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Making and Remaking the Political

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Abstract

In 2014 the Department of Politics and Public Policy at De Montfort University in the UK established a Policy Commission whereby students would work with academic staff to create a list of 100 ideas to change Britain. This paper reflects on the work of the Policy Commission, noting the manner by which the Commission engaged with students across the University. In so doing, the Commission not only brought the teaching of Politics into the lives of students outside of the Department's reach, but also more importantly established a 'political community' across the University. The work of the Policy Commission engaged students in the act of 'doing Politics'. This resulted in them having to compromise on their ideas and to negotiate among themselves. But it also brought these ideas into a public environment and built resilience and self-confidence into the students that were engaged with the work of the Policy

Commission. These skills are critical to the contemporary job market and tend to be harder to be taught.

Introduction

A common discussion in most democracies is the nature of political engagement by the general public, with a notable measure being low voter turnout. This is particularly true at the time of local elections or as they are often referred, to second-order elections, when, with the exception of those countries that do not have compulsory voting laws, the data has highlighted a sharp decline in voter turnout since 1945 in major democracies throughout the world. And even though participation is greater at national (first-order) elections, when issues are of greater saliency for the electorate, there has nonetheless been a notable pattern of declining turnout. Critics often point to levels of apathy, especially among the young (Marsh et al., 2007). Responses to these trends have included a move towards engaging the electorate through different voting mechanisms, such as in the form of electronic voting to making it 'easier' for participation to occur. And even though there has been some criticism as to the saliency of arguments linking voting to democratic engagement (e.g. McBride, 2013), it is nonetheless the case that governments as well as professional associations and relevant bodies such as charities have become more concerned about in recent years as the cohesion that once seemed to gel a nation together appears to be far less secure. There is an extensive body of literature that has focussed on these issues, with a common concern being that low voter turnout points to broader inequalities in political engagement (e.g. contacting local officials and taking part in demonstrations) which in turn undermines civic society. This is a trend which in the UK context was challenged by the recent vote in September 2014 on independence for Scotland that led to a shift towards engaging the youth vote through a lowering of the age of participation with the franchise being extended to 16 and 17 year olds. One consequence of this was to make the youth vote a key political background, with some 100,000 under-18s (approximately 80 per

cent of the eligible vote) having signed up to vote in what was the first UK election in which the age of participation had been lowered to 16 years. For some critics, a lowering of the voting age was a fop towards the independence campaign as the expectation was that the youth vote was overwhelmingly in favour of independence. In the end, the outcome was one that was in favour of Scotland staying part of the UK by 55.3% to 44.7% in response to the referendum question 'Should Scotland be an independent country?' on a turnout of 84.6%.

Although the referendum outcome proved to be an important shot in the arm for those who were sceptical about the nature of political engagement, it is arguably the case that this was a one-off event which has not reflected a broader trend in an uplift in political engagement across the UK. The outcome certainly feeds into wider debates that have taken place relating to those who have observed that recent decades have witnessed what have come to be known as 'apolitical times', with citizens appearing to be less interested in policies, procedures and views of the political elite. Such a position runs counter to the significance of political engagement that has been set out by a number of authors, most notably Bernard Crick (2000). Over the last decade we have also seen an effort by some academics to challenge what had come to be seen as an acceptance of political apathy. In the UK context the works of Gerry Stoker (2006) and Colin Hay (2007) are of particular note, given that they stress both the reasons for why Politics is significant as well as countering established wisdom regarding conventional approaches to the measurement of political engagement, such as in the form of electoral turnout. This is a point that Colin Hay (2007: 23) has stressed with regard to the fact that other forms of political engagement, such as in the form of social media, emphasise that the situation with regard to the public's level of discussion about, and participation in, political debates points to a healthier state of affairs than might otherwise have been considered.

What is surprising about these discussions is that they have for the most part taken place within political research communities, such as those focussing on elections and political participation, and that there has not been the same level of reflection as to the significance of these issues by those colleagues writing from a teaching and learning perspective about the nature of the study of Politics. Thus, while Gerry Stoker's book 'Why politics matters: making democracy work' (2006) went on to win the Political Studies Association's (PSA) book of the year award, and sparked a debate and reflection on the arguments that he set out, there is less evidence of these arguments having filtered into a broader discussion about how the teaching of Politics can respond to this. To this end, in Stoker's view one of the problems is that the public tend to have a naïve perception of the nature of the political process and do not fully understand the sort of compromises and bargains that underpin it. Moreover, discussion about political outcomes tends to be presented in a rather simplistic manner. As Stoker reflects: 'We tell them what we want, and they deliver it, and if they succeed we reward them with our support again; if they fail, we kick them out' (2006: 67). This represents the sort of transaction that increasingly shapes the lives that people experience in a society that has become dominated by a consumption approach where choices are made and future decisions taken as a result of that experience, with this being wrapped within a personal context rather than one that reflects the wider elements of society.

Taking these points as our guide, this paper reflects on the nature of the existing discussion on teaching and learning with regard to engaging students in the practice of politics. The paper draws upon established practices within the UK in relation to the politics curriculum, as well as drawing upon arguments in other countries, most notably the United States, with regard to political engagement. The paper then reflects upon a teaching intervention at De Montfort University that was introduced in 2013 to engage students in the practice of politics, namely the creation of a 'Policy Commission'. The Policy Commission initiative ran in 2013-14 and 2014-15, with the focus being on identifying 100 ideas that could

impact upon the political landscape. In 2013-14, focus was attached to identifying 100 ideas to change Britain, while in 2014-15 the focus was more localized with 100 ideas to change the City of Leicester. Operating under the leadership of the Department of Politics and Public Policy, the Policy Commission was open to student participation from across the University and as such challenged conventional teaching structures where disciplinary boundaries are increasingly fixed and siloed. This is in itself an interesting area of discussion given the fact that many of the key so-called 'grand challenges' that beset the contemporary political landscape require a joined-up approach. To this end, this paper argues that the creation of a Policy Commission is both a teaching innovation by which students are able to engage in the practice of doing politics and is also one which connects them to the political world through a process of change that is part of a critical pedagogy (Freire, 1972 and 1985). Such an intervention marks a shift in the teaching of Politics by moving it outside of the classroom and the bounded nature of what can often be an oppressed and confined learning environment through structured regulations of what can and cannot be done because of the constraints of the likes of time and matching learning outcomes.

The (lack of) 'politics' in the teaching of Politics

The economic crisis which beset the world economy in 2008 brought to the fore discussions about the nature and role of government, notably with regard to the remit of the state as governments in many developed countries sought to reduce expenditure. This was most evidently noticeable in a European context where, at least in the eyes of the public, the crisis has particularly affected Greece, Ireland, Italy, Portugal and Spain. Yet the crisis affected many other countries, such as the UK. In the UK context, although it did not suffer an economic catastrophe in the manner of the aforementioned countries, the crisis has nonetheless had a profound impact on the economy and the country as a whole through a restructuring and redefining of the nature of the state. While for many observers this process of change was very much a politically driven project, the nature and impact of these changes have spurred a great deal of literature, dealing with

such matters as charting the origins of the financial crisis through to providing growth models that move away from traditional models that focus on the logic of the Anglo-liberalism ascent of capitalism (Hay and Payne, 2015).

Whatever the merits of the differing models and approaches that seek to shed light on the future of Britain's economy, a further debate surrounds the nature of the country's society with particular reference to civic participation given the focus that Prime Minister David Cameron has attached to local participation in what he has referred to as the 'Big Society'. It is a strategy that has been reflected in the creation in May 2010 of the position of a Minister for Civil Society as a result of the election of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government. For some critics, such an approach was merely a means of reducing government expenditure and in turn filling the void of a retrenched public sector through civic involvement.

Although the notion of civic participation in Britain is not a new one, it is arguably the case that the underpinnings of civic involvement are somewhat patchier in the context of the policies and the curriculum underpinnings of higher education within the UK. The Labour government that was elected in May 1997 endeavoured to raise a debate regarding the role of civic education which led to the Crick Report on education for citizenship and the introduction of citizenship within the curriculum in English secondary schools for 16-19 year olds (Annette, 2003). Yet despite this initiative to create a civic sense of duty and purpose, there is less evidence that UK Universities have responded to these developments by means of having a focus on civic engagement in their mission statements (Annette, 2005). In the UK, the Report which Lord Dearing Chaired into Higher Education in 1997 (Dearing Commission, 1997) was a key turning point in discussion relating to engaging students in civic education projects by attaching emphasis to the need for students to develop critical skills through engaging in community learning activities or working experiences.

This focus on 'experiential learning' or 'learning by doing' drew upon broader arguments surrounding active learning that had been greatly influenced by the work of David Kolb (1984) which attached importance to students reflecting on their experience of participation through active learning by doing rather than simply learning through more passive involvement such as in the form of reading, watching and listening. To this end it is argued that active learning results in higher order learning and leads to stronger student performance (Dougherty, 2003). Students not only develop a more sophisticated and detailed understanding of the subject matter, but are energised by participating in learning opportunities which give them a degree of independent control and enable them to also engage in critical skills such as discussions and negotiations with other students. A desire to engage students through active learning has influenced a considerable body of literature which, among others, has focussed on such initiatives as small group teaching, role plays, simulations and problem-based learning (PBL) (on debates regarding active learning see for example Ishiyama, 2013).

But despite this focus on active learning, there is less evidence of an embedded discussion in relation to civic engagement in a UK or for that matter European context. This is in contrast to America where there is a tradition of Universities engaging in activities that prepare its students to participate in society through civic involvement (Ehrlich, 2000). And while such an imperative could arguably be traced back to the creation of the United States, it was in the Twentieth century that the notion of civic duty took greater hold, being influenced by the work of John Dewey on the importance of experiential learning in establishing engaged citizens (Dewey, 1916, 1933; Benson, Harkavy and Puckett, 2007). To this end, Dewey argued that 'there is an intimate and necessary relation between the processes of actual experience and education' (Dewey, 1938: 7). More recently, Universities have attached considerable emphasis to the approach that Dewey set out, albeit contextualising this in the context of service learning. This has been particularly evident since the 1990s, not least as a result of the

significant impact of Ernest Boyer and the Carnegie Foundation's Political Project (Boyer 1996, 1998; Colby et al., 2003, 2007). A key turning point in these discussions was the publication by Boyer of *Scholarship Reconsidered* (1990). Based on a 1989 Carnegie Foundation survey of over 5,000 American academics, Boyer argued that there was a need for the academy to have a broader understanding of scholarship given the shift towards research performance and outputs which had taken away some of the historic role that Universities had played as leaders in the movement of social change and in providing service to society more broadly. For Boyer this arose out of the fact that there was a 'deepening conviction that the role of higher education, as well as the priorities of the professoriate, must be redefined to reflect the new realities' (1990: 3). It was a view that he further advanced through the phrase *the scholarship of engagement* (a term that he coined shortly before his death in 1995), and through which he set out what could be regarded as a civic mission for American Universities to play a central role within the America (Boyer, 1996). Although Boyer's arguments primarily revolved around the role of University faculty, such as through their involvement in outreach activities, with him being far less concerned about student participation, there has in the period since been a far more elastic approach to Boyer's work (Curtis and Blair, 2010: 370). To this end, it has provided a pedagogic platform that a whole host of activities that Universities with external communities (a great deal of which have focussed on student participation) (e.g., Barker; Stanton, 2008; Watson, 2007).

Over the last two decades there has been something of a near tsunami of writing from American scholars who have for the most part provided reflections on initiatives that they have undertaken that have focussed on civic engagement, or as it came to be referred to as service learning whereby students participate in experiential activities (often in their local community) as an element of their academic studies. As I have noted elsewhere (Curtis and Blair, 2010: 370), such initiatives tend to be pursued in the hope that they will remedy what had come to be regarded as a crisis in the US education system and society at large through

the very process of reconnecting (young) people with community organisations (e.g. Astin, 2002; Ball, 2005; Barber and Battistoni, 1993; Rimmerman, 1997, 2010). This is on the backdrop of statistics which point to students being more interested in pursuing personal objectives, with the 2014 survey of American freshmen students highlighting that over two-thirds of all students considered that the primary benefit of higher education was greater earning power (Eagan et al., 2015). A move towards individual concerns has led to a wider concern about a decline in America's civic life and social capital, whether that be in the form of participation in voluntary associations through to voting in elections (Putnam, 2000, 2002; Skocpol, Ganz and Munson, 2000). For example, in 2014 the national turnout at the US midterm elections was a paltry 36.3 per cent – the lowest since the 1942 elections.

But while it is argued that experiential learning strategies serve a critical role in redressing the decline in America's social capital, there is less of a consensus as to the linkage between these initiatives and an awareness of politics despite the fact that politics scholars have engaged with such pedagogic approaches (e.g. Battistoni, 2000; Dicklitch, 2003; Gorham, 2005; Rimmerman, 1997, 2010). In other words, students who engage in service learning an/or civic engagement initiatives often fail to see the linkages with political life. Indeed, some academics have gone so far as to argue that some students view their involvement in activities within their local community as an alternative to being engaged in political activity (Bernstein, 2009: 1). Thus as I have noted elsewhere, students 'see service as something they can perform while keeping their hands clean' (Curtis and Blair, 2010: 370).

This is an issue that Anne Colby and her associates at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching on 'Higher Education and the Development of Moral and Civic Capacity' reflected on when they commented that 'not all forms of civic involvement count as political' (Colby et al, 2003: 19). The central argument of this thesis is that merely engaging students in service learning is in

itself not sufficient to develop the sort of active citizenship that proponents of such an approach seek to achieve. To this end, learning in this regard requires a political engagement, such as through the address and/or engaging with local political issues and matters that address public policy concerns as 'healthy democracies require higher levels of explicitly political participation' (Strachan, 2015: 67). In setting out these points, Colby and her colleagues in essence argued that many US Universities were in themselves not offering the sort of learning opportunities that promoted active citizenship despite the focus attached to service learning (Annette, 2005: 335), of which it was reckoned at the start of the twenty-first century that just 1 per cent of all service-learning programmes in America directly engaged with political organisations or actors (Colby et al, 2007: 5).

The significance of these points rest in the continued concern that policy-makers have relating to political engagement among the younger electorate and given the significant levels of participation in US higher education it is inevitably the case that this brings with it a focus on the linkage between the likes of civic engagement activities and political participation. This is an issue which the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) has traced in the US since its launch in 2000 by asking graduating students as to whether their college experience had made it more likely that they would in the future vote in local, state and national elections. Initial findings from the survey indicated that the majority of students considered that their college experience had no or little impact on their plans for voting (Kuh and Umbach, 2004). The outcome was one that was reflective of a broader trend in society whereby political participation through such norms as engaging in political discussions and paying attention to political debates had not become established practices for a considerable percentage of young people in America (Harward and Shea, 2013: 22-4).

A concern about political engagement by a younger generation is increasingly commonplace in many countries. For many people a simple explanation for this

is that young people are apathetic and not engaged as a result of their lives being shaped by electronic communication and virtual socialisation. It is a viewpoint which is therefore framed in the negative context based upon the beliefs, attitudes and activities of the youth vote. Such a simple explanation papers over the more fundamental and structural factors which shape, influence and determine a person's level of engagement in society, such as marriage, having children, buying a house, and owning a car. Such 'grown-up' activities are increasingly out of range of the young who, as a result of a mixture of personal choice and practical realities, are taking longer to what one might call 'settle down'. Indeed, it is this process of being settled which is more likely to lead to people being politically engaged through participation in and use of facilities (schools, hospitals, parks etc) which are shaped by political decisions.

Political Engagement (or lack of)

Sat against this backdrop of a concern about levels of political engagement and that approaches to civic education were not necessarily addressing this deficiency, some scholars have called for both a review of existing approaches to civic engagement as well as a reconsideration of the terms used to define such initiatives, such as through the usage of the terms 'citizen engagement' and 'democratic engagement' (Saltmarsh and Hartley, 2011, cited in Strachan, 2015: 67). Indeed, such was the concern about levels of civic engagement within America that the US Department of Education and the American Association of Universities and Colleges joined together to establish a National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement which set out its findings in a 2012 report, *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future*.

A review of the literature by Politics scholars who have sought to create learning opportunities for students which promote a deeper understanding of the subject through a teaching intervention such as a simulation and role play or through the use of an experiential exercise such as a placement highlights that a majority of these studies have focussed on promoting student understanding of the subject

matter through emphasis on an active learning approach (e.g. Ishiyama, 2012). Such approaches link to other innovations such as the provision of research opportunities that are aimed at providing students with the skills that will enable them to deal with the more complex nature of the working environment that is typical of the twenty-first century (e.g. Jenkins et al, 2003; Jenkins and Healey, 2005; Brew, 2006). As with active learning approaches, it is argued that the provision of research opportunities promotes academic development and results in higher levels of student knowledge and academic performance (Ishiyama, 2002). An interesting example of an innovative research project is the survey that students at Royal Holloway University undertook of British MPs evaluations of post-1945 British Members of Parliament (Royal Holloway Group PR3710, 2015).

A common theme that appears in the literature devoted to active learning opportunities that make use of the likes of role-plays and simulations is an appreciation that they are not the 'real thing'. In their review of their use of a role-play exercise relating to the parliamentary whips that are typical of the British system, Cowley and Stuart reflect that 'However much students suspend their disbelief and whoever else is involved, the exercise remains artificial' (2015b: 197). This is a state of affairs that is to be expected given that the nature of such exercises cannot mirror the real world and that the key focus of the learning environment is to develop and enhance student knowledge and understanding of the subject, of which Cowley and Stuart highlighted that their role-play exercise resulted in an increase of students knowledge of and support for Parliament (2015a). Cowley and Stuart do not, however, link these opportunities with the broader issue of civic engagement despite the fact that there appear to be clear links to this issue. It is a state of affairs which is reflective of the wider literature where emphasis has been attached to measuring learning gains through the use of pre and post test evaluations of teaching interventions that for the most part relate to studies of individual classes. And even though there are some examples of teaching interventions which promote civic engagement through the use of placements (Curtis et al, 2009; Sherrington, 2008), even here the fact of the

matter is that such interventions tend to be more couched within the context of enhancing student academic performance.

From Learning Politics to Political Learning

These above points raise a question about the nature and the extent of the role of Universities in responding to issues relating to the perceived crisis in civic society as a result of the decline in social capital. This is obviously a significant issue for discussion and one that somewhat goes beyond the remit of this paper. But for the moment a noticeable and potentially linked issue is the fact that there is for the most part an absence of literature relating to the students actively engaging in the political process through for example presenting research findings to local councillors and or national parliaments. Where students experience political engagement, it is often in the form of talks, debates and study trips (e.g. Bates, 2012). By contrast, the work of Buckley and Reidy (2014) stand out as one of the very few examples where students were engaged in a research project that led them to present ideas to a public meeting of the Irish Parliament's Committee on the Constitution that took place at University College Cork in November 2009 and which led to the main findings of the students' submissions being included in the final report of the Committee when it was published in July 2012. The authors note that twenty Politics students attended the workshops that were associated with the project, of which eight gave presentations to the committee and made formal written evidence submissions.

What is innovative about this approach is its focus on engaging students in the act of undertaking research that appears to have a purpose other than just learning in the traditional context of a classroom setting. Yet upon reflection it is quite surprising that there are not fewer examples of this type of innovation given the nature of the Politics subject matter and the possible opportunities to present evidence and reports to policy-makers. Such approaches have the benefit of making the subject real as well as linking in a practical way key skill development for students. Direct engagement with policy-makers also brings to the fore the

subject matter in a contemporary setting, where there has been criticism in other disciplines that teaching practices do not reflect the reality of the subject matter. This has been most publically evident in the context of the teaching of economics and the extent to which students were being provided with the necessary training to understand the economic system after the financial crash. In the UK this was an issue that was summed up by the Queen with the straightforward question as to why economic forecasters did not see the crash coming? (Giles, 2008). In one example, a frustration with traditional teaching models resulted in students at Manchester University establishing a Post-Crash Economics Society which sought to move teaching away from what had become an overly mathematically driven approach to understanding economic behaviour (Inman, 2013).

This is a point that is worth for the moment reflecting on in the case of the study of politics where there are both challenges of providing students with an understanding of key political debates that are often not fully covered in the literature and the concern that some commentators have raised that because students are not engaged in the political process then they are less likely to being prepared for active citizenship (Annette, 2003). The point that is advanced in this paper is that there is a gap whereby students learning of politics does not lead to political learning.

The Policy Commission Model

This is an issue that we addressed at De Montfort University (DMU) University through the creation of a Policy Commission. As a university dedicated to the public good, DMU has a commitment to use its knowledge and resources to benefit the public good beyond the campus that reflects a commitment to civic engagement. The most notable example of this is its Square Mile project which in the tradition of civic engagement projects engages a network of students and academic that in turn contribute to local community project through a range of projects that include working with primary schoolchildren to provide them with an understanding of finance through to providing support in the form of a homework

club which brings together 200 student volunteers to offer mentoring and learning support in 17 schools across Leicester.

Part of this sustained commitment to the public good, and to engaging with the world beyond the campus, the Policy Commission was designed to give students a say in the future of the country and a voice that will be heard by those in power. The objective at the outset was for students to produce 100 policy ideas to influence political debate and thinking ahead of the 2015 General Election.

With this in mind, the Policy Commission was launched on 12 February 2014 at a 'big-brunch' event where over 100 students participated in roundtable discussions to discuss policy challenges which the government faced. The students started with a blank sheet and over 2 hours they moved from table-to-table, exchanging ideas and proposals for change. By the end, five poster boards had been filled with policy recommendations, challenges facing politicians, and alternative visions of society. This led to the identification of five key policy challenges that the government and society faces:

1. Future of our urban spaces and cities
2. Citizenship and political participation
3. Welfare reform and communities
4. Young people and employment
5. Migration and communities

These issues all represented 'wicked policy issues' that Politicians face. They were selected, and confirmed, after an engagement with academics and students. As the work of the Commission unfolded, it became very clear that the boundaries of these themes were somewhat porous, with key policy challenges such as housing straddling more than one theme. Indeed, one of the challenges facing policymakers, as recognised by the Commission, is how to deal with these policy issues that cut across more than one policy sector and resist neat and narrow definitions.

The Policy Commission ran for five months from February to June 2014 when the students presented their report on 100 ideas to change Britain at the House of Lords. In the intervening period the students took part in a variety of initiatives, including imagining themselves as 'Prime Minister for a day', setting out what they would change in 24 hours at Downing Street. They took part in a Festival of Ideas, with students and academics running market stalls on policy themes across the university campus. The Rt Hon John Bercow visited the university to chair a student debate on young people and voting and the US Ambassador to the UK, Matthew Barzun, delivered a Question and Answer session with Politics students. At each step of the way, Commission webpages and Twitter feeds were established and updated, while thematic posters were displayed in different spaces across the campus. Participating students even had the opportunity to compete for prizes for the best ideas.

Importantly, the Policy Commission was provided an opportunity to engage students in new ways of learning. This meant that students were viewed as co-producers of knowledge, working in collaboration with academic staff to enhance the student learning experience. Drawing on an activist political pedagogy, the project has created a community of action, which went beyond existing notions of the lone student as a producer of knowledge working in isolation with academic staff. At the same time, it sought to challenge the stereotype that young people are less and less interested in politics. Indeed, final year student Jamie Osowski (20) said: "The Policy Commission combats the idea that young people aren't interested in politics. We have new ideas and just need a platform and a culture that encourages us to get involved."

The argument here is that the Policy Commission offers a new form of 'praxis', by which students are energised as a community of learners to enable them to maximise their learning outside of traditional curriculum boundaries. This praxis

importantly mixes subject disciplines and brings together students from all levels of study across the university. Through such an approach, we believe that the model of a Policy Commission reasserts the intellectual curiosity that is central to the mission of Higher Education and reinforces learning as a 'political act' that not only transforms the lives of those that it directly engages with, but crucially creates a dynamic process with outcomes that impact on the lives of others and places universities as a force for the public good.

The Policy Commission was open to all students at DMU on over 400 courses across four faculties. Over the course of five months, a programme of innovative events was put in place to harvest ideas of how to change Britain. The Commission was an active and dynamic body, taking the debate out to students rather than sitting in lecture halls.

To drive forward the different streams of work, each of the five thematic inquiries was coordinated and led by a small group of student policy commissioners. These volunteer commissioners, mostly undergraduate students, were supported by two academics per theme. During the course of the Commission, they were trained in writing for policy-makers, attended thematic workshops, as well as collective writing days.

The work of the Policy Commission depended upon these engaged students. Much of this work was undertaken during final examinations and assessment periods. Many students also had to juggle work and family commitments.

The work and organisation of each thematic group was left to students to decide (in conversation with their academic support). Each group worked differently. Some students undertook appreciative inquiries, while others started with the formulation of problem trees, before engaging in forms of action learning policy inquiries. Some undertook interviews with key stakeholders, while all undertook

critical reviews of existing policy programmes. All drew upon their personal experiences of policies and public services.

In keeping with the student-led aims of this Policy Commission, no strict guidelines were given on how to report findings. In fact, there was only one criterion: each theme was to present 20 policy ideas. Unlike other standard formats of policy reports, the Policy Commission brought together five different inquiries, united by the common objective of producing an agenda for change and ideas for policy.

Discussion

The Policy Commission provided students with an opportunity to combine a research project with a political focus. In practical terms, this meant that they were able to engage in the act of doing politics and also provide interesting suggestions to officials. While some critics might comment that such a teaching intervention was merely a gimmick, the Policy Commission model importantly brought the teaching and research of Politics outside of the setting of a Politics department. Students engaged from across the campus, from Engineering to health and life sciences. In total some 170 students participated over the five-month period.

For the students who engaged in the project, a common theme was that it provided them with an opportunity to express their voice. It is a viewpoint which challenges the conventional wisdom that young people are not interested in Politics and which therefore highlights that political engagement relates to issues regarding what motivates and engages the youth vote. This resulted in some interesting ideas that ranged from having a national migration day through to so-called mardi gras elections. Students also called for a 'none-of-the-above' option to appear on voting slips so that a lack of satisfaction with political choices could be registered whereas at present the vote is either not cast or is registered as a spoilt ballot. Given the nature of the wider economic environment, a number of

the policies focussed on practical and immediate concerns of the students, including matters to do with housing, welfare and employment. Fundamentally the Policy Commission demonstrated the extent to which students took the issues seriously and were able and willing to contribute clearly thought out policies.

The final report also provided the students with a number of unanticipated benefits. While the academics involved in the project expected that the report would engage students in terms of their motivation and learning, the report also provided students with a practical portfolio of the work that they had contributed to. This crucially gave them an ability to showcase and promote their experience at University in a manner that would not simply be possible in the context of a traditional essay.

Looking beyond the student experience, the Policy Commission raised the prominence of the study of Politics and the political world across the University and also engaged important external audiences. This in itself is not an insignificant issue given the pressure that exists on Universities in the UK as well as in other countries, of which the US is the most notable in relation to studying Politics. Thus, the Commission provided a model and means to demonstrate the relevancy of the study of Politics which in itself is not such an insignificant outcome.

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