

Raised Voices: from student engagement to political engagement

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The promotion of formal student involvement in enhancing the quality of university life has been a significant aspect of recent attempts to reform the provision of Higher Education in the UK. This involvement is framed around the concept of 'student engagement' as set out in Chapter 5 of the UK Quality Assurance Code¹. It is defined as motivating students to engage in learning and to learn independently, participation in quality assurance and enhancement processes and protocols leading to improvement in the student learning experience, and an institutional environment that promotes representation of the student voice at all levels with training and ongoing support. Providers of higher education should define and promote opportunities for engagement with their student body, including rewards/remuneration for students and other forms of recognition, as well as having meaningful discussions about the impact of engagement based on evidence and review of practice.

RAISE interprets this code as a symbiotic relationship between students and their institutions, constructing a purposeful education so that students realise their potential in education and in society.

There is clear evidence of students having an impact within their institutions and that engagement by students with academic quality protocols and procedures is beneficial for students. Engagement activities give students a sense of being, belonging and becoming as well as feeling part of their institutions. Other research is less positive, student representatives feel torn between representing the interests of students and those of the university, sometimes 'rubber stamping' university policies used by university managers to monitor academics. Student opposition is contained and controlled within a management strategy where the Student Union is framed as a provider of support and services for students rather than challenging their institutions and government policy on behalf of the interests of all students. There is much less evidence of 'student engagement' of this type having any impact at the sector level.

The sense of students having been incorporated into a pre-determined management and governance framework is exacerbated by recent UK government legislation on higher education: The Consumer Act 2015 and the White Paper on Higher Education and Research Bill 2016 (HERB): *Success as a Knowledge Economy*. While it has become commonplace to refer to students as consumers as a rhetorical device following the introduction of fees in 1997, under the terms of the new consumer act the student as consumer is now an objective legal fact. The consumer act confirms the University as a trader and supplier of educational services to the student in what amounts to a direct, individual contractual relationship. It is not only students and

their institutions who are covered by the act, academics need to deliver courses in an up-to-date, knowledgeable and timely way. Failure to meet the minimum standard will give rise to consumer law remedies, including repeat performance and damages, and can be subject to the criminal law in cases of misleading or aggressive commercial practices. This means that legal judgement may be extended to areas of academic practice from which it has previously been excluded, with unknown negative consequences for academic freedom. This new legal and financial framework has profound implications for the student-teacher relationship and the concept of student engagement. All legal regulation is based on a conflict of private interests which need to be protected, undermining the more progressive social aspects of community, collaboration and cooperation.

The notion of student as consumer is consolidated in the White Paperⁱⁱ: Higher Education and Research Bill, 2016 (HERB). The main provisions are the introduction of a Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), a new research funding body and a new Office for Students. These new arrangements have been interpreted by critics, including the National Union of Students (NUS), the University and College Union (UCU), academics and policy analysts, as a way of opening up space for private providers rather than improving teaching, undermining public education as well as the autonomy and independence of universities, and a device to raise fees above the already massive £9000 by linking the level of fees charged to an assessment of teaching quality. All of which is encapsulated by the subjective accounting device: value for money. Under the new marketised system institutions are expected to fail and are, therefore, required to provide an exit strategy as a condition of access to student finance. The quality of teaching will be based on a series of proxy metrics that include, student satisfaction, retention, employability and a new metric, learning gain, which sets out to record the improvement in knowledge and personal development of students during their time in higher education. These metrics have been extensively criticised as being unreliable measures of the quality of teaching and learning.

The issue of student engagement is not central to the HERB. However the White Paper notes a concern with student disengagement from their studies; resulting from an implicit agreement between 'distracted academics' more interested in their research and 'instrumental students'. Moreover, the TEF alongside the Research Excellence Framework, drives a wedge between teaching and research. This undermines one of the most progressive aspects of student engagement, which has been to develop collaborative and cooperative arrangements between students and academics not only in quality processes but within the design and delivery of the undergraduate curriculum through an emphasis on research-engaged teaching.

The government is seeking views on the detailed operation of the bill through a consultation document where engagement does feature more prominently. However, the requirements to include the student voice are undermined as institutions do not require the input of NUS or students as part of their TEF submissions, which was a significant feature of student engagement under the previous quality regime.

At the centre of a new governance model is the Office for Studentsⁱⁱⁱ, 'a consumer focused market regulator' responsible for monitoring finances and efficiency, maintaining standards, awarding teaching grants, with the power to redraft quality

codes as well as remove university status, all based on advice from the Secretary of State. It is not at all clear how students will engage with this new institution. Smita Jamdar, a lawyer specialising in Higher Education Law, said recently that this creation of the Office for Students marks a fundamental change in the regulation of higher education. Under the current regime the Higher Education Funding Council for England supports a stable system based on the interests of the institutions and their students while the new Office for Students is designed to regulate a marketised system that is inherently unstable, with the instability in the new system putting students at greater risk. All of this takes place in a hostile environment exemplified by the policing-like authority given to the Office for Students for 'entry and search' to enforce their powers.

What all of this suggests is that the sector is experiencing a paradigm shift in which the concept of student engagement is reframed as consumer protection within a legal and antagonistic market regulated system and where the student voice is no longer central. So how might we respond?

From student as consumer to student as producer

While the main focus of the debate about these reforms has been the concept of student as consumer within a marketised system, the real issue for this reform is productivity, as a way to generate economic growth of the British Economy: 'the productivity challenge'. The policy is part of a broader framework set out in 'Fixing the Foundations: Creating a More Prosperous Nation' (2015)^{iv} where higher education and the development of science and technology are key drivers in economic expansion. The TEF is designed 'to drive UK productivity by ensuring a better match of graduate skills with the needs of employers and the economy'. This model of social development is supported by human capital theory where every student and academic is an entrepreneur with a store of social and cultural capital, making investments in themselves and mortgaging their future for financial gain and personal development.

The productivity challenge has been the basis of successive government HE policy since the global economic crisis of the 1970s. The global financial crisis, 2008-2009, has brought an increasing intensity to neoliberal policies to enhance productivity, characterised in England as the politics of austerity, featuring a general reduction of public funding and a massive rise in university fees and student debt.

The productivity challenge in the UK and around the world is considerable. There are strong arguments that the capitalist world has reached the end of its capacity for growth, resulting from the high costs of extracting natural resources, the rising costs of labour, environmental destruction and very high levels of credit and debt. The economic collapse of 2008-2009 is seen not as a temporary aberration but a defining moment in long time tendency of decline in profitability. The intensification of neoliberalism through the politics of austerity has exacerbated the situation in which even the IMF has admitted the benefits of marketisation were overplayed. This led the late historian, Eric Hobsbawm, to argue 'We know now that the era [of neoliberalism] has ended... we don't know what is to become'.^v Paul Mason argues we have already entered a post-capitalist phase and must find ways to reinvent the

future based on heterodox social science as well as the reapplication of science and technology for social purposes.^{vi}

The 'university' is a key player in the productivity challenge, as a site for the development of science, social science and technology. From the position of heterodox social science the real issue is not the productivity challenge but challenges resulting from capitalist production, including environmental destruction, global warming, the growth of surplus populations defined by mass migration and rising unemployment. This means that an alternative politics of productivity is required organised around a transformation of the social relations of production based on common ownership and democratic decision-making so that people can start to take some control of their lives. A heterodox social science framing the natural sciences and technology based on a transformational politics of productivity could be developed in the form of a co-operative university. There is already synergy between the values of the cooperative movement and academic values: sharing, education, collaboration, open membership, democratic member control, autonomy and independence and concern for community. Joss Winn, a colleague at the University of Lincoln, has argued that, the co-operative is a real alternative business model because it is based on a different legal, governance and management structure, challenging the consumer model with a governance structure based on workers ownership and democracy, not value for money but social solidarity^{vii}. Co-operative enterprises do not avoid the imperatives of capitalist production but offer the potential for future radical possibilities. At the centre of this model of cooperative production is student as producer not student as consumer, recognising the extent to which students already contribute to the production of research and teaching within higher education institutions. There is nothing in the HERB which would preclude a co-operative university from setting up, indeed the bill points to such an arrangement. Dan Cook, author of 'Realising the Co-operative University', argues that 'a small cooperative organisation...could now see a route to becoming a university in name, and this appears to be in-line with the government's intentions, with other parts of the White Paper, arguing that the legislation allows for a return to small communities of scholars establishing as universities'.^{viii} This can build on the success of the schools co-operative movement with more than 800 schools in the UK taking up co-operative status since 2006.

Nevertheless, given the political motivation of the new bill it is unlikely that the new legal framework would appeal to radical new providers. They are more likely to set up a co-operative university in England by having degrees validated through universities based outside the UK, not operating in a hyper neo-liberal policy environment. There are already form of co-operative higher education in Greece, the Co-operative Institute for Transnational Studies, the Unicoop in Mexico and the Social Science Centre in Lincoln and Manchester. The University of Mondragon in the Basque region in Spain is the most established co-operative institution for higher learning. Work is now ongoing, with my colleague Joss Winn, through research funded by the Independent Social Research Foundation and the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education to establish a viable framework for a co-operative university.

Raised Voices: political engagement

The future is uncertain and is by no means predetermined. A progressive post-capitalist society cannot be established without a political struggle at all levels. Students have been a significant presence as 'unruly subjects' for civil rights, against colonialist wars and in 1968 a defining presence in the democratisation of higher education. Student resistance is taking place now around the world. For example, in Chile the student movement has been very influential in developing a critical approach to neo-liberalism in response to the privatisation of public provision. In the UK, the NUS is proposing action against the NSS. The UCU is currently working to rule and engaging in day long strikes. Academics have published an Alternative White Paper for Higher Education. The National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts is making demands for free education. There is a political struggle within the NUS about the nature of its role, with a movement led by conservative students calling for SUs to disaffiliate from the NUS. 90% of students are against the rise in student fees, according to the Higher Education Policy Institute^{ix}.

Political engagement means a different quality of student voice: not student engagement in the terms defined by Quality Assurance Agency protocols: compliant and representing their own individual interests as customers, reinforced by the HERB; but raised voices, by which I mean voices raised to the level of society, above and beyond institutions and student interests to general matters of public concern grounded in a critique of capitalist productivity. Recent debates about voting age as well as membership of the EU in the UK have opened up spaces for political engagement by young adult students, in a situation where their interests appear to have been overruled. Mature students are already engaged with the struggles of everyday life beyond the academy from which they are being excluded due to their reluctance to take on high levels of debt associated with tuition fees. In the middle of all of this education remains a key factor in social reproduction, students really are producers, so we should build a form of higher learning where students are encouraged to recognise their capacity as agents of radical social change.

ⁱ <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/uk-quality-code-for-higher-education-chapter-b5-student-engagement#.V5htX6JV0rY>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/higher-education-success-as-a-knowledge-economy-white-paper>

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid*

^{iv} <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/fixing-the-foundations-creating-a-more-prosperous-nation>

^v Hobsbawm, E. (1994) *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991*. London, Michael Joseph

^{vi} Mason, P. (2015) *Post Capitalism: A guide to the Future*. Penguin, London

^{vii} <http://josswinn.org/2015/04/08/the-co-operative-university-labour-property-and-pedagogy-2/>

^{viii} <http://josswinn.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/realising-the-co-operative-university-for-disemmination.pdf>

^{ix} <http://www.hepi.ac.uk/2016/06/09/students-demand-better-value-money-nine-10-students-not-want-higher-fees/>