

Introduction

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Abstract

This introductory chapter sets the context for *Student Identity and Political Agency: Activism, Representation and Consumer Rights*. It will outline the main motivations for writing this book and the key contributions it aims to make in the field of higher education research. The chapter defines and unpacks the key concepts, including student identity and political agency that form the core focus of this book. Finally, the chapter situates the core lines of arguments within the contexts of international higher education, the Covid-19 pandemic and this author's biases. The chapter summaries are also provided at the end of this chapter to facilitate the reader's engagement with this book.

Students and their experiences are at the forefront in today's political and economic discourses, mainstream media and day-to-day conversations among families and friendship groups. This heightened focus on student matters is unsurprising as there have never been so many students worldwide: in fact, there are now over 220 million tertiary education students globally (World Bank, 2021). More importantly, however, this attention may relate to the numerous challenges today's students face, especially as regards unequal and competitive access to higher education, increasing tuition fees, student debt and challenging transitions to graduate jobs. Alongside material struggles, resulting from marketisation and massification of higher education as this book will argue, there is evidence to suggest that students experience various other forms of struggles related to belonging, wellbeing and success in higher education. Many of these issues have escalated into what we now call 'crisis situations'; for example, a global mental health crisis among students, or systemic forms of discrimination and alienation based on race, gender, sexuality and so on. The World Health Organisation (WHO) has highlighted that young people's mental health is on the decline, and the Covid-19 pandemic has played a role in it (WHO, 2022). These pressing themes indicate that being a student today is a challenging life stage, if not distressing or traumatic for many students. This book sets out to explore the reasons for this, as well as opportunities that may exist for students to enact their interests and agency in an environment that is heavily shaped by market forces.

This book is centred around the core question of *'what does it mean to be a student in today's universities shaped by market forces?'*. I approach student identity from a poststructuralist perspective as an evolving matter which is always situational and shaped by dominant societal forces and discourses. While student identity can and will take many forms, the poststructuralist approach applied in this book considers restrictions and opportunities that arise from contemporary societal and higher education settings.

In addition to identity, this book is interested in exploring students' political agency: student opportunities to make their voices heard and to influence their own university experience as well as processes related to higher education and society more broadly. Klemenčič (2015, n.p.) defines student agency as 'the quality of students' self-reflective and intentional action and interaction with their environment'. Above all, enacting one's political agency means combining the agentic possibility ('power') and agentic orientation ('will') that both are always shaped by past habits and histories, as well as present-day structural and social situations (Klemenčič, 2015). When using a poststructuralist lens, the issues of identity and agency are ultimately interrelated, and both are closely tied to the contemporary socio-economic context. As this book is about undergraduate students, their identity and political agency must also be seen as tied to their experiences of going through youth transitions in today's society. When exploring and reflecting on themes related to student identity and agency, the book will therefore build its arguments around undergraduate students as young people who are not only shaped by university experiences but wider expectations and pressures related to being a young person. Working across the themes of identity and agency, the book aims to provide academic researchers, practitioners and student readers with an opportunity to:

- a) Critically examine student identity and political agency in a contemporary higher education setting,
- b) Explore past and present forms of political student agency – protest, unionism, representation, and consumer rights – in an attempt to influence positive higher education and societal change,
- c) Gain theoretical tools and concepts to analyse contemporary student identity and political agency,

d) Imagine future trajectories for student identity and agency.

Why this book now?

This book is deliberately centred around undergraduate students. While attending university has become a new normal across many countries in the world, it is also unsurprising that most undergraduate students worldwide are young people, raising a pressing need to better understand the intersections between studenthood and youth transitions. Across the OECD countries, for example, the average age of first-time entrants to higher education was 22 years old in 2019, and in about a third of the countries, most students enter tertiary education within the first two years after graduating from upper secondary education (OECD, 2021). This book argues that to fully comprehend the undergraduate student identity in contemporary universities, we need to understand what it means to be a young person in today's societies. To do so, the book engages with ideas around neoliberal meritocracy (Littler, 2018; Sandel, 2020), generational and youth studies as well as Bernard Stiegler's (2015, 2019) theorisations of consumer capitalism and young people's place within it, which all help to build an intellectual account of various forces and pressures shaping students as young people.

In addition to its ambition to bridge studenthood and youth in our understanding of student identity, the book offers an intellectual space to consider possibilities for students' political agency. Political agency has a broad meaning in this book, reflected in actions related to demonstration and protest, representative politics as well as consumer rights and complaints. In particular, the book challenges the often-dominant political and media views of students as being either apolitical *Snowflakes* requiring handholding and protection, or a woke generation who restricts political pluralism and freedom of speech. The book goes beyond such limiting narratives and argues that students always have some opportunities for political action, but their agency is situational and shaped by dominant societal and higher education regimes. To understand the opportunities and limitations for today's students, is to understand the context within which they operate.

In its pessimistic tone, centring around the brutality of market forces in higher education and our societies more broadly, I believe that this book is optimistic. It

argues that while opportunities for students to enact their political agency may have changed, students are still agentic beings with power to act.

Setting the context: Marketisation and massification of higher education

This book begins with a premise that higher education worldwide is ultimately shaped by market forces. Marketisation of higher education is reflected in reduced or restricted state funding to universities and the introduction of various managerialist tools such as league tables, performance management and satisfaction surveys to engineer competition between universities for their market share. Market forces also lead to massification of the university sector with rapidly increasing student and university numbers. I take a standpoint here that in order to understand student identity and opportunities for political agency, it is important to consider how marketisation and massification operate in higher education. I begin this book with a return to neoliberalism as a dominant mode of governance that shapes our understandings of education, universities and ourselves. By drawing on Wendy Brown's work, neoliberalism as an analytic concept is understood here as follows:

[Neoliberalism] is best understood not simply as economic policy, but as a governing rationality that disseminates market values and metrics to every sphere of life and construes the human itself exclusively as homo oeconomicus. Neoliberalism thus does not merely privatize – turn over to the market for individual production and consumption – what was formerly publicly supported and valued. Rather, it formulates everything, everywhere, in terms of capital investment and appreciation, including and especially humans themselves. (Brown, 2015, p. 176)

From this perspective, neoliberalism is more than a contemporary form of capitalism or economic order, it is a mindset that transforms our understandings of ourselves and our relationships with others. Some argue that neoliberalism means everything and nothing today, and it has become an outdated concept (Rodgers, 2018; Rowe et al., 2019). As a concept, it certainly has its limitations and can be easily misused as a buzzword to simplify complex societal processes. However, I also argue that as an analytic concept, guided by Foucault (1978, 2004) and Brown (2015, 2019) in this book, neoliberalism helps us understand how economic forces have a trickling down effect on the individual and their understandings of what constitutes desirable or even normal in any given context. It is also important to note that this book approaches

neoliberalism as an evolving mode of governance, with an aim to draw attention to its particular characteristics today: the neoliberal ideology that perpetuates inequalities and individualism under the illusion of meritocracy (Littler, 2018, 2020; Sandel, 2020). Race for access to higher education may appear fair at times, especially as the student population has never been as diverse as today; however, the meritocratic illusion does not cope well with the fact that not all young people have the same familial resources to support their transitions into and through higher education. I argue that such contemporary face of neoliberalism dismantles higher education, and it homogenises the diverse student population, their needs and contributions; it shapes our relations with each other and produces the consumer positioning for students.

In contexts where higher education is marketed as an investment into one's future, the consumer positioning becomes inevitable. Consumerism in higher education may be brutally explicit as in the UK context where students are protected by the Consumer Rights Act 2015 (see Competition and Markets Authority, 2015), or more subtly in systems where laws and regulations do not treat students as consumers, but the transactional idea of higher education and human capital development still imply similar understandings of students. I also argue that consumerism in higher education does not exist in isolation from consumerism in our wider societies where the prevailing belief is that individuals obtain gratification and social standing through their purchase of commodities and consumption of products (Kaye et al., 2006, Stiegler, 2015, 2019; Tomlinson, 2017). If young people are raised to self-actualise themselves through consumption, it can be expected that these habits travel with them to higher education.

In simple terms, the student as consumer is someone who, as a result of rational financial exchange, considers themselves to have purchased a particular product (a degree) and therefore expects access to certain quality services (staff/resources) (Williams, 2013). However, I also argue that consumer attitudes related to student rights and a transactional relationship with universities do not require students to be fee-paying, but these attitudes can also flourish in less marketised contexts. In competitive societies, most contemporary students are likely to be concerned with outcomes of their university education, and they find higher education costly. Even if they have no tuition fees to pay, costs related to accommodation and student life are

high, and transitions to employment may not always be most financially rewarding. I therefore use the term 'student as consumer' more broadly in this book, and in relation to particular characteristics that are associated with a contemporary student in a marketised university. The student as consumer is someone who develops a transactional relationship with their university, demanding that higher education delivers clear economic outcomes and employment prospects in a context where student debt has increased and graduate under- and unemployment is on the rise. As a reader, it is important to be mindful that this book does not argue that students are or perceive themselves as consumers, but it demonstrates how student as consumer positioning is being promoted as an ideal student positioning by dominant societal and higher education discourses.

The Covid-19 pandemic?

This book argues that the Covid-19 pandemic has acted as an important revealer and accelerator of brutal market forces in higher education. In many countries, particularly in the Global North, the pandemic revealed the effects of individualism and inequality through which even the devastating death tolls at the start of the pandemic did not bring collective solutions to combat the virus and support all citizens. The fatalities in the US and UK were vast compared to East Asia, where governmental strategies were centred around restricting individual freedoms for the benefit of the collective (Marginson, 2020; Sellars & Imig, 2020). It is the Covid-19 vaccine that brought some relief, and in the UK context where AstraZeneca vaccine was produced in collaboration with the University of Oxford, it demonstrated the role that university research plays in responding to global crises. Even then, however, inequalities existed in terms of distributing vaccines globally and presenting vaccination as an individual choice rather than a collective responsibility. Above all, the pandemic showed how the nearly five decades of neoliberal competitive economic policies and the 'survival of the fittest' education agenda in the Global North had promoted the individual rather than collective approaches to societal crises (Blackmore, 2020; Sellars & Imig, 2020). The pandemic has also revealed the growing divisions in our increasingly globalised world and the ways in which the relationship between the individual and the society has been eroded in many countries. The pandemic has therefore raised important questions about the relationship between the state and our current economic order, and the complex position universities (as well as individuals) hold within these dynamics.

Reflecting on the implications of the pandemic in this book, as and when relevant, Covid-19 offers a window to wider issues around neoliberalism, marketisation and massification. The pandemic becomes a useful lens that reveals the naked brutalities of neoliberalism and its workings. The book argues that most issues we witness in today's higher education, including what it means to be a student and the forms of political agency available to them, precede the pandemic. However, the pandemic provides 'a mirror of sorts, a means of common reflexivity' (Marginson, 2020, p. 1395) or 'a window' (Sellard & Imign, 2020, p. 9) to think about what higher education has become and what consequences it has on our students and society more broadly. Leask (2020, p. 1388) invites us to view the pandemic as a 'disruption to business as usual', where opportunities emerge to 'transform the way we think about preparing our students for their future in our complicated and entangled world – a world shaped by complex local and global relationships between people and their physical and cultural environments'.

To overcome the horrors of the pandemic and be prepared for similar or worse crises in the future, we need higher education to promote a value context where individuals take individual responsibility for the benefit of others but also collective responsibility for shared outcomes (Marginson, 2020). One could argue that such necessities make it important (if not essential) to understand what it means to be a student today, the restrictions and pressures students face and agentic opportunities they hold. Having a better understanding of student identity and political agency may help us reevaluate our approaches to higher education and our work with students for more inclusive and sustainable futures.

Conceptualising student identity

While marketisation of higher education is essential to this book and the line of argument, the book is ultimately about students, their identity and political agency. Taking a poststructuralist approach to identity, particularly influenced by the works of Michel Foucault and Bernard Stiegler, identity needs to be seen as in constant production while being shaped by societal forces. The student as subject from a Foucauldian perspective is always 'subject to someone else by control and dependence [and tied to their] own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge' (Foucault, 1982, p. 331). This means that students, like everyone else, are influenced

by a network of social practices and values that characterise the society at a particular time. While a Foucauldian approach is essential to understand how market forces shape what it means to be a student today, how students are spoken about and the opportunities they have to resist and revert these forces in higher education, it is not necessarily enough to understand what it means to be an undergraduate student as a young person in higher education. This book expects that meanings and experiences associated with youth and studenthood are intertwined, and student identity and political agency are shaped by the interplay between the market forces and youth transitions. Like Foucault, Stiegler is concerned with human becoming which in his work relates to the processes of individuation and transindividuation. Individuation refers to how identity is formed – becoming of oneself in a Foucauldian sense – and transindividuation refers to how identity is formed intersubjectively across generations and communities (Stiegler, 2010, 2019). The latter is particularly important contribution to consider when addressing students as young people. Stiegler’s concern is that the current consumer capitalism individuates by radical innovation, economic interests and market forces rather than through interrelational practices, the so called transindividuation process (Bradley, 2020; Stiegler, 2019). Stiegler argues that the breakdown of transindividuation processes can result in a situation where young people struggle to find meaning, belonging and purpose in life beyond immediate consumer gratifications and instrumental desires. This book is interested in exploring this claim in relation to the worldwide mental health crisis in higher education.

In this book, I will tackle consumerism in relation to student identity and argue that student as consumer positioning needs to be seen as an economic construct that aims to insert neoliberal self-interest and competition into the higher education market and divert attention from student diversity to a student who is primarily seen as an economic actor with homogenous (economic) aspirations and needs. Consumerism in higher education can and should be seen as an extension of consumer capitalism in our societies that socialise young people in the mindset of consumption. However, I also argue there is a lot we do not understand about consumer identity as it applies to students. Scholarly evidence indicates that consumerism in higher education is far from being straightforward, and student experiences of consumer forces are fluid and multiple, indicating how students do not always conform with the idealised student as consumer approach highlighted above (e.g., see Brooks et al., 2022; Jayadeva et al.,

2021; Patfield et al., 2021; Tomlinson, 2017; Williams, 2013). It is important to note that this book is built on conceptual work, and therefore, it does not have authority or ambition to make any claims about how students experience consumerism. Instead, the book aims to encourage discussion on forces that are constructing dominant narratives of students as consumers and are thereby likely to shape student identity and political agency.

Understanding political agency

Similar to the concept of identity, this book approaches political agency through a poststructuralist lens. Using Häkli and Kallio's (2014) approach, political agency is not restricted to participation in social movements or electoral politics, but 'it refers to a variety of individual and collective, official and mundane, rational and affective, and human and non-human ways of acting, affecting and impacting politically' (Häkli & Kallio, 2014, p. 181). Political agency is 'the subject's action when in a state of becoming prompted by future-oriented demands and contingencies of social life' (Häkli & Kallio, 2018, p. 57). When applied to students, political agency can be aimed at challenging or transforming the conditions of student experience, higher education or society more broadly. It includes what Klemenčič (2015) explains as agentic possibility ('power') and agentic orientation ('will'); the two need to come together to produce action.

Häkli and Kallio explain the individual's relative autonomy to enact their agency as being conditioned but not reduced to the individual's intersubjective constitution (Häkli & Kallio, 2014; Kallio & Häkli, 2013). They offer a unique counterbalance between the structure and agency, without romanticising the idea of all free liberal subject or falling into a trap of the tragic structuralist take on a passive subject. Such nuanced perspective to political agency helps us employ the poststructuralist idea of student identity where meanings associated with studenthood are conditioned by market forces; it also enables us to explore the ways in which agency emerges within the set restrictions and new possibilities. Häkli and Kallio's (2018) rather broad take on political agency draws attention to the complex interplay between the structural context, student identity and the political agency. These three core elements of the book are essential in understanding contemporary students as agentic beings.

Student political agency is reflected in many actions where synonyms such as 'student representation', 'student protest', 'student governance' and 'student movement' are often used interchangeably (Klemenčič, 2020; Luescher-Mamashela, 2015). Under such labels, the modes of political agency range from more conventional acts of voting to risky and unconventional forms of revolt and civil disobedience (Swank & Fahs, 2017). In simple terms, a distinction could be drawn between representational and activist agency as two rather distinctive ways of exercising political agency (Klemenčič, 2020; Klemenčič & Park, 2018). In this book, I attempt to combine both by drawing on examples of student demonstration and protest (as activism) and student unionism and governance (as representation). The overall objective is to understand the nuances within such broad categories of political agency and provide examples from contemporary contexts.

Author positioning and international dimensions

This book hopes to be of relevance and interest to a wide range of audiences from a variety of national settings. It engages with examples of marketisation and massification from various contexts across the globe, demonstrating how these processes are not a concern for few but extend across nation states and higher education systems. The country does not need to have a high tuition fee regime to be shaped by market forces. The book also offers examples of political action from various national settings and traces historic differences in their development. If it raises curiosity and further discussion, the book has achieved its aim. When reading this book, it is important to keep in mind that there are national differences in terms of how marketisation plays out in higher education. There are of course differences in terms of higher education funding and tuition fee regimes, as well as of the scale and scope of mass participation. It is also known that student as consumer positioning in higher education has been stronger in countries with a clear neoliberal orientation such as the UK and the US, compared to more social democratic countries (e.g., Denmark, Norway and Sweden) (Brooks, 2018). Furthermore, there have been recent and very evident differences in how the Covid-19 pandemic influenced students. While it is true that most students across the world experienced disruption to their education and some form of remote learning, there were variations in levels of support and resources available to them. The reader is encouraged to keep these nuances as well as their own lived experience in mind when reading this book.

As an academic and higher education scholar, I am located in possibly one of the most marketised higher education systems in the world, that is England. In the English context, students are expected to pay high tuition fees – a maximum of £9250 for home students and often over three times as much for international students – to participate in higher education. They are also likely to accumulate large amounts of student debt with average debt amount reaching to £45,000 (Bolton, 2021). We also have consumer rights legislation protecting students and constantly reminding us about the official student positioning as consumer. Prior to my academic career, I was educated in Estonia and have an understanding of how university systems operate in post-Soviet and Nordic countries. During the writing of this book, I also spent six weeks at the University of California, Berkeley, learning about the higher education systems in California and the US more broadly. I want to believe that I have been exposed to different systems and ways of organising higher education, student life and experience. However, as the students in this book are subjected to various forces and discourses, so am I as an academic and a scholar. My understandings of universities, students and what higher education is for are no doubt influenced by my doctoral education and lived experience in the UK. My reading and writing are also shaped by certain academic styles and knowledge regimes. I therefore urge the reader to keep these limitations in mind when reading this book. This book is not about the ultimate truth, but it offers my interpretation of existing research and evidence out there and my own experiences of the very marketised system in England. It is also shaped by my inspiring but often heart-breaking conversations with students who I have had the pleasure of meeting and working with.

Structure of this book

This book is divided into two parts. Part 1, titled '*Constructing studenthood*', is centred around conceptualising and exploring student identity, and Part 2, titled '*Exploring student political agency*', provides a thorough engagement with how student opportunities to express political agency play out in the marketised context. In particular, Part 2 explores a variety of examples, ranging from protest/revolt (Chapter 4) to unionism and representation (Chapter 5) and consumer rights and complaints (Chapter 6).

Chapter 1, titled '*Higher education for sale: Exploring marketisation and massification*', explores marketisation of higher education under the illusion of neoliberal meritocracy that has led to the massified higher education system, and where the tensions exist between the diversity of student backgrounds and interests and the homogeneous (policy) construction of students as consumers and recipients of education. The chapter argues that the marketisation processes have highlighted both, the diverse needs but also the homogenous 'one-size fits all' approach to students in contemporary market-driven higher education.

Chapter 2, titled '*From diversity to a (dis)satisfied student as consumer*', argues that the homogenising model of consumerism in higher education does not recognise the genuine diversity of student population, their needs and contributions. Homogenisation happens through offloading the costs of university education onto students in many higher education systems across the world as well as by introducing student rights, satisfaction and representative measures to capture student interest. The chapter argues that consumerism with its homogenising effects is most likely to result in student dissatisfaction rather than satisfaction, as the authentic needs and interests of diverse student populations are not sufficiently taken into account.

Chapter 3, titled '*Youth and studenthood in a market system*', provides a thorough and innovative theorisation of a contemporary student who as a young person is pulled into market society and is expected to self-actualise oneself based on false meritocratic ideals and consumer powers. The chapter draws on the works of Michel Foucault, Bernard Stielger and Byung Chul-Han to develop three potential scenarios that explain the student positioning: 'the lost and lonely subject', 'the futureless consumer subject' and 'the commodified subject'. While these scenarios need to be read as scholarly exaggerations, they demonstrate how market forces are expected to influence interpersonal relations, student mental health and wellbeing.

Chapter 4, titled '*Student activism and protest*', focuses on students' political agency that gets expressed through public action which is sudden, and which can but does not have to converge with representative student organs such as unions, associations and clubs. The chapter traces the motives for student activism throughout history, including independence movements as part of colonial breakdowns, the 1960s student

uprising and present-day activism. By doing so, the chapter demonstrates how student activism and protest are always situational and shaped by wider societal events and forces. The historic context helps us understand the present-day opportunities and characteristics for students to practise their activist agency.

Chapter 5, titled '*Student representation and unionism*', explores student representation and unionism in contemporary universities and how these processes have shifted from collective practices towards more individualised forms of representation. The chapter does this by first problematising the notions of representation and unionism as they are embedded in the discourses of student voice and satisfaction. It also explores a selection of key representational practices related to the work of students' unions and higher education governance structures.

Chapter 6, titled '*Student complaints as consumer empowerment*', draws on the ideas of active consumption and consumer activism in the field of business research to discuss the student as consumer complaints as an important but often overlooked mode of political agency in marketised universities. It introduces an innovative concept of student as 'nudnik', borrowed from Arbel and Shapira (2020a, 2020b), to question the extent to which student as consumer complaints constitute a new but increasingly powerful form of student political agency.

While Part 1 of the book is centred around market forces in higher education and their effects on student identity, the overarching task for Part 2 is to trace the changes in how students enact their political agency and the opportunities they still have to challenge dominant higher education practices and societal processes more broadly.

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To cite this article: Raaper, R. (2023). Student Identity and Political Agency: Activism, Representation and Consumer Rights. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003253648>

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