

## **Student Campaigning**

This essay aims to consider how a particular life-course category, the young adult, in a specific context, the British university system, can impact on development.

It is necessary to make a number of precursory comments to set the scene and specify the concerns of the essay before continuing. The first paragraphs will serve to do this by giving a justification for considering students as a life-course category and briefly discussing the value of campaigning. The essay will then proceed to consider three questions: Do students campaign? Why should students, as a particular life-course category, be involved in campaigning relevant to development? What is limiting student campaigning? The essay will then conclude by summarising the arguments made.

It is first of all important to recognise that concepts such as ‘young adult’ are socially constructed, defying definitions restricted to chronological age. For example, the ‘coming of age’ transition into adulthood cannot be pinned down as “*different societies, at different periods, define and mark transitions into adult status in different ways*” (Mayo 1997, 150) which may vary according to factors such as class, gender and entry into productive work, marriage or parenthood. The particular concept considered in this essay is not necessarily an age category; university students in the UK can vary greatly in age, particularly those studying at postgraduate level. However, the argument can be made that the public perception of a student is one of a young adult, and in particular of one without the responsibilities of ‘full’ adult life, such as a family or a job. Indeed, for some sections of British society the completion of education and leaving university is widely recognised as part of the ‘coming of age’ transition. According to estimates made by the Department for Education and Skills in 2003/04, approximately 43 per cent of UK 17-30 year olds currently enter higher education (DfES 2005), making up the vast majority of the approximately 2.3 million students in the UK (undergraduate and postgraduate) (HESA 2005). It is interesting to note that 52 per cent of first year undergraduate students are mature students (HESA 2005), i.e. of at least 21 years of age when starting to study, but this does not alter the fact that, generally speaking, while recognising some anomalies of considerably more mature students, in the British context students are considered as ‘young’.

This essay is not an appropriate forum to argue the case for campaigning in general. Instead it will assume its value after making a few brief comments. There are four broad strands in which students in the UK play a part in development: campaigning (sometimes referred to as activism, including the more radical direct action), public awareness raising, fund-raising (including giving financially themselves) and volunteering. While recognising that these four are often interlinked, this essay will focus on campaigning. Civil society plays a large role in the world today; *“from human rights to land mines, sustainable development, and democratization, global problem solving is increasingly being left to an agglomeration of unelected, often unaccountable transnational civil society actors”* (Florini 2001, 29). Campaigning is *“part of the discourse and practice of democratic politics and social change”*, offering opportunities for citizens to *“have their views heard and to influence the decisions and practices of larger institutions that affect their lives”* (Gaventa 2001, 275). Through campaigning individuals and groups attempt, sometimes with success, to hold politicians, corporations, opinion leaders and power structures to account. A variety of methods are used, including protests, boycotts, ‘shareholder activism’, direct action, petitioning and public shaming. Some of challenges which face campaigning will be discussed later when considering the factors limiting student campaigning.

### **Do students campaign?**

Common perceptions of the young in Britain are often negative; *“generally ‘youth’ today is seen as a problem: young people are beset by predominantly negative images...either are a source of trouble or in trouble”* (Roche and Tucker 1997, 1). Students in particular are often understood to be apathetic and politically disengaged, *“unconcerned about social or political issues”* (Wilkinson and Mulgan 1995), particularly when compared to student activists of the past – rebels now sometimes considered heroes, who supported feminism and Greenpeace while standing against nuclear weapons, apartheid and the war in Vietnam. Such views can be supported by statistics; only 48 per cent of students voted in the 2005 general election, a significantly lower proportion than the 75 per cent of older respondents (Whitehead 2007). Even with issues directly affecting them there has been limited action. Higher education has become a marketplace, in terms of fees and with respect to the international ‘trade’ in education, with very little protest from students; *“the vast majority of students keep shtum”* (Brendon 2007). When students do act their reasons for doing so may not be devoid of self interest. They stand accused of motivations that go beyond simple altruism, including the salving of their consciences and improving their CVs, and thus long-term financial prospects, with evidence of experience and motivation.

Are these fair criticisms? Some level of apathy cannot be denied, however “*it should be recognised that young people are currently taking action in a range of political activities even if they do not see them as political*” (Rowntree Foundation 2000), though the numbers involved are not large in proportion to the total student population. Organisations which campaign on development issues, such as People and Planet, Student Action for Refugees and the Student Global AIDS Campaign, have been consistently active and growing in UK universities. Volunteering, at home and abroad, is common, with many links to development. Large national campaigns, such as the protests before the invasion of Iraq and for action on climate change, contain significant numbers of students. Certainly the appearance of student campaigning has changed. There is definite tendency for young people, including students, to be more involved with “*particular campaigns and single issue politics*” (Roker et al 1999, 4) than traditional party politics. Such participation in “*single issue pressure groups*” (Hachett 1997) allows focus on specific causes about which individuals or groups feel passionate, giving them the opportunity to feel as if they are able to ‘make a difference’. The challenges presented by such an approach will be discussed at a later stage.

Another change is that campaigning is no longer the almost exclusive domain of rebellious students; “*activism is now a high street phenomenon...activists come in all shapes and sizes*” (Crace 2005). The prevalence of white ‘Make Poverty History’ wrist bands in the summer of 2005 showed that involvement in campaigning on development issues has become mainstreamed and even fashionable. It could be argued that at times campaigns and protests have been sanctioned, or even co-opted, by the very power structures they are trying to change; for example New Labour’s involvement/rhetoric regarding the Make Poverty History campaign. The existence of campaigners from across the age spectrum is interesting from a life-course perspective; it appears that the growth in numbers and improvements in the health of retirees has had an effect on the campaigning demographic.

### **Why should students, as a particular life-course category, be involved in campaigning relevant to development?**

It is possible to argue that all citizens of a ‘developed’ country such as the UK have a moral responsibility to campaign on development issues. Historically, through colonial exploitation and trade, their countries have often been parts of the problem, rather than the solution. They are (or at

least have more direct action to) the major creditors and stakeholders in international organisations, controlling access to finance and power. Chambers makes a similar argument.

*“There is more wealth in the world, and its distribution is more polarized and concentrated. The same is true of power. At the same time we are all more connected and more able to exert influence than before. For those with money and access, the revolutions in transport and communications have multiplied the number of activities which are open. Mobile phones and email have transformed communications. Over the past decade, for those with access to the internet and with money to travel, the range of things to do that make a difference has risen exponentially, almost beyond the reach of the imagination. It is easier than ever, and with a broader choice than ever, for a middle-income person in an OECD country to choose to give money, to team up with others who are like minded or to campaign for causes.”*

Chambers 2005, 203

Can it be argued that students have a particular responsibility? Chambers continues to suggest that *“since our [citizens of OECD countries] scope for action is greater, so, too, is our responsibility”* (Chambers 2005, 204). By this logic students would have particular responsibility if they have a greater ‘scope’ or opportunity to act. The following paragraph will attempt to show that this is the case.

The fact that a student has been accepted into university implies a certain level of education has already been achieved. Their time in higher education will, it is hoped, build on this, giving them the skills to locate, access, understand and act on information. Today’s British universities make extensive use of the internet, which also plays an important role in campaigning. For example, Collins et al noted *“the growing use of the internet and computer-based technologies, which have facilitated inexpensive, wider, and more timely dissemination of information”* (Collins et al 2001, 146) in campaigns. Jacob Bronowski, writing about university study in 1973, observed that *“it is important that students bring a certain ragamuffin, barefoot irreverence to their studies; they are not here to worship what is known, but to question it”* (quoted in Hastings 2005). Universities continue to encourage critical and analytical thinking. This could be brought to bear on development issues, which for some would then lead to action. While it is not always true to suggest that students have huge amounts of free time, it is often the case, particularly when extended university vacations are taken into account. Moreover, students are generally free of the responsibilities of later stages in the life-course; the vast majority are not married, responsible for a

family or attempting to balance the pressures of a career. Generally speaking students do appear to have a greater 'scope for action' and thus, by the arguments given above, a particular responsibility to campaign.

Some brief observations must be made before the essay moves on to discuss the factors limiting student campaigning. It is certainly not the case that all students have the greater 'scope for action' described above. Some struggle to keep up with the requirements of their courses, due to academic or health difficulties, while others find the pressure to achieve and the related competition for jobs or the need to work to financially support their study removes any such 'scope'. In addition, Chambers does not appear to recognise that the 'scope for action' can be utilized in fields other than development, such as sports, the arts or volunteering.

That students have this 'responsibility' does not mean other life-course categories do not; indeed some of the advantages mentioned above may also make students inappropriate campaigners in some contexts. The fact that they are often limited financially and young makes them unlikely candidates for 'share-holder' activism or lobbying at higher levels, as these require a certain amount of money and power. As has been observed earlier, retirees often have similar 'scope for action'. To these could be added other groups who have particular opportunities or motivation, such as the wealthy or religious.

### **What is limiting student campaigning?**

Student campaigning in Britain essentially follows the guidance of a number of organisations, including many of the major British NGOs such as Oxfam UK, Christian Aid and so on. All of these organisations have their own agendas, which in turn inform how they 'steer' their student groups. Students' agency therefore becomes limited; they can choose which organisations' messages to expose themselves to, whether or not to act on that message and, in some cases, how they will act (with respect to the method but not the intention or message). Some organisations, such as People and Planet, pride themselves on their democracy and student leadership. However, students usually still limit themselves to the information presented by the organisation, leaving the agenda predominately in their hands. In some senses this is a 'good thing' - students' opinions are informed by experts and so their campaigning action is guided to where it can be most effective. On the other hand this can limit the 'scope for action' discussed above.

Students' access to information about development issues and appropriate campaign opportunities is a key point; "*what the eye does not see, the heart does not grieve over*" (Old English proverb quoted in Chambers 1983, 1). Unfortunately it is "*widely conceded that the public [in Northern countries] knows little about international development or about the connections between development there and life here*" (Smillie 1998, 26). Images of the developing world presented by the media are often shallow and simplistic (wonderfully satirised by Wainaina 2005) so a more serious development education is required. Chambers makes an intriguing proposal in this vein by calling for a "*pedagogy for the non-oppressed*" which would enable "*those with more wealth and power to welcome having less*" (Chambers 2005, 203). There are two possible sources for such a development education in the UK: NGOs and government.

Clark argues that many Northern NGOs are so preoccupied with finding financial support that they miss the campaigning potential of their supporters; "*they view their citizens as merely donors, neglecting their potential to act as educators (of their children and peers), advocates (for example through local newspapers or societies), voters, consumers (boycotting or favouring certain products), investors (making ethical choices), and – if all else fails – as trouble makers through demonstrations and direct action*" (Clark 2001, 27). Instead they offer nothing more than "*small feel-good opportunities to 'do something useful'*" (Smillie 1998, 30). This priority given to fundraising limits NGOs' spending on development education in the UK.

Government support for development education has also been minimal. The New Labour government signalled its willingness to raise public awareness on development issues in a white paper issued in 1997; they would ensure "*accurate, unbiased, accessible information about the causes of poverty and inequality in developing countries, and about what the international community can do*" (quoted in Randen and German 1998, 148). Unfortunately this promising start appears to have led to little. Development education in schools (as part of the over-loaded Citizenship curriculum) is squeezed out by other subjects, exam preparation and the focus on league tables.

The lack of support for development education from both NGOs and government has led to the focus on single issues mentioned earlier. The drawbacks to this approach are numerous. Issues can be over-simplified into development narratives, leading to simplistic, and often ineffective, campaigning solutions. Clair Short, the then UK Minister for International Development, claimed

that “*single issue campaigning can lead to a kind of irresponsibility – organisations say ridiculous things to raise their profile and money*” (quoted in Harper 2001, 251). Issues chosen for campaigns are necessarily those which attract campaigners’ attention; “*in invoking the public interest, NGOs will have to respond directly to the concern of a broad base within society*” (Newell 2001, 1999). Issues that attract interest, such as those involving children, receive attention, while other less popularist ones, such as land reform, can be sidelined. It can be argued that this is better than nothing, but it remains a limit on the potential of student campaigning.

An interrelated issue is that of legitimacy and the voice of the poor. How can student campaigners in Britain “*link their own voice as advocates with the knowledge and voices of local people on whose behalf they sometimes claim to speak?*” (Gaventa 2001, 283). Do students, young people, in a developed country have the right to speak on issues affecting people, including their elders, in a world so far from their own? This is a particular problem when the question of inequality is raised; there is no doubt that “*Northern campaigns have significantly greater access to funding, equipment, technical skills, global policymakers, and international meetings, realities which mirror the historic inequalities between North and South*” (Collins et al 2001, 143). One partial solution to these problems could be alliances made between student campaign groups around the world, perhaps as part of wider networks, as is being attempted by the Student Global AIDS Campaign.

Finally it is important to note that apathy is a real problem. I could explain...but I can’t be bothered.

## **Conclusion**

This essay has considered how a particular life-course category, the young adult, in a specific context, the British University system, can impact on development. It did so by attempting to answer three questions.

Do students campaign? Yes, despite common perceptions to the contrary. However, they do so in a different way from in the past, and as part of a wider section of society which crosses life-course categories. On the other hand it must be noted that student apathy is real; the fact that some campaign does not mean that all do.

Why should students, as a particular life-course category, be involved in campaigning relevant to development? Because, generally speaking, due to their situation, they have a particular ‘scope for action’ – for example, they are educated, able to access information and free from many of the responsibilities that are associated with later stages of the life-course.

What is limiting student campaigning? Due to apathy and a deficiency of support from government and NGOs, student campaigning in Britain is constrained by:

- a lack of agency with respect to agenda, particularly in moving beyond simplistic solutions in single issue campaigning
- a lack of an appropriate ‘pedagogy of the non-oppressed’ (development education)
- a lack of legitimacy to speak on behalf of people in the developing world.

There are excellent possibilities for beneficial outcomes in development from campaigning. The life-course category of the young person in higher education in Britain has particular potential. Moving this potential into reality will require focused support from both government and NGOs.

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