it's online, people would take the opportunity not to come in"

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𝕏 @TomLowe_

Engagement pitfalls to avoid/consider

- One hour sessions alone in a day

- Reward vs punish models

- Assessments relating to one week's class

- Over working students with preparation work that may lead to non attendance

- Poor teaching and curriculum design / a.k.a. forgetting about educational developments!

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The Three R's of Engaging Students

- **Relationships** – Student-staff understanding & mutual respect
- **Rigor** – Course design, instruction & managing expectations
- **Relevance** – High relevance to students engaged

RELATIONSHIP-RICH EDUCATION

HOW HUMAN CONNECTIONS DRIVE SUCCESS IN COLLEGE

PETER FELTEN AND LEO M. LAMBERT

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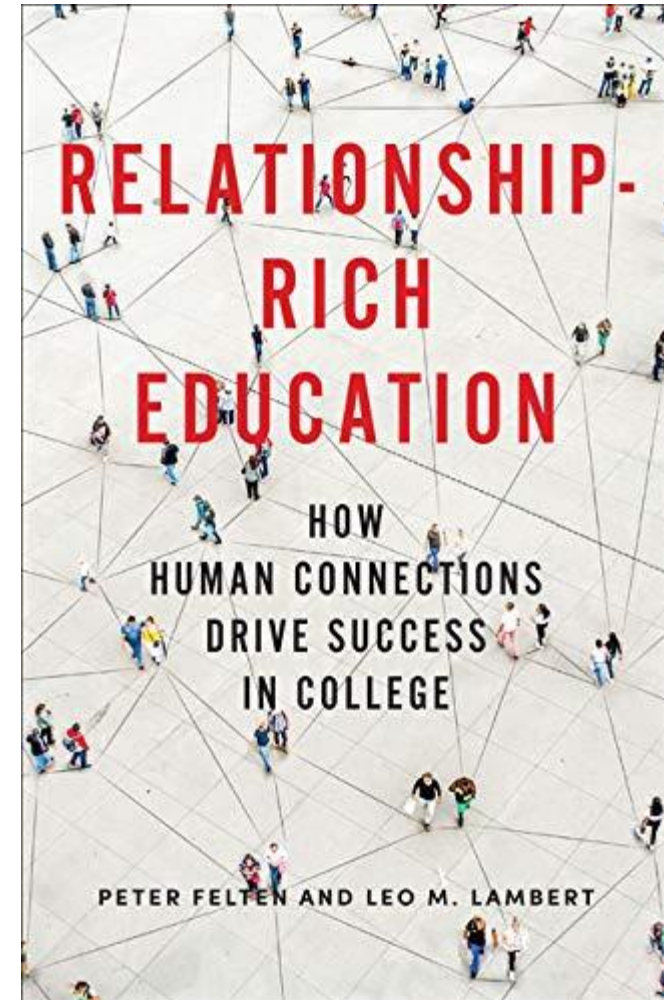
Focusing on core curriculum

- Community building in the curriculum
- Managing expectations consistently across programmes / departments
- Reflect on the balance between online and f2f
- Hold discussions around perceived relevance

(Richards, 2023)

That Student Page
@ThatStudentPage

University summed up:

Miss a lecture
Feel guilty
Attend next lecture
Realise it's pointless
Repeat 🔁

Community: Discussion 3

1. What do you think leads to a high sense of belonging at your institution?

2. What do you think leads to the opposite (alienation, othering and not mattering) your institution?

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HEIs and their "Campus Bubbles"

HEIs now enrol diverse student populations through a variety of pathways, each with their own set of characteristics (Lea, 2015)
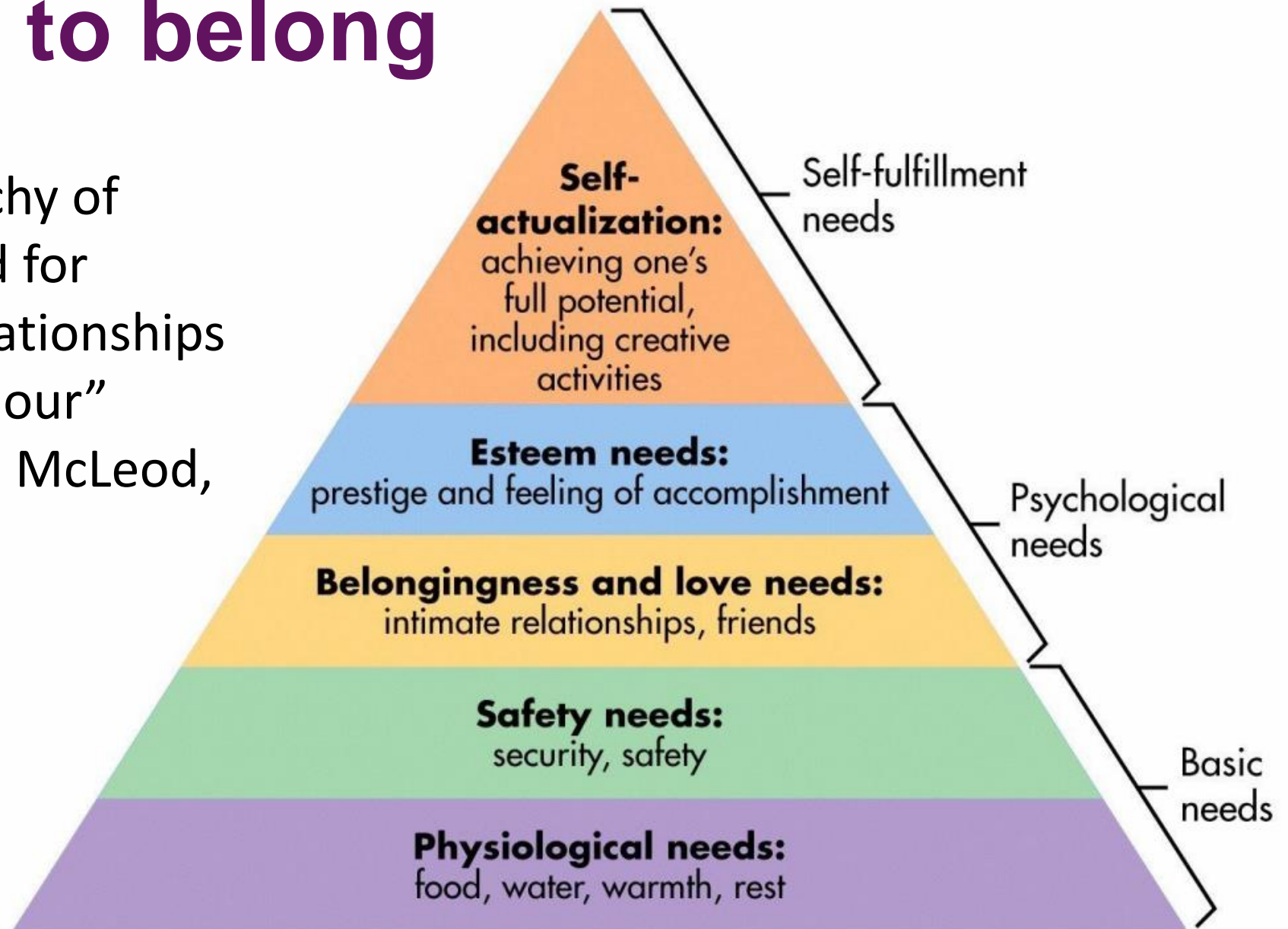
We are often guilty of operating in a campus bubble mind-set, based on traditional HE of full time, campus based UG students (Lowe, 2019).

The "campus bubble was the best and worst thing about [his] university"
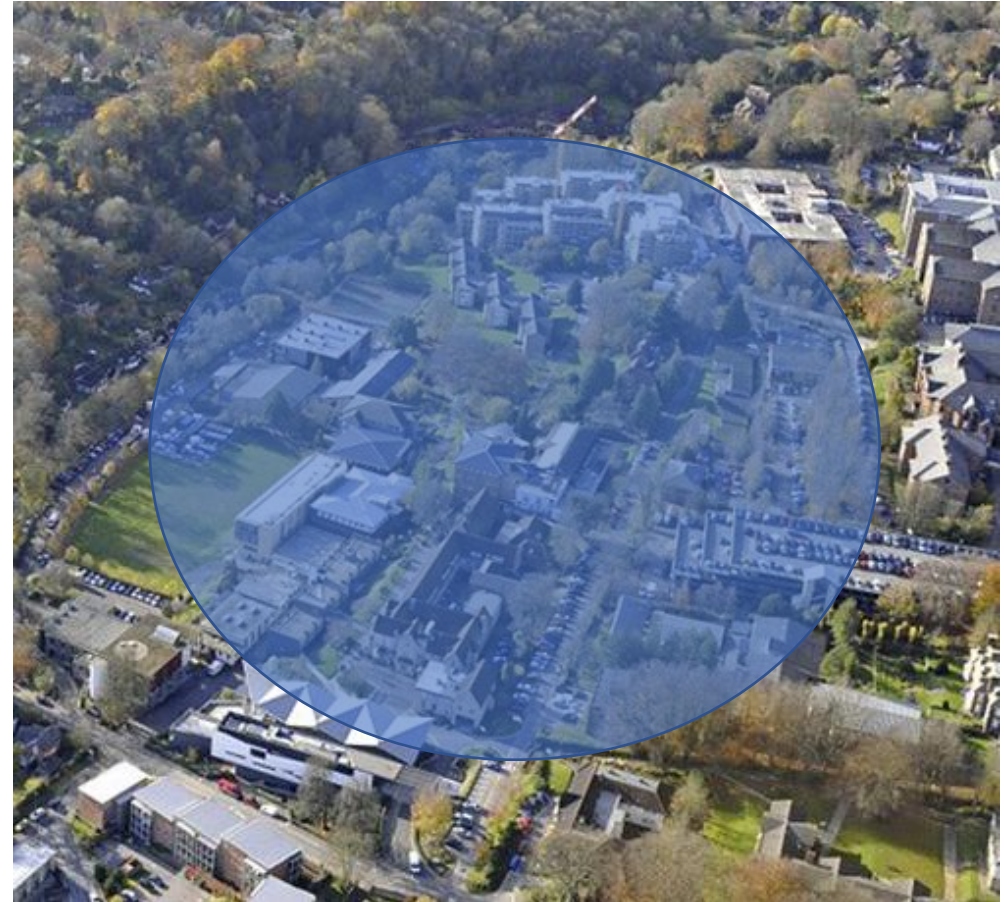
The need to belong

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs "The need for interpersonal relationships motivates behaviour" (Maslow, 1943 in McLeod, 2007)

Self-actualization: achieving one's full potential, including creative activities — Self-fulfillment needs

Esteem needs: prestige and feeling of accomplishment

Belongingness and love needs: intimate relationships, friends — Psychological needs

Safety needs: security, safety

Physiological needs: food, water, warmth, rest — Basic needs

The wish/need to belong

- We find much of our meaning, identity, relevance and satisfaction in life through our sense of belonging to groups (Allen, 2020)

- Belonging is facilitated and hindered by people, things, and experiences involving the social milieu, which dynamically interact with the individual's character, experiences, culture, identity, and perceptions (Allen *et al* 2021)

- "A need to belong – to connect deeply with other people and secure places, to align with one's cultural and subcultural identities, and to feel like one is a part of the systems around them" (Allen *et al* 2021, 88)

We all have an impact

- Every staff member has an impact on students' experience

- Every staff member has the ability to support student belonging/mattering

- But so can every staff member make a student feel alienated

- Create a space where **people** want to be

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Belonging in Higher Education

At the heart of successful *retention* and *success* is a strong sense of belonging in HE for all students, which is most effectively nurtured through mainstream activities that all students participate in (Thomas, 2012).

Factors that lead to a 'sense of belonging' at Winchester included:
- *Processes of becoming a student (enrolment, welcome, graduation)*
- *Socialising opportunities in and outside the curriculum*
- *Extra-curricular activities*
- *Spaces, locations and housing*
- *Course activities*
- *Safety and community*
- *Encouragement to succeed*

(Humphrey & Lowe, 2017)

The opposite of belonging - alienation

- Enrolling into Higher Education is like passing into a new country, with new language, titles, structures and processes (Mann, 2001)

- Increase in social isolation and loneliness during the pandemic (Jackson and Blake, 2022)

- "Struggles to belong are particularly evident in minorities and other groups that have been historically marginalised by mainstream cultures" (Allen *et al* 2021 89)

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Mattering and belonging best practice

- Knowing students by name

- Understanding their wider student journey (programme planning)

- Auditing student communications and the student journey

- Researching student backgrounds

- Turning up early and leaving a little later

- Focusing on positive relationships & relational pedagogies

- Recognise differing needs for belonging

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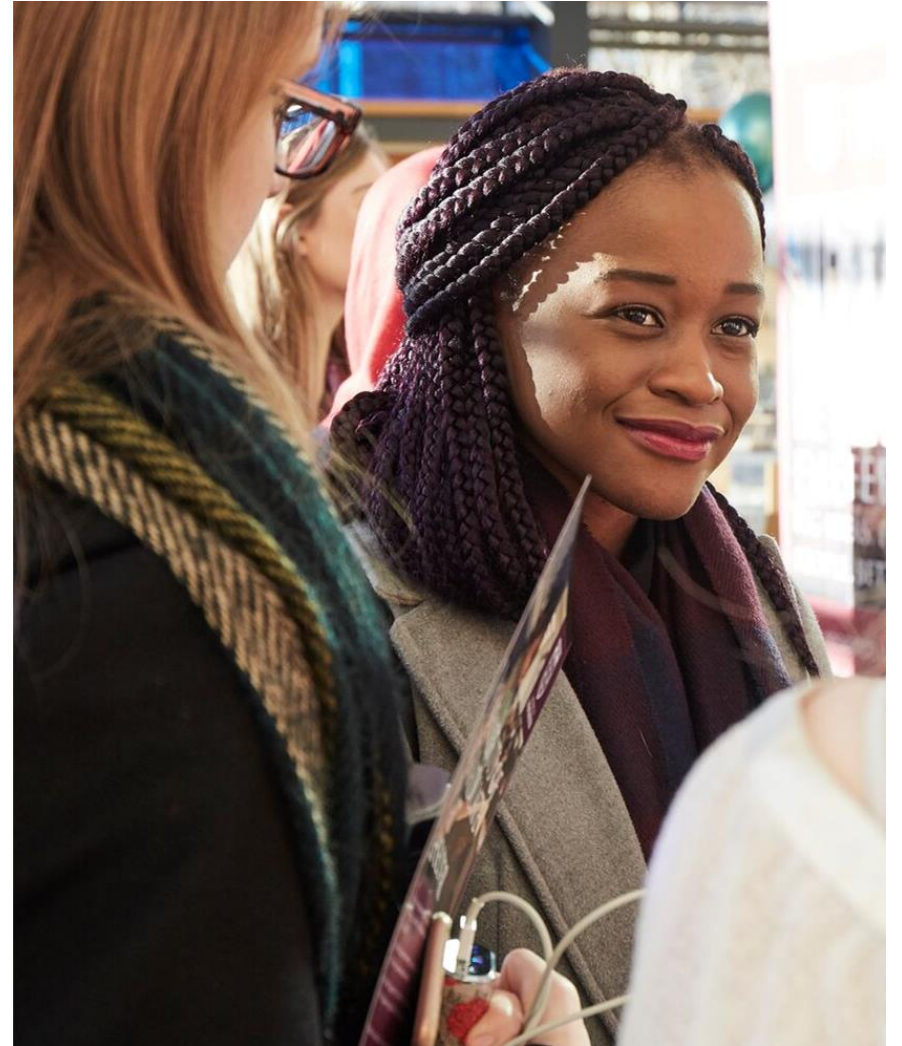
Don't forget our rich engagements

Rich conversations in the curriculum

Friends, conversations and socials outside the curriculum

Residential living, social spaces and group study

Sports Teams, Societies and Network Groups

Part time work, city life and internationalisation

Life making experiences leading to friendships, inspirations and community

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Talk to the people who are living it!

"Do we need to work on putting their views back to what we know, or do we need to evolve what we know and what we know now? And work with this new, the new influx of school leavers or college papers."

Too much historic staff opinion –the faux authority of the hackneyed "When I was a student…", which in fact depends on an HE experience quite unlike that of current students (Lowe, 2023, 4)

Ask Students for their definitions of Student Success

Three key themes in responses: (163 responses)

- Success as a form of validation - achieving grades; "knowing what I am doing"
- Success as defying the odds - keeping going despite adversity; personal survival
- Embodied and emotional success - Terms like 'happiness', 'enjoyment', 'being passionate', 'gaining respect' and engendering 'pride'
- What success is not

(O'Shea and Delahunty, 2018, 1062)

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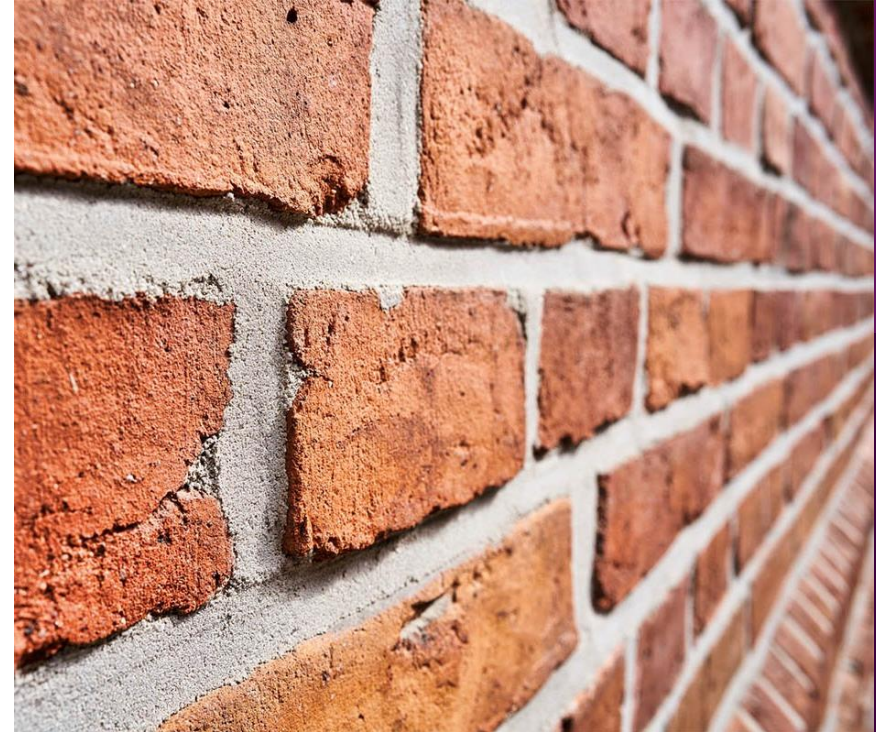
Ask Students for their definitions of Student Success

What do you consider to be "success" during University study?

- Achieving good grades (e.g. 2.1)

- Achieving goals

- Obtaining knowledge

What do you consider to be "success" following University study?

- Career goals or enhancement (majority)

- "I would consider anyone successful after university if they are happy in themselves, have expanded their world view and have contributed something positive to the world"

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We are partners in our Studen

Five Priorities for Student Success
Consideration 1: (Re)acclimatising to studying
Consideration 2: Imposter syndrome and sense of belonging
Consideration 3: Mental health consequences of COVID-19
Consideration 4: Increasingly unattainable hidden curriculum
Consideration 5: Accounting for (in)equality of experience

Student success for all students no matter their background?
- Technology poverty
- Space poverty
- Financial poverty
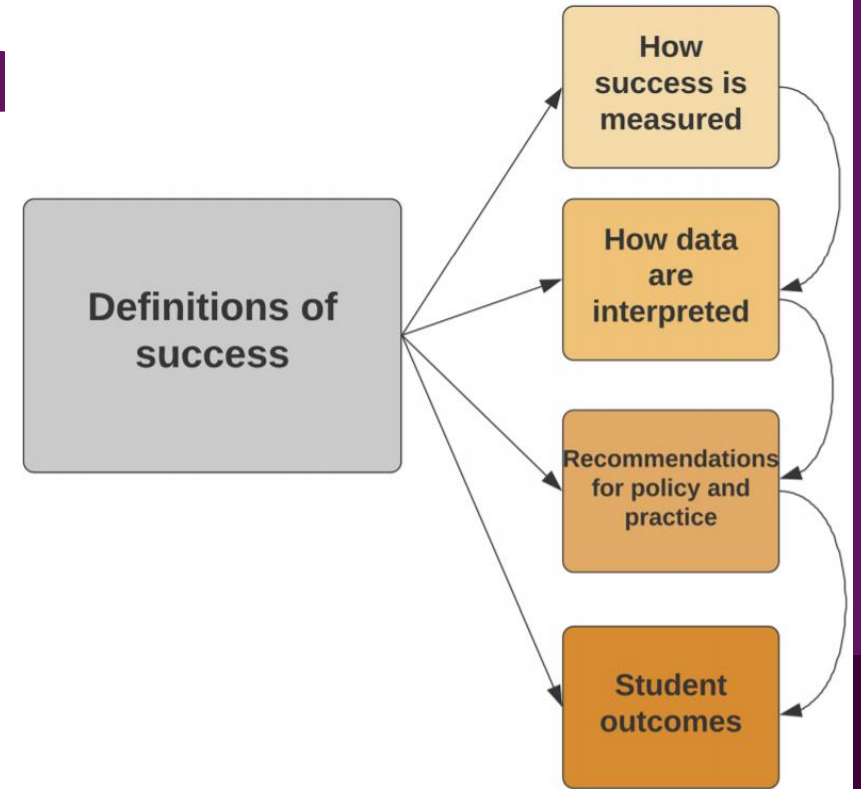
(Weatherton and Schussler, 2021)

(Pownall et al., 2021)

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Student at the heart of the engagement

Programme of Study

Faculty

Module 1

Module 2

Module 3

Student Voice Opportunities

Group Work
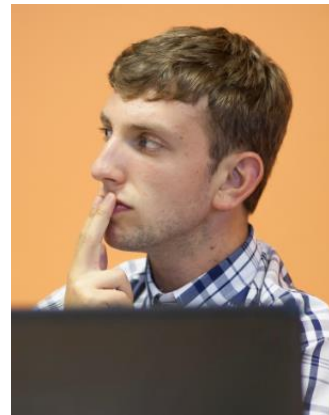
Student Union

Library

Student Services

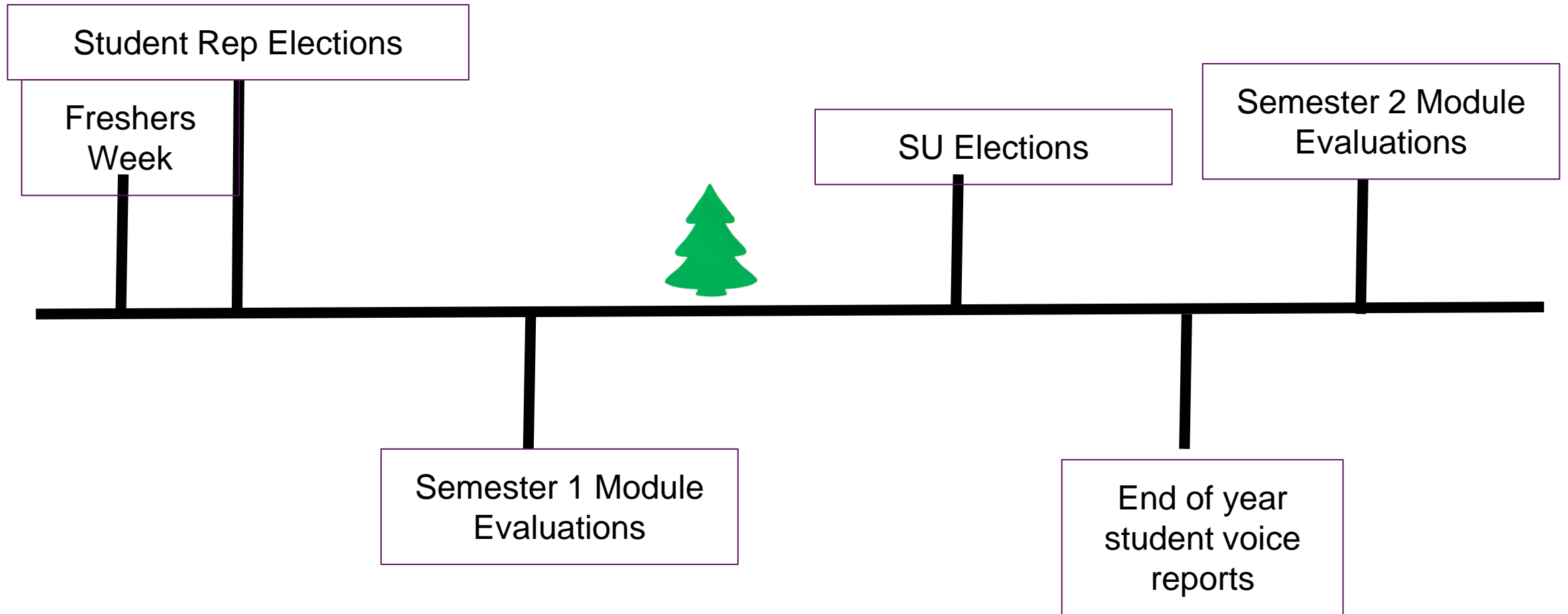Careers Service

Student Clubs & Societies

University 'All Student' Announcements
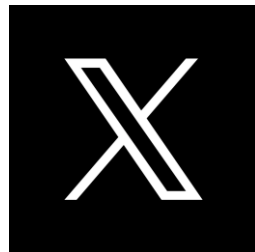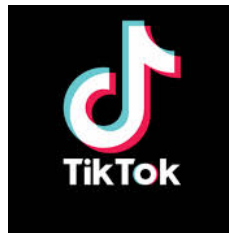
Dominos

NUS discounts

Trainline

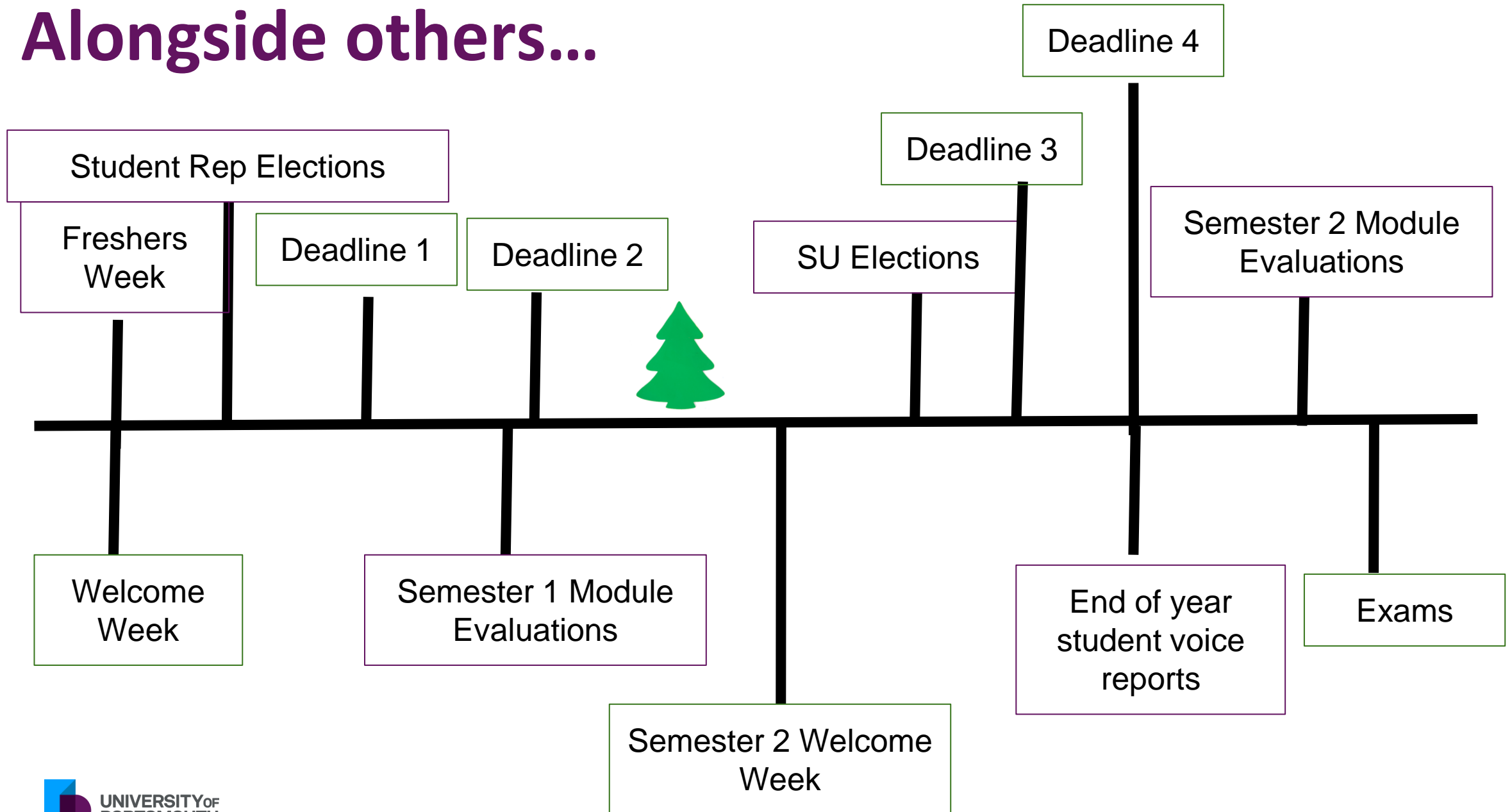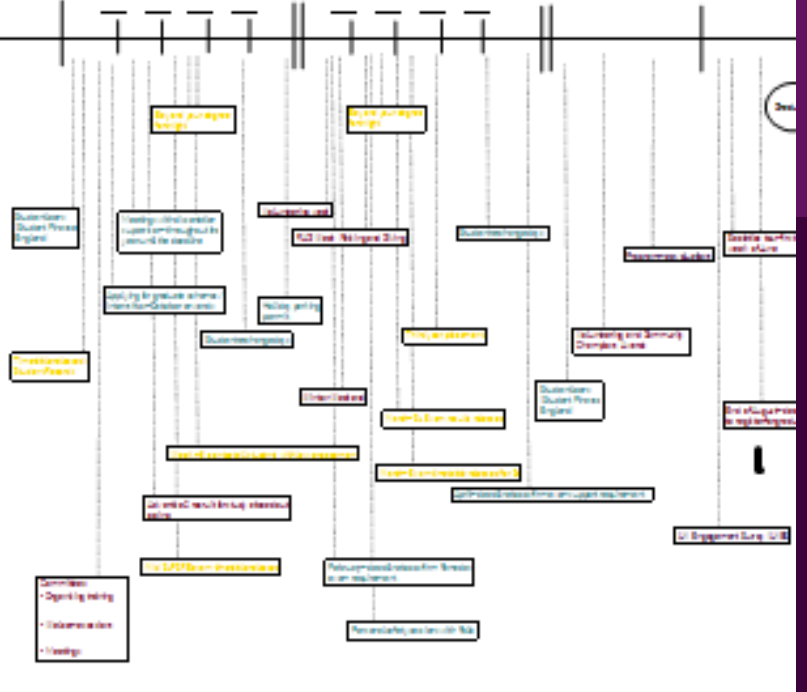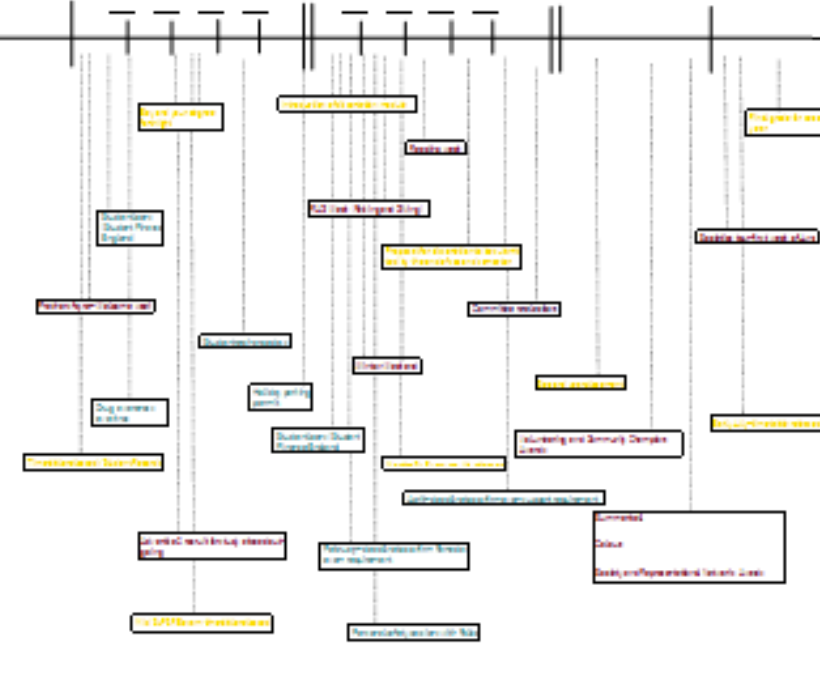Amazon Student

Besieged with Information (Walker, 2023)

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Charting student voice activities

Student Rep Elections

Freshers Week

SU Elections

Semester 2 Module Evaluations

Semester 1 Module Evaluations

End of year student voice reports

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Alongside others...

@TomLowe_

Final thoughts

- Individuals matter (staff and students) where we need to hear their voices

- There is no going back to the 'old' normal… we must anticipate change continuously in the years ahead.

- A need to greater research our students journeys to gain empathy to appropriate support belonging and success (Jackson and Lowe, 2022)

- We need to make room in the curriculum for community building in a cost of living crisis where engagement is impacted (Lowe, 2020; 2023)

- **Focusing in Student Engagement & Success is needed more than ever before** - as central to student engagement during this engagement crisis
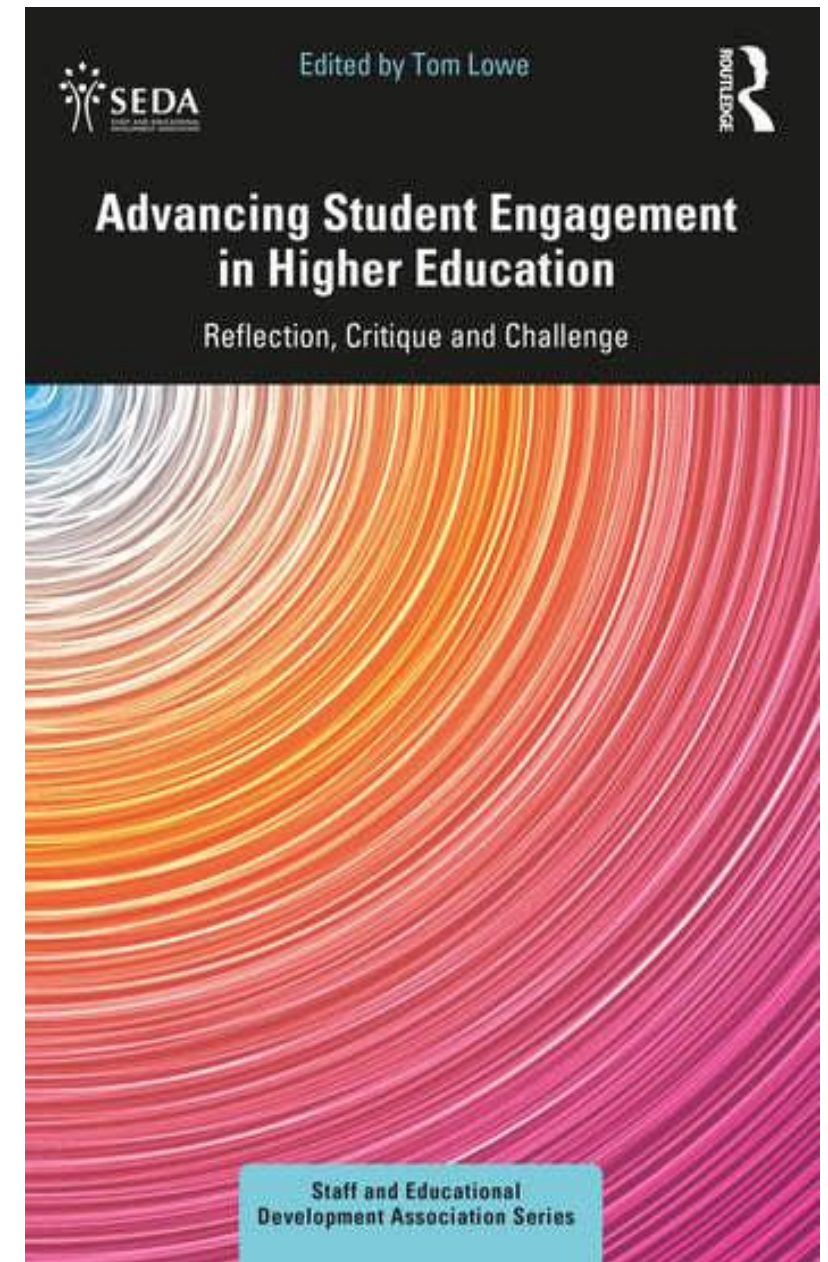
Thank you for listening

Tom Lowe

Tom.Lowe@port.ac.uk

RAISE Network

https://www.raise-network.com/

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