Partnership in pandemic: Re-imagining Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation for an era of emergency decision-making

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Abstract

As higher education moves from the COVID-19 pandemic into a still uncertain world, many questions remain unresolved. One is how students shape their learning experience after a period of extraordinary pressures on decision-making processes but also a new wave of energy from students to engage with those decisions (Hassan *et al.,* 2020). A useful prism for exploring students' roles is Sherry Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation, and this article offers two reimaginations of the ladder for emergency-era student engagement, adapting its eight rungs to reflect how students have been involved (or not) in institutional responses to the pandemic. By highlighting the connections between student and citizen engagement (Giroux, 2010) as particularly prominent during the pandemic, the article illustrates the negative consequences of the two extremes of disenfranchisement and protest which featured strongly in institutional life during the pandemic, often overlapping to the detriment of universities and students' unions. Further arguments are presented that reimagining the ladder in these ways shows partnership as steering a meaningful course between those two extremes, and that with more uncertainty ahead institutions must look to students' expertise and enable them to be constructive and partnered agents of change in institutions and wider society.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown from March 2020 presented an enormous challenge for higher education, described as *"a reset moment that prompts colleges to rethink how they operate at every level"* (Blumenstyk, 2020). There were huge and obvious disruptions to learning (Hill and Fitzgerald, 2020, p. 6), and the consequent adjustments featured *"an adrenaline-fuelled frenzy aimed at addressing immediate, novel problems"* (Bartolic *et al*., 2021, p. 14). Indeed, the COVID-19 outbreak meant that institutions had only a matter of days to reorientate themselves to virtual delivery (Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), 2020, p. 17). Others, meanwhile, have suggested that the virus brought new focus and urgency to existing arguments that had long been made about reinventing higher education (Scottish Funding Council (SFC), 2020, p. 10; Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), 2020b, p. 1).

Debate quickly began about what the sector should look like during and after the pandemic. This included the nature of learning and quality (SFC, 2020); how reopened campuses could be safe (AdvanceHE, 2020); the role of students' unions (Alcock and Ball, 2020; Eberlin and Thomas, 2020); and how COVID-19 responses might address, not exacerbate, existing structural inequalities (Dorn *et al*., 2020). Reflections, in Scotland at least, also raised fundamental questions about the purpose of institutions: with descriptions of them at the time as "national assets and civic anchors" (SFC, 2020, p. 29); while a major commission reported that from the pandemic has arisen an urgent need to "create a truly integrated tertiary system'" (The Independent Commission on the College of the Future, 2020, p. 9).

Such considerations featured some key assumptions. One was the idea that *"[t]he central importance of the role of education in the reconstruction of the economy is unarguable"* (Advisory Group on Economic Recovery, 2020, p. 2). Another was the increased significance of the student voice (SFC, 2020) which has *"never been more important"* (Student Partnership in Quality Scotland (sparqs, 2021, p. 3). As argued by Hassan *et al*. (2020), student representatives became more familiar with internal structures because of the lack of in-person communication opportunities and more aware of national education policy because of its profile in the media.

Therefore, it is worth exploring what partnership means as the sector emerges from this dramatic and traumatic period for learning and teaching, and this article aims to do so through the prism of Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation (figure 1). This introduction will outline the impact of the pandemic on higher education (HE) student engagement and briefly explain Arnstein's ladder. The second section will explore the ladder's applicability to the specific context of COVID-19 student engagement practice in HE, to draw lessons for wider emergency decision-making in the sector. Thirdly and finally, the article will argue that partnership is more important than ever to the rapid pedagogical transformation and emergency planning that still characterises this period, and that a re-imagined Arnstein's ladder can be valuable in developing partnership at times of crisis. Within these arguments, two adaptations of Arnstein's original model are proposed.

Sherry Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation (Arnstein, 1969) was developed from her research into American community engagement and has been described as ”one of the most widely referenced and influential models in the field of democratic public participation" (Organizing Engagement, n.d.). While many frameworks for visually expressing partnership exist (Varwell, 2021), Arnstein's ladder stands out due to its more than fifty-year vintage and its wide use in exploring student engagement in HE in many contexts. It has been used for instance in curriculum design (Bovill & Bulley, 2011; figure 2), in reflecting on the nature of institutions and role of students (Carey, 2018), and in exploring ideological motivations for engagement activities (Buckley, 2018).

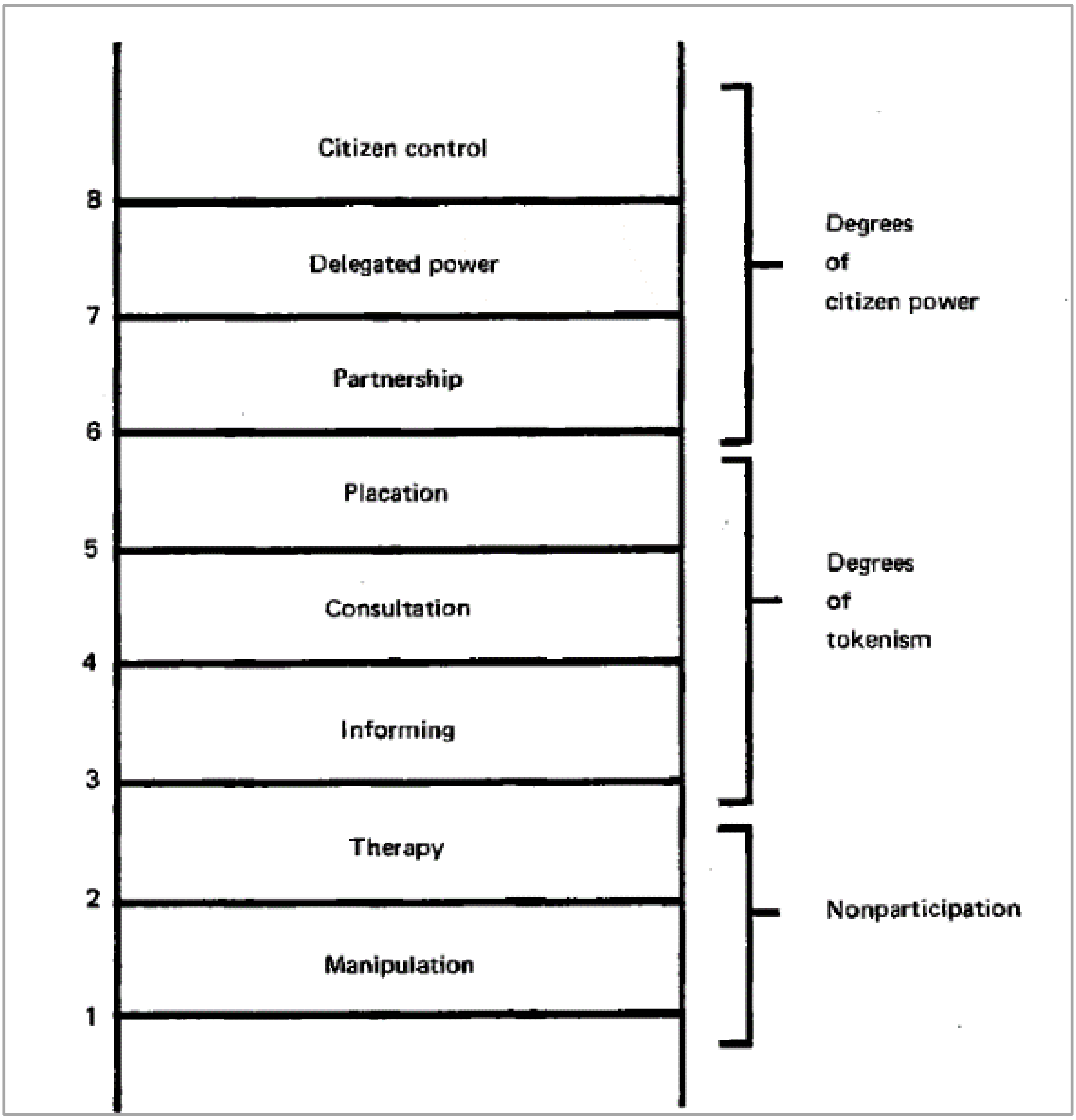

Citizen control
8
Delegated power
7
Partnership
6
Placation
5
Consultation
4
Informing
3
Therapy
2
Manipulation
1
Degrees of citizen power
Degrees of tokenism
Nonparticipation

Figure 1: A ladder of citizen participation (Arnstein, 1969, p. 217).

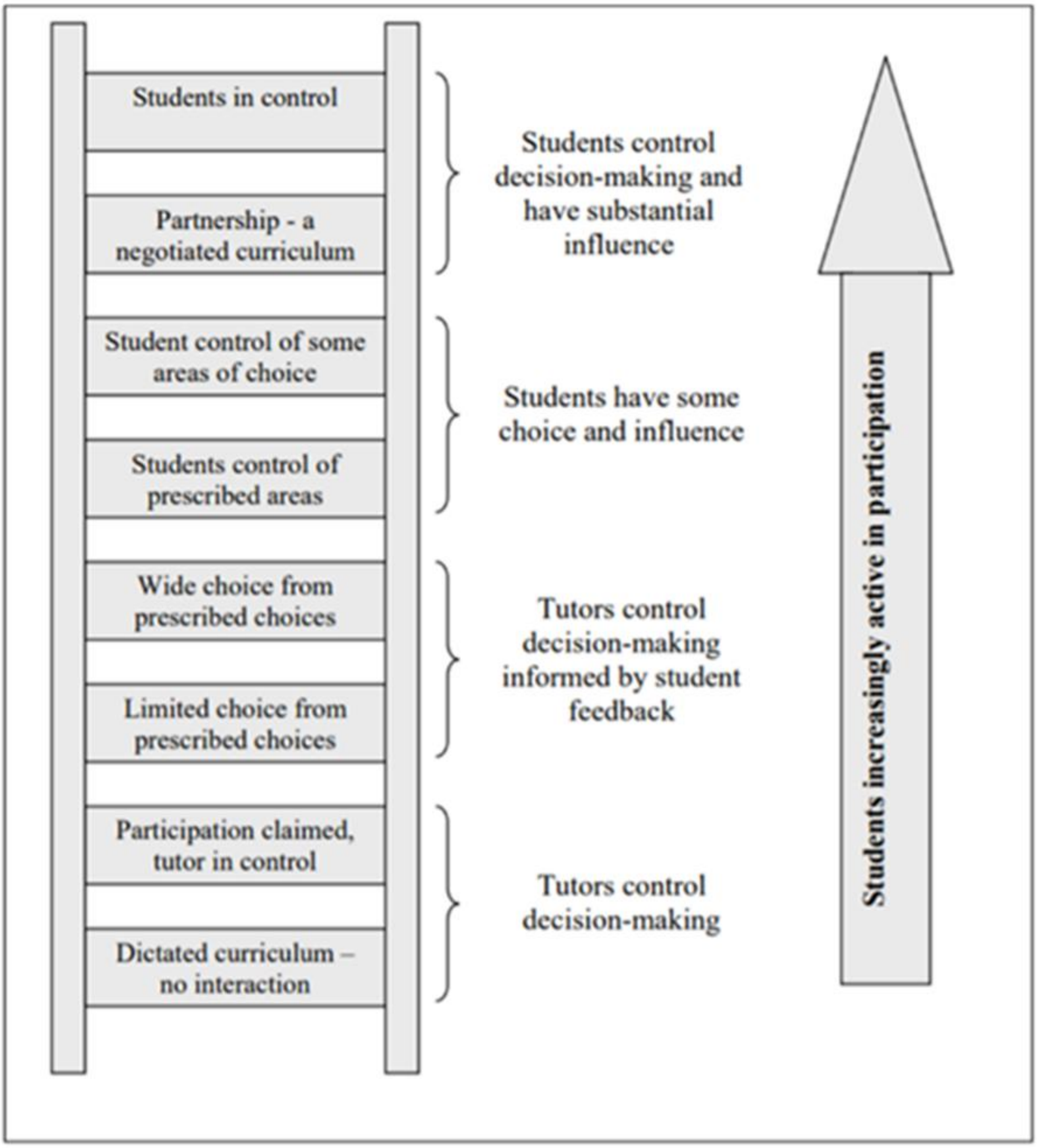

Students in control
Partnership - a negotiated curriculum
Student control of some areas of choice
Students control of prescribed areas
Wide choice from prescribed choices
Limited choice from prescribed choices
Participation claimed, tutor in control
Dictated curriculum – no interaction
Students control decision-making and have substantial influence
Students have some choice and influence
Tutors control decision-making informed by student feedback
Tutors control decision-making
Students increasingly active in participation

Figure 2: A ladder of active student participation in curriculum design (Bovill and Bulley, 2011, p. 5).

The ladder's eight steps are grouped under three headings of non-participation, tokenism and citizen power, as illustrated in Arnstein's original diagram (figure 1). It was published in 1969 against a backdrop of widespread debate about how citizens shape the world around them, as manifested in the 1968 student protests in France and the American civil rights movement, yet it echoes contemporary conversations about inequality and disenfranchisement. Arnstein herself prophetically states that her model could easily be applied in other public services, community organisations such as churches, or indeed HE (Arnstein, 1969, p. 217).

The ladder and the pandemic

Pandemic decision-making in HE, especially in the early days of lockdown and the rapid shift to online learning, covered the full spectrum of Arnstein's ladder, from the 'sham' (Arnstein, 1969, p. 218) of authorities manipulating citizens through to full citizen control.

Arnstein (1969, p. 217) describes the two lowest levels, manipulation and therapy, as 'non-participation', with attempts to engineer views or re-educate citizens. Institutions were criticised for second-guessing students' views about a pandemic learning experience rather than genuinely involving them, for instance where "university managers have decided that what students *really* want now, during a global pandemic, is face-to-face contact" (Finlayson, 2020 [online]). Universities also attempted, even while still in 2020's first lockdown, to paint highly optimistic pictures of returning to supposedly COVID-safe campuses (University of Bolton, 2020). This was despite claims that *"we cannot assume anything about the student learning experience at this time"* (McCreadie, 2020, p. 157). Even if well-meaning, such action demonstrates *"an egoism cloaked in the false generosity of paternalism"* (Freire, 2005, p. 54) and a power dynamic which reinforces the separate roles of the knowing and the ignorant (Ross, 1991, xx).

Arnstein's middle grouping, 'degrees of tokenism' (Arnstein, 1969, p. 217), includes informing citizens, consulting them, and placating them with restricted roles in decision-making: widely-used tools of student engagement. The power dynamic has not radically altered here, however, because information merely helps students react to and survive decisions rather than co-create them; while surveys are separate processes from any involvement in resultant action plans. Indeed, one team of academics seeking students' views on a restructured course during the pandemic wrote that they identified students' preferences but provided no evidence of those students being involved in creating the solutions (Lima *et al*., 2020, p. 682). Even students' union-led surveys about COVID-19 experiences were still not guaranteed to be acted upon by institutional decision-makers. As for committees, it was often either existing bodies that were making emergency decisions, or new ones that were still management-led and on which students may or may not have had seats. As Trendall and Black (2020, para 6) argue in the context of the pandemic, "[i]nstitutions might well have students (or student representatives) sitting on boards that discuss papers and finalise decisions, but this alone is not enough."

The highest rungs on the ladder, starting with partnership, are described by Arnstein as 'degrees of citizen power' (2020, p. 217) with increasing levels of involvement in decision-making. She states that "partnership can work most effectively where there is an organized power-base in the community to which the citizen leaders are accountable" (ibid), of which students' unions are obvious examples. Pleasingly, the pandemic sparked many such partnerships. There were examples of students' unions working with their institutions in genuine partnership to co-create new pandemic messages and services (University of St Andrews, 2020). Various students-as-partners projects during the pandemic, such as in the adaptation of learning materials for virtual learning environments (Cunningham *et al*., 2021; Riddell *et al.,* 2021), the co-creation of assessment criteria (Smith *et al*., 2021) and the observation and enhancement of learning and teaching (Groves *et al*., 2021; Wust *et al.,* 2021). A number of sectoral collations of successful partnership practice also exist (sparqs, 2021; Enhancement Themes [online]). These examples collectively build trust and confidence in staff-student relationships at a time when such relationships have been strained by physical, technological and academic disruption. Nonetheless, more strategic responses to the pandemic sometimes emerged through existing or adapted decision-making structures with continuing management-led dynamics characterised by placation, and it has been observed that there were *“far too many unwitting examples of institutions getting it wrong”* (McLaughlin, 2020 [online]).

Above partnership sit delegated power and citizen control, and the difference between them is important. The former sees citizens in dominant roles or holding vetoes over certain areas of work (Arnstein, 1969, p. 222). In the latter, citizens can be “in full charge of policy and managerial aspects, and… able to negotiate the conditions under which “outsiders” may change them” (Arnstein, 1969, p. 223). Delegated power arguably characterises students’ unions, whose services are run according to their own autonomous policy-making but with restrictions from national legislation or institutional funding levels. During the virus, these services such as peer-led pandemic support schemes (Brig Newspaper, 2020) could mitigate against, but not actually reverse or prevent, students’ difficult experiences. Student-Led Teaching Awards are an example of the power students have to celebrate and influence excellent teaching practice, and categories in such awards relating to technology-enhanced learning (Quality Assurance Agency Scotland [online]) had a role in reflecting the pandemic learning situation, though they did not in themselves direct a shift in practice. This level of autonomy in decision-making and service provision may be an encouraging indication of citizen-led work at the delegated power level. It could, however, still show little evidence of partnership if a students’ union sits at non-participative or tokenistic levels of the ladder in terms of the institution’s own decision-making.

As for the highest level on the ladder, Arnstein highlights direct public funding to citizen-led groups as a key feature (Arnstein, 1969, p. 223). Students’ unions are not an appropriate equivalent here, given the limits to their delegated power as discussed above and the fact that they receive core funding from their parent institutions and rarely directly from central funding bodies. Given this limit on students’ unions’ scope, therefore, the most obvious manifestations of citizen control in the context of the pandemic lay beyond these representative bodies in the realm of direct action. The experiences of lockdowns in halls of residences led to independent student-led movements such as Students Before Profit and Refund Us Now, petitions, and rent strikes (Hall, 2020). While it might be argued that such direct action merely influenced rather than controlled university services, it was notable that this citizen control achieved rent rebates (University of Manchester, 2020) where inside-the-tent students’ union positioning was not seen as succeeding. This suggests that protesters felt they did not have time in this crisis for Milner’s ‘convivial schoolroom atmosphere’ (Ross, 1991, xiii) and decided to initiate their own independent model of change agency.

Irrespective of success, such activity potentially created conflict between, on the one hand, formally constituted students’ unions who were recognised in (increasingly digital) corridors of power and whose ability to engage in political activity were limited by their charitable status (Dickinson, 2020) and, on the other, more anarchic student groups without such accountability and regulation. While students’ unions are unlikely, certainly in the short term, to be supplanted in their role as the primary voice for students, the existence of other student-led campaigns for change suggested that some students rightly or wrongly perceived a weakness in SU responses. As Arnstein concludes, we cannot dismiss the argument ”of embittered advocates of community control – that every other means of trying to end their victimization has failed!“ (Arnstein, 1969, p. 224).

Mapping these features of pandemic student engagement on to Arnstein’s original model suggests an equivalent ladder as set out in figure 3.

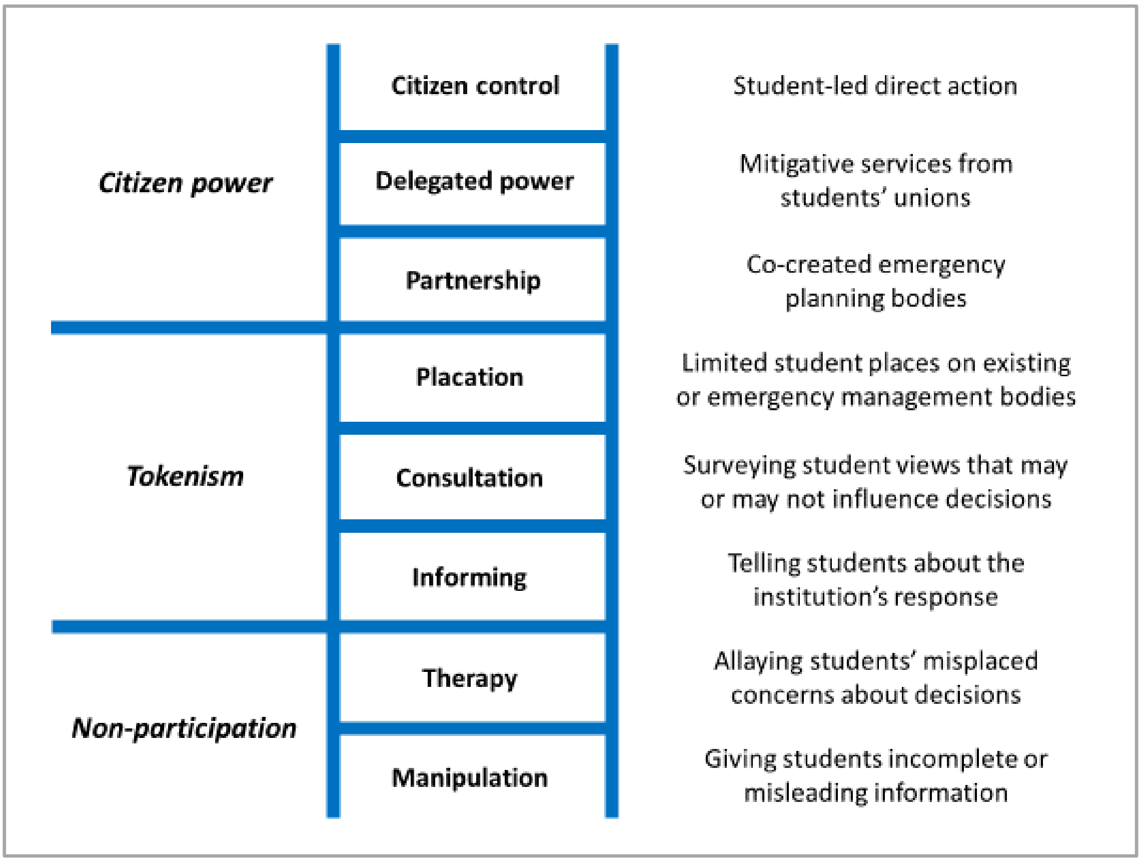

Citizen power
Tokenism
Non-participation
Citizen control
Delegated power
Partnership
Placation
Consultation
Informing
Therapy
Manipulation
Student-led direct action
Mitigative services from students’ unions
Co-created emergency planning bodies
Limited student places on existing or emergency management bodies
Surveying student views that may or may not influence decisions
Telling students about the institution’s response
Allaying students’ misplaced concerns about decisions
Giving students incomplete or misleading information

Figure 3: An emergency-era ladder of student participation

Applying the ladder

Such a reimagined version of Arnstein’s ladder can provide value in reflecting on partnership in decision-making during the COVID-19 crisis or indeed other disruptions to learning and wider society. By distinguishing partnership from other levels this model can be used to demonstrate that even during such a challenging time working with students as partners, co-creators and agents of change is achievable, desirable and essential.

Firstly, the achievability can be seen in sectoral collations of case studies (sparqs, n.d.), or through application of existing models to the new context. For instance, Fuller *et al.* (2020, p. 785) called for a pandemic-era ‘return to the principles of good assessment’. By identifying examples that match this reimagined ladder’s description of partnership, staff and students can celebrate successes at a time when celebration has never felt more precious. Such achievement of shared emergency planning spaces need not come at a heavy resource or time cost – a valid concern during uncertain and intense times for institutions. According to Ntem *et al*. (2020, p. 3), participants in partnership projects point to quick, informal conversations as the best ways of building staff-student relationships, and it has been argued that engagement and co-creation can easily keep up with a rapid pace of change (Advance HE, 2020, p. 16).

Secondly, the ladder helps to spark conversations about when partnership and other meaningful student roles can be desirable. Bovill and Bulley argue in their adaptation of Arnstein (2011, p. 9) that partnership is possible when the time and context is right. However, Arnstein herself points out (1969, p. 224) that higher levels of her ladder have their own disadvantages, for instance where citizen decision-makers have insufficient resources to be effective, where authorities cede power and resource only reluctantly, and in cases where new power holders do not improve the situation for disadvantaged citizens. These are all scenarios that could be faced by a students' union or other student-led group. Therefore, partnership discussions at this time should be a mutually enlightening process not a one-sided burden, in that ”re-visiting partnership values may mean having honest conversations and regular check-ins about your capacity for engagement, expressing your needs, and respecting what all partners need moving forward” (Ntem *et al*., 2020, p. 3). The value of that partnered voice has been argued as leading to better policy-making, in which students will better understand the contexts and limitations in which it occurs (Trendall and Black, 2020).

Furthermore, the pandemic highlighted the huge inequalities at the core of the sector (Dorn *et al*., 2020; Aucejo *et al*., 2020), and the economic shock of the virus could be viewed in the context of pre-existing inequalities where the pandemic hit hardest those who were already disadvantaged (Blundell *et al*., 2020, p. 292). Such inequalities require not to be locked into any future arrangements. By taking particular care to bring into those shared spaces the very students who have become even more vulnerable during crises, decision-makers can ensure that emergency responses confront rather than worsen these inequalities, and minimise the risk of unrepresentative student views. A key part of doing this is to recognise such students' strengths and qualities, rather than regard them as oppressed groups to be lifted up (Yosso, 2005).

Thirdly, and most importantly, partnership approaches during emergencies such as the pandemic are essential for the simple reason that a potential alternative is the disillusionment of an entire generation of students. Of course, any decision in any circumstances requires student input: as Fletcher (2020, p. 145) writes, ”the education system should be continuously, radically, intentionally and holistically transformed, and students should be the main partners in accomplishing this”. Nonetheless, there has been a huge transformation in the learning experience and wider institutional life since March 2020, which made this involvement all the more vital. The pandemic era saw an intake of students mobilised by campaigns on school exam results (Hall, 2020) against a backdrop of young people's growing voices in wider politics such as climate protest (Rogers, 2020). Meanwhile in Scotland the voice of school pupils in quality is strengthening (Education Scotland [online]), with the intended incorporation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child into law (Scottish Government [online]).

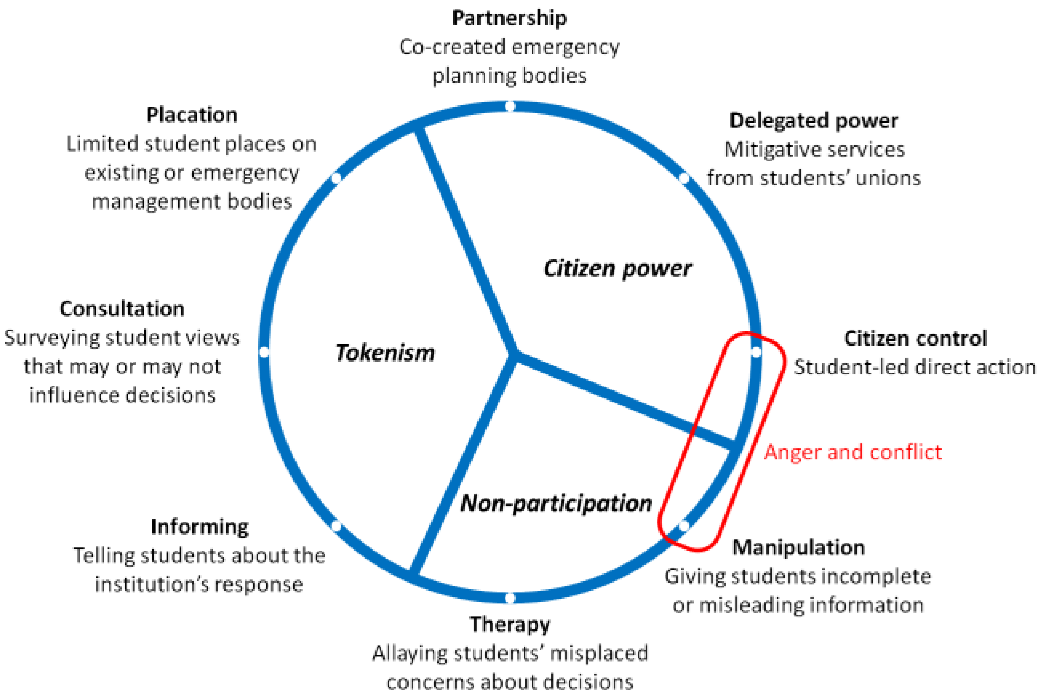
It is no surprise, therefore, that Hassan *et al*. (2020 p. 5) observed that at the start of the pandemic the incoming student cohort was highly energised on issues of learning and teaching; or that the National Union of Students UK reported that 52% of students were more politicised as a result of the pandemic and 65% disagreed that the government had adequately considered students' situations (Lowe, 2020 [online]). More starkly, student rent strike protesters organised *“to bring all the existing strikes into articulation with one another: to charge each particular strike with a significance beyond itself, a collective power”* (Rent Strike, 2020 p. 2). Such activism was self-described as fuelled by a hatred for the property-owning class and an ambition for “ultimately the overthrow of capitalism” (ibid). In short, a generation has entered HE which, compared to pre-pandemic cohorts, is angrier about the world, hungrier to shape it, and increasingly willing to try to do so.

Consequently, the alternative to engaging those students as partners is a slide to lower levels on the ladder, which will ironically lead to an increase in the reimagined ladder’s top rung of student-led direct action. Such conflict will further pressurise already strained institutions whose work has been tested on multiple fronts by the pandemic itself, by the disparity between increasing demand and decreasing resource (Aronowitz, 2000, p. 160), and by wider deconstructions of the perceived neo-liberal model of education (ibid; Matthews *et al*., 2019; Murphy, 2020; Daley *et al.*, 2020).

Admittedly, student partnership itself has been described as *“a revolutionary attack on the established order of marketised HE practices”* (Peters and Mathias, 2018, p. 54). However there are similarities in the vulnerabilities faced by staff and students (Ntem *et al*., 2020, p. 5), and partnership can in fact be the solution for management, given the recognition that institutional leaders will not have a monopoly on solutions and that a partnership approach to planning ”is crucial to ensure our induction processes are fit for the new COVID-19 landscape” (AdvanceHE, 2020, p. 42).

This suggests there is real value for an open and honest discussion about partnership as a medium between Arnstein’s non-participation or tokenism on one side, and the most disruptive manifestations of citizen control on the other. Of course, a shift from non-participation to direct action can also take place outside emergency contexts, though arguably not as quickly. Specifically at a time of crisis, therefore, there can and must be a model of partnership which is distinct from both the disenfranchised and unengaged citizen-student and the angry and potentially unrepresentative student activist, and which stops the former from converting rapidly to the latter.

A second emergency-era adaptation of Arnstein is therefore proposed, which can express both a linear movement along the levels as well as that potentially quick transition from manipulation to citizen control. This is set out in figure 4, where the highest and lowest levels of Arnstein’s ladder overlap in a space of anger and conflict.


Partnership
Co-created emergency planning bodies
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Tokenism
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Student-led direct action
Anger and conflict
Non-participation
Informing
Telling students about the institution's response
Manipulation
Giving students incomplete or misleading information
Therapy
Allaying students' misplaced concerns about decisions

Figure 4: An emergency-era circle of student participation

Conclusion

That Arnstein's original ladder focusses on broader community engagement is an important reminder of the political and social context in which HE exists. There is, after all, a link between students shaping their education and citizens shaping society. Hassan *et al*. (2020, p. 7), writing from an Irish perspective, argue that co-creation is essential to a democratic learning community. Meanwhile Giroux argues that Paulo Freire's pedagogy is *"a political and moral practice that provides the knowledge, skills, and social relations that enable students to explore the possibilities of what it means to be critical citizens while expanding and deepening their participation in the promise of a substantive democracy"* (Giroux, 2010, p. 716).

HE decision-makers have a clear choice about how to develop this student citizenship. Pandemic-era practice and policy around the world orientated towards protecting students (CHEA, 2020a [online]) and maintaining services (New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA, [online]), rather than engaging students in co-creating those services; and using student feedback merely to inform decisions (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), 2020 [online]). Examples of 'co-created emergency planning bodies' (figures 3 and 4) are perhaps rarer, but by exploring a scale of student engagement between extreme exclusion and the unilateral taking of power, as proposed in figures 3 and 4, a meaningful debate about the value and impact of partnership during a crisis can be enabled.

Granted, the abundant positive and constructive reasons for aspiring to partnership are better motivations than the fear of the consequences of disillusionment. Moreover, Arnstein's ladder has, as referenced earlier, been widely used to explore student engagement in HE in more stable times. Nonetheless, the sector is at a turbulent juncture, with more uncertainty ahead. The near future may bring a resurgent public health crisis; or threats may come from accelerated trends in climate change, economic inequality, political instability or any number of unforeseen disruptions that can threaten the learning experience. Arnstein, in her original article, quotes a community leader participating in a true partnership project who described themselves as *“coming to city hall with hat on head instead of in hand”* (Arnstein, 1969, p 222). HE must engage its own citizens with similarly meaningful dignity, drawing on students’ expertise to ensure that they become not protesters against perceived mismanagement, but positive, constructive co-creators of decisions and agents of change in both their institutions and wider society.

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