Shaping the future of 'student voice': understanding the individual, shared and sector ideologies informing student voice activity 2010-2025

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Abstract

'Student voice', while of course referring to the 2.9 million individual voices of students in the United Kingdom (UK), is in this context used to describe engagement between students and institutions to inform, shape or transform the education and wider experience. Activity associated with student voice has been subject to considerable attention, activity and commitment in higher education institutions in England over the last 15 years. It spans work that takes place at the micro level, focused on transformation of learning, through to whole institution approaches that shape priorities and inform change. During this period, changing models of financing universities, including increased tuition fees, student numbers, fluctuations in international recruitment and a focus on quality and equity of outcomes, combined with the significant disruption of the Covid-19 pandemic, and wider political and societal change has provided a nuanced backdrop. In this piece I look back at research that I undertook between 2010-13 on the different ideologies that inform student voice to understand how these have changed and adapted in today's landscape. As an academic and university leader who has experience of voice and partnership through a range of different roles over 20 years - as a student, students' union (SU) employee, national student leader and in professional service and academic roles at a range of institutions, I argue that understanding how ideologies intertwine, and making the implicit, explicit, is important for understanding the value of student voice. By acknowledging these, I argue for future approaches that are more honest and intentional to enable transformation, in an ever more complex, challenged system.

Introduction

'Student voice' is a term which is used to describe engagement between students and institutions to inform, shape or transform the education and wider experience. It has been subject to considerable attention, activity and commitment in higher education institutions in the UK over the last 15 years. Building on longstanding foundations of representation, student voice policy and practice intensified following the introduction and then increase in tuition fees in England. In 2025, the range of activity relating to student voice is wide. It includes national and institutional surveys, representation at course and institutional levels, co-creation, co-design and partnership inside and outside of classroom settings, complaints, appeals, protest and social media. It accommodates the collective and individual voices of students and takes formal, university supported and informal forms. The ways in which institutions, staff and students speak to each other, and are heard, are subject to considerable emotional, material, financial and time investment by institutions, managers, educators, students and students' unions. Student voice shapes the nature of how students are 'seen' and 'heard' and what institutions 'do'.

As a student officer in the early 2000s, and in my work in student engagement roles in Students' Unions and universities, I saw first-hand a shift in how students were positioned in

institutions with the introduction and increase in tuition fees in England. Curious to explore this, and to counter the tendency towards most positivist, survey influenced approaches to student voice at the time, I conducted research through semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis in two pre- and one post-92 institution between 2010 and 2013, to understand what the rise in policy and practice associated with student voice, meant to students, staff and senior managers. While relatively small scale, the in-depth case study approach (22 interviews supplemented by observations of key events (student representation meetings) and documentary analysis (institutional and national policies, handbooks)) aimed to explore the subjective ideologies and narratives of those taking part and enhance understanding of the nuance of experience. Analysis identified shared themes and differences across two Russell Group and one post-92 institutions. For most respondents, it was the first time that they had articulated the ways in which they made sense of their participation in different forms of student voice.

Respondents drew upon different experiences and ways of understanding to construct their own approach to making sense of their engagement or choice not to engage in different contexts. I found that while student voice activities tended to be regarded positively, there was often a lack of consensus or discussion of the purpose of student voice in different contexts. This meant that those engaging in the same student voice activity often brought with them different ways of understanding the purpose of engagement. I concluded that student voice processes, and those who participate, are not neutral. Engagement without acknowledging the ideologies informing structures and the individual understandings of the students and staff taking part could lead to tensions, confusion, divergent perceptions of purpose and impact and at times frustration. By acknowledging the context in which student voice takes place, we can act more knowingly within and to shape systems and better understand our own engagement.

Since that research, there has been considerable change in higher education in the UK. In 2025, our campuses (physical and virtual) are more international, diverse than ever and exist in an ever changing, more precarious political and technological landscape. Increased mental ill-health, cost of living, political disruption at home and internationally and social justice movements such as ‘Me Too’ and ‘Black Lives Matter’, all play out in the university. During the pandemic, many institutions shifted to ‘emergency remote teaching’, assessments were reimagined, student support and academic advising switched online, prompting short- and long-term change - in part dampened since as institutions to adapt to the evolution of generative artificial intelligence (AI). In my own institution, understanding student experience at a distance, through partnership working with the Students' Union, surveys, social media polls and online panels become a priority and a necessity and brought dimensions of equity, differential access to learning and resources, and experiences of belonging and connection to the fore.

In this paper, I explore how ideologies and practices have changed. I look back at some of the core ideologies that informed student voice in 2010 and explore how they have developed up to the present date in this changing context, to inform future directions for student voice.

Student voice, consumer voice and accountability

Neoliberalism is widely seen as having shaped government policy around education in the UK over the last 35 years, with successive governments focused on increased competition, choice, introduction of student tuition fees, emphasis on economic value in the context of wider demand (Canaan & Shumar, 2008; Brown, 2023). In this context, the ways in which English students are explicitly and implicitly framed as consumers in policy with the introduction and increase of tuition fees, is well documented (Gibbs, 2001; Lomas, 2007). The Higher Education Funding Council for England's (HEFCE) Strategic Plan stated, *"students increasingly see themselves as consumers, entitled to agreed standards of provision and to full information about the quality of what is provided"* (2003). Some in the sector saw this as empowering, with increased student rights, choice and institutions positioned as education 'providers' responsible for preparing students for employment (Dearing, 1997). Others saw the narrative as reductive of students' active roles in learning and shaping institutions, fearing that it would lead to engagement with learning as a product, or means to an end rather than a learning process and lead to demand culture (McMillan & Cheney, 1996; McCulloch, 2009).

In 2025, while the terminology of consumer is not always used, the idea that voice, or the 'user experience' should inform institutional priorities is accepted, embedded and seen as a financial necessity. League tables are informed by the National Student Survey (NSS) which gathers students opinions on their courses, and formed the metrics for the student experience element of the 2023 Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)[i]. Within institutions, there is a focus on student insight ranging through evaluation of teaching, experience online, campus experience and wellbeing, and inclusion informing institutional, course and staff development.

Sitting adjacent to a consumer ideology, accountability emphasises the responsibility of universities to students, as consumers along with parents and the public, drawing a focus on experience and outcomes. Developments over the last 15 years include a strengthened emphasis on teaching quality, initially through the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)[ii] who included students as part of institutional review panels, the introduction of the Office for the Independent Adjudicator (OIA)[iii] who adjudicate on student complaints, the Graduate Outcomes Survey[iv], which measures '*whether the student experience delivered what was promised to you, from a learning and potential employment perspective'*, the introduction of the Office for Students (OfS)[v] with an emphasis on student outcomes as core metrics in the TEF and Access and Participation Plans (APP)[vi].

Institutional data through large-scale surveys such as the NSS, and increasingly learning analytics on student attendance, online engagement and outcomes data on attainment, progression and success, inform comparison, benchmarking and management decisions. Austen (2020) cautions that student voice as data can privilege the quantitative in institutional discussions drawing sector attention towards student voice as metrics given *'limitations in time and resource'* (p.173). Drawing on Sabri (2011), Austen warns against their use as a way that institutions claim to 'know' their students (p.167) in ways that tend to homogenise what are individual, complex experiences of higher education in different settings. In earlier papers, Canaan (2008) and Ball, (2004, 2012) warned that the prioritisation of metrics and what is measurable can skew what is valued in higher education, encouraging staff performativity and drawing attention away from the human experience of teaching or learning. Nevertheless, in financially challenged market, in which league table position

matters for student recruitment and prestige, these types of student voice and outcomes data often inform institutional understanding of what 'good' performance means. This can be reductive; this type of data can serve as an indicator of an area for attention but rarely tells institutions what positive or effective change looks like for students or organisations. However, when the limitations of student voice as data are understood, it can serve to identify areas for deeper engagement with students and staff where the solutions to closing outcomes gaps, or improving experiences can be found. For example, exploration of data provided by the OfS on student continuation may provide a clear indication to institutions of a demographic group most 'at risk' but identifying approaches to reduce that risk would need to be in collaboration with those groups most impacted.

In 2025 higher education, the increasing availability of data at a distance from individual students, takes place against a backdrop of accountability in other spaces. Increasing complaints to the OIA (up by 15% 2022-2023), institutional responsibilities to uphold the Equality Act (2010), high public interest legal challenges and the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act (2023) are mirrored by increasing provision and support around internal complaints, and disclosure of experiences of sexual misconduct, discrimination, bullying and harassment. Media coverage focuses on the cost of higher education 'Cost of living: 'I skip lectures to do paid work instead', (Johnson, 2023), employability 'I went for 1200 jobs but I only got 2 interviews' (Khan, 2025), freedom of speech 'Be ready to be shocked and offended at university, students told', (Jeffreys, 2025), and mental health 'Universities must do more to prevent suicides, ministers say' (Shearing, 2025). This shapes the priorities of institutions (Hughes & Spanner, 2024; UUK, 2024) and the types of conversations taking place in students' unions, in student representation systems and in the classroom.

Student protests continue to be another way that students use their voice, often in the context of political or societal events, to hold institutions to account, taking voice outside of formal student voice opportunities and structures (Dickinson, 2025). Protest raises questions about whether formal university structures allow for engagement on the breadth of issues that matter to students in 2025 and how spaces for dialogue can be found where students view institutions and their structures to be 'complicit' or in opposition (Freeman, 2025).

Voice as democratic governance

There is a long history in the UK of institutional structures for student democracy underpinned by an ideology which commits to students having the '*right* to participate in the management of higher education as *citizens'* (Fielding, 1973). Student representation provides an infrastructure through which usually elected students act as course, department and students' union representatives at different levels of institutional structures (Little et al., 2009). These models were codified and reinforced in 2012 through the introduction of the Student Engagement chapter within the Quality Code (QAA, 2012). At the heart of these structures is a perception of voice as democratic representation, students have a right to be heard as a member of the institutional community at all levels.

The formal structure of representation provides points of feedback and connection between students and staff, space for students to raise questions or concerns and for institutions, to develop responses, manage expectations, and at times support student-led or shared

agendas. However, there are perennial questions, often explored at RAISE[vii] and students' union conferences, about the diversity of voices heard through these structures, whether elected students are 'truly' representative (noting this a question rarely asked of their staff counterparts), levels of engagement across institutions and courses and whether models cater for diverse modes of higher education delivery. Ideological concerns about how those in power might 'use or misuse' student voice as a nuanced form of management through *accommodation*, in which voices are reassured and reconstructed; *accumulation*, in which voices are used to provide knowledge which strengthens the status quo and; *appropriation*, in which voices are used to legitimise the position of the dominant group (Fielding, 2004) inform training, and new approaches. With relatively little research into representation in recent years, a current QAA study (Storer-Smith & Lowe, 2024) aims to look at how representation has evolved in a changing sector to understand shared challenges and inform future practice.

Voice for democratised transformation, equity and inclusion

Also subject to significant commitment by individuals and institutions are forms of co-creation, co-design, co-production and co-research, characterised as productive dialogue between students and staff. There are many examples, to which the RAISE community has contributed, and which in many cases, have their origins in resistance to the more distant, large-scale conceptions of voice offered in a larger, more commodified sector. Examples include those which take place in the classroom, through co-development of assessment criteria and learning resources, co-development of new modules and programmes, educational development projects at all levels of institution, and collaborative work to enhance equity, space and experience (Healy et al., 2014; Cook-Sather et al., 2014). These models often draw on ideas from critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) in search of more emancipated engagement which values socially engaged education and connection, grounded in the lives of students creating '*more horizontally organised, collaborative and dialogue-based learning and teaching practices within Higher Education.*' (Amsler & Canaan, 2008, p.5) and from radical collegiality in which teachers, students, and their communities, founded on reciprocity, collaborate to learn from each other to improve educational practices (Fielding, 2001).

While there are nuanced and contested discussions of definitions of these forms, at their core is a requirement that students are a direct and active part of the process and there is collaboration between students and staff (Brandsen & Honigh, 2018, pp.12-13). Nuanced discussion of power in relation to these forms has been significant over the last 15 years, with models often drawing on Arnstein's (1969) 'Ladder of citizen participation' to understand how different forms of participation have implications in terms of power and control for those involved. Noting Arnstein's identification of the '*difference between going through the empty ritual of participation and having the real power needed to affect the outcome*' (1969, p.216), Varwell calls for a deepening of reflection post-pandemic '*by senior leaders and decision makers about how they use, share or relinquish that power*' (2022, p.131). While ripe in potential for focused, transformation engagement between staff and students, these approaches require a recognition of power and openness to engaging with students in ways that can feel unfamiliar or uncomfortable to some and so are often, led by a few, individuals in institutions. Opportunities can be limited by the need for development of the underpinning

skills and values, and appropriate investment of time, expertise, renumeration and recognition in institutions.

In 2025, there is increasing focus on equity of student outcomes by the OfS as played out in APPs which set out ‘objectives’ for equity of student outcomes and strategies for how inequality will be addressed. Student-staff partnerships, as part of a whole institution approach, have been advocated alongside data, insight and more formal representation for change (Thomas, 2012; Cook-Sather, 2018) and collaborative work with students to understand nuanced, situated experiences are seen in many of the approved plans.

Studies have identified the value for underrepresented students of engaging in partnership work, including increased confidence, leadership skills, sense of belonging, and greater sense of agency in their own learning and development which can contribute to the success of minoritised students (Cook-Sather, 2018; Mercer-Mapstone, et al., 2021). However there has been some challenge to assumptions that co-creation is inherently empowering, inclusive or accessible to all students. In their study of institutional co-creation schemes, Mercer-Mapstone, et al. (2021), draw on interviews with staff leading institutional schemes and their own autoethnographic experience as recent graduates working in student engagement, to highlight how advertising of opportunities as ‘open to all’ can mask the sociocultural capital and confidence required for engagement, fail to recognise other demands on students which might prevent participation, for example, part time work, caring responsibilities, and were often promoted through routes that might fail to reach marginalised groups (p.238). Mercer-Mapstone, et al. also challenge the inherent reliance in some schemes on marginalised groups to ‘*produce the solutions to the systemic oppression that they face’* (2021, p.239), a fundamental dimension when co-creation intends to improve equity for minoritised groups.

Avoiding ‘deficit’ approaches, namely, “*framing students and their families of origin as lacking some of the academic and cultural resources necessary to succeed”* (Smit, 2012, p.369) and recognising the human experience of education becomes fundamental to our approach to student voice if equity is at its heart. Gilani’s (2024) work focuses on addressing differential experiences of belonging amongst minoritised students and advocates for asset-based approaches, which focus on strengths before barriers and ensure that approaches are nuanced and appropriate for the needs of students. Advocating for what she conceptualises as ‘community cultural wealth’, Yosso (2005) calls for education which

> *“focuses on and learns from the array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged” (p.70).* She argues, “*These forms of capital draw on the knowledges Students of Color bring with them from their homes and communities into the classroom”* (Yosso, 2005, p.70).

Ensuring our spaces for student voice make space for dialogue and change which value the diversity of knowledge, experience, skills and connections held by our diverse cohorts must be a core lens for the future of student voices in our institutions.

Concluding thoughts

Reflecting on the changes in narratives and ideologies over the last 15 years, many have grown and become embedded, taken new directions and adapted to societal and sector challenges. There are tensions between student voice as big data, and the need to genuinely know and respect the complexity and nuance in individual students' experiences, needs and values, to shape informed, equitable and meaningful change in institutions.

What is clear, are some themes which we should not ignore, increasing student complaints, student protest, concerns about equitable experience of student representation and co-creation. What do these tell us about students' experiences more generally? How are students seen and respected for their agency and potential in the classroom, their wider university experience, and in society? How do we ensure that there are opportunities in institutions that genuinely empower students to shape education and experience? All of these are challenging questions in a sector that is increasingly constrained.

In my role, I see the value of the breadth of data in surveys, and data on student outcomes, as a vehicle for drawing and holding institutional attention to areas of need for development, enhancement and greater equality. I am proud of our collaboration with the Students' Union to design and share data and insight, as a platform for identifying deliberate steps forward, often through partnership, engagement through our course representation system and focused collaboration, co-design, co-creation and research to inform change. As we evolve as a sector, responding to generative AI, diversification of modes of study, changing student numbers and demographics, we can achieve much more, and ensure that the human experience remains core, by doing that work with students. All of the ideological dimensions identified form part of the backdrop to that work but making assumptions, overreliance on a single dominant ideology or failing to collectively explore the values informing work, can limit the potential for transformation and risk alienating staff and students from opportunities to be part of change. As the external environment that we work in becomes more complex, and institutions adapt and change shape, shared dialogue with students, making the implicit, explicit and acting with awareness of competing ideologies, pressures and restrictions is ever-more important.

For me, understanding the ideological context and decisions that inform the student voice activity that we do is about being honest and transparent, with ourselves, and with students. It makes clear where there are boundaries or limitations, and through dialogue, can unlock ways of working that are more honest, intentional, creative and human in a large-scale and ever more complex system.

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[i] National scheme run by the OfS which assesses a range of metrics about teaching, learning and outcomes to rate universities and colleges in England

[ii] Organisation which works with government to safeguard standards and improve the quality of UK Higher Education

[iii] Independent regulator of higher education in England

[iv] UK annual social survey of the perspectives and current status of recent graduates

[v] Regulator for higher education in England

[vi] Institutional plan that outlines how a higher education provider will improve equality of opportunity for students from underrepresented backgrounds in the UK. A plan is required for English universities to charge the full home tuition fee

[vii] Worldwide network of staff and students in Higher Education who work or have an interest in research and promotion of student engagement