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## Research Notes

# Using ‘nudges’ to encourage student engagement: An exploratory study from the UK and New Zealand



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## ABSTRACT

This paper investigates whether student engagement is influenced by the use of specific nudges to direct behaviours to achieve a desired outcome. Evidence already exists that the use of nudges may have a positive effect in the wider population, although little prior research has demonstrated if there are potential benefits in the ‘choice architecture,’ or design, of such educational tools. Using student cohorts studying core undergraduate accounting modules at United Kingdom and New Zealand universities, a number of measures of engagement, such as attendance and student opinions on the efficacy of certain nudges were investigated.

The results do not appear to show a significant improvement in student engagement, although a closer examination of the evidence suggests that this is likely to be a consequence of the type of nudge used and the way that an individual student relates to the message that the academic is trying to convey.

Despite no significant results, this paper is still able to provide a contribution to the important area of student engagement and nudge research. The lack of response may be interesting to others to build upon in this under-researched area.

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## 1. Introduction

Strategies to improve accounting students’ motivation and learning in Higher Education have been researched extensively with evident success (e.g. Beattie, Collins, & McInnes, 1997; Harrell, Caldwell, & Doty, 1985; Lucas & Mayer, 2005; Turner & Baskerville, 2013).

One aspect, which the authors believe warrants research into its potential transferability from the field of behavioural science to education, concerns the specific issue of whether particular ‘nudges’ and their practical implementation, for example the ‘choice architecture’ or particular design used by educators, may increase students’ time on task and engagement on modules of study. This method of behavioural science is posited on the encouragement of individuals to change their existing ways of performing tasks by nudging them or giving specific information which results in an altering pattern of behaviour, rather than simply prescribing them to follow such paths. For example, by students being able to see for

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themselves the benefits of making a particular change to their way of learning, perhaps through peer pressure, they may decide to choose that option.

In the literature review that follows, examples of using nudges to successfully change human behaviour are considered (e.g. [Behavioural Insights Team, 2012](#)), and possible links with higher educational practice are explored. The paper then researches whether the motivations behind of such behavioural change are sufficiently robust to be usable in student engagement initiatives.

In order to obtain an international educational perspective, data were obtained from surveying second year undergraduates studying an accounting module at a university in the UK and also first year undergraduates at a university in New Zealand. This then provided evidence to enable an analysis of whether or not 'choice architecture' could be used successfully to engage students in particular course modules. Using student feedback to various nudge interventions and also by analysing metrics measuring their attendance and participation at seminars, this research gauges how their perceived engagement may be affected by such initiatives.

The paper considers relevant literature in the area and then explains the details of the methodology used for conducting this research in the UK and in New Zealand. An analysis of the findings and the conclusions drawn therefrom follow.

## 2. Literature review

Before addressing the matter of encouraging 'student engagement', it is important to define what is meant by the term. In one of the seminal pieces of research on student engagement in education, [Astin \(1984\)](#) defined it as being "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (p. 29). This notion has been built upon by [Kuh \(2009\)](#) and also [Pascarella and Terenzini \(2005\)](#), who have conceptualised engagement as the time and effort students invest in educational activities that are empirically linked to desired college outcomes. This encompasses various factors, including investment in the academic experience of college, interactions with faculty, involvement in co-curricular activities, and interaction with peers. Student interaction with the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) has been shown to benefit their learning experience ([de Lange, Suwardy, & Mavondo, 2003](#); [Gavira & Omoteso, 2013](#)) and is also considered to be an important form of student engagement. It therefore seems irrefutable that a student simply being present in the classroom at any time does not, on its own, represent engagement, though it is evident that student attendance does provide for positive educational outcomes ([Paisley & Paisley, 2004](#)).

There are many examples in educational research of initiatives designed to use assessment as a means of trying to encourage student engagement and to alter behaviours to a desired state. For example, [Johnstone, Mackintosh, and Phillips \(2013\)](#) used a case study approach to 'nudge students to develop professional scepticism' (p. 991). In other examples, [Meer and Chapman \(2014\)](#) investigated the effects on student retention rates of using 'low stakes' assessment techniques with a view to promoting the behaviour of students towards actively utilising their feedback, while [Grace and Gilsdorf \(2004\)](#) focussed on enhancing students' oral communication skills by using an exercise that 'gently nudges students into the position of having to explain their technical mastery to others' (p. 168).

While these findings suggest that it is possible to positively alter behaviours of students through careful course and module design, the emphasis on making subtle changes to student behaviours could be seen as a by-product of the main objective of improving student overall attainment and engagement. The approach in the following research is to investigate the direct effects of 'nudge theory' and 'choice architecture' in order to assess their effectiveness in student engagement.

[Thaler and Sunstein \(2008\)](#) defined a 'nudge' as:

any aspect of the choice architecture that alters people's behaviour in a predictable way without forbidding any options or significantly changing their economic incentives (p. 6).

The 'choice architecture' used is simply the careful design of the environments in which people make choices. A choice architect is therefore someone who has the ability to influence the way that people choose. An example of this is the positioning of food on shelves at supermarkets, where, for instance, the placing of chocolates beside champagne would be expected to lead to a more positive response and higher sales than if the same chocolates were positioned next to the meat counter.

When considering how this can be used in a teaching and learning context, it is necessary to consider the way that teachers make learning resources available to students and ask whether this can be done in a way that persuades students to take full advantage of them. This idea was shown to have had effective results by [Healy and McCutcheon \(2010\)](#), who used case studies to find that lecturers could guide or nudge students to a higher level of learning by careful encouragement in areas such as class discussion.

[Bailes and Hoy \(2014\)](#) took the idea of choice architecture a step further by developing principles of 'bounded free choice', where students and teachers are given the right to choose, while at the same time encouraging them to make 'good' choices. This involved, for example, encouraging students to self-regulate and set their own manageable deadlines (p. 492). Interestingly, they also found how the setting of simple positive defaults could be used instead of requiring individuals to make complex choices (p. 494). So, for instance, course leaders could create simple ways for students to automatically progress from one educational level of attainment to the next.

There are other opposing views on the effectiveness of nudge theory which are worthy of consideration. [Goodwin \(2012\)](#) argues that it is an ineffective strategy to promote behavioural change as it contravenes ideas of freedom and empowerment.

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