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Degrees of Independence Conference

From Absent to Active Voices:
the participation of disabled students in higher education

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From Absent to Active Voices:
the participation of disabled students in higher education

- Why is participation so important?

- How effective are the voices of a marginalised group in practice?

  (i)   participation of disabled students at a legislative and national policy level

  (ii) experiences of disabled students at a case study university in Wales

Why is participation so important?

- Equalising relationships

- Confronting dominant views and values

- Raising awareness of inequality and oppressive practices

- Empowerment: socio-politically and individually

Why is participation so important?

Eight Rungs on a Ladder of Citizen Participation
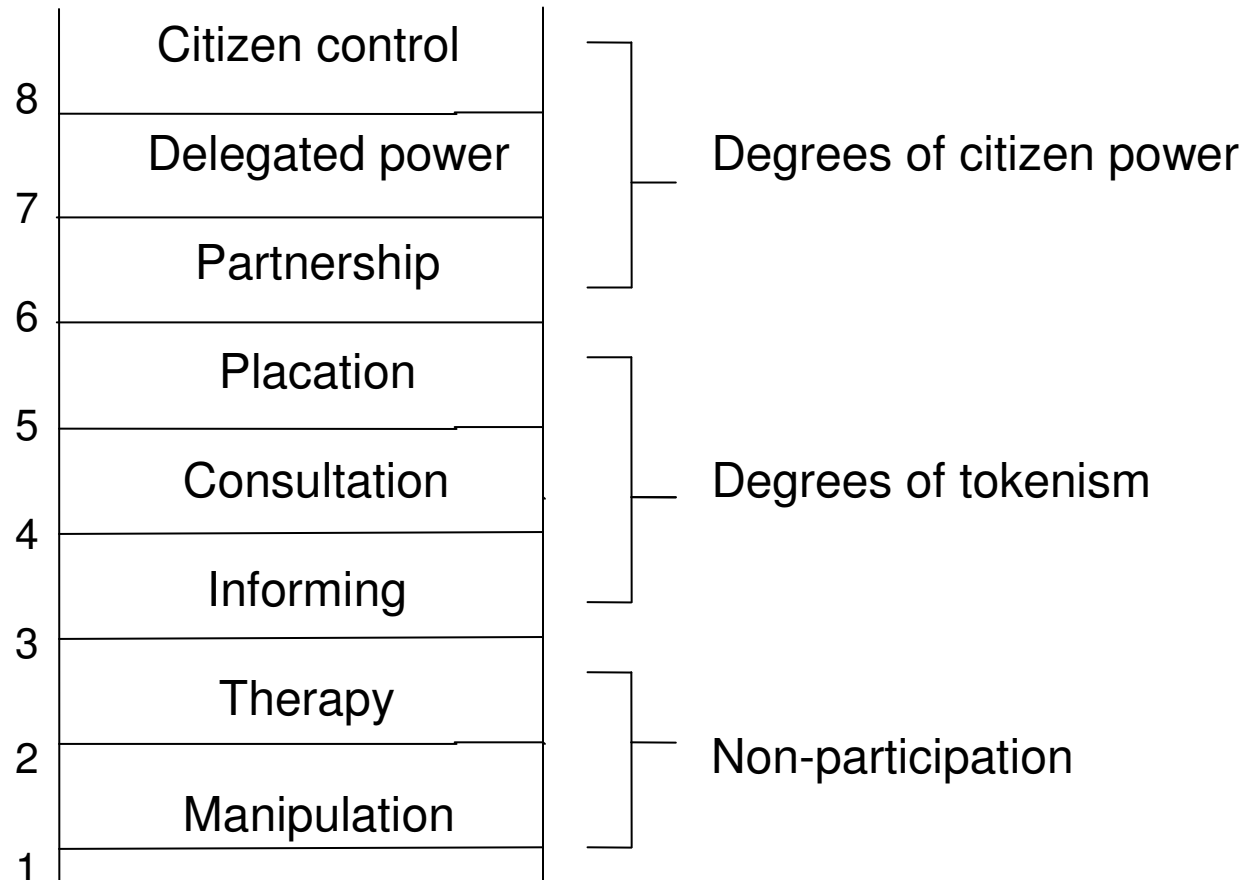
(Source: Arnstein 1969: 217)

How effective is the voice of a marginalised group in practice?

- Involvement of disabled people at a legislative and policy level

- Experiences of disabled students at a case study university in Wales

How effective is the voice of a marginalised group in practice?

Participation at a legislative and national policy level

Representation?

'…articulate their own assumptions about the needs of disabled people rather than the needs of disabled people as they themselves express them'. (Oliver 1990: 105)

How effective is the voice of a marginalised group in practice? Participation at a legislative and national policy level

Collaboration?

Skill argued in a Government briefing that:

'there is no sound reason why the increase in equality for one group should be made to threaten the existing rights of another, the universities'. (quoted in Hansard 1995a, 22nd May, col. 876).

Lord Beloff in the House of Lords:

'…those who represent disabled students believe that the way forward is through co-operation between such organisations and the institutions of higher education. They deplore the interjection of an unnecessary compulsory power …' (Hansard 1995b, 22nd May, col. 876)

How effective is the voice of a marginalised group in practice? Participation at a legislative and national policy level

Skill's review of Disabled Student Allowances (DSAs):

Completed questionnaires:

8 students (approx)

64 higher educational institutions (HEIs)

- Experiences of students largely omitted
- Focussed on the experiences of Local Educational Authorities (LEAs), disability officers and assessors

How effective is the voice of a marginalised group in practice? Participation at a legislative and national policy level

Quality Assurance Group (QAG)

Department of Further Education and Skills (DfES) officials

Representatives from Local Education Authorities (LEAs), Assessment Centres, Disability Officers, one Skill representative and one National Union of Students (NUS) representative

'It is clear that many of the parties involved in these meetings have a vested interest in ensuring the system is reorganised in a manner which is favourable to themselves rather than best for students'.
(NUS Annual Conference Report 2004)

How effective is the voice of a marginalised group in practice? Participation at a legislative and national policy level

Tokenistic?

'*they want us there but don't listen and take on board the student viewpoint*'. (NUS Disability Officer email: 25/03/04)

'*If we don't get our, the student, point across at these meetings they win, they close ranks and cover up the cracks in the system, because it is their system, they control. …They are approaching it from an administration and what's best for assessors/LEAs prospect, their own interests. As opposed to this is a system for disabled students and what's best for the students'.* (NUS Disability Officer Interview: 21/01/04)

How effective is the voice of a marginalised group in practice? Participation at a higher educational policy and practice level: experiences of disabled students at a case study university in Wales

(i)   Effectiveness and genuineness of consultation

(ii)   Issues around disability identity and stigma

(iii)   Process of empowerment

What happens in practice? An example of a participatory
        exercise at the case study university

How effective is the voice of a marginalised group in practice?
Participation at a higher educational policy and practice level: experiences of disabled students at a case study university in Wales

Effectiveness and genuineness of consultation:

Christine (interview: 09/06/03):

'They [disabled students] don't think they are listened too'.

'Well I think it's important, but only if views are taken on board. Not if you are asked along just to show you are being included. …If they are going to consult with students then they have to take on board what they say. Really listen to them'.

How effective is the voice of a marginalised group in practice? Participation at a higher educational policy and practice level: experiences of disabled students at a case study university in Wales

<u>Effectiveness and genuineness of consultation:</u>

<u>Sophie (Interview: 11/03/03)</u>

<u>An alternative expertise:</u>

'There are some things, people who aren't disabled just don't realise, a simple example is the electric sockets in lectures, or things like nowhere for someone using a laptop to sit'.

<u>Inclusion:</u>

'I want to sit with my friends, I don't want a separate desk, it would be horrible, it would be so embarrassing, but at the same time sitting with everybody else, when [the desk] is too high or too far away [pause]'.

How effective is the voice of a marginalised group in practice? Participation at a higher educational policy and practice level: experiences of disabled students at a case study university in Wales

Disability identity and stigma:

'I don't want to be different to the rest, you know. A lot of people on the course don't even know I'm disabled. I don't sort of advertise the fact'. (David Second Interview: 4/12/03)

'In the hierarchy of social values, prevalent within British society, which accords little or no status to disabled people, describing oneself as disabled cannot be seen as a positive step. There is no social status to be gained for 'coming out' as disabled'. (Watson 2002: 525)

How effective is the voice of a marginalised group in practice? Participation at a higher educational policy and practice level: experiences of disabled students at a case study university in Wales

The process of empowerment: support/encouragement/taking control

'You get ideas from other people, how they have managed and things'.
(Rebecca Interview: 13/03/03)

'It would have been interesting to talk to other disabled people, what their experiences had been like with the Disability Office, access to information, or access to services and stuff'.
(Dawn Interview: 20/03/03)

How effective is the voice of a marginalised group in practice? Participation at a higher educational policy and practice level: experiences of disabled students at a case study university in Wales

What happens in practice? An example of a participatory exercise

Disability Equality Scheme – active consultation

Case study stated:

'Student input into the initial plan arose from one to one discussion with students, Disability Forum priorities and direct comments and requests from students. The ongoing structural direct inclusion of disabled students in the continual development of the plan is seen as a primary importance'.

In reality, consultation was non-existent.