

The Price of Knowledge in the Times of Commodification of Higher Education: A Case Study on the Changing Face of Education

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Abstract—Current developments in the Western economies have turned some universities into corporate institutions driven by practices of production and commodity. Academia is increasingly becoming integrated into national economies as a result of students paying fees and is consequently using business practices in student retention and engagement. With these changes, pedagogy status as a priority within the institution has been changing in light of these new demands. New strategies have blurred the boundaries that separate a student from a client. This led to a change of the dynamic, disrupting the traditional idea of the knowledge market, and emphasizing the corporate aspect of universities. In some cases, where students are seen primarily as a customer, the purpose of academia is no longer to educate but sell a commodity and retain fee-paying students. This paper considers opposing viewpoints on the commodification of higher education, reflecting on the reality of maintaining a pedagogic grounding in an increasingly commercialized sector. By analysing a case study of the Student Success Festival, an event that involved academic and marketing teams, the differences are considered between the respective visions of the pedagogic arm of the university and the corporate. This study argues that the initial concept of the event, based on the principles of gamification, independent learning, and cognitive criticality, was more clearly linked to a grounded pedagogic approach. However, when liaising with the marketing team in a crucial step in the creative process, it became apparent that these principles were not considered a priority in terms of their remit. While the study acknowledges in the power of pedagogy, the findings show that a pact of concord is necessary between different stakeholders in order for students to benefit fully from their learning experience. Nevertheless, while issues of power prevail and whenever power is unevenly distributed, reaching a consensus becomes increasingly challenging and further research should closely monitor the developments in pedagogy in the UK higher education.

Keywords—Economic pressure, commodification, pedagogy, gamification, public service, marketization.

I. INTRODUCTION

WITHIN capitalist economies, education has been driven into the sphere of economic activity. Governments that exist within a capitalist state are increasingly serving the interests of the market and responding to the demands of capitalist players [1]. This shift from public funding to private funding can be seen across Europe but has been particularly

evident in the UK [2], with a 60% cut in public funding for Higher Education (HE) over the last 12 years, which has been replaced by a system of fees and loans developed through a collaboration between universities and the government [3]. Furthermore, over the last five years, the income of UK HE institutions (HEIs) has seen an increase in tandem with increasing fees [4]. This has led to heated discussions within both the academy and HEIs regarding the practical and conceptual impact of such financial commodification on student expectation and how this may affect recruitment, retention, and engagement.

As stated in [2], from 2010 onwards, it is undeniable that HEIs within the UK have become primary “commercial institutions serving almost entirely private interests”. This is particularly apparent in the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government’s (2010-2015) decision to decrease public funding for HEIs by £3billion a year and increase student fees to £9,000 per year, a three-fold increase [5]. In addition to this, the coalition government also capped student loans for part-time study at £6,750, resulting in a significant decline in part-time students and, consequentially, a drive from HEIs to attract and retain full-time home and international students in order for them to remain financially viable [5]. Thus, the situation now exists in which HEIs must both *attract* and *retain* increasing numbers of fee-paying students in order to remain operational. Governing bodies, therefore, consider the need for universities to be managed and marketed, and implement policies that seem beneficial for the commodification of the institutions, but detrimental for the pedagogical nature of universities. As part of the strategy to attract students and increase visibility in the HE market, universities have orientated knowledge towards the demands of capitalist tendencies, such as adopting a market orientation [6] in order to maintain functionality. This results in universities having to consider how to ‘sell’ and ‘export’ their services, despite education being primarily an intangible ‘commodity’—thus a situation occurs in which HEIs are forced to market their ‘product’ (access to knowledge) alongside more tangible benefits: employability, reputation, student support; even the town, city, or country in which the university is located.

At Middlesex University, the Student Engagement and Advocacy team helps boost the university’s visibility and directs students towards career choices that are responsive to the needs of the market. This team, although related to student engagement and progression, is located within the marketing

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department, which is being primarily driven by market-related demands. It focuses its actions on generating profit, usually by supplementing the appeal of the degrees offered with Middlesex University's London campus, its multicultural student body, its support services, its library, and free printing and e-textbooks for all students. However, this clashes with the pedagogical nature of the institution and draws educational activities towards market-related trends. One such activity that has been affected by the actions of the marketing department is the Student Success Festival (SSF). The SSF's primary aim is to highlight the range of available support services for students and improve engagement and attainment. However, as a result of differing aims and objectives between the pedagogical remit of the festival and the marketing of the same, a number of ideological and institutional challenges arose which affected the planning, coordination and ethos of the festival.

While the SSF may appear to be a largely uncontroversial project, we encountered numerous challenges regarding not only our approach (which was based on pedagogies of Task-Based Learning and Gamification) but also on how we communicate with the student body. This paper, therefore, aims to explore these challenges and analyse our responses to them, as well as offering a discussion on ways in which these two competing factions (pedagogy vs marketisation) interact with each other.

II. INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

Middlesex University (henceforth MU) is a post-92 university, meaning that, along with other former polytechnic colleges, it was awarded university status as a result of the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) [7]. These new universities had the opportunity to attract students from previously untapped markets; specifically, for this paper, lower tariff home and international students. However, the introduction of new HEIs in the early to mid-1990s, along with the introduction of universities fees towards the end of the same decade, has resulted in a competitive field. For post-92 universities, strategic marketing, both nationally and internationally, has become paramount in the continued drive to attract students and maintain financial stability [6] and, as underlined in [8], fee-paying students report an increased focus on employment potential. There are a number of avenues to employability: communication skills, problem-solving skills, team-working abilities, critical and creative thinking are all important for students to demonstrate in addition to their final degree qualification. Unsurprisingly, MU focuses on these areas when marketing itself to future students. The current (2020) [9] online prospectus begins with the following, written in bold on a bright red background: "Real World Learning [line] Our undergraduate courses give you hands-on experience to get you ready for the future". Further down the same splash page, the next prominent piece of text states:

Personal study support

Get support to succeed, wherever you're coming from.
You'll have a Personal Tutor, support from graduates and

students in years above plus academic writing and numeracy support.

As this shows, MU is keen to not only promote itself as an HEI which provides its students with good career opportunities but will also offer them 'personal study support' in the form of academic writing and numeracy support, personal tutors, and peer support. Nevertheless, despite the variety of services offered, we have found that many students often do not take advantage of them. Student engagement is vital to retention and success, and yet students are often unaware of the range of support available to them [10]-[12]. Moreover, it has been reported that students find the variety of services confusing (see, for example, the 2018 HEA report). As a result of this, the SSF was created to help students access the support that they are not only entitled to but which has been (and continues to be) marketed to them as a direct benefit of choosing MU. However, as will be detailed in the next sections, we encountered frequent conceptual and ideological clashes when trying to balance the pedagogic aims of the festival with the University's marketing arm, despite our goals being so similarly tied together: to better support our students, increase their skills base, promote engagement and retention, and ultimately provide students with better employability prospects.

III. CASE STUDY: THE STUDENT SUCCESS FESTIVAL

The SSF was created to highlight the range of Middlesex support services available for students. The event was co-created by the authors, lecturers working in the Learning Enhancement Team, one of such support services. Our aim was to develop a series of engaging events which foreground how student engagement and attainment can be increased through a better awareness of support services and, crucially, the people who run them. The initial concept of the event was to incorporate the principles of gamification, independent learning, task-based learning, and cognitive criticality to engage students in 'putting a face' to the service, thus hopefully overcoming any reticence in contacting them or confusion as to their purpose. This approach is clearly linked to grounded pedagogy theories, as this is our background in educational training. The SSF focuses on holistic success, incorporating academic success, career success and mental health and wellbeing, and facilitates over 20 support teams to promote their help and accessibility to students. In 2016/17, a decision was made to thematise the event, as it has been evidenced that theme-based learning boosts creativity and facilitates the acquisition of new material [13]. Thus, the inaugural SSF was designed within the overall theme of an Adventure Island, which allowed us to work with a theme of 'exploration' and 'adventure', and align our games and tasks to this visual metaphor [14].

In the planning phase of the next (2017/18) festival, we were advised by the Deputy Head of our service, who had initially granted us the budget to run the 2016/2017 festival, to discuss the thematisation of future events with the marketing team, based on the feedback from Executive regarding Adventure Island. We discovered that the Marketing Manager

and the Chief Commercial Officer had not understood why the SSF had utilised the Adventure Island theme and had been confused by the gamified and task-based learning elements. In an email dated October 2017, we were informed that “[Marketing Manager] and [Chief Commercial Officer] were concerned about the lagoon and the volcano in terms of looking ‘professional’ and representing the university. They also thought that “it was not immediately clear how the theme linked to student success”. The email concluded by saying, “we need the Exec to be totally supportive, so working with Student Engagement Marketing will ensure we are on message”.

What followed was a series of meetings with the Student Engagement and Advocacy team (we could not meet with the Executives who had voiced their concerns) in which we sought to justify the approach of the SSF. Initially, we had planned to redesign the event under the theme of ‘outer space’ as, based on the interviews with the Student Learning Assistants (SLAs) and the Student Union, it conveyed the motivational message of ‘reaching for the stars’ and extending boundaries, which we believed aligned with the university strategy and the festival’s ethos, as well as addressing the principles of theme-based and gamified learning in HE [15]. However, when we proposed this idea to our marketing liaison, we were informed that the Executive members still did not fully understand the link between gamification, task-based learning and information transfer, something which, we suggest, was encapsulated in their negative response to the outer space theme. Finally, the Executive decided that the Student Engagement and Advocacy team (henceforth the marketing department) should assume more conceptual control over the event. This new coalition created a number of challenges. It transpired that in many ways, the SSF had become a victim of its own success: more students and support services were interested in the event, which meant it became the focus of the non-pedagogical marketing arm of the University. This resulted in a series of fraught meetings with our new stakeholders. We argued for and were able to retain the principles of gamification, task-based learnings and independent learning, but we conceded the Space theme, instead accepting the marketing department’s suggestion of a Music Festival theme. We quickly encountered issues from an organisational stand-point. While a Music Festival theme was certainly less conceptually difficult to grasp, it allowed very little room within which to insert our pedagogic metaphors (reach for the stars/travel to new places/explore the universe, etc.). We were also hindered by the limitations of our campus—the SSF takes place in the Quad, a covered space in the centre of one of the University’s main buildings, around which classes are held. Due to the SSF occurring during term time, there are strict limitations regarding any possible disturbances to teaching. This meant that we could not include any music-related activities at the SSF. This new theme also presented issues for our participating stakeholders, who were unsure what exactly was meant by a Music Festival, many of whom made the connection with dancing, casual sex and recreational drug and alcohol use.

While some of these issues were easily resolved (for example, by stating that we were aiming for a calming, ‘in-touch-with-nature’ approach to the theme, rather than a large-scale Music Festival, such as Glastonbury or Coachella), others were trickier. One such example was the design of our promotional materials. MU follows a red, black and white colour scheme and all internal and external marketing materials are required to adopt this for branding purposes. Based on this remit, the design arm of the marketing department produced an initial mock-up which we felt did not invoke the concept of a Music Festival, and in fact, seemed more ‘Christmassy’ than ‘summery’. We rejected the black background, deeming it to be too depressing, which left us with red and white, and asked if something more in-line with the theme would be possible. The design department next produced designs using flags and a red background, which we felt was hard to read and also, with so much red and the torn nature of the flags, could be interpreted as aggressive. The design team accordingly altered the promotional materials again, this time opting to mute the colours and build in some flowers to help create a more ‘summery’ image. Unfortunately, when these images were shared with other stakeholders (such as our participating teams) it was noted that some of the images reminded them of a battlefield—the style of the flags being torn combined with the wildflowers to invoke the image of a poppy, the flower associated with both World Wars and the Armistice Charity (The Poppy Appeal) [see Fig. 1]. This was our final design as the team had to move on to other University projects.



Fig. 1 2017/18 ‘Music Festival’ SSF marketing design journey

We also encountered difficulties regarding how to ‘decorate’ the event. For Adventure Island, each area had been clearly delineated, allowing us to go to the Theatre and Arts Departments and commission students to design and create props for our event (such as a castle). One of the fundamental values of the festival is promoting inclusivity among students and encouraging them to take part in building the festival. However, the Quad is too small to host a ‘festival-style’ tent, and a stage seemed unnecessary given the fact we would have no performances. The marketing team suggested booking external sellers to run a vintage stall in order to ‘liven’ the space up, which we felt negated the purpose of the festival to promote student services and encourage student ownership of

the event. Unfortunately, with the limitations of space and the broad scope of the Music Festival theme, we were unable to utilise student products, instead hiring giant indoor flags (our only decoration, in the end) and an instant photograph booth with fancy dress props.

Following on from this, we again made a case for allowing us to work creatively within a theme, explaining how the theme allowed us to 'market' the festival in such a way that we could include student productions (settings, technology, costumes etc.) and also place our services within a fun and memorable context, thus setting the event aside from the more traditional University offerings. Happily, we now have garnered some understanding between ourselves and the marketing department, and in 2019 we settled on the permanent theme of Carnival/Circus. Within this theme, we have been able to reengage with the Theatre and Arts Departments, who created a ticket booth for us, along with a small-scale circus tent which was hung over the Engineering Department's powerwall. The theme also helped our stakeholders by giving them clear boundaries within which to create and present that games and tasks to students—guidance which also helped the creative team within the marketing department to design digital posters, web banners and social media shots for the SSF, all of which incorporated a circus tent and bunting in Middlesex colours. We were also successful in arguing for a slight adjustment to Middlesex's red, black and white branding, with the inclusion of a salmon pink shade.

In the next section, we will present and discuss some of our suggestions for why these conceptual and theoretical clashes occurred, and offer possible ways to avoid them.

IV. DISCUSSION

The organisation of the festival was impacted by the factors that are closely related to 'education wars', a concept coined by [16]. We were brought into conflict with proponents of marketisation over the value of pedagogy and production of knowledge. As Foucault [17] argues

We live in a social universe in which the formation, circulation and utilization of knowledge presents a fundamental problem. If the accumulation of capital has been an essential feature of our society, the accumulation of knowledge has not been any less so. Now, the exercise, production and accumulation of this knowledge cannot be dissociated from the mechanisms of power; complex relations exist which must be analysed.

Although key players in the commodification of HE have developed strategies that aim to govern core pedagogical activities, the conflict exists between the factions that are guided by principles of pedagogy and marketisation [18]. In the current climate of marketisation and monetisation, the factions representing the power (in our case, Executive and the Student Engagement and Advocacy team) have dominance over other stakeholders. Should educators and other pedagogical bodies carry their activities outside their remit, as we did with the SSF, their authority is curbed and thus their expertise and understanding is significantly reduced. While

the SSF may seem to be an undertaking that lies within the principles of knowledge and education, the mechanisms that affected its outcome stem from the necessity of commodification and the resulting power afforded to those who control the monetisation process. In this project, the relationship between the knowledge market and the financial market was evidenced through the response from the university's Executive and non-academic players, who, as it transpired, became a decisive factor in pedagogical initiatives and staff-student communication. This was first seen in the feedback from the Executive, where the pedagogic foundations of the festival were not understood and were instead seen to be deviating from the University's branding and image strategies. This resulted in both the above practical issues, but also, most fundamentally, in a lack of trust between us and the Executive and marketing teams, a result that has been seen in the response to commodification by other academic staff across the UK HE sector [19].

We have come to the realisation that our freedom of academic thought was curbed, which did not allow us to embed pedagogical values into an event designed to promote student development and support. According to the Education Reform Act 1988, Section 202 (2) [20], academics should be able to 'test received wisdom and put forward new ideas'. In the case of the SSF, this guarantee was denied as a result of our pedagogic foundation not being understood and instead replaced by generic publicity that did not clearly communicate the nature of the festival and its uniqueness, the suggestion of inviting unrelated outside business to the event, and the misunderstanding of the principle of theme, gamification and task-based learning. Nevertheless, after various discussions, the marketing team did give us more room for the creative planning of activities and agreed to support the festival with their budget. In some sense, then, it could be argued that the differences in understanding between the marketing department and us have not been, overall, negatively impactful. However, we are still feeling the effects of the mismanaged Music Festival in 2020, notably when trying to engage academic lecturers in the event, an issue we are still facing some two years later, and in the memory of the difficulties and conflicts we faced, which have the potential to fester and create further difficulties down the line. Ultimately, it is neither healthy nor productive to have two such essential factions—pedagogy and marketing—working against each other.

V. CONCLUSION

As managerial practices have replaced academic rituals, unrestricted academic discourse that allowed for holistic provision of attainment and success has been dismissed and ignored. Although advocates of these practices believe that this has enabled a more significant response from social and market needs, the impact of this shift is felt across academic bodies and the curricular and extra-curricular activities delivered by academic staff. This has also affected the way various projects are managed, such as our experiences with the SSF. The marketing department attempted to dictate a range of

solutions that, in the eyes of the organisers, were directed by policies that aim to align with branding and market goals, rather than educational ones. While it is impossible to ignore HE's need to survive within a marketised economy, it is also deeply problematic to prioritise this over the educational and pastoral needs of the student body; more so when such a focus on support is a significant marketing strategy. To that end, we believe that in order for pedagogy to play a valuable part in student development, academics and non-academic departments should reach a consensus that aims to preserve the value of education. Currently, in MU, these competing bodies do not share expertise and act within their own remit without realising the need for finding such consensus. While we believe in the power of pedagogy, we also think that a pact of concord is necessary between different stakeholders in order for students to benefit fully from their learning experience. Nevertheless, while issues of power prevail and whenever power is unevenly distributed, reaching a consensus becomes increasingly challenging.

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