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Through the looking-glass: An exploration of students'
discourse within the managerialised university

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A dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Master of Research
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Abstract

The primary purpose of this study was to develop an in-depth insight into the effects of neo-liberalism and managerialism in students' approach to higher education, namely in their relationships with academics and other students, in their identities, and the way students enact particular practices within contemporary higher education.

As a researcher, I adopted the perspective of social constructionism, and so the study took a qualitative interpretivist approach. The main data collection technique consisted of qualitative one-on-one semi-structured interviews using mainly open-ended questions. Seven participants were interviewed, and the interviews were analysed using Potter and Wetherell's (1987) approach to discourse analysis, and Erving Goffman's (1990 [1959]) metaphor of everyday life interactions as dramaturgical performances was used as a theoretical framework for presenting the findings.

The participants' accounts confirmed that, to an extent, students adopted an instrumental view of higher education as well as neo-liberal discourses to describe their expectations. Although much of the literature on students in the managerialised university has constructed (and reduced) them to 'consumers', the findings also revealed how going to university was reported to be more than a standard transaction of consuming. University is seen as a period of transition in their lives when they can be 'free' and independent from the parental gaze and one of their top priorities includes socialising and making friends. However, this 'life experience' is not free of the paradoxes and ambiguities of modern life.

Declaration

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the regulations of The Open University. The work is original except where indicated by reference in the text. A complete list of references has been appended.

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree either in the United Kingdom or overseas.

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Through the looking-glass, nothing is what it seems.

Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass*

You shall no longer take things at second or third hand,
nor look through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the spectres in books,
You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,
You shall listen to all sides and filter them from yourself.
I have heard what the talkers were talking, the talk of the beginning and the end,
But I do not talk of the beginning or the end.

Walt Whitman, *Song of myself*

Each of us is several, is many, a profusion of selves. So that the self who disdains his surroundings is not the same self who suffers or takes joy in them. In the vast colony of our being there are many species of people who think and feel in different ways.

Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*

The true mark of common sense, on the other hand, since you're human, is to have no intellectual pretensions and go along with the mass of humankind by either winking cheerfully at their faults or copying them good-humouredly yourself. But that too is folly, folk will say. And I'll not deny it; just in return let them admit that that's what it takes to act life's play.

Erasmus, *Praise of Folly*

Aims and objectives

Although there has been a great deal of research in recent years, the experiences of students in the managerialised university appear to be significant by their absence. It is difficult to find any studies which present students' accounts in terms of the relationship they have been experiencing with academics and other students and the way in which their identities have been and are being affected. The aims of this research are to understand the effects of neo-liberalism and managerialism in students' approach to higher education and in the relationship between academics and students, and the strategies students have adopted, and are adopting, to deal with this contemporary experience in higher education.

To achieve these aims, this study will focus on the following. First, some of the most significant literature on this subject will be critically reviewed to understand the main historical events that have led to the present context of the managerialised university, and, in particular, marketised higher education. Secondly, to explore how this context affects and reshapes students' relationships with academics and other students. More specifically, to better understand the way students experience the changing context and their relationship with academics.

In so doing I will present a comprehensive and accurate account of how the data was collected and analysed, and a summary of the main findings. In addition, there will be a clear theoretical interpretation of the results, discussion of the implications, and a comparison of findings with some of the most relevant literature. Using Creswell's words, the dissertation will "include the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, a [...] description and interpretation of the problem, and its contribution to the literature" (2013, p 44).

Since one of the requirements of any research is to consider ethically appropriate issues, I will explain how these have been addressed in different stages of the research process. The idea that these problems only occur during the data collection phase is a common mistake (Creswell, 2013), since they can arise at any or all phases of the research process, i.e., prior

to conducting the study, at the beginning of the study, during data collection, in data analysis, in reporting the data, and in publishing the study.

Literature review and research questions

Since the late 1970s and early 1980s the public sector has been subjected to profound change in most countries of the Western world. The movement responsible for those changes can be seen as a consequence of the process of expansion of neoliberal policies into the public sector initially undertaken by Ronald Reagan's Administration in the USA and Margaret Thatcher's government in the UK. Both were soon followed by Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands, and Sweden (Deem, 1998; Gruening, 2001; Lorenz, 2012). These changes can be organized under the label of *new public management* (NPM) or *new managerialism* (NM), although the two have different origins (Deem, 1998).

Gruening (2001) examines the "undisputed characteristics of NPM" (p. 16): budget cuts; privatization; separation of provision and production; contracting out; user charges and vouchers; competition; separation of politics and administration; decentralization; and accountability for performance; performance measurement; and performance auditing. Moreover, Lorenz (2012) analyses "how neoliberal ideology conceives of the public sector in general and [...] how this translates to an economic higher education sector" (p. 600), presenting and developing four thesis: (1) "neoliberal policies in the public sector [...] are characterized by a combination of free market rhetoric and intensive managerial control practices"; (2) "NPM policies employ a discourse that parasites the everyday meaning of their concepts [i.e., efficiency, quality, accountability, transparency and flexibility] and simultaneously perverts all their original meanings"; (3) "the economic definition of education ignores the most important aspects of the education process"; (4) "NPM discourse can be termed a bullshit discourse, in the sense ascribed to this concept by Harry G. Frankfurt" (pp. 600-601).

Traditionally, academics have enjoyed considerable freedom and universities a large degree of autonomy (Deem, 1998; Altbach, 2001; Akerlind and Kayrooz, 2003). There are different ways of viewing and understanding academic freedom (Akerlind and Kayrooz, 2003;

Karran, 2007), but it is consensual that it entails the “freedom of the professor to choose teaching and research topics, and to pursue them without governmental interference” (Kayrooz et al., 2007, p. 8). Moreover, there is agreement in considering “the capacity for critical thinking [as] a principal form and foundation of academic freedom” (Deem et al., 2007, p. 169) and academic freedom as being “at the very core of the mission of the university [and] essential to teaching and researching” (Altbach, 2001, p. 205).

However, NPM has been transforming academic freedom and university autonomy through the introduction of multiple control mechanisms over academic personnel (Shore, 2008). Although there is some evidence that management’s control may stimulate resistance on the part of employees (Knights and McCabe, 2000), this permanent control implies the replacement of “the collegiality of academics of equal status working together with minimal hierarchy and maximum trust” (Deem, 1998, p. 48) by “a culture of permanent distrust” (Lorenz, 2012, p. 609). Beyond this culture of distrust, these controls are responsible, among other things, for a demand for greater ‘accountability’ relating to the performance of faculty and an increased marketisation of higher education (Deem, 1998).

The increased marketisation of higher education implies that knowledge has been commodified and higher education has itself come to be seen as a consumer good, with the faculty being simultaneously its producer and seller, and students being the purchasers, i.e., consumers with rights (Molesworth et al., 2009; Maringe, 2011; van Andel et al., 2012; Williams, 2013; Giroux, 2014). In Nordensvärd’s (2011) words, “the dominant metaphor for the student has lately been that of the consumer” (p. 157) and “the student takes on this role when she or he consumes educational products and services connected to these products” (p. 159).

Nordensvärd (2011) distinguishes between three different consumer attitudes to higher education based on the consumer’s motive. One possible reason is to acquire skills that later translate into employability, and so universities must supply to students transferable

knowledge and skills that will allow them to be effective in society (or to become viable in the labour market, to use an expression that reduces labour activity to its marketisation). Another possible motive is to acquire the degree itself, perhaps an even more instrumental relationship with the university than the previous one, because here the student is not interested in acquiring skills and knowledge, but just a diploma that acknowledges and certifies those skills and knowledge. Finally, Nordensvärd suggests that the student may simply be interested in the fun side of joining the university (e.g., partying, making friends, avoiding paid labour). In this sense the relationship with the university continues to be instrumental, but not from an economic point of view. The author points out that these three types of consumer attitudes can coexist at the same time in many different forms.

Bauman (2005) states that in our present society “only as commodities, only if they are able to demonstrate their own use-value, can consumers gain access to consuming life” (p. 10). This author argues, therefore, that being a consumer and being an object of consumption are two roles that “interwine, blend and merge” (ibid.). Indeed, from a neo-liberal perspective, when students act as consumers of skills, knowledge or a degree, they must also act as (self-)managers (Nordensvärd, 2011) learning whatever makes them more useful for the labour market, i.e, to make them more employable. The student is no longer a subject of the global economy, but becomes merely an object of it. In this sense, the metaphor of the student as a consumer implies not only the commoditization of higher education but also the commoditization of the student too.

It is important to mention the suggestion that students see higher education in an instrumental manner and that they may demand ‘value for money’ on their educational ‘investment’ because when they start their academic studies they are already embedded within neoliberal markets of consumption from an early age (Scullion et al., 2011). Moreover, since “competition has recently been transformed from being a peripheral element in the practices of higher education to being a ideology that enters into the character of the central practices

of academic life” (Barnett, 2003, p. 84), universities often seem to encourage students to behave as consumers, e.g., by completing course evaluation forms and quoting survey results and statistics to them in academic brochures (Jones-Devitt and Samiei, 2011).

However, Maringe (2011) notes that it is impossible to apply the commercial notion of consumers “always being right” to higher education. Indeed, different students will react in different ways to specific lecture modes and it is not possible to adapt a specific lecture to each and every one of them. This author observes that this metaphor of the student as a consumer was reinforced by the introduction of fees in higher education and has led students “to believe that they are on the receiving end of educational instruction rather than at the centre of it” (p.152). Moreover, students fees mean that the more students universities admit the more income they will have (Foskett, 2011). However, Giroux (2014) notes that there has been some resistance on the part of students and student protests movements have been rising in the UK. But this author also adverts that this movements “must be viewed within a broader landscape that goes far beyond a critique of massive increases in student tuition” (ibid., p. 61).

All of the abovementioned have had an impact on the traditional hierarchical relationship between teachers and students, in which the “teacher represents professional authority” (Lorenz, 2012, p. 621). Indeed, this relationship has been, and is being, reshaped (Williams, 2013) and its present configuration is not clear in terms of power relations (Foucault, 1983). Some authors note that the vision of students as “consumers with explicit consumer rights” (Lorenz, 2012, p. 624) implies that the traditional hierarchical relationship between teachers and students may have a tendency to disappear or to be inverted (Lorenz, 2012; Williams, 2013).

This changing context and the changing conditions of their work have impacted the ways in which academics identify with their work, and more generally as professionals, while also influencing both lecturers’ and students’ ‘performed characters’, to use Goffman’s (1990

[1959]) expression. For Goffman (1990 [1959]), in social interaction, the self that interacts with other individuals is a 'performed character'. Goffman distinguishes between the individual as a performed character, on the one hand, and the individual as a performer on the other: "The individual was divided in two parts: he was viewed as a *performer*, a harried fabricator of impressions involved in the all-to-human task of staging a performance [and] he was viewed as a *character* [...] whose [...] qualities the performance was designed to evoke. The attributes of a performer and the attributes of a character are from a different order" (p. 244). In addition, Goffman argues that, in a performed scene, the audience (i.e., the others) will impute a self to a specific person as a consequence of the way she has performed. However, while this author argues that the essence cannot be recognized by the others, he does not deny the existence of an essence under the performed character. In fact, he notes that "the individual as a performer [...] has a capacity to learn [...], is given to having fantasies and dreams [...], often manifests a gregarious desire for team-mates and audiences [...] and he has a capacity for deeply felt shame, leading him to minimize the chances he takes of exposure" (p. 245-246).

Brown (2001; 2015) notes that identities are fundamental to understanding the most significant aspects of organizational life. Indeed, identity is "a construct that derives from the interaction between the identity holder and the wider environment [and] its core is formed by a more-or-less coherent set of norms and values going back to [...] the larger narrative of a particular culture" (Verhaeghe, 2014, pp. 33-34). Moreover, drawing from Foucault's (1977; 1980; 1983) work about power and subjectivity, identity can be seen as "a product of competing discourses that in turn reflect power relations within a particular social context" (Cassell, 2005, p. 170). Therefore, research in the field of identity has provided a means of exploring the variety of responses to managerialism by academics (Thomas and Davies, 2002; Clarke et al., 2012; Knights and Clarke, 2014; Clarke and Knights, 2015a).

For instance, since both research and teaching are central to the work identities of academics (Deem et al., 2007), Clarke et al. (2012) tried “to understand how the historical, cultural, economic, political and institutional relations in higher education [...] shape or reshape the conditions of identity work and how academic subjectivities are sustained or transformed” (p. 6). The need to continually publish more and more in top-ranked journals, with the inevitable criticism and rejection associated (Gabriel, 2010), and the demands to perform have resulted in the academic identities becoming fragile and insecure (Clarke et al., 2012). Using three concepts of love (romantic, unconditional and pragmatic) as a framework, the authors concluded that, due to a sense of disappointment motivated by continuous demands of accountability and performance, the academic labour “is less about romantic ideals and unconditionality but more about pragmatic and rational choices predicated on insecurities and career progression” (p. 13).

Collinson (2003) notes that notions of insecurity and identity are closely tied, insecurity being one of the main drivers for the preoccupation with identity. As Knights and Willmott (1989) suggest, insecurities can be a consequence of an individual’s attachment to particular notions of the self because identity is dependent on others’ judgments and validations of the self that cannot be fully anticipated or controlled (Berger and Luckmann, 1991 [1966]). Back (2016), for example, suggests that academics’ “forms of self-presentation are tied to the modern academic desire of being taken seriously – that is, the embodiment of entrepreneurialism, ‘being smart’ and ‘world-class’ braininess” (p. 68).

Collinson (2003) argues that it is possible to better understand organizational power relations by exploring the workplace construction of selves. Moreover, the existence of power asymmetries in an organizational context can reinforce or lead to material and symbolic insecurities (ibid.). Based on empirical research conducted with business school academics, Knights and Clarke (2014) also note that insecurity and identity are essential and mutually constituted concepts to study organizations. The authors describe the academic lives of the

participants as 'bittersweet' on the basis of the ambivalence detected around participant's understanding of what does and what should constitute academic life (i.e., being entitled to full freedom in teaching, researching and pursuing knowledge), and the near impossibility, at least for the majority, of achieving it.

Although there has been much criticism of the concept of student as consumer in higher education (e.g., Molesworth et al, 2009; Maringe, 2011; Williams, 2013; Giroux, 2014), we have yet to comprehend how the practices of managerialism are affecting academics-students relations, i.e., there is a need for these "identity dynamics to be better understood" (Brown, 2015, p. 20). At the moment, the experiences of students in the managerialised university appear significant by their absence (van Andel, 2012). Indeed, students' experiences tend to be portrayed from the academic's point of view, in a way that closes down the voice of the student, while students are affected by the marketisation of higher education and have to face countless challenges.

Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to develop an in-depth insight into understanding students' approach to higher education in the contemporary context of neoliberal managerialism, namely in their relationship with other students and academics, the way their identities are affected, and what strategies are enacted within the contemporary culture. In this analysis, Goffman's (1990 [1959]) distinction between, on the one hand, the individual as a performed character, and, on the other, the individual as a performer will be used as a theoretical framework.

Based on the identified gap in the literature, the following research questions emerge:

1. How do students reproduce, reshape and resist discourses of neo-liberalism and managerialism relating to higher education in the UK?
2. How have neoliberal and managerial discourses affected higher education students' identities?

3. To what extent has the relationship between students and academics been affected by the marketisation of higher education in the UK?

Epistemology and research approach

Researchers always bring their beliefs and philosophical assumptions to their studies (Creswell, 2013). The option for methodology embodies a variety of assumptions regarding the nature of knowledge (i.e., concerning ontology, conceived as a patterned set of assumptions concerning reality, and epistemology, the knowledge of that reality) and the methods through which that knowledge/reality can be obtained (Morgan and Smircich, 1980; Brannen, 2005). However, many researchers conduct their research projects without mentioning philosophical debates as their only concern is the “congruence between a research problem and a technique, or cluster of techniques, to answer the issue at hand” (Bryman, 1984, p. 88). I consider it essential to write about philosophical assumptions because, without knowing this, the readers will not appreciate through which criteria the final results must be assessed (or at least it will be more difficult for them). Furthermore, this information will allow the reader to assess the congruence between what the author proclaims to believe and what he or she has developed in their study.

As a researcher, I do not believe that social scientists can be neutral observers and limit themselves to articulate a scientific ‘truth’ as positivists understand it. Positivism is characterised by the belief that all phenomena can be reduced to empirical indicators which represent the truth and also by a preoccupation with, among others, objectivity, replicability and causality (Bryman, 1984). Instead, I adopt the perspective of social constructionism because I believe that all researchers’ accounts are specific social constructions, i.e., they are the outcome of their methodological interactions with an object of knowledge and the subsequent conceptualization of it achieved through a reflexive process (Cassell, 2005). Furthermore, social constructionism focuses on how people make sense of the world, namely sharing their experiences with others through language. In this paradigm, (1) the researcher cannot be separated from what is being observed, (2) human interests are the main driver of science, (3) the explanations provided aim to increase general understanding of the situation,

and (4) the research progresses through obtaining rich data, usually from a restricted number of cases, that generates ideas (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008).

This study took a qualitative approach because its purpose is “to understand and explore meaning and the ways people make meaning, rather than to prove a theory or determine a relationship between factors” (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 35). In other words, the study aims to understand this particular social reality from the perspective of the participants, and to appreciate their behaviours in the context of their specific group (Bryman, 1984). In this sense, the study can be classified as qualitative in terms of research strategy (Bryman and Bell, 2003).

A quantitative approach would not be adequate for this research because one of the main characteristics of quantitative methodology is that it seeks to identify and measure concepts through operationalising them, exploring the relationships between variables, and to explain or predict with the aim of generalizing the findings (Tolich and Davidson, 2003). That is not the aim of this research. The quantitative approach is often described as applying a natural science approach to social phenomena. In particular, it applies a positivist one, characterized by the belief that all phenomena can be reduced to empirical indicators which represent a search for the truth. Furthermore, it is also preoccupied with objectivity, replicability and causality, among other things (Bryman, 1984). However, as mentioned above, I do not believe that social scientists can be neutral observers and limit themselves to articulate a scientific ‘truth’ as positivists understand it.

Data collection

For this research project, the main data collection technique consisted of qualitative one-on-one interviews because “the aim was to study people’s experiences as seen from their points of view” (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008, p. 81). The interviews were semi-structured; I prepared an outline of the topics and issues to discuss and also some questions, but there was flexibility around ordering and the provision of suitable prompts for developing the discussion, in terms of what participants considered to be relevant. I made use of mainly open-ended questions because it was important to let the interviewees give more in-depth responses. This type of interview and questions may be challenging for a less experienced interviewer, but “the major advantage is that the materials are somewhat systematic and comprehensive, while the tone of the interview is fairly conventional and informal” (ibid., p. 82).

I interviewed a total of seven participants. Regarding the number of interviews, I would like to note that due to time limitations it was difficult to interview more students and then proceed to the transcription, analysis, and interpretation of the data. Moreover, this research project, other than being one of the requirements of my MRes, is also a pilot project for my Ph.D research project, and so the number of participants was considered sufficient for that purpose. Finally, it is important not to forget that there is a saturation point, i.e., that after a certain point more data does not necessarily lead to more information (Braun and Clarke, 2013), and although I am not claiming to have met it, this is something I will bear in mind in the Ph.D study.

All the interviews took place in the United Kingdom in July 2016. Five participants had just finished their first year as university students, and two participants were about to start their undergraduate degrees in September/October 2016, after a gap year. Two participants were female, and five were male. At the time of the interviews, all of them were 19 years old, or turning 19 years old, in 2016. All of them were studying or were about to study away from

home. Alfred¹ and Emma are studying at the University of Edinburgh, Bill at the University of Bath, Bob at the University of Oxford, and Gina at the University of Leeds. Arthur was about to start his higher education studies at the University of Glasgow, and Charles was about to go abroad, to Trinity College, in Dublin. Thus they all had, or would have to, move geographically to pursue their higher education studies.

A problem that may arise in a research project is obtaining access to one or several organisations. Buchanan et al (1988) argue that, both in the private and public sectors, managers tend to avoid participation in academic research because they consider it to be a non-productive activity since “the intervention of any researcher has the potential to disrupt occupational practices and working identities” (Clarke and Knights, 2015, p. 37). In the case of this study, the research occurred in the context of academia, and that was not a problem because I did not need to ask permission of any organisation to interview their members. So my primary concern was finding individuals available and interested in participating in the study.

I gained access to two of the participants through one colleague from the Open University who introduced me to them. Subsequently, I asked one of the participants if he could help me in the process, namely publicising the research through his contacts and introducing me to other individuals who would not mind participating in the study. He then introduced me to the others by email, and I invited them for the interview also by email, therefore, the sampling technique took the form of “snowball or chain” (Creswell, 2013, p. 158). It is also relevant to mention that six of them studied together in secondary school, and pertinent to note that all studied in private schools.

I let the participants choose the place where the interview would take place because I wanted to ensure that they would feel comfortable and secure while answering the questions. At the start of the interview, I explained the research project to them face-to-face and in detail, and

¹ All the participants were given fictitious names to assure that their identities would be kept anonymous.

I made myself available to answer any question or clarify any doubt. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) note that there is a power asymmetry in the relationship established between interviewer and interviewee, highlighting that it is not a relationship between equals, but one where the interviewer dominates. To overcome or, at least, to diminish the impact of this inequality, these authors propose a more collaborative and open interview. I believe that as postgraduate research student I was capable of mitigating such an issue as I have a fair knowledge of academic culture but, at the same time, I am not an academic, what gives me a good balance of the researcher's position.

Creswell (2013) warns that the inexperience of the researcher can also be a major issue. I believe we should never underestimate our weaknesses, because recognising them is the first step to overcoming them. It is important to admit that I was not, and am not, an experienced researcher used to conducting qualitative interviews. However, I was supported by my principal supervisor, a qualitative researcher herself with many years of experience conducting interviews in different research projects, in making careful theoretical preparation.

I interviewed the participants at a single moment in time, but I proposed interviewing them two or three times more in the future for a longitudinal study, and all of them indicated their availability. To elucidate, I will start my Ph.D next October, and I intend to develop a longitudinal research design, interviewing at regular time periods.

The interviews lasted between 15 minutes and 35 minutes and were all digitally recorded, and latter fully transcribed. The participants were asked about several matters associated with their day-to-day life as students, including their relationship with academics (naturally, the participants taking a gap year were not asked about these matters). Additionally, there were also questions relating to their views on higher education, their plans for the future, and the impact of other people in selecting their choice of degree, and university. The objective was to better understand the way they perceive the impact of the evolution of context on

themselves and on their relationship with their teachers. Goffman's theory (1990 [1959]) of the self as a performed character was used to contextualise and interpret the findings.

Data analysis

The data was analysed using discourse analysis. The term ‘discourse analysis’ was coined by the linguist Zellig S. Harris in 1952. Since then, many academics (linguists, sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists and communication scholars among others) have acknowledged that it is important to study discourse (Cooren, 2015). Discourse can be defined as:

[...] a connected set of statements, concepts, terms and expressions which constitute a way of talking or writing about an aspect of life, a phenomenon or an issue, thus framing the way people understand and act with respect to such matters (Watson, 2001, p. 391).

Discourse analysis focuses “on the cultural meanings attached to people, artefacts, events and experiences [that] are mediated through language practices [...] and provides a mean to study these and their consequences” (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008, p. 227). Although it is possible to find different variants of discourse analysis, my approach was based on Potter and Wetherell’s (1987) social psychological discourse analysis, which suggests that:

[...] social interaction is performative and persuasive; it is negotiation about how we should understand the world and ourselves [...] and aims at creating consensus [...] and justifying power relations. The task of discourse analysis is to unravel the form and functions of particular discursive constructions, and to indicate how they arise from various language practices and they are used by actors in particular social contexts (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008, p. 232).

Indeed, the discourse analysis that Potter and Wetherell propose is appropriate to this study because its main concern is:

how identities as versions of self are constructed as factual and real, and how people position themselves in relation to other people, ideas, groups and objects [and] use different and often conflicting discourses to understand the world around them, or to achieve goals” (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008, p. 232).

Ruiz (2009) notes that this variant of discourse analysis has interest for sociological interpretation because diverse ‘mental constructs’ – or ‘ideologies’, as Billig (1991) calls

them – such as shared patterns of understanding and interpretation or ‘interpretative repertoires’ can be derived from it. The concept ‘interpretative repertoires’ (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) can be described as:

[...] coherent and systematic ways of talking about things [that] may be organised around one or more central metaphors. They are historically developed and make an important part of the common sense of a culture. However, they may also be specific to certain institutional domain[s]. (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008, pp. 232-233)

So, it is important to note that in the discourse analysis that Potter and Wetherell (1987) propose:

First, there is the search for pattern in the data. This pattern will be in the form of both variability: differences in either the content or form of accounts, and consistency: the identification of features shared by accounts. Second, there is the concern with function and consequence. The basic theoretical thrust of discourse analysis is the argument that people’s talk fulfils many functions and varying effects. (p.168)

Potter and Wetherell (1987) argue that there are no recipes for analysing discourse, rather the researcher needs to develop interpretative schemes that may need to be changed, or abandoned, during the research process. The researcher always needs to decide which method of analysis best suits the study that he is developing.

It is important to mention that this research project was also a pilot for a longitudinal study that I plan to develop in the next three years (as my doctoral research), and so it was an excellent opportunity to verify if this variant of discourse analysis would be an adequate method for its development.

My primary concern was to identify patterns in the collected data. Subsequently, I tried to understand the ideological consequences of the participant’s accounts, and how the students’ discourse revealed and contributed to “reify current social relationships as natural or, indeed, essential” (Potter and Wetherell, 1987, p. 187).

Part of the analysis involved the full transcription of the interviews. Transcribing interviews is always time-consuming because it is “a skill that requires practice to perfect” (Potter and Wetherell, 1987, p. 165) and “there are no hard-and-fast rules” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p. 149).

Researchers always need to make decisions about what must be represented in the transcript, and they must remember that more detail in the transcript not only means more time to produce it, but also that it may become more difficult to read (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Taking into account both the research purposes and the time limitations, a pragmatic choice was made. I decided to ignore some details of the interactions, such as gestures, intonations, pronunciations and overlapping among others. My main concern was *what* was said, and not so much *how* it was said.

The data was interpreted through Goffman’s (1990 [1959]) dramaturgical model, but the interpretation process did not conform just to Goffman’s theoretical framework. The reviewed literature, my tacit knowledge and the data itself assumed a significant relevance through this process. Indeed, there was an interplay between data and ideas “in which ideas [were] used to make sense of the data, and data [were] used to change ideas” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p. 159).

During the analysis, I sought to identify different categories in the data (e.g., ‘students’ relationship with academics’). The transcripts were manually coded, and each category was highlighted with a different colour. In some cases, more than one category was identified in the same segment of text because “the social world – and therefore [my] data – is complex in its enactments [and participants] do not talk about just one topic at a time” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p. 155). In these situations, as Potter and Wetherell (1987) recommend, the excerpt was classified in each category, and a note was inserted mentioning the other categories where it had also been classified. To achieve this categorisation, multiple readings of the data were required.

Ethical issues

Creswell (2013) stresses how the idea that ethical issues only occur during the data collection phase is a common mistake. In fact, they may occur at any phase of the research process; prior to conducting the study, at the beginning of the study, during data collection, in data analysis, in reporting the data, or in publishing the study. Moreover, these issues “are ever expanding in scope as inquirers become more sensitive to the needs of participants, sites, stakeholders, and publishers of research” (Creswell, 2013, p. 56).

Prior to conducting the study

Since the research involves humans, the first step took place even before the data collection commenced and it consisted of obtaining the approval of the Open University for conducting this research. The specific entity responsible for this approval is the Open University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). To obtain its authorisation, I consulted the ethical standards of doing research at the Open University. Once the Open University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) verified my project, I was able to commence the study.

At the beginning of the study

I informed the participants of the purpose of the research and asked for their collaboration by email. During this phase, I was careful to make sure no one felt pressured to participate in the study. Moreover, I assured all the participants that their identities would be kept confidential at all stages of the research. To ensure this, I used appropriate procedures when collecting the data; for example, I codified all information regarding participants' identities.

During data collection

Data collection is one of the most sensitive phases of the process involving the participants, because it is during this phase that the researcher interacts more with them. I tried to build a trusting relationship with the participants, and by this I mean one where both parties were aware of what was expected of them and did their best to respect the other party's

expectations. To achieve this I explained to the students again what the purpose of the study was at the beginning of the interview, and explained, in more detail, how the information would be used.

Another potential issue was the possibility that participants may inadvertently give me information without intending it to be used in the study. Every time I faced such uncertainties, I checked with the student what her or his intentions were and I assured them that their wishes would be respected.

In data analysis

In this phase, I analysed the interviews with the students. Creswell (2013) notes that, when analysing data, we cannot forget that it is essential to present a multidimensional perspective of the phenomenon under research. As I noted before, a postgraduate research student doing research on a topic involving academia is in a somewhat peculiar position. I have a fair knowledge of the academic culture but, at the same time, I am not enacting in the academic world in the same way as a lecturer or professor. So, when analysing the data, I kept focused on presenting different points of view, even when they were contradictory. From my point of view, this required presenting insightful treatment of data, with an appropriate balance between my comments on the data and illustrative extracts, in order to allow the reader to assess the relevance of my interpretations.

Regarding the identity of the participants, it was important to respect their privacy and, therefore, to use appropriate procedures to assure that their identities would be kept anonymous. In order to achieve that, I gave them fictitious names that would not allow readers to track who they are. At times, some information had to be sacrificed. In some cases, the crossing of the socio-demographic characteristics or specific episodes involving the students with the identification of the course and institution could have revealed their identities. When presented with such cases, my main concern was to maintain the anonymity of the students.

Findings

Value for money and employability

As mentioned in the literature review, the marketisation of higher education implies that knowledge has started to be commodified. Indeed, from this point of view, higher education is a consumer good, with the faculty being simultaneously its producer and seller. In this context the student purchases the product to become a consumer (Molesworth et al, 2009; Maringe, 2011; van Andel et al., 2012; Williams, 2013; Giroux, 2014). But do all students see themselves in this way?

The participants' accounts show that pursuing higher education studies is, at least for most of them, attached to a notion of economic and financial value. So, when asked how they felt about fees at UK universities (approximately £9,000 a year without maintenance costs), most participants' answers revealed that they expect 'value for money' on their educational 'investment' (Scullion, 2011). The expression 'value for money' was explicitly used by Gina:

If they raised fees higher, I would probably have thought twice about going to university to do history because it just doesn't seem to work out cost wise. I would like to go to university, but I would probably do a course that was better value for money. (Gina, History Student, Leeds)

Moreover, Gina did not consider it fair to pay the same amount as someone in a degree program that involves more contact time:

I have six hours of contact time a week, and I'm paying £9,000 a year. But if you are doing medicine you are in from 9 am to 5 pm every day. It's hard to see where the money is going. I feel I'm subsidising people who are doing more intense degrees. (Gina, History Student, Leeds)

In keeping with idea, some students, like Emma, a medical student at the University of Edinburgh, do not mind paying fees:

I don't mind paying £9000/year. [...] I know that in my parents' days they received a grant and it was all free, and I think that for people who are less privileged than me – I have a very privileged background – it would be incredibly difficult, but I think £9000/year to do medicine is fair enough. (Emma, Medical Student, Edinburgh)

However, Emma's feelings do not differ from Gina's regarding attaching financial and economic value to a particular undergraduate course. Indeed, Emma is also basing her considerations on future professional opportunities offered by a medical degree:

I think if I was studying geography and I saw someone studying medicine who is also paying £9000/year... That's a bit unequal. I'm sure the teaching offered in geography is great, but you'll come out of geography, and you'll have a degree in geography. You'll have to try to find a job [...], but if it is in medicine you're given all these opportunities... (Emma, Medical Student, Edinburgh)

Even when questioned about what would she do if she ended up not liking medicine (at one point she told me she does not like seeing blood or touching dead bodies), Emma still indicated that she felt she would have good employment prospects with a degree in the healthcare field:

[If I did not like it], I would probably go into research or management because I know these options can be made available to you. Or maybe even medical law. I felt that medicine was a fairly safe bet because it opens many, many doors even if you're not practicing. (Emma, Medical Student, Edinburgh)

Indeed, when deciding on a particular degree, decision-making is closely connected to the discourse of 'value for money'. Instead of pursuing a program they felt passionate about, some students preferred to choose a field that ultimately will translate into better employment prospects. In this sense, employability is regarded by students as a measure of value for money. When I asked Bill why he opted to pursue studies in business administration at the University of Bath, he answered:

I wanted to do sports sciences, but I was never going to get anywhere with it. So, I was like, "I'll do business administration and see what happens." I thought it would be quite a good foundation. It's better than doing an average course, like geography. (Bill, Business Student, Bath)

However, choosing a seemingly more secure option does not mean that students think that enjoyment and fulfillment are irrelevant. Indeed, Bill admits he has considered the possibility of studying a different subject in the future:

You need to go back to the beginning if you realise what you have studied is not what your passion is. Because I think work is pretty much the majority of your life. So if you are doing something, you might as well bloody enjoy it. Otherwise, that is like 60% of your life you are not enjoying. (Bill, Business Student, Bath)

Other students did not associate their choice of program with the ease of securing a job in the future. Nonetheless, economic and financial considerations came up in their interviews.

Bob, a first-year law student at the University of Oxford said this:

Sometimes there is the thought that a lot of degrees that are done are not worth the money... They don't give you any better prospects after university, and they don't really help you from that perspective. (Bob, Law Student, Oxford)

Undertaking a degree that presents good chances of getting a job after finishing it gives students a feeling of security:

I loved geography at school; I loved English [...], but medicine is a vocational course. [...] it is possibly harder than other courses but at the end of the day I know that I'll come out with a job after six years. It just feels very secure. (Emma, Medical Student, Oxford)

For the participants, higher education is viewed, among other things, as a means to achieve something in the future. To use Bill's words, "to get anywhere":

I need [a bachelor's degree] to progress to the level I want to be. And now there's even the need to get a master's degree. I think having a CV with further education is very important. So I think it's a requirement, and obviously, I think you still get places without it, but I think for people who don't really get a good internship or set their very own business, you need it to get anywhere. (Bill, Business Student, Bath)

Alfie, a mathematics student at the University of Edinburgh, though admitting he had no plans for the future, also used the expression 'a means to an end', where the 'end' is obtaining a 'good job':

I don't really have any plans [but] I thought I would be better off getting a degree and having further qualification instead of just the A-levels and going to work three years later than going to work without a degree. You can't get a good job with just A-levels, can you? Not really anymore... It's a lot easier if you have a degree, isn't it? It's like a means to an end. (Alfie, Mathematics Student, Edinburgh)

Indeed, obtaining a university education is reported by most participants as something that increases professional possibilities. Arthur, who will start studying economics, psychology, and sociology at the University of Glasgow next October (after a gap year), is still not certain of what he will do in the future:

I'm kind of unsure of where it will take me in professional terms [but] hopefully it is something I think I can make something of career wise. (Arthur, on a gap year)

But that uncertainty does not mean that Arthur did not take his professional future into consideration:

There was definitely the thought of going into this degree because it does open a lot of doors profession wise. (Arthur, on a gap year)

And in the end, the majority of the participants assumed that having an undergraduate degree, regardless of the field, is better than not having one. For instance, Emma, although believing that it is not fair to pay £9000 a year for some degrees, was very clear:

I do believe that university does give you better prospects in life and I think that, especially in today's job climate, you need that edge. If that's given to you by having a degree in any thing from a university, then so be it. (Emma, Medical Student, Edinburgh)

It is relevant to observe that students showed significant concern with the reputation of the university they have chosen. To help them assessing that reputation, some students mentioned university rankings. And although universities ranking criteria was not exhaustively interrogated, different rankings were consulted to allow comparisons:

I looked at the Guardian University Ranking and I looked at a few others. There were things like employment, satisfaction with teaching and some more which were fairly well but I didn't

go into any further detail to how that was assessed. I kind of skimmed it [...]. Different rankings did vary [...] but it was notably coherent. (Emma, Medical Student, Edinburgh)

However, the position occupied by a university in the rankings was not always decisive to the decision-making:

My university was lower down on the rankings than I wanted, but then I looked at other university which was a lot higher up, and I was accepted there, but I didn't want to go into it because the city is too small and too much like my home town. (Gina, History Student, Leeds)

Taking professional futures into consideration does not automatically imply choosing a degree for the sole reason that it will 'open a lot of doors'. Indeed, Arthur had previously been accepted into a different degree program at a different university. He considered his first choice more promising for a future career than his current one because it was 'a more standard and well-regarded' course. However, this was not enough for him because he wants to study a subject he enjoys:

It wasn't necessarily what I want to do. I wanted to do something that I knew I enjoyed and liked to do. And so then probably do better at because I'm enjoying it. (Arthur, on a gap year)

In this case, enjoying the degree reveals an intellectual concern, i.e., it is closely connected to the need to understand the surrounding world:

I want to gain an understanding of the connection between how we think, what we do and how we behave in the economy, and how it all turns out. (Arthur, on a gap year)

In some cases, the student wanted to study a subject that he already enjoyed studying at secondary school, regardless of the future career.

My mum, my dad, my granddad, and my grandma, they all went to university to have a career, whereas I was going to study something I enjoy studying. (Gina, History Student, Leeds)

One of the participants, Charlie, who initially wanted to study at Cambridge but will start studying at Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland, after doing a gap year, rejects the idea of reducing an undergraduate degree to simply a way to get a job in the future:

I'm not going to do a degree because of a job I might eventually get because of it. I'm going there because almost certainly I'll learn much more about myself and my academic interests and gaining a lot more knowledge that is going to help me in my life. I think a degree is not a means to get a job; it's an end in itself. (Charlie, on a gap year)

Yet Charlie is aware that pursuing higher education studies may give him a hand in the search for a job in the future, although he highlights the relevance of graduate studies in finding not, just any job, but in being able to do what he enjoys most:

And yet that may help me in finding a job that I like and that I enjoy because I'm going to be more aware of my tastes. But I'm not doing it so that I can get a job, at all. I think about my future in terms of the things that I'll be doing. So, I would like to be doing some writing, and I can fit that into a profession if people ask me what I would like to be doing, like journalism or something involving this kind of skills, like reading, writing and arguing, but the profession doesn't dominate my view at the moment. (Charlie, on a gap year)

It is important to notice that the idea of an undergraduate degree as a means to an end is not limited to finding a job. Indeed, it may be a way to achieve other objectives, such as intellectual recognition from others, particularly if done at certain universities, like Cambridge or Oxford.

I've always felt the need to show people that I'm intelligent, and Cambridge gives you that kind of stamp of approval. If you go to Cambridge, people assume that you're clever, and you don't need to demonstrate it. It's lazy but also useful for basic communication and socialisation. (Charlie, on a gap year)

Yet it is not just a question of intellectual recognition from others. Indeed, for Charlie it is also an affirmation of his individuality:

At a young age, when you're working in a job that doesn't necessarily distinguish you from anyone around you, you know, when you're working at a pub or for caterers or in a shop, that doesn't in any way really require you to demonstrate your personality. I'm quite keen to show that I'm not merely a stereotype, some kind of youth. I'm more than that [and] I quite like to be considered for what I am. (Charlie, on a gap year)

It is interesting to note that, on the one hand, this participant does not want to be treated merely as a stereotype but, on the other hand, he considers that going to a university like

Cambridge would spare him from having to demonstrate his intellectual attributes to his “audience in everyday life” (Goffman, 1990 [1959]). However, this ‘reduction in performance’ would have to be done at the expense of mobilizing audience’s “stereotypical thinking” (ibid., p. 36), something that happens when “a given social front tends to become institutionalized in terms of the abstract stereotyped expectations to which it gives rise” (ibid., p. 37).

Relationship with academics

An interaction can only occur “when an individual enters the [immediate] presence of others” (Goffman, 1990 [1959], p. 13), and “the initial definition of the situation projected by an individual tends to provide a plan for the cooperative activity that follows” (ibid. p. 24) in the “front region” (i.e., “the place where the performance is given”) (ibid, pp. 109-110). Therefore, participants were questioned about the relationships with their tutors and lecturers. The majority of students’ accounts revealed that their interactions with tutors and lecturers at university were not frequent:

I have met my personal tutor only once in my first year at university. He is a very interesting gentleman, but I didn’t receive a lot of support from him. (Emma, Medical Student, Edinburgh)

Moreover, this student complained of not having a continued relationship with the specialists who teach her:

We are not taught by specialists related to our units. So, we would see them maybe once in all course. Yes, they were excellent, yes, they are very specialized, but there was no continued relationship with them. That’s the one thing about the course I didn’t like. (Emma, Medical Student, Edinburgh)

Emma believes the only reason this does not affect her academic results it is that she can turn to her family for help:

We are learning some complex concepts for the first time, and I find it incredibly difficult. And a lot of times, when I have questions, I ask [my family], and they will explain it to me.

But there comes a point when you just really need to speak to a lecturer just like you talk to your teacher at the school, and it's a bit difficult to do that. (Emma, Medical Student, Edinburgh)

Comparing her learning needs at university with her needs at secondary education, Emma also mentioned her high school to explain why it was easier to talk to teachers there:

I could have sorted my way out to them [but] it's not like school, where the office is down the corridor. Now, if I want to find them, I have to go out to the hospital, and it's a half an hour journey. But it can be done. (Emma, Medical Student, Edinburgh)

Some of the students (but not all) consider that a closer relationship would be positive for their academic progression:

I think a closer relationship with them would help my academics because I would be more engaged in the subject. (Bill, Business Student, Bath)

However, Bill has not actively sought out a closer relationship. He acknowledges his part in this:

Having a relationship with them is optional. I'm sure some people know their tutors very well, but I don't need it because I don't need help. I don't know what I would use it for. [...] I have a tutor but I've never meet him. [...] I've written recent emails about course work [...] but not of further information about the course. So I'm quite lazy, but I think quite few people did. (Bill, Business Student, Bath)

On the other hand, he also reported that some lecturers are inaccessible and not available to establish a relationship of proximity with students, in part due to their performances:

On the first day, [one of my lecturers] told us to treat him as a doctor, otherwise he would not reply. They are quite egotistical people. He would never mingle with us, coming to a seminar and having a personal chat with us. He always puts himself above us. If you're a lecturer, you think you're way better than your students. (Bill, Business Student, Bath)

But Bill also recognised that personal interaction would be difficult given the number of students taking his courses, illustrating how the massification of education brings problems for both academics and students:

We have got about 136 people on the course [...]. If I were a lecturer, I wouldn't want individual contact with 136 students. So they put quite a bit of emphasis on their seminars: "If you don't go to seminars, you're going to miss out a lot of content." (Bill, Business Student, Bath)

Indeed, at least to a certain extent, the introduction of specific learning support software has partially replaced the personal contact between students and the academics:

We don't need to have a closer relationship with them because the content is all on Moodle, our online thing. Well, at least the majority of it is. (Bill, Business Student, Bath)

For other students, like Emma, the existence of learning support software can be helpful. However, in her opinion, it is not a substitute for the advantages of having immediate personal contact with a teacher. At the same time, this participant reveals a passive approach to education:

We do have a great online system to ask questions, but then again it takes a week or two to someone get back to you. So if it is the night before your exam, do you see what I mean? (Emma, Medical Student, Edinburgh)

In most cases, participants' relationships with academics were mainly with their personal tutors. Typically, this involved having one meeting in each semester, and some students mentioned that these meetings were about functional matters such as academic procedures and module choices:

I have a personal tutor. She helped me choose my modules for next year; taught me the process and put me in touch with people. (Gina, History Student, Leeds)

I have a personal tutor, and we have a meeting once a semester, so I had two meetings with him. They are like twenty minutes each, and we just chat through my course choices. (Alfie, Mathematics Student, Edinburgh)

When I asked the participants if having two sessions per year was enough, Alfie answered that it was his choice not to have any more sessions. Indeed, the initiative for the two meetings was not his:

It was not my choice to have meetings with him. It was his choice to have meetings with me. He wanted to have meetings with me. [...] Well, if you want, you can have it, if you are not really interested in getting anything, then you can go the whole three years and never speak to them. (Alfie, Mathematics Student, Edinburgh)

But Alfie highlighted that he considered the relationship with his tutor to be a good one:

I think my relationship with him is quite good actually. I never had any big problems at university [but] if I did have a big problem, I would go to him. [...] if you need help, it is there. (Alfie, Mathematics Student, Edinburgh)

When questioned about the payment of fees, most students mentioned only the need to have value for money on their educational 'investment.' Alfie, however, made a direct association between the payment of fees and his relationship with university teachers and administrative staff. Indeed, the concept of 'student as a customer' was mentioned:

The people who work at the university feel like as you are customers. So, in my experience, they try making your money's worth. (Alfie, Mathematics Student, Edinburgh)

Then, Alfie compared a student's position to that of a restaurant's customer:

For example, when you go to a restaurant, and you pay £50 for you and someone else to have a meal and drink, the waiters are really nice, aren't they? I think that's quite the same for us for paying £9,000 a year because they see you as customers. And if you're paying £9,000 a year for something, then you want it to be really good, don't you? (Alfie, Mathematics Student, Edinburgh)

Freedom, independence, and social interaction

One of the questions the participants were asked, was what their expectations were about their lives as university students. In the case of students that were already studying at university (five out of seven participants), I asked them if their present situation had met their expectations. The idea was to better understand what had interested them most about joining the university and how they expressed those interests during the interviews.

One of the most frequently mentioned advantages of being at university was the freedom and independence the participants felt they attained by moving to a different city:

Part of me wanted to go to Edinburg because it was so far from home [...]. I like the freedom. I like that I have got my own space, my own flat, everything like that. I can see my friends when I want. I can go out when I want. I can really do what I want when I want. That's quite nice. (Emma, Medical Student, Edinburgh)

Bill also said something similar:

What I really enjoy about being here is the freedom. I can wake up and do whatever I want to do – apart from having a job but that takes up just a couple of hours; I think it was fifteen hours this week. I can choose to go to lectures or not, I can sleep whenever I want, I can go out or doing nothing. So when I go home and my mom tells me to do something it's a bit of a shock to me. It's really nice to do whatever you want because from school you're like 'do this', 'get to this lesson' ... (Bill, Business Student, Bath)

However, at the same time, students do not always enjoy the other side of independence, i.e., being on their own:

Freedom has its negative sides too. I absolutely hate cooking my own meals. Doing my own laundry, that is horrible. (Emma, Medical Student, Edinburgh)

But, at this time in their lives, it is clear to some participants that they can benefit from both the freedom of living away from home and the security of still being allowed to rely on their families' support. Moreover, it is seen as a transitional period in their lives, a bridge between adolescence and adulthood. For instance, Gina believes that:

It was also an opportunity to get away from my family. I love my family, but while still having some reliance on them, being somewhere quite a long way away is quite useful because it's a stepping stone to live completely on your own. (Gina, History Student, Leeds)

As well as a way of having freedom and being independent, going into university is also seen as an opportunity to meet new acquaintances and develop new friendships. This social dimension of academic life was highlighted by many participants:

The social part is the main thing. I mean, it's about the friends I've made, the things I've been doing socially and in sports. The life of being a student is great, and so is the independence that it brought. The degree is also important but it has been the social part that I'm loving about university. (Bob, Law Student, Oxford)

Arthur also highlighted the necessity of making new friends:

It's a big point for me to have a lot of friends and have a good time there, to get along with people, to feel comfortable with them, and having a good time because four years is a long time. (Arthur, on a gap year)

Learning experience

Seeing this period in their lives as a 'life experience', an expression used by Bill, does not imply that students do not make an effort to succeed in their studies, but this dedication to study is, in some cases, very instrumental. That is to say that, its sole purpose may be to achieve good marks without any interest in academic study as a learning experience. Bill illustrates:

Especially in the first year, we don't see university as a learning experience; it's more as a life experience. But every time I got exams I'll start prioritizing lectures and I won't go out as much. I do what I need to do and nothing else. I doesn't matter to me putting all the effort in much more. Some people work, they're reading everything, and they'll beat me in the exams by a mile, but they don't gain much from there. I'm not doing a PhD, so I don't need to be the top of my class. (Bill, Business Student, Bath)

Yet not all students seem to think like this. For instance, Emma relished the freedom and independence she has now, but she also mentioned the importance of academic life as a learning experience:

I quite like that all my days are devoted just to medicine. While in school I was doing four or five different subjects. I like that I'm concentrating on one thing now. (Emma, Medical Student, Bath)

Some students saw the relevance of university as a source of intellectual stimulus and challenge:

I enjoy studying. I like learning things. I don't like just doing the same things every day. I need stimulus and at university I have access to books and people who think differently to me, so I quite like that. (Gina, History Student, Leeds)

But it was also mentioned the importance of those challenges and stimulus not being overwhelming:

I also enjoy my degree so far. Obviously, there are ups and downs. You don't love it the entire time, but overall it has been something that I've enjoyed and found to be kind of challenging but not too much that I can't cope with it, which is always nice. (Bob, Law Student, Oxford)

Although not all the participants were already studying at university when I interviewed them, they noted that they were prepared to work hard and in a more independent way than in high school. Moreover, they observed that dedication to studies is an essential part of academic life. To quote Arthur:

I assume it's going to be pretty intense, a lot of hard work and a lot of self-learning. It's not as much teaching as you have in high school. You've lectures and then a lot of it is to do work and find it yourself. [...] I feel pretty ready to do a lot of work and work hard. There's really not much point in going to university if you're not going to work hard. (Arthur, on a gap year)

One of the participants who had not yet started his university journey noted that both the social part of university and acquiring knowledge are essential for students' academic progression of and their development as individuals:

I look forward to that being four years of formative learning [but] I do feel that shutting myself away in a kind of Ivory Tower and just keep reading books it would be a bit of a mistake if I want to progress as a person rather than just a mind. [...] I don't know if the social part and knowledge are at the same level, but I think there's always going to be this interplay between different spheres. (Charlie, on a gap year)

Furthermore, this participant observed the importance of knowledge in his present and future social relations. More specifically, he highlighted that knowledge influences people's behaviour, and ultimately has the capacity to change someone's life:

Knowledge informs how you socialize and who you socialize with and what you talk about. If you're going to use knowledge to develop a conversation and talk to people about things that they have never thought before [...], then I think that's a much more proactive form of knowledge and it legitimizes the fact that people get degrees because they go on to change the rest of their lives and how they behave. (Charlie, on a gap year)

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the payment of fees in higher education was also mentioned as potentially making students more aware of, and responsible for, their active role in the learning process:

The fact that I'm paying fees makes me a lot more responsible for my education because I'm paying quite a lot of money for it. If I miss a lecture, it's entirely on me, whereas if I wasn't paying, maybe I would feel different about that. (Emma, Medical Student, Edinburgh)

Students' influences: family and school

One of the purposes of this study was to have a better understanding of students' decision-making processes when going into higher education. In particular, to find out if other people influenced the decision process or if students were mainly deciding for themselves. Moreover, if the participants had been influenced by others' advice or opinions, it was relevant to have a clearer understanding of who had influenced them and how powerful that discourse was.

Goffman's (1990 [1959]) metaphor of dramaturgy suggests that performers tend to adapt themselves to the specific expectations of other participants and audiences present in the same interaction, i.e., "they must offer something fellow interactants will appreciate or reward" (Jacobsen and Kristiansen, 2015, p 72). All participants felt that pursuing a degree was a naturalized step, perhaps taken-for-granted and beyond mere 'choice', and they frequently mentioned school as having a significant influence on this. Emma, for instance, did not feel she had another option:

When I was at school, it was never put to me 'You don't have to go to university'. In fact, when a friend of mine didn't apply to university it was kind of a scandal to us. And that it had never occurred to me [...]. In my school it was never put to us. (Emma, Medical Student, Edinburgh)

Arthur said that the career department at his secondary school encouraged him to go to university:

[...] it definitely feels like a natural step to go straight into it, and I suppose that's somehow influenced by the people you know. And it's also encouraged by the sake of jobs. My school has a big careers department and they suggested going into university. It's quite a big deal for the high school to try to make sure that everyone who wants to go into university gets into that place. So they end up putting quite a lot of emphasis on it [...] and encouraging people to go. (Arthur, taking a gap year)

Bob expressed something similar:

I felt it seems just a natural progression of things [...]. It's certainly the case that a lot of people from my school just went to university [...]. There was a lot of emphasis on the academic side. Looking back, it was in some ways maybe a bit... not elite, but just the fact that the people were very intelligent. (Bob, Law Student, Oxford)

Yet this student also noted that it had been predominantly his decision but with support from the school and his parents:

I think it was mainly my decision, it was what I was wanting to do, but there were people who obviously influenced me suggesting other options. So there were people at school, some of my teachers and the higher education department. And then my parents as well, not in pushing me in this direction, but just giving me suggestions. (Bob, Law Student, Oxford)

Some students mentioned influences from other people in their choice of degree. For instance, Gina mentioned the head of careers:

My decision was between history and law. The head of careers, who was my history teacher, said that, because of the way I work, history as an undergraduate degree would suite me more, and maybe I could do law afterwards rather than just doing straight law. (Gina, History Student, Leeds)

Gina also mentioned some of her close family members, but although they advised her to do a different program, she did not follow their advice. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that family influences students' understanding of what is a 'proper degree':

My mom, my dad, my granda and my grandma, they all said I should do a proper degree, like medicine or law. So I decided just to ignore them. (Gina, History Student, Leeds)

Emma was the only participant who referred to her parents as people who have had an active and determinant role in the decision-making process:

It wasn't just me who made that decision. I couldn't have made that decision without those people. If it had just been me who decided to do medicine, and I hadn't asked anybody, I don't think I would be comfortable making it. In choosing the course and location, other people were incredibly important. If my parents had said no, and if they had good reasons, I wouldn't have done it. (Emma, Medical Student, Edinburgh)

In this section, I have presented the most relevant findings from this research. The participants' quotes were selected from the interviews I conducted with them, after I had analysed their responses to identify patterns and contradictions in their accounts. The intention was to present the findings in a way that allowed making sense of their discourse. In the next section, I will discuss these findings, comparing them with the most relevant debates identified in the literature.

Discussion

Nordensvärd (2011) claims it is possible to distinguish three different consumer attitudes toward higher education based on the students' motive. The motives can be: to acquire skills that later translate into employability; to obtain the degree itself; and to be part of the 'fun side' of joining the university. Moreover, it was noted that these three types of consumer attitudes could coexist at the same time in many different forms. In their accounts, none of the participants in this research presented themselves as being exclusively interested in acquiring the degree itself or the skills that later translate into employability, the most instrumental attitudes. Indeed, as Collini (2012, p. 137) notes, most human activities valuable to us are simultaneously 'instrumental' (i.e., they enable us to do or act) and 'intrinsic' (i.e., they are ends in themselves).

In different forms, all the students highlighted freedom and independence as one of the best things about going to or being at university. When questioned about the meaning of freedom, the participants associated it with being independent of their parents. However, being at university is at the same time a moment in students' lives when they know that they can benefit from both independence and security (i.e., they are no longer living at home with their parents, but they can still depend on their help if necessary). This feeling of safety can be particularly comforting when students know that "the possibilities of biographical slippage and collapse are ever present [and they will have to] struggle to live their lives in a world that increasingly and more evidently escapes their grasp" (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, pp. 24-25). And yet, at the same time, it is not possible to ignore that nowadays being dependent on someone else is seen as a weakness, so they need to wish for autonomy (Verhaeghe, 2014).

As well as freedom and independence, the social dimension of being a university student (i.e., the social interaction with other students and making new friends) was also considered by the participants as one of the most important aspects of going to university, and some

students even mentioned the social part as the most relevant in their current lives. I would argue that this point is intimately connected with the need to be free and independent because, once someone moves to a different place to pursue higher education, it is only natural that he or she feels the need to create new social bonds of friendship and trust with people who share the same or similar experiences and expectations. This is especially true in our 'liquid modern society', a society "in which the conditions under which its members act change faster than it takes the ways of acting to consolidate into habits and routines" (Bauman, 2005, p. 1). However, at the same time, this type of society does not promote the necessary conditions for long-term commitments (ibid.).

It is worth mentioning that all participants felt that pursuing a degree was not a choice, but a natural progression after finishing secondary school. It must be noted that all students who participated in this research have received a private school education, and it is reasonable to suspect that the accounts of less privileged students (i.e., students who studied in state schools) might not have reproduced the idea of higher education as a natural progression. Nonetheless, regarding which program to choose and which institution to go, they frequently mentioned family and school as having a significant influence on their decision. As mentioned before, Goffman's (1990 [1959]) metaphor of dramaturgy suggests that performers tend to adapt themselves to the specific expectations of other participants and audiences present in the same interaction. However, in some cases, family and school advice were ignored, and the participants decided based on their individual preferences. Verhaeghe (2014) observes that all of us are simultaneously unique and identical. On the one hand, the combination of someone's circumstances is unique, and creates the conditions of possibility for the options available to them to some extent. On the other hand, we are immersed into a particular group and culture, sharing many circumstances and experiences with people who are also members of the same groups and cultures. People often grow up listening to their parents' expectations of their future and being advised on what they are supposed to do with

their lives. In turn, parents' expectations regarding their children cannot be separated out from their family stories, culture experiences and specific periods of time in which they have lived, and along with other factors, for example class and economics, all help to produce a variety of circulating discourses that can be drawn from in the performance of identity (ibid.). Still, regarding individual choice, Verhaeghe (2014) argues that there are more options in a society rich in narratives than in a society that presents its members with a standard narrative. Consequently, a society that does not allow for cultural and ideological variety will produce "stereotypical individuals" (Verhaeghe, 2014, p.32). Giroux (2014) notes that currently "the notion of the university as a center of critique and a democratic public sphere that cultivates the knowledge, skills, and values necessary for the production of a democratic polity is giving way to a view of the university as a marketing machine essential to the production of neoliberal subjects" (p. 56). I would argue that most of the participants' accounts of their parents' advice, and their arguments to justify the choice of a particular major or institution revealed that they are part of a society dominated and, therefore, limited by a "standard narrative" (Verhaeghe, 2014, p.32). This narrative is one of the instruments of a specific ideology – neoliberalism, which uses a managerialised discourse offering an instrumental and narrow view of what a higher education degree is, and why it is worth having. That is perceptible, for example, when a participant classifies a program as a 'proper degree' (i.e., a degree worth pursuing) because it will 'open doors' in the future and facilitate employability. In the present context, it seems easy to criticize students' seemingly unreflective reproduction of particular discourses, but the managerialised university often seems to encourage students to behave as consumers, namely highlighting the employability of the degrees and even modules that they offer. Moreover, Goffman (1990 [1959]) notes that "when the individual presents himself before others, his performance tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society" (p. 45).

However, there was pockets of resistance for some students refused to be stereotyped and tried to follow a different path. One of the participants, on a gap year, stressed that he was very focused on showing he is not a mere stereotype, and wants to be considered for 'what he is', and his interview revealed that he was aware of the dominant narrative and was very critical of it. However, going against the system, the dominant ideology and its discourse, is never easy because "when an actor takes on an established social role, usually he finds that a particular front² has already been established for it [and] whether his acquisition of the role was primarily motivated by a desire to perform the given task or by a desire to maintain the corresponding front, the actor will find that he must do both" (Goffman, 1990 [1959], p. 37).

When students act as consumers of skills, knowledge or a degree, they must also act as self-managers (Nordensvard, 2011), learning whatever makes them more useful to the labour market (that is, to make them more employable). For example, one of the participants mentioned that she loved geography and english when she was studying at secondary school. However, she believed that medicine was a better option because "it opens many doors even if you are not practicing", such as "research or management or maybe even medical law", and that made her feel "very secure". Therefore, to feel secure, she manages her options in a way that commoditizes not only higher education but also herself. Although she may not be aware of it, this participant is no longer just a subject, but also (and from the market point of view, mainly) an object of the global economy. As Bauman (2005) pertinently observes, being a consumer and being an object of consumption are two roles that "intertwine, blend and merge" (p.10).

It is pertinent that students' accounts also showed a decrease in contact with lecturers compared with their secondary school teachers. One participant mentioned that she could try to access the university teachers, but she does not do it because it would not be as easy as it

2 The front consists of the attitudes, presence and expressions actors – consciously or unconsciously – use in order to construct a certain image of who they are (Fine and Manning, 2003, p. 46).

was when she was studying in secondary school. Using her words, at school ‘the office is down the corridor’, yet this admission reveals some ambiguities. The students enjoy a life experience that allows them to live with ‘more freedom’ away from the parental gaze but they miss the proximity with the people that could help them in different aspects of their academic life, and the feeling of security this proximity gave them. As Bauman (2000) suggests, in modern life there is an “imbalance between individual freedom and security [and] the transience of bonds may be an unavoidable price for individuals’ *right* to pursue their individual goals, and yet it cannot but be, simultaneously, an [...] obstacle to pursue them effectively – and to the courage needed to pursue them” (p. 170).

Some authors note that the traditional relationship between higher education students and the faculty has been, and is being, reshaped (Williams, 2013), and its present configuration is not clear in terms of power relations (Foucault, 1983). The participants’ accounts revealed that personal interaction between them and the faculty members is not regular, for scheduled meetings with their personal tutors were not frequent (approximately two per academic year). Although describing the interaction with their personal tutors as cordial and, in some cases, helpful, and reporting that they did not make a significant effort to seek them out, the participants considered lecturers distant and inaccessible.

It could be argued that the introduction of multiple control mechanisms over academic personnel in the managerialised university (Lorenz, 2012), including the monitorization of the number of meetings which faculty members can/must have with their students, it is contributing to the participants’ perception that lecturers are distant and inaccessible. In this context, Clarke et al. (2012) noted that academic identities are becoming fragile and insecure due to a sense of disappointment related to continuous demands of accountability and performance. Therefore, since “the individual as a performer [...] has a capacity for deeply felt shame, leading him to minimize the chances he takes of exposure” (Goffman, 1990 [1959], p. 245-246), I suggest that perhaps some academics try to limit the possibilities of

being exposed in front of their students, namely by reducing even more the personal interaction with them.

In his dramaturgical analysis, Goffman (1990 [1959]) observes that one of the concerns of the participants during face-to-face interactions is to contribute to a definition of the situation without starting an open conflict at the same time. Therefore, “a fundamental interactional goal is to sustain a collectively shared definition of the situation enabling participants to decode normative expectations and to adjust behaviour accordingly” (Jacobsen and Kristiansen, 2015, p. 70). One of the interviewed students mentioned that one of his lecturers advised him and his colleagues to treat him as ‘Doctor’ at the beginning of his first year; otherwise, he would not reply to them. This participant also noted that this lecturer never had a personal conversation with the students. The lecturer’s behaviour was interpreted by the student as “put[ting] himself above us [because] if you are a lecturer, you think you are a way better than your students”, i.e., a manifestation of arrogance. But it could be argued that by asking his students to treat him as ‘Doctor’, the lecturer was trying to affirm and secure his identity, or an idea of what his identity should be. Indeed, it is noted that academic identities have become fragile (Clarke et al., 2012) as a consequence of the increasing insecurity felt by academics (Gabriel, 2010) in our ‘liquid modern society’ (Bauman, 2005). Knights and Willmott (1989) also note that insecurities can be a consequence of an individual’s attachment to particular notions of the self, and since identity is dependent on others’ judgments and on validations of the self (Berger and Luckmann, 1991 [1966]), some academics may be tempted to reduce their students to “mirror[s] for confirming the self” (Knights, 2006, p. 265). But students’ judgments and validations cannot be fully anticipated or controlled (Berger and Luckmann, 1991 [1966]), so academics’ behaviour may contribute to building a wall between them and students.

In this section, I have discussed and interpreted the main findings from this study. I will now proceed to the conclusions.

Conclusions

The starting point of this study was to understand the effects of managerialism in students' approach to contemporary higher education and in their relationships with academics and other students, and also the strategies students have adopted, and are adopting, to deal with this experience. Therefore, the following research questions were proposed: (1) how do students reproduce, reshape and resist discourses of neo-liberalism and managerialism relating to higher education in the UK?; (2) how have neoliberal and managerial discourses affected higher education students' identities? (3) to what extent has the relationship between students and academics been affected by the marketisation of higher education in the UK?

It is relevant to mention that all the literature so far on this topic has been written by academics who tend to portray the student from their own point of view. My primary interest was listening to students' accounts, and then analysing how they described their expectations regarding higher education and their experiences inside the managerialised university. Seven participants were interviewed; five of them in their first year of studies at university, and two taking a gap year before starting their higher education studies.

The participants' accounts confirmed some of the considerations found in the literature. One of the students' expectations was to acquire skills that later would translate into employability (Nordensvärd, 2011), and students tended to reproduce managerial discourses of 'value for money'. In this sense, higher education becomes no more than a means (i.e., acquiring skills) to an end (i.e., getting a job in the future), and 'knowledge' is reduced to a commodity whose value can be assessed by its capacity to translate into a future job. For example, some students differentiated fees in terms of subject choice, and a History or a Geography degree was considered to be 'worth' less than a Medicine or a Law degree.

If students are consumers with rights (Molesworth et al., 2009; Maringe, 2011; Williams, 2013), those rights must presumably be fulfilled by someone with the corresponding duties – this is, by academics. Moreover, the relationship between students and academics was

reported to have been reduced to a couple of meetings per year, and the everyday social interactions (Goffman, 1990 [1959]) have been partially replaced by the introduction of learning support software. In this context, the distance between students and academics has tended to increase and fuel this lack of understanding of the position and situation of the ‘other side’. From the academics’ perspective, students seem to be on the other side of the ‘battlefield’ that university has become nowadays. In this context, the findings suggested that the traditional relationship between academics and students has been tending to disappear, not because it has been inverted, but because there seems to be no type relationship between them – just distance.

The findings from this study also revealed that, although students have been portrayed by some academics in a way that reduces their identities to a stereotype – “the dominant metaphor for the student [in the literature] has lately been that of the consumer” (Nordensvärd, 2011, p. 157), their desires and expectations go beyond the metaphor of the mere consumer. Indeed, students viewed going to university as a ‘life experience’, a period of transition in their lives when they can be ‘free’ and independent from parental gaze, while still benefiting from their protection. Moreover, the participants reported socialising and making new friends as one of their priorities and, in some cases, the most important aspect of their lives as higher education students. Some of the literature refers to this process of socialisation as the fun side of joining the university (ibid.), which seems to be a parody of the importance of building new social relations. Indeed, these social relations assume particular significance when students have to face uncertainties, insecurities, and fears that have always existed, yet seem to have assumed a hyperbolized relevance in our modern and paradoxal life by the increasing fragilisation of human bonds (Bauman, 2000).

In terms of limitations, it must be noted that all the participants in this research studied in private schools. Six of them went to the same school, and it is reasonable to wonder if the accounts of students who studied from state schools would have expressed this idea of

higher education as a natural progression. Obviously, these circumstances may limit the possibility of presenting a multidimensional perspective of the phenomenon under research (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, in my future research, I intend to include participants from several state schools, as well as students from different private schools to understand the nuances present in different groups.

Arguably most of the literature on the managerialised university has been reducing students' identities, limiting their experiences, and narrowing their expectations. Universities are not professional schools and should not act as such. Their historical mission has been the production of knowledge through research, and its transmission through teaching, activities that by no means can be reduced to a simple transference of skills to students, and that should transcend both students' and academics' immediate interests and concerns. Therefore, it is important to continue developing this type of research to obtain a multidimensional perspective on the current state of higher education in the UK, namely trying to understand students' experiences from their points of view and revealing their reproduction or reshaping/resistance of particular discourses and the reasons for this. After all, *through the looking glass, nothing is what it seems*³.

³ Lewis Carroll in *Through the Looking-Glass*.

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