
The Consumerist Turn in Higher Education: Policy Aspirations and Outcomes
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Abstract
Insights from the marketing and education literature are combined to analyse government rationales and mechanisms related to the positioning of contemporary students as consumers and to assess the impact on the process and outcomes of education, on the professional practices of faculty and on widening participation. Pierre Bourdieu’s conceptual framework is applied to analyse how consumer mechanisms are mediated by the organisational cultures and practices within universities. These theoretical insights are combined with data from different national contexts to indicate positive outcomes. However, the organizational context of higher education, gamesmanship and outdated marketing relations have also led to the opposite of what policy makers have aspired to. We show how consumerism also promotes passive learning, threatens academic standards and entrenches academic privilege. The paper contributes to scholarship on consumerism in sectors which are subject to changing relations between state regulation and market forces and offers policy and management insights.

Keywords: Consumerism; Higher Education; Pierre Bourdieu; Marketisation.

Introduction
The ascendance of market mechanisms in higher education systems worldwide has led to the conceptualisation of students as consumers of higher education. The ‘student as consumer’ discourse gained prominence in the United States of America (USA) in the 1970s when the Nixon administration introduced various competitive mechanisms which led to a rise in tuition fees as well as an enhancement of aid policy through which students, rather than institutions, gained funding from the government (Slaughter and Leslie, 1997). The United Kingdom (UK) was the first country in Europe to adopt quasi-market mechanisms and consumerist discourses. Rationales for these shifts were linked to market competition and tuition fees, the modernisation of the public sector agenda which was intended to break ‘producer capture’ and the need to maintain quality as higher education moved from an elite to a mass system (DfEE, 1998a; Blackstone, 1999, DfES, 2003). David Willetts, the Minister for Universities and Science in the UK has linked the development of university performance indicators to the government’s conception of students as consumers (Willetts, 2007; Fulh, 2011). Recent recommendations such as differential student fees contained in the Browne Report, which arose out of a government commissioned enquiry into university funding and student finance, will undoubtedly reinforce these consumerist trends (See Browne et al, 2010).
In Australia, the late 1980s heralded an intense form of competition between institutions for domestic and international students and universities were expected to transform themselves into customer focused business enterprises (Currie and Vidovich, 2000). In much of continental Europe, the shift towards forms of market competition has been slower although discernable patterns are emerging with the development of a common European Higher Education Area and the Bologna reforms which may be seen as an attempt to increase Europe’s overall market share of higher education (Robertson, 2009).

While the implementation of policies relating to markets and consumers has taken different forms across various countries, depending on, amongst other factors, the history and structure of national higher education systems as well as differing systems of macro and meso governance, there is general agreement that there is a global trend towards consumerism worldwide. Linked to this is a growing research interest on consumption in higher education, particularly in relation to how students choose universities and programmes. A range of research has emerged which addresses the complexities of choice and decision making and the impact of factors such as class, ethnicity and gender (Bredo, Foersum and Laursen, 1993; Connor, Burton, Pollard, Regan and Pearson, 1999, Hemsley-Brown, 1999; Reay, David and Ball, 2005). In addition, multi-level models of decision making which link individual agency to wider social influences have been developed by researchers such as Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2000). There has also been more recent attention on pedagogical relationships and learning outcomes particularly in the British context (Nixon, Scullion and Molesworth, 2010). However, there has been less research which brings together the influence of consumerism on the form, content and outcomes of education, on the professional practices of faculty and on the widening participation agenda in an international context. There has also been little research on the impact of consumerism on higher education conceptualised as a system consisting of diverse and stratified sets of institutions.

In general, with some important exceptions such Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2000) and Ng and Forbes (2009), the research has been located in either the education or the marketing fields with little cross communication between the fields. This has resulted in two main trends. The educational research has focussed on educational cultures and processes while drawing peripherally on the field of marketing research. In general, comparisons have been made with the consumption of goods rather than services and important tenets such as the co-creation of value have been largely ignored. This has led to the exclusion of more recent marketing philosophies and strategies which have the potential to assist universities in processes of constructive engagement with students. In the marketing research on the other hand, as Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2006) have argued, there is an absence of theoretical frameworks and research that reflects in an in-depth manner on the organisational context, professional cultures and the nature of services provided by higher education institutions. This is a major limitation given that consumer behaviour and outcomes are highly influenced by context (Arnould and Thompson 2005) and mediated by the particular characteristics of organisations.
We address some of the limitations above by combining conceptual and empirical insights from the marketing and the sociology of education literature. The rise of consumerism in contemporary higher education systems is particularly interesting to explore. In most countries until relatively recently, public higher education systems have been largely state funded and regulated and shielded from the direct pressures of market forces. Indeed, in many ways, public higher education institutions have traditionally encompassed professional cultures which have been antithetical to market principles and cultures (Halsey and Trow 1971; Bourdieu, 1984; Henkell, 2000). An analytical focus on the interaction of consumerism with the organizational characteristics and the internal culture of higher education will therefore generate insights on consumerism in sectors which are subject to changing relations between state regulation and market forces and which are undergoing cultural change. The paper also contributes to scholarship on consumerism as a historically shaped mode of socio-cultural practice that operates in different ways in the context of specific macro-structural, organizational and cultural imperatives (See Holt, 1995).

We begin with an analysis of the broader socio-political and economic forces that are shaping higher education as a marketplace and the student consumer as a social category. We then outline government policy aspirations and mechanisms related to the reconceptualisation of students as consumers. In the next section, we apply the conceptual framework of Pierre Bourdieu, particularly his concepts of ‘field’, ‘capital’ and ‘habitus’ to analyse the specific organisational characteristics and the dynamics of practice within higher education institutions. We then draw on relevant marketing literature and selected educational research to critically analyse the operation and implications of consumerism in higher education. We pay particular attention to the impact on student empowerment and learning processes, on the professional practices of faculty and on widening participation. This facilitates a critical review of the operation and consequences of consumerism in higher education and interrogates policy makers’ aspirations that these mechanisms will lead to a high quality and more equitable higher education system (Sellgren, 2009).

**Marketisation and the knowledge economy**

The rise of the student consumer in higher education is part of a global trend away from the discourses, funding and governance arrangements based on the ‘social compact’ that evolved between higher education, the state and society over the last century (Slaughter and Leslie, 1997). The belief that universities require independence from political and corporate influence to function optimally, which was in turn linked to the need for guaranteed state funding and professional autonomy, has been eroded. These developments, together with more general retractions away from frameworks based on Keynesian settlements, have resulted in the implementation of funding and regulatory frameworks based on neo-liberal market mechanisms and new managerialist principles (Dill, 1997; Deem, 2001). Such frameworks are based on the assumption that public higher education systems have become too
large and complex for governments to fund on their own, that market competition within and between universities will create more efficient and effective institutions, and that management principles derived from the private sector which monitor, measure, compare and judge professional activities will enhance higher education functioning. At the same time, state regulation has not decreased. Instead, we find increasing articulation between state and market forms of co-ordination. Governments create the conditions for a quasi market and at the same time market mechanisms are deployed to achieve governmental goals (Naidoo, 2008).

Governments have also linked consumerism to the high skills policy agenda whereby economic success in the knowledge economy is perceived to rely on producing higher value-added products and services that are, in turn, dependent on scientific and technological knowledge, and on continual innovation (Castells, 2001). In this context, universities are expected to contribute to each country’s competitive edge in the global marketplace by producing and disseminating economically productive knowledge. In addition, policy advisors have argued that the lifting of the skills level of the workforce as a whole is a basic pre-requisite for economic activity to shift from the old Fordist paradigms into new high skills modes of working (Brown, Green and Lauder, 2001). There have therefore been significant pressures on national higher education systems to shift from elite to mass institutions and to widen participation by providing access to members of social groups previously excluded from higher education. The consumerist turn in higher education has also been linked to policy discourses of distrust through which professional groups in the public sector are positioned as self-serving resisters of change who work against the interests of other stakeholders. There are therefore demands for the control of university education by professionals to be ceded to various stakeholders including students and their parents (Rouse and Smith, 1999).

Various consumerist levers to enhance student choice and control over the education process have been introduced in the international context. These include mechanisms for greater choice and flexibility, information on academic courses through performance indicators, league tables and student satisfaction surveys and the institutionalisation of complaints mechanisms. The assumption behind such policies is that students will utilise such mechanisms to demand high quality provision and will apply pressures on universities to make courses more relevant to the skills they require for the workplace. The related assumption is that consumerist forces will have a positive impact on the professional practices of academic staff. High quality will be rewarded and low quality penalised, and consumer choice will foster competition between universities to result in more responsive, inclusive and better quality teaching. Rather than merely stipulating new procedures to enhance the functioning of higher education, consumerism may be seen as a device to reform academic culture and pedagogic relationships to comply with market frameworks. It is therefore apparent that such policies are attempts to change, fundamentally, the terms on which education takes place in universities.
Insights derived from the wider literature on consumer and provider behaviour, however, indicate that consumerism as a mode of socio-cultural practice is highly mediated by the context of particular organisational and ideological imperatives (see Holt, 1995). It is therefore likely that the grafting of a framework derived from the commercial sector onto a sector with a deeply imbedded professional culture that is still steered by the state may not translate easily into the outcomes intended by policy makers. In the next section, we develop an analysis of the historically constituted internal culture and modes of practice operating in higher education by drawing on the theoretical framework of Pierre Bourdieu.

**Hierarchy, capital and field in higher education**

Bourdieu’s work on higher education as a specific institutional site, particularly his concepts of ‘field’, ‘capital’ and ‘habitus’ makes an important contribution to understanding the dynamics of practice within higher education institutions. His framework can be located in the wider literature on frameworks of consumption which link markets, culture and ideology in dynamic relationships (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). Bourdieu’s ‘field’ concept has received attention in management studies through the work of the new institutionalists who have developed the concept to depict a group of organisations within a common institutional framework held together by regulation, cognitive belief systems and normative rules; and which compete for legitimacy and resources (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991). However, while the new institutionalists’ work leans towards isomorphism, Bourdieu’s framework emphasises that while the location of individuals and institutions within a common field presupposes a minimum level of agreement, the field is not a product of consensus but the dynamic product of a permanent conflict. The institutional field perspective is a useful theoretical frame as it provides an analytical perspective and a mediating context linking the university to the external environment. It also provides a relational approach which focuses on interactive processes between and within universities.

Although Bourdieu’s work on higher education has been developed in the context of France, the application of his concepts to other national contexts indicates the significant contribution his work can make to the study of higher education in general (see, for example, Tomusk, 2000; Naidoo, 2004). According to Bourdieu, social formations are structured around a complex ensemble of social fields in which various forms of power circulate. The relative autonomy of fields varies from one period to another, from one field to another and from one national tradition to another (Bourdieu, 1993). The field of university education is conceptualised as a field with a high degree of autonomy in that it generates its own organisational culture consisting of values and behavioural imperatives that are relatively independent from forces emerging from the economic and political fields. The activities in the field revolve around the acquisition and development of different species of capital, which may be defined as particular resources that are invested with value (Bourdieu, 1986).
The types of ‘capital’ invested with value in the field of higher education are termed ‘academic’ and ‘scientific capital’ and consist in the first instance of intellectual or cultural, rather than economic assets. Bourdieu differentiates between ‘scientific capital’ which is related to scientific authority or intellectual renown and ‘academic capital’, which is linked to power over the instruments of reproduction of the university body. Individuals and institutions are located in various positions of hierarchy dependent on the type and amount of field-specific capital possessed.

Bourdieu introduces the concept of habitus to indicate how social practice within fields are generated. He defines habitus as a system of lasting and transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions (1977: 72). This inclines actors to act and react in specific situations in a manner that is not always calculated and that is not a conscious adherence to rules. According to these definitions, the ‘dispositions’ represented by the habitus are not fixed and unchanging but are ‘strategy-generating’. The habitus concept has been helpfully elaborated upon by marketing researchers such Holt (1997) to indicate how members of a collectivity share a similar habitus as a result of chronic exposure to similar social and institutional conditions. In his major empirical studies on higher education, Bourdieu (1988; 1996) illustrates the operation of an academic habitus which orientates practices that revolve around a belief in, and struggle for, the acquisition of scientific and academic capital internal to the field of higher education. These practices are based on a systematic suspension, or even inversion, of the fundamental principles of the economy. The operation of a general academic habitus operating across different national contexts has been confirmed by empirical studies in other national contexts and time periods (Henkell, 2000; Naidoo, 2000).

Taking the three concepts of field, capital and habitus together, practice in the field of higher education is therefore shaped by an academic habitus which engenders in individuals a ‘disposition’ below the level of consciousness to act or think in certain ways; and on the network of objective relations between positions that individuals or institutions occupy in the field. Individuals and institutions implement strategies in order to improve or defend their positions in the field in a competition that has historically been relatively autonomous from economic forces but which nevertheless consists of deeply ingrained rules, values and professional protocols (see, for example, Bourdieu, 1993).

Bourdieu argues that in the context of elite systems of higher education, there was also a close relationship between student and faculty habitus which contributed to social reproduction and the legitimation of privilege. Through acts of subjective and objective selection, universities selected those students richest in inherited cultural capital who originated from dominant positions in society and who were themselves predisposed to enter higher education and fed them back into dominant positions in society (Bourdieu, 1996). In the contemporary period of mass higher education, we would argue that the contribution of higher education to social reproduction also occurs through the hierarchical structuring of the field of higher education through which there is a strong correlation between institutional status and student disadvantage.
In this sense, the structuring of the field of higher education, whilst establishing internal homogeneity in terms of social origin and disposition within each institution, establishes stark differences in social origin and disposition between the student populations in institutions positioned at different levels of relative hierarchy within the institutional field.

Having established the historically constituted mode of social practice occurring in higher education, we now turn to the impact of consumerist mechanisms. Clearly, contemporary conditions and policies have led to the weakening of the boundary between the field of higher education and the external context. In particular, economic forces impact more powerfully and directly on universities than in previous decades. In addition, changes in funding policy that require institutions to generate surplus income have led to the undermining of academic and scientific capital. Higher education has therefore become more open to forces for commodification while education has developed into a product and process specifically for its ‘exchange’ rather than for its intrinsic ‘use’ value. The marketisation of higher education and the re-conceptualisation of students as consumers therefore impact on universities by potentially altering the nature of rewards and sanctions operating in higher education. There are pressures for success to be measured by income generation; the number of student customers—captured, the extent of involvement with commercial interests and the degree of financial surplus created rather than on principles for the accumulation of academic or scientific capital. This ‘devalorisation’ of academic capital is therefore likely to challenge the underlying logic and values shaping academic practices.

While all universities will be influenced by consumerist mechanisms, their position in the field of university education will determine how quickly and to what degree the former penetrate and restructure core university cultures and practices. Universities that are in the upper levels of the hierarchy with high levels of scientific capital are likely to be predisposed to attempt to draw on superior resources to delay, minimise or restructure forces for consumerism. However, these universities are not able to remain entirely immune to these forces over extended periods of time. Such actions, according to Bourdieu, function as an institutional strategy to conserve the academic principles structuring the field that maintain these institutions in dominant positions. Institutions that are in lower positions in the hierarchy are less likely to have the resources or the disposition to exclude forces for consumerism, particularly since such forces have the potential to undermine the academic principles which structure the field in hierarchy. These institutions are therefore likely to experience consumerism in pristine form. The initial refusal of Oxford and Cambridge to participate in a national survey of student satisfaction in the UK reflects this pattern of elite institutions delaying the onset of the consumerist turn.

In the next section, we focus on key areas that government policies have targeted. These are student empowerment and learning outcomes, the professional practices of faculty and widening participation.
The Empowered Student Consumer?

One of the aspirations of government policy in higher education is for students to become empowered consumers who gain influence over the education process and thereby enhance their own learning. While research on consumer empowerment encapsulates a diverse field, the general consensus is that consumers are empowered at the most basic level when they are able to make informed choices and at a more complex level when their resources and skills are combined to create circumstances in which companies are compelled to respond (See Cova and Dali, 2009; Firat and Dholakia, 2006). Clearly, contemporary students have greater opportunities than previous generations of students to choose between courses and universities. As well as a significant increase in the numbers of institutions, choices between and within universities have been facilitated by the modularisation of the curriculum and the assignment of uniform levels and credits to courses to facilitate movement (Middleton, 2000; Enders and Jongbloed, 2007). Greater opportunities for cross-national mobility in Europe has also been introduced by the Bologna process which aims to develop a common framework of higher education qualifications across different countries in order to facilitate cross border higher education.

Students also have greater access to information. Universities in many countries are required by statutory bodies to publish information on academic programmes so that students can be assured of what they are to receive at the outset of their studies. In addition, performance indicators including throughput rates, academic and social facilities and widening participation measures have been developed by statutory bodies. These are complemented by national and global league tables measuring various dimensions of university performance. An important recent development is the implementation of instruments through which students indicate the level of ‘customer satisfaction’ of their courses. The Course Experience Questionnaire is used as the national instrument in Australia while the National Survey of Student Engagement is used in the USA. The National Student Survey (NSS) through which final year undergraduate students are asked to evaluate their courses is used in the UK. The results of such surveys are made publically available in order to inform the choice of intending applicants. The European Commission has also funded a consortium of leading European higher education institutions to develop a ranking system for higher education institutions in order to support students’ decisions. The rankings system will be multi-dimensional and will compare similar institutions in relation to research, teaching and learning and other aspects of university performance (Robertson, 2009). In addition, consumer rights have been strengthened by the elaboration and institutionalisation of complaints and redress mechanisms (see, for example, QAA Code of Practice, QAA 2000) including the appointment of university ombudsmen.

All of the mechanisms noted above are important levers with the potential to empower student consumers. There is greater information on course aims and course content and greater transparency in relation to criteria and methods for assessment. There are also indications that league tables are increasingly
used in the decision making of students. This is particularly true for younger applicants of high academic achievement and social class and for many groups of international students while less true for applicants who are mature, vocationally oriented or from less advantaged backgrounds (King et al, 2008). Mechanisms such as student satisfaction surveys do not merely give students more information on which to base their choices but the subsequent public availability of such information empowers students to control, and indeed counteract, some elements of the communication process in order to affect the way in which other consumers perceive individual universities. In this way, universities are drawn into an interaction with students through which students can apply pressure on institutions to take actions that would not normally be taken. In the UK, there are indications that new institutional initiatives are arising in response to NSS results.

However, it has also been argued that while governments assumptions of student behaviour place great weight on the consumer being able to make informed choices, students do not necessarily have the tools to retrieve such information (McCulloch 2009). Research findings on consumer confusion (Mendleson and Polonsky 1995) can be readily applied to higher education. As Drummond (2004) notes, the expansion of higher education, cross border education, competition and the rise of marketing activity within the sector has led to increased information from multiple sources, a high rate of product proliferation, increasing use of imitation strategies and consumer shopping in alien markets. The possibility of sub-optimum decisions is therefore high. There are also indications that information about courses is often rendered inaccessible through the use of oblique and highly specialised language. McCulloch (2009), for example, has stated that the publication of learning outcomes through benchmark statements in the UK appears to be more a mechanism for a dominant group to articulate a code of practice to itself than information designed to be comprehensible to prospective applicants. While the institutionalisation of complaints mechanisms is welcome, many institutions do not have transfer or exit mechanisms. Students dissatisfied with one course cannot easily move to another course within the same university nor to another university. Refunds are also not easily obtained and this is particularly difficult where higher education is state funded or where students obtain loans from the government which they are expected to repay after graduation. A further complicating factor is that students, particularly those in elite universities from socially advantaged backgrounds, are well aware of the symbolic (as opposed to the functional) value of their degree. They understand that higher education operates as a positional good (Hirsch 1976) in which degrees from some universities offer better social status and lifetime opportunities than others. Marginson ( 2006) has indicated that the positional aspect of higher education is sometimes more important than teaching quality. A study by Moogan,Baron and Harris (1999) found that UK students are more influenced by university prestige than measures of program quality while an Australian study by James, Baldwin and McInnis (1999) found that applicants focus strongly on course and institutional reputations by taking the requirement for high admission scores as a proxy for quality when making their selections. In addition, accreditation by agencies such as the European Foundation for Management Development and the Association to Advance
Collegiate Schools of Business are also likely to act as proxy indicators for quality for business school students. Students are therefore predisposed to rate their degree and university highly in student satisfaction surveys because they understand that the results of such surveys will impact on the ranking of their own degree.

Furthermore, a crucial difference between higher education and other sectors which has important ramifications for student-university relations is that in the final analysis, institutions have the power to award or withhold a degree based on their judgement of the students’ performance. This has important implications for the power relationship between students and faculty and related issues of empowerment. In the next section we turn more specifically to the pedagogic relationship and the impact on learning outcomes.

**Passive or co-creative learners?**

Higher education managers and researchers have indicated that it is often the case that when higher education borrows marketing techniques from the corporate sector, outdated and shallow versions of such techniques are imported (Kotler; 1995; Ford, Joseph and Joseph, 1999). Many higher education institutions have adopted an older style consumer model based on the production of goods rather than services. This framework when combined with rising instrumental approaches to higher education on the part of students has negative and unintended consequences for student learning.

Studies arising from a variety of national contexts indicate that in the context outlined above, market rationality is likely to overtake other considerations and students are more likely to view the act of learning as a commercial transaction. Students who internalise this form of a consumer identity place themselves outside the intellectual community and perceive themselves as passive consumers of education who abdicate their own responsibility for learning. Cheney et al (1997) in the context of North America argue that treating students as consumers distorts pedagogical processes by confusing a momentary satisfaction of wants with educational outcomes. Consistent with this mentality is a resistance to engaging in education as a process rather than a purchasable product that is simply appropriated. In a survey of Business School students, Grisoni and Wilkinson (2005) conclude that the application of consumerist mechanisms within higher education leads to a ‘banking model’ of education where information is memorised and regurgitated. Nixon, Scullion and Molesworth (2010) in their phenomenological study involving sixty students at a vocational university in the second and third year of their undergraduate studies illustrate how student use the notion of choice to choose the route that they perceive to be the easiest, thus narrowing their learning experience; while Shumar (1997) in the context of the USA has noted increasing demands for short pre-packaged, modularised courses. These new identities and rationalities assumed by students have the potential to transform learning into a process of picking up, digesting and reproducing what students perceive of as an unconnected series of short, neatly packaged bytes of information. Under these conditions, the student disposition generated has
negative ramifications for the development of higher order skills and more importantly, for the dispositions and attitudes required for autonomous, lifelong learning.

However, this is not the only model of consumer relations available to higher education. Older models characterised by control over a passive consumer have been superseded by marketing principles based on the active participation of consumers (Lagace, 2004). Of particular relevance to higher education are the service dominant logic of marketing (Vargo and Lusch, 2004; Lusch and Vargo, 2006) and approaches to management and marketing termed ‘value co-creation’ (see Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2002; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). Lusch and Vargo (2006) for example argue that a Service Dominant Logic has shifted marketing orientations from a philosophy in which customers are promoted, targeted, and captured, to a market philosophy in which the customer and supply chain partners are collaborators in the entire marketing process. Value is thus generated when customers and suppliers interact to create solutions (see also Grönroos, 2006). Similarly, the concept of co-creation is based on the premise that consumers have specialized competencies and skills and that companies should provide a communications environment where such consumers can apply their knowledge for mutual benefit (see Thrift, 2005). One of the defining characteristics of services, such as education, is that the service is produced and consumed simultaneously. Value within this model is therefore the result of this ‘prosumption’ which influences the shape, content and nature of the product or service.

Principles emerging from the concept of co-creation and the service dominant logic have affinities with pedagogical models of learning based on social constructivism (see, for example Fry, Ketteridge and Marshall, 1999) which emphasise the learner as an active agent. An important principle to arise out of this literature is that for effective learning to occur, students need to engage in experimentation via modes of active learning, and most importantly teachers need to constantly adjust what they do to the needs of individual learners. This is of course in significant contrast to a model of learning which sees the task as one of essentially adding new knowledge to students (Mezirow, 1991). From this perspective, students will be configured as uniquely skilled participants, who, for the production of value-in-use to occur, must be given the opportunity to share their knowledge and make significant inputs to the learning and teaching process. This also requires a new understanding of the role of faculty. Co-creation when applied to pedagogical relations represents a more dialogical model that no longer privileges the university’s vision of education but provides resources which foster the creation of specific innovative forms of student participation. Ng and Forbes (2009) state that in co-creating the learning experience, students play key roles in creating a service outcome and as a contributor to quality, satisfaction and value. In this way the problems encountered by a model based on the notion of a passive and instrumental student consumer is replaced by the notion of an engaged and co-creative learner. There are indications of the emergence of versions of this model across the sector. The Reinvention Centre for Undergraduate Research, a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning at the University
of Warwick and Oxford Brookes University, for example, proposes that positioning undergraduates as researchers helps challenge the 'hierarchical binaries between teaching and research, and teachers and students' and offers opportunities for critical engagement (Lambert, Parker and Neary, 2007, p 534). There are also initiatives to position students as agents of change through action research projects that bring students and academics together to improve education (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2009).

Enhancing Academic Practice or Gaming the System?

The assumption underlying consumerist mechanisms is that the actions of students as consumers will impact on the professional practices of faculty in such a way that the process and content of teaching will be improved. High quality will be rewarded and low quality penalised, and consumer choice will foster competition between universities to result in more responsive, flexible, efficient and better quality teaching.

In reality, the undermining of elements of academic habitus offers benefits but also, perversely, has the effect of undermining some of the essential attributes related to high quality teaching and learning. As noted in previous sections, a collective habitus which operates particularly strongly in research intensive universities orientates activities that are tied to research accomplishment. One of the beneficial impacts of consumerism is that it has acted as a counterbalance to the hegemony exerted by scientific capital and has led to a focus on learning and teaching and the implementation of various mechanisms to assure quality. Institutions have developed mechanisms to monitor teaching and formal student evaluations of courses and complaints mechanisms have been instituted. These are important components of the protection of student rights against the outright abuse of power. At the same time however, the auditing of teaching can damage the very activities it intends to enhance. One of the ways in which this could happen is through organisational resources shifting from what Power (1999) has termed ‘first order’ to ‘second order’ functions. In the context of higher education, there are likely to be tensions in the extent to which valuable resources such as time and energy are invested in second order functions, such as documenting and accounting for professional activity, rather than in first order functions such as developing innovative academic programmes and working directly with students.

In addition, Parker and Jary (1995) have argued that increasingly bureaucratic forms of organization make academics increasingly instrumental in their attitudes and behaviour. The threat of student litigation and complaints, together with requirements to comply with extensive external monitoring procedures may therefore encourage academics to opt for ‘safe teaching’ which is locked into a transmission mode where pre-specified content can be passed on to the student and assessed in a conventional manner. This is a particularly important issue since the research on high quality reconstructive learning, or learning how to learn, indicates that risk taking and relations of trust between learners and teachers are essential, particularly because there is no guarantee of success (Haig, 1987; Seltzer and Bentley, 1999). Risk-taking does not sit easily with a learning relationship based on passive...
consumerism in which there is an assumption that qualifications will follow in return for specified levels of work and a fee. However, if relationships are developed on the basis of the co-creation of value, then there is the possibility of ‘trust-intense marketing relationships’ (Leisen and Hyman, 2004) through which unquestioned trust is replaced by trust based on knowledge and open communication between students and faculty.

Performance indicators including student satisfaction surveys and league tables, which have become part of the higher education landscape to give students information and choice, also function both positively and negatively as powerful market currencies. Student satisfaction surveys for example give access to the student perspective and provide insights on how students engage with learning. There are indications that senior university managers take the results of student surveys extremely seriously. Greater attention, for example, has been paid to information and communication technology, library resourcing and social facilities (Knapp and Siegel, 2009), although there is the concern that many new building projects can be perceived as branding statements rather than as meeting the needs of students. Senior managers also apply pressure on faculty to change academic practices in line with student requests. However, here again, there are unintended consequences. In the UK, for example, the NSS has revealed that one of the weak performance areas of universities is the length of time students wait to receive feedback on their assignments. There is emerging evidence to reveal that one of the ways universities are responding to this pressure is to replace a variety of feedback mechanisms which help students learn in a developmental way, with formal assessment systems, or in the worst cases, computerised multiple choice tests. As Hart and Rush (2007) note, policies which respond to consumer demands and which appear to be palliative in the short term, may have negative effects in the longer term.

In addition, performance indicators and league tables may also invoke a particular pathology. First, rather than investing in achieving missions, universities invest valuable resources in attempting to move up rankings. This may lead to the distortion of academic purpose. For example, Yardley (1996, cited in Drummond, 2004) notes that the importance attached to league tables has led to senior managers perceiving their primary role as enhancing the university’s position in such tables rather than adding real value from the perspective of students and faculty. League tables can also have more direct effects. These rankings become so crucial that universities are put under pressure to ‘manage’ data, or even in extreme cases to falsify it. Stecklow (1995) for example has asserted that since the component elements of league tables are under the control of universities themselves, there is the temptation to adjust practices to score more highly while Johnes and Taylor (1990) indicate that universities come under pressure to award more higher class passes.

In relation to the curriculum, marketisation and mechanisms of choice have reinforced the movement towards modularisation in an attempt to privilege movement across departments, disciplines and institutions. Such curriculum change is increasingly organised around the principles of market need and the
desire to attract students. This has led to universities developing a more in-depth understanding of student needs and providing courses that are designed specifically for market demand while retaining more traditional course elements. This is illustrated by Lowrie and Willmott (2006) in their ethnographic study of the introduction of curricula sponsored by industry which reveals the merging of a discourse related to market relevance with more traditional discourses.

However, consumer pressures can also lead to course development becoming a ‘just-in-time’ production process, whereby flexibility in response to rapidly changing specifications and consumer expectations is valued more than quality. The danger of such approaches is that modules that are developed and combined purely in relation to market need may lead to a loss of coherence and induction mechanisms that were traditionally associated with disciplinary study. In the context of post-apartheid South Africa, Muller has indicated that a modular structure, which excludes coherence and induction mechanisms, and which relies on students’ resources to make coherent choices, places students at a grave disadvantage (Muller, 2000). In addition, the development of programmes which attract students by simply linking in a direct manner to their everyday lives may also pose particular dangers. Sociologists of education including Young (2007) have warned that such approaches to the curriculum, which erode the distinction between the type of knowledge acquired in universities and experiential knowledge acquired in everyday life, may not have the capacity to induct students into complex intellectual work.

**Widening participation or Entrenching Disadvantage**

In a previous section, we outlined the elitist nature of higher education. Advocates present a vision of the market as a corrective to the highly unequal nature of higher education and as a benign deliverer of educational provision. The harnessing of the student as ‘autonomous chooser’ (Peters & Marshall, 1996) is positioned as a pivotal mechanism to improve access and educational outcomes for all. The assumptions of policy makers is that student consumers always act in a rational fashion, on the basis of conscious deliberation and needs. However, there has been a great deal of criticism of the central tenets of rational action theory in the marketing literature (see, for example, Firat and Dholakia, 1998; Willmott, 1999, Shankar, 2006). Research on the socially embedded nature of choice (Zaltman 1997; Lakoff and Johnson 1999, Smith and Lux 1993) reveals the influence of life experiences and social relationships which are in turn nested within social collectivities and historical contexts (Allen, 2002). These insights have at least two implications for the widening participation agenda in higher education.

First, the socialisation of students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds often results in processes of self-exclusion in which high status universities are often discounted. Bourdieu’s work, for example, has shown how the economic and social conditions that shape habitus transform objective limits into a practical anticipation of these limits through which a person excludes him or herself from the very places from which the person feels excluded.
(Bourdieu 1984:471). In addition, from within the marketing literature, the ‘Fits Like a Glove’ (FLAG) framework, which has been informed by Bourdieu’s work, reveals choice as a microcosm of individual-level, contextual, and sociohistorical conditions characterized by the experience of perfect fit constructed during an in-situ encounter between a consumer’s habitus and an object of choice (Allen, 2002). The application of the FLAG framework to an empirical analysis of students’ choice of education institution reveals that students choices were marked by an embodied experience of ‘fitting in’ which tended to overwhelm prior calculative and analytical processes (ibid, 2002).

Research by Reay et al (2001) on the processes of university choice confirm these findings and indicate that students from certain ethnic and social class backgrounds with high school leaving scores discount elite universities because they feel that such places are not for them.

Second, the inherited cultural capital of students and their families result in differential access to the resources required to negotiate contextual and institutional mechanisms of choice (Hemsley-Brown, 1999; Furlong 2003;). Pugsy (1998) indicates that students and families who have a heritage of cultural capital are able to reproduce their cultural, economic and social advantage in the hierarchical market of educational institutions. This is because they possess an understanding of the implicit and explicit rules that accompany the process of choice and can negotiate through these procedures to their advantage. Middle class parents and students are also able to identify the hierarchy of higher education institutions and deconstruct the implications of the structural differentiation in higher education and the likely social, economic and professional consequences (Brown and Scase, 1994). In stark contrast, working class families exhibited an inability to engage with the process or to negotiate the implicit and explicit criteria of hierarchy involving institutional choice. The co-existence of traditional forms of selection with market values thus has the potential to collude with social class dispositions to entrench social inequality.

The penetration of market forces in higher education, and the nature of higher education as a 'positional good' (Hirsch, 1977; Brown et al 2003) in the context of Australia and the UK has resulted in institutions at the apex of the hierarchy strengthening their historical positions of dominance. The same can be said of business schools. Accreditation agencies such as the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business contribute to the reproduction of elitism in the sector through a variety of mechanisms including devaluing the knowledge that takes place outside elite business schools (see Lowrie and Willmott, 2009). Meadmore (1998) in the context of Australia has illustrated that elite universities do not need to vie for ‘positional goods’ as they are able to capitalise on the 'cachet of the past'. This includes strong track records in research, intergenerational social capital through their alumni, reserves of wealth and oligarchic traditions. In addition, elite universities are compelled to constrain expansion in order to maintain and maximise their positional status (Marginson, 2006). Universities low in the hierarchical structure find themselves in a precarious position and face the full onslaught of the market. Such universities deploy drastic measures to survive, including shortened
postgraduate qualifications and market led courses with little pedagogical or professional value.

The implication of the above, taken together with insights drawn from Bourdieu’s framework relating to the divergent responses of dominant and subordinate institutions within the field of higher education, is that the most corrosive effects of consumption in higher education are likely to be felt more strongly in vulnerable institutions that admit students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The continuing elitist culture of higher education and traditional forms of selection, a system in which education in some universities may be reduced to narrowly defined core competencies legitimated on the bandwagon of consumer choice; and the increasing stratification of higher education systems worldwide are all likely to contribute to entrench, rather than erode, inequality.

Conclusion
In this paper we have traced the rise of consumerism in a sector which has until relatively recently been largely publicly funded and shielded from the direct pressures of market forces. Our uncovering of the specific organisational cultures and modes of practice within higher education institutions has enabled us to analyse the varied ways in which consumerist mechanisms are mediated within a particular sector. We have also shown how the particular nature of higher education, for example its characterisation as a positional good, complicates consumer tenets and subverts key consumer mechanisms such as student satisfaction surveys designed to aid choice and enhance system-wide quality. In this way our article interrogates some of the assumptions of policy makers and contributes to the literature on the operation of consumerism in sectors which are caught in fluctuating relations between state regulation and market forces.

By drawing on both the marketing and the education literature, we have offered a more nuanced analysis of the effects of consumerism in higher education which offers important insights to policy makers and managers. Clearly contemporary relations between faculty, students and universities cannot be structured with the same rudimentary tools that were used in elite systems of higher education when students were perceived as academic disciples with homogenous needs and wants. However, the unreflective implementation of outdated consumer mechanisms has resulted in passive and instrumental learners; an outcome which is the very opposite of what policy makers intend. By adopting more recent models of consumer relations, however, the capabilities and assets that students bring with them into the learning encounter can be recognised and utilised to result in the co-creation of learning. Insights from the marketing field which illustrate how providers can enhance consumers’ abilities to create value by identifying new opportunities and by increasing consumer access to operant resources can be readily applied to higher education (Frow, Payne and Storbacka, 2008).

While there is evidence to indicate that a model of co-creation is emerging in the sector, there is urgent need to identify how government and institutional policy needs to be radically rethought to support the wider spread of this
model and to achieve scale. Given the inherent power relation between faculty
and students, it is also important to establish clear student rights and
structures for ongoing engagement as well as accessible information and
appropriate tools for decision making. Students, like all contemporary
consumers must also rely on opportunism (See Gabriel and Lang, 2006) and
will behave in a way that best suits them given the changing field and habitus.
It is therefore also important for universities to develop dynamic and flexible
mechanisms, to match the method of engagement to the nature of the issue
under discussion and to draw on a range of methods to enable choice, voice
and representation.

In the same way, we have shown how the consequences on faculty practices
are uneven. While there is greater transparency and more student control over
the pedagogical process, we have also shown how attempts to restructure
professional cultures to comply with consumerist frameworks can
unintentionally deter innovation, threaten academic standards and create
perverse incentives. More worryingly, consumerism has the potential to erode
the intrinsic, ‘hard to measure’ emotional attributes that may be part of an
older academic habitus such as commitment to the pedagogic process,
enthusiasm for the subject and flexibility in dealing with the different needs of
students.

Finally, our paper has important implications for understanding the relationship
between consumerism and the massification and democratisation of higher
education. Bourdieus conceptual framework and related work such as FLAG
choice theory provide a critical perspective on theories encompassing the
principle of rational choice. Our perspective contributes to explaining the
conditions that structure how different groups choose and consume and the
unintended effects of such patterning. Our analysis also brings into focus the
limitations of policies that fail to recognize the socio-historical shaping of
choice in relation to social class, ethnicity and diverse cultural traditions. At the
same time it is important to draw on Bourdieus notion of habitus as strategy
generating and to acknowledge that student identities are influenced but not
entirely fixed by factors such as social class and ethnicity. As the work of
Lowrie (2007) indicates, such identities are also likely to be complex and
multiple as they connect to a plurality of broader sets of discourses arising out
of the higher education contexts they pass through.

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