Beyond the Data: The Politics of Care in Student Experience and Engagement

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Abstract

Student experience and engagement have emerged as key components of pedagogic strategies and agendas in higher education institutions in many parts of the Global North since the turn of the twenty-first century. We argue that the academy should understand student engagement as a collective re-figuring of pedagogic values to be more affective. Key to this, we argue, is a holistic notion of care, which manifests in multiple and multivalent ways: care for the individual student, care for the programme, care for the institution, and care for the sector. This case study outlines the work undertaken at Newcastle University (UK) in the past half-decade, which is predicated upon a holistic view of student experience, rather than a reactionary approach to the data alone. Student experience is the solid foundation for all education discussions and decisions, and the student voice has been centred alongside the data so that we are not driven by the annual cycle of review which the National Student Survey has mandated.

Introduction

Student experience and engagement have emerged as key components of pedagogic strategies and agendas in higher education institutions in many parts of the Global North since the turn of the twenty-first century. Colleagues in these institutions often began to think about student experience and engagement as a result of a wider shift in critical university studies, and we can point to a broader reflection on institutional and disciplinary histories.[1] The most recent shift to thinking about student experience and engagement in United Kingdom (UK) higher education certainly also had a discernible acceleration of this approach during COVID and its aftermath, with some students and colleagues struggling with the move online, and – in the UK – with the generation of students who came into higher education after disrupted GCSE and A-Level experiences.[2] This must all also be triangulated with the lived experiences of students struggling in a late capitalist world, the condition of which often means they have to undertake substantial paid employment, with an obvious curtailing of the time they have for university commitments.

[1] One factor that has received little consideration is how this broader reflection has necessitated considering the role and function of higher education institutions in the 1960s and 1970s. The impact of civil rights and social justice activist labour was discernibly felt in some institutions' understanding of their relationship with students in terms of co-creation.

[2] See Almusharraf and Bailey (2021) for a discussion of challenges pertaining to collaborative learning in online spaces during COVID; and Walters, Simkiss, Snowden and Gray (2022) for a discussion of the impact of the COVID lockdowns on student mental health.

Student experience and engagement is thus a complex and shifting landscape. For Tani, Gheith, and Papaluca (2021), student engagement is both "a process [...] and an outcome" (p.501). How can we enable students both to want to – as well as feeling able to do so – to feel supported and engaged by their studies and the institution? The flip side to this question is how can we enable and support a strong and diverse student voice, so that we co-create the (ideally responsive and proactive) conditions of engagement which are most useful to our students? Lowe (2023) also identifies the key challenge here: "[w]hen they embark upon a project, study or discussion relating to student engagement in our institution, colleagues and students alike face the same challenge: to define what is – and is not - 'student engagement'" (p.3). We argue that the academy should understand student engagement as a collective re-figuring of pedagogic values to be more affective, and one which recognises that student engagement "has many dimensions: behavioural, emotional, or cognitive" (Gamage *et al*. 2022, n.p.). Key to this, we argue, is a holistic notion of care, which manifests in multiple and multivalent ways: care for the individual student, care for the programme, care for the institution, and care for the sector. The turn to affect has been one of the pillars of feminist and queer scholarship in the past two decades, and care is often central to this in terms of thinking about how we understand ourselves in the world, and how we conceive of making change to the lived conditions of that world. Christine Beasley and Pam Papadelos (2024) succinctly posit that "[c]are actively contributes to debates about the kind of world we live in now as against the one we want to inhabit in the future" (p.12). The challenge for thinking about this kind of change is that these practices of care in higher education can often run alongside (and up against) the structures of quality assurance and the neo-liberal metricisation of the sector's practices.

In recent years, much of the scholarship around practices of care and community-building in higher education have been focused on questions of pedagogic practice in digital spaces during COVID. For example, Gourlay *et al*. (2021) point to "relationality, respect, communities, difference, and the importance of care" (n.p.) as vital to student engagement in digital spaces during COVID learning practices. These are helpful frameworks, and we would argue that these affects and commitments can and should be stretched far beyond the digital in terms of how students understand – and feel about – their relationship with their peers, their tutors, their programmes, and their institution. Indeed, many students both value and benefit from the sense of community which organically emerges from what Liasidou (2023) describes as the "equity-based and anti-discriminatory tenets of an inclusive pedagogical discourse" (p.9). At the same time, however, the global landscape is rapidly shifting in terms of commitments to practices and models of equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI; also referred to as DEI): these spaces are increasingly contested in some national contexts, which means that a focused approach to student experience and engagement is needed more than ever to ensure that students feel heard, and experience an education in which they are valued, and in which they have the opportunity to co-create the frameworks for student experience and engagement. But what does this look like on the ground, and how can we evaluate how our student populations are responding to these priorities?

Context

This case study outlines the work that Newcastle University in the UK has done in the past five years to embed student experience and engagement at the heart of our education work in the Humanities and Social Sciences (HaSS) Faculty, and details the work led by the HASS Faculty Student Experience Manager (HFSEM) – Helen Elliott – and the Associate Dean of Education – Stacy Gillis. Newcastle is a Russell Group (*i.e.* research intensive) institution in the north of England, with three Faculties – in addition to HaSS, there is the Science, Agriculture, and Engineering Faculty, and the Faculty of Medical Sciences – and roughly 28,000 students across undergraduate, postgraduate taught, and postgraduate research programmes. In the HaSS Faculty, there are ten Schools, and each of these have variable organising principles in terms of size, structure, and shape. Student reps sit on the Student-Staff Committee (SSC) and the Board of Studies (BoS) in each school. Each School's SSC and BoS is mandated to meet regularly, and provide spaces for students to provide feedback on all aspects of their course and experience. There is also a Students' Union (NUSU) which sits alongside the work of the Schools and Faculties, and one of its remits is to manage the student societies, as well as to represent student interests on key Faculty and University committees. The HaSS Faculty also has a system of governance which involves students. The Faculty Education Committee (FEC) has a membership consisting of – *inter alia* and including members of the Faculty Education Team – the Director of Education and student representatives from each School. There is thus a direct line of communication from the Schools' SSCs to FEC. These structures are replicated – in one form or another – at many higher education institutions across the UK, as are the points of possible interaction with the student voice.

What is also replicated – both anecdotally across the sector, and in the scholarly literature – is the *lack* of student participation in these moments of possible interaction. In a recent study, Palma *et al*. (2023) point to a discrepancy in student bodies: "they barely participate in formal governing bodies and in elections of their representatives, although they say they value participation" (n.p). This discrepancy has multiple factors for Palma *et al*., including lack of time and preparation, and agendas with no direct interest for students. We would add to this, however, that there is a particular framework in the UK higher education around the quality assurance structures articulated by our BoS. As Millard and Evans (2021) argue, these Boards were founded on "deficit model" and "the focus was on the parts of the learning experience that had failed to meet expectations. This would often result in representatives gathering a pile of negative issues" (p.157). This deficit model is a pernicious one, which means that formalised points of student engagement are affectively rendered as negative for all concerned. At Newcastle, we have found that student rep attendance at FEC is low, including at those FECs which are chaired by students, and SSCs are often the domain of a few students, and there is difficulty in gaining a broader sense of the issues in a School. There is a possible knock-on effect in terms of survey culture here: the Newcastle Engagement Survey (NES) is in its infancy and has so far had a low rate of return: this is intended for non-finalists, and to prepare students for filling out the National Student Survey (NSS) in their final year.

The significant point here is that the nationally-mandated NSS, with its peak periods of activity, is one which has historically shaped much of the activity around student experience

and engagement. The first is the pressured January-April period when Schools are pushed to ensure completion rates are over the threshold (at the very least) to 'count'; the second is the July-September period of post-coital *tristesse* when the results have not been what was expected/hoped for; and the final is the October-December period of rushing to implement actions and activities in a concentrated timeframe to mitigate against repeating the same NSS outcomes the following year. This mandated what might be described as a simultaneously measured yet panicked 12-month cycle of rinse and repeat institutional action plans (sometimes supported by some School-level action plans for those Schools which fell below a particular point). However, it is becoming clear that surveys – a neo-liberal mechanism widely embedded in UK higher education – are no longer fit for purpose in terms of thinking about student experience and engagement: there are multiple points and avenues for students to give feedback and to work on student experience and engagement, but there is clearly something not working (nor is this unique to Newcastle, by any means). Many students remain uninvolved in student experience and engagement activities, and the culture of surveys does little to mediate against this. In response to this, in Autumn 2020, the HaSS Faculty at Newcastle recognised the importance of locating student experience and engagement at the heart of its post-COVID education planning, and lay the groundwork for foregrounding student voice more fully in Faculty decision-making around matters relating to education and student experience.

Implementation

Key to this work at Newcastle was moving student experience and engagement activity outwith the 12-month cycle of NSS responses and action plans: while we cannot (yet!) not take part in the NSS, we recognise the importance of prioritising work that develops across multiple years, which is responsive to the work that has gone before, and which prioritises student involvement. There are three key developments in the past five years at Newcastle, which have underpinned this shift.

1. The creation of the role of the HFSEM, whose remit is to support both colleagues and students in their work around student experience and student voice. The HFSEM is also a vital conduit between the Students' Union and the Faculty, and brings significant expertise in ensuring that students are a part of every decision made by FEC. The HFSEM also has representation on university committees (notably the Student Experience and Wellbeing Sub-Committee – itself a sub-committee of the University Education Committee, and thus has a voice in decision-making across the institution (see Appendix A).

2. The setting-up of a HASS Student Experience Joint Working Group (HSEJWG), with membership chosen by the Head of School to best represent – as well as legislate for – the student experience on the ground. HSEJWG was initially established in response to a decline in NSS scores across the faculty. While the initial motivation for forming this working group was to address NSS Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), it soon became evident that focusing solely on NSS improvement would not suffice, and we needed to focus on school-led activities (see Appendix B).

3. The implementation of a holistic form of an action plan for each school in the faculty (see Appendix C). This one-page document is intended to be iterative and reflective: it is updated every 4 months, and shared with all the members of HSEJWG, so that all schools have the opportunity to reflect on what is working/not working, and to share moments of good practice.

In order to achieve staff buy-in and the necessary cultural shift for colleagues, it was essential that we prioritised a holistic approach to student experience; this has meant working with colleagues to ensure that student voice and student engagement are at the heart of our pedagogic practices. The big question is, however, is it working? Our collective understanding of care – for the student, for the programme, for the institution, for the sector – is one which is in it for the long game, and for nurturing the green shoots of change on the ground, which may take several years to bed in.

This means that while schools may consider particular NSS questions, but they are not driven by a KPI to best it in any given year: in practice this means colleagues have the time to build more robust, and more reflective, structures to support student engagement and experience; and to build in more fully student co-creation. For example, one school recognised a drop in question 10 on the NSS, relating to marking criteria. They undertook a co-creation project with their students over the course of an academic year to develop school-wide marking criteria. The criteria went through various stages and iterations with extensive student and staff consultation. Following the agreed criteria being implemented, the following academic year was spent embedding, promoting and evaluating this piece of work. The implementation of this co-created marking criteria saw the assessment and feedback NSS score jump from 55% in 2021 to 76% in 2023. There is also a more realistic sense of what might be achieved in a given year, bearing in mind colleagues' workloads. In another school, there had been a decline within the academic support section of the NSS. The school worked closely with student reps to understand the underlying reasons for this decline, which were revealed to be that, post-COVID, students felt less confident in approaching academic colleagues for support. The school co-created with students a clearer framework for tutoring sessions, and added personal tutor meetings to student timetables to highlight their importance. The school also embarked on a promotion campaign – spearheaded by students – for office hours, with each academic advertising their availability on their office doors. This activity saw the academic support metrics within the NSS jump from 64% in 2022 to 81% in 2023. While each school has a different approach to working with students, they are always asked to include student consultation for each line of approach.

Discussion

There are still some local challenges which we are conscious we still need to deal with. The first of this is a tendency for some schools' action plans to be overly-comprehensive, and either to set out a schema of activities which was unachievable, or to over-engineer possible student responses. We have partly addressed this by emphasising the one-page framework for the action plan, and encouraging schools to take risks, without over-committing

themselves. This had the effect of schools focusing on only 3-5 projects each year (with some activities repeating in subsequent years as the projects bedded in), and allowing for some approaches to fall away if they were not working. What will be vital is keeping this cycle of reflection moving forward as roles and colleagues shift in the schools. The second challenge was that the work – unsurprisingly, as it emerged out of NSS KPIs – was heavily undergraduate-focused. While we hope that the work undertaken for undergraduates might relatively easily transferred into the postgraduate taught space, there are some significant considerations for the postgraduate research student experience. These students often have an affective relationship with their supervisor which overrides their sense of belonging to a cohort. We have begun to address this by involving the PGR Dean in the HSEJWG meetings, but we are conscious that we have more work to do on this front. The third challenge remains the student voice: we have experimented with various ways of involving students in the discussions, but it remains that we are engaging with a small (and often self-selecting) cohort of undergraduate students at a macro level. The HSEJWG has involved students in various ways: student interns who sit on the working group; focus groups with student reps; student interns leading on discrete projects (*e.g.* student journey maps), with all students were paid for their time, thereby indicating our value of their labour and care. However, it is in supporting the individual schools' engagement with the student voice that the HSEJWG has been most effective to date in terms of student consultation.

There are also some challenges in terms of thinking about student experience and engagement, only some of which we can mitigate against. The financial challenges in the sector and the resultant redundancies in UK higher education means that staff workloads will necessarily have to shift, and the more intangible aspects of student experience and engagement may be squeezed out of the academic workload. There is also a question of staff goodwill around student experience and engagement, which may also diminish in the face of financial uncertainty and precarity. The cuts and challenges on the EDI front in America, Eastern Europe and South America add another level of complexity to thinking about student experience and engagement in terms of whose voices are valued. Crucially, linked to this point, is the importance of students feeling welcomed on campus. Luke (2008) has noted that cultural capital in academia is predicated upon the knowledge of norms and values, which are inextricably connected with power, and with identity. We argue that – more than ever – care is needed to build communities of belonging and learning for *all* of our students. However, there are also challenges here in terms of critical thinking: an engaged student might ideally be figured as a critical thinker who challenges the neo-liberalist models life and learning in late capitalism, but this is not necessarily the model of an engaged student who is might be palatable to some higher education institutions, or for some constituencies.

Conclusion

In building robust structures that enable and support student engagement and experience, and ones which are able to nimbly recognise when things are not working, and to share good practice transparently with one another, we will be building a dynamic and diverse student voice. It may also be helpful to look to other fields to think about how to use student voice as a space of necessary challenge in the student engagement and experience space. Couldry

(2010) has argued that the starting point for a post-neoliberal politics may be "to insist that no form of social or economic organization on any scale (from corporation to group, from transnational network to national government) has legitimacy if it prioritizes other values over the value of voice" (p.136). What might higher education look like if the sector adapted this as a framework for staff and students in terms of thinking about student engagement and experience? We are here relying on the good faith assumption that universities are genuinely trying to address the issues raised by students, and are equipped or capable of doing so. The NSS is not tailored to meaningfully identify issues in a manner that allows them to be productively and effectively measured. Real and sustained change in the student engagement and experience space should be holistic, reflective, and given the necessary support to possibly make us uncomfortable with how things have operated to date. Student voice is crucial to this, and the sector has yet to grasp how to mobilise this tremendous resource effectively.

We have tried to go some small way down this road at Newcastle, by embedding evaluation and measuring impact outwith the twelve-month framework of the NSS. This approach has helped us to partly break the cycle of misery caused by annual student survey results: we have undertaken a holistic view of student experience, rather than a reactionary approach to the data alone. Through the joint working group, we are able to work with both colleagues and students to bring student voices and stories to the fore: we then use this – alongside the data – to build a fuller picture of the Newcastle student experience. At the heart of this is an approach in which the data shows us what is working, rather than leading the work we are doing/want to do. As Ahmed (2014) reminds us, "[e]motions shape the very surfaces of bodies, which take shape through the repetition of actions over time, as well as through orientations towards and away from others. Indeed, attending to emotions might show us how all actions are reactions, in the sense that what we do is shaped by the contact with others" (p.4). Understanding students are individuals, rather than data points, is essential in the sector's approach to student engagement and experience. This means having some possibly uncomfortable conversations about what has worked, and what has not – and why this is so. We owe it to our students – past, present, and future – to continue this conversation. The next steps will be to continue working on centering student voice in our governance structures: this will mean working with students as partners to develop and implement our school-level action plans, and to ensure that student stories and experiences are always present in our work in order to provide context, and to generate student-focused solutions to the next challenges we will face in higher education.

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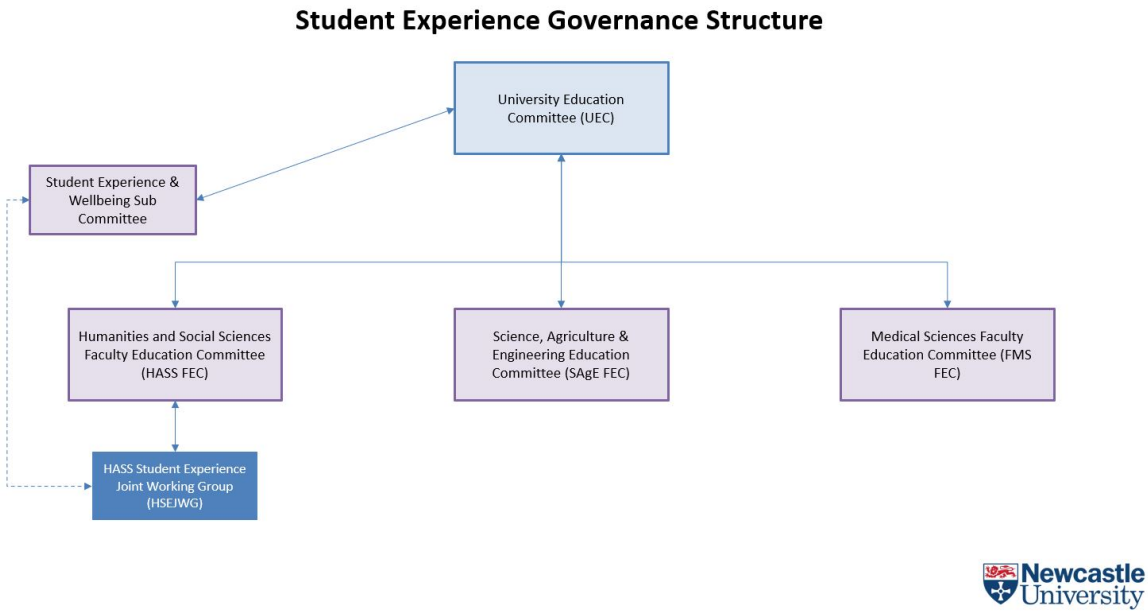
Appendix A



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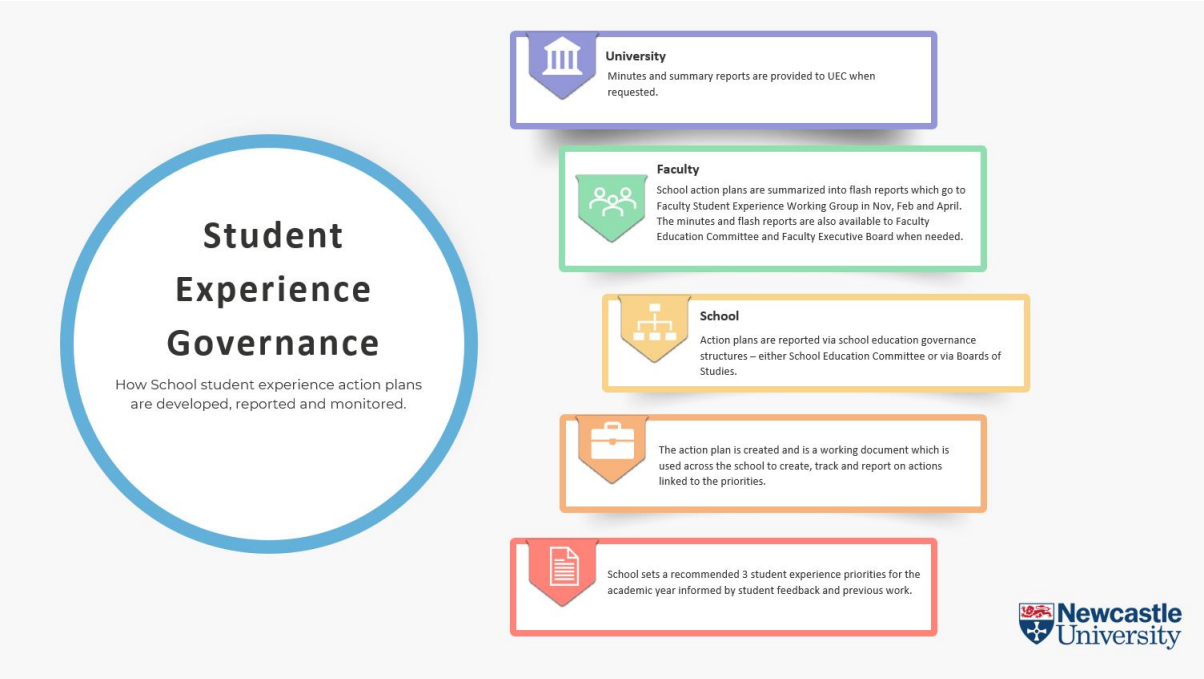
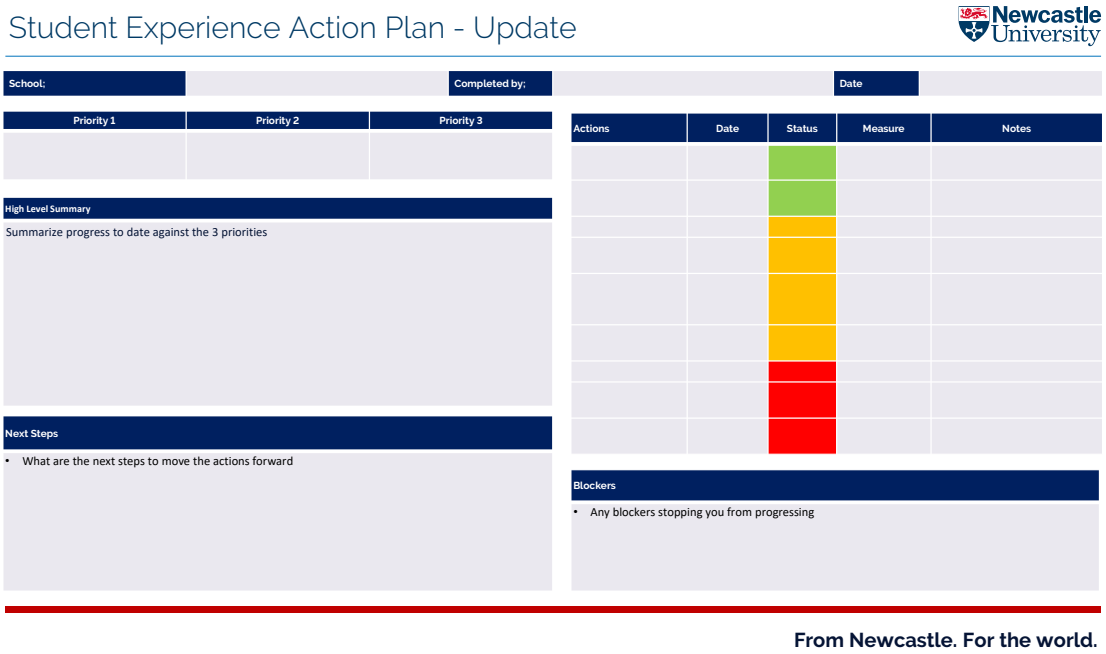


Appendix C



Student Experience Action Plan - Update

Newcastle University

School:		Completed by:		Date	

Priority 1	Priority 2	Priority 3

Actions	Date	Status	Measure	Notes

High Level Summary

Summarize progress to date against the 3 priorities

Next Steps

- What are the next steps to move the actions forward

Blockers

- Any blockers stopping you from progressing

From Newcastle. For the world.