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The Construction of Higher Education Students in English Policy Documents

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Contribution

The Construction of Higher Education Students in English Policy Documents

It is now widely held, in England at least, that students are considered by policymakers, and perhaps also by other stakeholders in the higher education sector, as consumers (e.g. Molesworth et al., 2009; Nixon et al., 2016). This assumption is based largely on the nature of the policies introduced over the past twenty years – particularly the requirement that most students now make a substantial financial contribution to the cost of their higher education, and the availability of an increasingly wide range of metrics to encourage students actively to ‘shop around’ when making their choices about institution and course. While such analyses are important in delineating the broad direction of change within English higher education policy, they rarely explore the ‘messiness’ of policy, and the internal contradictions that can sometimes arise. Indeed, most policies can be considered ‘ramshackle, compromise hit and miss affairs, that are reworked, tinkered with, nuanced and inflected through complex processes of influence’ (Ball, 2007, p.44). By adopting a fine-grained, discursive approach, this paper seeks to examine the extent to which coherent understandings of students are formulated within current English higher education policy and assess the dominance of the ‘consumer’ construction, in particular. It also explores whether alternative conceptualisations of the student are advanced, beyond that of the consumer. In addition, the paper considers the extent to which understandings – held by government but also other key stakeholders, namely staff and student unions, and representatives of business and graduate employers – converge. In doing so, it recognises that government policy pronouncements are rarely straightforwardly transferred into practice. Instead, they are enacted by relevant actors who interpret, translate and sometimes resist policy imperatives (Ball et al., 2011).

There is now compelling evidence that educational policies do not determine student subjectivities in any direct and straightforward sense. Indeed, Clarke et al. (2007) have argued that political subjects are not 'docile bodies'; rather, they should be considered as reflexive subjects who can contest the way they are constructed in policy, sometimes offering their own redefinitions. In the UK, numerous studies have indicated that there is no simple relationship between the provision of information and the knowledge acquired (and decisions made) by prospective students (e.g. Dodds, 2011). Nevertheless, it is also the case that while policies rarely act in a simple, deterministic manner, their influence is often significant. Ball (2007), for example, argues that policies are articulated 'both to achieve material effects and to manufacture support for these effects' (p.41). They are ways of representing, accounting for and legitimating political decisions; a means of classifying and regulating the spaces and subjects they hope to govern (Ball, 2007). Policies can also have effects beyond those intended by the authors - what Shore and Wright (2011) call 'runaway effects' - actively reshaping understandings and practices in the environments in which they are introduced. Dominant constructions of students are thus likely to exert some influence. Indeed, a considerable number of scholars have argued that students' relationships to higher education have been fundamentally altered by their positioning, within policy, as consumers, and the reshaping of the sector in general along market lines. Tomlinson (2016), for example, has contended that some HE students, at least, have adopted what he calls an 'active service-user attitude' - emphasising both their rights and the importance of obtaining value for money. Analysis of dominant constructions within policy is thus important, not just in helping to understand in more detail how policymakers (and other key policy actors) conceptualise students, but in exploring the representations that are likely to have at least some impact on the shaping of contemporary higher education institutions.

Method

The paper draws on texts produced by four different groups of policy actors in England: government departments; senior politicians responsible for higher education; business/industry representatives; and students' and employees' unions. Four documents from each group were selected, from those publically accessible on relevant websites, on the basis that they were the most significant at that particular point in time (December 2016). Many of the selected texts relate to proposed reforms to the higher education sector outlined in the government Green Paper of 2015. Furthermore, all four selected speeches were given by Jo Johnson, the then Minister of State for Universities and Science and all refer, in some way, to the proposed reforms.

An inductive, thematic analysis was conducted on the sixteen documents, exploring the ways in which students were being represented, and the conceptualisations of them that underpinned the various policy measures. First, the documents were coded in NVivo - using codes derived, inductively, from the documents themselves, but which were also, in some cases, informed by the extant literature. Second, the coded material was used to identify dominant themes across the dataset and to make comparisons across the four different groups of document (i.e. speeches by politicians, and written documents from government, business/employers and unions).

Expected Outcomes

This paper will make four main contributions to knowledge. First, it will show that, contrary to assumptions made in much of the academic literature, students are not understood as 'empowered consumers' in English policy documents. Although the language of consumerism is deployed throughout many of the analysed texts, both government and unions position students as vulnerable. However, whereas this vulnerability is attributed to processes of market reform within the union documents, for the government, it is a consequence of insufficient marketization. Second, it will identify other dominant discourses, including those of 'future worker' and 'hard-worker'. These articulate with extant debates about both the repositioning of higher education as an economic good, and the use of the 'hard working' trope across other areas of English social policy as a means of distinguishing between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' recipients. Third, and relatedly, it will demonstrate that important differences are drawn between groups of students. For domestic students, this is largely in relation to whether they are deemed 'hard working' or not. More extreme contrasts are drawn between international students, juxtaposing the 'brightest and best' with those that are considered 'sham'. International students are, however, largely absent from the majority of the documents, and particularly from discussions of social mobility. Finally, it will argue that the figure of the 'vulnerable' student and 'thwarted consumer' feed into broader UK government narratives about its policy trajectory - legitimising contemporary reforms while also excusing the apparent failure of previous policies. These conclusions will be situated in a European context, by making reference to comparable studies from other European nations.

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