Moé Suzuki September 2nd, 2025

The politics of voice in university finance

Higher education trumpets the value of student voice and satisfaction surveys, but universities need genuine dialogue with a range of stakeholders, argues ***Moé Suzuki***

"Staff working conditions = student learning conditions"

Those were the words on the banner I brought to the picket line. This was 2023, when staff went on strike to protest the redundancy plans at the University of East Anglia (UEA) where I was a PhD student. Despite staff and student action, more than 400 posts were cut in 2023. As a PhD student who had worked as an associate tutor, it was clear how staff working conditions were deeply intertwined with students' learning conditions. Many conversations I was part of expressed dismay at how decisions about how the university should operate were being made without the input of the very people who worked there.

Moving from UEA to the London School of Economics (LSE), what struck me the most was LSE's comparable wealth. However, though under different circumstances, similar questions, confronted me. Students at LSE engaged in various actions in solidarity with Palestine and in opposition to the genocide of Palestinians, including the occupation of the Marshall Building in May 2024. As Marral Shamshiri writes, this follows past examples of student mobilisation at LSE, against apartheid in South Africa and the US occupation of Vietnam. The LSE Students' Union Palestine Society released a report analysing the current situation and outlining the demands of the student movement: for LSE to divest from companies complicit in Israeli apartheid and genocide of Palestinians, and make the decision-making process more transparent and accountable. As a result of the report, the LSE Council established a consultative group, comprised of students, academics, and staff. In June 2025, LSE Students' Union Palestine Society released another report, *Stakes in Settler Colonialism*, with a section highlighting the limitations of this review process.

Politics of voice

What connects those two events at UEA and LSE? Prompted by a discussion in a PGCert workshop – when do institutions seek out and value student voice, and when do they not – I began to consider what kind of spaces and actions exist for staff and students to express their voice, when they don't have access to or are excluded from decision-making spaces. Whose voices are listened to, and whose voices are silenced or ignored?

Student voice, usually collected through surveys such as the Teaching Excellence Framework and the National Student Survey, has become integral to the metrics of performativity and marketisation of the higher education sector. As a teacher, this leaves me with mixed feelings as I value the opportunity to receive feedback from my students (despite the racial and gender bias) to improve the course and my teaching. Centring student voice also speaks to my pedagogical approach where teachers and students are equally responsible for creating a learning community through our generous and critical engagement with each other's voice.

Staff voice is perhaps a less ubiquitous term compared with student voice (which raises an interesting question about whose voices are valued within institutions). Nevertheless, there are formal opportunities for staff to express their views, whether through meetings with line managers, staff surveys, or committees and working groups.

> *It is not enough for someone to speak. Someone else must be present to listen.*

In addition to more formal avenues for expressing views, the strike action at UEA and the Palestine solidarity movement at LSE both bring to light what happens when voice is expressed through means that institutions might deem illegitimate or disruptive. Those two cases can be described as what Bruce Macfarlane and Michael Tomlinson call engagement-as-opposition, where "student activism falls outside rather than within the expected norms of institutions" or how student voice is normally conceived, which may also involve challenging university decisions and policies. Similarly, in her feminist and postcolonial analysis of student voice, Julie McLeod warns against idealising student voice, and emphasises the importance of listening to diverse voices – arguments that can be extended to staff voice.

Most importantly, McLeod shifts the focus to the act of listening. She conceptualises voice as something that is relational and contextual. Someone always speaks in relation to another in a particular context. It follows, therefore, that it is not enough for someone to speak. Someone else must be present to listen, and to recognise their voice as a voice that matters.

Educational commons

Writing about student movements that call for universities to divest from fossil fuel companies, Emma de Saram urges for more collective and inclusive decision-making that reflects the diversity of student and staff voices, rather than "an elite minority making purely market-based decisions". Creating an inclusive decision-making process requires reflection, relationship-building, and time. As McLeod notes, having a voice, for example in the form of being part a committee, does not necessarily mean those members have the power to influence decisions. One example of a more inclusive decision-making process might be open space, where the agenda is set collaboratively by participants. In open space, participants take ownership of the agenda and discussion, rather than being led by top-down agendas. The discussions must then be reflected into the final decisions. Coming back to McLeod, voice needs to be reframed as "a matter of listening, recognition and engaged dialogue", not just as a unidirectional expression of thought that is taken, then often disappears into the ether or packed into vague commitments.

What Alexander Means, Derek Ford, and Graham Slater term an educational commons might be one way to frame the relationship between voice and university finance. The authors define commons as "the totality of shared resources including our collective institutions and the natural wealth of the planet". They contrast this with the common (singular), which is "a social ontology…the communicative, affective, and relational foundation upon which commons are produced, circumscribed, and governed".

> *The Palestine solidarity movement… asks people who work and study here pressing questions about where our labour and money are directed, and what role universities play in society.*

To me, the case of UEA highlights what makes a university a university. It is the cleaners, security guards, cooks, students, professional services staff, and academics; the Norwich and Norfolk community UEA is part of; the land on which the university is built, and the resources it relies upon. The Palestine solidarity movement and the reports situate LSE within a flow of capital, corporate networks, and world events. It places academic institutions in the world that we inhabit, asking people who work and study here pressing questions about where our labour and money are directed, and what role universities play in society.

Educational commons are how one might think about the university in relation to everything that constitutes it (such as natural resources, knowledge that we produce, capital, students and staff), how it is situated in the world (connected to various parts of the world through investments as in the case of Palestine or through the backgrounds of everyone who work and study here), and how decisions about the commons are made. The authors also mention commons as a political ideal, as a way to imagine more sustainable and collaborative ways of organising and sustaining not just individual universities but the higher education sector as a whole.

Given that, what actions can teachers, and as workers at universities, take to common decision-making processes around university finance?

A version of this post first appeared on the Contemporary Issues in Teaching and Learning Blog, part of the LSE PGCertHE, on 6 May 2025.

Main image: Alex Chis / Flickr

About the author

Moé Suzuki

Moé Suzuki is an LSE Fellow in Interdisciplinary Social Science, London School of Economics, UK

Posted In: Student Voice