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Because we're worth it

Do students really define themselves in terms of their market value?

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Abstract

This is a position paper that challenges the hegemony of neoliberalism and marketisation as the dominant forces currently shaping higher education. It argues that too much academic commentary focuses on analysis of the problem rather than positing solutions.

Principal among the ways in which such challenges can be made is the forging of alliances between students, academics and the wider, campaigning world.

The dominance of market ideology

We live in a world where market forces predominate. Major news stories are accompanied with considerations of their effect on international markets, be this in relation to war, illness or a missing aeroplane (Time Online 2014; Bloomberg Business 2015). Higher Education in England has been part of this ubiquitous marketisation, with Furedi (2010:1) capturing something of the current climate in his observation that 'whatever one thinks about the costs and benefits of ... marketisation (it) is a reality that academics have to live with'. With the government department in charge of universities expressing clear commitment to opening up provision to a range of suppliers, along with its willingness to sell off the student loan book to the private sector (Department for Business, Industry and Skills 2013) – albeit at a massive prospective loss (McGettigan 2013) - we could be forgiven for thinking that market ideology is, indeed, the only game in town.

This prevalence of market forces, along with a strong discourse around students becoming customers or consumers, makes itself felt everywhere from lecturers' tea rooms to the content of academic journals (Molesworth et al 2009; Scullion et al 2010). Client-satisfaction questionnaires in the shape of the National Student Survey, along with a plethora of institutional means of scrutiny, serve to reinforce a professional nervousness, encouraging a response to growing managerialism in universities characterised by Ball's (2008) idea of performativity coupled with survivalism: we do that which is necessary to preserve our jobs and institution albeit with an occasionally heavy heart.

Against such a background, it would be easy to accept that the 'local variant of the pragmatist in a suit' (Collini 2103:3) had won the day and that resistance to the hegemony of market forces is outdated, futile and regressive. With university education frequently promoted as the gateway to well-paid employment - an aspiration unsupported by any firm evidence (Office for National Statistics 2013) - the notion of education as the source of human capital which has informed policy in England for decades (Berry 2013) appears to be immovably entrenched. This article acknowledges that marketisation does present educationalists with challenges, but falls short of accepting the premise that any potential consumerism is an inevitable or enduring consequence.

The pedagogic relationship

For the last decade in the UK, the National Student Survey (NSS) has been a prominent feature of university life for both academics and students. As Cheng and Marsh point out (2010: 694) although 'the purpose of ranking universities and the creation of league tables was not explicit in the original purposes, it was inevitable that they would be used for this purpose'. The consequence for many institutions has been that NSS, as with the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) inspection regime in schools, has become an unwelcome part of daily discourse. Irrespective of the views of those individual commentators whose position will be examined below, what unites them (and this author) is a fear that the worst effect of any supplier/customer model that evolves from this could be the damage done to the pedagogic relationship between student and lecturer.

In real terms this boils down to some very simple ideas. Faced with a student satisfaction survey that could have ramifications in terms of future teaching allocations, performance management outcomes or even issues around pay and promotion, why might a lecturer choose to embark on a topic that, although ultimately rewarding for student and teacher alike, runs the risk of presenting challenges and difficulties that may not be overcome by the student? Why not choose the safe option to prompt happy satisfaction all round? Why challenge accepted wisdoms or interrogate the tried-and-tested if the consequence could be an uncertain outcome and, heaven forbid, results that are not neat and measurable? Could it really be the case that universities choose to eschew such intellectual challenge?

Four possible ways to make the best of it?

If commentators are united in their concern about the very real threat to the pedagogic relationship, they are less so in the ways in which they believe this threat can be addressed. What follows are the outlines of four potential ways of conceptualising how undergraduates could choose to see themselves when faced with the prospect of a future of debt that has been unprecedented for UK students.

The first of these ideas posits the sanguine possibility of greater financial commitment acting as a driver towards positive engagement on the part of the student (Barnett 2010). In brief, having signed up for such a significant financial outlay, it should be inevitable that the student would wish to extract the most from what the provider has to offer. Second, Scullion et al (2010) see the very act of the introduction of payment and subsequent debt as a possibility for opening up a heightened discourse about the social value of the university. Third, there is a view that students will see themselves 'not as naïve customers of a simple good, but as informed customers in a complex and enduring co-production process' (Eagle and Brennan 2007:45). Finally, and building on this notion of engagement in dialogue about the nature of the university and education, we have the concept of student as producer, working collaboratively with academics to (re) establish the university in the tradition of liberal humanism (Boden and Epstein 2006; Neary and Winn 2009).

Of these four positions, only that proposed by Barnett - the clear notion that paying customers will take an acute interest in what they are getting for their money - is close to the dominant market ideology of the age. Anecdotal evidence (in the absence of, as yet, any accredited research) from academics might suggest that the principal manifestation of this new financial relationship takes the form of very occasional disgruntlement on the part of a student who feels that s/he is not getting what was signed up for - but even such circumstantial evidence is comparatively rare at present. More prominent, perhaps, is the concern among academics that such hard-nosed attitudes may develop more fully over time (Molesworth et al 2009). Of these positions, it is the notion of student as producer that offers the greatest possibility of a challenge to current hegemony, albeit that detailed discussion of this project would need to take place separately from this article. It is significant that the greater weight of general opinion leans towards the more optimistic possibility of a dialogue which could interrogate the nature, value and purpose of higher education. It is on this optimistic foundation that the rest of this article will build.

The death of the radical student?

In November, 2010 students took to the streets of London in mass demonstrations that had not been witnessed for at least a generation. Such outward revolt was not sustained in the same way that it has been in other parts of Europe, but the demonstrations themselves served to dispel the idea that this was a 'generation of young people written off by many as depoliticised (and) anaesthetised by social media and consumerism' (Berry and Edmond 2014: 2). Significantly, those on the streets would not be directly affected by the increase in fees endorsed by politicians who had denied the possibility of such an increase only weeks earlier. The protests were born of mistrust and informed by a sense of social injustice. When these sentiments manifested themselves in acts of disorder, the national leadership of the students' union was quick to echo the opprobrium of mainstream media and politicians (BBC News 2010). If this was a new upsurge of radicalism, it did not appear to be being led from the top.

The official discourse of student union websites and social media reinforces this sense of conventionality. It is difficult to resist the conclusion that the managerial class at universities would look at official student union sites with anything other than a degree of quiet satisfaction. Slickly constructed websites worthily guide students through information about finance, accommodation and job opportunities. Employability is the keyword underwriting the value of a university education. Twitter feeds celebrate awards for university facilities and although there are links to information about officer elections and campaigns, such sites are, for the most part, a politics-free zone. None of the official sites makes any mention of the campaigning operating on their campuses referred to below. To look upon them may be to invite the conclusion that the managerialism of the academic world has placed its grip firmly on the student body.

Independent student websites tell a somewhat different story (Berry and Edmond 2014: 12-13). Here we find news of successful student campaigns for a living wage for cleaners alongside broader arguments about the place of the university and society. Marketisation and privatisation are clearly identified as the manifestation of a system which is run for profit rather than for the benefit of wider society. The suppression of dissent and protest prompts calls for police to be banned from campuses. Universities are characterised as being run in the interest of a small managerial class rather than for promoting wider visions of education. The way forward is seen as the construction of an alliance of forces of all layers of society working against a system that benefits the few at the expense of the many. None of these examples constitute,

as yet, an enduring counter discourse to the prevalent market ideology: we are not on the brink of a new France in 1968 (Kurlansky 2005; Harman 2008). Nonetheless, societal and political developments might support the notion that, for all its apparent entrenchment as part of university life, the marketised view of students and education may yet encounter significant shocks.

Discussion: disillusionment, protest and alternative visions

When writing of growing dissent across Europe, journalist Paul Mason explains how demonstrations in Spain in 2011 amazed hardened reporters and politicians alike with their mixture of twenty-first century savviness and old-fashioned political anger, pointing in particular to the identification of capitalism as the enemy:

 'Error di Sistema' said a placard, brandished by three girls straight off the fashion pages of some upmarket magazine... 'La Crise es el Capitalismo' said the banner.... held up by similarly good-looking youths.

(Mason 2012:105) 

Similarly, one of the most renowned critical thinkers of the era, in a publication sponsored by a major Ivy League university, points out that 'you can tell that the capitalist system is in trouble when people start talking about capitalism' (Eagleton 2011; xi). At the time of writing, the election of an anti-austerity party in Greece and the possibility of a similar development in Spain have ignited debate about the very viability of political and economic systems that serve the interests of the '1%'. Disillusionment with mainstream political parties, who appear to be distinguished only by the degree to which they will manage austerity, has been instrumental in a reconfiguring of the political landscape in the UK as new and minor parties enjoy popularity (UK Political 2015). A figure from the world of popular entertainment enthusiastically associates himself with working class women fighting against corporatism and privatisation on London housing estates (The Independent 2014). Sales of Kapital proliferate as answers are sought to the cause and effect of the 2008 crash (Berry 2013). Increasingly, the argument is put forward that the certainties of partisan politics disintegrate as those a networked society challenge established hegemonies and present new possibilities for political expression (Castells 2000; Mason 2012).

In the context of this paper, this prompts two central questions. First, has marketisation so gripped the UK university that we must see any of these manifestations of dissent as nothing more than feeble blows against the fortress of the current hegemony? Second, what has any of this to do with (re)establishing a healthy pedagogic relationship between student and lecturer, referred to above in the potential models for reformulation of that relationship, that has been put at risk by creeping consumerism?

In order to frame an answer to both questions, it is important not to engage in futile speculation. Societal, political and economic developments follow no predictable pattern and it would be as foolish to predict a Europe-wide move to a Greek and Spanish style left as it would a worryingly Hungarian right (Kovacs 2013). Yet it would be unconscionable to believe that students and lecturers lived and worked in some sort of ideological bubble, immune from developments all around them. Ideology, as Althusser reminds us, does not exist as a separate entity beyond peoples' lives: 'what ...seems to take place outside ideology (to be precise, in the street), in reality takes place in ideology' (Althusser 1969:163). The notion of education as a commodified good, to be purchased in market terms with a suitable future return on the investment, is an idea reflective of a current ideological hegemony. The actions of students and lecturers could yet reframe and challenge this dominance.



[← Read 'Socratic pedagogy and citizenship formation in Higher Education...'](#)

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