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Employability and higher education: The follies of the ‘Productivity Challenge’ in the Teaching Excellence Framework

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Abstract

This article considers questions of ‘employability’, a notion foregrounded in the Green and White Papers on the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) (BIS, 2015; 2016). The paper first questions government imperatives concerning employability and suggests a series of mismatches that are evident in the rhetorics in this area. This summary opens up elements of what I am calling the first ‘folly’ in the field. The second section of the paper considers recent research with individual academics engaged in employability activity. This research suggests another series of mismatches in the aims and outcomes of ‘employability initiatives’ and opens up a further series of ‘follies’ in the day-to-day practices of academics and students’ responses to them. The third section of the paper turns to academics’ reports of student behaviour in relation to the outcomes of their degree. This section develops an argument that relates to the final ‘folly’ associated with the current focus on employability. I argue that students’ focus on outcomes (which at face value suggests they have internalized the importance of employment) is contributing to the production of graduates who do not have the dispositions that employers – when interviewed – say that they want. The highly performative culture of higher education, encouraged by the same metrics that will be extended through the TEF, is implicated then in *not* preparing students for the workplace.

Introduction

This paper is organized around a series of ‘follies’ in the field of employability in higher education policy and practice¹. The concept of the ‘folly’ is worked to suggest a series of ‘mistaken identities’, foci for misplaced attention, foolish ‘castles in the air’, in the field of employability in higher education and recent announcements from the Government in respect of the Teaching Excellence Framework (BIS, 2015; 2016). These interventions, however, are more than follies if follies are something that primarily amuse, distract or entertain; these attempts to intervene in the role higher education plays in the employment of graduates are having profound effects on higher education itself (e.g. Badley, 2016; Komljenovic and Robertson, 2016; Tomlinson, 2015; Collini, 2013). Because of this dual ‘character’, I organize what I am going to say around a series of ‘serious jokes’ from Kafka’s book ‘The Trial’.

¹ This paper does not differentiate between Higher Education Institutions (teaching led; research led; HE in FE). Such work would almost certainly throw up further nuances in the arguments presented here.

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These appear in bold in the text and act as a series of headings for the follies I describe. I end the paper with a lengthier discussion of why the use of such dark humour is appropriate to this debate and connect these ideas to Kavanagh's (2009) work on the academic as 'Fool' or 'Jester'. I argue that the essential role of philosophy – as disruptive of the 'taken for granted' - has been radically diminished as a consequence of New Public Management. My use of Kafka's work is an attempt to 'puncture' some of the orthodoxies that currently circulate in relation to employability in much the way that philosophy might. The approach in the paper takes seriously the idea that wider processes of change often begin in changes in discourse (Fairclough, 2005: 5). ". . . the official rhetoric is not just an illustration of policy; it is also a vehicle through which social reality is constructed and maintained" (Suspitsyna, 2010: 581).

FOLLY 1: "No", said the Priest, "you don't need to accept everything as true, you only need to accept it as necessary." "Depressing view", said K. "The lie made into the rule of the world" (Kafka, 1925: 159).

The Green and White Papers on the TEF (BIS, 2015; 2016) make clear that 'employability' will continue to drive the need for universities to "evolve" (BIS, 2015:10). "Employers want highly skilled graduates who are ready to enter the workforce. And the country needs people with the knowledge and expertise to help us compete at a global level." (10). Collini (2016) notes the Green Paper uses the phrase: "what employers want" thirty-five times. I want to argue, in this first section, that there are a series of lies, fictions or 'half truths' that are made into the 'rule of the world' in respect of such claims about employability. This section, then, sets out to expose the fallacy that there is a thing or set of things that employers want. And this, in turn, means 'giving employers what they want' highly problematic.

The Green Paper argued that the UK is faced with a "Productivity Challenge": with universities having a "vital role to play" in "increasing productivity" (BIS, 2015: 10). The call is familiar (see below) "too many organizations find it hard to recruit the skilled people they need; this poses serious risks to the competitiveness, financial health and even survival of many businesses" (11). By the time the White Paper was published, the agenda was clear: "This government is focused on strengthening the education system . . . to ensure that once and for all we address the gap in skills at technical and higher technical levels that affect the nation's productivity." (BIS, 2016:10). "The government will respond in the form of a Skills Plan, and we will ensure that the whole education and training system is focused on implementing its proposals" (BIS, 2016:10).

Numerous previous reviews have highlighted skills' deficiencies in UK graduates, and accompanying deficiencies in UK universities: Tymon (2013) "In the UK, the 2008 survey by the CBI found that 48% of employers were experiencing problems filling jobs with appropriately skilled graduates. Branine (2008) reports on a survey of 700 UK-based employers, where more than 60% mentioned problems of poor quality graduates in terms of their employability skills" (841/2). Cumming (2010): "A

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dominant theme emerging . . . is that many graduates lack appropriate skills, attitudes and dispositions, which in turn prevents them from participating effectively in the workplace” (3). And, more recently, The Guardian (29.1.16) reports: “English universities are failing to develop ‘quite basic’ skills amongst students, according to a report commissioned by the government . . . ” (12). In this analysis, higher education “not only holds graduates back from gaining satisfactory employment, but also has an inhibiting effect on the performance of employing organizations, and ultimately the broader economy” (Moore and Morton, 2015: 2).

It is evident in a review of further work, however, that such evidence has already been questioned by a series of authors. Moore and Morton (2015) describe a “stream of surveys” with simple percentages being drawn up on the basis of tick boxes. They returned to employers who had completed a survey on graduate skills and interviewed some of them. These interviews “do not lend support to the generally bleak accounts reported in some sections of the research literature” (Moore and Morton, 2015: 7). Cranmer (2006) also interviewed line managers who had said that “graduates had only some or none of the skills and knowledge required” and asked what types of skills were lacking. “A large proportion of the initial skills deficiencies identified by line managers related to areas of knowledge and skills which were likely to be technical and/or employer specific in nature as they were to be employability skills” (182).

This was also the broad finding of Mason et al (2003) in a study for HEFCE. Moore and Morton (2015) focused on the perceived lack of abilities in respect of the writing skills of graduates and found employers described a much more nuanced picture, face to face. They went on to describe the “highly situated nature of the routines and discourses” that graduates needed and regarded the best place to learn such practices was within the workplace. As Le Maistre and Pare (2004) describe: “each workplace has its own geography, political structure and culture” (46). Cranmer (2006) concludes these “findings . . . cast doubt on the assumption that these skills can be effectively developed within classrooms . . . despite the best intentions of the academics to enhance graduates’ employability . . . ” (169) because there is a mismatch between “the skills acquired at university and the skills that are required to use in employment” . . . She concludes that this is “indicative of the limitations of seeking to develop employability skills outside the workplace in any case” (182).

A parallel strand of research also suggests definitional problems in the field. Sin and Neave (2014) find the term employability “demands little consensus” (1447); it is used in different ways to mean different things not just between but within groups (Tymon, 2013). Tymon (ibid) provides a review of multiple definitions and attributes and finds little overlap. Other work considers whether employability means “soft skills” (Moore and Morton, 2015), “transferable skills” (Kalfa and Taksa, 2015), “the development of skills that enable individuals to find and remain in employment” (Kalfa and Taksa, 2015); skills to prepare for efficient decision-making or even “greater capacity to enjoy leisure” (Arrow, 1997; McMahan, 1998). Archer and Davison (2008) suggest the skills that are lacking are those “employers increasingly need in a more customer focused world” (8). As Tymon (op cit) describes, “In

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addition, any apparent agreement on skills, or attributes, is amongst a lit of *labels* and not a detailed examination of what these mean to the individuals, or groups, concerned” (845) (emphasis in original).

Whatever the case in respect of deficiencies described, or denied, or definitional problems, higher education has, over the previous three decades in particular, responded to calls to attend to the employability of graduates. Responses include changes in pedagogical approach, curriculum design and organisation, and assessment regimes (Williams, 2013)². Despite this attention, however, “perceptions seem to have become progressively gloomier” (Moore and Mason, 2015: 2) in respect of higher education ever properly attending to employers’ needs and the Green and White Papers certainly echo this disappointment, regarding ever greater efforts be expended on creating work “ready” employees (BIS, 2015: 10). (This cooking metaphor has connotations of higher education ‘basting’ undergraduates along the lines of producing the ‘oven ready’ turkey.) As Kalfa and Taksa (2015) describe, the connections between skills’ development and getting a job are now so entwined that university is “elevated to a panacea” (583) in respect of meeting employers’ needs.

What this first brief review has made clear, however, is that there are a series of mismatches involved in trading expectations and debating outcomes from the field which are not generally spoken of in higher education and that are ignored in the Green and White Papers (BIS, 2015; 2016). Clearly, employment matters to government and their response is to require higher education to attend to ‘employability’. However, there is no consensus over what employability means and a series of proxies have grown up associated with the discourse of ‘skills’. This suggests that students can be trained in ways which will be helpful, whatever the context, when they start work. However, when graduates start work we are told that employers find they do not have the skills they need. But there is a more serious mismatch revealed here: employers do not necessarily believe these skills can be taught in universities. Further, one would want to ask whether it is skills, as such, that are lacking, given the highly situated nature of what employers are looking for (Coffield, 1999; Polanyi, 1969).

Despite these semantic, practical and intellectual challenges, universities continue to attend to and invest in employability initiatives. As Tymon (2013) describes, universities have to attend to employment figures as these, increasingly, show up in league tables and will – it is claimed – have consequences on recruitment. Government rhetoric is that NSS (National Student Survey) Scores, KIS (Key Information Sets)³ data, and so on, (as evident in league tables) are a spur to ‘improvements’ in higher education and allow prospective students to make

² Tensions in respect of such moves date back to at least 1872 when Nietzsche lamented: “The true task of education, in this view, is to form people who are, as the French say, *au courant*, the same way a coin is *courant*, valid currency” (16). Economic metaphors continue to abound; in a more recent commentary Anderson (2014) notes: universities are being reduced to “so many sales outlets for customers in need of livery for the market” (39).

³ KIS (Key Information Set) data contains 18 items of information including data from the NSS and information about employment status/salary six months after completing a programme.

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informed choices about where they study (BIS, 2016: 6). Proposals in the White Paper suggest HMRC (Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs) tax data may now be published in order to "chart the transition from higher education into the workplace better. (. . .) This innovation is at the heart of delivering our reform agenda ambitions: improving choice, competition and outcomes for students, the taxpayer and the economy" (BIS, 2016: 14). Actually there is very little evidence that students, generally, currently look at league tables, and weigh up the 'best place' to go according to the data available (Boliver, 2013; Sullivan et al, 2014; Davies et al, 2014). In respect of employment outcomes the system is also far better at "reflecting, replicating and reinforcing the existing pecking order than it is at challenging or modifying it" (Keep and Mayhew, 2014: 14). And Smith and Smith (2014) describe how students from disadvantaged backgrounds (particularly white working-class) are now *less likely* to go to university than they were in the 1960s. However little evidence there is to link policy moves to social mobility the government is keen *to be seen to be attending* to such issues⁴ while enacting social policy, more generally, that pulls in quite the opposite direction (Keep and Mayhew, 2014; Harrison, 2011). Marginson (2013) describes how the abstract ideal of market reform is actually sustained for "*exogenous* policy reasons (e.g. fiscal reduction, state control, ordering of contents)" (353). The performativity associated with social mobility on the part of the Government is echoed in a series of micro-practices in relation to employability that individual academics engage in, as becomes evident in the next section.

FOLLY 2: "*Needless to say, the documents would mean an almost endless amount of work. It was easy to come to the belief, not only for those of an anxious disposition, that it was impossible ever to finish it*" (Kafka, 1925: 92).

The second 'folly' which is outlined here concerns academics' experiences of setting out to develop employability initiatives, and students' responses to them. My 'tongue in cheek' claim here is that this work constitutes, and will continue to constitute, a form of activity without end, a sort of recursive 'spur to action' evident also in the terminology employed in this field, e.g. Continuous Improvement, Total Quality Management and so on. This 'hamster wheel' of activity represents what Keep and Mayhew (2014) describe as a "wicked problem", a "major crisis for those within the education system who have to try to operationalise policy makers' dreams and desires" (775); the development of employability 'skills' (if such a thing exists) cannot itself translate into better labour market outcomes for all. Higher education has increasingly been constructed as a "'silver bullet' that can address a host of economic and social challenges" (Keep and Mayhew, 2014: 764) that, in fact, are beyond its control.

During 2015 I set out to explore academics' experiences of the National Student Survey (NSS) (Frankham, 2015), focusing on the effects the survey has had on

⁴ Enshrined in the title, for example, of the White Paper: Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice, BIS 2016.

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workload, roles and relationships in HE⁵. One issue that attracted the attention of senior managers in respect of “disappointing NSS scores” was described as ‘employability’. When I first heard an academic talking in this way I was puzzled, as the term does not appear on the questionnaire. In later interviews I was able to clarify that ‘employability’ was regarded, institutionally, as being measured by the questions on ‘Personal Development’⁶ (Ipsos MORI). Here, as suggested in the previous section, employability has been reduced to a proxy associated with skills and judged according to three brief questions which may not connect in students’ minds to the workplace at all. Senior Managers, however, apparently use disappointing scores under this category to encourage academics to attend to – so-called – employability. There is a clear irony, then, in respect of academics responding to students’ disappointment in relation to preparation for employment as – apparently – evident in poor scores on ‘personal development’. Students may not be expressing disappointment about this issue in those scores and yet those scores are being used to drive employability initiatives.

Partly as a consequence of drivers associated with the NSS, then, and partly as a consequence of expectations reported in the first section of this paper, universities already attend closely to the ‘employability’ of students. Academics described delivering sessions focused entirely on the subject, requirements to ‘embed’ employability targets across all lectures/modules in a degree and contributing to short courses on the subject. One academic said that employability “had to be the golden thread to everything” in her university. Sometimes hugely onerous requirements for increases in personal tutoring were also described as intended to address disappointing scores in this category (Frankham, 2015).

Of course, some degrees have a coherent, comprehensive and critical attitude to employment at their heart, for example a degree in commercial photography, or professional programmes aimed at teachers or social workers. Typically, however, ‘employability’, was described by academics as something that senior managers regarded as a necessary ‘add on’ to all degree programmes, regardless of their intentions to sometimes already directly prepare students for employment. One respondent described how the university where he works has set up “the employability initiative”. This is a ‘top-down’ requirement for every department to have an “employability committee”. In his analysis this doesn’t result in “people on the ground who know what students need” leading the work, but in the development of other ‘initiatives’ generated by a group who are deemed representative of the Faculty. This perhaps helps to explain another respondent’s

⁵ This work, funded by the British Academy/Leverhulme, included extended semi-structured interviews with 35 academics in the humanities in universities across the North-West. Volunteers to be interviewed included heads of department, programme leaders, module leaders and staff with responsibility (at different levels) for overseeing the NSS. A snowballing technique was employed in relation to identifying potential interviewees. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

⁶ Q19: The course has helped me to present myself with confidence;

Q20: My communication skills have improved;

Q21: As a result of my course, I feel confident in tackling unfamiliar problems.

⁶ KIS (Key Information Set) data contains 18 items of information including data from the NSS and information about employment status/salary six months after completing a programme.

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analysis: “I’m always astounded by how often those initiatives just run into the sand. They run into the sand. You’ve spent hours and hours of your time – we have this committee that I’ve been on – it’s a monster for creating these absurd initiatives and hardly any of them actually last for more than a year. We try them, they’re rubbish, we stop. We think of something else, we try that, it’s rubbish, we stop. Pointless.”

Given requirements by universities to attend to ‘employability’, staff also described having to account for these initiatives in multiple forms during the course of the year. In addition to changing the content of some of what they do, academics also described changing the *description* of the content of what they do, such that students were more aware of how lecturers were contributing to ‘personal development’: “We’re doing all these things, we’ve been doing them for a long time, and we’re just phrasing them differently. Personal development – we’ve been doing it for forever. (. . .) So it seems to me that the parameters of these kinds of surveys is – it’s not about enabling the students or enabling staff. Often it’s about just showing that we’re doing it, which is fair enough but we’re spending more and more time showing that we’re doing it instead of just doing it.”

In addition to ‘naming’, describing and articulating current activities in different ways, academics also described being drawn into areas they felt were outside their control – and this represented a quite radical shift in respect of their responsibilities towards students. ‘Employability’ has also changed the general environment of higher education. Universities increasingly have dedicated staff, responsible entirely for employability initiatives, for liaising with employers, for carrying out ‘skills audits’ at the point of graduation and gathering statistics on graduate destinations. Universities also host ‘Job Shops’ on their websites, directing students to vacancies, information on further study, volunteering advice and guidance on CVs, job interviews and employment legislation (see Shuker, 2014). In addition, universities increasingly employ their own undergraduate students (primarily in food outlets) often supported by the Students’ Union and at least one university operates a system whereby undergraduate students can be employed in a series of roles across the campus, facilitated by their ‘Guild of Students’ (their rebranded Union). (The changing role of students’ unions in HE is described by Brooks et al, 2015.)

This plethora of activities certainly fulfills universities’ requirement *to be seen to be* attending to “employability development” (Budd, 2016: 848), but as one co-ordinator interviewed for the NSS study remarked: “We know there is only so much that we can do – but we have to keep doing it.” He described how the only jobs that are “worth counting”, as far as his VC is concerned, are managerial and professional, as they are ones ‘The Times’ and ‘The Sunday Times’ publishes. He continued: “Most students in the Humanities from here don’t go into those jobs – they go into jobs that they want and they are very happy with their degree courses – but they do not show up in the figures.” When the employability statistics are released, then, they are not really representative of where students go, or of whether this university has given them what they want. This means “no-one is happy about these figures – staff feel vulnerable because it looks like they are not doing a good job; the VC is unhappy

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– he is all over these statistics – and I am in this position where I know there are problems with these numbers and yet I still have to circulate them.”

It seems, then, that here lie another series of ‘follies’. This university is gathering data which does not reflect what the students are actually doing, because the newspapers that publish that data, are not interested in what they are doing, but in what *they have decided* is relevant to judging the quality of higher education. Staff within the institution know this, but have to live with these (further) disappointing scores, and sometimes the real or imagined ‘threat’ associated with these ‘disappointments’. A recent article, written anonymously by someone in a “senior position in a university’s employability department”, in the THE (2015) described the lengths some institutions will go to in order to manipulate destination data in response to some of the problems associated with non-managerial, non-professional jobs described, above. As s/he described: “When I started the post, it was said that the DLHE (Destination of Leavers from Higher Education) would make me hard of hearing. In no time at all, they laughed, I’d be hearing ‘barrister’ not ‘barista’.” Of course, considerable resources are now expended on such fictions.

It is not just academics and administrators, however, who report scepticism about some of these initiatives and the inaccuracies and distortions associated with (apparently) measuring ‘employability’. It was quite commonplace in academics’ descriptions of employability initiatives to describe how students were lacking in enthusiasm in relation to the provision (also see Tymon, 2013; Rae, 2007). Maggie described the students “glazing over” when she starts talking about “careers and the personal tutoring they are expected to go through and the employability and volunteering and doing stuff before they leave university in order to beef up their CV and what have you.” I was told, many times, that attendance and enthusiasm for one-day courses/conferences on employability was also low and that students respond with groans in some sessions in which employability has become a mandatory of each module (personal communication). Tymon (2013) found that even first and second year Business Studies students expressed ambivalence about employability; this is a group of students, it has been suggested, that “should be more interested in, and have a greater awareness of, employability as they have opted to study a vocationally oriented subject” (853/4).

Academics reported students who would say: “I want to concentrate on what I’m doing now” and “Why are we spending all of this time doing this? It feels like that. I think the students are the same. They’re just going ‘we just want to, we just want to . . .’” I do not mean to imply that students, in general, are not interested in *employment* but it seems that many are relatively unconvinced of the value of employability focused initiatives (bearing in mind these are academics’ reports and further research is certainly called for in this respect). Given that a large proportion of undergraduate students are also already in paid work, it may be they feel these initiatives are somewhat redundant or perhaps, even a ‘joke’. Certainly many working class students have to work as a result of government policy in respect of student loans. They are already in jobs then, by dint of government policy but not the policy apparently concerned with employability. In a further irony, or “twist of

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logic” as Tholen et al (2016) put it: “Clinging to the mantra of a high-skill, knowledge-based economy, it [the Government] argues that the [skills] mismatch is an outcome of HE not supplying the skills that employers demand. It cites curriculum weaknesses rather than admit that the labour force is over-qualified for the jobs offered by employers” (511).

I move now to the final ‘folly’ described here. This section again draws on data generated when exploring the effects of the NSS on academics’ working lives.

FOLLY 3: “*They want, as far as possible, to prevent any kind of defence, everything should be made the responsibility of the accused*” (Kafka, 1925: 84).

This final ‘folly’ concerns academics’ accounts of student behaviour in relation to the outcomes of their degree and their associated focus on employment after graduation. I argue that there are a series of unfortunate consequences of this emphasis, in the current climate. Kafka’s ‘jest’ is relevant here as it underlines how the burden of responsibility for government policy in this area is assigned to those who are subject to those policies rather than to those who instigate them.

Alongside describing students’ perceived ambivalence in relation to employability initiatives, academics interviewed about the NSS regard students as highly outcomes focused in another respect – that of the classification of their degree. Other research confirms this shift in orientation by students (Bunce et al, 2016; Tomlinson, 2014; 2016). Allen (2014) describes how meritocracy is “now highly individualized in the form of a guiding logic that conditions and directs our daily lives. (. . .) It represents a system of coercion that seeks to govern us through the manipulation of our hopes” (17). Budd (2016) compared English and German undergraduates’ views of their university experience: “. . . the English students were unanimous in the view that an upper second⁷ degree was an absolute requirement because that’s what employers want” (8) and that they will face “intense competition for jobs” (ibid: 12). Kate connected a focus on degree outcome amongst students to a number of factors: the “economic situation”, the “pressure they are under in relation to jobs” and “they all get scored at work: How did I clean your room today . . .” In this respect, it could be argued, higher education has contributed to focusing students’ minds on securing employment.⁸ Unfortunately, as Tholen et al (2016) describe, the student, above, may find herself continuing to clean rooms *after* graduation.

There has been considerable recent debate on the student as a ‘consumer’ of higher education and how consumer-like behaviour is more evident as a consequence of changes in policy and practice in UK universities (e.g. Bunce et al, 2014; Williams,

⁷ English degrees are graded, in descending order: first, upper second, lower second, third, pass, fail.

⁸ This is in spite of research about what makes a difference to employers, as summarized by Collini (2016) “(1) perceived standing of the university they attended, (2) their field of study and (3) (a distant third) the class of their degree result” (34). As Morley (2007) describes, socio-economic issues still have strong effects in the UK in respect of which university, and which course, students access.) This would suggest another ‘disconnect’ in respect of what students think they need to do and what actually makes a difference.

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2010, 2013; Woodall et al, 2014). Budd's (2016) work describes how a focus on degree classification and job opportunity (and in that sense, an instrumental focus on degree 'worth') does not, necessarily, translate into students being passive 'consumers' or 'customers' or even 'pawns' of higher education (Tight, 2013). Budd finds that most students are both "extrinsically and intrinsically, instrumentally, and altruistically motivated – sometimes all at the same time" (13), in respect of where, what and why they study. In addition, all the students he interviewed saw themselves as the "principal actors in their degrees"; this was not something, then, that they were in passive relation to, as has been suggested elsewhere (e.g. White 2007). However, the English students in his study described their university as *also* having a much "more active academic as well as non-academic role" in their degree. This is in contrast to the German undergraduates who regarded their degree outcome as solely "a *personal* indicator of performance" (9) (my emphasis).

It is perhaps in the 'more active' relation that English undergraduates perceive that we see some detail in respect of a paradox that Budd (2016) outlines: students both see themselves as the 'principal actor' in their degree, but also tend to attach responsibility onto 'the university' if they do not do well. Data from my study of the NSS sheds some light on the 'workings' of this paradox, as evident in academics' reports of students' attitudes to getting a 'good degree' and how to achieve that.

Academics described how undergraduate students *arrive* with a clear sense of what they want from their degree in terms of achieving a good grade: ". . . the questions we get in the first few weeks is like, well, what do I need to do to get a really good mark? And "They get here and we say, we're not going to tell you precisely what to think, we're not. To set out our expectations from day one and we talked a lot about the fact that a lot of students come into the university and the first thing they say . . . is how do we get a first?" A similar focus on outcomes was evident in academics' reports on students' attitudes to pieces of coursework. Another academic described being asked for the sort of help students now expect at 'A' level – "in order to get an A, an A essay looks like this, a B essay . . . and they come to university expecting the same thing." Students seem increasingly to look for 'fine-grained' help on assignments – and whole lectures on how to do them. And: [They were saying] "*everyone else* has written a structure on Blackboard, *everyone else* has told me how to do it . . . I'm not going to give you a blueprint." It is now commonplace, nevertheless, for academics to provide detailed written guidance on each assignment and to give whole lectures on how to be successful in each piece of coursework.

Providing extra help, of course, does not necessarily address concerns, but can sometimes feed them: "It was very interesting. I told them in a lot of detail about the assessment yesterday. It's in four weeks' time. I'd made this little extra booklet, because I felt the matrix hadn't really . . . didn't really tell them exactly what was required. (. . .) Then this student, she was really quite frustrated and she went 'Why didn't we get this at the beginning? Why are you giving this to us now?'" Other academics reported the same phenomenon – a sustained effort to address concerns that had been raised, only to discover that "everybody was still feeling anxious". As

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this academic described, despite her best efforts to reassure and support people, “I kind of felt quite grotty about it and I think it’s because of this [the NSS]”. Students also complain about having been “spoonfed” when experiencing problems. This academic reported giving first and second years the guidance they wanted, and then third years “complain that they are spoonfed and they say, the trouble is we are spoonfed at levels four and five and then we are suddenly asked to be really critically reflective . . . “

The ‘active academic and non-academic’ role that Budd (2016) reports is clearly evident here: academics are engaged closely in supporting students and responding to their concerns but, in the process, it is clear that this does not necessarily address these concerns in any ultimate sense. Here you see elements of students developing an increasingly dependent relationship on ‘the university’ in respect of outcomes and an invitation, maybe, towards blame if things do not go as well as they had hoped. An increasing instrumentality is also evident in other accounts: “So frequently I get students saying, well I don’t ‘get’ today’s lecture, it’s not related to the assignment. Again, it’s that culture of I’ve got to do this to get the degree you’re paying for. I believe, anyway. Your job is to get me to pass these exams, these assignments . . . “ It is regarded that the £9,000 fee has exacerbated the tendency of students to focus on the classification of their degrees (also see Finney and Finney, 2010). Another academic observed that “You’re paying your fees and you’re reporting back [via NSS] on the value for money of that investment that you made. So that you start with the nine grand, oh my god what am I *getting* for this?” And: “In student/staff forum there’s a – ‘I’m paying you’ attitude. That comes through the NSS.” It is possible to see in these accounts other elements of the sort of responsibility/blame culture that explains Budd’s paradox: this is “your job” “what am I getting for this?” “I’m paying you”; “I deserve something”.

As academics described, students talking to them about grades is part of their role, and they are happy to discuss how students might improve their work. However, as this academic described, there is sometimes the sense in which: “They expect you to be able to *make it the case*.” This expression: “making it the case” is echoed in managerial responses to disappointing NSS scores. Academics reported that the NSS has encouraged a punitive attitude amongst senior managers who oversee the survey (Frankham, 2015; Sabri, 2013). This is evident in the ways in which the results are distributed, the public nature of the comparisons that are made, the requirements to respond to issues raised and the combative tone of much of the discussion around the survey results. This context helps to explain academics’ accommodation to the NSS. Shore (2008): “league tables simultaneously produce winners and losers, and the ‘policy of naming and shaming failing institutions has become an annual ritual in humiliation”. In these, and other ways, neoliberalism comes to ‘inhabit’ us – it is ‘out there’ and ‘in here’ in Peck and Tickell’s (2002) terms. In contrast to students’ attitudes to the survey, academics reported a keen awareness and preoccupation with the survey and its effects. This echoes other work in this area: “In the immediate aftermath of the publication of results one manager saw his role as nothing to do with ‘the actual results’ which ‘comes later’

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but rather in dealing with the ‘terrible weight’ and emotion that comes with receiving the NSS results” (Sabri, 2013: 5).

In the current climate academics need, and want, to do well in respect of NSS scores; this is partly a consequence of their public nature and partly about the ways in which they are used by managers. ‘Problematic’ scores come back onto the table “again and again and again” as one senior academic described, funneling the impact of those scores on the people concerned (Hey, 2011), and increasing their visibility. Course material that is challenging, and assignments which present students with a challenge, are clear foci for student expressions of dissatisfaction and concern. Given the public nature of NSS scores, the institutional emphasis on them, and academics’ desires to respond to student feedback, these provide the focus for much extra help being given to students in order that they feel less uncomfortable with these elements of their courses. As a number of other commentators have described (Williams, 2013; Woodall et al, 2014) this may be diminishing the intellectual challenge of a university degree, and the benefits that such challenge may bring. It may also help to explain the massive increase in students achieving first class and upper-second class degrees and to what is regarded as grade inflation (Bachan, 2015). As other authors have remarked (e.g. Stronach et al, 2014;

This issue is, coincidentally, raised in the Green and White Papers on the TEF (BIS, 2015; 2016). The Green Paper claimed that employers not only believe that graduates lack the skills they need, but have difficulty in judging the quality of applicants because of ‘grade inflation’. “. . . employers face a challenge distinguishing between graduates. Businesses need a degree classification system that will help them identify the best applicants for their firms . . . Students also suffer from degree inflation. They want their hard work at university to be recognized and for their degree to be a currency that carries prestige and holds its value” (BIS, 2015: 12). The instrumentality evident throughout policy directives on higher education, combined with the economic metaphors that litter the discourse (as above) construct education as a transaction and students as consumers. By the time of the Green Paper, the address to the problem of ‘grade inflation’ is made clear, along with a ‘shopping list’ of other items: “. . . data on teaching intensity, status and recognition of teaching staff, engagement with employers, how providers are tackling grade inflation and whether they are using approaches such as Grade Point Average to provide a more granular account of student performance” (BIS, 2016: 47).

As Sabri (2010) has described, the academic is “all but absent from the assumptive worlds of policymakers in UK higher education (. . .) cast into the shade by an overwhelming emphasis on ‘the student experience’”. This shade has grown deeper, in the Green and White papers, with the proposal to “update the regulatory architecture” (BIS, 2016: 15) through the establishment of the Office for Students (OfS) which will now act as the single “market regulator” in higher education. This will “protect the interests of students, employers and taxpayers”; it is unclear where the academics who carry out the work are located. As Sabri (2010) notes in her analysis of policy previously published in this area, it is institutional managers who

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will oversee the development of criteria for judging 'quality' and the processes whereby academics are deemed to have met these criteria. No wonder Clapham (2006) describes this culture as one in which academics increasingly feel they are 'functionaries': "in an edifice that is concerned only that you have carried out specific functions, and that the necessary checks on this have also been carried out" (6).

In one of only fifteen references to the 'academic' (as person, as role) in the Green and White Papers (BIS, 2015; 2016)⁹, the responsibility for failings in relation to grade inflation is made clear: 'There is a risk, as highlighted by David Palfreyman and Ted Tapper, that the combination of financial and cultural factors in the HE teaching system result in our higher education provision becoming less demanding' (BIS, 2016: 12). This is a rare reference to work from outside government departments or quangoes, although the general tenor of the Palfreyman and Tapper book (2014) is evident in its references to "elitist Rip Van Winkle dons" "golden agers" and the necessity for managers to address issues of "incompetent and underperforming academic staff."

To return to Kafka (1925) and everything being "made the responsibility of the accused" (84), there is a double irony here. An increasing instrumentality about the purposes of higher education, a culture in which outcomes are paramount, and a need to do well in NSS scores, is reflected, I believe, in an increasing dependence of students on staff. Academics note (Frankham, 2015) that students are becoming less independent, perhaps less capable of initiative, perhaps less capable of thinking for themselves, over time. These are all things employers say they want in employees: people who are able to 'read situations' and act in ways that are appropriate *to the context* (Tholen et al, 2016). Connected to this, students' outcomes are becoming more and more homogenized – everyone is getting lots of focused help to get a 2:1 or a first – and there is grade inflation. But - surprise – another failing of academics (who are described as "distracted" and engaged in a "mutually convenient disengagement contract" with students (BIS, 2016: 12) who continue to employ a classification system which does not help employers to differentiate *between* graduates.

AND TO CONCLUDE: "Even if it were possible to improve any detail of it – which is anyway no more than superstitious nonsense – the best that they could achieve, although doing themselves incalculable harm in the process, is that they will have attracted the special attention of the officials for the case that comes up in the future, and the officials are always ready to seek revenge. Never attract attention to yourself!" (Kafka, 1925: 87).

Kavanagh's (2009) work suggests some explanation for the dissimulation that has been outlined in this paper. His characterization of the university as 'Fool' is useful in helping to understand how HE has adapted over time to different 'sovereigns' (the church, the state, the corporations, the professions), and yet maintained some of its

⁹ In approximately 170 pages of text

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own character. Higher education has shown over time a “remarkable ability to align itself with different sovereigns and to institutionalize organizing practices that at once enabled transformation and yet sustained a meaningful link with tradition.” This ability to align itself with different parties and maintain its own ‘character’ is encapsulated in the metaphor of the ‘Fool’ or ‘Jester’ as these characters are “. . . juggler, confidant, scapegoat, prophet and counselor all in one” (Otto, 2001). Parts of this paper illustrate higher education’s willingness to align itself with different institutions that exert “coercive and normative pressure” on it. “Throughout history and across cultures the Fool has used masks and masquerades, costumes and carnival to play with (mis)representation and dissimilitude. With the Fool, you may not get what you see.” This is, of course, not without risk; in Kafka’s terms the ‘Fool’ or ‘Jester’ has to “attract attention to themselves”, ideally through humour. This is a precarious role; using humour, the ‘Fool’ can speak in ways that no-one else would, and they may be rewarded for such candid contributions. At the same time, the ‘Fool’ may be severely punished.

It is also useful to trace Kavanagh’s argument in relation to how higher education maintained a degree of autonomy in relation to sovereign power. This, he says, derives from the “‘authority’ of philosophy”. Philosophy is “autonomous, in that it legitimates itself by reason alone, *by its own practice*” (my emphasis). Readings (1996: 57) describes the principle that follows from this – that philosophy “animates the university and differentiates it from either a technical training school (a guild) or a specialized academy (a royal society).” It is this philosophical ‘freedom’ that lies at the heart of the notion of the university as ‘Fool’ – because it is the conceptual basis for academic freedom, “central to the continual process of institutional re-creation through which an institution breathes, lives and renews itself”. Such freedom is evident in the ways the university engaged in multiple ‘conversations’ as it developed: with the sovereign, with other institutions, with itself (“about the nature of the university and its role in the world”) and “Finally, the university engages in ‘idle’ speculation and basic research that have no immediate practical relevance” It is partly in this respect that quotes from Kafka’s ‘The Trial’ (1925) suggested themselves as an organizing structure for this paper – an attempt at a demonstration of our continuing need to “propose the outrageous and challenge the ordinary” (Williams, 2016: 5) in our defence of academic freedom.

The essential heterogeneity displayed by universities of old, as described above, and as enshrined in legitimate contestation of the existing order, has increasingly been threatened by the homogenizing practices of ‘New Public Management’ (Lorenz, 2012). Here the administrator has replaced the academic as central to decision-making and practices (Shore, 2008), and there is less and less that takes place within universities that “legitimates itself by reason alone, by its own practice” (Kavanagh, 2009). As Stronach et al (2014) describe, “The ‘educational’ has quite dramatically been dispossessed of its philosophical, psychological, and historical roots. A language of proliferating ‘capitals’ has taken over, prefaced on notions of quantified educational outcomes, league tables, and bolstered by a 1992 Nobel Prize, no less (Gary Becker)” (320). This alienation from past founding practices is one that MacIntyre (2007) also describes and laments. Kavanagh describes how the potential

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of the 'Fool' is diminished when the 'Fool' becomes an agent of the sovereign. And he makes another remark about how the relationship between sovereign and fool can break down, and the positive potential of philosophy is lost. This can happen, he says, when "the sovereign forgets that its power ultimately derived from a primordial sovereign, namely the people."

Commentators on 'capitalist realism' describe how politicians across Europe "are now more afraid of financial markets than of their own people" (Metahaven, 2013) and, in the process, deny alternatives for 'sense-making' – practices which are central to philosophy. "Reality management, or sense-making, is establishing a frame in which certain things can be claimed not to have happened. (. . .) We must cut spending now, there is no time for arguments, these are serious times demanding serious decisions, and so on – precisely the protocolar opiates issued by every technocrat in power today, which deny every alternative its right to sense-making, in the true spirit of capitalist realism" (Metahaven, 2013). As Stronach et al (2014) described in a paper which traced the dominance of economics in the social sphere, the "metaphors of the 'meltdown' are significant and performative, allowing variously moralized narratives to emerge as implicit diagnoses and remedies" (319). Here we see evidence of Taylor's (2004) liberal moral order enshrined in the centrality of economics. Such 'diagnoses and remedies' are seen in the discourses of employability that have been discussed here; we are in economic trouble because our universities are not producing the 'work-ready' employees we need; they must be required to do better in this regard; doing better will be judged by metrics developed from outside the academy; failings will be laid at the door of academics. As MacAllister et al (2013) describe, the notion of 'excellence' in this context is largely rhetorical and acts as an empty idiom of consensus in terms of what the system might achieve.

And it is not just 'failings' that are "made the responsibility of the accused" (as above); academics now operate in a culture of mistrust (Strathern, 2000) evident in multiple forms of accountability and the punitive culture associated with, for example, getting 'poor scores' in the NSS (Frankham, 2015; Sabri, 2013). This helps to explain how managerialism in education contributes to a diminishment of "institutionalized room for criticism, which it always sees as subversion" (Lorenz, 2012: 608). As Fitzsimons (1999) described: "Because managerialism sees itself as the antidote to chaos, irrationality, disorder and incompleteness, there are no spaces within such a social order in which autonomy can be contested legitimately" (online reference). Of course, this is something of an overstatement - we can still publish, we can still use Kafka (perhaps) to 'play the fool'. This attempt at engaging with a series of jests sets out to disrupt some follies in respect of employability - soon to be enshrined in legislation - before the last laugh is on us. This is a moment, surely, at which to "attract attention to ourselves" (from Kafka, 1925: 87) as a "practice of democratic life" (Amsler, 2014: 275).

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