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Rising to the Challenges of Research-Based Education

Abstract

In the current era of marketisation, the purpose of higher education (HE) is becoming increasingly disputed. Research-based education (RBE) is endorsed in an effort to address and navigate expectations of students, society and stakeholders. This roundtable will explore the challenges of RBE and how we may overcome these obstacles to give students the best education and experience. We will examine the role of student-staff partnerships (SSP) in helping unleash the potential of RBE. Discussions will be centred around balancing the expectations of students, academics and institutions in the changing HE landscape. More specifically, we will discuss the shifting dynamic between staff and students, the transformative nature of RBE through SSP, and the influences of competing priorities between research and education. To set the context for the roundtable, we will outline a case study on RBE through SSP, with four linked papers on the "Research=Teaching (R=T)" initiative in University College London.

Outline

The current marketisation of HE comes as a result of changes in the way that society views HE, now more for the private benefit of graduates than the benefit of society (Brown & Carasso, 2013). This change has justified the implementation and raising of student fees, and consequently, the perception of the student as consumer (Williams, 2013). The massification of HE has also created a market condition in which universities compete for students as a way to fund research, supposedly increasing the quality of provision through competition using student surveys (like the National Student Survey) to hold universities accountable for quality (Cowden & Singh, 2013). This is evident in the White Paper released in 2011 titled "Students at the Heart of the System," which seems to have given students more power over their education, while at the same time justifying why they now have to pay for it (Brown & Carasso, 2013). This new relationship between the university and its students means "the entire purpose of the university shifts to that of providing a satisfactory service; that is, flattering and appeasing students rather than intellectually challenging them through the rigorous pursuit of new knowledge" (Williams, 2013, p. 45).

Research-based education (RBE) provides a model with students as active participants in the research process (Healey and Jenkins, 2009). RBE can be an effective way to address student engagement and satisfaction while still recognising the transformative potential of challenging the concept of the student as consumer and teacher as producer.

However, challenging the traditional dynamic between staff and students can meet with resistance from both groups. Teachers often do not want to give up the power they have in the classroom or lab, while at the same time they may struggle to acknowledge the student as an expert in the student experience and a valuable collaborator (Allin, 2014; Cook-Sather, 2014). Students may resist RBE and SSP because they prefer more passive methods of learning (Bovill, Cook-Sather, Felten, Millard & Moore-Cherry, 2016), or on the grounds that as consumers they are paying for a service and teachers avoid doing their job by asking students to do more work (Fielding, 2004). However, in these struggles lies the potential for a disruptive and unsettling experience that can transform the way that student and staff view knowledge production and consumption (Cook-Sather, 2014; Cousin, 2010). Transforming the way that staff and students think about knowledge production is also important because of the recent implementation of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), which puts pressure on universities to excel at two activities that are often at odds with each other (Stromquist, 2007; Healey, 2005). These external assessments of teaching and research may also highlight the perception of society and stakeholders that teaching and research are separate. RBE offers an opportunity to combine research and teaching in a way that benefits both staff and students and helps create a research community and a research identity for students.

To address these challenges, the "Research=Teaching (R=T)" project was created in 2015 as a way to link RBE and SSP in University College London (UCL). The project is part of the UCL Connected Curriculum initiative, which is an institution-wide RBE programme (Fung, 2017). Students from across UCL worked with leading researcher-educators in the R=T initiative by hosting seminars on RBE for UCL students and staff. The students reflected on their experience, undertook relevant research and wrote up scholarly materials with their partner academics on pedagogy linked to RBE. The materials written and edited by the students from the forthcoming book (Tong, Standen and Sotiriou, forthcoming in 2018) are used in UCL Arena, a staff development programme. The R=T initiative therefore represents a novel approach to RBE through SSP, with students working together with academics to shape HE pedagogy in a consortium setting.

In this roundtable discussion, we will examine the role of SSP as a model for unleashing the potential of RBE. We will first set the context by outlining the four linked papers on the R=T initiative as a case study:

1. Relationships between RBE and SSP: By considering how RBE and SSP can inform each other in R=T, these two fields will become stronger and HE will be better able to meet the challenges of society and stakeholders by developing active, responsible citizens.

2. Students' perception of SSP in R=T: A better understanding of student perceptions and expectations can lead to more effective relationships within

institutions, the development of appropriate systems to encourage and support these relationships and making HE institutions a collaborative place.

3. Graduate teaching assistants as student-researcher-teachers, and their roles in R=T: By focusing on GTAs, a group of students whose experience has often been overlooked, in the context of research-based education, we question the traditional academic hierarchies.

4. Engaging students and staff in praxis: Students as active participants in their own education and research about their education gives them the power to question and challenge what is taken for granted and to act as change agents.

After introducing the papers on the R=T initiative as a case study, the main part of the roundtable discussion will focus on the following questions, taking into account the national and international contexts:

1. How can the traditional hierarchical relationships between students and staff be challenged, given the contexts of the marketisation of HE?
2. How can we strike a balance between the transformative aspects of RBE and the employability-driven agenda in HE?
3. Under what conditions is RBE an effective form of synergy between research and education, given that the term RBE implies asymmetries with education being the objective? How do these conditions change from research-focused institutions/ academics to teaching-focused institutions/ academics?

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