

# Employee engagement theory and practice in UK universities.

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# Employee Engagement Theory & Practice in UK Universities

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## Introduction

An examination of emerging employee engagement theory within the context of Higher Education (HE), to understand how the specific traits of the sector reinforce or negate current theoretical models and ideas.



The technological facilitation and social acceptance of fast, multi-way, meaningful dialogue through a range of channels has created an expectation that organisations will engage in similar practices.

Within this context the research considers the extent to which universities apply four key principles identified in recent academic and corporate literature on the topic of employee engagement:

- **Strong strategic narrative**
- **Engaging managers**
- **Valued employee voice**
- **Organisational integrity**

## Methods

Interpretivist research paradigm using an inductive approach to generate a phenomenological epistemology of employee engagement strategies within HE.

Qualitative, data collection through 30+ in-depth, loosely structured interviews with academic staff in variety of roles, career stages, disciplines and institutions.

Purposive sampling technique avoiding home institution to reduce researcher bias.



Telephone interviews to overcome geographical, space and time restrictions.

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to enable deeper scrutiny of the signs and indicators embedded in participant responses.

## Progress

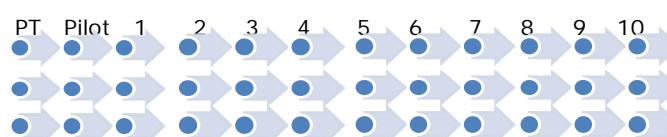
Participation in the 'Theories of Knowledge' course (Scottish Graduate School for Arts & Humanities, 2016) led to a revised theoretical framework situating the research within a sociological context. Is a neoliberal, market driven ideology underpinning a growth in managerialist employee engagement strategies within universities, and what impact does this have on academics' perceptions of their role and the employee engagement experience?



Interview questions and process pre-tested with 3 academics known to the researcher. Three additional pilot interviews were then undertaken with academics recommended by pre-test participants using refined interview questions. Superordinate and subordinate codes identified and early assumptions about academic perceptions reinforced and challenged.

## Next Steps

Develop participant map identifying roles, gender, disciplines, career stages and institutions to ensure strong range of constructs and avoid early data saturation. Build up to approximately 30 interviews in 10 waves:



Develop literature review using 500+ archived Google Scholar citations. MRes Module 2 and transfer to PhD completed in August 2017

## Anticipated Impact and Knowledge Contribution

Improved understanding of employee engagement strategies and their impact on Higher Education.

Enhanced university employee engagement strategies, structures, policies, processes and content.

Strengthened employee engagement within the HE sector and a corresponding improvement in morale, performance, recruitment and retention.

Enhanced work/study experience for staff/students through a more responsive, flexible and listening organisational culture.

Strengthened university leadership and management strategies and practices through improved understanding of employee engagement.

The outcomes may also have broader implications for employee engagement within Further Education and other parts of the public sector which have contextual similarities.



## Relevant Literature

GIROUX, H. (2002) Neoliberalism, corporate culture, and the promise of higher education: The university as a democratic public sphere. *Harvard educational review*, 72(4), pp.425-464.

ENGAGE FOR SUCCESS (2013) The MacLeod Report - Engaging for Success: Enhancing performance through employee engagement [online] Available from: <http://www.engageforsuccess.org/ideas-tools/employee-engagement-the-macleod-report/#.VcM89fbbLml> [Accessed 16 July 2015]

GROYSBERG, B & SLIND, M. (2012) Leadership is a conversation: how to improve employee engagement in today's flatter, more networked organisations, *Harvard Business Review*, June 2012, pp77-84.

GUEST, G., BUNCE, A., JOHNSON, L. (2006) How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability, *Field Methods* 18(1), pp59-82.