

Student voice: new forms of power and governmentality in higher education

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Mechanisms for student voice (students contributing to the evaluation of higher education) have increasingly become embedded into the daily business of universities and the lives of those who work within them. Activities relating to student voice such as national surveys, course representation, complaints, protest, and social media are subject to considerable emotional, material and financial investment by institutions, managers, academics and students. However, Bragg (2007) argues that while student voice *“is now taking a more central role in educational policy, guidance and thinking”* the meaning of these activities and the implications for those that participate have become increasingly opaque. Student voice mechanisms implicitly and explicitly change relationships between institutions, academics and students but these effects are currently underexplored.

Foucauldian concepts of governmentality, which refer to ways in which individuals come to *“freely conduct themselves in a certain rational way”* within society, provide a lens through which the power relations of student voice may be better understood (Burchell, 1996: 24). Drawing on data from a series of interviews, observations and analysis of national and university policies at two English universities (one Post-92 and one Russell Group), the research, conducted as part of my doctoral thesis, explored the different narratives associated with current student voice mechanisms. The use of qualitative case studies sought to act as a counterpoint to the prevalent large-scale technical studies of student experiences in higher education, and to recognise the experience of the academics and managers who also participate in student voice mechanisms.

The research found that participation (and non-participation) in student voice means different things to different people and is underpinned by a range of different, and at times competing, imperatives identified by respondents. These included students as consumers, accountability, democracy, equality, wellbeing and resistance. Analysis of policy documents suggested that there was often a lack of transparency about the purpose of formal mechanisms and the imperatives of involvement were often understood to be implicit. However, the exploration of different participants' understandings of their participation in student voice suggested that managers, academics and students held quite different understandings of the purpose of different mechanisms.

This paper will present examples of the experiences identified in the study by students and academics engaging in formal (student surveys, course representation) and informal (use of social media, protest) mechanisms for student voice, and will explore the associated identities and subjectivities that were produced. Through the analysis of the accounts and experiences of students, academics and managers, student voice mechanisms are problematised as influential new forms of power and governmentality in higher education, in order to develop a greater understanding of the ways that institutional and government policies influence the position of students and academics.

References:

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