Introduction

The aim of this paper is to consider the recent developments in student engagement practices within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and to reflect upon the practical reality and challenges faced by HEIs as they develop such practices. The paper outlines recent policy focusing on student engagement within HEIs and explores the core values which underpin student engagement practices. The implementation of student engagement practices in schools is already well established; the plethora of work relating to school-based student voice and student engagement practices will be drawn on to inform our understanding of, and open up debates about, the potential of student engagement practices in HEIs and the related dilemmas which surround the development of this work.

Policy Context

An increasing number of universities and HEIs are developing student engagement practices within their institutions, and the past five years have seen the adoption of various policy documents in the United Kingdom (UK) focusing on actively involving students in HEI’s decision making processes with the aim of enhancing their HEI experiences. In 2007, with the launch of the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS), the then Labour government sought to ‘amplify the student voice’ (Little et al, 2009, 3) and, in 2008, nine reports on the future of higher education were commissioned by DIUS (DIUS, 2008). In 2007, the strategic plan for the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) had, as one of its objectives, to ‘work with students and other stakeholders to ensure a high-quality learning experience that meets the needs of students’ (HEFCE, 2007). Since this time, HEFCE has worked with other national organisations, including the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and the National Union of Students (NUS) to develop student engagement policies and inform institutional practice. In 2008, the Chief Executive of the HEA, Professor Paul Ramsden, called for students to play a more active role in planning and quality assuring higher education courses. He argued that the student perspective is essential to students’ success and asserted: ‘The most effective higher education environments are ones in which students are diligently involved as part of a community of learners ... As part of this they work together with academics to enhance teaching, assure quality and maintain standards. Joint responsibility is the key to ensuring a successful future for our universities and colleges’ (Ramsden, 2008).

In 2009, DIUS was merged with the newly formed Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) and in 2011, a White Paper was presented to Parliament by BIS entitled ‘Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System’. This document stated ‘Student charters and student feedback will take on a new importance to empower students whilst at university’ (BIS, 2011, 6), and, ‘Charters should emphasise that to pursue higher education is to belong to a learning community and that the experience will be most enriching when it is based on a partnership between staff and students’ (BIS, 2011, 33). This growth in interest and activity by national organisations concerned with the conduct and betterment of HEIs has prompted HEIs to reflect on the worthiness of their current student engagement practices. In many cases this has led to HEIs purposefully extending the spectrum of opportunities through which students can become involved and meaningfully contribute to discussions and decision-making processes within the HEI, with the aim of enhancing their learning and their HEI experiences.

This interest comes at a time when student voice and student engagement practices are already well established in many primary, secondary and special schools throughout the UK (Halsay et al, 2006), as well as in schools throughout Australia, Canada, New Zealand and USA (Fielding, 2009). For many schools the move towards the embedding of student voice work, and listening to and acting upon the perspective of learners in schools, was triggered by Acts and Conventions which have addressed issues of children’s rights and children’s participation. For example, The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989 (UN General Assembly Resolution 44/25) gives children a right to
express their views, to be heard and to take part in decisions that affect them, and in the UK various
government policies have led the way to schools placing emphasis on listening to the voices of their
learners, (e.g. ‘Every Child Matters: Change for Children’, DfES, 2004; The Children’s Plan: Building
brighter futures’, DCFS, 2007; ‘Working Together: Listening to the Voices of Children and Young
People’ DCFS, 2008). Thus, a growing number of students are now entering HEIs having already
experienced and been involved in student voice and student engagement activities at school.
School-based
research has shown that there are benefits to staff, to students and to the wider school
environment brought about by listening to the perspectives of their student body (Rudduck and
Flutter, 2004; Flutter and Rudduck, 2004). Where schools have developed student engagement
practices, this has been found to contribute towards the development of a positive learning culture
(Flutter and Rudduck, 2004). Research relating to the impact of implementing student voice and
student engagement practices in schools has shown that where teachers listen to students’
perspectives on their learning experiences, this enhances teachers’ understanding of how students
learn most effectively and has led them to reflect on, and make changes to, aspects of their own
teaching practice (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004). Similarly, Bragg and Fielding (2005) found teachers
considered students were able to offer them valuable feedback in relation to students’ learning, and
this supported teachers in refining and developing their practice. Furthermore, where students are
actively involved in contributing to discussions and decisions about teaching and learning, this leads
to them developing a deeper understanding of the learning processes and promotes their
development of higher order thinking skills in (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004).

**Terminology relating to student engagement practices**

Throughout the student voice and student engagement literature various terms are used, each
referring, broadly, to different types of working with students to elicit their perspectives about their
school and HEI experiences and how these can be improved. The terms used include, student voice,
student engagement, student participation, students as researchers and students as agents of
change, to name but a few, however, there is no distinct definition relating to each of these terms;
the characteristics pertaining to each overlap and each have various connotations and limitations. A
brief overview of the meanings attributed to each of these terms is given below.

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**Student voice.** The terms student voice or pupil voice, which are often used synonymously in
school-based
literature (Robinson and Taylor, 2007), tend to be used as general terms to refer to the wide
variety of work taking place in schools and HEIs which involves students having a say in aspects of
their school lives that affect them. Cheminais (2008, 6) provides a general, all-encompassing
definition of pupil [student] voice in her statement: ‘pupil voice can be understood as pupils having
the opportunity to have a say in decisions in school that affect them’. When this definition is
translated to relate to students in HEIs, it implies that students will be involved in discussions and
decisions about aspects of teaching, learning, assessment, course organisation and the organisation
of other structure within their HEI.

**Student participation.** According to Flutter and Rudduck (2004, 5) student participation suggests
inclusion or membership of a community in which students are respected contributors. It relates to
students being given an active and direct involvement in school [HEI] matters, at some level. The
notion of participation in student voice work, however, often implies that the agenda is institution,
and not student-driven, and that students are merely invited to respond to questions presented to
them either verbally or in written form. Thus students are considered to participate when, for
example, they respond to questions about their experiences at school / HEI. The notion of students
as participants implies that students are represented on committees within the institutional system.
For example, students may sit on institutional councils and on learning and teaching committees, or
they may participate in activities such as writing codes of practice, however, the term does not have
implications of students being actively engaged in change processes (Kay, Dunne and Hutchinson,
2010).
Students as researchers. Healey and Jenkins (2009) assert that one of the most effective ways to enhance learning in universities is to engage students in research and enquiry. Student as researcher projects involves students identifying issues to be investigated, which the students themselves consider to be important, and leading research within their school or HEI. Students as coresearchers, however, involves tutors initiating and leading research projects with students supporting them in this endeavour (Fielding, 2004).

Students as partners, co-creators and experts emphasises the engagement and collaboration of students and tutors working as equal partners, with each respecting the views and expertise brought to the partnership by all members. Such partnerships include, for example, students training staff in new skills, designing curricular and resources, negotiating examination questions, setting assignments, redesigning module provision, and delivering and producing induction material (Kay, Dunne and Hutchinson, 2010).

Students as change agents, as the title suggests, involves students being actively engaged with the process of change within their institution. Stevenson (2008) defined change agents in the following way: ‘A change agent lives in the future, not the present… has a vision of what could or should be and uses that as the governing sense of action’. Thus, the notion of students as change agents requires a move from institution-driven to student-driven agendas and activity (Dunne and Zandstra, 2011), it involves students taking a pro-active rather than a reactive role within their institution and being pivotal in terms of initiating and driving forward change, the focus being on bringing about change built on evidence-based foundations (Kay, Dunne and Hutchinson, 2010).

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Student engagement. Within much of the school-based literature, student engagement refers to the excitement and investment a student feels towards an aspect or issue that is of interest to them (Cheminais, 2008, 6). However, an alternative view of student engagement is presented by the HEA (Trowler, 2010) who state:

‘Student engagement is concerned with the interaction between the time, effort and other relevant resources invested by both students and their institutions intended to optimise the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students and the performance, and reputation of the institution’.

The HEA states specifically that student engagement refers to ‘students as active partners in shaping their learning experiences’ (HEA website, accessed 10th Feb 2012). This approach to student engagement has a sub-text of students acting as change agents within their HEI and driving developments in teaching, learning and organisational change. When discussing models of student engagement, Taylor and Wilding (2010, 3) suggest re-creating the notions of an inclusive academic community where learners, teachers and researchers are all seen as scholars and collaborators in the common pursuit of knowledge.

Within the context of this paper, student engagement will be defined in broad terms as:
‘the active involvement of listening to individual and collective perspectives of students, about matters which relate to the students’ experiences of higher education, such matters may have institution-driven or student-driven agendas’.

For the pursuit of student engagement work to be authentic, those within HEIs must be open to genuinely listening to students’ perspectives in a variety of fora within their HEI, and to the possibility of making changes to HEI policies and practices as a result of this. Thus, student engagement aims to create a situation whereby staff and students have a shared responsibility for the development of practices and policies within their HEI, aimed at enhancing the students’ learning and HEI experiences.

Student engagement practices in HEIs

One rationale for HEIs moving towards developing student engagement practices is to enhance students’ overall HEI experiences and to create a learning community comprising both staff and students. In a report to HEFCE on student engagement in HEIs in England (Little et al, 2009, 4), it was noted that although institutions view student engagement as central to enhancing the student experience, there was a tendency for HEIs to place an emphasis on viewing students as consumers,
rather than viewing students as partners in a learning community. Related to the notion of perceiving students as ‘consumers’, it has become common practice for HEIs to develop a range of means of listening to students’ viewpoints about their learning experiences. For example, it is customary in HEIs to invite students to nominate a student representative for each of their programmes of study, and for these representatives to meet on a regular basis to discuss students’ concerns relating to particular programmes. These concerns are then fed into institution-led meetings where decisions are made about the appropriate action to be taken. It is also customary for HEIs to invite students to complete module evaluations to determine students’ views on their experiences of the modules they have recently undertaken, and for the completed evaluations to be reviewed by tutors who then make decisions about whether, and if so how, to act upon the students’ feedback. Little et al (2009) found the majority of HEIs rate their student engagement practices, typically comprising a basic model of student feedback questionnaires and student representation systems, as reasonably or very effective; student unions, however, are less likely to consider this to be the case.

To date, the development of student engagement practices in HEIs have largely been institutionally driven; however, Ramsden (2008) suggested that student involvement in quality processes should start from the idea of building learning communities. He asserted: ‘Practically speaking, this involves shaping student expectations of their role as responsible partners who are able to take ownership of quality enhancement with staff and engage with them in dialogue about improving assessment, curriculum and teaching’ (Ramsden, 2008, 6).

On a national level, undergraduate students in the final year of their programme are invited to participate in the National Student Survey (NSS). This is largely a tick box questionnaire focusing on students’ experiences of their programme of study and the support received during their time at the HEI. Students are requested to grade a series of statements on a five point scale from whether they ‘definitely agree’ to whether they ‘definitely disagree’ with the statements (there is also a ‘not applicable’ category of response). Examples of the statements included on the survey include: ‘Staff are good at explaining things’; ‘The course is intellectually stimulating’; ‘I have achieved sufficient advice and support with my studies’; ‘The course is well organised and running smoothly’; and, ‘As a result of the course, I feel confident in tackling unfamiliar problems’. Within the NSS survey, as with many programme and module evaluations commonly used in HEIs, the questions asked tend to be developed within a framework of what the institution or the organisation considers to be important and provides little opportunity for students to comment freely on areas which are of concern to them. Additionally, the NSS survey is administered towards the end of a student’s time on an undergraduate programme and, although the outcomes of these surveys can help inform future planning, the students themselves who complete the survey are unlikely to benefit directly from the responses they give. A similar situation arises where students complete institutional-driven evaluations administered at the end of modules or programmes of study.

There are, however, some examples of universities within the UK, purposefully providing opportunities for students to be involved in activities in which they act as partners with academics in the learning community during their time at the HEI. For example, the University of Exeter promotes the notion of students as change agents. As part of this, students are involved in training staff in the use of new technologies, designing curricula and resources, negotiating assessment processes and practices, writing examination questions and question banks, setting assignments, redesigning module provision and delivery, and producing induction material for new student cohorts (Dunne and Zandstra, 2011).

Birmingham City University runs a Student Academic Partners scheme (Birmingham City University website, accessed 12th Feb 2012) aimed at integrating students ‘into the teaching and pedagogic...
research communities of faculties as a way to develop collaboration between students and staff'.

The projects run under this scheme involve collaboration between student and staff teams and have included projects focusing on: The development of activities for improving communication between students and staff within the School of English; The evaluation of an online peer assessment tool on a Visual Communications course within the Faculty of Technology, Engineering and the Environment; The review of course evaluations and development of initiatives for improving the learning experience on a Nursing course in the Faculty of Health. Additionally, the University of Lincoln promotes the notion of ‘Student as Producer’. This is a development aimed at making research engaged teaching an institutional priority across all faculties and subject areas. ‘In this way students become part of the academic project of the University and collaborators with academics in the production of knowledge and meaning.’ (University of Lincoln website, accessed 12th Feb 2012).

Within the student engagement literature, there has been little written about the development of engagement practices geared specifically at post graduate students. However, the UK Government’s Higher Education White Paper (BIS, 2011) has asked sector bodies to consider proposals for a public survey of postgraduate taught students. The national Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) is a service provided by the HEA to all UK HEIs which aims to canvass the views of post graduate students in terms of their HEI post graduate experiences. Students’ PTES results are anonymous and allow for comparisons to be made against sector benchmarks and previous years’ survey results with the purpose of facilitating HEIs in developing strategies for internal enhancement. In 2011, 80 institutions and 38,756 students participated in PTES in (information on PTES available at HEI website, accessed 12th Feb 2012). Furthermore, in line with the QAA expectations, it is common practice for research students in HEIs to be invited to complete an institutionally-developed Student Satisfaction Survey to ascertain students’ views on their HEI experiences.

If HEIs are serious about authentically engaging and encouraging students to play a leading role in decision making and future planning within HEIs, the core values which lie at the heart of all student engagement practices must be explored and articulated. In an earlier paper (Robinson and Taylor, 2007) consideration was given to the theoretical underpinnings of student voice work. At the time of writing this paper, the term ‘student voice’ was most commonly used in the school arena to describe student engagement activities, however, due to recent changes in the terminology used, and due to the overlapping meaning attributed to the various terms, the values which lie at the heart of students voice activities can also be seen as central to student engagement activities. These values are:

- The conception of communication as dialogue;
- The requirements for participation and democratic inclusivity;
- The possibility for change and transformation;
- The recognition that power relations are unequal and problematic.

Below I will argue that each of these core values needs to be in place for student engagement practices to be meaningful in HEI settings.

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**A conception of communication as dialogue**

The notion of communication as dialogue does not refer to communication as in the transfer of messages from A to B, but rather to communication as the generation of meaning (Fiske, 1990, 39). Such communication between students and tutors, and amongst students themselves, leads to a joint understanding and opens up possibilities for new forms of knowledge to be generated as a result. Within these forms of communication, students and tutors engage in dialogue which allows each the chance to speak openly to each other and each to be receptive to the ideas of others. Thus, the topics for discussion should be ones that students see as significant and the discussions should be occasions for genuine dialogue in which students can speak without fear of retaliation (Rudduck and Fielding, 2006, 227).

**The requirement for participation and democratic inclusivity**

In many cases the perspectives of students are listened to in a tokenistic ways, with schools and HEIs
often listening only to those who possess and display the school’s desired cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977) and those who agree with what the school or HEI wants to hear. In order for students to voice their opinions freely without fear of rebuke, for students and tutors to genuinely engage in democratic discourse about HEI practices and procedures, and for them to engage in decision making at various levels throughout the HEI, HEIs need to create a climate in which all students, not just the more able or more articulate and those who glibly adhere to existing practices, feel comfortable to speak. As Bragg (2001, 70) invokes there is a need to hear ‘incomprehensible, recalcitrant or even obnoxious’ voices. Thus, as HEIs look to create an environment of democratic inclusivity, institutions need to consider ‘how to construct ideological and institutional conditions’ in which the vast majority of students are empowered within that institution (Giroux, 1999). Fielding (2001) raises a number of questions which HEIs should ask of themselves when developing student engagement practices, including: Who participates in student voice work? Who is allowed to speak? To whom are they allowed to speak? What are they allowed to speak about? Who is listening? Why and how are they listening? and Where are the public spaces (physical and metaphorical) in which these encounters might take place? Consideration also needs to be given to how the voices of students are recognised and affirmed within HEIs, how conflicting voices find resolution, and who, within the HEI, authorises the legitimacy of different voices (Pedder and McIntyre, 2006, 148).

If HEIs are to create democratic situations with authentic student engagement, the traditional hierarchical control discourse will need to be replaced with a deliberative democratic discourse (Thornberg, 2010) and this will only be achieved where staff are prepared to put their own views to one side and engage in a more democratic dialogue with students, without attempting to control or steer the voices and actions of students.

The possibility for change and transformation

With student engagement work, listening to students about their thoughts, views, feelings and experiences is not sufficient, it is what happens with this information that is crucial. Where students are listened to in a tokenistic way, it is unlikely that any transformation in HIE practice or policies will result. However, where there is a genuine desire to listen to students’ perspectives, and students have opportunities to initiate change within their HEI, there are more likely to be changes in policies and practices resulting from student engagement practices (Fielding, 2001). There is an assumption, therefore, that academic staff will understand and accept that students with whom they work have the capability of contributing to the production of knowledge and of transforming aspects of practice and that they will support students in this endeavour.

A recognition that power relations are unequal and problematic

If HEIs are to encourage and facilitate the democratic participation of students in decision making, tutors will need to develop ways of ensuring the participation of the whole student body, and the hierarchical tutor-student binaries which have existed, historically, in HEIs will need to change (Lambert, Parker and Neary, 2007). Power inhabits all processes of social communication and different social groups have differential access to forms of communicative and institutional power, and neither are equally available to all students. For Freire (1997), elements of power and oppression are ingrained within educational processes and these are made evident within the hierarchical power relations which exist within educational institutions. Freire (ibid) argues that it is through dialogue that the structures and mechanisms of oppression can be broken down. The presence of power relations within HEIs, both in terms of the hierarchical power relations between tutors and students and the power relations which exists between the students themselves, influence the extent to which students feel at ease to voice their opinions and engage in discussions about aspects of their HEI experiences. Due to the existence of assessment within HEIs, some imbalance in power relations is inevitable, however, such power relations need to be acknowledged and, where possible, challenged and minimised if the notion of student engagement is to reach and empower the wider student body to speak freely about matters which are important to them.
Discussion – Student engagement and issues of institutional and social power relations within HEIs

All teaching and learning situations presume a relationship between the tutor and the student and between the students themselves, and within all institutions, including HEIs, power relations are ingrained within the institutional hierarchical operational structures and systems and are also implicated in the institutional social relations. Throughout the discussion that follows, consideration is given to theoretical understandings around institutional and social power relations and to the influence such relationships may have on the development of student engagement practices within HEIs. Literature relating to school-based student engagement work will be drawn upon and related to HEI contexts to help develop and deepen our understanding of the power relationships at play within HEI student engagement practices.

Notions of power permeates institutional staff – student relationships by virtue of the hierarchical authority, status and expertise of the staff within the HEI when compared to the relative lack of authority, status and, in most cases, lack of expertise of the students. Such institutional power relations in schools between staff and pupils is magnified by the fact that school students are also all younger than those who teach them. With reference to schools, Lynch and Lodge (2002, p147) acknowledged that power relations between students and teachers are taken as a hierarchical given, Student engagement: What does this mean in practice in the context of Higher Education Institutions?

and Devine (2002) noted that within school, children perceived themselves as individuals with subordinate status to those of teachers. Clearly, within HEIs, students are older than school students, and in some cases older than the tutors themselves, thus issues relating to assumed positions of authority on the grounds of age differences, may not apply to the same extent. Where elements of hierarchical institutional power are entwined within staff-student relationships, such power may not easily be diminished when staff and students develop practices to promote student engagement. Constraints may, therefore, continue to be placed, albeit covertly, on the ensuing staff - student dialogue. Aronowitz and Giroux, (1993) acknowledge that within schools, relations of domination and subordinacy are reproduced through various school practices. Giroux’s (1981) understanding of how power operates in school settings can be applied to HEIs to help us acknowledge the multitude of operational practices which enforce institutional power relations. Giroux (ibid.) acknowledges the existence of visible hierarchical power relations in terms of the relative high status of staff when compared to students. For Giroux, the institutional routines and structures which are a recognised part of the operational aspect of the institution, such as the timings of lectures, the assessment of work and the procedures to be followed in terms of submitting work, are all decided upon by members of staff, and practices such as these all serve to establish a taken-for-granted acceptance of the lecturer or tutor as authoritative and ‘powerful’ and the student as the less powerful (ibid.). Similarly, Bernstein’s (1971) notion of pedagogical relationships acknowledges that teachers or tutors have a degree of control over the selection and pacing of knowledge they transmit to their students, thus the pedagogical relationship between staff and students serves to reinforce the hierarchical power relations and the existence of institutional power within HEIs.

Foucault (1980) sees institutions as agents of social control and regards discourse as crucial in promoting and legitimising the power differentials between students and tutors. Thus, in the context of HEIs, where tutors act in their role of ‘teaching’ students, the discourse within this relationship is unequal in terms of whose voices and perspectives prevail. Students view tutors as being in more dominant and, therefore, more powerful positions relative to themselves and the discourse which inhabits the commonly accepted tutor – student relationship serve to ‘normalise’ the power imbalance within this relationship. Foucault would argue that one of the outcomes of this ‘normalisation’ process is for students’ views of tutors as being relatively more powerful than themselves to become embedded within students’ imagination, thus automatically reproducing students’ glib acceptance of the disparity in terms of power at play within the social, as well as within institutional student-tutor relations. Thus, it is likely that the notion of tutor as the ‘powerful’ other remains in the student’s thinking, even when staff and students set out to work together in a
partnership, for example, to jointly review an aspect of practice, or when students are acting as change agent and leading a review of practice within their HEI. The embedded notions of power within institutional social relations can serve to constrain how students act and respond in the presence of tutors, and this can have significant implications in terms of the value of student engagement practices and the extent to which these genuinely capture the perspectives, interests and visions of students. Streeting and Wise (2009, 3) acknowledge that involving students and staff in democratic dialogue may not be straightforward as ‘students’ by definition, are not expert in their subject and this could make their involvement in shaping the curriculum quite difficult.

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One of the dilemmas surrounding student engagement practices is that the practices can presume a group identity (Fielding, 2004, 300), however, there is not just one homogenous student voice but a multiple complexity of students’ voices and, ideally, we need to find a way of listening to and engaging the whole student body. Thus, HEIs need to raise questions about which students are representing students’ views, and whether these students can realistically promote the interests of those students who are silenced by the more powerful students and tutors. Research into schoolbased student voice practices found that it tends to be those students who have experienced most success in school learning who tend to be the most articulate about what helps them to learn and to be listened to more readily when canvassing the opinions of students (McIntyre et al, 2005). There is a real danger, therefore, that an uncritical adoption of student engagement practices might reinforce existing hierarchies amongst the tutor-student and student-student relationships. The presence of institutional and social power relations can, therefore, lead to the silencing of some students’ voices. This resonates with Freire’s notion of a ‘culture of silence’ (1971) where some students feel unable, or lacking in power, to act as change agents, and feel compelled to keep their thoughts to themselves because they perceive themselves as the less powerful within student-tutor and student-student relationships. In Freirian terms, those students who are deemed, often through their own self-judgement, as being relatively ‘less powerful’ than others, could be regarded as being ‘oppressed’. Where students are silenced by the dominant members within the student-tutor and student-student relationships, this does not mean that students do not respond, but rather that their response lacks a criticality. Freire (1971) considers that for students not to feel oppressed or constrained by the relatively powerful positions of both their tutors and of some other students, they need to develop an awareness that they too can have power and can react to, and resist, the power which they see as being imposed on them by individuals and by institutional hierarchical practices and processes, Freire refers to this process as a process of ‘conscientization’. Aronowitz and Giroux consider ‘power to be at the root of all forms of behaviour in which people say no, struggle, resist, use oppositional modes of discourse and fight for a different version of the future’ (Aronowitz and Giroux, 1993, p150).

Thus, institutional structures and social power relations that surround student engagement practices are complex and the imbalance in power in the tutor - student, and student- student relationships, leads to the voices of some students being constrained. There may, of course, be some students who do not want to be participants in student engagement practices, and consideration needs to be given to whether, in the case of these students, it is more important that they understand the

messages and feel empowered, even if they choose not to engage. The extent and ways in which
Students' participation in student engagement activities is, therefore, laden with ethical implications which HEIs must acknowledge.

**Conclusion**

To date, many student engagement practices within HEIs have been institutionally, rather than student driven; however, HEIs are now beginning to embrace practices which encourages the engagement of students in a wide range of discussion and decision making processes. There is a concern, however, that as from next academic year (2012), students will position themselves more as consumers, demanding what they see as ‘value for money’ for the high premium fees they will be paying to study at an HEI.

While on the one hand the notion of students as consumers may lead to HEIs wanting to learn from students’ experiences in order to ensure that students are satisfied with what is offered to them by the HEI, one of the difficulties of perceiving students as consumers is that it can have notions of student passivity related to it. For example, students may automatically assume that the work covered in lectures is all that is needed in order to be successful in attaining a pass mark in the programme for which they are paying. Students may equate the payment of high fees more readily with the right to be successful in their programme of study and see it as the HEIs responsibility to ensure this success.

The notion of students as consumers also has implications for HEIs and the way they respond to students. As Schwartman (1995) points out, if students are envisioned only or primarily as consumers, with all its attendant dangers, this can lead to pandering to students, and to the study provider being devoted to the immediate satisfaction of its students rather than to offering the challenges of intellectual independence. It will be a matter of time before it becomes apparent if the fee increase for undergraduate study at HEIs will result in a shift in the power dynamics between students and HEIs. Such a shift may manifest itself in ways which results in students demanding more from HEIs in terms of, for example, contact time, as they see this is what they are paying for, and HEIs may have to work harder to keep students satisfied. Such a shift may also result in students demanding opportunities to engage more fully in decisions relating to their learning and to other aspects of decision-making within HEIs because they see themselves as having a right to this due to the high fees they will be paying. There is also likely to be an increase in the number of complaints where student do not see that they are getting value for money or a worthwhile service.

Despite the imminent fee increases and the resulting changes this may bring in students’ expectations, learning cannot be bought, and HEIs should continue to emphasise the students’ role in their learning experiences, as Ramsden (2008; 16) acknowledged:

> to sustain high quality student experience, we must not fall into the trap of accepting as accurate a reading of students principally as consumers, demanding value for money, expecting ‘satisfaction’, passively receiving skills and knowledge, grumpily complaining about service standards and favouring above all else the easy acquisition of qualifications.

McCulloch (2009, 177) asserts that viewing students as ‘consumers’ suggests undue distance between the students and the educational process, thereby de-emphasising the student’s role in learning. He asserts that this can encourage the ‘entertainment’ model of teaching and compartmentalise the education experience as a ‘product’ rather than ‘process’. In order to resolve or prevent this problem, McCulloch proposes that there should not be situations where students are passive recipients of a service. Rather they should be viewed as ‘co-producers’ and viewed as essential partners in the production of the knowledge and skills that form the intended learning outcomes of their programmes.

Regardless of any changes to the student – HEI relationship brought about by the fee increase, for student engagement practices to become embedded in the policies, strategies and operational structures of HEIs, consideration needs to be given to how HEIs conceptualises themselves and how they will balance student engagement with academic work. As measures are taken to work towards the new rhetoric of co-creation and student engagement and of providing joint responsibilities of those who provide HE and those who experience it, the roles of students and staff needs to be reconsidered.

There needs to be a willingness, on the behalf of tutors and students, to disclose their
preferences, motivations, aspirations and rationales and reveal themselves as serious and trustworthy partners in the enterprise of learning (Pedder and McIntyre, 2006). Practically speaking, this involves students developing an understanding of themselves as partners with staff in the process of improving the quality of their HEI experiences, including practices of assessment, curriculum and teaching. It also involves challenging and re-defining the historical hierarchical staff-student relationship as some staff and students move outside of their comfort zones in order to engage in fruitful dialogue based on developing mutual understandings which lead to the joint enhancement and development of HEI practices.

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