

Student voice in higher education: Opening the loop

Abstract

This qualitative research study draws on interviews with course representatives and on policy analysis to explore the discursive construction and enactment of student voice. 'Student voice' in universities is valued in policy and by course representatives as a 'good thing', based on rhetoric of both the empowered consumer, and of co-construction and partnership. However, the data suggests that the National Student Survey questions and the practices of course boards tend to reduce student voice to a feedback loop. In this loop, students express feedback, the institution takes this on board then they tell the students how they have responded to their feedback. The feedback loop is a significant element of the managerialist imaginary of Higher Education globally. The stages of this loop are used as an analytical frame for understanding the ways in which student voice is constructed and enacted and the effects of this.

Student voice in higher education: Opening the loop



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(based on research with Dr Lee Jerome of
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Discourses of student voice

- Democracy
- Rights discourse
- Collective solidarity discourse
- Consumer discourse



A 'good thing'

We wanted to explore:

How is student voice constructed by policy and by course representatives?

3

Course Representatives (Reps)

- Students
- Volunteer and/or are elected by peers
- Discuss courses at Course Board meetings
- Have ongoing conversations with Course Directors
- Attend training and forums in their student union (in most universities)

4

Research approach

- Interviews with 12 course reps across two universities (we have completed 7 so far)
- Analysis of policy texts

'A critique is not a matter of saying that things are not right as they are. It is a matter of pointing out on what assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged, unconsidered modes of thought, the practices that we accept rest' (Foucault, 1988a, p. 54 cited in Olssen, Codd and O'Neill, 2004, p. 40)

5

Policy context

6

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Policy context

- **England** has a unified HE 'system'
- Increasingly neoliberal
- Students as consumers
- High-profile / high-stakes performance indicators
- Increasingly managerialist ethos



7

Office for Students (OfS)

- Since April 2018
- Created to work as 'a champion of students and as the new market regulator of higher education' (DBIS, 2018, p.1)
- 'a data-led regulator' (Puttock, 2018)
- Emphasises 'value for money'
- Conflates 'student voice' with 'student interest'

8

Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)

Part of the quality code says:

'The provider engages students individually and collectively in the development, assurance and enhancement of the quality of their educational experience.' (QAA, 2018, p.3)

(Blue is the ideal but black is acceptable)

9

National Student Survey

- Measures 'satisfaction'
- Students can compare data on UNISTATS.ac.uk

84%

Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course

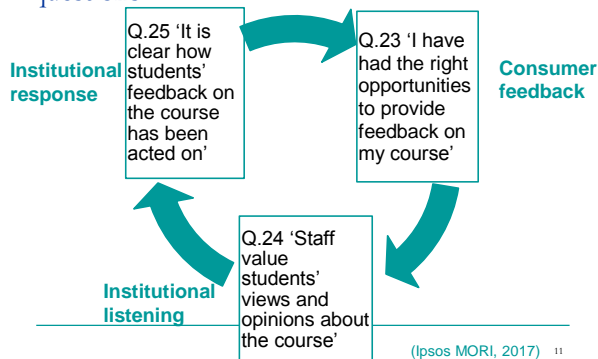
My course!

HOWEVER:

'User dissatisfaction may sometimes be an important sign that genuine education is happening' (Collini, 2017, p. 40)

10

National Student Survey (NSS) 'Student Voice' questions



11

Findings

12

Consumer Feedback (Q.23)

- Feedback has to be constructed. It is not just waiting to be gathered:

'some people, they sort of clam up, so then I kind of have to say "well I feel that this isn't working. Do you agree, do you disagree?"'
(Charlene)

13

Consumer Feedback (Q.23)

- Course reps are positioned differently to other students:

They tended to describe other students as young, indifferent or uninterested.

'you always find though it's the same people who tend to want to get engaged' (Michaela)

Similar to schools (Taylor and Robinson, 2009, pp.167-8)

14

Consumer Feedback (Q.23)

- Feedback tended to be understood as about problems:

'And so like a week before [the meeting] they send us like an email to fill out, like "okay, what problems do students have?"' (Yusuf)

15

Institutional Listening (Q.24)

- The system raised important issues around trust:

'I genuinely feel like everyone just feels like, "oh we're going to get in trouble" [short laugh] or, I just, I, from what I've seen I think it's more of a, "oh no they might not like us if we say this"' Charlene)

Florence felt that feedback should be anonymous 'because the lecturer marks your assignments'

16

Institutional Response (Q.25)

- Not all feedback can or should be acted on.

Michaela trusted staff and valued responsive changes such as on the need for extra maths and IT developments in halls. However, when she was asked about her answer to NSS Q.25, she only answered with 'Neither disagree or agree' saying "Because there's some things they say there is just nothing that the organisation is going to do.... Like say with that timetabling thing"

17

Institutional Response (Q.25)

- Temporal issues suggest students are acting as more than consumers:

Students recognised that their feedback might help next year's students more than them but they felt this was important.

18

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Institutional Response (Q.25)

- The loop constructs a managerial logic:

“it helps the staff as well, to understand like what’s working and what’s not working”
(Charlene)

19

Summary



- The feedback loop is one element of managerialist public sector reform and reflects a narrow conception of student voice.
- Each stage of the loop has significant effects on how different students and their relationships with staff are constructed.
- Student responses are more complex than a consumer/citizen binary might suggest **BUT** there is a danger that democratic constructions of student voice are marginalised.

20

Thank you!

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21

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22

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23

Extras

24

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TEF ranking



<http://www.lsbu.ac.uk/about-us/teaching>

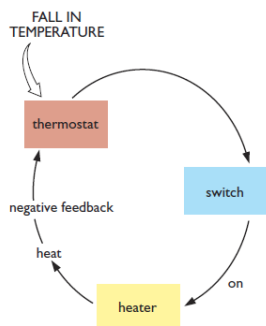
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Original research questions

1. How do discourses of 'student voice' operate in national policy texts? What subject positions are available to students?
2. How are representation and inclusion conceptualised and enacted in relation to 'student voice'?

26

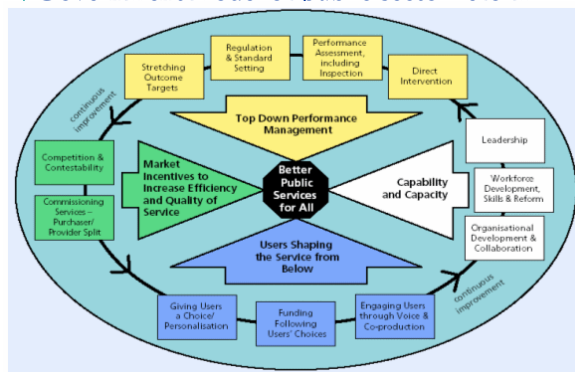
A feedback loop



<https://dc.edu.au/hsc-biology-maintaining-a-balance/>

27

Government model of public sector reform



Cabinet Office, 2006 cited by Coffield, 2006 - <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/164948.htm>

28

Deliberative democracy

- Contrasted with aggregative models
- Dialogue can transform preferences
- Unlike a market model
- Problematic concept with issues around elitism, consensus and rationality
- John Dryzek and Iris Marion Young emphasise the recognition of difference and challenging of existing power relationships

29