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Attendance as Control (0060)

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The question of student attendance at higher education has been somewhat neglected by researchers. While there have been small scale studies that show a weak correlation between attendance and academic success, there has been little analysis of the politics of student attendance. The issue has been given a higher prominence recently because of the withdrawal of "Highly Trusted Sponsor" status from London Metropolitan University, an action which threatened, not only that university's financial wellbeing, and operational independence, but arguably the independence of the entire UK higher education sector. This was a decision that was based not on the quality of the University's teaching, research, or student experience , but on its failure to act as a proxy for the state's border control mechanisms.

Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, I suggest that this is indicative of an attempt on the part of the state to classify all "forms of illegality" (Foucault, 1975: 98) The classification is being undertaken in this instance with a view to controlling the behaviour of institutions by normalising a discourse in which the student body is, in the most literal sense, accounted for, and that this accountability is achieved through the normalisation of neoliberal ideas. Students have always been seen as independent adults, able, and expected, to manage their learning, so proposals to monitor their attendance are likely to challenge the values of many working and studying in the sector. While the primary aim of this policy is undoubtedly a desire on the part of politicians to be seen to be doing something about immigration, universities have had limited success in resisting the panoptical influence that has led to micro monitoring of other state services (schools, hospitals and so on).Interestingly there is some evidence in the literature that undergraduate students do not seem entirely opposed to the concept of having their attendance monitoring, (Muir, 2009, Bowen et. al. 2005).

Here I argue that attendance monitoring is unlikely to act as a 'Trojan horse' for closer control of universities. First, the concept of "attendance" is itself questioned by the growth of virtual provision. Secondly, "learning" can and does take place outside the classroom, most obviously in the University Library, but in an increasingly heterogeneous range of spaces. Third, closely related to the last point, is that attendance at any given teaching event is no guarantee that learning will take place. As Macarthur (2012) has argued, drawing on the work of Adorno, the kind of knowledge that higher education deals with is complex and difficult to know and is not subject to the kind of commodification that is implied by setting a requirement to attend a lecture. (This is not to criticise the lecture *per se*, rather the idea that the lecture is all there is to learning). I do however argue that recording student attendance at lectures and seminars is likely to send a message that attendance is regarded as compulsory, and will in effect render it so. Finally I argue that many events that are key to learning, in particular assessment, already require the students' presence. One cannot pass an examination if one does not sit it!

While my research is still at a very early stage there is some, limited, evidence from my survey of university attendance policies of the emergence of a three way split in approaches to attendance monitoring. First there is the traditional approach of "taking the register", usually in the form of a student completed attendance sheet, second there is what might be described as "clocking in" where some where technological approaches to attendance monitoring have been implemented, and third, there is what might be termed unobtrusive monitoring where students' movements are tracked through RFID or similar technologies. (While the last is not used in any UK university, there is some evidence that it is being discussed in a small number). Where universities have used the clocking in approach, the survey indicates that they have not been able to resist the temptation to use the data to control student behaviour.

Further evidence from the survey suggests that the sector appears to be offering little in the way of a coherent response to the threat from the Border Agency, and that a source of that confusion is that the practice of attendance monitoring does have some value to universities in that it can provide helpful data about the exploitation of the estate, and contribute to the identification of students who may be in difficulties. On the other hand, unless carefully presented, the practice of attendance is likely to be damaging to an appropriately critical pedagogy and ultimately to the value of UK higher education to overseas students because it sends entirely the wrong message to students about the nature of knowledge in higher education.

The paper draws two tentative conclusions. First, it acknowledges that that there is some value in engaging in attendance monitoring, but that it is important that it be presented as monitoring for the purposes of data gathering rather than being used to imply compulsory attendance. Second, a case is made that there are many less obtrusive, and more appropriately pedagogical ways in which universities can monitor engagement with courses. Many university libraries have entry control systems capable of recording visits. All UK universities now have some form of virtual learning environment, which can give an admittedly limited indication of the extent to which students are engaging with course material. More frequent, lower stakes assessments could be introduced. However, few of these options seem to be under discussion, suggesting that the sector might usefully reconsider what it considers as appropriate attendance.

References

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