

The language of learning in higher education: a study in re-imagining teaching excellence in policy documents from Robbins to Johnson. (0130)

Maureen Spencer¹, Heather Clay², Catherine Minett-Smith³

¹Middlesex University, UK,

²Middlesex, UK,

³Bedfordshire, UK

The paper suggests that the language through which the evolving neo-liberalism in higher education has been expressed is a stark example of what Schmidt and Thatcher have called 'discourse hegemony'. Such hegemony has contributed greatly to the resilience and receptiveness of the ideology of the market in public conversation. The 2016 White Paper on teaching excellence is another landmark in what Williams (p135) has referred to as the transformation of British universities into 'commercial institutions serving almost entirely private interests'. This has taken some fifty years to achieve. The shifts in the persuasive language of key official documents in this period, presented as frequently unassailable common sense in line with every-day lived experience, have played a part in transforming the pedagogic relationship between students and lecturers. In short students have been induced to think and behave like consumers in a market place, rather than as co-learners in a university whose responsibilities also include preserving cultural and historical literacy and upholding the public good. As Ryan (p 97) 'What is worrying is the triumph of narrowly utilitarian standards, as though the only criterion was to send young people out into the world ready to make money by whatever legal means they could.'

The paper will examine selections from high policy documents over the past fifty years to trace the erosion of public good values in higher education by the gradual adoption of a commercialised and transactional language. The departure could not be more marked from the elegant and humanistic language of the 1963 Robbins Report (CHE). Robbins did not ignore training for employment but in a celebrated passage included 'instruction in skills' alongside three other objectives for higher education: promoting the general powers of the mind, the advancement of learning, and the transmission of a common culture and common standards of citizenship. (CHE, pp. 6–7). The Report contained a whole chapter on academic freedom which included freedom to determine the curricula and standards. (p. 230). Academics were trusted to be the best judge of how students could learn.

Discussion of educational policy was to take a different approach after 1979. By then academic freedom was under attack with the advent of the language of the market. The role of Think Tanks appears to have been pivotal. One of the earliest examples of the reference to 'customers' in higher education is the 1983 Report on Responsiveness of Higher Education to Market Forces and Employment Needs by the Cabinet think tank on Higher Education, the Central Policy Review Staff (Spencer). Official discussion on higher education

was to be increasingly formulated in terms of consumer interests and student employability. The language thus marginalised the public realm of collective values and concern for societal interests. The historiography of the intellectual historian Skinner can help an appreciation of these linguistic changes. Skinner's research revealed how, in early seventeenth century England, a successful merchant would try to legitimate his business activities by 'an attemptto connect the principles of Protestant Christianity with the practices of commercial life'. He gives examples of how as he puts it 'favourable evaluative-descriptive terms can somehow be applied as descriptions of his own apparently untoward actions'. Skinner argues that this was a 'linguistic sleight of hand'.

The next three decades after 1979 saw several of reports on higher education which privileged cost effectiveness in relation to state funding and highlighted student employability. They drew on an individualist terminology. The language of the 2016 White Paper demonstrates a deepening of the corporate intrusion into higher education. No longer is it enough that the existing universities, whose legal status is as charitable bodies, should behave like businesses but businesses themselves must have a more prominent place. Standards in the sector must be 'driven up' by the inclusion of for-profit providers referred to as 'challenger institutions'. Sporting language is employed to make this appear a natural development and achieve 'a level playing field for all providers'. All institutions must 'raise their game' and those that 'do not rise to the challenge' should 'exit the market completely', whatever their age or former reputation. Thus 'Improving choice, competition and outcomes for students, the taxpayer and the economy' will give students the information they need about 'the rewards that could be available, at the end of their learning, alongside the costs'. The intention is that the financial sector will be active in finding new outlets for profit making. 'We are introducing', announces the White Paper 'a range of new financial products over the next few years'. The economic model portrayed in the White Paper is short-term shareholder value funded by government-backed loans which the student takes on as an 'investment'. The definition of teaching quality is brief (p11): 'Good teaching- broadly, defined to include learning environments, student support, course design, career preparation and "soft skills" as well as what happens in the lecture theatre or lab....'

The presenters conclude with an account of an exploration of university websites. This reveals the differing terminology that institutions have adopted to portray the 'student experience', in some cases echoing national policy discourse. As Barnett, in a critique of the 2011 White Paper *Students at the Heart of the System*, puts it, national policy does have an effect on the micro character of higher education. He points out that Chapter 2 of that earlier White Paper, is entitled 'Well-informed students driving teaching excellence.' Barnett comments (p 75): 'The implied powers of the tutors are accordingly diminished. Such a reading points to a de-professionalisation of tutors: the power in the pedagogical situation is to be assumed by the students. It is they who are to drive towards 'teaching excellence'. In short the language of the market has a corrosive impact on student learning in the following ways: it confines the value of higher education almost exclusively to its effect on

students' employment prospects; its model of the student is as a passive consumer who has no responsibility for her own learning; and it undermines the professionalism of academics.

998 words

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