

HE in FE: Empirical Evidence of a Brave New World

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Urban (2009) reflects on the challenges for educators when educational “products” appear to be at odds with educational “processes”. This paper considers how the marketization of higher education in neoliberal countries like the UK is affecting teaching and learning in HEIs (Higher Education Institutions) and CPD. Neoliberal policy approaches resulting in the marketization of higher education may also be considered as separating “educational products” and “educational processes”. Many of the policies are cumulative and they can be interpreted as being flawed due to their contradictory nature. The paper presents research findings revealing the impact of neoliberal agendas on teaching and learning in higher education in the UK. The content of the paper is relevant to other neoliberal contexts including the US and Australia. The commodification of higher education has implications for the teaching relationship between academics and students as “student satisfaction”, “value for money” and “critical pedagogy” form part of the interplaying discourse in higher education.

Keywords: higher education; neoliberalism; philosophy of education; policy analysis; teaching and learning.

Introduction

This paper examines the marketization of higher education in England. The content is relevant to other neoliberal contexts including the US and Australia. The notion that students are consumers of educational products has become an important part of the discourse about higher education in the UK since 2010. Alongside retaining the concept of an emancipatory pedagogy, ‘quality’ higher education has become linked to an ‘employability’ agenda, especially (but not exclusively) for those students from lower-middle class backgrounds attending lower-ranking universities (Roberts (2009)). The study presents research data from academics and students on one academic programme taught in five English HEIs. The content reveals how neoliberal agendas can combine with emancipatory

pedagogy to generate novel interpretations of teaching and learning in higher education. The paper outlines the research context and gives a summary of key neoliberal characteristics by reflecting on the consequences for higher education. The study then examines how students and academic tutors engage with the interplay of these agendas on an academic programme in the England. The academic programme that has been used for the research is a foundation degree programme in early childhood studies taught in five English HEIs. The HEIs, the academic programme and the research participants were chosen as they are part of the ‘lower ranking universities’ that have become pivotal to the expansion of the university system in the UK (Abbas, Ashwin, McLean (2012, 182). This context was considered to be ideal for exploring the interplay of neoliberal and emancipatory pedagogical values. The students and academic tutors appear to interpret teaching in higher education through a synthesis of neoliberal values and emancipatory pedagogy. This notion of emancipatory pedagogy is based on the work of Archer and Leathwood (2003), Freire (1973, 1985, 1994), Giroux (2000), Harris and Isler (2013), Mayo (2013), Morley and Dunstan (2013), Torres (1998, 2008) and Williams (2013). The ideas are developed into the concept of ‘critical pedagogy’ by Clegg, Hudson and Steel (2010). Critical pedagogy opposes approaches to education that are based on political and/or economic imperatives. The final section of the paper reflects on the implications of an uneasy alliance that appears to have been forged between a combination of neoliberal values and emancipatory pedagogy.

The research background

The data presented in the paper comes from 10 academic tutors and 10 students associated with a foundation degree programme in early childhood studies. The degree

is taught in five separate HEIs with the academic programme being coordinated by a lead HEI that is responsible for the academic curriculum. The academic programme is based on sociological, psychological, pedagogical and social policy content. Each of the first year modules introduces content that is reinforced by the modules that are studied in the second year of the programme. The programme is assessed via a combination of essays, reports, case-study reflections and portfolio reflections. The data has been generated through two focus group discussions (one focus group with the five HEI programme leaders in January 2010 and a second focus group with five programme student representatives in April 2010) and 10 loosely structured interviews with the remainder of the research population (completed between October 2010 and May 2012). The research project was approved by Research Ethics Committee of the researcher's HEI in October 2009. The author utilised previous research processes that appear to have been successful in identifying academic/student perceptions of teaching and learning in HE associated with early childhood studies (Plowman and Stephen (2006), Simpson (2010), Tummons (2011) and Yelland and Kilderry (2010)). The author adapted Tummons' (2011) research methodology based on 20 students, eight staff and four HEI settings. Whereas Tummons' (2011) research gathered the views of more students than staff, this research has gathered the views of students and staff in equal measure in order to consider how staff and students are being affected by neoliberal policies. The research applies Maxwell's (2005) interactive model of research design. Maxwell (2005, 5-6) recommends considering how key research areas mutually inform and shape each other. It is considered to be especially important to identify how the research goals and research concepts inform the research questions, the methods used and the validity of the findings. Maxwell (2005, 5-6) recommends referring to previous studies with similar participants in order to "eliminate ambiguities" within the research

process. This is why the author consulted the work of Plowman and Stephen (2006), Simpson (2010), Tummons (2011) and Yelland and Kilderry (2010). Purposive and dimensional sampling enabled the selection of 20 research participants who answered the research question ('what key values are associated with your academic programme?'). Previous research data held on 330 students and 26 staff associated with the academic programme revealed that 98% of staff and students are female. This gender balance of both students and staff confirms what has been referred to as 'the overwhelmingly female' children's workforce in the UK and beyond (Parker-Rees, Leeson, Willan, and Savage, (2004, 128). The average age of the students on the programme is 36 years and 30% of the students are aged over 40 years. This data was used to select a representative research sample for the qualitative research. The five academic programme leaders and five other module tutors recommended by the programme leaders to be research participants were selected as the academic staff in the research sample. The programme's five student representatives and five other students (recommended by the student representatives) formed the rest of the student research sample. 18 females and two males made up the research sample. All of the research participants were informed of the voluntary nature of the research and given an explanation of the ethical protocols associated with the research. The research population were made aware that the research data would be confidential and that they had the right to withdraw from the research process at any time. Pseudonyms were used to present data from the focus groups and interviews. Content analysis was used to interpret the qualitative data that emerged from the focus groups and loosely structured interviews. The application of content analysis mirrored Krippendorp's (2004, 18) summary of this data analysis strategy as 'a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts'.

The neoliberal agenda shaping the research context

Simmons (2010, 369) argues that policy-making processes in societies like the UK are based on a number of assumptions about the nature of people and the role of the state. It is accepted that there are innate differences between individuals with respect to intelligence, motivation and moral character. This difference between individuals is highlighted so that competition and market forces become integral features of the social world (Lauder, Brown, Dillabough, and Halsey (2006, 25). This vision of society links to the writing of Friedman and Friedman (1980) and Hayek (1976). Olssen, Codd and O'Neill (2004) argue that the philosophical background of this approach to policy-making links to Hume, Ricardo and Smith. At the centre of these philosophies is the belief in competitive individualism and the maximisation of the market (Saunders (2010, 42). The economic essence of neoliberalism and its consequences for social policies has been commented on by critics of neoliberalism (including Apple (2001), Giroux (2005) Harvey (2005) and Torres (1998, 2008). These critics argue that the emphasis that is given to economic outcomes in neoliberal societies results in particular consequences for social, political, cultural and educational institutions. This argument is exemplified by Archer and Leathwood (2003) who draw attention to the neoliberal definition of 'high quality' and its basis on the type of employment gained by students after they have graduated. Mayo (2013) argues that the emergence of the word 'competences' is now a dominant discourse in UK higher education with its implication that there ought to be a clear purpose to higher education that can in turn be 'measured'. Archer and Leathwood (2003) propose that the association of 'education' with 'employment' is a consequence of complex political and socio-economic processes. Harris and Isler (2013) argue that these complex political and socio-economic processes are generated from historical and political discourses in order to produce a new

understanding (or synthesis) of the social world. This argument is supported by Williams (2013) who states that the neoliberal notion of students as ‘consumers of education’ is generated from a complex socio-cultural history. Moreover, this interpretation of the purpose of education is challenged by other educational stakeholders. In contrast to regarding students as consumers of education, Morley and Dunstan (2013) advocate resistance to this concept through the application of an emancipatory pedagogy that is based on the work of Freire (1973, 1985, 1994). Torres (1998, 2008) justifies this call to resistance by claiming that neoliberalism produces social changes, national developments, and educational reforms that are essentially ‘oppressive’. The critical pedagogy of Clegg, Hudson and Steel (2010), Morley and Dunstan (2013) and Torres (1998, 2008) appertains a developmental imperative to education. Moreover, Freire (1997, 80) argues that teaching should be based on a pedagogy in which ‘all grow’.

Through dialogue, the-teacher- of –the-students and the student-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teacher. The teacher is no longer the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach.

Far from being visualised as a ‘tool’ for teaching, pedagogy is interpreted by Freire (1997) as being a fundamental component of human nature and evidence that an educator has a democratic understanding of human society.

It is however important to emphasise that although neoliberal interpretations of education may be seen as visualising teaching and learning as a ‘commodity’, the two sides of the argument (neoliberalism and emancipatory pedagogy) can be made to ‘talk to each other’ with respect to curriculum development. Neoliberals can easily co-opt emancipatory language alongside developing a distinct political economic and

philosophical agenda. In policy documents published by the last UK Labour government (for example, Department for Education and Skills (DfES) 2003 and Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) 2009) ‘good teaching’ is regarded as being a particularly important indicator of the ‘high quality’ that will lead to ‘employability’.

There must also be clear and visible rewards for the best, to spread good practice in the system, as well as sending important signals both to students and to institutions about the value of teaching in its own right. (DfES, 2003, 43).

The research in this study has explored this blending together of differing interpretations of higher education in order to explore if selected academic staff and students in HEIs engage in a similar synthesis of the purpose of education.

The impact of neoliberalism on higher education in England

Two major white papers that were published by the last Labour government reveal key indicators of government interpretations of the nature of teaching in higher education in England (Department for Education and Skills (DfES) 2003 and Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS 2009). During the six years between the publication of the white papers, the UK experienced a major economic downturn with the economy going in to recession in 2008 (Selwyn (2011). This development had a significant impact on government policies due to the financial instability that resulted from the recession so that ‘cutting costs’ became a dominant form of discourse within policy documents. Despite the changing socio-economic circumstances between 2003 and 2009, the documents outline that successive UK governments have consistently used an economic and social rationale for expanding the higher education system (Abbas, Ashwin and McLean (2012, 181). Blair (2004) and Willetts (2011) both stated

that social inequality can be tackled if students from disadvantaged backgrounds are included within the higher education system. Critics are sceptical over whether the neoliberal policies of these governments are based on a desire to tackle inequality (Ainley 2004 and Canaan 2008). The UK has essentially imitated the US and Australia by claiming that the cost of higher education is too expensive for the state. This claim has intensified since 2008 due to the economic recession. Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) draw attention to the privatisation of higher education that has emerged in response to the belief that the government cannot pay the costs of higher education. Abbas, Ashwin and McLean (2012) and Knight (2003) argue that the neoliberal assertion that higher education is too expensive to be funded by the government is contradictory. According to the General Agreement Trade in Services (GATS), higher education is a business that is worth billions of dollars. Knight (2003) defines higher education as a 'product' that can be traded between nations. The assertion that the government cannot pay the cost for higher education and the subsequent creation of consumers of higher education appears to be an interventionist strategy that is designed to create the marketization of higher education.

In the UK, the 'lower ranking universities' have become pivotal to the expansion of the university system (Abbas, Ashwin, McLean (2012, 182). Crozier, Reay, Clayton and Colliander (2008) discuss the impact that widening access to higher education has had in the UK. This has led to students from lower-middle and disadvantaged class backgrounds becoming a significant part of the current UK university environment. Collini (2010) argues that this expansion of higher education in the UK has resulted in significant neoliberal interest in universities in the UK. Institutions, educators and students have been presented with a vision of HEIs as providers of a service (teaching) in order to obtain a product (a degree) as the students become consumers of education.

The rationale provided for this approach to higher education is phrased by McGettigan (2011) and Selwyn (2011) as ‘the need to save the state from financial ruin!’ The consequence for English universities in 2012-2013 led to funding being linked to students’ choice of HEI and degree programme.

The current UK Coalition government have continued to transform the English higher education system by claiming that access for disadvantaged students is now improved because they will not have to pay any of the money back if they do not manage to find employment that is salaried above £21000 a year. There is also the provision of grants and support for students from poorer backgrounds, particularly if they qualify to attend highly ranked universities. Critics argue that disadvantaged students are discouraged by the large debt and that government ‘number capping’ has resulted in fewer available places in the lower-ranked universities that are frequented by these students (Abbas, Ashwin and McLean (2012, 183).

The English university system has moved away from an elite, publicly funded system paying the fees of a minority of students. Whereas only 5% of the school leaving population went to university in the 1960s, this elite, publicly funded mode of English university education has been transformed to currently include 45% of school leavers (Brennan, Edmunds, Houston, Jary, Lebeau, Osborne and Richardson (2009). As well as this demographic change within English universities, there has been an evolution of the academic curriculum of UK universities. The traditional professions of doctors, lawyers and teachers (and their associated academic degrees) have been joined by vocational professions (including nursing, social work and the academic curriculum featured in this research (early childhood studies)). There is, however the perception that ‘quality’ degrees are associated with particular universities and specific academic programmes. The neoliberal tenet of ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ has become prevalent within

the English higher education system. It is this neoliberal background to the research context that has informed the responses given by the research participants to their experiences of teaching and learning in higher education in five English HEIs.

The impact on teaching and in higher education in England

This section is influenced by the work of Kamler and Thomson (2006) and Aitchison, Kamler and Lee (2010). As opposed to simply linking the research findings to previously published texts, the content is based on the application of Kamler and Thomson's (2006, 15) argument that 'there is a continual slippage between the person and the text'. Kamler and Thomson's (2006) framework is based on critical discourse analysis through the application of Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional model of discourse as a means of bringing together structure, agency and texts at several levels. These ideas have been applied to the research project by reflecting on how the focus-group and loosely structured interview data link to two major white papers that appear to have shaped the HEI experiences of the respondents (Department for Education and Skills DfES 2003 and Department for Business Innovation and Skills BIS 2009). In effect the content is shaped 'not only by local circumstances' but by the 'social, cultural and political climate' in which the data is produced (Kamler and Thomson (2006, 21).

The 20 research participants gave three types of reflection about the key values associated with their academic programme. The 10 academic staff in the research population are opposed to the vision of higher education that is presented within the two white papers. These research respondents appear to value education 'in itself' as a means of enabling 'personal development'. They are opposed to the concept that students are consumers of education. This appears to be because the academic staff are committed to the principles of developing 'reflective practice' through pedagogy. The

students in the research population expressed views that are similar to the combination of neoliberal values and emancipatory pedagogy contained within the two white papers. There is an expectation that the student experience should be based on 'value for money' and that 'good teaching' should be associated with higher education programmes. All 10 students were in favour of 'good teaching' but they do not appear to share the same understanding of the importance of developing reflective practice as their academic tutors. The third type of reflection, expressed by the research participants draws attention to the 'moral objections' that can be made about the rising tuition fees in English higher education. Whether or not higher education is considered as being important for 'self-development' or for 'employment' a third theme expressed by the respondents is that it is morally wrong to charge high tuition fees to students in order to try to resolve an economic crisis that has not been caused by them. The following content presents the reflections of the research respondents alongside key themes contained within the two white papers.

Barnett (1992) argues that the current English higher education is shaped by the government and their interpretation of what constitutes 'quality education'. A variety of institutions teaching a variety of academic programmes to a diverse market of consumers is presented as the ideal way of teaching higher education. Competition is presented in a wholly positive way with student choice being cited as central ingredient of higher education teaching.

Their (students') choices and expectations should play an important part in shaping the courses universities provide and in encouraging universities to adapt and improve their service. (BIS, 2009, 70).

A different reflection was offered by the 10 academic tutors associated with the programme. 'Lisa', 'Kate', 'Sophie', 'Emma', 'Anne', 'John', 'Ruth', 'Sarah', 'June' and 'Mariam' appear to value the 'developmental potential' of higher education.

I don't think we can equate students with customers. We aren't offering that sort of relationship. Most of the students need to be led. They are not in a position where they can dictate to us. We often deal with needy students who require our help. It is a very different relationship to dealing with a customer. (Lisa, academic programme leader).

This reflection is supported by 'Kate' who emphasises the importance of the unique relationship existing between academic tutors and students.

It's often the case that to get students to develop, they need to realise how wrong they are. The first essays and reports are often poor. They have to realise that they need to improve. We don't pander to their wishes in this respect. (Kate, academic programme leader).

The idea that students need to respond to employer choices alongside the assumption that university teaching ought to be influenced by what students and employers identify as being indicative of quality is a key theme within the white papers.

By requiring course content and outcomes to be more transparent, students and employers will be enabled to make informed choices that increase competition between institutions. No student should ever be misled into believing that a course will deliver employment outcomes that it will not. (BIS, 2009, 4).

The programme leaders however draw attention to the importance of nurturing 'reflective practice' as opposed to enabling 'competition'.

The best way to improve your professional practice if you're working with children and families is to reflect on your work in order to make improvements. It's nothing to do with competition. You could say that this value opposes what the students do when they're working in early years. We want to see cooperation as opposed to competition. (Sophie, academic programme leader).

A number of authors have identified a range of complex factors influence pedagogy in universities (Abbas, Ashwin and McLean 2012), Christie (2009), and Hernandez-Martinez, Black, Williams, Davis, Pampaka and Wake (2008)). The content of the white papers however appears to be based on the assumption that student choice is the most critical factor influencing pedagogy. This view is opposed by the academic tutors.

I don't think we have a relationship of choice. We don't let the students choose what they want to do. We nurture them so that they become skilled professionals who are able to adapt their professional practice accordingly.
(Emma, academic programme leader).

This view is supported by 'Anne' who comments on the difficulty of associating higher education with 'student choice'.

It isn't about "choice", it's more about recognising how professional development can occur. That often involves doing what you would rather not choose to do at all! (Anne, an academic tutor)

The white papers identify that degrees need to be taught well in order to provide students with the skills that enable them to contribute to the economy. This theme appears in DfES (2003).

As well as improving vocational skills we need to ensure that all graduates including those who study traditional academic disciplines, have the right skills to equip them for a lifetime in a fast-changing work environment
(DfES, 2003, 44).

In BIS (2009), the message is reinforced so that:

All universities should be expected to demonstrate how they prepare their students for employment, including through training in modern workplace skills such as team working, business awareness and communication skills
(BIS 2009, 13).

The link between 'good teaching' and 'the right skills' is commented on by all 10 students in the research sample. 'Katherine', 'Ashley', 'Laura', 'Hayley', 'James',

‘Kamit’, ‘Dawn’, ‘Emily’, ‘Anna’ and ‘Lucy’ value the importance of ‘good teaching’, ‘skills development’ and ‘employability’.

I think that good teaching is important if I am to gain the skills that I need to work effectively in the children’s workforce. The opportunity to study for a degree is bound to help my chances of getting a good job so that I have a worthwhile career. (Katherine, a programme student).

This reflection is mirrored by ‘Ashley’ who equates higher education with good teaching and gaining employment.

I think the purpose of studying for a degree is to get a good job. This can only come if we get a good teaching experience. It allows us to get a good degree classification. I want to go on to primary teaching. I can only do this if I get a 2:1 degree classification. (Ashley, a programme student).

The themes within the student reflections echo many of the sentiments within the two white papers. There is the expression of neoliberal values alongside an appreciation of the importance of an emancipatory pedagogy. ‘Laura’ values being the first student in her family to study for a degree as she perceives that this will enable her to become ‘wealthy’.

I’m very proud of the fact that I am the first student from my family to go to university. I think my degree will enable me to get a good job and that my standard of living will be good. (Laura, a programme student).

In BIS we see non-traditional students being identified as an essential component of higher education pedagogy.

We will give priority to growing a diverse range of models of higher education most attractive to non-traditional students. These include options such as part-time and workplace-based courses aimed particularly at mature students or those from non-conventional backgrounds (BIS, 2009, 11).

This theme is revealed in 2003 with the following statement of intent.

All those who have the potential to benefit from higher education should do so. This is a fundamental principle which lies at the heart of building a more socially just society because education is the best and most reliable route out of poverty and disadvantage. (DfES, 2003, 8).

This theme is supported by the student reflections. ‘Hayley’ and ‘James’ identify that ‘getting a degree’ is a way of improving their lives.

I have enjoyed studying for my degree. But moreover it’s a life-changing opportunity for me. It gives me the chance of a great career so it represents a life-changing opportunity. (Hayley, a programme student)

I could have left school and gone straight into employment. In lots of ways I wouldn’t have minded doing this. But I’ve got much more chance of getting into teaching with my degree and this will make all the difference to my life. (James, a programme student).

Alongside these reflections, the academic tutors and students associated with the programme commented on the increased tuition fees associated with the programme that came into effect in October 2012. These reflections raise moral objections to the association of ‘tuition fees’ with ‘economic recession’. Two reflections (from a programme tutor and a student) summarise the reasons for these moral objections.

There appears to be a hidden agenda at work in associating higher education with choice and markets. A main issue appears to be the attempt to get students to pay a bill that the government does not want to have to pay. There isn’t really anywhere else for young people to go after school so they have to go to the universities. But the government is not prepared to pay the cost and they are placing the burden of that cost on the students. I actually think it is most unfair. In fact it’s morally outrageous. It’s not the fault of the students that we got into an economic recession. (John, a programme tutor).

‘Ruth’ and ‘Sarah’ described the rise in tuition fees as ‘a disgrace’ and ‘not right’.

‘Dawn’ and ‘Emily’ reflected that ‘tuition fees places the burden of the recession on students who are not to blame for the recession’ as they are ‘innocent victims’.

I don’t think it’s fair that I should be paying such high tuition fees. It’s not my fault that we had the economic crisis. I also think that the government obviously have the money to pay our fees. We do not pay anything up front! If the money can be paid I don’t see why we have to pay it back later. It just seems a scandal. It causes a lot of bad feeling. But what else can we do? There is little else for us if we don’t have a degree. (Kamit, a programme student).

‘Anna’ and ‘Lucy’ said they felt as if it was ‘their fault’ that the country was in recession. ‘June’ and ‘Mariam’ acknowledged that ‘opportunities are available’ but ‘at a price’.

There are tremendous opportunities for young people if they get on to a degree programme but it isn’t always easy for them. There are all sorts of worries about debt. This just seems so unfair when as young people they should be filled with optimism. (June, a programme tutor)

It was so different in my day when I was a student. I had no tuition fees and a local authority grant and yet I was still considered to be “a poor student”!

Today’s students really do have a tough time. It just seems wrong! (Mariam, a programme tutor).

The research findings reveal that what appears to overshadow the content of the two white papers is what ‘Katherine’, ‘Lisa’ and the other respondents refer to as the ‘morally wrong’ English higher education system.

I’m in favour of having vocational degrees that help students to find employment. This has been a good development in my view. But these positive curriculum developments mean nothing when you think of the fees issue. It’s morally wrong. (Lisa, a programme leader)

I do appreciate having the chance to get a degree and become part of the children's workforce. It just worries me that I'll be starting my career with a load of student debt. How can this be right? If anything it's morally wrong!
(Katherine, a programme student).

Conclusions: the interplay of neoliberalism, emancipatory pedagogy and disaffection

The two white papers (DfES 2003 and Department for Business Innovation and Skills BIS 2009) present a simplistic view of teaching in higher education where the creation of a market place of providers and consumers is equated with quality teaching and best practice. The language of the documents is based on an assumption that there is a 'problem' that can be fixed with a 'solution'. The academic tutors in the research sample outline the flaws in this simplistic assumption. Teaching and learning in higher education is more than 'choice', 'good teaching', 'skills development' and 'employability'.

The students in the research sample appear to mirror the neoliberal values and emancipatory pedagogy of the two white papers. The student research participants value 'employability' alongside the 'good teaching in higher education' that realises this agenda. This combination of neoliberal values and emancipatory pedagogy within both the white papers and the student responses may be visualised as being flawed and contradictory. The ideal of having a higher education system that is based on a free market alongside direct intervention to make this happen is one example of this contradiction in terms. The alternative vision of higher education presented by the academic tutors (with an emphasis being placed on reflective practice) reveals a flaw in the neoliberal agenda. If academic tutors are opposed to neoliberal values, the goals of the white papers are not likely to be realised.

Moreover, the work of a number of authors draws attention to the oppressive values of neoliberalism (Archer and Leathwood (2003), Freire (1973, 1985, 1994), Giroux (2000), Harris and Isler (2013), Mayo (2013), Morley and Dunstan (2013), Torres (1998, 2008) and Williams (2013). If the ideas of these authors are developed, we can criticise the economic and political priorities of the two white papers on moral grounds. A main objection that is given by the academic tutors and the students in the research sample is that current educational practices within neoliberal governments in the UK evidence oppression and exploitation (or ‘unfairness’). Authors including Freire (1973, 1985, 1994), Giroux (2000) and Torres (1998) have attempted to place ‘moral education’ at the centre of educational policies. In contrast, the varying approaches to policy adopted by the politicians are influenced by their political beliefs and economic priorities. The perceived importance of globalisation and the need to compete with other emerging economies has been identified as a key element of teaching in higher education. Critical pedagogy disputes the rationale behind this approach to teaching in higher education for moral reasons. Critical pedagogy is opposed to the bilateral priorities of economics and politics we see within the two white papers. There is instead a recommendation for systematic enquiries into teaching and learning in order to develop pedagogy. It is this attempt to create understandings as well as change that rests at the heart of critical pedagogy. A merit of critical pedagogy is that attention is drawn to the oppressive nature of neoliberalism. Education is about realising individual potential in the fullest sense of the word. Unless this notion of education is propagated we may continue to do what Coffield (2006) phrases as ‘running ever faster down the wrong road’.

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Word count: 6532