

Politics as process: Salford's charter of student rights

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Politics as Process: Salford's Charter of Student Rights

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Abstract

This chapter analyses the development of a Student Charter in the context of the changing relationship between a Students' Union and a university administration. We identify a core tension between, on the one hand, the accountability of Students' Unions in Britain to the governing bodies of their universities and, on the other, their political accountability to their student electorates. The University of Salford's first Student Charter was launched in February 2012. By looking closely at the process of developing the Charter, and interviewing student leaders and university administrators who were involved, we show how the tension between working in partnership – the concept of a “covenant” – rubs up against the dynamics of student politics. We see this as the difference between “outcomes” and “process”, and as politics as normal. We also show how local, intra-institutional issues interact with national policy positions and political campaigns; how a general trend in student engagement manifested within the specific context of a single institution. In this sense, “all politics is local”.

Introduction

Our Student Charter is an undertaking between you and your university. For our part, we undertake to provide you with opportunities to learn that - at the least - meet the standards set out in the Charter. For your part, you agree to use your opportunities to best advantage in realizing your potential and your dreams. You've come to us because you believe that we have something special to give you. We've welcomed you to the university because we know that you've got what it takes. The University of Salford has great students and tens of thousands of graduates across the world who have benefitted from their time here. The Student Charter sets out a basis for you to work with our teachers and professional staff to best effect. Martin Hall, Vice - Chancellor

The Students' Union is delighted to introduce the Student Charter for Salford students. We believe that clarity about rights and responsibilities is imperative in building a strong relationship between students and the University. Students' rights are important in emphasising that excellence in teaching, supervision and support are the most important aspects of academic life, while responsibilities reinforce the partnership that is essential for students to gain the most from their time at University. We are proud to have helped the University create this Charter, and consider it a welcome addition to the student experience at Salford.

Preface, University of Salford Student Charter. February 2012

Students are engaged with Higher Education at scales that range from transnational issues to local concerns. In this chapter we are concerned with the institutional level of engagement – specifically, the development of Student Charter in the context of the changing relationship between a Students' Union and a University administration. At the same time, we show how positions are shaped by national issues, constraints and opportunities. We are particularly interested in the relationship between “outcomes” (products) and “process” (how outcomes are achieved). In questions of student engagement, as elsewhere, “all politics is local”. Consequently, we will show how institution-specific issues interplay with comparable spheres at the national level.

The University of Salford is in Greater Manchester, northwest England. Once the heartland of the industrial revolution, Salford experienced all the consequences of urban decline through much of the twentieth century as textile manufacturing, coal mining and heavy industry moved away from the city. More recently, there has been a steadily accelerating economic recovery as the service sector has expanded and as digital and creative enterprises have developed. The history of the university has reflected these local circumstances. Founded in the late nineteenth century as the Salford Working Men's College, the institution was a College of Advanced Technology before receiving a Royal Charter as a university in 1967. In 1996, a merger incorporated a range of health professions as well as art and design disciplines. Today, the University of Salford has about 20 000 students, with a majority from the northwest region and with about 10% drawn from across the world and from well over one hundred different countries. The university offers a full range of qualifications, from undergraduate degrees to doctorates and has a significant reputation for research in Health and Social Care, Environment and Life Sciences, Science and Engineering, the Built Environment and Arts and Media (University of Salford 2014).

While the university has long had a Students' Union this was previously a social and recreational organisation. However, in 2006 changes to the Charities' Act required governance reforms for many Students' Unions in Britain. At Salford, this prompted a reevaluation of the role and effectiveness of the Union, resulting in significant changes in governance that were implemented in July 2007. In effect, this was a re-launch of the organisation and the beginning of an explicit concern for students' rights and opportunities at the university, and of political engagement with the University's administration. As we

show, the development of the Student Charter has its roots in the significant changes in the way that the University of Salford Students' Union engaged from mid-2007 onwards.

Our narrative and interpretation of these developments has been informed by interviews with key participants in these developments.¹ One of us (Andrew Snowden) was President of the Students' Union between 2006 and 2008, when the union was reshaped. We interviewed five additional Students' Union elected leaders and a previous Chief Executive Officer for the Union. One of us (Martin Hall) joined the university as Vice-Chancellor (the equivalent of President) in 2009. Taken together with university documentation, these perspectives provide a rich sense of emerging student engagement at the local level between mid-2007 and the present, as well as demonstrating the co-dependencies of institutional level issues and comparable national questions.

The Students' Union

The University of Salford Students' Union (the USSU) is formally constituted as in a partnership with the university. This is required by Part 2 of the United Kingdom's Education Act of 1994, which gives the Council of all publicly funded universities the responsibility for both ensuring that a students' union is established and operates appropriately: "the governing body of every establishment to which this Part applies shall take such steps as are reasonably practicable to secure that any students' union for students at the establishment operates in a fair and democratic manner and is accountable for its finances" (UK Government 1994). As with students' unions across the UK, when elected into office student leaders are granted sabbatical leave from their course of study. The USSU comprises these sabbatical officers, a Board of Trustees of whom the majority is elected by students and an independent management structure. The union's Trustees and elected student leaders are accountable to the university's governing body (USSU 2014).

This said, and like most student unions in Britain, the USSU has a high degree of effective autonomy, with accompanying responsibilities. The twelve Trustees set strategic direction and oversee performance and achievements. The elected sabbatical Trustees – the USSU President and four Vice-Presidents – are accountable for ensuring effective student representation. Each Vice-President is responsible for a set of Schools and works with elected Student Representatives for each academic programme that the university offers. In parallel with the role of the Trustees and elected student leadership, the Student Council of 22 elected members discusses and decides policy motions for the union as a whole (USSU 2014). While the university provides the union with a substantial annual operating grant, the union is free to raise its own income from commercial activities. While previously student unions in Britain had been exempt from regulation, this exception fell away in the terms of the 2006 Charities Act and all unions with an annual financial turnover of more than £100 000 each year now fall under the direct regulation of the Charity Commission (Charity Commission 2014).

There is, then, a core tension in the way in which students' unions are set up in publicly funded universities in Britain. On the one hand, unions such as the USSU are established by their university and are accountable to the governing body of their university. In addition to practical dependency on annual

¹ Some names have been changed at the request of interviewees.

grant funding, the university's Council has an obligation in law to determine that the union is acting fairly, democratically and in the interests of all registered students. But on the other hand, the USSU has a direct accountability to the Charity Commission for its financial affairs, a political accountability to its student electorate, and is subject to resolutions of the Student Council. In many respects, this tension is analogous to the tension between management responsibilities and academic freedom across the university as a whole. While this complexity is often a wellspring of creativity and effective political action it is also a potential source of forms of dissent and conflict that are difficult to resolve. The implication here is that the substantive processes by which political issues are introduced, considered and resolved can be as important than formal outcomes. This, we suggest, is clearly demonstrated in the history of the development and introduction of a Student Charter at the University of Salford.

The Student Charter

Given the complexity of these governance arrangements, it is not surprising that many British universities have some form of statement that recognises the rights and responsibilities of students, and that this has been set up with the involvement of their students' union. The first overview to be provided of these statements was provided in the January 2011 report of the Student Charter Group and under the auspices of the Department of Business, Industry and Skills. Jointly chaired by a Vice-Chancellor and the President of the National Union of Students, the working group conducted a survey across all Higher Education Institutions in Britain as well as interviews with a range of senior university administrators and elected student leaders. About 60% reported that they had some form of student charter in place and a further 20% that they were either considering or developing a charter (Student Charter Group 2011).

There were, however, differing senses of the value of the student charters that were in place. Perhaps not surprisingly, university administrations were positive about the benefits of their statements. The most common benefit was seen as managing student expectations of their university. In contrast, student union leaders were less positive. While they did not see student charters as harmful, by-and-large they had experienced their value as supports for casework – for representing students in dispute with their university and therefore in challenging the university's management of student expectations. The tenor of these responses is evident in the extracts from the six interviews with student union leaders published as an appendix to the task group's report (Table 1).

Table 1: Extracts from interviews with student union leaders. Student Charter Group Final Report Annex C. January 2011

University A	"There had been no widespread student consultation. This may raise questions about the extent to which the document really feels like either a living or a shared document among students more widely. That concern continues into practice – the union reports that little practical use is made of the Charter beyond occasional reference in individual casework; it just 'sits on the website'".
University B	"The University and Union have been collaborating on a major overhaul of the Student Charter to modernise it and make it more important. The old 'Student Charter' will be replaced with a document entitled 'Our Commitment' setting out

	commitments on the part of the student and the institution. The old document was seen as institution-owned (even institution-imposed) and felt too much like a formal contract”.
University C	“The Charter is seen mainly as an institutional document, although the union was involved in the original ‘concept’ stage. Several hundred copies were printed, but the union’s impression is that awareness of the Charter is generally pretty low. The union believes that in redrafting the Charter (which is believed to have involved some scrutiny by lawyers), the language was ‘diluted so much that it is not really a helpful document’, and there is concern that it ‘doesn’t promise anything’”.
University D	“There is a feeling that the Charter is an institution-owed document; the union can recommend amendments (and has in the past), but it is up to the institution to decide on them – there is no sense of negotiation involved, and the document is not seen as an ‘agreement’. The Charter is well recognised by students and staff, as it is ‘put everywhere’, with thousands of printed copies available. It is used frequently in individual casework and the union is also planning to cite the Charter in representations to the institution about academic feedback this term, as it sets out minimum expectations in that area that union officers do not believe are being met universally”.
University E	“The process of creating the Charter was quite inclusive, with extensive discussions between institutional managers and student representatives, but the final document does not feel like a joint effort (it uses institutional branding and fits the institutional ‘uniform’). Over time, this has possibly become a factor in the union doing little to promote the document or its use – which is now largely confined to individual casework.”
University F	“A strategic decision was made to treat students as partners in as many areas of the institution’s work as possible. This implied major changes to the existing Student Charter, which was felt to be too one-sided in favour of the institution, and used as a tool against students especially in settings like academic appeals. A working group was established to review the charter, involving two union sabbatical officers, a union staff member and a Pro-Vice Chancellor of the university. There was wide consultation with students during the early work of the group. The group brought work forward through the formal committee structure of the institution and it was finally ratified by the senate and separately by the union’s executive committee”.

While the Student Charter Group recognised this divergence of perspectives in its final report, it interpreted this as requiring closer attention by universities to “partnership working” with their students and student unions. The major purpose of a Student Charter should remain the provision of “Information for students when they are starting a course – and during the course – so they know what they can expect and what is expected of them”. All universities should provide “short, clear statements - of student rights and responsibilities –so students know broadly what they should be able to expect, what is required of them, and what to do if things do not meet expected standards”. In providing guidance, the task group provided a checklist of twenty-four “issues” organized as seven “topics” (Student Charter Group 2011). These range from teaching and learning to sport and community volunteering, and are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Topics and issues for Student Charters. Student Charter Group Final Report. January 2011

Diversity, Respect, Communication	• Encouraging equality and promoting diversity – outlining obligations in a diverse community of staff and students • Mutual respect, courtesy and professionalism for other members of the community • Methods of two way communication between staff, students and student representatives • Respect for physical environment
Teaching, Learning, Research and Assessment	• Teaching, Learning and Research Facilities • HEI support for student-facing staff (including continuing professional development) • Staff input and learner support, including personal tutors and supervisors • Students' responsibilities/obligations as learners • Assessment and feedback guidelines
Finance	• Essential course costs and estimate of additional costs • Payment options and deadlines • Financial Advice services available
Complaints, Appeals, Discipline	• Redress if students are not satisfied that commitments are being fulfilled • Complaints and appeals • Student discipline
Personal Development and Employment	• Personal development, including employability • Professional accreditation (where appropriate) • Students and part-time work
Student Services (non academic)	• Health and welfare support services • Accommodation and security
Community, Sports and Social	• Obligations to wider community • Sports and social opportunities • Students and work • Volunteering

When the Student Charter Group asked the University of Salford to respond to its survey in mid 2010, the university had been in the process of developing its first Student Charter; unlike the majority of other universities, it had not previously had any policy in place in this area. Nor surprisingly, the publication of final report of the Student Charter Group in January 2011, that included a generic model charter, influenced the final outcome of Salford's Student Charter. Further focus and impetus was provided in March 2011 by notification from the Quality Assurance Agency that it had scheduled a major review of the university for early 2013. The last QAA review had been conducted in 2007 before the Students' Union had been restructured; the 2013 review would require completion, before the end of 2012, of independent evaluations by both the university and the Students' Union for submission to the QAA review team (QAA 2013).

The University of Salford's first Student Charter was completed by the end of 2011 and published in February 2012. Its overall approach followed the emphasis on partnership recommended by the Student Charter Group:

“the Student Charter is intended to give you the confidence that the University of Salford is committed to making sure you get the best out of your time with us. It also outlines what we expect of you as a student and gives you links to the most important information you will need to have a great experience as a Salford student. The Charter was developed in partnership between the University and the Students' Union and applies to all undergraduate and postgraduate students. The key to the relationship between the University, Students' Union and student is communication. The Student Charter is the start and a summary of this dialogue” (University of Salford 2012).

In its detail, however, the Salford Student Charter both goes considerably beyond the “topics and issues” outlined in the generic framework recommended by the Student Charter Group, while also omitting some of the recommended areas. The contents of the Salford charter are summarized in Table 3. The document has a four-part structure: undertakings by the university; commitments by the Students' Union, responsibilities of students, and a schedule of information that students can expect to receive.

Table 3: University of Salford Student Charter, February 2012

University undertakings	Student Union commitments	Student responsibilities	Information schedule
Require and encourage its staff to treat students and colleagues fairly and respectfully.	Support you and your fellow students to ensure you all receive fair and respectful treatment and are aware of your rights and responsibilities.	Treat all staff and students fairly and respectfully at all times.	Your final teaching timetable in a timely manner, normally by 1 August.
High standards of engaging teaching, support, supervision, advice and guidance.	Champion your student voice through the election, development and training of student representatives.	Attend and participate in induction, meetings with tutors/supervisors, timetabled classes, and any other scheduled activity.	A student guide covering programme and module details such as assessment criteria, contact hours, mode of delivery of the programme, examination arrangements and professional requirements (if appropriate) and a general University guide outlining assessments, regulations, academic guidance and support and appeals and complaints

			procedures.
Opportunities for one to one contact with a named member of academic staff to help you review and plan your progress.	Provide non-judgmental, independent and student-focused advice on academic and welfare issues.	Work in partnership with University staff and take responsibility for managing your own learning, in order to: actively engage in your programme; ensure you spend sufficient time regularly in private study; participate fully in group learning activities.	Guidance and feedback on good academic practice for Higher Education study.
Opportunities for you to participate in activities that will enhance your employability and personal development.	Represent the interests of you and your fellow students at local and national level.	Submit assessed work by stated deadlines, actively participate in feedback and attend formal assessments at a time determined by the University.	Effective and timely feedback on assessed work, normally within three weeks from the submission deadline.
Support for your participation in academic development and programme management, including elections of student representatives.	Encourage active student communities both within and beyond the University.	Be aware of and comply with the general and student guides ... the University's rules and regulations.	Reasonable advance notice of cancelled and re-scheduled classes.
Access to appropriate information, advice and guidance services.	Provide a diverse range of activity groups and opportunities to enhance your personal and professional development.	Give your School advance notice of any essential absences.	Programme costs, payment options and deadlines, and an estimate of necessary additional costs.
A high quality, effective and accessible physical and virtual teaching and learning environment.		Support your student representatives and participate in systems which will lead to improvements in the	

		quality of learning and teaching.	
Continuing professional development opportunities for its staff.		Participate in University activities that will enhance your employability and personal development.	
Effective communication with and to students.		Respect the physical environment of the University, including accommodation and behave respectfully towards neighbours in the local community.	
		Pay promptly any charges made by the University.	

Source: The University of Salford Student Charter, February 2012

In commenting on the process of developing the charter through 2011 the member of the university's senior leadership with overall responsibility for academic programmes, the quality of student learning and the relationship with the Students' Union, stresses that he had wished to avoid a "contractual" model that cast the student as a customer entering into a contract in return for a fee paid. Instead, he was seeking a "covenant", to be understood as a set of mutual commitments and responsibilities. However Jane, President of the Students' Union and a member of the working group that drew up the charter, is more ambivalent:

"The relationship between the Union and the University during the development of the Charter was as much as it had been during my time as a Sabbatical Officer – we had great working relationships with a number of University members of staff, managers and senior managers and there was much discussion of partnership working but I'm not sure there was an overarching culture of partnership. It felt more like an unequal partnership with the Students' Union as the junior partner and the University still ultimately holding all the power. There were times during my term of office when I didn't feel empowered to offer the student perspective, particularly when it was a different viewpoint to that of University management. My actual experience of being a member of the Student Charter Working Group was an overall positive one, and as I mentioned above, my opinion carried much weight, which gives an indication of the partnership working which was evident most of the time. I was allowed to offer the student viewpoint and it was listened to but I should not have been the only student involved".

This difference mirrors the tension in the work of the national Student Charter Group, with the emphasis on "partnership working" in the majority recommendations of the group's report and in the survey responses by university administrations, and the greater

ambivalence by NUS participants and by the student union leaders at all but one of the universities include in Table 1. These differences can be further understood by looking in more detail at the development of the University of Salford Student Union after its reform in July 2007, at the wider context of student politics through this period and at the significance of “process” as distinct from “outcomes”.

Politics as process

While the new Charities Act required all student unions falling under its ambit to be registered as charities by 2010, the new legislation did not in itself require any changes in the way that unions work or serve their student bodies; in this respect the 1994 Education Act continued to apply, as it does today. Andrew and James, respectively President and Chief Executive Officer for the USSU, provide the context for the 2007 restructure of the Students’ Union.

Andrew: “the Students’ Union before the governance review had been characterized by a lack of democracy - there was low participation, especially in elections at all levels. The sport clubs and the biggest societies dominated the election’s, even if they did not represent the wider students’ demographic features. Therefore, the Union Council and the full-time officers represented their own groups’ interests. The Student Union’s main activities were focused on the commercial services. The Union’s image in the eyes of the wider student population and the university was of a drinking club, which elected it’s mates to positions, who then didn’t do the jobs they were supposed to do and were out of touch with most students”.

James sees the key reforms as changes to decision-making processes. Before the restructure, Student Union leaders did not scrutinize or challenge decisions made by the university. Although there was a Student Committee (comprising four sabbatical student leaders and five non-sabbatical student representatives) and a Student Council, there were rarely any challenges to decisions that the university made concerning students. In contrast, the changes introduced in 2007 resulted in the USSU engaging with the university and questioning decisions. Now, student leaders want to know on what basis decisions are made and how they relate to the overall strategic direction of the university. Today, the Students’ Union is driven by a concern with “what the student wants”.

Andrew agrees with this view. Before 2007, the university did not take much notice of the Students’ Union when it came to important issues for the rights of students. In addition, there was a lack of collectivism: “without the two core principles of democracy and professionalism in place, wielding the power of collectivism was impossible. The students were not involved or engaged with the Union and the university knew it. The Union, in effect, was a toothless lion”. As President at the time, he saw the main driver for change as breaking this “downward circle”.

While being concerned with representing the interests of students registered at the University of Salford, the USSU was also an integral part of regional and national student politics, both because of broader student interests and because it is an affiliate of the National Union of Students. Issues began to heat up at Salford during the 2008 to 2009 academic year, when Yusuf was President and John was Vice-President, and the university began what was to be a series of wide-ranging staff redundancy exercises (YouTube 2009). In May 2010 a Coalition government was elected to power and almost immediately began a programme of radical

reform to student fee structures and funding (Guardian 2010a). This was compounded by the Liberal Democrat partners in the Coalition reneging on a pre-election pledge not to increase tuition fees. In late 2010 this came to a head in the proposal to almost triple student fees levels, leading to a large demonstration in London on November 10, with unanticipated confrontations with the police:

“Protesters smashed windows and waved anarchist flags from the roof of the building housing the Conservative party headquarters as the fringe of a vast rally against university funding cuts turned violent. The scale of the London protest defied expectations, with an estimated 50,000 turning out to vent their anger at government plans to raise tuition fees while cutting the state grant for university teaching ... the vast majority of protesters were peaceful, and those at the front of the march watched videos and heard impassioned speeches against the cuts” (Guardian 2010b).

The London demonstration was co-organized by the National Union of Students, who stated that “we're in the fight of our lives ... we face an unprecedented attack on our future before it has even begun. They're proposing barbaric cuts that would brutalise our colleges and universities. This is just the beginning ... the resistance begins here” (Guardian 2010b). A large delegation of Salford students travelled to London to take part in the protests.

For John, the re-politicization of national student politics was a welcome test of the efficacy of the USSU reforms. Would the newly re-constituted union engage with these issues, or it would it revert to being a “toothless lion”, a “drinking club which elected its mates to positions”? John says that he had been initially skeptical about the value of the 2007 reforms. Looking back, he feels that the relationship between the student leadership and the university leadership in the first year was too close, and that the Students' Union was overly concerned not to damage the new partnership. Consequently, the opportunity to join forces with the trade unions in opposing “Project Headroom” – the university's staff redundancy programme – was welcome: “the Students' Union has to be brave to confront the university”.

What emerges here is another manifestation of the tension in student politics between working in partnership with university management – the concept of a “covenant” – and standing in opposition to the institution when this is perceived to be in the interests of students. This, of course, is a widespread feature of student politics. In particular, the National Union of Students found itself, in late 2010, both co-chairing the Student Charter Group and advocating “partnership working” and also rallying students to oppose the same government's policies as “the fight of our lives”.

One way of reconciling this tension, we suggest – of seeing it as part of the normalization of student politics at the institutional level – is in the difference between “outcomes” and “process”. By outcomes we mean products: policies, agreements, funding arrangements, elections, appointments and the like. By process, we mean the mechanisms of representation, consultation, negotiation and mediation that result in outcomes.

Seen in this way, we can better understand Jane's ambivalence as a member of the working group that drew up the Salford Student Charter. She recalls, we noted “great working relationships with a number of University members of staff, managers and senior managers”. She feels that “my opinion carried much weight, which gives an indication of the partnership working which was evident most of the time. I was allowed to offer the student viewpoint and it was listened to”. But although she readily endorsed the

Student Charter when it was first published in early 2012, she is critical of the process that was followed:

“Right from the outset there should be a clear partnership between the Students’ Union and the University when determining the process by which the Charter will be developed. Neither stakeholder should dominate and have complete ownership over the process. There should then be a clear stage of consultation with both students and staff – what do they want from a Charter, what do they see its purpose as, what should be included, what should not etc. Using all the evidence from the research, a small working group with equal representation from staff and students should develop the Charter, and this should be put out for open consultation in the University community. If any substantial changes are needed, these should be incorporated before the document is approved. Once the Charter is approved, there should be a significant communications plan as it is vital both staff and students know about the Charter for it to be effective. There is no point developing a Charter which is just another document which forms part of a box-ticking exercise”.

It was, then, these criticisms of process that resulted in the USSU launching a consultation with students for an alternative to the proposed Student Charter. While accepting both the intent and the projected outcome of the Student Charter, the Students’ Union found that that failure to ensure appropriate consultation and representation undermined the legitimacy of the charter. This validated the emphasis of the 2007 reforms at the Union, which focused on enabling and encouraging widespread engagement with the student body to provide legitimacy to the union and the student leadership. While the university’s administration adopted the generic template proposed by the joint NUS/ government Student Charter Group, the USSU instead opted for a different model; a Salford Bill of Student Rights framed as a set of obligations required of the university to address perceived deficiencies rather than in the genre of “partnership working” (USSU 2011).

Through the first few months of 2011 the USSU held a range of workshops engaging with more than a thousand students. The proposed Bill of ‘Student Rights was launched in April 2011 and presented to the university’s Learning and Teaching Enhancement Committee the following month, where it was politely noted (University of Salford 2011). In making their case, the Students’ Union placed particular emphasis on the process of consultation they had followed, and the sources of students’ opinions that had been incorporated: “the Students’ Union believes that every student at Salford should be provided with a set of seven basic rights while studying at the University. ...The seven rights have been drawn up following comprehensive research and consultation with students over the past twelve months. Much of our information has come from the National Student Survey (NSS) results from the last academic year, looking at both the percentage results and the open comments to outline the areas for improvement. We have also made use of the University’s own survey, the Salford Experience Survey (SES). As well as survey data, we have used feedback gathered by going out as a team talking to students and from key Students’ Union services to inform the details of this document; namely the Students’ Union Advice Centre, and the student rep system” (USSU 2011).

Table 4: Salford Bill of Student Rights. University of Salford Students Union, May 2011

Issue	Right
Hidden Course Costs	The right to know the full costs of a course before application
Assessment and Feedback	The right to quality, constructive feedback on all assessments within three weeks
Course Based Careers Advice	The right to relevant, high quality careers advice
Representation	The right to effective, independent representation at course, school and college level
Learning Resources	The right to appropriate, high quality learning resources
Academic Practice	The right to advice and guidance on good academic practice
Timetabling	The right to well managed and organised timetables

The seven rights are summarized in Table 4. Taken at their face value – that is, as a set of outcomes – these issues are all within the scope of the generic Student Charter model recommended by the NUS to their affiliated branches at the beginning of the year. This close concordance of outcomes is confirmed by close comparison between the schedule of rights in the Student Bill of Rights (Table 4) and the provisions of the Student Charter summarized in Table 3.

Of the set of seven student rights, three relate to the core provision of learning and teaching opportunities (the rights to: appropriate, high quality learning resources; advice and guidance on good academic practice; quality, constructive feedback on all assessments within three weeks). These are for the most part met by university undertakings in the Student Charter (the undertakings to provide: a high quality, effective and accessible physical and virtual teaching and learning environment; access to appropriate information, advice and guidance services; effective and timely feedback on assessed work, normally within 3 weeks from the submission deadline). Two of the student rights relate to the provision of key services (the rights to: relevant, high quality careers advice; well managed and organized timetables). These are also met by university undertakings in the Student Charter (the undertakings to provide: access to appropriate information, advice and guidance services; a final teaching timetable in a timely manner, normally by 1st August). The Bill of Rights requires “the right to know the full costs of a course before application”. The Student Charter covers this in the provision that information will be provided for “programme costs, payment options and deadlines, and an estimate of necessary additional costs”. Finally, the Bill of Student Rights requires rights of representation – “the right to effective, independent representation at course, school and college level”. The Student Charter requires this through the work of the Students’ Union and its accountability to the university’s governing board in terms of the 1994 Education Act; the commitment to “champion your student voice through the election, development and training of student representatives” and to “represent the interests of you and your fellow students at local and national level”.

There are two points of difference between the outcomes sought by the Bill of Rights and the Student Charter. The Bill of Rights requires that all student feedback is within three weeks, while the Student Charter stipulates that feedback will normally be within three weeks of the submission deadline. The Bill of Rights specifies that there should be course based careers advice, while the Student Charter subsumes this within general guidance services. While these are important, they do not in themselves explain the degree of political divergence that caused the University of Salford Students’ Union to divert from the National Union

of Students' position and campaign for an alternative to the university's preference for a Student Charter based on partnership working. This must rather be seen as due to perceptions of shortcomings in the processes of consultation, negotiation and agreement. Jane again:

"I don't think the way in which the Charter was developed was a particularly good way of doing it. I was the only student representative in a Working Group of about ten and there were a number of issues which were discussed and points I disagreed with but I sometimes felt 'outvoted' by the members of staff as there were more of them. One particular issue we discussed was whether or not the University should commit to 'engaging teaching'. I firmly believed it should as all teaching should be engaging but there were a number of staff members in the group who wanted this word deleted. We even took a vote during the meeting on the issue. The outcome of the vote was to remove the word but then one member of staff reflected on the fact that I, as Students' Union President, represented 20,000 students and therefore my vote should carry more weight and so it was decided that the word 'engaging' could stay in the Charter. Whilst it was great to see staff understanding my point of view and who I represented, I felt it was silly we were in that position at all. There should have been wider consultation with both staff and the student body and on something as important as this, I should not have been the only student voice throughout the process".

Jane's perspective, as both participant and President of Salford's Students' Union, can be put in its more general perspective by returning to the six viewpoints of student leaders at other universities, collected by the Student Charter Group and given in Table 1. Student leaders at five of these universities shared Jane's equivocal point of view. The sixth – at University F – was far more positive:

"A strategic decision was made to treat students as partners in as many areas of the institution's work as possible. This implied major changes to the existing Student Charter, which was felt to be too one-sided in favour of the institution, and used as a tool against students especially in settings like academic appeals. A working group was established to review the charter, involving two union sabbatical officers, a union staff member and a Pro-Vice Chancellor of the university. There was wide consultation with students during the early work of the group. The group brought work forward through the formal committee structure of the institution and it was finally ratified by the senate and separately by the union's executive committee".

It seems a reasonable assumption that a key differentiator was the representation and balance in University F's working group: a Pro-Vice-Chancellor, a union staff member and two elected student leaders. Ratification was by both the Senate and by the student union Executive Committee, rather than by the Students' Union bringing a proposal to the Senate, with the Senate holding the authority to accept or reject it.

Considered overall, then, Salford's experience in developing a Student Charter shows that appropriate and effective processes can be a necessary condition for achieving the best possible set of outcomes. While the university now has a Student Charter in place, it has yet to achieve the full value of a covenant for full partnership working. And while the desired outcomes set out in the charter are comprehensive and central to the interests of students, their utility is closer to the "checklist" approach described by most student leaders in response to the Student Charter Groups 2010 national survey. For James, this means that the charter has little practical value: "the university has an obligation to deliver a high quality academic

experience. In practice, the Student Charter is only a paper exercise produced by the university and does not work. No student cares about it. It does not have any impact on student experience". While Jane and other student leaders do not agree with James's comprehensive dismissal of the exercise, his summary comment does underline how important appropriate processes are.

Conclusion: Local perspectives, general implications

This case study has shown how local, intra-institutional issues interact with national policy positions and political campaigns. By tracing the development of the University of Salford's Student Charter, founded in the reforms to the Student Union in 2007 and shaped the requirements of a pending university-wide review by the Quality Assurance Agency, we have seen how a general trend in student engagement has manifested within the specific context of a single institution: "all politics is local".

The case study has also highlighted inherent tensions in the concept of partnership working. These tensions originate in the legal construction of student representation in Britain, codified in the 1994 Education Act. Students' Unions are expected to be representative of their constituencies and fully democratic in the ways that they work, but are also accountable to university governing bodies that may make decisions that are contrary to the wishes of a majority of students. Indeed, were these tensions not to be manifest, this would suggest that a students' union was not functioning appropriately. Given this, the steady emergence of explicit tensions in student politics at Salford, following the reform of the Students' Union in 2007, is evidence of a student representative body in good and ever-improving health; a lion with teeth can be expected to bite. Similarly and at the national level, that the National Union of Students could have its President, in November 2010, both working in partnership with government and urging manifest opposition to the same government's policy proposals is evidence of student politics working effectively within the constraints and opportunities of prevailing circumstances.

This said, our case study also suggests a failure fully to appreciate the importance of processes in their own right, as necessary conditions for outcomes that are fully acceptable to both university administrations and to student representative bodies. We have shown how lack of perception that there had been adequate attention to the processes in developing the University of Salford's Student Charter prompted an alternative Student Bill of Rights. Another way of putting this is that over-eagerness to introduce anticipated outcomes, however favourable and consensual they may be, may undermine the desired result. Similarly and again at the national level, the composition of the national Student Charter Group and the results of its consultations resulted in a less than enthusiastic endorsement by the National Union of Students.

An overall purpose of this volume is to examine the challenge that student unions face in upholding their organisational autonomy and in maintaining freedom from interference by university administrations and governments. In the British context, as we have shown, this means managing the tension inherent in the enabling legislation of the 1994 Education Act. How effective has the University of Salford Students' Union been in claiming the freedom to decide, democratically, how and for what purposes it will use the means available to it to achieve the ends desired by its student constituents? Here, to close, are perspectives from three Student Union Presidents who have lived out these challenges in the five years between the 2007 reforms and the adoption of a formal Student Charter.

Looking back, Andrew (President between 2006 and 2008) stresses the importance of continual consultation with students, advocacy for students' rights and making every effort to hold the university to account: "although some issues are resolved by demonstrations and protests, few are. The day-to-day issues that impact students in a big way are far easier solved through meetings and collaboration with the university. Building these relationships requires that there at least be a respected professional organisation at work behind them". To be taken seriously by the university, the Students' Union has to develop professional skills. But "collectivism is the Students' Union's best weapon – the 'hanging dagger' of direct action is the one thing a Students' Union has as leverage over the university."

Yusuf sees the Students' Union as the voice of the student both on campus and outside. The union's job is to promote and defend the rights of students, representing the student both academically and socially.

How can this be given practical effect? Jane stresses the importance of credibility: "all partners publically agree to making commitments to working a certain way, and if any partner is not delivering what they said they would, they should be held account for it. This can be done in a very public way or could be kept more private and internal in the University. The point is, there should be discussion as to why commitments are not being met and what steps are being taken to ensure commitments are met in future. Whilst I do not want to see a Charter become a 'shopping list' by which students 'check up' on the University, there is no point having a Student Charter if nothing is done or said when one partner does not deliver on their commitment".

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