Student Engagement and Empowerment in Higher Education: Perspectives of students in England

Leigh Spanner
Green Templeton College
University of Oxford

This dissertation submitted for the degree of
Master of Science
August 2017

ABSTRACT

Student engagement, which emphasises students' role in shaping their higher education experiences, has become embedded as a core aim of national policy and the everyday management of universities. It has provoked a reconceptualisation of traditional hierarchies within higher education and offers the potential to be empowering for students. However, it has also been criticised for diminishing student agency by reinforcing ideas of student-as-consumer. Drawing on focus groups with students across three universities in England, this study aims to explore students' experiences and perspectives of empowerment in the context of student engagement policy. The research finds that students who do not have a representative role face significant barriers to shaping their academic experiences; they are excluded from decision-making processes and rarely get to experience any changes that result from their feedback. Although students' consumer identities give them confidence to demand more of their institutions, consumer rationales for student engagement may limit students' sphere of influence. A sense of community, enhanced by the quality and quantity of student-staff contact, can be truly empowering but the effects of massification and marketisation present significant challenges to promoting this. These findings lead to a number of policy recommendations, which can be used by those who wish to create empowering opportunities for students to influence their life at university.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank all the students who gave up their time to participate in this study, without them the research would not have been possible. I hope the final report does justice to their experiences and that their contributions go some way to improving the experiences of others. I am grateful to my contacts at the three universities I attended for their generous hospitality. Special thanks are owed to my supervisor, Dr Hubert Ertl, for his valuable feedback and guidance throughout the project. Finally, to all the students and staff at the Department of Education and Green Templeton College for their inspiring discussion and to my family for their continual support.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

TABLES

FIGURES

ABBREVIATIONS

NSS	National Student Survey
PTES	Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey
HEA	Higher Education Academy
BIS	Department of Business, Innovation and Skills
TEF	Teaching Excellence Framework
KIS	Key Information Set
NUS	National Union of Students
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency
Ipsos MORI	Market Research Company

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

"*Over the last 10 years [the NSS] has helped over 2 million students to make their voices heard about the things that matter to them, and has been fundamental to driving change in our universities and colleges." Professor Madeleine Atkins, HEFCE Chief Executive* (THE, 2014)

"*The University say that they want students to complete the NSS because they value students' feedback, but really it's because they want students' fees." Eden Bailey, Oxford University Students' Union Vice-President* (Independent, 2017)

1.1 Background and Rationale

Student Engagement, defined here as the participation of students in shaping their higher education experiences, has enjoyed considerable attention within the UK higher education sector in recent years. It is now firmly embedded as a core aim in national policy and the everyday management of universities. However, as the quotes above demonstrate, there is conflict between the assumptions underlying student engagement mechanisms, such as the National Student Survey (NSS), and how they are interpreted and experienced by students.

For some, student engagement is empowering. The 2011 White Paper *Students at the Heart of the System* states that student charters and student feedback will "empower students whilst at university" (BIS, 2011, p.6) and the Higher Education Funding Council for England states that student engagement will "involve and empower students in the process of shaping their learning experience" (Little, Locke, Scesa, & Williams, 2009, p.10). As students are involved in evaluating and shaping their academic experiences, there is a shift in the responsibility for decision-making from academic staff and university management to students. Student engagement is also closely related to the more radical notion of student voice, where student input regarding their learning experiences has the potential to transform practice and promote social justice within higher education. Whereas curriculum, pedagogy and the dominant culture within universities have traditionally made it difficult for certain groups of students to participate, student voice requires institutions to develop strategies to recognise and respond to the diversity of worldviews that make up their communities (Sellar & Gale, 2011). This becomes increasingly important as universities seek to enrol different students in greater numbers and are challenged to ensure that these students have equal access to all the benefits a university education can bring.

However, one of the driving forces behind the promotion of student engagement in national policy has been the introduction and subsequent increases in tuition fees (HEFCE, 2003). As such, student engagement has been linked to an emerging trend in policy discourse to construct higher education

as a market and position students as consumers within it (Little et al., 2009). Critics of student engagement argue see it to be about harnessing customer feedback for management purposes and is narrowly focussed on ensuring customer satisfaction as opposed to empowering students as critical voices and transforming institutional practice (Attwood, 2012; McQuillan, 2014). The quote above from the Vice President of Oxford University Students' Union above is set in the context of a recent boycott of the NSS by students across the country in response to government proposals to include the survey results in the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), a scheme which aims to assess teaching quality of higher education providers and inform increases in tuition fees.

Faced with two competing narratives, this dissertation contributes an empirical basis for understanding how the prevalence of student engagement in policy has been empowering for students in England. Although there are other benefits of student engagement such as improved learning outcomes and quality enhancement (Trowler, 2010), which may also have empowering effects, this study focuses on how students are empowered in terms of shaping their higher education experiences. There is a limited body of literature which assesses the value of student engagement from the perspective of students themselves, much less that investigates issues of power. Where power is evaluated, this tends to be from the viewpoint of students involved in engagement activities and excludes the voices of the wider student body (Bragg, 2007; Carey, 2013a; Freeman, 2014; Seale, 2010). This study builds on previous work by using focus groups to explore the qualitative experiences of those who do not consider themselves amongst the most engaged. Inspired by Amartya Sen's (1985) capability approach, it critically analyses the factors which enable and constrain student empowerment. Given that the trend towards the marketisation of higher education has at once prompted student engagement and been criticised for disempowering students, it assesses marketisation as one of these factors in particular. All this is with a view to developing a basis for policy-makers to understand how to enhance the transformative potential of student engagement in a way that is meaningful to students.

1.2 Policy Context

Student engagement is a very broad concept, relating to a range of activities and student behaviors which the literature categorises in multiple, diverging ways (see for example: (Healey et al., 2014; Kahu, 2013; Trowler, 2010). Following Ashwin and McVitty (2015), I define student engagement with reference to what is being influenced through student engagement, specifically students' academic experiences. Academic experiences are defined as any interaction between the student and the institution in connection with their studies (Temple et al., 2014). This is distinct from student engagement to form individual understanding, which is the definition of student engagement used in North American and Australasian contexts (Coates & McCormick, 2014; Kuh, 2009). The definition

chosen here, with its emphasis on the student's role in university decision making, is a distinctly British understanding of student engagement (Hardy and Bryson, 2010) and is the kind of engagement which government policy aims to promote. This definition also excludes students' engagement in shaping experiences that fall outside the academic sphere, such as their social or living arrangements at university. However, there is likely to be overlap between all these distinctions.

Although student involvement in decision-making predates much of the discourse around student engagement (Moodie & Eustace, 1974), it has become more prevalent and embedded within national policy since the introduction and subsequent increases in tuition fees in England. The 2003 White Paper *The Future of Higher Education* (DfES, 2003) introduced variable fees of up to £3000 a year and positioned students' assessments of their university experience as a primary means of judging quality within the sector, leading to the launch of the NSS in 2005. The 2011 White Paper *Students at the Heart of the System,* which raised the tuition fee caps to £9000 a year, emphasised student engagement as a key feature of university management (BIS, 2011). A year later the Quality Assurance Agency published a chapter dedicated to student engagement in the Quality Code (QAA, 2012). Since then, The Higher Education Funding Council for England has funded a number of projects with partners across the sector to develop student engagement policy and practice (HEFCE, 2015). Institutions have responded by developing a range of mechanisms for involving students in improving their courses, including: feedback questionnaires, student-staff consultancy committees, 'forums' where students and university leaders can discuss learning and teaching, and staff hired with a specific student engagement remit (Velden, Naidoo, Lowe, Bótas, & Pool, 2013). Students are also involved in specific initiatives, such as student-led staff development (Campbell, Eland, Rumpus, & Shacklock, 2009), curriculum design (Bovill, Bulley, & Morss, 2011) and research projects (Healey & Jenkins, 2009). The rationale for student engagement at a national policy level is that, as students take on greater financial burden, students' assessments of their provision allow applicants to make informed choices between institutions and enables current students to hold their universities accountable (Botas & Brown, 2013). It encourages universities to compete for student approval which, according to market logic, drives up quality whilst driving down cost (Furedi, 2011). Although student engagement developments across the the UK are closely linked, the discourse around tuition fee increases and marketisation has differed considerably between the devolved nations (Brown & Carasso, 2013). For this reason, this research will focus on the experiences of students from a range of higher education institutions in England.

1.3 The Experiences Informing the Study

The aims of the study are partly informed by my own experiences as a student, student representative for my Students' Union and the National Union of Students (NUS) and student reviewer for the QAA. In all these roles I have been involved in developing and implementing student engagement policy and have witnessed its potential to facilitate collaboration between students and staff, transform institutional practice and create more inclusive, stimulating learning environments. However, I have also observed how the purposes of student engagement are interpreted in different ways and seen how practice that is defined under this umbrella term does not always offer students the kind of influence that they value. Through this study, I have sought to think critically about my own assumptions around what meaningful engagement is for students and hope to aid more informed discussions within the sector around creating genuinely empowering opportunities for students to influence their life at university.

1.4 Research Aims and Questions

Given the prevalence of student engagement in national policy discourse, the objective of this study is to explore how students in England are empowered to shape their academic experience from the perspective of students themselves. Specifically, it aims to examine the factors which enable and constrain student empowerment in this context, with a particular focus on the marketisation of higher education as one of these factors and aims to provide recommendations for policy makers at who want to create empowering opportunities for students to shape their academic experiences. In light of these aims, I have developed a number of research questions to be investigated from the perspective of students. The overarching research question is:

How are students empowered to shape their academic experience?

This leads to the following sub-questions:

1. What factors enable student empowerment?
2. What are the barriers to student empowerment?
3. How does the marketisation of higher education enable or constrain student empowerment?
4. In what ways might the analysis of the data inform national and institutional policy which seeks to empower students to shape their academic experiences?

1.5 Outline of the Study

This dissertation contains six Chapters. Following the introduction and background to the study in Chapter One, Chapter Two presents and critically examines the literature around student power and student engagement in higher education. Chapter three introduces Sen's capability approach as the conceptual framework which will be used to evaluate student empowerment in the thesis. Chapter Four, research design and methods, outlines the interpretative-critical approach and choice of semi-structured focus groups and thematic analysis for the collection and interpretation of the data used to inform the study's conclusions, as well as exploring the ethical issues arising from the study. Chapter Five presents an analysis of the data produced from the focus groups and discusses them in relation to the literature. Finally, Chapter Six presents a summary of the main findings from the study, relates them to the research questions, reflects on the approach taken and provides a series of recommendations for policy makers seeking to create more empowering opportunities for students to shape their academic experiences.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter presents and critically examines the literature that explores student power in higher education and in relation to student engagement policy in particular. After a brief explanation of the approach taken to reviewing the literature, it introduces the field of scholarship that positions the university as a social institution with its own power dynamics that have traditionally offered students little influence over their academic experiences. It then discusses the literature around student engagement and groups it into two categories according to Clark's (1983) *Triangle of Coordination*; those that see student engagement as offering students market or consumer power and those that see it as offering democratic power. Finally, there is a discussion of the empirical research into students' perspectives of the factors which facilitate and constrain their empowerment.

2.1 Review Approach

A systematic approach, described by Booth, Papaioannou, & Sutton (2012), has been taken to identifying and reviewing the literature. Key search terms, parameters and relevant databases were drawn from the research questions and refined by an initial scoping search. I then searched grey literature and the reference lists and citations of studies I had identified to the point where no new concepts were emerging. The review includes seminal work, good examples or unique perspectives on major themes within the literature. Throughout the review I critically discuss the theoretical and empirical approaches taken by the literature and identify any gaps in understanding.

2.2 Power in the University

Mann (2008) argues that universities are social institutions with their own power relations and cultural norms. For students, who have little control over their learning and must adapt to university practices, this can be more limiting than enabling. Bernstein's (2000) theories illuminate this further. He suggests that the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment form 'codes' through which dominant actors define and control the particular practices and values required to participate in academic communities. A Foucauldian analysis of the university learning environment suggests that unequal power relationships between staff and students are normalised through maintenance of the notion of the 'good student' and the ways in which students are expected to engage with everything from assessment to timetabling (Grant, 1997). Inspired by the work of Bourdieu, a number of studies have identified that the received culture within higher education reproduces existing societal inequalities by excluding certain groups of students in particular. For example, Reay, Crozier and Clayton, (2010) study the experiences of students from working class backgrounds and demonstrate how participating as a member of the university is often a more complex process for these students as they lack the social and cultural capital of their more middle-class peers.

This area of scholarship demonstrates that those who control acceptable modes of learning and behaviour in higher education, namely university staff and the state, regulate and normalise unequal power relationships between students and the wider institution. However student engagement policy, with its emphasis on putting student evaluations of their experience at the centre of higher education decision making, has the potential to challenge traditional power relationships (Mann, 2008).

2.3 Student Engagement: New forms of power?

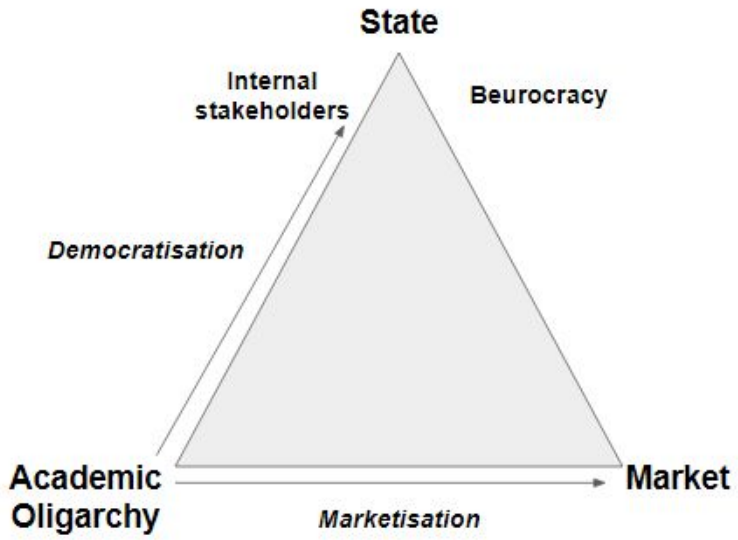
The prominence of student engagement in higher education policy has led to a considerable number of government-funded publications which review student engagement activity in order to offer guidance to the sector (see for example Little et al., 2009; Velden et al., 2013; Wait, 2015; Walker & Logan, 2008). These tend to position student engagement as a positive endeavour and focus on the practical aspects of engagement related activity, rather than considerations of empowerment. Academic literature assesses student engagement in terms of its benefits for quality enhancement and learning outcomes (Trowler, 2010) and says little about how it facilitates the transformation of power relationships between students and their institutions (Seale, 2010).

It is clear from the literature that the roles students are expected to adopt as a result of student engagement policy are ambiguous. University staff interviewed as part of research commissioned by HEFCE and QAA view students as partners, consumers, experts, fellow practitioners and young professionals (Little et al., 2009; Velden et al., 2013). Some have argued that the conceptual vagueness around student engagement has lead to its uncritical acceptance by the sector (Buckley, 2014) and that it could work in the interests of dominant groups, disguising inequalities in education as opposed to overcoming them (Trowler, 2015).

To better conceptualise what the literature tells us about students' changing role within higher education, we can use Clark's (1983) *Triangle of Coordination* (Figure 1). Clark's triangle remains one of the most influential approaches to understanding relations between actors in higher education systems and their relative authority (Austin & Jones, 2015). It maps the three key actors- the state, the market, and the academic oligarchy- along its vertices. Although these represent the ideal types of coordinating power, most systems are a complex and ever shifting combination of all three. Student influence can sit in two places on this model: i) towards the market vertex of the triangle as the consumer market and; ii) towards the state vertex of the triangle as internal stakeholders with political interest in the operation of higher education. Both are positioned in opposition to state bureaucracy and academic oligarchy, which have traditionally had a monopoly

over decision making in the British higher education system (Clark, 1983). The following section will group the literature into that which discusses student engagement as representing a shift in power towards students as consumers through a process of marketisation and that which identifies it as a way of giving more power to internal stakeholders through a process of democratisation.

Figure 1



Clark (1983)

2.3.1 Marketisation

The introduction of tuition fees and the government's continued promotion of market principles to regulate the sector has changed the relationship between universities, now viewed as service providers, and their students, who are viewed as consumers of the educational products offered by the university (Molesworth, Nixon, & Scullion, 2011). The NSS and successive policies around student engagement enable students to fulfil their consumer function by positioning them as principal evaluators of higher education services; their voices contribute to league tables, Key Information Set (KIS) datasets and are a heavily weighted component in the recent proposals for the TEF. Through these mechanisms, student assessments inform the choices of prospective students who are able to navigate the system as a marketplace, choosing institutions which offer the best return on their investment. As students take on greater financial risk, they also allow students to hold their institutions accountable. In order to compete for student interest, institutions must respond to their demands as individual learners and collectively as a market. In their analysis of market trends in the US system, McMillan and Cheney argue that the metaphor of student-as-consumer forces academics to train students to "find and raise their voices" (1996, p.5).

Although it is widely acknowledged that the marketisation of higher education has meant that students have more influence within the system, that this influence is necessarily empowering for students is contested. Critics of marketisation tend to focus on how this disempowers students in the learning process; arguing that students are excluded from powerful forms of knowledge when it is sold as a commodity to be passively acquired (Molesworth, Nixon, & Scullion, 2009) and when an "entertainment model of learning" is promoted by an emphasis on student satisfaction (McMillan & Cheney, 1996, p.6). Those that discuss marketisation in relation to students' power over their academic experiences argue that the metaphor of student-as-consumer works to diminish their agency whilst supposedly giving them a voice. In a marketised system, consumer opinion has commercial value attached to it (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005). As such, student voice becomes reified as a noun, something which can be uncoupled from students themselves to be measured and benchmarked (Hall, 2016). Streeting and Wise suggest:

> In a model of consumerism, power is cleaved; consumers exert it through their market choices and their complaints to the provider, but the provider makes its own decisions about how to respond to these pressures, through policy and management practice. (2009, p.4)

As opposed to recognising individuals with agency, student engagement appropriates student voices into the institution's regulatory processes for the purposes of management (Morley, 2003). Researchers have used discourse analysis to reveal how power operates within new consumer identities. For example, Sabri (2011) demonstrates how terms such as 'the student experience,' which refer to students as a single, homogenous market, essentialise and disembody students and ignore the diversity which comprises the student body. Williams (2011) describes how student-consumers are depicted as vulnerable in the media, with institutions having a duty to provide them with continual support and indulgence as opposed to constructing resilient, critical thinkers. Furthermore, the consumer status imposes limits on the kind of influence students are expected to have. Their rights as consumers are limited to complaining about services and demanding value for money. Indeed, drawing on research funded by HEFCE, Little and Williams (2010) indicate that student engagement often reflects service provider logic; limiting students' role to 'flagging' problems as a kind of damage limitation exercise.

However, there is limited empirical research which evaluates how marketisation has influenced student power from the students perspective. Tomlinson (2016) interviews students in the context of the 2012 fee increases and finds that students are aware of a power shift towards the consumer and their increased authority to criticise poor practice. However, many students saw their role as more

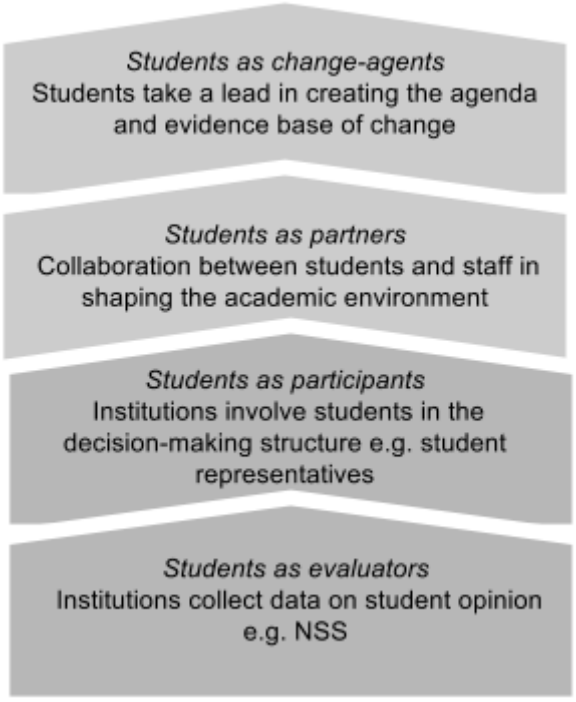
complex than that of a consumer and saw it as their right to demand high educational standards, as well as value-for-money. This aligns with a number of studies which explore the experiences of student representatives and find they are not motivated solely through self-interest, but want to improve the long-term quality of their institutions and the experiences of the wider student body (Carey, 2013; Lizzio & Wilson, 2009). More work needs to be done to understand how students who do not have a representative role perceive their consumer identities to have empowered them to shape their academic experiences.

2.3.2 Democratisation

In resistance to the idea of student-as-consumer, theorists have sought to reimagine the role of the student and position them as partners, co-creators, co-producers, and change agents (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Dunne, Zandstra, Brown, & Nurser, 2011; McCulloch, 2009). Initially, these ideas arose as a pedagogical device in which student-teacher collaboration in the learning process was seen as an antidote to passive modes of learning brought about by consumer principles. It has since been extended beyond the classroom and now includes students and staff working with one another on curriculum development, quality enhancement, and governance to counteract the kind of student engagement which positions students as dissatisfied consumers. Here, students are positioned as stakeholders in their institutions with more equal say in higher education experiences, closer to the state vertex of Clark's triangle. These ideas have had a great deal of influence and the language of partnership can be evidenced in the 2011 White Paper *Students at the Heart of the System* (BIS, 2011)*;* the student engagement section of the Quality Code (QAA, 2017); and is promoted by organisations such as NUS (2015), HEFCE (2015) and HEA (Healey et al., 2014). Although research suggests that true partnership is difficult for institutions to achieve on an everyday basis, staff see it as an ideal for them to work towards (Velden et al., 2013).

Advocates of the approach have produced a number of models outlining the different roles students can take within student engagement activity (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015; Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Dunne et al., 2011; Healey et al., 2014). All follow a similar hierarchical structure in which students range from passive evaluators to collaborative partners or even leaders of institutional change, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2

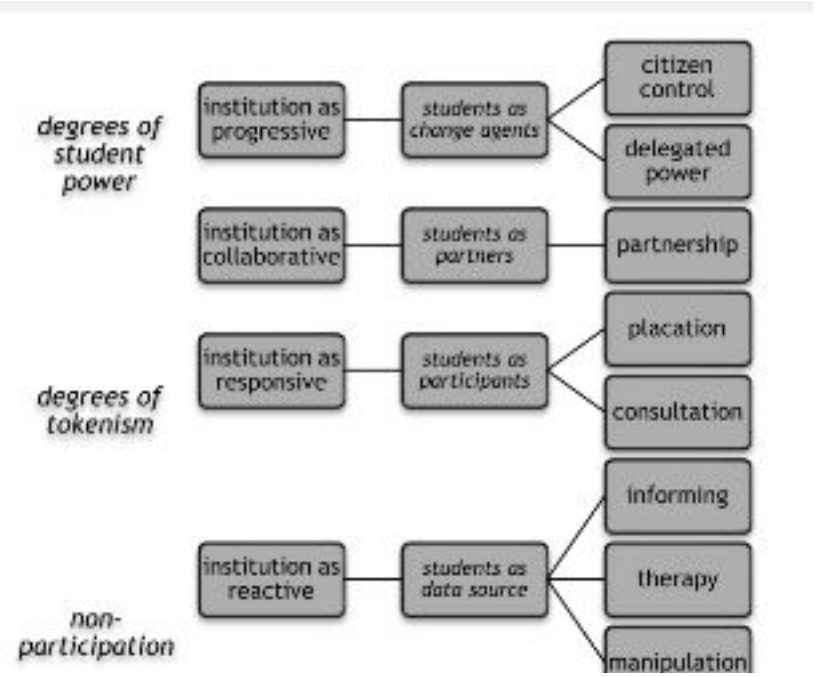


Adapted from Dunne et al. (2011)

However, the potential of partnership approaches to lead to more democratic relationships is largely assumed. This differs in the school context where student-staff collaboration, or 'student voice,' is strongly associated with empowerment and transformation (Fielding, 1999) According to Fielding, student voice has the potential to lead to *radical collegiality,* described as a dialogic form of democracy in which "everyone are teachers of, and learners from, each other within the context of a shared set of ideals" (1999, p. 29).

There have been some efforts to develop a theoretical basis for understanding partnership in relation to empowerment in the higher education context. Some have utilised Fielding's theories in evaluating partnership projects (Seale, 2010) and student representation (Carey, 2013a). Carey (2013b, 2016) has also illustrated how power relationships manifest in engagement practice by aligning the model presented in Figure 2 with Arnstein's (1969) *ladder of citizen participation.* Shown in Figure 3, at the lowest rungs of the ladder sit *tokenistic* forms of control, describing the illusion of participation to appease, to *citizen control*, which aspires to wholesale public authority and responsibility.

Figure 3



Carey (2016)

The limited empirical work supporting these theoretical approaches suggests that the unequal power relationships between students and academics have largely remained in the context of student engagement activity (Carey, 2013b, 2013a; Seale, Gibson, Haynes, & Potter, 2015). However, this demonstrates a weakness in the theoretical approach. Both these theoretical frameworks assume that full participation or complete levelling of power is the goal of student engagement and anything less is a form of failure. Not only does this underestimate the necessity of unequal power relations in managing an institution as large as a university, it neglects that full participation may not be something that students are always able or willing to achieve. Missing from the literature is an understanding of power that recognises that meaningful involvement in decision-making may take different forms from the perspective of the student.

Bragg (2007) and Freeman (2014) take a Foucauldian approach to assessing how power operates in student partnerships. Drawing on interviews with students and staff members involved in partnership activity, they highlight how narratives of partnership construct a new idea of the ‘good’ student as one that is active and is both responsible for their own experience and for the operation of their institution. However, rather than locate these identities as a product of democratisation, they explain how they are a product of market logic. Student partners are colonised into a “more sophisticated form of consumerism;” taking on a consultative role where they offer guidance on how the university should respond to the consumer market (Freeman, 2014, p.217). These studies suggests that partnership and consumer approaches to student engagement may not be so distinct

and may explain why partnership approaches are promoted alongside market principles at the policy level. More work needs to be done to understand how empowering students perceive these sophisticated forms of consumerism to be. Staying true to the Foucauldian technique, Bragg (2007) and Freeman (2014) expose the ways in which student engagement produces new identities whilst largely overlooking the fact that their participants talked of their new roles representing a shift in traditional hierarchies and affording them greater agency. There is a need for a theoretical understanding of power which is sensitive to the positively empowering effects of student engagement, as students perceive them.

The literature presents two narratives around student engagement; students are either positioned towards the market side of Clark's triangle as consumers or towards the state end as stakeholders. Clark's model does not preclude us from positioning actors on multiple planes simultaneously and it may be that student engagement allows students to take on more democratic and consumer roles. However, the exercise raises some important questions about how the processes of marketisation and democratisation interact. Within the literature, marketisation is seen as productive; driving student engagement policy (even partnership approaches) and providing a platform for students to influence their institutions in ways that extend beyond simple consumer concerns. But it also risks limiting students participation in decision-making and reconstructs them as a disembodied regulatory mechanism. More empirical work is needed to evaluate how marketisation has enabled or constrained student empowerment from the perspective of students themselves.

Furthermore, the review has identified a weak theoretical basis for understanding student empowerment in the context of student engagement. Approaches inspired by Fielding (1999) and Arnstein (1969) idealise full participation in decision-making which does not necessarily align with what students value and those inspired by Foucault (Bragg, 2007; Freeman, 2014) are unable to illuminate how students perceive changes to be positively or negatively empowering. Building on these approaches would require a theory of power which is sensitive to students' understandings of their empowerment in the context of student engagement policy.

2.4 Enabling and Constraining Factors

So far, I have discussed literature which evaluates how student engagement policy has shaped the kind of power students have access to at the system level. When discussing student agency, Klemenčič (2015) acknowledges that it is a product of broader social and structural changes, but that it is also something that is affected by a range of factors unique to an individual, an institution or engagement activity. In what follows, I will discuss the literature which gives some insight into

students' experiences of student engagement practice and the circumstances which allow them to become more equal stakeholders in higher education decision-making.

2.4.1 Constructive Conversations

A number of studies detail how students value opportunities to discuss their academic experiences with staff. Where this is most evident is in studies which explore the experiences of student representatives. Here, traditional boundaries between staff and students become blurred, offering a 'blueprint' for the kind of radical collegial relationships endorsed by Fielding (Carey, 2013a). However, research also exposes the complexities involved for students to overcome traditional hierarchies within these relationships. Any transformation of power relations is seen to be tentative and does not translate into the classroom (Carey, 2013a), with the need to assume different identities inside and outside the classroom causing confusion (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009). Even in meetings with staff, students are aware that power relationships are unequal (Carey, 2013a; Freeman, 2013). As such, there is a hesitancy to be critical of staff or express unpopular views (Freeman, 2014; Little et al., 2009). Students feel that meeting agendas are driven primarily by academics and the extent to which representatives have any real influence is dependent on the willingness of staff to engage in constructive conversations and take responsive action (Carey, 2013a; Freeman, 2014; Lizzio & Wilson, 2009). Carey (2013a) argues that when students have little control over the direction or outcome of change, the representative role is simply a mechanism for the collection and dissemination of information to meet the needs of the tutors.

There is a gap in the literature which explores the value of student-staff relationships from the perspective of the wider student body. As part of a mixed-methods study into the perspectives of students at one university, Carey (Carey, 2013b) conducted a survey which indicates that students who do not have a representative function also value opportunities for constructive dialogue with tutors. However, the mixed-methods approach does not allow a deep investigation into the qualitative experiences and the factors which enable these relationships. Equally, Freeman (2014) contends that the introduction of more formalised mechanisms of student engagement have constructed notions of legitimate forms of participation and, as such, students are less likely to see the value of informal conversations as a means of empowerment. However, her conclusions based on the perspectives three students who are already engaged in shaping their educational experiences.

2.4.2 Feedback Questionnaires

Student feedback questionnaires are one of the most commonly used student engagement mechanisms across the sector (Velden et al., 2013). Although they canvas a large number of

student opinions about their academic experience, research shows that students are rarely provided with feedback about the results and are unaware of their purpose (Brown, 2011; Freeman, 2014). As a result of his mixed-methods study, Carey (2013b) argues that students experience evaluations as examples of tokenistic involvement, at the lower levels of Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation. Students are not involved in a meaningful conversation about their experience and simply become a feature of the university's quality assurance processes.

Research around student perceptions of the NSS finds similar levels of tokenistic participation. Conducting an analysis of the free-text comments of the NSS, Sabri (2013) argues that the data does not reflect the views of students in any meaningful way as the substantive content of the questionnaire does not align with what students value about education. From focus groups with students at one university, she finds that students are unaware of the significance of their responses for academic staff and therefore relinquish agency in the process of production. Furthermore, the three students in Freeman's (2014) study said that the reputational impact of the survey on the university influenced their responses. The widespread use of NSS scores in league tables, and therefore its link to the perceived market value of a student's degree upon leaving, not only has the potential to undermine its validity as a measure of quality but as a means for students to authentically express their views around their academic experiences.

Considering feedback questionnaires and the NSS are widespread in their use across the sector, and are often coupled with discourse which suggests they "give students a powerful collective voice," the suggestion that they may not be empowering for students warrants further qualitative investigation (Ipsos MORI & HEFCE, 2017).

2.4.3 Non-Engagement

HEFCE and QAA funded reports have found that institutions across the sector have struggled to encourage students to participate in formalised student engagement mechanisms (Little et al., 2009; Velden et al., 2013). However, the literature provides limited and conflicting evidence as to why students may or may not want to participate. It is often assumed in such reports that non-participation is the result of students' passivity or laziness (Seale et al., 2015). However, there may be additional factors which constrain students' desire or ability to participate. That the majority of students in Carey's (2013b) survey stated that they would like to participate in decision-making, suggesting that this is a real possibility and therefore necessitates further investigation.

A number of more ‘engaged’ students interviewed in Lizzio and Wilson (2009) and Seale et al.’s (2015) studies suggest that one barrier to participation could be students’ inability to balance their workload and other demands on their time. Alternatively, one student has suggested that student engagement often means they have to adopt the role of “disgruntled consumer” and their non-participation might reflect an active rejection of this image (Seale et al., 2015). However, these studies do not draw from the perspective of students who do not participate in engagement activity themselves.

Other theories are that the identities students adopt within student engagement activities are “implicitly middle class” and therefore may work to exclude some groups of students (Bragg, 2007, p.356) or that non-participation is an active withdrawal from student engagement mechanisms which simply serve to reproduce dominant discourses in higher education and are not a realistic channel for dissent (Carey, 2016). Although these speculations are illuminating, non-participation in student engagement opportunities is an area that remains theoretically and empirically under-explored.

2.5 Summary

Although there is a body of research which has begun to question how the emphasis on student engagement has affected power relationships between staff and students in higher education, a review of the literature reveals some significant gaps in understanding. Most of our understanding of student engagement in relation to student empowerment is based on the perspectives of student representatives. Insights into the perspectives of the wider student body are based on a mixed methods study of students at one university, with limited insight into the qualitative experiences of students (Carey, 2013b). There is a demand for research which produces a deep, qualitative understanding of the experiences of students who do not consider themselves among the most engaged. More needs to be done to explore the factors that enable and constrain student empowerment in relation to shaping academic experiences and, in particular, whether changes to students’ role in higher education based on market principles have empowered them to shape their academic experiences or restricted their agency. The research questions identified in Chapter 1 provide a basis for developing a clearer understanding of student engagement in relation to these gaps in the literature.

Additionally, the review has identified weaknesses in theories used to understand student empowerment in the context of student engagement. The following chapter explores Sen’s capability approach as a conceptual framework which purports to build on existing theories and address their shortcomings.

CHAPTER THREE: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR EMPOWERMENT

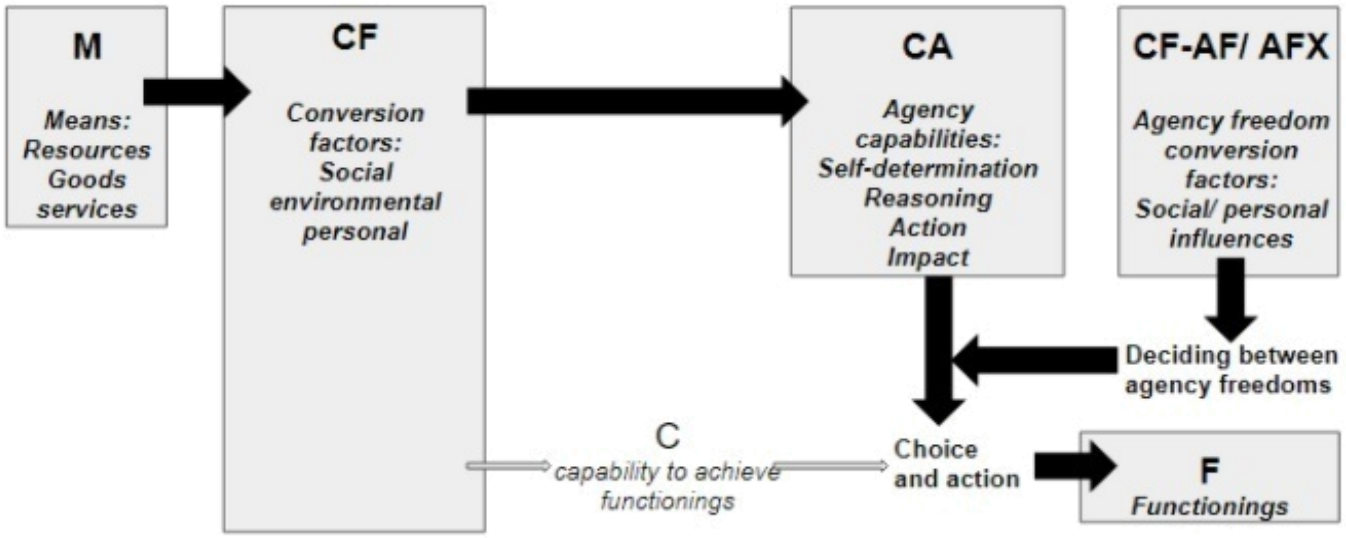
The previous chapter outlined the literature on how student engagement has shaped students' roles within university decision-making and started to explore some of the ways researchers have sought to assess how these roles can be empowering. This chapter introduces Sen's capability approach as the framework which will be used to evaluate student empowerment in this thesis. I begin by describing the key concepts involved in the capability approach and how they might be applied to interpreting how students are empowered to shape their academic experiences. I then discuss how this approach builds on alternative understandings of empowerment in the literature.

3.1 The Capability Approach

Empowerment is a complex concept which has a wide variety of definitions across a range of disciplines (Narayan-Parker, 2005). Ibrahim and Alkire (2007) survey definitions of empowerment within the academic literature and find that there is a common view of empowerment as increased agency. Amartya Sen defines agency as "freedom to achieve whatever the person, as a responsible agent, decides he or she should achieve" (1985, p.204), a definition which is generally accepted within the literature (Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007; Narayan-Parker, 2005). Sen's *capability approach* can also be used as a conceptual framework to understand the freedoms people have to achieve what they want. As this study is particularly concerned with an individual's agency, I use Crocker's interpretation of the approach, which he calls the "agency-focussed capability approach" (Crocker, 2008, p.159). By allowing us to evaluate how social arrangements enhance agency, it provides a normative framework which can be used to assess student empowerment.

In order to answer the overarching research question identified in Chapter One and make judgements about how students are empowered, it follows that two things need to be understood: first, what it is that individuals value and; second, what it means for them to be free to achieve what they value. To address the first three sub-questions, we also need to understand what it means for something to be a barrier or an enabling factor to this freedom and how social conditions, such as the marketisation of higher education can affect it. These concepts, and how they apply to assessing student empowerment, will be explained below. To aid the explanation, I will refer to the diagrammatic representation of the capability approach in Figure 4. All the main concepts are presented in the boxes and their relationships are depicted by the arrows.

Figure 4



3.1.1 What Individuals Value

Sen defines "the various things a person may value doing or being" as *functionings* (Sen, 1999, p.75). These are found in box F in Figure 3. In an educational context, valued beings and doings might include: getting good feedback, going on a year abroad, being employable or politically engaged. These functionings can be categorised as those achieved either *within* education (as with feedback and going on a year abroad) and *through* education (as with being employable and engaging in politics) (Vaughan, 2007). As this thesis is concerned with empowerment at university, it is necessary to understand Box F *within* the higher education context.

3.1.2 The Freedom to Achieve What is Valued

For Sen, quality of life shouldn't just be measured in the valued ways of life an individual has already achieved, but in the freedom they have to live a life they want. He defines two types of freedom. The first is found in the effective opportunities an individual has to be and do what they want, what Sen terms their *capabilities*. These are labelled C in Figure 3. As shown in the diagram, these define the possible functionings from which a person can choose and act on. The more capabilities students have, say to go on a year abroad or have meetings with their tutor or to benefit from whatever academic experiences they see as important, the better quality of life they have.

Although capabilities are important to assessing an individual's quality of life, it is the second freedom, *agency*, which is fundamental to understanding empowerment. This is the freedom of

individuals, not only to achieve what they value, but to decide for themselves what goals to achieve and bring them about through their own action. Represented in Box CA of Figure 3, agency defines a person's ability to choose and act on their available options. To illustrate, a student may have the capability to study a subject they enjoy, but they only have agency if they have been free to choose to study it themselves, as opposed to being forced to do so. Whereas the student's well-being is maintained in both cases, they are empowered only when they are free to make their own choices. For Sen, agency is "the liberty of acting as citizens who matter and whose voices count" (Drèze & Sen, 2002, p. 288). Without which, people run the risk of "living as well- fed, well-clothed, and well-entertained vassals" (Dr`eze and Sen 2002, p. 288).

However, it could be argued that to be free to choose and bring about what is valued necessarily requires the effective opportunity to do so. For this reason, agency can be seen as a specific class of capabilities, which I will term agency-capabilities. Following Crocker (2008), this study focuses on agency-capabilities specifically as these are most important for understanding empowerment. The concepts and relationships evaluated in this study are represented by the large arrows and bold text in Figure 3.

Crocker and Robeyns (2010) further explicate Sen's notion of agency by defining four conditions required for agency, or agency-capabilities, which are also detailed in Box CA. I will illustrate these with reference to an example of a student whose valued functioning is to go on a year abroad:

1. Self-determination: the capability of the agent to decide for themselves what functioning to achieve. As discussed, an individual does not have agency if they make choices through force or manipulation. Agency is reflected in the students' ability to decide between going, and not going, abroad.

2. Reason orientation and deliberation: the capability to base decisions on reasons. The student is an agent as long as they have critically assessed their options before making the decision to go abroad, rather than acting on a whim or impulse.

3. Action: the capability of the person to have a role in bringing about the functioning. In our example, the student might have a meeting with their tutor to see if a year abroad might be arranged or contact their course representative to request the university offer a year abroad to students.

4. Impact: the capability to bring about tangible change. The student actually goes on the year abroad.

Rather than these conditions being necessary or collectively sufficient for agency, Crocker and Robeyns (2010) suggest that the more fully an individual meets these conditions, the more agency freedom they enjoy. Sen has acknowledged that such capabilities are constrained within compulsory education, but there is more scope for student agency in higher education (Vaughan, 2007). An evaluation of student empowerment will require an investigation of the ways in which students have real opportunities to meet these conditions.

3.1.3 Barriers and Enabling Factors

The various agency-capabilities described above are both enabled and constrained by *means* and *conversion factors*. Means are the material resources or formal opportunities necessary for a capability, depicted as M in Figure 3. For example, if a student wants lecture notes to be accessible online, they can talk to their tutor as a means of bringing this about. However, Sen (1992) acknowledges that humans differ in their ability to convert the same means into a functioning. A student might not have the confidence to talk to their tutor, they might live off campus meaning they cannot attend regular meetings with them, or the hierarchies between student and tutor might mean that student suggestions are rarely taken on board. A range of personal, social and environmental circumstances, or conversion factors, shape the freedoms one has to determine and act on their goals (Sen, 1992). These are shown as CF in Figure 3. An understanding of these influences will be central to assessing the barriers and enabling factors to student empowerment.

3.1.4 Social Conditions

Social conditions, such as the marketisation of higher education, may be recognised at a conversion factor which shapes students' agency-capabilities. However, social conditions also define the value-judgements and choices individuals make from the freedoms they have. For example, literature relating to student engagement identified how the construction of students as consumers can reinforce the idea that students only have the right to participate in decision-making where there is grounds for a complaint (Williams, 2009). In this way, students may only see value influencing their academic experiences through making a complaint, even if they have the capability to do so in other ways. Sen suggests that those studying empowerment should critically engage with the social and cultural factors which influence the choices individuals make between the freedoms they have (Robeyns, 2003). Therefore this study will identify the conversion factors which influence how students use their agency freedoms. These are represented as CF-AF/ AFX in Figure 3. Although it is acknowledged that many social forces shape students' choices of agency freedoms, this dissertation is concerned with the effects of the marketisation of higher education on student empowerment in particular.

In order to address the research aims, and better understand student empowerment, it follows that the research methods and analysis should determine: the academic experiences that are valued by students (functionings); the opportunities they have to choose and bring about these valued experiences (agency-capabilities); the personal, social and environmental factors which constrain and enable students' opportunities to choose and bring about academic experiences that are valuable to them (conversion factors); how the marketisation of higher education in particular acts as a conversion factor in constraining and enabling students' opportunities to choose and bring about academic experiences that are valuable to them and; how the marketisation of higher education influences the choices students make from the freedoms they have.

3.2 Why the Capability Approach?

The capability approach builds on the weaknesses in the theoretical understanding of student empowerment identified within the literature review. Whereas the approaches inspired by Fielding (1999) and Arnstein (1969) idealise full participation in decision-making, which students may not always be willing or able to achieve, the capability approach asserts that participation in decision-making is only important in so far as it enables students to choose and bring about what they themselves value. Similarly, Foucault inspired approaches (Bragg, 2007; Freeman, 2014) lack a normative framework to judge where student engagement has lead to positive changes in power relations, even when they are identified by students. Foucault's assertions that "power is everywhere" and individuals are always already socially produced means he is unable to provide a convincing account of human self-determination (Caldwell, 2007). Unlike Foucault, Sen's approach recognises an individual's capacity to affect change in line with their own values and offers a tool to evaluate how social arrangements might enhance these attributes.

3.3 Summary

Student engagement may have challenged universities to change how students influence their academic experiences, but empowering students requires an evaluation of the freedoms students have to choose and pursue academic experiences that are valuable to them. Sen's approach necessitates an understanding of student perspectives on the opportunities they have to influence their experiences in line with what they value and the circumstances which enable this. It also requires us to think about how social factors shape how students use these opportunities and allows us to ask how the marketisation of higher education has been important in empowering students. The following chapter outlines the approach to establishing an empirical basis on which these theories can be applied.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

In the previous chapters I have identified a gap in the literature which explores student experiences of empowerment as a result of student engagement policy and have outlined the theoretical approach for understanding empowerment in this context. This chapter describes the approach taken to address the gap in the literature and provide data which can be assessed in light of our theoretical understanding of empowerment. As the research questions are inspired by an issue I identified from personal experience, I take a pragmatic approach in which the design and method decisions are informed by the aims of the research rather than because of an attachment to one paradigm or method (Punch & Oancea, 2014). I start by assessing the philosophical assumptions underlying the research questions and how these have informed the choice of qualitative research design. I then describe how the choice of semi-structured focus groups and thematic analysis have helped to address the aims, as well as discussing the practical implications, challenges and ethical considerations of these methods.

4.1 Research Design

Careful scrutiny of the philosophical assumptions underlying the research project can enable better understanding of the research aims and inform design and methodology choices (Oancea, 2016). Guba and Lincoln (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) provide a typology of the different philosophical paradigms underlying research but, as Oancea (2016) argues, these viewpoints are not necessarily incompatible. As illustrated below, both the constructivist and critical paradigms have illuminated aspects of my own investigation.

4.1.1 Constructivism

Guba and Lincoln define constructivism as the belief that reality is made up of “multiple, intangible mental constructions, socially and experientially based [...] dependant for their form and content on the individual or groups holding them” (1994, p.110). The approach taken by constructivist researchers is to expose these mental constructions to understand the subjective positions of the group under investigation and provide a ‘thick’ description of lived realities (Geertz, 2000). This tradition has been useful in addressing the research questions as it was first necessary to establish an understanding of students’ perspectives on shaping their academic experience. Qualitative research design, with its holistic appreciation of the depth and complexities of social life, is usually favoured within this paradigm and is the approach taken within this study (Punch & Oancea, 2014). Sen’s capability approach offers a conceptual framework which can be used to interpret what

empowerment means from the subjective position of students and what they perceive to be the factors which enable and constrain their empowerment.

However, the aims of this study go further than simply describing student experiences and sets out to analyse how social forces, in particular the marketisation of higher education, shape them. Furthermore, identification with this paradigm does not mean that an objective ontology is sacrificed altogether and researchers often attempt to ensure that error and researcher bias are eliminated as far as possible when interpreting others' experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Burke (2012) warns of the ethical implications of insisting that research be value-neutral, especially when researching issues of power in higher education. An approach which does not recognise the socially constructed nature of the research project risks masking and perpetuating the inequalities it seeks to investigate (Burke, 2012). The critical paradigm has proved useful in moving beyond a descriptive analysis of student experience and addressing power relationships inherent in the research process.

4.1.2 Critical Theory

The critical tradition in educational research is committed to the study of "power and relations of authority in education, and the political underpinnings and relations of educational policies" (Torres, 2009, p.40). Such research moves beyond a description of social life and seeks to "critique and transform" the social structures which "constrain and exploit humankind" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p.113). One approach used by critical researchers is participatory methods, which involve researchers and participants collaborating to transform their condition (Carr & Kemmis, 1986), such as creating ways for students to influence inclusive pedagogical methods (Seale, 2010). Transforming students' lives directly through the study is beyond the scope of this project but, by using the analysis to make recommendations to policy makers, the research can be used as a basis for transforming practice once it is completed. The critical dimension of this project is in its intention to evaluate where social relations of power are reflected in students' experiences. The concept of conversion factors in Sen's capability approach allows the researcher to critically assess how social structures, such as the marketisation of higher education, enable or constrain students' experiences of empowerment.

The critical paradigm is not just concerned with power within education, but within educational research itself. Knowledge is seen as socially constructed and therefore findings are always value-mediated (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Burke cites reflexivity as a powerful methodological tool which demands that researchers "interrogate the values, assumptions and perspectives that they bring to meaning-making processes" (2012, p.83). Throughout the project I have sought to be explicit about, and critical of, the assumptions informing the research design and interpretation of

students' lives through regular discussions with my supervisor, sharing research plans with peers, and keeping notes of decisions (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). The unequal power relationship between the researcher and participants has been considered throughout the project and is discussed in this chapter as part of the justification for methodological decisions.

4.1.3 Critical- Constructivist Approach

Constructivist assumptions have been identified as guiding the research in its aim to understand students' perspectives of shaping their higher education experiences and critical tradition informs the intention to evaluate how social relations of power are reflected in them. For this reason, the research takes a critical-constructivist approach. Qualitative design has been chosen to fulfil the constructivist aims of the study as it enables a 'thick' description of participants' lived realities to be formed. A conceptual framework inspired by Sen achieves the critical-constructivist aims of the study by allowing the researcher to understand what empowerment means from the students point of view and providing a means of assessing how social structures influence students' perspectives. As the critical paradigm necessitates that the researcher not just be critical of the research subject but of the research itself, the principles of reflexivity are observed throughout.

4.2 Data Collection Methods

In order to fulfil the aims of the study, the methods chosen allow the collection of rich, qualitative data on students' perspectives of shaping their academic experiences. The use of interviews enables the researcher to ask questions of participants in order to gain insight into their subjective viewpoints (Yeo & Legard, 2014). There are many different styles of interview; ranging from individual interviews to focus groups with more or less structured organisation (Robson, 2016). The choices made are justified below.

4.2.1 Focus Groups

Unlike one-to-one interviews, which are suited to eliciting the idiosyncratic experiences of individuals, the collective setting of the focus group allows the researcher to learn about the norms and range of perspectives among the student body (Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest, & Namey, 2005). Social interaction amongst the participants is encouraged, revealing how perspectives on student empowerment are constructed amongst the student body, as opposed to in dialogue between researcher and participant (Jenny Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999). Also, group dynamics allow participants to develop new insights and connections that do not occur in an individual interview (A. Williams & Katz, 2001). This is particularly effective when discussing empowerment, which students may not have reflected on previously (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999). Another benefit of focus groups is that outlying views are likely to be challenged during the

discussion and that the most important topics receive the most attention, providing natural quality controls (Robson, 2016).

As has been discussed, when analysing issues of power it is important that the researcher is aware of the unequal power dynamic between the researcher and researched. Although this can never be fully negated, some researchers have said that focus groups shift the balance of power in favour of participants due to the number of research participants involved (Wilkinson, 1999). The power difference was further relaxed in this study as I conducted the focus groups and am a student myself, meaning participants could feel more comfortable in expressing their views. Furthermore, whereas much of the policy and research around the student experience is criticised for restricting student agency by presenting the student experience as a homogeneous whole (Sabri, 2011), focus groups are best used to indicate a variety of opinion (Sim, 1998).

4.2.2 Interview Design

A semi-structured interview method has been chosen in order to retain the “synergy, snowballing, stimulation, and spontaneity" generated by the group dynamic (Catterall & Maclaran, 1997) whilst allowing the interviewer to ensure certain areas are covered. A series of questions were developed to give insight into the areas of experience relevant to Sen’s notion of empowerment [Appendix 1: Pilot Schedule]. For example, the first question “what would your ideal academic experience look like?” prompts students to consider valued academic experiences before the subsequent questions ask about their experiences of bringing these about. The questions were tested with a pilot group of five undergraduate students at one university in the UK. During the pilot, many of the questions on the original schedule became obsolete. For example, the questions following “are you involved in any of these processes [for talking about/ evaluating/ changing your academic experience]?” such as “do you think that your input was valued?” were either covered by students independently or received less attention as the discussion moved in an unexpected, yet relevant, direction. As such, the interview schedule was amended to be less structured, with six general questions to guide the interviewer and more specific questions such as “can you give an example...” and “what made you want to get involved?” used as prompts to direct and elicit deeper discussion [Appendix 2: Focus Group Schedule]. The pilot also provided an opportunity to ensure the questions were phrased in a way that was understandable to students.

4.2.3 Size and Composition

Students were recruited from three UK universities, where the focus groups were subsequently held. The universities and their specific processes were not the object of analysis, but they were practically useful as sites to recruit students and hold meetings. Students from two focus groups and

the pilot were from a ‘plate-glass’ university (Beloff, 1968) and those in the remaining two focus groups were from ‘red-brick’ universities (Peers, 1951) to ensure that the perspectives of students from a range of educational backgrounds were included in the analysis. As the study aimed to distinguish itself from the literature by assessing the views of the wider student body, the students included did not have representative roles. Where possible, the groups were internally homogenous in that they comprised of students of the same cohort from the same university. This is viewed as good practice as participants are more confident in expressing their views (Sim, 1998). However, a mix of faculties and fee status were represented to promote discussion of different experiences (Kitzinger, 1994).

Originally, the decision was to involve only undergraduate students in the final and second year to be recruited randomly via e-mail. Due to low turn out, students were recruited directly by myself on campus, meaning some postgraduate students were recruited and focus groups were mainly made up of students from pre-existing friendship groups. The recruitment of postgraduate students was not seen to be an issue as they have more familiarity with student engagement mechanisms than students in their first year and added to the diversity of perspectives represented in the data. Pre-existing friendship groups are seen to promote discussion, but it was important to be aware that these groups have their own social norms and hierarchies that may influence contributions (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999). I set a target of four to seven participants per focus group which was confirmed to be appropriate during the pilot. Details of the actual size of each focus group and the participant’s characteristics are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1: Focus Group Composition

Pilot Study: Plate Glass University					
Date	**Total**	**Year Group**	**Faculty**	**Fee Status**	**Female/ Male**
March 2017	5	3 second year 2 final year	2 Social Sciences and Health 3 Science	All home/ EU	2 male 3 female
Focus Group 1: Plate Glass University					
March 2017	5	All final year	3 Social Sciences and Health 2 Humanities	All Home/ EU	3 male 2 female
Focus Group 2: Plate Glass University					
March 2017	5	1 PhD 4 second year	4 Humanities 1 Social Sciences and Health	2 International 3 Home/ EU	All male
Focus Group 3: Red Brick University A					
May 2017	4	All second year PGDip	All Health and Life Sciences	All Home/ EU	All male
Focus Group 4: Red Brick University B					
May 2017	4	All final year	All Arts and Humanities	All Home/ EU	All female

4.2.4 Collection and Management of Data

Focus groups were audio-recorded and a note-taker was allowed the moderator to focus on facilitating the discussion (Robson, 2016). The note taker also documented non-verbal communication missed by the audio-recording, clarify ambiguous parts of the recordings, and verify interpretation of the data with the researcher (Mack et al., 2005).

4.2.5 Challenges

Although group dynamics have the potential to produce rich data and empower participants, they can also have the opposite effect (Sim, 1998). At times the conversation moved off topic, such as when students talked about participating in university sports societies, and dominant voices started to neutralise debate by preventing less confident participants from expressing their views or disagreeing. These effects were reduced with moderation techniques proposed by Mack et al. (2005) such as directing discussion according to the interview schedule, keeping track of who is speaking, inviting others to give alternative viewpoints and targeted questioning and body language,

to ensure that a wide range of views were heard. The pilot study provided an invaluable opportunity to for me to practice effective moderating techniques.

Having evaluated a range of methods for data collection, semi-structured focus groups were chosen as the most appropriate to achieve the aims of the study. A range of practical considerations around the size, composition and operation of the focus groups were also taken into account to aid the effective collection of rich, qualitative data on students' perspectives and ensure the inequalities of power between researcher and researched are limited as far as possible.

4.3 Analysis

Thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clark, was chosen as a method for "identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2008, p.79). First, audio-recordings and field notes were transcribed and read thoroughly, facilitating familiarisation of the data and allowing initial thoughts about potential patterns to be formed. Due to the manageability of the data collected and the inexperience of the researcher, the data was coded manually without software. An initial coding scheme based on the conceptual framework was developed prior to analysis [Appendix 3: Initial Coding Framework]. The codes chosen align with the key concepts depicted in Figure 3. Most researchers agree that qualitative enquiry should involve the researcher being somewhat theoretically driven but also responsive to the data (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011; Punch & Oancea, 2014). This is especially the case when exploring issues of power; Burke (2012) emphasises the importance of balancing the use of theory to identify the ways in which subjects are disenfranchised, but also ensuring that the researcher listens to the participants. As such, the initial coding framework was used provisionally and was examined for fit and utility in response to the data. Subcodes were also developed inductively from the data. Subcodes, such as "feedback overviews" and "resource constraints" under "conversion factors," helped to give more detail about the kinds of factors which shape students' agency freedom [Appendix 4: Final Coding Framework]. Apart from the combining of the self-determination and action capability categories, which were often hard to distinguish in students' accounts, the initial framework allowed all the important aspects of the data to be covered, attesting to the analytical strength of the capability approach. Codes were then grouped into broader themes such as which related to the research questions or which received the particular attention within a single focus group and across the whole data set. These overarching themes form the headings and subheadings within presentation of the analysis in Chapter Five.

As interpretation is always subjective and value-mediated, it is important to continually reflect on the potential interpretations of the data and issues of misrepresenting the experiences of participants

(Burke, 2012). It is also important to ensure that analysis, despite being a subjective exercise, is conducted in such a way that the conclusions can be justified by the data (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 1994). In order to help identify bias in the interpretation and verify potential conclusions, codes and emerging themes were discussed and refined with my supervisor. Particular attention was paid to highlighting unique and conflicting perspectives, or where multiple interpretations of the data might be present. For example, we discussed whether being far away from university meant that students were *unable* to participate in shaping their experiences or whether it meant they didn't *want* to. The inclusion of students from a range of courses and universities also enabled corroboration, or reinterpretation, of themes.

Thematic analysis proved useful in addressing the interpretative aims of the study as it identified students' perceptions of student engagement mechanisms, the factors which enable or limit their ability to shape their academic experiences, and why they do or do not engage, at the semantic level (Braun & Clark, 2006). It also allowed the identification of more latent themes, such as the social forces which shape students' perceptions of empowerment, informing the critical aim of the study.

4.4 Ethical Considerations

A number of ethical considerations were made during the design of the research. Ethical approval was obtained through the University of Oxford in order to ensure that the research applied the university's own policies and guidance [Appendix 5: Ethical Approval Form] and the principles of ethical research outlined by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011) were closely adhered to.

To ensure voluntary informed consent, all students were given a printed information sheet upon arrival at the focus group [Appendix 6: Information Sheet]. Before the study commenced, students were asked to sign a consent form [Appendix 7: Consent Form] and the researcher verbally reinforced the expectations of the study and the participant's right to withdraw at any point [Appendix 2: Focus Group Schedule]. An oral debrief was given at the conclusion of the focus groups and contact information was distributed in case participants had any concerns they wished to raise after the study.

Focus groups are particularly challenging in terms of maintaining confidentiality (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999). To mitigate this issue, participants were informed that any contributions they made would be shared with the group and they were encouraged to keep what they heard about others

confidential [Appendix 6: Information Sheet]. Individuals are more easily identifiable by audio-recorded data than hand-written notes. As such, the specific consent was sought for the collection of audio data [Appendix 7: Consent Form]. The data was only accessible to the research team and, when not in use, the recordings were stored on a personal computer in a password protected folder.

The research presented no harm to the participants involved, but did offer potential benefits. As will be discussed in the analysis of the data, students do not often have opportunities to discuss their academic experiences and feel as though decision-makers do not listen to their concerns. Students commented that they enjoyed having the opportunity to reflect on their time at university, have their voices heard, and potentially influence policy by contributing to the recommendations which arise from the study.

4.5 Summary

This chapter has presented the design and methodology for the study. In order to address the research questions, which aim to explore students' experiences of empowerment in the context of student engagement policy and assess how social relations of power enable or constrain this empowerment, a critical-constructivist approach has been adopted. Focus groups with students from three universities, across a range of faculties and year groups, enable the collection of rich, qualitative data on the subjective experiences of higher education students in England. Thematic analysis has been chosen to interpret how the data shows students' understanding of empowerment and how social forces shape these perceptions within the data. As a result of these processes, the research has produced a number of themes that are discussed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE: ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents an analysis of the data produced from the focus groups with students and discusses them in relation to the existing literature and the research questions. In order to address the first two sub-questions, pertaining to the enabling factors and barriers to student empowerment, the chapter begins by exploring the engagement mechanisms that students use and the factors which facilitate or prevent students using them as a means to enhance their agency. Relating to the third sub-question, 'How does the marketisation of higher education enable or constrain student empowerment?' I will discuss where the discourse of marketisation was either explicitly identified by students or implicit in their accounts as a critical factor in their empowerment.

5.1 Student Engagement Mechanisms

Students identified a number of ways they are involved in talking about, evaluating and changing their academic experiences. The most prevalent are formal student engagement mechanisms established by the university, such as feedback questionnaires, the NSS for undergraduates, the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) for postgraduates and student representatives. Students also talked about having informal conversations with academic staff and two attended national protests against the 2012 rise in tuition fees. In the following two sections I will use Sen's theories to discuss how students are able to convert these mechanisms, as a *means* to choose and bring about academic experiences they value, into the *capabilities* needed for *agency*. In 5.2 I will explore how each are converted into the capability for self-determination and action and, in 5.3, how they shape students' capability for impact. Throughout, I will evaluate the *conversion factors* which either enable or constrain these capabilities.

5.2 "Speaking to the Void": Students' capability for self-determination and action

The mechanisms identified above provide opportunities for students to discuss and decide between the academic experiences they value. However, in all of these cases, students bring about what they value through informing academic staff (and the wider sector in the case of protests and the student experience surveys), who ultimately make the decisions and take the critical action. Students exhibit what Crocker (2008) describes as *indirect* agency. As students have some position in the causal chain of events which lead to the achievement of the academic experiences they value, this is a legitimate kind of agency freedom. It is particularly valuable in situations where it would be impractical for every individual to have complete control over all the decisions that make up aspects of their academic life. However, without this control, students' capability for self-determination and action is only extended in the most limited of senses. I will now evaluate each mechanism in more detail.

5.2.1 Feedback Questionnaires

Module feedback questionnaires and student experience surveys such as the NSS and the PTES are the most indirect way in which students can influence the decisions and actions of others. Students are excluded from the decision making process and are completely unaware about what happens to their feedback once it is given:

> You fill [the survey] in and send it off and that's it, you never hear from it again.
> *(PGDip Student, Focus Group 3)*

As Carey (2013b) argues, feedback forms reduce students' input to data, limiting them to the kind of tokenistic participation represented by the lower rungs of Figure 3. Their capability for self-determination and action might be said to be equally superficial.

A lack of dialogue around their feedback causes students to lose faith in the process:

> It almost feels like you giving your feedback is a bit pointless because you never hear the results of it. So it's almost like you're speaking to the void. I'm sure changes are made it's just, like you never see the results of it so it sometimes can be a bit demoralising.
> *(PGDip Student, Focus Group 3)*

For the same reason, students perceive that filling out feedback forms benefits staff more than students. This highlights students awareness of being assimilated into the university's regulatory processes as opposed to being given a genuine opportunity to engage with their institutions (Morley, 2003). Some students suggested that they would perceive engagement mechanisms to be a more legitimate way of shaping their academic experiences if they had some reassurance that their concerns were taken into account. However, two students who had received an email summarising their department's response to feedback in one module disagreed about how beneficial this was. As Carey (Carey, 2013) notes in his study, 'closing the feedback loop' is a good technique for improving customer relations but doesn't make students' role any less tokenistic. Similarly, closing the feedback loop does not enhance students' agency-capabilities as the nature and extent of the outcomes remains under the control of academic staff. Alternatively, another group of students suggested that the university should set up a "reverse forum" in which staff discuss the outcomes of feedback with students. This comment conveys desire a for a more dialogic approach to decision-making as represented by the higher rungs of Figures 2 and 3, which would also enhance their capability for self-determination and action.

5.2.2 The National Student Survey

When taking part in the NSS, students have even less control over how their data influences the decisions and actions of others because of its highly politicised nature. Whereas Sabri (2013) describes how students relinquish agency as they are unaware of the significance of the results they produce, students in this study are highly conscious of the multitude of functions the NSS serves. They described how students in previous years had been told that the university would get more funding if they had good results and were enticed into talking favourably about their experience with free lunches. Similar to students in Freeman's (2014) study, they also understand the link between their responses, the university's reputation and the future value of their degree. Finally, they are aware of the government's recent proposals to link the NSS with tuition fee increases by including them in the TEF.

Although some students still responded to the NSS in the hope it would influence positive change, for many the multiple functions of the NSS has undermined it as an authentic opportunity for them to be open and honest about the factors they regard as important:

> Student 1: At the end of your course, if they're asking you for feedback, like there is a conflict between wanting to give good feedback so your uni gets good reviews and you're more employable and there's also-
> Student 2: Telling the truth.
> Student 1: Yeh.
> *(Two final year students, Focus Group 4)*

For others, the threat that the results will be used to support decisions they don't agree with prevents them from participating:

> I haven't looked at it. Just because I heard about them trying to use it as a conspiracy to raise tuition fees.
> *(Final year student, Focus Group 4)*

The language of "conspiracy" evokes the notion of manipulation at the lower rungs of Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation. Students are aware that the meaning of their responses are distorted by those in power to their own ends which, as with raising fees, can be in direct opposition to the academic experiences they value. Students' capability for self-determination is frustrated, which has resulted in distrust of their university and confusion around the purpose of the process. This discussion also provides an example of where non-participation is not the result of apathy but, as Carey (2016) speculates, is an active process of resistance to an engagement mechanism which does not provide a legitimate channel for students to express their views.

5.2.3 Student Representatives

Student representatives are a means through which students might have their views more authentically represented on decision-making committees. This extends their capability for self-determination, even if it is still indirect. However, indirect agency is predicated on individuals having some intentional influence on the actions and decisions of others (Crocker, 2008) and few of the students I talked to know who their representatives are or engage with them.

Students at the plate-glass university perceive this to be a result of an unorganised system in which anyone can email the department and become a representative with no established election process or communication channels. As such, students do not feel that they represent them or their views:

> It's kind of like a hollow position at the moment because people are course reps but I've never met them. I couldn't...I don't know what they look like, they've never been in contact. It's as if they've just applied for the position to put it on their CV or something.
> *(Final year student, Focus Group 1)*

Without the support of the wider student body, the position is "hollow;" a facade of a democratic process. In contrast, the same students spoke very positively about the Vice President of Education at the Student Union. They know him on a first name basis and said they appreciate having a student contact who they can approach with their academic concerns.

The student quoted above also raised the issue of how student representatives being motivated for personal gain, such as gaining experience for a CV, may undermine their capacity as stakeholder representatives in the eyes of students. This is consistent with Freeman's (2014) discussion of how partnership approaches to student engagement construct students representatives as consultants about service provision who have a shared responsibility for the operation of their institution in a new sophisticated form of consumerism. As such, they take on a hybrid identity between student and university employee. One group of students described a situation in which an issue raised by a student representative was dismissed by course leaders as they had been 'unprofessional' in identifying a staff member by name, demonstrating how representatives must assimilate into the norms of conduct adopted by university employees in order to be accepted by them. However, in doing so, their role in facilitating a democratic environment may be undermined in the eyes of their peers.

Students from one red brick university recognise and support the political motivations of their student representatives, but see them as ultimately distinct from the wider student population:

> Student 1: There is a community of very like political students who like run for president or whatever but you don't really hear about that. I mean you see posters sometimes and stuff on Facebook but I don't know anyone personally that's been involved in uni politics
> Others: No
> Student 1: It's like a very small, very enthusiastic group of people.
> *(Final year students, Focus Group 4)*

They do not vote, read representatives' policies or influence their campaigns in any way. For these students, there is some ambiguity around whether this extends their capability for self-determination. When asked whether it is equivalent to them having a greater voice in decision-making, one student responded:

> Well who's voice is it? That is the question.
> *(Final year student, Focus Group 4)*

However, Sen (2004) argues that, even if individuals achieve a way of life they would have chosen, there is a clear violation of agency freedom if they have had no role in bringing it about and are therefore effectively forced into it.

This group of students attributed their disinterest in university politics to feeling physically and socially distant from the university community. Spending most of their time outside of the university environment, they place less value on having a role in its democratic processes. This effect might be more prominent for these students as they are based in London where students' university, home and social lives are geographically dispersed. However, the sense of dislocation from the university community was echoed by many students across the focus groups, including those from campus universities.

5.2.4 Academic Staff

Talking to academic staff is the most direct means students are able to choose and bring about academic experiences they value. Their capability for self-determination and action is enhanced as they are involved in discussing decisions with those who have the power to make them, often as they are being made. However, students' experiences with academic staff vary considerably. In one group, students spoke positively about the availability and responsiveness of lecturers whereas students in other groups said they are not aware of having a personal tutor or find them less

amenable. It is evident from the focus group discussions that students' personal relationships with staff are a significant factor in their ability to convert their conversations into the capability for self-determination and action. For one group of students, personal relationships have developed naturally over the three years at university:

> Student 1: I think in first year I was a lot more aggressive with like "I'm paying money and I'm not in high school and you can't talk down to me" [...] but now I find it easier to talk to- you do build up friendships with specific lecturers over the years [...] I felt more indignant in first year. Whereas now I feel a lot closer [to academic staff].
> Student 2: We're like the exception though. We're a really small department and that's just not typical of uni.
> *(Two final year students, Focus Group 4)*

However, these students recognise that this has been possible because of the untypically small size of their department and, in earlier years, one student had been left feeling frustrated and indignant. Other students, even those from the same department, have not managed to build relationships so easily:

> I wouldn't want to talk to my tutors. I just don't think they seem friendly enough.
> *(Final year student, Focus group 1)*

> I mean I can't think of a single lecturer in our department who I would go to ask for a reference or like something like that [...] I'm confident that a lot of lecturers don't even know my name, even though I've had them for years.
> *(Final year student, Focus Group 4)*

> Student: I could talk to my supervisor more, I just don't.
> Interviewer: Why is that?
> Student: I feel like he's busy and I have issues with that anyway- because I'm rubbish at talking to people anyway because I'm on the autistic spectrum [...]
> *(Phd Student, Focus Group 2)*

These students face significant barriers to using staff as a means of shaping their academic experience. The final quote demonstrates how this situation might particularly disadvantage those who are less able to convert the tutor-tutee relationship into the capability for self-determination and action because of a lack of confidence or a disability.

Two students described how relationships between students and staff are facilitated at the universities abroad, where they had studied for a year. Small class sizes, short assignments, frequent group discussion, greater use of office hours and invitations to public lectures meant that

they got to know their tutors quite well. Students often discussed their courses with their tutors and tutors could tailor their academic experience to encourage their students' strengths.

> Everyone seemed like more of a community which helps each other.
> *(Final year student, Focus Group 1)*

This sense of community evokes the radical collegiality posited by Fielding (2001) in relation to student voice in schools. Unlike in Fielding's typology where complete equalising of power relations is depicted as the ideal, academic staff in universities abroad still maintained their role as ultimate decision-makers and experts. However, students were able to make valued contributions in areas that are important to them; such as the mode and direction of their own learning. These students contrasted their experience abroad with that in England:

> When I came back [to university in England], it was back to massive class sizes, ten to twenty contact hours per term- often less- lecturers who do their lectures and leave, little open discussion and maybe one or two coursework assignments per term. And, while there are office hours, you usually only go to ask a question related to the material of the last lecture or about an assignment. There were also little opportunities to attend speeches or other events the faculty attended.
> *(Final year student, Focus Group 1)*

Similar experiences with disinterested lecturers, limited contact time and poor quality group discussions were echoed by students across all focus groups. The maintenance of quality and quantity of student-staff contact has been identified as a significant challenge for universities in systems which are transitioning from mass or universal forms of access (Altbach, 2013), where the proportion of the population attending higher education approaches fifty percent (Trow, 2007). Without careful management of this transition, students may face significant barriers to developing the kind of collegial relationships that allow them to enhance their agency.

Students' experiences of student engagement mechanisms suggest that they allow them only indirect capability for self-determination and action, offering them limited to no involvement in making decisions about their academic experiences themselves. Young (2000) argues that, in order to deepen and broaden democracy, institutions must find ways of strengthening direct agency and making indirect agency less indirect. A significant barrier to this in higher education in England is an over reliance on feedback questionnaires and student surveys as a means of involving students in shaping their experience (Velden et. al., 2013), as these exclude students from the decision making process and leave their responses open to manipulation. Student representatives offer the potential for more direct agency but their legitimacy is undermined by an overemphasis on their role as

university consultants as opposed to democratic representatives. It is also clear that students' capability for self-determination and action, through involvement in university politics or speaking to academic staff, could be enhanced through the development of a sense of community and belonging amongst staff and students. However, strengthening students' direct agency does not guarantee that they will bring about academic experiences they value The next section looks at whether, and how, students' indirect influence increases their capability for impact.

5.3 "Stuck it Up": Students' capability for impact

As students' influence on their lives at university tends to be indirect, their capability for impact depends on the actions of others; whether this be academic staff, the government or the wider sector. Although students gave some examples of peers who had made a difference to their academic experiences this way, these tended to be isolated cases which did not involve the students I talked to directly. The overwhelming opinion of the students in the focus groups is that they feel incapable of having any real impact.

5.3.1 The Politics of Listening

Students continually expressed frustration or despair that academic staff or the government do not listen to them. In some cases, academic staff act as a barrier to students' capability for impact:

> I went to my personal tutor about the marking criteria and the transparency and like wanting to know- I complained, basically, and all I got was sympathy. There was nothing. I kind of wanted it to go somewhere but nothing happened from it. It was like "ooh, that's a lecturer, that's how he is" and then just kind of shut up about it. I wasn't told where to officially complain about it, all I was given was "you're going to have to suck it up."
> *(Final year student, Focus Group 4)*

However, there is a clear contrast between this example and one students' account of a meeting set up by staff in response to the concerns of a cohort of transfer students about module selection:

> They emailed all of us and said "just come by" and there was food provided and they said "tell us what is wrong and we will fix it." So that was pretty good as I recall, we were able to voice all of our problems and they apologised and said that it was their first time having a batch of transfer students for law.
> *(Second year international transfer student, Focus Group 2)*

These examples demonstrate that giving students the opportunity to discuss their academic experiences does not necessarily enhance their agency freedom; what matters is the quality of these opportunities. This aligns with McLeod's (2011) discussion of the politics of listening to student

voice. She argues that student engagement needs to be reframed, not as a problem of allowing students to express themselves, but of creating strategies for institutions to listen. As in the examples above, although both students have the ability to offer their opinion, it is only when the second student's voice was recognised and responded to that this turned into a genuine opportunity to bring about experiences they value.

5.3.2 Shaping the Future

Students are similarly frustrated that any impact they have does not benefit them directly. As feedback questionnaires and the NSS are given at the end of modules or the final year, only subsequent years will see the effects of any changes. Some students see this as a significant barrier to their agency:

> But that's the thing, it does feel very much like "help shape the future" and it's like- what about me?
> *(Final year student, Focus Group 4)*

Others spoke positively about being able to influence change for the wider student body but, not being able to influence change for themselves, see this as a kind of "half" empowerment. According to Sen's theory of agency, opportunities should only be judged on how far they enable social actors to achieve what they value. If you take the individual student as the unit of analysis, the opportunities they have to achieve what they value at their time in university are extremely limited. One could argue that students are able to achieve what they value as a collective body working in the interests of one another. However, as they do not have any direct contact with one another, current students cannot be said to be influenced by future cohorts in any meaningful way and are inhibited in implementing academic experiences that are valued by the wider student body.

Students' limited capability for impact is reflected in that very few students see participating in student engagement mechanisms as a way to change their own academic experiences for the better. Students are more likely to engage with feedback mechanisms because it's compulsory, they are entered into a prize draw (as with the PTES), they are pressured from a constant stream of phone calls from Ipsos MORI employees (as with the NSS) or out of politeness to staff who are seen as the primary benefactors of their input. The notion that their involvement does not lead to change, or does not benefit them directly, is one of the main reasons students are discouraged from participating in engagement opportunities. Again, non-participation is not a result of apathy or laziness, but the disinclination to exert effort where there is no perceived personal benefit. Some students suggested more incentives, such as free lunch, would make them more inclined to get involved. Whereas Carey (2016) advocates incentives as a way of motivating students who struggle

to balance the additional time demands student engagement brings, it became clear that students in this study only consider these as necessary because there is no direct benefit to participating, meaning they deserve to be reimbursed in some way.

Students' capability for impact is inhibited as they rely on others to bring about what they value. This is further constrained by the perception that decision makers do not listen to students and that they have limited opportunity to change their condition for themselves, as opposed to future cohorts.

5.4 "We're Paying for it!": The marketisation of higher education

The previous sections in this chapter have explored how students' empowerment is enabled or constrained through different student engagement mechanisms. This section relates to the third sub-question, which seeks to understand what students' experiences can tell us about the effects of marketisation of higher education on their capability for agency.

5.4.1 Student Consumers Find and Raise their Voices

Similar to students in previous studies (Carey, 2013; Freeman, 2014; Lizzio & Wilson, 2009; Tomlinson, 2016), students in these focus groups feel entitled to demand value for money as consumers and that this has become more important as students take on a greater financial burden:

> Student 1: My sort of thinking is that, if unis are going to treat it like a service, I'm wanting sort of feedback from my investment. Not feedback but like- I want lecturers to deliver a standard.
> Student 2: You have expectations and you want them to hit it.
> Student 1: Yeh. Which I'm guessing was different you know when unis were like 3 grand or whatever. But now it's such a significant-
> Student 2: Nine grand plus maintenance, yeh.
> *(Two final year students, Focus Group 4)*

As this quote illustrates, students' accounts of why they should be afforded greater powers were often couched in financial or transactional language. It is also evident that students perceive this to be an appropriate response to universities positioning themselves as a private, paid-for service. One student, frustrated that her complaint about a lecturer's teaching style was disregarded, attributed this to the university not keeping up with the times:

> I think there's such an old-world attitude to a lot of lecturers still which isn't valid for universities nowadays, especially with the fees and like it's a lot more commercial and it's not just on academic merit [...] I don't think lecturers should have the attitude they used to have.
> *(Final year student, Focus Group 4)*

In a world where students make such significant investments in their education, students believe that it is unjustifiable that those with academic merit should continue to hold the authority they once had.

As in the studies mentioned above, although students expressed concerns about receiving a value for money, this was not always limited to material or surface level aspects of their academic experience:

> 9K is a lot of money.You should want to be able to get as much out of the experience as possible and be able to shape it as much to your liking and so you are able to grow as a person and are able to develop useful skills to get a job, but also skills that *you* want to learn and you want to- I guess perhaps I'm just the kind of person that just finds satisfaction out of knowing something.
> *(Second year student, Focus Group 2)*

This student understands education, not only as a means of economic gain, but as a process of growth and transformation in which they have an active role. The high fees they are paying mean that they have high expectations of the university to enable this process as far as possible.

As McMillan and Cheney suggest, the consumer identity has inspired students to "find and raise their voices" (1996, p.5). However, as the previous sections in this chapter have demonstrated, students' perceptions of their increased rights to shape their academic experiences are not always translated into reality; students still face significant barriers to influencing decision makers and bringing about an academic environment that they value through student engagement mechanisms. Furthermore, some students actively reject the idea that they are merely consumers and perceive their consumer identity to diminish their influence as members of an academic community. These ideas will be explored below.

5.4.2 Students' Sphere of Influence

In the focus groups, students clearly demonstrated their capability for thinking critically about their academic experiences. However, when discussing their reasons for participating in student engagement mechanisms, these were restricted to seeking personal support or complaining about unfair treatment. This aligns with Williams' (2010) argument that, as consumers, students are constructed as either vulnerable or complainants. Although the consumer identity allows students to use student engagement mechanisms to access personal support and influence decisions where there has been a poor quality service, it is difficult for them to participate in other ways. Some see no

reason to engage with formal engagement mechanisms where they do not require support or feel the need to complain:

> Student 1: I've never found that I've ever had enough of a problem to complain on that sort of level [to student representatives] to be honest…
> Student 2: Just suck it up…
> Student 1: You have good days and bad days but I've never experienced something to the extent that I've felt, god I've got to do something about this, this is appalling. I've never felt like that at this university especially.
> [...]
> Student 1: I felt that [peer mentors] were a safety net more than anything. That if I felt like I had a problem I could go to them but, same as you, I didn't engage [...] because I didn't feel it was necessary to go to that sort of thing because I felt I was getting to grips with first year, didn't have any problems or anything.
> *(Two second year students, Focus Group 2)*

Students said they have relatively little say in higher level academic matters that do not fall into the categories of complaint or personal support, such as library resources, exam timetabling, teaching and national policy. This isn't because students do not want to influence these aspects of their experience, but that they do not see there to be many real channels for them to address these concerns.

As Luescher-Mamashela (2010) argues, the precedence of consumer justifications for student engagement may distract from other principles underpinning its development. Students discussed a number of reasons for valuing engagement in decision-making, including: their role as stakeholders in the decisions that are made about them; being a member of the academic community; that it is their choice to be there; that they are enthused about what they were studying; and that they had made significant investments of time and effort, not just money, in their education. Whereas these values might provide just reason for student involvement in influencing higher-level decisions, they are overshadowed by the prevailing notion that they have rights to shape their academic experience as paying customers, affording them a limited sphere of influence.

Although students' rights as consumers provides them with a rationale for demanding more influence within their institutions, the influence they have within student engagement policy may be limited to when they have grounds for a complaint or require personal support. Consumer justifications for student engagement may also undermine other reasons for student involvement in decision-making, such as the promotion of democratic values, which might prove a more appropriate basis on which to demand a wider sphere of influence.

5.4.3 Student Choice

Although student engagement mechanisms afford students limited influence, students are empowered to shape their academic experiences in other ways. An significant theme that emerged from the data is that students feel empowered when they have increased choices about how and what they learn. One group from the plate-glass university gave examples of times when they or their friends have been able to pick up modules from other course routes, change their principal subject halfway through their studies or make a last minute decision to take a year abroad. In contrast to the way many students talked about academic staff, they were very positive about their experiences with university administration who managed these transitions:

> This year I wanted to get rid of criminology entirely and [the undergraduate administrator]'s like "ok so you're not happy so we'll move you to history straight away" [...] I just got a change and it was (snaps fingers) really quick.
> *(Second year student, Focus Group 2)*

Students in other groups want more opportunities to manage their own learning. Lecture recording and playback facilities were repeatedly suggested as a means of achieving this:

> I think [lecture recording] is quite good because it's sort of like you're tailoring the course yourself without university input. Like if you benefit more from listening to recordings and doing it in your own space [...] I think you should be given a lot more independance about how you want to learn.
> *(PGDip Student, Focus Group 3)*

Students value flexibility and recorded lectures as they enhance their capability to determine the content and style of their own learning. Promotion of student choice and self-directed learning has been identified as a feature of a marketised system in which institutions are forced to develop new ways to meet student demand in order to gain competitive advantages amongst their consumer base (Molesworth et al., 2011). In this sense, marketisation has the potential to empower students in ways that are valuable to them. It is interesting that the group of postgraduate diploma students, who receive a bursary from the National Health Service as opposed to paying for their degree, are particularly frustrated about the highly structured nature of their course; having little choice what to study and having to adhere to a compulsory attendance policy. Dependent on government funding, they do not benefit from the range of choices offered to their more consumer-like peers.

However, as Nixon, Scullion, & Molesworth (2011) conclude from their study, students do not always make choices in their best interests. Whereas some students in this study prefer choice to create a more challenging, motivating learning environment:

> Student: [Students] should want to be challenged and engaged themselves.
> Interviewer: How does that happen?
> Student: Having the right modules so that if a student has a preference they can go into something they find particularly interesting. [...] If you have a very restricted module set, people who are being forced to choose modules aren't doing stuff that they particularly love.
> *(Second year student, Focus Group 2)*

Others see it as a way of avoiding engagement in learning beyond what is necessary:

> So if I could do it my way, y'know, I'd rather just learn and come in every now and then and then go to exams and play the game, essentially.
> *(PGDip Student, Focus Group 3)*

It could be argued that the student in the second quote does not base their choices on critical reflection or deliberation around their values, preferring instead the short-term rewards of taking the easiest route to achieving the degree. To be truly empowered, individuals need the capability to reason about the choices they have. However, in a marketised system, choice is promoted to satisfy consumer demand. There is little incentive to challenge consumers to reflect on their reasoning for these choices. For choice to enhance agency, it needs to be supplemented with mechanisms to enhance students' ability to think critically about their options and make choices in line with their values.

5.4.4 Market Values or Community Values

For one student, it is students' place in their academic communities which give them authority within their institutions, not their position as consumers:

> I don't think it depends on the money because if you go to university then the university is supposed to be a place of shared learning so everyone should have a say.
> *(Final year student, Focus group 1)*

Again, this evokes Fielding's (2001) notion of a radical collegiality, where traditional one-way interactions between student and staff are replaced by those that result in mutual learning. As discussed in previous chapters, a sense of academic community is also a critical conversion factor in students' willingness to engage in student politics and their capability to build constructive relationships with academic staff. However, a number of students talked about how the function of the university to promote mutual learning is becoming less obvious as its economic functions, in terms of preparing its students for the world of work, are prioritised. One university has sought to

replicate the individuality and competition in the labour market by ranking students by their assessment scores. Students see this as a perversion of the community values described above and said it devalued the university experience.

Students recognise that they themselves contribute to the promotion of market values over community values in the university. They note a prevailing attitude amongst their peers to see university solely as a means to get a job, preventing them from wanting to play and active role in their academic communities. Whereas some students reject this instrumental outlook, others agree with it:

> Student 1: There seems to be an increasing shift towards university as a commodity. It's becoming a business. A lot of students- I think they're still a minority at this point- say "I just want to get a degree so I can get a job." And they're content to tick boxes however they are told to get this thing [...] There do seem to be students who see university as a stepping stone to a career ladder and they just need to have a piece of paper and call that a degree.
> Interviewer: Do other people agree with that?
> Student 2: That describes me almost perfectly.
> *(PhD student and second year student, Focus group 2)*

The level of passivity amongst students with this attitude varies. For some students, this diminishes their willingness to engage in the learning process beyond attending lectures. Students see this as increasing the distance between themselves, staff and their peers. Others are happy to play an active part in their studies but, viewing their education as a means to an end, are less concerned about having a say in the nature and direction of their learning. One student defended this viewpoint:

> I can kind of tell that going to university would be somewhat of a requirement for me in order to get into the field I want to go to. On top of that, if i do change my mind, having a degree opens up more options than it closes so it's something that you just- that opens up more doors for you so you can actually- you have more power to do what you want to do, should you change your mind.
> *(Second year student, Focus group 2)*

Here, the student emphasised the nature of a degree as a means or a conversion factor to enhance their agency freedom once they leave university. Aligning this with the distinction drawn between different functionings in Chapter 3, students see greater value in the functionings they can achieve *through* education, such as a greater choice of employment options, as opposed to the ones they achieve *within* education (Vaughan, 2007). At face value, this might make sense. One purpose of education is, after all, to improve one's quality of life. But, as Vaughan (2007) argues, students' capability to choose and bring about what they value within education is likely to affect what

functionings they can achieve through education. For example, an individual's capability for voice, to have their epistemological position recognised in university culture, pedagogy and the curriculum, increases their ability to access, benefit from and transform their higher education experience into a valued way of life (Sellar & Gale, 2011). This is particularly important for students whose worldviews are often marginalised within higher education. Furthermore, the quote above demonstrates how in a marketised environment students prioritise economic advantage over all the possible functionings achieved through education. Other outcomes, such as practical reason, educational resilience, knowledge and imagination have less value (Walker, 2006). Whereas economic advantage may simply require a certificate, achievement of these alternative functionings and capabilities requires engagement in a complex learning process. As such, a narrowly economic understanding of higher education in policy may disproportionately depreciate students' value for the learning process and their freedom to shape it.

Another student described how this effect is intensified for students who, rather than seeing university as a means to get a specific job, have felt as though they had no choice but to go to university as the high proportion of people now attending means they will be inherently disadvantaged in the labour market if they don't. Those who choose university with a career path in mind have at least some basis to judge and make decisions about their own learning. However, for many students, their capability for self-determination has been curtailed from the very decision to attend university in the first place. This sense of obligation to attend university is something Trow (2007) identifies as a feature of a system in which is moving from mass to universal forms of access. Students in these systems face increased barriers to developing agency within higher education as they have less reason to value their academic experience beyond leaving with a qualification, and so are less willing to shape it.

In a marketised higher education system, the economic value of education outstrips its other functions. As such, universities are less concerned with facilitating a community of shared learning than equipping individuals with the qualifications and resilience required to compete in the labour market. Equally, students identify less as members of the academic community, satisfied with having minimal input into the learning process and the shape and direction of their learning. Students' unwillingness to shape their academic experiences within university may affect their ability to achieve what they want through university and this may be intensified for students who feel they have little option about whether to go to university in the first place.

The marketisation of higher education has had a profound impact on students' influence over their higher education experiences. On one hand, it has given students a sense of their rights as

investors in education to have a say in its delivery and has empowered students to shape their education through the promotion of flexible study options. However, if students' position as consumers becomes the overriding rationale for students' increased agency, this may limit students' sphere of influence to making complaints or seeking support and encourage a culture of increased but superficial choice. Marketisation also diminishes a sense of community of which students are an active part with a legitimate stake and where there is a shared value for academic life.

5.5 Summary

In this chapter, I have explored the enabling factors and barriers to students' empowerment, answering the first two sub-questions. In relation to the third sub-question, I then explored how the marketisation of higher education has acted as both a barrier and an enabling factor in students' ability to shape their academic experiences. The findings explored further in the following chapter, alongside some recommendations for policy makers who wish to empower students to influence their life at university.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

Working within higher education in England, I have witnessed the increasing popularity of student engagement policy and the competing narratives around whether this trend is a source of empowerment for students or serves to limit their agency. Noting a gap in the literature which explores this topic from the perspective of students, I conducted focus groups with students from three universities in England in order to investigate their understanding of their influence on their higher education experiences. Using Sen's capability approach, I have evaluated the factors which enable and constrain student empowerment. Due to it being identified as critical to, and a main inhibitor of, students' empowerment within the literature, I have explored the marketisation of higher education as one of these factors in particular. In Chapter Five, I presented and discussed the results of the analysis of the focus group data. In this chapter, I summarise the main findings in relation to the research questions, reflect on the methodological and theoretical approach to the research, and outline recommendations for policy makers arising from the analysis.

6.1 How Are Students Empowered to Shape their Academic Experience?

This section summarises the main findings relating to the first three sub-questions around the barriers and enabling factors to student empowerment, and the role of marketisation in enabling and constraining student empowerment, relating them to the overarching research question 'How are students empowered to shape their academic experience?'

6.1.1 The Barriers and Enabling Factors to Student Empowerment

The formalisation of students' influence on their academic experiences through student engagement policy has the potential to be empowering for students. However, a significant barrier to this is an over-reliance on feedback questionnaires and the NSS (Velden et al., 2013). Although these enable students to guide decision-makers, claims that they "give students a powerful collective voice" are misleading (Ipsos MORI/ HEFCE, 2017). As Streeting and Wise have said, "power is cleaved;" students raise their voices only to have them reduced to data which those with real authority use to their own ends (2009, p.4). At best students see the process as having little relevance to them and at worst, as with the NSS, they are aware of the extent to which participating leaves their responses open to manipulation.

Students feel more empowered when they are involved in dialogue with decision-makers, which supports the assumptions underlying partnership approaches to student engagement (Healey et al., 2014). Although some have argued that student representatives offer a 'blueprint' for more democratic relationships between students and staff (Carey, 2013), students in this study perceive

them to be unrepresentative. With no election process and taking on a more consultative than representative role, these representatives appear to be an example of a more sophisticated form of consumerism in which institutions develop partnerships with students to support their commercial interests as opposed to facilitating more democratic decision-making (Freeman, 2014).

A sense of community and belonging has been identified as a significant factor in student's' empowerment. For some students, the relationships they have forged with academic staff enable them to influence their academic experiences. Although far from the kind of radical collegial relationships proposed by Fielding (2001), they nevertheless facilitate constructive dialogue between students and those with authority. For others, a sense of detachment from their university community proves a barrier to using academic staff as means of shaping their experiences and means they are less likely to value their university's democratic processes. As higher education in England continues to move from mass to universal form of access, universities face significant challenges to sustaining the quality and quantity of student-staff interactions which are essential to a sense of community (Altbach, 2013). One solution is to continue to formalise these interactions through student engagement mechanisms (Brennan & Williams, 2003), but it must be recognised that the formal options currently available to students do not offer them the dialogue with decision-makers that they find valuable. The concern with community may become even more relevant as distance, part-time or blended learning becomes more prevalent (Barnett, 2014). Although students on these courses were not included in this study, they are likely to face greater distance in the pedagogical relationship and increased barriers to empowering themselves through building relationships with academic staff (Barnett, 2014).

Furthermore, students have few opportunities to shape their higher education experiences for themselves. Asking students for feedback after they have completed a module or course and not having systems in place for students to make decisions about their own programmes as they happen leave many feeling that their feedback is primarily for the benefit of future years or their tutors. Sen's theories illuminate how such mechanisms appear to give students a collective voice, when they are another example of students being assimilated into the university's regulatory mechanisms for the purposes of management (Morley, 2003).

Finally, although students have the means to voice their opinions about their academic experiences, these only become genuinely empowering opportunities to shape their experience when they are listened and responded to. Much of the policy and literature on student engagement talks about how students must take on new roles. However, as McLeod's (2011) argues, it might be more helpful to reconceptualise student engagement as being about how institutions can develop strategies for

listening to their students. Carey (2013b, 2016) has made some developments in this area by reinforcing the different behaviors an institution, as opposed to its students, must adopt at the various levels of Figures 2 and 3, but these ideas are yet to be reflected on by those developing student engagement policy.

6.1.2 Student Empowerment and the Marketisation of Higher Education

Students' awareness of their position as consumers in the higher education market is empowering in that it provides them with a new rationale for having a say in their own academic experiences. As McMillan and Cheney have argued, it has enabled students to "find and raise their voices," and put pressure on their institutions to become more responsible, accountable and practically relevant to their students and the wider public through developing student engagement mechanisms (1996, p.5). However, the analysis of the data supports the argument that student engagement in the context of marketisation becomes about narrowly ensuring customer satisfaction as opposed to transforming practice (Attwood, 2012; McQuillan, 2014). As Williams (2011) has suggested, the construction of students as vulnerable or complaining consumers limits their sphere of influence to flagging issues with service delivery and requesting personal support and continues to exclude them from higher level decisions, such as those around teaching quality. Emphasising consumer rationales for student engagement could prevent students from influencing decisions based on their political concerns as stakeholders in higher education.

Student engagement is not the only way students are empowered to shape their educational experiences. A key feature of a marketised higher education system is increased choice for students around the content and nature of their own learning through flexible course structures and resources such as lecture recordings (Molesworth et al., 2011). Although institutions that want to empower students should promote choice, it needs to be recognised that not all students have the ability to make informed, critical decisions and there is a danger in systems dominated by market principles that more options are created without first empowering students to use them wisely.

Some students reject the notion that they are simply consumers and perceive themselves to have more rights to shape their education through being a member of the academic community. However, an analysis of the data supports those who argue that marketisation leads to a situation in which the economic value of education takes precedence over its other functions, which has distorted relations within the university (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005). Students are aware that their institutions are more concerned with getting them a job than promoting collaborative learning environment which facilitates the kind relationships between students and staff that they find empowering. Equally, some students have adopted an instrumentalist attitude towards their education, meaning they have

less value for the learning process itself and taking an active role in shaping their academic experiences.

These findings have been considered alongside the final sub-question 'in what ways might the analysis of the data inform policy which seeks to empower students to shape their academic experience?', resulting in a series of recommendations for higher education policy makers. These recommendations are detailed in section three. First, I will evaluate the methodological and theoretical approach to the study so readers can judge the applicability of the recommendations for their own contexts.

6.2 Evaluation of the Research Approach

Unlike positivist research, research with constructivist or critical aims cannot be judged against the same principles of reliability and validity. Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose that constructivist research be judged for its *trustworthiness* and critical for the *historical situatedness* of the inquiry. Throughout the study I have ensured the trustworthiness of my findings and made evident their context-bound nature by being explicit about the process of moving from research aims to conclusions, providing thick descriptions of the phenomenon under investigation and applying the principles of reflexivity outlined in Chapter Four. The result has been to produce findings which, although a product of the particular research condition, may be used to spark discussion and allow readers to make judgement about their relevance to other situations.

This study builds on previous research on student engagement and empowerment by exploring the qualitative experiences of students from the wider student body. Although students in the study are from a range of educational backgrounds, they are all full-time students from large, research intensive institutions, meaning the full diversity of the sector is not represented. Velden et al.'s (2013) study indicates that student engagement practices are not dictated by the type of institution, be it large and research intensive or small and specialist, so the experiences of students in this study are just as relevant to stakeholders in other providers. However, how active students are in shaping their experience does vary for different demographics, such as part-time, distance-learning and mature students, who are not included in this study (Velden et al., 2013). Furthermore, the data collected from focus groups creates an overall picture of how perceptions of empowerment are constructed amongst the student body but does not detail more nuanced perspectives of particular students, such as the international students or the postgraduate research student, for whom the research suggests engagement is more difficult (Velden et al., 2013).

This study has also been unique in its theoretical approach to student empowerment. Whereas previous approaches defined power as the level of participation students have in decision-making (Carey, 2013b) and something which produces new identities through student engagement practice (Bragg, 2007; Freeman, 2014), the capability approach enabled a comprehension of the factors which enable students to bring about what they value. As such, the recommendations are more relevant for those wanting to create policy which is genuinely empowering from the perspective of students. Although through using the approach I have been able to strike a balance between acknowledging students' own understandings of empowerment and identifying how discourse around marketisation has shaped them, I agree with others that the approach doesn't make it easy to recognise other social forces which may affect student empowerment (Deneulin & Mcgregor, 2010).

Further research should address the gaps in understanding around how students with particular characteristics or modes of study are empowered to shape their academic experiences. It should also continue to develop a theoretical understanding of student empowerment. For example, researchers might take inspiration from Hart (Hart, 2012), who has combined the capability approach with Bourdieu's established critical theories to explore issues of social justice in education. Nevertheless, this research has produced findings that can inform policy development across the sector. The policy recommendations arising from the analysis of the data are presented below.

6.3 Informing Policy

After consideration of the barriers and enabling factors to student empowerment, I have produced eight recommendations for those involved in developing and implementing higher education policy at both the national and institutional levels:

1. Those developing strategies for student engagement should acknowledge that an over-reliance on mechanisms such as feedback questionnaires and the NSS serve to exclude students from the decision-making sphere and, as they leave responses open to reinterpretation and manipulation, has the potential to result in policy choices that may not align with what students want.

2. Policy-makers should create formal opportunities for students to be directly involved in the decision making process. This means facilitating dialogue between students and decision-makers.

3. Those who manage student engagement within institutions should ensure that student representatives are enabled to have a representative, as opposed to merely a consultative role. This means encouraging students to elect their peers and supporting representatives to champion the voices of the wider student body and facilitate dialogue between students and decision-makers.

4. Institutions should develop strategies for student engagement that not only consider how students' roles and responsibilities are transformed, but how they intend to listen and respond to students.

5. Institutions should develop opportunities for students to shape their own academic experiences, as opposed to those of other students. This might mean considering student feedback continually, not just at the end of a module or programme, and involving students in decisions about their own programmes.

6. Policy-makers should think critically about the imperatives informing the development of student engagement and be aware that, where the rationale is based around students having increased rights as paying consumers, this may restrict students' interactions with the university to complaining or seeking personal support. Where there are alternative rationales for involving students in decision-making, such as their rights as stakeholders, consideration should be given to the types of influence this affords students and appropriate strategies to facilitate this.

7. When developing policy within higher education more generally, consideration should be given to how trends such as massification and marketisation fundamentally affect perceptions around the value of education and the sense of community students feel within their universities. In the face of these trends, leaders should develop strategies to protect and promote the value of deep engagement with learning and the quality and quantity of student-staff contact. This enables students to form the kind of relationships with staff which empower them to shape their academic experience, encourages students to value having a say in how their university is run and emphasises students' rights to shape their education as stakeholders in the university community.

8. Finally, policymakers should continue to develop flexible study options which empower students to control the nature and direction of their study. However, this should be complemented by the development of mechanisms which encourage students to think critically about the choices available to them.

6.4 Student Engagement and Student Empowerment

This research confirms that, although student engagement represents the move to formalise students' influence in higher education, this cannot be assumed to be empowering for students. Students who do not have a representative role are often excluded from decision-making, find it difficult to build constructive relationships with staff, have opportunities to express opinion but not to be heard, and are often limited to influencing decisions about future cohorts as opposed to those that affect them directly. Having developed in the context of growing student fees and a system increasingly regulated by market principles, student engagement policy promotes the idea that students have rights to demand more from their institutions as significant investors in their education. However, consumer rationales for student engagement also limit students' sphere of influence to that of the consumer and weakens academic communities which students perceive to be truly empowering. If student engagement is to be truly empowering and transformational, policy makers need to develop ways to further involve all students in decisions about their academic experiences and develop strategies to promote the empowering effects of marketisation whilst limiting those that limit student agency.

REFERENCES

Altbach, P. (2013). The international imperative in higher education. *Global Perspectives on Higher Education* (Vol. 27). Boston, MA: Sense Publishers.

Amartya, S. (1985). Well-being, agency and freedom: The Dewey lectures 1984. *The Journal of Philosophy*, *82*(4), 169–221.

Arnstein, S. R. (1969). A ladder of citizen participation. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, *35*(4), 216–224.

Ashwin, P., & McVitty, D. (2015). The meanings of student engagement: Implications for policies and practices. In A. Curaj, L. Matei, R. Pricopie, J. Salmi, & P. Scott (Eds.), *The European Higher Education Area* (pp. 343–359). London, England: Springer.

Attwood, R. (2012, March 8). Satisfaction and its discontents. *Times Higher Education*. Retrieved August 01, 2017, from https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/satisfaction-and-its-discontents/419238.article

Austin, I., & Jones, G. A. (2015). *Governance of higher education: global perspectives, theories, and practices*. London, England: Routledge.

Barnett, R. (2014). *Conditions of flexibility: Securing a more responsive higher education system*. York, England. Retrieved August 01, 2017, from https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/conditions-flexibility-securing-more-responsive-higher-education-system

Beloff, M. (1968). *The plate-glass universities*. London, England: Secker & Warburg.

BERA. (2011). *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research*. *British Educational Research Association*. London, England.

Bernstein, B. B. (2000). *Pedagogy, symbolic control and identity: theory, research, critique* (Rev.). Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.

BIS. White Paper: Students at the heart of the system (2011). London, England. Retrieved August 01, 2017, from http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/pdfs/2011-white-paper-higher-ed.pdf

Booth, A., Papaioannou, D., & Sutton, A. (2012). *Systematic approaches to a successful literature review*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

Botas, P., & Brown, R. (2013). The not so “Holy” Grail: The impact of NSS feedback on the quality of teaching and learning in higher education in the UK. *Enhancing Student Feedback and Improvement Systems in Tertiary Education*, *46*.

Bovill, C., Bulley, C. J., & Morss, K. (2011). Engaging and empowering first-year students through curriculum design: Perspectives from the literature. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *16*(2), 197–209.

Bragg, S. (2007). “Student Voice” and governmentality: The production of enterprising subjects? *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, *28*(3), 343–358.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2008). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(October 2012), 37–41.

Brennan, J., & Williams, R. (2003). *Collecting and using student feedback on quality and standards of learning and teaching in Higher Education*. Bristol, England. Retrieved August 01, 2017, from http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rdreports/2003/rd08_03

Brown, R., & Carasso, H. (2013). *Everything for sale? The marketisation of UK higher education*. London, England: Routledge.

Brown, S. (2011). Bringing about positive change in the higher education student experience: A case study. *Quality Assurance in Education*, *19*(3), 195–207.

Buckley, A. (2014). How radical is student engagement? (And what is it for?). *Student Engagement and Experience Journal*, *3*(2), 1–23.

Burke, P. J. (2012). *The right to higher education: beyond widening participation*. Abingdon, England: Routledge.

Caldwell, R. (2007). Agency and change: Re-evaluating Foucault's legacy. *Organization*, *14*(6), 769–791.

Campbell, F., Eland, J., Rumpus, A., & Shacklock, R. (2009). *Hearing the student voice: Involving students in curriculum design and delivery*. Edinburgh, Scotland.

Carey, P. (2013a). Representation and student engagement in higher education: A reflection on the views and experiences of course representatives. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, *37*(1), 71–88.

Carey, P. (2013). Student as co-producer in a marketised higher education system: A case study of students' experience of participation in curriculum design. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, *50*(3), 250–260.

Carey, P. (2013b). *Student engagement in university decision-making: Policies, processes and the student voice*. Lancaster University, Lancaster, England.

Carey, P. (2016). The impact of institutional culture, policy and process on student engagement in university decision-making. *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, (February), 1–8.

Carr, W., & Kemmis, S. (1986). *Becoming critical: Education, knowledge and action research*. London, England: Falmer Press.

Catterall, M., & Maclaran, P. (1997). Focus group data and qualitative analysis programs. *Sociological Research Online*, *2*(1).

Clark, B. R. (1983). *The higher education system: Academic organization in cross-national perspective*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Coates, H., & McCormick, A. C. (2014). Emerging Trends and Perspectives. In H. Coates & A. C. McCormick (Eds.), *Engaging University Students: International Insights from System-Wide Studies* (pp. 151–158). Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer.

Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2011). *Research methods in education* (7th ed.). London, England: Routledge.

Cook-Sather, A., Bovill, C., Felten, P., & Cook, M. (2014). *Engaging students as partners in learning and teaching: A guide for faculty* (First ed.). San Francisco, CA: Ebook Central.

Crocker, D. (2008). *Ethics of Global Development: Agency, Capability, and Deliberative Democracy*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Crocker, D. a., & Robeyns, I. (2010). Capability and agency. In C. W. Morris (Ed.), *Amartya Sen* (pp. 60–90). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Deneulin, S., & Mcgregor, J. A. (2010). The capability approach and the politics of a social conception of wellbeing. *European Journal of Social Theory*, *13*(4), 501–519.

Drèze, J., & Sen, A. (2002). *India: Development and participation* (2nd ed.). New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press.

Dunne, E., Zandstra, R., Brown, T., & Nurser, T. (2011). *Students as change agents*. Bristol, England.

Fielding, M. (1999). Radical collegiality: Affirming teaching as an inclusive professional practice. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, *26*(2), 1–34.

Freeman, R. (2014). *Student voice: New forms of power and governance in higher education in England (2003-2013)*. University of Birmingham. Retrieved August 01, 2017, from http://etheses.bham.ac.uk/5379/1/Freeman14PhD.pdf

Geertz, C. (2000). *The interpretation of cultures: Selected essays*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Grant, B. (1997). Disciplining students: The construction of student subjectivities. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *18*(1), 101–114.

Guba, E., & Lincoln, Y. (1994). Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 105–117). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Hall, V. (2016). A tale of two narratives: student voice—what lies before us? *Oxford Review of Education*, *43*(2), 1–14.

Hardy, C., & Bryson, C. (2010). Student engagement: Paradigm change or political expediency? *Networks (HEA)*, *9*, 19–23. Retrieved August 01, 2017, from http://irep.ntu.ac.uk/id/eprint/19300/1/200478_6878 Hardy Publisher.pdf

Hart, C. S. (2012). *Aspirations, education and social justice: Applying Sen and Bourdieu*. London, England: Bloomsbury Academic.

Healey, M., Flint, A., & Harrington, K. (2014). *Engagement through partnership: Students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education*. York, England.

Healey, M. J., & Jenkins, A. (2009). *Developing undergraduate research and inquiry*. York, England: HEA.

HEFCE. (2015). Student engagement. Retrieved June 12, 2017, from http://www.hefce.ac.uk/reg/forstudents/sp/se/

HEFCE strategic plan 2003-08. (2003). Retrieved August 01, 2017, from http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20100303170306/http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2003/03_35.htm

Ibrahim, S., & Alkire, S. (2007). Agency and empowerment: A proposal for internationally comparable indicators. *Oxford Development Studies*, *35*(4), 379–403.

Ipsos MORI, & HEFCE. (2017). About the NSS. Retrieved April 27, 2017, from http://www.thestudentsurvey.com/about.php

Kahu, E. R. (2013). Framing student engagement in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, *38*(5), 758–773.

Kitzinger, J. (1994). The methodology of focus groups: The importance of interaction between research participants. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, *16*(1), 103–121.

Kitzinger, J., & Barbour, R. (1999). Introduction: The challenge and promise of focus groups. In R. S. Barbour & J. Kitzinger (Eds.), *Developing focus group research: Politics, theory and practice* (pp. 1–20). London, England: Sage.

Klemenčič, M. (2015). What is student agency ? An ontological exploration in the context of research on student engagement. In M. Klemenčič, S. Bergan, & R. Primozic (Eds.), *Student engagement in Europe: society, higher education and student governance* (Council of, pp. 11–29). Strasbourg, France: Council of Europe Publishing.

Kuh, G. D. (2009). The national survey of student engagement: Conceptual and empirical foundations. *New Directions for Institutional Research, 2009*, 5–20.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Little, B., Locke, W., Scesa, A., & Williams, R. (2009). *Report to HEFCE on student engagement*. London, England. Retrieved August 01, 2017, from http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rdreports/2009/rd03_09/

Little, B., & Williams, R. (2010). Students' roles in maintaining quality and in enhancing learning: Is there a tension? *Quality in Higher Education*, *16*(2), 115–127.

Lizzio, A., & Wilson, K. (2009). Student participation in university governance: The role conceptions and sense of efficacy of student representatives on departmental committees. *Studies in Higher Education*, *34*(1), 69–84.

Luescher-Mamashela, T. M. (2010). From university democratisation to managerialism: The changing legitimation of university governance and the place of students. *Tertiary Education and Management*, *16*(4), 259–283.

Mack, N., Woodsong, C., MacQueen, K. M., Guest, G., & Namey, E. (2005). Module 4: Focus groups. In *Qualitative research methods: A data collector's field guide*. North Carolina, USA: Family Health International.

Mann, S. J. (2008). *Study, power and the university*. Berkshire, England: McGraw-Hill/Society for Research into Higher Education.

Mauthner, N. S., & Doucet, A. (2003). Reflexive accounts and accounts of reflexivity in qualitative data analysis. *Sociology*, *37*(3), 413–431.

McCulloch, A. (2009). The student as co-producer: Learning from public administration about the student-university relationship. *Studies in Higher Education*, *34*(2), 171–183.

McLeod, J. (2011). Student voice and the politics of listening in higher education. *Critical Studies in Education*, *52*(2), 179–189.

McMillan, J. J., & Cheney, G. (1996). The student as consumer: The implications and limitations of a metaphor. *Communication Education*, *45*(1), 1–15.

McQuillan, M. (2014, May 8). Has the student voice been tamed? *Times Higher Education*. Retrieved August 01, 2017, from https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/has-the-student-voice-been-tamed/2013116.article

Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldana, J. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Molesworth, M., Nixon, E., & Scullion, R. (2009). Having, being and higher education: the marketisation of the university and the transformation of the student into consumer. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *14*(3), 277–287.

Molesworth, M., Nixon, E., & Scullion, R. (2011). *The marketisation of higher education*. London, England: Routledge.

Moodie, G. C., & Eustace, R. (1974). *Power and authority in British universities*. London, England: George Allen and Unwin Ltd.

Morley, L. (2003). *Quality and power in higher education*. Buckingham, England: Open University Press.

Naidoo, R., & Jamieson, I. (2005). Empowering participants or corroding learning? Towards a research agenda on the impact of student consumerism in higher education. *Journal of Education Policy*, *20*(3), 267–281.

Naidoo, R., & Williams, J. (2015). The neoliberal regime in English higher education: Charters, consumers and the erosion of the public good. *Critical Studies in Education*, *56*(2), 208–233.

Narayan-Parker, D. (2005). *Measuring empowerment: Cross-disciplinary perspectives*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

National Student Survey 2014 results show record levels of satisfaction. (2014, August 12). *Times Higher Education*. Retrieved August 01, 2017, from https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/national-student-survey-2014-results-show-record-levels-of-satisfaction/2015108.article

Nixon, E., Scullion, R., & Molesworth, M. (2011). How choice in higher education can create conservative learners. In M. Molesworth, E. Nixon, & R. Scullion (Eds.), *The marketisation of higher education* (pp. 196–208). London, England: Routledge.

NUS. (2015). *A manifesto for partnership*. London, England. Retrieved August 01, 2017, from http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/a-manifesto-for-partnership

Oancea, A. (2016). The aims and claims of educational research. In M. Hand & R. Davies (Eds.), *Education, ethics and experience* (pp. 109–122). Abingdon, England: Routledge.

Oxford University students are latest to boycott student survey in protest over tuition fee hikes. (2017, January 12). *The Independent*. Retrieved August 01, 2017, from http://www.independent.co.uk/student/news/oxford-university-students-protest-tuition-fees-hike-boycott-student-survey-satisfaction-tef-sorana-a7523781.html

Peers, E. A. (1951). *Red Brick University*. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin.

Punch, K., & Oancea, A. (2014). *Introduction to research methods in education* (2nd ed.). London, England: Sage.

Quality Assurance Agency. (2012). *Chapter B5: Student engagement*. *UK Quality Code for Higher Education*. Gloucester, England. Retrieved August 01, 2017, from http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code

Read, B., Francis, B., & Robson, J. (2001). "Playing Safe": Undergraduate essay writing and the presentation of the student "voice." *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *22*(3), 387–399.

Reay, D., Crozier, G., & Clayton, J. (2010). "Fitting in" or "standing out": Working-class students in UK higher education. *British Educational Research Journal*, *36*(1), 107–124.

Robeyns, I. (2003). *The capability approach: An interdisciplinary introduction* (Department of Political Science and Amsterdam School of Social Sciences Research Working Paper). Amsterdam, Netherlands.

Robson, C. (2016). *Real world research: A resource for users of social research methods in applied settings* (4th ed.). Chichester, England: Wiley.

Sabri, D. (2011). What's wrong with "the student experience"? *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, *32*(5), 657–667.

Sabri, D. (2013). Student evaluations of teaching as "fact-totems": The case of the UK national student survey. *Sociological Research Online*.

Seale, J. (2010). Doing student voice work in higher education: An exploration of the value of participatory methods. *British Educational Research Journal*, *36*(6), 995–1015.

Seale, J., Gibson, S., Haynes, J., & Potter, A. (2015). Power and resistance: Reflections on the rhetoric and reality of using participatory methods to promote student voice and engagement in higher education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, *39*(4), 534–552.

Sellar, S., & Gale, T. (2011). Mobility, aspiration, voice: A new structure of feeling for student equity in higher education. *Critical Studies in Education*, *52*(May 2015), 115–134.

Sen, A. (1992). *Inequality reexamined*. Oxford, England: Russell Sage Foundation.

Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom*. New York, NY: Anchor books.

Sen, A. (2004). Elements of a theory of human rights. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, *32*(4), 315–356.

Sim, J. (1998). Collecting and analysing qualitative data: Issues raised by the focus group. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, *28*(2), 345–352.

Streeting, W., & Wise, G. (2009). *Rethinking the values of higher education - consumption, partnership, community?* Gloucester, England.

Temple, P., Callender, C., Grove, L., & Kersh, N. (2014). *Managing the student experience in a shifting higher education landscape*. York, Enlgand. Retrieved August 01, 2017, from https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resource/managing-student-experience-shifting-higher-education-landscape

The future of higher education (2003). London, England: DfES.

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. (2017). *Chapter B5: Student engagement*. Gloucester, England. Retrieved August 01, 2017, from http://www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/uk-quality-code-for-higher-education-chapter-b5-student-engagement

Tomlinson, M. (2016). Student perceptions of themselves as “consumers” of higher education. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*.

Torres, C. A. (2009). *Globalizations and education: Collected essays on class, race, gender, and the state*. London, England: Teachers College, Columbia University.

Trow, M. (2007). Reflections on the transition from elite to mass to universal acces: Forms and phases of higher education in modern societies since WWII. In J. F. Forest & P. G. Altbach (Eds.), *International Handbook of Higher Education* (pp. 243–280). Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer Netherlands.

Trowler, V. (2010). *Student engagement literature review*. York, England.

Trowler, V. (2015). Negotiating contestations and “chaotic conceptions”: Engaging “non-traditional” students in higher education. *Higher Education Quarterly*, *69*(3), 295–310.

Vaughan, R. (2007). Measuring capabilities: An example from girls’ schooling. In M. Walker & E. Unterhalter (Eds.), *Amartya Sen’s capability approach and social justice in education* (pp. 109–130). Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan.

Velden, G. M. Van Der, Naidoo, R., Lowe, J. A., Bótas, P. C. P., & Pool, A. D. (2013). *Student engagement in learning and teaching quality management: A Study of UK practices, commissioned by the Quality Assurance Agency*. Bath, England.

Wait, R. (2015). *Making student engagement a reality: Turning theory into practice*. London, England.

Walker, L., & Logan, A. (2008). *Learner Engagement*. Bristol, England.

Walker, M. (2006). *Higher education pedagogies: A capabilities approach*. Maidenhead, England: Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press.

Wilkinson, S. (1999). Focus groups: A feminist method. *Physchology of Women Quarterly*, *23*, 221–244.

Williams, A., & Katz, L. (2001). The use of focus group methodology in education: Some theoretical and practical considerations. *International Electronic Journal for Leadership in Learning*, *5*(3).

Williams, J. (2011). Constructing consumption: What media representations reveal about today’s students. In M. Molesworth, E. Nixon, & R. Scullion (Eds.), *The marketisation of higher education and the student as consumer*. London, England: Routledge.

Yeo, A., & Legard, R. (2014). In-depth interviews. In J. Ritchie, J. Lewis, C. McNaughton Nicholls, & R. Ormstone (Eds.), *Qualitative research practice: A guide for social science students and researchers* (2nd ed., pp. 177–210). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

Young, I. M. (2000). *Inclusion and democracy*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

APPENDIX 1: PILOT SCHEDULE

Start

- Welcome.
- Outline the purpose of the study
  This study aims to understand how students are empowered to shape their academic experience from the perspective of students themselves. Academic experiences are defined as all the interactions you have with the university to do with your studies, or that helps you and your peers to achieve your degree. We hope to provide a fuller picture of how policy-makers can create empowering opportunities for students to influence their life at university.
- Confirm that people can leave at any time
- Expectations of the focus group: speak one at a time, respect each other, we encourage discussion and disagreement, please keep others' responses confidential once you leave this room.
- Are there any questions?
- Ask everyone to introduce themselves to the group and say a bit about what year they are in/ what they are studying.

Valued academic experiences

1. What would your ideal academic experience look like?
   Prompts: Resources, teaching, assessment, the environment, difficulty, the way it makes you feel, something that has been really helpful/ enjoyable/interesting in the past, what you would do.

2. Identify the 2 or 3 most important and say why.

Involvement in shaping academic experiences

3. Can you tell me about some of the ways you get involved in talking about/ evaluating/ changing your academic experience?
   Prompts: Informal/ formal, feedback forms, NSS, campaigns/ protests, student union, course representatives, discussions with tutors.

4. Have you been involved in any of these processes? If yes:
5. what made you want to get involved?
6. What role did you have?
7. How did you find the experience? What went well? How could it have been a better experience?
8. Do you think that your input was valued?
9. Do you feel that you made a difference? Example?

10. If no: what are your reasons for not getting involved?
11. What would make you more inclined to get involved?

12. Do you think students want to be more involved? Why is this?

Policy context

13. Do you think that students paying for fees helps them achieve their ideal academic experience? Can you give an example?

14. Do you feel empowered to shape your academic experience?

Close

- Before we finish, is there anything you would like to add that you hasn't been said already?
- Thank everyone
- Explain what will happen with the data next
- Point out contact information in case they have any further questions

APPENDIX 2: FOCUS GROUP SCHEDULE

Start

- Welcome.
- Outline the purpose of the study
  This study aims to understand how students are empowered to shape their academic experience from the perspective of students themselves. Academic experiences are defined as all the interactions you have with the university to do with your studies, or that helps you and your peers to achieve your degree. We hope to provide a fuller picture of how policy-makers can create empowering opportunities for students to influence their life at university.
- Confirm that people can leave at any time
- Expectations of the focus group: speak one at a time, respect each other, we encourage discussion and disagreement, please keep others' responses confidential once you leave this room.
- Are there any questions?
- Ask everyone to introduce themselves to the group and say a bit about what year they are in/ what they are studying.

Valued academic experiences

1. What would your ideal academic experience look like?
   Prompts: Resources, teaching, assessment, the environment, difficulty, the way it makes you feel, something that has been really helpful/ enjoyable/interesting in the past, what you would do.

Involvement in shaping academic experiences

2. Can you tell me about some of the ways you get involved in talking about/ evaluating/ changing your academic experience?
   Prompts: Informal/ formal, feedback forms, NSS, campaigns/ protests, student union, course representatives, discussions with tutors.

3. Can you tell me about a times you have been involved in these processes?
   Prompts: What made you want to get involved? What role did you have? How did you find the experience? What went well? How could it have been a better experience? Do you think that your input was valued? Do you feel that you made a difference? Example?

4. If you haven't been involved, why not?
   Prompts: Can you give an example of when you didn't get involved? What factors put you off? What would make you more inclined to get involved? What stops you from getting involved in some processes, but not others?

5. Do you think students want to be more involved?
   Prompts: Why is this?

6. Do you feel empowered to shape your academic experience?

Prompts: Why is this? What makes you feel empowered? Can you give an example of a time you felt particularly empowered?

Close

- Before we finish, is there anything you would like to add that you hasn't been said already?
- Thank everyone
- Explain what will happen with the data next
- Point out contact information in case they have any further questions

APPENDIX 3: INITIAL CODING FRAMEWORK

CODE	**DEFINITION**
Functionings- F	Academic experiences that students value.
Capability for Agency- CA	
Capability for Self Determination- CA-SD	Students talk about their ability to decide between or discuss academic experiences that they value.
Capability for Reasoning- CA-R	Students talk about their ability to choose between academic experiences based on their own reasoning and deliberation. This might be demonstrated in the purposes, goals or reasons they give for choosing alternative academic experiences (e.g. to get better feedback, to solve an academic issue, because they have a health problem).
Capability for Action- CA-ACT	Students talk about their ability to take action or have a role in choosing and bringing about experiences that they value.
Capability for Impact- CA-IMP	Students talk about the kind of impact they are able to have in choosing/ bringing about academic experiences that they value.
Means- M	Goods, services or resources that students can convert into the capability to choose and bring about academic experiences that they value.
Conversion factors- CF	The social, environmental and personal factors which constrain or enable a student's ability to convert a means into the capability for self-determination, reasoning, action and impact.
Pro-Agency Freedom- AF	Students talk about valuing opportunities for agency freedom and the reasons or influences for this.
Anti-Agency Freedom- AFX	Students talk about how they do not value/ reject opportunities for agency freedom, and factors that have influenced this.

APPENDIX 4: FINAL CODING FRAMEWORK

CODE	DEFINITION
Functionings- F	Academic experiences that students value.
Capability for Agency- CA	
Capability for Self Determination or Action- CA- ACT	
Course routes -CA- ACT- C	Students choose to change course route
Feedback forms -CA-ACT-F	Students give opinions on feedback forms
Discussions -CA-ACT-D	Students are are not involved in discussions or decisions about their academic experiences
Not being honest on the NSS -CA-ACT-N	Students give dishonest answers on the NSS or are confused about what answers to give
Talking -CA-ACT-T	Students talk to those who make decisions
Alternative action -CA-ACT-A	Students take alternative action from formalised routes to shape their experiences, such as protests or petitioning
Capability for Reasoning- CA-R	
Complaints -CA-R-C	Students shape their academic experience when they have a complaint about their experience
Changing course route -CA-R-CR	Students wish to change what they are studying or go on a year abroad
Personal issues -CA-R-P	Students shape their academic experience to deal with personal issues such as health issues
Capability for Impact- CA-IMP	
Unaware of impact -CA-IMP-U	Students are unaware of the impact they have
No impact -CA-IMP-N	Students believe they have no impact or question the impact they have
Example of impact- CA-IMP-E	Students give examples of times they have made an impact
Changes made for future cohorts -CA-IMP-F	Students are aware of having an impact for future cohorts, or previous cohorts having an impact for them

The wrong kind of impact -CA-IMP-W	Students have an impact that is unintended or does not align with what they would have wanted
Means- M	
Module Choice - M-MC	Mechanisms that allow students to choose modules or courses they want
Feedback Questionnaires - M-FQ	Feedback Questionnaires
Student Representatives/ SSLCs - M-SR	Talking to student representatives or having student representatives represent them on student-staff consultancy committees
Admin - M-A	Admin staff at the university
Students' union/ NUS -M-SU	Students' union/ NUS
Academic Staff -M-AS	Discussions with academic staff/ course leaders/ heads of department/ personal tutors
Advice Centre -M-AC	Advice Centre
NSS/ PTES -M-NSS	NSS/ PTES
Protests -M-P	Protests/ petitions
Conversion factors- CF	
Support for personal issues -CF-S	Students talk about the support available for personal issues, whether this is good or bad.
Personal relationships with staff -CF-P	Students talk about the benefits of having personal relationships with staff, what helps them build personal relationships, and the disadvantages of not having these relationships
Convenience/ organisation of the means -CF-C	Students talk about means being convenient or well-organised
Collective voice -CF-CV	Students talk about the benefits of a collective voice, and how this does or doesn't exist
Academic staff/ government listening- CF-L	Students talk about academic staff or the government either listening or not listening to them
Changes only made for future cohorts -CF-F	Students talk about changes only being made for students in future cohorts, and how this prevents them from having impact

Flexibility of course structure -CF-CF	Students talk about the benefits of having a flexible course structure, and how this has been a barrier where it is not provided
“Old-world attitude” towards tutors -CF-O	Students talk of an old world attitude of teachers as a barrier to them shaping their academic experiences
Personal issues vs course issues -CF-PC	Students talk about how changing personal issues is generally easier than getting higher-level or course level issues resolved
Constraints on staff -CF-CON	Students are aware of the time and resource constraints on staff, who may otherwise be well-meaning
Feedback overviews -CF-FO	Students talk about wanting overviews of their feedback, or perceive these not to be helpful
University wanting a good reputation -CF-REP	Students talk about how the university wanting a good reputation helps them shape their academic experiences
Community environment -CF-COM	Students talk about how a community environment helps them shape their academic experiences, how this community environment is enabled or is becoming increasingly weak
Multiple functions of NSS -CF-NSS	Students talk about the different functions the NSS has, and how this affects their responses
No communication from NUS/ Union -CF-NC	Students unions and the NSS do not help them shape their experiences as their is no communication
Student representatives are not Representative -CF-SR	Students talk about their representatives being unrepresentative or disorganised
Pro-Agency Freedom- AF	
Incentives- AF-I	Students talk about wanting to shape their academic experience because of external incentives such as vouchers or prizes
Mandatory -AF-M	Students talk about wanting to shape their academic experience because it is mandatory or they have been pressured into it
Fees-AF-P	Students talk about wanting to shape their

	academic experience because they are paying for it through fees
Moral obligation to future years -AF-MO	Students talk about wanting to shape their academic experience because of a moral obligation to future years
University's reputation -AF-REP	Students talk about wanting to shape their academic experience because it will help their universities reputation and this will benefit them in the job market
For staff -AF-S	Students talk about wanting to shape their academic experience for the benefit of staff
To change things - AF-C	Students talk about wanting to shape their academic experience to change things for the better
Their choice/ time/effort to attend university -AF-TE	Students talk about wanting to shape their academic experience because it is their choice to be there, they like what they are studying, or they have invested time and effort into studying there
Anti-Agency Freedom- AFX	
No impact- AFX-NI	Students talk about not wanting to shape their academic experiences because it has no impact
Apathy-AFX-A	Students talk about not wanting to shape their academic experiences because they are apathetic or lazy
Here to get a job -AFX-J	Students talk about not wanting to shape their academic experiences because they are at university to get a job, it is a means to an ends, and they do not value getting involved on a deeper level
Obliged to go to university -AFX-O	Students talk about not wanting to shape their academic experiences because they did not have a choice to come to university so are unsure about what experience they want
Disengagement/ lack of community -AFX-COM	Students talk about not wanting to shape their academic experiences because they do not feel part of the academic community: they are physically distanced, disengaged, or do not have a social connection with their life at university

Don’t have a problem or complaint -AFX-P	Students talk about not wanting to shape their academic experiences because they do not have a problem or complaint, so see no reason to

APPENDIX 5: ETHICAL APPROVAL FORM

CENTRAL UNIVERSITY RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (CUREC)

Form CUREC 1A Checklist for the Social Sciences and Humanities

The University of Oxford places a high value on the knowledge, expertise, and integrity of its members and their ability to conduct research to high standards of scholarship and ethics. The research ethics clearance procedures have been established to ensure that the University is meeting its obligations as a responsible institution.

They start from the presumption that all members of the University will take their responsibilities and obligations seriously and will ensure that their research on human subjects is conducted according to the established principles and good practice in their fields and in accordance, where appropriate, with legal requirements. Since the requirements of research ethics review will vary from field to field and from project to project, the University accepts that different guidelines and procedures will be appropriate.

- Please check the **CUREC flowchart and NHS flowchart** first to see if you need ethics approval.
- Please complete this form using a word processor and email it, together with your supporting documents, to your **Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC)** (**if applicable**). If you don't have a DREC please email this form to **ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk** using your official **ox.ac.uk email** address. **Only emailed applications will be accepted.**

WHAT THIS CHECKLIST IS DESIGNED FOR

This **CUREC 1A checklist** is designed largely for research that falls within the Divisions of Social Sciences and Humanities where ethical issues are relatively few and straightforward. Interviews, field work and oral history are also included in the CUREC process.

The **full CUREC 2 application** is only required where certain project characteristics (e.g. type of participants, or procedures) result in a more complex set of ethical issues. It is expected that only in a limited number of cases will it be necessary for researchers to complete a CUREC 2 application. The checklist below will direct you to a CUREC 2 application if needed.

WHAT THIS CHECKLIST WILL NOT ASSESS

This checklist does not cover research governance, satisfactory methodology, or compliance with the requirements of publishers when administering their tests or questionnaires. As principal researcher, it is your responsibility to ensure that requirements in these areas are met.

CUREC does not review studies classed as **audit** (see Glossary and Decision Flowchart for CUREC on our website).

If your study involves **NHS patients, NHS staff / data / facilities, or human tissue**, please check the Decision Flowchart for NHS approval and contact the Clinical Trials and Research Governance (CTRG) team in the first instance.

Further information on the University's research ethics procedures is available from the CUREC website: www.admin.ox.ac.uk/curec.

SECTION A: Filter for CUREC2 application

This section determines whether your study raises more complex issues which require the completion of a full application for ethical review, known as the CUREC 2 application.

(Please mark 'X' in the Yes/No column as appropriate to indicate your response.)

1. Are research participants classed as **people whose ability to give free and informed consent is in question**? (This may include those under 18 (though see "competent youths" in **FAQ C12**), prisoners, or adults "at risk".) Your attention is drawn to the University's **Safeguarding Code of Practice** and its implications for researchers involving children or adults at risk, including the need for the work to be risk assessed and for researchers to undertake related training. (**Note**: If any of your participants are aged 16 or under, please answer 'Yes' here **and** also answer question 5 below.)	Yes	No x
2. By taking part in the research, will participants be at serious risk of criminal prosecution (e.g. by providing information on drug abuse or child abuse)?	Yes	No x
3. Does the research involve the **deception** of participants?	Yes	No x
4. Does your research raise issues relevant to the **Counter-Terrorism and Security Act (the Prevent duty)**, which seeks to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism? Please see advice on this on our **Best Practice Guidance web page**.	Yes	No x
If you have answered 'No' to all of the questions above please go to **Section B**. If you have answered 'Yes' to any question above continue to question 5 below.		
5. Is your project covered by a CUREC **approved procedure** (formerly known as "CUREC Protocols")?	Yes	No
If yes, please give research procedure number(s):		

If you answered '**Yes'** to **ANY** of questions **1-4**, **and** answered '**No'** to question **5**, **please stop completing this checklist and do not submit it for ethical review**. Instead, please complete the CUREC 2 application form from the CUREC website. Then submit the CUREC 2 form for ethical review.
If you answered 'Yes' to ANY of questions 1-3, **and** answered 'Yes' to question 5, please go on to **Section B**.

SECTION B: Contact details and project description (NB: must be typed not handwritten)

Contact details:

1. **Principal researcher/**supervisor (title and name) (if student research):	Dr Hubert Ertl
2. Name of student (if student research):	Leigh Spanner
3. Degree programme, e.g. DPhil, BA, MPhil, BSc, MSc (if student research):	MSc Education (Higher Education)
4. Department or Institute name:	Department of Education, Oxford University
5. Address for correspondence (if different from above):	15 Norham Gardens, Oxford OX2 6PY
6. University e-mail (**not** private email) and telephone:	leigh.spanner@gtc.ox.ac.uk
7. Name and status of others taking part in the project, e.g. third year undergraduate; postdoctoral research assistant:	

SECTION B continued	
Project description:	
8. Title of research project:	Student Empowerment in Higher Education
9. List of location(s) where project will be conducted:	Oxford University 2 other participating Universities in the UK
10. If your research involves overseas travel or fieldwork, by the time the research starts, will you have completed and returned a travel risk assessment form? (This has to be approved by your department before you travel. If you are travelling overseas, you are strongly advised to take out University travel insurance.)	Yes No N/A x
11. Anticipated duration of research project overall:	6 months or years (maximum 5)
12. Anticipated start and end dates of the research project involving human participants:	From: (01/03/17) To: (11/08/17) Please note that you will need ethics approval **before** you start your research. CUREC1As may take up to 30 days to process.
13. External organisation funding the research (if applicable):	
14. Title and very brief and simple lay description of **research** (about 150 words), plus description (about 200 words) of the nature of participants.	
a) Title, brief lay description of research (150 words). When describing the research, please include your methodology, how you are applying professional guidelines, and the use to which results/data will be put. **Please also declare any conflicts of interest here.**	

This study is an exploration of student empowerment in higher education. National policy has placed increasing emphasis on the centrality of the student experience. In this context, the research aims to understand how students are empowered to shape their academic experience from the perspective of students themselves.

A pilot study will be conducted in the first instance, which will be an audio-recorded focus group with 5 to 7 participants. The primary data will be collected through 3 to 4 audio-recorded focus groups with 5 to 7 participants in each and lasting no more than 90 minutes.

In accordance with professional guidelines the researcher will: collect voluntary informed consent before the focus group sessions [Appendix B]; ensure the confidentiality and privacy of participants throughout; minimise harm to participants; and conduct the research with integrity. The data will form part of an MSc thesis which will be available in print and online within the Oxford University archives and some results may be published in academic journals concerned with educational policy.

SECTION B continued

b) Description of participants and **obtaining informed consent** (200 words). When describing participants, please include

- criteria for inclusion/exclusion
- method of recruitment
- processes for consent to participate

Please ensure you attach as separate documents (if applicable, in English translation):

- your recruitment and advertisement material e.g. a poster or brief invitation letter/ email
- information for participants to read (or hear) before they agree to take part e.g. written information sheets or (only if applicable) oral information scripts.
- a document to record informed consent. Templates for written consent forms and/or oral consent scripts (in case of an oral consent process) are available from the CUREC website
- a guide to interview questions (this may be a list of questions to be asked, or a preliminary scope of questions), or a sample of other instruments (such as a sample questionnaire)
- (if relevant) debriefing document after participants have taken part

The study will involve 25 to 40 undergraduate students in their final or penultimate year from two universities in the UK. The students selected will be studying a range of courses and will be as representative of the student population as possible in terms of the mix of fee status (home/ EU or international) and gender. Students who do not have a representative role or regularly work with the university to inform policy in an official capacity are preferred.

First, a staff member at the university will be identified, who will facilitate recruitment for both the pilot and the primary focus groups. It is anticipated that the method of recruitment will be e-mail [Appendix A].

An information sheet will be emailed to the university email address of all those interested in participating [Appendix C]. A print copy of the information sheet will be given to each of the participants upon arrival at the location of the focus groups, along with a consent form which they will be asked to sign [Appendix B]. Before the study commences, the researcher will verbally reinforce the expectations of the study and the participant's right to withdraw at any point [Appendix D]. A oral debrief will be given at the conclusion of the focus groups and contact information will be distributed in case participants have any concerns that arise after the study [Appendix C; Appendix D].

15. What are the ethical issues connected with your research and what steps have you taken to address them? Please do not answer 'none'. The committee needs to see evidence that you have identified potential ethical issues with respect to your research and have taken steps to address them. These issues could relate to:

- your own physical and psychological safety as a researcher (please see the University's and Social Science Division's Safety in Fieldwork guidance
- participant burdens and/or risks, and
- data protection/ confidentiality.

For more guidance on ethical issues, please see www.admin.ox.ac.uk/curec/resources/.

Focus groups

It is necessary to ensure that participants are giving informed consent throughout the study. As such, the researcher will continue to keep the participants informed about the expectations of the study and their right to withdraw at any point. This information will be provided via e-mail, in print at the location, and verbally before the study commences [Appendix C and D]. The researcher will remain honest and open to questions throughout.

Focus groups involve discussions about views and experiences of a topic in a group setting. Although it is not anticipated that any topics of a sensitive nature will be discussed [see Appendix D], the researcher will take care not put pressure on any members to speak and will inform participants that they can leave the room at any point, should they begin to feel uncomfortable [Appendix C]. The researcher will be aware of creating a relaxed and comfortable environment, show respect for participants' views, and thank them for their time.

Due to their nature of being in a group, focus groups involve unique issues around anonymity and confidentiality. To mitigate this issue, the researcher will inform participants that any information they do share will be shared with others in the group and the researcher and participants will be encouraged to keep what they hear about others confidential [Appendix C and D].

Audio recording

Participants are more easily identifiable by audio-recorded data than hand-written notes. Participants will be informed about the kind of data collected [Appendix C] and the consent form will seek specific consent for collecting audio data [Appendix B]. As the information sheet explains, the data will only be accessible to the research team and will not be shown to anyone else without explicit written consent from the participants. When not in use, the recordings will be stored on a personal computer in a password protected folder [See point 19]. The researcher will plan for the storage and ultimate destruction of the recorded data.

Use of a facilitator

A staff member at the university advising on recruitment of participants may raise ethical issues of coercion and bias. However, the researcher will make clear that their role is not to recruit participants personally, but advise on the methods of recruitment and provide a means of accessing the students for the researcher, such as through university email. The researcher will ensure that the recruitment methods agreed with the facilitator allow, as much as possible, for the participants to be randomly recruited on a voluntary basis.

Power relationships

As the study is concerned with power relationships within the university, it is a particular concern that the student participants are not made to feel disenfranchised by the process. This is mitigated somewhat by the researcher themselves being a student, and therefore of similar social standing, and that the research is likely to be of benefit to the participants themselves. This information is emphasised in the information sheet [Appendix C]. As far as possible, the researcher will attempt to create an environment where the researcher and the participants are collaborating on a shared issue and will continue to uphold the values of openness and honesty. The researcher will first conduct a pilot study, with feedback from participants on the appropriateness of the language used and the environment created, which should help to mitigate any issues around unequal power relationships.

During the analysis and presentation of data, the researcher will be sensitive to the fact that they are representing the experiences of others and that there will be subjective interpretation involved. Also, they will be aware that the views they represent are not those of a homogenous group and that, due to the nature of the focus group, the views presented may be more representative of dominant voices and exclude others. These issues will be discussed in the written report.

Where possible, participants will be provided with copies of the thesis or other publications arising from their participation.

Section B continued		
16. Will you obtain informed consent according to CUREC guidelines and good practice in your discipline before participation?	Yes x	No
If you have marked '**No**', please give a brief explanation and justification for this decision here:		
17. Will your research involve discussing sensitive issues? This could be information relating to race or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious beliefs, physical/mental health, trade union membership, sexual life or criminal activities.	Yes	No x
If you have marked '**Yes**', please make sure that you have included some **supporting information** (as directed in question 14 of this section) showing the range of questions covering these issues.		
18. Will you ensure that **personal data** collected directly from participants or via a **third party** is held and processed in accordance with the provisions of the Data Protection Act?	Yes x	No
19. How will you ensure that any personal and/or sensitive data are captured, transferred and stored securely? In particular if data are to be captured electronically, please consult with the University's research data team (**researchdata@ox.ac.uk**) and your local IT department and, with respect to University IT security policies, please comment on how you will capture such data in the first instance, how you will transfer them over networks or via portable media and how, where and how long data will be stored. For more information please see the University's web pages on research data management: http://researchdata.ox.ac.uk/university-of-oxford-policy-on-the-management-of-research-data-and-records/		
Data will be collected using handwritten field notes and audio recording. The field notes will be transported from the research site in a heavy duty envelope labelled confidential with the researcher's contact information. They will be transcribed within 48 hours into digital format on a personal computer, and saved to a password protected file. When not in use, the handwritten notes will be stored in a secure location and destroyed after transcription. Audio data will be transferred onto a personal computer whilst still on site. It will be stored digitally in a password protected folder. Both the field notes and audio recordings will only be accessible to the research team at any point. The data will be stored for 3 years upon completion of the MSc degree and then destroyed. The research team will adhere to university IT security policies throughout.		

SECTION C: Methods and procedures to be used	
Method used: Please ensure you have addressed any potential ethical issues related to these methods in Section 14 and in your Participant Information Sheet	**Please mark 'X'**
1. Analysis of existing records	
2. Snowball sampling (recruiting through contacts of existing participants)	
3. Use of casual or local workers e.g. interpreters	
4. Participant observation	
5. Covert observation	
6. Observation of specific organisational practices	
7. Participant completes questionnaire in hard copy	
8. Participant completes online questionnaire or other online task	
9. Using social media	
10. Participant performs paper and pencil task	
11. Participant performs verbal or aural task (e.g. for linguistic study)	
12. Focus group	x
13. Interview	
14. Audio recording of participant (you will generally need specific consent from participants for this)	x
15. Video recording of participant (you will generally need specific consent from participants for this)	
16. Photography of participant (you will generally need specific consent from participants for this)	
17. Others (please specify):	x

Use of a facilitator

SECTION D: Professional guidelines and training		
In this section, please mark 'X' against at least one of the following professional guidelines you aim to adhere to. You should use the principles listed in your chosen guideline(s) in conducting your own research. **Note**: this is not an exhaustive list.		**Please mark 'X'**
Research specialism/ methodology	**Association and guidance document**	
Anthropology	Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth	
Criminology	British Society of Criminology: Code of Ethics for Researchers in the Field of Criminology	
Education	British Educational Research Association Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research	x
Geography	Association of American Geographers Statement on Professional Ethics Royal Geographical Society: Research Ethics and Code of Practice	
History	Oral History Society of the UK Ethical Guidelines	
Internet-based Research	British Psychological Society: Conducting Research on the Internet Association of Internet Researchers Ethics Guide Also see our Best Practice Guidance on internet-based research	
Law (Socio-Legal)	Socio-Legal Studies Association: Statement of Principles of Ethical Research	
Management	Academy of Management's Professional Code of Ethics	
Political Science	American Political Science Association (APSA) Guide to Professional Ethics in Political Science	
Politics	Political Studies Association. Guidelines for Good Professional Conduct	
Psychology	British Psychological Society Code of Ethics and Conduct British Psychological Society: Conducting Research on the Internet Also see "Internet-based Research" guidance above	
Social Research	Social Research Association: Ethical Guidelines	
Sociology	The British Sociological Association: Statement of Ethical Practice	
Visual Research	ESRC National Centre for Research Methods Review Paper: Visual Ethics: Ethical Issues in Visual Research	
Other professional guidelines. Please specify the other guidelines used here*:*		
Please indicate what training in research ethics the researchers involved with this study have received, e.g. the title of the course and date completed (online training available at www.admin.ox.ac.uk/curec/training). If no formal training has been undertaken, please indicate any discussions of research methodology between researchers and supervisors here.		
The student researcher has undertaken a course on the foundations of educational research as part of the MSc programme. This involved research ethics training.		

SECTION E: Signatures

- 'Electronic signatures' sent as email confirmations from a University of Oxford email address can be accepted. Separate emails should come from each of the relevant signatories as outlined below, indicating acceptance of the relevant responsibilities.
- If you have obtained handwritten (wet-ink) signatures, please scan them and the rest of the checklist pages to create a single PDF document and email through.

Please ensure this checklist is signed by:

For staff research:	**For student research**:
1. **Principal researcher**	1. **Principal researcher (project supervisor)**
2. **Head of Department (or nominee)**	2. **Head of Department (or nominee)**
	3. **Student researcher**

1. **Principal researcher signature/supervisor signature (if student research)**

I understand my responsibilities as **principal researcher** as outlined in the CUREC glossary and guidance on the CUREC website.

I declare that the answers above accurately describe the research as presently designed, and that a new checklist will be submitted should the research design change in a way which would alter any of the above responses so as to require completion of CUREC 2 (involving full scrutiny by an IDREC). I will inform the relevant IDREC if I cease to be the principal researcher on this project and supply the name and contact details of my successor if appropriate.

Signature: ……..

Print name (block capitals): …….. **Date**: ……..

2. **Departmental endorsement signature**

I have read the research project application named above. On the basis of the information available to me, I:

(i) consider the principal researcher to be aware of her/his ethical responsibilities in regard to this research;
(ii) consider that any ethical issues raised have been satisfactorily resolved or are covered by relevant professional guidelines and/or CUREC approved procedures, and that it is appropriate for the research to proceed (noting the principal researcher's obligation to report should the design of the research change in a way which would alter any of the above responses so as to require completion of a CUREC 2 full application);
(iii) am satisfied that: the proposed project design and scientific methodology is sound; the project has been/will be subject to appropriate **peer review**; and is likely to contribute to existing knowledge and/or to the education and training of the researcher(s) and that it is in the **public interest**.

Signed by Head of Department or nominee *(example nominees for student research include the Director of Graduate Studies/ Director of Undergraduate Studies)*:

Signature: ……..

Print name (block capitals): ……..... **Date**: ……..

3. **Student signature (if student research)**

I understand the questions and answers that have been entered above describing the research, and I will ensure that my practice in this research complies with these answers, subject to any modifications made by the principal researcher properly authorised by the CUREC system.

Signed by student: LEIGH SPANNER

Print name (block capitals): LEIGH SPANNER **Date**: 08/02/2017

SECTION F: SUBMITTING THE COMPLETED CHECKLIST	Please mark 'X'
1. Check you have completed all sections (A-E)	x
2. Ensure your application is signed by you, your supervisor (if student) and department	x
3. **Please attach all supporting documents (see section B, question 14b for details).** If the appropriate supporting documentation is not included with your application, you will then be asked to provide this separately. **This may well delay the ethical review process, and thus the start of your research.**	x
4. Ensure you have declared conflicts of interest (if any) in Section B, question 14a.	x
5. If your department has a Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC), submit this checklist and supporting information to the appropriate departmental officer.	x
6. If your department does not have a DREC, submit the checklist and supporting information to the SSH IDREC (email ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk).	x
7. Applications must be sent by email from your official ox.ac.uk email account. Please do not send applications by post.	x

APPENDIX 6: INFORMATION SHEET

Department of Education
University of Oxford
15 Norham Gardens
Oxford
OX2 6PY

Hubert Ertl [Supervisor]
hubert.ertl@education.ox.ac.uk
Leigh Spanner [MSc Student]
leigh.spanner@gtc.ox.ac.uk

Student Empowerment in Higher Education

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Ethics Approval Reference:

1. ***Background and aims of the study***

This study is an exploration of student empowerment in higher education. In particular, it aims to understand how students are empowered to shape their academic experience from the perspective of students themselves. The study hopes to provide a fuller picture of how policy-makers can create empowering opportunities for students to influence their life at university.

The research for this study is being undertaken by Leigh Spanner who is an MSc (masters) student in the Department of Education at the University of Oxford. This project is being supervised by Dr Hubert Ertl, a lecturer in Higher Education at the University of Oxford and has been reviewed and approved by the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC).

2. ***Why have I been invited to take part?***

For this study, we intend to establish focus 3-4 focus groups with around 20-30 students in total to discuss their impressions of being involved in shaping their academic experience. The students will be undergraduates in their final or penultimate year from a range of courses and who are representative of the student body in terms of their fee status (home/ EU or international) and gender. We would prefer if the students did not have a student representative role or regularly work with the university to inform policy in an official capacity as we are interested in the experiences of the wider student body.

3. ***Do I have to take part?***

It is your decision to take part in this study and you may ask the researcher questions or ask for more information before deciding whether or not to participate. You do not need to answer questions that you do not wish to. However, we believe that you have something important to contribute to this study and to further researchers who want to study power relationships at university, and we hope that you will contribute. If you agree to take part in this study you will be asked to sign a consent form. Please note, however, that you are free to withdraw from the study at any time by advising the researchers of this decision and you will not be asked to give any reasons if you do choose to withdraw.

4. ***What will happen in the study?***

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to attend a focus group session. The focus group will be conducted by Leigh Spanner, a master's student, and there will be 4 to 6 other students present. The session will be very informal and relaxed. You don't need any prior knowledge about the topic; it is simply a chance to chat about your university experience and how this might be improved for you and your peers.

The study will take place at a pre-specified location on the university campus and will last no more than 90 minutes. It will also be audio-recorded.

5. ***Are there any potential risks in taking part?***

We hope that the experience of taking part in this study will be enjoyable for you. The focus group will involve participants talking about or personal experiences. You will at no point be pressured to talk and we do not anticipate that topics of a sensitive nature will be discussed. However, if you do begin to feel uncomfortable, you can tell the researcher and leave the room at any point. We ask all participants to remain respectful to each other and keep any information they hear about another participant confidential.

6. ***Are there any benefits in taking part?***

The aim of the research project is to build on our understanding of power relationships in higher education and how these are changed when students have the opportunity to make decisions about their academic experience. There has been little exploration of this topic from the perspective of students themselves. Only by understanding the perspectives of students like yourself can we begin to fully understand how universities can support students to be empowered members of the academic community. This is particularly important as students are investing more into their education and universities need to ensure they understand the needs of an increasingly diverse student body.

As part of the study, you will be able to reflect on your own experiences and motivations and discuss opportunities for you to be able to get the most out of your time at university. We hope that you will find it rewarding that you will be contributing to a body of knowledge which will help students, student unions, universities and other policy makers to create policy that enables students to be involved in making decisions about their academic experience in a way that is empowering for them.

7. ***What happens to the data provided?***

The research data will be audio-recorded and stored confidentially. Only the research team will have access to the research data. Your responses will be anonymised. All research data and records will be stored for a minimum retention period of 3 years after completion.

8. ***Will the research be published?***

If you agree to participate in this study, the research will be written up as a dissertation. On successful submission of the thesis, it will be deposited both in print and online in the University archives, to facilitate its use in future research. The thesis will be published open access. Some results may be published in academic journals concerned with exploring educational policy. If you wish to obtain a copy of the published results, please inform the researcher.

9. ***Who has reviewed this study?***

This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee (reference number: xxx).

10. ***Who do I contact if I have a concern about the study or I wish to complain?***

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, please speak to the relevant researcher 07479224343 or their supervisor 01865 274 044, who will do their best to answer your query. The researcher should acknowledge your concern within 10 working days and give you an indication of how they intend to deal with it. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the relevant chair of the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford who will seek to resolve the matter in a reasonably expeditious manner:
Chair, **Social Sciences & Humanities Inter-Divisional Research Ethics Committee**; Email: ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk; Address: Research Services, University of Oxford, Wellington Square, Oxford OX1 2JD

11. ***Contact Details***

If you would like to discuss the research with someone beforehand (or if you have questions afterwards), please contact:

Leigh Spanner
E-mail: leigh.spanner@gtc.ox.ac.uk

APPENDIX 7: CONSENT FORM

Department of Education
University of Oxford
15 Norham Gardens
Oxford
OX2 6PY

Hubert Ertl [Supervisor]
hubert.ertl@education.ox.ac.uk
Leigh Spanner [MSc Student]
leigh.spanner@gtc.ox.ac.uk

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

CUREC Approval Reference:

Student Empowerment in Higher Education

This study is an exploration of student empowerment in higher education. In particular, it aims to understand how students are empowered to shape their academic experience from the perspective of students themselves.

		Please tick all that apply
1	I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	☐
2	I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason, and without any adverse consequences or academic penalty.	☐
3	I understand that this project has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee.	☐
4	I understand who will have access to personal data provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.	☐
5	I understand how this research will be written up and published.	☐
6	I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint.	☐
7	I consent to being audio recorded	☐
8	I understand how audio recordings will be used in research outputs	☐
9	I agree to take part in the above study.	☐

Name of Participant	Date	Signature
Name of person taking consent	Date	Signature