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Higher education, consumed!

Peter Watt

review of

Williams, J. (2013) *Consuming higher education: Why learning can't be bought.* London: Bloomsbury Academic. (PB, pp. x + 166, £25.99, ISBN 978-1-4411-8360-6)

Introduction

Consuming higher education provides a much needed socio-historical diagnosis of how Higher Education (HE) has become a consumerised sector. Through the systematic analysis and critique of government policy and university history, which are interwoven with a set of of interviews and anecdotes from the sector, Williams tells the story of how HE has reached a widespread institutional ethos of consumerism, and charts the impact this has had on all facets of academic life. The book should be read by anyone with an interest in the present state and future of HE.

The book serves to both chart the rise of HE's consumerisation through the construction of 'the student' as consumer (referred to throughout as the 'student-as-consumer'), and in doing so makes the case for why, as the subtitle to the book claims, 'learning can't be bought'. In doing so it clearly and convincingly articulates the impact that consumerism has had on students, academics, knowledge, and the destiny of the university, as students are not only placed at the heart of university-life, but in being so have come to consider themselves, and are considered by others, as consumers.

Just another lament of the sector?

The originality of the book lies in its contribution to current debates on the nature, purpose and future of universities. While the book provides a number of instances that will be familiar to those engaged in HE and these debates, such instances are retold through the analytical lens of consumerism being at the heart of the system, with various accounts of today's students seeking to *have* a degree rather than *be* learners. In a number of ways *Consuming higher education* can be interpreted as a focused extension of previous contributions (e.g. Molesworth et al., 2010) that have dealt with the fall-out of marketisation and the implementation of 'fee-paying' students. However through the cultural-historical and sociological interrogation of consumerism's impact, the book escapes any potential of joining the ranks of yet another reductive lament on how the neoliberal marketistion of HE is changing everything for the worse. Rather, the book's overriding concern is with understanding the 'complex causal web' between the construction and proliferation of the 'student-as-consumer' as a central aspect *of* the deeper discursive nexus of the neoliberal regime (see also Naidoo and Williams, 2015). As the title of the introductory chapter declares, 'It's not about the money' [1-15]:

> *Consuming higher education* argues that it is neither the payment of tuition fees, nor the presence of commercial activity at the university which markets itself in competition with other institutions, that automatically leads to the corruption of education or the wholesale transformation of students into consumers. [14]

'Rather' – and it is upon this premise that the book's analysis begins – 'understanding this troubling process requires a deeper examination of the historical development of the university sector, and the interrogation of the contemporary social, political and cultural trends which help transform students into consumers' [14].

In order to do so, chapter 1 provides a brief historical account of the student's place in what is brought to attention as being a perpetually changing institution. By bringing attention to the central tenets and convictions of educational thought in the work of Wilhelm von Humboldt, John Stuart Mill, Hannah Arendt, Henry Newman, and Matthew Arnold, the book makes the case for the history of the University as one that is rooted in a dialectic between various conceptions of vocational and non-vocational perceptions of knowledge and HE's place in society. In doing so, the opening chapter serves to trace the current orientation of UK and US governmental HE policies and initiatives – which strives to place students at the *heart* of the sector – as being representative of the most recent instance of a deeper historical nexus between the liberal notion of education for

its own purpose, towards a more instrumental connection to the employment prospects and social mobility of individuals.

By charting the history of this dialectic across UK and US universities, Williams brings to light how the social question of education is not new in itself, but has shaped the university as we know it, and implicated students in a range of forms of engagement throughout this historical narrative. As a result, *Consuming higher education* reveals the myth that the consumer-centric state of the contemporary academy is not necessarily 'new' as such, but has recently taken on a specific discursive formation whose operation around the figure of 'the student-as-consumer' contains a new intensity which challenges what education *is*, or can be, *for*.

The rise of the 'student-consumer'

It is against this full, albeit 'brief', acknowledgement that Williams traces the most-recent consumer-oriented semblance back to the mid-1990s when a series of consolidative government policies led to the creation of a higher education market, which served to concretise the notion of education being akin to any other commodity in the social imaginary.

From this, chapter 2 seeks to understand the sensibility of the 'student-as-consumer' by aligning their prevailing comportment to 'their' education in light of recent government reports and media representations. In doing so the attitudinal shifts that many people working in HE (in various capacities) will have experience of are traced. In this, Williams argues that,

> Universities are no longer routinely concerned with the passing-on of knowledge, through education, to new generations of citizens. This has been replaced by new goals. Now universities are more often charged with serving non-educational purposes relating to individual employability, social inclusion and even personal transformation. How this plays out in practice, and the impact this has upon students, is the focus of the remainder of this book. [41]

Through this central suggestion, the book places a particular onus on the impact that recent government policy has had in constructing the 'student-as-consumer' and its contribution to the changing nature of HE institutions. While the mid-90s saw the creation of the higher education market, more recent developments have enhanced the perception that students are consumers and universities are merely service providers. In 2010, the now infamous Browne Report accounted for and helped further perpetuate the myth that HE leads to higher net earnings over a working lifetime, leading to the belief that students' paying and going to university is a financial investment in themselves, to which they will gain

financial returns. In 2011 the British government produced a 'White Paper' *Higher education: Students at the heart of the system*, setting out the eleventh new 'framework' for the UK sector since the Robbins Report of 1963. As Williams points out, '[t]his means in practice that roughly every three years universities in the UK have undergone fundamental ideological and practical upheavals [44].

By interpreting reports such as these, Williams goes some way to articulate their impact on the psychology behind students' understanding of HE and university life. Through the discursive association with HE as a means towards securing social and personal betterments like 'employment,' 'social mobility' and 'social justice', Williams argues that these reports were central to changing the values, behaviours and expectations of students. Since the most recent student-centric documents have been brought in alongside rising tuition fees, we will never know whether putting students at the heart of HE would have constructed them as consumers alone, however it can be deduced that the financial issue has only consolidated the matter.

Following this, Williams goes on to account for the abundance of ways that the 'student-as-consumer' is seen to cope with their newfound subject-position. The central one being that they are acting as responsible consumers, ensuring that they get their money's worth. Of course there is no way of evidencing any correlation between the contact-time students receive from tutors and the value for money they get from having the accreditation at the end, which is just one of the many ironies that emerges from the attempts to reconcile education with consumer imperatives.

> For the students who consider their focus to be negotiating their way through university, HE comes to be about the fulfilment of their rights in a technical sense, such as the 'right' to a specified number of contact hours with lecturers or a 'right' to have assessed work returned within a specific period of time. [114]

To this extent,

> [t]he focus on active participation matches the agenda of the student-consumer, who campaign for value for money in terms of contact time with lecturers. [97]

Such demands on academics' time are just one outcome. Others include a shift from wanting to gain knowledge and explore specialist subject-areas, as much as 'do what is necessary' to pass their degree with the required '2.1 in any discipline' to secure graduate-level employment. In response to this, many universities have come to attach statements to their modules that demonstrate to students how they have responded to previous feedback with 'you said, we did' claims on their 'virtual learning environments'. In addition to this practice bearing all the hallmarks of service-based accountability, the standard commitments to putting

slides up prior to lectures, and taking increasing interest and offering advice and support to the students' employment aims and prospects are presented as standard. Such responses both add to academics' everyday workload, and while these imperatives may be more pervasive in some universities than others, with the increasing emphasis on the student's status as a consumer it is only a matter of time before these principles are rolled out more extensively. Indeed, in the most recent UK government Green Paper since the books' publication, students' 'employability' has been posited as a forthcoming 'measure' of 'teaching excellence' in the self-same manner that the 'impact agenda' has been implemented as the measure for 'research excellence' (Fearnall-Williams, 2014; Martin, 2011; Pettigrew, 2011). In their own right, these examples make for a familiarly depressing read, however their implications make way for a dynamic between students and academics that is neither conducive to learning nor to the requirements of a satisfactory consumer transaction.

The rise of the academic as 'service provider'

It is from these opening contextually-oriented chapters that chapters 3 and 4 function to explain how consumption is itself constructed, both prior to (chapter 3, 'Constructing Consumption'), and while students are *at* University (chapter 4, 'Teaching consumption and consuming learning'). In doing so, questions are raised regarding academics' own complicity in further cementing the position of the 'student-as-consumer', which are explored more fully in chapters 5 and 6.

If chapters 1 through 4 can be viewed as collectively establishing the construction of the 'student-as-consumer' (with chapters 1 and 2 emphasising the historical context and chapters 3 and 4 elaborating on how the 'student-as-consumer' is discursively constructed), the remaining three chapters take up a focus on the central themes and implications of this subject-position. It is unsurprising that chapter 5, therefore, deals with 'The Question of Identity' [105-121]. As Gabriel and Lang have contended, 'identity is Rome to which all discussions of Western consumption lead' and 'the Western consumer readily transfigures into an identity-seeker' (2015: 86-87). However, in addition to the previously explored historical changes to the identity of 'the student' 'within a changing university' (chapter 1), the consequent change in values towards education extend this question of identity to those who provide this increasingly consumerised service: 'the academic'. An inevitable fall-out in the rise of the 'student-as-consumer' being part of a wider historical shift from 'lonely scholars to service-users' (2013: 106-110), is that it is academics themselves who have gone from mere scholars preoccupied principally with research (which, in turn, informs their teaching) to 'service providers'. With the rise of the consumer ethos projected towards

education and learning, Williams acknowledges a plethora of additional demands on academics' workloads that have proliferated. These are both in the form of an increased demand for time spent with students (both in the classroom and meeting them individually to help them negotiate essay titles) alongside managerial demands and responsibilities, including the rising institutional imperatives to adhere to, engage with, and justify one's work and content in relation to 'quality' measures, assurances and standards (see Louise, 2003; Morley, 2003; Roberts, 2002), student satisfaction surveys, alignment of course- and module-content with the employability agenda, issues related to inclusivity and diversity, concerns with preserving and the passing on of 'values' (rather than a body of knowledge), and most recently the monitoring of participation and attendance.

For Williams, it is due to the rise of the 'student-as-consumer' that HE has become dominated by the above-mentioned agendas, whose requirements and standards have become a core aspect of academics' everyday lives and workloads. These, in turn, raise a number of questions related to the identity of 'the academic', as much as 'the student' today. One particular outcome of this is the heightened schism that has emerged between 'the academic' and 'student', which the book makes various references to throughout.

By bringing attention to this schism, questions are raised once again as to who the book is for, and should be read by. At the beginning of this review I suggested that the book would be of interest to anyone concerned with the present state and future of HE, however this would suggest that 'students' would benefit from reading this book as much as anyone who deals with them during their time at university. The reasons why I would suggest that students would benefit from reading this book, and/or engaging with the questions it raises regarding the purpose of university, is on account of them experiencing their own frustrations due to their position as consumers. Indeed, while 'students-as-consumers' can be placed as the central perpetrators of consumerism, they are not the villains of this narrative anymore than victims themselves. It is therefore through Williams' articulation of this schism that the book *reveals*, and in part *falls into*, the category of one of the many ironies that the marketised approach to education encourages: as Frank Furedi (2009: 2) has suggested 'one of the distinct and significant dimensions of academic and intellectual activity is that it does not often give customers what they want' [102].

As both a diagnosis and a product of this schism, the success of the book's execution does not merely lie in relating to the prospective academics who will read it and recognise the problems that it diagnoses. To this extent, rather than blaming students as such, the book is careful in making the additional case for

students themselves falling victim to the trenchant imperatives of HE's conformity to this vacuous and ungrounded consumer model. This model leaves students both dissatisfied *as* consumers as well as being left short on a what a higher education could offer them: specifically, it has the 'perverse effect of preventing students from gaining a sense of intellectual satisfaction, or enjoyment, from their course at precisely the time when universities most seek to have demonstrably satisfied their students' [92]. Both these outcomes are a product and demonstration of the books' claim that the consumer model of HE is fundamentally opposed to all the ideals on which HE is based, and stands in contrast to a relationship as a 'conversation between the generations' which is structured by purpose and content. Despite all the talk of employability, inclusivity, freedom, choice, and satisfaction, under this latest of models students are as disempowered, lost, and more anxious and 'alienated from the academic disciplinary communities' than ever before [86].

Rather than a preoccupation with academic inquiry, the questions that students are encouraged to consider during their time at university come as questions related to themselves as consumers: *As a consumer, how should I act? How do I ensure that I am treated appropriately as a paying customer, and do not fall victim to an exploitative service provider*? Such preoccupations are another instance of the irony at the heart of this consumer model:

> On the one hand, learners are presented as rational actors within an educational free market. But within the same documents, learners are also presented as vulnerable in the face of the market and in need of national government to act as an arbitrator in the face of universities that may seek to exploit potential consumers. [17]

As previously discussed, this accentuates the them/us schism between lecturers and their students, and also collapses the notion that 'a sound education' is a 'real need', rather than one that is 'false' by virtue of it being 'superimposed upon the individual by particular social interests in his repression: the needs which perpetuate toil, aggressiveness, misery and injustice' (Marcuse, 1964: 4-5, in Gabriel and Lang, 2015: 131). In short, the 'student-as-consumer' is a victim of what comes through as the central premise of Williams' book: that 'learning can't be bought'.

It is in this capacity that while students might attempt (and ultimately fail) to negotiate their education *as* consumers during their time at university, they become well-practiced in *being* consumers. Therefore, by the time they realise that learning can't be bought (if indeed they ever do), they have prepared themselves *as* consumers and are seemingly ready for a world wherein work itself has become a site of consumption (Gabriel and Lang: 2015, 209-225; Dale,

2012). It appears that what students may learn (at the expense gaining an 'education') is that while education can't be bought, consumerism can be learnt, and in coming to realise this (whether consciously or not) academics are themselves complicit in perpetuating the logic of consumerisation, despite its contradictions.

The rise of the consumable university: From *in loco parentis* to duty of care

Although premised on different reasons for those commonly associated with victimhood, the liability of 'students-as-consumers' 'to experience intense feelings of anger, indignation, frustration and despair' (Gabriel and Lang, 2015: 133) is positioned against the consumer ideal of 'satisfaction'. Williams takes this up with a different focus in the penultimate chapter, where a further responsibility of managing the 'students-as-consumer' is addressed: their transition from youth to adulthood. Although Williams is clear to point at that the Universities' role in managing this transition is a 'traditional' one, under the current regime of consumerisation, academics appears to be assuming extended parental responsibilities for student's welfare, which in turn positions parents as 'co-consumers' [123-128].

As a result of this development, the central argument for this chapter is that rather than encouraging a responsibility for, and the cultivation of, the personal autonomy and accountability associated with adulthood, the notion and extant measures of 'customer care' reinforce the students' position as dependent and vulnerable consumers. These, in turn, reinforce a sense of infantilisation and the previously-suggested position of inevitable victimhood. However, rather than elaborating any further on the generational implications of entitlement, narcissism and heightened sensitivity that Millennials' experience of mollycoddling has arguably propagated (see Ellis, 2014a, 2014b), Williams brings these developments back to her previous consideration of Hannah Arendt, who she addressed in order to support her articulation of why the higher educational ideal of 'a conversation between the generations' (2013, 18) has been jeopardised. In doing so, Williams contrasts Arendt's notion that '[t]he teacher's qualification consists in knowing the world and being able to instruct others about it, but his authority rests on his assumption of responsibility for the world' (Arendt, 1954: 186; in Williams, 2013: 129), with the current state of customer 'service' and 'care'. In doing so she makes the case for the 'duty of care' in the contemporary university having replaced *in loco parentis* 'which is more about meeting the demands of parents that their children will be well looked after than meeting [the] historical, social, cultural and educational obligations' [133].

It is with reference to this that Williams reveals the sentiments behind her own conviction on the issue of the book, and what is ultimately at stake in handing higher education over to the vulgar and ungrounded-rationale of the current consumer model:

> Education, and higher education in particular, represents the historical accumulation of society's collective knowledge and understanding. The content, rather than the form, of higher education represents a nation's intellectual heritage: the knowledge, skills and traditions that are considered worth passing on from one generation to the next. [18]

It is telling that with the rise of consumerism and the intensive form that the 'student-as-consumer' takes, academics are inundated with increasing managerial pressures and administrative responsibilities themselves. This heightened demand appears to be set to only intensify as the student-as-consumer becomes evermore entrenched in the heart of the HE sector. This is largely because, as Gabriel and Lang (2015) have suggested, the figure of the consumer is itself unmanageable, and the only way that management appears to know how to deal with 'the unmanageable' is more management. With every gesture academics make to cope with the pressures the consumer-model of HE demands, the more they go to feed the monster of their own demise.

Therefore, the response to this phenomenon requires an unashamedly academic one, that takes us back to the question of what HE is and for who or what it should serve. Williams suggests that anything other than this makes academics idly complicit in the perpetuation and entrenchment of constructing students as consumers and passively conforming to the neoliberal impetus that has taken hold of the HE sector. In this way, a better-known thesis of Arendt's can be reflected on: that the lack of an adequate response when the times demand it is the mark of a lack of imagination and conviction which amounts to a parallel danger of deliberately complying with abuse (Arendt, 2006). For educators, this is all the more pertinent because, as Arendt notes, the responsibility of the educator is in the passing on of society's knowledge from one generation to another.

Reconciling resistance, reconnecting with the past

The final takeaways from the book are diagnostic in nature, and Williams leaves it up to the creative responsibilities of the reader to negotiate and perhaps resist the consumerisation of the sector. However, Williams does provide six 'proposals for change' [149-50] which are based on reestablishing the educational values that brought universities about historically. These proposals are all concise and based

on a form of reconciled resistance to the consumer imperative with a gesture towards returning to educational values on their own cultural, social and historical merits, and understanding our place in university history as part of the dialectic between liberal and instrumental forms of teaching and learning accounted for in chapter 1:

> lecturers and students need to debate together the purpose of university. The result of meeting short-term employability or satisfaction goals means that higher education too often gets reduced to its most technical parts: assessment feedback within a given period of time; emails answered within a set period; or lecture notes made available in advance, for example... Only when the purpose of education is placed at the heart of the university, rather than job training or social inclusion, can a debate on whether higher education is to be funded from the public or private purse, and how much money it should receive, become truly meaningful. [50]

However, for many who have found themselves working in business and management schools, the collapsed distinction between vocational and non-vocational education and knowledge is not as clear-cut as the traditional means through which liberal education was enframed. Studies focused around business, management and organisation, for instance, often traverse the vocational/non-vocational seam and are undertaken by students in a particular way where the challenge is mounted from the outset by negotiating this terrain by academics whose ideals are often non-vocational (studying business, management and organization as an object of social-scientific inquiry). Many business and management school students have signed up in order to learn 'for' rather than 'about' their chosen specialism. Therefore, Williams' final proposals hint at something specific for those dedicated to understanding the theory and politics of organization: that our 'discipline', or lack thereof, represents a unique opportunity to negotiate our domain in our own terms, and in doing so bring the discourse of the 'student-as-consumer' into our modules, programmes and curricula in a way that requires students to account for and critically negotiate their own constructed subject-position through their engagement with subject-specific material:

> By placing challenging subject matter, rather than students, at the heart of the university curriculum, lecturers can begin to reveal alternative models of what a university is for – not customer service or the delivery of a product, but a far more satisfying and transformative a discovery and interpretation of all that is known about the world. [102]

Whether in business and management schools or not, this is what academics should be doing, and anything other than this is a gesture of conformity to the new consumer standards that are shaping HE. One's conformity to these standards might not be explicit, purposeful or strategic, however a failure to

resist this makes us idly complicit in the very agendas that *Consuming higher education* has brought to attention and begins to make gestures towards overcoming.

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