Have we neglected UK universities' role in mediating the student experience? (0382)

Richard Budd[1] [1]*Liverpool Hope University, United Kingdom*

Overview

This paper considers question of how individual universities might mediate the UK student experience. While we often see case studies situated within higher education institutions, the role of the university tends be presented as the backdrop to sectoral or identity perspectives, perhaps for ethical considerations or to obtain permission for access to participants. It will be suggested that we could benefit greatly from foregrounding the position of the university more, exploring and analysing how contemporary students' experiences are shaped locally, through universities' social configurations, their organisational cultures, and how they are constituted as places and spaces.

Literature

The research around students' experiences of UK higher education largely falls within two overlapping areas, social background, and neoliberalism.

The first of these relates to student identity, and particularly around social class (e.g. Reay et al., 2009; Bathmaker et al., 2013). Scholarship has extensively documented and analysed that, and how, students from disadvantaged backgrounds do less well as school, are less likely to go to university and particularly elite universities, may find it more difficult to engage with aspects of university life than their more affluent peers, and are subsequently underrepresented in the professions (Budd, 2017a). Other social background dimensions such as race, disability, religion and gender orientation/identity have received less attention (NUS, 2011; Runnymede, 2015; Falconer & Taylor, 2017). However, the emerging literature in these areas, when combined with what we know about working class students in higher education, shows that students from minority groups are often marginalised in pernicious ways.

The second set of literature focuses on the marketization of universities and how this may encourage in students a passive, instrumental orientation towards their degrees (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005). There is a limited research base here, but as far as we can tell, students appear to reject the notion that they are consumers (Tomlinson, 2017). Furthermore, that they see themselves as the primary agents of their own success, while their university-related decisions are driven by intrinsic, altruistic, and social steering as well as rational calculations – often simultaneously (Budd, 2017b). A parallel track within this literature surrounds related student policies which seek to improve the attainment, retention, and student satisfaction that serve as spurious but highly visible external markers of quality (Macfarlane, 2015). The extent to which universities direct their energies towards these metrics may be mediated by the relative importance of other policies such as the REF, but it is interesting to note that the metrics themselves seem to have minimal effect on university choice (Gibbons et al., 2013).

Lacunae

In addition to expanding our knowledge of minority groups' experience of education, intersectionally (Rodriguez & Freeman, 2016), there is an argument for also exploring those of dominant groups. We know that middle class students may not face the same degree of social challenges as their working class peers (Bathmaker et al., 2016). However, there seems to be little research questioning the

extent to which those 'fish in water' (Reay et al., 2009) perceive, or are aware of, their dominant position and how this might marginalise others. There is some evidence that interacting with international students is socially and personally beneficial (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013), but that this interaction may be limited in practice (Campbell, 2012). We could, then, explore and promote inter-group student interaction for domestic students (see e.g. Antonio, 2001) to improve cultural understanding and inclusivity.

Assertions about the effects of ongoing marketization are difficult to support without longitudinal data. The conditions under which universities operate have changed, and the policy landscape seems to be in constant flux (Ball, 2014). This is certain to be having some effect on students, but we are somewhat in the dark as to what those effects actually are. There are signs that mental health issues for students are on the rise (Macaskill, 2013), which is of major concern. There may be some connection here with broader societal and political conditions, but also some which are more specifically related to the nature of university life, and teasing out and addressing these should be pursued with some urgency. There is also little examination of the ways in which universities differ in their individual responses to policy levers such as TEF/NSS which are purported to improve student engagement and outcomes, and subsequently how this influences students' understandings of, and relationships with, universities.

Outside these two literatures, there is a re-awakening in the social sciences of the role of the material in structuring human experience and action (Whatmore, 2006). There is a growing awareness and investigation of relationship between the non-human and learning (Taylor, 2017), but we know less about how the layout and architecture of universities channels student flows, interactions and shapes their experiences more generally (see e.g. Greene & Penn, 1997; Halsband, 2005). This is perhaps pressing at a time when universities are making historically significant investments in new capital projects (Dejevsky, 2016). There is also minimal UK research on the 'town and gown' dimension, in how students relate to the city in which they study – and how the city relates to them (although see Kemp, 2013 in the US).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the paper will suggest ways in which we can, both conceptually and methodologically, address some of these gaps the literature. It will be argued that we can go some way to achieving this through focusing more closely on the position of individual universities, by simultaneously considering their social composition, their organisational cultures, and the ways in which campuses do (and perhaps don't) function.

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