

7-5 Student Experience and Engagement: “At the sharp end”

Introduction

“Our university sector has a proud history and a world-class reputation, attracting students from across the world... ..This White Paper builds on that record, while doing more than ever to put students in the driving seat. We want to see more investment, greater diversity and less centralised control. But, in return, we want the sector to become more accountable to students, as well as to the taxpayer.” (BIS, 2011, p.2)

Change will be brought about [sigh] to some extent by the students. (Participant 01)

This section analyses the ways participants (three represented in this section) portray the relationships between academic staff and students within media studies, particularly in the light of the higher education reforms introduced by the Coalition government and heralded by the *Students at the Heart of the System* white paper published by the *Department for Business, Innovation and Skills* (BIS) in June 2011. The participant responses to the changes in tuition fees that resulted from these reforms are addressed in Chapter Seven, Section 7-4. This analysis focuses on the related changes that put an emphasis on empowering the student as an agent of change through a discourse of ‘*student experience*’, ‘*partnership*’ and ‘*engagement*’ (Kay *et al.*, 2010).

Analysis

The response of Participant 01 (above) recognises the role of students in bringing about change but she sees this as limited (“*to some extent*”) and it is delivered with a sense of weariness. However, consideration of her elaboration of this remark shows a more positive approach to working in partnership with students:

I wish I had spoken more to current students. I think that they would have had, when I was doing development work, I think they would have been... To me, the team, I understood was academics and it should have been. To me, that's, and now looking at it with hindsight and recognising how these things should work, I think it should be students, alumni, employers and all sorts. (Participant 01)

The regret is associated with hindsight following the development of a new journalism course shortly after appointment as a new member of academic staff following a career as a journalist and experiencing less support from other academic staff than she expected:

The academics were the ones who said, "I'm sorry. I'm far too busy. You'll have to do it by yourself". (Participant 01)

The participant then provides a rationale for the engagement of students in the course development process that echoes some of the public discourse (researcher's emphasis):

The students are at the sharp end of this delivery and they can see very often, where there are gaps. And we forget that **students are actually really well placed** because very often, they have a huge network of other students in other institutions and they all talk, however, whether it's via social media or whatever. And so they actually are influenced. They can bring lots of thoughts into play and if we're actually not open to that, or not even listening to those then we miss out on that and I think that's absolutely crucial. (Participant 01)

This response sees students as "*well placed*", a phrasing similar to that found in the *Browne Report* that preceded the *Students at the Heart of the System* BIS White Paper:

"We want to put students at the heart of the system. **Students are best placed to** make the judgement about what they want to get from participating in higher education." (Browne, 2010, p. 25, researcher's emphasis)

Sabri considers this phrasing as implying a diminishment of the role of academics:

“Students’ agency too is simple: all students are ‘best placed’. ‘Best’ implies that there are other invisible actors who are not so well placed to make such judgments. We can assume that these actors are academics and others in higher education whose judgments are now implicitly construed as having less value than those of students.” (Sabri, 2011, p660)

Although Participant 01 appears to engage with the public discourse as her response deploys similarly wording to Sabri’s, there is a significant difference.

Whereas the Browne Report refers to students as ‘best’ placed to make judgments about their higher education, the participant sees them as ‘*really well*’ placed. This implies a view that student involvement in change is important and valued but not dominant and less of a threat to academics than that perceived by Sabri. The discourse that emerges from the participant’s response is better characterised as ‘*partnership*’ with this approach extended to “*students, alumni, employers and all sorts*”.

Speaking of the tendency to equate practical production work with the vocational, Participant 04 takes a more paternalistic view of what students should be thinking:

It’s very bad if it becomes too strong in the students’ mind because they start seeing anything that’s theoretical, critical or not based around using equipment as actually a waste of their time, potentially and you don’t want that. (Participant 04)

This response clearly privileges the academic view of the issue and, whilst considering what is perceived to be in the best interests of the students, does not engage with the discourse of ‘*student as partner*’ but is framed as (“*too strong in the students’ mind*”, “*you don’t want that*”). Whilst there is copious literature that identifies the benefits of working in partnership with students, much of it is

uncritical and fails to tackle the depth of partnership working beyond the discourse of '*student voice*' and '*student representation*' that might help the contextualisation of this participant response. Seale *et al.* (2014) do provide a critical commentary of the area that can be usefully applied here. They argue that specific issues need consideration; tutors making selective use of student representations to support their pre-conceptions, student expectations of the role of the lecturer (a discourse of '*I pay my fees, now you expect me to set the assignment and mark it?*'), an uncritical acceptance of student views because of their source together with an undervaluing of lecturer expertise, again because of its source.

This analysis can be used to contextualise the response of Participant 04. Students have a right and an obligation to voice their perceptions of what they require from a course (for example, in this case, '*we want to learn how to use a camera so that we can get a job when we leave*') and the lecturer has a right and an obligation to point out the limitations of this approach and both students and lecturer need to engage in a meaningful dialogue to resolve the issue.

Participant 18 makes this clear in his response that distinguishes '*partners*' from '*customers*' ("*students are not always right*") and identifies the need for the distinct roles of students, academic and administrative staff to be clear and explicit:

Students should be in an academic partnership, and that partnership means that, unlike customers, students are not always right. Students have responsibilities, students have roles just as academic staff and administrative staff have responsibilities and roles within a university. (Participant 18)

Summary and Conclusions

The discourses of student participation and engagement are inextricably linked to the discourses of fees and an instrumental view of higher education. The participants here show a positive engagement with the discourse of '*students as partners*'. This is consistent with the findings of Little *et al.* (2009) that identified staff and students from creative arts subjects as more likely to engage with the ideas of '*partnership*' and '*co-creation*' than other subject areas and so this analysis may not be extendable to other subjects.

Whilst recognising the benefits and legitimacy of this approach the participants have also fore-grounded the issues that arise from the power relations in partnership working that can be overlooked but that must be addressed. The student can '*get things done*' because they now have a voice but tutors have an authority derived from their position and experience that can provide a broader, more considered view. A balance between the two is likely to yield the best results.

This final section concludes the analysis of discourses of public policy. This chapter has illustrated the ways an individual and, in numerical terms (see Chapter One), small area of English higher education has responded and is responding to national scale policy changes. The discourses of academic practice identified in Chapter Six are seen here operating in relation to specific national initiatives. For example, this section shows the longstanding discourse of '*collegiality*' is migrated to the discourse of '*students as partners*'.