Editorial

Ethics and student engagement: Exploring practices in Higher Education

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Abstract

Carol Robinson and Carol Taylor, guest editors of Student Engagement and Experience Journal, introduce this issue: Ethics and student engagement: Exploring practices in Higher Education.

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In recent years there has been a move within Higher Education (HE) policy and practice in the United Kingdom (UK) and internationally, towards the development of student engagement practices. This move comes at a time of increased marketisation within the Higher Education Institution (HEI) sector, where students are paying high university tuition fees for which they arguably want value for money. This changing university landscape has led to transformations in HE-student relationships. There is a strong feeling amongst some academics that the emphasis on learning processes and autonomous learning are becoming lost in attempts by HEIs to ‘sell’ their products to customers, and that student engagement in the current climate is often marketed as another ‘unique selling point’ USP between competitive institutions (Collini, 2012). Given this context, debates about the ethical implications of student engagement policies and practices are becoming increasingly prominent; this special issue presents a significant and timely contribution to these debates.

The idea for this special issue of *The Student Engagement and Experience Journal* (SEEJ) arose out of a conference held at the University of Brighton in July 2013. The conference, *Ethics and student engagement: Exploring practices in Higher Education*, attracted a number of scholars and practitioners from a wide variety of disciplines across HEIs within the UK. They shared emerging research, new theorizations and philosophical thinking around policies, practices and politics relating to the ethics of student engagement. This special issue contains a selection of thought-provoking papers which materialised from the lively conversations and discussions initiated by the conference presentations. The six papers included in this special issue reflect a breadth of perspectives around ethics and student engagement in higher education. The papers, while individual and diverse, are brought together under an umbrella which reflects both i) the growing ethical dilemmas evolving from the transformations in the university landscape; and ii) the move away from student engagement being perceived as a wholly positive practice, to this now being viewed through a more critical lens. The special issue captures student engagement as a contested practice in some particularly acute ways.

The first theme to be explored discusses conceptual understandings about student engagement, and focuses on how HEIs can purposefully devalue certain forms of student engagement practices through imposing constraints around what they
consider constitutes the ‘engaged student’. Emily Danvers and Jessica Gagnon examine and critique the normative model of student engagement and consider how student engagement practices can become framed as either legitimate or illegitimate by an HEI. Within the discourse of student engagement, their article highlights how student activists within one HEI constructed themselves, and compares this construction with how they were perceived by the university administration. Danvers and Gagnon posit that the agency of student campus activist can be devalued in situations where the HEI positions students as troublemakers, lacking valid and critical capacity.

Alex Buckley’s article broadens and deepens this conceptual line of thinking. Buckley asserts that in the UK, the current usage of the term ‘student engagement’ implies a unified endeavor in which student engagement is widely accepted as a positive practice. He posits, however, that such acceptance fails to reflect the fact that the term encompasses activities with two distinct sets of beliefs - those that are pedagogical and concerned with learning, and those that are concerned with political rights. Buckley argues that the contrasting nature of these two different domains threatens the conceptual unity of the term student engagement. His quite controversial claim is that it is not possible for the concept to have mainstream appeal and applicability, while simultaneously claiming to have a unified set of benefits and purpose. His article, therefore, offers an interesting discussion of the benefits to be gained from a closer alignment of student engagement and critical pedagogy, a choice which, he asserts, would also bring certain inevitable losses in how student engagement in HE is to be conceptualised.

A second major theme to be addressed within the contributions to this special issue relates to the changing HEI - student relationships, and the accompanying shift in power dimensions between tutors and students, both of which have stemmed from the changing UK policy context which now positions students as consumers/customers and HEIs as service providers. Caroline Barnes and Celia Jenkins’ paper highlights how until recently, notions of student engagement in higher education focused on shared dialogic relationships between lecturers and students in various forms of critical pedagogy. However, this relationship has altered to one which is increasingly appropriated as a quantifiable measurement of ‘student satisfaction’. Barnes and Jenkins contend that this changing landscape within HEIs has profoundly transformed the
working practices within HEIs. It has given rise to students adopting an instrumental attitude to study, in which priority is placed on attaining a level of achievement which they consider to be of value in return for the costs they are paying to study, and to demands being placed on academic staff to maintain levels of performativity that ‘satisfy’ students. In this provocative paper, Barnes and Jenkins argue that such reconfiguration within HEIs has led to the erosion of the pedagogic rights of both academics and students, and that processes of HEI accountability have displaced and marginalized the significance of critical pedagogies.

Nadia Edmond and Jon Berry raise further concerns about the nature of pedagogic relationships stemming from the marketisation of HEIs and neo-liberal hegemony which has resulted in the positioning of students as consumers wanting ‘value for money’. They highlight how, within such a political climate, the value of education within HEIs is reduced to the access it gives to the future earnings of students, rather than being a collective process of learning and knowledge development. Thus, the discourse of employability in which the function of education is a producer of labour power, is now a feature in understandings about student engagement policy and practices across the sector. Edmond and Berry consider that such notions of student engagement can be problematic and assert that students, academics and wider audiences should make joint efforts to resist positioning students in this way. They argue for the reformulation of relationships between students and academics in HEIs into one of students as partners and collaborators in knowledge creation rather than consumption.

A third major theme to be addressed in this special issue relates to changing demands being placed on HEIs operating in a world in which complexity of peoples’ lives is becoming the norm. Ruth Healey draws on Barnett’s argument (2000) that universities need to prepare students for lives of ‘supercomplexity’, and posits that the ability to think through ethical issues has a symbiotic relationship with the ability to think critically (Boni and Lozana, 2007). Healey asserts that if undergraduate students in HEIs are supported to think through ethical issues, this will serve to develop their critical thinking skills which will provide students with the skills needed for dealing with such supercomplexity. She contends that ethical thinking encompasses two elements: ethical sensitivity and moral reasoning, and that learning to reflect critically on ethical issue offers the opportunity for students to develop their understanding of
ethical reality and, as a result, recognise the complexities and uncertainties within life. The paper concludes that in order to engage students in learning to think critically, ethics needs to be embedded through active, social and creative learning within each subject discipline, and students need to embrace ethical thinking as part of their disciplinary skills set.

The final theme explored in this special issue relates to student engagement practices in health education. Julie Wintrup emphasises the complex nature of healthcare education and argues that the multifarious learning in healthcare means that there is often no single ‘correct’ answer in terms of how patients should be cared for, resulting in healthcare professionals having to exercise independence and ‘voice’ when they make ethical decisions about the care of patients. Wintrup raises questions about the pedagogical implications of placing a reflexive understanding of self as central to health education, and acknowledges the need to revisit how healthcare education is conceptualised and constructed. Such an education needs to support students to develop a voice in which their carefully maintained biography of the ‘good nurse’ simultaneously enables them to make decisions which they believe are right in a given situation, and to formulate a positive sense of identity which enables them to reflect on these decisions, even when they have made choices with which they don’t feel comfortable.

The various contributions within the special issue are indicative that ethical issues and student engagement policies and practices are gaining momentum across the HE landscape. The strength of this collection of papers is its diversity; the fact that there is no one specific definition of ‘ethics’ to which the various authors subscribe opens the way for multiple debates. These debates range from what ethics means in the detailed and everyday learning and teaching practices within a marketised HE context, to student engagement as a political construct with specific political effects within institutions, to broader conceptualizations of ethics, whether as a relational practice governed by rules or moral principles, or an educative component within the formation of critical citizens. What the papers share is a focus on normative ethics in which reference is made to standards of right and wrong, and good and bad, which ought to be accepted (Taylor and Robinson, 2014, 163). Collectively, the papers highlight that a ‘one size fits all’ approach to ethical issues relating to student engagement practices is
untenable, and instead show that ethical issues are complex, varied and multi-layered, and need to be considered on an individual basis.

The co-editors of this special issue of SEEJ, Carol Robinson and Carol Taylor, would like to thank the team at SEEJ at Sheffield Hallam University, in particular Manny Madriaga who willingly gave his time to address the numerous queries which arose in pulling the various elements of the journal together. We hope you enjoy reading the papers and that the contributions make a valuable addition to the field. We look forward to continuing this fruitful line of inquiry.

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References

