The shifting landscape of UK higher education: implications for widening participation and student diversity

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Overview

• Globalisation and marketisation of HE

• How being played out in practice (HEA research)
  – Institutions: competition, stratification
  – Academics: performativity, pedagogy

• Implications
  – Who gets to go to higher education and where; the teaching they experience
  – Overall issues of equity in relation to WP
Four key reforms

1. The Jarrett Report 1985
   - "whether...optimum value is obtained from the use of resources, that policy objectives are clear, and that accountabilities are clear and monitored" (1985, 1.2, S6)
   - Explicitly recognised universities as offering services to consumers

2. RAE 1986
   - Established to assess calibre of research; inform allocation of research income across universities
   - Instituted clear metrics for measuring academic performance
Four key reforms cont.

3. The Further and Higher Education Act 1992
   – Eradicated binary divide; doubled the number of universities in England; increased university students (from 300,000 in the 1960s) to 1.8 million by 1997 (Ross, 2001).

4. The Dearing Report 1997
   – Widely recognised as a driver for WP; also perpetuated culture of ‘new managerialism’; compliance culture for university staff, national frameworks for degree work and academic standards, measurable student learning and research outcomes.
Competition and stratification

• Post 92: new system unitary only in name
  – Publication of the first university rankings by *The Times* in 1993; emergence of university mission groups spearheaded by the formation of the Russell Group in 1994.

• Crafting of institutional identity exhibits the pressures of the market:
  • Competitiveness of the sector; necessity of carving out a place; Reputation; Globalisation of higher education (‘international’, ‘world-class’); Valorisation of league tables, rankings and neoliberal modes of institutional performative assessment
Effects of neoliberal reforms

• "increasing penetration of market forces into higher education and the reorganisation of university governance around ‘playing the game’ of academic capitalism …. In this context the market becomes the Trojan horse for undermining academic autonomy by ostensibly nonideological and noncoercive means based on the interest of the ‘consumers’ of education and research"

Implications: research performativity

• New academics increasingly formalised in terms of what is needed to gain a high [REF] rating rather than independence and creativity of thought (Parker and Jary, 1995)

• 'academics have been made individually responsible not only for their own fate but also that of their colleagues and their performance has been monitored in a brutal public way' (Harley and Lowe, 1998, p. 20)
Research performativity

• “the position of all staff eligible for the REF but not submitted will be reviewed. Those who cannot demonstrate extenuating circumstances will have two options. Where a vacancy exists and they can demonstrate ‘teaching excellence’, they will be able to transfer to a teaching-only contract. Alternatively, they may continue on a teaching and research contract subject to meeting ‘realistic‘ performance targets within a year. If they fail to do so, ‘the normal consequence would be dismissal on the ground of unsatisfactory performance‘. (University of Leicester memo; in THES, Jump, 2013)
Implications: performance indicators/metrics

• Academics constrained, monitored and documented via various PIs; individual goals of scholarship and enquiry are displaced by economic considerations (Miller, 1995)

• Evaluation/assessment used to embed culture of performativity (Ball, 2001), rather than developing pedagogical understanding.

• Rosalind Gill (2014) one HE institution in which any academic who is rated poorly by students will be subjected to a series of formalised disciplinary procedures
Implications: teaching excellence

- Strongly linked to performative frameworks and tightly bound to “reputational concerns on the ‘world’ stage” of higher education (Little & Locke, 2006, 49).
- Reduces pedagogies to market-oriented imperatives and frameworks
- Performative modes of assessing teaching excellence potentially preclude deeper consideration of pedagogical issues (Burke, Stevenson, Whelan, 2016)
The ‘dark side’ of ‘teaching excellence’

- "the masking of the material conditions that can only allow excellence to emerge unequally across increasingly differentiated institutions; atomising academic practice through fostering rival teaching/research ideologies; and trivialising excellent teaching as something that has easily identifiable dimensions, which it does not" (Layton & Brown, 2011, p. 164)
Implications: pedagogy

• Teaching viewed as a marketable good for the university positioned at the top.

• A decontextualised, homogenised, performative and skill-based conceptualisation of teaching and learning translates into particular forms of ‘quality’ and ‘standards’.
  – Staff in research-intensive unis most able to integrate concept of excellence with existent identity as ‘world-class academics’.
  – Younger staff in newer universities, often heavy teaching loads - less able to resist managerialist demands
  – Respond by adopting safe, sustainable approaches to pedagogy, rendering teaching technicist and performative rather than research-led and innovative (Stevenson, Burke and Whelan, 2014)
In summary: implications

- The ‘industry of HE’ has overshadowed ‘social and cultural objectives of higher education generally encompassed in the conception of higher education as a ‘public good’’ (Naidoo, 2010: 71).
- The intensification of individualism, connected to ‘the neoliberal assault’ (Rhoads & Szelenyi, 2011, p. 28), further reinforces discourses that the beneficiaries of HE are mainly self-interested individuals, consumers of a market and are thus free from the social constraints of gender, class and race.
Performance measurements

• "To devote just four pages to a mischievous and malevolent investigation (which, inter alia, popularised if it did not invent the notion that students are “customers”, which foisted on the sector the delusion that factory-floor “performance indicators” are entirely suited to a higher-education setting, and which led to the abolition of academic tenure and the concomitant triumph of managerialism in the academy) is – indeed – “foolhardy”.

Geoffrey Alderman, 2009, reviewing Higher Education in the United Kingdom since 1945, Malcolm Tight
The problem with rankings

- Shifts resources to areas that enhance prestige
- Amplifies gap between elite and mass education
- Perpetuates very narrow view of excellence
- Makes small differences between unis appear great because of the ordinal system they are presented in;
- Fuels ‘a demand for elite educational credentials’
  
  Hazelkorn (2011)

- Further entrenches long-standing institutional hierarchies
- Cultivates competition between HEIs rather than encouraging collaboration.

  Stevenson, Burke and Whelan, 2014
And gender, class and race do matter...

- **Access**
  - Students differentially accessing HE

- **Student experience**
  - Access to resources; staff time

- **Pedagogy**
  - 'pedagogically frail' staff; access to knowledge/credibility deficit (Fricker, 2007)

- **Success**
  - Differential outcomes; PG futures
So what should universities do?

• Think beyond the buzzword of ‘teaching excellence’ to engage with deeper issues of pedagogy
• Create opportunities for staff to engage in critical reflections on teaching
• Critique and deconstruct neoliberal discourses
• Connect institutional WP commitments to issues of pedagogy
• Showcase WP commitments in institutional documentation/marketing materials/as markers of institutional ‘excellence’.
And as academics?

• Create pedagogical spaces that recognise difference
• Develop more inclusive pedagogical understanding
• Write and publish about critical pedagogies
And as WP practitioners?

• Think holistically about WP - through the student life-course

• Think critically about practices and connect WP to pedagogy
In summary

• 'every established order tends to produce . . . the naturalization of its own arbitrariness’ (Bourdieu, 1977, 164)

• But it doesn't have to be this way....

• Pedagogic diversity, belonging, mattering, academic and family capital, reframing resilience…
Questions?
References

Alderman, G. (2009), Higher Education in the United Kingdom since 1945, Times Higher, 30th June, 2009
Stevenson, J., Burke, PJ and Whelan P. (2014), Pedagogic stratification in UK higher education. York: HEA.