

**TITLE:**

**Students' Unions and Consumerist Policy Discourses in English Higher Education**

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**BIOGRAPHY**

Rille Raaper is Assistant Professor in the School of Education at Durham University. Her research interests include neoliberalisation of higher education policy and practice, and consumerist positioning of students. She applies critical theory and discourse analysis to explore these themes. Her most recent research project explores students' unions' response to consumerist higher education policy discourses in England.

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## **Students' Unions and Consumerist Policy Discourses in English Higher Education**

### **Abstract**

This article centres on the recent Higher Education and Research Act 2017 in England and the consultation documents leading to the legislation. I will start by arguing that the reform promotes consumerist understanding of students. Guided by Fairclough's critical discourse analysis, I will further explore the ways in which five students' unions from England and their sabbatical officers understand and respond to the consumerist policy discourses. The unions' official responses to the government's consultation demonstrated a strong opposition to the reform, particularly against the tuition fee increase and metrics used to measure teaching quality. The follow-up interviews with sabbatical officers, however, highlighted that this opposition can often be fragmented by consumerist counterarguments. The interviewees emphasised consumer rights as benefiting students and the unions. The differences between the written and verbal discourses will be discussed, and the reasons for a lack of consistency in the participants' discourses questioned in relation to their relationship with the university management and wider student population they represent.

**Keywords:** higher education, consumerism, students' unions, student politics, critical discourse analysis

### **Introduction**

While the UK higher education sector has changed dramatically over the past decade, there has been limited research on students' unions and their role in the sector (Brooks, 2017; Brooks, Byford, & Sela, 2015a, 2016a). This is particularly worrying as students' unions in the UK are often positioned as the key actors in advancing student experience of higher education. For example, the National Union of Students (2014) argues that unions are essential in provoking and securing 'positive change in the policies and practices of colleges and universities, local and central government, as well as corporations and businesses' wherever they have an impact on students and their education. While aiming to promote critical discussion on student politics and their experience of informing policy, this article draws on small-scale exploratory research that traces the ways in which a selection of students' unions from England and their sabbatical officers have engaged with a recent policy reform imposed by the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 and related consultation documents. The reform introduces a Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) that aims to differentiate English universities according to their teaching quality, categorising universities as Gold, Silver and Bronze and adjusting tuition fee levels accordingly (DfBIS, 2016). While recent scholarly discussions have addressed the structural reforms, particularly the flawed metrics of measuring teaching quality, e.g. student satisfaction ratings, indicators of highly-skilled employment and further study (Wood & Su, 2017), there has been less analysis of the policy in terms of its underpinning consumerist discourse. Collini (2016) argues that the

reform aims to re-conceptualise students as 'economic agents' who make educational decisions based on value for money. Guided by Fairclough's (1992, 2001) critical discourse analysis, the main aim of the article is to understand how the unions construct their responses around (and against) consumerist positioning of students emphasised in the policy. The findings demonstrate some difference between the unions' official responses to the government's Green Paper consultation<sup>1</sup> and the interviews carried out with sabbatical officers. Moreover, the findings highlight the complex space the contemporary students' unions occupy and difficulties their representatives face when resisting existing and proposed consumer mechanisms.

### **The rise of consumerism in English higher education**

Higher education today is increasingly shaped by market-driven demands that emphasise research and teaching quality for the sake of institutional competitiveness (Allen, 2011; Carey, 2013). Canaan and Shumar (2008) explain marketisation as a process that exposes public sector organisations to market forces, particularly to market competition, with an aim to make them more efficient. There is an assumption that competition within and between institutions (e.g. universities) creates better functioning organisations (Naidoo & Williams, 2015). Marketisation of higher education has been enforced through public funding cuts to the sector, introduction of policy regimes that support greater competition, and increasing regulation of university practices (Klemenčič, 2014). Furthermore, these reforms have been accompanied by wider neoliberal governance trends in Western countries, particularly of the New Public Management. Marginson (2013) explains that the New Public Management enforces universities to adopt managerialist practices from the private sector, e.g. CEO-style leadership, performance management, cost efficiency and continuous self-assessment. In other words, the neoliberal reforms in higher education have altered the public service ethos and made it resemble the one of private management (Doherty, 2007). The aim is to increase institutional competitiveness, which is often made visible through various (inter)national league tables (Tomlinson, 2017). In an increasingly marketised and managerialist context, university education has become more open to the process of commodification. Naidoo and Williams (2015, p. 212) argue that education 'has developed into a product and process specifically for its "exchange" rather than for its intrinsic "use" value', positioning students as consumers of higher education. This is particularly relevant in English context where the tuition fees for home students have witnessed significant increase over the past two decades, from £1000 per annum in 1998 to £3000 in 2003 and £9000 in 2010 (Wilkins, Shams, &

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<sup>1</sup> As part of the Green Paper consultation from November 2015 to January 2016, students' unions and other interest groups (e.g. universities, research councils) were invited to respond to the government proposals. The consultation resulted in the White Paper that is available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/higher-education-teaching-excellence-social-mobility-and-student-choice>

Huisman, 2013). In other words, consumerism becomes a reactive position of professional accountability to external stakeholders (e.g. students) who increasingly pay for their education and therefore become entitled to 'instant gratification needs' (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 454). Students are expected to 'shop' for a university based on various factors such as price, degrees offered, location, services provided and reputation (Hoffman & Kretovcics, 2004). By desiring best service and value for money, they are seen to inform the market. Therefore, consumerist positioning of students becomes essential for making market forces work in higher education (Naidoo & Williams, 2015). The student as consumer is ideally seen as 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 or resources) (Williams, 2013). However, it is also known that consumer relations in higher education differ from most other economic transactions. Students cannot be seen as passive recipients of university education (Kotze & du Plessis, 2003), but consumption goes hand in hand with production of education by both students and staff in the classroom (Hoffman & Kretovcics, 2004). This is also why some would prefer to address students as 'partial employees' (Hoffman & Kretovcics, 2004, p. 112) or 'co-producers' (Kotze & du Plessis, 2003, p. 186) who not only consume but co-produce their own education.

Consumer relations in higher education are enforced by various legal and policy frameworks. Since 2015, UK universities are required to follow the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA)<sup>2</sup> guidance on consumer law which formalises student-university relations as regards information provision, terms and conditions, and complaints handling. The overall aim is to enhance competition and the reputation of the UK higher education sector:

Compliance with consumer law is not only important in giving students the protection required by the law, but also helps to maintain student confidence and the standards and reputation of the UK Higher Education sector. Complying with consumer law will help you compete for and retain students. (CMA, 2015)

Pitman (2000) explains that many universities are already shaping their educational provision in line with what consumers might want instead of what academic communities think should be taught. While 'consumer mechanisms' could empower students, the risks are that they enforce a one-sided relationship of institutional obligations towards students in terms of providing them with employment prospects (Naidoo & Williams, 2015) and a good experience (Sabri, 2011). However, I also recognise that consumer identity is imposed on students but little is known about its actual effect on student

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<sup>2</sup> The Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) is a non-ministerial government body in the UK, aiming to 'promote competition for the benefit of consumers, both within and outside the UK' (CMA, n.d.).

views of themselves. Scholarly work has identified some (but often isolated) cases where students act out as consumers who seek value for money, particularly in terms of good service and employment prospects (Naidoo & Williams, 2015) or where they have become highly competitive in a desire to succeed in their studies (Patsarika, 2014). A recent large-scale survey led by the Universities UK (2017)<sup>3</sup> suggests that consumerist policy discourses – national/institutional policies that enforce consumerist positioning of students – have had some but limited impact on the undergraduate student identity in the UK. The survey argues that 50% of participants identified themselves as consumers of higher education but they also described their unique relationship with universities, including trust and collaboration (Universities UK, 2017). This article does not suggest that students necessarily act as consumers but it recognises that the consumer identity has been increasingly enforced on students by various legal and policy frameworks, making it an influential discourse in English higher education sector.

The most recent example of consumerism relates to the Higher Education and Research Act 2017<sup>4</sup> in England, and the consultation processes leading to the legislation. The Act introduces a new quality assurance exercise branded as the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) which aims to link tuition fee increase with the outcomes of the exercise (Morris, 2017). Further key changes include establishing a new regulator and funding council called the Office for Students and actively encouraging alternative providers<sup>5</sup> of higher education to enter the sector. These proposals have received significant criticism from media (e.g. see Bagshaw, 2017; Rammell, 2016; Williams, 2016) and scholars of higher education. For example, Gourlay and Stevenson (2017, p. 391) argue that the TEF exercise has been surrounded by a rhetoric of ‘placing students at the centre of higher education’. The authors critique the lack of pedagogical focus in the reform, and argue that it promotes the notion of the student as consumer who is ‘engaged in a financial transaction with the university for private gain in terms of employability’ (Gourlay & Stevenson, 2017, p. 391). The wider issues of measuring teaching quality have also raised concerns, as teaching excellence is to be measured mainly through student satisfaction, retention and employability metrics (Neary, 2016). These metrics are not necessarily reflective of teaching quality but can relate to students’ socio-economic backgrounds and wider higher education experience (Neary, 2016). In other words, the TEF attempts to break the complex issues of teaching into discrete observable units, while reshaping the relationship between academics and students (Saunders &

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<sup>3</sup> The study included interviews with 1019 undergraduate students in the UK in January 2017 (Universities UK, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> The Higher Education and Research Act was approved in April 2017, and is available at: <http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2016-17/highereducationandresearch.html>

<sup>5</sup> Alternative providers of higher education do not receive direct annual public funding or funding from regional funding councils (HEFCE, 2017).

Ramirez, 2017). The following statements from the consultation documents provide some indication of consumerist influence:

*The TEF will increase students' understanding of what they are getting for their money and improve the value they derive from their investment...* (DfBIS, 2015, p. 12)

*This rich new data source will give students the information about the rewards that could be available at the end of their learning, alongside the costs.* (DfBIS, 2016, p. 58)

As the quotes above demonstrate, issues around student investment, choice and value for money are key in imposing transactional relationships in higher education. While focusing on consumerist underpinning of the English higher education reform, this project was particularly interested in understanding how students' unions (so called representatives of consumers) understand the policy and respond to this positioning.

### **Students' unions and representation**

While students' unions have a long history in the UK<sup>6</sup>, the concept of a student movement is relatively recent (Hensby, 2017), reflecting 1960s and early 1970s widespread student protests against so called massification and bureaucratisation of universities (Lipset & Altbach 1969, cited in Klemenčič, 2014). These protests resulted in student representation within university decision-making processes (Klemenčič, 2014). Furthermore, they made students' unions act as political institutions through which collective student interests could be intermediated and enforced (Klemenčič, 2014). One could argue that students were empowered by wider civil rights movements at the time. However, there is also evidence to suggest that motives for student representation, particularly in university decision making have shifted over the recent years. Luescher-Mamasela (2013) argues that as opposed to democratisation of university governance in 1960s and 1970s, more recent arguments for student representation relate to the role of students as consumers and their rights to have their interests safeguarded. In addition to representing student views, they are supposed to promote good experience through various social events and support facilities (Brooks et al., 2016a). This shift in positioning reflects in closer relationships between unions and senior management, and in a tendency to employ an increasing number of professional non-elected officers to students' unions (Brooks et al., 2015a). In other words, the unions have become important stakeholders within the system where universities need to increase institutional competitiveness (Klemenčič, 2014). This strategic positioning of students' unions allows universities to demonstrate that the 'student voice' is being taken seriously

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<sup>6</sup> The first UK students' union was established at St Andrew's University in 1864 (Brooks et al., 2015a). The National Union of Students (NUS) was founded in 1922, and it currently has over 600 UK students' unions as members (NUS, n.d.).

and student needs are accommodated (Brooks, Byford, & Sela, 2015b, p. 1204). Some (see Brooks, 2017; Klemenčič, 2011) suggest that this re-positioning of unions affects the ways in which students engage with political activism. Unions could be seen as depoliticised, requiring student representatives to act as advisors and service providers that contribute to institutional quality agendas (Klemenčič, 2011). Wider changes in student population (e.g. heterogeneity in terms of social and ethnic background, age, and mode of study) might further enforce the representative function of unions, especially as the diversity of students makes it difficult to develop a collective student identity for political activism (Klemenčič, 2014). The concept of studentship has become more varied among students with different backgrounds (Klemenčič, 2015).

It would be naive to suggest that there is no political activism among contemporary students' unions in England. Brooks (2017) argues that some protests have been particularly targeted against market forces in higher education. Vivid examples of student activism against marketisation of universities relate to world-wide student protests from 2009 to 2013 (Klemenčič, 2014). Some of these protests, especially in the USA and the UK, have been associated with the Occupy movement against wider social and economic inequalities (Klemenčič, 2014). Hensby (2017, p. 13) describes the UK student demonstrations in 2010/11 as being 'unexpectedly widespread and radical', acting against the government plans to treble the tuition fees from £3000 to £9000 per year. Collective action was formed at a campaign level, resulting in national demonstrations and about 50 campus occupation groups (Hensby, 2017). Luescher-Mamasela (2013) explains that this mass movement provided an example of the disruptive power that students as collective can have at national level. It also demonstrated that attempts to increase tuition fees tend to be the most significant mobilising force for contemporary student activism (Altbach & Klemenčič, 2014; Klemenčič, 2014). It could therefore be argued that despite the depoliticisation of students' unions, there is some evidence of unions acting against marketisation of higher education.

### **Research setting**

This project engaged with five institutional students' unions from Russell Group universities<sup>7</sup> in England who were involved in government policy consultations leading to the Higher Education Research Act 2017. The project analysed the unions' official responses to the Green Paper consultation and conducted follow-up interviews with sabbatical officers. The written discourses are largely in line with interviews in terms of opposing the higher education reform; however, the interviews enabled to trace

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<sup>7</sup> The Russell Group includes 24 UK universities 'which are committed to maintaining the very best research, an outstanding teaching and learning experience and unrivalled links with business and the public sector' (Russell Group, 2015).

some further complexity that surrounds the work of sabbatical officers in a consumerist environment. While an exception in this study, Union 5 distanced themselves from the written response analysed. They argued that it was produced by a former president, receiving no approval from the union council.

The initial aim was to conduct focus groups in all participating unions, but this became impossible due to rapid turnaround (mostly one year) of elected sabbatical officers in English universities. By contacting students' unions' presidents, it allowed them to propose the most suitable participants for the study (see Table 1). The only requirement was that these individuals needed to be involved in (or at least familiar with) creating the union's response to the Green Paper. The title 'sabbatical officer' in this study refers to a broad category of presidential, education or academic-related officer positions.

**Table 1. Research Participants**

<b>Students' union</b>	<b>Participant(s)</b>	<b>Method</b>
Union 1	President (P)	Individual interview
Union 2	Officer (O)	Individual interview
Union 3	Officer (O)	Individual interview
Union 4	2 officers (O1, O2)	Interview in pair
Union 5	President, 2 officers (O1, O2), 2 departmental representatives (DR1, DR1)	Focus group

The interviews/focus group took place from December 2016 to March 2017 when the reform was at the Higher Education and Research Bill stage and debated in Parliament. The questions addressed the participants' engagement with the reform, student positioning in government proposals, and their negotiation of the reform. All documentary and interview data were analysed using Fairclough's (1992, 2001) approach to discourse analysis. Fairclough (1992) understands discourse as a form of social practice, which shapes social entities, relations and subjects. From a Faircloughian (2001) perspective, critical discourse analysis is a dialectical method, making it possible to explore the relations between discourse and social processes. The method assumes that any new discourse, e.g. the discourse of consumerism, can meet resistance in institutions or groups of people which results in discourses being partly, if at all, enacted (Fairclough, 2001). This was particularly relevant, as the main aim of the project was to explore the ways in which unions construct their discourse around (and against) consumerism. By applying Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional model, all data was analysed as a text (by describing its vocabulary and grammar), a discursive practice (by tracing the situational context of text production and intertextual discourses), and a social practice (by analysing the social determinants influencing the discourse, and key statements). The study was approved by the School of Education Ethics Committee



at Durham University. In order to ensure impartiality, Durham Students' Union was not participating in the project.

### **Setting a context: 'Oh my God, the world's going to shit' (Union 4, O1)**

First, it is important to note that both documentary and interview data indicated the students' unions' strong opposition to the reform. For example, the phrases such as '*We are concerned*' (Union 1-5), '*We oppose*' (Union 3-4), '*We disagree*' (Union 3, Union 5), and '*We are alarmed*' (Union 5) were characteristic of the unions' written responses to the government's proposals. Their particular opposition was targeted against the link between the TEF and tuition fee increase which was seen as part of a systematic fee rise over the past two decades (see, e.g. Wilkins et al., 2013):

*...quality is not fundamentally linked to fees...* (Union 1)

*[We're] against linking this to 'incentives' in the form of fee increases...* (Union 3)

*...there should be no financial incentives linked to TEF...* (Union 4)

Furthermore, the official discourses pointed out a concern with the TEF metrics which were considered inappropriate for measuring teaching quality. The metrics were explained as '*proxies*' (Union 3) and '*oversimplified*' (Union 2). Union 4 argued that '*there must be a degree of flexibility within the TEF [to define the excellent teaching]*'. Like scholars in the field (see Neary, 2016; Saunders & Ramirez, 2017), the unions suggested that teaching process should be measured based on qualitative metrics that contain talking to students and academics. The interviews with the sabbatical officers demonstrated a similar opposition to the reform, including emotional comments such as '*it genuinely upsets me*' (Union 4, O2), '*I find it really worrying*' (Union 3, O) and '*this whole thing is a catastrophe, burn it*' (Union 2, O). These phrases echo the prevalent media responses that make the wider resistance to the reform visible (e.g. see Bagshaw, 2017; Rammell, 2016; Williams, 2016). The only difference emerged from the focus group with Union 5, who demonstrated lesser opposition by arguing, '*And really for us it was a matter of just applying simple logic and being objective and thinking, "Okay, let's look at the mechanics of the TEF"*' (Union 5, O2). As highlighted previously, their focus group differed from the written response which applied strong phrases such as being '*alarmed*' about the proposals. Their position towards the bill will be discussed later in this article. In most cases, however, the official and verbal discourses were similar, indicating a prevalent opposition to instrumental metrics. For example, the sabbatical officer from the Union 2 explained the TEF as being '*a very flawed mechanism for measuring teaching quality*', and the Union 1 president described the metrics as being '*brutal*':

*Brutal metrics like the NSS and, erm, the other metrics included in this bill, erm, you know, like the employment data and things like that, won't improve teaching quality because they're not relevant to the pedagogical quality of the classroom. (Union 1, P)*

Unlike the documentary data, however, the interviews revealed some further complexities behind the officers' opposition to the policy reform, particularly in terms of interdiscursivity with wider socio-political events. From Fairclough's (1992, 2001) perspective, interdiscursivity helps to understand the ways in which speech relates to the social context where it is produced. For example, the sabbatical officer from the Union 2 related the bill to Conservative Party politics by arguing that *'It's all definitely underpinned by political ideology'* and that she found *'it difficult to get into the mind-set of a Conservative politician'*. Similarly, the representative from the Union 3 critiqued the document as a Conservative Party reform by saying, *'I think people have almost been fooled by the, like, Conservative's tactics, er, in how they've presented and engineered this'*. While the proposed reform was seen within the domain of the Conservative Party, the individuals also emphasised wider links with political events such as Brexit. An example is provided by the Union 4 participants:

*...I don't really see politics in this country or in the world going in a good direction at the moment. (Union 4, O2)*

*I sit on the university's trustee board and when the decision went through that the university was going to submit itself into the TEF I cried. Like, it was, it was after Trump had just got elected and Brexit and I was like, 'Oh my God, the world's going to shit.'* (Union 4, O1)

It could therefore be argued that the concern the sabbatical officers place on the reform and emotional reactions it causes are interdiscursive, drawing on national and global events. It is unclear whether these political references reflect the unions' official views or people's personal politics. This is particularly the case as the written responses to the government's consultation were submitted prior to such events as Brexit or the US presidential election. In other words, it could be possible that opposing the Conservative Party policies has become a normative action among most sabbatical officers in England, especially in a context where nationalism is on the rise, e.g. through such events as Brexit. Sabbatical officers might be making normative judgements about politics to imagine alternative futures (Klemenčič, 2015). The interviewee from the Union 2, for example, not only opposed the Conservative Party but expressed her support for the main opposition party leader in England, Jeremy Corbyn : *'You know, I believe in taxing the rich [...] I think that my ideal would be, you know, I think as well it's just, Jeremy Corbyn's education proposal'<sup>8</sup>*. According to Forsyth (2014), most

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<sup>8</sup> For the June 2017 elections, the Labour Party manifesto proposed a national education service, including abolishment of tuition fees and reintroduction of maintenance grants in higher education (BBC, 2017).

Western universities are dominated by left-wing political values that reject conservative politics and neoliberal attacks on public services such as education. However, Forsyth (2014) questions the authenticity of these values in elite higher education settings (such as the Russell Group in this study), where students' pre- and after-university lives are often accompanied by wealth and privilege. Most students in elite universities enter higher education with significant economic, social and cultural capital (Martin & Spenner, 2006) which helps them to adjust to the dominant cultures without losing their middle class privilege. Further research could help to trace this emerging relationship between personal politics, higher education policy and elite universities.

### **Unpacking the policy reform: 'transform[ing] the sector into a marketplace' (Union 2, O)**

When tracing both datasets further, a concern with marketisation of universities emerged. For example, the interviewees described the reform as turning higher education into '*a training camp*' (Union 4, O1), '*a conveyor belt*' (Union 2, O) and '*a product that can be purchased*' (Union 3, O). Similarly, the written responses critiqued the impact that further marketisation can have on higher education as a public good:

*There is no mention of the wider public good of universities and students in enhancing society.* (Union 2)

*[The proposals read] whether we support the marketisation of education, something we are entirely against.* (Union 3)

*...marketisation of education and the explicit focus on employers will distort the public and prospective students' perceptions of higher education as a public good...* (Union 4)

The participants argued that the agenda for marketisation will be enforced by addressing universities as being '*lazy*' (Union 1, P; Union 4, O1), which need to be reformed to serve students. This positioning of universities is expected as low trust environments are essential for restructuring public services such as education (Raaper, 2016; Raaper & Olssen, 2016). The policy suggests that if universities are left unregulated, they will not benefit consumers in terms of educational choice or quality (Collini, 2017). By portraying universities as untrustworthy and inefficient, sabbatical officers perceive the government attempting to recreate universities as '*operators in a market, as essentially businesses*' (Union 3, O) and to put '*[students] as consumers at the heart of the market*' (Union 1, P). The government then becomes '*the champion of student interests*' (Union 1, P), enforcing a unidirectional relationship of institutional obligations towards students (Patsarika, 2014; Sabri, 2011).

When tracing the ways in which students had been addressed in government's proposals, the written discourses suggested a portrayal of students as '*passive consumers*' (Union 2) who have a '*liberty to*

*choose to leave an institution and go to another if they are not satisfied'* (Union 1). Some interviewees shared a similar view by arguing that *'the discourse is very much, you know, students as customers'* (Union 3, O) and *'It's this idea that, you know, students are individual consumers'* (Union 2, O).

*So students are positioned as choosing education like a handbag, so will you go to this one with this teaching quality at 9K or will you go to this private provider for 6K? And if this institution fails, you can swap institutions or you can drop out at any point.* (Union 1, P)

Klemenčič (2011) argues that new corporate-type universities need students as consumers rather than partners. There is an assumption that if students act as consumers, they will pressure universities to develop high quality education and practices (Naidoo & Williams, 2015). The Green Paper, for example, states that choice makes students *'demand better value for money'* (DfBIS, 2015, p. 13). Interestingly, however, the interviews introduced some competing views on student positioning in the policy. The interviewee from the Union 4 emphasised the discourses of employability and argued that *'students are seen as, erm, potential employees through the document'* (O2), and the sabbatical officer from the Union 3 addressed the investment aspect in student identity, saying that the reforms *'treated students as if they behave like, I don't know, investment bankers or something.'* It is common that neoliberal reforms view students as not only passive consumers but investors who seek to enhance their future employment (Naidoo & Williams 2015; Williams, 2013). In other words, the participants acknowledge the activeness in student positioning which align with the co-production idea of consumerism in higher education (Hoffman & Kretovics, 2004; Kotze & du Plessis, 2003).

By critiquing the ways in which universities and students are positioned in the policy discourses, the unions and individuals disapprove of the reform and attempt to protect higher education as a public good that involves pedagogical processes of learning and teaching. Like Giroux (2009, p. 460), unions believe that universities not only provide knowledge (and experience) to students but they shape students' *'identities, values, and sense of what it means to become citizens of the world'*. Union 4 official response emphasised the significance of *'student co-design and co-development'* and *'the important individual relationship between the academic and the student'* when describing the high quality teaching. The student-university relationship was seen as more than a purchase of a product: it involves various forms of interaction that is uncommon to marketing relationships (Svensson & Wood, 2007; Universities UK, 2017). It could therefore be argued that both unions and their sabbatical officers aim to protect education as a pedagogical process rather than a route to employment that can be purchased like *'a handbag'* (Union 1, P). Like Carey (2013), the unions indicate that students' educational choices (and their understanding of university education) are often dependent on multiple

factors that are difficult to define with a simplistic consumerist model in a marketised higher education sector.

### **Tracing a consumerist counterargument: 'I'm paying £9,000, is this all I get?' (Union 4, O2)**

While the written and verbal discourses analysed have been relatively similar in terms of opposing the reform, TEF metrics and further marketisation of higher education, some differences emerged when engaging with the contradictions in the interviews. In particular, the interview data demonstrated how the sabbatical officers often returned to the advantages of existing (and proposed) consumer mechanisms to explain their engagement with the policy. In order to trace the contradictions and reasons behind this, the complex space the unions and their officers occupy requires attention first. For example, the participants suggested that most students they represent might favour the bill and further enforcement of consumer rights, illustrating how the role of the consumer is imposed on students (Svensson & Wood, 2007).

*Erm, there wasn't much feedback, erm, and there were a couple of quite entertaining responses, like, 'I welcome the higher education White [correct: Green] Paper' and that was it. (Union 3, O)*

*I personally struggled to stir students around the TEF, such an unsexy topic and being like it's going up with inflation, that wasn't the easiest line to sell (Union 4, O1)*

*I've had so many conversations with students where they just go, 'Well that sounds completely sensible, you know, that sounds, surely that makes sense. Surely it's good if you know, you're going to a lower quality institution, you're paying less fees than other people, surely that makes sense.' (Union 2, O)*

These examples suggest that most sabbatical officers interviewed attempted to engage with wider student population to form an opposition to the reform; however, it was unsuccessful due to students' expectations of value for money in the current fee paying context. It could also be that by encouraging students to invest in education and to take responsibility for their future lives, opportunities for collective belonging become less possible (Patsarika, 2014), making students think about personal gains in such political contexts as the higher education bill. As Klemenčič (2011) argues, students are encouraged to prioritise personal achievement over moral and social principles, particularly in a context that promotes a consumerist student identity. This also raises questions about the authenticity of widespread left-wing political values in elite higher education, and like Forsyth (2014) I suggest that these values can become secondary in situations where students' privilege is at risk. In addition to the students' compliance with the reform, the sabbatical officers critiqued their universities as being sympathetic of the proposed reform, resulting in very little opposition from the Russell Group sector:

*They will do that [accept the bill] because they see that if they don't, they'll be seen as throwing their toys out of the pram and won't have any influence... (Union 1, P)*

*But they've [Russell Group universities] also thrived of hundreds of years of not doing anything differently. So like the idea about doing some radical action against something is very anti Russell Group. (Union 4, O1)*

The official discourses indicated a similar sense of mistrust towards the universities. Unions suggested that the reform might lead to institutional 'gaming', using phrases such as '*[The reform] will lead institutions to focus on manipulating metric*' (Union 1), and '*Many of the measures pose the risk of [...] incentivising damaging behaviour by individuals and institutions*' (Union 5).

This lack of opposition from both the students and universities demonstrates the complex space the sabbatical officers occupy. It appears to be increasingly difficult for unions and their officers to form cross university alliances on political matters such as the TEF. In other words, their strong critique against the conservative politics and the higher education reform (as became evident earlier in this article) remains at the level of discourse, resulting in limited action to reverse the policy. It would be easy to argue that the students' unions have been depoliticised (Brooks et al., 2016a; Klemenčič, 2011) and despite their discursive opposition to the bill, they are enforced to enact what students want. Discourse analysis certainly indicates some alignment with consumerism. For example, most sabbatical officers referred to the Consumer and Markets Authority (CMA) when reflecting on students' rights:

*...giving consumers consumer rights, as gross as that is, that has led to some wins for us on things like hidden course costs... (Union 4, O2)*

*I mean the fact that CMA guidance has been the friend of students, or like the biggest supporter we've had is a really big problem. (Laughter) Erm, and that we've had to draw on that to, like, you know, be protected... (Union 3, O)*

*I find myself in bizarre situations in kind of university committee meetings, where I'll be using the logic of consumerism to argue for something good for students. So you know, I'll be saying, 'You're charging students £9000 a year, and you're also asking them to pay for their printing. What's that about?'* (Union 2, O)

While seen as 'bizarre' and 'gross', the consumer rights allow the unions to have some negotiation power over the universities and wider higher education sector, making it difficult for sabbatical officers to completely reject consumerist discourses. These opportunities seem to outweigh the officers' opposition to consumerist positioning of students, particularly in a situation where wider student body might favour consumerism. However, it could be suggested that the accounts from the Union 5 participants were relatively consistent in terms of their so-called 'pragmatic' approach to the reform.

They deviated from a normative critical discourse characteristic of most sabbatical officers in this study. The quote below illustrates the strategic position Union 5 has taken in the university governance (Brooks et al., 2015b):

*We're an invested community that have a stake in improving our education, so we're happy to donate our time and labour to help the company, the university, actually improve their product.*  
(Union 5, O2)

The main tool for Union 5 to enforce their voice is the National Student Survey (NSS) which evaluates the experiences of final-year undergraduate students in the UK and makes the results publicly available to inform the choices of future applicants (Naidoo & Williams, 2015). The NSS also explores student satisfaction with their union, making not only universities but unions accountable to students. While the NSS is a contradictory tool, it has enabled Union 5 to strengthen their power over the university, confirming their advisory role in quality assurance of institutional services and performance (Klemenčič, 2011).

*And when it comes to that NSS, so last year, Physics did very poorly in the NSS which means that this year we've been able to make some changes because there's leverage. But if you take that away, then it's much more difficult to make an argument...* (Union 5, DR2)

The importance placed on the NSS is unsurprising as the students' unions' ownership over the survey has grown over the years, particularly in the Russell Group institutions. For example, the NSS boycott<sup>9</sup> organised by the National Union of Students (NUS) and targeted against the link between the NSS results and the TEF, was most popular among the Russell Group unions (Buckley-Irvine, 2017). According to Buckley-Irvine (2017), the majority of the 12 universities that succeeded in the boycott in terms of not securing the response rate necessary for their NSS data to be published at institutional level, were from these particular institutions. While the Union 5 was against the boycott, they still demonstrated ownership of the NSS: it has become a tool that provides the union with some power over the university.

Except in the case of Union 5, the references to consumer mechanisms made the sabbatical officers' discourses contradictory as well as different from the official responses. On the one hand, they demonstrated strong critique towards marketisation of higher education and consumerist positioning of students; on the other, they also emphasised the importance of existing consumerist tools in their

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<sup>9</sup> The boycott was supported by about 25 students' unions across the UK (Buckley-Irvine, 2017).

work as sabbatical officers. 'However, I do not wish to suggest that students' unions have been utterly depoliticised in neoliberal universities. Rather, the same (consumerist) discourses that act on individuals could also be seen producing possibilities for their subversions (Butler, 1997). The findings suggest that the NSS and the CMA guidelines have offered some opportunities for unions to claim power in a context that largely operates based on market forces. Resistance to marketisation of higher education should therefore be seen as 'a multi-layered phenomenon', taking diverse forms depending on the circumstances (Giroux, 2003, p. 9). For example, the problematic language of economics has provided sabbatical officers with opportunities for manoeuvring, e.g. when opposing hidden course costs or highlighting issues with teaching practices. The findings also illustrate that power operates in various 'networks of social' (Foucault, 1983, p. 372), making its exercise possible only so far as the individuals/groups are free to choose actions within a field of possibilities (Dean, 2013). Exploiting consumer mechanisms appears to be one of these possibilities in an increasingly marketised environment.

## Conclusion

*It's gonna be like Tesco, Sainsbury's, Amazon and, erm, the Odeon Cinema, all own universities, except we're not quite sure which business owns yours, and you're paying like so much debt. I don't know, it's gonna be a nightmare. All universities will be different, will charge different amounts, erm, and you'll have this really weird, erm, Comparethemarket.com website which will say things like, 'You can get this Gold course at this Bronze uni and then pay this amount,' and we'll all have to pay health insurance. (Union 4, SO1)*

This study has demonstrated the ways in which a selection of students' unions from England's Russell Group universities have engaged with the consumerist policy discourses promoted by the consultation documents of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017. In a neoliberal context where higher education has been increasingly marketised and where consumerist positioning of students is flourishing, it has become particularly important to explore the ways in which those affected by the reform respond to the dominant policy discourses. As the vivid quote above illustrates, the unions and their representatives in this study were highly critical of marketisation of higher education which attempts to turn universities into providers and university education a product that can be bought by students as consumers. Most importantly, however, the findings revealed difficulties that the sabbatical officers face when attempting to resist consumerist policy discourses in a context where an understanding of students as consumers is constantly enforced (Brooks, Byford & Sela, 2016b). This causes a situation where a strong critique is accompanied with hardly any action that would challenge marketisation of higher education and/or consumerist positioning of students. Some would describe it as depoliticisation of students' unions (e.g. see Klemenčič, 2011). I would argue that depoliticisation



might be a too simplistic answer to a process that is discursively highly complex as became evident from the analysis. Rather, this article suggests that in a marketised higher education setting, there is an increasing inconsistency between the ways in which politics and policies are spoken about and how individuals – in this case student representatives – enact those views. Furthermore, the findings also suggest a potential disparity between the perspectives of elected sabbatical officers and wider student population they represent. In other words, the work of participating students unions' has become increasingly isolated in a consumerist environment. Unions occupy a liminal space where the traditional political discourses (i.e. left-wing views) clash with practices that often rely on various consumer mechanisms rather than collective protest action. These consumer mechanisms allow sabbatical officers to argue for practical advantages (e.g. unmasked courses costs, printing and facilities) but they appear to result in very limited if any policy changes. Furthermore, the potential effects of this approach on higher education in longer term remain unclear and would benefit from further scholarly discussion.

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