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Between Consumers and Comrades: Student Identity in Marketised Higher Education

Carlos Azevedo
CIPES - Centre for Research in Higher Education Policies, Matosinhos, Portugal

Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

This paper draws on a Bourdieusian framework and a poststructuralist understanding of identity construction to explore undergraduate students' relationships with academics in marketised UK higher education, particularly during a period of academic strikes. Through 37 semi-structured interviews with students, the study examines how they navigate their dual positioning as learners and fee-paying consumers. While the dominant discourse constructs undergraduates as consumers, participants' accounts reveal more complex and ambivalent identities. Many expressed a sense of loss regarding the affective and relational dimensions of their educational experience and articulated solidarity with academics during strike actions in the UK, which are not typically associated with a consumerist logic. Although tuition fees shaped students' perceptions, this did not consistently translate into demands for compensation. The findings suggest that students' practices and discourses exceed narrow consumer constructions, as they occupy a liminal space shaped by conflicting imperatives of solidarity and economic investment.

Full paper

Introduction

In this paper, I employ a Bourdieusian theoretical framework (Bourdieu, 1986, 1990, 2010; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992), alongside a poststructuralist understanding of identity construction, identity regulation, and identity work (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002), to explore students' relationships with academics, particularly during a period of academic strikes. The construction of students as consumers has emerged as the prevailing discourse concerning undergraduate students in the United Kingdom (UK) (Tight, 2013), often resulting in a homogenised view of the student body (Raaper, 2024). This

construction, often (re)produced by policymakers, is closely linked to the marketisation of higher education (HE) and the growing financial burden placed on students to fund their studies. Within this marketised, fee-paying context, students are encouraged to conceive of learning as a commercial transaction (Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005), which may lead them to adopt passive, individualistic, and instrumental practices (Nordensvärd, 2011). Some scholars have suggested that the traditional hierarchical relationship between academics and undergraduates, in which academics represent the authority, has been reshaped and is no longer clear (Williams, 2013), or that it may have disappeared or even been inverted (Lorenz, 2012). Nixon et al. (2018) speak of a 'sovereign student-consumer'. However, Brooks (2018) points out that students may sometimes interpret and resist policy imperatives.

Method

The data collection technique for this study consists of qualitative, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews. I conducted 37 interviews over a period of three and a half years. At the time of the interviews, participants were between 18 and 23 years old, attended different types of universities located in the UK, and came from diverse socio-economic and educational backgrounds. Two-thirds of participants were interviewed during or after a period of academic strikes in 2018, which presented an opportunity to explore how they reacted to the cancellation of some of their lectures and tutorials. The data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2013).

Findings

Most participants complained about the lack of a closer relationship with their tutors and lecturers, either because they felt less supported academically or because they missed the affective dimension they had experienced at school, or both. In the case of degrees with fewer contact hours (such as, for instance, History or Literature), this was somewhat predictable. Still, it also emerged among participants studying degrees with significant contact hours (such as, for example, Medicine). Regarding the academic strikes in the UK, most participants' accounts show that they supported the strikes, with some reporting that they protested actively and joined academics at the picket lines, a practice more typical of a comrade than a consumer. Many accounts also showed that the strikes and interrelated events organised by academics, such as teach-outs and information sessions, opened a space for communication between students and academics, allowing the former to acquire a broader understanding of the issues affecting the university—namely, the marketisation of HE and its impact on both students and staff. Nonetheless, many students reflected on the consequences of the strikes for them, considering that they were paying for a service they did not receive. Some participants mentioned they had considered requesting financial compensation, but none proceeded with any initiative to do so.

Conclusion

The reported absence of an affective relational dimension between students and academics seemed to evoke feelings of nostalgia in some participants, who were used to

receiving more attention and support and, therefore, experienced difficulty in adjusting their educational habitus to the rules of the new educational field. This is somewhat difficult to reconcile with the idea of an entitled 'sovereign student-consumer' and suggests that students' practices go beyond those of a mere consumer of HE. During the strikes, participants were not moved by instrumental objectives but by solidarity with the academics on strike. These findings offer a perspective of English undergraduate students that challenge and go beyond the individualistic and instrumental practices often described in the literature. However, many participants simultaneously reflected on the strikes through the lens of their investment of economic capital due to the existence of tuition fees. Yet, despite their discursive claims, participants did not initiate any action to recover that economic capital, which again suggests that their discursive practices did not always translate into material ones. English undergraduates often seemed to be in a liminal space, uncertain about what position to occupy and what strategies to adopt in the field, as although they engaged in embodied encounters with academics, they could not ignore their investment of capital in HE.