Student voice in higher education: Opening the loop

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Abstract

UK national policy and the practices of university course boards tend to reduce understandings of 'student voice' to a feedback loop. In this loop, students express feedback, the university takes this on board then they tell the students how they have responded to their feedback. The feedback loop is a significant element of the neoliberal imaginary of higher education globally. This qualitative research study drew on interviews with course representatives in three universities in England and on policy analysis to explore the discursive construction and enactment of student voice. It uses the feedback loop as an analytical frame. Drawing on Foucault's later work, the article aims to open up the feedback loop by exploring its manifestation in the mundane everyday practices of universities. In opening the loop, we identify the following effects of the student voice policy ensemble: students have to construct feedback as it is not just waiting to be gathered; it promotes a dividing practice where reps are positioned differently to other students; there is a focus on problems; an 'us and them' is reinforced between staff and students; the loop closes down discussion; and a managerial logic obscures political processes. The article articulates its opening of the loop as a way of unmasking the modes of power which work through discourses of 'student voice' and hence seeks to create possibilities for resistance to being governed this way.

Keywords: feedback loop; student engagement; student satisfaction; course representative.

Introduction

'Student voice' is used in higher education (HE) to describe a range of activities from the rather narrow concerns inherent in gathering evaluations and feedback from students in order to improve courses (Bennett & Kane, 2014), to broader participatory and inclusive research designed to affect transformational outcomes (Seale, 2010). It also encompasses activities at very different scales, from relatively informal classroom strategies (Fielding, 2004) through to institutional level systems for student representation (Flint, Goddard, & Russell, 2017) and now at the national scale in the UK, through the National Student Survey (NSS) (Thiel, 2019), which added questions about 'Student Voice' from 2017. The emergence of this national framework has given rise to concerns that student voice has been co-opted into neoliberal discourses of consumer satisfaction, university competition and lecturer responsibilisation, all of which may be seen to threaten the core educational role of universities (Holligan & Shah, 2017; Sabri, 2013; Thiel, 2019). According to this line of critique, student voice policy in English universities is framed within a managerialist discourse that constitutes part of a 'neoliberal imaginary' (S J Ball, 2012). For Ball, this 'neoliberal imaginary' consists of a world-view in which the logic of markets prevails in all aspects of social policy and in which individual success and accountability replace the collective good or common well-being. In education in the UK (especially in England) this has led to a culture in which quality is supposedly driven up through market-like forces in a system of competition and accountability. Accountability operates through the creation and publication of performance data and league tables; and this stimulates a form of managerialism which focuses on hitting performance targets, responding to consumer needs and preferences, and competing with alternative providers (S J Ball, 2017).

Ball calls for explorations of how the 'neoliberal imaginary' works through the everyday mundane practices of education (S J Ball, 2012). In relation to student voice, these everyday practices can be glimpsed in the National Student Survey questions and the practices of course boards, both of which tend to reduce student voice to a feedback loop. In this loop,

students express feedback, the institution takes this on board then tells the students how they have responded to their feedback, exemplifying the managerialist logic implied within the neoliberal imaginary of HE. This article's exploration involves 'opening the loop' by investigating its effects. Empirically, we investigated the work of student course representatives (referred to as 'reps'), who occupy a key role in institution-level mechanisms for student voice. These reps are students who volunteer and/or are elected by their course peers to represent them. They can discuss courses at course boards; have ongoing conversations with course directors; and, in some universities, attend training and forums for course reps in their Student Union (SU) (TSEP, 2017). There is surprisingly little research on reps and the valuable research by Carey (2013) and Flint *et al*. (2017) is from staff rather than student perspectives. This article makes a contribution to the developing critical literature (set out in this section and the next) on how the student voice policy ensemble effects students and HE processes.

The literature on student voice in HE raises a number of issues that have informed this research project. First, McLeod (2011) notes that inclusion is a key issue, and that processes for enabling student voice often fail to provide full recognition for all students, especially those traditionally marginalised in educational institutions. Second, Fielding (2004) draws attention to the difference between simply offering some students the chance of 'being heard' and the more profound possibilities inherent in establishing a genuine dialogue between staff and students. Third, student voice practices which are entirely designed by managers can "redescribe and reconfigure students in ways that bind them more securely into the fabric of the *status quo*" (Fielding, 2004, p. 302). Fourth, data generated in standardised systems such as the NSS are fundamentally unreliable, as the reality of students' diversity means they understand and respond to questions very differently depending on their approaches to learning (Bennett & Kane, 2014). All of this suggests we need to be aware of the power relations at work within the university. This includes the differences between staff (notably between module lecturers and senior managers) (Sabri, 2013) as well as the differences between lecturers and students.

The issues raised in the literature on student voice are not always explicit about the power relations operating. However, 'power' understood as 'the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organisation' (Foucault, 1998 [1976], p. 92) is inherent in the relations of students, staff and institutions. Hence, it is unsurprising that Foucault's work is used in several analyses of student voice (Canning, 2016; Fielding, 2004; Thiel, 2019). Thiel focuses on the impacts of the NSS on lecturers, but also broadens out his discussion to include student rep meetings and the wider phenomenon of student-staff relations in HE. He draws on Foucault's (2010 [1979]) notion of governmentality to link student voice to, firstly, hierarchical observation (the feeling lecturers have that they are always subject to observation, monitoring and reporting) and, secondly, normalising judgements (the constant comparison between lecturers, modules and programmes enabled by performance metrics). In a neoliberal framework, these two processes require individuals to discipline themselves into becoming individually responsible agents within a competitive market emulating system. Hence Thiel refers to a "perpetual and reciprocal disciplinary cycle" in which students discipline staff through evaluation and lecturers discipline students through assessment. In this view, lecturers' primary experience of student voice is as a mechanism of discipline, redolent of Ball's (2006 [2003]) classic account of the 'terrors of performativity'.

This article builds on elements of Thiel (2019) account. Firstly. Thiel focuses on lecturers and suggests a rather homogenous, uncritical view of students. Our research aims to complicate this account by investigating the experiences and perceptions of students enacting the distinctive role of student reps and describing some of the different mechanisms through which student voice is enacted. Secondly, we use other aspects of Foucault's work

to complicate accounts of how the policy ensemble shapes HE practices. Foucault urges critique, where this is:

> a matter of pointing out on what assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged, unconsidered modes of thought, the practices that we accept rest. (Foucault, 1988a, p. 154)

In searching for such assumptions, it is important not to simplify the variety of competing discourses that help to shape practices and institutions. Rose describes Foucault's characterisation of the French judicial system as:

> more Heath Robinson than Audi, full of parts that come from elsewhere, strange couplings, chance relations, cogs and levers that don't work – and yet which "work" in the sense that they produce effects that have meaning and consequences for us (Rose, 2005 [1996], p. 38)

In this sense, we want to explore the variety of effects that can arise from the enactment of student voice in HE and in doing so we are also alert to another insight from Foucault, that "where there is power, there is resistance" (Foucault, 1998 [1976], p. 95). Whilst, on the one hand, Foucault encourages us to attend to the discourses which shape our everyday practices and experiences, he also acknowledges that these same forces generate a plurality of resistances which are "possible, necessary, improbable… spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted… quick to compromise…" (p. 96). In other words, we have to be alert both to the competing discourses which are constantly at play (and resist simplified accounts of institutions, actors and processes) and to the possibilities of disruption, compromise and opposition inherent in all power relations.

We noted above that student voice is often understood as a feedback loop, and a key managerialist task is to find practical ways to 'close the loop', through informing students about the institutional response to their feedback (Baldry Currens, 2011, p. 190 cites HEFCE, 2003; HEFCE, 2009 and QAA, 2005; QAA, 2018, p. 11; also see Trowler & Trowler, 2010). However, following Foucault, we want to open the loop, to open up discussion about how the feedback loop 'works' in the more general sense of producing effects, such as shaping how student voice is understood and enacted in multiple ways, and whether it closes down other possibilities for student voice, such as those more associated with forms of deliberative engagement (Dryzek, 2002; Young, 2002 [2000]).

Competing discourses of student voice

In this section we briefly outline the positions of some of the most influential national policy bodies which have contributed to the development of student voice policy in the UK. In this reading of policy from the top down, Ball's general observations about the development of the neoliberal imaginary draw attention to a powerful discourse which conceives of students as 'consumers', providing feedback on the quality of the 'service' they experience from their educational provider (Carey, 2013; Holligan & Shah, 2017). Towards the end of this section we identify some competing discourses, which provide alternative ways to imagine student voice.

The Office for Students (OfS) came into being in 2018 as 'a champion of students and as the new market regulator of higher education' (DBIS, 2018, p. 1) to deliver 'value for money for the student and taxpayers' (p. 3). The Minister's instructions to the OfS conflate 'student interest' and 'student voice' so the OfS can claim to represent student interests with limited direct input from students (after significant opposition within the university sector, a student

panel was added). The OfS 'want to be a data-led regulator' (Puttock, 2018) which resonates with the neoliberal imaginary in which deliberation and judgement are increasingly replaced by metrics (Davies, 2014).

The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) is the designated body for quality assurance on behalf of the OfS. Their revised code requires that universities 'actively engage… students individually and collectively, in the quality of their educational experience' (QAA, 2018, p. 3). As with the OfS this represents a shift from their original proposal in which student engagement was controversially reduced to, 'views and feedback from students are regularly sought and acted on and providers offer feedback in return' (Dickinson, 2018). The guidance still largely conceptualises engagement in terms of 'feedback' with the word appearing 52 times in the 14 page document (QAA, 2018).

The NSS measures undergraduate students' 'satisfaction' with their course as they near the end of their final year. Critics note that measuring satisfaction is far removed from measuring teaching quality and 'user *dis*satisfaction may sometimes be an important sign that genuine education is happening' (Collini, 2017, p. 40). The NSS provides information to prospective student-consumers which is essential to the construction of education as a market system. The data on the UNISTATS website (2018) is reduced from a Likert scale to single percentage responses for each question. There is a single (large font) percentage figure at the top for responses to the final question, 'Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course' (UNISTATS, 2018). Some NSS data is also used, together with data on student retention and destinations, in the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) which is used to judge institutions as Gold, Silver or Bronze. At the time of writing a subject level TEF is planned and the second year pilots now have 'student voice' (DfE, 2018) as part of the algorithm. Not only are NSS scores and other outcome data published for prospective students, but these data are used widely within HEIs for management and accountability purposes (Holligan & Shah, 2017) and the construction of ideas of 'best practice' (Brown, 2015, p. 135) that staff should follow. Thiel (2019) discusses the performative effects for staff producing 'lecturer subjectivities that become "competitised", "responsibilised" and hence "governable"' (p. 539).

Together, the OfS, QAA and NSS provide a strong policy ensemble requiring universities to act in certain ways. They reflect the significance of the neoliberal framing of student voice as all three focus on students as consumers (generating data on the 'quality' of education) and as consumers of the data (as prospective/current consumers of courses). However, as the small changes adopted by the QAA and OfS demonstrate, there is also some recognition that student voice might also include political representation and deeper forms of engagement than merely providing feedback data. Here one can see signs of a second, alternative discourse, which is promoted by the National Union of Students (NUS) and its sector-wide network, The Student Engagement Partnership (www.tsep.org.uk). This discourse emphasises collective solidarity and favours a broader model of students working in partnership with others. In response to an NSS consultation, the NUS commented:

> We welcome specifically the introduction of questions on the student voice, but we fear that the suggested language is too passive: questions focusing on 'feedback' and 'response' suggest a transactional, consumerist relationship between staff and students that does not reflect the sector's current commitment to true partnership (NUS, 2015, p. 4)

Whilst the NUS was unsuccessful in getting the wording changed, they have established training programmes for reps and provided guidance to ensure their own broader conceptualisation of student voice is promoted across the sector. Similarly, the NUS successfully campaigned for the NUS elected leader to be added to the OfS student board.

This position resonates with a third discourse – a rights discourse. This has been more evident in schools than universities (Seale, 2010), where it is often related to Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Czerniawski & Kidd, 2011). In universities, this may be more associated with adult students' rights, such as the right to free speech (defined in the Human Rights Act 1998); the right to equal treatment in the institution (defined in the Equality Act 2010); or the right to independent representation (www.nusconnect.org.uk/zones/education/students-rights). This rights-based discourse is often seen as being outside of market mechanisms and values (Couldry, 2010) or in opposition to them (UN, 2014).

Current conceptions of student voice derive from assorted discourses (Canning, 2016) which draw on varying conceptions of education as anything from a commodity to a transformational relationship (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009, p. 70). Varied discourses co-exist and frame students differently at different points, illustrating how policy exists as a 'ramshackle, compromise hit and miss affair' (Ball, 2007 cited in Brooks, 2017, p. 1). This helps to render student voice as a 'hooray word' (Whyte, 2003), which is generally accepted as 'a good thing' even though people may have different ideas about what it means in practice. Whilst the neoliberal-consumer account of student voice is strongly evident in the three national institutions we have considered, the other discourses concerning students' collective action and educational rights co-exist alongside these top-down neoliberal policy framings. It is, therefore, an open question how these alternative discourses inform processes of interpretation and enactment as student voice policy works its ways through HE and circulates in institutional and departmental practices (S. J. Ball, Maguire, Braun, & Hoskins, 2011). In the following section, we briefly outline our methodology before returning to the question of the effects of the student voice policy ensemble through considering the 'feedback loop'.

Methodology

Qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine reps (Fig.1) from June-Dec 2018. The interviews lasted approximately an hour, were audio-recorded and fully transcribed. The main questions focused on each student's own experiences as a course rep, and prompted them to think about their motivations for and experiences of the role, the purpose of it, and any impact they feel they had. The second part of the interview included more general questions about their views on student voice, and on the aims of education. Finally, interviewees were asked to answer the NSS questions on student voice, and to discuss their answers. They were asked their views on these questions at the end so they did not shape their answers to earlier questions.

Institutional ethical approval was granted. Interviewees were given written and oral information about the research and signed consent forms. Their right to withdraw was made explicit. The data was anonymised on collection using pseudonyms for participants and universities.

The interviews were conducted in three post-1992 universities in the South-East of England with reps from a wide range of courses from the arts to health to engineering. Holligan and Shah (2017) argue that in post-1992 universities 'consumer-oriented quality assurance is used strategically to bolster prestige' (p. 114) more than Russell Group universities which have other routes to prestige. Potential interviewees were invited through emails from SU employees. The six Tyburn interviewees responded and were interviewed in June. Finding interviewees elsewhere was more challenging. The SU contact at Fleet only emailed reps from areas where a (new) policy was judged to be working relatively smoothly. This resulted in one interviewee. A third university, Lea Valley, was then approached and resulted in two interviewees. Tentative analysis was conducted after the six Tyburn interviews. The

subsequent interviews showed that the findings were not due to quirks of Tyburn but resonated elsewhere. We recognise that students who participate in research are not necessarily typical but are not attempting statistical generalisations. The qualitative sample stimulated us to focus on diverse individual experiences and perceptions rather than seeing reps as a homogenous group. It appeared that there was at least as much diversity of experiences within Tyburn and Lea Valley as between them.

Anna	Lea Valley	Mid-way through her 5th year studying at this institution (completing an MA after her BA in Arts).
Charlene	Tyburn	End of 1st year on an occupational course.
Florence	Tyburn	End of 1st year on a Business course, applied after several years trying other things.
Gloria	Lea Valley	End of 2nd year on a Science course, identifies as a mature international student.
Jane	Tyburn	End of 1st year on an occupational course.
Michaela	Tyburn	End of 1st year on a Business course, applied after bringing up her family.
Sue	Fleet	End of 2nd year on an occupational course. School Rep, rather than Course Rep.
Timothy	Tyburn	End of 2nd year on a Technology course.
Yusuf	Tyburn	End of 1st year on an occupational course.

Fig.1: Interviewees

The analysis was broadly inductive but guided by research questions, the literature and our experience-based expectations (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 165). We are both lecturers in similar universities so approached the research as 'insiders' in some ways. The researchers each identified tentative themes, then compared these to identify common themes and differences in interpretation. Although the trope of the feedback loop was not a part of our interview schedule, nor an initial guiding framework for the research, it became evident that much of what the students said fitted into each stage of this process. We have thus presented the themes arising from our analysis under the three stages of the feedback loop as set out in the NSS questions (see Fig.2) in the next section. This helps underline some ways in which this narrow definition of 'student voice' emerged from our data and provides a way of opening the loop and showing the work it does.

Findings: Opening the loop

The trope of the 'feedback loop' is reflected in the three NSS questions on 'Student Voice' as each question describes a stage of the loop (Fig.2).
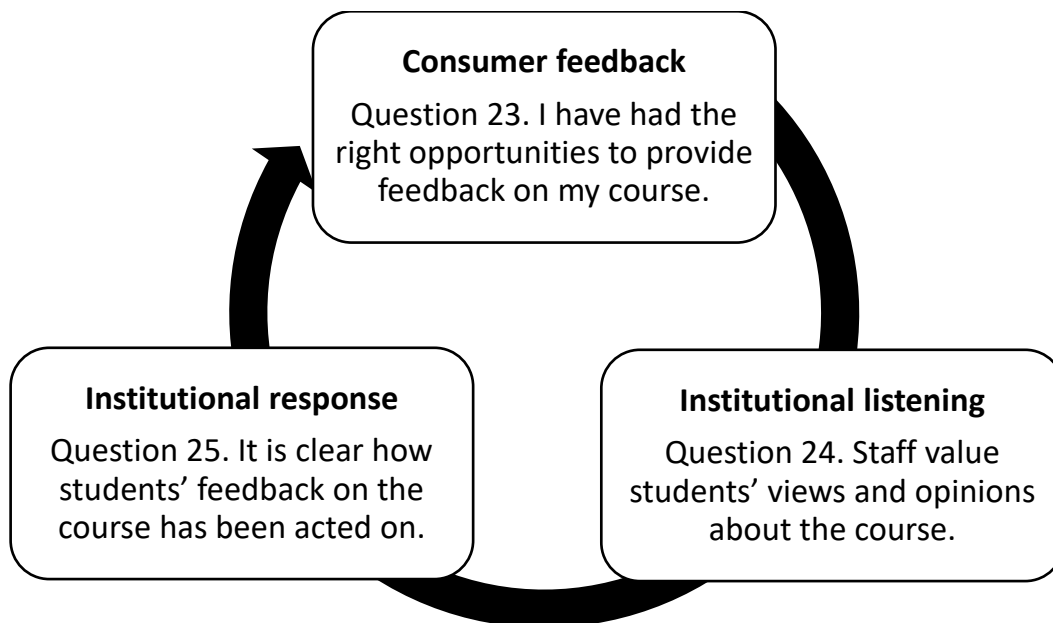
Fig.2: National Student Survey (NSS) questions from 2017 and 2018 (Ipsos MORI, 2017) with headings added by the authors

Such loops are common in management literature, where the aim is to secure a 'constant cycle of monitoring and improvement' (Newman, 2016). Companies are advised to devise ongoing systems of feedback so that managers can 'leverage the feedback' to improve their service. Thus 'a well-constructed customer feedback program or "loop" becomes a channel for acquiring business insights about customers and what is important to them' (Neckopulos, 2010, p. 29). This was also part of a Cabinet Office vision for public service reform under New Labour (S J Ball, 2017, p. 119), where a closed system loop is envisaged as creating self-improving systems driven by competition, consumer choice and performance targets. In this section, we present our findings organised under the headings of three NSS questions.

1. 'I have had the right opportunities to provide feedback on my course' (NSS Question 23)

In a physical closed system, such as a domestic heating system, the feedback loop is closed and the feedback required for adjustments is generated automatically as an integral part of the process. A thermostat measures the temperature and adjusts the heating to the desired level. However, in the context of a university course, 'feedback' must be deliberately constructed, then opportunities have to be created for the feedback to be provided to the university. 'Feedback', in this sense, is produced for this quality assurance system, not automatically generated through the processes of teaching and learning. In this section, we address this process of feedback construction.

1.1 'Collecting' or 'constructing' feedback

Documents from the three universities refer to 'collecting' views and 'gathering' feedback. There is an assumption that opinions in the form of feedback are pre-existing phenomenon that simply need to be collected up by a rep. However, our data illustrate there are actually a range of more active and nuanced processes underway to generate this feedback, in other words to produce this 'truth' (Foucault, 1998 [1976], p. 59). This resonates with Anderson's (2015) discussion of student voice where she observed that rather than simply 'free[ing] the

way' for voice to emerge, procedures had to be implemented which 'enabled, elicited, prescribed and supervised' forms of confession, so that information emerges in the correct form for official purposes (p. 140).

Some reps put considerable effort into seeking feedback. Yusuf said 'I just used to go around individually to people, or like in groups of twos, and ask them, you know, "oh okay look there's a course board meeting. Is there anything that you want to discuss?"' He also applies a filter here, looking for common problems and filtering out issues that seem too individual or one-off. He describes how he and his fellow rep sometimes feedback to students telling them why they are not raising an issue with staff. Yusuf also talked about actively intervening in discussions, sharing how he and his fellow rep might try to settle a disagreement, 'we'll step in and we'll say, you know, "this is what we think as course reps", and usually they just agree with us'. Charlene also said, 'some people, they sort of clam up, so then I kind of have to say "well I feel that this isn't working. Do you agree, do you disagree?"' Some interviewees had attempted to use technology to consult their peers, but as Jane noted, this is not always easy, and her peers started using the WhatsApp group to exchange jokes, so she abandoned it. Not all students are involved in these discussions, for example, Florence's whole cohort is only 15 students but she only draws on conversations with her immediate circle of friends to inform discussions with staff.

This variation notwithstanding, the interviewees generally agreed that there was a valuable role for someone to mediate between the student cohort and lecturers. However, because 'feedback' was not readily available to be 'gathered', the reps had to actively elicit, filter, monitor, shape and prioritise the feedback for formal meetings. This indicates how the reps seemed to have learned what counts as useful feedback to feed into the student voice mechanism, and took an active part in producing information in the right form. This led several reps to perceive their peers as unwilling participants and so we turn to consider this aspect of their relationships in the next section.

1.2 Peer perceptions

We were struck by how disparaging many of the reps were of their fellow students. They often contrasted their own confidence and ability to speak out with other students who they tended to see as young, indifferent or uninterested. Michaela contrasted her own motivation to be involved with the fact that other students needed the incentive of a fried chicken voucher to vote in SU elections. Yusuf said some students were too lazy to check their timetable, and would ask him where their lecture was; eventually he stopped engaging with such queries, arguing 'it's just so annoying'. Charlene complained that a second rep for her course 'didn't actually do anything' and that most students 'don't bother' with evaluations. Timothy was frustrated that when he asked for feedback from peers it was typical to hear: 'We don't want to say anything'.

Some reps tended to take a role in looking after their peers. Jane sensed her peers felt better for speaking to her, suggesting that once 'they've contacted the student rep, that communication and that reassurance… that is actually being heard'. Michaela said that she would like to step down so other, younger peers would have the opportunity to put the rep role on their CV, but felt it was difficult to convince them 'it's just trying to get people to kind of step up and to have a go, you know?' She continued: 'The people who will step up to do it are usually the ones who want to be engaged and who are…learning et cetera.' Whilst the comment is framed as supportive, it is also based on an assumption that students who are not interested in the role, are also less interested in learning.

As with much student voice work (for example, Czerniawski & Kidd, 2011), there are significant issues around who becomes a rep. Michaela spoke for most when she said, 'you

always find though it's the same people who tend to want to get engaged'. Taylor and Robinson (2009, citing McIntyre et al., 2005, p.155), consider how student voice work in schools becomes a 'dividing practice', separating off the confident and articulate students from those 'whose voices are silenced because … they don't fit the dominant discourse and academic aspirations of their schools'. They speculate that 'student voice work may itself become part of a disciplinary discourse which uses students' (and teachers') voices to promote, maintain and reproduce institutional and social inequalities' (Taylor & Robinson, 2009, pp. 167-168). Our data suggests the focus on reps as the 'carriers' of voice may similarly operate as a 'dividing practice' (Foucault, 1982, p. 778). The reps discussed their own life experience, confidence and interpersonal skills as equipping them for the role, indicating that they arrive at university with these forms of cultural capital. However, it may also be that the ways in which student voice and reps are constructed generate this division, as inevitably one or two students are cast in the role of reps, and thus given responsibility for generating 'feedback'. These students thus become co-opted into the managerialist processes required by the neo-liberal imaginary, and seek to actively transform their peers' experiences into 'inscribable and calculable forms', as described by Anderson (2015) above.

1.3 Problems

The idea of feedback tends to be understood as referring to problems. Timothy saw the role of the course board as being entirely about 'problems'. He talked about two lecturers who had been excellent but did not see the course board as a place to mention that. Gloria said she only asked students 'if they have some issues' and Yusuf said, 'a week before [the meeting] they send us like an email to fill out, like "okay, what problems do students have?"' Some reps talked about attempts to balance positive and negative comments, for example Charlene reminded peers 'it's not just all about the negatives,' but, even though she felt that most things about her course had been positive, when giving examples of what she took to the course board, she listed problems around timetabling and accessing library books.

Casting the rep as the conduit for feedback within a feedback loop almost inevitably frames student voice as consumer feedback/satisfaction. Collini has argued:

> it is in the nature of desire that it cannot be satisfied: consumer wants are not "satisfied", they are an endless cycle of temporary pleasure and recurring discontent (Collini, 2017, p. 107)

Adopting a consumer model may not only serve to focus on problems, but may also make it difficult to move beyond them. Despite Michaela's sense that the course boards operate as more than just 'them and us', this consumer feedback/satisfaction positioning may explain her sense that staff may feel 'all students want to do is turn up and complain'.

2. 'Staff value students' views and opinions about the course' (NSS Question 24)

This NSS question reflects the second stage of the 'loop'. Once the feedback has been constructed and brought to an appropriate forum, the next theme concerns how that forum operates. Our data raise questions about how students are heard, by whom, and how power differentials influence the process.

2.1 Are they heard? And by whom?

Not surprisingly, students greatly valued feeling heard, but even when they reported positive practices, this was often accompanied with a caveat. Jane noted:

It's more… the Student Union's hearing us [rather] than teachers, but in a general aspect it is good to know that at least we're being heard…Even if it might not be by the people we want or like not by everyone.

Charlene also felt that the rep system helped students feel heard so 'You're not just having to suffer in silence, you can actually say something and something [can] be done about it'. She felt 'the system worked 'to some degree' but that staff could act more on students' concerns.

In these two cases, the feeling that they are being heard is accompanied by a sense that course staff are not necessarily the ones listening to, or fully appreciating, their feedback. Given the rep system is meant to be about course staff, these caveats seem significant. This raises the question of which staff are listening. Some students, like Anna, recognised 'the university' and her lecturers were not necessarily one and the same. She referred to lecturers 'suffering for the sins of management' and suggested a new NSS question asking 'who do you blame for the problems at your uni?'

2.2 'Troublemakers' and trust

Some student voice literature highlights the power dynamics between students and staff (Taylor & Robinson, 2009). In our interviews, similar concerns emerged but were largely framed in terms of trust. The policy context may be reinforcing a student/staff sense of 'us and them'. Charlene argued that in lectures, when staff ask for feedback, generally no-one speaks up, which means 'when it gets to the course board… I think a lot of it might come as a surprise to the staff because not everyone voices their opinions'. For several interviewees this reticence from their peers was linked to not wanting to 'get in trouble' (Charlene) or draw attention to oneself.

In talking about staff, the reps generally demonstrated trust and empathy. Yusuf's course had lost some staff, meaning those left had increased workloads, and he felt they 'deserve a lot more credit than they're given at the moment'. He was happy just to bring issues to staff attention, then leave them to make judgements based on their wider understanding. He also recognised that sometimes staff are simply powerless to change things. Yusuf and Michaela seemed to tailor their engagement with staff to reflect what they thought was needed and helpful in the moment. Their attitude seems marked by trust and respect. By contrast, Jane felt that she had been kept in the dark about when meetings were scheduled and, even when staff appeared attentive, they did not always do what she had expected. Timothy was even more negative, describing lecturers who had 'lost the passion for teaching', who have a 'huge workload', and who are just not coping. His attitude was quite oppositional, describing one lecturer with a 'couldn't care less' attitude when students asked him to modify his teaching, and describing another lecturer who 'just wasn't interested in us'.

Several reps raised the issue of anonymity. Florence felt feedback should be anonymous 'because the lecturer marks your assignments'. Similarly Charlene said:

I genuinely feel like everyone just feels like, "oh we're going to get in trouble" [short laugh] or, I just, I, from what I've seen I think it's more of a, "oh no they might not like us if we say this".

Not only did Timothy not trust his lecturers to act on feedback, he also did not trust them to deal with it impartially. He felt module evaluation surveys were not anonymous (despite staff assurances) and was adamant that lecturers would reduce marks for people who were critical. He saw the evaluations as 'blackmail'. Such concerns led several interviewees to

suggest additional anonymous forms of feedback, such as suggestion boxes. Several interviewees felt able to mediate between students and staff, whilst protecting the identities of peers. However, when attempting to anonymise feedback, Charlene felt she was thwarted sometimes by staff insisting that the individuals experiencing a problem should contact staff directly. This led to a stalemate where staff said they could not act without talking to individuals to understand issues, and individuals lacked the confidence or trust to come forward.

Timothy was the most despondent about the possibility of trust, and felt his position as rep had created problems with a senior member of staff:

> She doesn't like the fact that if I see something wrong or if I have an issue with a particular individual and I mention it, I might be wrong… but I think I'm being portrayed as a trouble-maker (Timothy).

So the issue of being heard, and being valued, emerged as a complex one, invoking issues of power and trust. Anna drew a clear distinction in this regard, between seeing herself as an ally of her lecturers but an opponent of university senior management. Consequently her relationship with these two groups of staff was completely different. Here we can see how the narrow perception of the student as a consumer providing feedback to the university to improve its services is rendered more complex by other factors. Firstly, the student reps perceive 'the university' as a politically differentiated and hierarchical institution, in which they identify allies and enemies. This means 'feedback' becomes more overtly politicised, and it means the proposal that 'the university' should respond also becomes more complex. Secondly, students' relationships with staff also reflect the traditional lecturer-student dynamic and over-laying a provider-consumer relationship is not necessarily straightforward. These factors tend to lead student reps to become sceptical about student voice, or to invoke alternative discourses around forging strategic partnerships with staff. In one case, it also led to overt political opposition to management, building alliances on the ground between students and departmental staff to oppose budget cuts and room re-allocations.

3. 'It is clear how students' feedback on the course has been acted on.' (NSS Question 25)

In the previous two sections we started to explore some nuances in the processes of constructing feedback and having it listened to. We now turn to the final stage of the 'loop' – what action follows? This question is about 'closing the loop' (QAA, 2018, p. 11) which is a major concern of both universities and national policy makers.

3.1 'You said, we did'

Reflecting on this NSS question, Charlene said, 'I think that is a very important one to be honest… [It] hits the nail on the head'. She went on to suggest there 'should be a "you said and we've done" sort of thing going on between students and the university itself'. QAA explicitly suggests universities collect 'evidence where student feedback loops have been closed, such as "You said, we did"' (QAA, 2018, p. 13). Such strategies are used in a number of universities, and webpages and posters are sometimes used to promote the actions the university has taken in response to student feedback. However, the achievements listed by our interviewees tended to be rather small and relatively bureaucratic in nature, such as minor changes to timetabling or ICT.

If the process of eliciting feedback tends to generate lists of problems, it is unlikely that all these will be remedied. The potential for expanding expectations was reflected in several

interviews. Michaela felt some feedback (such as on the need for extra maths and IT developments in halls) was acted on. The university had improved teaching and infrastructure, but her answer to question 25 was 'Neither disagree or agree' 'because there's some things they say there is just nothing that the organisation is going to do…. Like say with that timetabling thing'. By contrast, Yusuf noted specific successes (such as a new system for reimbursing travel costs for getting to placements) and also accepted 'there's some things that they can't just, they can't change', but he 'Strongly agreed with question 25. Both Yusuf and Michaela have evidence of the university responding to feedback, but their additional list of unmet demands leads one to refuse to rate the university positively, whilst the other gives the highest rating.

Other students had seen less evidence of their engagement having an impact. Jane felt staff appeared to listen in the meetings with students, but saw no evidence of impact outside of meetings. Similarly Charlene said 'it's not really clear how the students' feedback on the course has been acted on, because we're not really told anything'. She felt that 'people who are more involved in the university life, as well as the Student Union, would feel that things are a lot better than people who are not involved in it', indicating that this area seems to be as much about publicising changes as it is about actually securing impact.

In these ways, the feedback loop is different from physical closed-loop systems. In the university context, it takes effort to continue to publicise these impacts and the extent to which students feel this is happening seems to reflect their own expectations as much as the actual level of response. Furthermore, as Flint *et al*. (2017) found, 'this approach could create a transactional view of feedback, or imply that the conversation was now closed'.

3.2 Temporality

Student feedback is often used to benefit future students rather than those giving feedback. In their study in Spain, Planas *et al* note that, students 'perceive the university as an institution which is "not their own" and one which they are only 'passing through' (2013, p. 578). By contrast, our interviewees referred to their feedback improving courses for future cohorts but did not seem to resent this, suggesting the complex relationship they have to ideas of collectivity and responsibility to others and that they do not only see themselves as individualised consumers. Partly, this is because some are aware that previous cohorts have raised issues that resulted in improvements for them. Yusuf said 'there's been things that the cohort before my cohort have raised and it's changed for my cohort'. Students' sense of timescale differed, for example, Gloria felt that things would be done about the ICT problems she had raised, whereas Anna, who had been at the same university for much longer, said that the same problems kept coming up and nothing was done.

Another way in which time plays a role in shaping the role is the frequency of consultation events. At Tyburn, students reps mostly feedback at course boards, which are only held twice a year. Charlene suggested more conversations with the course directors between meetings would help with the timing problems. Her comments suggest that formalising student voice through the board structure might restrict such conversations. At Tyburn, agendas include a section where course directors say how they have responded to previous feedback. The long time lag means issues discussed may not have been raised by current reps. At Fleet, by contrast, the equivalent meetings have been split into two meetings. In the first, reps raise issues, then the second meeting takes place a week or two later and staff report back. This has the potential to shorten the time lag, but still potentially suffers from the same problems as module evaluations, which tend to collect final judgements, rather than creating opportunities for continual discussion. A minority of interviewees talked about less formal discussions with module staff through which they 'actually had quite a lot of our concerns addressed very quickly' (Michaela).

Discussion

This article has explored the effects of the student voice policy ensemble in universities from two perspectives. First, inspired by Ball, we have sought to investigate some everyday mundane practices as experienced by the student reps. Second, we have structured that discussion around the trope of the feedback loop – a common managerialist concept within the neoliberal imaginary of HE policy, which has also enabled us to critique this approach to student voice. We have demonstrated that the feedback loop represents a simple sequential exchange, narrowing possibilities for students and staff to come together to engage in more collaborative, open-ended, exploratory and deliberative processes to improve or develop courses, or the institution. Forcing complex educational issues into a 'You said, We did' model seems to strip them of the possibility for the serious discussion they often merit. Perhaps not surprisingly, complex educational issues were not raised by interviewees as much as 'consumer' requests such as the need for microwaves (expressed in multiple interviews and two universities) or organisational issues, such as timetabling and rooming arrangements. A feedback loop reflects a managerial logic where discrete issues are identified and resolved and outcomes are measurable. The loop works to transform students' experiences into particular forms of feedback, which can be acknowledged, subjected to comment and acted on by staff. In this process, staff and student reps (and the other students 'represented') all have clear roles to play and clear expectations of their relationships with each other. Through these roles, the completion of specific forms of activity, and the monitoring and (potentially at least) publication of the outcomes, the various actors involved are disciplined, and discipline themselves, into new forms of being. In this way, the feedback loop can be seen as a mechanism for invoking 'technologies of the self' (Foucault, 1988b) within the neoliberal imaginary, one in which the actors come to perceive themselves primarily as individuals in a market system. Our critique of the feedback loop has revealed some of the ways it functions as a mechanism for creating consumer-subjects and a means by which the neoliberal imaginary is enacted in everyday practices.

However, that is only part of the story our data reveals. Whilst our findings support concerns that the current approach to 'feedback' reflects a consumer understanding (NUS, 2015, p. 4), we also found some more nuanced positions than a citizen/consumer binary implies. Most interviewees combined a consumer sensibility with a collective dimension. Pursuing this collectivist sense, some interviewees went to considerable lengths to represent the views of a range of students, and took seriously the task of voicing opinions their peers felt unable to express. They also cultivated a sense of solidarity between different cohorts of students, and sometimes between staff and students. For these students, being a rep is just one small way they can help people, or make a change for the better.

Furthermore, even if the rep role is narrow, some interviewees saw it within a wider repertoire of political activities, through the SU and community groups. For them, it was part of a more general and politicised engagement to 'help people' (Sue). For her, applying to be a rep led to a SU training course, which led to numerous opportunities to join campaigns on campus (for example, for gender equality) and in the local community (for example, on homelessness). For Michaela, her role similarly led to greater engagement in the SU and she stood as an elected officer.

In a further disruption of the citizen/consumer binary, Michaela actually framed her consumer identity as collective: 'I'm a great believer in collectivism… [because of the fees] we're now a collective consumer group.' Michaela, who saw education in terms of personal growth, perceived her own debt mountain as a challenge to the system – planning to run up a student debt through multiple degrees to show the government that the system is unworkable, because as someone approaching retirement, she sees no possibility that she will ever pay back a penny. She is simultaneously a compliant individual debtor; and a

quietly subversive citizen. She, and others, bring a subtle range of attitudes and understandings to the role of rep. There is not one 'great Refusal' (Foucault, 1998 [1976], p. 96), rather 'there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case' (p. 96). Significantly, these resistances emerged from students' developing an understanding of the power relations in which they were located. Understanding the ways in which the loop operates may give students and staff knowledge for further points of resistance.

By constructing student voice around the feedback loop, the system creates a default set of assumptions about the roles students and staff adopt, the processes that operate, and the kinds of outcomes that are appropriate and desirable. As such, the feedback loop reflects a narrow conception of student voice with particular effects. However, those effects are not always those predicted by the policy-makers, nor the policy critics. In a marketised HE system, with individualised debt, a narrow model of student satisfaction, and pressure to build one's employability, our data indicate there are still some students finding spaces to do things differently. They are finding a diverse range of ways to occupy the role of consumer-student, whilst simultaneously resisting the individualising impetus of the dominant policy discourse. Whilst some reps seemed to conform to this narrow definition of the role, others combined this role with a more expansive commitment to help other students.

Conclusion

We suggested earlier that there are a number of discourses that lead to the valuing of 'student voice'. None of our interviewees, having experienced student voice processes, suggested it was not valuable. However, the feedback loop has come increasingly to be seen as an obvious common sense way for student voice to operate, and we have identified a number of significant effects stemming from this narrow conception. Students have to construct feedback as it is not just waiting to be gathered; the rep system can operate as a dividing practice as reps are positioned differently to other students; the focus tends to be on problems; an 'us and them' is reinforced between staff and students; there is an implication that all feedback can and should be acted on; 'closing the loop' can close down discussion; the system highlights but does not address issues of trust; and the loop constructs a managerial logic which obscures political processes.

This study was a small-scale qualitative one, conducted with volunteer participants, who are unlikely to be representative. However, whilst we are appropriately cautious about generalising from such work, we argue that it has significance beyond its specific context. Holmwood (2014) has argued that England has become 'the leading edge of neoliberal reforms' (Holmwood, 2014, p. 64), which suggests that research undertaken in England has significance for all countries moving towards more neoliberal systems of HE. This study is also useful in that the data from student reps enables us to say more than previous studies, which have tended to either focus on developing a theoretical critique of policy, or collecting data from staff. By exploring the students' experiences, we have sought to open up some new lines of enquiry and thinking about the effects of student voice policy. Further work with different students, in different contexts should extend the range of interpretations.

The effects described in this article partly stem from the 'strange couplings' (Foucault cited in Rose, 2005 [1996], p. 38) of varied discourses rather than emerging despite them (Lemke, 2002, p. 57). Research such as this is, therefore, needed into the actual complex effects of student voice policy and practice rather than assuming the inevitable effects imagined within each of the competing 'student voice' discourses of consumerism, collectivism and rights. The effects are not the unavoidable consequences of all-powerful discourses. Possibilities for resistance (Foucault, 1998 [1976], p. 95) are produced with them. To paraphrase Foucault, maybe we are freer than we think (cited in S J Ball, 2013, p. 147) 'not to be governed in that way' (p. 146) and to resist the neoliberal imaginary of the university.

Opening the loop is one way of unmasking power and hence creating possibilities for resistances to the ways in which we are governed.

Acknowledgements

Statements

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