Can the student speak? Voicing identities and experience in UK higher education

Suki Ali & Lili Schwoerer

Published online: 11 Sep 2025.

Submit your article to this journal ⬚

View related articles ⬚

View Crossmark data ⬚

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Can the student speak? Voicing identities and experience in UK higher education

Suki Ali [a] and Lili Schwoerer [b]

aDepartment of Sociology, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK; bSchool of Law and Social Sciences, Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, UK

ABSTRACT

In recent years, HEIs have been under increased pressure to address persistent and significant educational inequalities. Within the current context of managerialism and 'audit', universities are required to demonstrate how they are working to improve educational outcomes. We have also witnessed a return to research and policy which draws on the concept of student voice. In this paper, we question the epistemological foundations and effects of such Voice work. We argue that we need to reconfigure the ways in which identity, experience and representation are understood and mobilised through Voice work within the neoliberal university. Despite the evident commitment of staff and students to improving education, we suggest that current iterations of Voice work are fundamentally flawed. We argue that we should move away from simplistic categories of 'the student' and focus more on collaborative forms of speaking in order to challenge the processes and practices that sustain educational inequalities.

1. Introduction

The belated pressure on UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to address access and awarding gaps has been shaped by renewed attention to the ways in which student experiences, positive or negative, impact outcomes. To enhance experience, HEIs are required to address Equality, Diversity and Inclusivity (EDI). Within this context, we are witnessing a return to working with student Voice.[1] While educational scholarship has long critiqued uses of the student Voice in secondary and Higher Education (HE) (e.g. McLeod, 2011), now, perhaps more than ever, universities position the concept as central to HE reform. We use Spivak's question 'Can the subaltern speak?' to animate our analysis of the way in which Voice is situated within representational hegemonies.[2] The market conditions which underpin Voice work produce student speaker-positions which in turn bring into being student-subjects who conform to simplified institutional categories of difference such as race, gender, ability and class. The object of Voice work is understood to be an autonomous, authentic speaker, who can be called on to provide unmediated insights into 'lived experiences'. Through the process of institutionalised listening and responding, structural critiques of the university can be neutralised. Students' speech that takes inconvenient forms is also increasingly heavily regulated and even suppressed.[3] We characterise students' hope for the transformative possibilities of Voice work as a form of 'cruel optimism' (Berlant, 2011) and suggest that under the current conditions, student Voice as an institutional practice is not only ineffectual but can actively hinder institutional change.

In the first section we outline how Voice has developed as a key concern in educational practice, policy and scholarship. We show that despite many critiques of the concept, its epistemic underpinnings in contemporary HE are yet to be fully explored. In the second section we analyse the re/production of Voice through representations of identity and experience. In the third section we explore possibilities for change, within and outside of contemporary iterations of Voice work in theory and practice.

2. From consultation to co-production: the reemergence of student voice in HE policy and practice

In response to scholarly critiques and broader developments in HE governance and funding, deployments of Voice have shifted over time. Understanding how and why Voice has taken on new meanings in the contemporary context requires us to understand these historical shifts.

2.1. The emergence and quantification of voice

Freeman (2014) traces student participation in universities back to representative councils in the 19th and early 20th century, but notes that a formalisation of this relationship was first suggested in 1944 reports by the NUS the Association of University Teachers (AUT). The 1963 Robbins Report then made student participation a requirement for all new institutions, and, in response to the student protests in the late 1960s, student representation was formalised further in all universities. During this period however, the concept of Voice was not central to discourses of student participation.

Scholarship on student Voice describes the concept's ascendance as being linked to the regulatory mechanisms accompanying moves away from social democratic funding models and towards managerialism and 'academic capitalism' (see Bragg, 2007; Holligan & Shah, 2017; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017; Sabri, 2013). The concept began to proliferate in the 2000s, where it was understood as tied to the need for quantitative evaluations (see Pötschulat, Moran, & Jones, 2021; Sabri, 2011; Szafrański, 2024). The 2003 *Future of Higher Education* White Paper discussed the importance of an annual student survey, later the National Student Survey (NSS), claiming that students should 'become intelligent customers of an increasingly diverse provision, and to meet their own increasing diverse needs, students need accessible information' (DfE, cited in Szafrański, 2024). The Voice of the student-as-customer, within this framework, becomes a guide for improving the services offered to them (Kelly, Fair, & Evans, 2017).[4]

The institutionalisation and metricisation of Voice through the NSS sparked an ongoing flurry of critiques in HE scholarship. Critics highlight the shortcomings of the survey, arguing that its questions are flawed (Bennett & Kane, 2014) and that Voice becomes homogenised and abstracted through quantitative metrics (Darwin, 2021). They argue that surveys such as the NSS cannot fully engage students (Darwin, 2021): rather, they position them as passive consumers. As such, the survey is built on, and reaffirms, neoliberal individualism (Holligan & Shah, 2017). Some critiques use Foucauldian frameworks, to argue that surveys like the NSS are a form of neoliberal governmentality and subjectification (Freeman, 2014; Thiel, 2019; Young & Jerome, 2020). However, much scholarship is underpinned by the idea that Voice should, and can be, represented *better*. The issue here is not so much the aim of representing students' experiences, thoughts and desires, but rather that quantitative metrics are unable to do so. Consequently, qualitative – and at times, participatory – methods of engaging and capturing Voice are positioned as potentially productive alternatives (Darwin, 2021).

2.2. A 'better' way of capturing voice?

In the early 2000s, qualitative, at times even participatory, research on Voice proliferated with the founding of 74 Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, (CETLs), and the swiftly expanding area of academic development (Sabri, 2011). The Higher Education Academy (HEA) financed the Centres through grants, including £315 million between 2005/6 and 2009/10 (Sabri, 2011), allowing CETL-led projects for student involvement to develop 'new roles for students as mentors, researchers, teachers and educational developers' (Freeman, 2014, p. 23). In 2007, the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills introduced the 'Student Listening Programme'. Voice further proliferated with the 2011 student fee hike – the NSS became positioned as an essential part of ensuring the quality of educational provisions that students now paid triple for (Holligan & Shah, 2017). Importantly, the NSS was increasingly conceptualised by government and universities as only one building block in capturing and representing Voice. Other forms of research and inquiry were designed to explore and give account of the students' experiences in more granular detail. For example, the 2009 White Paper *Higher Ambitions: The Future of Universities in the Knowledge Economy* describes students as 'clients', 'partners', and 'agents of change', and the paper lists 'action research

activities' as central to these roles (Kelly et al., 2017). In 2012, Student Voice became an explicit part of the QAA Quality code for HE, with the institution noting that universities should set up means 'for effective representation of the collective student voice at all organisational levels including decision-making bodies' and 'to ensure that the full diversity of student voices can contribute to enhancement and assurance activities' (Szafrański, 2024, n.p.).

Matthews and Dollinger (2023) critique uses of Voice in secondary schools in both qualitative and quantitative iterations, while Fielding (2004) identifies several epistemological problems with Voice: he explores the challenges of speaking for others and discusses the impossibility of ever being 'heard'. In his 2007 edited volume of *Discourse* on the future of Voice, authors discuss the potential of participatory and dialogical methods. McLeod's (2011) exploration of uses of Voice in Australian HE equity strategy guides our approach throughout. Drawing on postcolonial and feminist critiques of voice and representation amongst others, McLeod suggests that the slipperiness and irrepresentability of voice should be a ground for moving away from voice-as-representation and towards dialogic listening and recognition. McLeod warns us of essentialising speaker-positions in attempts to represent difference through voice and invites us to consider 'voice as inseparable from the practices and responsibilities of listening – intersubjectively, institutionally and collectively' (McLeod, 2011, p. 108). Following McLeod, we ask: to what extent does Voice, as used in the contemporary UK context, essentialise speaker-positions? What kind of speaking subjects are being brought into being through Voice work? Have answers to these questions changed since the time of McLeod's writing, and what are the specificities of the UK context for answering them?

2.3. The participatory fix

McLeod's focus on the interrelationship between Voice and difference is certainly relevant to the contemporary UK context, where managerialism increasingly involves the production and regulation of difference. The 2017 Higher Education and Research Act introduced, in then-University minister Sam Gymiah's words, 'a revolution in accountability' (Ali, 2022), establishing the Office for Students (OfS) as a watchdog for equality of opportunity and educational provision. While the NSS remains a central means for gathering student Voice, governance guidance increasingly acknowledges the limitations of quantitative methodologies. Advance HE's 'The future of the student voice' project recognises criticism of the administrative burden created by the NSS. However, they argue.

> … student feedback is a powerful tool for change, and we want to provide a platform for our members to share new and innovative practice which represents the student voice in a way which drives forward the discussion on quality.

As such, the organisation presents surveys as 'part of the picture of diverse ways of exploring, capturing, representing student voice' (Advance HE, n.d.).

Other means explicitly include participatory and co-production methodologies. Indeed, research projects which understand students as partners proliferate across UK HE institutions, often but not always linked to academic development and CETL's. These are not without their critics. There has been a long tradition in educational scholarship of questioning how 'participation' and co-production have been taken up in universities; critics warn of the cooptation of these methodologies and invite researchers to scrutinise the power dynamics that remain when social justice methodologies, such as action research, are placed within a neoliberal context (Neary & Saunders, 2016). Particularly interesting for our purposes are critiques such as Bragg's (2007), who understands participatory research with students as technologies of the self. Participation here relies on a modernist speaking subject, an individual which must be able to give an account of themselves (Taylor & Robinson, 2009). For example, student partnership projects may exclude, gloss over, or even re-marginalise, D/disabled and Mad students (de Bie, 2022). While these critiques are pertinent, they tend to address co-production and participatory research more broadly, rather than exploring uses of Voice per se. Overall, the once prevalent critiques of Voice are less visible in education scholarship and HE practice. At the same time, participation is positioned as a means of 'fixing' the problems associated with quantitative and interview-based means of capturing and articulating Voice. This leaves the epistemological underpinnings of Voice, and the concept's relationship to experience and identity, underexplored.

3. Representing voice in contemporary UK HE

In its contemporary form, 'Voice' is entangled with, and evaluated within and through, a number of other key interventions shaping the work aimed at improving the educational offer to 'the student' in UK HE. Here, we explore the various ways in which Voice is held in dynamic relation with 'student experience'. Research into inclusive education and more recent literature about decolonisation shows that poor student experience is impacted by narrow and often discriminatory pedagogic practices and exclusive cultures of learning, as well as the feeling of not belonging in the university itself (e.g. Raaper, 2019). The experience of belonging is in turn nurtured within teaching and learning spaces and in all areas of university life. To make education more inclusive and to foster a sense of belonging, educators are advised to be led by the needs of diverse student identities and how these inform learner identities. Identities are seen as providing the bedrock on which experiences are built. Thus, gathering the required data to explore these issues requires HEIs to hear the student Voice, which can be accessed in multiple ways. While this narrative can be interpreted as forming a chain of connected issues, it would be more accurate to consider them as a set of interrelated aspects of an integrated whole (Figure 1).

3.1. Identity and (Lived) experience

In many ways, 'experience' and 'identity' are indeed the glue that holds this cluster of objects together and facilitates research and analysis. However, we suggest that a commonsense understanding of experience as 'transparent' raises several important questions: What are the iterative relationships between identity, experience and Voice? What, if anything, can Voice tell us about experience? How is it used to both create and resist the categorisation of students? In other words, what epistemological and ontological assumptions support Voice work at this educational juncture?

A commonplace approach to Voice work reflects the idea that a person's particular identity gives rise to individual and collective experiences and these experiences in turn continue to shape identities. This
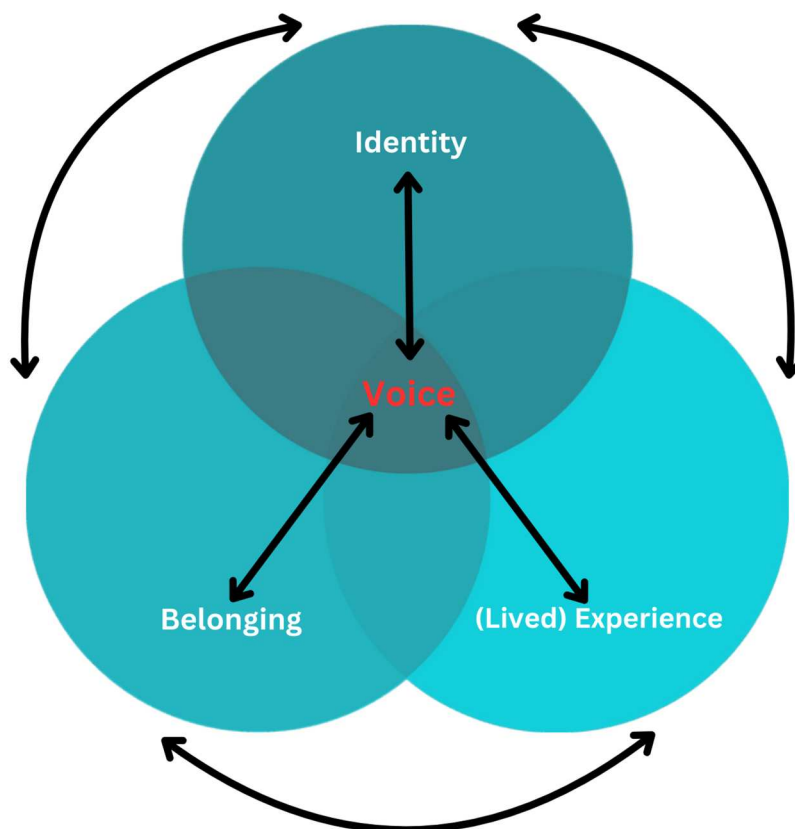
Figure 1. Voice objects.

formulation relies on a commonsense view of identity formation in which a knowing subject is able to analyse and represent their identities, and, or even through, their experiences. Starting from this position it follows that identities in the form of positive 'learner identities' can be developed and supported by the institution. Through a package of institutional commitments to improving, amongst other things, skills acquisition, cultural inclusion and diverse teaching and learning strategies, students who feel like they don't belong at university can begin to develop more positive learner identities and see themselves as students who can thrive and achieve to the highest levels in their studies (McIntosh & Wright, 2019).

We can find numerous theoretical, conceptual and political concerns with this approach. Feminist historian Joan Scott (1991) questions the idea that 'the evidence of experience' provides the 'truth' in personal historical accounts. She proposes both speaking *and* writing experience to better explore the relation between identity and knowledge in the pursuit of more inclusive accounts. In the process of capturing Voice, the relationship between speaking and writing is blurred. Students both speak and write their experiences within formal constraints. Surveys and feedback forms and student authored reports are shaped by academic norms. Institutional committees, forums and working groups can use both written and verbal contributions, as do student communications via representatives and with each other. However, as we discuss below, there are challenges to working with Voice in this way. Following Scott, we do not completely dismiss the value of experience for understanding social forms and relations, but we agree that 'Experience is at once always already an interpretation and something that needs to be interpreted' (Scott, 1991, p. 797)

Structural accounts of the social within European thinking have also interrogated the role of identity and the value of experience in knowledge production (see e.g. Ireland, 2002). The most powerful challenges to epistemological hegemonies come from marginalised and oppressed producers of knowledge. Feminist, post and decolonial and subaltern scholars have argued that the exclusion of entire categories of people inevitably results in partial knowledge of the social world which masquerades as an unequivocal, universal truth (e.g. Haraway, 1988; Quijano, 2000). Scholars from the Global South argue that for some communities, this has been no less than a form of epistemic violence that is rooted in a eurocentric view of experience (Mama, 1995; Lugones, 2016; Shiva, 1990). Inevitably 'privileged' students may feel able to speak, acting as 'informants' for institutions 'who are interested in the voice of the Other' (Spivak, 1987, p. 79). However, as Spivak underlines ' … one must nevertheless insist that the [marginalised] subject is irretrievably heterogeneous.' (Spivak, 1987, p. 79). Kimberle Crenshaw's (often misused) concept of 'intersectionality' also addresses the interlocking or intersecting structures of power which produce identities composed of more than one characteristic (Crenshaw, 1991). Reference to intersectionality has become all but compulsory in educational policy and practice, with Voice work being no exception. Often this assumes transparent relationships between individuals and groups, in terms of both identities and experiences. Labels such as 'BAME' or 'disadvantaged' exemplify the way in which individuals and identities are represented as homogenous in Voice work that is designed to improve the educational experience of all students.

In line with the turn to qualitative, participatory methodologies in Voice research discussed above, in the past decade there has been a marked shift to centralising 'lived experience', with most UK HEIs using a combination of 'experience' and 'lived experience'. While the former can refer to the external 'things' a student does, or encounters, and events during their studies, the other uses subjective perceptions and interpretations derived from personal narratives arising from the same. In sociological scholarship, the category of 'lived experience' tends to be associated with speaker-positions considered marginalised or disadvantaged (Jones, 2024). In Voice research, the connection between marginality and 'lived experience' is evident but little understood. However, we can be certain that the changing language matters. We suggest that rather than conjuring new, personalised ways of gathering data, this shift reanimates zombie categories by using the same problematic epistemological frameworks previously identified by educational scholars (e.g. McLeod, 2011).

3.2. Authenticity and representation

If we assume that experience, or lived experience, is held by an individual and shapes, and is shaped by their identity, we must also assume that authentic lived experience can be – at least hypothetically – voiced in a way that directly represents this experience. The evidence of lived experience is based on the premise that it is a direct conduit to students' own authentic knowledge. This kind of data is considered 'better' data as it

can be faithfully represented even after undergoing some form of analysis. However, authentic knowledge cannot simply be contrasted with *in*authentic knowledge. Voice itself may sometimes be seen as inauthentic or untrue in some way, with misunderstandings and misrepresentations arising in most part from the problem of 'speaking for others' by 'representing others' within existing educational structures (Alcoff, 1991; Spivak, 1987, p. 70). This can lead to resistance to qualitative methods which are increasingly called upon in Voice research. Embodied knowledge and affective states of being and knowing are seen to further undermine qualitative Voice work. However, rather than being a weakness, subjective and embodied knowledge production has been claimed as a strength of feminist and post/decolonial research. For example, Gloria Anzaldúa argues that 'Struggling with a "story" (a concept or theory), embracing personal and social identity, is a bodily activity' (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 6). Other endorsements for embodied knowing have come from extremely diverse if not oppositional political and epistemological positions on how and why bodies matter and how creative methods such as PhotoVoice provide alternatives to linguistic representations (Kessi, Kaminer, Boonzaier, & Learmonth, 2019).

Regardless of the form in which Voice is presented, if we accept that '[I]t is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience' (Scott, 1991, p. 779), we must recognise that the speaking subject is partly created through the process of giving an account of themselves. This process does not always go smoothly. A few years ago, author 1 took part in a meeting about improving EDI involving all interested staff and students. A student representative refused the offer of further consultation as it had not resulted in any action. They ended their contribution by exclaiming: 'We have told you so many times that we are hungry, you just need to feed us'. Their frustration was palpable. The metaphor of hunger captured the lack of nourishment the institution provided. Hunger in this context expresses a desire for something more, an attachment to the promise of something better, an optimism that sustains at the same time as it reinforces a sense of lack or loss (see Berlant, 2011). Students often do not, and cannot, refuse to cooperate with this logic of Voice-as-authentic-knowledge, while others seem happy to do so.

We can see that Voice is closely aligned with the recognition and management of difference and we must therefore attend to the ways in which broad categories of race, gender, disability and class feature in this process. As Spivak suggests, the 'banality of leftist intellectuals' lists of self–knowing, canny subaltern stands revealed; representing them, the intellectuals represent themselves transparent' (Spivak, 1987, p. 70). Replacing 'leftist intellectuals' with 'liberal academics', we can see that the same issue emerges in Voice work. While 'holding' categories or 'lists' can be helpful in showing some patterns of inequality across education, they are formed through the same epistemological frameworks of identity. To be recognised by the institution, the student is compelled to understand and identify themselves as an individual who belongs to one of these categories. Here we need to distinguish between 'the person', 'the individual' and 'the subject'. The subject can be understood as a discursive and linguistic category which is subjected to the regulatory regimes of power yet allows room for agency (Butler, 1997). If we understand The Student as a subject place which individuals occupy, we can see that although Voice requires a form of subordination to institutional norms, it also provides possibilities for change.

4. Possibilities for change?

Both authors have long been committed to working towards meaningful change in education. Below we reflect on key aspects of Voice work which prompt critical engagement with the politics of knowledge and the subjects they produce, and who resist their subjectivation. We explore the ways in which different constituencies express their desires and the forms of change they demand, arguing that the current framing of Voice provides a conduit for students to express their desires but is also a mechanism to foreclose spontaneous and more organic forms of speaking. Such ways of speaking can move beyond the epistemological problems in Voice work that we have discussed, but are often heavily regulated or even policed by universities.

4.1. What do universities want?

Metrics on students' satisfaction with their degree programmes, such as the NSS, directly link to universities' financial sustainability. Voice work beyond outward-facing measurement tools like these hopes to identify

ways in which the scores of such tools can be improved. While individuals within CETLs are, of course, genuinely committed to understanding students' challenges and improving their lives, funding for Voice work is ultimately tied to improving metrics such as NSS scores. As such, these projects are under constant threat of co-option or erasure. What gets 'heard', reported, represented and acted on is shaped by the priorities, categories and classificatory systems of outward-facing audit. Voice work itself can be 'non-performative' in that it provides evidence of 'doing' diversity, while the project itself stands in for the action that the students demand (Ahmed, 2012).

Authenticity and representability are essential here. Within contemporary audit regimes, efforts to facilitate diversity and inclusion are part of the state's requirements of universities (Ali, 2022). To show that inclusion is *being done* necessitates not only a clear definition of who is being included, but also legible data on the processes of inclusion itself: the challenges that exist for students individually and collectively and ways of overcoming them, of gaining 'empowerment'. Voice work can also bring in additional money through private donations and partnerships with external funders interested in representing themselves as progressive. In a funding regime reliant on fees, public evidence of 'listening' – published on university websites, discussed at open days – can be a recruitment mechanism. The reputation-management function of Voice work is however not confined to this. Providing formalised channels for listening can also be a means of avoiding, or minimising, reputational damage. Voice Projects might pick up on students' discontent and offer some response as appeasement. If student discontent becomes public, Voice research can be presented as a counterweight, demonstrating that the university *does* listen, that its own data on students' experiences is more authentic than the opinions expressed by what can then be framed as a 'minority of radical students'.

4.2. What do students want?

Students undoubtedly want to use their voices; they want to be able to speak and to represent themselves. Beyond that, they want to be heard and receive a response, preferably one that involves action that will benefit them. At the very least they want a meaningful dialogue on the possibilities for change. Our experience shows that within and across disciplines there are multiple versions of the student understanding of and demand for Voice. The 'clientism' that can be witnessed in marketised institutions provides the foundation for much Voice work. Institutions need to respond to clients, and students want to express dis/satisfaction with the educational product which can take the form of 'buyer's remorse'. While it is clearly not true for all students, many draw upon the very language of the market that the university, and the global capitalist knowledge economy, provides them with. This cannot be dismissed by a cynical response invoking the student-consumer. Universities as institutions are caught up in 'the tyranny of satisfaction', as are staff and students (Hansen & Mellon, 2022).

For students, the promise of education in the marketised University can never be completely fulfilled. Lauren Berlant argues that 'A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing' (Berlant, 2011, p. 1). This is a fundamental problem for many students who are voicing their discontent with an education that is defined and organised by market logics. Berlant takes what they call a 'compassionate approach' to the desire for the unachievable and shows contempt for 'intellectuals who shit on people who hold to a dream' (Berlant, 2011, p. 123). They posit that ' … one of optimism's ordinary pleasures is to induce conventionality, that place where appetites find a shape in the predictable comforts of the good-life genres that a person or a world has seen fit to formulate' (Berlant, 2011, p. 2). Clearly, Berlant is referring to issues that render the attainment of a 'good life' impossible. The theory of cruel optimism offers a fruitful way of exploring how and why some students 'buy in' to ideas of meritocratic achievement and qualifications in order to achieve the good life they desire. While being shaped by exploitative capitalist economics, the desire for recognition, response and the acquisition of tools for success within it is entirely understandable and indeed, a necessity for many. Thus, the current use of Voice is double-edged. It can provide opportunities for staff and students to contribute to institutional change but also has severe limitations. Below, we demonstrate how Voice work can be a vehicle for some change, though possibilities for structural transformation of inequalities are not possible in, or can even be prevented by the institutional context in which Voice work happens.

4.3. Regulatory listening

In our various Voice roles, projects and committees, we, along with other colleagues working on EDI, have tried to listen, document, and push back against the institutional consensus. We know that by doing this, we reproduce the logics of Voice, and the university's ability to produce, manage and capture student subjectivities. We have done Voice work despite being aware of the epistemological impasses we outlined in this article, because at different moments we had hoped that this work might be, if not transformational, at least making a small difference. Author 2 led a participatory project on students' experiences, and felt hopeful when students used this Voice work to establish and strengthen relationships that formed the basis of friendships, support and organising beyond the project's parameters. The project provided some push-back against existing inequalities, as well as a space for collective political education, in which the power relations involved in listening felt somewhat fluid and dialogical (McLeod, 2011). However, the institution made choices about how much it could or would respond to. In a sense, all universities are regulating student Voice in one way or another, making choices as to what is foregrounded and what is foreclosed. This often involves dismissing requests as unrealistic, effectively saying that students are ignorant of the real-world limitations to their autonomy. As feminist decolonial scholar Vandana Shiva contends, positioning people as non-knowers is fragmenting and is a form of violence against the subject of knowledge (Shiva, 1990, pp. 243–244).

McLeod (2011) argues that, despite the pitfalls of listening as a practice that fixes its objects in their place, 'listening also forces relationality, intersubjectivity and power dynamics into view because it evokes the address and location of voice' (p. 186). Informal conversations with our students about their courses and lives at university have informed our engagement with our employer, refusing to delineate their voice from others', including ours, while acknowledging the impossibility of transparent representation within the confines of current institutional norms (Spivak, 1987). McLeod suggests that listening *properly* – 'intersubjectively, institutionally and collectively' – means 'converting this opportunity into meaningful and practical recognition.' (2011, p. 581). We agree that this hints at the transformative possibilities of Voice. However, we do not consider truly listening to be possible nor adequate to the task of transforming education within the market economy.

Indeed, while funding and publicity for Voice work is continuing if not increasing, students across the country *are* speaking by taking up space and, forming encampments to protest their institutions' investments in genocide, warfare, (settler-)colonialism and occupation. The claims and demands voiced through student encampments cut to the very core of universities' functioning; they highlight their 'steam and pistons, the waterworks, the groundworks, the investments, the emplacements, the institutional-governmental' (paperson, 2017, p. 32). Students tie critiques of the material to the epistemic (Kamola, 2019). While universities are asserting again and again that they are listening, hearing and acting, they, quite literally, police these critiques. Responses include/d taking students to court, suspending them from their degree programmes, and threatening deportation. They are justified through a liberal logic which underpins Voice work, creating both individual and collective subject positions and categories of students who can then be pitted against each other. However, the communities that have formed in the encampments are not about individual needs or desires, nor the needs or desires of a particular identity group. Claims are formulated by a collective 'we' without attempting to fill this 'we' with a fixed group identity. As such, it is *the issue* that guides the participatory allegiances, strategies and demands. This moves us beyond the constraints of Voice logics towards coalition, solidarity, discussion and contestation and can be understood as a form of transversal politics (Yuval-Davies, 1997).

5. Conclusion

Leigh (2022) argues that in universities, the recognition of speech will inevitably be constrained by the limits of the institution in which this speech happens. In turn the institution works within external constraints imposed by regulatory bodies.[5] We contend that the structural position of universities, steeped in colonial, capitalist structures of power, both materially and epistemically, shapes what expressions of Voice can be heard, what counts as authentic expressions of Voice, and what happens to Voice once it has been expressed. Voice work translates students into speaking subjects, and in this process places them within

institutional categories of difference. Expressions of discontent that the institution cannot/will not hear are considered a threat that must be regulated, which can even amount to policing.

While being critical of Voice work, we emphasise that staff and students participating in it are not simply interpellated as neoliberal consumer-subjects. Berlant's (2011) work allows us to recognise the affective pull of Voice work and its related desires to be heard, recognised and responded to. However, we have argued that attempts to fulfil these desires through Voice work is ineffectual in the current marketised context. Focusing on institutional Voice work also risks ignoring, sidelining or policing the critiques of universities that challenge the foundational logics that structure processes of speaking and listening. We suggest that instead of attempting *better* ways of listening and representing Voice, we should ' … develop[…] work on the *mechanics* of the constitution of the Other; [as] we can use it to much greater analytic and interventionist advantage than the invocations of the *authenticity* of the Other' (Spivak, 1987, p. 90). In so doing, we can move away from Voice work solely based on uncomplicated notions of identities and experience, towards a transversal politics which enables more collective strategies for social justice in HE and beyond.

Notes

1. We capitalise Voice throughout to indicate its status as an object of knowledge and a set of material and discursive practices.
2. We do not suggest that the structures of power that produce 'the student' and 'the subaltern' are directly equivalent, but Spivak's postcolonial mode of analysis is relevant for our work.
3. We recognise the connection between discussions of speech and ongoing debates surrounding 'freedom of speech'. Here, we focus on structural issues linked to institutionalised practices of voicing students' university experiences.
4. See Brooks (2018) analysis of 'the student' in policy.
5. As we finish this article the new Freedom of Speech Act (2025) will soon come into force. At this time, some speaking subjects should have increased protections for their voices, however, which ones, and whether they are heard, is a different question.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Suki Ali http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8616-0376
Lili Schwoerer http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2806-3372

References

Advance HE. (n.d.). *The future of the student voice? Policy, principles, practice.* Advance HE. https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/membership/all-member-benefit-projects/the-future-of-the-student-voice-policy-principles-practice.
Ahmed, S. (2012). *On being included*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Alcoff, L. (1991). The problem of speaking for others. *Cultural Critique*, *20*, 5–32.
Ali, S. (2022). Managing racism? Race equality and decolonial educational futures. *The British Journal of Sociology*, *73*(5), 923–941.
Anzaldúa, G. (2015). *Light in the dark. Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting identity, spirituality, reality*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Bennett, R., & Kane, S. (2014). Students' interpretations of the meanings of questionnaire items in the national student survey. *Quality in Higher Education*, *20*(2), 129–164.
Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel optimism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Bragg, S. (2007). "Student voice" and governmentality: The production of enterprising subjects? *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, *28*(3), 343–358.
Brooks, R. (2018). The construction of higher education students in English policy documents. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *39*(6), 745–761.
Butler, J. (1997). *The psychic life of power: Theories in subjection*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, *43*, 1241–1299.

Darwin, S. (2021). The changing topography of student evaluation in higher education: Mapping the contemporary terrain. *Higher Education Research and Development*, *40*, 220–233.

de Bie, A. (2022). Respectfully distrusting 'students as partners' practice in higher education: Applying a Mad politics of partnership. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *27*(6), 717–737.

Fielding, M. (2004). Transformative approaches to student voice: Theoretical underpinnings, recalcitrant realities. *British Educational Research Journal*, *30*(2), 295–311.

Freeman, R. (2014). Student voice: New forms of power and governance in higher education in England (2003-2013) [University of Birmingham]. UBIRA Etheses. https://etheses.bham.ac.uk/id/eprint/5379/.

Hansen, D. R., & Mellon, K. (2022). The tyranny of student satisfaction: Cruel optimistic fantasies in education. *Power and Education*, *14*(2), 172–185.

Haraway, D. (1988). Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. *Feminist Studies*, *14*(3), 575–599.

Holligan, C., & Shah, Q. (2017). Global capitalism's Trojan Horse: Consumer power and the national student survey in England. *Power and Education*, *9*, 114–128.

Ireland, C. (2002). The appeal to experience and its consequences: Variations on a persistent thompsonian. *Cultural Critique*, *52*, 86–107.

Jones, P. (2024). Engaging With lived experience: Towards a sociological biography of a sociological category. *Sociological Research Online*, *30*(1), 225–242.

Kamola, I. (2019). *Making the world global*. New York, NY: Duke University Press.

Kelly, P., Fair, N., & Evans, C. (2017). The engaged student ideal in UK higher education policy. *Higher Education Policy*, *30*(1), 105–122.

Kessi, S., Kaminer, D., Boonzaier, F., & Learmonth, D. (2019). Photovoice methodologies for social justice. In S. Laher, A. Fynn, & S. Kramer (Eds.), *Transforming research methods in the social sciences: Case studies from South Africa* (pp. 354–374). Johannesburg: Wits University Press.

Leigh, D. (2022). The settler coloniality of free speech. *International Political Sociology*, *16*, 1–18.

Lugones, M. (2016). The coloniality of gender. In W. Harcourt (Ed.), *The palgrave handbook of gender and development* (pp. 35–58). London: Palgrave.

Mama, A. (1995). *Beyond the masks: Race, gender and subjectivity*. London and New York: Routledge.

Matthews, K. E., & Dollinger, M. (2023). Student voice in higher education: The importance of distinguishing student representation and student partnership. *Higher Education*, *85*(3), 555–570.

McGettigan, A. (2013). *The great university gamble*. London: Pluto Press.

McIntosh, I., & Wright, S. (2019). Exploring what the notion of 'lived experience' offers for social policy analysis. *Journal of Social Policy*, *48*(3), 449–467.

McLeod, J. (2011). Student voice and the politics of listening in higher education. *Critical Studies in Education*, *52*, 179–189.

Mercer-Mapstone, L., Dvorakova, S. L., Matthews, K. E., Abbot, S., Cheng, B., Felten, P., … Swaim, K. (2017). A systematic literature review of students as partners in higher education. *International Journal for Students as Partners*, *1*(1), 15–37.

Neary, M., & Saunders, G. (2016). Student as producer and the politics of abolition: Making a new form of dissident institution? *Critical Education*, *7*(5), n.p.

paperson, l. (2017). *A third university Is possible*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Pötschulat, M., Moran, M., & Jones, P. (2021). 'The student experience' and the remaking of contemporary studenthood: A critical intervention. *The Sociological Review*, *69*(1), 3–20.

Quijano, A. (2000). Coloniality of power, eurocentrism, and Latin America. *Nepantla: Views from South*, *1*(3), 533–580.

Raaper, R. (2019). Students as consumers? A counter perspective from student assessment as a disciplinary technology. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *24*(1), 1–16.

Sabri, D. (2011). What's wrong with 'the student experience'? *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, *32*, 657–667.

Sabri, D. (2013). Student evaluations of teaching as 'fact-totems': The case of the UK national student survey. *Sociological Research Online*, *18*(4), 148–157.

Scott, J. (1991). The evidence of experience. *Critical Inquiry*, *17*(4), 773–797.

Shiva, V. (1990). Reductionist science as epistemological violence. In A. Nandy (Ed.), *Science, hegemony and violence* (pp. 232–256). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Spivak, G. C. (1987). Can the subaltern speak? In L. Crossberg & C. Nelson (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271–313). Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Szafrański, M. (2024, April 07). Student voice: communication or commodity? *LSE HE Blog*. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/highereducation/2024/03/07.

Taylor, C., & Robinson, C. (2009). Student voice: Theorising power and participation. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, *17*(2), 161–175.

Thiel, J. (2019). The UK national student survey: An amalgam of discipline and neo-liberal governmentality. *British Educational Research Journal*, *45*(3), 538–553.

Young, H., & Jerome, L. (2020). Student voice in higher education: Opening the loop. *British Educational Research Journal*, *46*(3), 688–705.

Yuval-Davies, N. (1997). *Gender and nation*. London: Sage.