'It's Just Another Thing to Think About': encouraging students' engagement with extra-curricular activities

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'It's Just Another Thing To Think About':

exploring students' engagement in extracurricular activities

Abstract

Against the backdrop of a diverse and challenging Higher Education (HE) environment within the United Kingdom (UK), this paper extends existing debates around extracurricular activities (ECAs) and considers students' engagement in ECAs within this context. Adopting a case study approach, and involving a team of student researchers, students' perceptions of ECA-programmes at a post-1992 Higher Education Institution (HEI) are explored.

A total of 38 students took part in a series of six focus groups. The data collected was thematically analysed and two key themes emerged, namely: perceptions that there is a hierarchy of ECAs, and an enhanced awareness of the barriers to students' participation in ECAs, including the potential for harm. This paper examines the prospective impact of these findings and makes recommendations for the future development of ECA-programmes within HEIs.

Keywords: extracurricular activities; student engagement; student wellbeing; higher education; barriers to engagement

Context

Since the Dearing Report (1997), UK higher education policy has increasingly focused on the delivery of value for money for ‘students, graduates and the taxpayer'

(Department for Education 2019, 1). A key part of this strategy has been an increased marketisation of the sector. These changes have resulted in an emphasis on student employment outcomes, as demonstrated by various centralised national metrics (see, for example, the Department for Education's Longitudinal Educational Outcomes 2017), which purport to measure the effectiveness of HEIs. Furthermore, HEIs are tasked with supporting students to develop their employability skills (see, for example, Tomlinson 2012). According to Atkins (1999), post-1992 HEIs[1] have traditionally focused on vocational learning and professional development to offset employers' concerns about their students' social and cultural capital. However, Russell Group[2] universities are similarly marketing themselves with reference to graduate career prospects. Amidst this sustained drive to develop employability skills across the sector, universities, student unions, and employers often encourage students' engagement in ECAs as a mechanism for developing such skills (Watson 2011; Succi and Canovi 2019).

The dynamic HE environment has led to a degree of cynicism in some academic circles about the aim of education shifting from the achievement of the social good to meeting more individualistic and economic concerns (Collini 2012). At a more operational level, it has increased the pressures on HE students through a combination of reduced government funding and increased tuition fees (Macaskill 2012; Times Higher Education 2017), and growing student numbers (Office for National Statistics 2016) leading to intensified graduate competition (High Fliers 2018; Minocha et al. 2017). Whilst a more detailed discussion is outside of the scope of this paper, there are 'more

[1] *Post-1992 refers to higher education institutions in the United Kingdom who were granted university status through the Further and Higher Education Act 1992. This can include both former polytechnic colleges and institutions that have been created since 1992.*

[2] The phrase ‘Russell Group’ refers to a group of 24 'world-class, research-intensive’ universities within the United Kingdom (Russell Group no date.)

students than ever' reporting mental health conditions (Office for Students 2019, 5) with stress and apathy the most common symptoms (Kerr 2013).

Within this context, this paper will now outline some of the key concepts in the existing literature around ECAs. Firstly, an examination of the theoretical perspectives from the career development field will provide a philosophical justification of ECA participation before some of the reported attitudes of key stakeholders in practice are considered. Secondly, evidence of the barriers facing HE students' participation in ECAs will be explored.

The value of ECA engagement

The notion that ECAs can be utilised to generate career ideas or cultivate vocational interests is associated with the social cognitive theory of career development (Lent et al. 1994) which posits that continued engagement in a variety of activities can help to develop individual self-efficacy and career aspirations. Although this process occurs throughout the life course, it is most changeable during late adolescence and early adulthood, when activities focus more upon exploring interests and developing 'career maturity' (Ochs and Roessler 2004, 225). The literature also indicates that ECAs offer career exemplars (Lent et al. 2000) and opportunities for developing increased self-awareness (Super 1980). More recent career development models, for example the planned happenstance approach (Mitchell et al. 1999) and the chaos theory of career development (Bloch 2005), broadly promote ECA engagement as a mechanism for emboldening individuals to examine their own motivations, and increase their access to chance and unexpected opportunities.

Other studies, focussed more specifically on ECAs, explore the different perceptions of students, employers, educators and policy-makers about the worth of ECA engagement. Thompson et al. (2013) identify various student drivers for becoming involved in ECAs, including: access to support networks during times of stress, opportunities for skills development, and prospects for making contributions to the community. Stevenson and Clegg (2011) similarly highlight how those studying courses with a strong community-focus, such as social work or teaching, are more likely to consider the wider benefit for society when making decisions about ECA participation. Finally, Tomlinson (2008) notes how students recognise the need to develop their employability beyond their academic achievements (Tomlinson 2008).

Perceptions of ECAs are similarly value-laden amongst HEIs and employers. Clegg et al. criticise the culturally normative view of ECAs, dominant within HEIs, which typically refer to ECAs as on-campus, cultural, sporting and volunteering activities (2010). They recognise that defining ECAs in this way may prevent students with culturally atypical ECAs, for example off-campus, paid work commitments or caring responsibilities, from valuing their experiences as valid for their personal development. Clegg et al. (2010) call for broader ECA-programmes, and consideration of their wider impact on the curriculum and student learning. There is some evidence to suggest that employers may similarly hold a preference for unpaid, social and leisure-focussed ECAs when hiring graduates (Tchibozo 2007). This can negatively impact mature and ethnic minority graduates because of their general preference for ECAs with a community, domestic or spiritual focus (Stuart et al. 2011). Conversely, Lowden et al. (2011) highlight a tendency for some employers to hold more liberal views about what constitutes ECAs; identifying that the development of skills for life, and the ability to

market those skills at interview, were most important when selecting candidates. Rubin et al. (2002) found that employers were particularly interested in interpersonal and leadership skills; prioritising students who could evidence those skills as a result of their ECA engagement.

Barriers to ECA engagement

Whilst this discussion has demonstrated how some students, HEIs and employers perceive ECA engagement as beneficial, students may face barriers that prevent them from becoming involved. The rising costs of HE (Bolton 2018) mean that engaging with paid work is becoming an increasingly important source of student funding (Unite Students 2016). As may be expected, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds spend more time in paid employment at the expense of engaging in other ECAs, including 'clubs/societies… councils/committees… voluntary work… and other hobbies' (Stuart et al. 2011, 208).

The literature also indicates how students from lower socio-economic groups may have more concerns than their peers about how ECA involvement will adversely affect their studies (Stuart et al. 2011; Bathmaker et al. 2013) due to competing responsibilities (Robotham and Julian 2006). Students may also struggle to manage caring obligations alongside their other commitments (Universities UK 2015). A Report from the National Union of Students (2011) noted that only 36% of student carers felt able to balance their other duties, compared to 53% of students who did not have such roles.

Considering the importance that employers place on students' abilities to market their skills as discussed earlier (Lowden et al. 2011), graduates typically disadvantaged in the

work force may be underutilising or underselling the potential of ECA engagement. In a study which compared the experiences of students at a Russell Group against those studying at a post-1992 HEI, Bathmaker et al. (2013) found that middle-class students were more likely than their working-class peers to be engaging in strategic ECAs that they had specifically chosen in order to directly improve their employability. Stevenson et al. (2012) also found that female students were more likely than male students to undervalue the links between their employability and participation in ECAs. This demonstrates the need to be sensitive to the wide range of experiences when considering research into perceptions held by the student body.

The literature evidences the benefits of employing student researchers to explore student perceptions across a range of topics, for example assignment support and online delivery (Dickerson et al 2016). Yet, there is little evidence to indicate that student researchers have been involved in examinations of student views on ECA engagement, particularly within a post-1992 HEI setting. This presents an opportunity to examine how the participation of student researchers may bring an 'insider' perspective to such research (see, for example, Dwyer and Buckle 2009).

Against this backdrop, this study seeks to make its contribution to knowledge by working with student researchers to conduct an empirical exploration of students' perceptions of ECA engagement in a post-1992 HEI. It does so through positing the following research questions:

1. How do students at a post-1992 HEI perceive ECAs? and

2. What do students at a post-1992 HEI perceive as the motivators or the barriers which respectively drive or restrict their engagement in ECAs?

Methodology

Defining ECAs

For the purposes of addressing the research questions outlined above, the researchers adopted a wide definition of ECAs to include any activities that students may undertake outside of their formal course studies. The researchers envisaged that such a broad classification would provide the respondents with considerable scope for exploring their own understandings of ECAs to encourage the potential for a depth and breadth of perceptions to emerge.

Employing student researchers

Recognising the institutional, staff and student benefits to be gained from staff/student research collaborations, (see, for example, Healey et al. 2014; Russell et al. 2007; Lopatto 2004), the researchers sought to recruit a team of student researchers to support this study, advertising for four student researchers to collect the data and two student researchers to manage the process, under their supervision. To try to attract applicants from across the HEI (including all courses, at all levels), the opportunities were advertised via the central, internal campus jobs, with those interested being invited to submit their CV and an accompanying statement to explain their interest in the project.

Following a process of shortlisting and interviews, the successful applicants attended an induction to the project which comprised both ice-breaker and team-building elements in addition to action-planning. Adopting an approach that reflects Walkington's (2015) third level of student participation, the researchers framed the study but increasingly involved the student researchers in decision-making. By way of an example, the researchers fostered a discussion with the student researchers to consider and evaluate

opportunities for encouraging participant-recruitment. Reflecting on their own experiences as students, the student researchers suggested the recruitment of participants through a combination of online and face-to-face mechanisms, including visiting lectures and via student societies. The student researchers also actively participated in the facilitation of the focus groups; from initially taking notes to leading the discussions. Following the data collection, one of the student researchers expressed interest in conducting an initial analysis of the data and subsequently became involved as one of the co-authors for this paper.

Participants/sampling

Utilising 'self-selection' sampling techniques, the researchers provided students with the choice to become involved in the focus groups to encourage participants' commitment from the outset (Sharma 2017, 752). Students from all courses, at all levels of study of a post-1992 HEI in the North of England, were invited to participate in one of six focus groups and provided with a £5 lunch voucher in recognition of their time. The focus groups were conducted over a four-month period in the academic year 2017/18. In total, 38 students participated from a range of undergraduate taught courses, including: criminology, law, nursing, and hospitality management. In order to encourage informal, student-led discussions, the researchers did not collect demographic data. All of the focus groups were both manually and digitally recorded, and the digital recordings were then transcribed externally.

Data collection

The research team adopted a semi-structured approach for the six focus groups, drawing on Colucci's activity-based approach (2007) to encourage participant engagement. First, to 'increase the quality of responses,' the researchers utilised the 'Think, Pair, Share'

technique; building in opportunities for participants to actively consider the points within small groups before they contributed to the whole group discussion (Kaddoura 2013, 3). Rather than providing the participants with pre-determined examples, the researchers encouraged them to engage in processes of free-thinking to identify their own perceptions of ECAs. These included: part-time work, playing a musical instrument, volunteering, hobbies and sports clubs. The researchers then outlined the broad definition of ECAs that was being adopted for the purposes of this research; namely, any activities that students may undertake outside of their formal course studies.

Second, the researchers drew on ‘photo-elicitation’ techniques (see, for example, Bates et al. 2017, 459) to encourage discussion (Epstein et al. 2006), help address any power imbalance (Ayrton 2018), and generate rich data (Leonard and McKnight 2014). Participants were shown a series of photographs that had been sourced from the internet. The photographs featured a range of activities including: sport, caring, student societies and paid work, to help establish a congruence in participant and researcher understanding (Newby 2014) of ECAs. Whilst the researchers acknowledge how their selection of photographs risked the potential for researcher bias to affect participants' contributions (Matteucci 2013), they sought to identify photographs with reference to students' 'everyday lived experiences' (Leonard and McKnight 2014, 640).

Third, and drawing on recommendations made by Colucci (2007), participants were asked to review a list of potential benefits arising from ECAs that the researchers had drawn from the existing literature (see Table 1). The researchers then invited the participants to adopt a rating system to rank what they perceived to be the most valuable

impacts of ECAs before discussing their rationale and considering whether there were any benefits missing from that list.

Data analysis

Adopting a primary data analysis method (Bryman, 2012), the researcher team drew on the approach advocated by Nowell et al. (2017). First, the student researcher familiarised herself with the data (Braun and Clarke 2006) by repeatedly reading the transcripts and listening back to the recordings, noting potential codes. The research team then refined these codes by engaging in processes of ‘collaborative data analysis’ through holding an iterative series of meetings to identify a collective focus, develop a common discourse, and generate synchronous themes (Cornish et al. 2013, 1).

Findings

The analysis revealed two main themes: participant perceptions of an ECA hierarchy, and barriers to ECA engagement. Each of these themes is discussed in more detail below. References to raw data have been abbreviated, for example focus group 1 is referred to as 'FG1'.

Hierarchy of ECAs

Relevance to future employment

Implying an awareness of the employability agenda, participants suggested that employers favoured candidates who could demonstrate ECA engagement. One participant noted how prospective employers 'won’t just look at what you’ve got on… paper saying… you graduated... they want to see what else you did' (FG1). Participants recalled how the message that ECA engagement will enhance employability was

'drilled' into them by ‘school, college, university and careers advisors’ (FG2). One participant noted how, whilst on placement:

> ‘they [the employer] were going through CVs… they looked at… grades… and… extracurricular activities… if you didn’t have something [ECA] to do with the placement… if you weren’t showing enough interest in the area… you would be straight in the bin’ (FG6).

Secondly, there were perceptions related to activity type; participants valued ECAs that either related to their current degree or future career aspirations. One participant recalled choosing volunteering over playing hockey because its direct relevance meant that it 'matter[ed]' (FG2). When prompted about what types of activity would look best on their CV, participants revealed perceptions that 'volunteering', 'research jobs' and '[being a] student rep' demonstrated a level of 'responsibility' and 'transferable skills' (FG2).

Participants' desire to engage in ECAs that would help them ‘stand out from the crowd’ (FG1) is likely to be derived from their awareness of the employability agenda and that it is ‘very competitive to get… [graduate] jobs’ (FG1). When prompted about these perceptions, participants tended to agree that engagement with directly relevant ECAs 'shows real interest’ in that field of work and demonstrates how they have ‘tried to pursue [their career ideas] early on’ (FG4). Several participants suggested that it would be easier for employers to hire someone with relevant experience as they 'don’t have to spend as much time...going through everything... if I’ve already got some experience in the field’ (FG1).

Developing transferable skills

In addition, most participants did not define paid work as an ECA, or devalued it, because it rarely related to their career aspirations. One participant noted how they 'work in Topman... just folding jeans' (FG4), whilst another described themselves as 'just a waitress' (FG4). Participants only valued paid work in terms of '...obviously... money because I'm a student and I'm poor' (FG6), stating that it also '...helps with social skills ... that's about it' (FG4).

Although participants ranked ECAs according to relevance to their studies or career aspirations, some participants identified how general ECA engagement could help them to develop transferable skills. One noted that 'if you play sports... you're still doing... teamwork' (FG2), whilst another suggested that 'going to... pool society... might improve your communication' (FG3). This implies perceptions that any ECA could be made relevant to future employers '… it depends on how you perceive [it] and how well you can justify that' (FG3).

Cultivating social skills

When asked about what they valued least as an outcome of ECA involvement, one participant outlined that '…it may sound bad but feel[ing] more involved with my community' (FG4). Another admitted that although it was 'quite selfish', they '…think about [themselves] more' (FG4). This suggests that participants fail to recognise the potential benefits of ECAs which offer community engagement. However, some participants highlighted that ECA engagement had resulted in them making new friends: one participant suggested how '…ECA's have been really good in helping me to meet more people like me… more people who are interested in the same things' (FG1).

Participants suggested that taking part in ECAs, specifically sports teams and societies, can increase students' social circles. For example:

> '…you divide your friends into groups… people that you live with… people from your course… my flat mate did hockey last year… he's got a massive group of hockey friends… course friends, hockey friends and house friends' (FG2); and

> '…it's good to have friends who aren't your flatmates or the people… you work with' (FG6).

Despite this, several participants did not significantly value developing their social networks:

> 'My least important [reason to participate]…make friends' (FG1); and

> '…less so probably making friends' (FG2).

Understandably, this depended on their level of study with final-year students tending to be the least concerned about making friends.

Taken together, this highlights participants' recognition of their responsibilities to develop their employability, through seeking out ECAs which directly relate to either their studies or career aspirations. Participants placed little to no value upon ECAs that would involve them within their communities; and even when participants highlighted the development of friendships as a potential outcome, they tended to emphasise the individualistic benefits of ECAs. The findings also suggest that, whilst some participants understand how any ECA engagement might translate into transferable skills, there is scope to communicate this message further due to the continued emphasis on ECAs most relevant to career interests.

Barriers to ECA engagement

Participants identified several barriers to ECA engagement, including: time, location, money, carer commitments, cultural expectations, and lack of confidence. Each of these barriers is explored in more detail below.

Time

Many participants believed that a lack of time prevented ECA engagement. One stated: 'I've wanted to do volunteering since… start[ing] uni, but there's just never enough time' (FG2). Some indicated that this may be due to paid work and/or study commitments, suggesting that with '...how much we have to do on our course, I don't think [ECAs] would be feasible' (FG4). When asked specifically about the potential for ECA engagement to facilitate opportunities to de-stress from course pressures, several participants rejected this idea, for example: 'I think if anything you get stressed trying to sort one out! […]It's just another thing to think about.' (FG2). Others considered the value of not focussing solely on academic achievement: 'I think it's important to have a life outside of studies as well, just for your mental wellbeing.' (FG3) Other participants emphasised the significance of social networks away from university and had no regrets about prioritising other activities. One noted how: '[I] still live at home […] there's so [many] other things to do with family and friends […] I couldn't fit a society in as well.' (FG5)

The analysis identified another issue which related to the timing of the activities themselves. One participant noted how:

> ‘I joined the pool society… then I went on placement… by the time I came back… it was 6… pool society started at 7… do I come home and cook food, or do I go to this pool society… I had to prioritise’ (FG3).

Another believed that ECAs 'don’t cater around people who are on placement very well’ (FG3). Others, who commuted longer distances, were similarly struggling to engage as many ECAs were centred on campus.

Location

The HEI at the centre of this research comprises two campuses. Participants who did not study at the larger 'City' campus, where most campus-based ECAs were located, explained how their inter-campus commute presented a barrier to engagement. In addition, participants perceived inequitable facilities between the campuses, noting how:

> 'a lot of society stuff is… up at City… parking is an issue, I don’t want to… get buses… they’re expensive… if I could do more things here it would make me want to do more extracurricular activities’ (FG3).

Related to this, some participants identified how their commute (which, for one, was ‘an hour and a half drive’ (FG4)), presented a further barrier given the lack of public transport available. Another noted how:

> '…if they have a movie night, it will be ‘…nine o’clock… they obviously go out to eat as well, which… will last a little bit later… it’s almost like you can’t physically get home’ (FG2).

Participants additionally recognised how commuters might not be able to stay for the duration of ECAs, not only because of their commute but also because of their need to

study once they returned home. One participant also suggested how their commute reduced their ability to develop their social networks and prevented them from getting involved in ECAs.

Money

Many participants highlighted their lack of disposable income and their need to rely on student loans and paid work. One participant noted how: '…I wanted to do boxing…but I was so skint…I had to wait for my student loan' (FG1).' Participants revealed how their student loans did not 'really stretch far enough' (FG2), requiring them to prioritise living costs. Participants noted how they would have to work fewer hours to free up time for ECA engagement. This could prove especially problematic if the ECA involved extra costs, such as transport and administration fees. As one participant noted, there is a '...downside to volunteering... you have to cut your hours at work... but you still need money to be able to afford to volunteer' (FG2).

Carer commitments

Participants with caring commitments similarly recognised their lack of time 'to do anything else' (FG2). One participant noted that '…when I'm not here [at university] I'm with my kids' (FG3), whilst another identified that, because they '...only get 15 hours funded childcare a week', they 'had to give up [ECAs]' (FG2). Participants also noted a link between the barriers of carer commitments and money; namely, how they use free childcare to cover their time spent at university which necessitates them personally funding any additional childcare required. This highlights how caring commitments can exacerbate temporal and financial barriers.

Cultural expectations

Some ethnic minority participants indicated how cultural expectations, enforced by their parents and community, prevented them from engaging with certain types of ECAs. One female participant had considered going swimming but felt unable to take part because of the potential for disapproval, noting that:

> 'when it came to swimming… mum and dad said no straightaway...I didn't learn to swim... because I wasn't covered' (FG1).

She further explained how she '...wasn't able to experience anything [away] from parents'; implying that cultural expectations resulted in missed opportunities for engagement. She also discussed how ethnicity can sometimes result in both individuals and groups isolating themselves from their wider community. She asserted how:

> 'sometimes I look around and I see little Asian girls just grouping with themselves...not talking much. I...think to avoid that it really should be about come in, you can join, you don't have to go out dancing, but accept us' (FG1).

The point about going 'out dancing' perhaps highlights the responsibilities of both the student body and HEIs to ensure that engagement in ECAs is not dominated by a drinking culture which may prevent some student groups from becoming involved.

When asked about barriers to engagement, one participant, who identified as a Christian, suggested that religious expectations had previously influenced their choice of ECA, noting that:

> 'I went to…mainly a Muslim school…I was telling my friends I volunteered at Jesus Youth…they were like… 'that's just being biased, you need to look at Muslims and everything as well' …I volunteered at the same time at a local Muslim youth

> group…there was outrage at my church… everyone was shamed… I feel like social and cultural issues do play a part sometimes.' (FG1).

This demonstrates how cultural expectations may influence decisions about ECA involvement, and also suggests how multiple sources of scrutiny can impact on ECA choices.

Lack of confidence

Some participants identified their lack of confidence as another barrier; describing how '... it's quite difficult to start going to things on your own' (FG1), 'I didn't join anything [societies] in first year because I didn't feel confident enough' (FG2); '[I would not] even go to the gym... unless my housemate comes with me' (FG1); and how '...walking into a room full of people if you're starting something late can be really daunting' (FG1). Another highlighted how the anxieties of first-year could exacerbate this:

> 'Confidence. I think that's a big one and that was why I didn't join in the first year, just because - I wasn't a shy person, but I should have [joined in] really ... and now I feel really silly for doing that.' (FG6).

The preference for promoting societies during Freshers' Week was also described as being 'intense' (FG5). One participant attended the Freshers' Fair with friends, but found it overwhelming, 'there [were so] many people we just ended up giving up.' (FG5). As many participants believed that ECAs would help to develop their confidence, their anxiety about becoming involved presented a dilemma. One participant suggested that they 'know this [ECA] could give [them] confidence but [they've] not got the confidence to go' (FG1). It was also highlighted by some

participants that ECA involvement '…can go the opposite way', resulting in students 'los[ing] confidence' and 'regret[ting]' (FG1) participation.

Discussion

These findings have highlighted varying perceptions about the potential benefits of, barriers presented by, and harms resulting from ECA engagement. These are summarised in Table 2.

The research unequivocally demonstrates participants' inculcation of the employability agenda around utilising ECAs for both their personal and professional development (Watson 2011; Succi and Canovi 2019). Yet, it reveals a range of perceptions about the benefits of ECA engagement. Some participants recognised how ECAs that were not directly linked to their career aspirations could still help them to develop relevant transferable skills. Others suggested that their ability to 'sell' such skills and experiences was more important when applying for graduate roles. Participants also often focused on how ECA involvement could develop their skills and attributes rather than help them to investigate options for career development or offer opportunities for reflection on career goals.

As explained earlier, the literature suggests how ECA engagement can: provide context for influencing career aspirations (Lent et al. 2000); facilitate an exploration of career ideas (Lent et al. 1994); encourage individuals to explore their own motivations; and, increase access to networks and unexpected opportunities (Mitchell et al. 1999; Bloch 2005). The findings demonstrate how participants did not always particularly value or

acknowledge such benefits, perhaps because of the barrier presented by their lack of time as reported earlier in this paper. If students feel that they need to prioritise their activities, they may only consider those activities which will be of clear, direct benefit to them. Pressures to engage, and with the 'right' kind of activities, could lead to ECA engagement being perceived as an unnecessary source of stress for some students.

The findings also revealed a potential mismatch between students' and employers' perceptions of ECAs. Some participants suggested that there is an ECA hierarchy with some experiences being 'worth' more than others to prospective employers. Conversely, as demonstrated previously, employers value transferable skill development, and the ability to sell those skills at interview (Lowden et al. 2011; Rubin et al. 2002). Overall, participants suggested that the most important driver behind their ECA engagement generally was the potential to develop their employability, and the ECA types which they most valued were those that resulted in positive personal outcomes, such as increased confidence.

Many participants disclosed their most valued reason for ECA participation as enhancing their confidence. Participants almost universally perceived self-assurance as being important for both their studies and graduate careers. Additionally, participants also cited their lack of confidence as presenting a barrier to ECA engagement. When considered within the current HE context, and given some of the barriers reported in this paper, this presents a risk of ECA opportunities being accessible by only a privileged few; namely, those with both self-confidence and the time available. As mentioned earlier, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds spend more time in paid employment at the expense of engaging in other ECAs (Stuart et al. 2011) and stand to

be most adversely affected by lack of time and money. Although previous research demonstrates that paid work can be an important source of transferable skill development (Watson 2011), these findings demonstrate that students who engage with paid work may be undervaluing this potential benefit.

As identified earlier, the literature suggests that students may consider the potential for generating community benefits when making decisions about ECA participation. Furthermore, community engagement is advocated in a range of career development theories as a critical mechanism to facilitate the development of both social capital and ethical professional skills (Lent et al. 1994; Boss 1994). Yet, the participants from this study ranked community engagement as very low on the list of factors influencing their ECA choice. Coupled with the participants' emphasis on ECA participation for personal development, this may indicate that the individualistic focus of the employability agenda has been over-emphasised.

Cultural and social barriers to engagement were also evident from the findings. Black and ethnic minority (BME) participants who reported strong cultural or religious ties prior to making their transitions to HE were likely to consider the opinions of their families, friends and local community before engaging in ECAs. Stuart et al. (2011) also found that students from BME backgrounds were less prone to engage in ECAs linked to their HEI, and more likely to be involved with community activities. Commuter students and those with caring responsibilities also faced a range of social barriers to engagement. The commonality across all these groups of students was the influence of factors external to the HEI, and the decision to prioritise existing support networks over the creation of new ones. This highlights the diverse nature of the student

body and the need for HEIs to ensure that a range of culturally-sensitive and flexible opportunities are both available and promoted to help encourage a sense of belonging for all students.

Limitations

Whilst this research has explored students' perceptions regarding the benefits of, and the barriers to, ECA engagement, it is recognised that there are a number of limitations.

First, adopting case study methodology, the research focussed on the perceptions of a relatively small number of students at one post-1992 HEI in the north of England. The findings generated demonstrate the potential for future research to facilitate a comparative qualitative study with a range of HEI types, geographical locations and programmes.

Secondly, the adoption of 'self-selection' sampling techniques may have only attracted those participants who had something specific to say (Sharma 2017). Whilst this is an issue which potentially plagues many other research studies, future research could seek to address this by identifying in-course opportunities for the gathering of research data; perhaps facilitating data collection within personal and professional development modules.

Thirdly, as mentioned earlier, the researchers did not systematically collect any demographic data related to male/female ratio, age range, carers, year of study, and types of ECA engagement (including part-time work). Future research could focus on the potential influence of these demographic factors.

Finally, whilst participants from all levels of their studies were invited to participate, the data collection only captured their perspectives at one point in time. In addition, the researchers did not collect any data on participants' actual ECA involvement. Therefore it cannot be certain whether the participants' reported experiences were based on actual or hypothetical occurrences. Further studies could address this by designing in a longitudinal element; facilitating a series of focus groups with the same participants to record their perceptions at different stages of their studies.

Recommendations

A number of recommendations can be made from the findings. These principally relate to the need for more communication about the benefits of all ECA types, and the development of more inclusive ECA-programmes within HEIs as outlined below.

Overall, the findings revealed a lack of understanding about the wider benefits of engagement with ECAs which do not directly relate to students' chosen career paths. In response, HEIs could urge their ECA-programme providers to promote the range of ECAs available and the specific transferable skills that the ECAs could each generate. Following the success of student ambassador roles (see, for example, Gannon et al 2018) this could involve the recruitment of 'student champions' to act as conduits between the HEI and the student body in the development of the ECA offer and communication of its potential benefits.

Furthermore, HE personal development programmes could encourage students to value their range of ECAs, particularly caring and part-time work which are currently under-

valued. A potential mechanism for this could be through inviting alumni as guest-speakers to share their reflections on how their caring commitments and/or part-time work responsibilities have facilitated their career development. Such sessions could be included within the course timetable but also recorded and made available as part of the virtual learning environment to help ensure accessibility. Linking to this, an area for future research is revealed by the paradox that some students may not view part time work as relevant to their future career development, despite the fact that this ECA entails engaging in an actual work environment. This warrants an investigation into the reasons why students may undervalue part time work as a source of transferable skills development.

The findings demonstrate that the traditionally recognised benefits of ECA engagement, including meeting people and making friends, may be particularly valued by first-year students. Whilst providers could capitalise on this high interest and highlight the potential for ECA engagement in developing transferable skills from the outset, they also need to be mindful that facilitating a variety of networking opportunities (beyond the traditional 'fresher's fair' events) would be more inclusive for those with social anxiety and low confidence.

In terms of ECA types, although there is an increased awareness of the cultural and social pressures facing students (see, for example, Stevenson 2012), the findings suggest that HEIs need to work harder to ensure that all students can access ECAs in sensitive ways. The findings suggest a number of recommendations. First, HEIs could facilitate additional awareness training for ECA providers. Second, they could promote increased representation of minority groups amongst student society leaders. Third, they

could encourage student-carers to declare their status so that support can be provided. Fourth, HEIs could work with their programme providers to ensure that family-friendly events are included within their ECA-programmes. Finally, HEIs could facilitate opportunities for peer-reflection on the potential breadth of ECAs, and how ECA engagement could generate opportunities for students to develop transferable skills and demonstrate them to prospective employers.

This paper has highlighted how the extent to which HE students engage with ECAs may vary according to a range of factors, including: their other commitments, their culture, and their previous experiences of ECA engagement. Furthermore, the evidence presented suggests that a key factor in ECA engagement relates to confidence. Confidence was the only factor to appear in all three areas of discussion: benefits, barriers, and harms (see Table 2).

It is suggested that HEIs need to adopt a dual strategy in response. First, they could encourage the development of student-centred approaches to the development and communication of their ECA-programmes through meaningful consultation with their student bodies. Secondly, those involved with curriculum-development could be mindful of the importance of developing student confidence more broadly as a mechanism to encourage student community learning and social engagement. Whilst further research is needed to establish a link, it is suggested that such a bi-fold approach could simultaneously benefit HEIs by encouraging student retention and progression, developing students' employability, and increasing their wellbeing.

Disclosure statement

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Table 1: Participants were asked to rank which of these benefits were the most and least appealing to encourage their engagement with ECAs.

List of potential benefits to engaging in ECAs	**Source**
I will see an increase in my level of confidence	Stuart et al. 2011
It will help me to get a job when I graduate	Stuart et al. 2011; Tomlinson 2008; Thompson et al. 2013
It will help me to get a part-time job now	Watson 2010
It will help me to meet people who could help me with my career (networking)	Stuart et al. 2011
I will feel more focussed on my studies	Thompson et al. 2013
I will make friends	Thompson et al. 2013
I will feel more involved with my community	Stevenson & Clegg 2011; Thompson et al. 2013
It will help me to de-stress	Macaskill 2012; Thompson et al. 2013

Table 2: Student perceptions of the potential benefits, barriers, and harms derived from engagement with ECAs.

Benefits	Barriers	Harms
- developing career-relevant and transferable skills - increasing confidence - making friends	- lack of time - lack of confidence - lack of money - expectations (family, community, and peers)	- increasing stress - decreasing confidence