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Partnership as Student Power: Democracy and Governance in a Neoliberal University

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"STUDENTS VOICES MATTER", FLINDERS UNIVERSITY, MARCH 2019. PHOTO COURTESY OF AUTHORS

Is This University Success?

"... I would like to raise that students should be brought into conversations about the future direction of research – particularly in regard to the Academic Senate terms of reference – as this is our shared future, we would like to be a meaningful part of decisions about it. We desperately want to help shape the future of this institution. But we need meaningful consultation, consideration and respect so that we can build this brighter future together. Students must be allowed to speak. Students must be noticed. We must be consulted. We must be heard. And we must be included in steering this university."

(Cornelius-Bell, 2018: postgraduate student address to Flinders University Senate)

Significant organisational restructuring has taken place at South Australia's Flinders University that has had devastating effects on academic staff and students. This restructuring addresses the strategic plan, "Making a Difference: The 2025 Agenda" (Flinders University, 2016) and was in accordance with "Australia in the Asian Century," recommendations for University ranking improvements (Gillard, 2013). The Flinders University Council restructured staff roles, composition, and foci. A number of staff lost their jobs. At least twenty per cent have been moved to teaching-only roles, termed "teaching specialist." Higher degree research students lost their supervisors. Research in entire discipline areas ceased. In keeping with the neoliberal trend of bloated administrations, however, the University has seen the introduction of outsiders as a new class of management across the institution. This arrival has been evident across the institution's new governance and structure, in a new "college" design. This structure also gave rise to business language in management roles across the University: 'presidents,' 'vice presidents,' 'directors,' and 'executives.'

These changes were designed and orchestrated by the University Council and senior management in near total isolation from staff and students, raising serious questions about democracy and participation in university governance. Determined efforts were indeed made by students and staff to mitigate the drastic changes to the organisational structure. Feedback was provided in earnest, which was seemingly disregarded. Next came union action in the Fair Work Commission¹ to change the course of implementation – a small victory. Yet, just a week later, the University's Senior Executive was found in breach of process and asked to once again "follow the rules."

In addition to the various attempts to provide formal feedback to the University Council, students and staff held several protests.² In spectacular fashion, at the December 2018 meeting of the Flinders University Council, 200 staff and students squeezed into the boardroom to protest these hasty decisions and to challenge the managerialist concept of "university success" (Richardson, 2018). Members of the

professoriate, in echoes of past democratic Councils, voiced concerns about the dictatorial direction and the impact on procedural fairness, consultation, reputational risks, gaming the research rankings, and, of course, morale (Baum, Davies, & Lack, 2018). Chancellor Stephen Gerlach adamantly disagreed and side-lined the concerns of professors who spoke out. He stated that, while students and staff members present may disagree with the direction and implementation of major changes, the responsibility was his and the Council's alone to "see it in the broader picture":

... this Council has a responsibility, and I am Chancellor and chairman of this Council, so I have that ultimate responsibility and that is to make sure that this University succeeds. ... You can disagree with that, but we are the people that have, and carry, that responsibility and I want to be able to look all of you in the face in the future and know that we did the right thing. (Gerlach, 2018: address to Flinders University Council)

The Chancellor's dismissive and isolationist attitude embodies the neoliberal governance structure and has had significant impacts on both staff and students, largely excluded from the decision-making processes that changed the fabric, meaning, and future of the University. For academic staff, this has resulted in a reduced workforce and increased workload, with many roles being casualised. Importantly, academic staff have lost agency and ownership of their important intellectual labor (Zipin, 2019). For students, their roles are now those of 'consumers' within this neoliberal structure. A student-led survey circulated via student Facebook groups during the Flinders University restructure found that "99% of respondents [stated] that there had been no meaningful consultation with students on the previous proposals" and that "14 students reported that they had been told not to speak out about the proposed changes at Flinders by University management" (Say no to Flinders 'Academic Restructuring,' 2018). Reflecting on the shifts in academic roles and work, many postgraduate students hold little hope in attaining the academic careers to which they aspired. More recently, we have seen a further exclusion of students from democratic decision-making nationally: in an online forum at Monash University (July, 2020), students were muted and removed after they queried cuts to university funding and staff, and how teaching online (including from old lecture recordings) during the COVID-19 global pandemic would affect their learning (SBS News Staff). Thus, we ask, who defines "university success" and how might student power shift the conception of university to a new democratic form of governance?

Corporate University Governance in Australia

Much like the corporatization of American and European universities, Australia's university sector has adopted the behaviors and structures of contemporary neoliberal organizations (Marginson & Considine, 2000; Rogers et al., 2020). These moves have been well documented in both the Australian and international context by critical scholars of higher education (For example: Aronowitz & Giroux, 2000,

2000; Giroux, 2002, 2014; Houlbrook, 2019). Since Marginson and Considine's (2000) formative work on Australian University Governance, there have been several continued moves toward neoliberalist corporatized management in Australia. Before exploring those moves further, it is important to paint a brief picture of the origins of the Australian university sector.

Australia's university sector, like all of its institutions, has a colonial history marked with exploitation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Inheriting many of the colonial traits of Australian institutions, the "Australian university" was built on the foundations of the British university systems (Marginson & Considine, 2000). While there is an increasing blurring of those foundations towards neoliberal governance structures, including adopting United States university governance patterns, the fundamentals of Australian university governance and management still follow a British council-senate-faculty layout. Chief among the changes to mimic corporate governance at Flinders University, for example, was a shift from faculties and schools led by a dean, to colleges led by a vice president. These changes to the governance landscape, while seemingly subtle, herald a new discourse around the governance and management of the University (Connell, 2019).

Australian universities share a great deal with the European university sector, and while there are unique hallmarks of immediate colonial history, little of this bears great historical claim on the changing university today; we do not have an established institution to fall back on, and in some senses the Australian university council governance-management-group sees itself as a nimble and adaptable institution with little regard or respect for extant successful structures. We are equally at a disadvantage and advantage because we do not have a way of "doing governance" developed over many years. It is here, though, at Flinders University, that we see the potential for a shift in framing of governance – an opportunity for student engagement, beyond superficiality and representation, towards authentic partnership and democracy in governance structures. If governance, "leadership and management are often seen as *the* key to improving the universities problems" (Marginson & Considine, 2000, pp. 7–8), then we are presented with the opportunity to ask ourselves, what is the role for the student subject of higher education in this setting?

A Shift Towards the Neoliberal University

Ranking systems, vice-chancellors as "CEO-dictators" (Bonnell, 2016), and increasing accountability to funding bodies are endemic in the global higher education landscape. The recent moves by the Australian Federal Coalition Government (the current ruling conservative political party) to instigate teaching-only universities and a shift in the narrative about what makes a university "a university" (Matchett, 2018) further empowers isolationist and dictatorial management. Against this backdrop, the Flinders University Council appears to see no choice but to dictate change to arbitrarily increase research ranking and demonstrate this new conception of "success." Rather than challenging escalating neoliberal policies and asking

important academic questions about what a university is, and its role as a public good (Marginson, 2011), we find ourselves having to buy-in to the rhetoric of market logic at great expense to democratic governance, fair resourcing, and job security. Indeed, "neoliberal managerialism," a reconceptualization of management under a dominant economic rationalist regime, has taken a significant hold of the structure and fabric of universities across Australia as well as higher education internationally (Connell, 2013, 2019; Marginson, 2011). Moreover, the making of neoliberal subjects, the changes to governance, and the dictatorial nature of university councils has wider ranging implications for democratic society.

As *Radical Teacher* issues have discussed, rather than a democratic university that critiques culture and society, the neoliberalised university rushes to support the latest onslaught of public policy changes. Rather than focusing on building stronger and diverse humanities, arts, education, and law departments, the neoliberal university would disable the research done by these academics.³ Instead of harnessing the knowledge and spirit of the students and academic staff, the neoliberalised university sets a deliberate course against the people that make it, in order to be competitive in a market-society – a battle it is arguably destined to lose. It acts as a privatized body despite its status in Australia as a public institution. It works to shrink those research areas, even when profitable, that encourage critical thinking and democratic participation in society in favour of those areas that fit neatly with political slogans and entice corporate funding. Yet even students and academics within seemingly 'safe' areas have remarkably little power in the direction the university takes. While cancer research, for example, appears a well-funded, publicly supported academic area, the students and staff are often subject to the same barrage of cuts and new classes of management, and they are also unable to provide feedback or influence direction.

The neoliberal university sees their subjects – students and academic staff – as individualized, entrepreneurial, and competitive, seeking only to increase their market use-value by following the embodied neoliberal managerialism of their "President" and "Vice President."

While the neoliberal university presents a version of success in its glossy, commercially marketed exterior, which sees students and staff as empowered to live a "good life" (Gottschall & Saltmarsh, 2017), the shortcomings and undermining of a public good are abundantly clear for those inside. The neoliberal university sees their subjects – students and academic staff – as individualized, entrepreneurial, and competitive, seeking only to increase their market use-value by following the embodied neoliberal managerialism of their "President" and "Vice President."

In a broader higher education context, Brennan (2010) suggests that new glossy “university governance structures” reflect “business acumen” rather than institutional knowledge, and while there has not been a lack of protest from academic staff, they still lose their foothold in positions of governance in favour of those who know “what’s right” in the market-economy. Zipin (2019) defines this harmful mode of institutional governance as a Council-Management Governance (CMG). It comprises “an executive level of Council and Senior Management; a line-management chain that extends between executive level and academic labour grounds; and a range of auxiliary offices and actors” (p. 28). For academics in a university context, this structure poses significant consequences relating to agency and ownership of their important intellectual labor, for the CMG is resistant to engaging with grounded academic thought and work.

The departure from a democratic leaning university towards a dictatorial CMG should not be ignored. The New Left student power movements in the 1960s through 1980s had varying successes in opening up the traditional structures of university governance to allow more student and staff participation (Bonnell, 2016; Bourg, 2018; Cockburn, 1969; Connell, 2016; Hastings, 2003). Student power, which at its most basic level refers to the power of

movements. Broadly speaking, neoliberalism has *nearly* successfully erased the democratic management wins of students and staff (Connell, 2016).

If neoliberal universities are incapable of producing graduates who meaningfully participate in democratic life (Brown, 2015), then it is worth turning the looking glass back on universities to see what opportunities exist for learning and active participation in democratic governance. While student determination of the content and structure of their education is not in direct conflict with the aim of a neoliberal university, there is still a clear undermining of student power in governance bodies, especially in direct relation to any student control of curriculum (Marginson & Considine, 2000). However, there is a hopeful opportunity in this space, a partnership between academic and professional staff and students. Incorporating elements of mentoring and training, such partnerships aim for genuine and authentic collaborative “projects,” from completion of coursework module to critically informed policy submissions, rather than leaning into the rhetoric of students as consumers of education (Gravett, Kinchin, & Winstone, 2019). In the rhetoric of “graduate careers,” partnership might create genuine opportunity for student determination of content, but in *authentic* partnership with university staff



FLINDERS UNIVERSITY PROTEST, 2017. PHOTO COURTESY OF AUTHORS

students to determine the structure and content of their own education, had very real effects on the management of higher education institutions (Cockburn, 1969). Yet, these spaces have, for the most part, since been overrun with all kinds of “corporate experience” embodied in neoliberal managerial trends in universities. From the example in the introduction, and from a growing activist current around the world, we can see this area once again pulsate with opportunity (Marginson & Considine, 2000; Middlehurst, 2013; Shattock, 2013). Harnessing this energy in the context of university subjects is critical to the future success of both the university and democracy.

Democratic Governance in Higher Education

Centralized power in the overwhelming university managerial class structure (Brennan, 2010) in universities has overwritten the small victories of earlier student power

we could start to see a move towards a more democratic student/staff co-governance. Unfortunately, in neoliberal times, the collective power of students remains weakened. The power to determine *their* education now tends to rest in class enrolment numbers and student evaluations of teaching surveys.

Whether students are conceptualized as customers, consumers, stakeholders, or directors (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009) has deep implications for students in terms of governance. The latter terms envision a more authentic partnership approach (Klemenčič, 2012, 2014), while the former fit the neoliberal agenda of “students as consumers,” and “defines the value of their role in governance primarily as operationalising the expected transactive rights of maximising satisfaction, ensuring accountability and earning an appropriate return on investment” (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009, p. 70). In this sense, much like class selection and teaching evaluations, the actual metrics of value to the CMG is the number of “bums on seats” and net profit from student enrolments. This perspective reduces possibilities for

students' critical engagement with issues facing their institutions, their social and political lives, and the context of participation in issues of democracy generally. Not only have there been reductions in the number of student positions on university councils and academic boards and senates, reductions and cuts in student unionism, and an undermining of student power as a result of managerialism (Marginson & Considine, 2000), but the democratic potential of participation in every university has been undermined. In Australia particularly, many student unions lost their independence, being reabsorbed into universities as associations, run under the banner of "unionism" without any of the power or potential of a real union. This came as a result of Voluntary Student Unionism, a conservative attack to disband student unions in Australia (Barcan, 2011; Rochford, 2006). The limiting of student power, both in the sense of theoretical positioning and "student voice," further aids the banner cause of neoliberalism towards an unquestioning, uncritical public with the sole aim of increasing profit (Harvey, 2005). For a functional democratic society, we must have a citizenry who are "educated, thoughtful, and democratic in sensibility" (Brow, 2015, p. 199). To these ends, there is great need for a university sector that values democratic participation by students and staff in institutional governance. This involvement, however, must be foundationally understood on a basis of respect for student power, positioned through democratic, authentic, and collaborative decision-making.

While there are genuine efforts to challenge what and how content is taught, the neoliberal view of learning promotes individuals flourishing on their own and creating opportunities to profit through entrepreneurial behaviour.

The influences of neoliberalism in higher education not only manifest as a political struggle, but as a pedagogic one too (Scandrett, 2017). Thus, the vision of a democratic university does not end in governance; it extends into teaching processes and use of resources (Klemenčič, 2014; Planas, Soler, Fullana, Pallisera, & Vilà, 2013). In alignment with the worldview of those under the neoliberal ideology, there are effects upon every aspect of student and staff lives. Certainly, the breeding ground for neoliberal ideologies are not inconsistent with the fabric of some areas of the university where teaching and learning processes have devolved or remained stagnant, visible in the design of teaching programs with top-down and colonial pedagogies (Connell, 2016). While there are genuine efforts to challenge what and how content is taught, the neoliberal view of learning promotes individuals flourishing on their own and creating opportunities to profit through entrepreneurial behaviour. However, it is important to note that alternative teaching strategies, modes of governance, and pathways for curriculum development exist, and are not limited to student "start-ups." We are in an age where collaboration is made ever easier by technologies, where growing diversity is easier to support, and where we have remarkable access to

knowledge. This is truly fertile ground for liberating praxis politically, pedagogically, and societally (Scandrett, 2017). For instance, we have seen the adoption of technology to maintain teaching during the COVID-19 global pandemic. For many, this has resulted in enabling education to continue from home during social distancing; however, for the neoliberal university, it has not just enabled, but *justified* the use of replaying recorded lectures, reducing class times, enlarging class sizes, minimizing student engagement with critical conversation and inquiry through tutorials (Cornelius-Bell & Bell, 2020). Importantly then, these tools ought to be seized for the "public good" and the betterment of our institutions, not to further casualize the workforce, marginalize and sideline students with additional needs, or video record the expertise of senior professors to replay in lieu of their authentic presence.

Acting out Against the Oncoming Cascade

On occasion, students have responded to neoliberal shifts through considered voices. In response to the Flinders University Academic Restructure, the Student Association Education Officer reflected on the lack of due consultative process in the restructure and other neoliberal institutional changes: "University Management have intentionally tried to eliminate student voice from this process. History shows that they consistently rush through these proposals at the most inconvenient of time during the semester for staff and students" (Rayner cited in Hatzi 2017). In the ranks of the restructure protests were many members of the Student Association as well as the student body more broadly. Uniquely, the campaign we organised did not originate in the Student Association, but drew on the strengths of various non-political and political factions of students and staff across the campus. Bringing together this diverse group united under one banner was a good founding step towards *solidarity* we used as a foundation to build a new view for our public education.

Conceptualizing neoliberal universities as described thus far has the potential to drain hope for those who hold a view of education for the "public good." It is easy to lose sight of the potential of education when "lost in the forest." A bleak view, as highlighted by Connell (2016), shows us the successful universities that have "wealth skimmed from the corporate economy that has relentlessly degraded the global environment for the rest of humanity" (p. 68). However, Connell also embarks upon building a message of hope and possibility for reconceptualizing the university, pointing out the risks of viewing the past with rose coloured glasses: "[t]here has never been a golden age in universities", and "[w]e will probably need a range of new types of university, as the domain of knowledge becomes more complex" (p. 72). In envisioning a future university for all, then, we must negotiate the shifting space between reflection and action.

At Flinders University, there had been a notable gradual reduction in student positions on University Council and Academic Senate since 2013. Alongside restructuring from Schools and Faculties to monolithic Colleges, the capacity for students to provide input and discussion had been erased

and remnant representation and student “input” were little more than efforts to placate students and meet key performance indicators for student experience. Unfortunately, the real damage of conceptualizing co-governance as simply student experience was the resultant view that students can be wheeled off to conferences, meetings, and media events to give the University a face lift, or to improve the marketing image of the University’s provision of a “good life” (For example: Gottschall & Saltmarsh, 2017; Skalicky et al., 2018). Tokenised student experience in leadership also accounted for management’s view of student consultation in times of proposed significant changes. Graduate students were rarely consulted on the structural and staffing changes, even where important questions about the impact on colleagues and supervision were being discussed. Access to governing bodies at Flinders University was, in fact, made so difficult that to give a student address to the Academic Senate during the restructure, the significant support of the hamstrung Student Association was required. Even then, an address of only three minutes was allowed to speak on a range of predetermined topics, none of which were to relate to the Academic Restructure. Even following an address to the Vice-Chancellor and many members of senior management, follow up emails remained unanswered. Hence, more new activist movements in response to the changes that threaten all of Australia’s public universities are necessary.

In suggesting action, perhaps some of the best-received, coordinated consciousness-raising efforts used digital and social media, marking a difference between student action in 1960 and 2018. Running a series of YouTube⁴ videos that collected the real voices of affected students, “vox pops” which had been recorded for over 75 hours on YouTube alone, yielded real awareness of the issues. Word of mouth is a clear tactic for raising awareness around key issues but only as long as students are on campus, thus digital communication is key and employing social media platforms such as Facebook in conjunction with typical consciousness raising efforts can have real effect. There were very few students and staff at Flinders University who were unaware of the “Say NO to Flinders Academic Restructuring” Facebook page. However arbitrary the statistics provided by Facebook are, there was a real connection between the number of individuals reached (over 14,000) and the level of awareness on and off campus. While these efforts may have felt like they achieved little in the scheme of things, particularly in light of the steady forward march of the CMG, there were serious commitments made through the networks established. This suggests that to be effective any new student movement must embrace these types of social media technologies. However, these are victories of engagement, rather than victories of affecting actual change to democratic governance. For this we need a new approach, one other than protests which situate students on the outskirts; instead, they must be partners at the table.

Students as Partners

Student activism at Flinders University has a history as long as the University (Hastings, 2003). Various political and

educational issues have been tackled, but one of the longest standing issues for activists at Flinders, as far back as 1967, has been representation of students in topics, courses, and program development. In 1970, the *Empire Times* student magazine, established soon after the University was founded, ran an issue lamenting the lack of student involvement in effective organizational change: “Unfortunately, student involvement at Flinders at present seems to be of the ‘turn up, tune in, piss off’ variety which very soon leads to alienation of those staff members who do look forward to this kind of unity. The line of “student power” appears to have burnt too brightly and rapidly to sustain itself leaving only the dying embers of a few interested students...” (Empire Times, Issue 2.2, 1970, p. 2). The same issues Flinders University faced then were of course felt again during the 2017-2018 restructure. Once again, huge organisational change was occurring, and despite the best efforts of engaged students and academics, little resulted from collective action against the chancellery, let alone the neoliberal cascade. Just as the 2017-18 period saw a rapid dissipation of student and staff involvement, the 1970’s protests similarly fell prey to issues of morale.

The actions of students-as-partners, after the 2018 restructure, appear to be gaining more traction than efforts of the students-as-protestors during the height of the recent restructuring processes. This pivot, from fist-in-air activism to a more critically engaged student body likely could not have happened in any other way. Through traditional activism, new representation structures were won. With students now filling these spaces it is finally possible to commence a new form of student movement, working inside the neoliberal framework (and alongside the neoliberal managers themselves) to create something different, something critical, and something better. While “Students as Partners,” in general terms in the higher education context “re-envision students and staff as active collaborators in teaching and learning” (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017, p. 1), for our purposes the term refers more to a reframing of student away from customer towards a valuable contributor and ‘thinker’ in the higher education space. We would extend this to think of students as partners in governance and decision-making of the whole institution. Our contention is that in order for students to be meaningfully part of teaching and learning they must also be part of the structural fabric of the institution itself; without this, “Students as Partners” is destined for failure.

Formalised Student Partnership in Australian Higher Education is a relatively new initiative made prominent through a pilot research project at the University of Technology Sydney (Varnham, Olliffe, Waite, & Cahill, 2016). This pilot sought to increase students’ engagement in their university through representation, and partnership through engagement: “to encourage engagement, a sincere culture of partnership [with students] must be developed through demonstration by universities and the higher education sector of a commitment to and respect for the [voice of] student[s]” (Varnham et al., 2016, p. 8). This project has now expanded nationally into a “Student Voice Australia” project, though similar initiatives exist globally. Similar to the identification of student unions in partnership with university structures, Velden (2012) highlights “[s]ome

elements of a consumer-related culture appear to be more relevant but the stronger preference of the student voice remains a collegial, partnership-based approach for enhancement of the student experience" (p. 245).

Partnership is now becoming the preferred model of student engagement at Flinders University and is even part of the same strategic plan that oversaw the significant structural changes discussed above, which cites a student-centred ethos that sets out to "empower students as partners" (Flinders University, 2016). Initially, student representatives were stifled and disregarded when speaking to Council. Following the implementation of the new strategic direction, partnership has begun to be legitimised as an objective by the senior management of the University. Dozens of students from across the institution have been involved in partnership collaboration days; staff and students are engaging in building opportunities for authentic collaboration; and student numbers are increasing on academic and professional committees and boards across the institution. The theme of the Flinders' annual "Learning and Teaching" conference week in 2019 was "Students as Partners," whereby students from undergraduate and graduate programs spoke about their collaborations and projects to contribute to, challenge, and change the University. These involved having direct impacts on the betterment of the University *for them*, including projects for advancing wellbeing and access for students, negotiating new entry pathways for new equity groups, and contributing to research outputs as "junior academics." These moves are echoed nationally, with participants in Student Voice and Partnership projects seeing real success in engaging students meaningfully with governance. As a direct result of a student partnership pilot, one Australian university was able to "[establish] student consultation groups, led by students. Seeking timely student feedback (rather than as a last-minute action), student survey results have been taken into consideration with equal weight to requests from staff in terms of university infrastructure, projects and retail strategy" (Louth, Walsh & Goodwin-Smith, 2019, p. 20). While involvement of students in partnership may easily become superficial initiatives, when taken seriously, and when responsibility is delegated to students, real educative opportunities exist. When harnessed critically, these opportunities enable students as legitimate stakeholders, but more importantly as critical agents of positive change through work from "within."

Student partnership is not unproblematic, however. It is based on a core of *engagement* and, if implementors are not careful, it can fall into a mere addition to the student-as-consumer model, become diluted by existing approaches, and erode the possibility for a "radical" new vision through *partnership* (Peters & Mathias, 2018), whereby partnership becomes a way to increase the "value proposition" of students. Student partnership might also be conceived as another way of leaning into students-as-consumers approaches. This forges clear links between education and the neoliberal project whereby "education has proved to be well-suited to the neoliberal project, with its emphases on achievement and its measurement" (Tight, 2019, p. 275). However, if an authentic view of planning, both academic and governance projects, in meaningful collaboration with

students, then student partnership has a real opportunity to succeed as a *counter-narrative* or at least a more inclusive approach to students in the institution than the traditional "neoliberal student subject" (Wijaya Mulya, 2019). This important work needs help: institutions with the opportunity to participate in partnership projects need conscientious academic and professional staff to guide these projects towards a "public good," rather than allowing them to further distort the view of the students who participate in the initiatives.

Again, at Flinders University opportunities for genuine partnership are on the rise. As staff become increasingly aware of the philosophy of student inclusion and student-centred teaching, genuine opportunities for student collaboration, then partnerships arise. These opportunities appear in curriculum design, space and facilities planning, executive committees, and so on. Importantly, designing student partnership opportunities will not happen organically, nor without leadership. Students should push to be reconceptualised as an authentic part of the teaching, learning, and governance processes in higher education institutions. Viewing all students as vital representatives, in learning and teaching processes, and governance with the core view of universities as a "public good," can provide significant opportunities to counter the narrative of education as a for-profit business. Once this fundamental philosophical shift occurs, the new possibilities are endless.

The long game, then, for student partnership must be a progressive passing of the baton between students with rigorous understandings of the governance landscape of the Australian corporate university.

The long game, then, for student partnership must be a progressive passing of the baton between students with rigorous understandings of the governance landscape of the Australian corporate university. If good academic governance truly is the way to change university practices, surely a good path forward is to not just *include* students, but to actively *prioritise* students' role in governance of contemporary universities. Beyond simply giving power to a privileged minority (or high achieving or political studies students) or enabling a handful of democratically elected "representatives" to rule the nest, our aim, through partnership, should be to truly empower *all* students with a sense of *student power*. Students should also be working within the systems that set the strategic tone for the years to come and build a new vision for the future that does not rely on heavily corporatized models of success. Many students already recognise that success is not tied to financial outcomes or profit, but working to have new frames of success recognised is a significant task, and requires them to critically engage with the inputs and outputs of the institution.

University staff, too, must think bigger. Much of the extant literature pictures student partnership as merely a

new way of thinking about teaching and learning: “involving” students in the creation of curriculum, or “asking” students what they think about decisions relating to the structure or content of their education. This is not the “radical” picture of student power seen by our colleagues in the 1960s; if we really are to see students as “empowered” to tackle issues relating to the structure of universities, shape the content of courses, and make a valuable contribution to the social and political fabric of the nation, we need to work to educate ourselves as critical citizens.

Partnership offers us new opportunities. Through student partnership initiatives at Flinders University, we have seen an increase of students on committees in each of our Colleges. But these opportunities require strategy to be effective. No matter our role in education, if academics critically support students to understand the contemporary socio-political context of the university, and the potential of “student power,” the students placed in these positions have a real chance to challenge the status quo in universities. As Brown (2015) asserts, “human capital is distinctly not concerned with acquiring the knowledge and experience needed for intelligent democratic citizenship.” Rather, knowledge and training are valued by human capital only for their market use-value. Assuming a partnership approach, citizen students who act as partners in the structure and content of their education then become a slow but deliberate counter-view to students as consumers – a small victory against the neoliberal cascade. Indeed, through involving students in partnership, there are real opportunities to model, support and critically engage students in applying those skills sometimes cited as lacking in the younger generation.

Conclusion

What shape will the university of the future take? There are two very distinct paths. On one side we have a neoliberalised institution that seeks only to enhance the value that might be extracted from its students, workers, research, and community. On the other hand, a university of possibility which includes students and staff in a fundamentally more democratic negotiated process, working towards a shared vision of authentic partnership between the public institutions, students, and citizens. Of course, if we are truly tasked with leaving the public university in better shape than when we found it, then we need to act with a view towards real democratic participation in society and work collaboratively, meaningfully, critically, and democratically within the structures of higher education.

There is a significant need for meaningful public dialogue, lucid conversation, and evidence-based reasoning about the nature and future of universities. The future of education rests with the current and future students of universities around the world. Without developing co-responsibility, authentic collaboration, and meaningful partnership, many opportunities for student and staff critical understanding of society will be lost, and ultimately so may the “public good” of education. If the noble goal of the institution is to make meaningful contributions for the good of humanity, then we need a truly inclusive system of governance and education to be a flagship of what “to do”

in the face of growing damaging moves in education and society generally.

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Notes

¹The Fair Work Commission is Australia’s governmental body that promotes “harmonious, productive, cooperative and compliant workplace relations in Australia.” Essentially, it acts as a legal framework to support employer-employee relations.

²See the following Facebook posts:

<https://www.facebook.com/sayNOtofindersacademicrestructuring/posts/273966063532362>

³As a recent example, a 2020 Australian Government proposal extols dramatic fee increases to public higher education courses in the Humanities. See:

<https://ministers.dese.gov.au/tehan/minister-education-dan-tehan-national-press-club-address>

⁴Hear the student voices:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ju4Y9J22Zkc>



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