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Global Capitalism's Trojan Horse

Consumer Power and the National Student Survey in England

Great is the power of steady misrepresentation

Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*

Abstract

Neo-liberal capitalism is a representation of values detrimental to intellectual inquiry. Market-deregulation and consumer choice are relentless in their erosion of academic autonomy and traditions of independent scholarship. Education as a 'positional good' may be weakened more in the post-1992 higher education sector, where consumer-oriented quality assurance is used strategically to bolster prestige, and so improve relative competitive advantage (for student recruitment and external monies), than in the pre-1992 Russell Group of universities which privileges academic research and autonomy from regulation (www.russellgroup.ac.uk). The university as intellectual public domain is subject to suppression by capitalism's deployment of a putatively enlightened 'student voice'. This neo-liberal embrace of 'student experience' is evidenced in the privileging of choice and satisfaction anchored in the envisaging of earning power as a basic touchstone of relevance. Globalisation's Trojan Horse, we argue, is embodied in the positivism of the quantitative metrics of the National Student Survey (NSS) designed by global giant IPSIS MORI. The argument that a ranking of universities on the results of the NSS demonstrates excellence begs the question about what the university is for.

Keywords: choice, customer, satisfaction, students, survey, markets.

Intellectual background

A recent feature article in the *New Statesman*, '*The strange death of the public intellectual*', proposed the notion that leading academic thinkers play a smaller role in public life than during philosophy's golden age in the second half of the 20th century, when prominent symbols of intellectual life such as Isaiah Berlin and Mary Warnock were notable figures in mainstream culture (Herman, 2017). In our view, any resurgence of mainstream public intellectual culture is more likely to be hindered than aided by the National Student Survey (NSS).

The 1963 Robbins Report laid the foundation for the British mass higher education system. One policy analyst suggests it belongs to 'a world we have lost and which we fear we can never return' (Scott, 2014: 148), suggesting it came at a time of social solidarity in the 1960s when egalitarian values co-existed with university autonomy and agency for change arose from *within*. Now higher education is embroiled in a market struggle and remains highly class-inflected. The working-class demography of the post-1992 universities contrasts with the established middle-class student base found in Russell Group universities. The former, aside from differences in research power and the prestige of their 'positional goods', have a greater proportion of part-time students, greater ethnic diversity and more distributed partnerships with further education (Scott, 2014: 158). Although national ranking in league tables of British universities places certain post-1992 providers above prestigious pre-1992 universities, this does not seem to dent the positional strength of the Russell Group, as scholars recognise: institutional prestige does not depend upon rankings in the NSS.

According to Marginson (2006) the positional worth of a university degree is the *relative* advantage it is regarded as conferring. Its power of exclusion is achieved by denying entry to those lacking sufficiently high entry grades; how the degree awarding university is judged historically by the dominant establishment shapes the positional power of its products. The consumer with the requisite symbolic capital follows prestige; as Marginson (2006) argues, prestige is a class marker. The symbolic capital of the Russell Group university endorses this consumer interest in a certain form of class prestige, thus placing the student in an appropriate location in what Pierre Bourdieu calls the 'social field', which has remained stable in the present status hierarchy despite the removal of the binary line between universities and other HE providers in 1992 (Raffe and Croxford, 2015).

Between 1979-1997 the British public sector experienced radical reform imposed by a Conservative government, with power shifting away from producers to consumers (Williams, 1997). Quasi-markets were introduced through funding cuts and changes in funding allocation, so that higher education itself chased and developed markets for its products as 'positional goods' (degrees & status) giving access to social prestige and high-income employment (Marginson, 2006). Tensions developed between government and British higher education during the 1980s where the priorities of the latter did not always converge with those of the government; furthermore, concern arose that the expansion of student numbers might cause a drop in the quality of higher education (Williams, 1997). However, whilst external agencies were created to monitor teaching quality and, through this Weberian bureaucracy, enforce compliance, consumer individualism was yet to follow as a potential managerialist mechanism, given that the transformative Lord Browne funding reforms had yet to be introduced (Holligan and Chiang, 2011). Those reforms, we argue, must be

understood as the context for the nature of the agency that the NSS unleashed: the NSS became capitalism's Trojan Horse which forms part of a general marketisation of universities in terms of fees and quality assurance (Raffe and Croxford, 2015).

A key condition for efficient operation of markets is that purchasers have reliable information about the quality of the services they buy. The NSS attempts to construct and reinforce 21st century students in today's fragmented liquid social world as consumers, convincing them that this mechanism of measurement is an effective marker of prestige with attractive 'positional' authority, an argument which has yet to be supported by research: between 1996-2010 status stratification hierarchies in HE were stable, being based on historic reputation; these researchers concluded 'this stratification is embedded in wider social and economic structures' (Raffe and Croxford, 2015: 332). The NSS may, therefore, have differential impact depending on the class basis of the HE provider's student demography.

Higher education utilisation of students as customers continues a trend where external forces alter the focus of the university (Staddon and Standish, 2012; Zemsky, 1993). Under the British elite system of higher education of the mid-20th century the professional integrity of academics was 'the paramount guarantor of quality' (Williams, 1997: 287), but in contemporary higher education this intellectual authority appears to have shifted to students, as determiners of the 'quality of the student experience'. Positioned as consumers seeking to ensure employability, necessary for repaying debt arising from funding their studies, they are likely to reinforce the delivery of a political agenda of economic relevance.

Given this policy history and our conceptual focus, the purpose of this paper is to challenge and critique the NSS, arguing it constitutes a major mantra of choice in higher education and symbolises dynamics of market capitalism, and that this phenomenon is rooted in a political agenda, namely re-modelling the university and commercialising the mindsets of generations of students. In the prophetic *The Post-modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Lyotard (1984) identified this historical trend towards a type of post-truth world. Its key micro-sociological features merit attention in terms of how they are currently encoded in the fabric of higher education, sometimes projecting an identity as, for example, an objective survey, but with a lineage that reveals another biography. IPSIS MORI, whose clients include FTSE 100 companies, defines itself as a 'leading research company with global reach', its specialities including 'brand communication', 'advertising and media research', and 'reputation research' (www.ipsos-mori.com). Its deployment within quality assurance in higher education (NSS) contributes not only to the annexation of the academy by global capitalism, but also to the socialisation of students as brand consumers who unwittingly collude in their own domination.

Lukes' (2005) theory of power postulates its exercise through non-decision making while still controlling the agenda. This analysis captures the dynamic that, we argue, is currently unfolding in British higher education. The British Government sets the scene for micro-management of the university experience by replacing the support package of student grants and maintenance allowances, available in previous decades, with loans from which debt with interest is accrued, burdens that encroach upon the orientation of the student to their university experience. The way students adapt to accommodate this financial burden bolsters Government power, acting at a distance, to transform higher education while concealing neo-liberal partiality.

Lukes' (2005) third dimension of power is:

'... not exhausted by decision making and agenda construction but could operate at a deeper more invisible level...consists of deeply rooted forms of political socialisation where actors unwittingly follow the dictates of power even against their best interests.'

Our empirical focus taps this 'invisible level' and acknowledges 'political socialisation' in the shape of government policy, described below, and its promotion within the university system under the guise of empowerment rhetoric. We support the importance of listening to students about their experience of learning in higher education, as recognised through Knowles' (1970, 1989) theory of adult learning. Our critique's emphasis is upon the hidden curriculum of a market-economy disposition which the NSS secretly encodes. The NSS imposes cognitive scripts upon those who complete it, prescribing market behaviour scripts through which to perform evaluations. Studies of learning in adulthood endorse the way in which such scripts are inevitably products of a culture's social and political values (Caffarella et al, 2007: 5).

In *Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility, and Student Choice* (2016), authored by the Department for Business and Skills, transparency is emphasised: providers need to give quality variations, outcomes and clear information to applicants. Funding of teaching will no longer be based upon student numbers, but on quality assessment results, thereby, it is claimed, opening higher education to those from a wider range of backgrounds, and fostering 'excellent teaching that helps prepare them for the future'. Other barriers to the focus on 'access' are stated to be the length of degrees and their limited flexibility, so presumably the workforce staffing the knowledge economy must provide opportunities for evening, weekend, and on-line learning. Competition is emphasised as the key level to create more responsive and open universities, but 'clear information' is critical in order that customers' actions enforce market-behaviour, and, it is concluded, lead to higher GDP per capita.

The most important outcome for students, based on neo-liberal policy, is 'finding employment'; 'government has...chosen to put choice for students at the heart of the higher education reform strategy' (p. 11). Providers, to be employer-relevant, are expected to offer more 'work experience', training in 'soft skills', and give 'career advice'. New demands of this type mould a different university, offering a level of social support that in the past was experienced through family. Teaching excellence embraces these extra responsibilities; it is expected to drive 'our widening participation aims' (p. 14), with financial incentives – 'the rewards that could be available at the end of their learning' (p. 14) - to enable and inform choice. The university is expected to 'contribute to our success as a knowledge economy for years to come' (p. 17). The NSS is one of the constituent parts, the authors state, of their quality assurance system; employers are described as dissatisfied with many graduates, and the source of the deficit, it is implied, are the universities that short-change their customers (p.42). Relevance and excellent teaching define quality provision: excellent teaching is an oxymoron unless it impacts upon students' 'future life chances' and employment (p. 43).

Academics Sheridan and Simpson in their report *Reform in Higher Education: Higher Quality Provision and Better Informed Choice?*¹ argue that one of the aims of the Government's 2012 reforms of higher education in England was 'to generate increased competition between higher education institutions with a view to improving the quality of provision to students and overall performance of the sector' (p. 9). It is argued that, in the light of course fees rising to £9K per annum, the incentives for students to go to university, and the ways they construe benefits and make choices, may all change. Some universities with high ratings in the NSS, but comparatively weak on other measures, such as research or staff-student ratios, are likely to hope NSS ranking will play a growing role in shaping decisions. Reduced funding for teaching through the HEFCE direct grant may lead universities to become incentivised by choice: funding cuts 'should act to make providers more responsive to student demand'. As this new higher education market develops, the orientation of students may be towards economic returns from studying, with the students expecting, as of right, that a degree will position them favourably in the workplace. The authors describe evidence that those who graduate in the STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) or law, economics, and management, have higher graduate earnings compared with arts and humanities graduates (BIS, 2013, cited p. 10); in England during 2011-12 demand was greater for clinical and STEM subjects, suggestive of market-led choices. Referring to the NSS they argue it gives a 'wealth of information to guide choice, students will very likely place more weight ...[on], for example, results from the NSS on course quality'. As a corollary, providers in the market will devise strategies to boost their performativity on the NSS metrics irrespective of its validity,

¹ Bristol.ac.uk/cmpo. And, see Department of Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) The Impact of University Degrees on the Lifecycle of Earnings, Research Report BIS 112 (2013).

or possible distorting power dynamic towards the student and away from the broader educational emphasis as set out by, for example, Stefan Collini (2012).

Narratives gain power through repetition, a phenomenon that is apparent in overlap with statements in the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS/16/285) factsheet *Higher Education and Research Bill* claiming the Bill 'will support the Government's mission to boost social mobility, life chances and opportunity for all, and enhance the competitiveness and productivity of our economy'. Without explanation or the use of critical judgement it is asserted that one-third of undergraduates in England 'don't believe their course represents value for money', courses 'can be inflexible' and that twenty percent of students hold non-professional roles 3.5 years after graduation. The NSS is one lever of power designed as a solution to this disparity, presumably by making university education more impactful in the job market for its users. 'Excellent teaching' is argued as being supportive of 'their future productivity'.

Questioning the (NSS) questionnaire

Our documentary data for this section was accessed from the internet using the search term 'Student Satisfaction Survey'. For reasons of space we focus on the nuances of two fundamental sections of the NSS. Our model of the NSS that informs the critical analysis in this section is an uncompleted NSS questionnaire with the word 'EXAMPLE' printed across it. It is likely that an entire degree course can be evaluated within 15 minutes by students who complete this online anonymous survey, arguably contributing to a gross over-simplification of 3 or 4 years of study (more if the student is part-time). This approach to evaluation overlooks how impact of study may evolve over the years following the degree and colour an individual's consciousness in complex and interesting ways. For example, the prescribed period and completion estimate encourages students to accept the highly questionable theoretical premise that this is the optimum time to represent the quality of the 'student experience', rather than it being appraised at a later period, including post-university. There is, therefore, an ideology attached to this quantitative treatment of degree level studies congruent with the types of fast quality evaluations conducted upon customers using private or public sector company products. Education, in this case, is commodified in capitalist ontology in a qualitatively similar way to stereotypic consumer goods or services.

The NSS then manufactures an educational journey which may not, *a priori*, be relevant to the student or the university, but the questions in the NSS lead the students into a consumer-inscribed framing of their academic experience, which they may not have chosen to conceptualise in the way prescribed in the options of this survey tool. The online delivery arguably nourishes a judgemental personal distance from academic staff, impacting upon how they might construct an ethos of staff-student relations and conceptualise education as a service-oriented culture. There is a type of

empowerment of the student voice, but its political resonance is calibrated to a neo-liberal sensibility and for this reason the NSS is not neutral in measurement. In the next two parts of our paper we identify the micro-sociology of this sensibility by a close analysis of the key rubrics of the NSS.

Mantra 1: 'The teaching on my course'

Following our general argument and value position we judge that evaluative questions about academia should, in their mode of framing, prompt and remind students about the nature of university education, but the generic type questions in the NSS preclude this approach through a reductive simplification of social realities. Four statements are proposed for response in this first part of the NSS tool: 'Staff are good at explaining things'; 'Staff have made the subject interesting'; 'Staff are enthusiastic about what they are teaching', and 'The course is intellectually stimulating'. The responses are taken at face value, as no observational research is conducted to validate answers. These questions could equally well be asked about a secondary school or workplace training course. A focus upon explanation, interest, enthusiasm, and stimulation overlooks the context and content of the course. Repetition of the term 'staff' conjures academic lecturers not as individuals immersed within a canon of knowledge and scholarly tradition, but instead as an amorphous body of course-deliverers.

This discursive construction of academia matters in terms of the wider claims of this paper described in the introduction. The discourse reflects the choice of the market-research company contracted to undertake the NSS. It engenders in the student as consumer a homogeneous mentality where the 'service' of higher education is conflated with any business commodity which is amenable to appraisal on identical terms, and readily quantified. A different analysis of higher education could be framed through the proposal of alternative statements for response: for instance, respectively, my lecturers made me see the world differently; my lecturers communicated theories giving a pervasive critique of power; my lecturers were inspirational in their explication of their knowledge; the lectures, seminars and interactions with my peers will shape my problem-solving. Our conjectured statements would return students to contexts framed academically and as *members* of an intellectual community of debate and learning.

The prescriptive statement in the NSS form asking students to ensure 'that your comments do not identify you individually' arguably projects estrangement and judgemental anxieties that can only be made public under condition of anonymity. We do believe it is very important to access the views of students about their degree experience. We seek, however, to interrogate the political frame through which they are required to conduct their evaluation, and the implicit subjectification this contextualisation renders. The final illustrative basis that we incorporate from the NSS

into our paper is given a similar analysis and aims to underpin the general argument. The next sub-section takes another core rubric of the NSS.

Mantra 2: 'Assessment and feedback'

The statements forming the content of this section are: 'The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance'; 'Assessment arrangements and marking have been fair'; 'Feedback on my work has been prompt'; 'I have received detailed comments on my work'; and 'Feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand'. The note of technocratic intelligence is struck by the narrative of 'feedback' instead of dialogue or conversation; the political cadence of the terminology of 'assessment arrangements' resonates with a mechanistic input-output modelling of the phenomenology of academic experience and the life of the mind. The adoption of narrative terminology engineers a story for the student concerning higher education as an experience. The tale signalled by the narrative of 'feedback' establishes an intellectually impoverished relationality between the student community and the academic community. 'Feedback' conjures their relative positionality as those who receive and depend as opposed to learn through dialogic conversation and peer-informed discussion, characterising not an academic identity but a consumerist ontology of expectation and service provision. We can imagine the customer demanding 'Where is my feedback?' not to enter an academic dialogue but to claim ownership by dint of a commercial relationship. Overall this section of the NSS contains hegemony of service-sector accountability.

The students are made aware of their rights to have explained to them why the outcomes take the form they do, and in a circular manner provide them with an evidence base which may be used subsequently in a quasi-legal context where they pursue appeal. This section compels academics to justify themselves in connection with a certain formulation which they did not devise, and which they may judge inappropriate and misleading. The statement 'The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance' arguably deconstructs the complexities connected with learning. This particular rubric is commonly used throughout the age range 5-16 in schools where teachers are expected to preface their lessons with statements about learning outcomes and how, by implication, they will be assessed. This statement represents one example of an accumulation of discourses harnessed by the NSS mandate to define academic education.

Positivist methodologies, of which the NSS questionnaire is an exemplar, celebrate objectivity and neutrality. However, subjectivity informs the development of this measurement tool of quality assurance and the decision to deploy it for purposes that guide the determination of what the university is for. We have identified a process of deliberate re-configuration of the degree experience throughout the NSS modelling. As students must express themselves through this template, it follows logically the

NSS is not in fact identifying the authentic voice of the student about which our knowledge is likely to be highly nuanced and not amenable to league table metrics, comparative national judgement and hierarchic ranking. But hierarchical ranking is typified throughout published league tables and is taken very seriously by the public, managements, and funding bodies. This type of information nourishes and creates an institutional reputation.

'Achieving a high and rising position in the rankings is now considered a legitimate objective in its own right rather than being merely a positive side effect of good performance on other, more specific indicators' (Bell and Brooks, 2016: 16). Consequently, a poorer than expected positioning in the rankings is likely to lead to blame and the admonishment of heads of department by senior management; the former will in turn pass on their disappointment to those below and demand improvement (Locke, 2014, in *ibid.* p.1). Lower scores on feedback lead 'to a knee-jerk reaction on the part of embattled institutions, struggling with new funding regimes' (Staddon and Standish, 2012: 638). This is especially troubling when the value of such rankings can be questioned, yet if system maintenance, rather than truth, is the goal, then collateral damage can be ignored (Lyotard, 1984).

The validity of the NSS as a measure of student satisfaction has been comprehensively critiqued (Bell and Brooks, 2016) and will not be further discussed here. Two aspects stand out: firstly, the NSS itself is a cross-sectional survey, not longitudinal, making the interpretation of year-on-year changes dependent on the unmeasured characteristics of the survey population as well as the respondents' experience of their courses. Secondly, at the course level, the small number of responders at a given institution renders possible effects arising from 'error of understanding or completion by just a handful of respondents [which] can have serious consequences in the outcome' (Bell and Brooks, 2016: 14).

There are possibilities of spill-over effects between the categories of questions used in the NSS: a particularly bad experience, unrelated to teaching, but close to the taking of the survey may lead to a conflation of service satisfaction with teaching excellence as a whole - an inevitable consequence of drawing 'heavily on the logic of student as consumer' (Land and Gordon 2015, in *ibid.*, p.9).

Mantra 3: 'Student satisfaction'

The novice as expert

Since the advent of tuition fees, students have been elevated to the position of 'experts not only on their own learning but also on issues of governance, policy and practice', and thus are supposed to be 'partners in quality assurance' (QAA 2011, in Staddon and Standish 2012; see also Healey, Flint and Harrington, 2014). It is only

appropriate that the teaching and learning process should be student-centred; it is altogether different to view the novice as an expert in the scholarship of teaching and learning. For Plato, this would be equivalent to putting the crew in charge of the bridge to pilot the ship. To allow the crew to take control is akin to the Master ceding control to the novice. Such an approach not only undermines the authority of the teacher as an expert, but points to 'a higher education that lacks confidence in what it is doing' (Staddon and Standish, 2012: 639).

Students may well know what they want, but they cannot know or appreciate the many routes to achieving those goals, nor can they fully understand their own needs. A student has yet to learn to acquire the 'standards of rigour in explanation and evidence stricter than those with which he had previously been satisfied' (Hart 1997, p. 301). The hallmark of good teachers is that they create new wants, they open students' minds to new ideas that they were previously unaware of, nor would 'have been able to ask for in advance', or may not even have seen the point of (ibid.). The teacher helps the student 'form new wants and interests, new possibilities of satisfaction—and, of course, of dissatisfaction' and to go beyond what she knows (Hart, 1997). This requirement of teaching in higher education sees the student not as a *tabula rasa*, but as one engaged in dialectic: the student must actively participate in her learning and questioning of perceived wisdom and judgements.

This however, differs from viewing the student as an expert, especially, as Brennan points out, the factors identified by first year students as forming an important part of their choice of subject and institution, are largely replaced when final year students '[assess] what had been most valuable in their experience of higher education.' If universities listen to what students say they *want*, they may end up depriving 'them of the very things which they subsequently [find] of most value.' (Brennan 2012: .8). To view students as experts in quality assurance is 'an abnegation of responsibility on the part of providers of higher education' (Staddon and Standish, 2012: 638): it will likely lead to the lowering of standards, for a novice cannot distinguish between excellence and something feigning excellence.

What is it to be satisfied?

Some believe that in the market place 'consumers will only purchase products that meet their needs' (Ellis 1988, in Hart, p.298). To this end, the goal of quality assurance will be to discover 'what people will buy and to see that they get it'; it would not provide for more of something, or better 'than is strictly necessary' (ibid, p. 299). This 'represents [...] the abandonment of any attempt to maintain a standard' (ibid.,, p. 298), for in this context quality means that which is fit for purpose, a very functional approach. The market will of course always provide extra to those who can afford to pay more. Thus, the potential exists that an education which is the best 'of its kind', that which goes beyond the quality-assured minimum standard, would be beyond the

reach of many students, because they would not be able to pay for it. This would lead to the very opposite of what the government asserts can be achieved using student satisfaction in university rankings.

On the continent, there is the expectation and assumption that universities are of equivalent standard in terms of what they deliver. By contrast in the UK an HEI can be 'better' than another; here, focus 'has shifted from assuring consistent minimum standards which are comparable across courses and institutions, to demonstrating hierarchy and difference' (Brennan 2012: 9), and this will come at the expense of collaboration and cooperation. Moreover, by instilling competition between HEIs there is the danger that HEIs will not be beyond asking their students to give them a good score on the NSS, on the assertion that it will enhance the market value of their degree (ibid.). Initiating competition, with HEIs chasing high-stake rankings, shifts 'attention to practices which will help achieve success in the competition rather than practices which will achieve a larger public good through improvements which can benefit all' (ibid.).

Education is not like any other commodity - it is neither easy to quantify nor to 'succinctly specify ... the good at the heart of higher education' (Staddon and Standish 2012: 635). To try to quantify and measure education, using 'objective' criteria, is to deny the fact that quality assurance depends upon value judgements, which are themselves subjective and often contested. By ignoring this, attention is deflected from such complexities; procedures become emphasised at the expense of 'the substance of curricula' (ibid.). This notion of turning the student into a customer, seeking value for money, may result in the customer-student developing a 'go on, teach me' attitude, rather than viewing education as requiring effort and engagement on their part; this is the logical conclusion of transforming education into a commodity. The nature of customer satisfaction is to please the customer and customers who pay high fees for a degree are unlikely to be happy with a result lower than a 2:1. Litigation for unsatisfactory service will inevitably follow: in private schools, headmasters are already facing legal action over teaching standards, pupils' grades and the attempted expulsion of troublemakers (Paton, 2013). It is interesting to note here that a recent study found that those students who view themselves as consumers rather than students performed poorly academically (Bunce, Baird, and Jones, 2016).

To base the ranking of a university's teaching quality primarily on a questionable type of student satisfaction metric nudges the university towards serving the goal of job training, a tension which is historic in HE policy; government since Robbins has persisted in attempting to coerce HEIs to cater to a greater extent for the needs of the economy. This emphasis may, through a change of intellectual ethos, erode and demean the intrinsic worth of scholarship and values of critical enquiry. Further, it *encourages* lack of confidence in HEIs by looking for authority and purpose in the

wrong place, deflecting attention from what is central to the intellectual enlightenment gained through experiencing higher education (Staddon and Standish 2012: 639). A student, enmeshed in the challenging process of being educated, will not yet be knowledgeable enough to differentiate between what is real, and what is illusory in education. The famous Dr. Fox Lecture experiment (Naftulin, Ware, and Donnelly, 1973) highlights this well. In the experiment, an actor was hired to deliver a lecture nominally on an aspect of educational theory but with nonsensical content. The lecture was delivered in a lively and humorous way, with warm interaction with the audience. The audience, all professional educators, were asked to give feedback regarding what they had learnt. Despite the absurdity of the content, they gave positive feedback about the lecture, demonstrating that even experts can be 'seduced into an illusion of having learned if the lecturer simulates a style of authority and wit' (ibid; see also Peer and Babad, 2014 for a reaffirmation of this study).

This lends weight to the relevance of the halo effect: student perceptions of a lecturer can be influenced by variables other than their teaching abilities, for example in terms of charisma (Shevlin, Banyard, Davies and Griffiths, 2000), warmth (Nisbett, and Wilson, 1977) and even the level of attractiveness of the lecturer (see Landy and Sigall, 1974 on attractiveness influencing marking). It would not be far-fetched to envisage lecturers being hired for their looks, charisma, and acting abilities, 'delivering' a bank of lesson plans in a warm and positive manner. Given the evidence that student evaluation of teaching is not necessarily based on lecturers' abilities, and the importance of education as the building block of any society, one may ask why experts in teaching are not trusted to evaluate their peers.

Policy operators and networks

The NSS concept of student satisfaction is a core component of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), a metric which will in future constrain a HEI's ability to increase student fees. Other fundamental components of this governance by numbers include student retention and graduate employment. Those factors under the direct influence of universities are naturally coming under scrutiny as their administrative departments look to protect the income stream arising from undergraduate fees.

The TEF itself has the stated aim of complementing the Research Excellence Framework by ensuring focus is on teaching quality as well as research quality. The Government introduced it by secondary legislation under direct ministerial power, avoiding wider parliamentary scrutiny. Significant aspects of the TEF have now been embedded in the *Higher Education and Research Bill 2016-17* (the Bill) which will bring about major changes in fundamental aspects of the regulation and delivery of higher education in England. The Bill introduces a new regulator of HE, the Office for Students (OfS), to replace HEFCE; a new quango – UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) – to

oversee funding of research; and gives direct power to the Secretary of State for Education (SoSE) to withdraw degree-awarding status from a university. Under S.43 the autonomy of the university is undermined as power is given to the new OfS (whose chair and members will be selected by the SoSE, with no obligation to have academics or student representatives to influence 'particular courses of study' S.2(4)). The OfS will also be responsible for the TEF and under the direction of the SoSE: its chairperson and members will also be appointed by her, leading to direct political control of the direction of HE.

Further, the research budget will fall under the control of one super research council, the UKRI, replacing the HEFCE and direct government funding. The UKRI will be led by a powerful chair and chief executive, with oversight of almost the totality of public-funded research, leading to the abandonment of the Haldane Principle, under which researchers, rather than politicians, decide on what to spend research funds. The UKRI will be located in the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BIS), and will possess powers to determine *priorities* for research funding. Given the UKRI's location within BIS, these priorities may be narrowly focused and predominately instrumental. Coupled with the lowering of the threshold for private institutions to obtain degree-awarding powers and university accreditation, the way is paved for new, for-profit 'providers' to enter the higher education domain. Ultimately, this path leads to the near total removal of public funding, and thence to the privatisation of higher education.

Despite all this, the discourse of student satisfaction is the focus of much of the public debate, yet student satisfaction is but a canard for the greater changes that will take place when the Bill takes effect. The Government is on the verge of gaining absolute control of higher education, ushering in massive changes that will weaken and undermine the autonomy of universities with respect to academic freedom, to teaching, and to research.

The acumen of power

The title of the Green Paper, introduced on 6th November 2015, lists unarguably desirable and *prima facie* uncontroversial ideals: *Higher education: teaching excellence, social mobility, and student choice*. However, the process of consultation, from the Green Paper to the Bill, highlights the use of governmental power to restrict consultation and push through controversial changes in policy. The duration of the associated consultation process, on this wide-ranging Bill, was barely 10 weeks including Christmas and New Year breaks. The approaches taken by the last two governments regarding the implementation of education policy reveal parallels in the methods used to focus interest on selected dimensions of the proposed changes, and to draw attention away from the more radical proposals therein. The zealous approach

to the 'academisation' of all schools, in face of substantial opposition, followed by growing evidence that academisation does not necessarily drive up standards, suggests that a focus on student/parental choice will not necessarily lead to the improvements anticipated.

Regarding the White Paper, and its transformation into the Bill in a mere three days, the question arises as to whether the further consultation and discussion with interested or affected groups, supposed to allow for final changes to be made before a Bill is formally presented to Parliament, in fact occurred. Furthermore, there seems to be little public scrutiny of the Bill itself, now passing through the committee stage in the House of Commons, with the Minister of State for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation, Jo Johnson, providing limited detail. The process shows the hand of power guiding each stage safely for the government, with little that affected or interested groups can do in terms of having any proposed amendments considered.

There appears to be a concerted effort to bring private providers into this sector, under the guise of choice and student satisfaction, and ultimately to privatise higher education provision, although the Government has been effective in moving the discourse away from this issue, around the removal of the cap on fees and the size of debt to be borne by present and future generations. Such a change in the narrative has occurred under the guise of 'raising standards' and 'student satisfaction'. Permitted increases in student fees will be linked to TEF, from the 2019-20 academic year, and only an institution that is deemed excellent/outstanding in the three new measures of TEF (graduate employment, student retention and student satisfaction) will be permitted to raise their fees in line with inflation; those that merely 'meet expectations' can raise fees by half that rate. By focussing on such fine detail, any questioning of the underlying assumption - that student tuition fees are justified, or necessary - is erased from consciousness; student fees have come to be seen as 'normal', and 'common sense'.

The rationale for TEF is not questioned, nor is a case made that the existing Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and external examiners are insufficient for maintaining quality assurance. When students are told that they have been empowered, by having a direct link between their satisfaction level, the rankings of universities and their fee levels, they are unlikely to challenge this narrative. The introduction of the tuition fees and TEF, promoting a value-for-money philosophy in higher education, is instilling in the student the notion of 'entitlement', fundamentally changing the student-teacher relationship and paving the way to placing full responsibility on the student should their university education fail to fulfil their expectations: they had full access to information to *choose* where to study. Missing here, however, is the recognition that not all universities are equal in what they can provide, nor, in practice, are all students free to apply to what they may consider the 'best' university. Many may wish, for

example, to study at a Russell Group university, but are constrained by grades, monetary considerations or familial obligations that prevent relocation.

Discussion

The importance given in TEF to the ranking of universities based on students' overall satisfaction (NSS Q22) is misplaced. The scoring system developed by the Complete Universities Guide (CUG, 2017) produces results ranging from 3.89 to 4.36, on a scale which itself ranges from 0.0-5.0. The difference between the highest and lowest scores of overall student satisfaction is a mere 0.4, less than 10% of the possible range of scores. The relative homogeneity of scores therefore makes a straight ranking of universities inappropriate, and highly misleading. Given that reported levels of student satisfaction with teaching are consistently high, with, for example, 91% of students satisfied with the ability of their teachers to explain things (Bell and Brooks, 2016: 9), the question arises as to why ranking rather than banding (categorising) is considered the right approach. Ranking gives an illusory importance to the reported student satisfaction and to the justification for the charging (increase/decrease) of student fees). Initiating student satisfaction rankings when there is a very high student satisfaction rate with the teaching and learning, and when the difference in rankings of this satisfaction between the highest and lowest university is minimal, suggests there is something more at play here than student satisfaction and raising of standards. Rankings will force academics to occupy themselves with inter-university competition, preventing them from challenging the 'instrumentalisation' of education and its eventual privatisation, and preventing students from noticing, or challenging the idea that they must pay ever-increasing tuition fees.

University rankings and emphasis on student satisfaction, demanding a focus on 'improving' institutional/departmental performance and seeking value for money, have shifted focus away from whether the increases in tuition fees can be justified, given their socio-economic cost in terms of social mobility. By tying the variation permitted in student fees to the level of service provided, the fees themselves will not be questioned because they are linked to student satisfaction. The Government's diversionary tactics divide and conquer: the universities have had to adopt a more corporate outlook in order to generate new income and compete for the best-qualified students in an increasingly international student market-place (Chatterton and Goddard, 2000). In this cut-throat environment rankings matter greatly to students and consequently to universities; the dangers of rankings becoming embedded unquestioningly in the discourse is going unnoticed.

For the political power-brokers who, through various networks, operate the NSS and cognate practices and decide what knowledge is and the needs it is to serve, system maintenance is pivotal. The end user of this knowledge is not the scholar, who has

the status of vassal in this new type of feudal ordering; the end user is instead the market-economy. That entity decides on its pragmatic grounds what is true, or, we might add, true enough. Lyotard's (1984) prophetic analysis would conclude that performativity legitimates the validity of the NSS despite the misgivings expressed throughout our scholarly appraisal. He refers to this phenomenon as the "mechanisation" of knowledge. It is its utility as a commodity to underpin the increasingly de-regulated market that matters above all else. The academy has been caught on the back foot by a forbidding, and currently hegemonic, Trojan Horse. Lukes' (2005) 'invisible power' is inspired by Gramsci's ideas of hegemony and the manufacture of consent. In summary, our perspective is that the practices of the NSS encourage the interpellation of students into an unknowing compliance with market values.

Scott (2014) describes how under the neo-liberal turn and heightened market-inspired individualism of the 21st century the political and economic context of the university differs greatly from the period of post war solidarity and 'public' values. It cannot be assumed that student degree satisfaction, indexed by the NSS proxy score, overlaps with how employers judge the merits of the authority given to this student judgement of quality and the conflict of interest it represents. The power of a market misrepresentation of higher education is unwavering. Attention to the curricula vitae of the senior management of the post-1992 sector demonstrates business edicts are being imported and imposed through the target-setting performance management that is commonplace in business. Whether a cementing of a multiplicity of market mentalities across the hierarchy of the university sector will eventually lead to the incorporation of the Russell Group by a marketised commercial animus remains to be seen. Raffe and Croxford's (2015) data extended to only 2010, when the positional advantage of Russell group graduates in employment ensured established patterns of social reproduction continued; it remains to be seen if the NSS will alter the British class structure of higher education and entrenched occupational class hierarchies.

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