TITLE:

Contemporary Dynamics of Student Experience and Belonging in Higher Education

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Higher education has changed rapidly over the past few decades where market forces and global competition have become defining characteristics of university sectors worldwide. Alongside the intensification of marketisation, the meanings around what it is to be a university student has also undergone change. In 2015, *Critical Studies in Education* published an article entitled 'The neoliberal regime in English higher education: charters, consumers and the erosion of the public good' by Rajani Naidoo and Joanna Williams that placed the English university student within the rapidly shifting neoliberalised higher education context and encouraged important debate in the field. This paper has now been cited over 200 times, reflecting its significant contribution to our scholarly understandings of the consumerist policy construction of university students. The authors skilfully demonstrate how the policy discourses in England produce and portray the student as a fee-paying consumer and further marginalise students with lower economic and cultural capital. Further, Naidoo and Williams (2015, p. 219) caution us that

> the unreflective implementation of consumer mentalities and mechanisms lead to the colonisation of both positive and negative modes of practice by an exaggerated responsiveness to the market in a competition that pits students against lecturers and universities against other universities.

Reflecting on the relevance of the paper today and its place within the current special issue, Rajani suggests that:

> The increasing power and reach of market and other competitive forces combined with interventionist government policy applies even more pressure for university education to be subjected to market verification and audit control. The growth of platform capitalism is likely to reinforce and add new dimensions to such trends. While trenchant critiques of marketisation exist, consumerist mentalities are often unwittingly reinforced by university leaders and academic faculty through their daily practices. At the same time, there are important pockets of resistance; and inspirational work by students and staff to create more critical and inclusive university environments; for example, the work by students, staff and alumni on decolonising the curriculum; or the movement to create universities of sanctuary which supports local refugee communities. In recontextualising student experiences across geographic boundaries, while interrogating key assumptions, the articles in this special issue open up the space to link insights from contemporary research to a future research agenda focussing on the dynamics of transformations in the student experience in a global context. (R. Naidoo, personal communication, August 15, 2021)

Over the past few years, researchers have increasingly turned to students to capture their first-hand experiences and perceptions of the marketised higher education landscape. Such studies have demonstrated how student experience is complex both in terms of the drivers that shape student understandings of university education and value for money, and the

ways in which student views can differ depending on national systems and policy regimes. This work has revealed and responded to increasing inconsistencies in how policies speak about students and how students enact those views (Jajadeva et al., 2021; Raaper, 2019; Tomlinson, 2017; Wright & Raaper, 2019). For example, Tomlinson (2017) demonstrated that while the UK undergraduate students tend to be aware of their consumer rights and expect value for money, they do not necessarily view themselves as service users or commodity purchasers. Instead, students in Tomlinson's study (2017) were rather critical of consumerism that promoted a transactional idea of university education. Similarly, Koris and Nokelainen's (2015) large-scale survey in Estonia highlighted that students may have strong expectations for value for money. However, this does not automatically lead to lesser academic effort or consumerist entitlement to good grades. It is also known that student perceptions of 'an ideal student', as recently explored by Wong and Chiu (2021), tend to include strong academic commitment that includes a willingness to go the extra mile, being enthusiastic, motivated and reflective when aiming for high achievement. In terms of geographic differences, the large-scale Eurostudents project across six European countries led by Rachel Brooks, has demonstrated how a variety of positionings, ranging from consumers to learners, future workers and political actors, are all part of the contemporary student positioning in Europe. The project outcomes caution us about homogenising student experience and invite us to recognise the differences that exist in student perceptions and experiences across nation states (Brooks, 2021, 2018; Brooks, Gupta & Jayadeva, 2021).

Given that global market forces in higher education have only accelerated, and the student population has increased and diversified, it is important to continue discussions on the effects of marketisation on student experience. It is also known that the massification of higher education has particularly affected undergraduate education where the student population is getting younger, with expectations to enter higher education immediately after completing secondary school (Macfarlane, 2020; Molesworth, Nixon & Scullion, 2009). For example, across OECD countries, the average age of first-time entrants to higher education was 22 years in 2018 (OECD, 2020). This is even lower in many countries, i.e. the equivalent average age is 18 years old in Japan, where nearly all first-time entrants are below the age of 25 (OECD, 2020). In the UK, 57% of the first-time entrants were 20 years old or younger in 2018/19, and only 16% included students older than 25 (HESA, 2020). Such trends are characteristic of massification of higher education at global level where increasingly marketised and privatised strategies are used to create educational opportunities (Mok & Jian, 2018; Mok and Neubauer, 2016). Given this, it is not surprising that the homogenous notion of students as young full-time and fee-paying learners is thriving, even though their social background is increasingly diverse in massified systems (Macfarlane, 2020). Furthermore, the relationship between university credentials, high skilled employment and social mobility has been challenged by massification (Mok & Jian, 2018), adding further pressure on students and their university experience.

This special issue brings together a variety of recent research articles that explore contemporary undergraduate student experience in and of higher education. In line with continuing attempts to understand first-hand student encounters, this issue includes studies that have conducted research with students (Danvers; Flint; Guyotte et al.; Jin & Ball; Symonds) and explore policy shifts directly affecting students (Sapir; Smithers & Eaton). In

particular, the papers problematise the complex processes of developing a sense of belonging in universities that have become diverse but also heavily marketised. Further, they draw attention to the effects of marketisation on the changing interpersonal relationships in student experience. Above all, the themes covered in this issue promote an understanding of student experience and belonging as a dynamic, relational and non-linear process, intersecting with pre-existing social inequalities as well as market dynamics that forcefully continue to reshape the sector and university practices. Like Gravett and Ajjawi (2021), the authors in this special issue promote a situational and intersectional approach to student affairs with an aim to challenge the notion of student experience as universal and uniform.

The authors in this special issue enable us to visit a variety of national and institutional settings, including examples from the UK (Danvers; Symonds), the USA (Flint; Guyotte et al.; Smithers & Eaton), Israel (Sapir) and China (Jin & Ball), and from elite and non-elite university contexts. Further, the articles draw on a wide range of theorists and concepts, providing useful analytical tools for higher education scholars to consider in their research, including – among others – theoretical contributions from Rosi Braidotti (Guyotte et al.), Karen Barad (Danvers; Flint), Doreen Massey (Flint), Michel Foucault (Jin & Ball), Pierre Bourdieu (Jin & Ball), Roderick Ferguson (Smithers & Eaton). This theory-led special issue therefore contributes to higher education research in its work to bridge important themes of marketisation of universities, student experience and social justice.

The special issue starts with a contribution from Guyotte, Flint and Latopolski who explore first-year students' experiences of belonging in a large USA university. In line with the overall theme of the issue, the authors problematise dominant approaches to belonging as being static and, guided by Braidotti's notion of nomadism, the paper constructs belonging as a dynamic process that requires continuous negotiation. They map relations, spaces, places and temporalities that are all part of the process of belongingness and skilfully argue that the nomadic philosophy shifts understanding of students 'from static being to dynamically becoming in relation to the world, making possible a conceptualization of students in higher education as perpetually in transition and in relation' (Guyotte et al., p.4). These arguments were previously introduced and theorised by Gale and Parker (2014) in their seminal paper on 'navigating change' and are similarly taken up by Flint in this issue who argues that student belonging is always entangled with place and history. By using a feminist decolonial spatial perspective – combining theoretical ideas from McKittrick, Massey and Barad – Flint highlights how campus monuments (and other historic artefacts) act as special symbols that reflect how whiteness and coloniality are embedded in the Western campus culture. Such symbols ultimately enforce the differences in experience and belonging between white students and students of colour. Flint captures the complexity of student belonging as follows:

> [It is imperative for us] to move away from responding to belongingness as though it is a thing that all students can do in the same way, that belonging is something that happens in a neutral, static, and bounded space. Instead, belongingness is a doing that can ravel and unravel across the spacetime of the institution that is deeply connected to geometries of power. (Flint, p. 12)

Further emphasis on relationality in student experience and exclusion is evident in the article by Smithers and Eaton who employ Ferguson's theorisation of 'minority absorption' to explore the current state of student affairs in US higher education. The authors argue that the diversity and equality drivers that emerged from the revolutionary power of student movements in the 1960s and '70s have been absorbed in administrative bureaucracies of universities, losing their effect on meaningful change. Smithers and Eaton argue that market forces are aimed at absorbing and silencing the minority difference in higher education. Sapir further problematises the effects of marketisation on normalising certain types of student experience and silencing others. Interestingly, however, Sapir's article focuses on a senior citizen course-auditing programme at an Israeli university. The programme was initiated in the late 1970s as a free public service to the elderly population, and commodified as a profitable economic activity in the early 2000s. Sapir engages with Thompson's concept of moral economy to shed light on the changes in the university managers' practices and perceptions with regard to this initiative and the public role of universities. Above all, the paper problematises the prevailing shift to commodification of university education and the normalisation of homogenous student experience as that of young full-time undergraduate learners.

While continuing with the theme of belonging and marginalisation in marketised higher education, Jin and Ball focus on elite universities in China. They problematise the prevailing notion of meritocracy in China and demonstrate how working-class students tend to be marginalised and disadvantaged through such meritocratic ideals. By drawing on Bourdieu and an interview-based study with undergraduate students, the authors demonstrate how students reflexively compartmentalise their social experience of elite universities. They show how meritocracy can act as a double-edged sword in Chinese elite universities: it can provide high achieving working class students with academic opportunities and good employment outcomes, but it also limits the type of university experience. Students' academic experiences are also problematised by Symonds, whose contribution in the special issue focuses on the dominant discourses of students as consumers. Symonds argues that such discourses clash with pedagogical constructions of students as partners. Her engagement with critical discourse analysis highlights that student experiences of their consumer versus partner positioning can differ even across similar teaching intensive universities, depending on institutional policy frameworks and partnership models. Interestingly, Symonds' analysis implies that explicit and more rigid partnership policies can restrict rather than enable meaningful staff-student relationships.

Finally, the contribution by Danvers explores how market discourses produce and legitimise specific forms of critical thinking in higher education. The author's starting point is that critical thinking is always relational and context-dependant, and many meanings can be associated with it. Danvers' ethnographic project in a research-intensive UK university highlights two co-existing definitions of critical thinking which both have neoliberal underpinnings: critical thinking as instrumentalised practice within assessment technologies, and critical thinking as a way for self-improvement. The author uses Barad's notion of the apparatus as a shifting optic that constructs what is legitimatised as acceptable knowledge. Like Symonds, Danvers invites us to consider the boundaries and exclusions that pedagogical initiatives can have on meaningful student experience and a sense of inclusion in a marketised higher education context.

Collectively, these papers represent an effort to unwrap, critique and theorise contemporary undergraduate student experience and students' sense of belonging in marketised higher education settings. While echoing many of the important claims made by earlier research on the limiting (and often damaging) effects of consumerist construction of students (i.e. Bunce, Baird & Jones, 2017; Naidoo & Williams, 2015; Tomlinson, 2017), this special issue adds a further layer of complexity to the much-needed discussion on student experience. In particular, it emphasises the effects of marketisation on students from a variety of diverse and marginalised backgrounds and institutional and national settings. While students have increasingly been framed through a homogenising policy lens that views students as young, full-time and fee-paying consumers, it is more important than ever to consider how students experience university and develop their sense of belonging in spaces that often silence and absorb the difference at the cost of profit and market competition.

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