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Satisfied with what? Contested assumptions about student expectations and satisfaction in higher education

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Abstract

This paper aims to contribute to the contested body of work about the factors influencing student motivation, expectations, engagement and satisfaction in higher education (HE). Policy surrounding the deployment and use of the National Student Survey (NSS) and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) constructs social relationships between teachers and students as calculated instrumental exchanges, whereby, in exchange for the fee they pay, students expect to receive an education designed to ensure they have the knowledge, skills and innovative capabilities required by businesses and the economy in the competitive global market place. Drawing on fieldwork conducted between 2011 and 2015; and using narrative data obtained from face-to-face conversations and email interviews with sampled cohorts of post 30s students enrolled on two vocational degree programmes in a post-1992 university; the paper aims to highlight the flawed assumptions about student expectations, engagement and satisfaction, which fail to acknowledge the positive life-changing impact the higher education experience can have on students and in their work. Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field, capital and illusio, and Goffman's classic pieces on 'The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life', 'Stigma' and the 'cooling out the marks process', are used to develop this argument.

Key words: student expectations and satisfaction, 'second chance' vocational learners, Bourdieu, Goffman, psychological contract.

Introduction

This paper aims to contribute to the contested body of work about the factors influencing student motivation, expectations, engagement and satisfaction in higher education (HE). The origins of this research interest can be traced back to the 1960s and a growing realisation that HE for more people was necessary if countries were to successfully compete in the emerging global economy. The Robbins report recommendation that all who had the ability to benefit from higher education should have the opportunity to do so signalled the onset of this discussion in the United Kingdom (UK) (Committee on Higher Education 1963). Since then, the notion that education should serve the needs of the business community and the 'knowledge economy' has become enshrined in public policy in the UK and across Europe (Com 2005; DBIS 2016; Keep and Mayhew 2014; Leitch Review of Skills 2006; Santini et al. 2017). The

upshot of which is that policy, nowadays, constructs social relationships between teachers, career workers and students as calculated instrumental exchanges. Within this discourse, and related practices, education is regarded as a form of knowledge capital. In exchange for the fee they pay, students are portrayed as consumers expecting to receive a 'value for money' education, designed to equip them with the knowledge, skills and creative abilities to gain employment and career advancement in the competitive global marketplace (Davies and Bansel 2007; Frankham 2017; Harris 2007).

> If we are to continue to succeed as a knowledge economy, however, we cannot stand still, nor take for granted our universities' enviable global reputation and position at the top of league tables. We must ensure that the system is also fulfilling its potential and delivering good value for students, for employers and for taxpayers who underwrite it. (DBIS 2016, 5)

In seeking to embed neo-liberal market fundamentalism in public policy for education in the UK and in other countries, survey instruments are used to collect student feedback on the quality of their educational experience matched against their expectations; including, for example, in Australasia, Canada, the UK and in other European countries (Bennett and Kane 2014,130). First launched in 2005 in the UK to release market forces to 'drive up standards' and increase competition in HE, the National Student Survey (NSS) is used to collect student feedback on various aspects of their course-related experiences. Results from the survey are then published as benchmarking information for colleges and universities to use for course quality enhancement purposes, and for prospective students to use when comparing college and university positions in league tables, before choosing where to study a course of their choice (Institute of Education 2014).

Not content with the speed with which market forces are being unleashed in the HE sector, and seizing on reported claims about alleged high levels of student and parental dissatisfaction with the quality of teaching in universities (published in a Which? Organisation's research report, Nov. 2014), the announced introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in 2016 marked a paradigm shift in the UK government's intentions for HE (DBIS 2016; Neary 2016). Portraying students as customers who expect to compare and select courses, colleges and universities as they would select any other service where there is consumer protection and regulation, the TEF was trialled controversially for the first time in 2017-18. It aims to assess and rate the quality of teaching in HE institutions by generating metrics of student satisfaction, retention, and learning gain while in education. The results are then used to rate institutions as gold, silver or bronze standard providers of education. Moving on from this trial period; and signalling its intentions to further reinforce this consumerist agenda; the UK government's

latest consultation document outlines proposals for the TEF's re-design, this time at the subject level. If introduced, as proposed, in 2020, information for the TEF will be gathered to grade degree courses across the organisation, by giving them gold, silver or bronze star recognition to reflect the alleged quality of teaching and students' resulting post-degree employment prospects and potential earnings (DFE 2018). Overseeing the governance of this marketisation of Further Education (FE) and HE provision is the Office for Students (OfS). Introduced in 2018, the OfS is the 'consumer focused market regulator' responsible for delivering on 'the promise of higher education as an engine for social mobility, and a gateway to a better life for those who undertake it.' Portrayed as representing the interests of students, the OfS responsibilities include the 'value for money' monitoring of finances and efficiency, maintaining standards and awarding teaching grants. When deemed necessary, the OfS can also remove an institution's university status (OfS 2018).

Hardly surprising, given their importance for institutional reputations and survival in this metrics-driven 'winners and losers' environment, the combination of the OfS, NSS and TEF activities are influential and contentious. A 'value for money' approach connecting student satisfaction with employment prospects and potential earnings ignores the realities of the contemporary labour market, in which there are high-skill, high paid jobs for the privileged few, and low-skill, low paid jobs for the many, including graduates (Keep and Mayhew 2014; Leach 2017; Piketty 2013). In this climate, notions of the 'value for money' student experience and student engagement are multi-dimensional and contested. In addition to their academic experience, the term 'student experience' is often linked with their expectations and experiences of pre-enrolment activities, the built campus environment, accommodation experiences, extra-curricular activities, transport, health services, careers services, social life, and employment outcomes (Sandberg Hanssen and Sovoll 2015, 755). The way instruments are conceived, structured and used to gather the satisfaction information has also attracted criticism. Various studies question the NSS survey's construct validity in relation to ways in which it is designed and intended to be used, and for largely ignoring the emotional investment, commitment, engagement and practical contributions students put into their studies and the learning community (Frankham 2017, 634; Smith 2018b, 2). Further concerns have been raised over the way the publication of results in league tables commodifies HE, and causes institutions to focus too much on responding to the negative aspects of survey results and what they need to do to improve their position in league tables, and too little on sharing and building on good practice (for example, Bennett and Kane 2014; Cheng and Marsh 2010; Institute of Education

2014; Lenton 2015).

The psychological contract and modelling student expectations and satisfaction as unscripted drama

Although used in management and organisational literature to depict the processes of reciprocated social exchange relationships in a wide range of organisational settings, psychological contract theory is rarely employed to portray and explain the construction of exchange relationships between students and HE institutions (Leach 2015, 2016; O'Toole and Prince 2015). Originally introduced by Argyris (1960) and then taken up afterwards by Levison et al. (1962), classical depictions of the psychological contract are that it is implicit, unwritten and often unspoken, and concerned with expectations and obligations of trust, fairness and social justice. Such expectations and obligations are said to be powerful determinants of people's commitment and feelings of satisfaction. If, and when, either party to the implicit agreement reaches a point where they feel the other party is in breach of these expectations and obligations, the consequences can be serious for the relationship and the organisation (Conway et al. 2014; Guest et al. 1996; Piccoli and De Witte 2015; Zhao et al. 2007).

One of the expressed concerns is the way notions of a psychological contract, as originally conceived, have since been re-modelled to construct social relations in the workplace as calculated instrumental exchanges (Hayes and Dyer 1999; Leach 2009, 2010). The relevance of this in terms of HE is the way a similar mechanistic approach is used in public policy to construct social relationships between teachers, career workers and students. Modelling the contract in this way ignores the realities of everyday social processes, wherein notions of mutual expectations and obligations towards one another develop and change over time (Herriott, Manning and Kidd 1997; Leach 2015, 2016; O'Toole and Prince 2015). This is not to imply students are not interested in acquiring knowledge and skills for employment and pursuing a career, but it does suggest their commitment to HE, and satisfaction with it, is driven by many other things. Recognising this concern, and particularly the questioned repositioning of students as consumers of an instrumental education, critics claim the factors which appear to explain student satisfaction are far more nuanced than the design and use of the NSS and TEF instruments seem to suggest. Various affirming factors that can influence student motivation and satisfaction, including an affinity with and commitment to their studies and the learning process (Wilkins et al. 2016); a sense of 'belonging' in the university and host city community (Sandberg Hanssen and Solvoll 2015); remembered critical incidents (good or not

so good) and how they were resolved within the community (Bennett and Kane 2014); the quality of their social relationships with fellow students and with tutors and the support received from family members and friends outside the institution (Tompkins et al. 2016); and their satisfaction with the university experience in the years post-graduation; seem to be ignored.

Much attention has been paid to the structural weaknesses in the economy, the impact of the financial crash of 2007-8, and the subsequent impact of major changes in labour-market conditions and practice in employer-employee relationships (for example, Barrell and Davis 2008; Krugman 2015; Keep and Mayhew 2014; Leach 2017). In comparison, little attention has been given to re-imagining the role and purpose of education and student expectations of it in the twenty-first century. Recognising this, an alternative approach when researching the student experience draws on theories of symbolic social interaction (Blumer 1969) According to the symbolic interactionist perspective, people do not simply react, they interpret, evaluate and define, and then act in terms of these interpretations (Blumer 1969; Caron 1965; Mead 1935). Conceived in this way, the formal and informal roles people play in social settings determine the scripts they perform, and it is therefore more useful to think of role-related behaviour as a form of 'improvised' rather than 'scripted' drama (Goffman 1959; John 1996; Perinbanayagam 1974, 1982, 1985; Weinstein and Deutschberger 1964). Consistent with this approach, the paper argues that the repositioning of students as consumers of an instrumental education in the contemporary policy discourse portrays an impoverished idea of what students expect and gain from the HE experience. It deflects attention away from the social processes wherein teacher-student relationships develop and unfold, and the positive life-changing impact the experience can have on students and in the years post-graduation. Recognising this, and when presenting the findings from the research for this paper, Bourdieu's interlocking concepts of habitus, field, capital and illusio (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1989; Maton 2012, 51-2), and Goffman's classic pieces on the 'The presentation of self in everyday life' (1959); Stigma (1963) and 'cooling out of the marks process' (1952) are used to provide an explanatory framework.

The research

The fieldwork for this paper was conducted between 2011 and 2015. Although the investigation does not formally adopt a phenomenological format in design, it does seek to examine and represent the lived realities of vocational learner experiences in the social fields of HE and employment. In particular, it is important to note that the research was carried out soon after

the coalition government introduced the now familiar round of cuts in public sector funding, putting at risk the participants jobs when studying for their degrees and since then. As mentioned earlier, the contested repositioning of students as expectant consumers of an instrumental education for high skill, well paid jobs in the contemporary policy discourse deflects attention away from the positive life-changing impact HE can have on them and in the years post-graduation, as well as the problematic realities they experience in the contemporary labour marketplace. Acknowledging this concern, face-to-face conversations and email interviews were used to obtain data about undergraduate and subsequent post-graduate employment experiences from an opportunity sample of mature vocational learners in their 30s and 40s; a total of 47 participants. When enrolling on the degree programmes designed for learners employed in the education and social work sectors, 35 participants were working as teaching assistants in schools, and 12 were employed by a northern local authority to support vulnerable young people and families. All were interviewed over a two-year period after graduation.

In practice, the email interviews quickly became shared asynchronous conversations, a collaborative venture during which the emerging texts created online helped reflect and shape the researcher and participant understandings of the participants' lived experiences of vocational learning and its influence in their lives. Using this approach can create problems in terms of eliminating researcher subjective attitudes and judgements, and when judging the authenticity of the participants contributions. The possibility of this is the price we pay when gathering and working with qualitative data (Hayes 1997, 181-182), and, aware of this danger, we can reflect on, bring to the surface, and acknowledge our subjective viewpoints when making sense of the data we collect in qualitative research. Acknowledging this, a thematic approach is used when analysing the participants narrative accounts of their experiences.

Ethical approval was obtained from the author's Faculty Ethics Committee when planning the research. Known by me from the days when I was their university tutor, participants were approached via email inviting them to take part in the study. The nature and purpose of the research was explained, and, in line with common practice, they were assured their privacy and anonymity would be protected. Pseudonyms are used when quoting from the participant narratives.

Bourdieu's conceptual framework and playing the game

When examining the phenomenon of student expectations and satisfaction in HE, it is

important to look beyond what is said in the policy discourse, or at what has happened as a result of this. In particular, it is necessary to examine the various social spaces; or fields as Bourdieu renamed them; in which the unscripted drama of everyday social interactions, transactions and events occurs (Bourdieu 2005, 148, cited in Thomson 2012, 67; Goffman 1959, 26-27). Typically, fields of human activity have their own distinctive "logic of practice" and positions of recognised "distinction" or "quality" which participants can hope to gain (Thomson 2012, 70; Smith 2017, 2018a). There are also relationships of exchange between the fields which render them interdependent. People's dispositions, or *habitus* as Bourdieu renames them, are a kind of 'structuring structure', and the banks of *capital* they acquired from previous experiences in education, occupations and home-life circumstances can, for example, influence how they are positioned, and perceive themselves as being positioned, in the fields of HE and employment (Maton 2012, 51; Smith 2017, 107-8; Thomson 2012, 71).

The habitus concept, when used on its own rather than in combination with field and illusio, can help create an impression that people's dispositions are more or less fixed and determined by their previous experiences and difficult for them to change (Maton 2012, 52). Aware of this danger, Bourdieu argues that habitus only make sense when read alongside capital, field and practice (Rawolle and Lingard 2008, 731). Hence, he uses the concept of *illusio* to draw attention to the role interests and strategy play in field-related practice. To explain how field structure and individual agency can be reconciled in social spaces, Bourdieu repeatedly returns to the notion that social practices are a kind of game - a game in which people have a semi-conscious or conscious and strategic interest in playing, when the imagined outcome is a beneficial improvement in their social and economic position (*capital*) in the field (Grenfell 2012, 154, 156; Smith 2017, 2018a; 2018b) Using the term *illusio* or *libido* to highlight the importance of interest in people's strategic calculations, Bourdieu points out that rather than being "determined" by specific structural rules, individual social practices are influenced by the circumstances they find themselves in, and their subjective interest in improving those circumstances. The *illusio* concept is used, therefore, to explain the role interest plays in the relationship between *field*, *habitus* and *capital* (Grenfell 2012, 154), and, at the same time, to draw attention to the notion of "strategy" when discussing the creative nature of field-related practice (Maton 2012, 54). Similarly, for Goffman, agency and self-presentation are an important part of the identity construction process (Goffman 1959, 32-40). Hence, just as in a field where a sporting event takes place, social spaces are where human agency is played out according to a combination of personal interest in, and reason for, playing

the game. On gaining a feel for the game – its tempo, rhythms, unwritten rules, regularities and how it is played - participants use various strategies to maintain or improve their position in the field (Smith 2018).

At stake when 'playing the game' is the acquisition of new forms of capital, which can include economic capital (money and assets); cultural capital (aesthetic and cultural preferences, language, narrative and voice); social capital (affiliations and networks, family, religious and cultural heritage) and symbolic capital (forms of capital that can be exchanged in other fields, e.g. credentials) (Thomson 2012, 69). Participants in this study occupied the power-laden fields of HE, their occupations and place of work, family and peer relationships. All can be described as 'second chance' learners seizing on a newly created opportunity to enrol on a two-year Foundation and a third-year top-up BA honours degree programme - a programme designed to afford them the opportunity to cast aside the stigmatizing sense of not having fulfilled their educational potential, and not being suitable candidates for HE (Goffman 1963; Smith 2017). For many, the over-riding interest and motivation for 'playing the game' emerged from a desire to improve their prospects for career advancement and better pay rewards, and, for some, the potential for a change of career direction. Another common theme was a desire on their part to be seen to be engaging in HE and, as a result, 'a good role model for my children' (Smith 2018b, 4).

The pursuit of capital, graduation and the cruel optimism of imagined jobs and careers

As mentioned earlier, a 'value for money' approach connecting student satisfaction with employment prospects and potential earnings ignores the problematic realities of the contemporary labour market (Keep and James 2012; Keep and Mayhew 2014; Leach 2017; Piketty 2013). Throughout their studies, and thereafter, cumulative cuts in public sector funding put the participants jobs and careers at risk. The upshot of which is that, soon after graduation, they expressed mixed feelings. They were united in expressing optimistic dispositions (habitus), feelings that the learning experience, the friendships and contacts made and credentials gained (symbolic capital), would equip them in the new environment to achieve their ambition for a job and a career that is central to the identities they wish to inhabit. Most noticeably, the efficacy of the undergraduate experience and its positive impact on their capital-enhancing feelings of self-confidence, self-worth and enhanced ability and confidence to articulate their employment credentials with employers, colleagues and families, is evident in their narratives (Goffman 1959; Grenfell 2012, 154, 156; Smith 2018a; 2018b). At the same time, they were also well aware of unfolding job uncertainties in the desired fields of work.

Joanne

The degree course has enabled me to be more critical towards new initiatives and it has helped me grow in confidence with my own abilities; and it has made me more aware of my weaknesses. Because of the course I now feel that I have a lot to offer other newer members of staff; who are the same as I was at the beginning of this adventure (a little nervous and a little unsure of the job). As education is ever changing there are always new challenges that are a little daunting, but I know now that you have to give things a go; because you would never know if you didn't. (2012)

Clare

Graduation boosted my confidence as I am now in a similar position to my colleagues who are mostly graduates. For me, feeling very much overlooked at school, it's like a validation, confirmation of being as good as anyone else. Consequently, I am more willing to get involved and not just give and argue an opinion. The position I hold is one I moved up to from lower level posts, whereas some of my colleagues have come in at this level. I have always been conscious of this difference, and now I feel able to let go of this and think about looking at other opportunities as well. I volunteered to be part of a local pilot that may be rolled out county wide. If, or when, that happens, they often need 'leads' to help with implementation and that's probably what I have in mind when I think about opportunities, and about how to show management I'm interested in new things. (2013)

Louise

What gaining the degree has done for me is far greater than enhancing my career. I was written off at school for being lazy and lacking academic ability. This led to me failing all my GCSEs. Thereafter, I successfully embarked on a nursery nursing course, and began a career in child care. I attempted to do my A levels at aged 21. Again, I failed these. Later, I started the foundation degree course when I reached the point where my experience could no longer get me to the next step on the career ladder. The university picked up on my difficulties almost instantly and I was diagnosed with dyslexia. All the confidence issue I had disappeared on gaining this qualification. I am currently looking at new jobs, but, because of the cuts in funding for the kind of work I do, I think I need further training to enhance my career possibilities. (2013)

Tom

Studying enabled me to understand the behaviours of not only young people, but also my colleagues. I am looking for other jobs that have more responsibility, but my aim is to still have direct contact with young people. I know this limits my options but I would take enjoying my job over earning more. I am more confident in my work, and the course has opened a lot more doors for me. There are jobs that I can apply for now that I couldn't apply for before. My manager has said she can see a difference in my work, not just with young people. I now attend (nearly) all multi agency meetings because I kept going on about the importance of effective multi agency work. I do enjoy this, and it really makes a difference, not just for the organisation, but for the young people as they are receiving a better level of support. (2013)

For some, the graduate experience brought with it the anticipated capital enhancing opportunity to move on and obtain a PGCE qualification, followed by a qualified teacher post.

Amanda

If I am honest the impact on my career has been very positive resulting in me moving into a professional career that I love. I always wanted to be a teacher from the moment I began working as a TA in the classroom. (2013)

For others with a similar hope that the university experience would enable them to move into a career of their dreams, the outcome is not so positive.

Sue

The main reason for going to university was to gain a qualification that would open up some career opportunities for me. My first thought was to be a social worker or a primary school teacher. In second year we had a module with work experience placements which cemented my aspiration to teach. However, nearing the end of the degree programme, and being aware of the large number of students wanting to be a primary teacher and also the stiff competition (of younger applicants), my confidence and determination for this career has reduced significantly, so much so that I will take a year out before deciding whether or not to continue with my university education at post-graduate level. In conclusion, I am no further forward in my career thinking than I was when I first started university, just more confused. (2012)

Christine

I have continued with my previous working role with no extra pay after graduation. My concern is that I may forget what I have learned because of a lack of opportunity to put my knowledge into practice. I remember one tutor asking me what I would do after finishing the last year and I said - have a little break, spend some time with my children. The response from the tutor was to ensure I didn't stop learning. Already I can't stop thinking about this but now feel unsure which direction to take to continue my learning. I feel there is a danger of forgetting what I have learned. (2012)

Here, we see how the cruelly optimistic fantasy discourses of education for meritocratic employment and social mobility causes people to misrecognise the systemic inequalities in the employment market (Berlant 2011; Reay 2017). It is revealing to see how, so often, a participant's genuine expressions of excitement over the possibilities before them, brought about by the efficacy of the university experience, are also tinged with feelings of worry when contemplating, even anticipating, the all too possible cruel loss of the dream career (Berlant 2011). Their stories illustrate how frequent inter-connected changes in public policy, entrenched inequalities in society and the labour market, and a person's social and environmental circumstances influence career journeys. As cuts in public sector funding took hold, participants' expressed uncertainties about job security and career prospects reveal the emotional and psychological impact of cumulative restructures in the workplace on them and their self-protective behaviours.

Clare

It feels like everything has ground to a halt in anticipation of yet another restructure. The team is working on, but in limbo. We feel dislocated from the restructure process/decisions. We don't feel there is any real consultation, just lip service. We take on tasks from former, departed colleagues, because we don't have a choice, but also because we hope that by trying to adapt, and being willing to, we will strengthen our case. We continue in the hope that we will survive intact, but in reality, we all expect the opposite. We look at the internal vacancy bulletin, not for jobs, but to see what's new and what's changing. You get a taste for where things are going from the

posts advertised. We scrutinize job descriptions looking for elements of our role as an indication of what might happen to us. It's grim really. (2015)

Emma

Studying for a degree altered the course of my career. When my headteacher saw that I was keen to progress and learn, and was prepared to work hard, I was slotted into a role of home school liaison coordinator. I began the role with three hours a week allocated to it, which gradually increased to twenty in my last year of studying. After finishing my degree, I was given the role full time, and assured that I would receive a new contract, together with an increase in salary. However, the role had not been passed by the council's human resources department. When the job description was completed and sent for evaluation, the HR department disagreed with the grade. The grade they think it is worth is the grade I am currently paid. So, I am a little disillusioned. I thought my career was 'on the up' but at present I haven't moved at all through the pay bands yet have more responsibility. Although I enjoy the role, I feel a little 'cheated'. I am considering alternative options and starting to formulate new plans. On a positive note at least, my job has not been affected by cut backs. (2013)

Charlotte

Although my pay is protected for one year in the latest restructure, my salary will then be reduced by £3500, and my role has been down-graded so that you no long need a level 4 qualification, it is only level 3. It hasn't made me feel valued! (2015)

The perceived unfairness of Charlotte's situation is not just about changes in her job specification and the impending salary reduction, it is also about the cynical downgrading of the pay-related credentials for the job to absorb cuts in public sector funding. Emma's statement '*I feel a little cheated*' and Charlotte's '*it hasn't made me feel valued*' are particularly revealing because one can imagine the strength of their feelings soon after graduation. The language used suggests they believe the psychological foundations of strong employer-employee relationships; i.e. notions of fairness, trust and social justice; are being breached (Conway et al. 2014; Leach 2009, 2010, 2012; Piccoli and De Witte 2015; Zhao et al. 2007).

Discussion

The focus of the paper is on the contested factors influencing student motivation, expectations, engagement and satisfaction in HE, and, in particular, the portrayal of teacher-student relationships as calculated instrumental 'value for money' exchange relationships. As explained earlier, the role of interest (*illusio*) in the participants' decision to 'play the game' (Grenfell 2012, 154) involved embarking on a three-year degree programme in the illusionary and cruel belief that it would increase their chances of career progression and increased earnings in the occupation of their dreams; that it would allow them access to 'the good life' (Berlant 2011; Wolf 2002). Pursuing this interest, the participants' narratives bring to the surface the depths of their emotional investment in, and commitment to, their studies, and the

perceived benefits of this for them. Interviewed in the years soon after graduation, the powerful life-changing impact of the university experience and becoming a graduate on their dispositions (habitus) stands out, as does the influence of the experience on their feelings of self-confidence, self-worth and enhanced social capital and agential ability to articulate their employment credentials with employers, colleagues and families. In particular, it is noticeable how, in an all too uncertain employment marketplace, the work they still seek to do is central to their imagined work identities and makes them who they are and how they want to be seen (Goffman 1959). At the same time though, the cruel reality of their experiences is etched into accounts of changes in their employment status and opportunities brought about by waves of cuts in public sector funding, and, with this, reactive changes in employment practice. There is an expressed feeling among them that some wider, fundamental and implicit understandings of a psychological contract between them, the state and their employer is breached. These implicit understandings are about notions of mutual obligations of trust, fairness and social justice in employment practice.

Recognising this raises some troublesome questions for HE. In practice, HE can, and often does, become a positive life-changing experience for students, and in their post-graduation years; also, it can, and does, mirror and act to reproduce existing inequalities in society, and in the market economy and employment practices (Bernstein 1971; Keep and Mayhew 2014, 775). This is why the discourse about poor quality teaching, and students lacking the knowledge and skills to satisfy the economy's needs, becomes a paradigmatic target around which to re-direct and channel public outrage (Collini 2016; Palfreyman and Trapper 2014). Cast in instrumental terms, the notion of a psychological contract, where the roles of student and staff are set up in opposition as customers and vendors respectively, is affirmed.

The notion that education should serve the need of business and the economy is not new, and, understandably, graduate employability is a significant issue in these times. On the other hand, in this age of austerity and market fundamentalism, there are no silver bullets available to guarantee success in helping people to build and manage imagined careers. Rather, the great dangers are to over-claim what might be achievable through education, and then to become part of the 'cooling out of the marks' process, when the victim of the con is denied the imaginary reward of the imagined career (Goffman 1952). In Goffman's analogy, the mark is the sucker – the person who is taken in and becomes the victim of a con. The operator of the con, or his agent, stays with the mark in order to help them to 'define the situation in a way that makes it easy for them to accept the inevitable and quietly go home.' (Goffman 1952, 451).

Using Goffman's analogy, one can see how the uncritical pursuit of the skills and education for employability agenda; supported by a regime of NSS and TEF assessments; risks encouraging students to build and maintain an attachment to an imagined, problematic career outcome, and then becomes a 'shifting of the blame' and 'cooling out' mechanism to draw attention away from the entrenched structural inequalities in society and the labour marketplace when the imagined object of desire is lost (Berlant 2011; Keep and Mayhew 2014).

Acknowledging this danger, we can also see why a prolonged economic crisis accompanied by reduced public sector funding and the introduction of new robotic technologies in the workplace (Ford 2015, 124) can render traditional notions of education for high skill, high paid jobs irrelevant. In this climate, the analysis shows that the processes of career and employment sense-making are both cognitive and emotional. Often out of necessity, careers, including graduate careers, are built around available short-term paid and unpaid work opportunities and voluntary activities, which, when supported by a strong sense of professional identity, can nevertheless give rise to adaptability and a sense of well-being. Mindful of this and asserting that the purpose of HE is about more than the instrumental 'value for money' meeting of the needs of business and the economy, we can also assert that one, if not the most valuable of its purposes, is about enabling people to envisage, plan and manage their career journeys in a complex world of work and contested employment relationships. In such times, we can assert that HE is about enabling people to become empowered rounded citizens with the self-confidence, feelings of self-worth and enhanced social capital and agential ability to articulate their credentials with employers, colleagues and families throughout their lives and in the global community (Pring 2012, 753; Smith 2018, 10-11).

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributor

Tony Leach (PhD) is a senior lecturer in the School of Education at York St John University. As well as being a teacher and a supervisor of undergraduate and post-graduate research, his research and writings are focused on the topics of schools as research-informed communities, and graduate employment and career experiences.

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