

What it's like to be an H.E. student now

Patrick Ainley *reviews two recent and contrasting studies.*

Bruce Macfarlane *Freedom to Learn. The threat to academic freedom and why it needs to be reclaimed*, Routledge and the Society for Research into Higher Education, 2017

Lorenza Antonucci *Student Lives in Crisis. Deepening inequality in times of austerity*, Policy Press, 2016

Recently, *The Times Higher Education* seriously discussed whether undergraduate student attendance at lectures and seminars should be compulsory. That what was once the house-journal of the academic profession, but now describes itself on its website as 'the voice of the global HE industry', could entertain this question, with contributions for and against by several academics, showed not only the degeneration of *The THE* but also the associated loss of any shared conception of an academic vocation.

On this basic question of attendance, Bruce Macfarlane points out tertiary education is not a continuation of compulsory schooling, though for many students it has become so with marks for compulsory attendance – often checked by swipe card – counting towards their final degree pass. In students don't have to do anything – just be there – to pass the course! His book is therefore timely in seeking to stimulate debate on this and related issues by reasserting the rights of students and their freedom to learn.

Not just compulsory attendance but other panoptic expectations, such as keeping a conventionally reflective journal, appropriate participation in seminars and group work, endless presentations and compliance with other tedious obligations of the closely managed 'student experience', are all assessed supposedly 'transparently', along with work placements and participation in the local and student community. Students' Unions are complicit in this in the name of maximising 'student engagement' and 'voice'. Treating students as consumers demanding satisfaction inhibits the development and expression of academic freedom of both students and staff, so that students – 60 per cent of them women – 'are victims of a culture that is both corporate and patriarchal' (p11).

Freedom

Readers of *PSE* who work in FE (where the majority of students have in recent times always been adults) and in adult and continuing education, as well as HE where most students are over the age of majority and therefore also nominally adult citizens, would subscribe to the three types of student freedom that Macfarlane defends: personal, political and academic. There is, however, a paradox that he remarks that 'while students now often enjoy high levels of personal freedom . . . their political freedom is being redefined by institutions seeking to

domesticate students within a marketized framework of student engagement' (p39), often through 'self-commodification' by investing in themselves 'to look good on my CV'.

Instead, it is with the scholarly freedom to participate in an academic community that this book is concerned: 'The freedom to decide what, when and where to study. Students should be treated with respect as autonomous adults with the right to make choices about their study program that meet their personal needs and objectives' (p33). This involves four basic student rights that are more than consumer rights: the right to non-indoctrination and the right to reticence (not to speak if they choose not to but to reserve judgement), which in turn is part of the right to choose how to learn and to be trusted as adults. These, he asserts in conclusion, can reclaim 'student centeredness'.

But students are not the centre of the academic community. It is knowledge and skill into which students are inducted that is central and it is their successful graduation through its acquisition that legitimates their further participation towards Mastery should they wish to continue with it. This is not only knowledge of what is currently known in their field of study or application but commitment to what could be known or achieved as part of developing human culture. This includes science, which, together with technology, goes unmentioned in Macfarlane's conventional concentration upon the humanities.

Elitist

Here student-centredness is tied too closely to individual humanistic becoming – derived, in Macfarlane's case, from the protestant psychology of Carl Rogers from whom he borrows his title. It is essentially elitist and only applicable in elite universities. Although they too are becoming increasingly performative – and Southampton, where Macfarlane is now based, is from all accounts a good example of this – they are still different from the rest of tertiary education. Here, for most students, participation really is a performance that is enforced upon them, plus accumulating debt, in hopes of eventual semi-professional, secure employment.

By contrast, Lorenza Antonucci deals with the range of students across all types of HE institutions in contrasted socio-economic regions of three European countries (England, Italy and Sweden). She is not interested in 'the pedagogic side of the university experience' (p12) but in contesting the orthodox approach to higher education research,

which follows the widening participation agenda of successive governments, where failure to progress through the opportunities supposedly on offer is attributed to cultural factors.

Instead, as she says in a footnote on this predominant 'cultural capital approach', 'My focus in this book is on the material triggers of inequality' (p173). She grounds these in the welfare regimes supporting students in the three countries: from Sweden's still relatively generous quasi-universal loans and grants, through England's Americanised loan system, to Italy's residual state support that leaves many poorer students dependent on their families since they are unlikely to find work whilst studying. As she says, 'Welfare states are not just economic stabilisers; they represent the main field where class divisions can be reinforced and limited' (p51). Or one of them, it should be added.

Punctures

These contrasts result in five profiles of student experience displayed in different proportions across the various types of institution and programs that students have managed to access and progress through to different levels: 1) 'Struggling and hopeless', 2) 'Facing difficulties but with hope for the future', 3) 'Seeing university as a positive, but temporary, period', 4) 'Feeling good in the present, worried about the future', 5) 'Having a great time' (Table 3, p77). Antonucci's interview and questionnaire samples are too small to generalise to differing proportions of all students in the three countries and their regions and institutions (let alone the various programmes of study they are on) but she punctures 'the myth of a single, privileged experience of university' (p104) that Macfarlane takes for granted, at the same time placing the predominant cultural capital research orthodoxy in social context.