The impact of institutional culture, policy and process on student engagement in university decision-making.

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Abstract

There is a strong focus on the importance of student engagement in higher education, with increasing attention on how students can participate in their university's decision-making processes. Yet, although the concept appears to be almost universally accepted, it is rarely problematised. This has led some commentators to conclude that student engagement lacks theoretical clarity. Consequently, an increasing number of authors have sought to address this. This paper adds to those efforts by proposing a model for student engagement that recognises the importance of institutional action in facilitating different types of participation. These are aligned with expectations for student activity, but the key message is that the university shapes its students' engagement. This reinforces arguments that engagement needs to be cognisant of the power dynamics of higher education. In line with this, the paper borrows from debates around public participation to enhance understanding of student engagement in institutional governance.

Key words

Student engagement, student participation, co-production, representation, university governance

Introduction

Student engagement has become a dominant concept in the management and organisation of higher education (Buckley, 2014). It appears to solve many of the problems facing universities. There is evidence that engagement can increase retention (Thomas, 2012), encourage successful transition (Vinson et al, 2010), enhance performance (Kuh et al 2010), refine curricula (Bovill and Bulley, 2011), enrich the student and the staff experience (Streeting and Wise, 2009), meet equality objectives (Berry and Loke, 2011), establish civic engagement (Millican and Bourner, 2011) and improve the way that universities operate (Lizzio and Wilson, 2009). The danger is that unrealistic demands are placed on the concept by a sector in a time of unprecedented change. In the UK, this is illustrated by the promotion of student engagement by groups with different and potentially contradictory positions. It is, for example, backed by government (e.g. BIS, 2011), mandated by non-governmental organisations (e.g. QAA, 2012), supported by university managers (Little et al, 2009), encouraged by academic staff (Van der Velden, 2012) and championed by student bodies (NUS, 2012).

The seemingly universal acceptance of engagement has been attributed to a lack of conceptual clarity, resulting in an idea that can mean all things to all people. Fielding (2004) argues that it may become a victim of *"Fadism* [that] *leads to unrealistic expectation, subsequent marginalisation, and the unwitting corrosion of integrity"* (Fielding, 2004 p296). There is a growing effort to establish a coherent theoretical and evidence base for engagement activities (Trowler, 2015). This paper attempts to add to those efforts by proposing a model of engagement that scrutinises institutional activity. This is in contrast to the perspective of much of the literature, which, in this author's view, stresses students' role in engagement. Shifting the focus from student activity to institutional action presents engagement as being effectively in the gift of the university. This is not to say that students lack agency, but that each university has significant control over the extent to which its students are allowed to participate.

The impact of power on student engagement

Trowler (2010) identified three themes in the literature on engagement, relating to learning, identity and governance. This paper focuses on the latter. In contemporary higher education, quality assurance and enhancement is the major steer for student engagement in university governance. This is part of a pan-European emphasis on greater student participation in quality processes (Gvaramadze, 2011). Various UK policy directives align with this. The Quality Assurance Agency, for example, call for higher education providers to *"take deliberate steps to engage all students, individually and collectively, as partners in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience." (QAA, 2012 p4).* Their vision for engagement is expansive, with a clear expectation that activity is embedded into a university's deliberative structures. Notably, terms such as 'partnership', 'informed conversation' and 'dialogue' are prevalent in their documentation. A similar emphasis is evident in the agenda of other quasi-governmental bodies. The Higher Education Funding Council for England has collaborated with various stakeholders (including the Higher Education Academy, the National Union of Students and Universities UK) to develop student engagement policy and Practice (HEFCE, 2012). Meanwhile, in Scotland, SPARQS (Student Participation in Quality Scotland) call for a *'culture of engagement'* where students and academic staff *"learn from each other's perspectives and hard work"* (SPARQS, 2013 p9). These aspirations reinforce the perception that meaningful engagement is based on an authentic partnership between students and their universities.

The emphasis on partnership fails to acknowledge that power relations between university staff and students are unequal and problematic (Robinson, 2012). Student power is overlooked in official discourse around student engagement. The UK Government, for example, sees university improvements driven by *"a risk-based quality regime that focuses regulatory effort where it will have most impact and gives power to students to hold universities to account."* (BIS, 2011 p9). Tellingly, it offers little indication of how students could meaningfully acquire that power. Likewise, the Quality Assurance Agency state that, *"Student engagement is all about involving and empowering students in the process of shaping the student learning experience."* (NUS/QAA, 2012 p8). Yet, their quality code on student engagement (QAA, 2012), for example, makes no reference to student power. A clear exception to this is the

National Union of Students *Manifesto for Parnership* (2012) that articulates engagement as a far-reaching re-articulation of the contact between students and their universities. Their view aligns with Trowler's (2010) assertion that student engagement is a behavioural, emotional and cognitive process that should be considered in relation to the ownership and distribution of authority.

Mann (2008) maintains that the student experience can only be understood in the context of university power dynamics. Her argument is that students have little control over what is taught, the way it is taught and how their learning is assessed. The student is subjected to a constant process of evaluation, measurement and grading. Thus, the very appropriation of knowledge that is at the heart of the university endeavour becomes a mechanism for surveillance and regulation (Bloland, 1995). This presents the university as a regulating institution that normalises the power imbalance between students and tutors to exercise control (Laurence, 2009). Failure to acknowledge this undermines efforts to understand engagement. This is exemplified in how non-engagement is typically identified as students' passivity or laziness (Seale at al, 2014). Yet, it may be the safest way for students to express resistance. Trowler (2010) acknowledges resistance as a legitimate is a form of engagement. She cautiously uses the terms 'oppositional' and 'congruent' as extremes of a continuum of engagement activities that support or challenge dominant discourses. Non-engagement sits in the middle, but it can be difficult to ascertain whether this is a manifestation of lack of interest or distrust (Gourlay, 2014). An alternative is to rearticulate the spectrum of engagement as from 'resistance' to 'cooperation'. This retains the view that engagement is an active undertaking: the student resists or cooperates. However, it draws into question whether 'non-engagement' is necessarily passive. Certainly, resistance may be expressed through direct challenge (Pabian and Minksova, 2011). However, problematic power dynamics may result in resistance appearing to be passive (through, for example, non-attendance), when it is fundamentally an active process of withdrawal.

The hierarchical nature of student engagement.

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The position of students in the university's hierarchy of power and authority shapes their engagement. Kay et al (2010) suggest that they have four key roles:

- *Students as evaluators,* where the institution uses engagement to access the student voice. This is typically articulated through evaluation data and is the main method by which students are encouraged and expected to engage Gvarmadze (2011).   There is an assumption of a degree of activity, but Fielding (2001) offers an aligned idea of *'student as data source'* where the institution simply relies on existing data, such as attendance or performance

- *Students as participants*, which includes mechanisms by which the institution involves its students in the decision-making structure. Course representation is a common example of how this is manifest in university governance (Lizzio and Wilson, 2009).

- *Students as partners, co-creators and experts*. In this, the students have a more active role in university business.   Their role as key players in the university's learning community is recognised and valued (McCulloch, 2009).

- *Students as change agents*, where students take a leadership role in developing the evidence base for change. Here, students are much more proactive in managing the agenda for change (Dunne and Zandstra, 2011).

These roles suggest dimensions to engagement that signal differing expectations for student activity. Student action is a feature of engagement, but this is determined by institutional need. In other words, student engagement is confined to what the institution allows. Hence, to complement models that consider engagement in relation to what students do, there is a need to address what activities the university demands, expects or permits. This is offered in the form of a Nested Hierarchy of Student Engagement Interactions *(see figure 1).*

This model links student role with institutional role to explain how institutions act and encourage their students to act.
- When the institution is *reactive,* student behaviour and reported satisfaction analysed with the intention of utilising that information to enhance institutional objectives. There is a reliance on existing metrics and surveys. Engagement is

established through compliance. In effect, student participation is, at best, restricted to answering questions about experiences or preferences.

- In *responsive* mode, the institution recognises student expertise on the student experience and invites their contribution in decision-making fora. However, it imposes clear boundaries on engagement activity by establishing the students' role as a consultant, rather than a partner. Students are still expected to answer questions, but there is a greater sense of dialogue.

- If the institution is *collaborative,* there is a stronger vision of students as active agents in the institution. This is characterised by institutional efforts to determine mutual understanding, with students encouraged to contribute to the evidence-base for action and change.

- Instances where the institution is *progressive* are characterised by students having primacy in decision-making. The role of the university is to respond to their needs, with mechanisms in place for students to initiate, monitor and substantiate actions.

The nested hierarchy situates the responsibility for engagement at institutional level. It borrows from the work of Kay et al (2010) to distinguish between the different types of student activity contingent on the institutional drive for engagement. The four typologies should not be read as mutually exclusive. Instead, the notion of a nested hierarchy allows for the possibility that different types of engagement can coexist. This is coherent with Alvesson's notion of 'multiple cultural configurations' in which, *"Organisational cultures are … understandable not as unitary wholes or as stable sets of subcultures but as mixtures of cultural manifestations of different levels and kinds."* (Alvesson, 1995 p.118). Institutional data, for example, may become the bedrock of participatory forms of student engagement (Alsford, 2012). Likewise, outcomes of collaborative engagement may feed back into 'reactive' measures to be assessed across a wider student body.   This addresses concerns that engaged students may be atypical, more confident in expressing their views and less likely to come from some disadvantaged groups. If this is the case, an uncritical response to their input could reinforce inequalities between students (Cook-Sather, 2009).

The model also allows for multiple sources of information from students that may be contradictory. In addition, an enhanced role for students may result in unpredictable

and possibly unwanted conversations (Fielding, 2001). Consequently, the organisation needs to accept a degree of uncertainty and be willing to respond flexibly. Fielding (2001) further develops this by suggesting that greater levels of engagement are associated with notions of 'radical collegiality'. He sees this as an organisational orientation in which issues of power and hierarchy, although not eliminated, are transparent and flexible. This is characterised by a strong focus on discussion and negotiation through critical discourse. It is, therefore, beholden on universities to create spaces where students feel able to speak and the university is committed to listen and respond.

A public participation approach to understanding student engagement

Much of the theoretical development associated with student engagement is informed by learning theories. However, the relevance of these to student participation in university governance is questionable. Although students may learn as a result of being involved, that is not the primary objective. Hence, there is an increasing body of work (e.g. Carey, 2013a) that seeks to understand engagement through the theoretical lens of public participation. As with student engagement, public participation is rooted in notions of co-production, collaboration, engagement and advocacy. Likewise, it is also beset with problematic power relationships that can derail collaborations. Theoreticians have long grappled with this and their work is useful for reviewing processes associated with student engagement. Power is central to Arnstein's (1969) seminal theoretical work in public participation. Her 'ladder of participation' characterises activities on a spectrum from tokenism to citizen power, with ladder's metaphorical rungs progressing from 'manipulation' to 'citizen control'. The lower rungs of the ladder relate perfunctory acts that offer an illusion of participation through the provision of information to mollify and appease. Higher up the ladder is consultation. In this, the public is expected to respond to pre-set plans, often with little scope for meaningful exchange. The notion of participation is located towards the top of the ladder and is characterised greater levels of control throughout the process of decision-making. The final rung refers to a more deep-seated notion of participation through citizen control that aspires to wholesale public authority and responsibility for action. Relating student engagement activities to this ladder reinforces the link between notions of public participation

and student engagement. This is illustrated in figure 2 that maps the Ladder of Participation to the Nested Hierarchy of Student Engagement Interactions.

Power is also manifest in how and where participation is managed. Gaventa (2006) argues that citizen power in public participation is defined by formal rules of decision-making. Likewise, student power will be reflected in a university's mechanisms for engagement. These determine where students' participation is sanctioned and where it is prohibited. Further insight is afforded by reflecting on the work of Fung (2006). He asks three simple questions about participation: who is allowed to participate, what is the method of decision-making and how much influence is the participant allowed? These encourage consideration of where methods for engagement are enacted. Relating this to the Nested Hierarchy reinforces the importance of institutional commitment to student engagement. In the reactive mode, reliance on existing data and surveys expects little of students and their influence is constricted. Nonetheless, the extent to which students are encouraged to be authentic in their responses would reflect the perceived value of student involvement at this level. Similarly, more expansive methods, such as representation, do not necessarily facilitate an engaged student body. Thus, universities need to consider how and where they expect students to participate at a higher level. This prompts scrutiny of the committee meeting, which is the key mechanism of engagement in responsive modes (Little et al, 2009). In public participation, McComas et al (2010) argue that committees are ritualised spaces that discourage involvement. Their formality represents powerful forces that suppress criticism and debate.   Similarly, research in universities suggests that official meetings can alienate students, who have little familiarity with the processes and language used (Carey, 2013b).

Student engagement is often levered into procedural systems that are designed to meet the needs of the university and not its students (NUS/QAA 2012). Little et al, (2009) identified a plethora of university committees students are invited to. These are often the place where student views are received and information relayed back to the students (Van der Velden, 2012). Yet, they rarely encourage dialogue between students and other stakeholders. This is supported by evidence that

students are often confused about university structures and unsure of how they should act (Planas et al, 2013). The conventional committee further tests students by creating role confusion (Lizzio and Wilson, 2009). In effect, students have to manage partnership in one context with more submissive relationships elsewhere. Finally, the very process of preparing, attending and debriefing meetings is time-consuming. As a consequence, active and committed students often struggle to engage due to the additional demands on their time (Alsford, 2012).   As a result of this, universities have looked to incentivise engagement though the use of varied reward and recognition systems. Outside of a system of student union sabbatical officers, direct payment for engagement is rare, (Little et al, 2009). However, many universities acknowledge engagement through, for example, institutional employability initiatives (e.g. Dunne and Zandstra, 2011), local prizes and awards (Little et al, 2009) or reporting key engagement activities in a student's in a university's Higher Education Achievement Record (SPARQS, 2012).

A relocation of engagement activity?
An inflexible and institution-centric committee structure is a potent symbol of the power imbalance between students and staff. Changing this may facilitate a stronger culture of collaboration. Indeed, Little et al, (2009) have identified institutional practices that appear to be aimed at creating a more student-friendly space, such as involving students in the process of agenda setting. Furthermore, some universities have reconfigured student:staff meetings from a committee to workshop format to encourage dialogue and debates (e.g. University of Lincoln, 2012). Meaningful revision of the structure and operation of committees is a useful step, but meetings should not be seen as the only place where (governance-associated) conversations between students and staff can take place. Indeed for many managers, informal conversations can prompt significant reflection and action. A logical extension of this is to take these conversations to where students congregate. Van der Velden (2012) questions why decision-making takes place in the committee and not the class. The typical student is time-poor and manages a complex balance of the competing demands of domestic and social life, work and study. Encouraging students' contributions to decision-making in class puts no additional burden on their resources. It is unlikely that this would ever replace the full function of extra-

curricular meetings, but would provide opportunities for dialogue between staff and students to be more widespread. In addition, carefully managed in-class engagement could be a legitimate learning activity. This offers an option for enhancing engagement in decision-making by embedding it into course design so that it is intrinsic to educational achievement (Carini et al 2006).

Class-based, discursive engagement strategies may facilitate more direct involvement at grass roots level, but could conflict with bureaucratised university structures (Van der Velden, 2012). At the local level, relationships between students and staff are intimate and dynamic, but inherently inconsistent. This will challenge the tendency of university managers to seek technocratic solutions to problem through the identification and application of uniform approaches to practice (Sultana, 2012). Bluntly put, attempts to standardise local practices will inhibit the intuitive and personal response that may be needed,

> "...*do not reduce engagement to a set of techniques, strategies or behaviours that are meant to be universally replicable regardless of context. In contrast, given the differences in the nature of social structures and interactions, a reductionist stance of engagement is untenable.*" (McMahon and Portelli, 2004 p14).

Revising committees to create inclusive spaces for students will challenge most universities to reflect on where they see students in their deliberative structures. The message is that student–centered practices that are most likely to support responsive and collaborative forms of engagement require a degree of flexibility and risk-taking at institutional level. However, it is the concept of the *progressive institution* that really tests the limits of student engagement.

Towards the progressive university?

The nested hierarchy posits that universities need to make fundamental changes to address the most ambitious rhetoric of engagement. These are the concepts that are embodied in the language of co-production and the notion of the student as an agent of change (Kay et al, 2010). The progressive university exposes the conundrum that is the heart of student engagement. Universities are a site of learning and learning is, itself, a site of power. The idea of students in control would

disrupt any university's role in credentialising learning. Hence, it is argued that the progressive institution might be more aspirational than actual. As Lambert (2009) says,

> *"I do not wish to suggest that students' enhanced participation offers 'solutions' to the 'problems' of the contemporary university. Rather, the focus on participation is intended to provide a critical and productive intervention into the question of what higher education is, and is for."* (p305).

The *progressive institution* may be unrealistic with respect to the main business of the university. However, it may be manifest in how the university relates to civic society. Engagement inside the university necessarily differentiates between students, academics, support staff and managers. It therefore has its limits. However, the university is a more holistic entity in external relations. Watson (2009) describes the civic role of the university as *a 'Russian Doll'* that simultaneously focuses on community, sub-region, region, nation and global enterprise. The agency of students in these is much more fluid. Civic responsibility is a key aspect of the wider higher education project (Millican and Bourner, 2011). Hence, students' social engagement could define the university as a progressive institution. Indeed, engagement outside the university is a measurement of student engagement in the US (Kuh, 2009), but is not addressed in the UK. It conflicts with contemporary interpretations of the student as a customer; the communitarian spirit embodied in volunteering and charity work, for example, does not sit comfortably with the discourse of consumerism (Giroux, 2010). As a consequence, the extent of students' contribution to their local communities is often overlooked (Watson, 2012). The importance of civic engagement is that it progresses the debate about student engagement and situates it in a broader discussion about the social and cultural value of universities themselves. This reinforces the argument that theories of student engagement should coalesce around the notions of radicalism that are absent in much policy. Authentic student engagement will test how the relationships between students, their universities and civic society are perceived and managed. This requires universities to acknowledge their responsibility as a facilitator of engagement and review how their structure, actions, processes and procedures encourage or constrain engagement. There is a strong focus on the importance of

student engagement in higher education, with increasing attention on how students can participate in their university's decision-making processes. Yet, although the concept appears to be almost universally accepted, it is rarely problematised. This has led some commentators to conclude that student engagement lacks theoretical clarity. Consequently, an increasing number of authors have sought to address this. This paper adds to those efforts by proposing a model for student engagement that recognises the importance of institutional action in facilitating different types of participation. These are aligned with expectations for student activity, but the key message is that the university shapes its students' engagement. This reinforces arguments that engagement needs to be cognisant of the power dynamics of higher education. In line with this, the paper borrows from debates around public participation to enhance understanding of student engagement in institutional governance.

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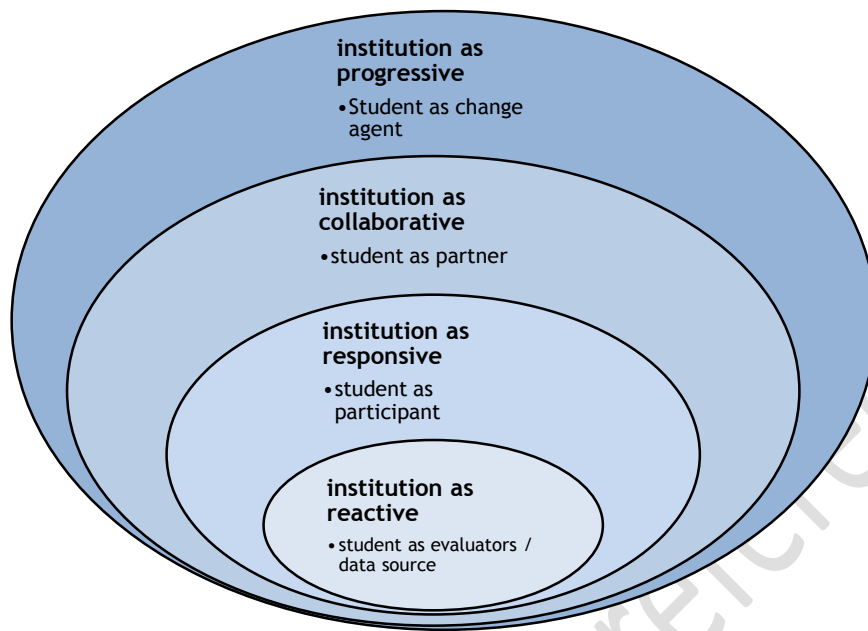
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Figure 1: Nested Hierarchy of Student Engagement Interactions

institution as progressive
- Student as change agent

institution as collaborative
- student as partner

institution as responsive
- student as participant

institution as reactive
- student as evaluators / data source

Figure 2: the Nested Hierarchy of Student Engagement Interactions mapped to Arnstein's Ladder of Participation