Student Voices – disengaged, controlled, empowered?

Sellar and Gale (2011) discuss mobility, aspiration and voice in relation to the emerging developments within Higher Education (HE) that continue to create 'stubborn problems' for the engagement of disadvantaged groups. The research in this paper explores the articulation of 'student voice' as a desirable and necessary accessory to HE quality assurance processes whilst questioning how student voices are engaged within their institutions. The wider and more substantial conception of voice raised by Sellar and Gale is reiterated by a range of literature in the field of student voice, relating voice to empowerment, development and capacity(Faux et al., 2006; Kezar, 2005; Seale, 2010). This literature plays a pivotal role in developing an alternative meaning to dominant policy discourses of student voice which is closely aligned with students as learning partners.

Normalised conceptions of HE being part of a traditional University model can be identified as part of the discourses of aspiration shaping both student and staff expectations of HE experience. For many students within non-traditional HE settings such as colleges, the student voice agenda is often contextualised within a traditional experience to meet Higher Education Institution (HEI) standard quality processes and national requirements (i.e National Student Survey (NSS)). The irony of this situation is that student voice literature from schools and colleges (Faux *et al.*, 2006; Walker & Logan, 2008) points to more progressive practice which has contributed to positive experiences of students as learning partners, directly impacting on student experience.

This research aimed to examine and heighten awareness of HE student voice within a University's college network and investigate how it is articulated as part of the promotion of HE identity and experience. The culture of Further/Higher Education (F/HE) is a significant factor in terms of the student learning experience. Validator's expectations of these students and their experience is required to be of parity with HEI's counterparts and is measured in ways that constitute the academic landscape of the University. In such circumstances a pertinent concern arises in relation to the cultural language and function of student voice. F/HE students are part of a national HE system situated within a cultural and institutional aegis dominated by the volume and practice of FE (Parry, 2009). This research aimed to investigate the ways in which college based HE conceptualises and operationalises student voice within dual sector environments.

Initially, focus groups were held with a small group of cross college institutional student representatives and then with college course representatives within the college environment. The focus of the NSS was used in order to specifically engage these students and gain some perspective on the low participation rates which had previously been reported within many college settings. This also gave scope to

identify and measure individual institutional engagement with this particular national census tool which is couched in traditional university culture and contextualisation. College student meetings were observed and recorded to gain a wider picture of institutional practice and various interviews were conducted with student union officers and student representatives to ensure a range of perspectives were captured.

The use of 'ideal types' as heuristic devices to encapsulate potential models of social action has been used by social commentators to demonstrate potential categories of behaviour or action. We have adopted this approach as a tool to illustrate the range of behaviours and actions that have been observed as part of this project. Three ideal types that constitute points in a continuum of student voice activity have been distilled from the data collected and analysed. The categories are represented by the terms: Disengaged, Controlled and Empowered.

It should be noted that, these ideal types do not reflect institution size or student numbers, but practices identified and observed across a range of college HE settings and practice. The three categories (Disengaged, Controlled, Empowered) have been generated from analysis of observation and student focus group data and represent caricatures of institutional culture. Where students felt empowered, this was clearly represented by a focussed 'buy in' from senior management. Respect and reciprocal engagement within the student community flowed and was evident through participation rates demonstrating a vibrant and effective student voice. Conversely, where ownership was not attributed nor a clear structure was in place, dis-engagement was evident. Where action had been controlled, structured and managed by the college, this produced what could be best described as minimal representation and innovation from students. It could be argued that for many colleges there exists an uncertainty in relation to the function and operation of HE student voice. In some settings assumptions are made that the HEI 'imposed' quality assurance approach is the legitimate and valid manifestation of student voice. Other college settings have tried to build on successful FE models but sometimes without an appropriate adjustment to the level and nature of HE study and HE student identity within non HEI environments. A key factor for successful development would seem to lie with the strategic recognition of HE student voice from senior levels of management, enabling empowerment without imposing restrictive managerial constraints.

To conclude, F/HE is often trapped between the pressures and demands of both cultural institutions and what Parry describes as the 'assumptive architecture of HE' (Parry, 2009) with a tendency towards mimetic isomorphism (Garrod & Macfarlane, 2009) and the replication of an assumed superior HEI model of student voice. This research demonstrates that where F/HE has empowered students to extend on FE models (Faux *et al.*, 2006; Seale, 2010), and adapt for HE requirements, engagement, participation and satisfaction can be raised. This said, practice

indicates where passionate students are empowered they reflect, engage and support the enhancement of teaching, learning and curriculum development through a wider understanding of institutional, local and national requirements. A negative and sometimes confrontational aspect of student forums is where they are used to channel complaints, rather than highlighting positive practice and innovative teaching and learning. Evidence from this research demonstrates students, on mechanisms such as the NSS, value 'peer to peer' input from student representatives to act as advocates, helping develop distinct identity within their communities.

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