Foreword by Wes Streeting

It is more than a hundred years since the first Students' Representative Councils were first established by the Universities (Scotland) Act of 1889. Today, the concept of ‘student voice’ is no less contested than it was when it was first formally introduced to the ancient Scottish universities. But the context in which debates about the value and nature of student voice is changing rapidly – both within the UK and internationally – as this handbook demonstrates.

The character of the UK education system has undergone significant change and transformation over successive periods of political reform and, with it, we have seen the ascendency of the notion of student voice as an expression of ‘student consumerism’. For more than a decade, the public sector reform agenda under New Labour was designed to introduce a set of market incentives to drive up quality and standards, involving a radical shift of power from the provider to the user. Catherine Needham described this approach as ‘marketplace democracy’ in her paper on ‘Citizen Consumers’:

*The government’s agenda for public service reform is concentrated on an objective of maximising “customer satisfaction” and expanding individual choice and competition.* (Needham, 2003: 6)

In New Labour (and before it New Right) educational ‘reforms’, parental choice was designed to act as the market incentive for improvement – informed by league tables and underpinned by a diversity of providers from the traditional ‘comprehensive’ state school to a new breed of specialist schools and city academies. The further and higher education sectors also faced significant re-organisation along market-driven lines, primarily through reforming the funding arrangements for post-14 research, teaching and training to promote a system of ‘demand-led provision’. This is not of course UK centric. The discourses and ideologies of marketisation, consumerism and ‘choice’ have also impacted in other education and other social welfare contexts globally.

Under New Labour, student voice and student consumerism were seen as one and the same – and an essential component of quality improvement. It was an intended consequence of the introduction of university tuition fees for full time undergraduate students and the expansion of user charging models throughout the further education and skills sector that student consumerism was seen to ‘higher standards’. However it is not simply that students in the Higher Education and lifelong learning sectors pay more and therefore expect more from their experience. Education is increasingly ‘sold’ to students as an investment that pays dividends in financial and social benefits later on. The system of loans to cover tuition fees and maintenance
costs are justified with ‘buy now, pay later’ messaging from the Government. An increasingly diverse range of state-funded and private providers market themselves to an ever-more discerning generation of students in more sophisticated ways. The notion of student consumerism may be seductive to some public policy makers, but it ultimately offers a reductive vision for our education system; one where students go simply to become certified, rather than educated; and one which leaves the educational process as little more than a commodity to be bought and sold in the market place.

There is an alternative.

This is where authentic student voice comes in. At every level of the education system, there is inherent value for the learner and the teacher in rejecting student consumerism without reverting to the traditional, paternalistic relationship where teacher always knows best and imparts his or her wisdom to the grateful recipient. In both models, students assume a passive role, stifling creativity and minimising opportunities for deeper learning.

In a paper for the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in 2009, Graeme Wise and I argued for an approach to student voice based on the ‘community of practice’ model developed by Professor Frank Coffield for Learning and Skills Network (Coffield, 2008). Rather than seeing students as consumers or as equal partners – a notion heavily contested by some teaching unions and many academics including some of those writing in this book – learning is viewed as a process of induction. The strength of this model is the emphasis on relationships:

... not only between teachers and students, but between students and other students, at the same time and differing levels of study. It is an approach that calls for cross-disciplinary interaction to happen much more, and in ways that involves students at every level of study (Stree ting and Wise, 2009: 3).

Within this model, students are encouraged to become active participants, not only in learning but in the process of learning. It rejects individual utilitarianism and puts in its place an alternative model based on community participation and mutually beneficial outcomes. These principles are applicable at every level of the education system. School councils could, and should, be more than a series of discussions about school toilets, uniforms and whether detentions should be abolished. They should be about curriculum, pedagogy and extra curricular provision. This is the role and the value that authentic student voice work can bring: genuine and active participation, changing the nature of educational provision.

Education in the 21st century ought to involve active participation rather the passive receipt – active in the sense that knowledge isn’t simply transmitted to students, but explored, shared and even produced through an academic apprenticeship. It should
also be engaging and challenging, rather than merely satisfying. Learning is often a difficult and frustrating experience and we ought to foster a culture in which students demand an engaging and challenging experience.

As the many case studies in this handbook demonstrate, the debate about student voice and the tensions between the old orthodoxy of ‘teacher knows best’ and the emerging orthodoxy of student consumerism is not limited to the UK. But they also point to an emerging body of practice across diverse cultures and educational ecosystems that see student voice – and education itself – as much more than a means to an end.

At a time when education is increasingly valued in terms of its economic utility, there is an urgent need to restate the value of education for its own sake. By connecting students with their learning they are taught to connect with themselves and with others. Education should be personally liberating – not just an exploration of course material but of our individual and collective identities.

In a world still ridden with inequality, education is the best social leveller there is. For those whose beginnings have placed them at the greatest disadvantage, it is too often their first and only chance at breaking the cycle of poverty and deprivation. As Baroness Helena Kennedy QC wrote in her seminal report on lifelong learning, for too many students ‘if at first they don’t succeed, they don’t succeed’.

Those students, more than any other, deserve to be heard. A good education, that involves the active engagement and participation of students, can give them that platform.

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References

Coffield, F (2008) What if teaching and learning were really the priority? LSN, London

