# How radical is student engagement? (And what is it for?)

**Research Article**

# How radical is student engagement? (And what is it for?)

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Abstract

This paper argues that the term 'student engagement' as used in UK higher education covers activities with two distinct sets of benefits: those that are pedagogical, and those that are political. Without an overarching account of the value of student engagement that can unify these two sets of benefits, the concept of student engagement in the UK is therefore fundamentally fractured. The paper proposes that critical pedagogy can provide that underpinning account, but at the expense of the current mainstream nature of student engagement. The paper therefore argues that those working in student engagement in UK higher education face a dilemma: either sacrifice the idea of student engagement as a popular solution to mainstream challenges, or give up the idea that student engagement has a unified set of benefits and coherent purpose.

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**Introduction**

A key development in contemporary UK higher education is the growing interest in student engagement. However, there is a distinct lack of clarity about precisely what is meant by the term 'student engagement'; most recently, Graham Gibbs has stated that it 'is now used to refer to so many different things that it is difficult to keep track of what people are actually talking about' (Gibbs 2014). The absence of clarity around the concept of student engagement is demonstrated by the fact that it has 'become…accepted as a universal good' (Millard *et al*. 2013, 8), and all things to all people: 'it suffered from being too popular, too quickly and before it was firmly grounded by a coherent intellectual underpinning, a bubble was born' (Leach, 2012, 59). A review of the literature found 'widespread uncritical acceptance' of the value of student engagement (Trowler and Trowler, 2010, 14).

This lack of conceptual clarity carries a number of risks. If we are not clear about what student engagement is, then our ability to improve, increase, support and encourage it through well-designed interventions will be severely diminished. On a more fundamental level, it will remain unclear what benefits an increase in student engagement will produce, and who incurs those benefits. In the current politicised and shifting state of UK higher education, this is a key point. As Michael Fielding observes in relation to school-level education:

> Student voice and student involvement have become increasingly vogue issues, yet we remain a good deal less clear about what is meant by them than we ought to be and, equally worrying, even less clear whose purposes are served by their current valorization (Fielding, 2001, 235).

This problem is clearly manifested in the contrast between student engagement as a mainstream solution to common challenges, and as a radical approach involving a fundamental change to the structures and values of higher education; it is testament to the current level of confusion that both of these positions have been coherently presented. As evidence for student engagement as a mainstream solution, there is (in addition to the almost universal assent to its value for learning and teaching in higher education) the 2011 White Paper for HE in England which (as well as containing a section titled "Student Engagement") included the following comment: 'In this Chapter, we look at how higher education institutions can create a learning community where

engagement of students is encouraged, their feedback valued and complaints resolved transparently and as soon as possible (36).'

On the other side, there are those who believe that student engagement is key to a fundamental re-evaluation of higher education, and the rejection of the quasi-customer, quasi-market orthodoxy. Those who believe that student engagement 'challenges the hegemony of key tenets of neo-liberal discourse' (Lambert, 2009, 305), and enables students to 'resist the powerless subject position of "consumer"' (Taylor *et al*. 2012, 261) would take themselves to have little in common with the vision of David Willetts and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

The fact that student engagement can coherently be thought of as both underpinning and undermining a quasi-market model of HE should make clear the lack of conceptual clarity; a clear conceptualisation of student engagement would not permit it to be both mainstream and radical in these ways. It should also alert us to the dangers raised by Fielding in the quotation above. It would be a serious mistake to continue to champion student engagement without a clearer sense of 'whose purposes are served by [its] current valorization' (in Fielding's words).

This paper will consist of an exploration of how student engagement and its benefits are understood in the UK, in order to shed light on whether it is correctly considered a mainstream or radical approach to higher education. This exploration will be undertaken through a discussion of a range of published literature on student engagement, focusing on literature that contains categorisations and addresses the benefits and purposes of student engagement. The next section will distinguish two broad purposes of student engagement found in the literature, and argue that at a fundamental level those two purposes seem to be substantively different. The following section ('Putting student engagement back together again') will propose the theoretical means for subsuming those two different purposes under a single coherent conception of the purpose of student engagement. Finally, last section will draw some conclusions about the status of student engagement as a radical approach to learning and teaching in UK higher education.

**Pedagogy versus Politics**

*Categorisations of student engagement from the literature*

The range of phenomena to which the term 'student engagement' has been applied is diverse. At the most fundamental level, it has been taken to be a process that leads to effective learning, undertaken individually by institutions (Little *et al.* 2009) or students (Kuh, 2009), and by both together (Trowler, 2010). It has also been understood as an outcome of effective learning (Kahu, 2013). At a more specific level, the term has been applied to, among other things, work-integrated learning (Coates, 2010), student involvement in research (Taylor *et al.* 2012), interactions of students with each other and with staff (Kuh, 2009), the use of student surveys (Little *et al*. 2009), feeling a sense of belonging to a course or institution (Baron and Corbin, 2012), deep approaches to learning (Nelson Laird *et al*. 2005), student representation (Carey, 2012), development of active citizenship (Zepke and Leach, 2010), student involvement in curriculum design (Bovill *et al.* 2011) and student-led riots (Taylor *et al*. 2012).

These diverse uses of the term urgently need categorisation, and many people have obliged. The Higher Education Academy has proposed a 'spectrum', focusing on the locus of engagement (HEA, 2010). Trowler and Trowler (2010) distinguish three levels: student engagement in their individual learning; student engagement in structures and processes; and student engagement with identity. A number of writers draw on Arnstein's (1969) 'ladder of participation', which represents a hierarchy ranging from manipulation through to partnership and student control (Rudd *et al*., 2006; May and Felsinger, 2010; Freeman and Dobbins, 2011; Bovill and Bulley, 2011). Kahu (2013) sees four kinds of student engagement: behavioural, psychological, socio-cultural and holistic. Zepke and Leach (2011) also propose four perspectives on student engagement: motivation and agency, transactional engagement, institutional support and active citizenship. Fredericks *et al*. (2004) distinguishes behavioural, cognitive and affective elements of engagement. Fielding's (2001) hierarchical model of school-level students as data sources, active respondents, co-researchers and researchers have been cited by some working in higher education (Seale, 2010; Carey, 2013).

Though very useful for other purposes, none of these categorisations explicitly capture what is perhaps the most striking feature of the UK concept of student engagement (understandably in the case of non-UK focused authors), which is its dual nature. In North America and Australasia, student engagement is solely understood in terms of the practices, behaviours and attitudes that lead to good learning. The inclusion of student's roles in decision-making – what in other parts of the world is called 'student voice', 'student participation [or involvement] in governance' – in the concept of student engagement is a uniquely British notion (Hardy and Bryson, 2009), and adds to the challenge of achieving clarity.

A simple categorisation that does recognise these two (geographically-influenced) aspects of engagement has been codified by the Quality Assurance Agency in the chapter on student engagement in their Quality Code. This paper will use the QAA categorisation as a focus for discussion:

> The term ['student engagement'] covers two domains relating to:
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> • improving the motivation of students to engage in learning and to learn independently
>
> • the participation of students in quality enhancement and quality assurance processes, resulting in the improvement of their educational experience (QAA, 2012, 2).[2]

### *Stated pedagogical benefits of student engagement*

For any of the categorisations offered for student engagement, including that of the QAA, there is a question about why these different categories of engagement are beneficial; why they should be supported, promoted and encouraged. The benefits of the first of the QAA's dimensions of engagement – which we will follow Trowler (2010) in calling 'engagement in individual learning' – are relatively explicit due to the fact that it aligns with the concept of engagement developed and extensively explored in North America and Australasia, and closely associated with the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and its derivatives: the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE), the South African Survey of Student Engagement (SASSE), and most recently the Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE). The UK Engagement

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[2] This categorisation shares features with Barnett's (2013) distinction between 'inner' or 'pedagogic' engagement and 'outward' or 'bureaucratic' engagement.

Survey (UKES), a derivative of NSSE, is currently being piloted, but it is notable that there is an intention to add additional questions to reflect the distinctive nature of engagement in the UK (Buckley, 2013).[3]

Insofar as a conception of student engagement is contained in, or presented by, the NSSE questionnaire, it is a complex and multi-faceted conception. It is nevertheless well-established and therefore helpful as a fixed point in the shifting sands of debate around the nature of student engagement. The NSSE draws on a number of theoretical sources: quality of effort (Pace, 1982), student involvement (Astin, 1984), deep learning (Marton and Saljo, 1976), and Chickering and Gamson's (1987) 'seven principles of good practice'. One thing these contributing elements share is that they all concern the behaviours and attitudes that (the evidence suggests) lead to high-quality learning outcomes. And those high-quality learning outcomes are conceptualised in relatively traditional terms, such as retention and persistence (Kuh *et al*., 2008) and the development of critical thinking skills (Pascarella *et al*., 2010). It seems fair to say that the learning and development – understood in those fairly traditional ways – of the individual, or of collections of individuals, is the concern of the NSSE, and of the conceptions of engagement by which it is underpinned:

> In essence, therefore, student engagement is concerned with the extent to which students are engaging in a range of educational activities that research has shown as likely to lead to high quality learning (Coates, 2005, 26).

Turning to the stated benefits of the second of the QAA's dimensions of engagement – the participation of students in the processes of quality enhancement and quality assurance – the situation is made more complex by the lack of a well-established rationale for such engagement. There are clear overlaps with the benefits of students' engagement in their own learning; one of the most widely-cited benefits of student participation in representation and governance is the pedagogical benefit to the individual students involved. This has been described in terms of autonomy (Freeman *et al*., 2013), metacognition (Robinson, 2012), leadership skills (Zuo and Ratsoy, 1999) and skills and confidence (Lizzio and Wilson, 2009). More broadly, as early as 1900 the benefits of involvement in university decision-making to students' ability to act as

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[3] http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/surveys/engagement

responsible citizens in a democratic society were being noted: 'Self-government is part of [students'] education, whether for their profession or for national and civic life' (Ramsey Muir, 1900, as cited by Ashby and Anderson, 1970, 45). More recent authors have stated that such involvement allows students to 'learn by example' to develop citizenship skills (Menon, 2003; Klemencic, 2011a).

The stated benefits of students' involvement in decision-making range beyond the pedagogical benefits to the individual students involved – for example, as representatives – to encompass benefits to the quality of education offered by institutions, and thus benefits to the wider (non-directly participating) student body. There is a relatively unclarified sense that involving students in decision-makings can lead to a general improvement in the life and culture of the institution. Freeman *et al*. (2013) state that such involvement 'injected new life into the community of the university' (10), while Menon (2005) describes a 'positive organisational climate' (169) and Kay *et al*. (2012) talk about 'improving the ethos and culture of the university' (375). In a similar vein, Luescher-Mamashela (2013) describes the idea that involving students creates 'a more peaceful and orderly academic life' (1446) and moderates partisan views. Looking further back, Epstein (1974) drew a link between the student protests in the 1960s and the increased involvement of students in university decision-making, in order to 'forestall campus crises' (195)

More concretely, it is commonly held that students can provide valuable feedback about the learning and teaching within an institution, and that they possess a particular form of expertise on those issues (McGrath, 1970; Carnegie, 1972; Epstein 1974; Little *et al*., 2009; Luescher-Mamashela, 2010). This view (mostly implicit in the vast literature on student surveys which we will not explore here due to lack of space)[4] is summed up by Ramsden's (1998) comment that '[g]ood teaching means seeing learning through the learner's eyes' (353). The value of such 'expert' feedback to institutional efforts to improve the quality of learning is described by a number of

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[4] For an overview of survey approaches see Richardson (2005); for a description of the role of the National Student Survey in quality enhancement see Buckley (2012); for a critique of the NSS see Sabri (2013).

authors (Carnegie, 1973; Boland, 2005; Menon, 2005; Kay *et al*., 2012; Van der Velden, 2012).

Some authors have described the relationship between student feedback and the quality of education offered by institutions in terms of students' roles as consumers or clients (Zuo and Ratsoy, 1999; Little *et al*., 2009; Carey, 2012; Klemencic, 2012; Luescher-Mamashela, 2013).

> The new market orientation adopted by tertiary institutions in their attempt to survive in an increasingly competitive higher education arena is associated with a "customer" focus in educational planning and decision-making. In this context, traditional forms of university governance are rejected in favour of more transparent mechanisms with greater student participation in decision-making. (Menon, 2003, 233)

This brief review of the literature demonstrates that just as students' engagement in their own learning (the first of the QAA's two dimensions) is taken to have key benefits for the quality of education, so is students' involvement in institutional decision-making (the QAA's second dimension). There are pedagogical benefits of student involvement in decision-making both through the developmental opportunities for the individual students directly involved, and through the beneficial nature of student input for institutions' efforts to improve educational provision.

### *Stated political benefits of student engagement*

However, the literature also strongly suggests that the benefits of involving students in decision-making are taken to extend beyond the kinds of pedagogical benefits described above; there are benefits that are described in explicitly political terms:

> The issues involved [in student participation in governance] are primarily political and only secondarily educational. (McGrath, 1970, 29).

As Seale (2010) observes, the political nature of student engagement is often implicit in the literature, and commonly used political terms like 'empowerment' 'tend to be poorly developed' (1000). Nevertheless, there are some explicit treatments of the political benefits of engagement.

Firstly, the citizenship education described above is taken to have political benefits beyond individual institutions, through counteracting democratic fatigue, voter apathy and loss of trust in democratic institutions (Boland, 2005; Klemencic, 2011a;

2011b). However, it is the political benefits that accrue *within* institutions that are more prominent in the literature. Several authors highlight the rights of students to contribute to decisions as 'stakeholders' – individuals whose lives are so strongly affected by the consequences of decisions that they are entitled to a voice in those decisions (Menon, 2003; 2007; Pabian and Minksova, 2011). Relatedly, the right of students to be involved has been linked to issues of democratic representation, 'the participation of all politically significant constituencies, including – and especially – students' (Klemencic 2011a, 16. *See also* McGrath, 1972; Boland, 2005; Luescher-Mamashela, 2010). An alternative conception is also given in terms of students as consumers, customers or clients, with the authority and empowerment that entails (Zuo and Ratsoy, 1999; Klemencic, 2012; Luescher-Mamashela, 2013).

> [I]t is proposed that, as 'consumers' of education, students are entitled to participatory rights in managerial processes and practices at their institutions. (Menon, 2005, 169)

Some authors also highlight the fact that the proposed rights of students to be involved in decisions are related to their responsibility for the delivery of effective education (Zuo and Ratsoy, 1999; Boland, 2005).

There are of course vast differences between these different conceptions of students' political status, but what is relevant for present purposes is that the recognition of their rights through student participation in decision-making is an unequivocally *political* benefit. The literature does therefore contain explicit conceptualisations of the political benefits of student involvement in university decision-making, but they are rare in comparison to the volume of *implicit* appeal in UK HE to political issues of democracy and empowerment. For example, every spring at UK institutions students are urged to 'have your say' or 'make your voice heard' by responding to the National Student Survey. There seems a general consensus in the sector that 'students in higher education are adults. Treating them as adults involves… shared responsibilities and the participation of students in educational organisations' (Visser *et al*., 1998, 451). However, the ubiquity of these (largely implicit) appeals to political considerations should not disguise how much they differ from the pedagogical benefits of engagement described earlier. It seems clear that while the benefits of the second of the QAA's dimensions of engagement do include pedagogical benefits (to the students involved

and to the wider cohort through improved provision) there is also a second class of benefits that are characteristically political.

## *Pedagogy versus politics*

The distinction between the pedagogical and political benefits of student participation in decision-making is neatly illustrated by two contrasting quotations from the same US organisation reporting in the 1970s on the governance of universities:

> [I]t is both unwise and inherently wrong to be unconcerned about [students'] reactions and wishes. (Carnegie, 1972, 34)

> Students should be involved in governance to the extent that they contribute to the quality of decisions and the overall performance of the campus. (Carnegie, 1973, 72)

While the latter (and later) quotation explicitly restricts the benefits of student participation to narrow improvements in quality, the former goes further and also recognises the moral right of students to be involved in decisions. By being engaged in their own studies (in the sense reflected in the NSSE questionnaire) students' learning is improved; and by being engaged in representation, governance and other forms of decision-making, students improve their own learning and that of their peers, but additional political benefits accrue from the recognition of students' rights to such involvement.

In terms of benefits, it therefore seems as though what is covered in the UK under the apparently unified concept of student engagement actually falls into two sharply different categories. There are attempts to improve learning and development (both through engaging students in learning activities and through enlisting their help to improve decisions) but there are also attempts to reap political and moral benefits, by recognising and enacting students' legitimate political claims to involvement in the decisions that affect them. It is undoubtedly the case that these different benefits overlap and intermingle as motivations for particular student engagement initiatives. It is also likely that in current practice they rarely exist in isolation. However, that does not negate the fact that they belong to fundamentally different classes of benefits: those concerned with political rights, and those concerned with student learning.

For example, it would be coherent for someone to be persuaded of the *pedagogical* benefits of student engagement, whilst maintaining that institutional governance and decision-making should be solely in the hands of academics or university administrators (e.g. due to their supposed greater expertise). Similarly, it would be coherent for someone wedded to a didactic approach to teaching to reject the pedagogical benefits of student engagement and the idea of active learning on which it is based, and yet lobby for the greater participation of students in decision-making in recognition of their status as stakeholders, customers or political constituents of the institution. Even if in practice the two kinds of benefits enunciated in the literature overlap, they seem conceptually distinct on a fundamental level.

The belief that there is a unified set of benefits or purposes underlying student engagement in the UK is rarely made explicit, but is apparent in the assumption that there is a unified (though complex) conception of student engagement (capturable by a single definition or framework). Even where a unifying vision of the value of student engagement is presented, it has not been conceptualised beyond the most basic level. The idea that student-centred learning underpins both the notion of student engagement contained in NSSE, and the right of students to be involved in decision-making, has been presented but only in broad outline (Foroni, 2011; Klemencic, 2011a; 2012):[5]

> Present developments in higher education increasingly focus on the central role of students in education. A logical next step in these developments is to give students responsibilities not just in the learning process but also in curriculum organisation and the management of medical schools. (Visser *et al.,* 1998, 453)

Something like this view is likely to be popular; that engagement in learning and involvement in decision-making are somehow connected by an underpinning conception of higher education. However, no conception has yet been explicitly offered as performing this role, beyond gestures to the idea that students are in some sense 'at the centre of learning'. The next section will present a candidate for such an underlying

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[5] It is worth re-emphasising that this question of a unified set of benefits is a distinctly British problem. There are serious issues with the conceptualisation of student engagement in the rest of the world, but they do not include the challenge – created by our extension of the term 'student engagement' to students' involvement in decision-making – of combining these particular pedagogical and political issues.

account. The conclusion of this section is that without such an account, student engagement in the UK is a fundamentally fractured idea.

**Critical Pedagogy: Putting student engagement back together again?**

Critical pedagogy is a conception of education that draws on a range of related theoretical concerns, including Marxism, post-modernism, cultural theory and psychoanalysis. It gives a central role to reflection on, and critique of, power relations and structures – including those present in the educational context itself – with a view to effecting change within society. The hierarchies and distinctions of 'traditional' education are rejected (or at least transmuted) and learning explicitly incorporates, as a central purpose, engagement with wider societal issues:

> Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teacher. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach (Freire, 1970, 61).

> [C]ritical pedagogy proposes that education is a form of political intervention in the world that is capable of creating the possibilities for social transformation. Rather than viewing teaching as technical practice, radical pedagogy in the broadest terms is a moral and political practice premised on the assumption that learning is not about processing received knowledge but actually transforming it as part of a more expansive struggle for individual rights and social justice (Giroux, 2004, 34).

The last section presented the case that the pursuit of student engagement in the UK threatens to collapse into two very different enterprises: the improvement of students' learning and development, and the political reconfiguration of higher education. An account is needed that can explain how these ostensibly different aims are actually unified. Critical pedagogy, in viewing education as fundamentally concerned with issues of power and politics, promises just that kind of unifying account.

For critical pedagogy, issues of student learning and development always involve political considerations. This is in order for education to serve democratic ends (Fielding, 2001; McMahon and Portelli, 2004), to connect with societal issues (Giroux, 2004), or to promote social justice (McLaren, 2009), and because 'to teach is to encourage human beings to develop in one direction or another' (Shor, 1999); but beyond this, there is a view that all spheres of human activity involve issues of power

and justice, and education is no exception. To claim otherwise is also to itself adopt a political position (Giroux, 2004; McLaren, 2009; McMahon and Portelli, 2004):

> Conceptions of engagement, it was clear to us, were never theoretically or politically neutral, whether or not the people espousing them explicitly claimed their politics. Furthermore…the claim to political and theoretical neutrality on such issues is in itself a politically conservative, techno-rational position on engagement and education. (Vibert and Shields, 2003, 236)

Critical pedagogy does not recognise the gap between pedagogical and political benefits that threatens the coherence of student engagement in the UK. The two sets of benefits are inextricably intertwined. The kind of student engagement justified by critical pedagogy would not possess all the same features as the current conception, but there are considerable areas of overlap, including the notions of transformation (Vibert and Shields, 2003), empowerment (McMahon and Portelli, 2004), partnership (Fielding, 2012), and the rejection of didactic forms of teaching (Freire, 1970). The critique, rejection or transmutation of hierarchical structures by critical pedagogy would entail that just as students should be empowered to take responsibility for their own individual learning (as with the first of the QAA's dimensions of engagement) so they should be empowered in the wider decisions about their education: it is crucial to expose, critique and modify power structures not only in the narrow confines of a classroom or lecture hall but more widely. Critical pedagogy thus promises to provide an underlying connection between the pedagogical and political benefits of student engagement.

**How radical is student engagement?**

By rejecting a principled distinction between benefits in the realm of learning and benefits in the realm of politics, critical pedagogy could usefully underpin a unified account of the value of student engagement in the UK. However, the cost of this conceptual clarity may be the widespread support that student engagement currently seems to enjoy. There may be considerable resistance to the idea that the value of student engagement depends on the claim that learning is essentially political. As supporters lament: 'Critical pedagogy faces a crisis… grounded in the now commonsense belief that education should be divorced from politics' (Giroux and Giroux, 2006, 21). For example, it is unlikely that those who espoused the benefits of student engagement in the English White Paper would be comfortable with a concept of

student engagement underpinned by critical pedagogy.

There may potentially be general support for the claim that education is concerned on some deep level with societal change, with improving the world around us and with reassessing and altering the status quo. The preparation of students for involvement in civic life (discussed earlier), the pursuit of curricular relevance and the recent emphasis on community engagement are all obvious indications of the widespread view that higher education is fundamentally concerned with contribution to a better society (though the contrasting idea that a university education is about private economic benefit is also very visible). However, critical pedagogy takes the links between educational and social change much further. Both critics and supporters have claimed that it does not aim at social change *in general*, but at particular kinds of social and political change (McLaren, 2009; Ellsworth, 1989; Shor 1999):

> Critical educators typically enter the classroom with preformulated political objectives. Their goal is not to bring out students' independent thoughts, as it were, like a genie out of a lamp, but to alter students' ways of thinking to conform with a preconceived notion of what constitutes critical thought. Freire, for instance, admits that he wants students to understand that hunger is caused by the 'asymmetrical social and economic distribution of wealth'. (Freedman, 2007, 444)

This idea, though not unexpected given the roots of critical pedagogy in radical left politics, is contentious. There is a debate within critical pedagogy about whether it does necessitate the promotion of particular ideologies (Giroux and Giroux, 2006), and a well-documented dilemma about the role of the teacher's authority in directing and (thus) limiting the 'emancipation' of students (Roberts, 1997; Freedman, 2007). Nevertheless, the idea that education does not just involve vague notions of social change, but is fundamentally about the promotion of particular (left-leaning) political ideologies is unlikely to receive widespread acceptance, and that is arguably appropriate. The current challenges of higher education as conceptualised by the mainstream discourse – issues of quality of provision, student choice, quality of learning outcomes, graduate earnings etc. – are unlikely to be amenable to a drastically politicised conception of education. Critical pedagogy is correctly viewed as a radical alternative to mainstream conceptions of education; and, some may say, diametrically opposed to a vision of higher education as a space for politically unaffiliated freedom of

thought. A conceptualisation of student engagement supported by critical pedagogy would also of necessity be a radical proposal lacking mainstream appeal.

Some in the UK would be likely to welcome that conclusion, particularly those who promote the concept of 'student-as-producer'.[6] This concept incorporates aspects of student engagement (specifically around student involvement in research) into an explicitly "radical and political sociological project" (Neary, 2012, 2) to reconceptualise higher education along socialist and anti-capitalist lines:

> In order to fundamentally challenge the concept of student as consumer, the links between teaching and research need to be radicalised to include an alternative political economy of the student experience (Neary and Hagyard, 2011, 209).

As the quotation above suggests, the student as producer model is viewed explicitly as 'more than the mainstream interpretation of student engagement' (Neary, 2012, 2. *See also* Lambert 2009; Taylor *et al*. 2012).

**Conclusion**

This paper has argued that student engagement as understood in the UK covers two domains of benefits: the pedagogical and the political. The contrasting nature of these two different domains threatens the conceptual unity of student engagement in the UK. This paper has further argued that critical pedagogy offers the prospect of a coherent and unified account of the value of student engagement, but at the cost of the mainstream acceptance of student engagement as a positive force in UK higher education.

This paper therefore attempts to pose a dilemma for those working on student engagement in the UK. If they wish to preserve the concept of student engagement as it is currently understood, encompassing benefits both of improved learning and more equitable political organisation, they will have to sacrifice the mainstream acceptance of student engagement and all that comes with it in terms of funding, attention and activity. On the other hand, if they wish to preserve the idea that what is thought of as student engagement can provide a general and popular solution to mainstream issues in

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[6] http://studentasproducer.lincoln.ac.uk/

UK higher education, then they will have to give up the idea of a unified purpose or set of benefits of student engagement. The option that is not left open, according to this paper, is what currently appears to be the assumption: that student engagement in the UK is a concept with mainstream appeal and applicability and a unified purpose and set of benefits.

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