Student Engagement Through Partnership: A Critique

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Introduction to the Research (1)

- **Research topic: student engagement in higher education**
  - Refers to the *practices* through which students relate to staff, e.g. teaching, learning, assessment, and which, taken together, constitute the *process* of higher education.
  - Different *forms* of engagement e.g. student as apprentice, student as consumer

- **Research question: how can we generate greater student engagement in the Division of Politics & IR at NTU?**
  - Problem with student attendance
  - Problem with existing mechanisms of student representation e.g. staff–student course committee
  - Partnership as a potential solution to these problems(?)

Introduction to the Research (2)

- **Research objective (stage one): to explore critically the way in which partnership is used in higher education**

  - What is the context to the emergence of the concept of students as consumers and how is this related to the emergence of the concept of partnership?
  - How does the theory of partnership relate to the practice of partnership?
  - How does the (re-)interpretation of partnership among policy makers relate to different interests in higher education?

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Context (1): Students as Consumers

- **Economic motivation**
  - To contain level of public expenditure on higher education in order to support continuing accumulation of capital (following crisis of capitalism in 1970s)

- **Political agenda**
  - Government-promoted marketization of higher education ⟶ knowledge as commodity, purchaser–provider split, competition for students, measurement of teaching quality (Dearing 1997; HEFCE 2003; DfES 2003; Browne 2010; BIS 2011)

- **Intellectual justification**
  - Neo-liberal ideology: efficient resource distribution through instrumentally rational action

- **Pedagogical practice**
  - Transmission-oriented approach to teaching and assessment ⟶ 'surface-atomistic' approach to learning ⟶ strategically selective approach to attendance (Ramsden 2003)

- **Cultural consequences**
  - Instrumentalist: conditional and partial student engagement, grade inflation ⟶ decreasing academic standards

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Context (2): Students as Partners

- **Economic motivation**
  - To ensure that UK graduates are employable in an increasingly competitive labour market (Ramsden 2008)

- **Political agenda**
  - Transformist: redistribution of power and liability (NUS, HEA, TSEP)
  - Reformist: improving effectiveness of quality control mechanisms (QAA, HEA, TSEP)

- **Intellectual justification**
  - Constructivist epistemology: knowledge constructed through process of conceptual change (Vygotsky, Dennett)
  - Relational social ontology: how students approach learning relates to their perceptions of the social context of teaching and assessment (Ramsden 2003)

- **Pedagogical practice**
  - Student-centred approach to teaching ⟶ 'deep-holistic' approach to learning ⟶ development of cognitive skills and understanding (Ramsden 2003)

- **Cultural consequences**
  - Communitarian: 'partnership learning communities' (HEA 2014), unconditional and much greater student engagement (Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten 2014) ⟶ increasing academic standards

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Partnership in Theory and Practice

- **Abstract conceptualization of partnership**
  - Implicit assumption that both power and liability are distributed equally between staff and students.
    - Exemplified by definitions of partnership in Bovill et al. (2011) and Cook-Sather (2011)

- **Reflections on experience of partnership in practice**
  - Explicit acknowledgement that liability is distributed equally, by virtue of difference in role expertise, but power is distributed unequally, by virtue of difference in level of subject expertise.
    - Exemplified by reflections on experience of partnership in Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten (2014)

- **Hence, <u>contradiction</u> between theory and practice of partnership**
  - Problematic: partnership at risk of becoming discredited by conveying expectations which cannot be realized in practice.

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The Politics of Partnership

- **Meaning of partnership contested:**
  – Partnership as 'joint working between students and staff' (QAA 2012)
  – Partnership as 'dispersal of power' and 'shared responsibility' (NUS 2012)
  – Partnership as a particular 'culture' (TSEP 2014)
  – Partnership as both 'relationship' and 'process' (HEA 2014)

- **Contested meanings reflect different organisational agendas:**
  – Improving effectiveness of quality assurance and enhancement mechanisms (QAA, TSEP, HEA)
  – Empowering individual students: (NUS, HEA, TSEP)

- **Different organisational agendas presuppose different political agendas:**
  – Reformist i.e. reforming social structures (QAA, HEA, TSEP)
  – Transformist i.e. transforming social structures (NUS, HEA, TSEP)

- **Therefore, concept of partnership is being re-interpreted in line with, and thus accommodated to, different interests in higher education.**

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Conclusions

- **How should we resolve the contradiction between the theory and practice of partnership?**

  – Bring practice into line with theory?

  – Bring theory into line with practice?

- **How can we make mechanisms of quality assurance and enhancement more effective and empower students without using the concept of partnership?**

  – Transform governance of universities and colleges

  – Remove internal market and culture of instrumentalism from higher education

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Questions?

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