

# **More than just listening: The role of student voice in higher education, an academic perspective.**

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**Abstract**

In the past decade in the UK there has been an increasing emphasis and amplification of student voice in higher education, raising questions around its purpose and use. The aim of this perspective paper is to consider the role student voice can play in a UK higher education sector that is heavily dominated by marketised and consumerist discourses and perspectives. The paper draws on scholarship from both the UK and international perspectives and argues that student voice should focus on transformation and empowerment of the learner and not just listening to students. Adopting such approaches to student voice shares commonalities with research and practice that focuses on working with students-as-partners. The paper argues that there is a need and value to foster and develop a culture of partnership between staff and students and suggests how adopting a partnership approach has the potential to change the culture and relationships between students, academics and their institution. To conclude, the paper provides a number of recommendations to assist practitioners in developing their approaches to student voice and suggests that creating institutional approaches will never be fixed, requiring constant development of practice.

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In higher education in the UK, shared authority and independent responsibility are important in institutional governance and the development of learning and teaching. Historically, administrators have performed the traditional roles and responsibilities for decision-making, however, students have been provided with representation at various levels of governance structures since the 1960's (Bergan, 2003). The extent to which students are given decision-making powers in learning and teaching is often limited, with students afforded more of a consultative role, lacking agency and voice (Klemenčič, 2014; Bovill et al., 2015).

In the last ten years in the UK, the notion that students can assist in a role beyond consultation has gained traction, with student involvement in projects such as students-as-partners, change agents, producers and co-creators of their own learning (Bovill, Cook-Sather and Felton et al., 2011). Healey, Flint and Harrington (2014) suggest that engaging students and staff in the development of learning and teaching is currently one of the most important issues in higher education.

Furthermore, Neary (2016) outlines that there have been numerous attempts to promote the development of student involvement in enhancing the quality of university life in UK higher education. Part of these attempts are due to an increasing expectation by external agencies such as the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) who stipulate that institutions are required to encourage students to participate in quality enhancement and assurance mechanisms (QAA, 2012). In addition, there has been a much greater emphasis placed on student representation and more cooperative relationships between the students' union and institutional management teams (Brooks, Byford and Sela, 2015; Neary, 2016). Such changes, have resulted in an increased emphasis being placed on institutions to involve students in their institutional governance. Therefore, the increased requirement by regulatory bodies to include student voice has the potential to emphasise consumerist approaches that promote listening to students, in an attempt to respond to student demands.

However, Klemenčič (2014) and Bovill et al. (2015) suggests that increasing the involvement of students can promote and develop democratic relationships between students and their institution and is the focus of scrutiny and research interest within

academic communities. 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 or affect this can have on learning environments.

The current framing of the relationship between staff and students in the UK 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). It could be argued that the sector has been driven by an 'audit culture,' where the performance of institutions is now quantified, compared, scrutinised, rendered visible and ranked all in the name of improving quality (Shore, 2008). The associated effect of the increased accountability within the UK has therefore seen a greater emphasis on enhancing learning and increasing learner engagement, with students playing an increased participatory role in governance mechanisms, institutional operations and policy development (Little and Williams, 2010). Increased participation in governance does not necessarily demonstrate a more democratic working with students, conversely it may entrench and promote consumerist perspectives that seek to develop a product, in this case an 'education'.

The term 'student voice' has become a very widely used term across higher education, identifying a wide variety of practices. At a basic level, student participation or involvement can be the "listening to" and "valuing of" student views regarding their learning experience (Seale, 2010) and may be enacted through formal mechanisms such as module evaluations, reports, student/staff committee meetings, institutional surveys, the National Student Survey and metrics of teaching excellence (Naidoo and Jamieson 2005). However, at a more advanced level the term 'student voice' is characterised by a form of participation or involvement that sees staff working in partnership with students as equals to influence change, empowering them to take an active role in shaping or changing their education (Seale, 2010). Bovill and Bulley (2011) provide a helpful continuum of how students can participate in enhancing learning and teaching utilising Arnstein's ladder of participation. The approach is applied to the field of curriculum design and is a useful example of how students can participate at differing levels of engagement appropriate to the individual.

As Freeman (2016) suggests, there is a need to question more closely the relationships and experiences that are produced by the types of student voice that are used and valued within higher education currently. Applying a student voice lens, it is important to consider how students can participate and be included in both the formal and informal mechanisms of governance in an institution, and poses important questions: What is the purpose of student involvement? How much or little involvement do students, staff and managers feel that students should have? What role/s do students, staff and managers feel that students should play?

Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felton (2014) define partnership as:

a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision-making, implementation, investigation, or analysis (Cook-Sather et al., 2014, pp.6-7).

It could be proposed that through the development of a partnership model it is possible to include students in institutional governance, moving beyond the marketised approaches of the 'you said, we did' styles of listening and responding to students.

### **From Consumerism to Partnership**

Relatively early in the partnership movement Little and Williams (2010) concluded that whilst institutions view student voice as central to enhancing the student experience, more emphasis seems to be placed on viewing students as consumers and less on viewing students as members of a learning community. Raaper (2018) suggests that the consumer identity is imposed and enforced on students by the various legal and policy frameworks that have been introduced in the last decade, with little known about its actual effect on students' views of themselves. Whilst not all forms of consumerism can be viewed in the same way, the concern is that students may start to behave as passive recipients in higher education models of the student/university relationship, restricting their full involvement in a learning environment.

The increased prominence of the notion of student as consumer alongside a more expanded and differentiated higher education system has meant that quality assurance processes have become a means of engaging students (Little and Williams, 2010). Adopting such approaches poses the risk of conflicting with notions

of partnerships in learning endeavours and provides a clear indication of the dichotomy between the formal requirements of student involvement to meet the requirements of the QAA; and providing students with the opportunity to be involved in quality assurance and enhancement processes. This is further compounded by the demand on institutions to meet the increasing requirements of a competitive market, scoring well on measures that are reported publically e.g. the National Student Survey, employability figures and salaries and the number of good honours degrees (Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005) all of which link to performance in the Teaching Excellence Framework and university rankings.

The positioning of a 'student as consumer' has been established by the increased expectation of students to fund tuition fees and the invitation to students to navigate higher education as a market, making informed decisions and judgments about the value for money of knowledge, learning, teaching and space. Neary (2016) suggests this has been further compounded by the introduction of the Consumer Act in 2015, which positions the university as a trader and supplier of educational services, creating contracts between students and their institution. In addition, Neary (2016) proposes that legal relationships with students in this manner are by their nature antagonistic and undermine the material basis for partnership working with students. The governmental policy changes and developments have created an increased emphasis on student satisfaction with the resulting effect of needing to respond to both the demands of students as individual learners and indeed student demand in aggregate (Streetling and Wise, 2009).

With consumerism has come an entitlement culture, where 'what should I do' has turned into 'what can I get' from the part of the students. Naidoo and Jamieson (2005) propose that there is a belief by students that getting a 'good degree' is an entitlement paid for by their fees, with the desire for a good honours degree (2:1) framed by its subsequent bargaining power in the job market. Furthermore, Gourlay & Stevenson (2017) suggest that the lack of pedagogical focus in the reforms of higher education promotes the idea that the student is engaged in a financial transaction with the university for private and capital gains, linked directly to employment. These changes appears to be justified and supported by an increasing acceptance that this is the purpose of higher education, a provision that appears to eliminate transformational opportunities and the development of scholars (Molesworth et al., 2009).

An entitlement perspective shifts the form of student voice and partnership to one which is different to both audit-focused and emancipatory approaches. The result is a changing dynamic between staff and students that makes it more difficult to work together in a reciprocal manner. Such approaches suggest the neoliberal agenda of government has succeeded and that students have fully internalised the neoliberal view of higher education (Troschitz, 2017). However, the student revolts of 2010 in the UK are a reminder that not all students act as passive consumers and when pushed they have the capacity to transform to more radical proponents, willing to fight government changes affecting students in both further and higher education (Myers, 2017).

Molesworth et al. (2009) argues that a marketised higher education environment prevents those who have the capacity to co-create a pedagogically sound experience from doing so, due to the importance of audit measures. Furthermore, Molesworth et al. (2009) believe at present a 'good' education is based on economic growth, 'profitable' higher education institutes and satisfied student-consumers rather than, and regardless of, ideas of sound pedagogy. Hence a 'good' education as defined by a neoliberal agenda may even be in critical opposition with both the pedagogic literature that privileges deep learning and the development of scholars.

Barnett (2011) believes that the notion of the student as a consumer is not fixed, but needs to be identified outside a discourse that conceives higher education in purely instrumental terms as an investment in human capital. Therefore, what is required is a shift from a complaints culture with its associated assumption that students are driven by consumer expectations, to a position that encourages students to co-create the learning and teaching environment. As a result, a number of models or metaphors have been suggested to help define the student/university relationship such as 'students as co-producers' (McCulloch, 2009), the concept of 'communities of practice' in learning (Streetling and Wise, 2009), students as partners (Healey et al., 2014; Cook-Sather, Bovill and Felton, 2014) or more radical alternatives such as students as producers (Neary and Winn, 2009). The model of student as producer distinguishes itself from the other examples, which look to reform practice, by questioning whether the neoliberal university needs to be replaced and reconstituted as a new form of dissident institution (Neary and Saunders, 2016).

However, Dunne and Zanstra (2011) identify that there are commonalities in the partnership based approaches that attempt to reform and redefine the relationship with students in a different way to those offered by a consumerist perspective in higher education:

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, p.4).

Dunne and Zanstra's vision is set within the context or belief that listening to the student voice implicitly supports the perspective of student as consumer, as opposed to engaging students as researchers or 'change agents' which positions the student as an 'active collaborator' and 'co-producer' promoting transformational opportunities (Dunne and Zanstra, 2011).

In agreement with Carey (2013), I would advocate that there are clear ways in which opportunities for students can be created to enable students to participate in the design of their learning. Examples in practice of students working in partnership with staff can be found in the development of co-curricular and course design (Bovill et al., 2011; Carey, 2013; Brooman et al., 2015); as researchers or co-producers (Neary and Winn, 2009; Peseta et al., 2016); student-as-partners (Seale, 2010); student involvement in governance processes (Bishop et al., 2012; 2016); and students as consultants on teaching (Crawford, 2012).

Whilst the above examples demonstrate how students can be involved in improving learning and teaching, few studies have sought to examine if it is possible to bring different activities and approaches together to build and develop a culture of partnership and transformation with students. Therefore, what is required is a collective institutional approach that combines the aforementioned approaches, projects, strategies, student representation and evaluations/surveys to develop a culture of partnership across the institution.

The extent to which students 'buy-in' to work as partners with staff in enquiry and the willingness of staff to engage in 'power sharing' are key determinants in redefining the student/lecturer relationship (Bishop et al., 2012). Furthermore, it is important to avoid falling into the trap that students-as-partners initiatives are seen as an elite scheme (Healey et al., 2014) with limited scope in terms of the number of



opportunities and the extent to which it reaches the wider student bodies. Therefore, to develop into mainstream opportunities, institutions must identify how it is possible to grow and expand isolated projects that promote the student-as-partner in 'pockets' of an institution to approaches that are available and accessible by the whole student body (Peseta et al., 2016).

Carey (2013) suggests that partnership needs to become a living feature of the learning assessment strategy, which is an on-going process throughout the whole learning experience, not just a one-off exchange or involvement. More radical co-operative models to the structure and organisation of an institution have been cited by Neary and Winn (2017). A co-operative model of higher education places employees, students and members of the local community as governors of the institution, which has the potential to secure universities and their knowledge products as a social rather than private asset (Neary and Winn, 2017). A partnership model may not be quite as radical as a co-operative higher education institute, however, as Healey et al., (2014) identifies what is required is a shift to a:

whole-institution approach to partnership, in active collaboration with professional services, educational and learning development, academic departments, students' unions and student societies, which extends beyond learning and teaching to encompass institutional governance and other aspects of the staff and student experience (2014, p.10).

Adopting a whole-institution approach to student voice and partnership could still constitute as a radical approach to conventional models of governance, questioning the roles students, academics and institutional staff can play in higher education. Partnership approaches should assist in problem solving at a local level and has the potential to help build a sense of community (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013; Healey et al., 2014; Cook-Sather and Felton, 2017) and social capital (Zuo and Ratsoy, 1999; Bergan, 2003). In addition, Bovill (2017) suggests how partnership approaches need to be flexible, as it may not be desirable to aim for full partnership all the time and that students or staff may be in control at different stages of the work. Consideration therefore needs to be made into how the balance of power can be shifted between staff and students. As Matthews (2017) suggests, adopting approaches such as student-as-partners is difficult and therefore cannot be used like a recipe card as there is no magic formula. Therefore, students and staff need to navigate ways in which they can come together, exploring at what stages

and in what ways students can be involved.

### **Consideration for Practice**

In summary, the paper has argued the need to develop institutional approaches to student voice, which adopt a partnership approach. Adopting a partnership approach to the enhancement and assurance of learning and teaching has the potential to rekindle higher education as a site for personal transformation that has benefit to wider society, countering consumerist and audit-focused approaches. From the combination of my arguments and the work of Robinson and Taylor (2007) the following recommendations emerge for practitioners who are involved in the development of institutional approaches to student voice:

- Develop clear communication and guidelines that enable all people involved to understand the remit of the work and what this will involve, especially on the part of the student. For example, mentoring undergraduate research, facilitating service learning, designing and leading study modes and advising on learning communities;
- Develop inclusive participation from all voices ensuring that those voices that are harder to reach are heard, ensuring student voice does not become homogenous;
- Consider ways power can be shared with students especially in formal settings and governance structures, working to involve students-as-partners from the outset, providing ownership and a sense of shared responsibility. For example, using staff and student co-chairs, considering meeting formats and how members input to agenda items;
- Provide space for change and transformation, listening to learner voice alone is not sufficient, therefore it is important to include students in shaping outcomes and solutions.

The recommendations proposed are by no means exhaustive. However, it is important to encourage staff and students to consider how opportunities can be created that empower the learner in the higher education sector and importantly work across the institution as a whole, including academic, support departments and the students' union. Adopting such approaches has the potential to provide a shared vision and culture that fosters the development of learning and teaching across the

institution. The aim should be to move to a position where members of the academic community have equal status and agency, countering consumer orientated models of education and marketised approaches that use student voice to improve a metricised sector.

Approaches to work with students-as-partners will require buy-in from both the staff and students across the institution at all levels, a complex task that will involve the questioning of values and a change in culture and perceptions from all involved. It is also important to recognise that adopting an institutional student-as-partner approach will never be complete and cannot be achieved by isolated projects and will therefore be a continual and ever-changing process that has no fixed end point or eureka moment. It is critical that approaches to work with students must be collaborative, often innovative and creative, but importantly will be required to evolve and mould to accommodate changes in staff and students, institutional priorities, and institutional and government strategy/policy. Furthermore, there is a need for further research in higher education that evaluates institutional partnership work, assessing the positive and negative impact of such approaches, enabling the development and enhancement of theory and practice in the field of students-as-partners.

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