Representations of Student Protest: a critical discourse analysis of media, political and institutional texts relating to the 2024 encampments

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Abstract

In 2024, student protests against Israeli military action in Gaza spread across campuses. This paper examines the discourses deployed to frame the protests by those in positions of influence both outside the university (politicians, journalists, and media commentators) and within (senior administrators and other institutional managers). These discourses are situated within a broader historic and political context, showing how protests were contained (and sometimes delegitimated) by an assortment of established anti-student and anti-university tropes. Responses to the protests can usefully be seen as an extension of a programme of marketisation across higher education sectors, closely tied to funding models that impose consumerist identities on students and indebt graduates. It is argued that once universities become co-opted into a funding environment driven by competition, the campus as a site of activism and resistance is compromised.

Full paper

Introduction

Previous studies (Smyth 2017; Docherty 2018; Jones 2022) have demonstrated how a recurring set of tropes and discursive tactics are used against the higher education sectors by politicians and media commentators seeking to undermine academic freedoms, normalise competition, and frame staff and students as problems in need of a (typically market based) solution. Jones (2022) suggests that sector leaders and institutional managers are sometimes part of the problem because they respond under-confidently to attacks, or because they are ideologically sympathetic to a programme of market-based reform. This paper looks at representations of the 2024 student encampments against Israeli military action in Gaza through a critical lens, investigating how protests and protestors were framed both by external actors and by senior university administrators.

Method

Student activism has received growing attention in the literature, with a focus on how students and student unions have been reimagined in the neoliberal university (Brooks, Byford & Sela, 2015), and the mechanisms through which they are co-opted into managerial agenda (Raaper 2020). Using the techniques of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), as pioneered by Norman Fairclough (2013), and

following Liz Morrish's use of Critical Applied Linguistics (CAL) methods to decode the language of the managerial academy (Morrish 2019; Morrish and Sauntson 2019), this paper goes further by looking closely at a range of key texts relating to the 2024 students encampments. These texts include university statements and policy documents, press coverage, social media, and political rhetoric. Through this approach, which replicates that used in previous higher education research (Jones 2022; Candarli and Jones 2024) and draws specifically on the three-stage cycle of the 'PC myth' (Malik 2019), a broad sense is developed of the discourses used predominantly to frame the protests. Particular attention is paid to how market-based policy and discourses affect the responses of sector leaders and institutional managers when it comes to issues around protest.

Indicative Analysis

On November 1st 2023, then UK Education Secretary Gillian Keegan published a piece on ConservativeHome entitled *Hate has no place on campus, and we will crack down on antisemitism at British universities*. Among the familiar discursive strategies used in the piece were those that framed the sector as an international success story ("we are home to many of the best universities in the world") while also framing academics as potentially 'extremist' and universities as a site of potential indoctrination ("these ideologies are dangerous at the best of times, but even more so when in positions of power and influence"). There is a heavy reliance on anecdote over evidence ("I have been made aware of some university lecturers who have …") and the piece ends with appeals to established outside authorities ("I will be calling on [the OfS] to make full use of their powers"). The purpose of this paper is not to comment on the events in the Middle East but rather to show how pieces like Keegan's form part of a larger discourse trend that seeks to frame university staff and students as problematically 'politicised', and to discipline sector leaders and institutional managers into compliance with government policy by leveraging a newly marketised funding environment. The response of some university administrators was to attribute misleadingly high levels of power and threat to the protestors, while positioning themselves as the neutral, pragmatist decision makers seeking merely to keep their campus safe.

Indicative Conclusion

Universities worldwide stand at a crossroads, increasingly unsure about their role in society and often expected to demonstrate their value in market terms, not educational terms. Student encampments represent a unique kind of flashpoint and challenge, as governments exert pressure for activism to be seen as disruption to business-as-usual (and treated accordingly) rather than interpreted through the wider, historic lens of academic freedom. This paper argues that the university as a site of political resistance is not necessarily compatible with a funding model that positions students as consumers in search of value from a private investment, and higher education 'providers' as corporate entities subservient to the needs of the economy. As such, it is not only perceived injustices in Gaza that were protested in summer 2024 but the status of the campus itself as locus for counter-hegemonic thinking and a catalyst for social and political change.

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