Reconciling social and environmental roles and purposes of higher education within the marketisation context: the pragmatist and pluralist research lens

This paper summarizes the research design, theoretical framework and key findings of a recently completed doctoral study conducted part-time over six years in the field of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). ESD is an international education movement and agenda backed by the United Nations (UN), the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the Higher Education Academy (HEA), the National Union of Students (NUS), as well as the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). The QAA have defined ESD as: *'…the process of equipping students with the knowledge and understanding, skills and attributes needed to work and live in a way that safeguards environmental, social and economic wellbeing, both in the present and for future generations'* and have emphasized the importance of working with students in all disciplines to explore the concepts of global citizenship, environmental stewardship, social justice, ethics and wellbeing, in relation to their academic, personal and professional lives (QAA, 2014, pg. 5).

The overall aim of the thesis was to explore the development of the ESD agenda in English higher education (HE) within the context of increasing marketisation in the sector. Defined simply, marketisation involves the introduction of competitive market-based mechanisms and forces into HE, *'…where the demand and supply of student education, academic research and other university activities are balanced through the price mechanism'* (Brown, 2015, pg. 5) and where universities increasingly participate in a range of competitive quasi-markets, yet are also increasingly controlled by the state via audit and accountability regimes (Williams, 1997; 2016; Middleton, 2000; Henkel, 2007; Naidoo, 2008; Brown, 2011). The relationship between marketisation and ESD was explored from an ideological/theoretical, as well as a practical perspective, focusing in particular on the political-economic ideology of Neoliberalism and associated public sector management philosophy of New Public Management (NPM) which has underpinned the marketisation epoch (Bessant, Robinson and Ormerod, 2015). A central tenet of theorising in the thesis relates to the relationship between three models of higher education: the economic/marketised; the socio-sustainability; and the liberal/traditional – exploring the contradictions and challenges, as well as the synergies and opportunities presented at their interface within the contemporary higher education context.

A unique research design was employed consisting of a macro-level embedded case study (Yin, 2008) of the national ESD movement and Community of Practice (CoP) across English HE, which comprised a selection of subunits, including: eight HEIs (two Russell Group; two 1994 Group/Research Led; two Former Polytechnics; and two New Universities), all four of the HE bodies outlined above (HEFCE, HEA, QAA and the NUS), as well as the Environmental Association of Universities and Colleges (EAUC). Fifty-four semi-structured interviews were conducted with senior managers/directors, academic staff and sustainability/ESD active individuals across the subunits.

A unique theoretical framework was also devised for the thesis taking a divergent approach from the predominant 'total critique' (Crotty, 1998, pg. 141) of marketisation found within all three of the core literature realms explored in the thesis (which were mainstream HE, mainstream ESD and socially critical environmental education (EE) literature). Indeed, much literature in the field of ESD has roots in critical theory and critical pedagogy and stresses the need for a 'transformative', 'whole systems' paradigm change in higher education which challenges the hegemonic ideologies and power structures of the marketisation trend in the name of social and environmental sustainability, justice and equity (Sterling, 2004; 2013; Jucker, 2011; 2014; Kopnina, 2012; Blewitt, 2013; Huckle and Wals, 2015; Hursh, Henderson and Greenwood, 2015). Such critical theoretical approaches have however consistently failed to materialize or prove themselves as realistic or tangible approaches for advancing sustainability education in practice. In contrast, the theoretical framework of this thesis combines tenets of the Interpretivist and Pragmatist theoretical traditions and provides a new lens through which to view the relationship between the marketised and the socio-sustainability models of HE, focusing on the nature of reality and upon rational and pragmatic reasoning (Goldkuhl, 2012; Morgan, 2014). Ten theoretical principles of 'Pragmatist Interpretivism' were devised and underpinned the research design, data collection methods and data analysis.

The empirical findings of the research found that although there is an intrinsic ideological contradiction between the provision of collectivised socio-sustainability public goods through marketised university systems, the practical relationship is much more complex. Findings point to an entrenched theory-practice gap between the

transformative ideal found within mainstream ESD literature and the pragmatist reality of sustainability education developments occurring within English universities, which are largely incrementalist, reformist and deeply entwined within the marketised reality. Through the thesis, the ideas of epistemological and value pluralism were built as a way of countering the morally absolutist and morally universalistic approaches central to much marketisation critique which decries marketisation as intrinsically and irrevocably pernicious and all-encompassing upon the academic life of staff and students. Barnett (2011, pg.50) has described how '*We cannot escape the presence of ideology in higher education and so have to find ways of living effectively with it. Marketisation is one such ideology. As with all ideologies, it has both its virtuous and its pernicious elements'.* Further to this, Collini (2012) has written that universities serve both instrumental and non-instrumental purposes and always have done and Williams (2016, pg. 140) says that HE *'…has many of the attributes of both a public and a private good'.* Indeed, epistemological and value pluralism is offered as a way of appreciating that the contemporary higher education context in England is deeply imbued with multiple ideological, values and political influences (i.e. it is not a neutral, values-free and disinterested public sphere) and comprises a plural mix of marketising, socio-sustainability and liberal/traditional roles, purposes, ideologies, values and realities, which may be incontrovertibly conflicting, yet symbiotic in equal measure. Overall this paper will problematize the interface of the three higher education models, outline the unique methodology and theoretical framework of the thesis and point to further avenues of research.

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