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Constructing political subjectivity: the perspectives of sabbatical officers from English students' unions

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Abstract

Informed by policy sociology and a Foucauldian theorisation, this article explores how a selection of sabbatical officers from English students' unions formed their political subjectivity during the policy consultation processes leading to the Higher Education and Research Act 2017. Discourse analysis demonstrated a strong influence of the unions' professional staff members and the National Union of Students on sabbatical officers' work. In particular, they guided the officers in writing a response to the Government consultation document and lobbying politicians. These actions indicated that the sabbatical officers' political subjectivity was highly dependent on professional actors and discourses. The shift towards professionalisation, however, received diverse responses from participants. Some perceived it as leading to necessary policy amendments; others were concerned about wider depoliticisation of their role and student movement. The article suggests that the sabbatical officers interviewed operated within a complex network of competing interests, raising questions about (1) whose political agency they enacted and (2) their future opportunities to successfully unite and challenge higher education policy in neoliberal times.

Keywords Higher education policy · Student politics · Neoliberalism · Discourse · Foucault

Introduction

The higher education sector in England has changed rapidly over the past two decades, and the understanding of university education as being just another market category has become prevalent (Lynch 2006). While concerns around students becoming consumers of higher education have been widely explored in recent scholarly literature (e.g. see Brooks and

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Abrahams 2018; Tomlinson 2017), there is limited research on students' unions and their role in a marketised higher education sector. This paper is concerned with how a group of sabbatical officers in England—full-time student officers elected to students' unions by their members[1]—constructed their political subjectivity in response to the processes leading to the Higher Educational and Research Act 2017[2] (HERA 2017). The HERA 2017 is the most recent reform in English higher education, promoting further marketisation of university education. In particular, it has introduced the Teaching Excellence Framework that aims to boost competition within and between English universities by differentiating institutions according to their teaching quality as Gold, Silver and Bronze (DfBIS 2016). It also encourages alternative higher education providers[3] to enter the sector in order to diversify educational provision (Gourlay and Stevenson 2017). As part of this exploratory research project, I conducted interviews with sabbatical officers from five students' unions in England and the representative of the National Union of Students[4] who responded to the government policy consultations leading to the HERA 2017. The project explored the sabbatical officers' understanding of the reform and actions they undertook to engage with the consultation.

This article will start by discussing the ways in which student groups have become important stakeholders in contemporary higher education policymaking in England. Guided by Foucault's (1982) theorisation of the subject and Fairclough's (1992, 2001) critical discourse analysis, I will then move on to discuss the ways in which the sabbatical officers interviewed formed and enacted their political subjectivity during the network-like policy consultation process leading to the HERA 2017. The article will conclude by considering implications to the wider student movement. While the findings are solely drawn from an English context, they are likely to indicate similar challenges to student movements across neoliberalised countries.

Setting a scene: higher education policymaking under neoliberalism

In order to make market forces work in such complex public settings as higher education, most Western universities have been forced into competition where an increasing emphasis on improvement of educational products and practices is seen essential for regulating markets (Jankowski and Provezis 2014). Universities' market position (and associated prestige) is often made visible through various national and global league tables (Pritchard 2005). The recent introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in England has raised concerns about the many flawed metrics used in league tables. The TEF is set to measure teaching quality based on student satisfaction ratings, indicators of graduate employment, and further study which according to many (e.g. see Wood and Su 2017) demonstrates a limited relationship with the quality of education. These sector-wide economic pressures that reflect in an increasing number of quality assurance exercises and league tables are underpinned by a neoliberal ideology.

Neoliberalism is a distinctive political and economic rationality in Western public policy that promotes privatisation of public sector services and an understanding of citizens as

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[1] The role lasts for one year, but in some students' unions officers can be re-elected for a second term.

[2] The HERA 2017 was approved in April 2017, and is available at: http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2016-17/highereducationandresearch.html

[3] Alternative higher education providers do not receive direct annual state funding or funding from regional funding councils (HEFCE 2017).

[4] The NUS was founded in 1922, and its current membership includes over 600 UK students' unions (NUS n.d.).

consumers (Peters 2012). However, neoliberalism is not simply a process of marketisation but a rationale that perceives state as an important market regulator (Ball 2012) with a fundamental role in establishing policy regimes that protect economic competition (Raaper 2017; Raaper and Olssen 2016). I therefore approach and critique neoliberalism as a specific mode of government in a Foucauldian sense (e.g. see Foucault 2004) that is paradoxical in terms of believing in free choice and the market but also in a need to regulate competitive relations and institutional/individual success (Raaper 2016). Radice (2013, 408) describes the neoliberalisation of universities as 'a combination of Stalinist hierarchical control and the so-called free market' in which a shift from professional to executive power has taken place along with an increasing use of performance targets and financial incentives. This is what Ball (2012, 34) calls 'governing by numbers'. In the UK higher education setting, the neoliberal policy regimes include various quality assurance exercises such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF)[5] and the National Student Survey (NSS)[6] and the TEF as a new addition.

In addition to the introduction of various policy regimes, the policymaking process itself has changed to suit the needs of a neoliberalised sector. Universities are now being shaped by 'new patterns and networks of governance' (Simons et al. 2009, 43) where policies are created by multiple agencies, sites and discourses (Ball and Exley 2010). These stakeholders include but are not limited to various educational institutions, think-tanks and entrepreneurial bodies who are able 'to speak about and speak to policy' through the networks that cross between public, private and third sector spaces (Ball 2013, 223). These complex policy relationships create 'fuzzy divides' between different state sectors, producing new forms of educational markets, hierarchies and heterarchies (Ball 2010, 155). It could also be argued that the power shaping higher education becomes more diffuse, creating an illusionary sense of freedom and democratic policy participation, characteristic of neoliberalism (Foucault 2004). In practice, however, it is difficult to identify which voices are heard more and how the decisions are arrived at (Ball 2012, 2013). This is particularly the case with higher education that interacts with a number of different communities, each having its expectations to the marketised sector (Jongbloed et al. 2008).

Klemenčič (2014) argues that within such complex policy networks, organised student groups have become increasingly important stakeholders. In a market system, students are seen as consumers whose rights need to be protected by law (e.g. see CMA 2015). The role of students' unions in safeguarding consumer interests will be explored later in this article. The most recent example of network-like policymaking in English higher education and the position of student groups within it, however, reflects in the consultation processes leading to the HERA 2017. Gourlay and Stevenson (2017, 391) argue that the HERA 2017 has been surrounded by a rhetoric of 'placing students at the centre of higher education' where students are mainly seen as consumers. Student representatives in the form of students' unions along with other interest groups such as universities, think-tanks and research councils were asked to provide feedback on the proposed reform at the Green Paper[7] stage. The same invitation was

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[5] REF is a system for assessing research quality in the UK universities. It was first implemented in 2014, replacing the previous Research Assessment Exercise.

[6] Since 2005, most UK universities participate in the NSS which evaluates the experiences of final-year undergraduate students and makes the results publicly available to inform the choices of future applicants.

[7] Green Paper is a preliminary government proposal released for consultation. The Green Paper consultation for the higher education reform took place from November 2015 to January 2016, resulting in the White Paper, available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/higher-education-teaching-excellence-social-mobility-and-student-choice

sent to private enterprises such as Rolls Royce, MoneySavingExpert.com and IBM UK Ltd. (DfBIS 2016), making the importance of the private sector in higher education policy networks visible.

Conceptualising political subjectivity: students' unions as the rising stakeholders of English higher education

The origins of student involvement in higher education governance go back to widespread democratisation processes of Western universities in 1960s and early 1970s (Luescher-Mamashela 2013). As an outcome of extensive student protests at the time, May 1968 in Paris being the most prominent one (e.g. see Jobs 2009), students' unions became political institutions through which collective student interests could be intermediated and enforced (Klemenčič 2014). Above all, they gained voice in key university governing bodies (Luescher-Mamashela 2013). Barker (2008) describes student movements in 1960s and 1970s as having two unique and interrelated facets: firstly, students were protesting against various institutional regulations and practices; and secondly, students formed a significant force in other social movements (e.g. the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements). This also made the student movement more than a simple campus demonstration. Altbach and Cohen (1990, 32) even argue that for a short period in the late 1960s, the public opinion polls indicated that 'the most important concern of the American population was campus unrest'. This is probably the case as several demonstrations escalated into violent outbursts between students and police, i.e. the Columbia University protests of 1968. With the expansion of higher education worldwide from the second half of the twentieth century, however, student activism started to change: student population has become more diverse and their orientation towards vocational outcomes has increased (Altbach 2007). This does not mean that all student activism has disappeared. Some examples of student revolt against marketisation of universities relate to the world-wide student protests from 2009 to 2013 (Klemenčič 2014). The UK student protests in 2010/11 were mobilised against the plans to treble the tuition fees to £9000 per year (Hensby 2017).

More recent cases of student organisation reflect in their representation in institutional/national higher education governance (Luescher-Mamashela 2013). Klemenčič (2011) suggests that there is a new form of contractual relationship between the universities as providers and students as consumers who need a guarantee of value for money, particularly in a situation where tuition fees have significantly increased. The fees for home students in England have increased from £1000 per annum in 1998 to £3000 in 2003 and £9000 in 2010 (Wilkins et al. 2013). They have also been raised in line with inflation up to a maximum of £9250 for 2018/2019 (UCAS 2017). The consumerist positioning of students is further enforced by the UK consumer law which formalises student-university relations as regards information provision, terms and conditions, and handling of complaints (CMA 2015). It aims to protect students and enforce competition between the universities as becomes evident below:

> Compliance with consumer law is not only important in giving students the protection required by the law, but also helps to maintain student confidence and the standards and reputation of the UK Higher Education sector. Complying with consumer law will help you compete for and retain students. (CMA 2015)

It could therefore be suggested that while the 'student voice' is now taking a central role in education policy, it is less reflective of emancipatory political practices targeted against oppressive

hierarchies within universities and society more broadly (Bragg 2007). From a neoliberal perspective, students need to be consulted, so that educational practices, standards and outcomes meet their expectations (Fielding 2004; Jongbloed et al. 2008). It is therefore unsurprising that students' unions were invited to participate in the recent policy consultation. Some (see Brooks 2017; Brooks et al. 2015; Klemenčič 2011) have raised concerns that making students' unions perform representative functions, it could have a depoliticising effect on student movements and their sabbatical officers. They might turn into advisers rather than political actors who challenge institutional and national governance approaches (Klemenčič 2011).

It is expected that the neoliberal changes in higher education governance influence what it means to become and act as a sabbatical officer in contemporary universities. From a Foucauldian perspective, there are no 'universal necessities in human nature', only various technologies through which the subject is created or creates him/herself (Besley and Peters 2007, 6). However, Foucault (1984) suggests that the subject is not a substance but a form that differs in various situations depending on countless interactions with the social context. The process of becoming a subject is therefore a never-ending process in which subject positions are created, negotiated and transformed both in and through everyday discursive practices (Lehn-Christiansen 2011). Foucault's approach to subjectification is a widely applied framework for understanding how subjects are created in relation to a dominant mode of government such as neoliberalism. This is particularly the case as Foucault (2004) explains power in neoliberal societies as highly diffuse, constantly balancing between maximum and minimum, and rather minimum forms of coercion. This article does not concern itself with the positioning of students as consumers as such but is more specifically interested in how students construct their political subjectivity within a neoliberal higher education policy setting. It therefore limits itself to a one particular aspect of contemporary student subjectivity which is currently little explored in scholarly literature. It suggests that the sabbatical officers' political subjectivity—the ways in which they understand, engage and negotiate policy in this study—is context dependent and in a constant process of being produced (Butler 1997). They need to navigate a complex and changing field of student politics that is increasingly shaped by neoliberal policies and consumerist positioning of students. By drawing on a Foucauldian theorisation, this article does not approach sabbatical officers as utterly passive or a homogenous group of actors but like 'late-Foucault' (see, e.g. Foucault 1982), it recognises that sabbatical officers' experiences of policies and politics might differ and be enacted in various ways. According to Danaher, Schirato and Webb (2000), thought and critique are the key processes that help to shape one's subjectivity.

By conducting a critical discourse analysis of the interviews, this article aims to shed some light on the ways in which the sabbatical officers' political subjectivity was formed in five students' unions in England, and in relation to the HERA 2017. The fore-mentioned concerns around the role of students' unions and their political engagement makes the project particularly timely, encouraging debate beyond the unions' representative function in the UK and abroad.

Research setting

This paper acknowledges that the structure and operation of students' unions can differ significantly across the world. In the UK context, most students' unions are members of the National Union of Students (NUS),[8] making the NUS a network of about 600 individual students' unions (Brooks et al. 2015). The NUS in turn is a member of the European Students'

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[8] This applies across all four countries: England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Union which is the umbrella organisation of 45 national students' unions from 39 countries (ESU n.d.). While the affiliation with the NUS is optional for the UK students' unions and disaffiliation is possible, all individual unions need to comply with the Education Act 1994. The Act states that students' unions are separate legal entities from the universities (or colleges) which they are associated with, and that their primary role is to promote 'the general interests of [their] members as students' (Bals 2014). The law also requires the students' unions to remain neutral in terms of party politics (NUS 2014). All students become automatically members of their institutional students' union, and the Act regulates certain ways to opt out. At the micro level, funding for the unions comes largely from the institutional 'block grant' which is often supplemented by running additional services to members, e.g. shops and bars (NUS n.d.). Furthermore, students' unions tend to be led by a team of student-elected sabbatical officers; however, as argued earlier in this paper, there is an increasing number of non-student professionals working in the UK students' unions (see Brooks et al. 2015). I will employ the term 'unions' professional staff to refer to various permanent senior management and/or specialist positions, e.g. in the fields of policy, research, communication. The paper will not engage with professionalisation as an increase in organisational qualities and efficiency per se but will primarily focus on the influence of the unions' professional staff over the sabbatical officers' work and subjectivity.

This project included interviews with sabbatical officers from five students' unions from the Russell Group[9] universities in England and the National Union of Students (NUS). These unions submitted their official and publicly available responses to the Green Paper consultation in January 2016. Table 1 provides an overview of the data collection process. By contacting students' unions' presidents and education officers, it allowed them to suggest the most appropriate participants for the interviews. The only requirement was that the participants needed to have been involved in producing the union's response to the Green Paper. The title 'sabbatical officer' refers to a broad category of presidential and education officer positions. The interview data from the NUS representative is used with a function to comment on the views of the sabbatical officers.

Data collection took place from December 2016 to March 2017 when the reform was debated in Parliament. The questions addressed the sabbatical officers' understanding of and engagement with the reform. The data was analysed using Fairclough's (1992, 2001) approach to critical discourse analysis (CDA). From a Faircloughian perspective, discourse is a form of social practice, which shapes social entities, relations and subjects (Fairclough 1992). The CDA therefore becomes a dialectical method, making it possible to explore the relations between discourse and social processes (Fairclough 2001). This was particularly relevant for understanding such complex processes as political subjectivity. It is through language that the 'fuzzy divides' (Ball 2010, 155), interactions and diverse expectations become visible. In other words, by conducting a Faircloughian discourse analysis, it was possible not only to unpack the actions that the sabbatical officers undertook to engage with the reform, but the ways in which the interaction took place and how different views co-existed within the student movement. Discourses are always rooted within the networks of social interaction and material contexts (Ball 2007), and any political subjectivity is formed in interaction with others. By applying Fairclough's (1992) CDA, each interview transcript was analysed as a text (structure,

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[9] The Russell Group includes 24 UK universities 'which are committed to maintaining the very best research, an outstanding teaching and learning experience and unrivalled links with business and the public sector' (Russell Group 2015).

Table 1 Participants and data collection

Students' union	Participant(s)	Method
Union 1	President (P)	Individual interview
Union 2	Officer (O)	Individual interview
Union 3	Officer (O)	Individual interview
Union 4	2 Officers (O1, O2)	Interview in pair
Union 5	President (P) and 2 officers (O1, O2), 2 departmental representatives (DR1, DR1)	Focus group
NUS	Representative (R)	Individual interview

vocabulary and grammar), a discursive practice (situational context of text production and interdiscursivity) and a social practice (social determinants and key statements). The deconstructed discourses revealed the ways in which sabbatical officers' subjectivity was formed and then enacted within the higher education reform context. The project was approved by the School of Education Ethics Committee at Durham University. In order to respect impartiality, Durham Students' Union did not take part in the project. The findings presented in this article will emphasise the importance of discourse in the process of subject formation. The findings will start by introducing the ways in which the sabbatical officers' political subjectivity was constructed in relation to the opportunities and interactions available to them in a neoliberalised higher education setting. I will then move on to discuss how their subjectivity was enacted through certain political actions. Finally, I will question the implications of professionalisation on contemporary student movements.

Constructing political subjectivity

First, it is important to note that the sabbatical officers interviewed expressed their concern with the marketisation of universities. In particular, they described English higher education being under attack, e.g. turning higher education into 'a training camp, yeah, the point of higher education is to get a job and to make money' (Union 4, O2), 'a product that can be purchased' (Union 3, O) or pushing 'for privatisation of institutions where new providers can gain degree awarding powers very easily' (Union 1, P). When addressing students, the participants argued that 'the discourse is very much, you know, students as customers' (Union 3, O).

> So students are positioned as choosing education like a handbag, so will you go to this one with this teaching quality at 9K or will you go to this private provider for 6K? And if this institution fails, you can swap institutions, or you can drop out at any point. (Union 1, P)

As the participants' critical response to the policy reform has been previously analysed in detail (see Raaper 2018), I will move on to trace the ways in which the sabbatical officers' political subjectivity was formed and enacted through their engagement with the reform. The officers' participation in the higher education consultation was relatively similar across the group, including a written response to the Green Paper, lobbying politicians and in one rare case organising a demonstration (discussed in the next section). In order to understand the reasons behind these actions, wider issues around their political subjectivity require attention. The sabbatical officers interviewed described themselves as having 'a political leadership' (Union 2, O), taking 'a fundamental role' (Union 1, P) or giving 'a political steer' (Union 4,

O2) to the consultation. However, this leading role was constructed in relation to other influential actors such as the unions' professional staff:

> We [sabbatical officers] would obviously have to have the kind of political leadership, but then staff members can help in terms of the actual, you know, research and things and helping to write stuff. (Union 2, O)

> So I wrote the response apart from question 20, which the CEO of the union wrote which is to do with the value of student unions. Erm, but the rest of the questions were all penned by me with consultation with student groups and also with some staff support from our advice team and from democracy and representation and other areas of policy work. (Union 1, P)

The sabbatical officers' discourses reflected a sense of democratic mandate and responsibility characteristic of these roles in students' unions (Bragg 2007; Luescher-Mamashela 2013); yet, the influence of professional support on strategic matters cannot be ignored, confirming an increased influence of the unions' professional staff over the sabbatical officers' work (Brooks et al. 2015). It is important to recognise that all participants were from the Russell Group institutions that often have more resources available to engage with policy consultations such as the higher education Green Paper. These institutions are able to use the resources to advance their competitiveness in neoliberal higher education markets, particularly in matters relating to student experience and satisfaction. A recent report produced by the Russell Group on provision of unique student experience even argues that their member universities have made 'significant financial investments in students' unions', including improvement of facilities and employment of increasing number of permanent staff (Russell Group 2014, 17). The interviewee from Union 4 (O1) recognised their relatively privileged position by arguing 'So yeah, we're a well-resourced union, so we're definitely not reflective of how most SUs engaged in this process.' Similarly, the NUS representative described the Russell Group students' unions being more exposed to the expert advice from the unions' professional staff:

> So some of the larger universities, Russell Group institutions, will have big enough unions that they have a policy team or person who is hired to deal with policy campaigns. And they would have a staff member coordinating the response and seeking input from the elected officers and from the wider membership. (NUS, R)

In addition to the inner dynamics within the students' unions, most sabbatical officers[10] emphasised the role of the NUS in the consultation process. The NUS was described as an important coordinator of the process at the national level. They provided a template with standard replies that the individual students' unions could use as appropriate (NUS 2015). My former analysis of the unions' written responses (see Raaper 2018) confirmed the NUS's significant input in the policy consultation, making the unions' official discourses relatively similar. This also becomes evident from the accounts below:

> The NUS gave their Green Paper response earlier than others as a sort of template and gave a template before they gave their full response, erm, and that was very, very helpful

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[10] This excludes the Union 5 that is not the member of the NUS.

because we were able to see some of the national themes and to take some of that but also to tailor it to our own institutional needs. (Union 1, P)

I can't really underestimate the role that NUS has played in all of this, like we would just be a load of students' unions fumbling around with some documents that we don't understand really, without them. (Union 4, O2)

As is the case in wider education policy making, it could be suggested that students' unions themselves have shifted from central governance to what Ball and Exley (2010, 151) call 'polycentric governance' where policy is negotiated through multiple sites and agents. Within the process shaped by non-student actors from students' unions and the NUS, however, it is difficult to pinpoint how the decisions were arrived at (Ball 2013). This situation illustrates how power acting on individuals in neoliberal settings has become diffuse and difficult to identify (Foucault 2004). While the influence of the unions' professional staff was relatively obvious through their advisory role, there was limited evidence of how wider student body shaped the work of sabbatical officers in the consultation process. Rather, the claims indicated a lack of student involvement in the process: 'I personally struggled to stir students around the TEF, such an unsexy topic' (Union 4, O1) and 'there wasn't much feedback, erm, and there were a couple of quite entertaining responses, like, "I welcome the higher education White (correct: Green) Paper"' (Union 3, O). Similar to Klemenčič (2014, 2015), the findings suggest that mainstream students have become little interested in higher education policy. It is possible that the neoliberal positioning of students as consumers makes them prioritise personal achievement, leading to social fragmentation of group loyalties and a lack of collective agency for action (Klemenčič 2011).

Furthermore, the discourses demonstrate a Foucauldian understanding of the subject who is clearly influenced by the social context s/he is part of (Foucault 1984): that of a marketised higher education setting that promotes professionalism and consumerism. This also means that the sabbatical officers' political subjectivity was mainly formed in relation to professional rather than student actors. The professional staff, both from individual students' unions and the NUS, shaped the opportunities available to sabbatical officers: their support and guidelines created what Foucault (1972) would term 'a space of functioning' to participants.

Forming political action

Participants' engagement with the unions' professional staff outlined above led to particular types of political actions. This is from a Foucauldian perspective expected as subjectivity is a precondition for agency: individuals cannot have a capacity to act without being a thinking subject (Allen 2002). Besides composing a Green Paper response (see Raaper 2018) which was a requirement for taking part in this study, the sabbatical officers explained how they lobbied the Members of the Parliament (MPs) and the House of Lords[11]:

I was invited after that paper [Green Paper response] to speak at the Westminster Policy Forum and spoke on the effect it would have on accessibility to education and on

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[11] The main business of the UK Parliament takes place in the two Houses: the House of Commons (publicly elected Members of Parliament) and the House of Lords (appointed by the Queen on the advice of the Prime Minister).

different areas of employability for women, and how these things have to be measured and tested. (Union 1, P)

…I went to the House of Lords [Laughter]. So we approached some members of the Lords who we have connections with, erm, and have monitored the debate and have been supportive of certain amendments. (Union 5, P)

The officer from the Union 3 did not describe her attendance at the parliamentary events but explained how they launched a campaign for sending letters to the Lords:

So, erm, one of the biggest, like, things that we did as a students' union regarding the HE bill, which was, I mean it was sort of my own initiative in getting the student campaigners involved, erm, was we, erm, wrote to, I think in the end it was 64 members of the House of Lords about the bill. (Union 3, O)

The discourses above indicate the sabbatical officers' attempt to make their voices heard beyond their institutions, particularly at the political level. They used an evidence-based approach with a focus on measurement and testing (Union 1, P) as became apparent above. It could be argued that this type of political engagement is characteristic of neoliberalism where consumers of higher education are encouraged to exercise their power through certain accepted routes. Their engagement with Lords could be particularly expected as all UK laws need to be approved by both Houses of Parliament (see Parliament n.d. for further information). The officers hoped that the Lords could obstruct the majority vote in the House of Commons. As part of their encounters with politicians, their voices formed what Ball (2007, 123) would describe as 'discourse communities', bringing into play new policy narratives. The NUS representative emphasised how the focus on evidence has become highly important in the discourses of student movement:

Well, where the students' union has been successful [in policy consultations], they've taken a kind of two-track approach. So, on the one hand, you have a kind of covert track where they're in a room with officials that make decisions and they provide them with the evidence […]. Then on the other hand, you have a more overt track, a track where you have public facing campaigning. Campaigning that's directed at MPs, their vice-chancellors, where you, where there is, erm, pressure on government from the outside. (NUS, R)

The discourses above indicate the sabbatical officers' initiative and involvement in lobbying; however, they also reveal how the participants' professionally shaped political subjectivities resulted in relatively professional action. Klemenčič (2015) suggests that the engagement with key stakeholders through lobbying and representation at various meetings is characteristic of contemporary students' unions in the UK and internationally. In other words, professional discourses in students' unions normalise certain actions (e.g. lobbying) while making others such as student demonstration potentially less desirable (Foucault 1975). In fact, radical action against the policy reform in a form of student demonstration was mostly absent from the participants' discourses, confirming the similar findings of recent scholarly work on students' unions in neoliberalised universities (see Brooks et al. 2015; Klemenčič 2011, 2014). The only exception was the sabbatical officer from the Union 2 who did not agree with the claims on

depoliticisation of their students' union (Brooks 2017) and explained: 'we've also kind of supported a campus occupation that was like, you know, seeking to stop the university opting into the Teaching Excellence Framework'. However, the interviewee emphasised that modern student demonstrations require a more collaborative approach, e.g. between academics and students:

> ...a big feature of kind of activism here at [the Union 2], is the links between students and [academic] staff which is so essential, if we're actually going to have a hope of kind of, you know, destroying the HE bill or whatever, or kind of making progress. That it's gonna have, it has to be kind of students and staff organising together. (Union 2, O)

The exception above demonstrates a Foucauldian understanding of discourse as a discontinuous practice which can be contradictory and evolve over time in particular social circumstances (Foucault 1970). In other words, some unions such as the Union 2 in this study still hold on to the idea of mass demonstration as an important part of sabbatical officers' political action. However, any collective action such as the campus occupation requires enough people with common interests and sufficient resources to form a critical mass (Crossley and Ibrahim 2012). Combining forces—that of students and academics—is seen as essential to strengthening the voice. This is particularly relevant in the case of the TEF (and other market reforms) where groups affected are not only students but academics whose teaching work would be further measured and monitored (Stevenson et al. 2017).

In short, it could be argued that the sabbatical officers interviewed demonstrated a clear attempt to engage with and influence higher education policy. However, they also operated within particular 'discourse communities' (Ball 2007, 123), often concerned with evidence and representation. This is characteristic of neoliberal universities where student voice is welcome as long as it aligns with rational political actions such as writing consultation responses and lobbying politicians. The participants enacted a political subjectivity of a rational and evidence-based negotiator/lobbyist rather than a leader of student movement as traditionally known. Their positioning resulted in a certain type of policy negotiation process with 'particular kinds of social relationships, flows and movements' (Ball 2012, 5). This network included internal dynamics between sabbatical officers and the unions' professional staff, and external interaction with the NUS and various politicians. The policy consultation process has therefore been a complex network of social interactions (Ball 2007), rather than any instantaneous or emotional demonstration that student movements have historically been known by (Luescher-Mamashela 2013).

Implications for student movement

This paper does not critique the professional approaches to policy consultations; these processes might be helpful for interacting with various policy stakeholders as became evident above. However, the findings have indicated that the shift towards professionalisation of students' unions work takes place by professionalising the role and actions of the sabbatical officers. The participants had conflicting views about their positioning in the consultation. This reflected particularly in the cases where the officers shared their contentment with the policy consultation process and outcomes. Jongbloed et al. (2008) argue that different viewpoints are characteristic of contemporary higher education policymaking that is increasingly shaped by various interest groups and competing discourses. This study suggests that variances among

the students' unions with similar Russell Group background can also be substantial. In particular, some sabbatical officers interviewed were unhappy about their role and achievements in the consultation process. The phrases such as 'to be honest, it's been pretty lacking in wins, the whole campaign' (Union 4, O2) and 'I don't think we've had the most significant wins for students that there could be' (Union 3, O) were characteristic of their discourses. Union 2 sabbatical officer even suggested that nothing, but the full cancellation of the reform could be considered as a win for students:

> But ultimately there is no amount of kind of tinkering with the edges, with this bill, that can be done to make it into anything decent. It needs to be destroyed like in its entirety, you know. (Union 2, O)

Some others, however, were more optimistic, arguing that adjustments in the reform should be seen as positive outcomes for students' unions. The sabbatical officer from the Union 1 brought an example of holding back the tuition fee increase: 'the fee implementation with 'TEF was going to be pushed through quicker than is now'. Similar views were shared by the NUS representative who suggested that the unions had been successful to some extent, particularly in terms of delaying the tuition fee increase and challenging the ways in which widening participation would be monitored:

> ...some of the, erm, specific policy challenges delaying the introduction of, erm, differential fees, was very important I think. Erm, and other delays around TEF, improving the ways in which you measured access and widening participation and changing the regulations around the publications for every institution, to publish an access and widening participation report, and for that to be publicly available. Those were things which we directly lobbied on and gained as a result of that lobbying. (NUS, R)

As is evident above, the issues around lobbying are seen to be particularly influential in the experience of the NUS representative. This, however, creates further tensions within the wider student movement, resulting in a situation where sabbatical officers have different understandings of how policy consultation should be organised and what the role of sabbatical officers in wider student activism is. Some have adjusted better with the professional approach to policy consultations, others, particularly those who were unhappy about the results, did not wish to be limited to lobbying politicians. Keywords such as 'mass movement' (Union 2, O), 'mobilisation' (Union 2, O; Union 3, O) 'grassroots activism' (Union 2, O), and 'occupation' (Union 2, Union 4, O1) were at the forefront in their discourses, revealing their expectations to the wider student movement:

> Students' unions should be supporting, facilitating, erm kind of developing grassroots activists on campuses that then form part of a kind of like national movement. (Union 2, O)

> The age of occupation now is like a revolutionary principle but in, erm, 2010 that was like every week, in like every campus there were occupations. (Union 4, O1)

Furthermore, the sabbatical officer from the Union 2 criticised the NUS as the 'National Union of Sabbs[12]', and would like it to become more radical in its approach: 'it should be like a fighting

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[12] 'Sabbs' stands for sabbatical officers.

political union, that is, you know, essentially kind of a force to be reckoned with, that can actually mobilise, you know, thousands and thousands and thousands of people'. The view that the NUS and individual students' unions should promote student activism, however, was met with opposition from the Union 5 participants. They desired a more 'constructive' approach (Union 5, P) and viewed the current student movement along with the NUS as being already too radical. The phrases such as 'the moderates are generally driven out, erm, and then kind of find themselves isolated' (Union 5, O2) and 'the NUS is quite a politically controversial organisation' (Union 5, DR2) were common to this union. They also emphasised the importance of representative and service provision functions in the work of students' unions (Klemenčič 2011).

> I think the challenge is actually creating meaningful relationships that aren't based on really radical ideas. And I think that is what's driving us apart, is that everybody having these really strong radical moot points and ideas, and more students, the average students don't want to engage with it, they just want to have a cheaper pint and have a cheaper experience. (Union 5, DR1)

It could therefore be argued that while the actions undertaken, and actors involved in responding to the reform were relatively similar across the participant group, differences emerged when tracing the officers' contentment with professionalisation of their actions in the consultation process. Some interviewees wanted to lead and be part of wider student activism against the reform and seemed to long for a political subjectivity from the past: that of a student activist (Luescher-Mamashela 2013). However, as composing response letters and lobbying politicians turned out to be the most common political actions, reflecting a neoliberal influence on students' unions work, their dissatisfaction with the process grew. This conflicting experience provides an example of how 'the walls of society' (Butler 1997, 74), or in this case professional discourses and actors in neoliberal higher education, can limit the political agency of the sabbatical officers. It is particularly influential in the case where mainstream students have become less interested in higher education policy or politics more widely, as argued earlier in this article. Some others, however, described the consultation as a constructive process, leading to valuable outcomes. They had settled with the positioning of sabbatical officers as rational negotiators and lobbyists. From a Foucauldian perspective, all subjectivities are shaped by complex 'networks of social' (Foucault 1983, 372) and they are created within the fields of possibilities. These possibilities, however, were received with different levels of contentment by the sabbatical officers interviewed.

Concluding thoughts

This study did not attempt to represent all Russell Group students' unions in England but to shed some light on how a selection of sabbatical officers constructed and enacted their political subjectivity in relation to the recent higher education policy consultation in England. This is particularly timely as students' unions' role in university governance has grown through various representative functions (Brooks et al. 2016; Klemenčič 2011, 2014), but the understanding of how sabbatical officers are able to inform or challenge policy within in a neoliberal environment is still limited. The findings suggest that the network-like policymaking (Ball 2013; Simons et al. 2009) within and between the students' unions is increasingly complex. It includes various interactions between sabbatical officers and professional staff members from individual unions

and the NUS, making officers process diverse strategic inputs when engaging with the reform. This situation is characteristic of neoliberalism in that prioritises student voice and participation in policy making, but also dictates certain outlets for student interest to be exercised. Some would argue that the shift towards professionalisation of students' unions' work and actions has led to the depoliticisation of unions and their student population more generally (Brooks et al. 2016; Klemenčič 2011). While the relationship between professionalism and its depoliticising effects on mainstream students require further research, this study indicates that the professional interactions in sabbatical officers' experience can shape their political subjectivity and turn it into a rational negotiator who practises evidence-based lobbying rather than leads student demonstrations. These sabbatical officers were governed by professional discourses and actors in their unions which also means that their subjectivity was situated within the domain of the unions' professional staff rather than students. This experience, however, received different responses from the participants. Some were wanting to 'destroy' (Union 2, O) the reform and engage with wider student demonstrations, while others were happy with lobbying politicians and 'delaying' (Union 1, P) the aspects of the proposal. It appeared that the sabbatical officers who longed for student demonstrations and revolt resisted the political subjectivity they were enforced to enact. Foucault (1982, 331) would say that it was 'a struggle against the forms of subjection'. Sabbatical officers like everyone else are subjected to the complex and shifting relations of power in neoliberal higher education settings and are enabled to take up certain subject positions in and through these relations (Allen 2002).

The findings suggest that it is not only difficult to mobilise students for collective action against marketisation of universities (Klemenčič 2015), but difficulties emerge at the level of unions and sabbatical officers who appear to hold different views on professional approaches to student politics and their role within it. Unlike Klemenčič (2014), I would question the extent to which the students have become important stakeholders within the neoliberal policy network of higher education and argue that students' unions as representatives of students have turned into a complex policy network with increasingly different actors, views and approaches to policy. This seems to have fragmented the power of student actors in unions, while also shaping the role and practices of sabbatical officers. The professional approaches to student politics include an increasing employment of professional staff to students' unions, but perhaps more importantly, these new discourses promote a particular understanding of the sabbatical officer's role as a rational and evidence-based negotiator and lobbyist. With these structural changes in mind, it is important to critically question the opportunities for bottom up student-led activism in contemporary students' unions.

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