STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN UNIVERSITY DECISION-MAKING: POLICIES, PROCESSES AND THE STUDENT VOICE.

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Declaration

This thesis results entirely from my own work and has not been offered previously for any other degree or diploma.

The following publications have arisen directly or indirectly from the work that led to this PhD:

> Carey, P. (2012a) Exploring variation in nurse educators' perceptions of the inclusive curriculum. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, *16*(7), pp741-755.

> Carey, P. (2012b) Student engagement: stakeholder perspectives on student representation in university governance, *Studies in Higher Education* pp 1–15. (ahead of print online publication)

> Carey, P. (2013a) Representation and student engagement in higher education: a reflection on the views and experiences of course representatives, *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 37(1), pp71-88.

> Carey, P. (2013b) Student as co-producer in a marketised higher education system: a case study of students' experience of participation in curriculum design. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, pp1-11. (ahead of print online publication)

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Abstract

This thesis explores student engagement in university decision-making. Universities are expected to involve their students in a range of governance activities. Yet, the conceptual base for this is under-formed and often draws from learning theories. As a result, the emphasis is on what students should do and how they can be motivated to engage. This thesis proposes an alternative view that examines the issue from a public participation perspective. To support this, it offers a model of engagement that refocuses the debate onto the processes and procedures of the university. These shape the nature of student engagement in an institution. Various modes of engagement exist and each has different expectations on student activity. However, there is little published data to establish whether students actually want to participate. What is available tends to focus on the experiences of highly engaged students, such as course representatives. To redress this, the thesis establishes an evidence-base for mainstream students' views on engagement. This is based on mixed-methods research that involved over 1,300 students in one university. It used a sequential design, in which information gathered in a qualitative phase was tested in a university-wide survey. The research demonstrates that many students see the value of engagement and want to participate. Yet, this was not universal and an argument is presented that student subjectivities influence engagement. These are shaped by a variety of factors, including the relative power of the student in a university environment. Contemporary literature suggests that this is shifting in favours of students as they assert themselves as customers of the university. However, the research findings dispute this. Students are not overwhelmingly consumerist and, if they are, this has little impact on engagement activity. Instead, the localised connection between students and tutors appears to be crucial for engagement. This tests the new public management approach to university governance that overlook or over-regulate such relationships. This is one of several challenges identified in this thesis for student engagement in university decision-making.

Chapter One: Introduction

Student engagement is rapidly becoming a dominant concept in the management and organisation of higher education (Leach, 2012). It is an expansive idea that encompasses participation in learning, issues of identity and how students are involved in institutional structures and processes. The concept is also unusual in its apparent widespread appeal. It is backed by government (e.g. BIS, 2011a), mandated by non-governmental organisations (e.g. QAA, 2012a), supported by university managers (Little et al, 2009), encouraged by academic staff (Van der Velden, 2012) and championed by student bodies (NUS, 2013). However, the notion of student engagement has only recently been subject to significant analysis, particularly in relation to those areas of engagement that sit outside learning and teaching regimes (Trowler, 2010). As a result, it could be argued that the higher education sector is embarking on an experiment in engagement, with little theoretical understanding and a very limited evidence-base for practice (Leach, 2012). This thesis explores this by considering student participation in university decision-making processes that impact on the student experience.

Background to the study

My interest in student engagement grew from earlier research into the notion of inclusive education (Carey, 2012a). I was struck by the potential for an inclusive curriculum to fundamentally challenge the way that the university engages with its students. It presented a model of a student:staff partnership in learning. As one of the respondents in the research had said,

> *"The benefit (of diversity) is about having a range of different people from a range of different backgrounds… I think that is a really positive thing – just having different people on the programme with these experiences to be able to share and contribute."* (Carey, 2012a, p750)

This notion of contribution extended outside the teaching environment. It offered an opportunity for students to influence programme design in a way that challenged the conventions of curriculum development, as well as associated governance practices. If students are to be architects of their own learning, then it follows that they should be included in the process of decision-making that informs that learning. However, many of the mechanisms for engaging students

can appear tokenistic (Little et al, 2009). In addition, institutional relationships are characterised by a hierarchy of authority, status and expertise that generally does not favour students (Mann, 2008). This is often overlooked in engagement activities (Robinson, 2013). Student representation appears to be an example of this, with representatives sometimes feeling cautious about addressing concerns in front of academic staff (Lizzio and Wilson, 2009). To explore this further, I undertook a study that explored the views and experiences of course representatives (Carey, 2013a) and a companion piece that examined the issue from a staff perspective (Carey, 2012b).

Research questions

Although not directly reported in this thesis, these studies have fundamentally influenced my views on student engagement. However, course representatives' views are not necessarily characteristic of other students. Hence, this research explores student engagement in institutional governance by focusing on mainstream* students. It does this by addressing the following research questions:

- What are students' perceptions of the engagement opportunities offered to them in one university?
- How do student subjectivities influence engagement?
- Based on the above, what are the challenges presented by student engagement in university decision-making?

Contribution of this research to understanding of student engagement

In answering these questions, this thesis offers a model of student engagement that addresses student activity in the context of institutional action. This moves the debate from what students should do to what universities permit or facilitate. The model provides a framework for the analysis of research findings on students' view about engagement. This data, in itself, offers the first, large-scale study into the thoughts and experiences of UK students regarding engagement in decision-making. Prior to this, when student engagement has been measured, it tends to be in the context of learning and teaching activities (NUS/QAA, 2012a). Furthermore, although student engagement is routinely measured in the US (e.g. Kuh, 2009), the

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* I recognise that the term 'mainstream' may imply a hegemonic student culture. This ignores pressing evidence of increasing diversification of the student body (Little et al, 2009). Hence, in this context, 'mainstream' simply refers to students who, for whatever reason, are not necessarily involved in defined student engagement activities.

research instruments used do not address participation in decision-making. As such, this research provides valuable data to support the further development of student engagement. Finally, exploration of student subjectivities allows for a discussion on the possible impact of consumerism on engagement. As this is based on students' views, it avoids the reliance on anecdote or conjecture that seems to characterise much of the debate in this area (Saunders, 2011).

The research is located in a single institution. Every university has distinctive characteristics so care needs to be taken in generalising the findings from this study. Nonetheless, the issues raised in this thesis should be of wider interest. This is based on an argument that there are broadly consistent approaches to university governance in the UK (Shattock, 2008). Moreover, evidence from across the sector suggests orthodoxy in student engagement in decision-making resulting from highly standardised practices and procedures (Little et al, 2009).

Outline of the thesis

The context for this research is explored in the following chapter. It starts with a account of the institution where this research was conducted to give the reader a sense of its structure and culture. This locates the university in the UK system of higher education. Despite a period of rapid growth and change, there is a still a recognisable university system in Britain (Gallacher and Raffe, 2012). Whilst this system is differentiated into clusters of aligned universities, these relate to national and international status, research profile and subject mix (Fillipakou et al, 2012). However, there appear to be no discernible relationships between university type and student engagement. Differences exist, but they are associated with local conditions and differ from institution to institution. Institutional and sector-wide drivers may offer a broad-brush outline of engagement activities and approaches, but the fine detail is provided at department and programme level. Indeed, central to this thesis is an argument that engagement is shaped by the students' immediate environment.

Consideration of UK higher education and the drive for student engagement prepares the ground for an exploration of what student engagement is. This is the focus of chapter three. The chapter provides an indication of the expansive nature of student engagement and where participation in decision-making is located in that. This sets the scene for the presentation of theoretical model of student

engagement in decision-making in the form of a *nested hierarchy of student engagement interactions*. The model moves beyond consideration of student engagement that focuses on what students should do (e.g. Kay et al) to consider how institutions should act. The chapter then addresses two interrelated themes in this area. These are a general notion of the *'student voice'* and the more formalised concept of student representation.

The focus on institutional action encourages a reconceptualisation of theories of student engagement. Crucially, this scrutinises student engagement from a public participation perspective, in contrast to the learning approaches that are often used to examine engagement (e.g. Krause, 2005). Moving away from learning locates engagement in a political and relational context. This surfaces the connection that students have with their institutions. At the heart of this is the enduring power dynamic that characterises higher education (Mann, 2008). The chapter explores this with specific reference to two key, contemporary conceptions of studenthood. These are the assumption that the student is primarily a consumer of a higher education product and the opposing perspective that students are co-producers of their educational experiences (McCulloch, 2009).

Chapter four describes and defends the research methods and methodological position of this thesis. The scope of the research questions necessitates collecting data from a wide and diverse range of students. This suggests the need for a large-scale, quantitative study. However, there is limited empirical evidence for the student perspective on engagement. What there is also tends to focus on highly engaged students such as course representatives (Lizzio and Wilson, 2009) or those involved in fairly select projects (Dunne and Zandstra, 2011). Relying on this limited evidence as the foundation for a quantitative study increases the risk that the research will misrepresent a mainstream the student perspective. To address this, the thesis employs a 'sequential mixed methods design' that relies on information from a small-scale, qualitative research stage in the development of a survey tool for use in a larger, quantitative study (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007). This approach to survey design reduced the risk that the research instrument would simply reflect the conceptual position of its author (Wolff et al, 1993). The resultant questionnaire was distributed and collected in-class to maximise response rate. The associated sampling framework meant that students of a range of subject areas were included in the study.

Mixed methods research has only relatively recently gained acceptance as a legitimate research approach. Today, it is often seen as the 'third research methodology' (Johnson et al, 2007) that liberates inquiry from the positivist and constructivist paradigmatic assumptions that have dominated discussion over how individual methods can be used (e.g. Lincoln and Guba, 1994). However, the approach still raises concerns (e.g. Giddens and Grant, 2007), so this chapter provides an opportunity to defend the use of mixed methods in the context of this research. It is based on the argument that mixed methods research is located in a critical realist paradigm. This is also associated with insider research (Brannick and Coughlan, 2007), which is another key feature of this study. Consequently, the following chapter (chapter five) considers this project in that context. In this, I explain my role in the university and elaborate on personal motivations for conducting the study. A central feature of this is to examine the possible impact of an individual insider's position on their research (Costley et al, 2010). Moreover, as this research is dependent on student participation, consideration is given to how this was encouraged. The risk in educational research is that students may feel compelled to take part (Wagner, 1997). Hence, the chapter will address the power dynamics of the student: staff relationships in the university and how these were ethically managed.

The results of this project are split into two chapters. Chapter six focuses on the qualitative phase. It provides an analysis of interview and focus group data that has formed the basis of a research paper on how student engagement is managed in a marketised university (Carey, 2013b). The chapter identifies key themes in relation to engagement. These relate to the experience of being heard. In addition, it explores the influence of students' relationships with their tutors. Following this, two distinct engagement procedures are considered. The first relates to students' response to conventional evaluation mechanisms through course appraisal. The second focuses on student representation at course level. In addition, research participants offered a number of alternative methods for student engagement. These linked participation in decision-making to learning activities and notion of advocacy. Finally, the analysis suggests that engagement mechanisms often focus on complaint and frustration. Having offered this analysis, the chapter goes on to explain how these ideas were translated into a

questionnaire that formed the quantitative element of this mixed methods study *(see appendix 1: student engagement questionnaire).*

The results from the quantitative phase are presented in chapter seven. A response rate of nearly 95% was achieved. This establishes some credibility for the findings, but the chapter offers a health warning by explaining this in the context of student attendance at the point of the survey. Nonetheless, the analysis relates to the views of over 1,300 students across the institution. Having described the reported characteristics of these students, the chapter focuses on analysis of the 30 engagement-related items that constituted the student engagement questionnaire. These are presented in the context of an exploratory factor analysis that distilled these into seven distinct categories:

1. Student satisfaction in the context of engagement.
2. Students' views about getting involved.
3. Students' experiences of getting involved.
4. Students' perceptions of module evaluation
5. Students' thoughts about representation,
6. Students' opinions about complaining.
7. Students' assessment of their impact on decision-making.

Each of these is fully considered and significant associations between response and student characteristics are noted. An example of this is the relationship between engagement and consumerism. The research found that a third of students defined themselves as predominately consumers of education. Although this was associated with dissatisfaction, it was not connected to engagement activity. The headline findings of this phase are that students are interested in engagement and want to be involved. It also appears that students' relationships with their tutors are important for engagement. However, the study identified that there were insufficient opportunities for students to participate. In addition, concerns were expressed over the two key engagement mechanisms used in the university, namely course appraisal and representation.

The results of both research phases are discussed in chapters eight and nine. Chapter eight focuses on students' views of engagement. The implications of these are discussed in relation to four areas: evaluation and appraisal, student representation, student:staff partnerships and civic engagement. These are

related to the Nested Hierarchy of Student Engagement Interactions to highlight the view that student engagement is a joint venture between universities and their students. This message is reinforced in chapter nine. This considers the extent to which student engagement is influenced by neoliberalism in higher education. The implication of this for students' subjectivities is explored in the context of assumptions regarding the student as a consumer. Examining this establishes the extent to which such discourses come from, or are imposed on, students. A key argument in the chapter, however, is that consumerism is not irreconcilable with other notions of studenthood. The neoliberal university is also defined by managerialism. This is characterised by top-down management notions and associated notions of surveillance and distrust (Beckman, 2009). These may conflict with the local and responses mechanisms that appear to be required to encourage student engagement. Hence, this chapter considers how ambitions for student engagement may be constrained in the neoliberal university.

This sets the scene for the concluding chapter. The chapter begins by establishing the reliability and validity of this research. It then revisits some of the main challenges that engagement poses for university decision-making and considers the scope of actions that can be taken in the university to address these. However, at the centre of this is an argument that engagement is affected by local influences and institutional cultures. Hence, the next chapter sets the scene for the research by describing and analysing the institution where the research was conducted. This locates the university in a broader system of higher education in the UK to enable the reader to assess the transferability of the research findings to other organisational cultures.

Chapter Two: research context

Student engagement is a broad and diverse concept. In this thesis, I address a specific perspective on engagement that focuses on how students can be involved in making decisions that have a direct impact on their university experience. This is examined with reference to how students' view a range of appropriate engagement opportunities available to them. I established these views through research in a single university. Hence, this chapter provides the context for the research by describing the University in which it was conducted. It situates the institution within a network of British universities. This is explained in relation to the diversification of UK higher education, as it is evolved from an elitist to a massified system. As a result, universities can be differentiated into 'types' that are shorthand for institutional characteristics, status and expectations. These offer some insight into the extent to which the findings of this thesis may be applicable to similar institutions. However, I argue that these categories are not particularly helpful for explaining student engagement activity. Instead, there appears to be overall consistency in how British universities involve their students in decision-making. Consequently, this research may have wider reach than would be implied by consideration of institutional type alone. As such, the chapter offers a discussion of the environment in which student engagement in decision-making occurs. This provides a backdrop for the following chapter that offers a comprehensive critique of the notion of student engagement.

The context for this study

This research was conducted in a single university. The operational structure is fairly conventional. It is arranged into faculties, subdivided into schools or subject areas. A range of centralised services supports these. It is worth noting that, at the point when the data was collected, the university executive (comprising of the vice chancellor, pro-vice chancellors and faculty deans) had been largely unchanged for several years. Hence, the institution had experienced a long period of organisational stability. The university was granted a charter in 1992 as part of the expansion of British university system following the 1988 Education Reform Act (Dearlove, 2002). Prior to that, it was a polytechnic. Polytechnics operated under local authority control and were expected to respond to local need (Shattock, 2002). As a consequence, they often had a greater connection to the community and a high proportion of local students (Archer, 2007). This is the case in this

institution, with around a quarter of students coming from the immediate locale. The polytechnic legacy has also had implications for the range of subjects offered in this institution. Although the current prospectus offers breadth of disciplines, as with many such organisations, there remains tendency to applied subjects, vocational study and professionally accredited programmes (Parry, 2009). In addition, the university's heritage is reflected in research activity. Although there are pockets of excellence in research, like most post-1992 universities, it is not a research-intensive institution (Hewitt-Dundas, 2012). Instead, there is a stronger emphasis on learning and teaching, evident in greater levels of engagement with professional recognition (HEA, 2009).

Organisation and management appears to be rooted in its polytechnic past. Connection to local government meant that the administration of polytechnics was more bureaucratic than the collegial style seen in universities. An element of this was retained after these institutions were awarded university status (Dearlove, 2002). Today, this university's management ethos embodies the decisive, managerial approach that characterises former polytechnics and increasingly defines the whole sector (Kok et al, 2010). This is reflected in the existence a strong regulatory framework, supported by an audit culture (Deem and Brehony, 2005). The focus on audit is illustrated in institutional key performance indicators that attempt to measure the student experience (Ter Bogt and Scapens, 2012) and a system of annual appraisal for all staff (Olssen and Peters, 2005). Financial management is also distinctive of a managerial approach. The university utilises cost-centres and devolved budgets to maximise resource allocation, but these are coupled with a centralised process for hiring new staff (Deem and Brehony, 2005). Finally, from a pedagogic perspective, the university has embraced notions of transferrable skills, embedding them in all undergraduate curricula. Shore (2008) argues that this reflects a managerial, performative response that seeks to standardise and marketise learning.

At face value, the university appears to be typical of many former polytechnics. However, there are important characteristics that that sit outside the pre/post-1992 university divide. These relate to location, size and organisation. The university is mainly city-based and non-campus. This can have implications for student engagement, with campus-based universities appearing to benefit from greater social integration of students. The '*What works?*' project on student

retention and success, for example, found that students who live on campus are more engaged than their locally-based peers (Thomas, 2012). Therefore, the relatively high number of students who live at home may have implications for engagement in this university. Institutional size may also influence this. The university has around 25,000 students, making it one of the 20 largest UK universities (HESA, 2012). Research indicates that students in large universities are less likely to engage. However, Porter (2006) argues that density, rather than the sheer number of students is the issue. Student:staff ratio is an indicator of density. At over 21:1, this university is in the lower quartile of British universities for student:staff ratio (Complete University Guide, 2013).

Mechanisms for how students contribute to decision-making are typical of those found in most universities. This is reflected in a key focus on appraisal processes, such as course evaluation and annual surveys (NUS/QAA, 2012a). In addition, there is a network of course representatives. Management of this is in keeping with standard practice. Previous research in the institution (Carey, 2013a) indicates that there is no standard mechanism for becoming a representative. Students are either elected or selected following nomination by their peers or themselves. This process is often undertaken in the first year and may be officially managed or informal. Representatives can remain in post until they graduate. Although there are procedures for 'de-selection', they appear to be rarely used. This appears to be consistent with how representation is managed across the university sector, with very few examples of student representatives being formally elected (Little et al, 2009). Representation is usually based around committee meetings (Rodgers et al, 2011). In this university, programme teams are expected to organise three formal boards with representatives every year, although these are often supplemented by less official meetings. As in most UK universities, representatives are trained by the Student Union (Little et al, 2009). In addition, elected Student Union sabbatical officers sit of a variety of institutional committees. This is in keeping with common practice across the sector (QAA, 2009).

Institutional diversity in the British university system
This university described above forms part of a diverse system of higher education. It appreciated that higher education is delivered in non-university settings (Widdowson, 2012). However, there are historical, social and organisational ties between universities that may not be replicated in other providers (Parry, 2009). Hence, this thesis focuses on universities. The notion of a *British* system could be

seen as hard to justify. Devolution has resulted in progressive differentiation between English, Northern Irish, Scottish and Welsh universities (Filippakou et al, 2012). However, Gallacher and Raffe (2012) argue that historical inter-dependence between these countries, coupled with the need for individual universities to respond to a globalised higher education market, results in as much convergence as divergence in the devolved systems. Moreover, as these developments are relatively recent, it seems premature to assume that regional variation would have already resulted in radical differences in how universities engage with their students.   Examination of British higher education could suggest that variation between 'types' of university may be a stronger differentiating factor than regional politics. That university mission groups cut across UK regional boundaries (e.g. Russell Group, 2013) reinforces suggestions that the marketplace may be more significant than any differential impact of devolved legislative power (Gallacher and Raffe, 2012). Consequently, this thesis addresses the full UK picture, rather than a more parochial English perspective.

To understand the current picture, it is helpful to consider how the British system evolved. As university education moved from elite to mass consumption, UK higher education became characterised by increasing diversity. The 20th Century witnessed the most sustained change, with a rapid expansion in student numbers. In 2010, 76 times as many students obtained a first degree and 260 times as many obtained a higher degree than in 1920 (Bolton, 2012).   This has been paralleled by a considerable increase in the number of universities. By 2013, there were 135 universities or colleges of higher education in the UK (Universities UK, 2013) out of over 300 institutions that offered a higher education qualification (UCAS, 2013a). As a result, the student body has become more wide ranging. In 1878, the University of London became the first university to award degrees to women (Harte, 1986). By 2009, nearly half of British women studied at higher education level, compared to fewer than 40% of men. Moreover, female representation is now comparable or higher than it is for men in all types of higher education institution (Thompson and Bekhradnia, 2009). In addition, higher education is no longer the preserve of a privileged few. However, there remains a significant gap between working and middle class participation, and this is particularly sharply defined in higher status institutions (Blanden and Machin, 2004).

The Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee (2009) compared the growth the British University system to the expansion of many of its cities. They

argued that these grew in response to need and social change. A medieval centre enlarged exponentially in the Victorian era. Suburban spread and, finally, a range of out-of-town developments followed. The metaphor illustrates the differing status between the "ancients" (the medieval centre), the "redbricks" (Victorian civic expansion), the "plate glass universities" (suburbia) and "post 1992's" (out-of-town). Fragmentation into a range of institutional types is illustrated by existence of five distinct mission groups that represent clusters of aligned universities (Newman, 2009). Filippakou et al (2012) describes these as *"very loose confederations"* through which universities attempt to address the potentially conflicting demands of the state and the marketplace. Naturally, no two universities are the same, but the constitution of these clusters implies commonalities between groups of universities. These often relate to the provenance of the organisation and the implication that this has for its range of disciplines, the relative status of teaching and research, as well as the types of student it can attract.

It is, of course, a gross assumption to expect similarities between students based on university type. However, there may be some commonalities. Polytechnics were granted university status as part of a drive to deliver mass higher education. This is reflected in their relatively lower prestige in comparison to longer established institutions (Scott, 2012). They retain an emphasis on widening participation and generally expect lower entry grades. This reflects their market position relative to higher status institutions. There will be a different approach to the student market when demand does not significantly exceed supply (Filippakou et al, 2012). As a result, former polytechnics have less control over admissions, with an emphasis on recruitment rather than selection. It is conceivable that this will extend beyond recruitment and influence the relationship that students have with their universities. If this is the case, it is reasonable to conclude that this research will have most relevance for other 'post 1992' universities.

However, there is an argument to suggest that this research could have a wider reach. This depends on whether there is an observable relationship between student engagement and university type. Establishing this would require comparative data on student engagement. This information does not exist in the UK. This contrasts with the US and Australian university sectors, for example, where nationwide surveys of student engagement are conducted (Bryson and Hardy, 2011). In the absence of such data, exploring this will rely on proxy

measurements for engagement. These include student engagement-related funding, student retention and student satisfaction. Funding student engagement activities could indicate the perceived value of engagement in an institution. Consideration of this offers a very mixed picture. The majority of institutions in the Higher Education Academy *Students as Partners* project (HEA, 2013), for instance, are post-1992 universities, with only one representative from the Russell Group. Conversely, a Russell Group university (the University of Warwick) has invested heavily in the concept of the *student as producer* through the *Reinvention Centre* (Neary and Winn, 2009), now the *Institute for Advanced Learning and Teaching*. In addition, Student Unions in established universities tend to be better resourced than their counterparts in 'post 1992' universities (Rodgers et al, 2011).

Association between university type and other gauges for engagement are equally ambiguous. Student retention could be seen as one such measure. Thomas (2002) suggests that retention is linked to the extent to which students feel that they fit in and are valued by their universities. Furthermore, research suggests that student engagement can enhance retention (Thomas, 2012). There are differential retention rates across the sector, with higher status universities reporting better rates (Bourn, 2007). This could suggest that these universities have more engaged students. However, there are well-documented links between students' choice of universities, their preparedness for higher education and their academic ability (Mangan et al, 2010). Consequently, it would be inaccurate to assume that retention is a matter of student engagement alone. The final indicator for engagement could be student satisfaction. The UK National Student Survey provides an opportunity for cross-institutional comparison. However, analysis of institutional data does not present compelling evidence for variation in satisfaction between types of university (Fielding et al, 2010). There are measurable differences between individual universities, regardless of their provenance. Moreover, it is argued that the survey is not reliable for exposing whether these differences are meaningful (Cheng and Marsh, 2010). The lack of a convincing pattern in student engagement across the sector suggests that this research should be of relevance to a wider range of universities than mission group allegiance, status or university heritage may indicate.

Sector-wide consistency in the management of the student experience.
An apparently uniform, sector-wide approach to the management of student participation may explain why university typology has little predictive power for

student engagement. Mechanisms for student involvement in decision-making are remarkably homogenous. Rodgers et al (2011) describe a *'near universal'* system of student representation by Student Union officers at board of governor, council or senate level. Below this is an array of staff-student committees at faculty/school and programme level. In these, representation is by students themselves. Participation of the wider student body is presided through traditional, survey-based evaluation data (Robinson, 2012). Consistency in how universities manage student engagement is indicative of a wider convergence in university governance processes across the sector. There has been a long history of self-governance in universities. This reflects their heritage as a community of scholars. As the sector evolved, decision-makers adopted a bicameral structure of 'academic' and 'corporate' governance. The former was usually overseen by a board of staff members and focused on the core business of teaching and research. The latter operated through a governing body that oversaw resource allocation and compliance with legislation and regulation (Taylor, 2013). This body included lay representation to reflect the university's broader social and economic mission. Since the 1980's, however, there has been an increasing emphasis on corporate governance. This is associated with introduction of mangerialist principles across state-financed institutions, including universities. Managerialism is a neoliberal ideological position that justifies the authority of a university executive as professional managers (Becher and Trowler, 2001). It is allied to the application of business-based leadership styles to academic governance (Luescher-Mamashela 2010). This has eroded academic autonomy by transferring power from academics to academic-managers (Deem and Brehony, 2005).

Managerialist principles will influence how students participate in decision-making. However, the nature of the impact is difficult to assess. Arguably, the growing emphasis on student engagement is itself an outcome of the extension of neo-liberal ideology into the public sector. This has seen the principles of the free-market applied to public service management (Saunders 2011). A feature of this has been a growing emphasis on user-involvement across the public sector. This is based on the assumption that users' needs are best served by listening and responding to their views. In contemporary health and social care, for example, the influence of users is writ large in policy and practice documents (Schehrer et al, 2010). Likewise, there has been a shift to greater user-involvement in compulsory education (Fielding and McGregor, 2005). Indeed, in primary and secondary education, pupil perspectives have significant role in school governance.

Pupils routinely engage in activities that university students are rarely involved in, such as staff appointment and appraisal (Fielding, 2006).

However, the literature on university governance appears to be almost exclusively anti-managerialist. This may reflect the fact that its authors represent the academic constituency that has lost out to professional university managers. In consequence, there is a tendency for the literature to present academic staff as victims of managerialism or heroic figures in resistance against it (Page, 2010). In this environment, there is a risk that managerialism will inevitably be seen as detrimental to student engagement. This discourse may overlook the potentially negative impact that some academic staff may have on the student experience. Previous research has shown that senior managers can support students who are blocked from escalating concerns by antagonistic or unsympathetic academic or support staff (Carey, 2012b). Lipsky (1980) coined the term 'street level bureaucrat' to acknowledge that practitioners have a significant impact on how policy is implemented and resources are distributed. Members of staff in such roles lack the statutory power and authority of managers, but any unwillingness to engage with students would undermine the student experience. Furthermore, Johnston and Deem (2003), suggest that academic-managers have been instrumental in supporting widening participation initiatives that were viewed with suspicion by academic staff. In addition, the growing emphasis on indicators of teaching quality has been attributed to encouraging research-intensive universities to pay greater attention to the student experience (Marinetto, 2012). Finally, the emphasis of engagement in quality assurance processes has prompted increasing levels of student engagement (Gvaramadze, 2011). Hence, it is not the purpose of this section to criticise managers *per se*, but to present managerialism as a common model of university governance in which student engagement in decision-making will occur.

The ascendancy of managerialism has been attributed to a lack of government trust in academics to manage public investment (Shattock, 2008). Universities do not have *direct* accountability to government (Schofield, 2009). However, towards the end of the 20th century, the role of the State shifted from supporting autonomy to regulating activity. In the immediate post-war period, the University Grants Committee provided 95% of university funding through block grants (Shattock, 2002). Support for universities has been progressively cut and now accounts for less than 15% of university budgets (Paton, 2012). However, as public funding has

reduced, indirect political control through regulation has increased. Modern-day university funding bodies are charged with implementing policy through allocation procedures and enforced adherence to grant conditions (Gillies, 2011). With a decline in public funding, universities have looked to the market. This led to the rise of the 'entrepreneurial university' that is charged with being business facing and innovative (Dobbins et al, 2011). The entrepreneurial university operates in a number of markets. In addition to the core business of research, there is growing activity in third-stream income (such as knowledge transfer, patents and consultancy) and asset maximisation (for example providing conference and leisure facilities) (Barnett, 2011). In this environment, the 'Vice Chancellor' becomes a 'Chief Executive' and business-focused management styles thrive (Mautner, 2005).

The entrepreneurial university can be seen in the context of a shift in cultural perception of what universities stand for. It is this that may have the most profound impact on student engagement. The notion of a university education has become associated with private benefit rather than a public good. Indeed, spending on higher education is often presented as a threat to, rather than investment in, national competitiveness (Cribb and Gewirtz, 2012). These perceptions have paved the way for the introduction of student fees in England. English students can now pay up to £9,000 in annual tuition fees. The common assumption is that fee-paying has rearticulated the student:academic relationship as a consumer:provider relationship (Furedi, 2011). However, Williams (2011) argues that students' consumer identity was in place well before the introduction of fees. Consumerism is an inevitable outcome of the neo-liberal marketisation of university education. It therefore resonates beyond the fee-paying regime in English universities to capture a broader commodification of higher education throughout the UK. To illustrate this, the perception of the student as a consumer is apparent in all areas of the UK, regardless of whether the university charges students (Gvaramadze, 2011).

Marketisation and managerialism are mutually reinforcing phenomena (Mautner, 2005). Hence, their aligned principles and practices will inevitably shape student engagement. Central to this is a reliance on the identification of performance standards and associated measures (Ter Bogt and Scapens, 2012). Critics suggest that this attempts to distil complex practices into auditable indicators (Lock and Lorenz, 2007). The impact of this is that it encourages managers to adopt a technocratic approach that cannot account for the 'messy compromise' of practice

(O'Reilly and Reed, 2011).   This resonates with Wilson and Cervero's critique of US adult education.   They suggest that technical-rationalism is the dominant discourse, with alternative approaches to educational planning being increasingly subjugated to technical-rationalist thinking (Wilson and Cervero, 1997).   Arguably this will be most evident in how students are included in the decision-making processes.   Johnson and Deem (2003) argue that, despite university rhetoric that champions student-centredness and student involvement, most academic-managers focus on controlling students to eliminate risk.   This highlights a danger that mechanisms for engagement in decision-making will be conservative and risk adverse.   It encourages a centrist and cautious, one-size-fits-all approach to engagement.   McMahon and Portelli, (2004, p14) warn against this,

> *"…do not reduce engagement to a set of techniques, strategies or behaviours that are meant to be universally replicable regardless of context… given the differences in the nature of social structures and interactions, a reductionist stance of engagement is untenable."*

This has implications for how effective practices for engagement are disseminated. A key recommendation of The Centre for Higher Education Research and Information Report into student engagement (Little et al, 2009) was for the Quality Assurance Agency to work with universities to encourage the sharing of successful outcomes from engagement activities.   The emphasis of this is to ensure that these examples have wider applicability across the sector.   The extent to which a project can be effectively disseminated relates to the extent to which it will replicate the initiator project.   However, such fidelity can only be assured if an initiative is highly structured (Century et al, 2010).   Dissemination may result in a successful local process being unnecessarily bureaucratised, diminishing the very qualities that made it a success in the first place.   Consequently, there are dangers in overlooking whether there is a good fit between a given approach to student engagement and organisational culture (Van der Velden, 2012).   Indeed, Gillies (2011) suggests that the notion of disseminating best practice can be seen as a 'common sense' approach that reflects the failure of a managerial elite to ask crucial questions regarding who, why and with what?   In engagement, therefore, the focus should not be on fidelity, but appropriate adaptation.   The fundamental components of any intervention are retained, with local actors allowed to make informed adjustments to ensure success in a new location (Southwell et al, 2010). However, Lorenz (2012) argues that managerialism creates "*a culture of*

permanent mistrust" (p.609) that would discourage such adaptations. This presents a discord between managerialist policy drivers for greater levels of engagement and the likely success of such policies.

Student engagement in policy

Student engagement has become a defining feature of the contemporary higher education landscape.   To further clarify the context for this research, this section will explore key policy expectations for student engagement. A major steer for engagement has come from quality assurance. This is not limited to the UK higher education sector, but is part of a pan-European emphasis on greater student participation in quality processes (Gvaramadze, 2011). Quality assurance is associated with a mangerialist culture that imposes external regulations on academic practice (Filippakou et al, 2012). Critics argue that processes are bureaucratic, inflexible and mechanistic, whilst having little positive impact on the student experience (Harvey, 2009). Cheng (2011) found that academics did recognise instances of improved practice as a result of quality assurance, but felt that the system undermined their professionalism. Indeed, some commentators have argued that quality assurance might obstruct improvement by *"creating a compliance culture that dampens creativity, rewards conformity and slows down the responsiveness of the system to a rapidly changing environment"* (Gosling and D'Andrea, 2001, p.10). The tendency to regulate, standardise and bureaucratise practice is illustrated in concerns over the management of student participation in quality enhancement. Klemenčič, (2011) attributes this to an ideological perspective that students are clients of the university. This depoliticises the student voice and encourages universities to only solicit student participation for feedback that complements their agenda.   Operating this under the banner of student engagement may offer an illusion of participation, without motivating institutions to make it more authentic.

Concerns over limitations of quality assurance were shared by agencies such as Higher Education Funding Council for England and the Quality Assurance Agency that were charged with overseeing quality assurance (Hodgson, 2008). This led to re-emphasis from *assurance* to *enhancement*. It signalled a shift in focus from accountability to improvement. Externally imposed criteria were replaced with internal indicators, with quality seen as located in cultures rather than systems (Harvey, 2008). However, Filippakou and Tapper (2008) argue that there are tensions between assurance and enhancement. They suggest that the ingrained

'audit culture' of English higher education may undermine genuine enhancement activities. Conversely, Little and Williams (2010) suggest that the increasing emphasis on student involvement in quality processes is a positive development. It reinforces learning communities and establishes students as partners in university processes.

This notion of partnership is evident in the most recent policy developments for student engagement in quality enhancement. The Quality Assurance Agency, for example, calls for higher education providers to *"take deliberate steps to engage all students, individually and collectively, as partners in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience." (QAA, 2012a p4)*. There is no direct mandate for what engagement activities universities should undertake. However, their vision for engagement is expansive. Notably, terms such as 'partnership', 'informed conversation' and 'dialogue' are prevalent in documentation. There is also a clear expectation that activity is sustained and embedded into a university's deliberative structures (QAA, 2012a).

The emphasis on engagement is seen in other quasi-governmental bodies. The Higher Education Funding Council for England has coordinated partnership working between various stakeholders (including the Higher Education Academy, the National Union of Students and Universities UK) to develop student engagement policy and Practice (HEFCE, 2012a). Meanwhile, in Scotland, where enhancement is seen as more established (Little and Williams, 2010), SPARQS (Student Participation in Quality Scotland) expect enhancement to exist within a *'culture of engagement'* where students and academic staff *"learn from each other's perspectives and hard work"* (SPARQS, 2013 p9). In addition, the concept has direct government backing. The Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS, 2011a) stated that students should be involved in key decisions about their education. This was reflected in government recommendations that universities should regularly provide opportunities for engagement with students (BIS, 2011b).

The message to universities is clear and unequivocal. Student engagement is expected throughout institutional activity. However, there is a danger that its significance will be over-played. This is understandable as student engagement has been associated with many of the issues that trouble contemporary higher education. There is evidence, for example, that engagement will increase retention (Thomas, 2012), encourage successful transition (Vinson et al, 2010),

enhance performance (Kuh et al 2010), refine curricula (Bovill et al, 2011), enrich both the student and the staff experience (Streeting and Wise, 2009), meet equality objectives (Berry and Loke, 2011), establish civic engagement (Millican and Bourner, 2011) and improve the way that universities operate (Lizzio and Wilson, 2009). If student engagement is presented as a panacea, will the concept be robust enough to withstand scrutiny when policy becomes embedded in institutional practice? Indeed, Leach (2012) describes student engagement as a *'policy bubble'*. These are policy areas that reflect the zeitgeist rather than a solid theoretical foundation. He suggests that student engagement has achieved rapid prominence and been appropriated by varied, diverse and sometimes opposing organizations,

> *"Research was commissioned and presented, centres of excellence rose and fell; ink was spilled all over the education press. Yet as an idea, it [student engagement] had not yet been fully realised and defined, even by its biggest proponents and certainly not by its critics. When something starts to mean all things to all people, this is often the sign of a bubble about to drift away in to the policy stratosphere."* (Leach, 2012 p59)

Hence, at issue is not whether student engagement is a valuable goal, but whether it will withstand the weight of expectation.

Fielding (2004) also expresses concern that engagement will be a victim of *"Fadism* [that] *leads to unrealistic expectation, subsequent marginalisation, and the unwitting corrosion of integrity"* (Fielding, 2004 p296). In addition, he constructs scenario where student engagement is appropriated into 'persistent managerialism' and its radical vision is lost. This will result in technocratic practices that limit imaginative and critical engagement. He refers to this as *"manipulative incorporation* [that] *leads to the betrayal of hope, resigned exhaustion and the bolstering of an increasingly powerful status quo."* (Fielding, 2004 p296). Like Leach (2012), Fielding's solution to this is to reinforce the theoretical foundations of student engagement. This will provide the intellectual tools to challenge the misappropriation of the concept. Consequently, having explored the context for student engagement in this chapter, the following chapter will offer broader critique of the concept. As Bryson and Hand (2007) said, *"There is too much to gain in seeking greater focus on student engagement not to pursue that goal"* (p360).

Chapter Three: Understanding student engagement

This chapter focuses on student engagement in university decision-making. I begin by offering an overview of the expansive nature of student engagement and where participation in decision-making is located in that. A theoretical model of student engagement in decision-making is proposed that considers student activity in the context of institutional action. The chapter then explores two key, interrelated themes regarding student engagement in decision-making. These are the notion of the 'student voice' and the idea of student representation. This sets the scene for scrutiny of engagement from a public participation perspective. Implicit throughout the chapter is the view that active student participation in decision-making processes is a personal investment and relies on voluntary engagement. This is surfaced exploration of how engagement is influenced by the connection that students have with their institutions. In the previous chapter, I argued that university governance structures are rooted in neo-liberalist, managerial ideology. This is developed in this chapter by exploring how this shapes and defines the student:staff relationship. It is considered in the context of the two key conceptions of studenthood that appear to have informed contemporary debate on student engagement. These are the idea that the student is primarily a consumer of a higher education product and the opposing perspective that students are co-producers of their educational experiences.

What is student engagement?

The previous chapter described a new era in UK university governance where students are seen as key stakeholders. As such, they are afforded a more substantial role in defining the expectations of the institution and verifying its performance (Gillies, 2011). This chapter explores how students participate in decision-making. It is acknowledged that this is only one of the ways that students engage with their universities. Hence, the intention is not to distil the concept solely down to notions of governance. Rather, it seeks to tease these ideas away from the other, equally important issue of student engagement. Student engagement is a multi-dimensional concept that encompasses varied aspects of the student experience. Definitions range from the simple,

> *"…engagement is a broad construct intended to encompass salient academic as well as certain non-academic aspects of the student experience"* (Coates, 2007 p122)

…to the complex,

> *"Student engagement is about what a student brings to higher education in terms of goals, aspirations, values and beliefs and how these are shaped and mediated by their experience whilst a student. SE is constructed and reconstructed through the lenses of the perceptions and identities held by students and the meaning and sense a student makes of their experiences and interactions. As players in and shapers of the educational context, educators need to foster educationally purposeful SE to support and enable students to learn in constructive and powerful ways and realise their potential in education and society"* (RAISE, 2010).

These definitions illustrate of the difficult task of capturing the breadth of the concept in a single definition. The first statement is succinct, but does not offer much insight into what actually happens. Conversely, the longer definition focuses on engagement as a learning opportunity, potentially ignoring other dimensions. Across this literature, student engagement is associated with a seemingly endless list of factors that contribute to student experience. This includes notions of academic and social integration, active learning, student satisfaction, representation, student aspiration, student:staff interaction, retention and performance, extra-curricular activity, employability, intellectual challenge, civic engagement, collaborative learning, peer relationships, feedback, institutional policy and processes, online learning, transitions, personal development and curriculum design (Hardy and Bryson, 2010). To make sense of this, Trowler (2010) identified three distinct themes in the literature on engagement. These relate it to learning, identity and governance. Although the primary focus of this chapter is on the latter, it is recognised that these three spheres overlap. Moreover, they all require the university to offer democratic and inclusive practices. This presents an apposite characteristic of student engagement. It is essentially something that is permitted by the institution in which the student is studying. Hence the university has significant control over the extent to which students are encouraged to participate. Recognising this acknowledges that power relations between university staff and their students are unequal and problematic (Robinson, 2012).

Student engagement is a behavioural, emotional and cognitive contract that can be considered in relation to the ownership and distribution of authority (Trowler, 2010). Mann (2008) maintains that the student experience cannot be understood

without acknowledgment of university power dynamics. This is based on the fact that students have little control over what is taught, the way it is taught and how their learning is assessed. As Bernstein (1996) argued, curriculum, pedagogy and assessment is a major regulator of the student experience. In line with this, a Foucauldian critique identifies the university as a regulating institution that normalises the power imbalance between students and tutors to exercise control (Laurence, 2009). Normalisation is made possible by subjecting the student to a constant process of evaluation, measurement and grading. The very knowledge that is at the heart of the university endeavour becomes as mechanism for surveillance and regulation (Bloland, 1995). In this way, the normal is championed and the abnormal is excluded. This process marginalises those at the periphery of the university and maintains the power and position of those who create discourse. Students are expected to conform to a narrative of a 'good student' that is embodied in the rituals and processes of the institution (Grant, 1997). A regulatory technology for this is assessment. Hence, even though engagement in decision-making typically exists outside formal teaching and assessment regimes, the student:staff relationship will be fundamentally influenced by them. However, these power dynamics often appear to be ignored in official pronouncements. The Quality Assurance Agency quality code on student engagement (QAA, 2012a), for example, makes no reference to power. Meanwhile, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills sees university improvements driven by *"a risk-based quality regime that focuses regulatory effort where it will have most impact and gives power to students to hold universities to account."* (BIS, 2011a p9), but offers little indication of how students could meaningfully acquire that power.

Indeed, student engagement is often presented as a benign force. Arguably, this reflects a paternalistic assumption that if students are given the opportunity, they will inevitably act in a manner that benefits the institution. In many cases this is true, but engagement can be expressed as a form of resistance (Cook-Sather, 2006). Trowler (2010) suggests that this is a legitimate is a form of engagement, albeit one that is not often well received. She cautiously uses the terms 'negative' and 'positive' as a heuristic device to offer a continuum between engagement activities that support or challenge dominant discourses. Indeed, Trowler herself later renamed these concepts as 'oppositional' and 'congruent' (Trowler and Trowler, 2011). In the middle of this continuum is non-engagement, which may be a manifestation of apathy or disinterest. Another alternative to the philosophically troublesome notion of 'negative' and 'positive' engagement is to rearticulate the

spectrum of engagement as being from 'resistance' to 'cooperation'. This retains the view that engagement is an active undertaking: the student resists or the student cooperates. However, it draws into question whether apparent 'non-engagement' is necessarily passive. Certainly, resistance may be expressed through direct challenges to the dominant discourse (Pabian and Minksova, 2011). However, the power dynamic in higher education makes this a problematic course of action for many students (Grant, 1997). Hence, resistance can appear to be passive (through, for example, non-attendance), but may in fact reflect an active process of withdrawal. This is consistent with the argument that engagement can also be understood in relation to the antithetical concept of alienation (Mann, 2001).

Where students sit in the university's hierarchy of power and authority will influence the engagement activities that they undertake. Kay et al (2010) suggest that there are four key roles for students:

- *Students as evaluators,* where the institution uses engagement to access the student voice. This is typically articulated through evaluation data (Little et al, 2009). Gvarmadze (2011) suggests that this is main method by which students are encouraged and expected to engage.
- *Students as participants*, which includes mechanisms by which the institution involves its students in the decision-making structure. Course representation is a common example of how this is manifest in university governance (Lizzio and Wilson, 2009).
- *Students as partners, co-creators and experts*. In this, the students have a much more active role in university business. Their role as key players in the university's learning community is recognised and valued (McCulloch, 2009). As a result, they can be seen as equal partners with academic staff.
- *Students as change agents*, where students take a leadership role in developing the evidence base for change. Here, students are much more proactive in managing the agenda for change (Dunne and Zandstra, 2011).

The above roles embody increasing levels of student activity. As such, the model has similarities to a model for student engagement developed in for the compulsory education sector. In his classic typology of student participation, Fielding (2001) offers the four different mechanisms for accessing student voice.

These range from the student being a passive resource for institutions to the student as an active agent of change.

- *Students as a data source* – the student experience is expressed in information about performance, the quality of their work and evaluative data. Change follows institutional analysis of this data. Therefore, the student voice is passive in the change process.
- *Students as active respondents* - this requires a discussion between tutors and students. The institution sets the agenda for change, with students in a consultative role. Transformation of practice occurs after consideration of data that encourages active engagement with students.
- *Students as co-researchers* – the relationship between tutors and students becomes more of a partnership in this mode of engagement. Tutors remain in control of the agenda, but a tutor-led dialogue replaces the consultation of the previous mode with. This offers greater potential for creative action on the part of the student.
- *Students as researchers* – in this mode, students have a leadership role. Their experiences become the focus of activity and they identify where action is needed. It is beholden to the institution to respond appropriately to the students' agenda.

Both of these models could be seen to suggest dimensions of engagement that signal student passivity or activity. However, acknowledging the power dynamic in university processes offers a different a reading. Passivity and activity may be features of engagement, but this is determined by institutional need as opposed to any student (in)action. In other words, student engagement is limited by what the institution allows. In parallel to models that consider engagement in relation to what students do, there is a need to address what activities the university demands, expects or permits. This has been developed into a more holistic theory of student engagement in the form of a Nested Hierarchy of Student Engagement Interactions *(see figure 1)*. This is based on the view that engagement requires a revision of the role of the institution in encouraging authentic student participation.
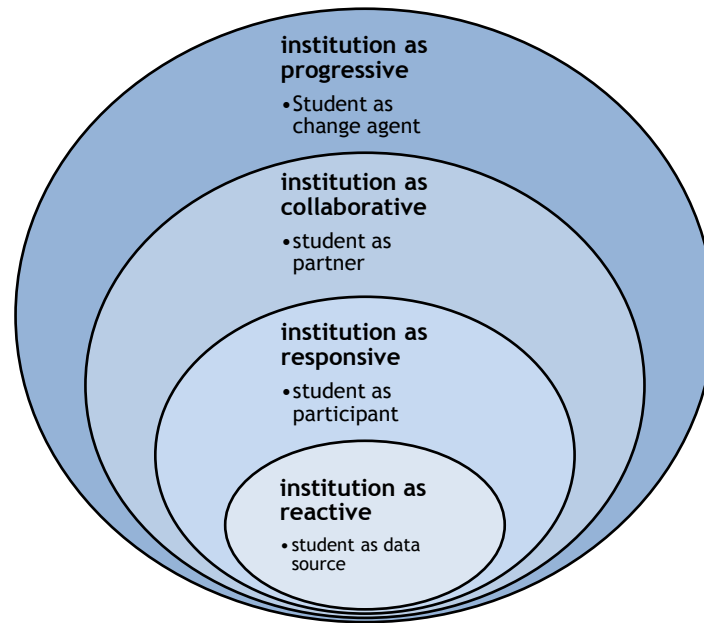
Figure 1: Nested Hierachy of Student Engagement Interactions

This model explains how institutions (or people in institutions) act and encourage their students to act. Hence, it aligns student role with institutional role

- When the institution is *reactive,* student behaviour and satisfaction is observed and analysed with the intention of utilising the information acquired to enhance institutional objectives. There is a reliance on existing matrices and performance indicators and student compliance with these is expected when required. In effect, student participation is restricted to answering questions about their experiences or preferences.

- For the institution to be *responsive*, it needs to recognise student expertise in the student experience and invite students to contribute their views on this in decision-making fora. However, it imposes distinct boundaries on engagement activity by firmly establishing the students' role as a consultant, rather than a partner. Students are still expected to answer questions. However, there is potential for students to ask questions and challenge the answers they receive.

- If the institution is *collaborative* there is a stronger vision for the student as an active agent in the institution. This is characterised by institutional efforts to determine agreed understanding, with students encouraged to contribute to the evidence-base for change.

- Instances where the institution is *progressive* are characterised by students having primacy in decision-making. The role of the university is to respond to

students' needs and mechanisms are in place for students to initiate, monitor and substantiate actions.

Typologies can appear nomothetic and mutually exclusive. An institution could be characterised as 'reactive' or 'collaborative', for example, but not both. However, the notion of a nested hierarchy allows for the possibility that different types of engagement can coexist. In this way, institutional data becomes the bedrock of more participatory forms of student engagement (Alsford, 2012). In addition, institutions have to monitor mechanisms of evaluation to ensure that the outcomes of more participatory interactions are relevant to a wider student body. In this way, outcomes of collaborative engagement may feed back into more reactive measures. This reflects concerns that engaged students may be atypical and uncritical response to their input could reinforce inequality between students (Cook-Sather, 2009). Finally, the nested hierarchy recognises that the level of student engagement expected should be fit for purpose. The expertise required in financial planning, for example, may necessarily limit student input.

The Nested Hierarchy of Student Engagement Interactions is therefore coherent with Alvesson's notion of 'multiple cultural configurations' in organisation,

> *"Organisational cultures are … understandable not as unitary wholes or as stable sets of subcultures but as mixtures of cultural manifestations of different levels and kinds. People are connected to different degrees with organisation, suborganisational unit, profession, gender, class, ethnic group, nation, etc.; cultures overlap in an organisational setting and are rarely manifested in a 'pure' form."* (Alvesson, 1995 p.118).

Fielding further develops this by suggesting that greater levels of engagement are associated with notions of person-centred education that create the opportunity for a 'radical collegiality'. This requires,

> '*an expectation that teacher learning is both enabled and enhanced by dialogic encounters with their students in which the interdependent nature of teaching and learning and the shared responsibility for its success is made explicit'* (Fielding, 2001 p130).

He sees this as an organisational orientation; one in which issues of power and hierarchy, although not eliminated, are transparent and flexible. There is a strong

focus on discussion and negotiation through intense dialogue and critical discourse. As a result, individuals and institutions need to tolerate ambiguity and unpredictability. His views can appear radical and idealistic, but it is worth considering how they relate to the state-sponsored vision for engagement from the UK Quality Assurance Agency,

> *"Student engagement is all about involving and empowering students in the process of shaping the student learning experience. It is about making sure that all students have the chance to make their voice heard and to inform the way that universities and colleges provide learning opportunities."*
> (NUS/QAA, 2012b p8)

If this is to succeed, it is beholden on universities to create spaces where students are able to speak. Part of this is recognising that the power dynamics of the university may discourage speech (Seale, 2010). Moreover, the university has to be committed to listen and respond to what it hears. As Collins (2012) says, *"there is absolutely no point in giving someone a megaphone if you still don't listen to or perceivably react to what they're saying"*.

The 'student voice' and student engagement
Student engagement is associated with the notion of the 'student voice'. This locates students firmly in the articulation, analysis and enhancement of their educational experiences. The idea of a student voice is evoked in regulatory aspects of university life, such as quality assurance (QAA, 2012a). It can also be reflected an assortment of other initiatives, for example in student-run staff development (Campbell, 2011), participatory curriculum design (Bovill et al, 2011) or student-led research (Neary, 2010).   The emphasis of all of these is for students to have their voices heard and to influence outcomes (Walker and Logan, 2008). Seale (2010) suggests that encouraging engagement requires actively listening to what students have to say regarding their education; effective communication of these views to relevant change agents; working in partnership with students to understand their learning experiences and empowering students to be actively involved in the development of their education. Consequently, the 'student voice' is a complex concept that can be viewed in association with transformative practice, democratic or participatory systems; the promotion of inclusion and diversity or support for student rights (McLeod, 2011). There is a danger that the 'voice' is always viewed in the context of speaking out, but needs to be understood

in relation to being heard. Therefore 'voice' becomes speaking AND listening. Ignoring the latter presents the student voice as non-dialogical and disconnected. Conversely, listening creates a virtuous cycle of engagement, as the validation and enhanced confidence that comes from the experience of being heard incentivises further engagement (McLeod, 2011).

Listening is a socially embedded practice that has its own institutional and cultural dimensions. It is important, therefore, to consider how institutions listen to their students. There is an implicit message in the types of information that universities seek from their students. As Seale (2010) asserts, exploring this can clarify,

> *"...whether higher education is only interested in a particular kind or dimension of student voice: a voice that expresses views but doesn't necessarily demand equality or empowerment, in other words a voice that does not impel action."* (p999)

The nature of the student voice in institutions, therefore, says much about an institution's aspirations for engagement. Active expression occurs when students directly communicate with staff. Classically, these have been illustrated by efforts aimed at encouraging students to be actively involved in a learning community (Walker and Logan, 2008). However, universities may seek to access the student voice with the purpose of meeting institutional performance indicators. This reflects Van der Velden's (2012) argument that the student voice can be effectively passive. Institutions have access to various proxy measures for the student voice. The sector's reliance on National Student Survey to understand the student experience is one such measure (Naidoo et al, 2011). Relating this to the Nested Hierarchy of Student Engagement Interactions situates the student's role as being a data source or evaluator, with limited expectation for engagement. The agenda here is firmly based on addressing institutional outcomes that may not resonate with students' needs (Wimpenny and Savin-Baden, 2012).

As with all student engagement, the student voice may be suppressed by the power dynamic of higher education. However, the notion of voice adds an extra dimension to this. Some students will be oppressed by (and within) the higher education system and unable to contribute to the student voice (Robinson, 2012). Hence, there is the risk that the student voice will be that of the confident and articulate, with the powerless rendered silent. In addition, reliance on the student

voice for student engagement may amplify deeper social inequalities (Harper and Quaye, 2009). This may be a consequence of reliance on mechanisms for speaking out that favour the cultural resources of some groups over others. As such, the drive to engagement could reinforce technologies of exclusion. Freire's notion of *conscientisation* (critical consciousness raising) (Freire, 1970) offers a possible solution. In this way, the issue is not simply whether students are engaged, but that they understand the process of engagement and feel empowered to be involved if they want. This presents a notion that the curriculum should be transformative. Freire and Macedo (1995) outline three core conditions for this. The first is that the student should be on equal footing with the tutor in the learning relationship. The second condition is that the curriculum should focus on critical reflection. Finally, teaching practice should move from didactic to problem-based methods. However, it is likely that a transformative curriculum may only interest a core group of students. There are a number of reasons for this. Such curricula challenge the instrumentalist, employability-focused agenda that characterises a contemporary, marketised system of higher education and that many students appreciate (Nordensvärd, 2011). Moreover, Lea et al (2003) caution that although many students are interested in such student-centred practices, they can feel dissatisfied with the reality of the experience.

Student representation as a mouthpiece for the student voice

Listening to the student voice can take many forms and, in common with any democratic system, representatives often act as an advocate for collective views (Seale, 2010). This section will explore the nature and meaning of student representation and its role in engagement. Representation is a feature of university governance throughout Europe (Klemenčič, 2011). It is not a new phenomenon. In the Renaissance period, for example, students had significant control over university life, with the power to hire and fire staff (Sultana, 2012). The shifting landscape of higher education has seen a diminution of the power of students. Yet representation still provides an opportunity for active student engagement in university decision-making. Despite this, it has been the subject of surprisingly little analysis (Trowler, 2010). In the UK, students are represented in governance at national, institutional and course level. National representation is often coordinated through the National Union of Students, whose activities are less local and more 'political' (Day, 2012). At institutional level, this role tends to be taken by a university's Student Union (Little et al, 2009). By law, these are independent from their parent universities and their elected officers advocate for

that university's students (Rodgers et al, 2011). Many Student Union staff are not currently students, although some may be on sabbatical. Although this does not question their support for student engagement, their activities may not be considered as student engagement *per se*. Hence, the primary focus of discussion is on representation at course level by students who stand for a particular cohort of students. For the sake of clarity, these individuals will be referred to a 'course representatives'. This differentiates their role from paid officials. It also distinguishes them from student activists who usually operate outside formal decision-making processes (Pabian and Minksová, 2011).

Course representation appears to be based on an egalitarian model, with representatives volunteering their personal resources on behalf of their peers (Little et al 2009). It typically involves individual students speaking for their fellow students on specific course-related issues and often focuses on the day-to-day student experience (Lizzio and Wilson, 2009). In the contemporary higher education environment, evidence of student representation in curriculum design, development and evaluation activities is expected (QAA, 2009). Hence, course representatives are expected to sit on an ever-growing range of committees, review documentation and act as a medium though which messages are relayed to the rest of the student body. Research has suggested that representatives utilise a number of mechanisms to understand the collective experience of their cohorts (Carey, 2013a). As such, they provide universities with an instrument to access authentic student views. Representation at course level is often presented as intrinsically valuable and fundamentally benign, with significant advantage to those students who are involved (Kuh and Lund, 1994). Indeed, some universities have developed recognition systems as an incentive for students who undertake the role. Representation activities, for example, are included in many institutional Higher Education Achievement Records (HEAR) (SPARQS, 2012). Furthermore, various institutions have explored rewarding representative activities through awards, certification, accreditation or payment (NUS, 2012). In addition, representation is linked to personal development and employability, as a result of the significant opportunities that it offers for extra-curricular learning and skills development (Lizzio and Wilson, 2009).

Despite the widespread reliance on a system of course representation, there are concerns about students' deficiencies as representatives. A key staff criticism focuses on the extent to which they adequately represent their constituents or are

self-interested (Lizzio and Wilson, 2009). These concerns are mirrored by the student body. Students are often unsure about how representation works for them and are generally unaware of who their representatives are (Planas et al, 2013). This could explain the experience of representatives themselves, who see the antipathy of their fellow students as a significant obstacle to their role (Lizzio and Wilson, 2009). Student hostility or ambivalence towards their representatives may be indicative of a lack of trust in the capacity of the system to make a difference. In a survey of student engagement, Little et al (2009) found high levels of institutional confidence regarding the impact of student representation, but these were not shared by Student Unions. In addition, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA, 2009) has questioned whether representatives are given adequate support and training in their role.

Lizzio and Wilson (2009) suggest that role ambiguity is at the heart of student and staff confusion over the operation of course representation. This is reflected in research that identified representatives' concerns about the system as pressures on time, inadequate training and fear of punishment for criticising practice (Little et al, 2009). Course representatives have reported a cognitive, psychological and financial cost in fulfilling their responsibilities (Carey, 2013a). This often relates to a sense that they need to juggle various identities to function in the role. Hence, it is easy to see a blurring of the distinctions between the course representative as a student, an assistant, a consultant or a messenger. Theoretical perspectives on Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998) offer some insight into this. Typically, the Community of Practice model in higher education suggests legitimate peripheral practices that focus on scholarly activity. In effect, the students' process of learning focuses on the mastery of the skills of being a learner. However, this does not apply to the course representative role. Representation is not about learning, although learning may occur. In fact, the activities associated with course representation are distinctly NOT those of being a student, but more closely associated with information giving and management (Lizzio and Wilson, 2009). Hence, the Community of Practice that the course representative engages in (whilst they are in role) is arguably closer to that of a tutor. This is reflected in research on course representation that found conflict in how representatives are expected to act in student:staff meetings and the classroom (Carey, 2013a). It also explains arguments that students are insufficiently informed in pedagogy to make meaningful contributions (Brennan and Williams, 2004). As *de facto*

members of the course team, their pedagogic capability is questioned in a way that it never would be of a student.

It is interesting to note that much of the criticism of course representation is aimed at the representative and not at the representative system. Understanding the system can illuminate the motivations for how different universities operate representation. Luescher-Mamashela (2012) relates student representation at course level to communitarian, politically-realist and democratic perspectives of university governance. The communitarian case plays to the notion decision-making as a collegiate activity. It follows a traditional model of academic governance in which student contribution is seen in the context of their position in a community of scholars. This coherent with the view that students should be collaborators in educational processes (Streeting and Wise, 2009). The political-realist argument offers a less harmonious view of the relationship between students and their universities. It is based on observations that assimilating activitists into systems of decision-making neutralises their impact (Bertocchi and Spagat, 2001). At its centre is the management of the potentially disruptive influence of student power,

> *"Co-optation of students onto university committees, therefore, holds out the promise of a moderating effect on student activists, as well as moderating the partisan views of other role-players in decision making." (Luescher-Mamashela, 2012 p6)*

Concerns have been expressed that the role of representation has been assimilated into a quality assurance and monitoring framework that discourages academics from working with students to effect real change (Seale, 2010).

Finally, the democratic case has a vision for higher education as civic engagement. This sees university education as a preparation for democratic citizenship.   It is based on the view that representative activities will develop of social capital and a greater sense of civic responsibility among students (Thornton and Jaeger, 2007). This follows the logic that representatives' participation in university decision-making offers students a chance to witness governance at first hand. Involving them in this way emphasises the value of engagement in the public sphere, engendering greater understanding of democratic institutions and political

processes. The impact of this is that it prepares engaged students for active and responsible citizenship (Klemenčič, 2011).

Central to the notion of representation is the assumption that representatives will influence policy through expression of collective needs and perspectives (Ramsden, 2008). However, the university culture will shape how this is manifest. The representative role will be defined by the relationship between students and the institution on a broader level. Referring back to the Nested Hierarchy of Student Engagement Interactions, it is the university that decides what the extent of the student representative role should be. They could, for example, treat representatives as a source of data. In this way, the focus of the system is to allow universities to profit from better-informed decision-making (Menon, 2003). This will enhance the student experience through improvements in service provision (McCulloch, 2009). In essence, the value of representation is to allow universities to 'nip problems in the bud' (Rodgers, et al, 2011). This does not position representation as a challenging or radical mechanism. Universities could encourage their course representatives to act as partners or change agents. However, there is scant evidence that they do. It is interesting to note that some of the sector's most championed initiatives in student engagement, such as The University of Lincoln's 'Student as Producer' project (Neary, 2010) or the University of Exeter's 'Students as Change Agents' (Dunne and Zandstra, 2011), make little reference to student representation. It may be unfair to read too much into this, but the exclusion of course representatives in this area of engagement could reflect a concern that the representation system is over-institutionalised.

A public participation approach to understanding student engagement
Student engagement embraces the aligned notions of representation and participation. As previously discussed, the former corresponds to processes that seek to secure expression of the student voice through the advocacy activities of selected individuals. The latter is a more expansive notion that is related to attempts to encourage all students to be able to make meaningful contributions to decision-making. Theories of participation in education tend to focus on learning. Hence, engagement is often associated with notions of situated learning, motivation and social learning. Although these explain how and why individuals may participate in learning activities, they tend to overlook other aspects of engagement. Social learning theory, for example, often centres on a journey from novice to expert (e.g. Wenger, 1998). The implication is that there is an

experience of transition. However, participation in decision-making does not necessarily follow that arc. There is no intention to transform students into apprentice university bureaucrats. Indeed, there is a strong argument that that would pervert the process (Luescher-Mamashela, 2012). The value of involving students in decision-making lies in the fact that they are students. There is an argument that an alternative theoretical lens may facilitate the exploration and understanding of those aspects of engagement that are not directly linked to the learning experience. That is not to say that the process of engagement will not provide learning opportunities. Indeed, the ideal of *radical collegiality* (Fielding, 2001) suggests that everyone learns from a more engaged student body.   However, this addresses the impact of participation and not what prompts participation.

Understanding student participation in university decision-making may require a stronger focus on participation *as a process*. This links the debate to broader considerations around public participation. The assumed benefits of public participation bear striking similarities to the ambition of student engagement. Moreover, the vocabulary of public participation also includes the notions of co-production, collaboration, engagement and advocacy that are common to the literature on student engagement (Boviard, 2007). Finally, the values of public participation map to those of student engagement in decision-making. The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2, 2007) state:

1. *Public participation is based on the belief that those who are affected by a decision have a right to be involved in the decision-making process.*
2. *Public participation includes the promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision.*
3. *Public participation promotes sustainable decisions by recognizing and communicating the needs and interests of all participants, including decision makers.*
4. *Public participation seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected by or interested in a decision.*
5. *Public participation seeks input from participants in designing how they participate.*
6. *Public participation provides participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way.*
7. *Public participation communicates to participants how their input affected the decision.*

Replace the words 'public participation' with 'student engagement' and this could be a manifesto for how universities should engage with their students.

The principles of public participation have been applied to how organisations manage their external associations with stakeholders, as well as their internal relations with their varied constituents. Brown and Isaacs (1994) have identified the six C's of the organisation as a participatory community. These are: capability, commitment, contribution, continuity, collaboration and conscience. Whilst the authors provide examples of how these have benefitted organisational activity in some of the biggest names in US commerce, there is a danger that such lists over-simplify issues. Key to this is that it appears to overlook how organisations manage power relations. Universities, like all organisations, are sites of power (Laurence, 2009). Gaventa (2006) argues that power is manifest in three ways. First is the 'visible power' of the formal rules of decision-making. The second is 'hidden power' that characterises organisational dynamics that privilege certain groups over others. The final is 'invisible power' that defines the limits of participation. This is linked it with processes of socialisation, enculturation and ideology. Consequently, Gaventa (2006) describes this as the most insidious of the three as it is associated with the internalisation of powerlessness through shaping how individuals see their position in the world. This resonates with the argument that the normalising function of the university creates a power imbalance that shapes student subjectivities and maintains that imbalance (Grant, 1997).

Power is central to what is arguably the seminal theoretical work on the subject of participation. This is Arnstein's (1969) 'ladder of participation' (see *figure 2*). The ladder characterises participation activities on a spectrum from tokenistic to radical. Central to this is her view that participation reflects power. The lower rungs of the ladder relate to manipulation or therapy. These are perfunctory acts that offer an illusion of participation. Often this involves the provision of information that is designed to mollify and appease citizens. Higher up the ladder is consultation. This may be a *post facto* event that facilitates minor cosmetic changes or a more fundamental process of assessing and responding to need or preference. Participation is located towards the top of the ladder and is characterised by the public sharing control. The final rung refers to a more deep-seated notion of participation through citizen control that sees the community as having the authority and responsibility for action.
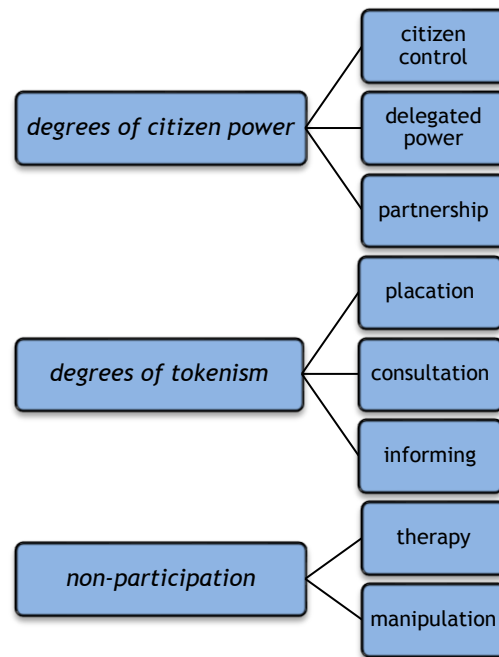
Figure 2 – Arnstein's ladder of participation

Relating student engagement activities to this ladder can help to contextualise the notion of student participation. Bovill et al (2011) have done this in relation to student involvement in curriculum development. At the base is a model of curriculum development where no engagement is sought or expected. This reflects the traditional notion of a curriculum that is developed by experts and delivered to novices. Arguably this may be less problematic than the manipulative uses of participation that Arnstein proposes. There is a degree of deception inherent in manipulation. The associated danger is that students will come to resent the 'myth' of their participation and this will undermine the process (Bartley et al, 2010). Higher up the ladder there are a widening range of choices for the student, but the nature of participation is constrained by what institution sees as an appropriate place for students to be involved. This has parallels with the Nested Hierarchy of Student Engagement Interactions. The institution defines the extent of students' participation. In curriculum development, the top of the ladder would reflect examples of 'negotiated curricula' where students and tutors collaborate. Bovill et al (2011) cite instances of negotiated assessment and student management of some aspects of the learning experience. Finally, they refer to a concept of 'student-controlled curricula' where students have full authority and responsibility, suggesting that this is an unlikely scenario in a higher education environment that champions expert input and assessment.

This last case reflects a common criticism of Arnstein's work. Fung (2006) suggests that the ladder implies that full citizen control should be the holy grail of public participation. He argues that there are instances where this is warranted, but equally there are occasions where it is naïve and inappropriate. Another limitation of the model is that the categories of participation are too broad and lack the nuanced detail that reflects the reality of participation (Collins and Ison, 2006). The notion of information giving, for example, can vary from the provision of superficial essentials that placate the population to detailed analyses allowing for informed choices. Indeed, Lizzio and Wilson (2009) suggest that inadequate access to meaningful and accurate information is a significant constraint on student representation systems.

In an attempt to unpack some of Arnstein's categories of participation, Burns et al (1994) postulated a 'ladder of citizen empowerment'. In an interesting parallel to the contemporary concerns in higher education, the impetus for this came from concerns that public services were increasingly being defined within a consumerist model. In this, customer choice is seen to offer access to power. Therefore, this development of Arnstein's work expands on the ideas of manipulation. It presents the notion of 'civic hype' and 'cynical consultation' to reflect an approach to participation that treats the process as a marketing ploy. This mirrors concerns that student engagement efforts lack genuine support in universities. Emily Collins (2012) talks of the failure of the debate around engagement to move from concerns about how to get information and ideas from students to consideration of what to do with that information,

> *"Without addressing these issues, the theoretically powerful tool of student engagement will become another agenda that is defeated by the sector's proven ability to resist making any real change to the way it does business, whilst simultaneously appearing to make real progress."*

Burns et al (1994) also further distinguish the notion of citizen control into ideas around independent control, entrusted control and delegated control. This reflects the continued emphasis on power. The centrality of power to the debate is also reflected in the work of Fung (2006). He asks three simple questions about participation: who is allowed to participate, what is the method of decision-making and how much influence is the participant allowed? Relating this to the Nested Hierarchy of Student Engagement Interactions reinforces the perspective that

institutional commitment is the key to student engagement. In the reactive institution, for example, student participation is low and there is a reliance on pre-existing methods to make decisions about the student experience. Students would have very little influence and their role would be to comply with the data collecting processes that the university relied on. Fung's questions encourage consideration of methods for engagement that extends beyond their superficial purpose to how they are enacted. Inviting students to contribute in meetings is associated with a responsive institution. However, McComas (2010) argues that reliance on meetings for public participation overlooks the fact that they are ritualised spaces that may discourage engagement. He suggests, for example, that meetings tend to follow formal proceedings that alienate those who have little familiarity with these. In addition, there is invariance and rule governance that defines appropriate behaviour, so limiting creativity and flexibility.

This presents a challenge to the university. Abandoning or recreating such rituals to create more inclusive spaces opens the institution to unpredictable responses and outcomes. This exposes the conundrum that is the heart of progressive approaches that seek a degree of student control. In the progressive institution, students participate fully the co-creation of knowledge and this would encourage a continuous process of reinvention. There is a danger that this constant flux might undermine the capacity of the organisation to compete. It offers the possibility that a progressive institution might be more aspirational than actual. As Lambert (2009) says,

> *"I do not wish to suggest that students' enhanced participation offers 'solutions' to the 'problems' of the contemporary university. Rather, the focus on participation is intended to provide a critical and productive intervention into the question of what higher education is, and is for."* (p305).

The consequence is that full participation may be unlikely goal. Hence, a further development by Wilcox (1999) tries to move away from the common interpretation of Arnstein's work that all participation activity should strive towards notions of citizen control. This presents participation as related to five interconnected domains: information, consultation, deciding together, acting together and supported independence. These are all equally acceptable in the right own context and recognise that power is not always transferred (fully or in part) to

communities. This presents a multi-faceted perspective on participation that moves away from the linearity implied by the metaphor of the ladder. However, there still remains a question over who decides what level of participation is required or desired. This highlights a key value in considering student engagement in relation to public participation theory. It recognises that power ultimately resides in institutions and therefore shines the light on what institutions do to encourage engagement, as opposed to what students should do to be engaged. Central to this is the explicit exploration of power in participation theory. It reinforces the view that a great deal of participatory activities in higher education does little to broker any realignment of power between students and their universities.

Despite the flaws, Arnstein's vision offers a useful heuristic device for reviewing student engagement activities. Central to this is the notion of power and the extent to which institutions want, or are able to, transfer power to their students. In figure 3, the Nested Hierarchy of Student Engagement Interactions has been mapped to Arnstein's ladder to illustrate the relationship between student engagement and student power.
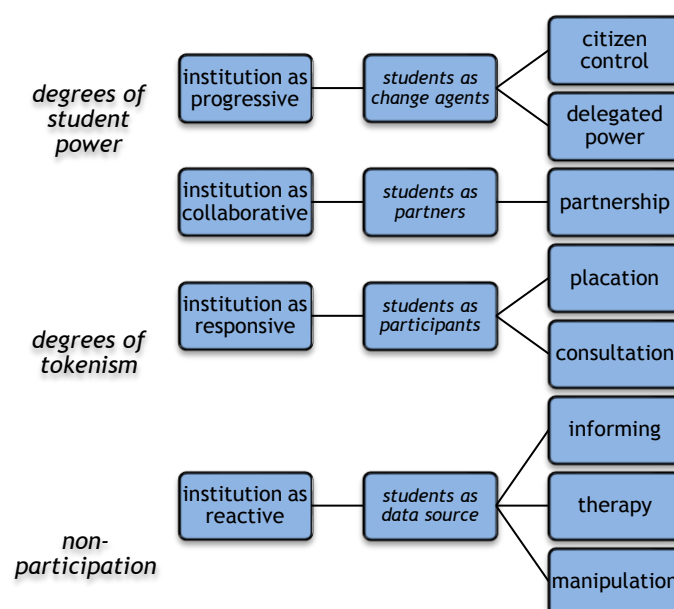
Figure 3: The Nested Hierarchy of Student Engagement Interactions mapped to Arnstein's ladder of participation

A key aspect of the application of Arnstein's model for student engagement is that it sees students through the lens of citizen power. This contradicts an increasingly

accepted discourse that judges students in the context of their consumer power (Nordensvärd, 2011).

Neo-liberalisation of higher education and the student as consumer

In the last two decades, students have been increasingly viewed as principle stakeholders in UK higher education. This, in no small part, has been associated with the growing perception of the students as a consumer of an educational product (Rodgers et al, 2011). In England, it would be easy to attribute this to the introduction of fees in 1998 (Freeman and Thomas, 2005). A perspective made more compelling since the replacement of state funding for university teaching with a full-cost tuition fee (Ling et al, 2012). However, marketisation appears to be a feature of all higher education systems, regardless of their funding regimes (Barnett, 2011). Whether or not a student pays fees, in the neoliberal university the idea of the student is often conflated with the idea of a consumer. Fees aside, the principles of neo-liberalism that endorse student as a customer of the university are: the relaxation of constraints on service provision to encourage competition; the identification of sector-wide performance indicators to facilitate comparison and easier access to information to inform choice (Brown, 2011a). In the neoliberal system, the student is recast as an informed consumer of an education product. Their time, intellectual resources and (in England) finances are invested for individual gain.

Marketisation has challenged the relationship between universities and their students. In recent years, terms like 'investment', 'choice' and 'value for money' have dominated the lexicon of higher education (Universities UK, 2011). The UK government sees this notion of choice as empowering students and putting them at *"the heart of the system"* (BIS, 2011a). It suggests that this will enhance engagement through encouraging a partnership between students and staff. However, most commentators on consumerism in higher education see this as detrimental to partnership. In the neo-liberal educational environment, a counter discourse has evolved that presents the consumerist student as a malignant influence on the sector. As a result, students are increasingly painted as demanding customers, rather than willing learners (Molesworth et al, 2009). They are routinely portrayed in the literature as selfish and self-serving. With respect to this, some commentators have reported a new stridency of student opinion, reflecting 'a customer is always right' mentality that undermines any sense of education as a joint enterprise (Furedi, 2009). The impact of this for academics

has been the suppression of their expertise and integrity, as the free-market leads to over-simplification of the curriculum and grade inflation (Lorenz, 2012). In addition, the language of consumerisation has created a complaints culture that sets students against their tutors (Jones, 2010). This has led some critics to suggest that the student-as-consumer damages the collegiality intrinsic to the contract between students and academics (Beckmann et al, 2009). Unsurprisingly, the fiercest critics of the consumerisation of higher education are academics that teach students (e.g. Acevedo, 2011) and student organisations that support them (Streeting and Wise, 2009).

The danger is that this discourse will undermine their relationships with students and constrain any efforts for engagement. It is possible that universities are creating a self-fulfilling prophesy by focusing on the student as a consumer. If students are constantly told that they are consumers, then it should come as no surprise if they start to act like consumers (Svensson and Wood, 2007). To date, the focus of the literature appears to be the implications of students acting as consumers and not research on whether they do. There is scant evidence that a student's choice about where to study is based on traditional consumer principles (Johnson and Deem, 2003). Moreover, when they arrive at the university they show few of the attitudes that would be associated with seeing themselves as consumers (Saunders, 2011). This reflects a basic critique of the commodification of education; namely that education cannot be treated as a conventional product (Svensson and Wood, 2007). Purchasing an educational experience involves entering into a contract that presents the student with a set of rights and obligations that contradict accepted marketing practices. Moreover, students are in the unusual position of being a 'customer' who is reliant on the provider to grant them access to the product (Svensson and Wood, 2007).

That is not to say that students do not sometimes act as customers. This has long been a feature of the student:university relationship (Woodall et al, 2012). What appears to have changed is that universities now *see* their students as a source of income and have used this to market their services. The 'market-oriented university' underpins managerialist university governance (Luescher-Mamashela, 2010). Indeed, Little and Williams (2010) point out that it was university managers who demonstrated the least resistance to the imposition of university fees in England. Enhancing customer satisfaction has become a management tool, reinforced by rebranding the student as a client of the university. This is

characterised by top-down policy directives, centralised quality assurance, audit and target setting (Deem and Brehony, 2005). An additional feature of this is the deligitimisation of it the academic role through an erosion of professional autonomy (Lorenz, 2012).

Despite these criticisms, it has been argued consumerisation has forced universities to attend more carefully to their students' needs (Maringe, 2011). This has been through an increasing focus on enhancing student satisfaction. This follows a free market logic that customers make purchasing decisions based on how content they are with services (McCulloch, 2009). In a market-orientated university, the expression of student satisfaction becomes a form of market research. In the UK, this has resulted in growing emphasis on the National Student Survey. This was introduced in 2005 for all English and Welsh universities, with optional uptake from Scottish institutions. Its purpose was to reduce the costs of review and provide standardised data to allow for comparisons between institutions (Williams and Brennan, 2003). Since its inception, the survey has been the focus of much debate and criticism. Although derided as, *"Shallow, costly, widely manipulated and methodologically worthless"* (Harvey, 2008), the survey has been attributed to encouraging higher education institutions to invest time and resources in the student experience (Brown, 2011a). Nevertheless, the focus on satisfaction has been criticised for not encouraging students to reflect upon their learning. This stands in contrast to the engagement focus evident in other national surveys, such as the US National Survey of Student Engagement and the Australian Survey of Student Engagement (Kahu, 2013).

The National Student Survey has had a profound impact on university management. Universities pay significant attention to its findings, particularly as findings contribute to university league tables (Naidoo et al, 2011). Competitive league tables are a classic neo-liberalist technology for encouraging inter-institutional rivalry and compliance. The university's agenda is to continuously improve its position and failure to do so can be catastrophic. As Shore (2008) says, *"the policy of naming and shaming failing institutions has become an annual ritual in humiliation"* (p286). It comes as no surprise that university actions to enhance satisfactions ratings may be disingenuous. In 2005, Naidoo and Jamieson (2005) predicted that that the introduction of league tables to distinguish between UK universities would lead institutions to manipulate data to protect or enhance their position in these tables. Their argument was based on the observation that

wherever league tables had been introduced into public sector services, distortion of data had followed. Today, abuse and manipulation of the National Student Survey is recognised and the value of data to reflect the student experience is questionable (Swain, 2009). Such actions suggest that even if students are consumers, their consumer power is tentative. Despite the aspirations of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS, 2011a), students are not at the heart of the system. At best the consumerisation of higher education has provided a new set of criteria for universities to respond to. It has not, however, re-articulated the power dynamics between students and institutions (Gvaramadze, 2011).

The student as a co-producer: an alternative or antidote to consumerisation.
If the objective of commodifying education is to challenge to the power imbalance that favours university staff over their students, it appears to have failed. In fact, the experiment will backfire if consumerisation creates a hostile environment for student:staff relationships. Moreover, the consumerist student may reject opportunities to engage. McCulloch (2009) argues that customer status engenders passivity in students. They expect a degree of service that attends to their needs and requires a relatively modest personal investment. This is in direct opposition with the aspiration for student engagement. Engaged students are far from passive. Not only are they supposed to active learners and get a good qualification, students are also expected to engage in a range of activities that have no direct impact on their educational performance. UK Quality Assurance Agency guidance, for instance, sees a role for student involvement in every quality enhancement function (QAA, 2012a). Moreover, Liam Burns, former President of the National Union of Students argues that students should be included in decision-making at all levels,

> *"Student power must develop into much wider authority, with the ability not only to shape strategic decisions, expenditure and investments but to approve or veto them. We have to move beyond a relationship that, when we agree, looks like partnership, but when we don't relegates students to the status of consultees." (Burns, 2012)*

In line with this, a notion of co-production has been applied to student participation in university structures and processes (Streeting and Wise, 2009),

> *"…a model of co-production also implies student involvement at the collective level. It suggests that institutions should bring students into the decision-making process, ask students to help design the curriculum, and give students control of some parts of the learning environment. In addition, it emphasises the role of students' unions, course representatives, and so on, in influencing institutional policy by adding a student viewpoint in various contexts, or increasingly by running projects and services on the institution's behalf. (p3)*

This demands a level of student participation that extends way beyond simple customer:provider relationships (Gvaramadze, 2011). Hence, a model of engagement is evolving that situates the learning experience as a co-production between students and universities (Streeting and Wise, 2009). This fundamentally challenges how students should work with their universities. Crucially, this focuses on the development of inspired learners (McCulloch, 2009). At first glance, therefore, co-production can be seen to align with notions of engagement that are associated with learning (Trowler, 2010). Indeed, a significant focus of debate around coproduction has explored this. Typically, this is seen in the context of research activity and the contention that engagement with research affords the *"optimum learning experience"* (Taylor and Wilding, 2009). However, understanding the foundations of co-production as learning can clarify how the concept can be applied other aspects of engagement.

In the co-production model, students are expected to work cooperatively with university staff in the construction, dissemination and application of knowledge. The idea that students co-create their learning is not new. It can, for example, be traced back to Dewey's notion of progressive education; is a key component of social learning theory; is embodied in Rogers' principles of humanist education and central to the transformative/emancipatory educational vision of Freire and Gramsci. Therefore, co-creation, expressed through the active participation of learners with the tutor as a facilitator of learning experiences, has been a defining feature of 20th Century thinking about education. It is possible that this has been impeded by the neo-liberalist experiment of the late 20th and early 21st centuries (Neary, 2010). However, there appears to have been a return to these principles, with co-creation seen as an antidote to the stagnation of learning in universities and a vision for the reinvention of the university itself (Neary, 2010).

Co-production defies narrow, neo-liberal approaches to university management (McCulloch 2009). It is often seen as the antithesis of a consumerist approach as it requires a greater sense of partnership between the student and their university (Gvaramadze, 2011). However, Bragg (2007) argues that the contemporary discourse of coproduction is based on a neoliberal governmentality that shapes norms, preferences and capacity. In a discussion of the notion of student as researcher, she suggests that this works in tandem with strategies that are familiar to students because they are grounded in a consumerist culture of self-reliance and personal responsibility. Her concern is that this requires taking on an inherently middle class identity to act in a manner that is expected or demanded by those in authority. This echoes Bernstein's (1996) notion of 'the pedagogic device' and associated arguments that university education can exclude working class students (Maton, 2004). Conversely, research by McLean et al (2013) found student engagement with subject specialist learning, regardless of class. Although their research focused on learning and teaching, it does suggest that university practice can be inclusive. However, the question remains whether the potentially rigid, managerialist framework for university decision-making offers its own variant on a pedagogic device. This may exclude students and thwart aspirations for engagement. In other words, power cannot be shared if the rules for engagement prohibit participation.

The Nested Hierarchy of Student Engagement Interactions sets a challenge to universities to work with students in an authentic manner. This may require institutional change, but necessitates understanding the student perspective. In part, this needs to address what student think about the opportunities that are available, but it also requires a much more basic comprehension of whether this is something that students want to do. Finally, institutions need some insight into how students see their own role in education. The following chapters will outline this study that sets out to establish some answers to these questions.

Chapter Four: Methodology and methods

This research explores student engagement in institutional decision-making. It addressed the following research questions:

1. What are students' perceptions of the engagement opportunities offered to them in one university?
2. How do student subjectivities influence engagement
3. Based on the above, what are the challenges presented by student engagement in university decision-making?

In the literature review, I argued that there is a paucity of data on students' views about engagement. Available information tends to focus on representatives or students who have been involved in very specific projects (Little et al, 2009; Lambert, 2009). Hence, there is little understanding of the spread of student opinion. This research attempts to address this by providing data on the views of a wide range of students. This ambition suggests the need for a large-scale, quantitative study. However, the limited empirical evidence on students' views in this area would weaken the foundations of such a project and increase the likelihood that it would fundamentally misrepresent the student perspective (Wolff et al, 1993). Therefore, I have opted for a 'sequential mixed methods design' that utilises information from a small-scale, qualitative research phase in the development of a larger, quantitative study (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007). In this, the rich, experiential and attitudinal data from a small group of individuals is tested on a much larger audience. To achieve this, the study employed interview and focus group data in the development of a questionnaire that was disseminated to a cross-section of undergraduate students. Interviews, focus groups and surveys are seen as highly complementary research tools. This is particularly relevant for questionnaire design, where the qualitative phase reduces the likelihood that the eventual instrument will reflect the conceptual position of its author(s) (Wolff et al, 1993).

This chapter offers a detailed overview of the research process. Section one discusses the rationale for the three methods used and outlines the research process. In section two, I defend mixed methods as a legitimate approach to research. It presents this a methodology that liberates research from the positivist and constructivist paradigmatic assumptions that have dominated discussion over

how individual qualitative or quantitative methods can be used.

Section one - mixed methods in this research design

Mixed methods research utilises two or more methods to answer a research question. The principal feature is that at least one of these is qualitative and one is quantitative (Johnson et al, 2007). It is seen as a relatively recent approach to exploring research problems in the human and social sciences. As a result, the language of mixed methods research is only just settling into commonly accepted terms. To illustrate this, the concept has also been called 'multi-method', 'integrated' and 'hybrid' research (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007). However, the term 'mixed method' appears to have become the preferred title. This differentiates it from 'multi-method research' that also employs more than one approach, but only from qualitative or quantitative domains with no mixing of methodologies (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007). Having long been on the peripheries of social research, mixed methods research is gaining increasing acceptance in the social research community (Johnson et al, 2007). It is indicative of the mainstream acceptance of this approach that there is now a journal devoted entirely to the concept. Sage first published The Journal of Mixed Methods Research in 2007.

My research design is based on an approach to mixed methods that Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) call an 'Exploratory Design'. In this, the findings from a qualitative phase inform the operation of the quantitative phase. As there is a linear path from the first to the second stage, the approach is also called a 'Sequential Exploratory Design' (Hesse-Biber, 2010). This design is particularly useful if the research seeks to explore a little known phenomenon and then measure its prevalence in a wider population. As a result, exploratory designs are often used in the development of survey instruments when variables are unknown or speculative (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007). The relationship between the interview and focus groups with survey is depicted below (*see figure 1*). I have used the imagery of cogs in a machine to symbolise the interconnectedness of the methods. Moving the first cog (the qualitative phase) drives the second and so forth. To continue this metaphor, the 'crank' that I used to move the first cog was my previous research, my experience of working with students and the available literature. This shaped my thinking about what students might feel about engagement. As a result, the qualitative phase enabled me to assess and refine these assumptions. Moreover, the lubricant that kept the cogs moving was ongoing

consultation and discussion with colleagues from teaching and support services, as well as the Student Union. This was vital in developing and testing the final survey tool, as well as facilitating efficient, university-wide dissemination.
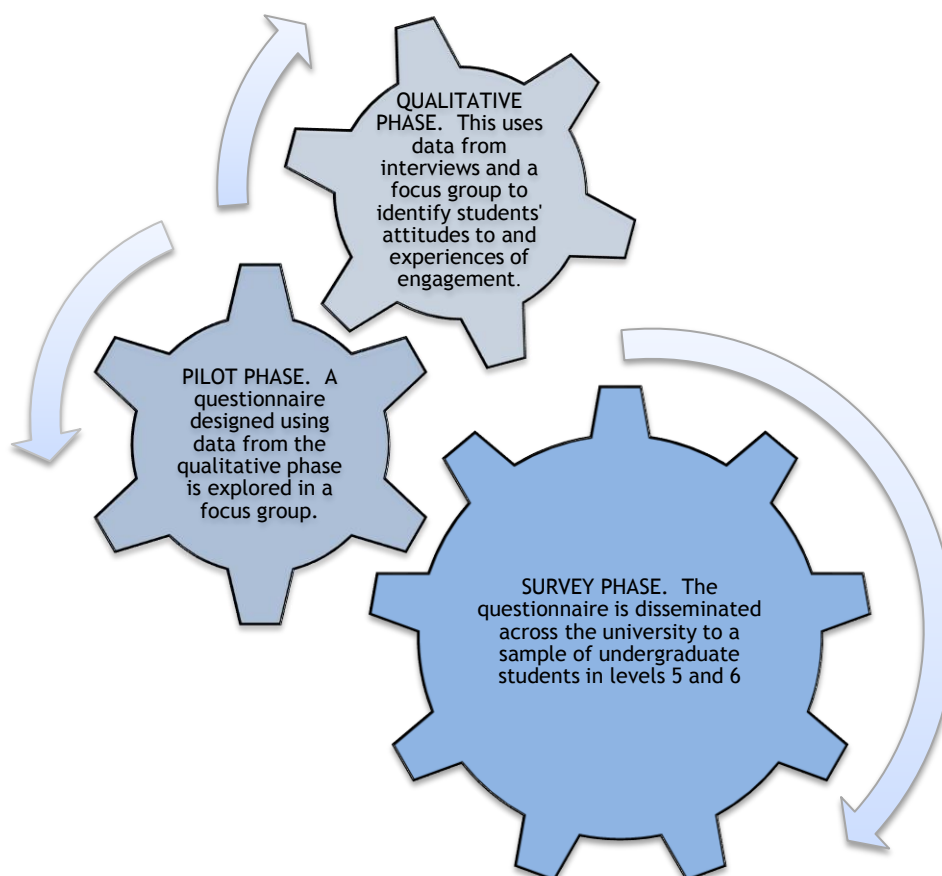
Figure 4: Relationship between the phases of the research

Phase One: interviews and focus group research

In common with most literature that attempts to explore students' relationship with engagement activities, my previous research had focused on student representatives and student unions (Carey 2012b; Carey, 2013a). Whilst this information is valuable, constructing a questionnaire that is meaningful to a wider student body needed to be informed by more mainstream students' views. Researching students who have not engaged in university systems is problematic. Participants would be expected to explore issues that they may have had little experience of.   A nursing curriculum development project offered a possible solution. In this, a number of students had been included in the process to ensure that the student voice was reflected in final curriculum (Carey, 2013b). These

students had not been invited as representatives. Hence, the qualitative phase
included interviews with a sample of the students who had been involved in the
project. However, as it is possible that these students would be atypical,
interview data was complemented by a focus group with students from a similar
background who had not been invited to take part in the project.

All students involved in the qualitative phase were offered £30 in vouchers as a
gesture of thanks. The use of rewards for participation in research is common
practice and is not seen as undermining the quality of data (Grant and Sugarman,
2004). It acted as an incentive for participation, but also recognised both the
contribution that students would make to this research, as well as offering some
recompense for their time. None of the students who were involved in this phase
were included in the final survey, as this may have contaminated the results (Peat
et al, 2002).

Interviews

Students were invited to interview if they had been involved in the aforementioned
curriculum development project. In this, a number of students had been invited to
attend curriculum design meetings. They were eligible to be interviewed if they
had attended two or more meetings. Seven students met this criterion. Four of
these had subsequently graduated and two had left the region. All accepted an
email request to be interviewed. However, arranging interviews with the
graduates who had relocated proved to be impossible, leaving a final sample of
five. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview followed a
framework of general topics. The focus was on respondents' views of the specific
curriculum design project that they had been involved in. Each interview began
with questions regarding the respondent's course and how they became involved in
the project. This provided illuminative data and 'eased' the respondent into the
interview process (Kvale 1996). As the interview progressed, it explored more
complex issues regarding their views and experiences of the process. This
culminated in more expansive questions on their views of engagement.

Loosely structured interviews are valuable for exposing the respondents'
perspectives on the phenomena under investigation (Marshall and Rossman 2006).
The interview facilitates interpretation of the world through a managed dialogue
between researcher and respondent. This develops a narrative that facilitates
understanding of the social world (Silverman, 2011). Interviews are human

interactions and the relationship between the researcher, the respondent and the setting will influence data generation. Consequently, there were established relationships that could effect the nature of the data collected. In an effort to minimise the impact of this, respondents were sent a clear outline of the interview process and assurances regarding anonymity before any meeting. This clarified the purpose and nature of the research and was designed to promote trust in the research process. Not only is this ethically appropriate research practice, but it has the added advantage of encouraging reflection on practice before the interview, enabling respondents to provide information that would better replicate their experiences (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

In relation to student engagement, students might feel a connection to a certain set of values that they believe guide their views on participation, when their actions imply that they are motivated by other values. This is associated with Argyris's distinction between espoused theory and theory-in-use. Divergence between these occurs when a respondent recounts the world view that they believe their behaviour is based in, as opposed to that implied by their actual behaviour (Argyris et al. 1985). It is not based on a deliberate attempt to deceive, but a genuine unawareness of the discrepancy between perceived and real values. This could be associated with the social desirability bias that is a greater risk in face-to-face interviews than in more anonymous data collection methods (Mitchell and Jolley, 2010). To counter this, respondents were encouraged to ground their statements with concrete examples. This has the added benefit of promoting greater reflection upon the issues under consideration (Kvale 1996).

Focus groups
The focus group is widely used in research, but is sometimes dismissed as a quick and cheap market research device that offers little value as a rigorous social science research tool (Morgan, 2007). However, this ignores their potential for the investigation of issues that individuals may not have considered deeply (Rocco et al 2003). As a result, focus groups are an increasingly accepted means to the development of other research instruments, including questionnaires (McLeod et al, 2000). They can be used in the identification of the broad issues that the questionnaire should address, as well as consideration of specific questionnaire items (Wolff et al, 1993). Focus groups were used on two occasions in this research (*see table 1*). The first encouraged students who had no history of

engagement to consider their thoughts and feeling about the subject. A working draft of the questionnaire was piloted in the second group.

	Purpose	Composition	Number	Time
Focus group one	Exploratory	Final year B.A.(hons) Nursing students	9 (all female)	May 2011
Focus group two	Pilot	First year M.Sc. Nursing students	12 (2 male)	September 2011

Table 1: The role of focus groups in the research

Focus group one was selected from a cohort of final year nursing students. This group matched the academic career of the students in the curriculum development project, but the cohort had not been included in the process. Students were invited by email and 10 of the 30 eligible students accepted the invitation to attend. One student was ill on the day, so the group was run with nine students and lasted for just over one hour.

All the data from the qualitative phase had been from nursing students. However, the questionnaire developed from this needed to be relevant to a wide range of students. Hence, the draft questionnaire ought to be piloted with students from varied disciplinary backgrounds. Therefore, this focus group had to represent the intended survey population (Van Teijlingen and Hundley, 2001). Organising a multi-disciplinary group was a challenge, but a pre-registration, post-graduate nursing course offered a solution. This course had just started and students had only recently graduated from a number of subjects, including drama, sociology, psychology and biology. Hence, their student experience in their original discipline was relatively fresh. The group was run as an optional addition to the induction programme and 12 of the 14 registered students attended.

Rationale for the focus group method
Focus groups generate data through discussion and interaction (Wilkinson, 1999). Kitzinger (1994) describes this as a synergy that allows opinions, feelings and beliefs to surface. It is therefore ideal for research topics that participants may have had little opportunity to consider (Cohen et al, 2011), as is the case in this study. The advantage of the focus group is that they replicate familiar social activities such as conversation, debate and argument. Hence, respondents will feel more comfortable with the method (Wilkinson, 1999). This benefit is amplified in research with students as focus groups echo the discussion groups that

are a regular aspect of university-based learning activities. Hence, as Asbury (1995) argues, the focus group encourages individuals to explore their views in a way could not occur in an interview situation. Group dynamics, for example, may promote disclosure. Ideas and opinions expressed in discussion may prompt others to talk about issues that they might have felt reluctant discuss in one-to-one situations (Hollander, 2004). In consequence, focus group data has a high degree of face validity, as statements can be confirmed or challenged during discussion (Kitzinger, 1994).

Focus groups can also facilitate a democratic form of discussion as the researcher's control is diluted through group interaction (Jordan et al, 2007). It is naïve to assume that the power of the researcher can be fully negated, especially in an educational environment. Indeed, Olitsky and Weathers (2005) suggest that no research method can overcome the power imbalance between the researcher and the researched. However, the likelihood that one or more group participant(s) may take the initiative makes the focus group harder to control than one-to-one interviews. Furthermore, the presence of a group of people means that the data is less open to the researcher's influence (Wilkinson, 1999). As a result, focus groups can be particularly useful in research such as this where the power differences between the participants and researchers may skew the data (Morgan and Kreuger 1993).

Focus group management

Both groups came from pre-existing networks. Wilkinson (1999) suggests that this is good practice as the social lubrication in an established group may facilitate discussion. Whatever the provenance of the group, key individuals can influence the nature of interaction. Their impact is capable of catalysing or derailing debate (Parker and Tritter, 2007). Hence, the researcher takes on the role of a facilitator of discussion between all group members. This is reflected in the development of question schedules, prompt materials and techniques to involve all group members (Parker and Tritter, 2007). Kreuger (1997) describes a number of 'subtle control' mechanisms for handling the input of self-elected experts, dominant talkers, ramblers and shy participants. These use body language, targeted questions and even careful challenge to manage group discussion. Most teachers would recognise these as techniques that they might use in classroom management. Hence, I felt reasonably confident in my ability to manage the group. However, groups are also affected by broader social norms. Hollander (2004) discusses how social

expectations may suppress expression of 'unconventional' views. Alternatively, they may compel an individual to comply with ideas that are not their own. She conceptualises this in the notion of 'problematic silences' and 'problematic speech'. This links to a broader critique that withholding information or presenting socially desirable responses is a risk in all research (Nederhof, 1985). It is possible that focus groups will magnify this. They may encourage 'group-think'. This is essentially a bandwagon effect when ideas expressed gather their own momentum and participants endorse beliefs that they don't necessarily hold. Group-think can be addressed through directly questioning the groups about alternative perspectives (Esteves, 2007).

The management of both focus groups followed the principles and processes outlined above. However, the emphasis differed. Questions and prompts used in the first group addressed broad themes around engagement. To avoid imposing any discursive or conceptual layers on the discussions, I steered clear of providing any definitions of engagement. Instead, the concept was explored in relation to terms such as 'participation' and 'getting involved' that students would be more familiar with. The second group was based on discussion of a draft of the questionnaire. This further enhanced understanding of how students viewed of engagement, but in the context of how the issues would be best articulated in a questionnaire. Piloting involves careful design and testing of the instrument prior to distribution (Fink 2003). It is crucial to establish the internal validity of the survey tool (Collins, 2003). Oppenheim (1992) suggests that the pilot instrument should replicate the proposed final tool in every way – from the nature of questions, the design to the quality of paper that will eventually be used. Hence, I presented the group with a fully functional questionnaire rather than just a series of questions. Initial discussion focused on the statements that constituted the main body of the questionnaire. This was followed by a broader discussion of readability and usability.

Data management

With the consent of participants, all data was digitally recorded and transcribed. Audio recording misses details of body language and gesture, but video-recording was rejected as it is cumbersome and off-putting for participants (Cohen et al, 2011). Moreover, the interviewer will pick up on non-verbal cues and use these to inform the interview, so their impact will be reflected in the data (Kvale, 1996). Recording interviews is relatively straight-forward. However, it presents a

challenge for group data. The use of a multi-directional microphone reduces the risk of individual contributions being overlooked, but it cannot pick up visual cues that might also indicate group dynamics. As group facilitator, I felt that taking notes on this would be counter-productive as it might hinder discussion. Hence, I employed a note-taker who observed the group. This is considered good practice in focus group facilitation (Kreuger, 1997) and the note-taker provided me with a mechanism for the data and analysis verification (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

The collective nature of focus group data presents unique challenges for its analysis and presentation. Parker and Tritter (2007) suggest that analysis should take into account the dynamic nature of the data. This is because focus groups provide 3 layers of data: the spoken word of each group member, the group discussion and group interaction (Willis et al 2009). The discursive nature of data collection process makes it problematic to attribute ideas to a single individual. As a result, they are often reported in the context of an interaction (Belzile and Öberg, 2012). Nevertheless, data analysis that explores the nature of interaction will differ from analysis that explores the outcome of interaction. In questionnaire development, straightforward concept analysis is more beneficial than interaction analysis as it is the concepts that will be translated into questionnaire items (O'Brien, 1993). Consequently, an iterative process of analysis of interview and focus group data was conducted. Initial analysis established themes from the focus group data, with interview data used to refine these. The process was repeated until a stable set of themes was identified.

Phase Two: survey method

The quantitative phase of this study is a university-wide survey. This provides the opportunity to explore issue with a large and diverse group of students. Moreover, the method is straightforward and requires only a modest investment in time from respondents. This may encourage greater participation in research and limits self-selection, making the results more generalisable to a wider population (Robson, 2011). Hence, surveys offer a potentially high level of reliability. Surveys provide numerical data that enables comparisons to be drawn between responses to assess the differential impact of key characteristics (Cohen et al, 2011). As a result, this research will have predictive power that may be useful in the development of initiatives to enhance engagement. This is an outcome of the collection of data through standardised measurements that can be analysed through the use of mathematical models. Inevitably this will change the nature of the data collected

from the rich detail of the lived experience that characterised the qualitative phase to broad-brush generalisations. As Cohen et al (2011, p 257) say of the survey method, *"The individual instance is sacrificed to the aggregated response (which has the attraction of anonymity, non-traceablity and confidentiality for respondents)"*

Anonymity and confidentiality are key components of ethically sound research practice (BERA, 2011). Mechanisms are needed to reassure respondents that access to their details will be restricted. The anonymity afforded by a self-completion questionnaire, therefore, offers a distinct advantage for large-scale research by reducing the need for such mechanisms. It also may minimise *social desirability bias*; a phenomena where individuals provide answers that they think they should (Mitchell and Jolley, 2010). Lelkes et al (2012) question this, stating that anonymity may increase the likelihood of respondents lying by removing any notion of accountability. However, the inherent power dynamics in education research may distort respondents' answers if their input is not anonymous (Olitsy and Weathers, 2005). This is sufficient to negate any possible benefits from greater accountability. Consequently, the questionnaire used in this study was fully anonymous and could not be traced back to individual respondents.

Self-completion surveys offer other advantages for this research. Notably, they capture the views of a wide audience at relatively low cost. This is the outcome of a distribution system that can exploit economies of scale. Whereas the unit cost of interviews is constant, in self-completion surveys it reduces incrementally. Once the survey instrument has been designed, additional costs relate to printing and data entry. These can be practically eliminated if the survey was online (Nulty, 2008). However, online surveys appear to be particularly prone to low return rates. In light of evidence that suggests that response rates for higher education surveys are falling (Nair et al, 2008), it is important to avoid a dissemination technique that adds to that. As a result, this research used a paper-based survey tool.

Low response rates destabilise the reliability of survey research (Czaja and Blair, 1995). To put this in perspective, response from 20% of the sample should prompt questions over whether the respondents were systematically different from 80% who did not complete the survey. Although there is debate as to the ideal response rate, the literature suggests 60-70% returns allow for confidence in results

(Nulty, 2008). It is worth bearing in mind that a response in this range for the National Student Survey is only achieved through a complex combination of online, postal and telephone-based surveys conducted over a five-month period. As a result, I deliberated whether to include follow-up procedures to enhance the rate of return. However, effective follow-up procedures make full anonymity impossible, as non-respondents need to be targeted (Czaja and Blair, 2005). Therefore, I needed a dissemination process that would achieve an acceptable response rate in a one-off anonymous survey. The solution is to capture the distinct advantage of working within education. This is the ability to access large groups of respondents in one place and at one time, through managing data collection in lecture settings. This is a well-used method for surveying students, although in recent years there has been a drift from in-class surveys to their online equivalents. However, the available evidence suggests that the former achieve considerably higher response rates than the latter, with response rates of over 70% for in-class surveys being easily achievable (Nair et al, 2008).

Survey sample

The first stage in determining a sample is to define the study population. The research questions suggest that this should be as inclusive as possible. Nevertheless, there were two exclusion criteria. First, the survey did not include postgraduate students on the grounds that their experiences are very different to those of the undergraduate community (O'Donnell et al, 2009). Secondly, first years were excluded, as they would have had little exposure to any of the engagement opportunities offered by the university. Taking these criteria into account, approximately 14,000 students would be eligible. Calculating a suitable sample needs to take into account an acceptable *confidence interval* and *confidence level* (Cohen et al, 2011). The former is the acceptable margin of error in the results. A confidence interval of 2% for example suggests that if 30% of the sample chooses a particular answer, then the proportion of the entire population who would select this response would be would be between 28% and 32% (30+/-3%). The confidence level relates to reliability. In social sciences, the typical confidence level is 95% (Bryman, 2012). This means that if 100 different samples were drawn from a population, responses within the confidence interval would be achieved on 95 occasions. Using an online sample size calculator, I estimated that a sample size of 2000 would give me a 2% confidence interval with a 95% confidence level.

Sampling methods dictate the extent to which the sample is representative. The gold standard is probability sampling that means the likelihood of a specific member of the population being selected is known and bias can be limited (Cohen et al, 2011). It is based on a degree of randomisation that would be difficult to achieve in this research. A simple random sample, for example, would be impossible in light of my decision to maximise response rates through in-class completion. This means that the minimum unit of randomisation for this project is the class and not the student. An additional problem that I faced was that I lacked the authority to insist that the survey was distributed in specific classes. Instead, I had to rely on a university network of faculty-based individuals to broker access to classes. Therefore, there are elements of non-probability sampling in this research that will constrain the representativeness of the sample (Cohen et al, 2011). However, as Wellington (2000) argues, the practicalities of educational research often require a sampling framework that falls between probability and non-probability approaches.

When the survey was delivered in the academic year was crucial. Ideally, survey data should be collected contemporaneously across the sample (Cohen et al, 2011). This could be particularly relevant in this study. Higher education is characterised by pressure points for students (e.g. transition, assessment and waiting for feedback) and their views may shift correspondingly. Hence, the survey period needed to be short to facilitate realistic comparison between groups of students. The survey was conducted over a four-week period from late October to late November 2011. This avoided key transition and assessment periods. Moreover, dissemination in the second semester would coincide with the National Student Survey. This may have caused confusion and disrupted institutional efforts to encourage eligible student to complete the nationwide survey.

Questionnaire Design
There are basic principles of good questionnaire design regarding length, question style and readability. Respondents need to clearly understand how they are expected to respond to questions. This can be achieved through explicit instructions for answering questions (Robson, 2011). A key limitation of the standard wording of questionnaires is that it restricts the extent to which a survey can probe into responses. A possible solution is to guide the respondent through a series of follow-on or branching questions that clarify and develop their answers (Czaja and Blair, 2005). However, these as they can result in a complex and

confusing instrument that either leads to respondent error or frustration and non-completion (Rattray and Jones, 2007). Hence, the questionnaire developed was based on a simple combination of four question types as illustrated in table 2.

Question type	Number	Answer type	Purpose
Code	1	Pre-coded (*no answer required*)	Dissemination details
Student characteristic	5	Specific, single response	Identification of student variables
Engagement statements	30	Likert-type scale (*'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'*)	Response to engagement issues
Open text	1	Written	Optional information

Table 2: Question types used for the Student Engagement questionnaire

Questionnaire length is associated with response rate, with shorter surveys achieving higher rates (Sahlqvist, 2011). Providing a unique class code enabled me to avoid questions on programme and level of study. It also gave background information on date and time of dissemination, as well as specific attendance and response rates for each class. This offers an opportunity for analysis to drill down to a level of granularity that is not usually seen in large-scale survey research. It also meant that questions relating to student characteristics could be limited to age, gender, part/full time status, history of student representation and whether the respondent was from the UK or Irish Republic. The latter was a compromise between asking expansive, census-style questions on ethnicity and place of birth and recognition that the provenance of the student may have some bearing on engagement (Kuh et al, 2008). Combining UK and Irish students recognised the cultural similarities and shared language these two countries. It also acknowledged that the significant presence of Irish students in the university under investigation would make data that distinguished between home, EU and non-EU students somewhat meaningless.

As my research focuses on students' views of engagement, I needed opinion and attitudinal questions. Likert-type scales are an example of these. They present respondents with clear statements and ask them to rate how much they agree or disagree with them (Rattray and Jones, 2007). The assumption is that attitudes can be measured on a linear scale, although there is no suggestion that equal intervals exist between the points on the scale. Typically, scales offer 5 or 7

possible responses with a neutral point. Some controversy exists as to whether a neutral point should be offered. Forcing respondents to choose agreement or disagreement may lead to irritation and increase non-response bias (Rattray and Jones, 2007).   Likert-type questions can also suffer from acquiescence response, where the respondent is naturally inclined to agree with statements (Krosnick and Presser, 2010).   The solution is to offer a range of favourable and unfavourable statements to encourage the respondent to consider their answers more carefully. However, it is important to avoid exceptionally negatively worded statements and double negatives as they can cause confusion (Barnette, 2000). A criticism of Likert scales is that people's real feelings are hard to grasp in terms such a "strongly agree" or "disagree". In some ways this is an inevitable outcome of the decision to sacrifice the nuanced detail of qualitative data for the 'big picture' of quantitative data. Ensuring content validity can address this by presenting the respondents with statements that are meaningful to them. Questionnaire design should rely on a range of sources, including discussions with experts in the field and proposed respondents (Rattray and Jones, 2007). This supports the decision to adopt a mixed methods approach to this study.

Questionnaires can utilise open questions that allow respondents to answer in their own words. This could include adding to a range of possible answers or making general comments (O'Cathain and Thomas, 2004). Open question data needs to be categorised and coded after the survey to facilitate analysis. This may lead to misinterpretation or coding errors that reduce the reliability of the survey (Adams and Cox, 2008). Moreover, open questions can discriminate on the grounds of how articulate the respondent is (Cohen et al, 2011). Furthermore, Czaja and Blair (2005) suggest that the effort of constructing answers may discourage those who are ambivalent about issues, resulting in data that overestimates more polarised views. Closed questions overcome these problems by limiting the respondent to a choice from pre-set answers. There is no need for post-survey coding of responses, so data entry and analysis is more efficient and accurate (Krosnick and Presser, 2009).   In light of these possible problems, open questions were limited to a single space at the end of the survey.

Section two - defending the mixed methods approach
The central justification for mixed methods research is that it offsets the weaknesses of both qualitative and quantitative research (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2008). This follows the perception that quantitative research is fundamentally

constrained in its understanding of the context of research. It fails to 'honour' the voices of research participants, with individual experiences becoming lost in mass data. Finally, the impact of the researcher is overlooked and they are often presented as a completely objective outsider (Bryman, 2012). Conversely, qualitative research creates data out of personal interactions between the researcher and the subjects. This results in limited generalisability of findings beyond the specific research context. It leads to criticisms about the usefulness, if not the veracity, of research findings (Williams, 2000). The key argument for mixing qualitative and quantitative research methods is that it can overcome the limitations of individual approaches. Hence, at its most basic, the case for mixed methods research is that it offers the 'best of both worlds' (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007). Supporters of the approach contend that mixing methods allows researchers to address the sort of complex problems that characterise the contemporary social environment. As Creswell et al (2011) suggest, mixed methods research suits research questions… *that call for real-life contextual understandings, multi-level perspectives, and cultural influences*" (p4). Student engagement in university decision-making provides an example of the complexity that may benefit from this approach (Lizzio and Wilson, 2009).

The case for mixing method appears to be simple and straightforward; findings present a more complete picture. Hence, it may seem counter-intuitive that mixing qualitative and quantitative methods should only recently be seen as an acceptable approach to research. After all, it has long been recognised that problem solving tends to rely on both inductive and deductive reasoning (Nuzdor, 2009). Moreover, many qualitative researchers will use numbers or approximations (such as 'most', 'a minority of', etc.) in reporting their analysis, while quantitative researchers often report qualitative data (Roberts, 2002). As such, it could be argued that mixing methods is a natural and instinctive means to answering research questions. Yet, there remains significant controversy around the appropriateness of this. Perhaps part of the problem is that mixing methods implies an 'anything goes' approach to research that is too loose and undefined to be taken seriously. Certainly, a review of the literature suggests that there are very vague 'rules' for mixing methods. It can be done at any point, in any order, at any level, and in any proportion (Rocco et al, 2003). This research uses qualitative and quantitative data sets in a sequential fashion. However, mixed method research could involve utilising different data sets in an expansive range of

combinations (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007). Data can be merged so that the researcher can simultaneously investigate a whole research problem through different methodological lenses. Alternatively, one method can be embedded into another to provide a different view of a single element of a research problem. Finally, methods can be connected in a more linear fashion with one data set building upon the findings of another. In addition, qualitative data can be analysed quantitatively (such as the auditing of key word repetition) and quantitative data considered qualitatively (e.g. through the use of data in individual profiling) (Rocco et al, 2003). To further add to the confusion, the study can be a single design, where the qualitative and quantitative elements are completed and reported together, or a multiple design, with the phases reported separately and adding to each other as the project progresses (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007). What is needed is something to bind all of this together. This, it can be argued, is through mixed methods research being grounded in a distinct ontological and epistemological vision.

A mixed methods paradigm?

The debate over the value and appropriateness of research has become dominated by the view that research operates within a distinct and identifiable paradigm. It can be argued that the lack of a philosophical doctrine for mixed methods research has constrained its development. Indeed, critics contend that without a clear explanation of the nature of reality and truth, mixed methods research is fundamentally flawed. As Lincoln and Guba (1994) assert,

> *"Paradigm issues are crucial; no inquirer, we maintain, ought to go about the business of inquiry without being clear about just what paradigm informs and guides his or her approach."* (p116)

Paradigms describe world-views that fundamentally shape how researchers perceive the nature of knowledge and their role in its discovery. The focus on research paradigms has become a key feature in social sciences research critique (Morgan, 2007). This was driven by qualitative researchers in an effort to explain and defend their practice (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Their views are based on the influential work of Thomas Kuhn, who described paradigms as, *"a universally recognized set of scientific achievements that for a time provide a model problems and solutions for a community of practitioners"* (Kuhn, 1970 p viii). He argued that members of a scientific community share a common understanding

about the best methods for answering research questions. These determine how scientists explore research problems until the assumptions that define the paradigm no longer enable them to answer these questions. When there is sufficient dissatisfaction with the paradigm, innovative members of the community seek new solutions. Eventually, these coalesce to form a new paradigm that dominates thinking in that specific area of inquiry. Kuhn calls this 'scientific revolution' or 'paradigm shift' and argues that the new paradigm is inevitably better at explaining the world than the old paradigm. Moreover, once it has been accepted, scientists in that community will never return to the principles of the defeated paradigm. This is where Kuhn's view deviates significantly from the contemporary interpretation of paradigms in the social sciences. Kuhn's work focused solely on the natural sciences and he claimed that the notion of paradigm shift was not consistent with what he witnessed in the social sciences (Kuhn, 1970). He maintained that ongoing and overt disagreement and controversy appeared to be part of the culture of social sciences, but the same level of debate was rarely encountered in the natural sciences. He concluded that this was because the process of scientific revolution fundamentally changed the landscape of inquiry and rendered obsolete the ideas of the old paradigm. This is not to say that debate never occurs in science, but rather that the evolution of areas of inquiry is much more conclusive.

Notions of eventual consensus may define the Kuhnian view of paradigm shift, but the same cannot be said of their application to social science research. Here, revolution is replaced by on-going conflict, which some commentators have described as 'paradigm wars' (Hammersley, 1992). This colourful metaphor describes the hostility that existed between qualitative and quantitative research in the 1970s and 1980s.   The catalyst for this was the efforts of qualitative researchers to establish credibility in the face of a dominant paradigm that ignored or dismissed them. The debate was framed around difference, with qualitative research positioned as a radical alternative to conventional wisdom (Morgan, 2007). This was based on a strict ontological and epistemological vision. Lincoln and Guba (1985) focused on higher order assumptions, arguing that qualitative research is grounded in an interpretivist or constructivist view of knowledge that sees the world from the point of view of the research participant.   Positivism, on the other hand, is based on a search for authoritative knowledge. Crucially, the two cannot co-exist in the same project. By implication, researchers have to ally themselves to one camp. In this, the metaphysical becomes conflated with ethics

and aesthetics, with social research presented as a moral endeavour (Morgan, 2007). Moreover, branches of qualitative research became explicitly political, as methods were associated with emancipatory research, transformative research and feminist research (Willis, 2009). These positions often presented the positivist paradigm as fundamentally failing to respect social differences (Weber, 2004). The result was a level of incommensurability between the paradigms that suggested radical distinctions between the two that could not be overcome.

One problem with the notion of incommensurability is that the picture it paints of the two paradigms is not necessarily accurate. Silverman (1997) suggests that the critique of quantitative research is based on a 'straw man' that bears little resemblance to the reality of quantitative research practice. Far from being naïve realists, he argues that many quantitative researchers are acutely conscious of the problems of data classification and interpretation. His position is that quantitative researchers need not be positivist, just as qualitative researchers are not necessarily interpretist. He goes on to say,

> *"There are no principled grounds to be either qualitative or quantitative in approach. It all depends upon what you are trying to do. Indeed, often one will want to combine both approaches. This means that, if we want to understand the logic behind qualitative research, we need to recognise its points of continuity with, as well as difference from, more quantitative or 'positivistic' studies"* (Silverman, 1997 p14)

The conclusion of this is that quantitative and qualitative methodologies are not polar opposites, but make up a continuous scale. As such, it has been suggested that there are up to six distinguishable research methodologies (Hammersley, 1992) and even these don't capture the full range of research approaches. As a result, the qualitative-quantitative debate as can be seen as being based on a set of false dichotomies ('numbers' versus 'words', 'deductive' versus 'inductive', 'objective' versus 'subjective') (Bavelas, 1995). This has created unnecessary antagonism between researchers. Feminist researcher, Ann Oakely (1999) describes the negative reaction she received as her work shifted from a qualitative position and increasingly used quantitative methods. She sees this as a hangover from the paradigm wars that is frustrating the development of feminist research,

"…what my 'case' illustrates is the co-option of individual methodological positions by prevailing paradigm arguments. The fundamental question is one about why social scientists (and others) conceive of different research methods as opposed in the first place." (p248)

Oakley's argument reflects increasing frustration with what some claim is a contrived and unhelpful divide between qualitative and quantitative methods that constrains research (Weber, 2004). Instead, social problems are best served by research that is fit for purpose and not restricted to positivist or constructivist methodologies alone. This notwithstanding, many commentators are concerned that researchers cannot take an aparadigmatic stance (Hall, 2012). It is suggested that the lack of unambiguous paradigmatic positioning leads to theoretical and political confusion. Giddings and Grant (2007), for example, describe mixed methods research as a 'Trojan Horse' for positivism. They argue that it is facilitating a resurgence of a positivist bias in health, social and educational research. This is fundamentally affecting the nature of the evidence base that shapes contemporary practice. Their conclusion is that mixed methods researchers need to clarify their research paradigm.

There has been some debate over whether mixed methods can exist in a paradigm of its own or takes a multi-paradigm stance. The latter is a pragmatic position taken by many researchers,

"mixed methods approach to social inquiry distinctively offers deep and potentially inspirational and catalytic opportunities to meaningfully engage with the differences that matter in today's troubled world, seeking not so much convergence and consensus as opportunities for respectful listening and understanding. " (Greene, 2008 p20)

Pragmatists choose the method (or methods) with respect to the purpose of and the nature of the research question (Creswell 2003). The choice of quantitative or quantitative research methods is based on perceived suitability rather than philosophical commitment. As an aside to this, it has been argued that loyalty to a specific paradigm may actually reflect a researcher's skills and training in associated methods and not her or his philosophy (Brannen, 2005).

Pragmatism offers a multi-paradigm position that accepts different ontological and epistemological traditions. Mason (2006) refers to this as a 'parallel logic', but is

concerned that this can amount to the respectful co-existence of two positions rather than any attempt to integrate them. The synergies of mixed method research are better served by an assimilation of positivism and constructivism. This dialectical position asserts that research can offer greater insight into human phenomena when paradigms are combined (Rocco et al, 2003).

Pragmatism is associated with critical realism and based on a perception that positivism is over-deterministic and interpretivism is too relativist (Cruickshank, 2004). Positivism has been systematically criticised as a form of *'naive realism'*. It assumes that knowledge can be established and generalised with little consideration of context (Lincoln and Guba, 1994). There is little room for human agency in the face of universal laws.   Hence, the value of positivism in understanding complex human phenomena is questionable. Interpretivism provides a route to that understanding, but critics argue that it is so contextual and relativist that its value is questionable (Williams, 2000). Critical realism attempts to reconcile these two positions. It argues that reality exists, but that that knowledge is socially constructed (Cruickshank, 2004). Central to this is a concise ontological position that the world exists independently of what we think about it. Bhaskar (1998) argues that this leads us to accept the fallibility of our knowledge and the possibility of getting things wrong. He argues that knowledge can be transitive and intransitive. The latter are independent of human activity, for example gravity. This responds to a fundamental belief that there has to be some sort of knowledge that exists beyond our perceptions of it. Criticising the divide between interpretive and positivist positions, Weber (2004) cites the example of what would happen if a person stepped off a tall building. He jokes, *"I've yet to find a colleague who calls herself/himself an interpretivist willing to undertake the experiment to show me that the outcome I'm confident would occur is a perception rather than a reality!" (pV).*

Of particular interest in social research is the idea of transitive knowledge. This is described as *"artificial objects fashioned into items of knowledge by the science of the day"* (Bhaskar, 1998, p16). They take the form of 'facts', theories and paradigms, as well as the methods and techniques of research. It follows that the mechanisms for developing such knowledge do not need to be bounded by the conventions of positivist or interpretivist methodology (Benton, 1998). For critical realists, therefore, any research on an issue, from whatever angle or level, will contribute to understanding. As such, it critical realism provides a distinct

methodological foundation for mixed methods research. This moves the debate from the pragmatist, aparadigmatic stanc*e* to claims that mixed methods reflects its own paradigm (Hall, 2012). As such, mixed methods research has been called the *third research paradigm* (Johnson et al, 2007).   This has implications for how researchers engage with the process. It follows from the critical realist perspective that researchers are actively immersed in the process and cannot wash out their own interests and views. Since this is an intrinsic part of qualitative research process and reporting, it follows that this will have the most significant impact on the operation and account of quantitative elements of research. De Loo and Lowe (2011) argue that reflexivity can help to in this process and that researchers need to be cognisant of the context of the research.   Consequently, in the following chapter, I consider my role and possible impact on the research process by exploring the concept of insider research.

Chapter Five: Insider research

In this chapter I explain my role in the university and my motivation for conducting this study. A key aspect of this is to examine the possible impact of my position in the university on this research. This is examined in the context of insider research to acknowledge that I have a strong connection to the institution under examination. The chapter therefore considers how this is both an advantage and a constraint for educational research. My chosen research methods rely on the willingness of students to participate. Therefore, the chapter outlines the steps taken to maximise their participation. Exploration of this addresses the power dynamics that influence the relationship between university staff and students. These might result in students feeling compelled to accept an invitation to engage in research. Hence, the chapter reviews the ethical dimensions of this research project. In doing this, I set the scene for research data reported in the following chapter.

What is insider research?

The term 'Insider research' is used to describe projects such as this where the investigator has a direct association with the research setting (Robson 2011). From a positivist perspective, being an insider compromises the validity of the research. This is aligned with what Merton (1972, cited in Mercer, 2007) calls the 'outsider doctrine' that assumes that only neutral observers can objectively assess human interaction. Researchers must be detached from the subjects of their research. The outsider doctrine is coherent with the traditions of the scientific approach that demands objectivity. If the researcher cannot be objective, their findings will be distorted. This follows a realist ontological perspective that there is a truth that exists independently of the observer, so establishing that truth requires complete impartiality (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2008). Conversely, insider research sits more happily in a constructivist paradigm that is based on an assumption of multiple realities. It is consistent with this that the researcher's role in constructing a particular reality should be acknowledged (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This is not to say that insider research is unproblematic in qualitative research. Mercer (2007) for example, states that the insiders need to avoid the risk of 'myopia', where they presuppose that their perspective is universal rather than personal. However, it is easier to reconcile such concerns within conventional qualitative research procedures. In these, researchers are usually expected to explore their

motivations for undertaking a piece of research, including and explicit focus on their insider/outsider status (Corbin-Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). As insider research does not necessarily compromise the epistemological basis of qualitative research, the dilemmas of insider investigation are frequently explored in the qualitative literature. Conversely, they are barely considered in relation to quantitative research (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007).

Insider research in the context of this study

As discussed in the previous chapter, mixed methods research does not position itself in a qualitative or quantitative paradigm. I argued that it is based on a critical realist perspective that accepts the notion of an 'objective truth', but acknowledges that objectivity is impossible. In line with the epistemology of mixed methods research, I accept that my position in the university will inevitably threaten any traditional assumptions regarding validity. The key is to establish the trustworthiness of this research. This involves exploring the possible extent of my influence over the research process and explaining the mechanisms that have been put in place to attend to these. This aligns with the view of Onwuegbuzie and Johnson (2006). They propose that insider status must be addressed in all aspects of mixed methods research and not just the qualitative elements. Hence, although my impact as an insider could be more pronounced in the qualitative phase, it should still be considered in relation to the survey phase.

In considering my position as an insider, I need to address the following questions:

• What are the assumptions that I will bring to this research as an insider?
• How will I manage information that I acquire outside the planned research?
• How might my understanding of institutional politics influence my analysis?
• Will any relationships I have with the research subjects encourage them to react in an uncharacteristic manner?
• How can I be confident that this research will be conducted in an ethical manner?

There are several variants of insider research. This study typifies one of these, namely 'practitioner research' where investigation is conducted by a professional in her or his work setting (Costley et al, 2010). However, it is worth considering that insider research can also be extended to subjects where the researcher has strong opinions on the research matter or an affiliation with a particular community (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007). Therefore, consideration of my position

in the research has to take into account my personal views on student engagement. This is particularly relevant; as my previous research has focused on this issue and I am an advocate for student engagement in the university under investigation. At this stage it is worth providing a short biographical account to explain my role in the institution under investigation. This will also establish the key motivations for undertaking this specific project. Naturally, in a career of over 20 years as an educator, this is heavily edited and focuses on those aspects that I have judged to be salient to this research. It is acknowledged that this process will result in a somewhat distorted picture. Indeed, a criticism of autobiographical details in research is that they may mislead as much as elucidate (Macfarlane, 2010).

I have taught in the university under investigation for 15 years and have a leadership role in learning and teaching in one of its five faculties. The faculty's programmes are in health and social care and I teach across most of these. However, I am only loosely associated with the majority of undergraduate programme teams. In addition, I also coordinate a range of student engagement activities. Most notable of these is work with student representatives and student voice initiatives. As a result of this activity, I am in a fairly unusual position of having worked with, taught or assessed most of the faculty's students at some point in their university career. Therefore, given that the qualitative phase of this research is wholly based in this faculty, it is likely that I will have some connection with the students who participated in that phase. I have no undergraduate teaching responsibilities outside the faculty. However, I have taught on the University's Post-graduate Certificate of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education since 2006. Consequently, I have an association with a number of university staff who were 'students' on this course. Furthermore, I also sit on a number of university-wide committees. In consequence, I have a degree of reach outside a single faculty and into the rest of the institution.

I first became interested in student engagement in relation to how students participated in learning and assessment activities. However, my move into a more managerial position prompted me to consider this from a different perspective. As chair of the student representatives' forum, I became aware of how vulnerable course representatives could be. To learn more about this, I undertook research on the views and experiences that student representatives had regarding the representation system (Carey, 2013a). This was complemented by a project on key university stakeholders' views of the system (Carey 2012b). The experience

consolidated my respect for student representatives and clarified my thinking on the subject. A number of key issues struck me. Central to these was the complexity of the representative role and the way that representatives had to manage their identities as a representative in some contexts and a student in others. As a result, it was clear that these students were not 'typical'. They had privileged insight into university processes and procedures that most students did not. In consequence, I became interested in how mainstream students felt about engagement. In 2011, I acquired funding from the Higher Education Academy to undertake a small piece of research on student engagement in curriculum development (Carey, 2013b). I used this as an opportunity to explore the views of students who had not been involved. What struck me was that their perceptions were not radically different from those of students who had participated. Moreover, I saw strong parallels with my earlier research on course representatives. It appeared, therefore, that motivation for engagement may not the preserve of the few, but a much more widespread phenomenon. Hence, I wanted to test this idea with a more extensive student body.

The benefits of insider research

Being an insider affords distinct advantages in the research process. It offers a wealth of knowledge on institutional habitus that an outsider could neither access nor analyse. Brannick and Coghlan (2007) refer to this *as 'pre-understanding'* of the acceptable and the taboo. The researcher, therefore, has an instinctive understanding of the macro, meso and, micro-political landscape of the organisation (Mercer, 2007). He or she is conscious of institutional and personal sensitivities and can use this to gain support and facilitate access (Costley, 2010). As a very simple example of this, I was aware of concerns regarding the possible impact of 'survey fatigue' on National Student Survey response rates. Hence, I *knew* that I would struggle to get cross-university support for the survey if I planned to disseminate the questionnaire when the national survey was running. Once permission was granted, I knew not only who to ask for support at faculty and department level, but how best to ask them.

It is suggested that a key benefit of being an insider is that the researcher will have credibility with research participants (Mercer, 2007). As a result, they may feel more comfortable engaging with someone who is familiar to them. This will enhance the fidelity and authenticity of the information (Perryman, 2011). In this instance, however, the notion of credibility differs slightly from how it is often

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presented. Breen (2007), for example, discusses how shared identity may encourage participants to trust the researcher. In this project, however, participants were students. Moreover, in the qualitative phase they were all studying nursing and predominately female. Consequently, as a male, non-nurse, lecturer, my identity was radically different. In this study, credibility was based on familiarity, experience and authority (Perryman, 2011). My personal history of working with students, both inside and outside the classroom, meant that I could rely on a range of techniques to manage my interactions with them. This was illustrated in the survey dissemination process. In most instances, I distributed the questionnaires, but on some occasions a member of university staff in a non-teaching role undertook this task. Reviewing response rate data, I recognised a pattern. The lowest rates were from classes that I did not attend. On investigation, it transpired that the very lowest of these were recorded when questionnaires had been collected at the end of the session. An experienced teacher would have understood that students tend to leave the lecture room at the end of the session and would not have undertaken collection at that point. This demonstrates how being a tutor afforded distinct advantages in this research. Yet, it raises issues of power and influence that need to be considered. How these were addressed will be considered in the context research ethics.

The ethics of insider research

Insider educational research is expected to conform to the same ethical standards as any research (Floyd and Arthur, 2012). Naturally, the research must not put participants in any danger. They also relate to whether contribution is voluntary and how the identity of respondents is protected. In addition, participants need enough detail on the research to give informed consent and must have the right to withdraw at any point. Finally, all data needs to be safely stored (Cohen et al, 2011).   As the planned project met these criteria, the University's research ethics committee granted ethical approval.   Interview and focus group data was digitally recorded and is stored in a password-protected area of the university's mainframe. Completed surveys and printed transcripts are stored in a locked cabinet. This is in line with stipulations of the Data Protection Act (1998) and standard ethical research practice (BERA, 2011). Informed consent was encouraged through the provision of participant information. In the qualitative phase, a participant information sheet was given to each student who agreed to take part prior to the commencement of the interview or focus group. In addition, a consent form was filled in at the start of the process. The management of informed consent differed

for the survey stage. Information was e-mailed to each participating class before survey dissemination. However, there was no separate consent form. It is accepted that consent in survey research can be implied through completion of the questionnaire, as long as there is a statement that participation is voluntary (DeVaus, 2013). Indeed, as the survey was anonymous, asking respondents to sign and return a separate form may have undermined anonymity (DeVaus, 2013).

Engagement in the qualitative phase was not anonymous, but confidentiality was assured. In keeping with common practice in qualitative research (Robson, 2011), pseudonyms have been attributed to all participants to protect their identity. In addition, identifying features such as age and gender have been stripped from the data. This recognises that anonymity can be compromised through reporting personal details that may indicate a specific participant's identity (Cohen et al, 2011). This is also an issue in reporting survey data. Although the survey was anonymous, some analytical procedures could inadvertently identify a respondent if they have a distinctive characteristic. In this project, a student's position as a course representative could be such a characteristic. They would be instantly recognisable as in many classes there will only be one representative. To avert the risk of this, analysis avoids the level of granularity that would expose such associations.

At face value, this research is uncontroversial and ethically unproblematic. However, Macfarlane (2010) criticises the governance of research ethics through committees for encouraging "*inauthentic, scripted*" responses to ethical issues. He suggests that standard ethical procedures do not necessarily reflect ethical practice. This may be particularly relevant to in insider research. Such research may be ethically more problematic than 'outsider' research. Yet, Floyd and Arthur (2012) suggest that traditional ethical approval processes often overlook this. Trowler (2011), for example, discusses how anonymity can be difficult to maintain, particularly when research is in one institution. In addition, insiders have access to information that sits outside planned data collection processes. Mercer (2007) argues that a significant ethical dilemma for insider researchers is the use of 'incidental' data acquired through workday engagement in the organisation. This may be from informal conversations or from overheard information. She describes the use of such information as a betrayal of trust and a failure to understand the difference between research and voyeurism.

Managing incidental data requires a distinction between what is an acceptable feature of an insider's position and what constitutes an abuse of that position. The issue is particularly pressing when insider research has an ethnographic element (Perryman, 2011), which this research does not. However, my work with staff and students means that I often participate in discussions about engagement-related matters. Furthermore, in the methodology chapter I described *"on going consultation and discussion with staff from teaching and support services, as well as the student union"* as a lubricant to the research process. Although, these discussions were always explicitly located in the context of this research project, I have not referred directly to any of the notes that were taken in theses meetings. In addition, I have been careful to ensure that the development of the survey instrument was firmly based on documented sources, whether research data or literature, and not conversations with students or observations of processes.

Unlike in exogenous research projects, insider research can have a long-term impact on relationships in the organisation (Floyd and Arthur, 2012). Managers may not welcome analysis that exposes institutional errors. There are well-documented incidents of university research findings being suppressed by its industrial sponsors (Washburn, 2008). It is conceivable that as universities become increasingly marketised, this may happen in educational research if there is a feared impact on the institution's competitive position (Trowler, 2011). In addition, the investigator has access to privileged information about participants that could undermine future working relationships. To some extent, the risk to relationships in this instance was limited by the temporality of student status. The vast majority of students who were involved in this study have now left the university. However, this does not diminish the importance of this issue. What is particularly salient to this project the possible impact of power on these relationships. The micro-politics of educational encounters inevitably problematise educational research (Wagner, 1997). These centre on the power dynamics between tutors and students (Robinson, 2012). Whether I taught the students or did not, it is likely that they saw me as a representative of the university. Consequently, I was likely to be in a more powerful position than any of the students who I asked to contribute to the study. This may have influenced their motivation to participate (Wiles et al, 2006). The power imbalance could not be eliminated, but it could be minimised. In the qualitative phase, I was able to avoid participation by any students that I had regularly taught or ever assessed. Furthermore, the survey dissemination strategy was designed to discourage

students from feeling coerced into completing the questionnaire. Although the students' lecturers had granted access to their classes, they were not involved in explaining the purpose of the research or requesting participation.

Reflecting on my relationship with the students who participated in this study raises some questions about the nature of insider research. The insider/outsider dichotomy does not adequately reflect my role(s) in this aspect of the research. I was certainly not a member of the student community, but my role in the university made me more than a simple observer. Students in the qualitative phase knew me, even if our relationship was not as significant as that of student and tutor. Hence, my insider status in this phase was relatively strong. However, to the majority of students in the survey phase, my status was much more tentative. This corresponds with Mercer's view that insider/outsider is a false separation and all researchers will be positioned on a continuum between these points. Moreover, the researcher's position is mutable as relative statuses and power dynamics shift (Mercer, 2007). Indeed, DeLyser (2001) argues, *"…in every research project we navigate complex and multi-faceted insider-outsider issues"* (p. 442).

Mercer (2007) describes insider research as a double-edged sword. On one hand, the researcher benefits from easy access to participants and a clear understanding of the research context. Conversely, they will have some preconceptions about the issues and will have to work within the confines of preformed relationships. This chapter has demonstrated how these issues were managed in the organisation and operation of this project. In this chapter, I have outlined some of the key steps taken to nullify the potentially negative impact of my position in the university. Many of these related to curbing the risks associated with the likely power imbalance between students and me. It would be arrogant to assume that these actions fundamentally challenged the balance of power. Indeed, although this research attempts to capture some students' views, I recognise that students are essentially subjects of my research and not collaborators. Failure to acknowledge this may result in my research becoming an act of ventriloquism that attempts to pass the research off as reflecting '*the student voice*'. Instead, I accept that this project research is consistent with a lot of educational research in that it is research *on* students and not research *with* students (Cook-Sather, 2006). That is not to say that this research lacks value. Establishing baseline data and providing a large-scale quantitative evidence base is a significant step in

understanding engagement. However, the true value of this research will be judged on the extent to which the results that I describe in the following chapters contribute to more radical interventions to establish an authentic student voice in engagement. The first of these chapters focuses on the qualitative phase. It offers an analysis of the interview and focus group data and explains how this informed the development of a student engagement questionnaire. The data collected from this is then presented in the second chapter.

Chapter Six: Results from phase one and student engagement questionnaire development.

This chapter outlines the key research findings from the qualitative phase of this mixed methods study. It is presented in two parts. The first offers an analysis of the data collected from interviews and focus groups. In the second section, I explain how this data informed the development of a pilot questionnaire that was explored in a focus group of students from a range of backgrounds to refine and revise the questionnaire. The eventual survey tool was used in the survey phase of this study. The results from this are presented in the following chapter.

Analysis of qualitative data

The first phase of this mixed methods research project involved the collection of interview and focus group data with student nurses. It formed part of a project that explored student engagement in curriculum design (Carey, 2013b). Interviews were conducted with students who had been involved in a nursing curriculum development project. The inclusion criterion for interviews was whether the student had attended two or more meetings. Five of the seven eligible students were available for interview. Interviews ranged from half an hour to 40 minutes. The gender mix of the sample was three male and two female, but to protect the anonymity of interviewees, gender-neutral pseudonyms have been allocated. The focus group was made up of students who had not been involved in the project. Nine students volunteered following an open email invitation sent to a single cohort of 30 final year students. This cohort was all female. The group lasted for just over one hour. As focus group data is the outcome of a discursive process, no quoted material is attributed to individuals. However, where discussion is reported, pseudonyms have been allocated to indicate the flow of conversation.

Analysis involved reviewing both data sets to establish key themes. The dataset was then tested against these and adaptations made to themes as required. This process was repeated until a stable set of themes was achieved. These were:

1. Being heard
2. Relationships with tutors
3. Conventional mechanisms for feedback: evaluation forms
4. Alternative methods for engagement

5. Student representation
6. Complaints

It is worth noting that respondents did not appear to be significantly dissatisfied. The data indicated that they enjoyed their course, respected and liked most of their tutors and felt that they were benefitting from their educational experience. Although, discussions often focused on problems, students tended to frame these as aberrations from a generally positive experience.

1. Being heard

There was a prevailing view that participation focused on explaining experiences and expressing opinions. The assumption was that staff would use this information to make better decisions. Hence, both interview and focus group data indicated that students saw future students as beneficiaries of participation, in addition to their own cohorts. This related to a perception that previous student engagement had probably prompted improvements that they had benefitted from. In fact, students did not necessarily envisage personal gain from engagement activities, as illustrated by Ronnie,

> *"I think a lot of the stuff that we do to help in the university is not going to impact on us…because the business plan for the university isn't for one term, it isn't one year, it's not even three years. It's a long ball game isn't it? So a lot of the changes that come about will be several years down the line when I am driving past [the university] and it's a distant memory."*

Participation was considered in relation to the aligned ideas of speaking out and being heard. A major motivation for getting involved appeared to be having someone listen to them. This was manifest differently in interview and focus group data. Those students who had been involved in meetings reported that the desire to '*have their say*' had been a key factor in their decision to attend. However, their ambition was not simply that they would get a chance to air grievances, but that these would inform better decision-making. Hence, listening appeared to be related to action,

> *"I felt as though maybe my frustrations had been listened to for a short time and somebody there would have picked it up and thought maybe [s/he] is right and we should look at it in a slightly different way in the future."* (Bernie)

Interview data signalled that curriculum development meetings had focused on complaints and problems. Students reported that prompts for their input were framed around requests for information on what went wrong and needed fixing. This was exacerbated by the fact that most of the students who had attended meetings indicated that they had done so because they wanted to see change. Charlie, for example, acknowledged that a key motivation for getting involved had been a sense of irritation that issues weren't addressed. S/he felt that this would be the case for other students and might have skewed the meetings towards criticism,

> *"I think the people with the good experiences don't have anything to say, whereas the people with the bad experiences were quite passionate about improving the system for the next students".*

The complaint-focused agenda of meetings was reinforced by a perception that students were not expected to contribute to the process of seeking solutions to these problems. This was reflected by a reported tendency of staff to politely dismiss proposals as unfeasible or tried before.

In the focus group, the emphasis on complaints was expressed in the context of an incentive to participate in the research. There was agreement that they had accepted the invitation to attend the focus group because it gave them a chance to talk about their experiences. Student in the focus group had not been involved in meetings and claimed not to have been invited. They felt aggrieved at this, as one of them said, *"We've got a lot to say about this and all we want is to be heard".* Consequently, there was a general consensus in the focus group that students would welcome more opportunities to engage,

> *"OK, some people might not have an interest in it, but I think if you asked anybody in our cohort if they wanted a chance to try and give a bit of an input into our curriculum anybody would jump at it."*

They recognised that comparatively few chances to feedback to tutors and course teams meant that conversations tended to concentrate on problems. The group reflected on how this had occurred on this occasion, as this interaction illustrates,

> *Sally: "You know it's not all bad. I know we are giving out and saying all this, but it's not. We don't get enough of these opportunities to*

> *voice our opinions, so it's probably overwhelming at the minute*
> *that it is all negative. I don't want you to go away thinking that we*
> *are unhappy, but I don't think we get enough opportunities like*
> *this."*

> Jill: *"Yeah, if it was all negative we wouldn't be here would we?"*

> Paula: *"Too right, if it was that bad we'd have left"* (Laughs)

For these students, it appeared that the research process, itself, had provided a rare opportunity for a frank discussion about their experiences.

2. Relationships with tutors

Interview and focus group data suggested that students valued good relationships with academic staff. They saw positive relationships as characterised by trust, enjoyment and a perception that the tutor wanted to engage with them. When these conditions existed, students felt enabled to talk to tutors about their educational experiences. Focus group students felt that this created a relationship that facilitated a dialogue about learning experiences,

> *"If you are talking to your tutor and you are interacting you feel you as*
> *though you can talk to them more….you are going to be more honest if you*
> *have a bit of a relationship"*

This was reflected in interview data. However, they located these relationships specifically in the more formal arena of the meetings that they had attended. Analysis suggested that students had appreciated working with their tutors outside the normal student:staff relationship. They saw this as creating an environment that encouraged mutual understanding,

> *"I really enjoyed [the meetings] because you could actually meet staff on a*
> *sort of equal footing. You could have an interesting discussion from their*
> *perspective and your perspective as to how things are done and you get a*
> *bigger insight. There is so much more below the surface from what you*
> *see as a student that goes on and what the lecturers have to deal with."*
> *(Drew)*

Although comments about tutors tended to be favourable, this was not always the case. Across the data there was a sense of frustration with tutors who did not

listen to them. Central to this was a sense that these tutors did not care. These tutors were usually described as dismissive and disinterested rather than actively malevolent or hostile. They were seen an irritant that students would often circumnavigate by working with a different member of staff. However, in meetings their apparent attitude was more problematic, as Pat complained,

> *"Most of the lecturers were great, but I think one or two lecturers either didn't want to be there or they felt that we deliberately misinterpreted what we heard on certain points - almost like we fed back the wrong information. To me it was a really important set of meetings. Yes it's the lecturer's work, but it's the career and lives of students. To see lecturers who are not really bothered … is disrespectful to fellow colleagues as well as the students."*

3. Conventional mechanisms for feedback: evaluation forms

A stark difference between focus group data and interview data related to their direct references to feedback mechanisms that involved evaluation forms. The focus group students discussed these at length, whereas they were rarely mentioned in interviews. However, a frustration for students who had been in meetings was a sense that existing evaluation form data meant that meetings were just revisiting problems that had already been expressed. As a result, they felt that staff had heard it all before and reported feeling frustrated by an apparent lack of action,

> *"I got the impression it was stuff that had been said to them before. Which made me think 'OK great - if it'd been mentioned by previous cohorts in previous years, why hadn't it been resolved?'" (Ronnie)*

Lack of action was also a concern for focus group students. There appeared to be a suspicion that evaluation was a tokenistic exercise. One student described it as a *"waste of time"*. However, this generated some debate. Other group members argued that evaluation forms at least offered a mechanism for any student to be involved. They felt that apprehensive or quiet students might be unwilling to participate in more discursive methods. Nonetheless, the whole group questioned whether their efforts to feedback had any impact on decision-making. This view appeared to have been compounded by a failure on the part of the university to

close the feedback loop. The group complained that they rarely heard anything from the feedback that they were given,

> *"We are never told if there is anything done about it. You are just given it and that's it…There is no feedback, no, 'we have changed this, we have done this."*

This had discouraged some them from making the effort to complete forms, but they felt that clear and visible action would act as an incentive,

> *"When there is change that comes about by what you have done, you should get feedback on your feedback. Because sometimes you do, you just tick it just to get out. But I think if you see actual changes you are more likely to [complete the evaluation]."*

In the absence of a dialogue about their feedback, the group said that they only felt compelled to complete forms when they were frustrated about something,

> *"If I have got a problem, I will then do something. I fill in that evaluation form. It's usually when you have got an issue with something that you actually bother."*

4. Alternative methods for engagement
By virtue of being in meetings, the interviewed students had been involved in engagement activities they went beyond evaluation forms. Prior to attending meetings, all of these students had a history of engagement through student representation (two out of the five) or student mentorship (four out of the five). All saw a value in attending meetings. In fact, the experience had encouraged one student to take on the role of a student representative. However, the data suggested that the management of the process could have been more student-centred. This related to the over-formality of meetings and a significant disparity between the numbers of students and staff in attendance (the typical ratio was 1:6). In addition, students sometimes found that the language used in meetings was obtuse and confusing and this had discouraged them from contributing.

> *"There were certain bits when I could have done with a dictionary…It was almost like we would put our point across as students, and then we'd start looking at each other as lecturers talked across the table using these*

acronyms and abbreviations and we are going – 'yeah OK then – what is that language of theirs?' It's almost they were translating it into something more, a higher meaning – that was a bit off-putting to say the least." (Pat)

However, each interviewee said that they would recommend attending meetings to their peers,

"I would say 100%, it is valuable that it's an on-going thing that the management do talk to students and I am not just saying mentors and students reps I am saying the students in general." (Pat)

Students in the focus group had not attended meetings, but still appeared to be interested in engagement activities that deviated from conventional evaluation forms. One suggestion was that feedback mechanisms should be built into research modules. This would serve the dual function of helping students learn about research, whilst providing valuable data on the student experience,

"It would be much better wouldn't it? You'd get the whole process of research, of how it is supposed to be. You would understand it more, plus you [the university] are gaining from it as well."

This idea was also explored in interview data. Drew, for example, questioned whether curriculum development could be built into lessons. This would exploit the everyday interaction between students and tutors to encourage understanding and ownership

"…it's sort of like a mixture of teaching methods – making sure that every single student feels engaged. …you could do group study sessions to build the design [of the curriculum] into the curriculum so that it was part of learning. That way they would have actually got an insight into the design and it would be theirs too."

5. Student representation

Interview data suggested that students had been invited to meetings as interested individuals who had spoken up about issues before. They were not invited as representatives. However, four of the students reported making efforts to assess their fellow students' views. This suggested that they related this sort of activity with representation and saw their role as standing for their fellow students.

Ronnie, who went on to become a student representative, talked about how there was little point in simply relating personal views,

> *"Before I went to the first one I wasn't a rep, but I did ask other people in the group what they thought as well. There's no point just presenting my point of view, because I'm not exactly representative being [personal details removed]. What I want is completely different to what a lot of them want. So I said, 'well what do you want?' basically."*

Student representation was briefly discussed in the focus group. They felt that their representatives had made an effort to find out about the cohort's needs. However, the discussion indicated that they did not have a great deal of confidence in their impact,

> *"We have had a few meetings [with student representatives] to voice our opinions, but I don't think they got very far."*

Broader notions of representation though the Student Union were not seen as particularly significant to the students in this aspect of the research. They put this down to the fact that their course meant that they were often away from the university and didn't get involved in events and activities.

6. Complaints
The final theme that emerged from analysis of the qualitative data was how students felt about complaining. This related to concerns that complaints may lead to punishment. Students didn't want to be seen as causing trouble. However, as the following discussion in the group illustrates, this was not only a fear of annoying a tutor, but of possible punishment. The conversation began with a discussion about trying to get help from a tutor,

Carla: *"you don't want to be e-mailing your tutor all of the time and them saying 'it's this dose [slang term for idiot] again'".*

Jill *"Yeah, but you know when you are trying and they don't respond, it's just like 'I don't want to be annoying anyone again'. And it is just like is someone going to think badly of you?"*

Me: *"And what will happen if they think that?"*

Jill: *"Well they might be marking your essay".*

Zoe: *"…and it might reflect in your marks."*

Carla: *"Yeah, and I think we have already got the reputation as moaners as a group.*

   [Laughter and general agreement]

Zoe: *"…and I don't think we have benefitted at all."*

Similar concerns were expressed in the interviews. The students did not directly express this in relation to being marked down, as much as being marked out. Their worry was that being seen as a troublemaker may undermine their performance. As in the focus group, there was a reluctance to explicitly state their fears. The following quotation is typical of the tentative manner in which students voiced their concerns,

> *"They are your tutors and you are a student and it comes back to that power thing. Plus the fact that it's the end of the course, you've got 3 assignments to get in and you don't want to create havoc with people. I know it's silly and they probably wouldn't think that, but it does go through your head that you don't want to stand out and make a nuisance of yourself."   (Bernie)*

Anxiety about complaining prompted the students in the focus group to explore mechanisms for making the feedback process feel less threatening. They explored a variety of options (such as suggestion boxes) that were all characterised by a degree of anonymity. However, one idea received unanimous approval. This related to the notion of staff advocacy for a specific cohort of students,

> *"Yeah, and I think when a module is running, I think there should be somebody who is separate from the module that we could all go to personally and express any concern and that person should be identified at the beginning of the module."*

Identification
Much of the literature on engagement addresses issues around identity. The US National Survey of Student Engagement, for example, includes questions that relate to how universities foster social relationships amongst different groups and

the extent to which students are involved in extracurricular activities (Kuh, 2009). However, issues such as these were barely touched on in interview or focus group data. Moreover, as the data was collected from nursing students, I was concerned that the insights would be limited by the unique characteristics of these students. My experiences with these students suggested to me that they see themselves as a different. Their identity is as much 'nurse' as 'student' and they spend significant periods in work placements. This was illustrated by a brief discussion in the focus group about fee-paying. The context of this was the group's sense that student nurses have less influence on decision-making as they do not pay fees,

> *"We don't see ourselves as consumers, as we are not actually personally going, 'here you are, there is the money', rather than the ones on the more academic courses."*

To address this, I liaised with the University's Student Union to consider issues around Union activities, consumer attitudes and broader social engagement that may have been of greater relevance to students on different courses.

Using focus group analysis for questionnaire design.
The analysis of this data reinforced findings from my previous research (Carey, 2013a, Carey, 2012b). There was a coherent sense that students are interested in getting involved, but are sometimes hindered by an institutional culture and its procedures that suppress their voice. Hence, the six categories reported provided the basis for the development of a student engagement questionnaire (*see appendix 1: student engagement questionnaire*). Using this data, I produced a series of engagement-related statements that students could respond to using a five-point Likert scale. Development of these involved an iterative process of drafting and re-drafting the engagement statements following conversations with academic colleagues, support staff and the Student Union. These statements were bracketed with two satisfaction-related statements (at course and university level) to establish if there was a relationship between engagement and satisfaction.
A working draft of the questionnaire was subject to further focus group analysis as part of a final pilot stage. The group was made up of 12 students from a variety of educational backgrounds. The session lasted for one hour. At the start of the session, students were asked to complete the survey without discussing it with their peers, but noting any difficulties they had with the questions. This was followed with a question-by-question discussion that focused on their

comprehension of the items. There appeared to be a high level of shared understanding and this prompted the group to explore personal experiences of engagement whist studying for their first degree. In these discussions it transpired that two items caused confusion and needed changing. These were

- **Item 19**. This had evolved from an idea expressed in first phase regarding alternative methods of engagement. It had originally read, *"Opportunities for student feedback should be built into learning activities"*. However, there was little common interpretation of what this statement meant. The group felt that 'learning activities' is not common vocabulary amongst students. They also thought that students might think that this was related to feedback on the subject matter of the lecture.   The following statement emerged from the discussion, *"More opportunities for students to feedback their views on the student experience should be offered during lectures"*. Whilst this might not capture the essence of what the original focus group had meant, it retained the central idea of the lecture as a location of feedback.

- **Item 29.** Originally, this had bluntly stated, *"I* am *a customer of the university"*. However, the group felt that the answers to this might be difficult to interpret. Their view was that students may see themselves as a customer, but not only a customer. They suggested that the issue was not identification as a customer, but whether this was the most significant aspect of their student identify. After much discussion, the following statement was developed, *"I see students as customers of universities rather than learners in universities"*

In addition, it was suggested that the notion of a *university teacher* in **item 2** should be clarified. Several of the group had graduated from courses where technical and support staff or post-graduate students had been part of teaching teams. Hence, it was suggested that the bracketed statement *'this could refer to any staff who contribute to you learning'* be added to reflect this. Finally, the group commented on the phrasing of one of the demographic questions. This related to the provenance of students and had read, *'Did you come from outside the UK or Ireland to study at [the university]?'*. It was pointed out that part of Ireland was in the UK and that this might alienate or offend students from that

region. Hence, the question was re-worded to *'Did you come from outside the UK or R.O.I to study at [the university]?'*

This pilot phase suggested that the questionnaire was well designed, clear and easy to understand. It had also encouraged individual members of the focus group to reflect on their own experiences of engagement, suggesting that it was likely to be salient to contemporary students. In light of this, no further changes were required and the questionnaire was ready for distribution across the university. The data from this is analysed and described in the following chapter.

Chapter Seven: Responses to student engagement questionnaire.

This chapter reports the data collected from the survey phase of a mixed methods research project on student engagement. It relates to students' responses to a student engagement questionnaire that was distributed in selected lectures across a single university. The focus of the analysis is on students' responses to the 30 engagement-related items that formed the basis of the survey tool (*see appendix 1: student engagement questionnaire*). However, this will be preceded by an outline of the key features of the dataset relating to the response rate and demographic characteristics of respondents.

Investigation of data utilises two types of statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics explain patterns in responses and offers a broad summary of the data. Inferential statistics will be used to establish associations between variables. A key concept in this is the notion of 'statistical significance'. Typically, this is established when the application of relevant statistical tests produces a 'p value' of less than 0.05 (Field, 2009). This means that the likelihood of a difference or correlation being the result of chance is less than 5%. The key tests in this study are the Chi-square test and the Mann-Whitney U. Chi-square is one of the most widely used statistics tests to determine differences in categorical data. It compares the observed with the expected rate to establish whether the difference between the two is significant (Bryman and Cramer, 1994). However, it has limited use for data where there are many response categories. In this study, the Likert-type questions have 5 possible answers. Hence, using Chi-square would require these categories to be collapsed into meta-categories (e.g. 'strongly agree' and 'agree' into 'agree'). This is commonplace in both the reporting and analysis of Likert data, but means that the data loses some of the subtlety associated with the range of possible responses (Cohen et al, 2011).

There is controversy over the analysis of Likert-type questions. This links to whether the information is treated as ordinal or interval data (De Winter and Dodou, 2010).   An approach to analysis would be to treat Likert data as 'interval' data. This assumes that there is the same 'distance' between each item and it can be treated as a scale. Supporters of this argue that the line between ordinal and interval is very 'fuzzy', but detractors point out that there is no such concept as 'agree and a half' and that Likert type data is patently not interval data

(Jameison, 2004). Likert-type data does not mirror the notion of "scale" as measurement, but offer groups of conceptually and empirically related items. As such, there is a difference between categories, but this is undefined (Carifio and Perla, 2007). In light of this, statistical tests that treat Likert type data as interval data have been avoided. Identifying significant associations for this data will use the Mann Whitney U test. This is designed for testing 'ordinal' data, such as that produced by Likert-type scales (De Winter and Dodou, 2010).

Statistics were calculated using the *Statistics Package for the Social Sciences, version 18* (SPSS, 2009). This calculates to three decimal places. Hence, in some instances the p value is presented as 0.000, meaning that the likelihood of a findings being the result of chance variation is less than 0.099%.

Establishing a response rate

An accurate response rate indicates the extent to which the research results are representative of the sample population. A high response rate reduces the impact of non-response bias, where the views of respondents differ from those who did not complete the survey (Fowler, 2009). It is often suggested that a response rate of above 60% is adequate for social research, although the relevance of this depends on the extent to which the researcher(s) can assume that non-response is not an outcome of bias (Johnson and Wislar, 2012). In this survey, 1377 questionnaires were distributed in 35 classes across the university. The survey was completed at the beginning of the session and collected immediately in 32 of the classes. In the remaining three, the survey was handed out at the beginning, but collected at the end of the class. A total of 1309 questionnaires were returned. Two were spoiled, leaving a data set for analysis of 1307 completed questionnaires. This equates to a very healthy return rate of 94.9%. The rate differed across the classes from 71.0% return to 100.0%, with the lowest rates achieved in the three classes where collection was at the end of the session. The high response rate indicates that the research topic was salient to respondents. This is particularly relevant when there are no direct incentives for completing the questionnaire (Groves et al, 2004). It was also noticeable that there was a low item non-response rate. This is refers to partial completion of the questions. It can have implications for data analysis if particular questions are unanswered by a significant number of respondents. Item non-response is associated with confusion or a lack of perceived relevance for specific questions (Adams and Umbach, 2012). The lowest response to any question in this study was 97.5%. This suggests that the

statements that were developed from the qualitative phase made sense to the wider pool of participants in the survey phase.

These rates suggest that the data reported in this chapter is representative of the full sample. Yet, the veracity of the response rate is brought into question by significant levels of student absence. University data suggests that the number of students who should have been available to complete the survey was 2173. This gives a mean attendance rate of 63.4%, ranging from 30.0% to 100.0%. Hence, the 1307 returns equate to 62.1% of the maximum possible number of students who could have completed the questionnaire. It is impossible to assess whether the views of students who were absent would differ from those in attendance. Yet, it is reasonable to assume that motivation to attend may be linked to engagement (Nicholson, et al, 2013). Non-attendance could be a symptom of some students' disengagement, dissatisfaction or resistance. Such students constitute a hard-to-reach/easy-to-ignore group. This is particularly the case in research such as this that does not use network-based or snowball sampling techniques (Gile and Hancock, 2010). Consequently, there is a risk that non-response bias may be a more significant factor than suggested by the very low in-class rate reported above. However, it is unlikely that disaffection would explain all cases of absence. Indeed, tentative evidence has been presented to suggest that absentee students' views may not necessarily differ from those who were available to complete the questionnaire. Kelly (2012) identified an extensive array of reasons why students may miss lectures. These include illness, bereavement, work commitments, weather, travel, timetabling, disinterest and boredom. Although some of these indicate a lack of motivation, others do not. Hence, it would inappropriate to suggest that all absent students were disengaged. Consequently, if the value of a response rate is to establish the credibility of the research, then the meaningful rate for this student is *somewhere between* 62.1% and 94.9%. As such, it easily falls within acceptable parameters (Johnson and Wislar, 2012).

Does non-attendance matter?

The wide variation in attendance rates recorded across the 35 separate classes in this study offers a possible mechanism to assess whether attendance has an impact on students' views about engagement. This follows the logic that classes with low attendance may have a culture of non-attendance, whereas attendance is the norm in those classes with high rates. If this is the case, then it could be argued that students who attend in spite of a culture of non-attendance are more engaged than

the average student. If this is the case, comparing the mean scores recorded in high and low attendance classes should reveal differences. It would be expected that the latter would have a more positive response to engagement. However, this was not the case for this data. This tentatively suggests that the views of non-attendees may not have differed widely from those who completed the survey.

Sample characteristics

A majority of the sample (60.1%) was female and, as figure 5 indicates, nearly 60% were under 21 years old, with less than one in 20 being over 40 years old.
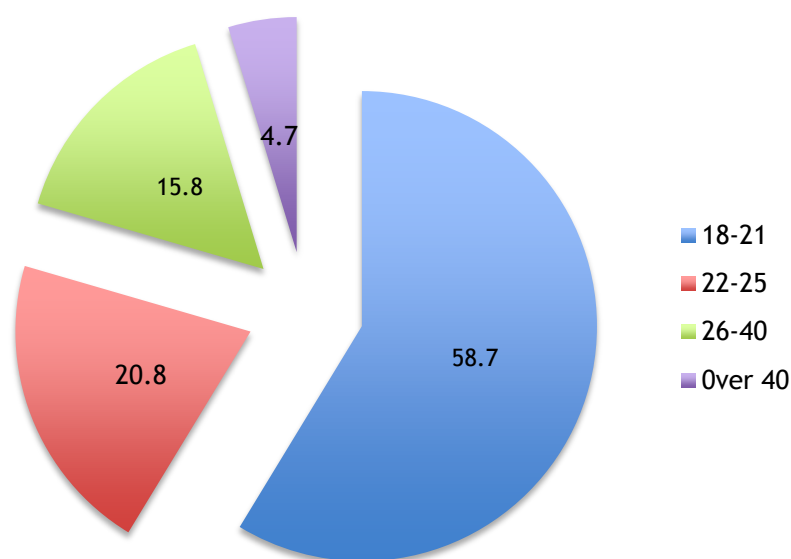
Figure 5: Age range of respondents

Fewer students were from level 6 (35.7%) than level 5 (64.3%) and the vast majority were studying full time (96.1%). Less than one in 20 (4.7%) had come to the university from outside the UK or Republic of Ireland.

Students came from a wide range of academic disciplines and these have been categorised into typical academic groupings. An initial decision to sort subjects into Biglan's hard/soft pure/applied classification (Biglan, 1973) did not prove to be satisfactory. Nursing, for example, is traditionally seen as a 'soft-applied' subject, although contemporary nursing courses will explore 'hard' subjects such as anatomy and pharmacology. Yet, re-defining them as a 'hard-applied' subject would categorise them alongside subject such as engineering, which would be equally unhelpful for analysis. However, it was clear from this process that the

sample was skewed towards applied subjects studied, as only 20% of courses were in either of the 'pure' categories.

To facilitate any analysis by subject type, the categories proposed by the FSSE (Faculty Survey of Student Engagement) were used (FSSE, no date). This is the subject-reporting element of the NSSE (National Survey of Student Engagement) that is used to measure student engagement in the USA. A list of where each specific subject was mapped to these categories is provided in appendix 2.
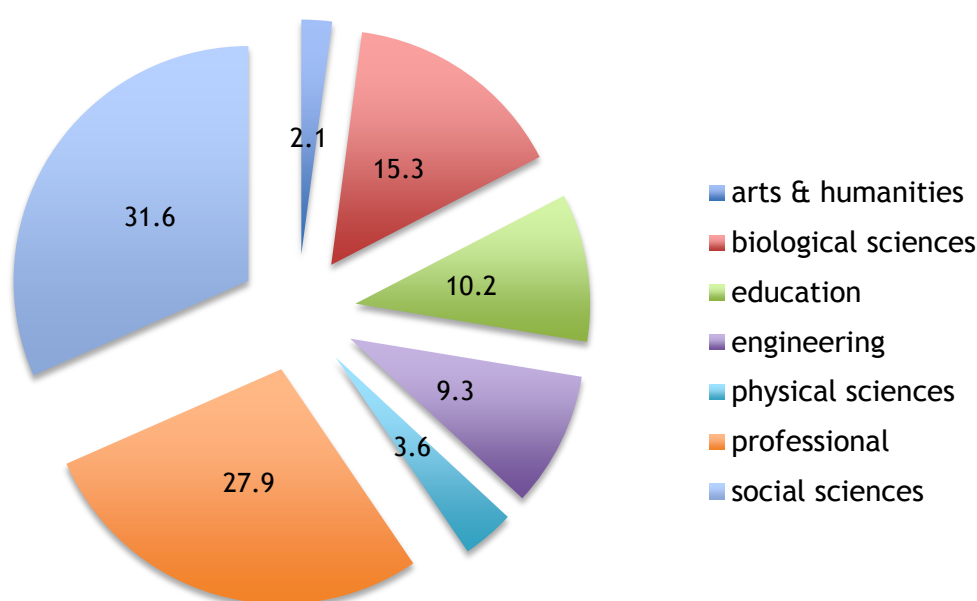
Figure 6: Respondents by major subject grouping

Response to engagement-related items

This section relates to students' reponses to the 30 student engagement items that formed the basis of the student engagement questionnaire. An outline of the data collected for each of these items is presented in appendix 3. It was anticipated that responses to these would be interrelated as items focused on a range of allied issues in student engagement. The nature of this was identified using factor analysis. This exposes the underlying structure beneath a range of variables. It indicates how items are statistically related and is acceptable procedure for analysis of ordinal data, and particularly Likert-type scales (Field, 2009). Sample size is an important consideration in factor analysis and Costello and Osbourne (2005) call it a 'large sample' statistical technique. Their view of a large sample is 500plus, meaning that this data set is more than adequate for factor analysis

Exploratory factor analysis indicated that the 30 items could be distilled to 7 factors (*see appendix 4 for the full structure matrix*). These are:

1. Student satisfaction in the context of engagement.
2. Students' views about getting involved.
3. Students' experiences of getting involved.
4. Students' perceptions of module evaluation
5. Students' thoughts about representation,
6. Students' opinions about complaining.
7. Students' assessment of their impact on decision-making.

There appears a loose association between factor analysis and the categories presented in the qualitative phase.   This is particularly the case for evaluation, representation and complaints.

This section employs the results of this factor analysis as a framework for a presentation of the survey data. Two items did not load strongly into any of these factors. These were *"Information about actions taken as a result of student feedback is readily available"* and *"There are not enough opportunities for me to meet with students who are not on my course."* The latter is weakly associated with statements that were associated with getting involved (factor two); whilst the former appeared to be linked with statements relating to direct participation (factor three). Therefore data from these is reported in the context of the factor that they were most closely linked to.

Responses to all engagement items are presented and any significant associations between response and any of the characteristics outlined above (gender, age, full/part-time status, subject grouping and whether the student was from UK or the Irish Republic) are explained.

1. Student satisfaction in the context of engagement.
The six items associated with this factor are outlined below. It is interesting to note that views on consumerisation are negatively associated. Students who see themselves as consumers are less likely to respond positively to the other statements.

- I am pleased with my course.
- I have positive relationships with most of my university teachers

- Most of my tutors are genuinely interested in hearing what I have to say about my course.
- I would recommend this university to my friends or family.
- I am happy with the opportunities available for me to voice my opinions about studying at this university.
- I see students as customers of universities, rather than learners in universities *(negatively loaded)*.

This category relates to satisfaction university and course level. In addition, it considers students' feelings about the opportunities available to them to voice their opinions. Data related to these issues are reported in Table 3. Although levels of satisfaction appeared to be generally high, the data suggested that students tended to be happier with local (course-based) provision than with the university as a whole. The latter was assessed by the extent to which they would recommend the university to others and just below three-quarters of the sample said that they would. However, satisfaction with the actual course was higher, with less than one in 20 students indicating that they were unhappy with the programme that they were studying. Despite this, satisfaction with opportunities to voice opinions was lower. Although the majority of students were happy with these, there was a noticeable increase in the number of students who were dissatisfied or unsure. This constituted as sizable minority of the sample at over 40%.

Engagement statement	Number	% strongly agree	% agree	% neutral	% disagree	% strongly disagree
I am pleased with my course.	1305	19.3	67.1	9.2	4.0	0.4
I would recommend this university to my friends or family.	1293	23.4	50.3	16.8	7.0	2.5
I am happy with the opportunities available to voice my opinions about studying at this university.	1284	11.1	45.9	29.4	12.3	1.3

Table 3: Respondents' general satisfaction

Responses to these statements were uninfluenced by any of the reported student characteristics. No significant associations in terms of the gender and age of the

student were established for students' responses to any of the satisfaction-related questions. Nor were these linked to part-time status or whether the student had come to study from outside the UK or Irish Republic.

The apparently high satisfaction rates may be a feature of constructive relationships between students and their tutors. As shown in figure 7, over four in every five of the respondents indicated that they had generally good relationships with their tutors. In addition, approximately 70% of students felt that their tutors were interested in their views

0.7% & 0.3% respectively in the strongly disagree category
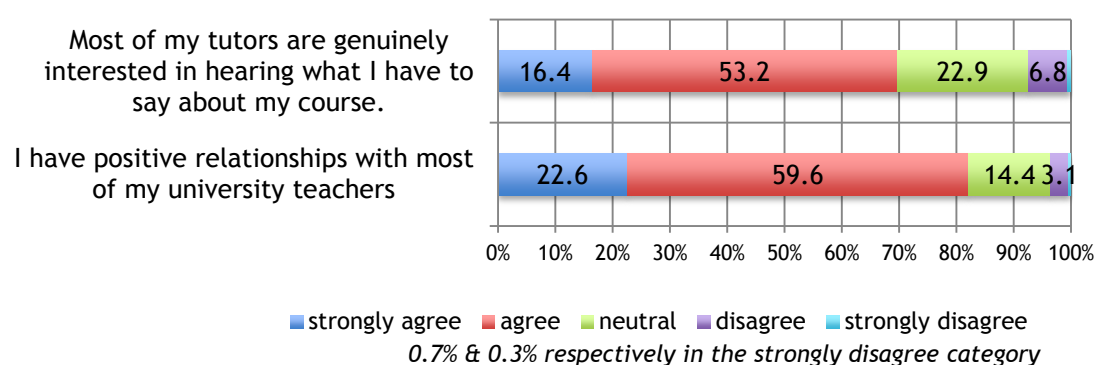
Figure 7: Students' views about their relationships with tutors

However, the age of respondents appeared to have an impact on students' views about their relationships with tutors. Students under 21 were significantly less likely than older students to agree with either statement (U= 174557.500, Z=-4.591, P=0.000 and U=177299.000, Z=-3.837, p=0.000 respectively). In addition, level of study was associated with whether students saw the relationship with tutors as positive, as level five students rated this lower than those in level six. Clearly, these 2 characteristics will be associated, so it is difficult to establish at this stage whether this is a feature of a sophomore slump or an outcome of the age gap between students and tutors. There was also a noticeable pattern in satisfaction related to discipline studied. Students on professional courses were less likely to have positive relationships with tutors (χ^2=26.069 (6df) p=0.000) or to recommend the university (χ^2=26.300 (6df) p=0.000). They were also more unhappy with feedback opportunities (χ^2=15.769 (6df) p=0.015) and more likely to judge their tutors as disinterested in their views (χ^2=30.712 (6df) p=0.000).

The final item associated with satisfaction is related to whether the student saw her or himself as a consumer. This was barely explored in the qualitative phase,

but there was an indication that nursing students did not relate to this concept as they did not pay fees.   Therefore, it seemed appropriate that the questionnaire should seek data on whether fee-paying students saw themselves as costumers or not.   The data suggests ambivalence across the student body to this idea. As figure 8 illustrates, there is a roughly equal split between those who primarily see themselves as customers, those who feel neutrally about this and those who do not see themselves in this way.

I see students as customers of universities, rather than learners in universities.
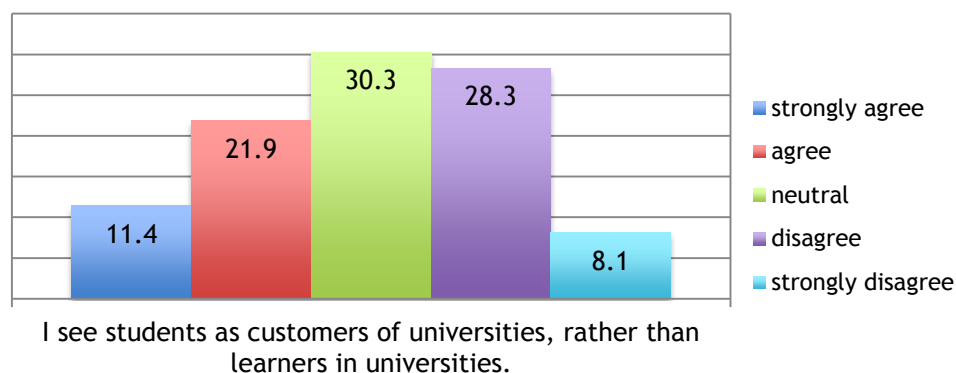
Figure 8: Respondents' views on whether students are consumers.

The only student characteristic that was associated with this was gender. Male students were significantly more likely than female students to agree with the statement (U=159590.500, Z=-3.905, p=0.000). It is noteworthy that comparison of students on courses where fees were paid with those on courses that were subsidised (for example nursing or social work) revealed no significant difference in their response to this question.

2. Students' views about getting involved.
The second factor identified in the analysis is related to the desire to be involved, but not necessarily the experience of being involved. The items that were associated with this were:

- I would like to get more involved in decisions relating to my experiences at university.
- More opportunities for students to feedback their views on the student experience should be offered during lectures.
- More students should be involved in the university's decision-making processes

- I would like the chance to work with university staff on collaborative projects around improving the student experience.
- The university would be able to make better decisions for future students if it understood my experiences.

An additional statement, "*There are not enough opportunities for me to meet with students who are not on my course.*" was weakly associated with this factor.

Students in the qualitative phase had been very clear that they saw a role for students in decision-making. It was also patent that individual students wanted to be personally involved. The data from the survey reflected this, as presented in table 4. Of the three statements reported in this table, one referred to a general student engagement, whilst the others focused on personal involvement. Three quarters of students felt that more students should be included in decision-making, but it is noticeable that they were less convinced when it came to their own participation. In this case, only about half the sample wanted to be personally involved. Nevertheless, just under two-thirds felt that decision-making would be improved if the university had insight into their experiences.

Engagement statement	Number	% strongly agree	% agree	% neutral	% disagree	% strongly disagree
More students should be involved in the university's decision-making processes.	1304	19.1	54.6	22.1	3.7	0.5
I would like to get more involved in decisions relating to my experiences at university.	1284	8.1	45.6	33.3	11.8	1.2
The university would be able to make better decisions for future students if it understood my experiences.	1286	13.9	49.0	31.9	5.0	0.2

Table 4: Respondents' view on student engagement in decision-making

Response to these statements appeared to be fairly evenly distributed across different types of student. Yet, there were some associations between students' views on engagement and student characteristics. Female students were more likely than their male counterparts to agree with the principle of student involvement in decision-making (U=166301.500, Z=-3.520, p=0.000). When it came to preference for personal involvement, though, there was no association. What

appeared to be significantly related to other student characteristics were views about whether decision-making would improve with insight into individual experiences. In this instance, both part-timers (U=24063.500, Z=-2.794, p=0.000) and students under 21 years (U=170329.000, Z=-4.441, p=0.000) were more likely to agree with this than other students were.

This category also includes responses to two suggested mechanisms for engagement. This is shown in figure 9. One of the suggested ideas expressed in the qualitative phase was that engagement activities could be incorporated into lectures. The questionnaire item lacked the nuance of the original suggestion that this could be embedded into learning activities. Nevertheless, majority of students (at nearly six in every 10) appeared to appreciate the idea of feedback being embedded into class-time. Students were clearly less convinced by the idea of collaborative work with staff. However, the relatively high proportion of neutral response to this indicates that students might require more details to make an informed choice.
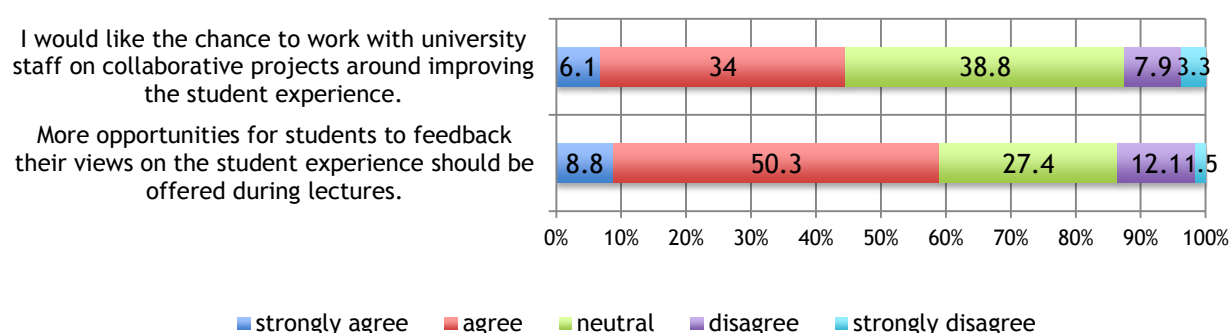
Figure 9: Students' preference for mode of engagement.

There were no associations between student characteristic and whether they had a preference for classroom-based engagement. However, students from outside the UK or Republic of Ireland appear to have been more likely than those who were UK based to want to work with staff (U=26992.000, Z=-3.173, p=0.002).

Finally, it appears that preference for getting involved may be associated with a broader sense of a university community. Half the sample felt that there were insufficient opportunities to meet with students who were not on their course. This was weakly linked to the category, but may suggest that the preference to be involved is associated with the desire to engage away from the confines of their course.

There are not enough opportunities for me to meet with students who are not on my course.

| 11.7 | 30.5 | 30.6 | 24.1 | 3.2 |

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

■ strongly agree ■ agree ■ neutral ■ disagree ■ strongly disagree
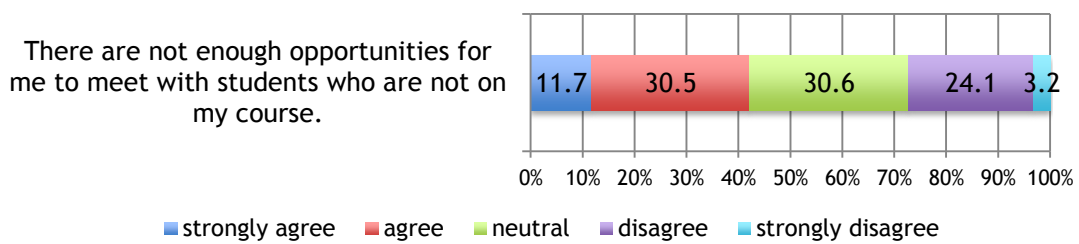
Figure 10: Students' views on opportunities to meet other students

Students' responses to this statement did not significantly differ with respect to any of the reported student characteristics.

3. Students' experiences of getting involved.

The above data relates to preferences for engagement. Conversely, this category is associated with students' actual experiences of engagement. The items that were related to this are outlined below. This implies that there is some association between engagement with staff, with the broader student body (through union activity) and with the local community.

- I regularly participate in students' union activities
- I work with members of university staff on activities that are not directly related to my studies
- I have been involved in task groups that were designed to find ways to improve some aspect of the university
- The university encourages me to get involved in community or voluntary work.
- Information about actions taken as a result of student feedback is readily available *(weakly loaded, negative association)*

The qualitative phase of this mixed methods research had included a sample of students who had been involved partnership work with staff through a curriculum development project. The survey sought to capture the prevalence of such work across the institution. The data related to this is presented in table 5. This also reports students' participation with the Student Union and their engagement in the broader community. This data suggests that involvement is not a key feature of the student experience, despite the preferences expressed in the above section. It also appears that the university promotes external work more than engagement

within its confines. Over twice as many students felt encouraged to get involved in their local community than had been engaged in work inside the university. Another engagement item related to working in task groups. Students gave very similar responses to this, although there was a slight trend towards greater involvement. The more positive response to this question may indicate that some students has worked in student-only task groups, such as those run by the student union. Student engagement with their Student Union was low, with less than one in five regularly participating in activities. Furthermore, this category received the highest proportion of responses in the 'strongly disagree' category for the whole survey.

Engagement statement	Number	% strongly agree	% agree	% neutral	% disagree	% strongly disagree
The university encourages me to get involved in community or voluntary work.	1288	9.1	33.5	25.5	24.0	8.0
I regularly participate in students' union activities	1291	6.7	12.3	12.1	42.8	26.1
I work with members of university staff on activities that are not directly related to my studies	1288	3.2	10.4	19.3	46.7	20.3
I have been involved in task groups that were designed to find ways to improve some aspect of the university.	1285	2.9	14.8	25.5	40.6	16.2

Table 5: Students' experience of engagement activities

Student union activity was associated with age and gender. Students over 21 years old were significantly less likely than their younger peers to participate in this (U=167709.500, Z=-4.810, p=0.000.). Male students were more likely than female students to participate (U=166394.000, Z=-2.916, p=0.004). Encouragement to do community or voluntary work was associated with level of study and age. Students under 21 were more likely than their older peers to feel encouraged (U=173433.500, Z= -3.711, p=0.000) and level five students were more likely to agree than those in level six (U=168199.500, Z=-3.660, p =0.000). A possible explanation for this is that work-based learning modules are located in the second year of most of the universities degree programmes and voluntary or community work often provides the focus for these activities. This is supported by an association with discipline, as students on professional course were less likely to

agree and those in the social sciences more likely to agree (χ^2=152.051 (6df) p=0.015). Many students on professional courses (e.g. nursing) are placed with specific employers, whereas placement opportunities for social sciences often rely on the voluntary sector. Finally, students from outside the UK or Republic of Ireland appear to have been more likely than those who were UK based to have experience of working with staff (U=26348.000, Z=-3.421, p=0.001).

One item was negatively loaded into this category. This was related to the lack of information about university action following student feedback. This appears to reflect the frustrations expressed in qualitative phase. Figure 11 suggests that this is not a university-wide issue, as over half the sample felt that this information was readily available.
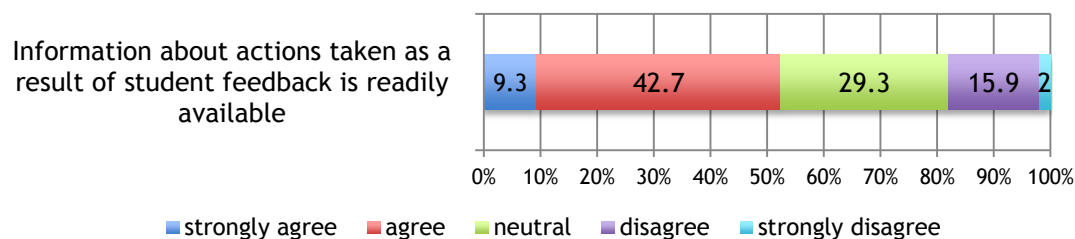
Figure 11: Availability of feedback on feedback

There was no association with subject area, suggesting that this may not be related to the customs and practices of particular teams, but the perception of individual students. However, the negative relationship between this item and experiences of student engagement indicates that the failure to 'feedback on feedback' may discourage student participation.

4. Students' perceptions of module evaluation

The qualitative phase of this study indicated that module evaluation through completion of feedback forms was a common mechanism by which the university accessed the opinions of its students. Hence, the survey sought to gain some insight into students' views on these. The factor analysis suggested that responses to these were interrelated. It is worth noting that the statement relating to effort is negatively worded. Hence, an interpretation of this category is that a relationship between effort and strength of feeling is associated with completing forms. The specific items associated with this are:

- I don't usually put a lot of effort into completing module evaluations

- I always complete module evaluation forms. (negatively associated)
- I am more likely to complete evaluations when I have a strong opinion

About half the sample claimed to have always completed forms. This does not correspond with university data that suggests that the typical response rate for module evaluations is about one third. However, this relates to the university's official feedback form and does not take into account local evaluation processes. The factor analysis suggested that students who agreed with this statement were less likely to agree with the other statements that related to module evaluation. Just under half of the sample indicated that they put some effort into the task of completing forms. The data also suggests that students' motivation to complete module-level evaluation is driven by their strength of feeling about an issue. That nearly two-thirds of the sample agreed to this reinforces comments made in the focus group.

Engagement statement	Number	% strongly agree	% agree	% neutral	% disagree	% strongly disagree
I always complete module evaluation forms.	1281	12.7	41.5	21.4	20.0	4.4
I don't usually put a lot of effort into completing module evaluations	1294	3.9	21.7	27.3	37.5	9.7
I am more likely to complete evaluations when I have a strong opinion	1300	17.8	55.5	17.3	7.5	1.9

Table 6: Students' response to evaluation

Views on completion of evaluation forms did not appear to be significantly associated with any student characteristic. The only association related to age, with students over 21 being significantly more likely that younger students to state that they completed these forms (U=177625.000, Z= -2.827, p=0.005).

5. *Students' thoughts about representation*

The next category of data relates to representation, but is bound around a notion of being represented rather than whether students believe that representation has an impact. The following statements are associated with this category and confirm a relationship between students' view about representation at a course level and that at a university level:

- I am confident that course representatives fairly represent the views of the students on my course.
- Course representatives regularly meet with the class to discuss course issues.
- I am confident that my students' union represents my views.

Table 7 offers data that is specifically relates to course representation. Under half of respondents felt that their representatives stood for their views, with about a third indicating that they did not know. The data offers a possible insight into why respondents appeared to be unconfident about the student representation system. It suggests that the representatives do not often meet their fellow students, with less than one in five students agreeing with the associated statement. This appeared to be associated with discipline, as engineering students were less likely to agree with the statement (χ^2=36.554 (6df) p=0.000)

Engagement statement	Number	% strongly agree	% agree	% neutral	% disagree	% strongly disagree
I am confident that course representatives fairly represent the views of the students on my course.	1280	8.4	38.1	34.5	15.5	3.5
Course representatives regularly meet with the class to discuss course issues.	1300	3.8	12.1	22.2	39.2	22.8

Table 7: Students' views on course representatives

Age appears to have an impact on confidence about course representation. Under 21 year olds appeared to be less convinced than older students that representatives stood for the views of students (U=172640.000, Z=4.396, p=0.000). Again, there was an association with engineering as these students were less likely to agree with the statement (χ^2=15.198 (6df) p=0.019).

Faith in representation at university level appeared to be lower than that recorded at course level. Figure 12 shows that less than a third of respondents were convinced about the student union's ability to represent them. Once again, a high level of neutral responses suggests that students were unsure about these processes.

I am confident that my students' union represents my views.
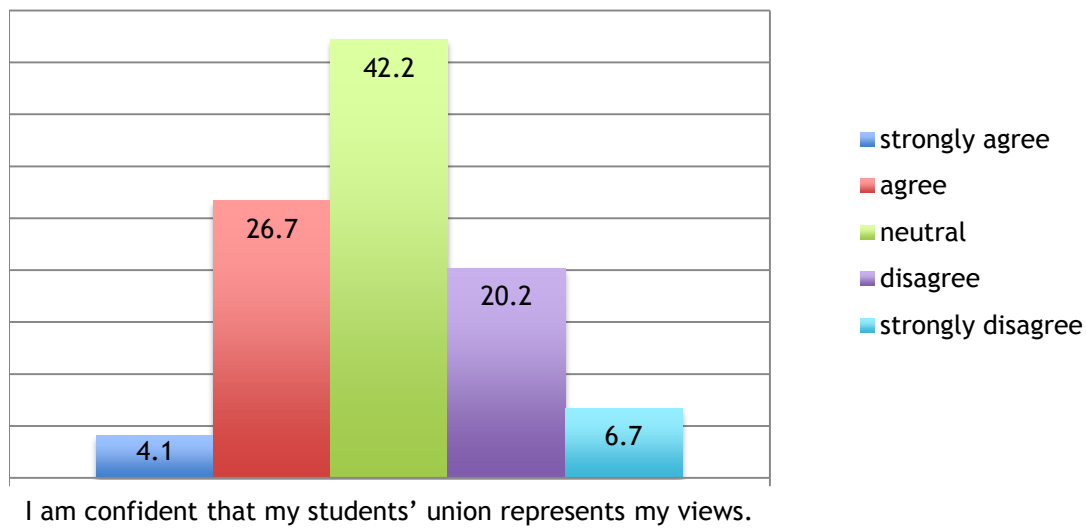
Figure 12: students' views about the student union

Confidence in the student union was associated with the level of study. Level five students were more confident than those in level six (U=171810.000, Z=-3.145, p=0.002). There was also an association with discipline, with those students on professional courses being less likely to agree (χ^2=25.237 (6df) p=0.000).

6. Students' opinions about complaining

The qualitative data suggested that students often felt vulnerable about complaining. This was mirrored in the previous research that informed this study. The survey asked two questions about this. One related to the general sense of unease that students might have about being seen as a trouble-maker. The other explicitly referred to an issue that had been raised in other data, namely that complaining would be 'punished' with lower marks. This category signals that these two ideas are interrelated. It also brackets the two statements about complaints with the view that it is easier to speak to someone other than a tutor. The three items are:

- I don't like to complain to an individual tutor for fear that it will have a negative impact on my marks.
- I worry about complaining in case I am seen as a trouble maker.
- It's easier to comment about my course to somebody who doesn't teach me than to my lecturers.

Figure 13 shows that response to statements about complaints was very consistent, with about a quarter of students appearing to perceive some threat in complaining.
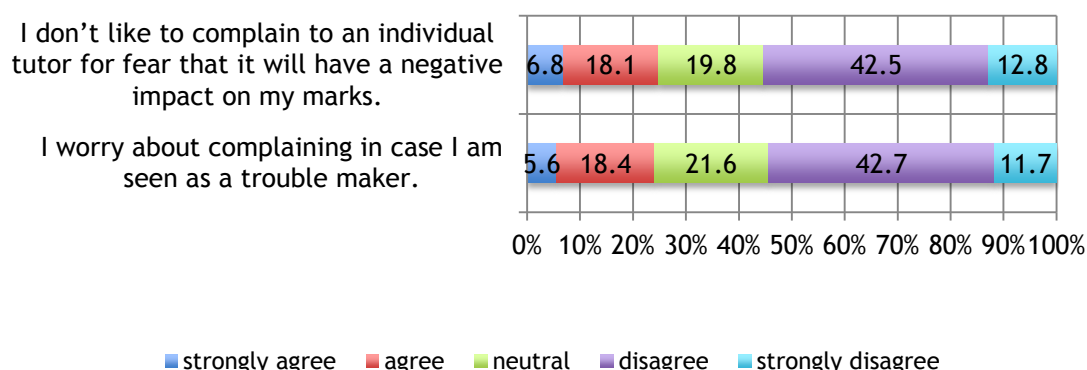
Figure 13: Students' perceptions of a possible negative impact of complaining

There was no association with any student characteristic in relation to the fear of a punitive response to complaint. However, female students were significant more likely to be concerned about being seen as a trouble-maker than male students were (U=161105.000, Z=-3.890, p=0.000).

Although the data does not fully support the view that fear of punishment discourages complaints, it does suggest that there may be reluctance amongst students to complain to their tutors. This is illustrated in the fact that over half the sample indicated that they would rather make comments to someone other than their lecturer (*see table 8*). This confirms the support in the focus group for the notion of an advocate for students.

Engagement statement	Number	% strongly agree	% agree	% neutral	% disagree	% strongly disagree
It's easier to comment about my course to somebody who doesn't teach me than to my lecturers.	1291	13.6	42.2	22.1	19.1	3.0

Table 8: Response to statement 'It's easier to comment about my course to somebody who doesn't teach me than to my lecturers'.

Responses were significantly associated with age. Students under 21 years old were more likely than their older peers to agree (U=170836.000, Z=-4.303, p=0.000).

7. *Students' assessment of their impact on decision-making.*

The final factor relates to how students judge the likely outcome of their input into decisions. It is worth noting that aligned to this is the notion of confidence, which could suggest that students feel that the university may be more likely to respond to feedback from self-assured students.

- Apart from evaluation forms, most ways of commenting on the student experience are suited to vocal and confident students.
- When students complain, it is rare for anything to get done.
- I don't think that course representatives have much influence on the decisions made about courses.
- I don't have much say over what happens on my course.

Over six in every 10 respondents appeared to see engagement as associated with confidence. This is illustrated in figure 14. This shows that very small proportion of students (slightly over one in 20) disagreed with this idea. Response to this statement was associated with gender, with female students being significantly more likely than male students to agree (U=170161.000, Z=-2.468, P=0.014).

Apart from evaluation forms, most ways of commenting on the student experience are suited to vocal and confident students.

| 12.2 | 58.3 | 23.9 | 5.3 |

strongly agree   agree   neutral   disagree   strongly disagree
0.3% in the strongly disagree category
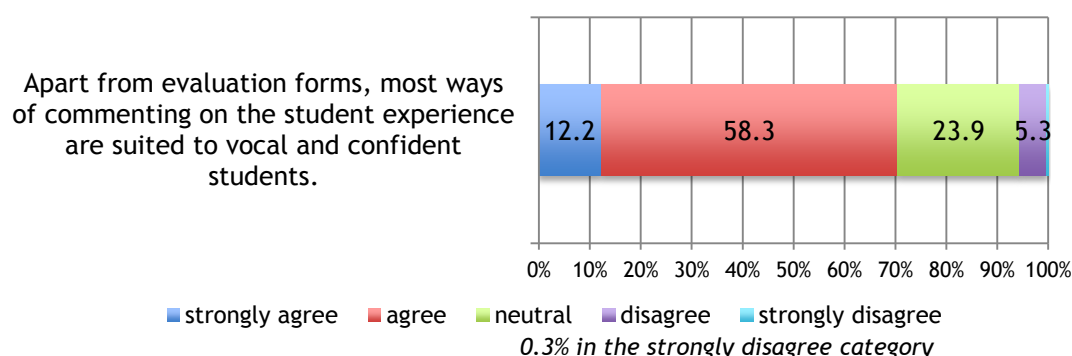
Figure 14: response to "Apart from evaluation forms, most ways of commenting on the student experience are suited to vocal and confident students".

The other three items that were associated with the category relate directly to the impact that students could have on how the university was run. Data related to this is reported in Table 9. It indicates that half the sample felt that they had a no personal impact on their course. However, there is no sense that students saw a

collective response as the answer, with a similar proportion having little faith in the influence of representatives. Finally, about one third of the sample felt that complaints were unlikely to result in action. It is interesting to note that there was a relatively high neutral response for all these statements, indicating that students may not have enough insight to answer these.

Engagement statement	Number	% strongly agree	% agree	% neutral	% disagree	% strongly disagree
I don't have much say over what happens on my course.	1289	10.1	38.9	33.8	15.2	2.0
I don't think that course representatives have much influence on the decisions made about courses.	1288	8.1	32.9	38.0	17.7	3.3
When students complain, it is rare for anything to get done.	1291	7.3	26.3	44.0	20.6	1.8

Table 9: Students' views on the impact students have on decision-making

There were few associations with regard to student characteristics for these statements. However, age appeared to have an impact on confidence in course representation system. Students under 21 years were less convinced about this than older students were (U=175924.500, Z=-2.989, P=0.003).

Open Text comments
The survey offered respondents an opportunity to make additional comments. Less than 10% of the sample (n=121) took this opportunity. There was no discernible pattern of response with reference to any student characteristic. Students' comments covered a range of issues. In approximately two-thirds of comments, students made some form of direct criticism about their experience. The highest number of complaints related to the organisation of courses. Some of these related to curriculum design issues regarding choice or assessment. However, poor communication was a factor in most negative comments in this area. Concerns over poor teaching were also noted. In most cases students' comments located these in the context of a 'mixed bag' learning experiences. In these, students seemed keen to praise as well as criticise their tutors. In fact, positive comments about tutors or the university in general were made in about half of the responses to the open text question.

About a third of the comments included a suggestion for how the student experience could be improved. These ranged from very specific ideas associated with particular programmes to more expansive thoughts on how practices or facilities could be adapted. Student representation was a focus of a quarter of the comments made. The overwhelming focus of these related to confusion over who representatives were or even whether they had representatives at all. Several students made suggestions about improving representative system. These related to more opportunities to meet with representatives to talk about experiences or get feedback.

In one in 10 cases, students used the open text box as an opportunity to reflect on survey process. About half of these comments related to specific questions to clarify or elaborate on an answer. The remaining observations were positive about the research. The only negative survey-related comment was that the timing of the survey was unsuitable, although no indication was given as to why this was the case.

Comparison between the views of student representatives and other students
The questionnaire sought information on whether respondents had a history of representation. Representatives accounted for 6.8% (n=87) with another 1.6% (n=21) having been representatives in the past. It is possible that previous representatives may have left the role as a result of disenchantment with the university. However, analysis of the satisfaction statements suggests that there was no significant difference between previous and current student representatives. Hence, for the purposes of analysis, the sample of students with some history of student representation (n=108) will be used. Representation was not associated with age, gender or study status. However, there were proportionately more students with some history of representation at level six than at level five (χ^2=6.748 (1df) p = 0.009). Students from outside the UK or Irish Republic were more likely 'home' students to have a history of representation (χ^2= 4.280 (1df) p=0.039).

Students with a history of representation appeared to have very different views about engagement to their peers. They were significantly more likely to agree with the statement, *The university would be able to make better decisions for future students if it understood my experiences.* (U=49133.000, Z=-3.331, p=0.001) and less likely agree with, *I don't have much say over what happens on my course*

(U=39209.000, Z=-6.736, p=0.000). However, experience of representation was not associated with whether individuals felt that more students should be included in decision-making or whether they personally wanted to be involved. This suggests that personal preference for engagement may not be the major motivating factor in whether students participate. Such an observation may explain why focus group students, who had no history of representation, sometimes felt frustrated at not being involved.

Analysis indicates that this representation is linked to satisfaction. Representatives may be no more or less likely than their peers to want to participate, but appeared to be happier with the opportunities available to voice their opinions (U=42613.500, Z=-5.245, p=0.000). They were also more confident than their peers that action would be taken if students complained (U=50402.000, Z=-3.380, p=0.001). It would seem that this extended to general notions of satisfaction, with representatives more likely than other students to recommend the university (U=52047.000, Z=-3.124, p=0.002) and more pleased with their course (U=49788.500, Z=-4.235, p=0.000). There was also an indication that representatives they had better relationships with tutors, with more positive responses given to both statements, *I have positive relationships with most of my university teachers* (U=43605.500, Z=-6.032, p=0.000) and *Most of my tutors are genuinely interested in hearing what I have to say about my course.* (U=48519.000, Z=-4.318, p=0.000). Aligned with this, they were less likely than their peers to agree that it would be easier to talk to someone other than a teacher about their course (U=50294.000, Z=-3.515, p=0.002). They were also less likely to worry about being seen as a trouble-maker if they complained (U=50016.500, Z=-3.646 p=0.000).

In terms of module evaluation, representatives were more likely than other students to complete forms (U=44844.500, Z=-4.872, p=0.002) and less likely to admit to not putting a lot of effort into the process (U=47181.000, Z=-4.415, p=0.000). However, there was no association with the response to the statement *I am more likely to complete evaluations when I have a strong opinion about something to do with my course.* In terms of other mechanisms for engagement, a history or representation was associated with preferences towards collaborative projects. These students were significantly more likely to have been involved in task groups (U=42609.000, Z=-5.681, p=0.002) or worked with members of staff on activities that were not specifically related to their studies (U=43992.500, Z=-

5.380, p=0.000). Moreover, they were more interested in opportunities for collaborative work (U=41633.000, Z=-5.951, p=0.002).

It is perhaps unsurprising that students with a history of representation appeared to have much more confidence over the role of representatives. They were significantly less likely to agree with the statement *I don't think that course representatives have much influence on the decisions made about courses* (U=39881.500, Z=-6.521, p=0.002) and more likely to agree that representatives fairly represented their cohorts (U=36326.000, Z=-7.386, p=0.000). Representatives also seemed to have more faith than other students that their student union represented their views (U=53040.000, Z=-2.721, p=0.005).

This chapter has outlined the key feature in the analysis of both the focus group and survey data. It broadly confirms that the data gathered in the focus group (and earlier research that supports this project) was not atypical. It also indicates that despite the diversity of the student body, views on engagement are remarkably consistent. These results are discussed over the next two chapters to ascertain how they answer this thesis' research questions. They will therefore offer more insight into these results by exploring them in the context of other research and theory in student engagement.

Chapter Eight: Students' views about student engagement

In this chapter, I discuss the findings of a mixed methods research project on student engagement. The project addressed the following research questions:

- What are students' perceptions of the engagement opportunities offered to them in one university?
- How do student subjectivities influence engagement?
- Based on the above, what are the challenges presented by student engagement in university decision-making?

This chapter focuses on the first question. It draws on the data presented in the previous two chapters to examine the implications of students' perceptions in four key areas of student engagement. These are evaluation and appraisal, student representation, student:staff partnerships and civic engagement. I will use the Nested Hierarchy of Student Engagement Interactions (*see figure 1*) as a framework for analysis of these. This will establish the association between the university's ambition for engagement, its operation of methods for student participation and students' motivation to get involved. This sets the scene for the following chapter that addresses the remaining two research questions.

Students' views of available engagement opportunities

This research offers one of the first datasets on student engagement in decision-making that explores the views of a wide range of students. Although there is some quantitative data on student engagement in decision-making, this offers a staff perspective (e.g. Little et al, 2009). The available data on students' views tends to be qualitative, small-scale and is based on individuals who have a demonstrable history of engagement (e.g. Lizzio and Wilson, 2009). There is large-scale, quantitative data on mainstream student views of engagement in learning and assessment, but this has no real application to governance issues (e.g. Kelly, 2012). Even the US National Survey of Student Engagement makes little reference to this. A handful of its 100 questions could relate to governance issues (e.g. *'Worked with a faculty member on activities other than coursework (committees, student groups, etc.)'* or *'Hold a formal leadership role in a student organization or group'*), but there is no specific question on participation in decision-making, (NSSE, 2013).

The paucity of evidence creates a risk that universities, government and non-governmental organisations are developing processes and procedures for engagement with no indication that there is sufficient student interest. Streeting and Wise (2009) argue that the greatest challenge lies in persuading students that they should be involved. However, this research suggests that students want to contribute to decision-making. This was evident in the qualitative data and reinforced in the survey phase where over half the sample indicated that they would like to participate. This figure may have been inflated by social desirability bias, where respondents provide the answer that they think they should provide (Marsden and Wright, 2010). Even taking this into account, there was a wide discrepancy between the wish to be involved and actual levels of involvement; for every student who reported working with staff on projects, for example, another three would like the opportunity to do that. It is easy to conclude from this that, in spite of the growing expectation for engagement (e.g. QAA, 2012a), the university has failed to tap into a substantial reservoir of motivated students.

Students' motivation for engagement

The qualitative element of this research offered some insights into why students want to participate. Before considering these, it is worth establishing current practices in the higher education to incentivise student engagement. These often centre on reward and recognition. In fact, the *UK Quality Code for Higher Education* (QAA, 2012a) encourages universities to explicitly recognise the contribution that their students make. Although it is rare, a few universities pay students for certain engagement activities (Little et al, 2009). Others certificate students' accomplishments outside of an academic model. In some instances, these are associated with institutional employability initiatives (e.g. Dunne and Zandstra, 2011). Elsewhere, engagement activities such as representation and mentoring are reported in a university's Higher Education Achievement Record (HEAR) (SPARQS, 2012). Finally, some universities have a system of prizes and awards that include various aspects of student engagement (Little et al, 2009). It appears that there are attempts in the sector that explicitly recognise engagement activity. However, there is little indication that these are widespread or have been subject to analysis.

The survey did not explore whether students want to be rewarded for their engagement efforts. In its failure to do this, the project could be seen as part of a pervasive silence in the literature over the provision of tangible incentives for

students to become involved in decision-making. There is an irony in this. Putting to one side whether student engagement enhances university practice and reputation, there is a basic requirement on institutions to develop engagement. Universities are directly judged on student engagement (QAA, 2012a). Hence, unlike their students, they have little choice in the matter. Yet, there is little consideration of why students would choose to get involved. The benefits of engagement are generally framed in relation to imprecise concepts such as kudos (Dunne & Zandstra, 2011), skill acquisition (Millican and Bourner, 2011) and personal development (Lizzio and Wilson, 2009). Arguably, this reflects a paternalistic assumption that getting involved is inherently good for students.

The qualitative element of this research did offer some insight into why students might become involved. Engagement appeared to be related to a combination of the desire to be heard, a belief that students' experiences could be instructive and a faith that their input could improve the situation for future cohorts. There was a strong emphasis on how frustration with current provision can compel a student to participate. This could position engagement as a form of reactive criticism. The students' role is to alert the institution to problems; the institution's role is to solve those problems. Complaint becomes a one-sided conversation. Students have the right to challenge poor practice, but the lack of dialogue in this approach reinforces a complaints culture (Jones, 2010). Naidoo et al (2011) argue that this consolidates the consumerist model of educational management by linking reform and improvement to grievance. They suggest that this diverts resources from the processes of learning and teaching to the monitoring and documenting of problems. Yet, it is the potentially negative impact on the relationship between students and staff that may make a complaint-focussed model of engagement unsustainable. It encourages a defensive response from academic staff that offers short-term solutions to problems that may be unjustifiable in the long term (Furedi, 2011). However, there is an argument to suggest that the desire to see problems fixed is not necessarily indicative of an individualist, consumerist mentality. It was evident that students choose to get involved to help future students and in recognition of the efforts of their predecessors. This is more collegiate than consumerist. It aligns with findings from previous research on representation that identified altruism as a significant factor in students' decisions to engage (Carey, 2013a).

Understanding why students participate is important, but this needs to be contextualised in the activities that constitute engagement. A limitation of the

survey design is that it is difficult to capture complex ideas (Czaja and Blair, 2005). As a result, this research could only examine mainstream students' responses to a relatively basic palette of opportunities for student engagement. One of these is the use of course appraisal at module level.

Evaluation forms as a mechanism for engagement

The research focused on course appraisal at module level for consideration of the role of evaluation forms in student engagement. With over half the sample regularly taking part in these appraisals; they were by far the most widely experienced method of engagement. Indeed, across the higher education sector, this is the most commonly used mechanism by which students feed back to their universities (NUS/QAA, 2012a). The questionnaire did not address other key quantitative data sources relating to this student experience. Most notable amongst these is the National Student Survey. Naidoo et al (2011) suggest that this increasingly drives institutional decision-making. It provides a range of student-focused matrices that are seen to have encouraged universities to be more accountable to their students (Rodgers et al, 2011). However, the National Student Survey has little relevance for research on student engagement. It measures satisfaction rather than participation (Fielding et al, 2010). Moreover, the survey methodology limits its function as a mechanism for engagement. This is because the Survey is only available to undergraduate students in the final year of their studies. Their response will be informed by the fact that they are preparing to leave the institution (Williams and Cappuccini-Ansfield, 2007). Hence, although findings may influence decisions, Rodgers et al (2011) argue that the National Student Survey has had little impact on actual student engagement in governance.

Instruments such as the National Student Survey impose on students a narrative of what matters in their education (Jones-Devitt and Samiei, 2011). The same can be said of course appraisal forms. They are condemned for providing limited data that offers little real insight into the student experience (Ives et al, 2013). Appraisals are also criticised for providing *ex post facto* information that, at best, highlights changes for future iterations of a course (Gvaramadze, 2011). Nonetheless, in spite of their limitations, course appraisal does enable a degree of mass participation that would be difficult to achieve otherwise (Elassy, 2013). Indeed, this research supports the continued use of such mechanisms. Respondents recognised these as providing an approach to participation that does not rely on students' confidence or assertiveness. As such, they could be seen as a tool for

democratising engagement. This suggests that surveys can encourage participation. However, information from both phases of the study implies that they reinforce a discourse of complaint. Relating this to the Nested Hierarchy of Student Engagement Interactions *(see figure 1)*, situates module appraisal in the context of a *reactive* institution.
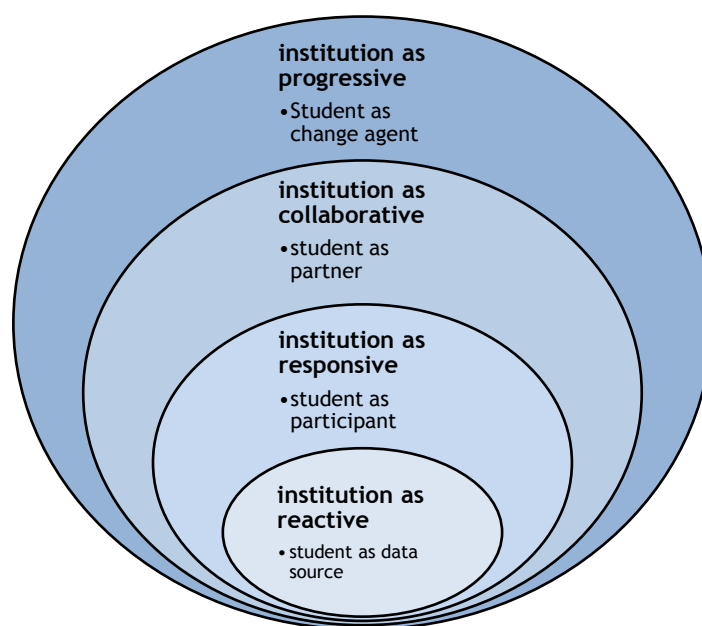
Figure 1: Nested Hierarchy of Student Engagement Interactions

The students' role in this is to provide data to enhance university decisions. The university can be seen as a dominant player with the student as submissive. The institution dictates the terms of reference for engagement and students are expected to comply. Crawford (2012) argues that this trivialises the student experience. It is a manifestation of student engagement as an institutional requirement.   Sanderson (1999) suggests this is *"…a 'technocratic veneer' of techniques and tools of participation and consultation, susceptible to audit and inspection but failing to make any significant contribution…"* (p.388).   Used in this way, appraisals require little active participation and so would be positioned on the lower rungs of Arnstein's 'ladder of participation' (1969). This brackets the process with tokenistic gestures designed to provide an illusion of engagement, whilst maintaining the status quo. Interestingly, students' comments from the qualitative element of this research reflected this. They were sceptical and suspicious that engagement was a 'tick-box exercise'. In some instances, this had discouraged their engagement. Yet, such expressions of disaffection are easy to

dismiss. This reflects the argument made in the literature review that resistance expressed through non-compliance can easily be mistaken for indifference (Mann, 2008). Students are expected to cooperate with the survey methodology and their engagement is strongly encouraged (Sid Nair et al, 2008). However, when students do not respond, the assumption is that this is due to disinterest, survey fatigue, questionnaire design, inadequate distribution, lack of incentive or a failure to provide feedback (Alderman et al, 2012). A student actively choosing not to respond to surveys appears to be rarely considered as an option.

Students were far more likely to complete forms if they felt strongly about an issue. As a result, student engagement through module appraisal reinforces a culture of reactive criticism. Perversely, as students in the qualitative phase observed, institutions often know what needs fixing. When this is the case, the focus on complaint underlines perceptions that the university is failing to act. It creates a vicious cycle of complaint, frustration and further complaint. Providing the opportunity for students to evaluate their experiences is not enough for student engagement. What matters appears to be evidence that the institution is seen to respond.   Exploring students' role in quality assurance, Elassy (2013) offers a 20-rung ladder of engagement. She relates each rung to increasing levels of involvement and associated influence. The opportunity to complete surveys is only the first rung, with the second linked to the effort that students put into responding. Hence, engagement is associated with opportunity and response. A quarter of the students in this research indicated that they did not put a lot of effort into completing course appraisals. It would be easy to portray these students as disengaged or disinterested.   However, the institution's apparent failure to '*close the feedback loop*' offers an alternative interpretation. The university is effectively starting a conversation when it asks students to complete module evaluation forms. Yet, it appears that this conversation stops when the university gets the information that it wants. In a case-study of a single university's response to evaluation data, Brown (2011) details student frustration with the lack of a clear institutional response to their feedback. Conversely, providing feedback on feedback is a recognised mechanism for maximising the value of data and encouraging continued student contribution to surveys (Young et al, 2011). This is supported by this research. There appeared to be an association between the availability of information regarding actions taken as a consequence of feedback and students' involvement in other engagement activities. Therefore,

it would appear that how the university engages with its students post-evaluation could be a key to encouraging further and higher-level engagement.

Failure to close the feedback loop is a sector-wide issue (NUS/QAA, 2012a). However, the notion of a loop implies a one-sided conversation between student feedback and institutional response (Carey, 2013b). It encourages the mechanical, 'you said, we did' response that seems to be ubiquitous across the university sector. Critics suggest that this promotes kneejerk decision-making to improve key performance indicators rather than the student experience *per se* (Naidoo et al, 2011). Although course appraisal is ostensibly aimed at adding value to the student experience, Young et al (2011) suggest that it is usually more closely associated with accountability and assessment. It provides a tool for comparing course with course and teacher with teacher (Dolnicar and Grün, 2009). If used this way, it becomes a mechanism for performance review of academic staff, subsuming student participation into the performative and regulatory regime of university governance (McLeod, 2011).

The argument that course appraisal is part of a repertoire of techniques associated with the *institution as reactive* (*see figure 1*) appears to be compelling. However, this is akin to equating method with methodology. The above discussion relates to course appraisal that uses a predetermined tool at the end of the course. This is based on insider information that this is how appraisal is conducted in the institution under investigation. However, appraisals can be used in a manner that is indicative of more partnership-based approach (Van der Velden, 2012). In this, students would be involved in developing appraisal tools, analysing data and action planning. Cook-Sather (2009), for example, outlines an approach to using conventional course appraisal as a point of departure for a broader conversation around engagement. These relocate the process from the end of a module to the mid-point, allowing for students and tutors to engage in conversations about learning. What is effectively the same approach leads to very different outcomes. The symbolic closing of the feedback loop is replaced with an open and on-going dialogue (Alsford, 2012).

Course representation and student engagement
A shift from reactive to responsive interactions with students (*see figure 1*) could be linked with notions of democratic governance (Gaventa, 2006). In universities, this is typically associated with an increasing reliance on a decision-making model

that champions student representation (Luescher-Mamashela, 2012). Organised representation on departmental committees has been identified as a strategic and potentially useful participative mechanism (Lizzio and Wilson, 2009). Although universities appear to value the impact of representatives, there is evidence that students are less convinced of their role (Little et al, 2009). This evidence came from Student Unions and not from students themselves. In fact, there appears to be little analysis of how mainstream students view their representation system.

In this research, it was clear that the main sample of students did not have great faith in the representative system. There are two salient issues in this. The first relates to students' confidence that representatives speak for them; the second refers to the impact of representation. Only half of respondents felt that their representatives stood for their views. This could explain the findings of previous students that representatives often face hostility or ignorance from their fellow students (Lizzio and Wilson, 2009). However, there were notable differences between subject areas. This is reinforced by analysis of data regarding the failure of representatives to meet with their constituents. It reflects previously reported variations in representation both between and within institutions (HEFCW, 2006). The implication is that representation is shaped by culture of distinct subject areas. Whether that related to the nature of the discipline or how teams in those areas organised representation is open for debate. The second concern for students appeared to relate to the impact of the system on decision-making. Less than one in five students felt that their representatives had an impact. This may reflect a negative estimation of the capacity of individual representatives. However, the striking difference between perceptions of representativeness and views on impact indicates that their distrust may be with the institution. This supports the scepticism from Student Union staff reported by Little et al (2009). It also reflects concerns expressed by representatives themselves over their impact (Carey, 2013a).

This data reinforces evidence from across the sector that unsystematic co-ordination of student representation schemes hinders the impact that students can have (Little et al, 2009). There is tentative evidence in this study that a lack of clarification of the position of representatives undermines their role. Although this research did not address representation procedures, it is notable that a sizeable proportion of open text comments questioned the system. Furthermore, the majority of these indicated that the respondent did not know the identity of her or

his course representative. The reliability of open text data is questionable (Marsden and Wright, 2010), so it would be wrong to attach too much weight to this. Nonetheless, it indicates that the process of becoming a representative is always not transparent to the constituency of a particular representative. This is consistent with nationwide research that found very few examples of student representatives being formally elected into the post (Little et al, 2009). Hence, it is difficult to locate course representatives in any specific democratic tradition – are they representative of a collective position, special interest views or personal perspectives? At question is not whether these have their place in the discourse of participation (Fung, 2006), but how they are related to notions of responsibility and accountability. Gaventa (2004) suggests that the legitimacy of the representative is essential. The ballot box affords immediate authority that is simple to understand and defend. He argues that the contribution of community leaders and unelected representatives is not necessarily any less important, but is much easier to dismiss. Sanderson (1999) suggests that experts and technocrats can reject the views of self-advocacy groups as unrepresentative. He argues that this could be a smokescreen for the reluctance of those in positions of power to take on board alternative views. The parallels with student representation are clear. Universities acknowledge the value of course representation (Little et al, 2009), but inadequate clarification of the system may undermine its impact. If universities are to adopt a more responsive model of engagement, they need to ensure that the mechanisms for active student involvement through representation are fit-for-purpose.

Moving towards student partnership

The literature review offered a view of student engagement in relation to the notion of coproduction and partnership. It examined this in the context of popular participation that would require high levels of engagement across the institution. Understanding course representatives offers some insight into how this could be achieved. The survey established that becoming a student representative was not associated with any of the student characteristics recorded. Therefore, there is no reason to assume that the engagement associated with representation could not be more widely realised. This would afford significant benefits to the institution. Course representatives were more closely aligned to their university. They differed significantly from their peers with respect to a range engagement issues. In all cases, these differences were positive. Simply put, representatives appeared to be happier with their courses, more trusting of the institution and better

convinced of the impact that students can have. This adds a further dimension to the argument that engagement benefits universities. The value of listening to the student voice to improve decision-making has been noted (Cook-Sather, 2009), but this analysis also indicates that the experience of being listened to can increase satisfaction and a sense of belonging. Moreover, data from the qualitative phase indicated that student experiences of working with staff (albeit not necessarily in a representative function) offered them greater insights into the process. This reinforces earlier research that suggests that student representation can foster a greater sense of community between students and staff (Carey, 2013a). Hence, representation could offer a prototype for a partnership model in universities that would be associated the institution as collaborative (*see figure 1*).

Elassy (2013) argues that power, information, knowledge, skills and rewards are essential to meaningful student involvement. Some of these could be associated with student qualities and their personal capacity to participate. This research does not address these, but it would be wrong to dismiss their impact. However, the conditions for participation are created by the institution and informed by how it enables and empowers its students. Arnstein (1969) explores participation in the context of a deficit model that focuses on why people do not engage or, more accurately, how their engagement is suppressed. Her contention is that citizen participation provides an opportunity for the less powerful to take control, but that this is diminished by distrust in institutions. Indeed, trust is seen as a powerful factor in establishing public participation (Boviard, 2007). Issues of trust were reflected in this research. These where characterised by apparent distrust in systems, coupled with a general sense of trust in individuals. In the qualitative phase, for example, students had been critical. They had misgivings about the university, but were careful to stress their confidence with most of their tutors. A similar pattern emerged in the survey data. Although students were uncertain that 'the university' reacted appropriately, there was a marked difference in their reaction to questions that were framed in the context of tutors. Responses to these were much more positive. There is debate as to whether tutor evaluation is closer to 'popularity contest' than a meaningful assessment of ability (Stein, et al, 2013). Leaving the veracity of this argument to one side, this data did not ask students to rate individual lecturers. Instead, it sought more general views of the nature of students' relationships with their tutors. These suggested that students' relationships with their university were most successful at programme level and in relation to tutors.

The conclusion is that universities should establish mechanisms for engagement at local level. Localism will be based on relationships that are intimate, dynamic and unlikely to conform to a simple behavioural algorithm (Gaventa, 2004). However, this challenges the managerialist principles of university governance that tend to be centrist and top-down (Beckman et al, 2009). These are based on a technocratic assumption that the solution to a problem lies in the identification of the appropriate formulae (Sultana, 2012). They constrain local decision-making that deviates from regulated activity (Lorenz, 2012). Bluntly put, local responses cannot be standardised and attempts to do so will inhibit the intuitive and personal response that may be needed,

> "...*do not reduce engagement to a set of techniques, strategies or behaviours that are meant to be universally replicable regardless of context. In contrast, given the differences in the nature of social structures and interactions, a reductionist stance of engagement is untenable.*" (McMahon and Portelli, 2004 p14).

Positioning student engagement away from the local environment where students are located is a typical managerial response. Student engagement is often levered into procedural systems that were designed to meet the needs of the institution (NUS/QAA 2012a). The Centre for Higher Education Research Institute report on student engagement (Little et al, 2009) identified a plethora of university meetings that students were invited to. These existed at programme, department and institution level. They ranged from including students in general strategic or task groups to specific student:staff liaison fora. The students' role in these varied from minimal to expansive, but they all created a formal environment for engagement activity. Formality can hinder student engagement. The interview data in the qualitative phase supported this. Students had found processes to be at best off-putting and, at worst, hostile (Carey, 2013b). This supports research by Planas et al (2013) that found that students were often confused about university structures and unsure of where they were accommodated in this. In addition, the process of preparing, attending and debriefing meetings is time-consuming (Carey, 2013a). As a consequence, research has shown that active and committed student participants often struggle to engage due to the additional demands on their time (Alsford, 2012).

Examining reliance on meetings from a public participation perspective indicates that the student status in these could be relegated to that of a spectator (Fung, 2006). University committees are often a place where student views are received and information relayed back to the students (Van der Velden, 2012). They do not encourage a conversation between the student and other stakeholders. Although there is evidence that students may be included in the process of agenda setting for such meetings (Little et al, 2009), it is debatable whether they have legitimate power to influence decisions (Bartley et al, 2010). A key issue is that meetings can reinforce the inequalities between students and university staff (Fielding, 2004). Students occupy a lowly position in the hierarchy of power that defines higher education (Mann, 2008). The apparent caution that the students in this study appeared to exercise when complaining is indicative of that. It is likely that this will influence their behaviour in meetings. Mann (2008) explains how students are expected to, and expect to, comply with university rules and norms. The committee structure tests students by creating role confusion (Lizzio and Wilson, 2009). In effect, students have to manage partnership in one context with more submissive relationships elsewhere. In the author's earlier research on course representatives (Carey 2013a), students talked of this as a sense of dislocation and the feeling that they had to recreate themselves in different contexts.

This analysis suggests that a conventional committee structure may not be the best location for student engagement. If a culture of collaborative engagement is to thrive, then there may need to be a reconceptualisation of the theatre in which the relationship between managers, tutors and students is played out. Van der Velden (2012) questions why decision-making takes place in the committee room rather than the classroom. The survey explored this relation to a broader notion of opportunities to feedback in the context of the lecture. This was something that most students appeared to be interested in. The typical student is time-poor and will manage a complex balancing act between the competing demands of her or his domestic and social lives, work and study (Reay et al, 2010). Hence, an immediate benefit of this approach is that it puts no additional burden on the students' resources. In consequence, such an approach to engagement may also simply offer a more efficient mechanism for working with students.

However, the classroom can provide more than just a location for feedback, it can shape the nature of engagement. Although this thesis is based on the argument that engagement in decision-making is different to engagement in learning, the

two need not be completely dislocated. Much of the literature on the student partnerships relates to the student as a learner (e.g. Lambert, 2009). Indeed, this reflects foundation of the co-production model in the construction of knowledge (McCulloch, 2009). Hence, learner engagement activities can be embedded into course design so that they are intrinsic to educational achievement (Carini et al 2006). The survey explored this relation to a broader notion of opportunities to feedback in the context of the lecture. This was something that most students appeared to be interested in. The relevance of partnership for university governance requires a different perspective. The focus is more closely aligned to democratic renewal rather than learning *per se* (Sanderson, 1999). Nonetheless, a learning focus can intimate how the system might look. An option for enhancing engagement in governance would be to embed decision-making into learning strategies and student achievement. In the qualitative phase, students posited a model of engagement that combined input into decision-making with distinct learning tasks. Research modules were the chosen location for this. This is aligned with work in other universities that have used the student-as-researcher to learn more about the student experience (Lambert, 2009).

It appears that universities could better exploit the classroom-based opportunities open to them to enhance engagement. Linking governance-related engagement to learning-related engagement means that the former effectively becomes part of the contract between students and the university. There could be resistance to such a strategy. Consumerist discourse suggests that the aim of today's student is to acquire a degree rather than learn about a subject (Williams, 2011). It would discourage them from engaging in activities that is not directly related to assessment and ultimately degree classification. However, Watson (2012) questions this view, suggesting that contemporary views about student over-emphasises the 'poverty of aspiration' in the student body. He maintains that today's students engage in a wide variety of activities that counter claims to pure instrumentalism. The familiar critique of higher education managerialism offers a more salient threat to attempts to build governance-related engagement into learning activities. Classroom-based partnership will be localised and projects are likely to be highly contextual. Although they may facilitate more direct involvement at grass roots level, they may conflict with the corporate, bureaucratised university structures (Van der Velden, 2012). Neary (2010) warns that institutional frameworks for learning and teaching constrain co-production. He argues that these are excessively rigid and stifle creativity. This is most pressing

if engagement activity is linked to academic credit. Yet, some institutions have already taken this route (Planas et al, 2013). Awarding credit embeds engagement into an assessment regime. As such, this is likely to measure how students intellectualise their engagement experiences, rather than the engagement activity itself (Little et al, 2009). Furthermore, assessment in the neo-liberal university has an increasingly performative function in credentialing a future workforce (Giroux, 2010). This research did not directly address the issue of assessment of engagement, but does offer a cautionary note. Findings indicate that assessment per se can inhibit some students from getting involved. This reflects the power relationship that will characterise any assessment process (McLeod, 2011).

Engagement beyond the university walls

The fourth engagement category identified in the Nested Hierarchy of Student Engagement Interactions (*see figure 1*) relates to the *progressive institution.* As discussed in the literature review, this may be unrealistic and unwanted with respect to the main business of the university. Hence, it may be best manifest in how the university relates to civic society. In effect, engagement inside the university necessarily differentiates between students, academics, support staff and managers. However, in its external relations, the university is a more holistic entity. Watson (2009) describes the civic role of the university as *a 'Russian Doll'* that simultaneously focuses on local community, the sub-region, the region, the nation, the international region and the global enterprise. This section, however, focuses on student's community engagement. This is a key aspect of the wider higher education project (Millican and Bourner, 2011). Engagement outside the university is a measurement of student engagement in the US (Kuh, 2009), but is not addressed in the UK.   Civic responsibility conflicts with contemporary interpretations of the student as a customer. The communitarian spirit embodied in volunteering and charity work does not sit comfortably with the individualist discourse of consumerism (Giroux, 2010). Hence, the extent of students' contribution to their local communities is often overlooked (Watson, 2012).

In this study, only one questionnaire item related to external engagement. This addressed whether students felt that they were encouraged to undertake voluntary or community work. Less than half the sample felt this to be the case. Moreover, analysis indicated that this was more prevalent in level 5 (the second year for most students). This is where work-based learning is usually located. Hence, the university's promotion of such work might be linked to employability rather that

social responsibility. If this is the case, it aligns with neoliberal emphasis on university education as preparation for the job market (Beckman et al, 2009). It is argued that this undermines the social ideals of higher education and discourages civic responsibility (Lamber, 2009). The survey did not explore students' views on employability, but this is cited as a key reason why students attend university (Jones, 2010). However, this does not always translate into how they engage with their studies and their subjects (McLean et al, 2012). Moreover, evidence of students' engagement in community work (Watson, 2012), coupled with the altruism displayed by students in this and other research (Carey, 2013a), suggests that civic virtue, as well as job prospects, may encourage students to volunteer. Arguably, promoting this will enhance progressive notions of student engagement.

This chapter has indicated that students responded positively to the engagement opportunities offered by the institution in question. They appeared to be willing to participate and this is reinforced by evidence of generally positive relationships with lecturers. There are also signs that engaged students are more content with their university. This indicates that universities, as well as students, benefit from greater engagement. However, reference to the Nested Hierarchy of Student Engagement Interactions suggests that institutions often constrain engagement activity. This is less associated with the method of engagement than the operation of that method within an institutional culture. Consequently, universities may obstruct their own objectives to enhance engagement. However, for engagement to move to the partnership model espoused by regulatory agencies and universities themselves, consideration needs to be given to the impact of the relationship between students and the institutions. Hence, the chapter offers a note of caution that approaches to student engagement that are expansive and encourage genuine participation simultaneously test managerialist organisations. Failure to address this may result in tokenistic engagement gestures that belie any real sense of student participation. The following chapter will consider this in the context of the challenges engagement poses for universities. However, central to this is how engagement relates to the ways in which students see themselves. In consequence, the chapter begins by examining what the results of this research suggest about student subjectivities.

Chapter Nine: The challenges of student engagement

In the previous chapter I painted a picture of students who were willing to engage and universities who wanted their students to engage. However, it appeared that the motivations of one did not always align with the operations of the other. This chapter explores this further by considering student subjectivities and how they relate to student engagement in modern university governance. Using the survey and focus group data as a starting point, I consider the extent to which student engagement is influenced by the various discourses that define the student. Exploring this establishes the extent to which these come from or are imposed upon students. This is considered in the broader context of how neoliberalist principles challenge the ambition for greater student engagement in university decision-making.

Neoliberalism has signalled a move from social democratic ideals of collectivism and the rights citizens. In their place is a belief in the power of entrepreneurialism and a defence of consumer rights (Beckman et al, 2009). Neoliberal reforms of higher education have replaced state support with privatisation and marketisation. Key to this has been the imposition of a 'business model' into university governance. This is evident in the dominance of managerialist ideology in higher education management (Lorenz, 2012). Becher and Trowler (2001) identify key characteristics of managerialism in higher education. These are associated with an emphasis on the market and an orientation to the student as a customer. In addition, there is strong executive that operates a top-down model of management. Devolved power is strictly controlled and staff are carefully monitored. Neoliberalism has had a significant impact on university culture (Olssen and Peters, 2005). It has fundamentally changed the nature and purpose of higher education (Lorenz, 2012). This has profoundly influenced how students are seen, and see themselves (Giroux, 2010)

Student subjectivities and student engagement
The Nested Hierarchy of Student Engagement Interactions signals that involvement is something that students do with the permission of their universities. In other words, students can only participate as much as the university is willing or able to let them. This overlooks the significant impact that individual agency has on the engagement process (Saunders, 2011). Whilst the survey method is insufficiently nuanced to facilitate an exploration of agency, it does shed some light onto

student subjectivities and how they shape engagement activities. The focus on subjectivities follows the view that a student's sense of self will be in a constant state of flux as her or his university career progresses. The literature suggests that student engagement is a psycho-social process that is shaped by institutional factors and rooted within the wider social context (Kahu, 2013). Hence, how students see themselves is provisional and transitional (Field and Morgan-Klien, 2010). Yet, much of the literature on engagement tends to present a homogenous and static view of students. There is a tendency for them to be depicted as a cadre of similar thinking and similar acting individuals. Where difference is noted, it is often presented in the form of polarities: the student is inspired or apathetic (Davies and Mello, 2012); the student is a partner or a consumer (McCulloch, 2009); the student is compliant or confrontational (Mann, 2008). As a result, the idea that studenthood is a multi-dimensional and provisional concept seems to be generally overlooked.

Whilst the data from this study does present some commonalities in student opinion, it also establishes differences between students that appear to be dependent on key characteristics. The nature of these differences offered few surprises. Female students, for example, appeared to be more collegiate than their male counterparts, but were also more cautious of power dynamics. This could be a manifestation of their perception that higher education remains a gendered space (Leathwood and Read, 2009). Younger students (under 21 years) tended to be more guarded when it came to engaging with tutors. This reflects the argument that younger students, especially those from non-traditional backgrounds, often see university as an extension of school and this influences their relationships with their 'teachers' (Field and Morgan-Klien, 2010). Part-time students seemed to feel less included in the institution, which mirrors sector-wide evidence that part-time students are less socially engaged and feel less connected to their universities (Thomas, 2012).

Meanwhile, second year students were not as content as their peers in the final year. This reflects the recorded phenomena of a 'sophomore slump' (Yorke and Zaitseva, 2013). Students from outside the UK or Republic of Ireland were more likely to have been involved in project work than 'home' students. At first glance this may seem to be counter-intuitive. Cultural and language differences put international students at greater risk of being isolated (Krause, 2005). However, having made the considerable investment to study in the UK, they may in fact be

more willing to take up a range of learning opportunities. In addition, there were associations between views on engagement and subject area that may reflect organisational or disciplinary differences between students. This is consistent with previous research that found disciplinary differences in how academics viewed and reacted to their students (Lomas, 2007). Moreover, McLean et al (2012) contend that engagement with the discipline shapes student identity. Their argument relates to the acquisition of sociological knowledge, so it seems reasonable to assume that different disciplines will have a different effect. Finally, that course representatives' views varied so considerably from those of their peers reflects the position of representatives in the university. It mirrors research that demonstrates that course representatives differ from, and are treated differently to, other students (Lizzio and Wilson, 2009).

The existence of these differences indicates that students' views are shaped by a variety of aspects other than their status as a student. In other words, their subjectivities are created through an interaction between the various aspects of their being, of which studenthood is just one facet (Field and Morgan-Klien, 2010). The survey only sought information on five basic characteristics, with further information gleamed from the distribution process. It did not request information on matters such ethnicity, sexual orientation, faith, disability, social class or work history. It seems likely that each of these may also have influenced perceptions. In line with this, Porter (2006) maintains that students' social and cultural capital shapes engagement. Hence, personal characteristics will also influence how students react to the engagement opportunities offered to them. This suggests a dimension to student subjectivities that defies efforts to compartmentalise students into 'types'.

Students in a marketised university
Subjectivity is not simply a product of individual characteristics, but is relational (Brown and Murphy, 2012). This means that students' perceptions of their role will be shaped by broader discourse around the function of higher education. In the current climate, notions of education as a personal investment are likely to influence how students view themselves (Molesworth et al, 2009). The argument is that students have repositioned their role from pupils or apprentices to customers (Furedi, 2011). As such, there is an increasing expectation that students are driven by their purchasing decisions (Molesworth et al, 2009). Recent commentary on the marketisation of higher education suggests that customer-power has distorted the

relationship between students and staff, shifting control to the student (Furedi, 2011). This has also presented the sector with an emerging model of the *student as adversary*. This depicts students as demanding and antagonistic clients who see qualification as their reward for payment (Brady, 2012).

The evidence that the university system has become marketised is compelling (Brown, 2011a). However, it does not necessarily follow that students will act as consumers. This study demonstrates that a sizable proportion of students are willing to engage in activities that extend beyond the formal contract between them and their universities. Williams (2010) argues that students have agency, albeit influenced by the cultural, social, political and economic environment they inhabit. Therefore, paying fees will have a differential effect. The survey data supports this view by indicating that students hold a range of views on this issue. This partly echoes findings in other universities. The Director of Marketing and Communications at the University of Bristol, for example, said, "*Talking to our students, they're absolutely clear that they don't consider themselves to be consuming something. They do not see this as a consumerist transaction*" (Robinson, 2013). The data in this study, however, is less absolute. Although under a third of respondents viewed students primarily as customers, this is a sizable minority. There is no baseline data on this, so it is difficult to predict any direction of travel regarding their views. It is noted, however, that this data was collected prior to the imposition of the £9,000 fee regime that is predicted to entrench consumerist tendencies in England (Alderman and Palfreyman, 2011).

The survey judged consumerism through response to a single survey item. This eschewed the nuanced sense of what it is to be a student in a consumerist society. Instead, it offered a bold dichotomy between customer and learner. This reflects a position that characterises most of the literature on the consumerisation of higher education. Whether this sees this as a threat to education (e.g. Acevedo, 2011) or identifies some benefits (e.g. Maringe, 2011), a common feature is that it posits being a consumer is the primary identity of the students. Consequently, the item could be judged as complicit in the idea that the '*student-as-consumer*' is a binary concept: they either are consumers or they are not. The use of a Likert scale did offset this by allowing each respondent to locate himself or herself on a continuum of predominately consumer to predominately learner. Simple measurements such as this are also open to social-desirability bias (Mitchell and Jolley, 2010). Consumerist views may be seen as less palatable in an academic environment,

prompting students to modify their views when responding. Nevertheless, even accepting the limitations of the measurement of consumerism, this study indicates that students are far from overwhelmingly consumerist. The sample was split between support for consumerism, neutrality and disagreement. It appears from this that consumerism may be part of a student's sense of self, but it is not necessarily the dominant part.

The survey offers little insight into what would motivate a student to see him or herself as a consumer. No association was found between whether a consumer-focused views and any of the demographic characteristics reported. This suggests that this is something that is not easily predicted. Instead, the lack of clear differentiation reinforces an argument that the perception of the student as a customer is associated with growing consumerism throughout the public sector (Saunders, 2011). Comparative analysis of the responses of self-funded students with those on subsidised courses supports this. The survey did not interrogate students on whether they paid fees and it is recognised that some students will receive grants and subsidies (UCAS, 2013b). However, all undergraduate nursing, midwifery and social-work students are sponsored for their studies. Yet, these students were statistically no less likely than their peers to see themselves as consumers. Further indication that consumerism is a multi-dimensional, cultural phenomenon was the lack differentiation between the responses of younger students and their older peers. This contradicts the assumption that *Generation Y* (born from the early 1980's onwards) is driven by consumerist attitudes and that the sector will have to adapt for much more demanding students this age group enters higher education (Nilson, 2010).

The design of this survey item was invaluably informed by pilot group discussion. This suggested that students see a consumer status as reconcilable with other aspects of being a student. This reflects the perspective that consumer characteristics are only part of a multi-faceted studenthood (Woodall et al, 2012). The university experience for most students is characterised by a continual negotiation between different subjectivities as they progress through their academic careers (Krause, 2005). Lawrence (2005) suggests that students are adept at managing this and it is university staff who struggle with diversity. Tutors attempt to impose a singular identity on their students. In a recent paper, Tight (2013) offered a myriad of metaphors for what the student is. All of these help

'others' to make sense of their relationship with students, but none of them appear to have been generated by students themselves.

It is worth reflecting on where the narrative of the student-as-consumer came from. It is embedded in a more widespread critique of neo-liberalisation of university education and the commodification of education (Molesworth et al, 2009). It follows the logic that if students pay for their education, they will start to act like consumers. Yet, the evidence-base for this is limited. Saunders (2011), for example, found that much of the literature on students' consumerist behaviour was based on anecdotal evidence and personal experience. The authors, he maintains, rarely presented their arguments with research-based evidence. In one of the few available pieces of research on students' perceptions of consumerism, Williams (2010) reports that they appear to be conflicted in how they view themselves as consumers. She found that students appeared to embrace the ideals and language of consumption, whilst simultaneously rejecting it. This thesis expands on this by postulating that students understand that their consumer-power is constrained by learning, teaching and assessment processes. Yet, they exist in a culture that appears to constantly reinforce the message that they are consumers. This has been expressed through government messages (e.g. BIS, 2011) and the media (Tight, 2013). Managers use it to control the university (O'Reilly and Reed, 2011) and marketeers to sell courses (Alderman and Palfreyman, 2011). Finally, even its chief critics, such as the National Union of Students and the academic community, appear to occupy a lot of their time addressing it (e.g. NUS, 2013; Molesworth et al, 2011).

Consumerism, power and student engagement

Variation across the student body in their views about students' consumerism indicates an ambivalent relationship with the higher education marketplace. It suggests that students react differently to the powerful consumerist discourse presented to them (Williams, 2011). Arguably, some students perceive that their power as a customer is offset by their position in an academic hierarchy. Student life is bounded in a system of surveillance and regulation that the student has little control over (Lambert, 2009). Hence, power defines the relationship between students and their universities (Mann, 2008). It is manifest in notions of 'expert' and 'novice' or 'assessor' and 'assessed'. This reflects the fact that students depend on their tutors to define legitimate knowledge and they are charged with reflecting that back to the tutor in the assessment process (Grant, 1997).

Regardless of changes in market expectations, this remains a key aspect of university education. This is grounded in the requirement for universities to evaluate the performance of their students. Nonetheless, a key concern of the impact of the commodification of higher education is that it will lead to grade inflation, with tutors modifying their assessment and marking practices (Furedi, 2011). The implication is that students will dictate this. Yet, it is naïve to see grade inflation in the context of student demands. It a managerialist drive to meet key performance indicators that creates an upward pressure on grades (Lorenz, 2012). Marketisation has simply transformed the power of the academy. Academics may have less control over student performance, but that does not mean that students will have more.

Mann (2008) compares universities to Goffman's notion of a 'total institution'. In this, she illustrates how the power of the university is retained and reproduced. Hence, consumer-driven students will not be more powerful in themselves. The shift in what universities teach is illustrative of this. Marketisation has led to growing pressure on universities to exploit the links between qualifications and employment opportunities (Gallacher and Raffe, 2012). Recent years may have seen a shift from assessment of academic literacy to employability and transferable skills (Yorke, 2011), but the emphasis has remained on assessment. The power balance inevitably favours the assessor. Indeed, the position of academics in this is protected, as evidenced by the fact that the Office of the Independent Adjudicator will not accept students' complaints against academic judgement (OIA, no date).

The students in this study appeared to be aware of the power of the assessor. Information from the qualitative phase suggested that concerns over possible negative impact on assessment could suppress their engagement. It was noticeable, however, that students were reluctant to directly suggest that tutors would punish them for complaining. This has also been noted in previous research on course representatives (Carey, 2013a). The survey data is broadly coherent with this. The relationship between power and assessment was measured by through consideration of reluctance to complain. Although this was an issue for a sizeable minority of students, there was no widespread concern. This conflicts with research from the National Union of Students (NUS, 2009) that found that three-quarters of student advisors felt that students were discouraged from complaining for fear of reprisal. Lala and Priluck (2011) suggest that students

utilise a variety of mechanisms to voice their dissatisfaction. When they fear punishment from tutors, they will use other means to address their concerns. These range from talking with a more sympathetic tutor to posting comments on social networking sites. This study did not focus on such varied methods of complaint. However, when associated with a more general notion of commenting about their course, a majority indicated that they would prefer to talk to someone other than their tutors. The overall conclusion from this is not that students distrust their tutors as such, but that they are cautious of damaging their relationships them. Research elsewhere in the public sector has reported a similar phenomenon with regard to user complaints (e.g. Scottish Health Council, 2009). The possible impact of complaint, no matter how unlikely that is seen to be, is often sufficient to dissuade a service user from raising objections.

Consumerism, co-production as student engagement

Taylor and Wilding (2009) argue that consumerism fails to explain the complex motivations that support engagement. Although this research presents evidence that a fair minority of students do see themselves as consumers, the thesis challenges the arguments that this will necessarily threaten engagement. The research found that, whilst these students were less content, there was no evidence that they were less engaged. However, the apparent dominance of consumerist discourse (Furedi, 2011) signals that the sector may be over-reacting the perceived threat of consumerism and ignoring other aspects of the studenthood. Arguably, it is this, rather than consumerism *per se*, that will undermine partnership working. Both sides need to have the motivation and capacity for effective collaboration. Hence, the commitment shown by staff to participation is crucial for the success of engagement activities (Luescher-Mamashela, 2012). However, labelling students as consumers encourages academics to see them as feckless, self-centred, hedonist and fearful of risk (Nixon et al, 2011). These views infantilise students (Williams, 2010), so damaging student:staff encounters and destabilising any sense of joint venture.

Co-production is presented as an antidote to the excesses of consumerism in higher education (McCulloch, 2009). However, this research indicates that the relationship between consumerism and co-production is more complex than might first appear. Student representation is associated with the *student as co-producer* (Streeting and Wise, 2009). If co-production is the antithesis of consumerism, then it follows that representatives should be less convinced of their role as a customer

than their fellow students are. In this study, course representatives were no less likely than their peers to hold consumerist views. The conclusion from this reinforces an argument made in the literature review that consumerism and co-production are not incompatible (Bragg, 2007). However, the rhetoric of co-production needs to be approached with caution. The revolutionary pedagogy that informs the notion of the student as a producer (Neary, 2010) may not sit comfortably in a system driven by assessment of student performance. At the heart of this is an acknowledgment that students are constantly judged (Mann, 2008). The students who contributed to this study recognised this. It appeared that assessment experiences have suppressed engagement for some students. This is not to suggest that there is no capacity for enhancing co-production models. Clearly, it can have a considerable impact (Lambert, 2009). However, any activities that rely on co-production need to be mindful of the power imbalance that is an unavoidable part of university life (Robinson, 2012).

The paradox at the heart of the notion of student as a co-producer is that the process may reinforce inequalities. Fielding (2004) questions whether certain groups of students are more adept at negotiating power and asserting themselves. Inevitably, this is related to their privilege and status.   Hence, there is a danger that coproduction may institute new power relations between tutors and 'engaged' students. It creates a new set of obligations on students. In addition to academic performance, the coproduction model can set up an expectation that students must identify with their universities. Moreover they are expected to provide emotional and intellectual labour to improve it (Bragg, 2007). Refusal or inability to engage may create a new set of categories of problematic students.

Managerialism and student engagement
Students' relationship with the market in higher education is clearly more complex than a simple neoliberal model would imply. However, the language of consumerism is a central feature of a managerialist model of university governance (Becher and Trowler, 2001). Managers routinely use this to support top-down decisions (Lorenz, 2012). Critics have suggested that this contributes to the deprofessionalisation of lecturing staff and the phenomena of student-related decisions being made by an executive that have few day-to-day encounters with students (Dearlove, 2002). This has created a contradiction in the organisation of student engagement at university level. Universities are judged on student engagement (QAA, 2012a), so engagement becomes part of management

orthodoxy. However, greater levels of student participation may conflict with managerialist principles. Engagement that sits most easily with managerialism is that which occurs within carefully delineated settings and is consistent across the organisation (O'Reilly and Reed, 2011). It corresponds with engagement interactions that would position the university as a reactive institution. These restrict the relationship between students and staff. Yet, universities are expected to demonstrate increasingly sophisticated engagement activities. A central tenet of these is the notion of engagement through 'informed conversation' (QAA, 2012a). Implicit in this is that universities should engage in dialogue with their students. This evokes McLeod's (2011) emphasis on the politics of listening to the student voice. She argues that universities need to offer mechanisms for students to express their voice, but equally have strategies for how the organisation listens. These must take account of the various elements and practices associated with the student voice. Otherwise they are in danger of reinforcing inequalities and divisions between students. The reliance of senior managers on accessing the student voice through Student Union advocates (Rodgers et al, 2011) lacks the expansiveness that authentic 'listening' demands. Relating this to the Nested Hierarchy of Engagement Interactions indicates that listening is not part of a move from a reactive stance to responsive or collaborative forms of engagement, but requires a shift in the location of engagement.

It is inconceivable that senior managers in universities with thousands of students could ever access the diversity of the student voice. However, these students regularly engage with representatives of the institution through interactions with lectures, support staff and professional services. If the various dimensions of the student voice are to be listened to, it follows that this is most likely to occur at the local level. Locally based engagement will enable the university to exploit the generally positive relationships that appear to exist between student and tutor at the micro-level. However, the question will then be how outcomes of from this are fed into executive decision-making. At first glance, this could be seen as a relatively simple adaptation of reporting mechanisms. However, the barrier to this is that it counters the top-down inclinations of managerialism (Dearlove, 2002).

Brown (2011a) argues *"it would greatly assist matters if the whole audit/risk regime were to be abandoned or heavily scaled down"* (p.90). He argues that reliance on audit has subdued mangers trust in their staff. However, trust is a

feature of managerialist systems. It is manifest in faith in the indicators that that the organisation measures itself against and the veracity of the information that it acquires from staff to populate these (Lorenz, 2012). The lack of trust, therefore, lies in methodologies that treat academics as *"workers to be monitored and not professionals to be trusted"* (Sultana, 2012 p12). The challenge of 'abandoning' the audit regime is doubtless outside the agency of any single institution. Audit is both developed in the university and imposed on it. The existence of a pervasive 'audit culture' epitomises the neoliberal of public services and is central to the governance of universities (Shore, 2008). Whilst quality assurance processes have been reconceptualised with an enhancement focus, there is still an emphasis on audit (Hodgson, 2008). Moreover, a plethora of league tables, ranking systems, matrices and information sets is designed to facilitate comparison between universities (Ter Bogt and Scapens, 2012). Hence, audit has become a mechanism by which universities protect their competitive advantage.

The risk that a managerialist, audit culture poses for student engagement is that universities may judge themselves against indicators that are measurable, but not necessarily meaningful. There is already a focus on numeric evaluation data to establish mass student participation (Gvaramadze, 2011). The limited student activity in such methods can be associated with perfunctory approaches to participation (Arnstein, 1969). The implication is that such information collection is disingenuous. Indeed, this research indicates that some students see module appraisal as an empty gesture and this discourages their participation. However, Wilcox (1999) challenges the view that surveys are always tokenistic. He suggests that they can be justified depending on their context and consequence. Key to Wilcox's argument is that participation is a process and that participation through any single, time-limited method will be superficial. Indeed, a key advantage of course appraisal is that it is egalitarian. This aligns with the proposal that evaluation tools are a useful starting point for engagement, but need to be conducted in the context of a wider conversation (Cook-Sather, 2009). This is difficult to audit, presenting the possibility that the number of conversations will become an indicator of success rather than the nature of the discussion.

Managerial trust and student engagement
Olssen & Peters, (2005) argue that the audit culture of surveillance and scrutiny symbolises distrust of managers in the capacity of their staff. However, effective

student engagement is dependent of trust, whether this is between students and students, students and staff or staff and staff (Bryson and Hardy, 2011). The challenge for universities is how they can orchestrate a diffusion of trust throughout the institution in this environment. Greater trust will not always be repaid with effective and appropriate practice. Brown (2011a) paraphrases Samuel Johnson, '*it is better for a man to sometimes be cheated than not to trust*' to argue that universities have to accept that not all individual members of staff may act appropriately. The possible negative impact of individual tutors on student engagement should not be overlooked. It is inevitable that some academic staff will not act in the best interests of their students (Alsford, 2012). Tutors can be considered as 'street level bureaucrats' (Lipsky, 1980). They have the capacity to limit access to resources and operate as gatekeepers to suppress students' capacity for redress. This creates a risk for the university. The dominant discourse suggests that students are becoming more litigious (Lambert, 2009). Moreover, there can be significant consequences for a university if a student's complaint is not dealt with swiftly and effectively (Lala and Priluck, 2011).

In this climate, a defence of managerialist techniques is that they make it harder for individuals to hide poor practice (Lomas, 2007). The executive has to be fundamentally suspicious of the intentions and actions of all academic staff to identify the negative impact of some.   However, at the same time, student complaints are often seen by academic staff in the context of 'playing the system' and driving down academic standards (Naidoo et al, 2011). This results in a tension in how complaints are managed. Poorly handled, this may entrench a potentially adversarial relationship between students and tutors. Mechanisms are therefore needed that do not heighten hostility between students and tutor. One of these is to expand the sphere of influence that students can have. In this research, this was explored in the context of having named individuals outside the teaching team that students can talk to. Elsewhere, it is manifest in the notion of GOATing (Go Out And Talk) or GOALing (Go Out And Listen) (Trowler and Trowler, 2011). This is where managers engage in informal discussions with students in a neutral setting. If the pervasive view of academic staff is that they are not trusted, this may be viewed as another mechanism for surveillance.

This chapter has explored how neoliberalism in higher education may hinder efforts to engage students in university decision-making. This is associated with the

marketisation of education and the implications that this has for how students see themselves. In addition, it has had a profound impact on what students are perceived to be. Consumer identity is imposed on students and this threatens the relationship between staff and students. Aligned to this, the chapter considers how the flexible and responsive practices associated with engagement are problematic in a managerial system. This highlights the challenges that engagement poses for the modern university. The following chapter will conclude this thesis by revisiting some of these challenges and considering the scope of action that a university can take to address them. However, before this, the chapter will establish the credibility of this research and reassert the importance of local cultures in defining engagement.

Chapter Ten: Conclusion

The key drivers for student engagement in university decision-making include quality assurance and enhancement regulations (e.g. QAA, 2012a), as well as the aspirations of sector-wide organisations such as the Higher Education Academy, the Higher Education Funding Council for England and the National Union of Students (e.g. NUS connect, 2013). However, what appears to be missing is a coherent sense of what students want. The student-focused research that exists tends to centre on highly engaged individuals, such as course representatives (Little et al, 2009; Lizzio and Wilson, 2009; Carey, 2013a). Consequently, a key incentive for this research was to address the scarcity of empirical evidence on what mainstream students think about engagement. This was discussed in the previous chapter that focused on two research questions:

- What are students' perceptions of the engagement opportunities offered to them in one university?
- How do student subjectivities influence engagement?
- Based on the above, what are the challenges presented by student engagement in university decision-making?

To answer these questions, the thesis offers a model of student engagement that situates institutional activity as the engine for student action. The Nested Hierarchy of Student Engagement Interactions (*see figure 1*) provided the framework for the analysis of research data. The importance of this is that it progresses the debate about student engagement. It shifts the focus from consideration from what students do. The emphasis is now on what the university sanctions through its processes, procedures and values. The advantage of this is that it challenges the deficit model that is a feature of some of the debate around engagement (Lawrence, 2005).

This study offers the first, UK-based, large-scale study into the thoughts and experiences of mainstream students regarding engagement in decision-making. Although nationwide research into the student experience by the National Union of Students (NUS/QAA, 2012a), for example, did address some issues around engagement, the focus of this was on learning and teaching. Indeed, when student engagement is measured (e.g. Kuh, 2009), those measurements barely consider

participation in decision-making. Consequently, this research provides valuable data to support the development of student engagement in university governance. It offers a different lens for consideration of the student experience to the qualitative methodology that appears to prevail in this area of inquiry. The advantage of working with a large, quantitative dataset is that it allows associations between various responses to be identified (Field, 2009). This has provided an opportunity to explore the links between different student characteristics and engagement.

A claim is therefore made that this work contributes to the growing body of research and theoretical debate in student engagement. An example of this is consumerism. Although this issue is widely debated in the literature, it has been the subject of surprisingly little research. Furthermore, the evidence that does exist is qualitative (e.g. Williams, 2010). As a result, the thesis offers a perspective on the consumerism that is based on views of over 1,000 students. This has enabled an evidence-based argument to be proposed that does not rely on the anecdote or conjecture that distinguishes much of the debate in this area (Saunders, 2011). The emphasis on go decision-making also addresses a recognised gap in the research evidence (Trowler, 2010). By focusing on students' views, it complements existing research in this area that provides data from a staff perspective (e.g. Little et al, 2009). The value of this is based on the extent to which these findings have relevance beyond the university where the study was conducted. However, prior to this to discussing this, the legitimacy of the research process and operation needs to be assessed. Hence, the next section will acknowledge the strengths and limitations of this piece of research and the implications these have for its validity and reliability.

Establishing the reliability and validity of this research

Accessing data on mainstream views necessitated working with a wide spectrum of students. This ambition lends itself to the survey method. Surveys are ideal for establishing the views of a large group of people and provide data that is appropriate for statistical comparison (Czaja and Blair, 2005). However, a key limitation of questionnaire-based research is that the data is only as good as the questions asked. It is vital that the questionnaire provides appropriate measurements for the phenomena under investigation. Crucially, there is no opportunity for clarification, elaboration of follow up (Cohen et al, 2011). This presents a problem for research on student engagement. The reported lack of

available information on the views and experiences of mainstream increases the risk of a questionnaire having little real meaning to the students who are expected to complete it. The danger is that the research tool will reflect the conceptual position of its author (Wolff, 1993). To avoid this, the study used a 'sequential mixed methods design' (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007).

The *raison d'être* of mixed methods research is that one methodology overcomes the limitations of another (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2008). In this project, an exploratory, qualitative stage was followed by a survey-based, quantitative phase. The qualitative research offered rich and insightful data. Yet, no matter how compelling a qualitative account is, there are always questions over the reliability of this when applied to a wider group (Silverman, 2011). The survey method addressed that by investigating the views of a significant number and variety of students. A characteristic of survey research is that it only provides a broad-brush understanding of an issue (Robson, 2011). In this study, the 30 questions that cover a spectrum of engagement issues could not to justice to the nuances of subject. However, the existence of a body of qualitative research on the same issue offered fine detail on engagement issues that brought colour and life to the mass data. Hence, this research did not simply use qualitative data to develop a research tool. It returned to that data in discussion to explore areas of convergence and divergence between the datasets.

Validity

One of the key justifications for sequential mixed methods design is that grounding a quantitative stage in qualitative data tends to enhance the validity of the former (Johnson et al, 2007). The first phase identified the views and experiences of a small group of students and tested these on a large and diverse sample. To further enhance the validity of the research questionnaire, students were involved in the reformulation of problematic questionnaire items through the use of a pilot focus group (Bryman, 2012). The validity of the research tool is indicated by the clear relationship between qualitative and quantitative datasets. Each of these told its own story about student engagement in decision-making. Although there were differences between the two, these were not marked. This suggests that the issues identified in phase one were of interest and relevance to a wider student body. The validity of the survey tool can also be defended by the high response rate and negligible item non-response. A high response rate indicates that the questionnaire made sense to the students who completed it. In addition, low item

non-response suggests that students did not abandon the questionnaire through boredom, confusion or frustration (Czaja and Blair, 2005). Finally, the fact that this was achieved when there were no direct incentives for completing the questionnaire further supports arguments for saliency (Groves et al, 2004). Taken in combination, all these factors present a robust defence that the student engagement questionnaire developed and used in the study offers a valid measurement of the relevant issues.

Reliability

That over 1,300 students participated in this study gives the findings an instant sense of weight. It does not necessarily follow that their views are representative. However, there is a powerful argument that this is the case. A key indicator of reliability is a good response rate (Cohen et al, 2011). At nearly 95%, the response rate of this survey is easily defended. Nevertheless, it is important to note that this rate was achieved at the point of distribution. Across the dissemination period there was a mean absence rate of over a third. As a result, the research relates to the views of only 62% of the students who should have been available to complete it. This still matches the 60-70% return that establishes confidence in the reliability of survey data (Nulty, 2008). All the same, it is conceivable that absence masks a population of disaffected students. This raises the possibility of non-response bias, where a distinct subsample does not participate in survey research (Czaja and Blair, 2005). If this is the case, these research findings are likely to over-estimate engagement. Yet, although disengagement or resistance may account for *some* non-attendance, there is no indication that this will be common to *all* students who were absent on the day of the survey. Indeed, research has demonstrated that students' attendance is not necessarily related to engagement (Kelly, 2012). As a result, the strong return rate recorded at the point of dissemination can be taken as a realistic indicator of reliability.

A common threat to external reliability in survey research is sampling bias. This relates to the extent to which the sample was representative of the chosen population (Cohen et al, 2011). A non-probability sampling mechanism was used in this survey. Hence, there is a risk that the results are not representative (Robson, 2011). Unfortunately, probability sampling was not feasible for this study. Classic random sampling would mean that every eligible student in the university would have had the same opportunity to be involved (Bryman, 2012). Disseminating questionnaires in class made this impossible. Furthermore, relying on faculty

representatives for access meant that classes could not be randomly selected. As a co-worker, I simply did not have the authority to demand access to specific classes. I was also mindful of the impact that any such demands may have had on longer-term relationships with colleagues (Floyd and Arthur, 2012). However, the dissemination strategy did provide a sample that bridged the university structure. As a result, a wide range of disciplines was included (*see appendix 2*). Clearly, not all subject areas were represented. This is demonstrated by the reported ratio of four 'applied' subjects to every 'pure' subject. Although this partly reflects the fact that university courses are predominately in applied areas, applied subjects were over-represented. That having been said, the dataset broadly matched the university's demographic indicators for gender, age, part-time study and home student status (HESA, 2012). The higher proportion of students at level five is explained by the fact that the sample included some diploma and foundation degree programmes. In addition, the number of student representatives is roughly in line with information held by the Student Union (unpublished data). Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that this sample is broadly representative of the student body in the institution under investigation.

The relevance of the research

The extent to which this data can be generalised to other institutions is a matter of debate. Establishing this will depend on how engagement is managed in those institutions. An argument was made in chapter two that universities can be clustered into types. These ostensibly relate to the mission of the university, but are broadly defined by the institution's provenance (Scott, 2012). The university under investigation is one of a group of 'post-1992' universities. It would be straightforward to suggest that this research would be of most relevance to the other former polytechnics that constitute this group. Yet, consideration of student engagement by university type does not justify that assumption. Cluster groups are indicative of relative status, research activity and recruitment. They may also predict the range and nature of subjects taught (Newman, 2009). However, there is far less compelling evidence that they are associated with how universities are run. In fact, approaches to university governance have converged across the sector, with the managerialist model being broadly universal (Shattock, 2008). This is consistent with the neoliberalisation of universities that has seen the commodification of higher education and the rise of powerful management elites (Becher and Trowler, 2001). There is also no apparent association between university type and student engagement. The literature describes a relatively

standard model of student engagement across the university sector (Little et al, 2009). Consequently, this study may have wider reach in the sector than reference to cluster grouping would imply.

Consistency in the management of engagement activities does not mean that student engagement is homogenous across higher education. There are examples of institutions that have attempted to embed engagement into university culture (e.g. Neary and Winn, 2009). Conversely, there is evidence that some universities have barely begun to address the issue (Little et al, 2009). Therefore, the importance of institutional ethos should not be overlooked. The research presented in this thesis is associated with a unique university culture. There is also evidence of different subcultures in the university when it comes to engagement. This was reflected in differences in students' responses dependent on their discipline. It reflects the notion of 'multiple cultural configurations' (Alvesson, 1995) that sees cultures as overlapping in an institution and infrequently evident in a 'pure' form. Additionally, expectations on universities to engage with their students have rapidly evolved in recent years (QAA, 2012a). As a result the landscape of engagement has changed accordingly. Since the data that informed this thesis was collected there have been a number of student engagement initiatives in the institution under investigation. It seems likely, therefore, that these will have changed students' perceptions. This suggests that the cultural factors that influence student engagement are provisional and unstable. Hence, although the research exposes some key challenges in enhancing student engagement, its value is less concerned with any assumption of predictive power than with the debate it provokes.

The challenges of student participation in institutional decision-making
There appears to be an ambition for mass student participation in all aspects of university life (QAA, 2012a). To assess the feasibility of this, it is important to consider the extent to which students are motivated to engage. The findings of this research are positive. Although the preference to be involved was not universal, it was substantial. The issue is then how universities rise to the challenge posed by increasing emphasis on engagement. The first step in addressing this is to understand that student engagement is ultimately in the gift of the institution. Students have agency over the decision to participate, but institutions are responsible for providing the opportunities and incentives. To clarify this, the thesis suggests a Nested Hierarchy of Student Engagement

Interactions *(see figure 1)*. This is based on an argument that it institutional factors have a significant bearing on student engagement. It attempts to reconcile the role of the organisation with established models of engagement that focus on what the student should be or how they should act (Kay et al 2010, Fielding, 2001).

institution as progressive
•Student as change agent

institution as collaborative
•student as partner

institution as responsive
•student as participant

institution as reactive
•student as data source
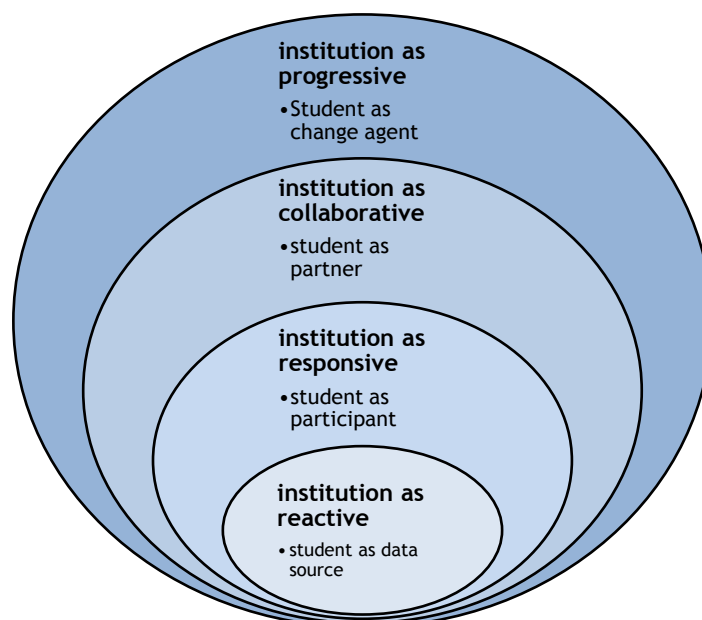
Figure 1: Nested Hierarchy of Student Engagement Interactions

The nested hierarchy locates the responsibility for engagement with the institution, but recognises that student activity is a key to effective participation in all by the most reactive instances. It distinguishes different types of student activity depending on the institutional drive for engagement. These are characterised by increasing levels of student action. In the *students as data source* model, the student community is essentially passive. Their role is to provide information. At its most basic, students are not expected to do anything. The institution gets the information it needs through observation or mining data collected for other purposes, such as attendance, retention and academic performance (Fielding, 2001). In some ways, this is the least problematic area of engagement. No expectation of engagement frees the university from the "*empty rituals of participation*" that characterise the lower rungs of Arnstein's ladder of participation *(*Arnstein, 1969, p 216). However, it is doubtful that a modern university could avoid a degree of active student participation (Pabian and Minksová, 2011). Hence, it is increasingly beholden on institutions to demonstrate varied mechanisms for authentic student involvement (QAA, 2012a). This is will

test university processes and procedures. Involving students in decision-making may result in conversations that are unpredictable and possibly unwanted (Fielding, 2001). The organisation needs to accept a degree of uncertainty and be willing to respond flexibly. How this relates to a neoliberal management ethos has been discussed. Hence, this section will focus on issues relating to the processes of engagement.

The location of engagement

In relation to public participation, Wilcox (1999) suggests that conventional processes and procedures suppress engagement. This was reflected in the qualitative phase of this project, where students claimed that meetings were too formal. Reference to the ladder of participation (Arnstein, 1969) illuminates why this may occur. The ladder is a metaphor for the evolution of power sharing. The public acquires authority through mutual exchange. This is characterised by co-production of knowledge and ideas (Boviard, 2007). Key to this is a focus on local environments. In other words, public participation best occurs where people live and not where they are expected to visit (Gaventa, 2006). Relating this to student engagement is illuminative. Shifting the theatre of engagement from centralised committees to locations where student feel comfortable should encourage student activity. However, this is not simply a matter of the geography of meetings. Previous research, for example, has suggested that the presence of senior managers in student engagement activities can be unsettling as they are unfamiliar to students (Carey, 2013b). This research develops this by identifying unequal student:staff ratios and overly technical language as inhibiting student input. These formalities are the traditions of meetings that McComas et al (2010) suggest are powerful, symbolic forces that suppress criticism and debate.

The literature on public participation suggests that power is enacted in institutional cultures and practices to discourage engagement (Sanderson, 1999). Formalised processes and procedures of committees are, therefore, a potent symbol of the power imbalance between students and staff. The solution is not to abandon meetings as a mechanism for engagement, but to adapt their operation. Sensitively managed meetings offer significant benefits to engagement, as McComas et al (2010) say, they provide "*the opportunity for group discussion and interaction opens up the possibility for collective understanding of the issue of concern*" (p123). University-based participation offers a unique opportunity for

operating 'public meetings' in the context of student engagement. Learning and teaching conventions mean that students regularly congregate and there is no reason why the lecture theatre or classroom should not offer a suitable location for participation. In this study, the majority of students were interested in opportunities for in-class engagement. However, in common with any engagement method, how this is operated will determine the extent to which this constitutes an authentic engagement activity. There is a danger that this would lead to *engagement by stealth,* resulting in the covert collection of data from student to enhance institutional activity. Hence, as with previous discussion on course appraisal, the key is how in-class engagement would relate to broader dialogue (Cook-Sather, 2009). This returns to the Quality Assurance Agency's expectation for 'informed conversations' between university staff and students (QAA, 2012). It underlines the importance of engagement being explicit. In many ways, the outcomes are less important that the process. Students' apparent frustration with institutional failure to 'close the feedback loop' illustrates this. There were clearly instances when the university had responded to feedback, but students did not know.

The student as a 'customer'

The notions of 'informed conversations' and 'closing the feedback loop' can be associated with New Right reliance on active consumerism in public participation (Sanderson, 1999). An active consumer is someone who does not just react to the market, but interacts with it through informed decision-making and feedback. Yet, there is a tendency for students to be judged as passive consumers (McCulloch, 2009). The academic community has shown an understandable distrust in consumerism (Molesworth et al, 2009). However, in a consumerist society, this is a legitimate and inevitable aspect of studenthood. This is not to say that universities should champion the customer status of their students. There is a strong argument that universities should temper internal and external promotions that over-emphasise students as customers (Brown, 2011b). Such activities further entrench the dominance of the consumerist discourse in higher education (Williams, 2011). The implication is that this will not only influence how students see themselves, but how members of staff relate to them. Moreover, a third of students in this study actively *disagreed* with the view that they were consumers. They preferred to identify themselves as learners. Hence, marketing that signifies students as customers may alienate a substantial number of students. However, an equal

number of students agreed with the idea that they are consumers. The research suggests that this may have been detrimental to their university experience. This was evident in a negative association between consumerism and satisfaction. There are several interpretations of this. Consumerist attitudes may engender dissatisfaction by encouraging capricious and short-term assumptions about value for money (Nixon et al, 2010). Alternatively, negative experiences could encourage student to adopt a more consumerist stance (Lala and Priluck, 2011). However, the work of Jary and Lebeau (2009) offers another perspective. They suggest that academic staff often struggle with students whose motivations differ from their own. Consumer views could be one such motivation. Hence, consumerist students could feel alienated in an institution that simultaneously champions their views in its marketing materials and side-lines them through the reaction of academic staff.

At the heart of concerns about a consumerist culture in higher education is the idea that it undermines the spirit of collective action that supports effective engagement (McCulloch, 2009). The lack of any association between consumerism and student engagement suggests that this view may be unfounded. Conversely, it is the actions of the university itself that may threaten this spirit. The focus on complaint as a motivation for engagement supports this. Analysis suggests that identifying students concerns is the emphasis of student participation in university processes and procedures. This is associated with a vicious cycle of criticism, (assumed) inactivity and yet more criticism. Students recognise that academics often know what needs addressing and this leads to frustration (Carey, 2013b). A complaints culture can have destructive impact on student:staff relationships. In this research, students questioned whether efforts to engage with them were tokenistic. This was based on perceived non-response to feedback. It creates the potential for distrustful relationship.

Emphasising complaints can also have an impact on how staff relate to students. It can reinforce the increasingly commonplace depiction of students as selfish and self-serving (Furedi, 2009). However, this research refutes that view. It identified altruism as a motivation for participation. This supports the argument that universities rely on generosity and public spirit in the student community to maximise engagement (Carey, 2012b). In this way, engagement can be associated with notions of civic responsibility and citizenship (Lizzio and Wilson, 2009). To

support this, it has been suggested that student participation in governance is based on, and should promote, democratic ideals (Bartley et al, 2010).

Dissemination of innovation and ideas

Curbing the complaints culture requires on-going dialogue and explicit action. This is consistent with more collaborative operations on the part of the university. The question is then how action and initiatives that grow from student engagement can be disseminated across the institution. An argument in this thesis is that localised interventions are the vital for effective student engagement. Universities have access to students who are motivated and whose relationships with academic staff are positive. This offers solid, local conditions for establishing and nurturing engagement initiatives. The question then becomes whether successful projects can be disseminated and replicated across the institution, or indeed translated to other organisations. Once again, this challenges the conventions of university management. Managerialism is associated with the drive to standardisation and a preference for a 'one-size-fits-all' model (Giroux, 2010). Dissemination then becomes a matter of ensuring fidelity. This relates to the extent to which scaled-up innovation works as well as its initiator project. However, fidelity can only be guaranteed if an initiative is highly structured (Century et al, 2010). As this thesis suggests, much student engagement is relative, contextual and liminal. Hence, there is a danger that attempts to disseminate a thriving local process will weaken that process. Standardisation will eradicate the distinctive features that led to initial success (Johnson and Deem, 2003). In engagement, the issue is less the fidelity of dissemination, but its appropriate adaptation. This relates to how an intervention can profit from adjustments driven by local expertise, whilst maintaining the fundamental components (Southwell et al, 2010). Central to this is establishing what those components are. This requires institutional identification of the essential principles of student engagement in decision-making.

Returning to the literature on public participation offers a valuable perspective on this. The list below is an adaptation of Brown and Isaacs (1994) *Six C's of community engagement* to offer a tentative list of principles:

- Capability - all students and staff are seen as capable of dialogue and the university promotes and resources that dialogue.
- Commitment - engagement focuses on mutual benefit and not self-interest. This highlights the importance of staff being explicit in what they expect of

student and what students can expect in return.

- Contribution - student engagement is voluntary, but students are actively encouraged to get involved. This is supported by a range of opportunities for engagement that will take account of diversity and the different talents that students have.

- Continuity – engagement schemes and processes are rolled forward so the there is an on-going transition process that sustains activity beyond the student lifecycle.

- Collaboration – all participants attempt to work together in an environment of sharing and trust. This requires attention to personal relationships and the emotional labour associated with working together

- Conscience – engagement work embodies ethics of trust and respect between staff and staff, students and students, as well as between staff and students.

Diffusion of an initiative across an organisation requires strategic support. Southwell et al (2010) argue that this needs executive sponsorship, but must also be championed in day-to-day leadership at department and team level. Failure to do this undermines sustainability and threatens the capacity of the organisation to learn from experiences and work collaboratively. This returns to a significant theme of this thesis. Student engagement is a joint venture. It requires creativity, adaptability and trust. The enduring challenge is that engagement may conflict with other institutional requirements. There is no quick fix for this. In fact, engagement activities will differ between and within institutions. Different methods of engagement can co-exist and some will be more effective than others. There cannot be, and should not be, an ideal model. Instead, university managers need to work with the unique capacities of their students and staff.

The operational challenges that student engagement presents for university decision-making are indicative of the complex and contextual nature of the endeavour. Trowler (2010) described engagement as a behavioural, emotional and cognitive contract between students and their universities. This thesis reinforces that by considering engagement in relation to diverse and dynamic student subjectivities and institutional processes that enhance or suppress engagement depending on how they are operated. In addition, it locates student engagement as a both a product of neoliberalism and constrained by it. The neoliberal emphasis on consumerism has created a culture in which students are expected,

and expect, to be involved in decision-making. Simultaneously, it has put pressure on the student:staff relationships that underpin effective engagement practices. Meanwhile, managerialist practices have replaced collegiate decision-making with top-down governance. This has deemphasised the relationship between student and tutor. It appears to have discouraged opportunities for localised student engagement. As a consequence, engagement activities may alienate some students. That may disproportionately exclude students from less privileged social and cultural background, so maintaining inequalities. However, the risk of this can be associated with all forms of student engagement, as they all appear to favour articulate and confident students. This is connected to an aspect of the student experience that has been untouched by the evolution of a neoliberal higher education system. Whilst this has signalled a shift the relative position of managers, academics, administrators and public relations experts in a hierarchy of status and authority, the students' position has remained unchanged. They remain a comparatively powerless group in the university and this presents the most significant challenge for their participation.

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(Note: all web addresses checked and accurate on 26th May 2013.)

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Appendix 1: student engagement questionnaire

[university] Survey of students' views of engagement

[logo]

This survey aims to help us understand how students feel about how the ways they can provide feedback to the university and be involved in decision making about the student experience. We hope the findings will help us to improve how we listen to and work with students. Participation in the survey is voluntary but we would be pleased if you could take 10 minutes to complete and return this anonymous questionnaire.

Thank you

Some information about you
(Please tick the appropriate box for each)

How old are you?		
	18-21	
	22-25	
	26-40	
	Over 40	

Are you...		
	Male?	
	Female?	

Are you a ...	Full time student?	
	Part time student?	

Are you a course representative?	Yes	
	No	
	Used to be	

Did you come from outside the UK or R.O.I to study at [university]?	Yes	
	No	

Your views

Please indicate the extent to which you agree with each statement on a scale of 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. Please try to relate your answers to general experiences as opposed to one-off events.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. I am pleased with my course.					
2. I have positive relationships with most of my university teachers (this could refer to any staff who contribute to your learning.)					
3. I don't have much say over what happens on my course.					
4. The university would be able to make better decisions for future students if it understood my experiences.					
5. I am happy with the opportunities available for me to voice my opinions about studying at this university.					
6. I worry about complaining in case I am seen as a trouble maker.					
7. Most of my tutors are genuinely interested in hearing what I have to say about my course.					
8. Information about actions taken as a result of student feedback is readily available (e.g. on Blackboard, a website/noticeboard or via tutors).					
9. I don't like to complain to an individual tutor for fear that it will have a negative impact on my marks.					
10. There are not enough opportunities for me to meet with students who are not on my course.					
11. I don't usually put a lot of effort into completing module evaluations					
12. I am more likely to complete evaluations when I have a strong opinion about something to do with my course.					
13. Course representatives regularly meet with the class to discuss course issues.					
14. More students should be involved in the university's decision-making processes.					

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. Apart from evaluation forms, most ways of commenting on the student experience are suited to vocal and confident students.					
2. When students complain, it is rare for anything to get done.					
3. I am confident that course representatives fairly represent the views of the students on my course.					
4. I work with members of university staff on activities that are not directly related to my studies (e.g. committees, mentoring, etc).					
5. More opportunities for students to feedback their views on the student experience should be offered during lectures.					
6. I would like to get more involved in decisions relating to my experiences at university.					
7. I regularly participate in students' union activities (e.g. societies, sports, clubs, etc).					
8. I don't think that course representatives have much influence on the decisions made about courses.					
9. I would like the chance to work with university staff on collaborative projects around improving the student experience.					
10. I always complete module evaluation forms.					
11. It's easier to comment about my course to somebody who doesn't teach me than to my lecturers.					
12. The university encourages me to get involved in community or voluntary work.					
13. I have been involved in task groups that were designed to find ways to improve some aspect of the university.					
14. I see students as customers of universities, rather than learners in universities.					
15. I am confident that my students' union represents my views.					
16. I would recommend this university to my friends or family.					

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR TIME.

Any comments?
Please use this space to provide any additional comments about how the university listens to feedback and involves students in making decisions.

Appendix 2: Questionnaire dissemination: subject area related to Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE) Academic Discipline Categories

Course	n	FSSE Academic Discipline category
Fashion (2 classes)	27	Arts & Humanities
Food science (2 classes)	44	Biological Sciences
Sports science	84	Biological Sciences
Chemical and Pharmaceutical Sciences (2 classes)	42	Biological Sciences
Environmental studies	30	Biological Sciences
Sport development and coaching (2 classes)	116	Education
Youth and community Studies	18	Education
Quantity surveying (2 classes)	68	Engineering
Engineering	53	Engineering
Geography	15	Physical Sciences
Computing	32	Physical Sciences
Law (2 classes)	113	Other Professions
Adult nursing (2 classes)	99	Other Professions
Paramedic studies	52	Other Professions
Midwifery (2 classes)	36	Other Professions
Healthcare assistant practitioner	14	Other Professions
Mental Health Nursing (2 classes)	54	Other Professions
Youth justice	38	Social Sciences
Criminology	104	Social Sciences
Criminal Justice	51	Social Sciences
Public health (2 classes)	21	Social Sciences
Social work (2 classes)	54	Social Sciences
Working with Children & Young People	20	Social Sciences
Psychology	126	Social Sciences

Appendix 3 : mean response to engagement items

Engagement item	Mean	Std. Dev.	N
I am pleased with my course.	1.99	.692	1305
I have positive relationships with most of my university teachers	1.99	.726	1303
I don't have much say over what happens on my course.	2.60	.931	1289
The university would be able to make better decisions for future students if it understood my experiences.	2.29	.772	1286
I am happy with the opportunities available for me to voice my opinions about studying at this university.	2.50	.867	1284
I worry about complaining in case I am seen as a trouble maker.	3.37	1.081	1296
Most of my tutors are genuinely interested in hearing what I have to say about my course.	2.22	.821	1301
Information about actions taken as a result of student feedback is readily available	2.58	.934	1297
I don't like to complain to an individual tutor for fear that it will have a negative impact on my marks.	3.36	1.122	1295
There are not enough opportunities for me to meet with students who are not on my course.	2.77	1.043	1296
I don't usually put a lot of effort into completing module evaluations	3.27	1.029	1294
I am more likely to complete evaluations when I have a strong opinion	2.20	.884	1300
Course representatives regularly meet with the class to discuss course issues.	3.65	1.075	1300
More students should be involved in the university's decision-making processes.	2.12	.770	1304
Apart from evaluation forms, most ways of commenting on the student experience are suited to vocal and confident students.	2.23	.739	1294
When students complain, it is rare for anything to get done.	2.83	.897	1291
I am confident that course representatives fairly represent the views of the students on my course.	2.68	.953	1280
I work with members of university staff on activities that are not directly related to my studies	3.71	1.007	1288
More opportunities for students to feedback their views on the student experience should be offered during lectures.	2.47	.869	1286
I would like to get more involved in decisions relating to my experiences at university.	2.52	.847	1284
I regularly participate in students' union activities	3.69	1.178	1291
I don't think that course representatives have much influence on the decisions made about courses.	2.75	.950	1288
I would like the chance to work with university staff on collaborative projects around improving the student experience.	2.78	.920	1292
I always complete module evaluation forms.	2.62	1.076	1281
It's easier to comment about my course to somebody who doesn't teach me than to my lecturers.	2.56	1.040	1291
The university encourages me to get involved in community or voluntary work.	2.88	1.116	1288
I have been involved in task groups that were designed to find ways to improve some aspect of the university.	3.52	1.021	1285
I see students as customers of universities, rather than learners in universities.	3.00	1.133	1290
I am confident that my students' union represents my views.	2.99	.951	1290
I would recommend this university to my friends or family.	2.15	.939	1293

Appendix 4: structure maxtrix for student engagement items

Engagement Item	component							
	1	2	3	4	5	6		7
I am pleased with my course.	.758							
I have positive relationships with most of my university teachers	.748							
Most of my tutors are genuinely interested in hearing what I have to say about my course.	.722							
I would recommend this university to my friends or family.	.692						-.399	
I am happy with the opportunities available for me to voice my opinions about studying at this university.	.532				-.418			
I see students as customers of universities, rather than learners in universities.	-.440					.405		
I would like to get more involved in decisions relating to my experiences at university.		.788						
More opportunities for students to feedback their views on the student experience should be offered during lectures.		.702						
More students should be involved in the university's decision-making processes.		.639						
I would like the chance to work with university staff on collaborative projects around improving the student experience.		.612						
The university would be able to make better decisions for future students if it understood my experiences.		.471				.402		
There are not enough opportunities for me to meet with students who are not on my course.		.354						
I regularly participate in students' union activities			.668					
I work with members of university staff on activities that are not directly related to my studies			.663					
I have been involved in task groups that were designed to find ways to improve some aspect of the university.			.655					
The university encourages me to get involved in community or voluntary work.			.611					
Information about actions taken as a result of student feedback is readily available	.360		.385				-.368	
I don't usually put a lot of effort into completing module evaluations				.838				
I always complete module evaluation forms.				-.779				
I am more likely to complete evaluations when I have a strong opinion				.475				.448
I am confident that course representatives fairly represent the views of the students on my course.					-.801			
Course representatives regularly meet with the class to discuss course issues.					-.757			
I am confident that my students' union represents my views.					-.652			
I don't like to complain to an individual tutor for fear that it will have a negative impact on my marks.						.864		
I worry about complaining in case I am seen as a trouble maker.						.861		
It's easier to comment about my course to somebody who doesn't teach me than to my lecturers.	-.353					.444		.416
Apart from evaluation forms, most ways of commenting on the student experience are suited to vocal and confident students.								.698
When students complain, it is rare for anything to get done.	-.378					.446		.536
I don't think that course representatives have much influence on the decisions made about courses.					.501			.525
I don't have much say over what happens on my course.								.449