

152 Student Activism, Plural Citizenships, and the Political Purpose of the University

James Harrison

Durham University, Durham, United Kingdom

Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

Citizenship, as a political and educational rather than legal concept, is rarely discussed in the UK higher education sector. This paper explores the troubled relationship between higher education and the concepts of citizenship and citizenship education, and the complications presented to this relationship by the persistent phenomenon of student activism. Informed by a holistic conception of plural and multiplex citizenship, as well as by the work of Jürgen Habermas on higher education, this paper sets out the conceptual underpinnings of a doctoral research project in which the disruptive potential of student activism provides a lens through which to consider the question of the political purpose of the university, as well as diverse forms of citizenship in HE, as they are experienced and practised by students. The paper concludes by outlining the methodology of a substantive piece of ethnographic fieldwork designed to investigate the questions posed in this paper.

Full paper

Citizenship in Higher Education

The concept of citizenship (broadly defined here as ‘the basic human equality of membership’ of a political community [Marshall 1950:7]) has historically sat uneasily in the UK HE landscape. While ‘education for citizenship’ in primary and secondary schooling has often been posed as a political imperative (Crick 2000), the question of citizenship in HE is more complex. Not only are HE students overwhelmingly adults, of majority age to vote and therefore legally recognised as politically mature (Scott 2022), but also (within the UK context) a large proportion of students are not ‘formal’ citizens of the country in which they are studying (HESA 2022).

Broadly speaking, two primary discourses of citizenship are prevalent within British HE policy and practice: ‘academic citizenship’ and ‘global citizenship’ (Horey et al. 2018; Albia and Cheng 2023); both of these discourses, by focusing on communities other than the nation-state, avoid the more substantive political issues raised by other conceptions of citizenship, which delineate political membership on more exclusive characteristics (Cohen and Ghosh 2019). In contrast to approaches which consider differing visions of state and non-state citizenship to be discrete categories of social affiliation, this paper works from the perspective that citizenships are plural, multiplex, and overlapping, and can be experienced at different social levels simultaneously. The notion of ‘active’ or political forms of citizenship, centred around the individual citizen as a bottom-up constituent of the polity (Habermas 1995), by comparison, are rarely used in an HE context, in contrast to policy and practice in primary and secondary education (QCA 1998; Crick 2010).

Student Activism and Citizenship

Despite the long-acclaimed ‘demise’ of British student activism suggested across academic and media commentaries (Brooks et al. 2015, 2016; Raaper 2020a, 2020b), evidence suggests that a culture of ‘disruptive’ student activism persists across UK HEIs (Abrahams and Brooks 2019). It is arguable that student activism, broadly construed as active pursuit of a political or social cause, represents one of the strongest performances of commitment to a community, even if that activism manifests as opposition to the community’s existing leadership or institutional arrangements (Walzer 1970). Yet the reactions of university leaders to more disruptive (though peaceful) forms of activism often range between caution and hostility (e.g., Hall 2023).

This paper suggests that the forms of 'political consciousness' (Habermas 1967, 1971) promoted in institutional discourse and policy, in contrast to the plural and radical citizenships likely demonstrated by student activists, are broadly analogous with Habermas's notion of 'civil privatism': a 'safe' form of citizenship, which elides the constitutive nature of the citizen, and promotes the expression of discontent via 'institutionally provided opportunities' (Habermas 1973:75) – in this context, for example, delegation of representative status to students' unions increasingly integrated into the decision-making apparatus of the university itself (Klemenčič 2014). Conceptions of citizenship which promote a political, activist approach to students' interests with respect to issues on and off the university campus represent not only a direct challenge to the authority of university leaders, but also an indirect threat to the marketised, neoliberal HE system which underwrites that authority and the stability of the institutional status quo. It is this fundamental tension which underpins the central question posed by this paper as part of ongoing research: How are citizenship(s) understood and practised by student activists and institutions on the university campus?

Methodological Approach

The substantive portion of this project will take the form of (broadly) institutional ethnographic fieldwork (Smith 2005) with multiple student activist groups at a UK HEI. This fieldwork, comprising participant observation, interviews and digital ethnographic methods, will run alongside a study of institutional texts including policy documents and value statements, in order to explore student activist and institutional experiences and constructions of citizenships.

Expected Findings

Preliminary social mapping exercises conducted for this project suggests that citizenship acts in various political communities occur throughout the institutional architecture of the university: not merely in advertised opportunities for student engagement or consultation, but across a wide variety of situations in which students voluntarily invest in the communal life of one or more forms of political community which overlap on the university campus. These exercises have also suggested that forms of acts of citizenship within the institutional structure of the university can broadly be situated upon two scales: (1), between inward- (i.e., university-) and outward-facing orientations; and (2), between disruptive and service-focused orientations. I expect to have more extensive empirical findings to discuss at the SRHE Conference, as substantive fieldwork will by then have commenced on the project.

References

- Abrahams, J. and Brooks, R. (2019). Higher education students as political actors: evidence from England and Ireland. *Journal of Youth Studies* 22(1): 108-123
- Albia, J. and Cheng, M. (2023). Re-examining and developing the notion of academic citizenship: A critical literature review. *Higher Education Quarterly*, DOI: 10.1111/hequ.12428
- Brooks, R., Byford, K. and Sela, K. (2015). The changing role of students' unions within contemporary higher education. *Journal of Education Policy* 30(2): 165-181
- Brooks, R., Byford, K. and Sela, K. (2016). The spaces of UK students' unions: extending the critical geography of the university campus. *Social & Cultural Geography* 17(4): 471-490
- Cohen, E. and Ghosh, C. (2019). *Citizenship*. Cambridge: Polity
- Crick, B. (2000). *Essays on Citizenship*. London / New York: Continuum
- Crick, B. (2010). 'Civic Republicanism and Citizenship: the Challenge for Today' in Crick, B. and Lockyer, A. (eds.), *Active Citizenship: What Could it Achieve and How?*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 16-25
- Habermas, J. (1967). Universität in der Demokratie – Demokratisierung der Universität. *Merkur* 21(230): 416-433

Habermas, J. (1971). *Toward a Rational Society: Student Protest, Science, and Politics*. Trans. by Shapiro, J.J. London: Heinemann

Habermas, J. (1973 [1976]). *Legitimation Crisis*. Trans. by McCarthy, T. Cambridge / Malden, MA: Polity

Habermas, J. (1995). 'Citizenship and National Identity: Some Reflections on the Future of Europe' in Beiner, R. (ed.), *Theorizing Citizenship*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, pp. 255-282

Hall, R. (2023). Sheffield University criticised for hiring private investigator after protest. *The Guardian*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2023/mar/13/sheffield-university-criticised-over-handling-of-protest-investigation> (accessed 10/06/2023)

Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, 2022). HE student enrolments by domicile, country of HE provider, first year marker, level of study and mode of study. Available at: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/sb265/figure-9> (accessed 10/06/2023)

Horey, D., Fortune, T., Nicolacopoulos, T., Kashima, E. and Mathisen, B. (2018). Global Citizenship and Higher Education: A Scoping Review of the Empirical Evidence. *Journal of Studies in International Education* 22(5): 472-492

Klemenčič, M. (2014). Student power in a global perspective and contemporary trends in student organising. *Studies in Higher Education* 39(3): 396-411

Marshall, T.H. (1950 [1992]). 'Citizenship and Social Class' in Marshall, T.H. and Bottomore, T., *Citizenship and Social Class*. London / Concord, MA: Pluto Press

Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA, 1998). *Education for citizenship and the teaching of democracy in schools: Final report of the Advisory Group on Citizenship*. London: QCA

Raaper, R. (2020a). Students' Unions and Consumerist Policy Discourses in English Higher Education. *Critical Studies in Education* 61(2): 245-261

Raaper, R. (2020b). Constructing Political Subjectivity: The Perspectives of Sabbatical Officers from English Students' Unions. *Higher Education* 79(1): 141-157

Scott, R. (2022). Does university make you more liberal? Estimating the within-individual effects of higher education on political values. *Electoral Studies* 77, DOI: 10.1016/j.electstud.2022/102471

Smith, D.E. (2005). *Institutional Ethnography: A Sociology for People*. Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press

Walzer, M. (1970). *Obligations: Essays on Disobedience, War and Citizenship*. Cambridge, MA / London: Harvard University Press