University Students’ Unions: Changing Functions, a UK and Comparative Perspective

Abstract

In this article, we consider the functions of students’ unions (SUs) through a UK case study. First, a functional classification of educational representation; wider representation; delivery of commercial services; and facilitating a student community is outlined. Second, we specify a theoretical framework in terms of neo-liberalism and therapeutic ideas of education. Third, we discuss recent Su functional changes. Fourth, we interpret those changes through the theories outlined above. Our contribution to scholarship is threefold, first we study the evolution of UK SUs. Second, we apply theory to interpret these changes. Third, we generate findings that could be applied to develop a comparative international literature.

Key Words: student participation; student attitudes; student support; student voice; student volunteering.

Introduction

Despite extensive literature chronicling the development of specific universities and higher education trends, scholarship about university students’ unions (SUs) is quite sparse. Exceptions concern student political and social activism (Giroux 2013), difficult to locate descriptive monographs on individual SUs (Mathers 2007), small sections in university histories (Sanderson 2002) and references in reports about wider higher education themes
Little et al. 2009. A significant contribution to the student literature has been made through a special edition of Studies in Higher Education (39 (3) 2014). This collection, however, focused primarily on national student movements and higher education policy-making. Alternatively, we consider the evolving balance between SU functions and complement existing scholarship. Our analysis also places SUs within neo-liberal and therapeutic higher education theories, and so develops a theoretical perspective on SUs.

There are three broad research questions. How have the functions of UK SUs altered since approximately the millennium? Why have any changes occurred? How can such shifts be interpreted through wider trends affecting SUs and universities generally? The second and third questions are situated within the neo-liberal and therapeutic theories specified above. Our study, therefore, involves identifying and explaining important contemporary SU functional changes and using higher education theories to interpret and deepen our understanding of these phenomena. Finally, the existence of similar structures across the globe shows the comparative relevance of this UK-based study.

**Students’ Unions**

Here, we develop our functional SU categorisation and comment on its evolution until approximately the millennium. Our analysis is constructed through a substantive study of scholarly and practitioner literature.

**Representation: educational**

SUs in democratic societies have long-benefitted from assumptions about participation rights in university governance. This activity was significant in the late-nineteenth and early-
twentieth century in the UK (Dahrendorf 1995) and elsewhere, for example concerning Canterbury Students Association (New Zealand) (Sharfe 1995). Nevertheless, until the 1960s, SU voices were confined primarily to communicating student opinions to university authorities, power remaining with the academy.

Changing social/political contexts from the mid-1960s transformed this SU function, precipitating opposition to university authorities and wider higher education agendas. For example, in 1964-65 Berkeley students clashed with university authorities over regulations limiting political activity (Otten 1970). Similarly, in 1977 increases in overseas student fees prompted an occupation at Sheffield (Mathers 2005). This campaigning survived diminution of the radical atmosphere evident from the mid-1970s. For example, UK SUs organised protests against student loans in the late-1980s (Pullan and Abendstern 2004; Sanderson, 2002), although the scale and intensity of this campaigning have diminished (Sanderson 2002). This function incorporated generally successful campaigns to increase SU influence in university governance, an activity chronicled at universities such as Cambridge (Pagnamenta 2008), Copenhagen (Stybe 1979) and New York (Frusciano and Pettit 1997).

**Wider representation**

Early SUs possessed a wider representational function, although restricted primarily to debating societies and discussions within and between political groups (Catto 1989; Hercock 1994). This culture persisted until the 1960s, when the radical surge amongst youth drove SUs towards more substantive non-educational campaigning, for example on military interventions, nuclear disarmament and equality issues. This SU activism and acquisition of left-wing/radical identities has been chronicled widely, for example at the London School of
Economics (LSE) (Dahrendorf 1995) and Harvard (Keller and Keller 2007). Although the intensity of this activity diminished as the radical culture moderated from the mid-1970s onwards, SUs still campaign on such themes (Klemencic 2014).

**Commercial services**

SUs supply commercial services such as bars, nightclubs and shops. This function is identifiable amongst early SUs, for example Iowa SU ran a non-alcoholic nightclub in the early-twentieth century (Gerber 1988); although strict constraints on student activities, such as consumption and sale of alcohol, meant slow evolution (Gordon 1975). Development was also restricted through accommodation deficiencies, for example Melbourne SU was based in a few huts until the 1930s (Dow 1983).

Evolution of SUs as providers of substantive commercial services resulted from two central changes. First, increases in student numbers (from the mid-1960s in the UK) meant more potential consumers. Furthermore, associated campus developments often incorporated new student buildings, trends chronicled at, for example, Sheffield (Mathers 2005) and San Jose (Walsh 2003). Second, an enhanced student emphasis on commercial services, such as discos, shops and bars; evolved at the expense of participatory and campaigning orientations. These trends occurred at SUs across the globe, at institutions as diverse as East Anglia (Sanderson 2002) and Canterbury, New Zealand (Sharfe 1995).

**Student community**

Although commercial facilities encourage some community spirit, SUs generate more coherent social networks. Core aspects include supporting student clubs and societies,
providing facilities such as bookable rooms; delivering welfare services; and engaging in community outreach (Palmer 1983). Origins lay significantly in supporting clubs and societies, an activity since inception in the UK (Dahrendorf 1995; Kelly 1981) and elsewhere, for example at Canterbury, New Zealand (Sharfe 1995) and Queensland (Thomis 1985). Again, this function was boosted by growth in student numbers, through additional student volunteers and accommodation improvements. This expansion and shifting social-political cultures also led to the establishment of student welfare services from the late-1960s onwards (Hercock 1994; Mathers 2007).

**SUs and contemporary higher education debates**

Our SU functional categorisation can also be situated within the overarching university context. First, it reflected assumptions of SUs as participants in university governance, although there has been a clear change from a paternalistic consultation culture towards one more reflective of partnership, the 1960s and 1970s being the pivotal era in the democratic world. Second, widespread assumptions exist that the student experience should (ideally) incorporate engagement with public issues. Similarly, there is an interpretation of commercial functions through an evolving consensus amongst the academic community about the facilities contemporary students require. Finally, there are widespread perceptions about advantages of supporting student voluntary networks. Positioning SUs within the university contest suggests connections to extensive contemporary higher education debates. Here, we explore these associations though two scholarly narratives, neo-liberal and therapeutic universities, and specify relevance for SUs. The objective is to identify trends and theories through which to explain and discuss our findings.
The Neo-Liberal University

Neo-Liberalism relates to ‘political-economic governance premised on the extension of market relationships’ (Larner 2000, 5). It has been used to study political discourses, such as Thatcherism or Reaganomics, promoting more market-orientated solutions. Scholarship has positioned universities within this paradigm and neo-liberalism has been deployed to discuss contemporary changes (Marginson 1997). The core application arises through development of higher education markets, although as Gibbs (2001, 85) observed, this can be better theorised as a ‘quasi-market’ given the combination of market mechanisms and substantive state regulation, such as the UK’s quality compliance apparatus. There are also agendas compelling universities ‘to increase their private funding and reduce their reliance on the taxpayer’ (Brown 2011a, 1). Similarly, market demands have become increasingly important in course design and delivery (Levin 2005). Impacts can also be identified through greater stratification of universities between elite institutions and the rest, enhanced managerial control within universities and diminished collegiality (Brown 2011b).

Neo-liberalism has been associated with perceiving students as higher education consumers (Briggs 2006) with a stronger focus on the quality of provision (Ginns, Prosser and Barrie 2007). This trend reflects the spread of ‘US-type funding models’ (Woodall, Hiller and Resnick 2014, 49) and specifically, in the UK and elsewhere, higher tuition costs (Bachan 2014). Cost increases make students more discriminating in course selection and much more appreciative of learning in terms of specific career-financial benefits and developing employability skills. As Gibbs (2001, 87) observed, there was the replacement of “the aim of ‘what ought I to do?’ with the imperative of ‘what do I need’.” Similarly, Little et al. (2009, 13) commented that the
‘language of student as customer is very strong but the language of student as a junior member of a learning community is less often heard’.

Although universities have long-recognised requirements to market their services to students and others (Studdert-Kennedy 1976), neo-liberalism reinforced its importance. In particular, there is heightened focus on global marketplaces (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2006). Evidence also exists of changing marketing strategies. As Maringe (2005: 566) observed, initially there was a product orientation, through ‘developing and offering programmes believed to be desired by the clients’, but which reflected insufficient attention to demand, thus risking ‘rapid irrelevance of institutions’. This culture has, however, reconfigured into one more reflective of a production orientation; through developing new offerings clearly sought by their customers (Maringe and Foskett 2002) and emphasis on increasing customer (mostly student) satisfaction. In the UK, this trend is reflected in the growing importance of the National Student Survey, which measures student satisfaction with their university experience. This approach incorporated enhanced emphasis on marketing university amenities, for example improved accommodation, modernised libraries and new SU buildings (Naude and Ivy 1999). These marketing trends can also be interpreted through quasi-markets and government regulation. For example, in England marketing on price for home undergraduates is limited by the £9,000 per year fees cap and reluctance of most universities to charge less.

Regarding relevance for SU functions, there are several themes. First, the left-of-centre orientation of much SU representation implies connections through campaigning against the paradigm and its impacts. Second, increasing student focus on course quality, their learning
experience and the career-financial benefits of study has potential implications for the intensity and direction of SU voices about educational issues. Third, the neo-liberal concept of students as consumers has implications for the nature and quality of all SU functions, especially commercial services, given the private sector competition. Fourth, emphasis on SU facilities as important marketing tools has potential implications for SU functions, through development of activity judged more favourable for student recruitment, an approach that might be interpreted as a production strategy through which SU functions are aligned to better reflect recruitment marketplaces and enhance student satisfaction. Fifth, there are potential connections between an enhanced employability emphasis and SU support for voluntary activity given acknowledged benefits for career and personal development. We explore these issues in more detail in the findings and discussion sections.

**The therapeutic university**

This narrative emerged from scholarship interpreting contemporary universities through re-orientation to address students’ emotional well-being (Ecclestone and Hayes 2009) and is constructed on assumptions that ‘we are all to a greater or lesser extent, emotionally fragile and vulnerable’ (Ecclestone and Hayes 2009, x). Therapeutic notions are deployed to theorise the increasing application to universities of approaches such as ‘emotional management, life coaching, mentoring, counselling and interventions to build self-esteem’ (Ecclestone 2004a, 11).

Emphasis on student vulnerability also helped frame scholarship about obstacles faced by certain student groups, for example international (Brown and Jones 2013) and ethnic
minority (Richardson 2008) students. The notion of student vulnerability has also been applied widely to the general student population. Bourdieu and Passeron (1979, 65) identified vulnerability as central to the student experience, for example concerning ‘an asymmetric pedagogic relation’ between students and academics. Similarly, Ecclestone (2004b) suggested that contemporary higher education reinforced rather than challenged vulnerability assumptions developed through secondary education.

Therapeutic approaches have been subjective to two substantive criticisms; first, that they marginalise ‘traditional goals linked to knowledge and understanding’ (Hyland 2009, 128) in favour of concern about emotional well-being (Ecclestone 2004b; Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009). This critique has been developed to argue that therapeutic education reflects ‘pessimistic images of people’s resilience and agency’ (Ecclestone 2007, 465); educational achievement being attributed, in part at least, to emotional conditions. Second, writers such as Thompson (2007) argued that therapeutic education accentuates emphasis on self, thus weakening connections between learning and wider social-political themes. Alternatively, others have advocated therapeutic approaches, for example Bennetts (2003) stressed the importance of learners’ self-awareness and self-identity. Similarly, Cornelius-White (2007) advocated allied educational techniques such as student-centred learning.

Therapeutic approaches have obvious connections with SU functions. First, emphasis on student vulnerability suggests relevance for educational representation; SUs having expertise about student vulnerability and fragility regarding their education.
Second, stress on emotions and individual vulnerabilities have relevance for the wider representational function. Drawing on Thompson (2007), therapeutic orientations might be interpreted as militating against an outward focus on wider issues and encouraging an inward tilt towards representational requirements closely alignment to the immediate emotional well-being of students. In particular, this context might imply stronger focus on courses and practices at their own institution rather than national campaigning, whose effects (if successful) might be felt after most of the current members have graduated and which, therefore, had limited capacity to improve their individual well-being. Third, there are potential associations between student vulnerabilities and growth of SU welfare activities, particularly general counselling and advice services; and emphasis on perceived vulnerable groups such as women, ethnic and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) students. Again, we explore these themes later.

**Methods**

Our study was constructed through evidence from five elements. First, we undertook an extensive analysis of secondary material, incorporating evidence from the UK and beyond, to develop the functional classification and theoretical analysis. Second, insights were gathered through work experience of one team member at a local SU, which facilitated informal processes of participant observation.

Third, we held semi-structured interviews with SU student officers and staff. In developing the questions, a pilot version was discussed with several key personnel (employees and students) at the SU where one of the authors worked; these discussions generated refinements, for example concerning the reasons for contemporary functional changes. This
aspect adopted a case study methodology; five comparative studies were undertaken between 2008 and 2011. Those SUs reflected a cross-section of institutions regarding factors such as research emphasis, student numbers, length of university status and SU income. There were three Russell Group SUs (CSU, DSU and ESU) and two University Alliance institutions (ASU and BSU). CSU, DSU and ESU were long-established as universities, while ASU and BSU were post-1992 institutions. Inclusion of contrasting universities meant that our research design facilitated identification of any functional variations between SUs in different institutional contexts. Before interviewing, data about each SU was collected; sources included managerial memorandums, promotional literature, community newsletters, financial statistics and reports into specific issues or projects. This information enabled an appreciation of the organisational context interviewees operated within and helped us refine questions to reflect those circumstances.

Fifty semi-structured interviews were undertaken. Our sample incorporated five distinctive groups of interviewee: senior managers operating at a strategic level (15); commercial services staff (10); staff supporting educational representation (5); staff supporting student voluntary-community activity (5); and student officers (10). At each SU we also interviewed another quite junior member of staff employed in a role only indirectly related to the functions mentioned here, for example finance. These samples derived from a purposive approach, researchers using their subject expertise to select institutions and individuals broadly reflective of the population and individuals with substantive insights to contribute. Care was taken to ensure that the sample at each SU was even (10 subjects) and incorporated individuals from each category. Interviews were between 30 and 90 minutes duration, recorded, transcribed in verbatim format, and manually studied using template analysis.
There were significant similarities in the questions put to each group of interviewee. Everyone was asked what they understood to be the functions of their SU, whether those functions had altered recently and, if changes had occurred, what form they took and why they had happened. There were (of course) variations. For example, discussions with senior managers concentrated on strategy, while those with staff from the relevant departments emphasised changes in their area. Ideally, staff interviews covered approximately the period from the millennium onwards, although we exercised some flexibility over timeframes as similar trends affected different SUs at slightly different speeds. Where interviewees were very recent appointments, and possessed little knowledge of previous developments, the discussion had a more contemporary feel. However, all the senior staff and most of the others had either worked at the SU across the whole timeframe or had a substantive awareness of events across the whole period. Those with a narrower time-focus were selected because of identifiable expertise about more contemporary developments. Concerning student officers; interviews reflected mainly the shorter timescale of their experience, although some individuals could discuss longer-term changes.

Choice of a time-period starting at approximately the millennium reflected several factors: first, assessment about what timeframe would help us to understand the contemporary position and its evolution. Second, this period facilitated consideration of changes since approximately the introduction of tuition fees (1998), a period of particular relevance given the neo-liberal context. Third, assessment of the collective memory of the interviewees; staff turnover meant that many interviewees had worked at their SU for just a few years and had a limited knowledge about historic events occurring approximately before the millennium.
To strengthen the evidence-base, we undertook a wider survey. Questionnaires were emailed to a senior manager at 80 UK SUs, a sample reflecting a purposive approach and covering a larger group mirroring the whole population. The questionnaire resulted from a piloting exercise; a draft was discussed with student officers and staff in two SUs, a process that generated refinements. Respondents had to identify functional changes occurring since the millennium and indicate whether changes reflected financial difficulties. Nineteen questionnaires were returned, a 24% response rate. Survey evidence is quoted in the findings section and indicated through (questionnaire response).

Interviewees were guaranteed institutional and personal anonymity. Alternatively, specific institutional responses from questionnaire returns have been identified, reflecting minimal risk of identifying individual respondents and emphasis on gathering information already in the public domain, albeit often not in an easily-accessible format. Each questionnaire offered the option of institutional anonymity, although none of the respondents requested anonymity. Interview and questionnaire data was supplemented through reference to a diversity of relevant publications. SUs were identified only when those documents were in the public domain.

Our methodological approach reflected clear attempts to triangulate (Denzin 1970; Miles, Huberman and Saldana 2014) findings. First, we triangulated in terms of data sources, this involved asking very similar questions to key individuals in five contrasting SUs and covering the same diverse mix of individuals at each institution. We then tested (and ultimately confirmed) these findings through collecting data relevant to a much wider range of
institutions through designing and sending the questionnaire and studying print and online materials about specific SUs and national trends. Second, triangulation occurred through using a range of methods in order to confirm the findings. Here, methodological triangulation might be specified in terms of the combination of semi-structured interviews, a questionnaire, documentary analysis and participant observation.

**Findings**

This section reflects evidence from the case study interviews mentioned in the methods section, triangulated with evidence from other sources, principally questionnaire returns and extensive documentary analysis, in particular of SU publications. This research suggested clear functional changes, trends reflective of parallel developments in each case study SU and substantive evidence from elsewhere. Tentative connections are made between these findings and neo-liberal and therapeutic theories, themes which are explored in more detail in the discussion section.

**Commercial services, competition and decline**

By the close of the twentieth century, commercial activity overshadowed the other functions and defined the spirit of many SUs. However, in approximately the first decade of the twentieth-first century, this shift was challenged, initially through declining commercial income. In particular, bar sales halved nationally from £120m in 1998 to £60m in 2008 (NUS 2010, 25). These trends occurred at each case study SU. As the commercial services manager at ASU observed:

‘The development of commerce, in the vicinity of our main building, the city
centre and other student areas, that was directly targeted at students began to have an adverse impact on sales.’

Similarly, a CSU Commercial Services Manager commented that ‘a huge decline in the services being used’ in the last few years reflected strengthened competition from ‘the bars and clubs in town’ and ‘the union couldn’t compete with that’. As a CSU senior manager observed, growing student numbers had generated ‘a massive economic footprint on the city’ and encouraged ‘the rest of the city to put things on those students wanted to go to’.

Comparable themes were echoed by an ESU senior manager, who argued that ambitious commercial aims were ‘unrealistic and unachievable’. S/he observed that the SU ‘struggled to compete’ with private sector rivals and, therefore, should ‘not try to copy others who can afford to undercut our prices’.

Similarly, a commercial services manager at DSU commented that:

‘we saw a knock on effect in that our entertainment budget has gone down quite a lot since we lost a lot of gigs and events to the O2 Academy, which took the business for live music events.’

Likewise, a senior manager from Northampton SU noted in 2011 that, ‘we have not made a profit from our operations for over ten years now.......and need to be bailed out by our University every year’ (questionnaire response). At the University of Portsmouth SU, the
trading company went into administration and was purchased by the University in 2005 (questionnaire response).

Intensified competition and declining income generated a widespread diminution of commercial services, from approximately the middle of first decade of the twenty-first century onwards. As an NUS report acknowledged, most SUs have reduced their commercial services in the last five years (NUS 2009, 3). At Bristol SU, the ‘main retail operation ceased trading’ (questionnaire response), while at Salford SU, restructuring meant closure of the travel shop and the Union’s nightclub, (questionnaire response). A major retrenchment occurred at Derby SU, which was forced to sell four nightclubs it owned in the city centre in response to financial pressures (questionnaire response).

This trend was reflected at each case study SU. In 2007, ASU closed its leisure centre, two bars and two shops, while in 2006 BSU reduced the number of its bars and nightclubs from nine to four. More radically, in 2011 ESU completed a re-design of its building to diminish the space occupied by commercial operations, for example a small Starbucks outlet replaced a large café. The staging of commercial entertainments events diminished, for example in 2008 CSU scrapped its loss-making weekly club night. At DSU, there was a substantial decline in performances by bands with consequential staff redundancies. In 2010, the NUS estimated that in the previous five years at least 15 SUs had completely withdrawn from commercial operations (NUS 2010, 26).

Declining commercial services suggests neo-liberal interpretations, specifically failure of SUs to remain competitive in intensified markets. These findings support an extension of the
theme of developing higher education markets (Brown 2011b) to SUs. Furthermore, concerning SU commercial services there is an interpretation through a genuine rather than a quasi-market, given the absence of specific, substantive and distinctive regulations governing services supplied by SUs as against similar services supplied by other organizations. Similarly, neo-liberal critiques of student behavior through consumption (Briggs 2006) seem relevant. Such assumptions offer explanations for willingness to forsake services supplied at their obvious community hub for those delivered by organizations with which they have no overarching affiliation; in other words, decisions dependent on product quality rather than mediated significantly through non-commercial loyalties or identities. Finally, re-configuration of SU buildings reflective of diminished commercial services might be interpreted through university marketing priorities, given SU reliance on university funding and agreement for significant organizational and accommodation changes.

Re-invigoration of education representation and community functions

There was a shift from commercial services, towards educational representation and the community function; these trends were identified at each case study SU and supported through findings from many other SUs. This change was noted in a 2010 NUS report, which observed that most SUs ‘have reoriented their primary focus on to representation and member services, away from commercial services’ (NUS 2010, 26).

This movement was, for example, reflected at ESU, where the Chief Executive commented that the SU was growing ‘the representative function…..our main focus is now on enabling students to influence their education’. This agenda derived, significantly, from ‘increased student concern about career-benefits of their studies’ (ESU CE). A similar change was noted
at ASU, where an employee observed a recent re-assertion that they were ‘not just about the bar and shop’ but also ‘membership and activities’. This agenda was echoed at DSU, where a diminished commercial focus was accompanied by the establishment of a ‘new salaried democracy and representation position’ and a clear strategic decision that ‘we wanted to expand in that area…principally so that our members could influence their education’ (DSU senior manager).

Enhanced emphasis on educational representation was also stressed by an employee at BSU, who commented that this development reflected what should always have been the central role of SUs. S/he observed that SUs:

‘always have been the voice of students, but unfortunately because there has been an area of a lucrative market we have jumped on that with both hands’.

This reorientation was characterised as emphasis on ‘the Union as a Union, rather than as a supplier of commercial services’ (BSU student officer).

Similar trends were recognised by an ASU employee, who observed responsiveness to ‘the focus of members, which is much more on course quality’. A DSU student officer supported such observations, and noted ‘growing pressures from our members to improve the quality of courses and academic facilities’, arising substantially ‘from the cost, concerns about career-relevance’. Similarly, a CSU employee observed re-orientation as ‘a lobbying organisation for students’ and stressed the educational representational focus through impacting on taught courses. Specifically, s/he mentioned recent SU collaborations with the University’s education
department to improve ‘training courses’ the University runs for lecturers. Similarly, CSU’s President, a student sabbatical-officer, observed functional re-alignment driven through recognition of their importance as the ‘learning voice’ of students and to ensure that the University ‘is investing in good quality learning and teaching’.

Parallel developments were identified at Exeter SU, where a review justified greater emphasis on educational representation because students had ‘higher expectations in a fee paying system’ and sought ‘a quality, value-for-money learning experience’ (Exeter Guild of Students 2009, 14). At Edinburgh, SU emphasis on teaching quality led to the establishment of teaching awards to recognise innovative and high-quality course delivery at the University (NUS 2010, 11), a development that was matched elsewhere, for example, at ASU, CSU and ESU. Similarly, restructuring of the roles of Salford SU’s student sabbatical officers, to cover specific faculties, reflected a stronger focus on course quality (NUS 2010, 16).

Recent years have also witnessed some increase in radical campaigning, especially since the onset of the economic downturn, often against neo-liberal agendas (Giroux, 2013; Solomon and Palmieri 2011) and concerning both educational and wider themes. Nevertheless, there has been no return to the intensive activist and radical culture that infused campuses in the late-1960s to mid-1970s. Overall, there was little evidence of any transformative ‘resurgence of political campaigning’ (DSU Manager) or ‘culture of revolt’ (CSU Student Officer), most students focusing on ‘more immediate and personal objectives’ (ESU Student Officer). Radical and active opposition to neo-liberal agendas whilst noticeable is still the preserve of quite a small minority.
In terms of neo-liberalism, reorientation towards educational representation implied, therefore, a prime SU response to work within its constraints, for example in responding to student concerns about their teaching (Gibbs 2001; Little et al. 2009), rather than challenging wider neo-liberal agendas. Furthermore, there are potential connections with therapeutic theories through SUs responding to student concerns about vulnerability and fragility (Ecclestone 2004a; Ecclestone and Hayes 2009) regarding their university experience.

There is also an association between our findings and contemporary recognition of SUs as central stakeholders in the university community and its governance, phenomena that facilitate SU influence over course delivery and overarching student experiences. This culture has been referenced in several significant reports. For example, while reviewing governance at Welsh institutions McCormick (2011) noted the importance of having student representatives on the main boards. Similarly, a Scottish university governance study concluded that SUs had ‘a major part to play in the governance of institutions’ and that there was normally ‘a strong working relationship between students’ associations and university courts’ (Von Prondyzynski 2012, 22). Such findings reflected analysis of student engagement at English universities, which identified SU representation on university-wide committees as ‘near-universal’ (Little et al. 2009, 16).

Our findings also showed an invigoration of the community function, particularly through renewed emphasis on clubs and societies, trends evident at each case study SU and elsewhere. For example, at Derby SU, a 2008 re-structuring re-orientated the marketing function to support the whole organisation, including clubs and societies, rather than simply being a ‘club night’s promotion tool’ (questionnaire response) as previously. Elsewhere, new
organisational strategies emphasised clubs and societies. In 2008, ASU implemented a strategic shift towards facilitating clubs and societies. As its General Manager explained:

“We have realised the imbalance in development between commercial services and membership services over the past decade. We now refocus on developing membership services by expanding training/development departments and by providing more sports facilities….Central to this strategy is the promotion of a network of clubs and societies’.

Similarly, at ESU, the Chief Executive observed that the:

‘strategy was to make savings on the commercial side so that we can refocus the money onto the membership side and, in particular, support clubs and societies’.

These developments reflected, in part at least, heightened student focus on long-recognised career benefits of developing CVs and skill sets attractive to employers through SU voluntary activity. Such rationales were clearly identified across many SUs. For example, Exeter SU integrated explicit employability considerations into training for SU activities (Exeter Guild of Students 2009). At Durham SU, enhanced focus on opportunities to participate in the SU or SU-sponsored clubs and societies followed from observations that such participation helped students ‘cultivate a broader range of skills’, which were important in the ‘competitive employment environment’ (Durham SU 2012, 5).
This emphasis was recognised at each case study SU, for example in 2009 CSU developed a strategy to enhance student volunteering as a component of the university’s employability strategy. BSU published a guide for first years about how to acquire employability skills, which included advice to participate in clubs and societies to develop team-working, administrative and leadership skills. Similarly, DSU encouraged participation in its clubs and societies to enhance student employability. Again, our findings imply possible neo-liberal interpretations through SUs responding to personal and self-interested agendas (Briggs 2006).

Discussion

In this article, we supplement academic literature about the application of neo-liberal and therapeutic theories to universities (Brown 2011; Ecclestone 2004a; Ecclestone and Hayes 2009; Gibbs 2001) by applying these theories to SUs. This research agenda has previously attracted little attention from scholars beyond under-theorised narratives relating recent student campaigning to neo-liberalism (Giroux 2013; Solomon and Palmieri 2011). Our descriptive findings also add significantly to scholarship, given the sparse literature about SUs in general. In particular, there has been very little scholarship about the evolution of SUs since the millennium, exceptions confined mainly to student campaigning (Solomon and Palmieri 2011). Our study, therefore, represents a notable academic advancement, in particular through combining theories with some distinctive qualitative data.

This study has specified a series of substantive SU functional shifts since approximately the start of the millennium. These trends appear to be consistent across the full range of institutions, particularly evidence from the case studies generated similar findings despite
variations in institutional types. We suggest, therefore, that despite a diverse sector, similarities in recruitment requirements and regulatory, competitive and cultural regimes have generated uniform patterns. Next, we develop the connections between neo-liberal and therapeutic approaches mentioned above into clear theoretical interpretations. In the last part, a future research agenda is outlined.

**Neo-Liberal Interpretations**

There are distinctive neo-liberal interpretations. The neo-liberal paradigm and its policy impacts can be viewed as fuelling the upsurge in SU representation on agendas relevant beyond their institutions, especially since the onset of the contemporary global economic recession; effects that can be appreciated through campaigning on education policy and other agendas (Solomon and Palmieri 2011). This interpretation draws on centre-left biases in SU wider campaigning and sees functional realignment through a dominant paradigm supplying substantive agendas for SUs to react against; trends intensified through a combination of global economic problems and, in the UK for example, increasing study costs. However, reaction against neo-liberal agendas cannot be compared to the revolts of the late-1960s to mid-1970s because student reaction has been much smaller in scale.

In contrast to this reaction against neo-liberalism, our findings suggest a dominant interpretation through neo-liberalism as the context for SU functions becoming more responsive to market-induced pressures. This effect can be observed through intensified SU engagement with educational representation and interpreted in terms of responsiveness to greater member focus on quality and value added by their university education. Similarly, re-invigoration of the community function has been situated amongst a neo-liberal framework
in terms of being driven by marketplace concerns amongst students about, for example, developing CVs, job-related skills and employability. There is also an interpretation of neo-liberalism as precipitating contraction of SU commercial services through market-induced responses to shifting student preferences towards alternative suppliers.

Effects on the commercial and community functions illustrate diminution of SUs as organisations fortified through intensive member loyalty and identity towards being institutions that have to strive much harder to obtain member involvement in a tougher market-place. Volunteering in the student community thus becomes much less about any spirit of public obligation, while SU commercial services benefit much less from being integral to a clear and distinctive student community. There is also a potential neo-liberal marketing interpretation, given the heightened significance of SU facilities for recruitment. SU functions evolving to facilitate recruitment at the expense of activities potential students regard as better delivered by other suppliers, such as nightlife. In other words, as we speculated earlier, our findings imply interpretation through production marketing. New or (at least) modified SU products were created in reflection of student demand and those features publicised to aid recruitment. For example, renewed focus on clubs and societies promoted to potential students through employability gains.

**Therapeutic interpretations**

There are three distinctive therapeutic interpretations emerging from juxtaposition of theory and findings. First, there is an overarching interpretation that renewed emphasis on trying to influence university courses and its student experience reflect responses to the immediate and educational vulnerability and fragility of students. Second, there is a distinctive
therapeutic interpretation for increased SU emphasis on student employability. This interpretation views heightened SU emphasis on aspects of educational representation and their community functions as attempts to counteract longer-term student vulnerability and fragility about their employment and career prospects. Third, therapeutic interpretations also exist through developing counseling and welfare services to address a wide scope of student vulnerabilities. However, the core shifts in this area occurred before the millennium, for example SU emphasis on specific groups of vulnerable students, such as women, LGBT and those with a disability, date from shifting attitudes in the 1970s and or 1980s (Weiner 1998).

**Neo-liberal and therapeutic interpretations synthesized**

Our analysis suggests interpretations through synthesis of neo-liberal and therapeutic discourses. This synthesis reflects SU functional changes derived from enhanced student focus on ‘self’ as opposed to, for example, strong identities as a SU member or commitment to broad policy agendas. This idea incorporates emphasis on increasing specific gains accruing to each individual from their university experience, heightened concern with individual choices generally and enhanced desires to promote individual well-being and to counteract emotional vulnerabilities and fragilities. The most obvious juxtaposition concerned emotional vulnerabilities about learning and a neo-liberal emphasis on maximizing value-added through their courses. These themes often produced similar SU agendas; such as pursuing enhanced assessment feedback, greater job-relevant course content and implementation of anonymous marking.

This triumph of ‘self’ could also be used as an overarching interpretation for other functional shifts, for example commercial decline as reflective of emphasis on immediate self
gratification or a consumption ethos rather than being mediated through instinctive community loyalty to SU provision. Similarly, quite narrow personal goals have been identified as driving renewed emphasis of the community function, concentration on ‘self’ can, ironically, be specified as generating resurgence of a more participatory and civic culture amongst SUs.

This primacy of ‘self’ also offers explanations for why the upsurge in opposition to neo-liberalism has not galvanized the mass of the student population in a spirit akin to that of the late-1960s to mid-1970s, most students focusing on narrower and more personal concerns. Finally, emphasis on ‘self’ can be interpreted through contemporary recognition of SUs as significant stakeholders in UK university governance (Little et al. 2009, McCormick 2011: Von Prondzynski 2012). Entrenchment of SUs as important participants in university communities thus facilitating greater institutional responsiveness to SU agendas derived from the market-induced interests and emotional vulnerabilities of their members.

**Future research agendas**

This UK study has identified and developed interpretations for a functional reconfiguration that has occurred approximately during the early years of the twenty-first century. Our findings and approach suggest two prime directions for future research. First, existence of similar institutions across the globe and the widespread relevance of the broader theories and student-related trends discussed, particularly neo-liberalism and students as higher education consumers, imply relevance for the study of SUs in other countries. Second, our interpretative analysis through neo-liberal and therapeutic perspectives, suggests a diversity of research
projects to test the specific ideas in more details. In applying these theories to SUs, we have identified significant scholarship gaps and have mapped the starting point for a substantive set of much more specific research agendas.

References


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