

Students are not disengaged, they are adapting to a thinner university

For Fredrick Agboma and Andrew Doyle, the question isn't whether students are less committed, but what culture they're asked to inhabit

Universities are increasingly worried about student engagement.

Students are attending less, reading less, participating less, and often treating university as one commitment among many.

At the same time, compressed timetables, lecture capture, flexible delivery and two-day degree models all respond to the economic and personal pressures students face.

Two day degree courses are a striking example: campus teaching that is concentrated into two consecutive days a week so students can balance study with work, caring responsibilities and commuting. For many students, flexibility is not a preference but a condition of participation.

But if universities increasingly teach students that higher education should fit around life, work and employability, should we really be surprised when students begin treating it instrumentally?

This is not a nostalgic argument for a lost era of full lecture theatres and five-day campus immersion. Many students are navigating financial pressure, caring responsibilities, long commutes, paid work and complex lives.

The question is not whether students are less committed. It is what kind of university culture they are being asked to inhabit.

Thick versus thin

A “thick” university culture does more than deliver teaching.

It inducts students into rhythms, relationships, expectations and identities. It creates repeated encounters with people, ideas and practices that make learning feel like something worth organising life around.

But thick cultures have not always been equally accessible. The argument is not restoration, as if the traditional residential model worked well for everyone. It is reinvention: how might universities create richer cultures of learning for students whose lives no longer fit older assumptions about time, place, and participation?

A “thin” university culture, by contrast, is one in which participation can be demonstrated without deep attachment. Students can attend enough, submit enough, log in enough and collect enough credits while remaining weakly connected to the identity of being a learner.

That thinness is rarely intentional.

Lecture capture improves accessibility. Flexible delivery supports participation. Compressed timetables help students manage work and commuting. Employability activity responds to anxieties about graduate futures.

Individually, these developments make sense. Collectively, they communicate something about the role university is expected to play in students' lives. The policy task is not to choose between flexibility and depth, but to design flexible provision that still creates rhythm, relationship and repeated intellectual encounter.

Choose your own engagement story

A timetable compressed into two days may solve an access problem while creating an identity problem. It can unintentionally suggest that higher education is something to batch, consume efficiently and fit around other priorities.

For many students, engagement decisions are no longer purely educational decisions. They are economic decisions. A two-hour seminar may contribute indirectly to long-term development, employability or intellectual growth. But a two-hour work shift may pay for food, transport or rent this week.

The 2025 Student Academic Experience Survey reported that **68 per cent of students undertake paid work during term time**, a 12 percentage point increase from 2024. It also reported that independent study time had fallen from 13.6 hours per week in 2024 to 11.6 hours in 2025.

That reflects more than poor time management. Higher education's rewards are increasingly delayed, uncertain, and debt-financed, while paid work is immediate and tangible. Under those conditions, selective engagement can look less like disengagement and more like rational prioritisation.

If universities want sustained engagement, they need to examine the choices their designs make rational. That means looking at the whole student week, not only scheduled contact hours: where preparation, feedback, peer learning, commuting, employment and recovery actually fit.

This is why the medium matters. Universities often treat timetables, lecture capture, virtual environments, assessment patterns and attendance systems as delivery mechanisms. But they are also meaning-making systems.

The timetable teaches students how often university expects to matter. The virtual learning environment teaches whether learning is a live practice or a resource archive. Lecture capture teaches whether presence is essential or optional. Assessment patterns teach whether learning is cumulative or episodic. Employability messaging teaches whether knowledge has value in itself or mainly when converted into labour-market advantage.

What did you imagine?

This may explain why some engagement debates feel unsatisfactory.

Universities often measure engagement through visible behaviours: attendance, logins, submissions, continuation and survey responses. But these measures tell us whether students are moving through the system, not necessarily whether they are being formed by it.

What sometimes appears as disengagement may be better understood as immobilised participation. Students remain operationally present while becoming educationally distant. They are present in the thinnest possible sense, but not necessarily held by a thick culture of study.

That thinness also matters for belonging. Belonging is not generated by welcome activities, dashboards, campaigns or occasional community events alone. It emerges through sustained participation in a culture where students repeatedly encounter the people, practices and expectations that allow them to see themselves as learners.

For some students, there is now a gap between the university they imagined and the university they encounter. They may arrive expecting higher education to be developmental and transformative, only to find themselves managing study as one obligation among many in a system organised around flexibility, efficiency and employability.

The institutional question is not only whether students have attended, logged in or submitted. It is whether the design of the course has made it possible for them to build a learner identity over time.

Spinning broken records

The challenge is not to remove flexibility or return to an older model of higher education that was inaccessible for many students. The challenge is to ask what our institutional arrangements are teaching students about the meaning of learning.

We spend enormous amounts of time auditing the formal curriculum: learning outcomes, assessment criteria, skills mapping, continuation data and graduate outcomes. We spend far less time auditing the symbolic curriculum.

What does the timetable teach students about the place of study in their lives? What does employability messaging teach about the purpose of higher education? What does lecture capture teach about presence? What do attendance systems teach about trust? What do student experience metrics teach about satisfaction and education? And what does it teach students when we measure their satisfaction before they have had enough time to understand what they have learned?

Practical responses might begin with smaller, deliberate moves: protecting time for sustained intellectual encounter rather than content delivery; building assessment patterns that reward cumulative engagement rather than episodic compliance; reviewing what employability messaging teaches students about the value of what they are studying; and asking whether engagement metrics are picking up formation or only motion.

The point is not another initiative. It is to read our existing arrangements as a curriculum in their own right.

Students are not simply disengaged. Many are adapting intelligently and rationally to the university we have designed around them.

When higher education is organised around flexibility, employability, platforms, metrics and economic survival, students learn to treat study as one obligation among many rather than a central formative practice.

The challenge is not to shame students back into engagement. It is to build forms of higher education thick enough to compete with the economic and psychological pressures that increasingly shape student life.