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Negotiating Contestations and 'Chaotic Conceptions'

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Negotiating Contestations and 'Chaotic Conceptions': Engaging 'Non-Traditional' Students in Higher Education

Vicki Trowler, Moray House School of Education, University of Edinburgh, vicki.trowler@ed.ac.uk

Abstract

Student engagement has been widely hailed as the solution to all that ails higher education but there is little agreement on the meaning or ambit of the term. Similarly, literature concerning 'non-traditional' students is characterised by a multiplicity of meanings and assumptions, seldom spelled out, ascribed to the term, which is nonetheless imbued with analytical and predictive significance. This paper uses data from early stages of the research to illustrate the importance of conceptual clarity in a study of engaging non-traditional students, illuminated through the lens of the Marxian notion of 'chaotic conceptions'. The paper examines the ideological work being done in disguising interests and inequities through the use of chaotic conceptions and uses the examples of students who define themselves as 'non-traditional' in their own study contexts to illustrate the problems of deploying such chaotic conceptions for purposes beyond description.

Introduction

Research needs to have conceptual clarity if it is to be useful and usable. There is a need for consistency in the use of terminology to allow meaningful discussion and debate between studies of phenomena observed. Also, researchers and other readers (and users) of research need to understand without ambiguity what is included, or excluded, by concepts that are deployed and what their explanatory weight can reasonably be expected to be.

A study undertaken in Scotland to explore the engagement of 'non-traditional' students at university and the effects of this engagement on

their intentions to persist or otherwise revealed problems with the understanding and use of the concepts of student engagement and 'non-traditional' students. Both are the object of considerable attention from policy makers and both are the subject of considerable resourcing. Therefore, it would seem sensible that what is meant, and understood, by both of these terms is explored and that conceptual clarity is attained. This paper deploys the lens of 'chaotic conception' to explore ideological work that may be hidden in the apparently careless use of these terms with the aid of data collected in the early stages of a research project which is still ongoing.

Engaging students

Student engagement is widely viewed as the 'silver bullet' solution to fix all that ails higher education, yet there is little agreement about what precisely the term means, encompasses or excludes (Trowler, 2010, p. 9). Moral panic generated by texts such as *Academically Adrift* (Arum and Roksa, 2011) and earlier texts such as those by Rodgers (2001), Booth (2001) and McInnis and Hartley (2002) sparked a headlong rush toward student engagement as a strategy to increase student retention, success and learning (Markwell, 2007; Harper and Quaye, 2009; Salamonson *et al.*, 2009). Baron and Corbin (2012, p. 759) reported that:

> ideas about student engagement in the university context are often fragmented, contradictory and confused. Even the meaning of the term 'student engagement' is uncertain.

However, without a common understanding, or at least a specified definition when used, confusion and misunderstanding are likely to result. It is not that an essentialist definition, true for all deployments in all situations over all time, is required; however, in order to 'ask more critical questions about research and policies relating to student engagement' (Ashwin and McVitty, 2014) and to militate against 'use of the concept [that] is ambiguous, tangled and even misleading' (Vuori, 2014, p. 509), it is necessary to agree at least within a particular context what is being denoted, and what understood, by the use of the term. How the term is understood has implications for the attribution of responsibility and accountability, the formulation, implementation and monitoring of policy, the allocation of resources and the definition and evaluation of success. Thus, these contestations are seldom trivial but, rather, indicative of interests and ideologies. As an illustration, a relatively benign example can be found at Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) (2012), in which student engagement is

reduced to 'representation', with the subtext that, in order to have a good student experience, students need to volunteer to assist the Quality Assurance Agency in carrying out quality assurance work within their universities.

'Chaotic conceptions'

Likewise, studies of 'non-traditional' students in higher education indicate a concept whose edges are blurred, not through fuzzy thinking but so as to mask the ideological work afoot. This is akin to the 'chaotic conceptions' identified by Marx (1973) and introduced in higher education research by Clegg (2004).

The Marxian term 'chaotic conception' was introduced in the *Grundrisse* (Marx, 1973) with reference to the construct 'population'. In contrast to fuzzy concepts, whose precise meanings vary according to context and conditions (Haack, 1996), chaotic conceptions are abstractions [*Vorstellung*] that require further disaggregation into simpler and simpler concepts [*Begriff*], unmasking the 'rich totality of many determinations and relations' (Marx, 1973, p. 100). 'Chaotic conceptions' are neither simply sloppy nor accidental; they function actively to carry out real ideological work, disguising interests and inequities.

From a critical realist perspective, Sayer (1992, p. 138) distinguished chaotic conceptions, or 'bad abstractions', from 'rational abstractions'. He argued that the former 'arbitrarily divides the indivisible and/or lumps together the unrelated and the inessential, thereby "carving up" the object of study with little or no regard for its structure and form'. (Sayer, 1992, p. 138). The conception 'non-traditional' when applied to students encompasses a large variety of characteristics that have little of significance in common, do not form structures, nor do they interact causally in any notable fashion. Rather, they are included by virtue of what they are not, rather than by virtue of any essential characteristic they possess in common.

Chaotic conceptions can, as Sayer (1992, p. 139) observed, be used unproblematically for descriptive purposes but when they are deployed with any 'explanatory weight' problems may arise as similar properties or behaviours are assumed where these may not exist. Thus, material differences between objects that are internally heterogeneous become obscured and assumptions are made that what defines, or distinguishes, the object, will necessarily be causally significant. A minor example of this is the reductionism implied in inviting students with disabilities and racial or ethnic minority students to select artwork for the walls of a new

building (advocated by Harper and Quaye, 2009, p. 9) as if these students would necessarily share taste across (or even within) such diverse groups and that this taste would differ significantly from other, more 'traditional' student tastes. Of greater material significance would be a decision to redesign the curriculum based on a homogenised assumption of the needs of non-traditional students.

Who are 'non-traditional' students?

The term 'non-traditional' student (elsewhere depicted as 'the new student'—see Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003, p. 598) has been used uncritically in the literature for several decades, often as a shorthand marker for those seen as the intended beneficiaries of widening participation-type policies. Few authors define their use of the term and most elide seamlessly between this term and more specific groups, assumed to be the real focus of their studies, such as working-class students, first-in-family students, students from minority ethnic or religious groups, or mature students. While there are sound reasons for selecting certain groups who have suffered structural disadvantage or historic exclusion and who continue to be underrepresented in higher education or particular higher education contexts, all too often use of the term in both literature and policy fails to distinguish adequately between specific identified target groups and more general usage. As an example, Juststroud (2011) demonstrates the unreflective reduction of the term 'non-traditional' to 'old', while Adnett and Slack (2007, p. 23) reduce the term to refer to students from less advantaged backgrounds. Oftentimes, students in the study present with more than one of these characteristics (for example, working class students, the first in their families to participate in higher education, who have come to higher education later in life) and yet the relationships between these constituent characteristics, when they occur together, are seldom explored, nor are differences within the groups (where some students present with multiple characteristics and some with fewer, for example) teased out to develop a finer-grained understanding of the nuances within these conveniently homogenised experiences.

In the same way that the 'other' has been distinguished from the 'norm' in many other contexts (for example, 'non-white' used as a bucket-term to cover all people whose only common characteristic is that they are not 'white'; or 'non-academic' which is still used in many universities to designate all staff whose only common characteristic is that they are not employed on academic conditions of employment), 'non-traditional' students exist as a group only in the presence of

'traditional' students. These 'traditional' students are often understood in the UK higher education context to be native British, mostly white from broadly Christian traditions, fully able-bodied, middle or upper class, heterosexual young people whose parents attended higher education, directly transitioning from public or 'decent' state schools, with the requisite numbers and grades of Highers or A-levels, and without dependents or family responsibilities, studying full-time, forming a gendered distribution among the disciplines.

This suggests that 'non-traditional' students possess at least one of the following characteristics: international or immigrant students; minority ethnic or religious-affiliated students; students with disabilities; working class students; lesbian, gay, trans- or bisexual students, or students questioning their sexual identity; mature students, or students returning to higher education after early departure; first-in-family students; students with vocational or other qualifications; student parents and students with caring responsibilities; part-time students, or students registered for full-time study but working too; students choosing to study in a discipline in which their gender has historically been under-represented.

However, in reality, there are a multiplicity of factors that may lead to a student feeling 'non-traditional' in a particular institutional context (including, for example, region of origin, such as 'having a dopey northern accent' at a southern university, or holding unpopular political views) even if on the surface they appear to meet the 'traditional' characteristics; and likewise, a student who may appear to be 'non-traditional' for one or more reasons may not consider themselves to be so and may identify more strongly with those characteristics they have in common with more 'traditional' students. This can be seen in the examples below.

What does this mean for operationalising the term?

Pilot interviews conducted for an ongoing PhD study (Trowler, forthcoming) indicated clearly that individual students consider themselves 'non-traditional' or otherwise for a far broader range of reasons than could have been anticipated in advance. These may have little to do with the categories listed earlier and may also reflect changes in identity politics as experienced by incoming cohorts of a diversifying student population. Subsequent interviews affirmed these findings, with students who identified as 'non-traditional' substantiating their claims with a variety of evidence. Students were recruited through posters, emails and social media postings calling for students who considered

themselves different to what their university was likely to be imagining when thinking about 'students'. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, lasting between one and two hours, conducted loosely along 'life history' lines, and were recorded before being transcribed and analysed with the use of qualitative data analysis software.

The examples selected (below) include students from both pilot and later interviews, reflecting a range of views on their non/traditionality. J and N were both interviewed during the pilot phase, having been identified through others as being 'non-traditional' students. They were asked if they would be willing to assist, being students, with testing out the resonance of concepts for the study among students who were not deeply institutionalised or steeped in the rhetoric of student engagement. They were asked how they came to be students, whether they considered themselves 'non-traditional' and why and how they viewed their engagement with their university contexts. B & T were interviewed during the 'live' phase of the study, having both responded to the recruitment efforts outlined above, and the data below derives from first interviews in which they were asked how they came to be students, why they felt they were 'non-traditional' and how they viewed their engagement with their university contexts.

J was 63 when interviewed. He runs an online business from his home, which he shares with pets since his long-term relationship ended about eighteen months prior to the interview. Partly to distract himself from his loneliness, and partly because a health scare made him conscious of the fragility of life, J decided to commence undergraduate studies, having worked since leaving school. No one in his family had studied further; his children had disappointed him deeply by not doing so either.

J elected to study psychology, wanting to gain insight on 'the human condition' since he 'so obviously sucked at understanding how people worked'. He was asked whether he considered himself 'non-traditional' and he did not: despite being a mature student, a working student (running a business 'full-time' and registering as a full-time student), a first-in-family student, a student from a working-class family of origin and a student with no vocational intentions linked to his course of study (it was purely for 'personal development').

Although he spontaneously commented several times that it was 'weird' to be studying at his age, he felt comfortable among his classmates, affirmed at their asking his advice on assignments, he felt he belonged and that he mattered to his lecturers and his classmates and he felt fully engaged in his studies and that his needs as a student were well

catered for. (It is likely that the habitus of the university at which he was studying would have contributed to his feeling 'at home'. The study was designed to explore students' perceptions of engagement within *their particular* study context. Different students with their different habitus will feel more or less comfortable in different universities with different habitus.)

In speaking of 'non-traditional' students, he felt that 'they' (in which he included a young mother of an infant, a couple of international students whose home language was not English and whose dress set them aside as 'foreign' and a student with a severe visual disability) were not as well understood or catered for: that the curriculum assumed a white, western paradigm, access to time and resources that only the 'single and restless' could muster and insider knowledge of support structures and services that would be opaque to 'non-traditional' students.

N was interviewed when aged 22, from a traditional Muslim family and herself observant of her faith, studying law. She was also first-in-family, from an immigrant family (though she completed her schooling locally). N did consider herself 'non-traditional' albeit not for reasons that may be immediately obvious. Her reasons were that she, unlike other female Muslim students who would be dropped off in the morning and would immediately disappear into the cloakroom to remove their hijab or niqab before joining their friends, would continue to wear her burqa on campus, aware that it marked her out as different; and that she studied law, despite having no intentions of practising as a lawyer. She planned to accept a traditional marriage after examinations, without attending graduation, and become a full-time wife and mother.

She felt comfortable at university and felt that she mattered but was ambivalent about whether she belonged, feeling she inhabited some kind of resistance identity in a context she found quite homogenising. She felt others around her would feel a lot more comfortable if she dressed as they did. She felt that the university made an effort to accommodate diversity but that there was a naïve ignorance about 'otherness' and was unsure where the responsibility lay in addressing that: was it incumbent on the university to make itself familiar with, and welcoming to, every single culture and subculture that might exist, or was it the duty of students who felt 'othered' to speak up and challenge assumptions, making people aware of this diversity? Nonetheless, she felt fully engaged.

Both J and N had their own understandings of traditional and non-traditional and did not stop to interrogate what might have been meant by that. Both were highly committed and highly engaged.

T offered himself as a non-traditional student on the basis of his delayed transition to higher education. Having applied unsuccessfully during his A-level year through the UCAS process for a place at art school, he had instead elected to turn down his fall-back offer of a place to read English at a metropolitan university in England 'because he did not want to be on the same treadmill as all the others—just going to university because it was expected'. It was almost universally expected of his A-level class: he could not name any of his former classmates aside from himself who had not gone on to higher education, describing them as 'blandly middle class, uncritical lemmings.' He found work in retail and socialised with other, mostly older, working people. After two years of work, he felt ready to return to his studies, electing to study at an ancient university in Scotland.

Consciously eschewing the 'student' social scene, he preferred to socialise with a small group of musicians, artists and writers (most of whom worked in the service sector to finance their cultural lives) and spent time on campus only when formally required for lectures or tutorials. He considered himself engaged in his course, insofar as the concept held resonance for him but his real passion was music. He played in a band that was 'on the verge of success' and he was a telephone call away from giving up his studies to play full-time with the band. He considered himself a musician rather than a student; similar to his friends who worked as waiters or call-centre operatives, he saw his day job as simply a means to occupy himself before the inevitable success beckoned.

Like N, T inhabited a 'resistance identity', which he wore as a badge of honour, but unlike N did not feel that the university made any effort to engage his brand of 'non-traditionality'. He felt that the university's engagement attempts were directed at 'the students on the treadmill', on the one hand, and at 'cash cow' international students, on the other, with students such as himself being left to define their own experience. When pressed on what engagement efforts he would wish the university to make and what might lure him away from his decision to leave his studies should the call come summoning him to a full-time role with the band, he admitted that any such efforts would be futile, as his heart was set on his musical career and his studies were only a means of marking time; although he did consider himself fully engaged with his course and spoke very warmly about receiving positive feedback on an essay he had submitted and an affirming chat he had had with his personal tutor (whom he had not informed of his intentions to leave the course when the opportunity arrived).

B oscillated in his identification as non-traditional. His initial contact had been hesitant: 'I'm not sure if I'm what you're looking for' and several times during the interview he stopped to check whether what he was saying matched the criteria for inclusion. He had rescheduled the interview twice after failing to appear at the first appointment and seemed to have doubts about whether he fitted or not: either the study criteria, or at (his) university.

B had grown up in a home that had been traditionally working class but with the decimation of the manufacturing sector had been severely affected by unemployment, with many members of his extended family on benefits or in precarious underemployment. He had attended a school with others from similar backgrounds and had been the only one of his former peer group to progress to university. He did not know where most of the others had gone, as he had not kept contact with people from his home town beyond his immediate family.

He admitted that, growing up, he had never questioned that he would go on to university: after all, he recounted, universities were places for smart people and his teachers had always told him he was smart. He had applied successfully for a place at a new university that was close enough to his home town to commute, although he had soon chosen to move into accommodation he shared with classmates because he felt that the emotional distance between his former home and the university was growing exponentially larger and harder to span.

His university was full of 'people like him', who were smart, and he knew of several who had come from similar backgrounds to his own: although he did not feel that this in any way made them alike (beyond that they qualified, as he did, by virtue of their 'smartness'). However, he did not feel engaged; neither by his course specifically, nor by his university more generally. He recognised that they were making efforts to engage 'students from backgrounds like his', with a wealth of services and structures but did not feel completely at home in any sense beyond the intellectual. He enjoyed having the run of the library and the freedom to associate with 'other smart people' but found little of resonance in his course or in the climate of the university and wondered whether another, older, university may have been a better match. Nonetheless, he was determined to 'stick it out' and graduate, in the hopes that a good undergraduate degree could provide him with access to a different university to continue with further studies.

In considering what his university could do to engage him more fully, B listed a range of ideas spanning 'instil more respect for learning among some of the students' and 'make the campus look more like a serious

TABLE 1

Examples of congruent ('positive') and oppositional ('negative') engagement

	Congruent engagement	Non-engagement	Oppositional engagement
Behavioural	Attends lectures, participates with enthusiasm	Skips lectures without excuse	Boycotts, pickets or disrupts lectures
Affective	Interest	Boredom	Rejection
Cognitive	Meets or exceeds assignment requirements	Assignments late, rushed or absent	Redefines parameters for assignments

Source: From Trowler (2010, p. 9).

academic institution', before catching himself and laughing that he was 'describing [the ancient university not too far away], which this will never be!' He described his motivation for engaging with higher education as 'developmental, rather than instrumental' but admitted that he would not be satisfied with a 'menial' career and aspired to work that satisfied him intellectually.

Reflecting on these four examples, some interesting differences emerge. J's intention in studying may be considered 'non-traditional' in contemporary terms since his studies were entirely for personal development rather than for any vocational purpose and N categorised herself this way for a similar reason; while T and B both claimed that their studies were not vocationally inspired, both had instrumental (though differing) reasons for participating in higher education. The debate as to whether or not a university education should necessarily be linked to an instrumental outcome (a career), which is clearly contestable and value-laden and raises questions about the nature and purposes of the university, is beyond the scope of this paper; this issue is one of many that demands a more critical reflection on what we mean by 'student engagement'.

This can be contrasted with notions of congruent *versus* oppositional engagement (Table 1) since both J's and N's engagement would be congruent, with respect to affective, behavioural and cognitive dimensions; despite N's rejection of the goals, while B's and T's engagement would be congruent on the cognitive and behavioural dimensions, while oppositional on the affective dimension. Table 1 illustrates the three dimensions of student engagement identified by

Fredricks *et al.* (2004, pp. 62–63), namely behavioural (what the student does), affective (what the student feels) and cognitive (what the student thinks), mapped onto the antithetical forms of engagement (congruent and oppositional; contrasted with non-engagement) identified by Trowler (2010, p. 9).

A naïve understanding of student engagement, which fails to discriminate between affective, behavioural and cognitive dimensions and their congruent and oppositional manifestations, might then easily mistake T's visible engagement (congruent, as observed on the behavioural level and congruent on the cognitive level as evidenced by his assignment submissions) as predicting intentions to persist, while in reality the failure to engage on an affective level has him ready to depart at a moment's notice. A fuller, more nuanced understanding of how students engage, and with what, thus allows greater use to be made of the concept of student engagement and greater understanding achieved as to how it might affect outcomes and, thus, how institutions can tailor their efforts to maximise the benefits derived from their investments.

Likewise, a more fine-grained understanding of how 'non-traditionality' manifests in a particular context, allowing for the fact that there will be heterogeneity of experience and understanding, may provide a more authentic expression and may facilitate the representation as accurately as is possible under the circumstances, of the nuances and dynamics involved, so as to unmask the 'rich totality of many determinations and relations' (Marx, 1973, p. 100).

Distilling order from chaos

In *Sorting Things Out*, Bowker and Star (1999, p. 6) described their purpose as follows:

> First, we seek to understand the role of invisibility in the work that classification does in ordering human interaction. We want to understand how these categories are made and kept invisible, and in some cases, we want to challenge the silences surrounding them.

A similar process of interrogation is required here, in order to examine what ideological work is being done through the use of these chaotic conceptions and what is being rendered invisible through this.

What ideological work is being done by conceptualising student engagement chaotically?

Defining student engagement as engagement *by* students lays the responsibility and accountability at the door of students: students who

are not engaged have failed to engage. The implication here is that the responsibility of the institution is not to provide resources, or review structures, processes or curricula, or seek in any other way to engage their students. Their duty is to refine their recruitment and selection processes to improve their ability to attract the 'right' students, who will engage and persist.

Defining student engagement as engagement *of* students ascribes responsibility to institutions but denies agency to students: students who are not engaged have not been engaged (but will be when the institution does it 'right'.) The implication here is that students are passive recipients of resources, programmes and offerings designed for them by the agentic university. Once the institution correctly understands the character of the 'changing student body', it can target resources and implement programmes that will engage students, inspiring them to persist and succeed in their studies.

Defining student engagement as engagement *of*, and *by*, students ascribes mutual responsibility but blurs the lines of accountability and glosses over issues of interest and power. The new discursive device of 'student partnership' (in reality often a form of ideological co-option) is an example of this: students now share responsibility and accountability for unpopular decisions such as the magnitude of the fee increase in some English universities through their membership of governance committees making these decisions.

The students in the examples outlined above all claim to be engaged, though it is evident from their descriptions that both B and T are oppositionally engaged along the affective dimension. A definition of student engagement which ascribes responsibility to either party alone would see this oppositional engagement as either a 'failure' to engage congruently by these students and, thus, outside the remit or the duty of the institution to address; or as a failure by the institution to target the correct engagement strategy which would necessarily have resulted in congruent rather than oppositional engagement.

In reality, in both of these cases, neither position is helpful. Enrolling these students and alienating them, however unintentionally, achieves little. Rather, a form of dialogical engagement by both students and their institutions would seem necessary to move beyond the impasse. For T, this may involve more active engagement with his tutor and greater honesty on his part regarding his intentions, while for B it may involve transferring to a university whose *habitus* is more closely aligned to his expectations. However, slapping on a coat of 'student partnership' without exploring the differing positionalities and interests of these

students and their institutions is also unlikely to achieve much. These positionalities include the social and political landscapes students inhabit, usually referring to factors, such as 'race', ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexuality, disability status, religion, socioeconomic class, whether rural or urban in background, and home language. Merriam *et al.*, (2001, p. 411) argued that 'positionality is thus determined by where one stands in relation to "the other". More importantly, these positions can shift', which differs from a position or a perspective in its relationality and context-dependence.

What ideological work is being done by conceptualising non-traditional students chaotically?

Conceptualising students as non-traditional sets up the notion of a traditional student that is seldom defined but, when it is (such as Munro, 2011, p. 115), is often depicted thus (or similarly):

> Typically, for most of the post-war period, the traditional university student was a recent graduate from high school with good grades and enrolled full-time. Most importantly, such students came predominantly from high socio-economic backgrounds that equipped them with the kind of cultural capital that provides a head start in the academic environment.

Thus, the 'traditional' student is the one equipped for higher education, while the 'non-traditional' student is by contrast 'poorly equipped'. Defining students as 'non-traditional' thus positions them as 'other' and subject to deficit, leading to them being or feeling marginalised and disadvantaged by their institutions (Read *et al.*, 2003, p. 1).

Using the term uncritically and slipping into the particular 'non-traditional' population one wishes to concentrate on also has the effect of equating the term with that population, rendering invisible other groups who feel similarly marginalised or 'othered' (for a discussion on the difference between marginalisation and 'othering', see Canales, 2000), leading to a climate of where some groups are seen (or depicted) as being more deserving (of attention, of affirmation, of resourcing) than others. This is yet another problem with the use of 'chaotic conceptions' such as 'non-traditional': that despite their having no traction beyond the merely descriptive within a particular context, their use within that context is assumed beyond that context to refer to the specific group as if the term were synonymous with that group across all contexts. This leads to the rendering invisible in other contexts of groups who, in those other contexts, may more appropriately (or may also) be deemed

'non-traditional'. Where the term is used beyond mere description, for example to govern policy regarding resource distribution, this will have material consequences.

Conversely, not looking at the specifics of a particular manifestation of 'non-traditionality' leads to assumptions or projections of homogeneity, which in turn leads to insufficiently nuanced policies and strategies for provisioning, that may fall short of the mark.

In the cases of the students described above, the examples that would most obviously have ticked boxes on the 'non-traditionality checklist' (J the mature student and B the working-class student) were less likely to consider themselves 'non-traditional' (or to consider themselves 'non-traditional' in an unproblematic way). Of the other examples, whose claims at 'non-traditionality' may have appeared more tenuous, N (the student from an immigrant/observant Muslim family) and T (the delayed transition student) more readily assumed the label, if for reasons than might have been less obvious (relating to their purposes in choosing to participate in higher education). In these cases, interventions targeting the groups on the 'non-traditionality checklist' may have failed because the targeted beneficiaries did not define themselves as needing the interventions, while the other examples may have been bypassed for attention or resourcing, or have had the 'wrong' type of intervention designed for them. Given that it was one of the latter who was most at risk of early leaving, such ill-matched interventions could have had a double negative effect: 'wasting' resources on mismatched provisioning while not providing interventions where these may have had effect.

Conclusion

Concepts such as student engagement and non-traditional are typically used in ways that may appear merely slapdash but, in reality, often mask positionalities, interests or disparities of power that embody ideological ends. Exploring these concepts through the lens of 'chaotic conceptions' allows the unmasking of this ideological work, exposing what is rendered invisible through these discursive choices. Inasmuch as the essentialised construct of 'the student' provides a convenient but ideologically laden concept for policy, the chaotic conception of the non-traditional student similarly allows for a construction of an essentialised being whose presence in higher education can be accommodated through carefully choreographed interventions. Conceiving student engagement chaotically allows for the term to be reduced or expanded to encompass whatever an agency, an institution,

or a policy might wish, without the need for explicit recognition: thus, student engagement might serve as a convenient umbrella term to justify directing substantial resources to secure a better ranking in a league table; alternatively, it can be used to mask institutional monitoring of international students to appease politicians; elsewhere, it might be invoked to introduce fundamental reform of curriculum.

Without agreement on (or understanding of) what a term means when deployed at a particular time in a particular context, allocating resources and responsibility, monitoring progress and defining and evaluating success become hit-and-miss. Focusing on real examples of variously engaged students who define themselves as 'non-traditional' in their own contexts for their own reasons reveals the gap between the assumptions of who these students are and how they engage and thus how best to design and resource student engagement initiatives, and the perceptions and understandings presented by these students themselves. This resonates with Sayer's (1992, p. 139) caution about deploying such conceptions for any purposes beyond simple description and allows for unmasking the 'rich totality of many determinations and relations' (Marx, 1973, p. 100).

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