Measuring the Impact of the 'Get Involved Button' - An Evaluation of Creating an

Online Signposting Service for Student Engagement Opportunities at a Medium UK

University.

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Abstract

Accessibility and equal participation remain important considerations for the operationalisation of student engagement practices to ensure all students can participate and benefit from engagement in extra-curricular activities in Higher Education (HE). This case study details one institution's approach of ensuring all opportunities remain accessible to a broad and diverse student body via a centralised online directory (the 'Get Involved Button' (GIB)) in order to break down barriers to participation and stimulate involvement. The paper summarises the project and gives recommendations for other Higher Education providers embarking on similar projects. Importantly, the paper highlights the effectiveness of the GIB in catalysing student involvement and provides recommendations for institutions looking to implement a similar resource.

Keywords: Student Engagement; Student Involvement; Students as Partners; Accessibility; Extra-Curricular Activities; Higher Education.

Introduction

Ensuring that all students have access to enriching, empowering, and developmental opportunities alongside their formal studies in Higher Education (HE) is a priority for universities and colleges that want to see their students succeed. This is a priority at the University of Winchester, a medium-sized Higher Education Institution (HEI) in the south of England, which aims to be sector leading in its student engagement practices (Lowe, Shaw, Sims, King, Paddison, 2017).

In 2015, Winchester sent a delegation of staff and students to the McMaster Students as Partners summer institute to develop their practices in 'students as partners' and 'student engagement' to further develop institutional practices following many years of activity in the realm of co-curricular activities (Lowe et al, 2017; Sims, King, Lowe, and El Hakim, 2016). At the summer institute, the international facilitation team asked questions, ran activities and allowed the Winchester team of students and staff to hypothesize the next developments at the HEI. This was informed by a recent student-staff partnership research project from the Winchester Student Fellows Scheme suggesting multiple aims for the HEI including: the creation of a single location where students can find out about student opportunities (Shaw, 2016), the empowerment of students as Chairs in course-level feedback committees, and the formation of a Centre for Student Engagement. In August 2017, Winchester established its Centre for Student Engagement with an initial core priority of focusing on the above targets, which included the creation of a single location for students to become better engaged in extra-curricular opportunities.

The University of Winchester has adopted a wide definition of the subjective term of 'student engagement', which many previously have aligned to students engaging / engaging students in learning and becoming with the curriculum (Bryson, 2014), engaging in pedagogy

development and policy (Buckley, 2012), student voice and representation (Bols, 2020; Fletcher, 2017) and even wider discourses surrounding students' experiences, sense of belonging, and retention (Beniston and Harris, 2017; Thomas, 2012; Strayhorn, 2012). When 'student engagement' roles are referred to within a UK context, often these are co-curricular opportunities, responsibilities, or schemes, which relate to enhancing students' educational experiences, pedagogical practice, and quality assurance, which has largely been driven by policy movements encouraging student engagement (see: Quality Assurance Agency, The Student Engagement Partnership), creating a vast array of roles and schemes such as 'students as change agents', 'student fellows', and 'success coaches' (Sims, Luebsen and Guggiari-Peel 2017; Dunne, 2016). Since the visualisation of the Student Participation Map in 2015 by Winchester Student Union, a holistic perspective of student engagement has developed at Winchester to be inclusive of all opportunities and not solely co-curricular activities relating to education. This recognises that extra-curricular activities such as sport, societies, volunteering, and campus employment all hold value to students' experiences and engagement (Shaw and Lowe, 2017). This inclusive definition of student engagement follows American conceptualizations of student engagement and student involvement initially coined by Astin, highlighting how all campus-relating activities benefit the student education (Astin, 1984). This is in addition to other work which aligns extra-curricular activities to benefitting students' success and outcomes such as gaining sense of belonging, retention, and engagement whilst studying in higher education (Hunter, Tobolowsky and Gardner, 2010; Tinto, 2006; Kuh and Hu, 2001).
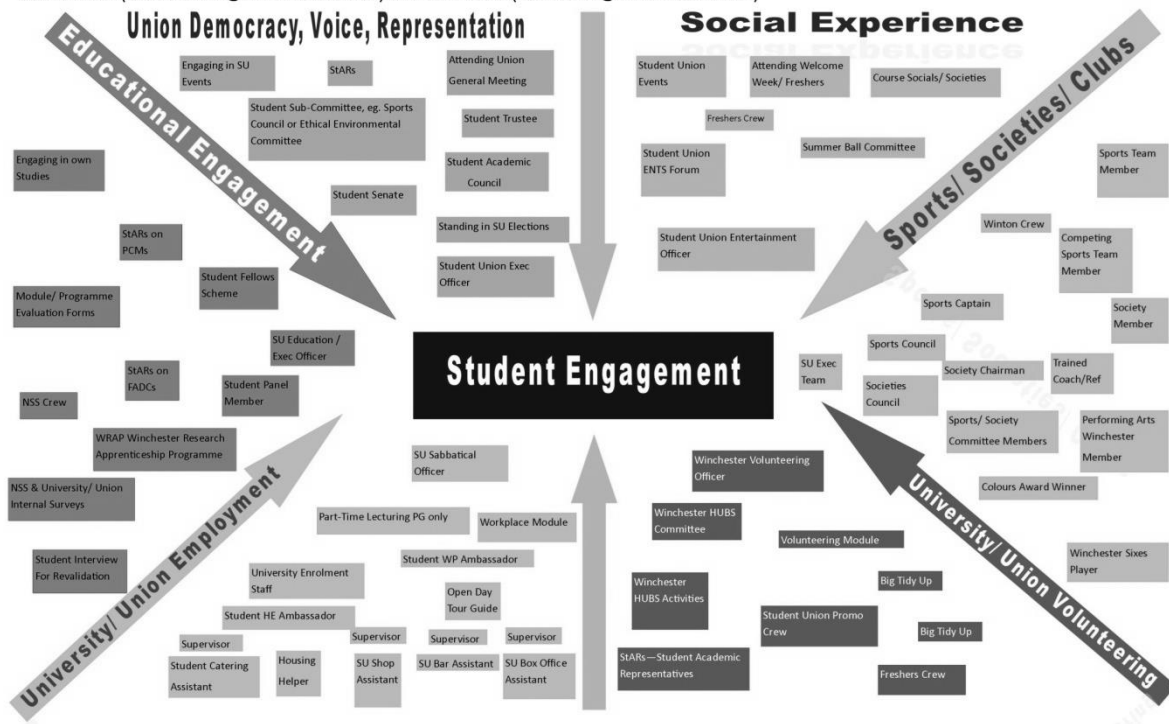
Figure 1 – The Student Participation Map, Shaw and Lowe, 2017

During 2015-17, Winchester hosted a *HEFCE* (Higher Education Funding Council for England) Catalyst project to research the benefits to student engagement activities, and to question which students were engaging through an assessment of the term 'hard to reach' students (Dunne and Lowe, 2017). Alongside several other studies looking at particular groups of students, the research conducted during the *REACT* (Realising Engagement through Active Culture Transformation) project found that students often face several barriers to engaging in extra/co/beyond the curricular activities, which can be due to practical barriers but also perception and communication barriers (Shaw, Humphrey, Atvars and Sims, 2017; Goddard, 2017). The *REACT* project highlighted that the term was in fact damaging to strategic approaches as it places blame on students themselves. Additionally, it is difficult to collectively diagnose who is 'hard to reach' across an entire HEI, with some students who

may be 'hard to reach' for one staff member or office and not to another (Lowe and Dunne 2017, Shaw *et al*, 2017). However, the research team of the *REACT* project found that students who were engaged in co-curricular activities saw benefits to their retention and possibly even their attainment (Sims *et al*, 2017), which supports scholars like Kuh and Huh (2001), Tinto (1987), and Astin (1984), who align engaging in additional activities at HE as beneficial to students' educational experiences. Another significant observation and recommendation of the *REACT* project outlined that collegiate communication and definition of student engagement / involvement at a HEI was core to ensuring that language related barriers did not occur (Beniston and Harris, 2017). Communication is often paradoxically a major challenge and the main solution when strategically enhancing student engagement at a HEI. The ability to appropriately communicate opportunities and their meaning to students and staff at University has begun to be highlighted as a wider priority in the sector, so conversations surrounding student engagement can be then become more successful (Lowe & El Hakim, 2020; UKSCQA & QAA, 2018; Weller and Mahbubul, 2018).

In actualizing the Student Participation Map (see Figure 1), it was suggested that an online signposting service be created which showcased student opportunities in a single location within the University's internal portal. This would allow for an interactive tool, which could benefit students' engagement in all realms of activity.

Literature Review

Student involvement in co/extra-curricular activities have shown to provide multiple benefits to students in HE. These benefits include the following: integration, retention, a sense of enjoyment, as well as employability gain (Hunter *et al.* 2010; Stuart, Lido, Morgan & May 2009). The particular employability benefits of activities (e.g., work placements, e-portfolios. or volunteering) have also been extensively researched to benefit graduate destinations

(Nghia, 2017; Tchibozo, 2008). Furthermore, student leadership roles in recreational activities, such as sport and academic societies, have proven to have an impact upon on students' sense of belonging, retention, and overall experience (Horseley, 2016; Gerrard & Billington, 2014; Thomas, 2012). Contemporary 'student engagement' or 'students as partners' roles (i.e., focused on enhancing pedagogy or wider HEI provision) have begun to be evaluated, suggesting similar benefits to students as well as fulfilling altruistic motivations (Curran, 2017; Sims *et al.* 2017). As pressure for retention, employability, and student satisfaction continues in UK HE due to a mixture of governmental and policy pressures (Office for Students, 2018; Department for Education, 2017), the University of Winchester was keen to capitalise on its 150+ extra-curricular opportunities to ensure students were appropriately able to access these opportunities.

The HE student experience is known to include a wide range of extra-curricular activities. This includes recreational and competitive sport (e.g. soccer, tennis, etc.); student societies based around programmes of study, shared interests, or identity (e.g. Law Society, Photographic Society, Islamic students Society, etc.); academic engagement opportunities (e.g. student-staff partnership projects); volunteering; and part-time work. However, there is still much work required to ensure these opportunities are accessible for diverse student bodies. Many of these opportunities pose barriers to engagement such as high fees, time commitments, selection processes, and travel requirements, which can prevent student participation (O'Shea, 2018). Also, there are many cultural barriers that prevent student engagement such as "lad culture"/ "locker room culture" in sport, low demographic diversity in student leadership groups, and certain preconceptions associated with opportunities that may negatively affect a student's confidence to engage – particularly for those students from minoritized backgrounds (Mercer-Mapstone, Islam and Reid, 2019).

Finally, another reported barrier to student engagement and participation is communication related issues, such as advertising opportunities to students; single points of entry (i.e. "Orientation week" or "Fresher's Fayres" – events that block out the beginning of term in order to showcase extra-curricular opportunities); social media/website adverts; and other general ambiguity surrounding opportunities which prevent student engagement and the associated alienating nature of higher education (Greenbank, 2015; Mann, 2001). Often communication, managing expectations, and breaking down the barrier of perceived relevance is key to addressing and increasing student engagement in any HE extra-curricular activity (NUS, 2015). This case study thus details a university-wide approach to create a signposting service for student opportunities, which can tackle these associated barriers to engagement.

Significance of the 'Get Involved Button'

Previously, marketing and communication of student opportunities at Winchester was ad-hoc, organic, and only strategically led with one major event each academic year known as "Freshers' Fayre". This event is hosted by Winchester Student Union during the beginning of the academic year and constitutes of more than 100 student opportunities. However, this one-day event was easily missed by students and presented several barriers such as participation in a loud crowded venue, which could be deemed inaccessible due to size but also created a barrier for students with low levels of social confidence. Additionally, there was no other physical event of this size promoting engagement in extra-curricular activities at Winchester. As a result, to engage in activities beyond this, students would become involved via peer networks, or through online or physical publicity, which were on a case-by-case basis. As this only amounted to a few occurrences per opportunity, where the opportunities to engage were often left to chance, many students reported a lack of awareness of 'how to get involved'.

The coordinators of opportunities at Winchester also presented barriers to direct engagement as the majority did not have a student facing office (or in many cases, an office at all), so staff or student coordinators of activities were often hard to reach, or unknown to students. From the research outlined above, although Winchester had high engagement rates of 8,000 student memberships of activities (note: students could be engaged in more than one activity), there were still significant barriers to becoming involved relating to communication. Therefore, an online directory in which they could browse, consume and sign up at leisure before becoming engaged in an extra-curricular activity was proposed. This project was initially titled a 'Signposting Service for Student Opportunities' and later named by the University's Student Academic Council (a consultative and advisory body to the university's senior management team) as the 'Get Involved Button' (GIB), as a literal name for the digital button/tab on the student portal where information on student engagement activities would be found. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to detail the University of Winchester's 'Get Involved Button' project and offer a story of its implementation for other HEIs to replicate.

A Co-Designed Project

The creation of the GIB spanned over the course of eight months (see Figure 2). In its entirety, the 'Get Involved Button' team comprised of the following:

- Centre for Student Engagement manager (who acted as the project lead and oversaw the larger operational actions and strategy).

- Centre for Student Engagement Graduate intern (who primarily researched and gathered content of all student engagement opportunities for the GIB).

- Three Centre for Student Engagement Marketing interns (of these three, one intern was a third-year Marketing student who worked part-time).

At the heart of the project, collaboration across university departments, Winchester Student Union, student opportunities coordinators, the Careers Service, on-campus employers, and students themselves was vital. To ensure all opportunities were being collected and gathered together appropriately, the project team astutely navigated through this by being adaptive of communication styles and through being fully transparent of the aims and objectives of the project. Stakeholder engagement was a priority, as opportunity coordinators were rightly proud of their opportunities. Therefore, moving all opportunities to a new central space had to involve constant consultation to ensure all parties had their voices meaningfully heard. A Task and Finish Group was formed to complement the latter and guide the project to fruition. The project team also regularly reported to various university committees and groups such as the Student Academic Council, Student Experience Committee, and Student Engagement Advisory Group.
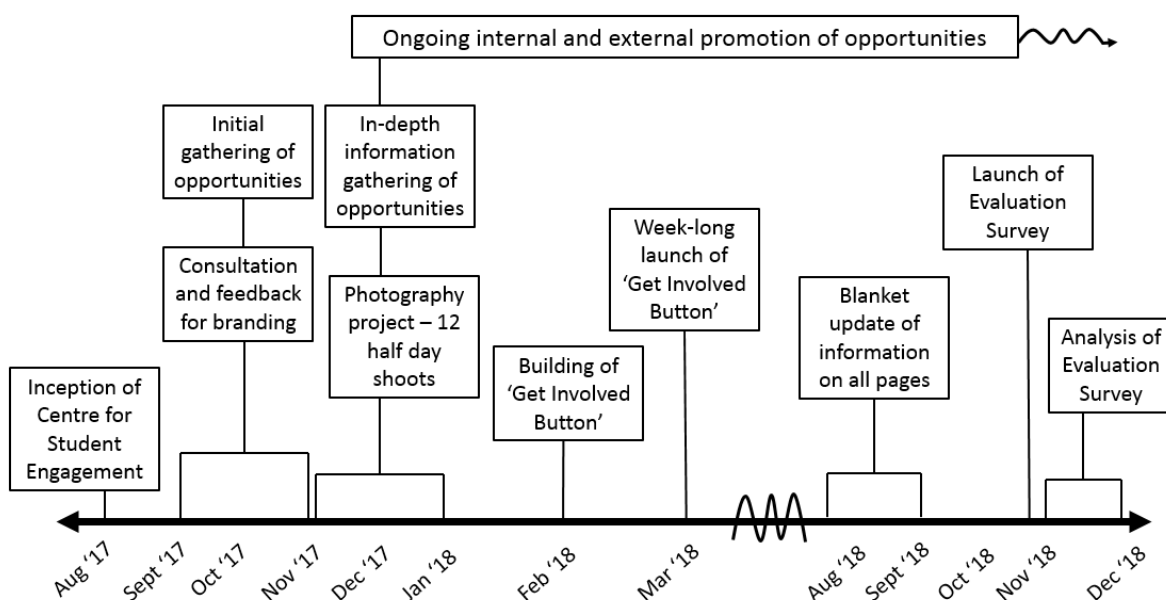

Figure 2 – Process map of the 'Get Involved Button' project

Campaign and launch of the 'Get Involved Button':

As exemplified by Figure 2 above, the first six months of the project was dedicated to three main phases:

1. *A comprehensive gathering of all opportunities*:

This phase included a two-stage approach where opportunities were identified and basic data were collected (i.e. brief explanations, type of opportunity, lead contact information etc.). Following this, a meeting was set up with each individual coordinator to gather an in-depth 250-300 word case study detailing opportunity specificities and associated activities when taking part. Over 180 student opportunities were identified, with the vast majority having its own case study/page on the GIB.

2. *A multi-faceted marketing approach*:

This phase comprised of a photography project of twelve professional photoshoots which were conducted with over 100 students, alongside the building of the directory. Our final year Marketing intern led on this stage, which was integral to capturing and engaging with a wide variety of student networks. This marketing project was able to showcase a representative range of student opportunities from sports and societies, to academic engagement and campus employment. The photos gathered were used in the launch posters and social media campaign of the GIB and have since been used in wider university and Winchester Student Union marketing materials, highlighting student engagement in opportunities as part of the "Winchester experience". Finally, our marketing interns were crucial to launch communications and design-related aspects of the project, e.g. designing posters and bespoke visual elements of the GIB directory.

3. *Continuous student and staff engagement*:

Continuous student and staff engagement were key to the success of this project. The first phase of the student consultation of this project was executed through 'Feedback Exhibitions' at the start of the project to gather student opinions. We use the term 'Feedback Exhibition' to describe a pop-up event on campus where students were to take a walking tour around a room to answer questions about what they wanted from the GIB, and then received a complimentary tea/coffee and cake after completion. Feedback from this session included a gauge of key words that students relate to extra-curricular activities, where the terms "*get involved*" and "*opportunities*" yielded high responses. Additionally, Winchester Student Union and other departments were consulted and updated to ensure cross-university buy in. Examples of staff engagement included running staff-facing 'Learning Lunches' and liaising with our Student Communications and Marketing Department to update and provide content for advertising student opportunities to both current and prospective students.

Following six months of research and one month of building the GIB online directory, the team conducted a weeklong launch event in the late spring semester of 2018. This launch campaign was conducted in a carefully considered time period, i.e. a week in which no other campaigns were running and during a light assessment period for students. The overarching aim was to build student awareness of the GIB where multiple communication platforms were used. This included:

- Virtual and printed posters across the University

- Utilising official university social media platforms, including a takeover of the Snapchat and Instagram account

- Weekly posts to the student internal noticeboard

- Pop-up stands across both campuses on Winchester, including live demonstrations on tablets and free GIB branded cupcakes

Visual Design of the 'Get Involved Button':

The GIB was a new tab located on the top right of the home page on the student intranet. It was bright yellow to stand out amongst the rest of the established tabs on the intranet and was badged as 'Get Involved Button'. Once students clicked on the button, they were taken to a page with five sections to choose from: Sport and Clubs, Societies and Interest Groups, Volunteering Opportunities, Employment Opportunities, and Academic Engagement. Upon clicking these sections, students were taken to a page of coloured tiles which represented each of the 150+ extra-curricular opportunities at the university and Student Union. Once students clicked on one of the opportunities (e.g. American Football) the student would be taken to a page which detailed a case study about the opportunity, photos of the opportunity in action where available, an email address of who to contact to get involved, the contact time/training time of the opportunity, and finally, for employability reasons, the skills gained from said opportunity. Example images of the GIB in summary can be seen in figure 3:
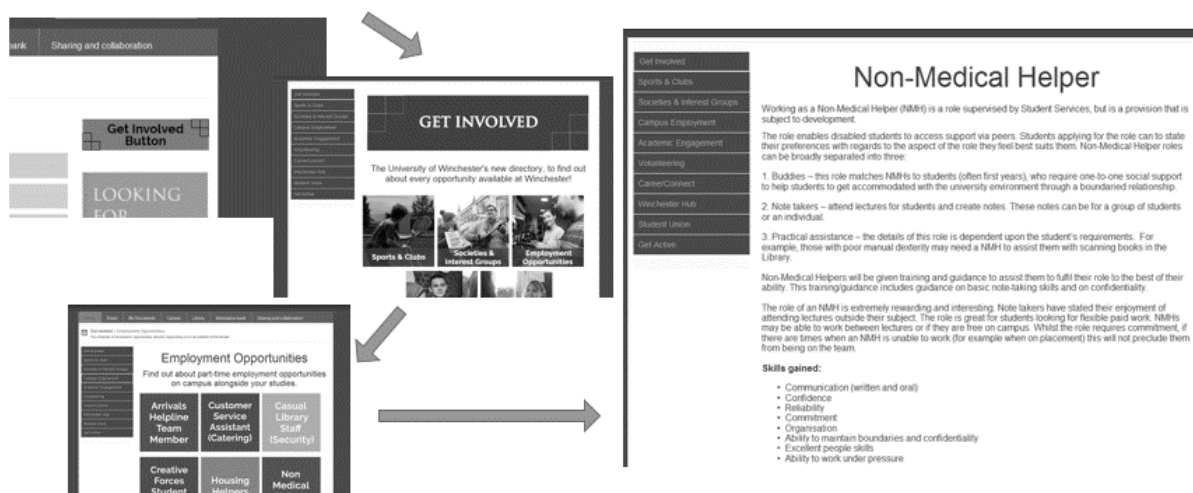

Figure 3 – Example images of the 'Get Involved Button'

Recommendations:

Following two years of maintaining, promoting, and retaining stakeholder and student engagement with the 'Get Involved Button,' the team recommend the below to Universities, Colleges, or Students' Unions embarking on a similar project:

1. **The effectiveness of student opportunity directories relies heavily on the information it provides**

A clear strength of the GIB was that it was fulfilling its core purpose of signposting students to the array of opportunities that the university was providing to them. However, if this information is not kept up to date, the effectiveness of the directory will cease to exist. There were also recommendations for how this information could be better communicated. For example, students would want to be alerted directly to any new opportunities, and coordinators mentioned having some sort of ownership of the pages that represented their opportunities (rather than having to email through updates, as is the current practice).

2. **The design element of student opportunity directories is an important aspect to the use of the directory itself**

Ensuring a simple layout and easy-to-use navigation aspect of the GIB made it an accessible tool to find out about different opportunities. However, the presence of the GIB itself needed to be clearer on the virtual portal homepage. As a result, many respondents noted that its presence needed to be physically larger so that it was not lost in an over-crowded online space.

3. **Ensuring that student opportunity directories are embedded into the consciousness of the university/college**

Whilst there has been anecdotal evidence for high student awareness, there was still an indication that more advertising was required to fully embed the GIB and its presence into

university culture. As such, a heavy amount of promotion was concentrated during the initial

launch of the GIB, it indicates that there still needs to be a continuous effort to publicise it

over each academic year – especially as institutions receive a fresh intake of students each

year.

Conclusion

The creation of the GIB as an overall project should not be underestimated in its effort

to bring into fruition. However, it is clear that the outcomes emanating from the project have

been multiple and will continue to bring about positive results. Not only is the GIB beneficial

to current students who will come across and embark on new extra-curricular activity, but

similar consequences will be enjoyed by prospective students showcasing the wealth of

opportunities at the university. As the GIB is able to keep track of a comprehensive and

updated list of all university activity, the recruitment value it brings are exemplified by being

advertised on the official university website and showcased during Open Days.

As the university also prepares for an upgraded design and layout of the portal

homepage, the GIB has already been identified as one of the most used online service on the

student portal. From feedback provided by students to the university, this new portal

homepage will now prioritise the presence of the GIB and make its use more obvious. It

should also be noted that the success of the GIB came through the team effort which largely

comprised of recent graduates and a final year student. Whilst the opportunity to work on the

project provided important experience and employability skills, it also valued the knowledge

and expertise that these graduates and final year student were able to bring to the project.

Should other universities wish to replicate a similar tool as the GIB, creating internship

opportunities to execute this would be beneficial as the hours required to both audit and build

such a directory is a significant task taking at least six months. Ensuring a concerted effort

with institutional buy-in was also key in the establishment of the Button. Following this

approach can thus work to break down implicit barriers to student participation, paving the

way for equitable HE spaces.

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