

Conceptualising the student-university relationship within a UK higher education institute



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Introduction

In the last 10 years, the notion that students can assist in a role beyond consultation in learning and teaching has gained traction with the development of projects such as students as partners, change agents, producers and co-creators of their own learning (Bovill et al., 2011). Healey, Flint and Harrington (2014) suggest that *'engaging students and staff effectively as partners in learning and teaching is arguably one of the most important issues facing higher education in the twenty-first century'* (2014, p7).

Dunne and Zanstra (2011) presented a radical re-visioning of traditional forms of student engagement, asserting that *'There is a subtle, but extremely important, difference between an institution that 'listens' to students and responds accordingly, and an institution that gives students the opportunity to explore areas that they believe to be significant, to recommend solutions and to bring about the required changes.'* (2011, p4)

The research project aims to conceptualise the input of student voice within a student-university relationship where student participation is welcomed and encouraged by the rhetoric and policy produced by the Institution.

Literature

Conceptualising how student voice is integrated within the student-university relationship and governance models stems from the position that students should be provided with the space and opportunity to be heard, be empowered to influence change and have equal roles as partners with staff in the development and enhancement of teaching and learning and the student experience.

This framing and current thinking is suggestive of a democratic relationship between students and the institution which is an intriguing prospect that has captured the interests of academic developers educational researchers and is the focus of scrutiny and research interest within academic communities (Klemenčič, 2014; Bovill et al., 2015). In particular, it raises debate and dialogue about how students, students' unions, staff and senior managers can work collectively to form the student-university relationship and the impact this can have on learning environments.

Historical and political discourses have framed the current relationship between staff and students in the UK and is a direct consequence of neoliberal reforms that have changed the face of higher education (Little and Williams, 2010), shifting to a marketised higher education sector with clear consumerist agendas (Brooks, Byford and Sela, 2016). The values held in the research, reject the neoliberal ideology of a marketised sector and instead looks towards emancipatory models of working with students that share common goals and are collective in wanting to improve the student experience (Bragg, 2007).

Research Questions

Specifically, the research seeks to identify how the ethos and culture of the institution proliferates down to practice, examining the: nature and extent of student voice; impact of student voice on the decision-making across multiple levels of institutional governance; and the power relations between the institution, staff and students.

- To address the aims of the research a number of key research questions have been formulated:
- What are the drivers behind how and where student voice fits within the hierarchy of a university?
- Who wants to be involved in improving the collective teaching and learning experience and why?
- Who ultimately makes the decisions and alters policy?
- What are the challenges, barriers and tensions to a more democratic student - university relationship?

Research Design

The research project will use a combination of **critical theory** (constructing and reconstructing the student-university relationship) and **post-structuralism** (acknowledging the historical discourses that influence or limit the conceptualisation of the student-university relationship) within an **ethnographic case study** (analysing multiple forms of data collection and documentation within one institution); to conceptualise the discursive reality of the student - university relationship within a UK-based institute.

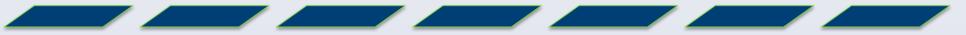
A post-structural ethnography acknowledges that the transactions that occur within the student-university relationship are embedded and absorbed in the historical discourse and that reality is therefore transient and relative (Gallant, 2008).

The institution selected as the case example is one of the first in the UK to set-up a Student Engagement unit within the University's infrastructure and in the words of the University **"placing students at the heart"** of the institutions governance processes. Figure 1, illustrates the data collection methods and participants involved in the research that was conducted during the academic year 15-16.

University

Observation of Education and Student Life Committee (ESLC) over the academic year

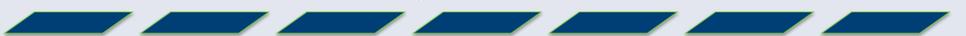
Interviews of Vice Chancellor, Pro VC for Learning & Teaching, Student Engagement Manager, Sabbatical officer for Academic Affairs and SU Student Voice & Impact Manager



College

Observation of Education and Student Committee over the academic year

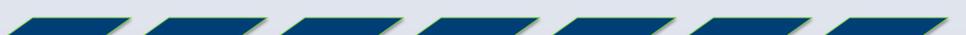
Interview of Chair of College E&SC and College Representative



Three Schools (One selected from each College)

Observations of School student - staff committees and informal staff meetings over the academic year

Interview of Programme Leader/SE champion and Senior School Representative



Group interview: 1 x 8 students from sample schools, 1 x 4 students involved in SE partnership activities, 2 x 3 student reps



Summary of Research

13 x interviews, 4 x Group Interviews, 18 x observations at School, College and University level, survey of students in sample schools n = 69, informal journal



Figure 1: Outline of data collected

Data Analysis

The analysis will examine how the historical, political, economic and institutional discourses effect the concepts of shared authority and independent responsibility in the development of learning and teaching.

Qualitative data generated from interviews, observations, texts/policy documentation and an informal participant journal kept by the researcher will be analysed through a combination of thematic and discourse analysis

The analysis will take a Foucauldian perspective exploring the concepts of discipline, surveillance and governmentality to help expose the problematic practices and the external power that has helped develop the discourses narratives at play. In addition Habermas' theory of knowing will be used to offer an insight into the individual that Foucault neglects (Stahl, 2004).

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