

# Introduction

## Constructing and practising student engagement in changing institutional cultures

*Lisa Garforth and Anselma Gallinat*

---



### ABSTRACT

This introduction sets the theoretical and historical context for this special issue on student engagement. Drawing on literatures about audit culture, governance and change in higher education institutions, and theories of practice, institutions and organisation, it sheds light on the current era of English higher education. The Browne Review led to the withdrawal in 2010 of the majority of the government teaching grant for English universities, and it tripled tuition fees in 2012. In the post-Browne era, 'engagement' emerged as an organising concept linked in multiple ways to other objects and discourses, in particular university league tables and measures of student satisfaction; and it was swiftly and often unreflexively translated into visions for developing learning and teaching. This special issue focuses on this specific shift in policy and discourse, exploring institutional change and everyday experience, and reflecting on the power and limits of policies.

### KEYWORDS

higher education, pedagogy, policy, practice, rapid reform, student engagement

---



This special issue of *Learning and Teaching* explores student engagement in the context of recent rapid reforms in English higher education. The Browne Review (Browne 2010) and the subsequent government White Paper (BIS 2011) led to the withdrawal of the majority of the teaching grant for English universities and to a tripling of student tuition fees in 2012. These changes precipitated significant transformation in the English higher education sector and inaugurated intense processes of review and reform within its various institutions. The notion of student engagement was the focus



of a one-day symposium at Newcastle University in 2015. Papers raised questions about the many lives of student engagement – as an idea and a set of practices; as a policy goal and pedagogical strategy; and as an instrument for managing rapid reform and changing institutional cultures – in institutional discourses and in students' experiences. This special issue draws together some of the contributions from the symposium that focus on the question of the meaning and practice of student engagement in the context of rapid reform in higher education.

Student engagement has been variously framed as students' involvement in their own learning, their engagement in the development of curricula and teaching practices, their participation in the democratic structures higher education offers through student representation, and their membership in the academic community more generally (Council of Europe 2015; Trowler 2010). Student engagement has been an issue in the U.S. since the late 1990s with the rise of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE; see Payne, this issue). The publication of *Academically Adrift* (Arum and Roska 2011), a study of learning practices and outcomes on U.S. college campuses, engendered intense debate in education studies, the popular media and beyond. Although the study's methodological robustness and theoretical sophistication have been much discussed (for example, Greenwood 2011a, 2011b; Greenwood et al. 2011), Arum and Roska highlighted the complex relationships between the processes of acquiring substantive knowledges, high-level analytical skills and wider personal development that are together often loosely referred to as university experience.

The articles in this special issue explore engagement as a multifaceted trope, a policy instrument, a learning tool and a set of practices. All the articles offer in-depth qualitative analyses of student engagement in specific social and educational contexts. They ask what different texts and practices of student engagement achieve and what they conceal, limit or delegitimise in terms of learning and teaching or academic cultures more generally. Many note that student engagement came to prominence in the context of shifts in higher education often referred to as academic capitalism (Slaughter and Leslie 1997), new public management (Bleiklie 1998; Clarke 2010) and audit culture (Shore and Wright 2015a, 2015b; Strathern 2000). They discuss the extent to which student engagement is an aspect of academic neoliberalisation – that is, the application of free market principles to many aspects of academic work, the instrumentalisation of knowledge, the commodification of degree level study, and the emphasis on student



choices and measurable educational outcomes. For social scientists, it is not enough simply to look at what neoliberalism is, or offer a critique of the values, regulations and forms of discipline that it is supposedly importing into higher education (Greenwood 2011a). We also need to look at the complex ways in which neoliberal reforms are layered into existing institutional values, activities, orderings and commitments. We need to examine the capacity for neoliberal reforms to change people and practices, and to understand where and why those reforms fail, or are resisted, or simply melt into nothing. The articles explore student engagement as it is being defined, mobilised, practised, adopted, adapted, expanded and resisted by academics and students at this particular moment of rapid reform in higher education.

### Rapid reform and its wider contexts

Student-engagement-in-the-making can be studied especially well in contemporary processes of intense institutional transformation in England. As Anselma Gallinat points out, periods of accelerated change can '[bring] to the fore structures and dynamics that are difficult to detect in the routines of everyday life' (this issue, 36). Gritt Nielsen likewise has noted that focusing on 'frictional events', that is, 'moments of contestation or ambiguity', can stimulate a 'productive curiosity' about institutions and the subject positions they produce (2015: 4, 24). Observing student engagement through the lens of rapid reform enables us to identify the values, decision-making structures, bodies (collective and individual), processes, relationships and textual constructions that are assembled together in the name of 'the university'. It is also a way to see the university's various spheres of activity and contestation in motion, to follow new forms of order as they emerge and identify the disorderings, complexities and contradictions that are present in any organisation (Law 1994). Thinking about engagement and rapid reform together highlights the indeterminacy of policy – 'a messy and multi-dimensional process with no single original ownership' (Nielsen 2015: 16), a process in which multiple and sometimes incommensurable processes of negotiation and renegotiation bring into being new but always incomplete subjects and objects, persons and practices.

The logic of the reforms to remove most of the government's block grant and charge students a 'full' fee to be (re)paid when graduates secure a salary over a specific base level<sup>1</sup> was that this would endow students with the power of consumers and place them 'at the heart of the system'.<sup>2</sup> The vision

was that students' choices would increase competition in the higher education marketplace, increase differentiation between institutions and drive up quality. Providers with insufficient demand would have to adapt or withdraw from the market, and new providers would emerge (McGettigan 2013).

The new fees regime precipitated significant changes within the English higher education sector and intense processes of institutional review. Many universities have fundamentally examined their identities within the mixed ecology of higher education and subsequently overhauled their recruitment and marketing strategies. Academic staff have been invited or expected to take part in these repositionings, learning new languages for attracting students and taking part in new processes of accounting for, objectifying and even quantifying what their degree programmes have to offer. Students have been encouraged to ask new questions – as empowered consumers, as knowledgeable choosers, and student 'experiencers'. In this volatile environment, the already-contested idea of student engagement has become both more prominent and more complex, promising to do more work than ever before. Student engagement is seen as a way of enhancing individual student academic outcomes and leveraging staff accountability for student learning. Information about student engagement is increasingly positioned as a way of circulating evidence about universities' performance, informing prospective choices, and articulating new demands for student inclusion. In the context of these reforms, what is meant by student engagement is far from self-evident. But it clearly matters in the rapidly changing landscape of English higher education.

Andrew McGettigan suggests that the 'full' fee introduced 'market-mimicking devices' into higher education (2013: xx). Market logics and multiplying forms of audit are now present in everyday academic labour and administrative practices for staff, and are visible in the emphasis on the provision of information to enable students to make choices. Many have argued that staff are increasingly urged to view and manage their own professional and intellectual labour in terms of measurable outputs and efficiencies (Burrows and Kelly 2011; Shore and Wright 2015a, 2015b). Nielsen shows how even in a strongly social democratic state such as Denmark higher education is being reformed around the idea of accountability to student choices framed in instrumental terms (2015: 10). The extent to which students are expected to take up consumer-like attitudes towards higher education is a source of debate (Brown and Carasso 2013; both Gagnon and Hayes, this issue; Naidoo and Williams 2014). At university, as in society more widely,



such reforms are intertwined with the production of new kinds of subjects, who are relentlessly invited to constitute themselves as both enterprising and accountable (see Close, this issue). In this context, education becomes a transaction and knowledges and capacities become objects that can be quantified and exchanged (see both Payne and Hayes, this issue).

The composition of the student body has also been changing with ‘massification’ (Trow 2007) and calls to widen participation (DfES 2003), and there has been an increasing need to review teaching techniques and approaches to respond to the needs of students from ‘under-represented groups’.<sup>3</sup> Although the binary distinction between vocationally oriented polytechnics and traditional universities was dissolved in 1992, the higher education sector has remained highly differentiated in terms of the specialisations and reputations of different institutions in research, teaching and knowledge transfer (Jones and Thomas 2005). Recent reform will thus have very different institutional impacts, and student engagement will be variously interpreted and positioned in different universities. All of this is playing out in a sector that is already rich with ambiguity and multiplicity:

[A]s Bleiklie [1998] suggests [...] different layers of expectations have gradually been piled upon one another. Each of [the university’s] roles – as autonomous cultural institutions, public agencies and market-oriented corporate enterprises – requires different standards of loyalty, quality and efficiency. (Shore and Wright 2004: 104)

Like many other social scientists, we are curious and concerned about these shifting academic contexts. Following Boone Shear and Angelina Zontine (2010: 35), rather than bemoaning our plight(s) or looking back towards an imagined past of intellectual freedom and autonomy from wider social forces, we want to use the tools of our disciplines to explore how these forces are playing out on the ground and in everyday practices. We are suspicious of the idea that neoliberal incursions into the university have been ‘total, homogeneous, or unopposed’ (Shear and Zontine 2010: 35); yet with Cris Shore and Susan Wright (2015a, 2015b) and Marilyn Strathern (2000), we recognise the immense power, pressure and seduction of audit culture. We are interested in exploring the particular ways in which such processes are introduced and how they are imagined and experienced by individuals and groups. As such, we follow Shore and Wright’s call to action for more and better anthropologies and sociologies of organisations (2004; also Greenwood 2011a, 2011b). Our approach also shares much with

Nielsen's recent study of student participation in the context of neoliberal university reform and especially with her ambition to 'work ... with issues of reform, policy and processes of change as objects of inquiry' (2015: 4). Nielsen's concept of 'figuration work' draws attention to the effort, imagination and routine involved in making organisational change and to the incessant work of 'assembling, articulating [and] interlinking ... diverse elements into a whole' (2015: 19) that is necessary not just for organisations to change, but also just to endure. Neoliberal policies relating to student choice and engagement are not simply enacted or implemented; they must be actively envisioned, emplaced and embedded into already complex and moving assemblages of people, practices, discourses and things, mobilising some existing relationships while cutting off others, introducing novelties while at the same time reinforcing traditions.

The symposium that initiated this special issue emerged from the aspirations of the authors of this introduction to use our ethnographic fieldwork skills and sociological and anthropological imaginations to examine change at work in our own institutions and working lives (Gallinat 2005, 2010, 2016; Garforth 2012; Garforth and Kerr 2011; Kerr and Garforth 2016). In putting together the symposium and this special issue, we aimed to use these perspectives to reflect on the contours of an uneasy and conflicted new settlement in U.K. universities and in particular on the kinds of teaching and learning practices and student and academic personhoods that are enabled or delimited in this emerging world. We sought to unfold student engagement both as a discursive expectation and a practised reality – who does it, how, and what does it feel like? We have tried to find new ways of shedding light on how neoliberal reforms are remaking the subjectivities of teachers and learners, and identifying where actors individually and collectively find ways to push back, resist, oppose or even simply neglect audit imperatives in the contexts of complex multilayered institutions with heterogeneous and even conflicting missions and activities.

The articles cover ideas of student engagement that were encountered in the analysis of a very large corpus of policy documents (Sarah Hayes), through auto-ethnographic observation of developments within one organisation (Anselma Gallinat), in media accounts of student protest (Jessica Gagnon) and from student reflections on their own engagement (Jacqui Close). They look at enactments of engagement in its most mundane and perhaps restricted and distorted, yet most common, form (student surveys on teaching and learning) (Geoff Payne) and in radical and contestatory



guises that stretch and even explode conventional ideas of what student engagement might be (Jessica Gagnon). The issue considers what engagement means in official discourses and how this is translated into staff planning and teaching practices. It also explores what engagement does and does not mean for the very students who are its supposed objects and agents. The richly qualitative methods and the commitments to thick description used by all the authors are crucial for thinking beyond the stalemate of politicised assertions and counter-assertions regarding the marketisation of higher education and the emergence of a post-Browne Review version of the student-consumer.

### **Student engagement: pedagogy, politics and practice**

Discussions of student engagement now range across a heterogeneous body of literature (Council of Europe 2015; Trowler and Trowler 2010; Trowler 2010; Vuori 2014). Here, we focus on three strands: pedagogy, politics and practices. First, student engagement is often treated primarily and even exclusively as a pedagogical issue. According to this treatment, effective learning in higher education is not just a mechanical matter of taking on new information or practising new skills, or even a more elaborate set of practices related to reflection on a particular subject matter; rather, student engagement signifies the idea that investments of time, care and attention in the full breadth of activities in their course and their institutions confer measurable benefits for learners (Arum and Roska 2011; Kuh 2009; Milburn-Shaw and Walker 2017). This pedagogical model of student engagement suggests a need for enhanced involvement in studies and extensive connections between students, their peers, their teachers and their institution; it also suggests that involvement and connections are inherently valuable for learners (Axelson and Flick 2010). Student engagement seems to promise learning processes that are expansive, self-reflexive and transformative. This pedagogical model sees engagement rooted in relationships: between learners; between teachers and learners; and in collegial and interactive dynamics within the university. This viewpoint links to long-standing pedagogical concerns about students engaging in ‘deep learning’ instead of ‘surface learning’ (Biggs 2012; Entwistle and Ramsden 1983), which can only be achieved with a degree of buy-in from learners.

Going further, Milburn-Shaw and Walker (2017) suggest that the subjectivity of a truly engaged student would be shaped by a journey of

(self-)discovery through education. This idea of student self-development is strongly related to a Humboldtian vision of *Bildung* – a process of developing the self in learning that greatly depends on the individual’s own drive or will. This idea envisages higher education as a space of critique, dialogue and intellectual growth. It also speaks particularly strongly to academics’ own experiences and desires, which derive from their long struggles to *become* academics. In contrast to this ideal version of pedagogical engagement, Milburn-Shaw and Walker (2017) argue that the type of engagement endorsed by policy-makers and implemented in universities is often narrow and behavioural (also Arum and Roska 2011). Referring to Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris’s (2004) distinction between behavioural, cognitive and emotional engagement, they argue that full engagement entails all three levels combined with active, open-ended and affective processes for students’ involvement in higher education. The kind of student engagement playing out at many universities, however, is limited and goal-oriented. It encourages modes of learning and student selves that are only behavioural, modes that are ‘passive’ and ‘compliant’ (Milburn-Shaw and Walker 2017: 55). They argue that this is an unfortunate but inevitable outcome of the limited ways in which engagement can be enacted in the context of neoliberal government education policy and audit-driven higher education institutions.

Milburn-Shaw and Walker’s argument is indicative of a second strand, the political turn taken in discussions of student engagement in recent years. Milburn-Shaw and Walker (2017) contend that current policies in student engagement primarily seek to benefit the institution rather than the students themselves, leading to a narrow and target-driven model of student engagement (see also Hayes, Gagnon, as well as Payne, this issue). This point was strongly made in the so-called Zepke thesis (2014), which led to considerable debate (Trowler 2015). Concerned with the coercive forces of neoliberalism, Zepke argues that the dominant idea of student engagement circulating not only in universities and higher education policy-making but also in academic literature is an uncritical, short-sighted and instrumental one that has an ‘elective affinity’ (2014: 702) with global neoliberal agendas. Trowler strongly criticised Zepke, notably arguing that Zepke misunderstood the concept of elective affinity, which is about the progressive and partial routinisation of features of an ideology in the practices and process of reflective social actors (2015: 332).<sup>4</sup> It is not a static, ‘homogeneous and universal’, but a ‘context-specific process’ involving struggle and contestation (334).



Trowler turns the focus towards practice, the third strand in the debate about student engagement. The variety of ways in which student engagement might be imagined and performed is a topic ripe for exploration by sociologists and anthropologists because it demands that we look at student engagement not as a singular (pedagogical or ideological) thing that can be defined, implemented and achieved once and for all, but rather as something that emerges in contingent and plural ways from multiple processes at work in complex organisations (Law 1994). Engagement on this reading is something that is done in partial and heterogeneous ways and in specific institutional contexts. Whatever it says on the mission statement and in the organisational chart, universities are composed of diverse and even contradictory processes, policies and people. As Law observes, in any organisation there are ‘multiple different strategies at work, intersecting with one another’. There is ‘no single key order’ (Law 2001: 2). Organisations are seen here as partial and provisional outcomes of ongoing *organising*, that is, maintaining and changing ‘complex relations between ... different modes of ordering’ which are as often contradictory as complementary (2). Seen in this light, engagement cannot be understood either as a single pedagogical ideal or as a corrupted political instrument. It is, rather, composed of different kinds of practice, and understanding it requires detailed empirical investigation; there are no analytical or ideological shortcuts.

## Uncovering and exploring student engagement

Sarah Hayes’s article, ‘Invisible labour: do we need to reoccupy student engagement policy?’, offers insights into the discursive life of student engagement in higher education policy documents. Here, ‘student engagement’ seems to reflect a neoliberal world-view and reproduce a transactional academic orthodoxy. Student engagement is reduced to an exchange relation and positioned in terms of traceable outcomes and measurable performances. Using critical discourse analysis (CDA), Hayes reveals that in formal policy contexts the term student engagement is used as though it were on the one hand an actor that can itself accomplish ends or goals (enhancing student experience, improving academic outcomes) and on the other as if it were a thing that can be packaged, marketed or otherwise provided to students. In both instances, the people, the labour and the relationships that are key to teaching and learning are erased or marginalised. These documents make it hard to see and value the work, the interactions,

the bodies that are an integral part of pedagogy. Hayes highlights the tendency for higher education policy documents to emphasise ‘only the visible successes of student engagement’. Instead, Hayes suggests, we should ‘reoccupy’ the hollowed-out term student engagement, putting bodies and relationships back in.

Anselma Gallinat’s article, ‘Student engagement in the management of accelerated change’, is based on an auto-ethnographic account of reform in one institution after the publication of the Browne Review in 2010. If the documentary life of student engagement, explored by Hayes, conceals the work of doing engagement, ethnographic reflection vividly reveals it. The labour that Hayes notes has been erased in policy documents is the very cause of the fatigue among teaching staff that Gallinat observes at the end of a long process of trying to implement central policy changes prompted by the coming rise of tuition fees. Gallinat focuses on two institutional initiatives that anticipated and tried to respond to enhanced demands from students in the new higher education landscape. Student engagement was positioned both as an instrument of change and as the desired outcome of change in attempts to reshape teaching and learning in the university. Gallinat’s account recognises how easily student engagement can be enlisted in an audited vision of teaching and learning. But it also recognises how incomplete and partial the realisation of such visions can be. This is a nuanced account that situates policy change in the context of complex, dynamic relationships and that demonstrates the academic time, effort and labour – much of it duplicated or lost – that is needed to translate managerial visions into institutional practices.

Both Hayes and Gallinat focus primarily on how higher education policy-makers, universities, and their academic and administrative staff define, communicate, operationalise and implement student engagement. Students appear only fleetingly in these discussions as the imagined beneficiaries or recipients of engagement policies (Hayes), or as members of a focus group that is hastily cobbled together to include student voices in attempts to improve National Student Survey responses (Gallinat). But the next three articles in this collection focus systematically on the *students* in student engagement. They offer starkly differing portraits of how institutions conceive of, normalise, incorporate and even actively resist different kinds of engagement. They help make visible the kinds of engaging subjectivities that are preferred, accepted, ignored and rejected in official discourses of student engagement. In the articles by Geoff Payne and Jessica Gagnon,



respectively, we see students as they have been imagined by producers of student evaluation surveys and as they have been constructed as wilful and infantile subjects. In Jacqui Close's article, students themselves step forward to define, narrate and analyse their own sense of student engagement in the contemporary academy.

Geoff Payne produces surprising insights by considering student evaluation questionnaires as forms of engagement. The pedagogical literatures which envision more transformative models of student engagement clearly do not have this kind of activity in mind – it represents the reductive, audit-culture-driven modes of participation that have been the objects of critique. Nonetheless, as Payne persuasively argues, filling in surveys is a routine, frequent and hands-on way in which many students engage with their studies and their institutions and through which they affect the development of teaching practices. Payne discusses local module evaluations which invite students to comment on learning and teaching in one particular subject area, and he looks at the U.K.'s National Student Survey (NSS), an annual poll asking final-year students to reflect on their whole programme. NSS data allows student experience and student satisfaction to be quantified and compared across institutions and courses, and it can be used to inform institutional policy-making. This data represents an important but mundane flow of engagement from students towards academics and academic managers. Payne shows, however, how the promise of that everyday and student-centred form of engagement is betrayed by questionnaires which frame students as passive consumers.

Payne's approach also demonstrates clearly how U.K. universities and the wider higher education sector have failed to (or chosen not to) mobilise the critical resources of their own institutions in generating ways of measuring satisfaction or understanding student experience. Instead, institutions depend on surveys with basic design errors that incorrectly deploy Likert-type scaling techniques to quantify multiple fragmented aspects of teaching, learning and higher education experience, rather than explore a single attitude with a specifiable object. But more than that, the survey questions make unfounded assumptions about learners, one of them being that they 'are well-placed to evaluate the teaching and learning experiences which they encounter' (Payne, this issue, 61). Student surveys seem to be a way in which U.K. universities routinely do student engagement in bad faith: they generate and base policy decisions on unreliable and sometimes even irrelevant data, reducing engagement to a matter of managerial control. Payne

endorses the U.S. National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) as a better alternative. The NSSE, he argues, explicitly explores student engagement rather than the amorphous ‘student satisfaction’ of the NSS. The former concentrates on measuring specific learning and engagement activities owned by students themselves, whereas the latter seeks to determine feelings or perceptions relating to students’ experiences. But even while preferring the ‘technical quality and clarity of focus’ of the NSSE’s methodology, Payne (this issue, 73) acknowledges that what is also at stake in student surveys is the capacity of institutions to set the terms of what does and does not count as engagement and for whom. These questions are directly addressed in Jessica Gagnon’s article.

‘Unreasonable rage, disobedient dissent: the social construction of student activists and the limits of student engagement within higher education in the United Kingdom’ explores how enactments of engagement of a wholly different kind are rejected in public and in policy discourses. If student surveys represent the bureaucratic or consumer minimum of student engagement, what might be gained from recognising a more ‘monstrous’, more ‘revolting’, more ‘will-ful’ side of engagement (Gagnon, this issue, 86)? Gagnon identifies neoliberal ideas operating in the national press and in the statements of university management, where they rule out student opposition and critique as forms of engagement. Gagnon focuses on instances of opposition to the new fees regime in the post-Browne era. Drawing on ideas from Ahmed (2014) and Tyler (2013), she shows how this kind of activism is delegitimised as infantile and irresponsible. Part of the power of Gagnon’s analysis comes from identifying the edges of engagement. Understanding what kinds of student actions and identities are written out of student engagement not only reveals the narrow ways in which engagement is often conceptualised by powerful actors, but also tells us something about the fragility and brittleness of those institutions as they take up defensive stances against students’ more critical engagement.

Gagnon notes that the voices of student activists are heard but also tamed or misrepresented in media accounts of student activism. In our last article, we hear more from students themselves, this time as sociologists reflecting on their own engagement. These student voices are not overtly oppositional in the sense that Gagnon captures, nor can they be described simply as instrumental or consumerist. They are navigating contemporary socio-economic realities but also questioning them; they are articulating the plural ways in which engagement is both understood and practised in their



own lives and those of their friends and peers. We asked Jacqui Close to take on the challenging task of reflecting analytically on the undergraduate and graduate student panel that we convened as part of our 2015 conference and in which she herself took part. Her article – and the generous contributions that our students brought to the panel – allow a genuinely novel insight into student engagement. Students appear here not as participants in social science research or as the objects of university engagement policies. Rather, they are equipped to various degrees with disciplinary knowledges, perspectives and skills, and Close shows how they draw on their sociological training to reflect critically on their own experiences.

Close's article gives us insights into student engagement as it is articulated by students. They speak from inside their own complicated higher education experience and shifting identities as students and graduates. The student contributors were given a wide brief to explore student engagement as they best understood it. They suggested aspects of engagement that we could never have imagined, including its intimate connection with having friends and a social life at university – with all the problems, especially for non-traditional students, which that involves. Close argues here that student engagement is not just a matter of (often exhausting) work for academic staff, as Gallinat's article shows, it is also an object of intimate and relentless identity work for students that challenges both the tropes of student engagement and 'the student experience'.

Almost without exception, the contributors note the impossibility of defining student engagement and point to its contested nature. The articles here raise the question of whether student engagement still offers the possibility of a transformative model of learning and self-development for students, or whether it has been captured ideologically as higher education institutions have remade themselves in a neoliberal age. Payne, Gagnon and Hayes all make different and intriguing proposals for reclaiming, 're-occupying' or reimagining student engagement. But as Close's and Gallinat's articles in particular make clear, the referential openness of student engagement is both part of its appeal and its weakness. There is no 'true meaning' of student engagement nor, we suggest, is there a pure version untainted by the marketisation of higher education and the reforms associated with New Public Management. It certainly is partly captured by ideologies of neoliberalisation and audit culture. One particularly insidious aspect of that capture has been the explicit betrayal of supposed pedagogical benefits of engagement as an active practice and relationship between students and

educators by attempts to make it into an object that can be ‘provided’ or quantified in relation to external audiences or markets.

As all the articles in this special issue show, student engagement involves work – administrative work, teaching work, identity work and the students’ work of engaging with and contesting the university. Some of that work is rendered invisible in dominant neoliberal models of student engagement. Some students must work harder than others, not just to do well at their studies but to be engaged students. The language of audit and measurement makes it difficult to acknowledge and value work that does not produce tangible outcomes. The context of rapid reform both calls forth and reveals student engagement as a process rather than as an object. Engagement is not the answer to the challenges posed by ongoing higher education reform, nor is it the cause of those changes. In contexts of rapid and relentless institutional change, engagement is something we make – and something we can try to remake.

---

**Anselma Gallinat** is a Senior Lecturer in Social Anthropology at Newcastle University. She works on post-socialism, memory, history writing, morality and ethics with a particular focus on regime change. Her monograph *Narratives in the Making* was published in 2016. She is an experienced ethnographer with particular expertise in auto-ethnography; she is co-editor of *The Ethnographic Self as Resource: Writing Memory and Experience into Ethnography* (2010).

E-mail: [Anselma.gallinat@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:Anselma.gallinat@ncl.ac.uk)

**Lisa Garforth** is Senior Lecturer in Sociology at Newcastle University. She works across sociology of utopia and environment and the sociology of science and knowledge production. Her recent work has concerned the role of women in scientific cultures and institutions, and focuses particularly on how different kinds of knowledge work are valued and gendered. Her monograph *Green Utopias: Environmental Hope Before and After Nature* was published in 2017.

E-mail: [lisa.garforth@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:lisa.garforth@ncl.ac.uk)

---



## Notes

1. Most recently, the government announced a review of the current tuition fee system. Theresa May has been quoted as suggesting that it may be recommended that some universities lower fees for certain courses depending on cost and quality (Adams and Walker 2018).
2. Strikingly similar rhetoric had already been mobilised elsewhere; see Nielsen (2015: 9) on the Danish example.
3. This although, as Robert Jones and Liz Thomas (2005) note, the White Paper and institutional policies failed to utilise the transformative potential of widening participation, expecting instead the new entrants to change to meet established university cultures.
4. In fact, as Trowler explains, the concept derives originally from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Its sociological use is rooted in Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills's (1946) description of Max Weber's analysis of a particular social group of religious believers selectively adapting parts of a system of ideas over time while at the same time modifying their own recurrent practices to align with those adapted ideas (Trowler 2015: 334).

## References

- Adams, R. and Walker, P. (2018) 'May warns universities over high costs of tuition fees', *The Guardian*, 18 February, < <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/feb/18/cutting-tuition-fees-would-backfire-justine-greening-warns-theresa-may> >
- Ahmed, S. (2014) *Willful Subjects*, London: Duke University Press.
- Arum, R. and Roksa, J. (2011) *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Axelson, R.D. and Flick, A. (2010) 'Defining student engagement', *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* 43, no. 1: 38–43.
- Biggs, J. (2012) 'What the student does: Teaching for enhanced learning', *Higher Education Research & Development* 31, no. 1: 39–55.
- BIS (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills) (2011) *Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System*, London: HMSO.
- Bleiklie, I. (1998) 'Justifying the evaluative state: New public management ideals in higher education', *European Journal of Higher Education* 33, no. 3: 299–316.
- Brown, R., and Carasso, H. (2013) *Everything for Sale: The Marketisation of UK Higher Education*, London: Routledge.
- Browne, J. (2010) *Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education: An Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance*, < [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/422565/bis-10-1208-securing-sustainable-higher-education-browne-report.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/422565/bis-10-1208-securing-sustainable-higher-education-browne-report.pdf) >

- Bryson, C. and Hardy, C. (2011) 'Clarifying the concept of student of engagement: a fruitful approach to underpin policy and practice', Working paper presented at the HEA conference, Nottingham University, Nottingham, 5–6 July.
- Burrows, R. and Kelly, A. (2011) 'Measuring the value of sociology? Some notes on performative metricization in the contemporary academy', *Sociological Review* 29, no. 2: 130–150.
- Clarke, J. (2010) 'So many strategies, so little time ... Making universities modern', *Learning and Teaching* 3, no. 3: 91–116.
- Council of Europe (2015) *Student Engagement in Europe: Society, Higher Education and Student Governance*, Council of Europe Higher Education Series 20, Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
- DfES (Department for Educations and Skills) (2003) *The Future of Higher Education*, London: HMSO.
- Entwistle, N.J. and Ramsden, P. (1983) *Understanding Student Learning*. London: Croom Helm.
- Fredricks, J.A., Blumenfeld, P.C., and Paris, A.H. (2004) 'School engagement: potential of concept, state and evidence', *Review of Educational Research* 74, no. 1: 59–109.
- Gallinat, A. (2005) 'A ritual middle ground? Personhood, ideology and resistance in East Germany', *Social Anthropology* 13, no. 3: 291–305.
- Gallinat, A. (2010) 'Playing the native card: the anthropologist as informant in Eastern Germany', in P. Collins and A. Gallinat (eds) *The Ethnographic Self as Resource: Writing Memory and Experience into Ethnography*, Oxford: Berghahn: 25–44.
- Gallinat, A. (2016) *Narratives in the Making: Writing the East German Past in the Democratic Present*, Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Garforth L. (2012) 'In/visibilities of research: seeing and knowing in STS', *Science, Technology and Human Values* 37, no. 2: 264–285.
- Garforth L. and Kerr, A. (2011) 'Interdisciplinarity and the social sciences: capital, institutions and autonomy', *British Journal of Sociology* 62, no. 4: 657–676.
- Gerth, H. and Mills, C.W. (eds) (1946) *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Greenwood, D. (2011a) 'The future of US higher education', *Learning and Teaching: The International Journal of Higher Education in the Social Sciences* 4, no. 2: 62–74.
- Greenwood, D. (2011b) 'Summary and response', *Learning and Teaching: The International Journal of Higher Education in the Social Sciences* 4, no. 3: 70–73.
- Greenwood, D., Shram, S.F., Mills, D., May, T., Zuber-Skerrit, O., Quiddington, P. and Bönnisch-Brednich, B. (2011) 'Commentaries', *Learning and Teaching* 4, no. 3: 70–73.
- Jones, R. and L. Thomas (2005) 'The 2003 Government Higher Education White Paper: A critical assessment of its implications for the access and widening participation agenda', *Journal of Education Policy* 20, no. 5: 615–630.



- Kerr A. and Garforth L. (2016) 'Affective practices, care and bioscience: A study of two laboratories', *Sociological Review* 64, no. 1: 3–20.
- Kuh, G.D. (2009) 'The National Survey of Student Engagement: Conceptual and empirical foundations', *New Directions for Institution Research* 141: 5–20.
- Law, J. (1994) *Ordering Modernity: Social Ordering and Social Theory*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Law, J. (2001) 'Ordering and obduracy' Centre for Science Studies, Lancaster University, <http://www.comp.lancs.ac.uk/sociology/papers/Law-Ordering-and-Obduracy.pdf> (accessed 10 December 2017).
- McGettigan, A. (2013) *The Great University Gamble*, London: Pluto Press.
- Milburn-Shaw, H. and Walker, D. (2017) 'The politics of student engagement', *Politics* 37, no. 1: 52–66.
- Naidoo, R., and Williams, J. (2014) 'The neoliberal regime in English higher education: Charters, consumers, and the erosion of the public good', *Critical Studies in Education* 56, no. 2: 208–223.
- Nielsen, G.B. (2015) *Figuration Work: Student Participation, Democracy and University Reform in a Global Knowledge Economy*, New York: Berghahn Books.
- Shear, B.W. and Zontine, A.I. (2010) 'Reading neoliberalism at the university', *Learning and Teaching: The International Journal of Higher Education in the Social Sciences* 3, no. 3: 32–62.
- Shore, C. and Wright, S. (2004) 'Whose accountability? Governmentality and the auditing of universities', *Parallax* 10, no. 2: 100–116.
- Shore, C., and Wright, S. (2015a) 'Governing by numbers: Audit culture, rankings and the new world order', *Social Anthropology* 23, no. 1: 22–28.
- Shore, C., and Wright, S. (2015b) 'Audit culture revisited: rankings, ratings and the re-assembling of society', *Current Anthropology* 56, no. 3: 421–444.
- Slaughter, S. and Leslie, L.L. (1997) *Academic Capitalism: Politics, Policies, and the Entrepreneurial University*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Strathern, M. (ed.) (2000) *Audit Cultures: Anthropological Studies in Accountability, Ethics and the Academy*, London: Routledge.
- Trow, M. (2007) 'Reflections on the Transition from Elite to Mass to Universal Access in Modern Societies since WWII', in J.J.F. Forest and P.G. Altbach (eds) *International Handbook of Higher Education*, 243–280.
- Trowler, P. (2015) 'Student engagement, ideological contest and elective affinity: The Zepke thesis revisited', *Teaching in Higher Education* 20, no. 3: 328–339.
- Trowler, P. and Trowler, V. (2010) *Framework for Action: Enhancing Student Engagement at the Institutional Level*, York: Higher Education Academy.
- Trowler, V. (2010) *Student Engagement Literature Review*, York: Higher Education Academy.



- Tyler, I. (2013) *Revolting Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain*, London: Zed Books.
- Vuori, J. (2014) 'Student engagement: Buzzword or fuzzword?', *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* 63, no. 5: 509–519.
- Zepke, N. (2014) 'Student engagement research in higher education: Questioning and academic orthodoxy', *Teaching in Higher Education* 19, no. 6: 697–708.