**Engaging students as co-producers: a critical reflection on the policy commission model**

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**Abstract**

The teaching of political science has a tendency towards traditional classroom based learning environments. This article describes the development of an innovative model of student learning that takes place outside of the bounded nature of the established curriculum through the creation of a Policy Commission. The Policy Commission established an innovative ‘community of action’ that challenged traditional perceptions of the lone student as a producer of knowledge. This article describes the work of the Policy Commission, which engaged students in the act of 'doing Politics' and discusses the impact that it had on student learning. The article examines the potential of the Policy Commission model to offer a new form of learning.

**Keywords**

active learning; co-production; policy commission; politics

**Introduction**

A key challenge to all disciplines is ensuring that their curriculum provides students with the necessary range of skills to prepare them to be active global citizens. For political science educators this has been reflected in emphasis being attached to a range of teaching innovations that have included a focus on role-plays and simulations (Asal and Blake 2006; Dougherty 2003; Frombgen et al. 2013; Bridge, 2014), different approaches to assessment and the importance of feedback (Blair and McGinty 2012; Blair et al. 2013a, 2013b, 2013c, 2014; Cohen 2008; Kollars and Rosen 2013), the use of technology (Ulbig and Notman 2012; Holland, Schwartz-Shea and Yim 2013), the development of skills such as writing policy briefs and giving oral presentations (Trueb 2013; Franklin, Weinberg and Reifler 2014), the provision of placements (Curtis et al. 2009; Curtis 2012) and the integration of research methods (Adriaensen, Coremans and Kerremans 2014; Ryan et al. 2014). In more recent years there has been a growing emphasis on the adoption of active and problem based learning approaches to teaching as a means of developing student understanding and competency with regard to research proficiency, communication skills and the art of giving presentations (Ishiyama 2013; McInerney and Adshead 2013; Johnson 2016).

Whereas this literature has tended to focus on establishing learning environments that create more involved opportunities for students to learn about the subject, less attention has been attached to the role of the student as a producer or creator of knowledge. This is despite the fact that the concept of a student as producer has been increasingly debated in recent years. In the UK this has been most evident through the work of a group of scholars led by Mike Neary at the University of Lincoln who have argued for student influence and control as a means of challenging the neo-liberal underpinning of mass higher education (Neary and Winn 2009; Neary and Saunders, 2016; Neary and Winn, 2017). In this context, the student as producer model as advocated by Neary is a subversive one that seeks to challenge the fundamental underpinning of higher education as opposed to merely have a focus on greater levels of student engagement and enabling more student control. This has instead been the approach that has tended to underpin much of the literature which has focused on harnessing student creativity and enthusiasm through the likes of an undergraduate student journal and giving students the control to undertake simulation exercises (Barrios and Weber 2006; Griffin 2011; Obendorf and Randerson 2012; Frombgen et al. 2013). Within the political science learning and teaching communities, the roots of this work on students as co-creators or co-producers of learning can partly be traced to the broader civic engagement literature (e.g. Boyer 1990, 1996) where there is a considerable body of literature that has included students engaging with voter registration drives (Bennion 2006; Bardwell 2011), participating in political campaigns (Elder et al. 2007), volunteering in civic communities and undertaking research-led placements with the likes of local government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and voluntary organisations (Curtis et al. 2009; Curtis and Blair 2010a, 2010b; Van Assendelft 2008).

This article contributes to this co-production literature by reflecting on a Policy Commission initiative, whereby students worked with academic staff to create policies that were then presented to policy-makers.  It reflects on the experience of running the Policy Commission at De Montfort University over three academic years from 2013-2016. Unlike many other pedagogic initiatives, the Policy Commission was open to participation from all university students, albeit with a disciplinary home in the Department of Politics and Public Policy. The Commission required students to work together to produce policy responses, which resulted in them having to compromise on their ideas and to negotiate among themselves. It also brought these ideas into a public environment through presentations to policy-makers and the local populace, and in so doing assisted in building resilience and self-confidence into the students. Yet while such outcomes tend to be emphasised by those who argue in favour of co-production models of learning, the Policy Commission also raised issues about the nature of responsibility in a co-production model between staff and students. This was because the Policy Commission went beyond views of co-production that just focus on students being given greater autonomy in their work, getting them to share their work with others, and engaging them as researchers. In this context, the Policy Commission sought to genuinely engage students as co-producers where students worked with staff to produce policy responses. Yet in setting such an objective, this approach also raised issues regarding the attribution of success and failure as having established the parameters of the Policy Commission, academic staff were in essence ‘locked in’ to a programme of policy delivery. To this end, this article argues that genuine co-production models of learning are inherently problematic in a competitive higher education system unless they are linked to curriculum and assessment points that attach responsibility for participation to students.

To understand students’ experiences, this study drew upon qualitative and quantitative data that was obtained from the students who participated. This included interviews with students that were undertaken after key events during each of the three iterations of the Policy Commission that took place between 2013-2016. Although on each occasion the Commissions engaged with hundreds of students across the University at the likes of public gatherings, a far smaller group of students actively participated: 23 in the first Commission, 28 in the second and 20 in the third. Of these 71 students, 1 participated in all three Policy Commissions, 4 participated in the first and second, 1 participated in the first and third, and 3 participated in the second and third. This meant that 63 students took an active role.

Data was also obtained from 24 (38%) of the above students who completed a questionnaire that was distributed via Google Forms in April 2016 and which provided an insight on student learning gains. In terms of the profile of the questionnaire respondents, 15 (62.5%) were male and 9 (37.5%) were female, with the majority of participants being in the 18-24 age range: 18-24 (N=18, 29.2%), 25-34 (N=2, 7.7%), 35-44 (N=2, 7.7%), 45-54 (N=1, 3.8%), and 65+ (N=1, 3.8%). In terms of engagement, 10 students (41.7%) participated in the first Policy Commission, 7 students (29.2%) in the second, and 14 students (58.3%) in the third. Of these students, 1 participated in all three Commissions, 1 in the first and second, 1 in the first and third, and 3 in the second and third. The responses from the questionnaires were downloaded onto Google Sheets, with qualitative responses like ‘not at all’, ‘a little’, ‘somewhat’ and ‘very much’ being turned into numeric data through the use of appropriate scales such as 1-4, which in turn provided the opportunity to enable comparisons between question responses.

**The Policy Commission Model: Rationale, Design and Implementation**

The Policy Commission was established in 2013 to create a platform where students and academic staff could work together to respond to issues of a contemporary concern over a time-limited period of enquiry. The approach taken was to follow the model of policy commissions that are more typically found in the public sector as part of an effort to provide fresh and independent thinking on complex and problematic issues. Examples of these include the UK Drug Policy Commission that ran between 2007 and 2012[[1]](#footnote-1) and the 2015 Lancet Commission on Health and Climate Change.[[2]](#footnote-2) The rationale was to harness the academic and student community to engage in the practice of ‘doing politics’ through jointly researching topics, undertaking research surveys such as ‘*vox populi*’, as well as discussing and producing policies that addressed and responded to the issues which they researched.

The Commission was open to student participation from across the university and challenged conventional teaching structures where disciplinary boundaries are increasingly fixed and siloed. Its creation was both a teaching innovation by which students were able to engage in the practice of doing politics and one that connected them to the political world through a process of change that was part of a critical pedagogy. This marked a shift in the teaching of political science by moving it outside of the classroom and the bounded nature of what can often be a regulated and confined learning environment through structured policies and procedures that set out what can and cannot be done because of the constraints of the likes of time, learning outcomes and benchmark statements from the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA).

The Policy Commission was designed to give students a voice by developing ideas that could impact upon the political landscape. As figure 1 highlights, the two leading factors in motivating student participation in Policy Commission work were a desire to learn about politics and to make a contribution outside of the classroom. The Commission sought to challenge the stereotype that young people are less interested in politics by highlighting that politics is both everything and everywhere, as well as drawing upon the work of other scholars in the discipline who have sought to engage students in the process of doing politics by, for example, establishing a policy network (Grossman 2011), publishing in student journals (Bauer et al. 2009; Mariani et al. 2013) and submitting evidence to policy-makers (Buckley and Reidy 2014). As one student reflected, ‘the Policy Commission combats the idea that young people aren’t interested in politics. We have new ideas and just need a platform and a culture that encourages us to get involved’. Since its creation, the Policy Commission model has challenged students on each occasion to produce 100 ideas that would act as policy responses to the topic under discussion.

**Figure 1**

In terms of research focus, the 2013-14 Policy Commission concentrated on 100 ideas to change Britain, with this theme reflecting the broader national debate that was taking place ahead of the 2015 General Election, with the Commission’s findings being presented to representatives of the three main political parties at the Palace of Westminster on 24 June 2014.[[3]](#footnote-3) The first Policy Commission grappled with the major issues that dominated the country and which cut across multiple policy areas. Students highlighted that it was impossible to examine public health concerns without similarly investigating questions relating to housing, transport, air pollution, noise pollution and food production, to name but just a few. In 2014-15 the Commission’s focus turned towards local issues by concentrating on the City of Leicester,[[4]](#footnote-4) with the findings being presented to the City Mayor’s Cabinet on 3 March 2015. As with many other local authorities in Britain, Leicester was faced with a once-in-a-generation set of funding reductions. The backdrop of these issues provided a fascinating area of investigation, of which the Commission aimed to connect with residents and communities across the City, from regular voters and community activists, to those who felt their voice did not matter. As one student reflected, ‘we should never leave decisions that affect the city entirely in the hands of politicians’.[[5]](#footnote-5) Finally, the 2015-16 Commission examined the issue of European integration and in particular Britain’s relationship with Europe.[[6]](#footnote-6) This was a particularly topical issue given the decision by the Conservative government to hold a referendum on Britain’s membership of the EU on 23 June 2016. The Commission also sought to inform the local community, staff and students (many of whom were voting for the first time) about European issues.

**How the Policy Commissions worked**

The Policy Commissions were open to all students on over 400 degree courses across the four university faculties. In each instance, the starting point was to have an open forum where students were invited to share their views in a public gathering format.[[7]](#footnote-7) This was achieved by students participating in discussions supported by academic staff and then recording their views on storyboards that provided the opportunity to capture and visualize the key messages that emanated from these discussions. The initial public forums provided an important means of gathering views and for students to identify areas of particular interest that they wished to research. A common theme to emerge from these discussions was the desire by students for their voice to be heard. In the case of the first Commission, the research themes that emerged from these meetings were the future of urban spaces and cities, citizenship and political participation, welfare reform and communities, young people and employment, and migration and communities. In the second Commission they were transport, housing, health and children, economy and regulation, crime and community safety, environment and leisure, and community and youth. In the third Commission they were economic integration, trade, security and defence, environment and climate change, foreign policy, culture, health and social policy, legal cooperation and regulations, freedom of movement and agriculture. Many of these issues represented ‘wicked policy problems’ that politicians face and brought to the fore the complexity of issues surrounding governance and the requirement for collaborative thinking. This was a point that the students themselves were aware of, with, for example, one student summing this up at the launch of the European focussed Commission: ‘It’s not a black and white issue, but it’s one which people get very emotional about. People have been very vocal about the EU. As a student to get involved in something like this is a great experience’.[[8]](#footnote-8)

As the work of each Commission unfolded, it became clear that the boundaries of the themes being investigated were somewhat porous, with key policy challenges often straddling more than one theme. One of the challenges facing policymakers, as recognised by the Commissions, was how to deal with this very problem. To drive forward the work, a structure of activities was organised by academic staff in order to provide a degree of scaffolding to the learning process, with these activities being further refined and developed as the work of the Commissions progressed. In the first Commission this included students imagining themselves as ‘Prime Minister for a day’ and setting out what they would change in 24 hours at Downing Street. The students took part in a Festival of Ideas where along with academics they ran market stalls on policy themes on the university campus. The students benefited from external visits. In the first Commission this included The Speaker of the House of Commons, The Rt. Hon. John Bercow, who chaired a debate on young people and voting, while the US Ambassador to the UK,[[9]](#footnote-9) Matthew Barzun, delivered a question and answer (Q&A) session with politics students.[[10]](#footnote-10) In the second Commission students had a Q&A session with the City Mayor,[[11]](#footnote-11) while in the third Commission students benefited from the visit of three former Members of the European Parliament,[[12]](#footnote-12) took part in a public debate on the EU[[13]](#footnote-13) and had a Q&A session with the Government’s Education Secretary, Nicky Morgan.[[14]](#footnote-14)

The Commissions were an iterative process, with staff and students learning as the work progressed. While the students were a key driving force behind each of the Commissions, the second and third had a particularly close link to academic teaching and research interests on local politics and European integration. This meant that students who were studying those subjects played a larger role in the shaping and debating of these Commissions, whereas the first engaged a wider cross-section of the university student body. Each of the Commissions engaged students in a variety of learning formats. Some undertook appreciative inquiries, while others started with the formulation of problem trees, before engaging in forms of action learning policy inquiries. On a number of instances interviews were undertaken with key stakeholders, while all undertook critical reviews of existing policies. In the third Commission students took part in a study visit to the EU institutions in Brussels and met with officials from the Committee of the Regions, Economic and Social Committee, European Commission, European Parliament and European Council to gain a greater insight and understanding of European policies and policy-making.

Whereas in the first Commission the students primarily undertook desk-based research and engaged in discussions among themselves, in the second and third Commissions students undertook surveys and interviews with the local community and participated in a pop-up shop activity in the City Centre for a week. During the second Commission students spent over 60 hours in the City Centre asking open-ended questions such as ‘How would you change the City of Leicester?’, ‘What would you like to see evolve?’, and ‘What would you do if you were in charge of the City?’ In the third Commission the students engaged the public on the issue of European integration, asking such questions as whether Britain should remain a member of the EU and ascertaining what the major concerns that the electorate had with the EU, with this data then providing a reference point that could be used to gain an insight into the views of the electorate.

During the second Commission the students surveyed 92 members of the public on their views on such issues as cycling lanes, the creation of a local travel card, food shelters, investment in brownfield sites, and travel congestion. Local residents were additionally invited to set out their own personal agenda for change. This resulted in 103 completed responses, of which common themes included cultural cohesion, housing, travel, and business needs. Many of the responses emphasised the complexity of the policy environment where, for example, national government policy on the privatisation of bus companies meant that the City Council was unable to solve residents desires for improved transport access as privatised companies were not concerned with subsidising less-profitable routes. During the third Commission the students surveyed 543 people who provided their opinions on such issues as whether Britain should be a member of the EU as well as recording the public’s attitudes towards specific aspects of European integration, such as regulations and policy-making. While the responses to both surveys were not representative samples of the population as a whole, they nonetheless provided an indication of the attitudes of the people in Leicester more widely. As such, at the very least, the surveys provided data that the students could draw upon to inform their own policy writing. But more importantly, as figures 2 and 3 highlight, the process of undertaking the surveys and working in the pop-up shop impacted in a positive way on students’ understanding of research methods, knowledge of politics and levels of confidence.

**Figure 2**

**Figure 3**

The Commissions engaged a wider audience through a web and social media presence that included Twitter feeds (#DMU100 and #DMU100Ideas) where individual staff, students and the broader university could disseminate and link ideas to other initiatives and government policies in an active learning format. While Twitter provided an ability to measure impressions and engagements relating to the work of the Commissions, measurement of engagement and impact was also obtained through profiles generated by local and national media.[[15]](#footnote-15) The views of student researchers were also captured through short films that were uploaded to You Tube.[[16]](#footnote-16) Apart from profiling their work, a common theme that came from these videos was the feeling of empowerment that students obtained from undertaking the research. A film was also made of the first Commission that was used to disseminate this area of work within and outside of the University.[[17]](#footnote-17) In addition to this social media presence, thematic posters were displayed in different spaces across the campus to profile Commission work. This included creating a ‘Living Wall’ in the University Library where students and staff were able to contribute by writing (and drawing) ideas that linked to the Commission. Participating students also had the opportunity to compete for prizes for the best ideas. Finally, the students were trained in writing for policy-makers, attended thematic workshops, and undertook collective writing days.

The Commissions produced responses to key public policy concerns. In the first Commission these included establishing vehicle free zones in towns and cities, encouraging political participation through so-called ‘Mardi Gras’ elections via a voting bank holiday weekend, legislating for a living wage, creating a mandatory two-week period of work experience for every person in education from ages 10-18, and the abolition of zero-hour contracts. Ideas from the second Commission included establishing an integrated transport ticketing system across the different bus companies operating in the City, creating a bicycle renting scheme funded by the private sector, providing graduate housing schemes to help retain graduates in the City, extending discretionary tax rate relief for new small local businesses, promoting urban art, and improving heritage signposting. Finally, the third Commission included a focus on high profile media issues, such as the introduction of a standard EU corporation tax and agreed quotas for the intake of migrants across all EU member states, as well as broader ideas relating to governance structures.

**Re-reading the Policy Commission**

The Policy Commission model offered a method of engaging students in the art of ‘doing politics’. When asked what they liked the most about the experience, the students who completed the questionnaire stressed the active nature of the learning process: ‘learning outside of the classroom’, ‘the survey’, ‘pop-up shop’, ‘interaction’, ‘debate and presentation to House of Lords’, ‘an opportunity to develop current skills and learn new ones also’, ‘the sense of actively participating in politics’, ‘I enjoyed learning about politics and how manifestos are formed, something I had no knowledge or experience with’. What these responses show is that the Policy Commission initiative went significantly beyond the initiatives profiled by other scholars who have sought to ‘make politics matter’ (Bates 2012) as well as through engaging students in a more active form of learning through the likes of online journals and establishing a policy network (Grossman 2011) and presenting evidence to policy-makers (Buckley and Reidy 2014).

 As figure 4 demonstrates, a key outcome for students who participated in the Commissions was one of empowerment, whereby they were able to present ideas to policy-makers and undertake learning outside of the classroom. Students considered that they had a voice that could be heard and that they were engaged in a process of learning that took them away from a lecture-based format to one that forced them to address challenges, analyse data and produce policy responses that they had to articulate and defend. In contrast to traditional learning tasks that focus on summative assessment, the Policy Commission was focused on developing student understanding through practical learning opportunities.

**Figure 4**

The feedback from this process of experiential learning in figure 5 highlights that the Policy Commission was entirely consistent with the goal of ensuring that students went beyond merely remembering information, with students emphasising the value of the experiential learning activities that the Commission provided. To this end the focus was on getting students to understand, apply, analyse, evaluate and create new forms of knowledge. As Bennion has noted, this ensures educators are producing students who are ‘generating new ideas, planning new programs or producing new organizations that reflect their working knowledge and beliefs about politics, public policy and the public good’ (2015: 354-5). These points were also supported by the qualitative comments from the questionnaire relating to the learning that the students found the most useful, with responses including ‘policy writing’, ‘group activities’, ‘in the field learning’, ‘pop-up shop – learning people’s views’, ‘practice debates, policy writing, problem solving’. Moreover, as figure 6 demonstrates, the students also recorded a considerable learning gain in their levels of skills and knowledge about politics over the duration of the Policy Commission, while students also considered that the process of participation had a positive impact on learning in other modules, with a mean of 3.39 on a five-point likert scale that ranged from 1 (of little use) to 5 (of great use).

**Figure 5**

**Figure 6**

The work of the Policy Commission also received external recognition.[[18]](#footnote-18) After having been presented with a copy of the first Policy Commission, Liz Kendall MP commented that ‘the most inspiring thing that happened to me this week was meeting students from De Montfort University who came to Parliament to present their 100 ideas to change Britain’.[[19]](#footnote-19) The work of the Policy Commission was recognised by the Permanent Secretary of a UK Government Department who commented that ‘[t]he enthusiasm of the students (and the supporting professors and visiting speakers) produced some very creative suggestions. It is good to see students so engaged and empowered’. The City Mayor’s Cabinet commented on the significance of the findings, both in terms of their relevance as well as the number of engagements with the public that had underpinned the work. This also extended to the Deputy Mayor sharing the work of the Policy Commission at the Labour Party Policy Forum in July 2014.[[20]](#footnote-20) Elsewhere, the Policy Commission achieved second place for the best student experience initiative at the 2015 *Guardian* newspaper University Awards.[[21]](#footnote-21) And while such recognition does not directly relate to education outcomes, it did nonetheless reflect the innovative nature of the learning experience.

Finally, for the students themselves, the Policy Commission provided a vehicle by which they could demonstrate and show learning experiences that they had undertaken at university through a variety of formats, such as peer learning, undertaking field research and meeting policy-makers. The students were able to point to tangible outcomes, such as survey questionnaire responses and media interviews, while the process of engagement had been documented on the university news pages. The effect of this was to provide the students with a portfolio of learning that was quite different from the traditional learning and assessment points, such as essays, document reviews and exams, with students noting that the experience had a positive impact on their future employment prospects. When asked ‘to what extent do you think the Policy Commission will have a positive impact on your future employment prospects?’, the 21 students who responded on a five-point likert scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) produced a mean rating of 4.04. This was also supported by other qualitative evidence. One student wrote that ‘taking part in the make up of the policy document had a massive impact on me getting my first job’, while another wrote that ‘taking part in the Policy Commission had an impact on me getting my previous role’.

But despite these positive benefits, it was nonetheless the case that the Policy Commission also put considerable demands on the students. As such it is likely that some students chose not to participate through a process of self-regulation. Moreover, for those students who did participate, a common theme that emerged from their response to the question about ‘what did you like least about the Policy Commission?’ was the challenge of working as a team and engaging with the local community. Students spoke of the difficulty of ‘asking people their views’, ‘approaching people who wanted to take part in the survey’, ‘it was hard sometimes to have your say’ and ‘it’s very challenging to face different people’s ideas’. Such evidence raises an important issue about the extent to which students were prepared for the ‘cut and thrust’ of the discussions and the tension that exists between more free-flowing initiatives like the Policy Commission and the need to provide students with learning structures that enable participation as well as rewarding effort. At the same time, as the benefit of participation in the Policy Commission was in essence shared among the students, this meant that the final outcome did not differentiate between the different levels of student involvement. As such, those students who took a greater role did not receive a greater level of reward, which brings to the fore the issue of free-riding that is commonplace in groupwork.

Just as students had concerns, it was also evident that the Policy Commission was not an equal process of co-production between staff and students as ultimately the benefit of participation was felt the most by the students while the risk of failure was felt the most by the staff. On each occasion it was the members of staff who took the lead in driving the process forward because having taken the initiative to establish the Policy Commission, it was in essence the members of staff who risked the greatest failure if the work of each Commission did not meet its goal of producing the 100 ideas. Upon reflection, this might have been influenced by the fact that the Commissions had no assessment points and as such the implication of failure for the students had no direct impact on their studies. This raises the broader question of who owns failure and who owns success in models of co-production where the literature is often overly optimistic to the role of students as co-producers of knowledge. In this context, the problem with optimistic accounts of co-production is that they do not take into consideration the impact that failure of delivery might have on the staff involved who are in effect bound into a delivery endpoint. In this context, if co-production is to be an equal process then failure of delivery has to be an accepted part of the practice for students as well as for staff. Yet the problem with this is that the politics of blame for co-production teaching initiatives that sit outside of the curriculum are inherently problematic for academic staff in a competitive higher education environment where institutional reputation and management responsibility attach focus to the importance of student satisfaction.

To deal with these issues, we took a decision to establish a specific final year undergraduate Policy Commission module from the start of the 2016 academic year. While on the one hand this meant that the module would be restricted to Politics students, and as such would not create the same level of opportunities for learning across discipline areas, the new module was designed to provide students with a scaffolding approach whereby they were initially taught about the nature of policy-making before progressing to undertake assessments that included designing a research strategy, reviewing current literature on the policy problem and producing a final report. And while the Policy Commission module retained a project-based approach of staff and students working together to co-produce a series of policy proposals in response to a contemporary political issue, the responsibility and risks attached to this process is more squarely placed at the feet of the students.

Yet, even with such an adjustment to the process of running the Policy Commission, we are mindful that the very process of embedding this approach in a module format means that in the end the responsibility is one that rests with staff. This in essence highlights the challenge of embedding innovation in the curriculum and the management of risk. As with other innovative learning approaches such as simulations, it is difficult to replicate real world experiences within the classroom. But despite the complexities of these challenges, it is nonetheless the case that such initiatives raise the horizon of expectations of students and involve them in experiential learning activities which enhance their subject knowledge as well as developing skills that are otherwise hard to develop in traditional classroom learning environments.

**Conclusion**

For the students who engaged in Commission work, the process of researching and discussing the ideas that formed the basis of the reports provided a major learning curve in terms of their understanding of the subject matter as well as developing skills in the areas of problem analysis, project management, presentation, confidence, social media and communication. With an increasingly competitive employment market and a growing number of graduates, students must be offered as many opportunities as possible to broaden their skills and expertise. When asked about the expected impact that the Policy Commission would have on their future employment prospects, the majority of students who responded to the questionnaire regarded it as being particularly positive. To this end, the Commissions offered students an exceptional opportunity to meet politicians, observe as well as intervene in the policy-making process, from the initial gathering of ideas, through researching existing proposals to the final formulation of tangible solutions. Indeed, as figure 7 shows, the Commissions also challenged the students to be more engaged citizens. As such, the Commissions were an embodiment of our belief that politics means more to young people than Russell Brand’s ‘not voting revolution’.[[22]](#footnote-22) The final report also provided the students with a number of unanticipated benefits. While the academics involved in the project expected that the report would engage students in terms of their motivation and learning, the report provided students with a practical portfolio of the work that they had contributed to. This crucially gave them an ability to showcase and promote their experience at university in a manner that would have not been possible in the context of a traditional coursework assignment. Looking beyond the student experience, the Commission sought to demonstrate the active role that universities can play in the local community. The current financial context calls for greater collaboration between universities and stakeholders such as local communities and authorities, putting our knowledge, expertise and skills together in the service of local communities.

**Figure 7**

The question is, however, how best are initiatives such as the Policy Commission embedded into the student learning environment. Our experience has been that despite the considerable benefits of a Policy Commission model that sits outside of the traditional classroom boundary and curriculum delivery, that this is nonetheless not a sustainable model for the long-term. This is the result of such issues as the extent to which students benefit from a free-rider effect as the tangible outcome of the Policy Commission report is one that all students can benefit from. At the same time, the nature of the initiative meant that rather than being a risk-tasking development, it was actually one that was risk-averse because of the involvement of academic staff through the process of co-production. The issue here was not one of academics wishing to take control. Rather, it is about a broader institutional and higher education environment that creates risk-averse academics. As such, it is our argument that for a true model of co-production to exist then it is essential failure is part of the learning process and consequently we argue for a realistic approach to co-production which moves away from optimistic interpretations which often over-inflate the benefits to students and ignore the risks for staff. To overcome this, we developed a Policy Commission module that provides students with a creative learning environment that truly advances a co-learning and co-production educational experience.

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