**The Engaged Student Ideal in UK Higher Education Policy**

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The UK government’s Green Paper (BIS, 2015), White Paper (BIS, 2016a) and Higher Education and Research Bill (2016) appear to be premised on a normative student ideal in UK higher education policy. This ideal student presupposes a transactional model of student engagement, which relies on the accumulation of knowledge capital by a systemic subject. The current government vision forms part of a long-term shift away from the discourse of social democracy since the policies of the 1960s. This shift towards neoliberal political economy is reflected in legislation to establish the Office for Students, United Kingdom Research and Innovation and the Teaching Excellence Framework (BIS, 2015, 2016a and 2016b). Rather than adding to the transactional view of student engagement based on the neoliberal student ideal, this article explores the democratic idea of a higher education multitude in which there might be a more nuanced pedagogic and socio-technical understanding of student engagement for further policy developments.

Keywords: student engagement policy; higher education multitude; teaching excellence framework; pedagogy; socio-technical approach.

Introduction

The UK Government Department for Business, Innovation and Skills published *Fulfilling Our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice* (BIS, 2015) as a Green Paper consultation document on the 6th November 2015. The policy set out a Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) designed to ‘deliver better value for money’ (7), and the resulting consultation produced over 600 responses (BIS, 2016b). The Green Paper was followed by a White Paper, *Success as a Knowledge Economy*, and a technical consultation for the TEF published on 16th May 2016 (BIS, 2016a). Just three days after the White Paper’s publication, a Higher Education and Research Bill was presented to Parliament by the Government. These policy moments form part of a longer-term series of UK Government documents that institutionalise market-oriented policies in higher education (Brown and Carrasso, 2013). This series notably includes the Robbins Report (1963), the Jarratt Report (1985), the Dearing Report (1997), the Higher Education Act (2004) and the Browne Review (2010). The development of recent White Papers from *The Future of Universities in a Knowledge Economy* (2009) and *Students at the Heart of the System* (2011) to *Fulfilling our Potential* (2015) and *Success as a Knowledge Economy* (2016a) is indicative of an isomorphism in which the projected flourishing of an ideally engaged individual student is equated with the aim of economic growth at a systemic level.

This article argues that a shift in the government conceptualisation of the role of higher education is evident in these documents and that a normative transactional approach to the concept of student engagement has accompanied this change. These developments have meant that higher education policy in the UK increasingly conceives undergraduate students as individual entrepreneurs, transacting their way through higher education, preparing themselves for high-earning success in the global field of market competition. This conception of an engaged student can be understood in the context of subject formation, which is defined here as *becoming what one is* in relation to ‘a discourse we never chose but that, paradoxically, initiates and sustains our agency’ (Butler, 1997). The development of an engaged student ideal would seem to evoke the construction of a Weberian ideal type (Rosenberg, 2016; Weber, 1949), but here the critical emphasis is on questioning the presupposition of a specific kind of student agency in policy discourse.

Students have been positioned as units of systemic growth within the political economic conception of UK higher education policy. This implies both a particular mode of knowledge production and a historically situated interplay of power relations (Foucault, 2000, 15-16). However, the restricted form of agency corresponding to a transactional ideal of student subjectivity in policy documents can be contrasted with a more pedagogically nuanced approach to student engagement for a variegated range of student needs. Further nuance can also be brought to the fore using a socio-technical approach to learning which views the question of student engagement through the lens of ontological multiplicity. The result of such a move is to enable a more detailed understanding of the context in which it might be possible to speak of a higher education multitude, rather than an engaged student ideal based on a normative transactional approach.

The historical construction of an engaged student ideal in UK HE policy

There is a trend in recent UK HE policy documents for policies to be made *about* students, and *for* employers, managers, policy-makers, researchers, teachers and funders (Trowler, 2010). The emergence of an entrepreneurial conception of the engaged student ideal in policy discourse can be traced through developments in UK HE policy since the 1960s, which have led to the individual student being conceived as an enterprise among enterprises, interacting through a set of contractual relationships. The key policy moments referred to here are not exhaustive, but represent a partial account of subject formation in the context of a market-oriented political project in the UK (Flew, 2014). Although economic concerns regarding the division of labour were significant for Robbins in the 1960s, the engaged student ideal was also a cultivated person who would strive to understand, contemplate and create the democratic conditions that enabled a set of shared social and cultural ideals to be realised (1963, 8). This inward cultivation of a good person could be achieved through the outward collective pursuit of the good society. In addition to the instruction of skills for the professions, this entailed a commitment to free inquiry, the intellectual life and social justice. For Robbins, economic imperatives were the focus of only one of four ‘social ends’ to which higher education might be directed (1963, 6). Market-oriented policies did not provide the only logic of a higher education system that was beginning to admit greater numbers of students into a relatively elite minority system, albeit one which was linked by policy to ideals of citizenship and social democratic principles.

However, by the time of the Jarratt Report (1985) two decades later, there was a much greater emphasis on the market orientation of HE policy, which presupposed a change from the student ideal of cultivated men and women to the ideal-typical agents of an increasingly marketised set of social relations. The aim here is not to interpret as self-evident the historical situation in which the term ‘pipeline of graduates’ could be used without irony as a policy metaphor (BIS, 2015, 18). The genealogical perspective adopted here sees the production of such discourse as an operational feature of subject formation in HE policy documents (Nietzsche, 1997; Foucault, 2000). While there were structural limits to the extent of marketised relations in a quasi-market sector (Brown and Carrasso, 2013), policy discourse was positioning students using technologies of institutional governance characterised by a chain of principle-agent relations (Olssen and Peters, 2005). The increasing emphasis on a business-education interface was an explicit expression of political economic discourse in which the accumulation of knowledge capital was linked to existing mechanisms of power (Olssen and Peters, 2005).

In the Jarratt Report, students were individualised customers in a corporate enterprise, run by a CEO according to the logic of effectiveness, economy and efficiency (1985, 4 and 26; Power, 1999). In the Jarratt model of university efficiency studies, students as a collective force had largely disappeared from policy discourse, except where they appear as one-dimensional customers who were economically engaged in transactions within specific educational economies (1985, 6). The difference between the two policy moments of Robbins and Jarratt demonstrates a politico-historical move which de-emphasises the contribution of students to the life and culture of a democratic community, while stressing the role of students as customers in an auditable market-oriented university which is premised on value for money. The tensions characterising this policy shift are constitutive to the continued emergence of neoliberal subject formation as a prevailing trajectory in late twentieth-century UK HE policy. As a result, the Jarratt ideal of student customers being ‘engaged’, in a specifically transactional sense, appears to partly reflect the interplay of power relations that comprise the familiar story of the marketisation of higher education in the UK.

By the late 1990s, the engaged student ideal was neither the good person, nor the customer, but a generic individual human subject called the ‘learner’ (Barnett, 1999, 298-300). The Dearing Report (1997) reflected a fragmentation of UK HE policy discourse in which multiple perspectives were unconvincingly held together by the idea of a ‘learning society’ (1). The ideally engaged learner would contribute towards the cost of teaching as part of a ‘learning society’, which used the discourse of the OECD and World Bank to integrate higher education into the normative rationality of global competition (Olssen and Peters, 2005). Students were now learning to be global citizens in an age of super-complexity (Barnett, 1999). While there are residual elements of Robbins’ student ideal in the Dearing Report, the term ‘new compact’ amounted to introducing student contributions to the cost of tuition (9-10). If universities were to be treated in increasingly instrumentalist terms, then so was the fee-paying generic learner of the tertiary education sector. In the Dearing Report, the ‘innermost subjectivity’ of the learner could be increasingly conceived in terms of neoliberal subject formation and the marketised relations of power which constituted the holder of valorisable human capital (Dardot and Laval, 2013). In short, the normalising market logic of UK higher education policy situated the student ideal in individualised power relations where engagement was defined in the form of an economic transaction.

As well as positioning students within a category of transactionally engaged generic learners, there was also a corresponding legislative account of their legal personhood. The Higher Education Act (2004) reflected a growing concern with the specifically legal aspects of student-institution relations, embodied by the individual student complainant. In a legislative sense, students emphasised their legal personhood by bringing individual cases against qualifying institutions on the grounds of alleged institutional acts or omissions (5). Furthermore, the rise of contractualism in higher education reflected this tendency towards conceiving students as legally incorporated budgetary units, who carried out transactions in the field of entrepreneurial competition with other such units (Williams, 2016). Formal student charters, which increasingly characterise the relationship between students and institutions in terms of rights and responsibilities, serve to increase the sense in which the engaged student ideal reflects a form of legal personhood appropriate to a potential student complainant (Williams, 2016). Crucially, any attempt to interpret ‘the interests of students’ was now indexed to rates of fee payment for which individual student persons were liable and judged according to the ‘provision’ of services by higher education institutions (Williams, 2016, 7-9). The forms that student engagement might have taken were now conditioned by the legislative fact that the scope for ‘matters of academic judgment’ had diminished in proportion to the financial operations of the sector (Williams, 2016, 5), whose primary feature was competition between contractually individualised budgetary units of enterprise.

The development of a transactional relationship between students and institutions can be further seen in the 2009 White Paper, *Higher Ambitions: The Future of Universities in a Knowledge Economy*, where students had become ‘the most important clients of higher education’ (BIS, 2009, 70). The policy document demonstrates an ambivalence characteristic of a discourse in which students were ‘clients’, but also ‘partners’ and ‘agents of change’ (76). Crucially, student engagement in the 2009 White Paper was explicitly related to ‘action research activities’ and ‘enabling students to engage formally with processes of change’, particularly around teaching and learning (76). However, the concept of engagement was also used in a much broader sense in the 2009 White Paper, including a chapter whose focus is ‘Engaging with our communities and the wider world’ (80). If the concept of engagement was used in a wider sense here, this reflected a communitarian emphasis on civic engagement as part of the political compromise with market-oriented economic imperatives that characterised the New Labour years (Naidoo, 2008b). In addition, the depiction of fragmented and multiple perspectives since the Dearing Report was discernible insofar as students could appear to be empowered either as a client, or as a partner, to exercise their agency in terms of change within higher education institutions. However, this ideal appears along a trajectory of increased marketisation in a quasi-market sector (Molesworth *et al.,* 2011; Brown and Carrasso, 2013). The ideally engaged fee-paying student was now faced with economic forces beyond their control, which they could at best only mitigate through mobilising strategic logics for individual empowerment.

The publication of the Browne Review (2010) made explicit the financial relations of power informing a transactional approach to the concept of student engagement in policy discourse. While policy was now framed by a primary concern for finance and reputation, the counter-point to this discourse appeared in the collective form of student protests during 2010 and 2011 (Brock and Carrigan, 2014). The social agency involved in organised student opposition points to a politicised kind of engagement with the proposals of the Browne Review, which by 2012 had amounted to a nine-fold increase in undergraduate tuition fees across a fifteen-year period. In contrast to the ideal of an individual student complainant, a more collective form of student political engagement sought to challenge policies that had been made *about*, but not *for*, students. In the Browne Review, students were depicted as rational consumers, burdened by rising fees and obliged to become skilled in acts of educational choosing that were deemed appropriate under the terms of their contractual repositioning as individual debtors.

The White Paper (2011) published the following year omitted to consider the opposition posed by student protests at the time of its release. Instead, the ideal of a ‘good student’ was an independent and autonomous member of a learning community, who could use institutional resources to learn as much as possible in a defined period of time (BIS, 2011, 33). The engaged student ideal here was an entrepreneurial *homo economicus*, who could maximise the return on their educational investment. Such an ideal was now discursively constructed around the activities of choosing, consuming and competing (BIS, 2011, 34). However, these three activities might also reflect certain types of individualised activity, which presuppose a set of socio-material relations between individuals, but which are not themselves the focus of critique or the basis of collective identities. In addition, the good student also appears as a student representative whose negotiating and advisory experience might contribute towards their ongoing accumulation of human capital. Still, the theme here was the re-ordering of power relations in HE according to a student ideal that was increasingly becoming isomorphic to market demands and framed by the terms and conditions of an engaged student’s debt to study.

The Green Paper (BIS, 2015) aimed to enable the flourishing of an ideal-typical entrepreneurial student. For this to happen, there needed to be a type of student engagement focusing on enterprise in an extractive mode of knowledge production. The correspondence between engagement and production presupposed the commodification of research and a rather one-dimensional mode of subjective self-formation (Foucault, 2000; Naidoo, 2008a). This implied that only a student who primarily saw themselves in terms of market competition would be able to thrive in elite institutions (Brown and Carrasso, 2013). Crucially, the characteristics of an ideally engaged student did not include a critical disposition towards the conditions in which they were compelled to operate according to the imperatives of choice and competition in a marketised HE environment. Student potential was to be fulfilled insofar as the one-dimensional neoliberal student ideal was a secondary consideration in the process of sectoral marketisation. However, the limits of such a process could be seen both in the structural nature of a quasi-market in higher education and in the complex nature of student subjectivity, neither of which were sufficiently acknowledged in the policy document (Brown and Carrasso, 2013; Marginson, 2013; BIS, 2015)

The White Paper (BIS, 2016a) *Success as a Knowledge Economy* equated the dreams of a competitive student entrepreneur with a trajectory of self-expanding desire characteristic of the systemic subject (5). In other words, the proposed legislative changes to higher education were now less concerned with the potential of individual students, however one-dimensionally conceived. Fulfilment was now equated with the realisable growth of economic potential by the system itself. The concept of student engagement was now considered in the narrower terms of retention rates as a proxy metric for the new Teaching Excellence Framework (46). There was also the claim that student consumers might become disengaged (BIS, 2016a, 12), but that students could be encouraged to engage with their studies through certain teaching practices whose quality might be measurable (BIS 2016b, 12). Teaching quality, learning environment, student outcomes and learning gain were the key aspects of measuring quality in which performance management mechanisms would function (BIS, 2016b). There was less emphasis on student agency in the assessment framework proposed for technical consultation, except a view of student engagement that reflected ‘what the students themselves put into their studies’ (BIS 2016b,12). This appeals to a more general everyday meaning of the term engagement, which simply denotes the extent of student effort.

Nonetheless, student engagement was also something to be ‘maximised’ and its maximisation was to be proven using additional evidence such as data from the UK Engagement Survey (UKES) (BIS, 2016b, 29). The concept of student engagement was further narrowed by the use of tax data to focus on the link between graduate earnings on the one hand, and institutions, disciplines and courses on the other (Britton *et al.,* 2016). The result is that a narrower definition of student engagement emerged from the parameters of a new dataset for Longitudinal Educational Outcomes (LEO), which was conceived as a ‘business as usual resource’ (BIS, 2016a, 59). It seems that what is good for the student might primarily be synonymous with what is good for the knowledge economy. This synonymy was particularly noticeable in the replacement of ostensible policy objectives, from the fulfilment of student potential to the growth of knowledge production and the accompanying management of student desires (Haywood *et al.,* 2011). The intellectual, emotional and social development of students was clearly subordinated to the instrumental role of a commodified higher education for economic competitiveness (Naidoo, 2008b; McGettigan, 2013). This would seem to be a reflection of the longer-term process in which the policies of marketisation have been increasingly institutionalised since the 1970s (Naidoo, 2008b; Furedi, 2011; Brown and Carrasso, 2013).

While there was a narrowed definition of student engagement in the White Paper (BIS, 2016a), there was also a broadened definition of engagement in relation to employers, government, the HE sector as a whole, policy-makers, research funders and research councils (BIS, 2016a, 46, 47, 59, 71 and 78). This broader definition of engagement resembled a similarly wide use of the term in the 2009 White Paper *Higher Ambitions: The Future of Universities in a Knowledge Economy*. Crucially, engagement was now also a type of activity that Government would be doing with institutions, students, technical experts and the sector as a whole (2016a, 54; 2016b, 28 and 34). This indicates a move from students engaging with their studies, to a systemic subject engaging with itself for the accumulation of knowledge capital. As a result, the ideal-typical competitive student entrepreneur of the Green Paper (BIS, 2015) was equated with the normative agenda of the political economic system in the White Paper (BIS, 2016a). This equation of systemic demands with a limited notion of student agency reflected the rationale for a new Office for Students, which seemed to present student agency as an instrument of market growth (BIS, 2016a). Instead, this article proposes that an imminent critique of policy developments is a starting point for the conception of a democratic higher education multitude, which does not reduce student engagement to an indicator of economic productivity.

From systemic subject to a democratic higher education multitude

So far, this article has traced the historical emergence in UK HE policy documents of an ideally engaged student figure, who reflects the systemic demands of a subject compatible with neoliberal political economy. The analysis has drawn significantly on the ideas of Foucault (2000), Olssen and Peters (2005), Ball (2012) and Dardot and Laval (2013). In addition, the works collected in John and Fanghanel (2016), Brown and Carrasso (2013), Molesworth *et al.,* (2011) and Naidoo (2008a) have also enabled the exploration of a process by which marketisation has become institutionalised in higher education policy in England. The context to both theoretical and empirical work on the engaged student ideal also includes recognition of a changing mode of knowledge production in an era of uncertainty, which has been identified as a key feature of late modernity (Gibbons *et al.,* 1994; Beck, 2000; Barnett, 2004). The narrow basis of a transactional concept of student engagement in policy documents appears to be linked to the one-dimensional character of an equally narrow neoliberal student ideal. The claim here is that we must not simply conflate our understanding of student engagement with the figure of an engaged student ideal according to the dominant political imaginary. Instead, UK HE might be conceived through a social imaginary whose engaged student ideal is primarily a member of the democratic multitude.

The historical project of neoliberal subject formation can be identified as a process of ‘accountable and financial subjectivation’ (Dardot and Laval, 2013, 15-17). This amounts to the political process of generating a relationship between the individual and him or herself that corresponds to the relation of capital to itself (Dardot and Laval, 2013). Put simply, a currency of persons, as understood by the instrumentalist approach of human capital theory, would presuppose that students in UK higher education were to be quite literally *coined* (Nietzsche, 1997). The argument made here is that this process of neoliberal subject formation has reflected an increasingly explicit premise running through recent UK higher education policy (Ball, 2012). In other words, the Green Paper (BIS, 2015), White Paper (BIS, 2016a) and Higher Education and Research Bill (2016) have been formulated as part of a longer-term project that produces a ‘fearful symmetry’ between student agency and systemic demands (John and Fanghanel, 2016, 1). In contrast, a social ontology of the multiple might enable variegated forms of individual and collective agency to appear. The viability of such a conception is likely to be conditioned by the extent to which the operations of an Office for Students could be influenced by higher education policies formulated for a multitude of subject formations.

At first glance, the Office for Students was designed for the systemic subject. This article argues that such a one-dimensional ideal might be re-conceived in terms of a democratic higher education multitude. A self-expanding system whose goal was the accumulation of knowledge capital would seem to rely on the production of a single homogeneous subject formation. This simply excludes any form of student engagement that does not function according to the reproduction of systemic imperatives. While the concept of student engagement at present seems to be under-theorised (Kahn, 2014), there is a growing sense of the need to approach various definitions of student engagement in terms of multiple *dimensions* (Trowler, 2010; Evans *et al.,* 2015). We need to consider which dimensions of student engagement we value, and promote, and we need to question whether the Teaching Excellence Framework can meaningfully measure the impact of these dimensions on student learning both in the immediate and longer terms (Evans *et al.,* 2015). It is clear that caution is needed against treating student engagement as a ‘magic wand’, without acknowledging the normative agenda to which such a one-dimensional concept might be reduced (Trowler, 2010, 7 and 9). At present, this normative policy agenda appears in ‘the deployment of the logic of the market as generalised normative logic from the state to innermost subjectivity’ (Dardot and Laval, 2013, 18). There is a clear tension insofar as market logic cannot be made socially, psychologically or ontologically authentic due to its one-dimensionality, while at the same time the systemic subject cannot foreclose the possibility of its own non-being. In other words, it is not possible to exclude the thought of a democratic multitude, but the engaged student ideal relies on a process of neoliberal subject formation which cannot abide such a thought.

The discourse of the multitude implies an explicitly critical stance towards one-dimensionality, while positing an analytical and normative framework based on a social ontology of the multiple (Deleuze, 2006; Hardt and Negri, 2006; Badiou, 2009). Although this does not solve the Parmenidean problem of the relationship between the one and the multiple (Plato, 1996), the further claim here is that an imminent critique of the systemic subject makes possible the thought of a democratic HE multitude. The intrinsic problem with a dialectic of the one and the multiple is crucial insofar as the engaged student ideal starts to resemble a composite multiple, which only appears consistent as a unity in relation to other multiples. In other words, there is no ultimately intelligible form of the engaged student on which a concept of student engagement could be based. This also problematises the possibility of interpreting a discursively constructed ideal student to function as a Weberian ideal type (Aronovitch, 2012). In this respect, a social ontology of the multiple might generate a more nuanced account of student engagement than the one-dimensional student ideal historically constructed under neoliberal political economy (Negri, 1999; Badiou, 2009; Archer, 2012).

Multiplicity as an ontological concept could provide an axiomatic basis for an analytical framework to develop policies for a democratic higher education multitude (Plato, 1996; Deleuze, 2006; Hardt and Negri, 2006; Badiou, 2009). On this basis, the ideally engaged student simply does not appear in policy documents in the form of an exemplary or fully realised psychological being. Such a historically constructed figure is composed of an inconsistent multiplicity that cannot be counted as a unity in any meaningful sense beyond its immediate discursive context (Badiou, 2009). While the theoretical and empirical limits of evoking a concept of the multitude can only be outlined here, the point is that one-dimensionality need not be the defining feature of subject formation, or of the power relations in which the social agency of students might develop, particularly in relation to the operations of the Office for Students. In addition, the problem of aligning a concept of student engagement with new forms of performance reporting in the TEF demonstrates the limits to the utopian ambitions of market reform in HE (Marginson, 2013).

The role of such performance reporting in recent policy is partly characterised by an attempt to link student engagement to measureable indicators of student effort. If students are to spend considerable time and effort carrying out an approved form of practical or meta-cognitive activity, the direction of that effort needs to move from the self-formation of transactional subjectivity to the process in which students become members of a democratic HE multitude (Dardot and Laval, 2013). It may not be possible to quantify ‘what the students themselves put into their studies’ without losing a sense of nuance regarding different student expectations and variations in unquantifiable priorities that may characterise a course of study (BIS 2016b, 12). In addition, students who question the self-evidence of performative technologies must not be omitted from policy considerations (Ball, 2015; Bye, 2015; Olssen, 2016). In other words, there is a political trajectory in higher education policy which relies on the premise that if individuals are placed in a re-ordered set of market conditions, then they will naturally learn to behave in a manner that boundlessly valorises their human capital (Ball, 2012; Dardot and Laval, 2013, 107). It would also appear that students who might challenge such a premise are made politically invisible by existing higher education policy (Ball, 2012). Instead, academic and student freedoms might be encouraged by a policy agenda that promotes a concept of student engagement rooted in a democratic multiplicity, rather than a transactional systemic subjectivity. As a result, policy-makers could start by considering the non-coincidence of student desires with the societal consequences of increased economic productivity in the short-term.

A nuanced approach to student engagement in UK higher education policy

The term student engagement did not appear in the 2016 Higher Education and Research Bill, nor did it appear in the 2004 Higher Education Act. There is only one instance of the term in the 2016 White Paper *Success as a Knowledge Economy*. Engagement in relation to students specifically is mentioned six times in the 2015 Green Paper *Fulfilling Our Potential*. It appears on seven occasions in the 2011 White Paper *Students at the Heart of the System* and twice in the 2009 White Paper *Higher Ambitions*. The conceptual role of the term in higher education policy might now simply reflect the metrics-based approach of the TEF, which also recognises the difficulty of quantifying student engagement. This would mean that it has not been considered measurable in terms of demonstrating the performance of higher education institutions in relation to teaching quality, the learning environment, student outcomes and learning gain (BIS, 2016b). However, it is still necessary to focus on the appearance of the concept in the 2015 Green Paper, prior to its reduced use in the 2016 White Paper.

In *Fulfilling Our Potential* (BIS, 2015), three references to student engagement focused on aiming to improve employer recruitment decisions through changes to degree classifications, possibly using a Grade Point Average system, and the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework. It was suggested these changes would ‘drive’ student engagement and ‘deliver graduates who are more ready for work’ (12 and 21). Exactly how such outcomes might be meaningfully sought or measured using the concept of student engagement were unspecified. Three further appeals to student engagement refer to engagement *in study*, as measured by teaching intensity metrics, such as those in UK Engagement Surveys. The Green Paper suggests that a university student who spends more time studying and more time being taught is therefore more engaged and more ready for work. However, a sufficiently coherent range of supporting evidence to warrant such a claim has not been provided.

Using the systemic view of a neoliberal student ideal, student engagement looks like an instrumentalist form of preparation for the work place, reaching fruition in employment by well-informed recruiters at the end of a degree programme. By claiming that more intense teaching, means more and better engagement, more and better jobs, further dimensions are omitted which might be fore-grounded by a more nuanced concept of student engagement. Such a concept would be predicated on research-informed pedagogies underpinned by strong theoretical frameworks encompassing a more holistic view of engagement. The notion of ‘active student engagement with their studies’ as presented within the Green Paper needs clear articulation around what comprises a deep approach within the discipline and indeed what approaches support students to become more self-regulatory in their studies. A key aim of HE should be to support a multitude of idiosyncratic students to be able to self-monitor their own performance. This could be accomplished through an emphasis on the development of students’ self-regulatory capabilities, such as development of metacognitive, cognitive, and affective dimensions (Vermunt, 1996), if they are to develop their knowledge and understanding within and beyond HE, and in order to decide how, when, and with what, they engage. In practice, the length of time a student spends being taught or studying might not be an appropriate measure with which to understand what is meant by student engagement under the aspect of a democratic HE multitude.

What is required is an informed, holistic, and fine-grained understanding of student engagement that is nuanced in the requirements of specific disciplines. Engaged pedagogies within HE need to take account of 21st century learning needs and also need to look to 22nd century possibilities; they are underpinned by a critical pedagogical stance to consider who is advantaged and disadvantaged by current models and emphases in learning and teaching within HE (Waring and Evans, 2015). An understanding of the multiple roles of students as owners, producers, and collaborators within their programmes of study and more broadly within HE to effect transformational change remains underdeveloped within UK HEI contexts (Evans *et al.,* 2015). Student experience measures have been too focused on narrow conceptions of teaching and student choice. A more current and nuanced understanding of what constitutes meaningful learning within 21st century HE pedagogic designs is needed in discussion of contact hours as an indicator of valuable student learning, along with a more informed understanding of the requirements of the discipline in such discussions. Furthermore, a move away from an excessive concern with limited classroom-based engagement metrics and towards a concept of student engagement premised on the subject formation of an HE multitude, would be beneficial. Similarly the notion of student choice in policy documents is problematic (BIS, 2015 and 2016a). Over-emphasising choice as defined by the number of options a student may take as part of their HE career may be misguided and actually undermine the quality of the student experience (BIS, 2016a).

A nuanced conception of student engagement requires an understanding of the relationship between students and the technologies they use for learning, which provide a range of possibilities for students to exercise their freedom, as students, in an academic environment. In considering the multiple roles of the student within HE pedagogies, current attempts to index a limited concept of student engagement to the effectiveness of employer recruitment might have the effect of using policy levers as a means of further reducing student and academic freedoms. The transactional approach to student engagement evident in recent policy fails to adequately consider the conditions of emergence for critical and alternative forms of subjectivity in a democratic HE multitude. For example, the socio-technical impact of digital technologies (Latour, 2005), such as Web 2.0 and mobile devices, and the existence of personal learning networks (Rajagopal *et al.,* 2012), enables the development of sets of educational practices that might not be subjected to the governing market rationality and its homogenous identity formations to such a great extent. This socio-technical approach to education (Evans and Waring, 2015) is compatible with democratic forms of student subject formation since the Web itself consists of the code and protocols created, and given away, by Sir Tim Berners-Lee, among others, at CERN around 1990. The Web, at the code level, is impossible to institutionalise or commercialise because it is openly and democratically available for students to reuse, although this is clearly not true for the devices, telecoms networks and services which are used to access it. Both by design and intention, the Web is distributed and democratically open, thereby enabling students to prioritise their own learning interactions according to individual identities, purposes and preferences.

A socio-technical approach recognises the relationship between students, learning technologies and personal learning networks which might enable the setup of appropriate forms of student interaction for higher educational development, while meeting the needs of multiple student identities. Such an approach involves a *flexibility* of where, when, how and with whom learning takes place; a *multiple learner-centred focus*; *contextual sensitivit*y, which provides scope for self-directed learning and individual contexts as well as discipline differences; and *authenticity* related to students’ personal aims (Evans and Waring, 2015). Within this context, flexibility reflects a universal design stance in advocating curriculum design that promotes access for all learners rather than focusing on adapted designs to suit the needs of specific groups (Evans *et al.,* 2015; Hockings, 2010). A set of self-regulating students participating in personally meaningful learning could deploy a range of strategic logics through such Web-based interaction, alongside formal contact hours, which might equip them with skills and literacies to redefine their own relationship to normative governmentalities. In this sense, students might be significantly freer to establish their own connections between heterogeneous knowledge-power structures (Foucault, 2010). Such an approach would be productive of a wider range of student subjectivities, whose characteristics might not correspond to the subject formation on which the neoliberal art of governing depends. In other words, students need not be positioned into self-identifying with a singular kind of systemic subject, such as that presented in the White Paper (BIS, 2016b). Instead, a socio-technical approach to learning could facilitate further critical questioning of the rationale behind policies that seek to shape higher education into an isomorphic reflection of the neoliberal imaginary (Ball, 2012; John and Fanghanel, 2016).

One example of such a critical socio-technical approach, is ‘*Living and Working on the Web’*; an accredited online module developed at the University of Southampton. The module generates interactions in the form of heterogeneous connections made by undergraduate students from a variety of international campuses, faculties, disciplines, and programmes. Teaching intensity is very low, comprising just one compulsory, face-to-face, introductory hour and no lectures, exams or essays. Module resources, questions for study, teacher-student and peer interaction, assessment, and feedback are almost entirely online as students participate in a fortnightly, topic-based Blog-Comment-Reflect-Feedback cycle. The inclusion of a varied student cohort on such modules might further indicate the need to problematise the one-dimensional student ideal that has historically developed in HE policy since the 1960s. A more nuanced approach to an HE multitude using socio-technical pedagogies would enable policy-makers to re-consider the marginal position of many students in current policy debates. This would also help to overcome the constraints of a discourse in which the Office for Students defines the interests of students as primarily financial and reputational, rather that social or developmental.

Evaluative findings from *Living and Working on the Web* include official feedback statements from participants emphasizing the module’s ability to facilitate individual student aims, the highly-engaging nature of the module design and learning process and its scope for creativity (Fair *et al.,* 2016). In this context, the proposal that TEF can use greater teaching intensity as a performance indicator, narrowly and inappropriately defined as face-to-face teaching, would seem to limit policy debates to a concept of student engagement that does not appreciate the wider variety of emerging educational practices enabled by the Web. This module serves to illustrate the need for HE policy debates to recognise the implications of such practices for the subject formation of a democratic multitude, and to enable the development of less transactional approaches to student engagement. Furthermore, the range of educational practices across academic disciplines might also involve a particular weight of emphasis on societal, political, cognitive or technological dimensions of engagement. The extent to which such variegated emphases are appreciated in HE policy cannot be separated from the positional nuances of student subjectivity and the role of higher education in providing appropriate conditions for modes of subject formation that may not reproduce existing presupposed types of ideally engaged students.

Concluding remarks

A nuanced understanding of how the engaged student ideal has been historically constructed in UK HE policy can inform a critical policy focus. There has been a consistent shift over the past few decades towards entrenching a transactional approach to student engagement based on a one-dimensional student ideal. The policy implications to be drawn from a critique of the engaged student ideal in UK HE policy include the need for greater emphasis on the idea that students can come to a recognition of the extent to which they are free to decide with what they might engage, and to negotiate how they might do so. This implies a mode of cognitive and affective student work regarding where to focus their activity in relation to a set of variegated activities that constitute what it might mean to be a student. There also needs to be further discussion of the relationship between higher education pedagogies and socio-technical forms of learning, in which there is a critical approach to existing categories and practices used to define what might constitute the object of engagement for multiple student subjectivities. In addition, there is a real concern regarding the consequences of establishing an Office for Students which only recognises a limited role for students themselves. As a result, there is a further need to discuss whether, how and on what terms the Office for Students might become the object of social and political engagement for a democratic higher education multitude.

Furthermore, the emergence of the TEF, and important debates around learning and teaching have heightened the need for a clear articulation of the core principles underpinning engagement agendas. While the recent TEF year two specification (DfE, 2016) acknowledges the role of students in contributing to an understanding of teaching quality there is still an over-emphasis on a transactional approach to learning and teaching along with an overly simplistic assumption regarding the link between student engagement and learning outcomes. While there is a commitment to consider measures of learning gain in assessments of the quality of learning and teaching in the future, the current heavy reliance on the National Student Survey remains a considerable limitation in any discussions of teaching quality.

There needs to be much greater emphasis on developing measures of quality within the disciplines and more emphasis on what co-creation, co-design and co-regulation look like from student and staff perspectives utilising robust pedagogical research to support the development of participatory pedagogies and notions of co-ownership (Evans *et al.,* 2015). Personalisation has re-emerged as a construct important in measuring the quality of the learning environment rather than teaching quality in supporting students' transitions into, through, and beyond higher education. Of crucial importance in supporting student independence in learning is a joined up approach that considers how students are prepared throughout their years of schooling to be able to be independent rather than dependent learners; the latter condition reflecting high levels of external regulation and patterns of assessment within the school context. The application and value of the concept of universal design in supporting the needs of all students is under-utilised in current policy documentation. A critically reconfigured understanding would adequately recognise such a joined up approach in terms of a social ontology of the multiple, the use of socio-technical spaces, and the authentic expression of variegated modes of student engagement from early years to higher education.

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