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Enhancing by Stealth: Student ‘Becoming’, Mobility and Engagement

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Research Domains

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Abstract

In this paper, we explore the link between mobility and student engagement. We start from the framing of higher education as an inherently mobile space and suggest that the inherent mobility might, in fact, interfere with student engagement. In contrast to approaches that emphasise spatial mobility within and across HEI sectors, we understand mobility as a process of becoming that occurs as students progress in their studies. While becoming requires engagement at least with discipline-related curricular activities, it is an increasingly greedy trajectory in which engagements are assessed based on perceived benefits and available resources. While it is tempting to link these observations with the emergence of marketised higher education, we suggest that attention should focus on how to communicate the relevance of engagements to students who are in different stages of their becoming.

Full paper

In this paper, we set out to address the link between mobility and student engagement and claim that these two shape each other. In the existing literature, mobility has been on defined movement within and across HEI sectors (Rivza and Teichler 2007), whereas others define mobility in the context of higher education as with movement from one social class to another (Mok and Neubauer

2016). In particular the later framing of mobility directs attention to access (Elwick 2019), and thereby, allowing us to uncover factors that underpin inequalities in higher education. Similarly, the notion of student engagement has a potential for critical lens. While student engagement is one of terms that have multiple meanings, it is generally defined as something positive and even desirable (Ashwin and McVitty 2015). One of the central assumptions is that student engagement is underpinned by ownership over one's learning (Velden 2013). Thereby, attention has been on how to integrate students and enhance their sense of belonging to HE (Thomas 2012) through curriculum design (Kift 2015) and other activities (Dickinson, Griffiths and Bredice 2021).

To further our understanding of student engagement, we propose a formulation of mobility that links it with student lifecycle. Instead of focusing on spatial and international movement, we frame mobility to consider the process of coming to know (Barnett 2009). While mobility as becoming can be seen to entail spatial shifts and therefore, provide students with aspiration (Tran, 2016), the central assumption is that learning results in a trajectory that emerges from exposure to disciplinary knowledge through engagement in diverse learning and other activities. While the trajectory is shaped by curriculum, we align with Engeström (2009) and acknowledge the presence of both official mobility scripts and counter-scripts. Along these lines, we assume that the process of becoming is not necessarily a straightforward trajectory but potentially characterised by periods of engagement and disengagement. Hence, the question of what underpins moments of engagement and disengagement becomes crucial as it allows us to identify how to support students as they progress in their studies. Along these lines, we set out to answer the following questions

How does student mobility, understood as a process of becoming, shape student engagement in diverse learning activities?

The data for this paper is collected in the context of a two--year research project funded by the Office for Students and Research England. The project's overarching theme is knowledge exchange in work integrated learning-based curriculum. As part of the project, we have followed 4 Pearson Business School and 3 Escape Studios students' journeys as they progress in their studies. The initial

interviews were done in summer 2021, followed by second-round interviews in early 2022. The third round of interviews will be conducted in summer 2022. As our data collection is still on-going and the final analysis is to be executed, we discuss the initial conceptual link between mobility and engagement. Therefore, the following section captures only the initial themes emerging from the data whereas the conceptual framework will be assessed further when the data collection and analysis are finalised.

Our initial analysis suggests that becoming can be framed as a greedy trajectory in which engagement in different activities is based on their perceived value. That said, the perceived value is not necessarily defined in terms of industry readiness or employability but is often something that fits in with a student's overall trajectory and available resources. The student interviews suggest that student becoming is characterised by the initial need to socialise and find one's way around in a HEI. However, the initial stage is followed by a more selective period in which focus is on those activities that students perceive relevant for their trajectory.

While it is tempting to claim that becoming as a greedy trajectory is symptomatic of the marketised mass higher education and the framing of students as clients, we rather direct attention to the factors that underpin greedy behaviours and subsequent engagements and disengagement. As our earlier work points out, industry engagement allows students to make sense of what is required and what is possible in the realm of work. Hence, extracurricular activities in a form of industry engagement could be highly beneficial for those who struggle to make sense of their becoming. Thus, the points for further research are how to communicate the relevance of industry engagement to students who are in different stages of their becoming and how to ensure that differences or difficulties in becoming do not further inequalities.

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