

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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#9K4WHAT? The voice of the actively disengaged

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**Research Domain:** Student experiences (SE)

**Abstract:** Against the backdrop global pandemic, student unrest rumbled throughout the autumn term in Manchester at both Universities. The pandemic ripped through the student population in Manchester during September and October 2020, forcing local lockdowns and clashes between students and Universities. In the wake of fresh protests from students in Manchester in May 2021 it is evident students continue to use alternative mechanisms to make their voices heard and that Universities in the city are under pressure to answer to the deafening cries of disaffected students. Votes of no confidence in senior leaders at Universities nationally and calls to action for senior leadership teams to engage in a dialogue with students potentially demonstrate that more formal, entrenched student voice structures and avenues may not be fit for purpose are not engaging students in meaningful discussions to find urgent solutions about the issues that are important to them.

**Paper:** Student voice is often understood in a very reductionistic way as a feedback loop and is a significant element of the neoliberal imaginary of higher education globally (Young & Jerome 2020) positioning students as customers and Universities as accountable entities able to demonstrate they are listening to student voice (Bols 2020:69). The result is the proliferation of student voice initiatives and representation structures in Universities which have over time become established norms, regarded as authentic and legitimate student voice which are not questioned. Student voice work that is done to students (Nelson 2015) through established norms 'binds it (student voice) to the hands of educators' (Fletcher in Lowe 2020:144) and is often neo-liberal approaches emphasising a range of different ways in which students can be consulted (Fielding 2004:203). Something that is only as authentic as the agenda it serves and the domesticated voices it elicits often foregrounds day to day issues (Brooks, Byford and Sela 2015) and presenting the palatable voice to various audiences. Authentic student voice is not always presented in a palatable form (Trowler 2018:25) and often the raw, unfiltered voices come from outside representative structures and are unwanted, unwelcome by the University as student occupy a different, less domesticated position. The student activist/campaigner position is the students engaging the University and one that shifts the power to the student and removes the institutional filter on student voice that Brooker & McDonald (1999) refer to. Student voice does not need adults to agree with it (Fletcher 2017:64) but listen and understand.

Often this voice is the voice of disaffection. Disaffection in higher education is often assumed to be linked to passivity, withdrawal, and a focus on off-task activities (Henry & Thorsen 2021:468) however active disengagement and agentic disaffection can be understood by a motivation for personal authenticity, where the students' identities are misrepresented or threatened (Skinner 2016, Henry & Thorsen 2021). If it is the case that students' feel that the representation channels are misrepresenting them and are not accessible to raise their concerns in a constructive setting (Lowe & Bols 2020: 280-281) they may move to protest and occupy the student activist position. Student activism akin to that of the 2010 protests and occupations has seen a resurgence during the pandemic and there are similarities to be drawn. In 2010 students were unhappy about the fees hike following the Browne review, in 2020 #9K4WHAT was trending on Twitter and called into account value for money as Universities shifted learning online and campuses closed due to Government imposed lockdown and social distancing measures. Students can try a University in the court of public opinion (Twitter) with leaving their sofa, tweeting their institution a hard-hitting character limited complaint, knowing the internet's power to distribute information and the effects can be disastrous (Thacker 2021), providing a an ideal pressure keg for conflict, spurring finger-pointing and accusations (da Silva 2021:2). Without ever having to join an occupation, protest or be labelled as an activist student can show their support to the social-media enabled bandwagon to cancel a prominent University leader such as Nancy Rothwell using hashtags such as #Nancyout #NomoreNancy.

Agentic engagement is action and behaviour, where students are constructively contributing, being proactive and the relationship is reciprocal (Reeve & Shin 2020) without power imbalance skewed towards institution or student. Young (2020) talks about dialogue instead of feedback and this is an extremely valuable distinction to make. Feedback is the reductionist view of student voice elicited by institutions, whereas dialogue is about reciprocity and storytelling. The most authentic student voice is about storytelling, not that voice which is sought by the institution but the voice that is offered unsolicited and as a reflection of students' self-efficacy to speak with their own agenda and urgency in a way that represents their identity. 'Authentic student engagement will test how the relationships between students, their universities and civic society are perceived and managed' (Carey 2018 15-16) and is uncomfortable as it sits beyond the parameters of the established norms. Rather than behave inauthentically, students demonstrate resistance to an imposed and undesirable positioning and identity by creating a counter-narrative that enable them to provide an authentic reflection, much in the way Henry & Thorsen identify in their case study (2021:469). Students have begun to make institutions uncomfortable with their disaffected agentic voice and going forward there should be a space for this voice to be legitimised and acted upon, rather than vilified. The existence of this counter-narrative suggest that the established norms lack authenticity and should be reviewed critically with a view to reform.

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