‘Student engagement’ can be a bit of an oxymoron in some cases; all students want is the most marks for the least amount of work. So when I was invited to a workshop focussing on ‘Student Engagement’ I honestly believed I might be the only person in the room. I was, however, pleasantly surprised; not only was the room full of students from a variety of years and a wide selection of universities, but we all seemed to care about not only our own education but that of others on our courses.

There are essentially two categories of student engagement: individual and wider engagement. Individual engagement is exactly what it says; how engaged each student is with their own studies. This can be anything from attending lectures and completing problem sheets to private study and wider reading. This obviously varies from student to student, and is largely down to the individual. There are a few ways to help improve individual engagement, for example clear, audible lectures. Many at the workshop said ‘a little context in lecture goes a long way’; we like to know where an equation came from, what it’s used for or the history behind it. Also, I was introduced to the concept of ‘gap notes’. Having spent the last 3 years scribbling frantically in almost every lecture, this was definitely something that caught my attention. The idea is very simple; the definitions and theorem are printed on a sheet with a gap for the proofs which the student fills in as the lecture continues. It gives the student a little more time to understand in the lecture and prevents them from switching off.

Wider engagement is a little more varying. Mentoring seemed to be a largely discussed form of student engagement, and possibly the most obvious on first glance. However, a little further discussion lead the group of eager students to the conclusion that there is more than one type of mentoring. The first is a more ‘pastoral’ form of mentoring, almost like a buddying scheme, where a student from an upper year is partnered with a group of students from a lower year, to show them the ins and outs of life at university. This gives a new student someone to ask the ‘silly questions’ without feeling embarrassed. The second form of mentoring is in an educational capacity; who better to help on problem sheets or understanding lecture notes than the students who struggled through them only a year or two ago. It can be asked how many students would really give up time to do these kinds of things, but I think it’s quite surprising how many are willing to do this kind of thing; and let’s be honest, this kind of thing can give a graduate CV the edge it needs.

Another popular form of student engagement is some type of Staff- Student Committee; these go by a variety of names depending on the university and it was quite amusing discussing the acronyms with the rest of the workshop group. I think
most universities have an operating SSC, but they vary largely in success. My own university has a flourishing SSC; meetings are well attended and at each meeting we are told what action was taken about issues raised in the last meeting, and one of the students even attends the staff meetings to feedback to the committee, making the students really involved in the workings of the department. However, this sort of practice is not commonplace, with some students at the workshop feeling like their SSC was a bit of a waste of time.

These are just a couple of general examples of wider student engagement, but some universities have some innovative ways of engaging students. One student told me she was proof reading a course rewrite for one of her lecturers and some others have taken on roles within the subject related societies. An example of above and beyond student engagement at Leicester is a House System. It all sounds very Hogwarts, with many new students joking along these lines when they are first told about it, but from a purely student support perspective the whole thing makes a lot of sense. The department is divided into four houses, each named after a famous mathematician (Gauss, Euler, Noether, Newton) and students are put into a house depending on the course they’re on (still sounds like Hogwarts; if only we had the wands). For example, those on a joint honours course are put in the same house because they require good connections with the other department they study with. Each house has a tutor, who is a senior member of staff, and a house president, a student. As well as helping with support, it has improved communication between different years and has initiated a healthy sense of competition in both Maths based challenges and football. This is an interesting way for students to get involved, and we get pizza once a fortnight which is always nice!

I think that overall wider student engagement is important at university; it encourages a more even relationship between lecturers and students, makes students feel cared for and respected, and for those who do get involved gives a sense of accomplishment, a boost of confidence and an excellent addition to the all important CV.