What does 'student voice' mean to students and does anyone listen to it? (0059)

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'Student voice' has become a defining feature of the contemporary higher education landscape and continues to take an increasingly prominent role in higher education policy and guidance.

For example, while the 2016 Higher Education White Paper emphasises about student choice in reference to the idea of 'student voice'; the QAA (2012a) notes that 'student voice' is evoked in quality assurance and the HEFCE 2009 report related the 'student voice' term to student engagement.

As Freeman (2014) rightly noted, 'student voice' in higher education has a wide-ranging influence: it shapes the concerns of management and academics, changes the organisation and content of degree courses and at times, challenges authority.

However, although the growing significance of 'student voice' has led to universities exploring various means of engaging students, the term encompasses a flurry of ideas and practices and is not clearly defined in literature.

For example, while Faux et al. (2006) defined 'student voice' as a process leading to empowerment through active engagement with those in positions of power, McLeod (2011) noted that 'student voice' is a complex concept that can be viewed in association with transformative practice, democratic or participatory systems; the promotion of inclusion and diversity or support for student right. Fletcher (2006: 1), on the other hand, widely defined 'student voice' as the "individual and collective perspectives and actions of young people within the context of learning and education that can include, but is not limited to, active or passive participation, knowledge, voting, activism, service, opinions, leadership, and ideas."

Thus, despite being a catchword in higher education, the exact nature of 'student voice' remains highly contested and important questions remain unanswered. For example, while other studies have focused on student voice, democracy and rights (McLeod, 2011; Shannon 1993); student voice and quest for involvement in university decision making (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013); student voice being replaced by the customer voice (Williams, J., 2010); and student voice in participatory curriculum design (Bovill et al, 2011); literature has underexplored the following, which my study asks: What does student voice mean to the wider student body, other than course representatives and the students' union who undergo student engagement training? Do students think they have a voice? Does anyone listen to it?

My research attempts to fill this gap in literature by asking students and academics their understandings of the aforementioned questions.

The paper will, therefore, report preliminary findings from an ongoing research project in which I engaged qualitative investigation into the 'student voice' idea by conducting 12 semi-structured focus-group discussions with students at four institutions in the UK representing a diversity of history and a range of positions within the popular league tables. This was supported by semi structured interviews with 4 academic staff and 16 senior academic staff at the four institutions, using similar criteria. The senior leaders within institutions were people employed at a senior level with significant responsibility for teaching and learning and/or the student experience.

The findings indicate that students' responses, and those of academics about the meaning of 'student voice' were more varied, suggesting the multi-dimensional nature of the student voice phenomenon. For example, while 'student voice' means different things to different students, with most of the participating students pointing to ability to voice opinion and concerns about their education and being heard with evidence of taking action to their suggestions, most of the academics involved in the study mostly pointed to feedback mechanisms like class representatives and surveys (institutional and national) as being evidence of 'student voice'.

The study has also revealed inconsistencies about practice. Students have been recognized by many commentators as the "principal stakeholder" in higher education (Harvey, 1996). However, despite majority of participating senior academic leaders maintaining that there has been enhanced collaboration and student engagement which has seen incorporation of student representatives at various institutional levels and 'student voice' amplified in the process (Williams and Mindano, 2015), majority of students I spoke to believe that they have a voice but universities do not listen to it. Thus, some of the students involved in the study reported that while they are heard in class and believe they have ability to influence changes therein, they mostly feel 'patronised' as universities have put up structures and demonstrate having listened without necessarily changing practice.

As most of the academics who were interviewed pointed to feedback mechanisms as evidence of 'student voice', the study explored a disconnect between accounts of senior academic leaders and students concerning value of feedback mechanisms and if indeed, they are a representation of 'student voice'. While majority of the senior academic leaders I interviewed indicated that feedback mechanisms including surveys are a good sounding board for 'student voice', majority of the students in my focus groups reported that most student feedback mechanisms are not a true representation of their voice. The students stated that most of the instruments like the NSS are blunt and students fear being too honest and subsequently ranking their universities low may have complications in their job prospects.

Consequently, the participating students' reported that they mostly take part in the feedback mechanisms not necessarily with the hope of being heard but to avoid being 'pestered' with

emails about surveys. The students involved in the study also indicated that incentives like Amazon vouchers are the main motivation for their participation in feedback mechanisms as they do not have much trust in prevailing 'student voice' systems.

Like Harvey (2003), who suggested the need to move away from formal evaluation surveys at the end of modules as the primary source of feedback and to look for more qualitative, dialogic methods, my findings agree with this suggestion as some of the participating students reported that they are inundated with emails and surveys and would prefer more face to face dialogue to provide express their voice than through surveys.

Interestingly, some of the participating academic staff reported that as 'student voice' is being enhanced by universities through various mechanisms including the NSS, they feel squeezed and their voice dismantled in the process, corroborating with other studies including Frankham (2015), who found that mechanisms like the NSS have made institutions place a huge weight on academics.

Key References

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