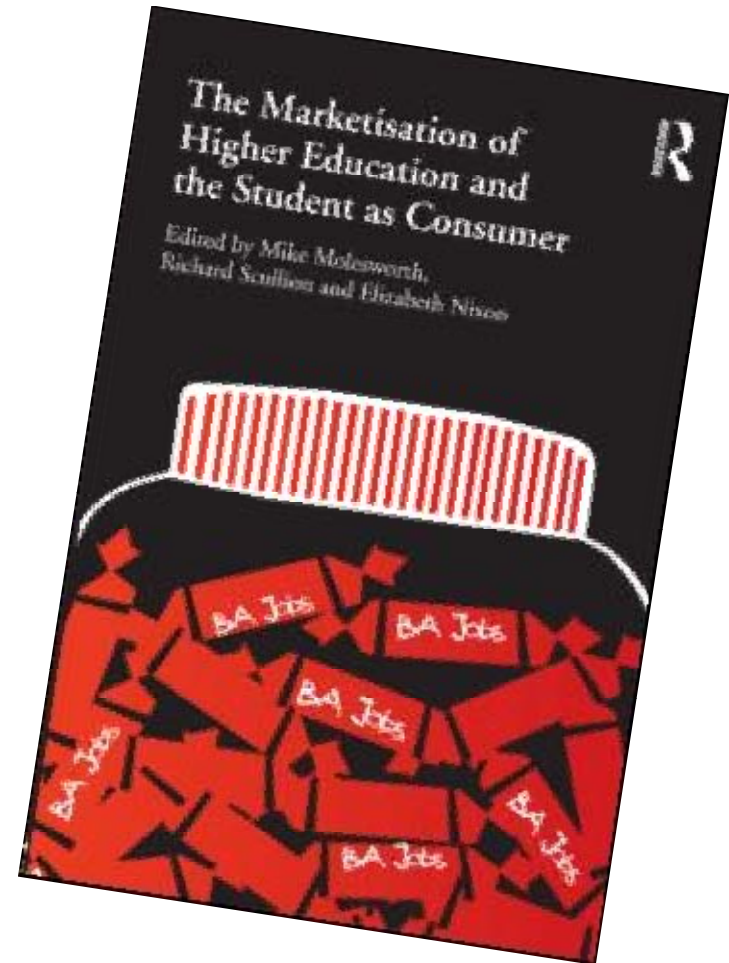


The Student as Consumer

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In summary...

Assumptions that student/consumer choice is a good mechanism for regulating HE provision may be dubious. Rather (and like other markets) we might see student/consumers as desiring and daydreaming agents. Markets may pander to the latter but in adopting this view of marketised HE, tutors (and HEIs) may be failing in their responsibilities to disciplines.

The promise of markets

- A mechanism for exchange based on money
- Supply matched to needs through rational choice of what to buy and how much to pay
- Goods and services have a value based on what customers need. Customers allocate their money based on which goods and services have most value to them
- Leads to innovation
- Ensures quality
- Drives down costs

"Since the late 70s the culture of academic life has been transformed by the institutionalisation of the politics of marketisation.... Advocates of marketisation argue that this process will turn higher education into a more flexible and efficient institution... In one sense there is very little that is unique about the embrace of competition by higher education. Academia has always been a highly competitive enterprise..."
Furedi, 2011

"Our recent decision to describe all students as 'shoppers' has been broadly welcomed by all our sales staff (formerly the academic community) while my own previous experience in the management of a large biscuit factory has given me unique insights into the art of persuading people to purchase well-wrapped objects of little value." VC, Poppleton University, 2011

What if marketisation
changes the way actors see
themselves and are seen by
others, their aims, and their
expectations?

As we consider change that
results from marketisation,
we might consider this new
framing.

My particular interest is
in the student as
consumer though
(because primarily
markets are meant to be
responsive to them)

Market actors

Marketing organisations
*that employ Workers to
meet their market aims
by providing goods and
services to Customers
who pay for them so
that Consumers may
use them within
restrictions set by
Government on behalf
of Everyone in society*

Market actors versus other actors

Actor	Aims	Expectations	Status in society	Reflexive questions
University	Knowledge repository, generation and dissemination	Autonomy	Privileged and protected	How do we maintain/develop /disseminate knowledge?
Marketing organisation	Maximise financial return on activities	Freedom to exploit most profitable markets	Potential wealth creator	How do we generate more income/grow?
Academic	Knowledge generation and dissemination	Autonomy	'Public good'	What's important in my discipline?
Service worker	Deliver cost effective service/maximise revenue	Payment based on financial performance	Taxpayer/ employee	How do I meet the organisation's objectives?
Student	Gain knowledge/skills	Access to learning opportunities	'Our future'	How much can I learn about this discipline?
Customer/consumer	Maximise value for money	Get what they have paid for	Individual economic agent	Am I getting value for money?

If income comes from knowledge, not much change?

If org objectives prioritise knowledge, not much change?

If value is about knowledge, not much change?

And we can enjoy the benefits that market choice and efficiency brings – yippee!

Regardless of our feelings about the merits of marketisation, do we really understand the consumer correctly though?

Consumer Culture Theory

Rejection of the old rationalities of economics and psychology built on choice

Experiential marketing, Post-Fordism and beyond, spectacle, knowledge-products

The imagination and desire, irrationalities and social relationships

Co-construction of cultural values by market actors with consumption as a 'moment' in practices



Students as consumers

Students
as (bad)
choosers



*So maybe we can't
assume that 'consumer'
choice is a good
mechanism for improving
HE offerings*

Students as
dream
artists



*Which potentially makes
them vulnerable to
persuasive marketing and
focuses them on
unrealistic aspects of
courses and learning*

*'I'm paying for this, I
should be able to get
what I want'*

It's not that these issues are entirely new, rather the new affordances a consumer subject position provides. Individual choice becomes seen as a right; desire a legitimate motivation.

See Chapters 15 & 16 in Molesworth, Scullion & Nixon 2011

How choice in higher education can create conservative learners

The assumption that 'choice is good' is largely unquestioned in our consumer society. It is indeed at the heart of a system that is assumed to ensure quality, diversity and individual freedom.

Student choice is also considered to be sound pedagogy. Yet we might recognise that the learning-related choices that lead to complex individual transformations are not the same as consumer-related choices that dominate in the market.

Universities may now legitimately claim to 'give what the market demands', in preference to what subject specialists may intuitively feel are subject demands.

Students persistently reiterated the discourse that having choice is 'good', whilst often actually strongly disliking the experience of having to make a decision. For example, Caroline told us:

I do like having choice but it's the deciding that's not good. It's the pressure I guess. I think it's the idea of blame . . . when you're choosing things, when it's your decision you can't blame anybody else for the outcome, that's what I don't like about it, that I'm to blame. But not having choice would be restrictive.

Choices created uncertainty and with it the possibility that errors might be made. For example, Thomas told us of his frustration with one unit where choice created a risk of getting a low grade

And then they say, well you are taking responsibility for your own learning but . . . that's fine . . . but it's just . . . I guess some think that you are here just to learn but you aren't, ... you're here to get a degree, because you're here to get a job at a later point in life. It's not all about learning, it isn't! I mean you would think so to go into a learning institution you know . . . but it's not! It's partly learning, but mostly to get a job and to get good grades and then get a job. That's what it is. And then that gets you money, and then a wife, and house and children . . .

I remember one essay last year where I just decided, because there was so much other stuff going on that I was so much more interested in, I just thought that . . . so I calculated 'alright, this essay is about 2% of my degree, my final degree, I'm not going to put that much work into it. I'm going to focus on the production work which is what I enjoy doing, which is what I really am good at, and then I'm going to let this essay sort of slide'.

Where work seemed unimportant students may choose simply to neglect it. Aidan provided one such confession:

Students also judged the options (electives) on perceived difficulty, familiarity of the subject or its assessment, and on the reputation of the tutor. Natalie, Paul and Vicky explain:

I'd known from the first year that the person who taught it had never given me a particularly strong mark for an essay, whereas with other lecturers, I'd got much stronger marks. We were all, I think all of us, were kind of inclined to go . . . for subjects where we know the lecturer likes our style of writing.

I often knew in my own mind what I would be good at, or better at, or less worse at . . . I sometimes worry that if I'd have gone and seen them perhaps they would've suggested I do one that I'm not very good at just for the sake of learning it . . . whereas I'm a bit of a chicken when it comes to that, I'd rather just do something I know I can get a 2:1 in without sort of having to really work as hard as perhaps I should do.

We picked the ones we knew we'd enjoy. Choice ...allows you to pick units you think you'll enjoy and we were also told to look at how you're going to be assessed as well . . . it allows you to pick the options that'll give you the best chance of a good grade.

How choice in higher education can create conservative learners

Put simply, students rejected the idea that university study might allow them meaningful choice in investigating a range of conceptual or theoretical areas such that they might become knowledgeable in these fields

One consequence of this approach was that students chose to minimise the breadth of their learning. Choice therefore acted as a conservative force in their educational lives and our young students became fixated with the implications of their choice for the mark they might gain.

Consumerist attitudes may be so deeply engrained that many students believed their instrumental approach to learning to be obvious, 'natural', that it was rational to take the easiest route through the challenges of academia in order to 'get the degree' at the end.

Choice exists outside of HE.
HE is merely a way to get more and better consumer choices later

'You can enjoy a breath of fresh air and fantastic sea views on [location] seafront. Four miles of beach are backed by green spaces of [location], great for meeting friends, picnics in the summer as well as running, cycling and football'.

'[the institution] is located in the heart of the city, which has grown dramatically into a busy, cosmopolitan centre of culture, entertainment, nightlife and shopping'.

'Degrees with the WOW factor'

'Our ethos is dream, plan, achieve and we aim to nurture the dreams of every single student'.

Our alumni include: Zoe Ball, Neil Tennant, Vic Reeves, Jamie Theakston, Zandra Rhodes, Charlie Wheelan . . . Alison Moyet and Viscount Linley'.

'Many of our graduates have quickly achieved varied and senior positions within television, eg.: Commissioning Editor, Channel 4; Director, Casualty; Head of Technical Development, BBC; Director, GMTV; Producer/Director, Top Gear'.

'This is a dream job for me as I am getting well paid to travel the world but I doubt I would have been considered for this position without my degree from[institution]'

A degree will make all your dreams come true

Students' daydreams are structured around celebrity lifestyles, travel and portrayals of jobs in films and television.

An irony of some of the daydreams constructed by students is that they are focused on consumer lifestyles supported by 'well paid' jobs. Higher Education Institutions may pander to fantasies of a leisure-based 'good life'. This is evident in marketing materials.

One compelling story of post-Fordist, experiential consumption sees the contemporary consumer as a Romantic daydreamer using the resources of the market to imagine the 'good life'. Markets respond to elaborate and individualised fantasies.

[In the future I'll be] living in [my] barn conversion, working 9-5.30 and being successful and not being stressed because PR's quite stressful, it's synonymous with that and I don't want that . . . I've got my kitchen sorted and everything. Whether I would get 'Grand Designs' in or something and do it from scratch I don't know . . .

Nicola's dream is of the lifestyle of someone who works in PR, rather than of the work itself. Such idealised lifestyles foreground consumption so hopes for the future are consumer hopes and a career is understood in terms of providing access to desirable consumption activity.

Natalie, a final year
Communication student,
reflects on her placement
experience assuming that it
reflects everyday working
practices.

I don't know what type of job I'll be going into yet, so I can't quite see what I'm doing but I'm doing something very fun, well paid and exciting. Like when I worked for [placement company], they haven't even launched yet but the company just was amazing, like they went on weekends to Amsterdam and they all went out for drinks every Thursday and they had company lunches . . . and it just, it was a really nice place to be and I could see myself doing something that's enjoyable like that.

Katie another final year
Communication student, tells
us of her hopes for the future
that are built around success,
fun and exciting travel

I imagine myself being successful, just because it's something I've always obviously wanted to be. And I probably imagine myself working [. . .] somewhere where I can really have fun. Like I wouldn't want to work some - where where it's numbers, I'd like kill myself, I wouldn't because I wouldn't end up in that kind of job, but definitely somewhere where I can be creative. And I would quite like to travel as well . . . I definitely will look into moving abroad and working.

Another really slightly stupid reason, is like seeing films and what they do for their job, I'm always like 'That's what I want to do,' Because I remember I think a couple of films I was like 'That's what I want to do' and they worked in like advertising . . . the films? There was 'What Women Want'. . . .

Well if I enjoy the media, there's no reason why I can't have a career in it. I think my dream job is to have a job on 'Wish you Were Here' because I love travelling and I'm pretty passionate about travelling, I'd love to travel and I'm quite talkative as well, and I actually thought I could get paid to do both.

Students may be choosing vocational courses based on misguided perceptions which are likely to have been influenced by media representations.

Lucy, a first year Advertising student, tells us how her choice of subject was partly inspired by a film. And Lauren, a first year Media Production student, evokes a TV programmes influential in her choice of course:

Students take actions to protect the dreams they have constructed by focusing on idealised images of jobs and dismiss ideas that may contradict them. Thus they become resentful of any subjects which are not relevant to the imagined career.

For example, Hannah, a Communication student, tells us

But I just don't want to do things that I don't want to do obviously. And there were certain things like journalism and PR that really did not interest me . . . And I don't see why I should do something that really is not my thing . . . I don't want to be trained for that, because I know I'm not going to use it . . . so why would I be trained for something that I'm not going to use?

We had to work on real PR campaigns. So like an agency and we got a real client. We had to pitch to the client about our ideas and stuff, so quite real life . . . So that was really fun. We had about a month to develop the pitch and then we had to propose it to people, [. . .] I know it sounds sad but it was fun in a way because it was more live . . . It felt like we were an actual agency.

'I know why you have to do it, but it's just not fun. It's just sitting there learning all the laws. So that side of it I guess is not that great.'

Students particularly liked role-play. David, a second year Public Relations student, describes his enjoyment in doing an assignment where he can choose a brand and focus on a 'real' campaign.

He then contrasts this experience with the 'boring side' of his degree where the focus is on business (finance and law)

When disillusionment sets in – either because aspects of a course or the reality of working in certain careers disappoint, or students realise the limits of their own talents – they cannot so easily find new objects of desire – they are, after all, signed up for three years – and instead must modify, or ‘correct’ their daydream to ‘construct a more ‘realistic’ anticipation of those events to come’. Bethany and Kelly explain

I didn't realise how technical it was going to be . . . stuff about science that I wasn't good at it at secondary school . . . and wasn't going to be good at it at university . . . you did need to sit down and study and read through the books . . . so that for me I was like, 'OK, I'm not going to do camera because it's too technical . . . I'm going to make mistakes and break the equipment . . . Sound, I didn't have a chance to be soundman on any of the pieces. So, without even realising it, that made the decision that I'm not going to do that because I'm not confident in using the equipment . . . And then the director was, is very, very creative, and I think . . . there's a lot of pressure on a director . . . I didn't think I was creative enough . . .

all the girls on my course wanted to be buyers but having done this [course] we realised that it involves a lot of calculations . . . and it's obviously put a lot of people off . . . They liked the idea of going abroad to buy but they didn't actually like the idea of there's actually quite a lot of paperwork to do.

A degree will make all your dreams come true

Daydreams specifically related to a job may be rather fanciful, where students pick and choose elements that they enjoy and discard any they dislike, informed by glamorous media representations.

HEIs are complicit in projecting idealised images through marketing, selling a lifestyle that students' desire. We might even call this 'good' marketing practice.

HEIs then continue to pander to student fantasies by enabling them to aesthetically actualise the dream in the form of role play and industry speakers that embody fantastic jobs.

A free market rejects interference with the supply side of education through, for example, such measures as controls on the numbers of university courses in certain areas, more stringent requirements on what must be taught, or more drastically the removal of financial incentives that require institutions to compete for students, then it is the demand-side controls which may need to be strengthened.

Implications for markets?

So markets aren't the balance of efficient supply to rational needs then?

As a result markets help create unstable and potentially chaotic cultures. It's possible that these are damaging to consumers and workers

Markets might pass responsibility onto individuals. In this case 17 year-olds (and their families) with dubious assumptions about their desires/ability to make rational choices.

Marketing organisations only respond to consumer desires if left unchecked

'Values' that are co-constructed are cultural and not just economic

What values does marketised HE reproduce?



And tutors' responsibilities?

- Support students in making informed choice (including choice of course)?
- Consider needs of discipline in course design and assessment?
- (and resist market/organisational pressures to 'pander') ?
- Direct student ambition to knowledge and skills (including through marketing materials)?
- Consider structures of governance for these things?

The problem with markets though is that you are competing with others. Markets can be aggressive and focus on the short term.

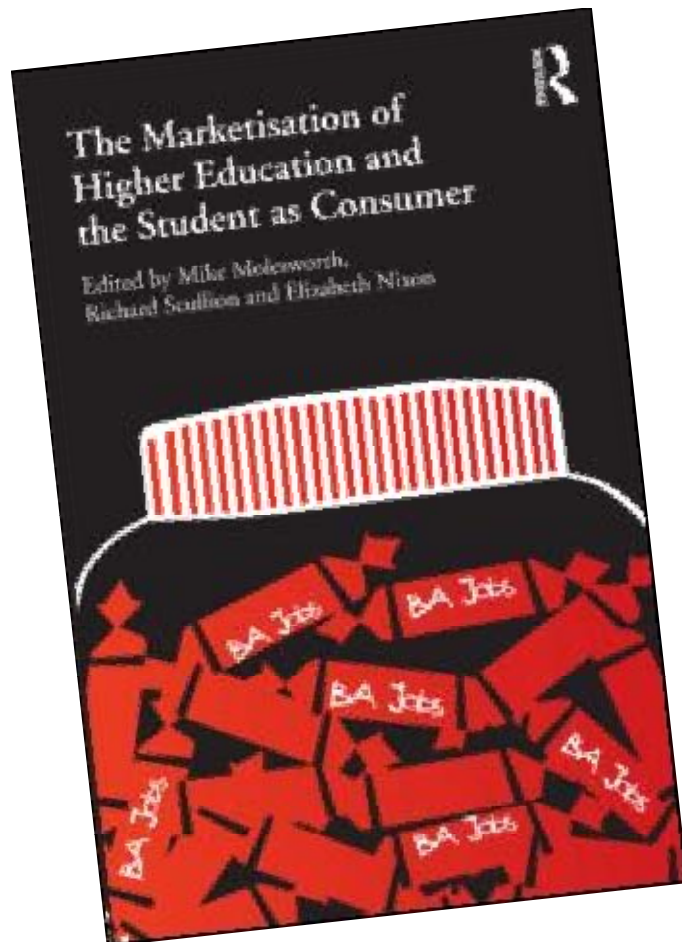
In this market, consumers have little opportunity to learn from previous consumer experience

And the consequences of this consumer act might not be realised for decades

Discussion points

- What signs of marketisation have you witnessed (good and bad)?
- Do you recognise the characterisations of students that I have described?
- What has been the institutional response to these? And your individual response?
- Given this policy direction, what are your hopes and fears for HE?

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