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Title Students' Unions Response to Consumerist Policy Discourses in English Higher Education

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Background

Higher education (HE) today is increasingly shaped by market-driven demands that emphasise research and teaching quality for the sake of institutional competitiveness (Carey 2013; Jankowski & Provezis 2014). Klemenčič (2014) explains marketisation of HE as an introduction of greater competition into educational provision, increasing use of tuition fees in university funding and granting more autonomy to universities over their practices. Shaped by marketisation, universities are expected to turn their degree programmes into commodities that can be sold in global markets (Williams 2013). It is also known that turning students into primary funders of their education can affect student-university relations, positioning paying students as consumers rather than educational partners (Klemenčič 2011; Williams 2013). Pitman (2000) explains that many universities are already shaping their programmes in line with what consumers want instead of what academics think should be taught. The overall aim is to make students act as investors who seek for better service and employability skills (Naidoo & Williams 2015).

While the UK HE sector has changed dramatically over the past decade, there has been limited research on the role of students' unions in the sector (Brooks 2017). There is evidence to suggest that motives for student representation have shifted over the recent years to align with a marketised sector. Luescher-Mamasela (2013) argues that unions have moved to represent consumer interests. Furthermore, they are supposed to promote good student experience through various social events and facilities (Brooks et al. 2016). Some (see Brooks 2017; Klemenčič 2011) suggest that this repositioning of unions affects the ways in which students engage with political activism.

Research setting and methodology

While aiming to promote critical discussion on student politics, this paper draws on a British Academy project that traces the ways in which a selection of students' unions from England understands and responds to a recent policy reform imposed by the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 and related consultation documents. The reform proposes a Teaching Excellence Framework which aims to differentiate English universities according to their teaching quality and to adjust tuition fee levels accordingly. While discussions have addressed the flawed metrics of measuring teaching quality, e.g. student satisfaction, indicators of highly-skilled employment and further study (Wood & Su 2017), there has been less analysis of the policy in terms of its underpinning consumerist discourse.

Interviews were conducted with sabbatical officers of five students' unions from Russell Group universities in England and the National Union of Students. These participants took part in the government consultation process. The data was analysed by using Fairclough's (1992, 2001a) approach to discourse analysis. Faircloughian discourse analysis is a dialectical method, making it possible to explore the relations between discourse and social processes (Fairclough 2001a). The method assumes that any new discourse, i.e. the discourse of consumerism, can meet resistance in institutions which result in them being partly, if at all, enacted (Fairclough 2001b). This was particularly relevant, as the main aim of the project was to explore the ways in which unions construct their discourse around (and against) consumerism. Each interview transcript was analysed as a text, a discursive practice and a social practice (Fairclough 1992).

Indicative findings and implications

The unions were critical of the policy which attempts to turn universities into providers and education a product that can be sold and purchased. The phrases such as turning HE into '*a training camp*' (Union 4), '*a conveyor belt*' (Union 2) and '*a product that can be purchased*' (Union 3) were common among the participants. The findings also indicate that the participants perceived the reform in relation to wider political contexts:

I sit on the university's trustee board and when the decision went through that the university was going to submit itself into the TEF I cried. Like, it was, it was after Trump had just got elected and Brexit and I was like, 'Oh my God, the world's going to shit.' (Union 4)

However, the study argues that the unions find it difficult to completely resist consumerist policy in a context where an understanding of students as consumers is constantly enforced. This is particularly the case as students' financial dependency on loans has increased in line with tuition fees, making students prioritise value for money.

I've had so many conversations with students where they just go, 'Well that sounds completely sensible, you know, that sounds, surely that makes sense. Surely it's good if you know, you're going to a lower quality institution, you're paying less fees than other people...' (Union 2)

Like Klemenčič (2004) this study suggests that in order to activate wider student resistance to policy, a collective student identity would have to be politicised. As this has not happened in the participating universities, the unions are left in a relatively isolated position. A lack of opposition from the universities towards the reform, only adds to this sense of isolation. The unions therefore occupy a space where power to resist is limited, and this makes their discourses fragmented. While most participants share an understanding of HE as a public good, they often return to consumer law to maintain their strategic position in neoliberalised universities.

I mean the fact that CMA guidance has been the friend of students, or like the biggest supporter we've had is a really big problem, and that we've had to draw on that to, like, you know, be protected... (Union 3)

I find myself in bizarre situations in kind of university committee meetings, where I'll be using the logic of consumerism to argue for something good for students. So you know, I'll be saying, 'You're charging students £9000 a year, and you're also asking them to pay for their printing. What's that about?' (Union 2)

However, it does not mean that unions are necessarily passive in accepting marketisation of HE, rather, the ways in which they make use of consumer mechanisms indicate their experience in manoeuvring within the neoliberal context. By contributing to a much needed discussion on student politics, this paper questions to what extent can consumer mechanisms be used by unions to maintain their political voice in HE.

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