

## Research Article

# Discourses of ‘equivalence’ in HE and notions of student engagement: resisting the neoliberal university.

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### Abstract

There is no shortage of analysis of marketization and the theorizing of the student as consumer/customer and how this impacts on notions of student engagement. This compelling analysis forms the starting point for any investigation into the possibilities for resistance to the current hegemonic view of education and learning as commodities and the purpose of the university as developing ‘employability’. In this article, we discuss the impact of the discourse of employability on student engagement and argue that it positions students as engaged in an individual process of CV building rather than a collective process of learning and knowledge development. We focus on the growing role of academic credit awarded for work and other experience via which experience is commodified and valued in terms of employability and legitimated through the notion of ‘equivalence’. The notion of ‘equivalence’ in education is problematic in that it serves to disguise inequality, and more significantly in that it conflates all learning and obfuscate the distinctiveness of learning and student engagement in different contexts. We argue that the notion of equivalence serves a dynamic in which (for example) Higher Education Achievement Records seek to measure all achievement in terms of the metric of employability. We provide analysis of text from student websites to show how this dynamic is dominant in official student union texts but countered by very different perspectives in less official texts. Against the background of academic understanding of marketization/neo-liberal hegemony, the authors suggest that the very notion of ‘student engagement’ becomes problematic if it fails to acknowledge resistance and engagement.

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**The marketization of education: here for keeps?**

For a few days in England, in November 2010, resistance took centre stage. The generation of young people written off by many as depoliticized, anaesthetized by social media and consumerism, took to the streets to protest about increases in student fees. The assistant editor of the Guardian newspaper was able to write: 'right on cue, exactly six months into David Cameron's premiership, the ancient British roar of "Tory scum" echoed across central London again' (White, 2010). With widespread strikes over public service pensions and two significant demonstrations organised by the Trades Union Congress over the next eighteen months until May, 2012, there appeared to be the possibility of organised and sustained resistance to a range of austerity measures and opposition to the primacy of marketization of public services. However, from whichever political perspective one views the current age of austerity in England and the wider UK, it has not since been characterised by the sort of widespread and coordinated resistance that has taken place in other parts of Western Europe and beyond. In terms of Higher Education (HE), when Furedi (2010, 1) writes that 'whatever one thinks about the costs and benefits of ...marketization (it) is a reality that academics have to live with' this pragmatic compliance, albeit tempered by occasional angry outbursts, appears to capture the mood of the age.

What follows in is an acknowledgment of the way in which the academy has convincingly analysed the introduction of marketization in higher education in England. We argue that the commodification and subsequent exchange value of education as a redeemable good - notions which are the direct outcome of marketization - should be placed firmly within the wider context of the neoliberal hegemony and its demands for performative outcomes and indices. The paper concludes by arguing that worthwhile resistance to such marketization has to be conceptualised within the context of joint actions by academics, students and the wider world.

That higher education institutions exist in a competitive environment in the UK is now a fact of life – at least in the eyes of those charged with managing and marketing such bodies. The 'local variant of the pragmatist in a suit' (Collini, 2013, 3) may or may not have become the hero of the hour in the eyes of academics, but an uneasy

coexistence between pro and anti-marketisers can frequently exist even within one university (Barnett, 2010). The political support for such marketization is unapologetic. The senior minister charged with higher education provision actively promotes the introduction of a wider range of providers while addressing an audience at a university bearing the name of a multinational investment bank (Willetts, 2012); a private university charging rates double those applicable to UK students, and backed by a wealthy ideologue, is happily accommodated (Guardian, 2011); a university offering courses in a single subject (thereby conveniently disregarding any notion of universality) is officially sanctioned (see [www.law.ac.uk](http://www.law.ac.uk)). The possibilities for making profit from such enterprises is forensically exposed by McGettigan's (2013) explanation of how group corporate structures operate, and lest we remain in doubt about the ideological drive behind the 'opening up' of the higher education sector, recent moves to privatize the student loan book (Department for Business, Industry and Skills, 2013) should leave us clear as to the trajectory of a project firmly rooted in neoliberal ideology. McGettigan draws a somewhat chilling parallel in terms of the ruthlessness of free market capitalism in his use of the term 'sub-prime degrees' (2013, 185) when considering potential outcomes from current funding arrangements.

In a view, or perhaps more accurately a fear, now frequently expressed by academics, the inevitable corollary of such marketization would be a concomitant student consumerism and its inevitable consequences for student engagement. Along with the expression of such fears (Molesworth *et al.*, 2009), and some discussion about the nature of such potential consumerism (Eagle and Brennan, 2007; George, 2007; Barnett, 2010), there is now some evidence that students are indeed being shaped as 'consumers' wanting 'value for money' (Kandiko and Mawer, 2013). There is, furthermore, clear evidence that this notion is used to justify the actions of an emergent managerial layer in universities. The centrality – some would say the tyranny – of the National Student Survey (NSS) along with similar local mechanisms of client satisfaction and the production of information in Key Information Sets (KIS) as well as publicly available league tables for employability and a whole range of other 'success criteria', have combined to create a fractious atmosphere of commercial transaction in some areas. But to underscore the point: the drive towards a (largely specious) demonstration of the university as the provider of good client services stems from the

nervousness of a growing layer of workers charged with managerial duties which are, in themselves, the result of the prevalence of a neoliberal market-driven agenda.

The issue which unites commentators in terms of the discourse of student as consumer/customer, is a concern for the purpose of the university, the nature of student engagement in HE and the pedagogical relationship between lecturer and student which forms part of that engagement. Concerns relating to student satisfaction surveys and, more starkly, aggregated final grades as a clumsy mechanism to measure performance have now woven their way into the consciousness of academics and their institutions.

However, if what unites commentators – including these authors – is a fear for the nature of the pedagogical relationship, there is also a shared view among many that the relationships formed in this way can be reformulated into one of student engagement as partnership and collaboration in knowledge creation rather than consumption. Barnett (2010) identifies the element of choice and financial commitment as being a potential driver towards greater engagement; Scullion *et al.* (2010) envisage an opportunity for academics to restate the relationship and to open up a heightened discourse about the social value of the university; Eagle and Brennan (2007:45) optimistically see the possibilities of students 'not as naïve customers of a simple good, but as informed customers in a complex and enduring co-production process.' Others (Boden and Epstein, 2006; Neary and Winn, 2009) argue for the concept of student as producer, working collaboratively with academics to (re) establish the university in the tradition of liberal humanism.

We would argue that it is *only* through the joint efforts and engagement of academics, students and a range of societal 'stakeholders' that a productive pedagogical relationship can be sustained, fostered and developed. It is critical that academics engage with the argument around marketization at every possible opportunity, working with students to understand the process in which they are engaged and to illuminate and expose the frailties of a market-led, neoliberal view of what education is and what it is for.

The current climate in HE of managerialism, scrutiny, survivalism and performativity (Ball, 2008) has not come about through an instance of the law of unforeseen circumstances: such concepts form the very bedrock of neoliberalism. To

mount opposition, it is vital to conceptualise education in the same way as neoliberals do, as a commodified – and increasingly privatized - good to be bought, sold and bid for along with housing, healthcare, energy and basic transportation. To do so is to open the argument about the very nature of value itself. With such questions at the centre of the discussion, this paper now moves towards a consideration of how the mission of the university is changing and how the notion of equivalence is an example of the way in which commodification of the process and its reduction to exchange value on the labour market are central to neoliberal approaches to education and construct 'student engagement'.

### **The Changing Mission of the University**

The mission of the university has evolved over its long history, from the development of pious clerics for the medieval church, to its role in the Early Modern University as 'finishing school for gentlemen', and on to the 'advancement of science' of the Humboldtian University (Bourner *et al.*, 2013). In recent decades, the 'massification'<sup>2</sup> of higher education has been justified in terms of its role in producing enhanced labour power potential 'up skilling' UK plc' and a response to global competition (see for example the Leitch Review of Skills, 2006). At the same time, an increasingly differentiated HE has perpetuated its function as mechanism of social stratification. Under neoliberalism, higher education has increasingly taken an explicit role in the market and, through privatisation, has become a potential source of profit.

This shift has been marked by the increasing commodification of HE as a purchasable individual benefit expressed in terms of employment potential. In 1997 Ron Dearing was arguing that government and universities must 'encourage the student to see him/herself as an investor in receipt of a service, and to seek, as an investor, value for money and a good return from that investment' (Dearing, 1997, 22.19). Of the Robbins Report's four equal objectives for Higher Education (Committee on Higher Education, 1963), 'employability' is raised to the dominant mission of the institution.

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<sup>2</sup> In the 1980s the participation ratio passed 15 per cent, which is generally seen as the tipping-point between elite and mass education (Anderson, 2010).

Where, in the past, a supply of educated, knowledgeable and skilled individuals had been the 'by-product' of the university's dominant mission, production of labour power is now presented as its *raison d'être*. This prioritising of 'employability' reinforces both the function of education as producer of labour power and its commodification as a positional good whose value is at least in part (if not exclusively) a function of its desirability ranking. The 'value' of education is reduced to the access it gives to earnings through different combinations of positionality and labour power. Thus the commodification of education can be understood not just in terms of the 'exchange value' of courses and programmes expressed as fees but in the relationship between fees and the 'exchange value' of the graduate's labour. This translation of the value of education into labour power value can be seen as one aspect of what has been termed 'new vocationalism' in HE (Symes, 2000).

This 'vocationalisation' of HE has manifested in a number of ways including the introduction of new types of work-based and work-related provision ranging from Foundation Degrees and Work-Based Learning degree programmes to Professional Doctorates. All these express their value explicitly in terms of enhanced labour power. But, increasingly, so do more traditional 'academic' courses, evidenced in the promotional materials which give reassurances that prospective students will gain 'the skills employers want' and the inclusion of 'placement modules' or other work-experience opportunities in fulltime programmes, thereby changing both the nature of student engagement and the process in which they are engaged from prioritising learning to prioritising 'Curriculum Vitae building'.

### **The issue of 'equivalence' in HE**

Two important strands of thinking about knowledge and learning have served to justify transformations to the curriculum of HE consistent with its new mission. The first is the challenge to the monopoly and authority of the university in the production and validation of knowledge posed by its characterisation as 'mode 1' knowledge supplanted by 'mode 2' knowledge generated out with the university (Gibbons *et al.*, 1994). The second is the challenge to the dominant metaphor of 'learning as acquisition' on which formal learning is premised, by a metaphor of 'learning as participation' (Sfard, 1998) in which learning is seen not as transfer of knowledge from

one mind to another but as a process of participation in social practices or apprenticeship within 'communities of practice' (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

By arguing for recognition of alternative sites of knowledge production and alternative processes of knowledge development, these perspectives have provided a theoretical basis for the emergence of notions of the 'equivalence' of experiential learning and academic study, formal and informal learning and the equating of student engagement in one with student engagement in the other. This 'equivalence' in education can be seen as comprising two dimensions, equivalence of level and equivalence of content. In relation to the first, the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications proposed in the Dearing Review in 1997, was introduced in 2001 making it possible for non-academic programmes and qualifications to be positioned on the framework as 'equivalent' in level to academic awards.

The second, related but separate, notion of equivalence is the equivalence of content according to which different forms of learning experiences may yield 'equivalent' learning outcomes. This concept of equivalence was articulated in initiatives such as National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) and Accreditation of Prior Experience and Learning (APEL) which developed in the 80s from two different and largely incompatible policy perspectives. One (APEL), arising out of emancipatory and feminist critiques was motivated by a concern to empower disadvantaged learners, while the other (NVQs), informed by human capital theory was motivated by a concern for greater efficiency in workforce development and mobility (Colley, Hodgkinson and Malcolm, 2003). As Colley *et al.* (2003) argue it is the second that has come to dominate articulations of 'equivalence' in education.

Both these conceptions of 'equivalence' (level and content) legitimate the expansion of universities' involvement in the development of the existing workforce through means such as part-time in-service courses and bespoke programmes for employers and the trend within some universities to move into the 'territory' of the workplace to enhance and accredit workplace learning.

Most of the critiques of work based learning (WBL) (see for example, Usher and Solomon, 1999; Zemblyas, 2006; Wang, 2008; Rhodes and Garrick. 2003) revolve around the fact that the norms and practices of, and student engagement in, WBL are

dominated by the 'needs of the workplace' (i.e. its profitability). While the proponents of WBL talk of 'mutuality of benefit', with both learner and the workplace gaining from the learning, the gains are expressed in terms of organisational change and enhanced labour power (see for example Lester and Costley, 2010). Proponents of WBL stress its potential for the development of critical reflection and enquiry while others (Rhodes 2003, Garrick 2003, Valentin 1999) critique the influences of corporate capitalism on the type of learning that becomes regarded as legitimate within workplaces.

The advance of WBL within academia is also evidenced in the shift from a 'technocratic' to a 'post-technocratic' model of professional formation (Bines, 1992); from transmission of a systematic knowledge base as one of three components (along with application of the knowledge base to practice, and supervised practice in work) to the 'acquisition of professional competence' primarily developed through practice and reflection on practice in work-based situations, and premised on the recognition that not all professionally relevant knowledge is necessarily, or best, acquired through formal study.

This recognition has long informed the design of high status professional accreditation such as law and medicine where university study has been combined with professional practice either concurrently or sequentially. This model is based on the **complementarity** of student engagement in these sources of learning; however, 'equivalence' of the learning potential of the workplace has also been increasingly used to justify the **substitutability** of student engagement in university and workplace learning.

In the field of education, we saw this, for example, in the assertion that the status of 'Higher Level Teaching Assistant' (HLTA) could be reached *either* through relevant HE *or* through relevant experience (TDA, 2006). The fact that the 'professional standards' for HLTA were based on those for teachers paved the way for Michael Gove's recent claim that: 'Teaching is a craft and it is best learnt as an apprentice observing a master craftsman or woman' (Gove, 2010).

Learning is a feature of all human experience and, of course, education should recognise this. However, as Dewey (1938) argued, not all learning is of equal *educational* value and it is important to distinguish between student engagement in

'educative' and 'non- or mis-educative' experience. Workplaces are concerned with the development of labour power through workforce learning (Warmington, 2008), but engagement in this learning is not *necessarily* 'educative'

### **The marketization of HE, student engagement and inequality**

The market discipline of competition requires differentiation and, as well as growth, the HE sector has seen increasing differentiation of institutions and of provision. In this differentiated 'market', the evidence is that social class inequalities have been both maximally and effectively maintained (Boliver, 2011; Croxford and Raffe, 2013).

For many, the notion of equivalence has been a way of bridging the so-called 'academic/vocational divide' by asserting the equal worth of traditional academic qualifications and higher level occupationally relevant awards. But markets have their own logic for calculating value and this discourse of 'equivalence' can serve to obscure or deny inequality (in this case of the exchange value of qualifications) much as the 'equal but different' discourse of apartheid and the Jim Crow laws sought to do.

Recent research by Vignoles *et al.* (2008) demonstrates for example that poorer students who do go to university are more likely to attend lower status institutions, where status is measured in terms of research quality and institutional prestige. On average, Black-Caribbean, Bangladeshi and Other Black ethnic minority students tend to access lower-status institutions than similarly-achieving White British counterparts. Students who have graduated from institutions which scored highly in the Research Assessment Exercise and from institutions with higher staff to student ratios, higher retention rates and higher expenditure per student earn significantly more than their fellow graduates. 'Equivalent' provision may be not just different but, in important respects, not equal.

Market competition presupposes 'consumer choice' but as Ball *et al.* (2002) have argued, the very idea of choice assumes a kind of formal equality that obscures 'the effects of real inequality.' The distribution of classes and minority ethnic groups within HE and across HE institutions has to be understood as the outcome of several stages of decision-making in which choices and constraints or barriers interweave. The model of HE as a market in which students (as 'customers') are making equally

informed choices is problematic in that it not only assumes an equally accessible 'market', it also fails to address how the role of the student as 'producer'<sup>3</sup> of themselves as 'labour power' influences decision making in relation to educational choices. Essentially, within a marketized system in which the 'value' of HE is expressed in terms of eventual earning potential (the exchange value of labour power), student engagement becomes a process of 'commodification of the self'. The student must attend to the building of their 'brand' expressed through their CV in which university and course choices and achievement are just one component amongst a broad range of 'brand signifiers.' As Moreau and Leathwood (2006) have argued, the discourse of employability, with its emphasis on individual responsibility, neglects social inequalities and the way in which class, gender, ethnicity, age, disability and university attended all impact on employment opportunities.

Like Williams (2008) we can draw on Bourdieu's (1990) argument that academic devaluation increases the significance of the individual's social and cultural capital whilst simultaneously devaluing human capital and the value of the graduate's labour becomes increasingly linked to their overall 'character'. In the field of education, this is clearly articulated by Stanfield and Cremin (2012), for example, who argue that coalition government teacher training initiatives emphasize 'teachers' dispositions'. Higher Education teacher training programmes such as 'Troops to Teachers' and 'Teach First' are performative in creating 'ideal types' of teachers (the 'ex-soldier' and the 'elite graduate' respectively).

In both cases the symbolic capital associated with work experience is emphasized as indicative of 'character'. In the case of Teach First, graduates are depicted as 'those who do not want to make a long-term commitment to teaching' (Policy Exchange, 2008, 26), but who will gain 'the skills, experience and leadership to excel in careers in any field' beyond their two year commitment to teaching in

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<sup>3</sup> It is this implicit role of student as producer of self as labour power that Mike Neary seeks to challenge by his concept of "Student as Producer" which reframes the student as collaborators in the production of knowledge <http://studentasproducer.lincoln.ac.uk/>.

'challenging schools'. In the case of Troops to Teachers, it is service in the armed forces which equips ex-soldiers to face the challenges of teaching.

It is no coincidence that both the Coalition government and the opposition have recently expressed concern with education's role in building 'character' (see for example the DfE page on "military ethos in schools" [DfE, 2014] and recent pronouncements by the Labour Party on 'character' [Hunt, 2014]). The purpose of education becomes to build (the right kind of) character and student engagement is both investment in and demonstration of 'character'. Failure to develop/demonstrate 'character' attractive to capital becomes an individual failure (and by extension a failure of education). Students speak of 'needing to go beyond their degree to gain the skills and experience they would need for employment, highlighting the importance of extra-curricula activities, internships and work placement opportunities' (Kandiko and Mawer, 2013, 8), and the Higher Education Achievement Record (HEAR) initiative seeks to give HE institutions a role in authorising and stewarding a record of students, academic and non-academic experiences which contribute to their employability (UniversitiesUK, 2012)

A marketized system positions students as having to make increasingly sophisticated judgements and decisions about the nature and optimising of their 'brand'. Should they seek differentiation from the competition by pursuing higher levels of qualification (resulting in 'credential inflation' [Collins, 2011]) or by developing 'work-readiness' by building a portfolio of relevant work experience or by demonstrating 'character' by undertaking 'challenging' projects' each with associated implications for notions for engagement? But the more fundamental question is, to what extent do students (and their parents and university staff) accept this positioning and these choices? What alternative conceptions of 'value' and 'character' influence decision making and become expressed as engagement?

### **Engagement in resistance**

This final section considers possibilities for active resistance to the neoliberal hegemony of marketization and offers a challenge to the notion of character that is central to much of the thinking generated through this ideology. In doing so, it draws upon documentary research from websites, both officially sanctioned and those operating as entities

beyond the auspices of the university, of five English universities (Birmingham, Manchester, Cambridge, University College London (UCL) and Sussex)<sup>4</sup> where students have engaged in some measure of coordinated protest during the twelve months to the point of writing.

The official student union websites guide students through information about finance, accommodation and job opportunities. Twitter feeds celebrate awards for university facilities and although there are links to information about officer elections and campaigns, such sites are, for the most part, a politics-free zone. Absence of critique of the employability agenda, for example, is apparent in the 'student engagement as self-commodification' discourse evident in the way that participation in student union roles and broader volunteering is justified in terms of employability.

"becoming a Rep is an experience that gives you many skills which you can add to your CV." (Sussex University Student Union)

"Being an officer also gives you valuable and varied experience that will look great on your CV and help when applying for jobs in the future." (University College London Student Union)

"More and more employers are recognising the benefits of candidates who have proven that they'll go that extra mile. This is a chance to improve your CV, get invaluable free training and have some fun!" (Manchester University Student Union)

"For most UCL undergraduates, your volunteering can now be included upon the HEAR (Higher Education Achievement Report). The HEAR contains your academic record, but also includes extra-curricular activities such as volunteering." (University College London Student Union)

To look upon these sites may be to invite the conclusion that the managerialism of the neoliberal university has placed its grip firmly on the student body.

The narrative, and the ethic of student engagement within it, which is reflected in independent student sites is somewhat different – and what is noticeable about the content here is that it goes some way beyond opposition to student fees. What emerges is an engagement with a range of broader themes that encompass more than immediate, localized matters. Of these, one of the most immediate to emerge is a concern about privatization and the effect that this will have on a range of non-academic workers, the

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<sup>4</sup> All sites listed separately as *Student Websites* in Reference List.

services they provide and the university community as a whole. Along with this goes a commitment to campaigning for a living wage – i.e remuneration that goes beyond the statutory minimum wage and recognises local conditions of cost of living - and for this to be paid to contracted workers whose labour is not outsourced. There is a clear acknowledgement that privatisation reflects a ‘larger ideological push...to marketize education’ (Sussex Against Privatization) and that any resistance must include ‘cleaners ...and administrative staff’ (Cambridge Defend Education) as well as academics. There is also a willingness to engage in wider debate between students and wider national networks of workers.

This analysis of the far-reaching effect of privatisation is reflected in clear concern about the selling off of student loans and the implications of this not just for the individuals involved but for the concomitant effect on the provision of education on an equitable basis. Thus it is that comment about universities being ‘for the benefit of society, not run for profit’ (Manchester) and calls for public statements from Vice Chancellors opposing the loan-book sell-off (Birmingham) proliferate. Alongside this sits a widespread concern about the suppression of protest and dissent, with comment about this being a ‘political act designed to muzzle dissent’ and ‘managerial intolerance for protest’ (UCL) and of institutions being run for the benefit of ‘a small class of senior managers’ (Sussex). Once again, the way to combat this is framed in terms of resistance ‘with unity through national networks’ (Manchester), coalitions with groups ranging from trade unions to UK Uncut (Cambridge) and through ‘debate and dialogue between students and workers at the university’ (Birmingham). At the time of writing students at London’s School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) have made their support for a group of cleaners clear and concrete, albeit that reference to the dispute is entirely absent from the official student union website (see Justice for SOAS Cleaners).

### **Conclusions and ways forward**

Student engagement takes many forms and if it is not to be reduced to assisting and encouraging the process of ‘self-commodification’ we have outlined, we must examine and critique the processes whereby some forms are legitimated while others are marginalised and devalued. In looking at spaces for resistance within the academy, we applaud and welcome the perceptive work of colleagues who have analysed

marketization so convincingly, as we do with the work of those who look to accommodation and reform through notions of co-production with students. The defence of the pedagogic relationship is of great importance and efforts to preserve notions of human liberalism within the student experience must continue as energetically as ever. However, we argue that it is only through challenging some of these basic precepts of value - of which employability, the privileging of skills and the development of certain notions of character are most prevalent – can we, as students and academics, open up the possibilities of concerted opposition to neoliberal hegemony. To do so, we maintain that academics must look beyond their classrooms, lecture theatres and offices and to the wider world identified by those student groups who themselves reject current dominant ideologies.

In order to do this we need to recognise the competing discourses around value and employability, of both ourselves as academics and as students. The notion of labour as a saleable commodity needs to be further examined, particularly in the light of how students conceive of their engagement in their university experience and indeed, the wider world. This paper has concluded with the ideas and actions of those students who see themselves operating outside those discourses privileged by current dominant ideologies. Research is needed to look further into what prompts such thoughts and actions and to consider how this alternative discourse can be harnessed in a joint effort to challenge the neoliberal university and the quiet compliance that currently characterises it.

#### **Student websites referred to in text**

Birmingham: <http://www.guildofstudents.com/groupsandvolunteering/volunteering/>

Birmingham: <http://www.defendededucationbrum.org/our-demands/>

Cambridge: <http://www.cusu.cam.ac.uk/>

Cambridge: <http://www.defendededucation.co.uk/about-us>

\_Manchester: <http://manchesterstudentsunion.com/studentvoice/howwemakedecisions>

Manchester: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Defend-Our-Education-Manchester/250425511780731>

Sussex: <http://sussexagainstprivatization.wordpress.com/about/>

Sussex University Student Union: <http://www.sussexstudent.com/>

UCLU: <http://www.uclu.org/sites/uclu.org/files/policies/up1109.pdf>

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