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Students as Consumers, Students as Product in the Age of Liquid Modernity: a Critical Appraisal Through the Lenses of Zygmunt Bauman and Critical Pedagogy

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Abstract: In the age of commodification of higher education, students are often pitched as the consumers of higher education (Brancaleone & O'Brien, 2011), with elaborate systems of marketing and recruitment present in higher education institutions to 'compete' for 'customers'. This paper aims to recenter the debate on higher education by questioning the nature and purposes of HEIs, and ultimately their 'product'. This paper aims to critically discuss the repositioning of students as the product of higher education, seemingly on offer for consumption by the market. In order to offer a framework for this discussion, the topic is viewed through the lens of Zygmunt Bauman and his thesis on liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000. 2007, 2011). The paper offers also hope and recommendations for future action within the 'unclaimed liminal spaces' within curricula, underpinned by critical pedagogy.

The paper would fit within the conference themes of Creativity, Criticality and Conformity in Higher Education.

Paper:
Introduction

This paper aims to critically discuss:

- the transformation of higher education into a market product, with the student pitched as the consumer
- the transformation of students from consumers to the product of higher education, within the framework of Zygmunt Bauman's thesis on liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000. 2007, 2011)
- Disrupting the dominant narrative through the 'unclaimed liminal spaces' within curricula, underpinned by critical pedagogy.

HE as product and the students as the consumers

We can trace the emergence of the paradigm of 'HE as product' in the late 1970s, when Thatcher's politics sought to limit HE autonomy and bring it under more centralised control under the New Public Management trend which was also applied to the NHS and local government (Avis, 2000) (Shattock, 2008). This signified a turn which brought HE under the scrutiny of the state, and introduced for the first time processes for accountability.

The Dearing Report of 1997 introduced a series of measures for quality control and accountability which led to the creation of the Quality Assurance Agency (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997) (Lunt, 2008) (Hadjianastasis, 2017). It also brought with it the era of tuition fees. What happened next was the repackaging of a social good into a commercial product, including shiny wrappers and promises of quality and success attached to it. The space of higher education was re-imagined in commercial terms, and academics and students were recast as providers and consumers (Brancaleone & O'Brien, 2011).

As a result, students have been cast as the consumers of higher education and universities as the providers. However, these terms can be misleading. Higher education is not a product with a predictable outcome. The backgrounds, upbringing, cultures, sexual orientation, race, gender, politics and a myriad other parameters of all those involved makes it a fascinating and messy process to be involved it. Individuals and groups start making sense of it based on who they are and what they know. What motivates them. Attempts at standardisation, labelling, controlling of quality and output can only take us so far.

Students cannot realistically expect that education is a product whose quality, effect and outcome can be predicted. The promise of success that the business model of higher education is built upon, especially the massified, expanded version of HE we are living through, is inherently flawed: a beauty product which does not work for everyone. The stratified system of UK HE means that the best paid jobs, and the most influential roles in society will be taken by those whose cultural and social capital give them a head start anyway.

Students as the product

Students are not only seen as the consumers of higher education, but also its product.

In order to help students find professional success, universities have been trying to make explicit the employability skills gained or developed during study. In many universities, the idea of a recognizable 'graduate' has emerged, with specific attributes condensed into a convenient list (like ingredients) for the use of prospective employers. Such attempts at codifying what a graduate is as exist throughout the sector, represent an attempt to present the product of higher education to prospective consumers-employers and business more broadly-in a way that is as attractive as possible, and responsive to their needs. Higher education positions itself as the exclusive provider of such a product to the market.

Which brings us to Zygmunt Bauman, widely known for the idea of liquid modernity, which proposes that we are living through a post-modern era which follows a period of 'solid modernity': where there was on the one hand an attempt to order, classify and rationalise society, (which are Weberian

principles), and upheaval and constant change on the other. As modernity has failed to order the world, this has led to an amplification of upheaval and constant change. The impact of this idea on identities is that the concept of durable, long-term identity no longer holds. We construct identities relevant to contexts and occasions, which can constantly change and be adapted to suit such occasions. Liquid modernity is not presented as an opportunity, or a manifestation of a more flexible way of approaching life. Rather, it is presented as a way in which humans become more superficial in order to survive constant insecurity and change, but without deep understanding, and without critical thinking about underlying factors to do with their condition (Bauman, 2000).

Reinvention is linked to consumption. The same way we constantly seek to reinvent ourselves in terms of our appearance, we also seek to reinvent ourselves through a series of 'purchases' of skills and attributes which we hope will make us more marketable and attractive to consumers. Our consumption is the first stage of turning ourselves from consumers to products (Bauman, 2007). Consider the image we project in different social media for example, from Instagram, to Facebook, Twitter, Linkedin, Academia.edu, and ResearchGate: different manifestations/offerings of the same person, intended to attract the consumer to 'buy' us. Education is part of this: we offer our students mostly 'general' or 'generic' skills which may serve them in a variety of contexts, roles or careers, but perhaps at the expense of depth (Bauman, 2012).

Bauman laments the relegation of education to the role of preparing people for the job market of the future, which is in any case uncertain. Therefore we focus on the individual skills of learners, especially their ability to reinvent themselves, and to be led by the market into whatever they will (attempt to) become next. He goes on to reclaim the role of learning as something which gives humans more than employability skills. It can give them "the skills, abilities and confidence to enter the public sphere and be empowered." (Best, 2017, p. 210).

Higher education has been forced to operate as a business, on market terms. It brings in paying customers, who generate revenues and are in turned offered the choices which might make them a better product, fit for the uncertain times of liquid modernity.[1]

Hope

If employability, marketisation and ranking systems have become the dominant narratives which dominate higher education participants, then surely to subvert this dominant narrative we must reclaim higher education as a space for fostering critical thinking which serves, but also transcends, disciplinary boundaries.

Critical pedagogy offers this hope. Understanding the power narratives within HE today can be a powerful stepping stone to further action. All disciplines have within their core the concept of critical enquiry. However, the links between this and citizenship are often either implicit or non-existent. This is despite the inclusion in many universities' aspirations (as expressed in brochures and strategy documents) of terms such as 'civic' and 'citizenship'.

Embedding research-intensive cultures within curricula, and stressing the links between academia and the social, economic and political context surrounding it, would be a significant first step towards the disruption of the employability/rankings narratives. It could be argued that critical pedagogy, blended with the ideas stemming from Ernest Boyer's work, could offer the solution.

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