

# The Meanings of Student Engagement: Implications for Policies and Practices

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## 1 The Problems of Defining Student Engagement

Student engagement has come to be seen as a ‘good thing’ in higher education for researchers and policy makers alike. For example, the 2011 UK Higher Education White Paper ‘Students at the Heart of the System’ (BIS 2011) emphasises student engagement as a key element of the development of learning communities in higher education. However, as Geven and Attard (2012) noted in relation to ‘student-centred learning’, the fact that it would be very difficult to be against student engagement is testament to its vagueness.

The vagueness around student engagement means that it is currently used to refer to student engagement in learning activities, in the development of curricula, in quality assurance processes, and in institutional governance (for example see Coates and McCormick 2014; Kuh 2009; Trowler 2010). These many different meanings of student engagement have led some researchers to be very critical of its use as a term, with some arguing that it is used uncritically (Zepke 2014) and others arguing that its use is ‘chaotic’, with its very vagueness doing important work to mask inequalities by those who use it (Trowler 2014). What is interesting about these criticisms is that ‘student engagement’ was initially a term used by researchers, which has later been adopted by policy makers as it appears to do useful work.

The question at the heart of this chapter is whether the vagueness and confusion around the use of student engagement can be addressed in a way that helps us to ask

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more critical questions about research and policies relating to student engagement. Our answer is ‘to some extent’. This is because, whilst it is possible to be clearer about the focus and degree of student engagement as we outline below, even when these issues are addressed, the meaning of student engagement will be shaped by (i) the particular context in which it operates, as Vuori (2014) shows in her study of student engagement in three US universities, and (ii) by the meaning of ‘non-engagement’. Thus student engagement means something slightly different when it is contrasted with ‘passivity’, where it is the active nature of engagement that is highlighted or with ‘alienation’ (for example see Case 2008; Mann 2001), where it is the sense of having a stake in the institution that is foregrounded. This highlights the ways in which the meaning of student engagement in particular contexts will always involve a process of shifting and change even when there is a shared sense of the focus and degree of student engagement that is at stake. This suggests that engagement has similar properties to those that Klemenčič (2015) ascribes to student ‘agency’. These are that it develops over time; that it can be stronger or weaker; that it is embedded in particular places and times; and that it is shaped by the conditions in which it operates and by students’ social relationships in higher education. In this way the meaning of student engagement will always shift over time, but we argue that it is possible to be clearer about what is at stake by analysing the focus and degree of student engagement at a particular moment in time.

## 2 The Focus of Student Engagement

One notable aspect of the student engagement literature is how often the ‘object’ or focus of student engagement is left undefined. For example, Kahu (2013) develops a model of student engagement without any explicit discussion of what it is that students are engaging with. This is crucial to know because the meaning of student engagement changes when the object of engagement changes.

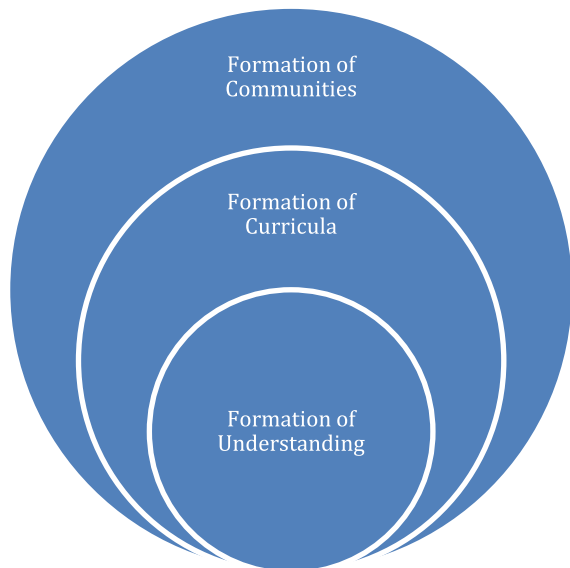
Where work on student engagement *does* focus on the object of engagement (for example see Healey et al. 2014; The Student Engagement Partnership 2014; Trowler 2010), there are a confusing array of objects of engagement identified: student engagement in a wide range teaching and learning processes; in the scholarship of teaching and learning; in quality enhancement processes, in decision making processes; in learning communities. The confusion is increased by the different ways in which these objects are configured in different models. For example, Trowler (2010) includes students’ engagement in curriculum design processes as a form of engagement in learning design, whereas Healey et al. (2014) include it as a form of engagement in quality enhancement processes. This problem is caused by the multiple meanings that can be attributed to learning and teaching (see Ashwin 2009 for a discussion of the problems with these terms). For example, ‘students’ engagement with learning’ could refer to their engagement in particular learning activities (which is what the National Survey of Student Engagement

(NSSE) survey attempts to measure); it could refer to students’ engagement with their courses (which is what the National Student Survey (NSS) in the UK and the University Experience Survey (UES) in Australia measure) or it could refer to students’ engagement with the knowledge that they are learning on their programme (see Ashwin et al. 2014). Thus we argue that the focus of student engagement needs to be more clearly delineated in order to provide a useful sense of the meaning of engagement.

One way of more clearly delineating the objects of student engagement is by focusing on what is being ‘formed’ through student engagement. In thinking this way, we can analytically distinguish between three broad objects of engagement: engagement to form individual understanding; engagement to form curricula and engagement to form communities. This is an analytical distinction because all three formations can occur at once but generally one will be the primary focus of student engagement.

Engagement to form individual understanding focuses on the ways in which student engagement can help students to improve their learning outcomes. Engagement to form curricula focuses on the ways in which students can help to form the courses that they study in higher education, whilst engagement to form communities focuses on the ways in which students can be involved in helping to shape the institutions and societies of which they are part. These three foci of engagement can be seen to form a nested hierarchy illustrated in Fig. 1, with engagement to form communities including and building on notions of the development of curricula and understanding, and engagement to form curricula including

**Fig. 1** Nested hierarchy of the objects of student engagement



and building on notions of engagement to form understanding. It should be noted that this positions student engagement as a knowledge-centred activity because students' engagement in the formation of communities and curricula are predicated on their engagement in the development of understanding. Thus for student participation in higher education to be considered 'engagement' under this framework, they need to be engaging with disciplinary or professional knowledge. This is deliberate and based on the view that "it is the critical relationships that students develop with knowledge that makes a university degree a higher form of education" Ashwin (2014, p. 123).

It can be noted that this way of distinguishing between the objects of engagement cuts across the division between student engagement that focuses on the engagement of student representatives, and those that focus on the engagement of everyday students. We see this as a strength of our proposed model that it brings together these forms of student engagement.

### 3 Three Degrees of Student Engagement

As well as the 'object' of student engagement, distinguishing between different degrees of student engagement can help to clarify the particular meaning of the term. The literature on student participation (Klemenčič 2012a) and partnership (Healey et al. 2014) can offer useful tools. Klemenčič (2012a) argues that participation ranges from its most basic form as access to information, to consultation and dialogue, and finally to partnership. Healey et al. (2014), drawing on Higher Education Academy and National Union of Students (2011), argue that partnership can range from consultation to involvement to participation and partnership. It is interesting to note that both of these frameworks seem to limit students to being engaged as partners. This limitation is consistent in the student engagement literature. Neither the basic terms of engagement nor the object(s) of engagement are in the hands of students to determine.

An alternative way of conceptualizing the degree of student engagement is to examine the ways in which the object of student engagement is affected by students' engagement with it. In doing so, this highlights three broad degrees of engagement: *consultation* in which students engage with a fixed object that is not changed through their engagement; *partnership* in which students participate in the transformation of a pre-existing object of engagement; and *leadership* in which students create new objects of engagement. Unlike the aforementioned models, which imply the value judgement that partnership is the desirable endpoint of student engagement practice, this model seeks only to describe the prospective degrees of engagement available to students and institutions.

In consultation, the idea is that students are asked for their views on a fixed process. Thus the object of engagement is not transformed by students' engagement, but rather small amendments might be made.

In partnership, the emphasis is on reciprocity in relationships between students and academics, along with a shared responsibility for what is happening in the learning environment, a shift that includes meaningful sharing of power (Cook-Sather et al. 2014). Here students engage with a pre-existing object of engagement, but there is the potential for this object to be transformed through the collaborative work of students, academics and their institutions.

In leadership, the emphasis is on the ways in which students can create new objects through their engagement. In this degree of engagement students set their own terms for what engagement entails and for the outcomes of engagement.

In the next three sections, we examine the three degrees of engagement in relation to student engagement as the formation of understanding, as the formation of curricula and the formation of communities. We then conclude the chapter by discussing what is highlighted by this classification and the implications for policy makers.

## **4 Student Engagement as the Formation of Understanding**

Student engagement as the formation of understanding is what is normally referred to as ‘student engagement’ in the US, Australia, Ireland and the UK. The dominant form is derived from a substantial body of literature evidencing the importance of students’ personal investment in a course of study for their learning to be successful (Trowler 2010). It is in this sense that van der Velden asserts that most academic practitioners view student engagement:

- Within the community of academic practitioners, engagement by students is most commonly interpreted in relation to the psychology of individual learning: the degree at which students engage with their studies in terms of motivation, the depth of their intellectual perception or simply studiousness. Engaged students are viewed as taking ownership for their own learning, working together with staff on ensuring academic success and accepting the role of engaged and willing apprentice to an academic master (Velden 2013, p. 78).

In this body of the literature the object of student in engagement is the development of their understanding of the knowledge they are engaging with in their degree programmes.

### ***4.1 Student Engagement in the Formation of Understanding as Consultation***

In this degree of engagement in the formation of understanding, students are seen as engaging with a fixed body of knowledge that does not undergo any change through their engagement with it. This notion of student engagement can be seen in the

mainstream research on student engagement related to the National Survey of Student Engagement in the US and its variants in Australasia, Canada, South Africa and the UK. For example, Coates and McCormick (2014, p. 155), argue that “Simplistically put, students must learn to do higher education in ways likely to promote high-quality learning outcomes”. Here the sense is that the learning outcomes are fixed and that students need to learn the curriculum as set. Thus students are ‘consulted’ to the extent that their understanding is checked and material reviewed or presented in a different way in response to the degree of understanding students exhibit or report.

#### ***4.2 Student Engagement in the Formation of Understanding as Partnership***

In this degree of student engagement in the formation of understanding, the focus is on the ways in which students transform the knowledge that they engage in as part of their courses, and how they are transformed by this knowledge. The focus is on the partnership between academics and students as they work together in teaching and learning interactions in order to co-construct knowledge (see Ashwin 2009). Examples of this kind of engagement include enquiry based learning (Healey and Jenkins 2009) and ‘Student as Producers’ (Neary and Winn 2009) in which students are engaged in authentic research projects in order to produce academic work. It is also reflected in Ashwin et al. (2014) exploration of undergraduate sociology students’ changing relations to knowledge over the course of their degrees. The key focus here is on the way in which knowledge transforms students as they engage with it, and the ways students also transform knowledge as they make sense of it. Thus rather than seeing student engaging with a fixed object of knowledge, the focus is on how students and knowledge are transformed by this engagement.

#### ***4.3 Student Engagement in the Formation of Understanding as Leadership***

In this degree of engagement in the formation of understanding, the focus is on the ways in which students create new objects of understanding. This kind of engagement is much rarer in higher education because the focus is on the ways in which students develop understandings that transcend the existing knowledge domains of higher education. One example is the independent studies degrees that used to exist in the UK in which students negotiated their own programmes of study in order to address a problem that they had identified that they wanted to solve (Robbins 1988). The rarity of this kind of engagement in the formation of understanding is unsurprising, as it challenges the nature of academic knowledge and the role of academics in making this accessible to students.

## 5 Student Engagement in the Formation of Curricula

In *Engaging the Curriculum in Higher Education* Barnett and Coate argue for greater public debate about curricula:

- Through curricula, ideas of higher education are put into action. Through curricula, too, values, beliefs and principles in relation to learning, understanding, knowledge, disciplines, individuality and society are realized. Yet these profoundly important matters are hardly ever raised. It is as if there is tacit agreement that these are not matters for polite company (Barnett and Coate 2005).

The definition of the curriculum ranges from the body of knowledge that constitutes an academic discipline or area of professional practice, to the creation of a structured course of study which tacitly articulates what knowledge is the most important and the ways that students might be expected to encounter it, to what students actually do and understand through their encounters with knowledge (Fraser and Bosanquet 2006). The creation of a curriculum in the sense of a structured course of study is a process that requires significant value judgements about both the evolution of the academic discipline, and the purpose and meaning of higher education (Peach 2010). The published curriculum formally legitimises certain forms of knowledge and learning activity, and delegitimises others. The hidden curriculum—the norms and values that are transmitted through established behaviours, language and practices, but that are not formally encoded anywhere—also sends tacit messages about what matters (Margolis 2001). Students, in encountering a course of study, also encounter and respond creatively to the value judgements and messages about their place and identity as learners embedded in the visible and hidden curricula. For some this encounter may be painful and lead to alienation—Clegg refers to ‘the symbolic violence of the hidden curriculum’ (Clegg 2011). As such the curriculum is widely perceived to be a powerful force for change: witness the various attempts to reform the curriculum in socially purposive directions, most recently the drive to embed Education for Sustainable Development in higher education curricula (for example Ryan and Tilbury 2013; Winter and Cotton 2012). That the cited examples both take the starting point of describing the inefficacy of attempts to change curricula suggests the power and resilience of established academic disciplinary cultures.

### 5.1 *Student Engagement in Curricula Formation as Consultation*

In student engagement in curriculum design as consultation, students are simply consulted about the content of their courses. Within this framework there is arguably limited room for active student agency in determining the nature of the

learning environment or the curriculum. The definition of an effective change in this context is academic-led revisions to curriculum or teaching approaches with a view to enhancing student engagement. In order to test the effectiveness of the intervention it is generally necessary to seek the views of students, but this may be confined to a post hoc opinion survey or similar (see Nixon and Williams 2014 for a recent example of this approach). This is not to say that such interventions are not useful, but to observe that the conventional distribution of power between academic and student remains undisturbed by this conception of student engagement, because it depends on a model of curriculum design that requires knowing about what is needed to be known, and this is the preserve of the academic.

Student engagement is a means by which institutions and academics can cope with the demands of a massified system and a diversified student body when 'engagement' can no longer be taken for granted. Consultation on curricula may be taken to include the efforts of institutional managers and policymakers to gauge student satisfaction with teaching approaches, learning resources, and other factors that shape their encounters with the curriculum. This has led some to perceive an alignment between student feedback practices and an emergent consumeristic culture in higher education in which students' judgements about their academic 'experience' are elevated to the degree of the sacred (Sabri 2011). It is notable that Sabri considers the consumeristic emphasis on student voice as a way in which students are systematically deprived of agency.

There are indicators that academic staff retain protected territory into which student voice is unwelcome; often the specific question of what knowledge students should be able to access in a given course of study is withheld as an object of engagement. As van der Velden notes:

- Academic staff who are content with student involvement in setting teaching policy appear less supportive when considering student representational involvement in the management of a department and its teaching (Velden 2013, p. 87).

Carey's exploration of an instance of student involvement in shaping curriculum, though hardly paradigmatic, is instructive in identifying the conventional power dynamic:

- [M]uch of students input in curriculum design meetings echoed of the passive voice of existing evaluation data...This is associated with tokenistic participation and it was clear from the data that some students recognised this (Carey 2013).

Carey explores the ways that encounters between students and academics, though putatively on equal terms, tend to reinforce existing power structures, through absence of a common language, failure to articulate the potential role of student as offering suggestions and recommendations rather than merely complaints, and the expectation that students participate in university-led processes—formal curriculum review meetings in which students were in the minority—rather than flexing the system to facilitate more student-led encounters (Carey 2013).



## ***5.2 Student Engagement in Curricula Formation as Partnership***

In student engagement in curricula formation as partnership, students take an active role in forming the courses they will study in partnership with members of academic staff. Why should students have the opportunity to influence the curriculum? If the claims that experiencing an in-depth encounter with disciplinary knowledge is not merely a process of acquisition but a process of identity formation and transformation—a ‘becoming’ not a ‘having’ is accurate (Ashwin et al. 2014; Barnett 2009; Molesworth et al. 2009), then the question of students exercising agency in their own learning becomes a profoundly moral one. There are valid communitarian and democratic-consequentialist cases for student involvement in decision-making relating to the strength and inclusivity of academic communities, and to the kinds of capabilities we might hope to see from an educated citizen in the twenty-first century (Luescher-Mamashela 2013), but there is also the proposition that people should be encouraged and enabled to elaborate their own ‘intellectual selves’ (Clegg 2011), and that higher education is one of the primary opportunities for this to occur. Hence radical approaches to curriculum design avoid the tendency of published course outlines to fix the curriculum, and instead create the conditions for the curriculum to be a constantly evolving entity, structured around students’ developmental encounters with knowledge (Lambert 2009; Smith and Rust 2011).

One example of such an approach to curriculum formation is from the Centre for Sustainable Development (CEMUS) at Uppsala University and the Swedish University of Agricultural Science, in which students design and commission courses in partnership with academic staff and postgraduate students, (Hald 2011; Stoddard et al. 2012).

## ***5.3 Student Engagement in Curricula Formation as Leadership***

In student engagement in curricula formation as leadership, students take the lead in designing their own curricula. Use of independent study elements in courses and research-focused initiatives like the Student As Producer model at the University of Lincoln (Neary and Winn 2009) seek to introduce an element of student leadership through the practice of curriculum as research, though student leadership in these example is still framed by institutional process and guided by academics. Outright student leadership of the curriculum may be born of student frustration with the lack of relevance of university curricula. One example is the student-led Post-Crash Economics Society movement which calls for reform in the traditional economics curriculum to include new and emerging economic theories in light of the 2009 economic crash. In one large research-intensive UK University following an

extended campaign, students have successfully organised to protest through the National Student Survey leading to a significant drop in student satisfaction scores for the economics department, a serious blow for any institution seeking to maintain its position in national and international league tables. A more benign version may be seen in student academic societies or special interest groups who arrange reading groups, work-in-progress seminars and speakers, beyond the confines of the formal curriculum. Not enough is known about the extent of this kind of informal learning activity and how it aligns with (or challenges) more formalised encounters with knowledge.

## 6 Student Engagement in the Formation of Communities

In many ways the most long-standing object of student engagement in higher education is their work in forming higher education communities through student representation. Klemenčič (2012a) traces back representative student organizations to the medieval Bologna University where “students were organised into ‘nations’ which initially offered them mutual welfare, protection and collective security against the local authorities” (p.3), and argues that “the Bologna students created a type of university in which sovereign power resided in the student body, the student body associated in nations, and these effectively controlled the university.” However, this form of student representation was short-lived and most subsequent forms of engagement-as-student-representation have not involved such intensity. However, as Klemenčič (2012a) argues, the role of student representation in HE policy making has been highlighted by European Ministers through the Bologna Process, and affirmed as a principle of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

In the UK, versions of students’ unions and students’ associations have existed for as long as there have been universities, and the National Union of Students was founded in 1922, although before the 1960s these were more like social clubs. Modern-day students’ unions have their origins in the post-Robbins settlement in which the democratic principle that students should be represented in institutional decision-making bodies was widely accepted. Student representative bodies bring student community into being; they draw their existence from the premise that there is some element of shared experience that enables a level of solidarity among students and the prospect of being treated with by institutions as a collective or generality of interests. Student representation systems also position students as one group of stakeholders among a wider institutional community or corporation within which the interests of different groups are not always in alignment. Artefacts of community formation include institutional strategies and policies, including those that deal with the participation of students in institutional processes, institutional cultures and practices which may play out distinctly at the level of department or school, and the habits of interaction between various members of the community.

## ***6.1 Student Engagement in the Formation of Communities as Consultation***

In student engagement in the formation of communities as consultation, student engagement can be seen as being incorporated into the wider functions of the corporate university. This is usually as part of quality assurance mechanisms. An example of this form in the UK is the 2012 Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) 'Quality Code' that stipulates that higher education institutions should engage students individually and collectively in assuring and enhancing educational quality through, primarily, systems of student feedback and collective representation (QAA 2012). A subsequent QAA-commissioned report investigating student engagement practice cited a number of established engagement practices including production of student charters, student feedback questionnaires, student representation on committees, student participation in periodic review, and student affairs forums (Van der Velden 2013). It is usual for students' unions to have a significant role in supporting student feedback and representation systems, co-signing the student charter, holding student affairs forums and so on. However, it is noticeable that activities such as these mandate student participation in university-owned processes. For the most part institutional staff produce the surveys in line with institutionally-approved outcomes, and institutions set the committee and decision-making structures into which students are invited to express their views. Institutional staff have the choice as to whether to attend to those views or not, and to avoid seeking student opinion on matters which they consider students to have little to contribute.

This type of student engagement is situated as merely one of numerous systems by which students express opinions and raise issues, rather than a vehicle for critical dissent or challenge (Brooks et al. 2014). Through these formal feedback and representation systems students could, in principle, raise wider issues about the university community in those spaces, but while these are framed in terms of raising issues and feeding back on pre-defined categories, there is limited likelihood that they will do so spontaneously. Thus the possibility of students exercising some degree of agency over that process is carefully withheld, even as institutions publicly proclaim their commitment to listening to students. This can mean that students are increasingly disengaged at a time when they are most encouraged to engage (Baron and Corbin 2012).

## ***6.2 Student Engagement in the Formation of Communities as Partnership***

Student engagement in the formation of communities as partnership can be seen in the emerging literature on 'students as partners', most prominently that produced by the UK National Union of Students (NUS): 'At its roots partnership is about

investing students with the power to co-create, not just knowledge or learning, but the higher education institution itself' (National Union of Students 2012). The 'students as...' formulation signals an opposition to the perceived neoliberal paradigm in higher education that constructs the relationship between students and their institutions as one of consumer and provider.

In opposition to notions of consumer power are positioned ideas of democratic engagement and 'empowerment', as in increased independence, autonomy and critical thinking on the part of students (Bovill et al. 2011a, b). This idea of student engagement in the formation of communities as partnership also can be seen in Klemenčič's (2012b) notion of national student associations as 'interest groups'. Within this, student associations are seen as supplying important resources in the relationship with the state, including legitimizing policies and supporting policy implementation. Student charters, the documents that set out expectations of students, institutional staff and the students' union within a given institution, and that are signed by the head of the institution and the students' union President, are an example of this kind of community formation work. The key issue is that student representation takes place within established channels and is focused on the optimal outcomes for all of the parties.

### ***6.3 Student Engagement in the Formation of Communities as Leadership***

Klemenčič's (2012b) category of student association as 'social movements' is an example of student engagement in the formation of communities as leadership. There is more of a trend towards making claims outside of established channels, such as through protest and other forms of direct action, and the organizations tend to be oppositional to established power structures. Thus they tend to set their agendas rather than responding to requests for partnerships from universities or policy makers. There is also a sense that student interests cannot be separated from wider movements against global capitalism and the restructuring of higher education. There is debate within the student movement whether it is more appropriate for student representatives to construct a shared agenda with institutions to secure the best possible conditions for students, or whether to focus on securing institutional and social change, for example, challenging the salary level of the head of the institution or campaigning for free education, through these more oppositional means.

It is interesting to note that student engagement in the formation of communities as partnership involves greater formal recognition of student organizations and greater rights to represent students. However, as Klemenčič (2012b) notes, this should not be assumed to lead to greater influence.

## 7 Discussion

Our analysis of the different foci and degrees of student engagement highlights six important aspects of students' engagement with higher education. First, it highlights that it is the degree of student engagement that is crucial in determining students' role in transforming the object of engagement. Thus the extent to which engagement is about consultation, partnership or student leadership seems more important than the precise foci of engagement. This is not surprising because it reflects the nested nature of the different foci that we outlined earlier.

Second, it helps to bring together new student engagement practices and the traditional systems of student voice that they have been superimposed upon, such as representation in institutional decision-making bodies. Klemenčič (2015) captures these differences as different modes of agency: personal, proxy and collective. In terms of student engagement these refer to student engagement involving individual students, student engagement involving student representatives, and student engagement involving students coming together in their engagement. By focusing on what is being formed through student engagement and the degree of engagement, it moves away from focusing on who is doing the engaging to the focus of the engagement and the degree of engagement. This allows a consideration of the relations between different forms of student engagement, rather than separating out student representation and student participation in teaching and learning development.

Third, it helps to make explicit some of the work that is done by the 'chaotic conception' of student engagement (Trowler 2014). This is that the discourse of student engagement mediates the tensions in higher education between a neoliberal paradigm that places emphasis on free market competition, value for money and return on investment for individual students, and an emergent learning and teaching culture that recognises the psychosocial and affective dimensions of learning and is concerned with rejecting the notion of the student as consumer. It does this by showing the way in which student engagement at the level of consultation is presented as student engagement at the level of partnership. This misrepresentation of student engagement by institutions and governments risks doubly alienating students, firstly to the extent that as consumers of higher education they are encouraged to commodify their own process of intellectual and personal transformation, and secondly to the extent that the possibility of exercising some degree of agency over that process is carefully withheld, even as institutions publicly proclaim their commitment to listening to students.

Fourth, it highlights that there are three different elements that help to set the degree of student engagement. There is the ways in which student engagement is presented to students, the ways that this is enacted in institutional processes, and the ways that students engage in these processes. For example, whilst traditional forms of curricula formation might limit student involvement to consultation, students can exercise agency in their own learning, and they could exercise influence through the various channels available. Students already exercise choice in which teaching hours they attend, what they choose to read, and the effort they choose to put in. To

characterise these choices as inevitably unconscious, ill-informed or a consequence of immaturity is to ignore the many reasons why students may make strategic choices in being selective in their learning patterns, whatever frustrations and inefficiencies are generated by those choices.

Fifth, these three different elements of student engagement also highlight the importance of institutions and policy makers ensuring that there is alignment between their rhetoric about student engagement, and the ways in which they seek to engage students. Our analysis shows how student leadership tends to be born of frustration with the institutional processes that are offered to students, and seems to be more likely when student engagement as consultation is presented as if it is student engagement as partnership.

Finally, as we outlined earlier, our framework re-emphasises students' engagement in higher education as primarily about an engagement with knowledge by placing their development of an understanding of disciplinary and professional knowledge at the centre of their engagement with higher education. The nested hierarchy we set out in Fig. 1, highlights the ways in which students' engagement in curricula and community formation are predicated on their development of understanding. Thus under our model without engaging with disciplinary and professional knowledge students cannot engage with the formation of higher education curricula and communities.

## **8 Implications for Policy Makers**

The implications of our arguments are that if institutions and/or governments are seeking to promote student engagement, then they need to consider two key questions about this engagement. The first question is what it is that students are being engaged in forming, and the second is what degree of engagement is being sought. It also highlights that more engagement is not necessarily better. Engagement as leadership appears most likely to occur when students feel that existing systems prevent them from having a significant impact on their current educational experience. This is more likely to occur when engagement as consultation is presented as if it is engagement with partnership.

The second implication for policy makers is that higher education is highlighted as fundamentally about knowledge. It is students and academics collective engagement with disciplinary and professional knowledge that is the basis on which students develop understanding, on which curricula are formed, and on which higher education communities are developed. It is the development and transformation of knowledge that higher education crucially offers to societies, and yet knowledge is barely mentioned in European policy documents related to teaching and learning in higher education (for example, see Ashwin et al. in press). Thus we end this chapter by reasserting the importance in thinking about knowledge when thinking about student engagement, and the development of teaching and learning in higher education more generally.

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