

## Student as Producer

# Browne, employability and the rhetoric of choice: student as producer and the sustainability of HE

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*Jill Jameson, Mandy Jones and Katie Strudwick*

University of Lincoln, Brayford Pool, Lincoln LN6 7TS

## Biographies

Jill Jameson is a senior lecturer in criminology at the University of Lincoln. Her current research focuses academic teaching and learning with particular interests in graduate 'employability' and student experience. She is currently working on projects looking at the development of open educational resources for student employability and on the role of student mentors.

Mandy Jones is the careers and employability development manager at the University of Lincoln. She has over 20 years' experience working in graduate employability and has contributed to articles and presented papers on a number of issues related to graduate employability and student experience. Mandy has been keen to discuss her issues of interest in the media and has contributed to a number of local and national radio broadcasts on behalf of the university.

Katie Strudwick is a senior lecturer in criminology at the University of Lincoln. Her research interests focus on core issues in the ever-changing agenda of higher education, particularly the role of employability and skills in the social sciences and student experiences. Her current research interests address pre-entry students, parent perceptions, and the motivations of higher education. She is currently researching the role of student mentors on a student as producer funded project.

## Abstract

This paper presents a critical reflection of the rhetoric of choice offered in the current system of HE. The theoretical foundation of the discussion draws on the work of Bauman (2007) as a support for a critical stance on the implementation of the recent reviews of HE, for instance by Browne (2010) and Dearing (1997). The concept and agenda of the student as 'producer', versus the student as consumer or even student as commodity, are further evaluated in the context of the 'free' market and the apparent 'industrialisation' of HE, which has arguably brought graduate 'employability' to centre stage. The work goes on to discuss how student choice of course appears to go beyond judgments about potential job prospects. Along with this, it is argued that the values espoused by consumerism may well have a detrimental effect on the way that students develop the types of skills that employers say they want. Counteracting this, the student as producer is investigated as a means by which students become active producers of themselves as enterprising citizens, which also has benefit in respect of their future employability.

**Key words:** student choice, HE, student as producer, student as consumer; KIS; employability

## Context: the impact of the Browne review

By now those working in HE are well versed in the recommendations and the coalition government's interpretation and implementation of the Browne review, *Securing a sustainable future for higher education. An independent review of higher education, funding and student finance* (Browne 2010). Indeed, most university departments are still reeling from the shock waves since its publication in the autumn of 2011. The remit of the Browne review was to "make recommendations to ensure that teaching at HEIs is sustainably financed, that the quality of its teaching is world class and that our HEIs remain accessible to anyone who has the talent to succeed" (Browne 2010). Few would argue with this. But it is the radical way that funding is to be achieved that has catapulted employability to centre stage and thus raised questions about the future of arts, humanities and social science subjects and, indeed, the overall purpose of universities.

By shifting direct funding away from universities to the individual, provided that they achieve specific qualifications, students can, in effect, choose to buy (with their tuition fee loan) a particular course of study. Browne's contention is that students are best placed to judge what they want out of higher education and that student choice will drive up quality. Similar debates have taken place in other countries such as Australia (see Gale 2011). However, this isn't just about quality. There is an assumption that, given the high cost of tuition, students are more likely to choose those subjects that appear to lead more directly to employment. Browne's justification for high tuition fees is being couched in terms of the economic good of having a degree and that students are given the ultimate choice in purchasing a stake in their own economic wellbeing. This rhetoric of choice is an attempt to mask the desire of recent governments to "change the landscape of higher education" (Browne 2010: 25) so that courses become more vocational to meet the apparent needs of the business world.

One could argue that there has always been a link between university education and career choice. But it was the Labour government's response to Dearing's (1997) National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education that made this link, with the introduction of tuition fees and income-contingent loans to be repaid by graduates after they started working. In essence, the argument is that graduates are more likely to be in employment and that, over a course of a working life, graduates earn significantly more than non-graduates. Along with changes in the graduate labour market since the 1990s and the implementation of student fees, the rationale for increasing participation in higher education has unsurprisingly been justified primarily on economic grounds. Peter Mandelson's *Higher ambitions* report (2009) reinforced this point:

*As a developed country we are operating at the knowledge frontier. We no longer have the choice in a globalised world to compete on low wages and low skills. We compete on knowledge – its creation, its acquisition and its transformation into commercially successful uses. Although universities have a much civic, cultural and intellectual role, they are central to this process.*

(Mandelson 2009: 3)

The Browne review continues to support the idea of high levels of participation, stating:

*Great advances have been made in making it possible for more people from all backgrounds to enter an HEI. Currently 45% of people between the ages of 18 and 30 enter an HEI, up from 39% a decade ago ... Our recommendations build on this success.*

(Browne 2010: foreword)

Browne also highlights the wider benefits of higher education, stating that it:

*... helps to create the knowledge, skills and values that underpin a civilised society ... generate and diffuse ideas, safeguard knowledge, catalyse innovation, inspire creativity, enliven culture, stimulate regional economies and strengthen civil society. They bridge the past and future; the local and the global ...*

(Browne 2010: 14)

In making a case for investing in higher education, in chapter one Browne puts the economic argument before all others:

*Sustaining future economic growth and social mobility in an increasingly competitive global knowledge economy will require increased investment in higher education. Other countries are already broadening and strengthening their higher education systems and we need to rise to this challenge.*

(Browne 2010: 14)

The number one principle for reform as set out in the Browne review states:

*There should be more investment in higher education – but institutions will have to convince students of the benefits of investing more.*

(Browne 2010: 24)

This is similar to the Dearing inquiry (1997) but, by putting an end to the government providing block grants to universities for teaching, with finance now following the student, there is clearly a shift in ethos. Browne quite explicitly states that the student choice “will shape the landscape of higher education ... and this will result in a ... better education through a system that is built around their aspirations” (Browne 2010: 25). This apparent retreat of the state from financial responsibility, according to Collini (2010), means that higher education is no longer seen as ‘the provision of public good’ through education but as a consumer-led marketplace where students have the ultimate purchasing power.

The work of Strudwick and Jameson (2010) challenges the assumption that students make their choices about higher education in the ways that government thinks or hopes they do. In their study, the majority of the pre-entry students claimed that they were “very” or “fairly” well-informed about their HE choices for HE but that the extent of being informed was only one of a number of complex factors in making their decision. Indeed, students may not make their choice in such an instrumental manner and the complexity of this needs to be fully appreciated. Understanding the motivations of students, and their decision-making in relation to HE, is arguably complex. The danger is that the free market alone does not necessarily deliver on government policy and that students may not make choices in ways that the government might want them to. It is fair to argue that there are no transparent reasons which explain why students choose a specific university or course.

Wilson’s (2012) *Review of business–university collaboration* also alludes to the problem of mismatch between what students as consumers might *want* from their courses and what they *should* have. Bauman (2007: 10) provides three observations about what he refers to as the current culture of deregulation and privatisation in all markets. These are: first, the ultimate destination of all commodities offered for sale is consumption by buyers, in this case students; second, buyers will only want to obtain commodities if consuming them promises gratification of their *desires*, which for the university sector raises questions about the purpose of HE; and third, the price they are prepared to pay will depend on the *credibility* of that promise and the intensity of those *desires*. Significantly, decisions about whether or not to buy a commodity will depend on

whether the buyers *believe* that possession of that commodity, in this case a degree, will, on balance, fulfil their expectations and desires.

In the context of Bauman's work on the culture of deregulation, currently a degree is seen as a commodity to buy, leading us to identify two important questions. First, given that Bauman argues that buyers will only consume a commodity if it promises to gratify their desires, do the desires/aspirations of individual students match the needs of business or the economy as the government sees it? Second, how much do students believe that possession of an HE degree as a commodity will actually fulfil their desires? Authors such as Lucas et al (2004) and Knight and Yorke (2003) identify that influences on motivations regarding HE are affected by socio-cultural factors, alongside an assessment of skills and employability; employability is not the only factor. Data from research by Strudwick and Jameson (2010) indicate that the most common reasons for pre-entry students going to university are complex and abstract, ranging from "wanting to experience university life" to "enjoying studying". In their research, students reflected on levels of employability, stating they thought that "graduates earn more money"; this was followed by comments of a more personal nature, for instance "the job that I want needs a degree". The study showed that students were clearly aware of the connections between studying at university and employability and careers. However, they also saw the importance of personal growth from university life.

In the same study, parents also reflected on the value of their son or daughter attending university, with reference to social science courses in particular. The importance of particular issues for parents varied, with a large majority concerned about employability after graduation. But there was also concern about the reputation of the university and a clear recognition of the positive benefits that attending university might bring:

*Fantastic opportunities now available to them, and to embark on a course that hopefully will provide quality of future living and choices.*

*Better jobs prospects, meeting new people, being away from home and learning to grow up in an adult environment.*  
(Strudwick and Jameson 2010: 11)

In fact, parents felt that to 'experience university life', 'grow as a person' and to 'increase self-confidence' were as if not more important as employability issues. This suggests that reasons students give for going to university go beyond getting a 'good' job.

## **Student identity: consumer, commodity or producer?**

Bauman (2007) argues that with the advent of "liquid modernity" we have seen the transformation of a society of producers into a society of consumers. In this context, perhaps there is no surprise that participation in higher education has become commoditised in the way previously described. However, Bauman goes on to identify that the most significant part of this transformation is the subtle and pervasive transformation of consumers into commodities. He contends: "In the society of consumers no one can become a subject without first turning into a commodity" (Bauman 2007: 9). It could be argued that there are a number of different levels of this in HE. As we have seen in the context of Browne, the student is expected to act in the role of buyer/consumer, choosing their programme of study and institution after making an 'informed' decision based on a number of government-created performance indicators called Key Information Sets (KIS) (these will be discussed in more detail later in the paper). However, universities also see the student as a commodity: their personal qualifications suggest not only their fitness to study but have both financial and credibility value in the post-Browne system. For instance, high-performing students (AAB or equivalent) potentially command greater financial rewards for universities because, under the current funding

rules, universities are allowed to recruit these students beyond their capped limits. Such students are effectively 'free' and are not counted in terms of funding caps. They also represent positive value to universities because A level points, or their equivalent, are measured in the higher education league tables, to make inferences about university performance, and are also valued by some employers who require excellence at both A level and degree level. Potentially, therefore, such students may find it easier to secure a graduate job, again having a positive effect on KIS.

Thus, for the government, students are seen as commodities to fulfil business requirements in generating wealth and prosperity in society, where the public good is framed in terms of students accruing their own economic capital. Students are therefore not only paying consumers of HE but their degree becomes integral to their accruing personal capital as a developing commodity in their own right, to be able to participate in the 'consumer society'. Students are investing in their future through their choices, but this further links to the sustainability of HE. Bauman (2007: 17) argues that consumer identity is wrapped up in what individuals consume – 'I shop therefore I am' – and possession of a particular university degree becomes part of the student's identity. While this in itself is not a problem, and could even be seen as a positive factor, it is perhaps the expectations that come with commoditisation that are potentially contentious. Bauman (2007: 16) argues that, in the consumer society, commodities come with answers to all of the questions that prospective buyers might ask. This minimises risk, which also has the effect of reducing or abdicating personal responsibilities. He argues: "[C]ommodities confess all there is to be confessed and more without asking for reciprocity. They stick to the role of Cartesian object – fully docile, obedient stuff for the omnipotent subject to handle ... By their sheer docility they elevate the buyer to the noble, flattering and ego-boosting rank of the sovereign subject, uncontested and uncompromised" (Bauman 2007: 16).

If the student is created as the uncontested sovereign subject in this relationship, with "institutions [having] to convince students of the benefits of investing more" and by their power to consume "shap[ing] the landscape of higher education [which will be] built around their expectations", according to Browne, this has the potential to be highly problematic. As Collini argues:

*It may be that the most appropriate way to decide whether the atmosphere in the student bar is right is by what students say when asked in a questionnaire whether they 'like' it or not. But this is obviously not the best way to decide whether a philosophy degree should have a compulsory course on Kant.*

(Collini 2010)

Paradoxically, students as commodities are also expected to answer the question asked of them by employers and businesses. In practical terms, this could be by demonstrating how they fulfil competences required by business. But problematically, if student's creation as the sovereign subject in this relationship as a consumer of HE matches with what Bauman suggests, this may well undermine the very types of skills that businesses say they require. The Future Track Survey (Purcell et al 2010), for instance, identifies that sources about alleged skills shortages in the graduate labour supply are contradictory and indicates that organisations have differing expectations. Research by Jameson et al (2009) established that employers felt that graduates were particularly poor at taking 'calculated risks'. Perhaps this finding is unsurprising if, as Bauman argues, commoditisation (in HE) attempts to remove the risk and abdicates responsibility from consuming experiences.

In terms of defining important employability attributes, Jameson et al (2009) found that accepting responsibility was one of the three top qualities, along with a positive attitude and the ability to work with others. The prospect.ac.uk site (accessed 2012) also identifies self-reliance skills and other general employment skills such as problem solving, communication and flexibility as important too. Therefore a

consumer culture based on Bauman's analogy – where students might 'like' it if they perceive their HE experiences to be a risk-free commodity, where they might abdicate responsibility and do not expect to reciprocate in order to develop and enhance their experience, where all the answers they might require are created for them – might undermine students' ability to develop the types of transferable skills that businesses say they require. In other words, a risk-free commodity might be what students *want* but not what they *should* have or what business actually wants.

## The industrialisation of HE?

While the rhetoric of Browne suggests that students have choice, we have already argued that students may not choose HE in the ways that government might want them to. It has also been argued that employing consumer culture might have some unwanted consequences that could potentially work against the government's definition of 'economic good' and what employers say they are looking for in graduates. We can see, however, that, rather than there being a real free choice and free market in HE, the government is in fact attempting to engineer choices more directly by cutting funding to the arts and restricting growth to STEM subjects. This engineering and potential industrialisation of the market is further refined by the direct involvement of employers (see for example the reference to professional recognition in KIS (HEFCE 2012)). At the same time, universities are attempting to influence the market by reiterating transferable skills and the integration of employability into the curriculum. By being explicit about this, and by the manner in which employability is measured in KIS, universities are coming under increasing pressure to demonstrate not just how they can prepare their students for the world of work, which would be broadly defined as 'employability', but also how they can *place* them in 'employment'. This pressure has been felt more acutely in the arts, humanities and social science departments, where immediate graduate employment outcomes are less easy to achieve because of the academic rather than vocational nature of the degrees, meaning that students are not *trained* for a particular type of employment.

There is a recognised unease about the extent to which employability and graduate skills are misunderstood or misinterpreted and this has been an ongoing concern for a number of authors. In their 2006 study, Moreau and Leathwood (2006: 305) argued that "the employability of graduates now stands high on the government agenda" but, as Gedye, Fender and Chalkey (2004: 381) state, referring to the work of Lees (2002), the term "employability is a difficult concept to define concisely and comprehensively" and Knight and Yorke (2003) challenge the idea that graduate employability can be measured by employment rates. Other factors affecting graduate employment are clearly important, with Wilton (2011) stating that traditional labour market disadvantage relating to race, class and gender continues to undermine graduate achievement, irrespective of the development of employability skills during undergraduate degree programmes. Yorke (2006) further argues that achieving graduate employment is often out of the control of academic teaching staff and Yorke and Knight (2007) identify that, even if it was within their control, academic staff range from enthusiastic to indifferent about engaging with student employability. Jameson et al (2009) document a number of different views from academic staff on this issue, from those who believed that employability takes up "valuable time that could/should be used to work on theory" to those who thought it was something that academic staff should be concerned about. The staff interviewed in this study also identified that students themselves would "opt out" of employability and skills tasks "if they aren't compulsory" and see careers modules as being of "less value" than "academic modules". Ultimately, university careers departments often struggle to engage academic staff and even students in employability issues.

While graduates still appear to be faring better than other groups in terms of gaining employment, Neary and Winn (2009: 192) have argued that we have also seen an "intensification and casualization of the graduate

labour market”, which has created a situation which not only demands a focus on student employability and ‘graduateness’ but also presumes that students will have to accept “periods of under-employability, un-employability, student poverty and debt”. Bauman (2007:9), using work by Hochschild, talks about the current preference among employers for “free-floating, unattached, flexible generalists... disposable employees ... Jack of all trades” rather than specialists. For social scientists, many who have traditionally migrated into public sector organisations after graduation, the current contraction of the public sector in the UK has also made the situation difficult and is consequently more than likely to have an adverse effect on KIS data.

While the KIS documents provide information about quality and satisfaction with programmes, it could be argued that the inclusion of employment destination data, in the context of Browne, attempts to engineer student subject choice towards programmes that appear to have more immediate positive employment outcomes. As stated above, Collini (2010) argues that the idea that students are best placed to make judgments about programme content and learning outcomes is problematic, and while they may be able to determine ‘what they want’ from participation in higher education, they are not necessarily best placed to judge what they *should* be getting. Nonetheless, through its comprehensive spending review, the government is trying to influence this market further by increasing the number of student places in STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) subject areas by maintaining the science budget while at the same time cutting funding for social science, arts and humanities subjects. Collini (2010) argues that this is unsurprising given that, despite the occasional mention, the Browne review implies that such subjects are almost ‘optional extras’ and that there is little public interest in having them.

This engineering by government to skew the ‘free’ market aligns with Cohen’s (1985: 220) ideas that academic knowledge is directly affected by institutional domains, shaped by organisational structures and that this affects things like research funding and the publication of findings. It has to be said that, in terms of collaboration, the social sciences in particular have historically had an uneasy relationship with recent governments. This is perhaps unsurprising, as knowledge, subject content and methodology in the social sciences tends to invite criticism of government policy and process. On this note, Jefferson and Shapland (1994) identify tensions between social scientists and the Thatcher government of the 1980s, arguing that this friction resulted in a gradual contradiction of the research process and marginalisation of some approaches, which was shaped by government policies of financial control. The ESRC budget suffered a relative contraction and there was a tendency to try to steer the direction of research initiatives, resulting in a decline in funding for ‘critical’ research.

There have also been examples of spats between academics and ministers from the Blair government, who saw some social science research as being unsupportive of their political policy and agenda (see Cohen 2000). In this sense it can be seen that, in recent times, critical research and knowledge does not have a happy relationship with governments. For universities, a fundamental issue in this regard is that, historically, there has been no absolute consensus about the aim and purpose of the university, although core activities are seen to be research and teaching (Neary and Winn 2009). While some ambiguity may be an advantage, because it allows creativity in research and teaching, this lack of clarity as to the purpose of university study has potentially left universities vulnerable to the political whims of the government of the day. Even before Browne, Evans (2004, cited in Neary and Winn 2009) argued that this resulted in universities being vulnerable to being redesigned according to the logic of market economics and the pressure for universities to create business-ready graduates. Collini (2010) goes so far as to say that the Browne review has no interest in universities as “places of education” but requires them instead to be “engines of economic prosperity ... agencies for equipping future employees to earn higher salaries”. This pressure can be seen in the current literature from policymakers: for instance, the Wilson review is explicit about the need to influence student career choice:

*There is a significant misalignment between the aspirations of graduates to obtain employment in the corporate sector and the number of jobs that are available in that sector. Universities have an important role in helping students understand the opportunities that are available in the SME sector or in self-employment.*

(Wilson 2012)

In many respects, this whole shift undermines the fundamental ethos of the Bologna Magna Charta Universitatum (1988) and Bologna Process, which was developed to ensure compatible and comparable courses across European universities. While concerned with university processes, the Magna Charta states the importance of university autonomy:

*... to meet the needs of the world around it, its research and teaching must be morally and intellectually independent of all political authority and economic power ... Freedom in research and training is the fundamental principle of university life, and governments and universities, each ... must ensure respect for this fundamental requirement.*

(Bologna Magna Charta Universitatum 1988)

While it might be argued that applying a purely free-market strategy abides by this ethos, the reality is that the consequences of the Browne review and current government policy undermines the independence of university to be able to offer all different knowledges. Perhaps part of this manipulation of the market comes from the perception that recent increased participation in higher education is not achieving the outcomes recent governments had intended. During the Labour government, Mandelson's *Higher ambitions* report made it quite clear that there was a greater need for universities to be more responsive to the needs of employers:

*There will be a new central role for the UK Commission for Employment and Skills to advise on areas where there is an insufficient supply of graduates in particular disciplines, and also cases where university programmes are failing to reflect changed business requirements or the priorities articulated by employer led bodies.*

(Mandelson 2009: 8)

The Browne review (2010) also pointed out:

*[The UK is judged to be] at a competitive disadvantage [due to its] inadequately educated workforce, which is identified in the survey as the fourth most problematic factor for doing business in the UK. On the quality of its maths and science education, it was ranked 55th out of 139 countries ... Already, employers in the UK frequently report that some graduates lack communication, entrepreneurial and networking skills, as well as an understanding of how businesses operate.*

(Browne 2010: 16)

The recent *Review of business–university collaboration* adds significant weight to this debate:

*If the potential of UK business–university collaboration is fulfilled, the next review will report that universities are firmly at the heart of our economy, collaborating with business and government in generating the wealth that is necessary for a healthy and prosperous society.*

(Wilson 2012)

Implicit in this is that universities are currently not achieving these outcomes or aims to the extent required by government and/or business. By their actions in focusing funding and resources on STEM subjects, the government is signaling that, in their view, there is a hierarchy of knowledges to achieve a healthy and prosperous society, with some being more valuable than others. However, government contentions about the worth of particular degree knowledges – for instance that STEM subjects have greater value – is not as straightforward as is claimed. Increasingly, volunteering and paid work is seen as having considerable value to



employers (HECSU and AGCAS 2011) and the survey by Jameson et al (2009) found that 75 per cent of employers thought that while having a degree was an important baseline qualification, the degree subject and knowledge were not necessarily as important as the graduate skills and competences developed while doing the degree. One employer stated:

*A degree is a basic indicator of aptitude and application. People do not necessarily know what they would like to do after uni; their choice of degree topic is not an indication of their aptitude, aspiration or a constraint in their talent.*

(Jameson et al 2009: 14)

Despite this, owing to the importance of employability in the KIS data, university careers departments are increasingly under pressure to guide students towards employment rather than towards personal development. For university careers services, restructuring and repositioning are the order of the day, as universities chase league table positions and require positive KIS employability data entries. This has seen careers services moving away from a student service model to alignment with either enterprise/business development units or academic services. Many of these changes are to be welcomed, especially if they improve engagement with students and academic colleagues. However, despite the central importance of employability to institutions, heads of university careers services are coming under increasing pressure to demonstrate impact and value for money. This often results in crude reliance on the DLHE (Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education<sup>1</sup>) survey returns as the litmus test for performance. The majority of university careers services subscribe to the Association of Graduate Careers and Advisory Services (AGCAS) code of conduct, where the mantra is impartial advice and guidance that should be in the best interest of the individual:

*Guidance should be impartial. Providers should be able to demonstrate any claim that they offer an impartial service, or declare any factors that might limit the impartiality of the guidance offered to the individual. This includes guidance provision reflecting the vested interests of the provider, and/or the provision of incomplete information on opportunities for learning and work.*

and

*The guidance process should be focused on the needs of the individual, whose interests are paramount.*

(AGCAS 2010)

Yet careers advisers are feeling increasingly compromised, as their managers demand ‘get them jobs – and at graduate level, too.’ Yorke (2006: 11) argues that, ultimately, there are likely to be contentions about what employers would ideally like in terms of a graduate perfectly attuned to their needs and what HE can reasonably supply without compromising academic freedom or autonomy. In the immediate wake of these recent government reports, the social sciences, humanities and arts are coming under increasing pressure to justify their existence in terms of opportunities for employment and also to be responsive to the perceived needs of employers. With savage retrenchment in the public sector, these opportunities and ‘needs’ will come to be dominated by a resurgent private sector when, or perhaps if, it materialises.

## **The student as an economic enterprise or the really enterprising student: student as consumer versus student as producer**

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<sup>1</sup> This looks at graduate employment destinations six months after graduation.

As previously stated, the development of KIS requires the answer, as identified by the government, for a tangible measurable product, to be able to 'provide the answers' that they believe that students need to make informed choices, for instance measuring levels of graduate employability, salary, professionalism, contact hours and satisfaction. This context could be said to encourage what Neary and Winn (2009) identify as a positivist model of teaching where faculty experts transmit knowledge to the passive student recipient who does not expect to reciprocate because, after all, they are *buying* the knowledge. Of course the concept of 'if you can buy it, you can have it' is contentious in relation to gaining an HE degree, particularly if the market is based on what students 'want', because it could lead to students expressing their dislike of tasks and courses they see as difficult and pressure being put on staff to change courses to suit student whims. Neary and Winn (2009: 193) suggest that knowledge in this sense "remains contained, under control and restricted to the privileged under the logic of ... the knowledge economy".

Knowledge being the commodity it is expected that students will want to buy in HE is inextricably linked to their future aspirations and personal capital; the student as consumer concentrates on the acquisition of intellectual capital/property and privilege. However, the student as producer requires students to collaborate with academic staff in the production of knowledge from within, rather than judge it from the outside. Neary and Winn (2009: 206) state that the student as producer concentrates on the student's intellectual development rather than their consumption of knowledge, which is then 'beyond the logic of market economics'. They say that there are powerful arguments to encourage research-based learning and teaching, which then inspire students to develop critical academic and evaluative skills, supporting participation and retention at the same time as elevating degree aspirations and degree completion. Importantly however:

*The idea of student as producer encourages the development of collaborative relations between student and academic for the production of knowledge. However, if this idea is to connect to the project of refashioning in fundamental ways the nature of the university, then further attention needs to be paid to the framework by which the student as producer contributes towards mass intellectuality. This requires academics and students to do more than simply redesign their curricula, but go further and redesign the organizing principle, (i.e. private property and wage labour), through which academic knowledge is currently being produced.*

(Neary and Winn 2009: 209)

It is not that the student as producer is anti-capital, but that it promotes the values and creates a landscape of openness in respect of knowledge, deconstructs privilege and promotes collaboration between students and academics. This raises issues about the fundamental value of a degree, shifting this from being about student as a passive consumer of the degree, which is conceived narrowly as providing particular knowledge and skills as a passport to future prosperity, to the student as an active producer of themselves as enterprising citizens in an educational landscape in the university designed to promote and enable their intellectual development. For the social sciences it goes back to the intrinsic worth of the social sciences in terms of the value of being able to create argument, evidence, analysis, context and engagement, which goes beyond the ability to speak, write, add up and comply. For students, it is known that, in the context of motivation, agency and even enjoyment in their learning, rather than pushing knowledge at them, enhancing students' self-belief and enabling them to work autonomously and develop belief in their self-competence are significant (Zepke and Leach 2010). This was also found by Strudwick and Jameson (2010) in their study of students, identifying 'soft skills', such as self-confidence, as one of the motivating factors for doing a degree. Being able to construct their own knowledge, and have the self-belief that they have the personal resources to complete tasks, has been found to help motivation and engagement even "in the face of short term failure" (Zepke and Leach 2010: 170). This is a valuable attribute in the UK's current graduate employment market as it may potentially bolster them against the difficulties of securing an occupation that matches their ambitions

and allow them to gain more resilience to keep them motivated. Zepke and Leach (2010) also identify that teachers and teaching are central to engagement and suggest that students will commit to work harder if the teacher is perceived to be approachable. This is intimately related to the importance of creating active and collaborative learning relationships, and Bryson and Hand (2007 cited in Zepke and Leach 2010) conclude that students are more likely to engage if teachers create inviting learning environments as well as demand high standards, reiterating the importance of the learning landscapes in the university.

## Conclusion

This paper has presented a number of conceptual discussions to assess and challenge the impact of recent policy implementation concerned with the future sustainability of HE. The paper has documented the apparent creation of the student as consumer, couched in the economic good of having a degree and thus purchasing a stake in their own economic wellbeing in an educational 'free market'. The paper has challenged the concept that students instrumentally choose in ways that the government would want or that choices occur in a totally free market. This is because the government is clearly attempting to influence student choice more directly, by cutting funding for the arts, humanities and social sciences and restricting growth to STEM subjects.

Using Bauman's arguments about consuming societies, we go on to identify why location with the student as consumer is potentially problematic because it may undermine students' ability to develop the very skills apparently required by employers. We offer the idea that the student as producer potentially registers the movement away from a passive consumer, consuming knowledge and conceived narrowly as a passport to future prosperity, to the student as active producer of themselves as enterprising citizens. They are able to develop this by becoming part of the academic project (Neary and Winn 2009), producing knowledge in a landscape that promotes openness, enquiry, ownership and empowerment, rather than one where they buy, passively consume and then judge their knowledge acquisition from outwith, with little personal ownership of their development. It is perhaps ironic that the clear attempt to engineer student choice appears to ignore the critique of social engineering, which lies at the heart of social scientific endeavour. In other words, it just might not work.

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