

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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From Students to Professionals. Constructing Student Politics in English Students' Unions

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Research Domain: Student experiences (SE)

Abstract:

Informed by a Foucauldian theorisation, this paper explores the ways in which a selection of sabbatical officers - full-time student officers elected to students' unions by their members - from English students' unions formed their political subjectivity during the policy consultation processes leading to the Higher Education and Research Act 2017. Discourse analysis demonstrated a strong influence of the unions' professional staff and the National Union of Students on sabbatical officers' work. They guided the officers in writing a response to the Government consultation document and lobbying politicians. The shift towards professionalisation, however, received diverse responses from participants. Some perceived it leading to necessary policy amendments; others were concerned about wider depoliticisation of the student movement. The paper will conclude by questioning whose agency the sabbatical officers exercise in such processes as higher education policy consultation: that of students or professional staff?

Paper:

Background

There are various media and policy claims made that undergraduate students worldwide have become disconnected from conventional forms of politics such as student unionism, elections and participation in political parties. Recent research argues that students' unions, which used to be the hubs of political activism have turned into advisors and service providers within a system where universities need to increase student satisfaction, institutional efficiency and competitiveness (Brooks et al. 2015, 2016; Klemenčič 2014; Raaper 2018, 2019). They are increasingly seen to represent student (as consumer) interest (Klemenčič 2014), e.g. unions' representatives are invited to sit in various institutional committees and participate in multiple national higher education (HE) policy consultations. This paper centres on the role of students' unions in the consultation processes leading to the recent Higher Education and Research Act 2017 in England (HERA 2017). The reform introduced the controversial Teaching Excellence Framework and established the new regulatory

body, the Office for Students (DfBIS 2016).

The paper starts by discussing the HE policymaking as an increasingly complex network of relations within which student groups have become important actors (Ball 2010, 2013). As part of HERA 2017 consultation, student representatives in the form of students' unions along with other interest groups such as universities, think-tanks and research councils (as well as private enterprises such as Rolls Royce and IBM UK) were asked to provide feedback on the proposed reform (DfBIS 2016).

Theoretical and methodological approach

The paper is underpinned by Foucault's (1982) theorisation of subjectification to address the main research question: How did the sabbatical officers interviewed - full-time student officers elected to students' unions by their members - constructed and enacted their political subjectivity during the network-like policy consultation process leading to HERA 2017? From a Foucauldian perspective, there are no 'universal necessities in human nature', only various technologies through which the subject is created or creates him/herself (Besley and Peters 2007, 6). Foucault (1984) suggests that the subject is not a substance but a form that differs in various situations depending on countless interactions with the social context. The sabbatical officers' political subjectivity - the ways in which they understand, engage and negotiate HE policy in this study - is therefore context dependent and in a constant process of being produced (Butler 1997). They need to navigate a complex and changing field of student politics that is increasingly shaped by neoliberal policies and consumerist positioning of students. This paper does not approach sabbatical officers as utterly passive or a homogenous group of actors but like 'late-Foucault' (Foucault 1982), it recognises that sabbatical officers' experiences of policies and politics might differ and be enacted in various ways.

This project included interviews with sabbatical officers from five students' unions from England. These unions submitted their official and publicly available responses to the Green Paper consultation in January 2016. The interview data was analysed using Fairclough's (1992, 2001) approach to critical discourse analysis (CDA). The CDA is a dialectical method, making it possible to explore the relations between discourse and social processes (Fairclough 2001). It is through language that the 'fuzzy divides' (Ball 2010, 155), interactions and diverse expectations become visible. By conducting a Faircloughian discourse analysis, it was possible to unpack the actions that the sabbatical officers undertook to engage with the reform, and the ways in which the interaction took place within the student movement. Each interview transcript was analysed as a text, a discursive practice, and a social practice (Fairclough's 1992). The project was approved by the School of Education Ethics Committee at XXX University.

Research findings

The sabbatical officers interviewed positioned themselves as having '*political leadership*' (Union 2, O) and giving '*a political steer*' (Union 4, O2) to the consultation. However, this leading role was constructed in relation to other influential actors such as the unions' professional staff (e.g. policy advisers), indicating an increasing influence of non-elected professionals over the unions' strategic work (Brooks et. al 2015, 2016). Furthermore, the sabbatical officers had become lobbyists and

rational negotiators who primarily engaged with politicians and evidence-based discussions. They tended to lobby the House of Lords, and they used the consumer protection law to safeguard the student interest. This professional approach to policy consultation became essential as there was a lack of wider student opposition to the reform: '*I personally struggled to stir students around the TEF, such an unsexy topic*' (Union 4, O1).

Foucault (1982) would argue that these sabbatical officers were governed by professional discourses in their unions, which in turn shaped their possible field of action. Their political subjectivity was situated within the domain of professionals rather than students. This experience, however, received different responses from the participants, indicating that students' political engagement can become part of 'the struggle against the forms of subjection' in a Foucauldian (1982, 331) sense: that is the struggle against the consumerist positioning of students and sabbatical officers. In this study, some were wanting to '*destroy*' (Union 2, O) the reform and engage with wider student demonstrations, while others were happy with lobbying politicians and '*delaying*' (Union 1, P) the aspects of the proposal. It appeared that the sabbatical officers who longed for demonstrations resisted the political subjectivity they were enforced to enact.

The findings suggest that it is difficult to mobilise students for collective action against marketisation of universities (Klemenčič 2015; Nissen 2019). In other words, 'acting in concert' (Arendt 1958) has become less likely in higher education environments shaped by competition and immediate necessities. The paper will therefore question the extent to which the students have become important stakeholders within the higher education governance and argue that students' unions have turned into a complex policy network with increasingly different actors and professional approaches to policy. The paper will conclude by considering implications to wider student movement. It will suggest that in a changing landscape of student politics, it is increasingly important to explore more subtle forms of politics that might take the shape of questioning, contesting, or tweaking the existing status quo.

Essential references

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