Listening to students for tomorrow, today: engaging students to define the future of higher education

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Abstract
This article examines the voices of students at a symposium organized by the European Consortium of Innovative Universities (ECIU) in 2018: 'Learning for Tomorrow, Today: Future Fit Universities for 2040'. Twenty students from 11 universities attended with university leaders and policy makers. A dataset of field notes, written comments, post-event evaluations, and over 3 hours of video-material was accumulated, and has been analysed through video-hermeneutics and content-analysis. Five students chose to become co-authors after critically reading and validating the text and analysis.

The research question asks how students perceive teaching and learning in a future fit university in 2040. Using an 'engagement through partnership' model, we argue that combining the voices of current and future stakeholders moves the sector a step closer to 'future fit' higher education. Our main finding is that students are eager to contribute to policy, strategy and practice. Furthermore, they express a view that universities must play a significant role in securing core societal values and in developing future citizens able to participate in democracy. At no point did students question the existence of universities in 2040.

We argue that the students express a wish to assume the role of co-drivers and agents of change, not only in university management, but also in pedagogy and co-creation of new knowledge. Positioning themselves thus, they challenge our practice as academic staff, signalling that to develop full partnerships, we must position ourselves as learners too, and embrace co-creation.

Keywords
Students, partnership, teaching and learning, ECIU, engagement

Introduction

Higher education in Europe is experiencing rapid change in several domains, as noted by the literature: European Commission [EC], 2013; European Political Strategy Centre [EPSC], 2017; German Rectors' Conference [HRK], 2011; Ernst & Young, 2018; Barber, Donnelly & Rizvi, 2013; Fishman & Sledge, 2014; Loukkola & Dakovic, 2017; Davey et al, 2018; European Consortium of Innovative Universities [ECIU], 2018. The tone is one of urgency, at times of impending disaster: we are presented with "enormous global challenges" and "an immediate need to better align universities with business innovation supply chains, talent needs of employers as well as regional needs more generally" (Davey et al., 2018, p. 7). We are warned that "an avalanche is coming" (Barber, Donnelly & Rizvi, 2013, p.1); and cautioned that the challenges we face are "too big to be dealt with by any one country" and must be faced collaboratively (EC, 2013, p. 4).

These studies express a deep concern with the survival and sustainability of higher education (HE). The question is how to align 21st century HE with societal goals and the expectations of students (e.g. EC, 2013; HRK, 2011; Davey et al., 2018; Scott, 2015). Closer collaboration with industry, expansion of lifelong learning, the unbundling and customisation of curricula, a greater focus on relevant life and employment skills, and pedagogical reform, are among the main recommendations (see, for example, Ernst & Young, 2018; EPSC, 2017; ECIU, 2018). It is argued that technological advances, generational change, shifting demographics, internationalisation, societal and economic needs, and global risks, require profound changes in HE if it is to maintain its relevance when compared to the alternatives offered by new entrants to the market.

The role of students plays a central part in these discussions, although the extent to which their views have informed the literature is unclear. A focus on student-centred learning has encouraged institutions to invite their students to partner in the design of curricula and the organisation of the learning experience (HRK, 2011; EC, 2013; Davey et al., 2018) while the increasingly competitive HE market, where students bear a growing responsibility for the costs of their education, has strengthened their role as customer and consumer (Barber, Donnelly & Rizvi, 2013; Davey et al, 2018; Felten, 2019). These shifts require that students be given a voice in institutional governance and contribute to decision-making (ENQA, 2015; Bishop et al., 2012; Hénard & Roseveare, 2012). Students are increasingly valued as researchers, entrepreneurs, co-constructors of knowledge and partners in research and community-based projects (Barber, Donnelly & Rizvi 2013; Fung, 2017; Loukkola & Dakovic, 2017; Davey et al., 2018; Knight-McKenna, Felten & Darby, 2018). They are invited into peer-teaching and mentoring roles, peer- and self-assessment, and other activities designed to engage them in their own learning (Fung, 2017; Knight-McKenna, Felten & Darby, 2018; Felten, 2019; Hanson et al., 2016; Boud et al., 2006).

Students are transitioning from passive recipients and spectators to active participants, engaged partners and co-decision makers, although this process is far from complete. The focus of recent research has been on moving institutions beyond listening to student voices towards creating opportunities for transformation through student agency (Dunne & Zandstra, 2011; Bishop, 2018). Felten (2019) explores student engagement on two levels: micro and meso. The former focuses on the teaching and learning experience, active pedagogies and teacher-student partnerships which challenge traditional roles; the latter is centred on the student as partner in quality assurance. He also identifies a macro level, where the student as customer is engaged in strategic decision-making activities, which Felten argues is, in general, only implemented on a tokenistic basis. Recognising that student engagement on all levels can 'unintentionally' work to promote undesirable values (e.g. that student satisfaction and institutional revenue-generation are more important than student learning and the institution's civic mission; or that active, technology-enhanced learning is 'fun' and 'easy' (p.8)), Felten argues for the building of partnerships with students as "a path out of this consumer-oriented engagement framework" (Felten, 2019, p.10). He writes:

> *When institutions and faculty engage with students as partners in learning, quality assurance, and decision-making, they create an environment characterized by*

> *dynamic reciprocity. […] Like student engagement, reciprocity is based in a notion of collective responsibility for education; what the student contributes matters just as much as what the institution does* (Felten, 2019, p.10).

Healey, Flint & Harrington (2016) consider that "Students as partners is a concept and practice whose time has come" (p. 9). For them, as for Felten, partnership with students looks to embody values of authenticity, inclusivity, honesty, reciprocity, empowerment, trust, courage, plurality, and responsibility, and involves:

> *sharing power and an openness to new ways of working and learning together. It challenges traditional models of HE relationships* (Higher Education Academy [HEA], 2014, p. 9).

In this way, institutions can move beyond students as consumers to students as members of the learning community (Bishop, 2018, p. 5), or, in Dunne and Zandstra's model, from customer to collaborator and co-producer (Dunne and Zandstra, 2011, p. 14). But Dunne and Zandstra's work is most valuable to us in its theoretical presentation of students as change agents, seen as a distinctive category in the matrix of student integration into educational change which "requires a move from institution-driven to student-driven agendas and activity" (idem, p. 18):

> *the importance of the model is that we are shifting the agenda towards students taking on greater leadership through actively participating in enhancing their learning experiences. They are moving beyond being commentators to being participants in change* (idem, p. 18).

This participation is summed up by students in the 2018 EdSurge report:

> *Student voice is an integral part of shaping the future of higher education. This report shows the diversity of experience and ideas that students can bring, and is a collaborative effort to inform college and university leaders of what students today are thinking about education for tomorrow* (EdSurge, 2018, p. 20).

Learning for Tomorrow, Today: Future Fit Universities for 2040

With these educational discourses as theoretical background, the ECIU steering group set out to create a symposium bringing students from all 13 partner institutions together to discuss the future for higher education in Europe. The symposium was held in Brussels in November 2018 and was titled: Learning for Tomorrow, Today: Future Fit Universities for 2040. We sought to facilitate student voice and agency through transformational opportunities. This required an international collaborative effort, projecting these opportunities to an inter-institutional level. The first authors of this article were the prime organisers on behalf of the ECIU, charging member institutions across Europe with a common mission to 'Challenge conventional thinking'.

Initial ideas for the symposium were planned in the first half of 2018, spinning around a series of themed 'provocations', such as: 'What should Universities stop doing by the end of the 21st century?', 'Is the traditional degree on borrowed time?', 'How

might universities reshape their offer to meet the changing needs of society?', 'How might the career paths of academics and the study journeys of students be remodelled to respond to an evolving and technology-driven labour market?', 'How should universities be responding to the '4th industrial revolution'?'. As we honed these 'provocations', we began to realise that our crafting of questions was less important than our development of a conceptual framework for student engagement. Using the Dunne and Zandstra model (2011, see Figure 1 below), we realised that 'listening' to students and ensuring student representation on committees sit in the top quadrants as examples of 'student voice'. A self-critical understanding nudged our thinking from these top quadrants towards the bottom right quadrant (students as drivers and as agents of change – in this case, of change in our assumptions) as we started to unpick the nature of the event. We shifted our focus from its outcomes towards the partnership process. Our emergent model acknowledged that "partnership is a way of doing things, rather than an outcome in itself" (Healey et al., 2014, p.1).

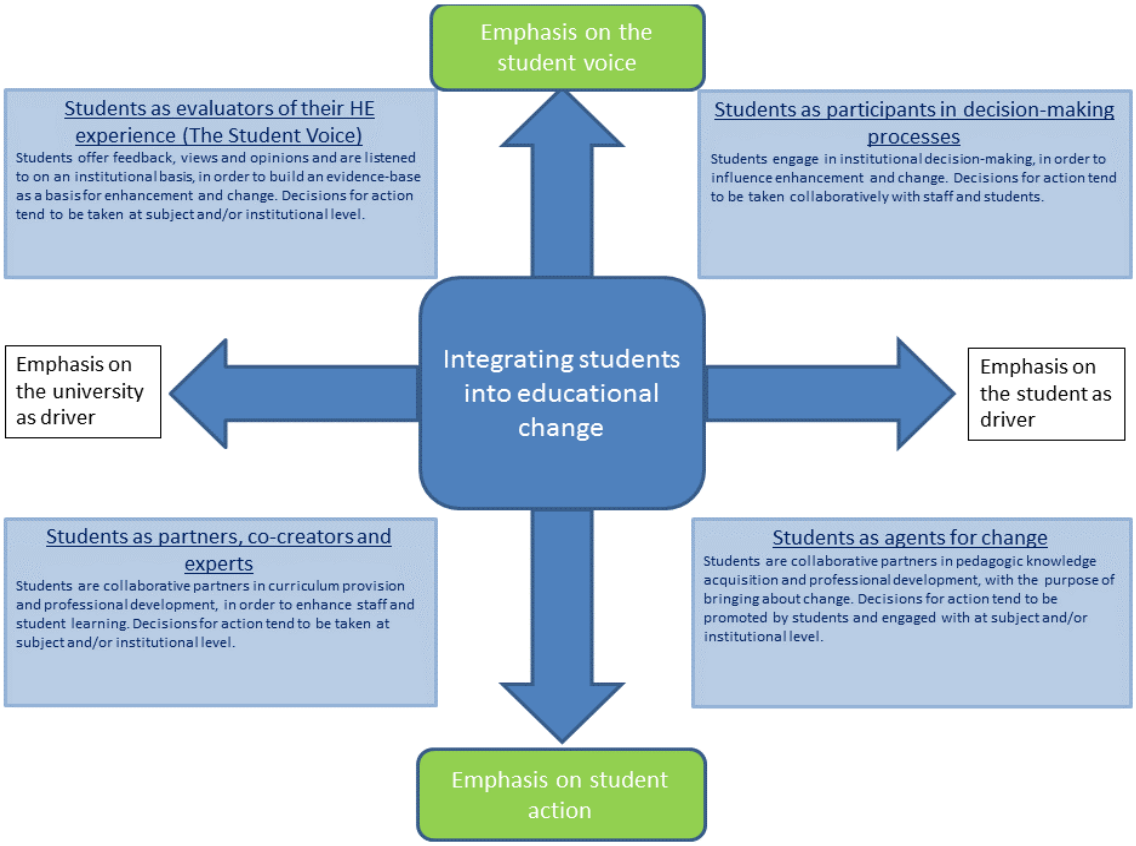

Figure 1: Model for student engagement, after Dunne and Zandstra, 2011

Agreement on the nature of the partnership we sought enabled us to develop a re-usable planning model which ensured that ECIU staff and students were equally identified as delegates. We invited 20 students to attend, drawn from 11 of the 13 ECIU universities, and including the ECIU associate member, Tecnológico de Monterrey (Mexico). The strength of this approach was that recruitment was successful; the weakness was that our approach was not open or inclusive. We recruited students 'in our own likeness' who were already leaders. The majority had been elected by their student bodies but this did not mean that they were

representative of all students. They were, however, equipped to participate in the symposium due to their prior experience and training.

During October 2018, two online briefings were offered. Student engagement was minimal, and one was affected by technical issues, but a recording was made available and there was evidence that students were talking to their ECIU staff lead locally. Two students were asked to set up a social media group to encourage pre-event networking. Awareness of this was limited and there was no engagement from the other students – perhaps because this was initiated by us, the staff, rather than by them, the students. As we approached the event, we were nervous about how successful we would be in creating meaningful dialogue. Our anxiety focused upon the contribution of the students whereas, on reflection, we see that our messaging was mixed. Our invitation to participate was still subject to the traditional boundaries of academic control.

The night before the event, most of the students arrived in Brussels and met with the organising committee at a city centre hotel. We took them for a welcome drink, and then left the students to network. The following morning, we walked together from the hotel to the event venue, the Dutch House of Provinces in the European quarter. By this point, we could see, and hear, that the students were comfortable with each other and enjoying sharing stories of their university experiences and their career aspirations. Face to face engagement, at the time and place of THEIR choosing, had produced the result that we did not achieve through our attempts to engineer online pre-event engagement.

The event was divided into a 'Student Summit' and 'World Café'. The purpose of the summit was for the students to come up with the 'big questions' that they wanted to discuss during the World Café. We had shifted from our starting position of offering them 'themed provocations', but, even then, we felt the need to offer suggestions as to how the students might organise themselves. Quite rightly, our suggestions were ignored. Staff were excluded from the room and the summit was genuinely 'students only'.

The non-student delegates arrived at lunchtime for an informal networking session supplemented by 'national nibbles'; a selection of snacks brought along by the ECIU staff and students to give a 'flavour' of the countries represented. Then it was into the 'World Café' and the moment of truth for the organisers; were the students going to deliver what we hoped for – a set of meaningful 'provocations' for us to debate during the afternoon? In small groups, the students presented their 'big questions', explaining why they had prioritised these. There were 5 questions; each of which was written on a tablecloth in real time during the student presentations. Each group then hosted the table with their question, while the other delegates moved from table to table, prompted by a change in the background music (as chosen by the students), to discuss, to debate, and to add their thoughts to the tablecloths. Plenary feedback was managed by a professional facilitator and followed by a formal response to the student inputs (their questions and the discussions of these as recorded on the tablecloths) from two members of the ECIU: these were two of the first-authors, who took on the role of participant-observers. We contributed to the discussions, but only in response to the agenda set by the students. The event concluded with comments from non-ECIU stakeholders: the European Commission, the European University Association and the European Students' Union.

Research data and method

The empirical research material presented in this article was generated during the Student Summit and World Café described above. Our intention to collect, analyse and publish this material was explained to the students, and they were asked to sign consent forms. First, we had a professional video team produce over 3 hours of footage, including mini-interviews with students and other delegates. Field notes were taken by the authors of the article, and we took photographs of the written student expressions on tablecloths (see Figure 2). Additional photographs documented scenes taking place during the event and a small number of student evaluations (n=5) were completed afterwards.

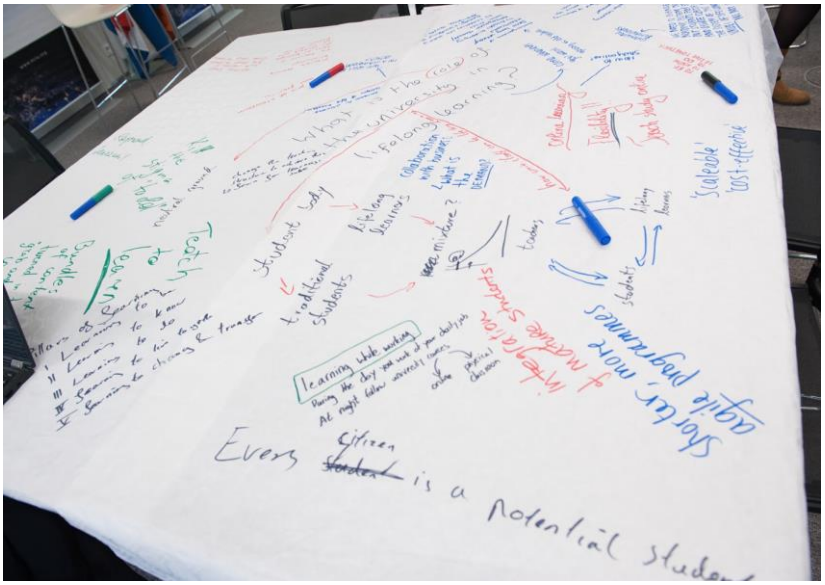

Figure 2: One of five tablecloths capturing the World Café discussions

The research question pertinent to this material is how the students perceive teaching and learning in a future fit university in 2040. To answer this question, the first authors, who come from different academic backgrounds and parts of Europe, collaboratively analysed the material using video-hermeneutics and content-analysis. We also went through our field-notes to analyse what occupied our thoughts during the event. We had placed ourselves in a more peripheral position to the students' discussions than first planned. This gave us an opportunity to walk around the different tables where the students were working, listening to the buzz and registering important thoughts and comments; we joined in the debates, but as fellow learners rather than as teachers.

The written and recorded presentations of the 'provocations' crafted by the students, and the comments on the tablecloths, were then analysed. Each first author searched for significant issues related to the research question in the different parts of the empirical material. Using a focused and narrow scope we established our initial categories and grouped the empirical material related to the particular questions that the students wanted to discuss, looking to understand these answers in their own right as expressions 'within-case' (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 90). 'Within-case' is here understood as what seemed important for the students concerning each question raised in the World Café. Coming together for further

discussions and interpretations, we refined our understanding of the students´ specific answers to each question, looking for overall patterns between the research material as a whole and our first individual understandings. New more finely meshed categories emerged alongside more common understandings 'cross-case' (Ibid, p. 172). In the analysis we will present the shared overall patterns found 'cross-case', and then return to a selection of student expressions, using them to go in-depth.

The video-material was analysed using video-hermeneutics. We identified key incidents (Raab & Tänzler, 2009) as those elements that caught our attention while watching the films. Transcribing the words found in relation to such key incidents, we made the video into a text. Not only what we can hear is transcribed, but also what we can see and what we experienced while being present. Just like other hermeneutical interpretations of traditional textbooks, our transcribed text must be interpreted as part of a wider understanding held by the students. But at the same time the interpretation must be seen as part of the researchers' horizons` (Gadamer, 1989). The spoken words are part of the students´ pre-understandings and must be handled with critical distance, not taken for granted as carrying the truth. And at the same time the authors' interpretations must be dealt with just as critically, being influenced by our positions and socio-cultural schemas. The ideal we have been striving for is a "non-reductive and extensive interpretation of the data in all recognizable details and aspects" (Raab & Tänzler, 2009, p.87).

Findings

Both the overarching research question, and the five questions that the students wanted to discuss in the World Café, guided our approach to the analysis and the identification of key incidents. First, we will present findings from our data material 'cross-case' (Miles & Huberman, 1994), before we discuss how these findings were handled by the students during the discussions in the World Café. Four main analytical categories are developed in order to grasp the students' main concerns regarding a future fit university: purposeful citizenship; educational goals and models; students as co-drivers; and values-led education. After presenting these four categories, we discuss the students' attempts to answer their own questions in the World Café 'within-case' (Ibid), with the use of the 'cross-case' findings. The questions they raised for their own discussions were: How and what will students be learning in 2040?; What role do universities play in lifelong learning?; How can students be involved in shaping universities?; What is the role of universities in 2040: to produce workers or citizens?; What will the business models of universities be in 2040?

Once we had a draft of the text, it was sent to the 20 participating students by email. They were invited to read and comment, and asked to critically consider the interpretations made, and how the text described the event they had participated in. They were invited to do so by their full name if they wanted to be acknowledged for their contribution in the article. This analytical step was crucial in order to validate the new knowledge generated through the analysis. Having invited the students to take this further part in the knowledge production and dissemination, it became clear to the first authors that we should also invite them to be co-authors. Five students accepted this offer. The finished version of the article includes changes in 17 paragraphs related to the reading and critical commentary of these students. This

reflects the learning journey of the first authors as we softened our position as sole-owners of the research process.

Purposeful citizenship

There was a consensus among the students that the purpose of the university was to provide a "public good", with social purpose as paramount. A frequently used concept was "citizenship", with students talking about the need to grow as citizens of their university, and also of society. They saw universities helping to "grow people" who would have the capability to "do positive things in the world". This included solving "the problems of the future; natural situations and economic situations". They saw themselves as agents for change, ready to play their part in tackling issues of social justice and planetary health.

The purposeful citizenship envisaged by the students came from the intellectual capabilities and personal development fostered through their university journeys. They were equipped to solve problems and, at the same time, to fulfil themselves as individuals. Using the metaphor of a key, one student described how university enabled them to:

> *open the door for life; education should give wings to the person to reach their goals; it is not only about work and about success; it is about your life as a person.*

The university key unlocked capabilities well beyond the threshold concepts of their degree programmes: it was in the higher education experience, in the multicultural and disciplinary learning, that they were moulded into activists for change. One student described the purpose of the university thus:

> *to enrich, to create cultures; it shouldn't just be about getting a career and a good salary, it should be about being a good person, about understanding and being a part of something bigger than yourself.*

They became "a part of something bigger" through learning. When you:

> *co-operate with different opinions, you see value of different people and different sets of skills; you see that these all hang together and this is how society works.*

Educational goals and models

The students knew that they had unprecedented access to information: "in the Google era, we millennials are particularly well informed". They recognised this as changing the nature of their higher education; strengthening the focus on critical thinking and problem-solving as well as on knowledge acquisition. There was keen interest in interdisciplinarity, and a feeling that universities could facilitate this: "we shouldn't just be churning out graduates for specific degrees". This was reinforced by the enthusiasm of students studying on 'ATLAS' programmes – degrees encompassing technology, liberal arts and sciences.

Well-being and personal happiness were recognised as essential requirements for success. These students were motivated by feeling empowered, by both enjoying

their university experiences and knowing that they would be able to do great things as a result of it:

> *despite what your degree is, you should become a member of society, of a team, of a family; the university gave me a feeling that I can do something, that I can accomplish something.*

They were clear that instrumental learning, focused on grades rather than personal development, was short-sighted. Looking ahead to the university of 2040, while they believed that course length would change, they did not believe that what was needed was an increase in the number of accelerated, two-year degrees:

> *If you just cram everything in, you won't learn. One year to make a research, to create something, to write about it, it's not enough time.*

They were more interested in alternative models for degrees: degrees in partnership with industry, apprenticeships, significant increase in, and development of, Erasmus+ programmes; and in creating a higher education culture in which mobility was the norm rather than the exception. They saw the ECIU as a vehicle for cross-border higher education opportunities:

> *the ECIU universities are not the biggest whales of the education system, so they are smaller fish that can go smaller and faster and change the business model and change the thinking in a way that other universities cannot.*

They were committed to lifelong learning. They believed that universities should develop stronger partnerships with schools as well as with each other (the idea of 'mega universities' was mentioned), and that higher education learning opportunities should be available well into later life.

Students as co-drivers

These students had made a significant effort in committing to the event. They had travelled significant distances. They did not know each other, but they knew that they would have to work together. It was interesting to see and hear the format of the event folding into a core theme around the role of students in university governance:

> *This is a one-time event; how can we do this at a structural level; as students we have insights into how we think the university should develop; it should be a dynamic process involving students alongside staff.*

They challenged us, as university leaders and policy-makers, to accept students as co-drivers of educational change (as positioned in the right-hand quadrants of Dunne and Zandstra's model). Their reasoning was that if the power dynamics between staff and students shifted, and became less hierarchical (the term 'mentor' was used several times as an alternative to 'teacher'), knowledge could be produced, and skills developed, to tackle global issues:

> *If you improve the connection between them, you have the ground-work for all the problems and you can tackle them.*

What they did not say, although it was strongly in evidence, was that the 'connection' they created amongst themselves was just as powerful. The best higher education in

2040 would be collaborative across cultures, across disciplines, across institutions, across countries and continents. The ECIU event was one small embodiment of this potential:

> *The workshop was really inspiring because there were no boundaries, we were all sharing ideas; we were just talking about how we see the world and how we imagine it in the future.*

The student symposium subsequently informed the ECIU's successful application to take part in the Erasmus+ initiative for European Universities. The video recorded for dissemination of the event, available at https://www.eciu.org/innovation-in-teaching-and-learning, and findings in this article, influenced the final proposal and the consortium's pilot to try out new models for 'future fit' university collaboration.

Values-led education

Towards the end of the event, the students were invited to offer one word to encapsulate what universities should be offering to society in 2040. Their choices illustrate the values-led approaches that informed their thinking: flexibility, integration, opportunity, specialisation, independence, cooperation, leadership, inclusion, access, innovation, proactivity, individuality, creativity, courage, fairness, possibility. These students had strong intrinsic motivation and felt keenly that 'future fit' universities would stand or fall by such values:

> *how the university is run has a direct impact upon how strong our appetite is and how able we are as students to engage with the world's grand challenges. A model of running the university where executives and business thinking is the leading impulse in shaping the future is not the kind of institution that actually produces the most engaged and active citizens.*

They had already demonstrated a strong appetite for engagement through their contributions on the day and the content of these:

> *We stood up, we started seeing that it is important not just to be good at something but to be good in general; we have started something here today and it is just going to keep getting bigger and more important.*

Discussions in the World Café

During the World Café, the participants moved around the tables, discussing the questions written on each tablecloth and adding their thoughts and ideas. In this section, an overview of these is presented, organized by the questions formulated by the students.

What is the role of the university in 2040? Is it to produce workers or citizens?

This philosophical question reflected the tension between responding to the needs and demands of the job market and educating for citizenship, a tension reflected in the 2018 Edsurge Report.

The students' questioned what a good citizen or worker might be and, indeed, whether a "good skilled worker" was also a "good skilled citizen", and that citizenship

was itself “a profession”. They foresaw a changing “perception and culture of higher education, which catered for the job market but also for people pursuing lifelong learning as well as, or instead of, employment.

They regarded close and wider collaboration with local bodies and institutions (councils, schools, residents, police, health care), as well as central government, as crucial to defining what citizenship means in each community: “what works in Paris is different from the needs of York”. The idea of locally-situated and locally-motivated HE institutions, oriented to citizens, local government, companies and education, emerged as a strong model. Research and innovation were highlighted as ways of “target[ing] the changing environment”.

Students advocated a balance between academic and personal skills, resulting in skilled “technical workers” engaged critically and socially in public affairs as citizens, and equipped to solve the problems of the future. The skills and attitudes students should acquire would constantly evolve in a rapidly changing job market and society. They would be integrated into the curriculum, with recognition of skills and attitudes gained through extra-curriculum “proactive achievements”; for example through volunteering, involvement in clubs and societies. Formal curricula would require more flexibility between disciplines, with the possibility for students to “mix and match modules”, and international exchange opportunities as a way “to fill gaps”.

Students advocated methodological change in which knowledge was combined with practical applications, perhaps integrating the existing workforce as “career mentors”, leading to the development of new skills, competences and values, including: teamwork, collaboration, critical thinking, problem-solving, decision-making, and other “intangible” skills. They recognised the misnomer in a commonly-used term by emphatically writing “Never delete soft skills!”

How or what will students be learning in 2040? How will they get the knowledge or skills?

The students’ discussions highlighted the importance of intercultural, digital and life skills, learning to learn and critical thinking, pointing to the skills of communication, creativity and cooperation – and need to concentrate on the skills computers and robots cannot and will not (in their view) be able to do.

They emphasised adaptability in the face of rapid evolution and uncertainty, asking “How can we future proof for the unknown?” They discussed how study programmes would be personalized and learning methodologies adjusted to meet individual learning styles; they believed that universities would have to be agile, to adapt mid-session to the changing needs of the market. Joint study programmes catering for the globalization of learning were suggested, as well as joint programmes with industry. These education-industry partnerships should bridge theoretical and practical knowledge.

The learning context would also be subject to adaptability with a combination of online and face2face delivery, practical and theoretical orientation, a focus on competences and learning rather than diploma achievement, simulation techniques, transdisciplinarity and project-based learning. In this context, the teachers’ role would transition from teacher to mentor, depending on the focus of the learning. Professional mentors would be appropriate in situations where work-based skills

were to be learnt. These new learning contexts would reduce the need for examinations. In this less structured learning environment, motivation, particularly self-motivation would be important and, as such, might also need to be taught and learnt.

How can we involve students more effectively in the development of the university?
Some very clear views were expressed on how students could and should be involved in the development of HE, recognizing the benefits of engaging students meaningfully, “not only in decision-making but in finding solutions”. A strong feeling that students were not listened to emerged, along with a view that students need to be informed, and their contribution held to be relevant, if they were to contribute effectively and provide the feedback that universities need.

Concrete proposals were put forward, namely: that students' roles should be formally constituted at study programme level, on university boards, as well as on national bodies. As they expressed it: “The right students in the right rooms; not all students in all rooms all of the time”. The importance of engaging alumni in university development and including them on university boards was highlighted.

As well as inclusion in decision-making, students saw themselves as “ACTIVE ACTORS” in both student-centred learning, and in curriculum development. They believed they had a role in contributing to the development of modules that students “would like to have”.

The discussions provided a clear vision of how a future-oriented university culture should empower students to contribute to a changing institutional environment and model, moving towards “cooperation” and “joint ownership”. But as these students pointed out, participation would require transparency and trust in the system.

What is the role of the university in Lifelong learning?
The students considered lifelong learning to be a key dimension of higher education in the future. They described this in two ways: lifelong learning as a continuous process of education accessible to all, and lifelong learning as a way of providing re-education for those whose skills sets and occupations were at risk of obsolescence. They pointed to problems related to inclusion, drop-out and ageism, and to the challenge of combining work with study, both online and face2face. They recommended that institutions work on promoting a sense of belonging and integration for all students, young and old, full-time and part-time, developing a “come whenever you want” philosophy.

To achieve this, learning environments had to become more flexible, [“Will we be in a classroom in 2040?”], study programmes more agile, and methods of delivery more varied: “a mix of classroom and practical”. The teaching structure would change, embodying the notion of learning for learning’s sake rather than “churning out students for entry exams and degree classifications”, a philosophy incompatible with the values of lifelong learning. Online learning would be important, but students would have to be taught how to study effectively online.

They highlighted the need to improve social benefits and develop a level playing field where all had equal opportunity to thrive.

Embedding the spirit of lifelong learning in institutions and teaching staff would require close collaboration with business and industry to identify demand, ensure support and "give people the chance to come back to education". The students considered lifelong learning as a way to encourage the updating of skills and a means to adapt to a changing employment climate. They regarded business and industry investment in lifelong learning as an opportunity for HE, mentioning the possibility of sponsorship of relevant courses. They gave industry a clear role, noting that employers should be committed to the continuous development of their staff and should see their staff as students as well as employees.

Rather than offering "bundles of content turned into "grab and go" competency", lifelong learning should be committed to the pillars of [21st century] learning: learning to be; learning to know; learning to do; learning to live together; learning to change and transform (Delors, 1996). As they wrote: "Every citizen is a potential student".

What will be the business model of universities in 2040?

A lively debate took place around this, reflecting the fact that students came from different countries and educational systems, with different models and different underlying philosophies; some from countries where higher education is (still) 'free' (i.e. funded by the taxpayer) and others where students pay varying amounts in direct fees. The debate was less about economic models and more about the ultimate source of funding for a university education. Students questioned whether higher education was a public good, and as such should be free and open to all at point of access. Constructive proposals were made regarding mixed private and public funding, industry investment in their employees, and cooperation between universities and companies for research and training. Other ideas included the adoption of a hybrid model as in the healthcare sector; and having a mixed model financed by both students and government, on the grounds that "paying motivates students".

But doubts persisted over the future business model, with concerns about the influence of private finance upon educational systems and curriculum, concerns surrounding quality and value, the dominance of elite universities, and income dependent higher education. Students commented that a variety of models (private, semi-private, public, free, half paid, etc.) exists now and would continue to exist in the future.

What is needed, they said, was a "long-term vision of society's needs", in which learners and society interacted in a "fluid operational model" and universities were oriented towards solving social problems. For the ECIU students, "Higher education IS a public good" and "a social need".

Discussion and Conclusions

This article took as its starting point an event organised by the ECIU. The question that caught our attention, and motivated us to look more closely into what actually took place, was related to the students' engagement: their willingness to take control of the event and lead it forward. Not accepting simply to be heard, they grasped the

opportunity to act, becoming agents in the shaping of the event itself. Using Dunne and Zandstra's (2011) model, we interpret this as evidence of students assuming the role of pedagogical partners and drivers of the practice they were engaged in. What we did not initially construct or interpret, was a model of our own evolving role during the preparation and running of the event. We now see that we initially lacked confidence in the students' ability to respond to a vision of co-creation that was traditional in its preservation of the agenda-setting role of the academic staff. It was the students who helped us to relinquish this role and reposition ourselves as co-facilitators (with the students themselves) of their skill development as opposed to conveyors of scientific knowledge.

Although we prepared our own 'big questions', the students wanted to decide and define for themselves what to do and to discuss in order to achieve the goals set for the event. This position was reinforced afterwards by the 5 students who completed the evaluations anonymously. They felt that their views and opinions were important ("students need to know that they are what matters") and they wanted regular and both informal and formal opportunities to contribute to strategy formation. In addition, 5 students answered the invitation to read and comment on the article during March 2019. They critiqued our analysis and the description both of the event and of the students' contributions. They thereby provided a critical validation of the draft and assumed the role of co-authors of the text.

The 20 students may be considered as 'atypical'. They were student or Student Union leaders, with many having aspirations towards careers in higher education policy and leadership. We acknowledge that this may have shaped both their questions and their answers, but argue that their roles equipped them to challenge the power dynamics of the event and ensure that they created an agenda amongst themselves that spoke to their needs rather than ours. In so doing, they reinforced their assumed role as agents of change, positioned in the lower right-hand quadrant of the Dunne and Zandstra model.

The students' role as drivers for new insight was not limited to their co-authorship or leadership of the event. Our analysis has shown that their vision of future fit universities is both ambitious and grounded, and that they are prepared and willing to contribute actively to the change it requires. In their words "we have started something here today and it is just going to keep getting bigger and more important". In this way they have added an important facet to the existing policy literature on higher education (reviewed above) by presenting their vision for higher education and the centrality of their role in achieving it. Unlike the literature which, for the most part, appeals to institutions and their decision-makers to implement change from above and attributes certain roles to students, these students were quite clear that they must have a real voice in the designing of this change, enabling the 'dynamic reciprocity' and 'collective responsibility' envisaged by Felten (2019).

The discussions that they had around the five questions that they identified, and the ideas they shared on video and paper, revealed that the role of the university in educating citizens able to contribute to the needs of society as a whole, both locally and globally, (rather than 'churning out' degrees and graduates), was central to their thinking. Future fit universities will require future fit teaching and learning. Students foresee that this will demand better combinations of knowledge and (practical and social) skills, attuned to their increasingly diverse needs, and more flexible study paths, developed and delivered in close collaboration with relevant social and

business institutions, and able to meet the demand for lifelong learning. In many ways, these discussions were closely aligned with the ideas and recommendations found in the literature, echoing the view that current educational practices and outcomes often fall short of meeting the needs of society. This was particularly the case regarding the need for re-alignment to meet global challenges, to reinforce lifelong learning, to engage with technology and industry and to provide authentic and relevant learning paths. However, the students were in general more optimistic about the continuing relevance of higher education, not foreseeing “an avalanche” of private enterprise or AI sweeping it away.

The students offer a sharp reminder that a degree should not be simply a ticket to employment, as some policy documents suggest, but also a preparation for life. Unlike the literature reviewed, which focuses on technical and soft skills in line with the ‘needs’ of industry and the job market, the students put their emphasis on the development of citizenship. However, they do not ignore these needs, but envisage a relationship in which universities and industry work collaboratively in the development of a new curriculum ‘model’, which foresees new approaches to lifelong learning, and to the financing of HE.

Communication, creativity and collaboration were considered key competencies by these students; essential principles for a higher education fit for an uncertain future in which advanced human skills will take precedence over those tasks delegated to robots. Critical thinking, problem-solving, decision-making and leadership were among the essential skills identified. Crucially, they regarded their role as central to the development of such an education; not as mere bystanders fulfilling roles allocated to them by teaching staff and institutional management, but as “active actors” in a changed learning culture and (equal) partners in the construction of a transformative education for all. In one of the evaluations, a student commented that, if they were not thus enabled, they would lose out as they would be less well equipped to find their path in life. They describe a humanistic university organised around inclusion, diversity, flexibility, access, fairness, courage, creativity, cooperation and independence, and set up to cater for individual needs and motivations, clearly in line with the value-driven educational environment envisaged by Felten (2019). This university is, for them, undoubtedly a public good (and a public responsibility), open to all, independent of age, gender, physical ability, social background and financial possibilities. It is charged with the development of citizens able to shape the future of Europe and the world.

So, while our findings are broadly aligned with the current literature on the future of higher education and the role of students, we believe that the students’ voice registered here provides a vital, and so far, largely absent, contribution to it. An emergent insight which took us by surprise is related to us, as academics, university leaders and researchers. In effect, throughout the event and the process of reflecting on it and writing about it, we were aware of the need to shift our own thinking and question our own assumptions regarding our professional identity and roles in the higher education partnership we were promoting. We came to realise that we need to develop a model, conceivably along the lines of that of Dunne and Zandstra (2011), for staff to help us reflect on our own evolving roles. Our challenge is to build new identities as HE shifts from the model of the knowledge-based degree towards skills-based, learning-focussed, people-oriented education.

We adopted an ‘engagement through partnership’ model to interpret what happened at the event and what the students were telling us, in order to answer our research question: how do students perceive teaching and learning in a future fit university in 2040? We are confident that combining the voices of current and future stakeholders has moved us a step closer to ‘future fit’ higher education. In what can be dispiriting times, the energy and optimism of these students was inspiring. As students today, and conceivably parents in 2040, they want to take the lead in shaping the future. They believe that higher education must be valued and secured as a public good and a social need. The final message emerging from this event must be for us, as institutional leaders, to share in this belief and to ensure that our institutions act upon it.

The last word should go to one of the student co-authors:

> *While reading this, I noticed that we actually came up with many more questions than answers, which can be seen as a good thing. I had a great time and hope that what we had discussed gets noticed by EU officials.*

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