

**Specialist**

**Institutions**

with a  
**Specialism**

# Student Experience and Engagement Briefing

## World-class higher education systems

Politicians and policy makers are increasingly likely to be talking about world-class higher education systems rather than just focusing on world-class universities.

The UK should rightly be proud of the number of universities in the global elite. But it is the strength across the sector and diversity of provision and provider that really gives the UK claim to be one of the world's best education systems. It is only by understanding and valuing the full diversity of the UK's higher education providers that we will continue to build a truly world-leading higher education system.

This is the first in a series of briefings highlighting the contribution of a range of institutions that are often not featured in the national spotlight – from the highly specialised subject-specific institutions, to smaller institutions with just a few thousand students to larger institutions with a particular focus, whether delivering part-time courses or celebrating their religious roots.

This briefing focuses on student experiences in these institutions and the impact that this can have on their engagement with their learning.

## Introduction

Student experience and engagement have been high on the political agenda in recent years, with much talk of students being at the “heart of the system”. However if we consider the policy landscape, the student at the heart of this system would probably look like an 18 year-old moving away to study a full-time Bachelors degree at a large multi-faculty university. This briefing seeks to highlight the positive experiences of students at a range of other institutions to demonstrate and showcase the benefits and differences that there are.

It is increasingly recognised that there are a range of student experiences – in fact probably as many as there are students. But with student choice becoming more important, it is crucial that we are able to articulate these different experiences to help prospective students make more informed choices. It is by understanding these different experiences and the benefits of them that we are able to recognise what it is we need to protect to prevent a scenario in which institutions present ever more homogenised experiences.

This paper looks at three dimensions of the student experience under the headlines of ‘The 3 E’s’:

- Engagement
- Employability
- Experience

Distinction and Diversity  
in Higher Education

**GuildHE**

***Celebrating the diversity of the higher education sector***

**Briefing 1: Student experience & engagement**

*This is a new series of monthly briefings produced by GuildHE looking at different aspects of a diverse higher education sector.*

**December 2014**

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## 1. Engagement

*Engaging students in their learning is key to helping students unlock their true potential. Two of the key factors in engaging students, and therefore in the quality of education in higher education, are class size and the extent of contact between students and teachers (Gibbs, 2012<sup>1</sup>).*

### 1.1 Small Group Teaching

Gibbs' work (ibid, 2012) demonstrates that class size is one of the most significant predictors of both student performance and learning gains. This was also seen as much more of a significant indicator than purely the number of 'contact hours' that the student receives.

Many smaller institutions - or more specialist providers with highly specialised courses - are able to deliver highly individualised learning and teaching in a small-group setting due to the number of students on each course. This gives students the opportunity to develop close and productive teaching and learning relationships that simply would not be possible in larger institutions or on larger courses. This smaller student cohort can also lead to informal teaching environments.

*"One of the advantages of being a smaller university is that lecturers and other teaching staff can spend more time working with smaller groups and can get to know you as an individual, helping you learn, develop and achieve your goals."*

**Jessica Clarke, Fdsc Veterinary Nursing, Harper Adams University**

### 1.2 Specialist provision

There are many universities and institutions that are specialist in a particular subject area. These institutions are able to bring together a large critical mass of experts who are specialised in specific areas. For example in many history departments across the country there may be, at most, one specialist in say Japanese history, whereas at SOAS, University of London – which specialises in the study of Asia, Africa and the Middle East – there is an entire Japanese history department. This means that students are able to focus their studies on particular areas of interest.

This kind of environment, where there is a high concentration of specialist knowledge bringing together both experts in the field but also the library and other resources to support the further exploration of the field, is something that is likely to be rare in less specialised institutions, especially at an undergraduate level.

There is also an expectation within specialist institutions that there will be highly specialist equipment. For example, in creative and performing arts institutions it is expected that cutting-edge, industry standard equipment is available to use, ensuring industry ready graduates and this is integral to the teaching delivery with industry experts.

### 1.3 Flexible provision

Engagement is also facilitated in a number of institutions by the type of course that they offer or the way in which they deliver the course. This can be a diverse range of qualifications beyond the more traditional Bachelors, Masters and Doctorates including many short courses for continuing professional development to Higher National Certificate or Diplomas and Foundation Degrees. Providers also vary the way in which these are delivered – whether full-time, part-time or even on an accelerated timescale.

This diversity of delivery enables institutions to provide more tailored approaches that are flexible to the needs of the student. A good example of this flexibility is Birkbeck, University of London, which specialises in part-time and evening higher education aimed at meeting the changing educational, cultural, personal and career needs of adults. Whereas SAE Institute offers "fast-track" degrees with students studying for two years rather than three – having a third semester in the Summer and with shorter holiday periods.

The Open University is perhaps the most well-known for delivering high-quality distance learning but this is increasingly becoming the norm, with many universities now offering online provision, with for example, Rose Bruford College delivering an online BA (Hons) in Opera Studies.



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1. Gibbs, G. (2012). Implications of 'Dimensions of quality' in a market environment. HEA [https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/resources/HEA\\_Dimensions\\_of\\_Quality\\_2.pdf](https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/resources/HEA_Dimensions_of_Quality_2.pdf)

## 2. Employability

Students have become more focused on the employment opportunities that their course will open up. This encourages students to look not just at the employability data but the nature of the course and how it will prepare them for the world of work. This includes the industry links that a university has and the experiences that they will have integrated into their course. Universities that are able to provide practical experiences will become increasingly popular.

### 2.1 Graduate Employability

One of the key pieces of information provided by the Government to prospective students is graduate employability six months after graduation. Whilst there are many challenges with the data – particularly for those careers which often involve internships and volunteering before getting a full time job – it is interesting to look at the chart below of the top institutions.

There are a couple of expected names in this list but there are also a high proportion of quite specialised institutions – focusing on subject disciplines as diverse as music and medicine to art and agriculture. This suggests that employers within specialist sectors value the graduates that specialist institutions train, and this is reinforced by the fact that graduates from specialist institutions often go on to work within the same sector they have been trained.

### 2.2 Practitioner Teaching from Industry Experts

One of the key features often cited by employers in some of these more specialist institutions is that graduates are job-ready in part because lecturers are often current practitioners and industry experts with many years of experience within their sectors.

The practitioners can provide a mix of both practical knowledge but also a ready-made set of contacts from within industry. Many universities are also getting better at building links with alumni which can provide many opportunities including graduates returning to their alma mater either as a client, teacher or supporter and offer key opportunities for growth and development to current students.

*“The quality of teaching at LIPA is exceptional. Teachers and lecturers are experienced performers and practitioners that care about each individual dancer. They are committed to getting the best out of us and providing us with the tools to sustain a fulfilling career. In addition to the excellent internal support and training, we are given a wide range of master classes from current industry professionals of a high calibre.”*

**Rebecca Whaley, 3<sup>rd</sup> year BA (Hons) Dance, Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts**



## Celebrating the diversity of the higher education sector

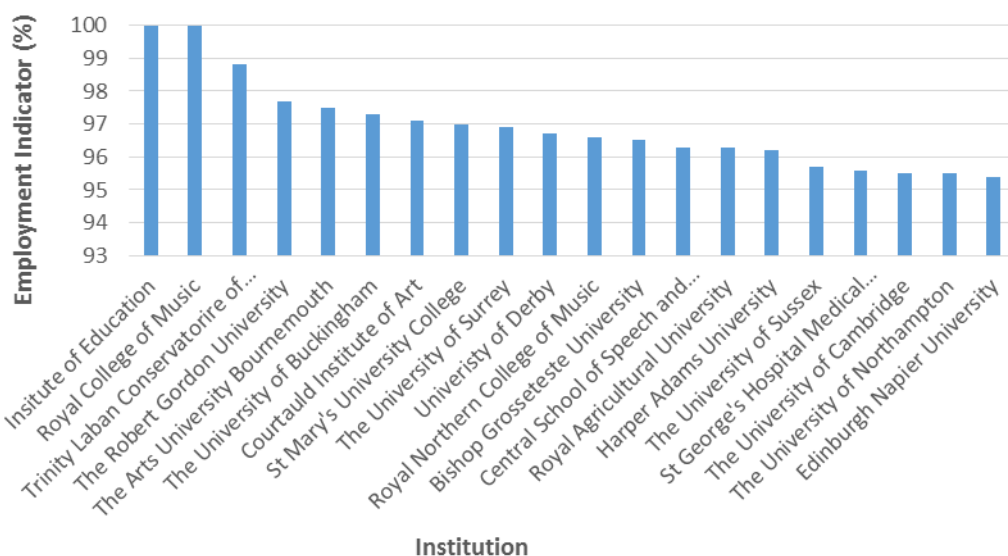
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**Figure 1 – Destination of Leavers in Higher Education 2012/13**

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*“Abertay’s strong links with industry and focus on practical projects helped me to get hired upon graduation and work on my first Triple-A game title.”*  
**Ewan, Dumfries, Game Design and Production Management, Abertay University, Dundee**

### 3. Experience

*The expectations that students have will be as varied as the students are themselves. But the closer the experience matches the expectations of the students the more likely they are to achieve their potential in higher education and also the less likely they are to drop-out. A key element of this is providing a welcoming and safe learning and living environment.*

#### 3.1 Institutional Community

Whether you are going for the first time, or returning to education after many years, going to university can be a very daunting experience. Different students will want different things from their experience. But for many students attending a smaller institution they often talk about the sense of community that there is – making it easier to get to know everybody by name and feel that you are known by the institution. This gives a perception of a more personalised experience.

*“...the main thing that sets the RVC apart... is the real community feel. There are very few places where the bond between students is greater. There is a real community spirit which extends from students to staff and even alumni of the college... There are not many universities where you can walk around campus and be greeted with smiles from so many familiar faces.”*

**Charlie Mays, Students’ Union President, Royal Veterinary College**



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#### Case Study – Norwich University of the Arts

At Norwich University of the Arts (NUA), engagement with the business community, and especially the creative industries, is at the core of their courses and business engagement strategy, winning a Times Higher Award for Excellence and Innovation in the Arts in 2014 for this work.

NUA works with Industry Liaison Groups, (professionals from industry who advise for each course on sector development and employability) to ensure courses are continually relevant to employers’ needs. High level creative industry skills shortage is an issue at regional and national levels, and they innovate their offer to meet this need, for example, the development of a new MA in Games Design, supported by Creative Skillset, to meet the demand in this buoyant sector.

Businesses need NUA graduates not just as employees, but as self-employed entrepreneurs, fuelling the national creative economy. More than 50% of their graduates set up their own creative business. In 2015, NUA opens an incubation facility for early stage digital creative business, jointly funded by NUA, HEFCE Catalyst Fund and New Anglia LEP. In addition to physical facilities and business mentoring, start-up businesses will be able to access the continuing support, advice and network of the NUA community. Situated in the heart of the city, this centre will become the focus for their ambitious plans for business-facing interaction.

**Table T3a - Non-continuation following year of entry: UK domiciled full-time first degree**

	Percent no longer in HE (%)	Benchmark (%)	Standard deviation (%) +/-
The University of Cambridge	1.1	2.1	0.35
The University of Oxford	1.2	2.0	0.35
The University of Buckingham	1.4	7.6	1.16 +
The University of St Andrews	1.6	2.3	0.65
Royal Northern College of Music	2.0	5.6	1.99
Royal College of Music	2.1	5.0	2.77
Central School of Speech and Drama(#3)	2.2	7.6	1.53 +
Conservatoire for Dance and Drama	2.2	11.7	1.51 +
University of Durham	2.2	3.0	0.35
The University of Exeter	2.2	3.4	0.33

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This sense of community is likely to contribute to the feeling of being welcomed, with many smaller institutions featured in the top 10 'Most welcoming' universities – Harper Adams University at 4<sup>th</sup>, Norwich University of the Arts at 8<sup>th</sup> and Falmouth University and 9<sup>th</sup> - as part of the 'The Higher Expectations Survey' conducted by Youthsight. Students – particularly international students - also refer to feeling safe on smaller campuses, or consciously choosing rural campuses.

It is perhaps this sense of community in smaller and more specialist institutions that feeds in to low levels of non-continuation. The latest data examining this from HESA (Table T3a – specialist institutions highlighted in green) shows the interesting mix of institutions that comprise the top 10 for lowest levels of non-continuation.

### 3.2 Student Satisfaction

The positive student experience is reflected by the high student satisfaction responses in the National Student Survey. Student feedback regarding their time and experiences at university is very positive – and this is true across all types of institutions, with the top ten institutions for overall student satisfaction incorporating a range of institutions including three specialist institutions.

*'The community at Leeds Trinity is so close-knit, you get to know all the staff and students really well. We actually had a day in which the Vice-Chancellor of Leeds Trinity and I actually went round and met every single student who attends the university.'*

**Miki Vyse, Students' Union President, Leeds Trinity University**

### 3.3 Students' unions and student representation

Students' unions are as diverse as the universities themselves – with varying degrees of resources, activities that they run and also differing levels of engagement. Although it is worth highlighting that even though students' unions in smaller institutions don't necessarily have the same resources as some larger unions, they also have many advantages.

The sense of community within smaller institutions, highlighted above, can impact on student representation with many opportunities for informal engagement. Students know senior members of university staff and so can approach them about specific issues and there are often open door policies in these institutions. This can also mean that students' union officers often know most students across the institution and so can get high election turnouts and easily find out what large numbers of students think.

Collectively these factors come together to create a scenario in which the students in smaller institutions often have good student representation and a louder voice than they might in a much larger organisation.

*"We don't have a students' union. We have a student body that puts on social events and, far more importantly, productions that students generate themselves.*

*Every staff member, not just Discipline Heads, is required to see at least three productions a year. We are engaged with each other, we celebrate with each other, we eat with each other (no staff rooms) we drink with each other; there isn't an institutional facility we don't communally share."*

**Mark Featherstone-Witty, Founder and CEO, Liverpool Institute of Performing Arts**

### 4. Why does this matter?

This briefing has highlighted some of the features of the different student experiences that a diverse range of institutions will have. If we value the opportunities offered to students by this variety of choices, as well as the differing impacts that these different experiences will have, then we will need to ensure that they are sustained and supported.



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