

## **The responsibilised consumer: neoliberalism and English higher education policy**

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**The Responsibilised Consumer:  
Neoliberalism and English Higher Education Policy**

Andrew Morrison

**Introduction**

With a principal focus upon the higher education policies of the UK Coalition government of 2010-15, this article examines the commodification of higher education in England and the discursive and material subjectification of young people as consumers of a higher education "product". Employing a two-part analytical framework drawing from Gramsci and Foucault, I shall begin by analysing the 2011 white paper, *Students at the Heart of the System*. I shall examine this as an exemplar of a technology of governance aimed at the mobilisation of neoliberal values of individualistic consumerism and "self-reliance" through policies which consolidate a monetized student customer-institutional provider relationship. Discussion of the Coalition government's higher education policies subsequent to the 2011 white paper will follow and then, following that, I will consider possible future policy directions in the higher education sector under the new Conservative administration elected in 2015. My focus in this article will be upon higher education policies in England only because higher education now falls within the purview of the devolved assembly governments of Scotland and Wales.

The rationale for this article lies in current concerns regarding higher education in England. Deep austerity-driven welfare cuts, enacted first under the Coalition government and now under the present Conservative administration, leave grounds for arguing that the UK is returning to a level of market-led economic liberalism not seen since before World War Two (Taylor-Goodby, 2012). Under such an aggressively neoliberalist political and economic culture, individuals must increasingly look to their own resources for personal survival, and it is within this context that higher education plays a key function in the production of "worker/consumer citizens" (Boden & Nedeva, 2010, p.40). The following section will

briefly outline the educational policy environment that has been shaped by neoliberalism, and then examine the influence of Gramsci and Foucault upon some critical studies of neoliberalist educational policies in the UK.

### **Neoliberalism**

The emergence of neoliberalism in the U.K. may be traced to the shift, towards the end of the 1970s, from a collectivist Liberal welfare form of government based upon Keynesian economics to a market-led form of governance. Since the election of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government in 1979 neoliberalism, in variant forms, has been the dominant economic discourse and effective form of economic relations in the U.K. The shift towards neoliberalism has seen a concomitant and progressive instrumentalisation of education at all levels in the service of economic competitiveness. Following what is now well rehearsed rhetoric, education occupies a pivotal place in the attempt to create a "magnet" economy, whereby high-skilled, high-waged employment is to be attracted to the UK (Brown & Lauder, 1996). Consequently, education is increasingly positioned as a social good whose primary value lies in its economic utility to the nation and to the individual, a discourse that Lauder et al. (2012, p.2) term "learning = earning". The work of Gramsci and Foucault, among others, has proven to be a key resource to researchers seeking to theorise these shifts within the educational policy environment.

### **Gramsci**

Gramsci, of course, never wrote about neoliberalism. Rather, his value to an understanding of processes of subjectification in neoliberal societies resides in the application by contemporary writers of the Gramscian concept of hegemony. Gramsci (1971, p.80) believed that in order to maintain ideological credibility within the context of an apparently democratic state, the ruling classes have to keep power chiefly through consent rather than coercion, and this was to be obtained through their capacity to shape a "common sense" view

of the world. To this end, a successful hegemonic project needs to make effective links between what Gramsci termed formal culture (as produced and channelled through established institutions) and the informal culture of the mass of the populace. Gramsci further sub-divided this latter form of culture between *common sense* and *practical sense*: the former is fragmentary, conservative in nature and "opposed to novelty" (Gramsci 1988, p.346); the latter is also incomplete in outlook but is how people understand and approach everyday tasks in the present and future. For Smith (2004, p.220) hegemony is, thus, "janus-faced": both backwards and forwards facing, and herein lie the possibilities both for forms of regulation and, crucially, for agency, contestation and resistance.

As indicated previously, Gramsci has been drawn upon as a theoretical resource by scholars concerned with the educational policy environment shaped by neoliberalism in the UK. For example, Avis (2009) has employed a range of Gramscian concepts to illustrate and critique the contradictions between the rhetoric of social justice surrounding Post-compulsory Education and Training (PCET) and the ways in which the sector is geared to service dominant capitalist interests. Similarly, Greaves, Hill and Maisuria (2007) have utilised Gramscian concepts, among Marxian other theoretical resources, to argue that the UK education system functions as a medium of capitalist social reproduction but is also a site of contestation and resistance.

## **Foucault**

Foucault's discussion of neoliberalism is framed through his concepts of governmentality and biopolitics, and these rest upon quite different ontological premises to the structuralist, institution-centric accounts of Gramscian perspectives on neoliberalism. For Foucault (2008, p.2), there can be no "...primary, original and already given object" in the form of a state or civil society. We observe the existence of the state, and its powers, through its effects which are enacted through a complex of different techniques and practices of governance; thus, the

state is "...the correlative of a particular way of governing..." (Foucault, 2008, p.6) rather than a bounded entity. This, then, is the basis of what Foucault terms governmentality: a discursive field within which the enactment of power is rationalised, and his understanding of neoliberalism is grounded within this perspective. Thus, for Foucault (2008), neoliberalism represents a key transformation in the rationalities that underpinned the earlier forms of liberal governance in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Unlike the classical laissez-faire liberalism of the 18<sup>th</sup> and earlier part of the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, neo-liberalist thought challenges the presumption of economic rationality amongst social actors; rather, if markets are to function optimally then the state must intervene. This requires the protection and active promotion of private enterprise but, beyond that, it is premised upon the assumption that, "...competition as an essential economic logic will only appear and produce its effects under certain conditions which have to be carefully and artificially constructed". (Foucault, 2008, p.120). This, then, requires an "active governmentality" to create a society framed by a regulatory principle of "pure competition" (Foucault, 2008, p.121). The correlative of this art of governance is "homo economicus": an individual who accepts economic reality and who conducts their life as a form of enterprise characterised by rational choice-making and the optimisation of personal resources (Foucault, 2008, p.269).

Foucault (2008, p.252) is clear that homo economicus and the enterprise form represent neoliberalism's "grid of intelligibility" for individuals' behaviour rather than an all-encompassing reality as not all individuals will accept and adopt such positions. Nevertheless, the generalisation of the enterprise form represents a powerfully normative ethical framework by which individuals come to judge their behaviour and that of others, and Foucault (1988, p.18) explains this form of self-governance through the concept of "technologies of the self" which are techniques of governance which, "...permit individuals to effect a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being, so as to

transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, wisdom, perfection or immortality". Thus, the governmentality perspective sees power not as a force of constraint upon citizens but as a way of constructing citizens capable of living a form of "regulated freedom" (Rose & Miller 1992, p.174).

Foucault's work has proven to be an enormously influential theoretical resource among UK-based researchers seeking to understand education policy within the context of neoliberal forms of governance. A key scholar in this respect is Stephen Ball, who has employed Foucauldian analyses to examine the ways in which the progressive marketisation of the UK higher education sector presents both an objective economic reality to practitioners, and engenders a deeply felt subjective set of social relations that frames the parameters of professional ethics and practice (Ball, 2012). Thus, the work of both Foucault and, to a lesser extent, Gramsci has been employed by scholars examining the dynamics of neoliberal governance and its impact upon UK higher education policy. How though do these two quite different theoretical approaches work together to aid in the analysis of this present paper?

### **A two-part theoretical framework**

In addressing the question of what we mean by the term "policy", Ball (2005) offers a useful distinction between "policy as text" and "policy as discourse". Policy as text views policies as textual representations which are encoded in complex ways and which are decoded by social actors' interpretations of them. In consequence, the outcomes of policy cannot simply be "read-off" from texts because social agents interpret, enact and contest policy meaning (Ball, 2015, p.47). On this reading of policy, there is much social agency and social intentionality and Ball (2005, p.48) argues that this perspective is consonant with a realist form of analysis. The Gramscian schema with its realist attention to social structures, institutions and agents and its conceptualisation of power as contested and in need of constant defence is clearly congruent with this view of policy. However, Ball (2005, p.48) goes on to

note that a limitation of the policy as text analysis is that it places an excessive focus upon policy actors' thoughts and actions at the expense of what they do *not* think about. Here, then, the policy as discourse approach sets out to uncover the "bigger picture" by which policy ensembles exercise power through their capacity to produce "truth" and "knowledge" as discourses (Ball, 2005, p.48). On this Foucauldian reading of discourse--which goes beyond language to encompass social practices and ethics--we are concerned with the ways in which a dominant policy discourse subjectifies and sets the boundaries of a discursive reality for social actors (Ball, 2005). Both these approaches rest upon different ontological premises but, as Ball (2005, p.43) argues, we need both because the complexity of policy analysis requires a flexible toolbox of concepts.

The next section will discuss the higher education policies of the 2010-15 UK Coalition government. My purpose here is not to provide an exhaustive and detailed survey of the Coalitions' higher education policies; rather, my aim is to take a broader view of policy by analysing the ways in which it exemplifies the arguments that I have made with regard to neoliberalism and higher education: the more active role of the neoliberalist state in the engineering of markets, and in the attempt to create student-consumers.

### **Marketisation and Consumer Responsibilisation: the 2011 Higher Education White Paper**

In May 2010 a Coalition government of centre-right Conservatives and centre-left Liberal Democrats was formed following a general election which produced a hung parliament. The Coalition government's most significant comment on higher education, in the absence of any subsequent legislation on the sector, was the 2011 white paper, *Students at the Heart of the System*. As Callender and Scott (2014, p.1) contend, the reforms which it introduced are arguably the most radical in the last fifty years of English higher education policy. The white paper's fundamental shifting of the funding base of undergraduate-level higher education, its

concerted attempt to create a market within higher education and its use of state financial levers to this end mark it out as the clearest expression to date of the commodification of higher education in England. However, significant though these reforms were, they should be seen in a broader line of continuity. In particular, the 2011 White Paper cannot be understood without reference to the 2010 Browne Review commissioned under the previous Labour government and which largely informed the white paper.

The Browne Review or, more formally, The Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance, chaired by Lord Browne, began work on 9 November 2009. The remit of the enquiry was to make recommendations to government on the future of tuition fees. These had remained capped by government at a maximum of £3,000 per year since the passing of the 2004 Higher Education Act. As Callender and Scott (2014, p.2) note, the report tried to achieve a fine balancing act: to increase higher education participation at a time of ever-growing but unmet demand, and to produce a sustainable system of funding for the sector by making it less dependent upon the vagaries of public funding at a period of intense fiscal retrenchment following the global banking crisis of 2008. The report was published after the General Election in October 2010 and its recommendations were therefore inherited by the new Coalition government. The principal two recommendations, with regard to the focus of this present article, were (a) to greatly reduce government grant funding for undergraduate teaching; (b) to replace this income with uncapped tuition fees, the levels of which would reach their “natural” market level.

In the event, the Coalition government adopted some of the Browne Report's proposals but rejected others while devising new initiatives, and these policy initiatives are detailed within the white paper. In what follows, I shall offer an account divided by two salient themes of the principal policy strands of the white paper, and of key subsequent developments under the Coalition government. These themes were arrived at by a thematic analysis process which



drew partly from the steps set out by Auerbach and Silverstein (2003), who offer a three-part model originally intended for interview analysis but which may usefully be adapted and applied to documentary analysis. The first step is a process of “making the text manageable” (Auerbach and Silverstein 2003, p.42) whereby the researcher chooses which parts of the text to analyse and which parts to discard. The researcher will be aided in this process by explicitly recalling their research concerns and the theoretical framework(s) within which they are working. In this case, my research concerns related to the marketisation of higher education which was covered in the first four chapters of the paper, the remaining two pertaining to social mobility (Chapter Five) and the regulatory framework of higher education (Chapter Six). In the second stage of the model, Auerbach and Silverstein (2003, p.42) advise the researcher to extract a list of “repeating ideas” from the text and then group these repeating ideas into a list of more general “themes”. Auerbach and Silverstein (2003, p.62) describe a theme as “...an implicit idea or topic that a group of repeating ideas have in common”. An initial close reading of the text revealed a number of repeating ideas. The prevalence of these was then confirmed by use of a word search which mapped key words and related cognates considered pertinent to the focus of this study. In mapping such repeating ideas across the four chapters, I was able to coalesce their common ideas around two key themes, as I shall discuss; these themes shall then be discussed in relation to the theoretical framework outlined previously.

### **Students as Consumers**

The government accepted Browne's recommendation to substantially decrease the grant funding for undergraduate teaching with the exception of "...a contribution to the costs of the most expensive subjects, such as medicine, the laboratory sciences and engineering" (DBIS, 2011, p.15). The reduction in funds was to be offset through an increase in tuition fees (DBIS, 2011, p.15). However, the government rejected the Browne Report's recommendation to

completely remove the cap on fees. Instead, it was decided to raise the cap from £3,000 per year to a maximum of £9,000. The rise in fees was (and remains) highly controversial and, therefore, a key theme of the white paper is to offer a post-hoc defence of this decision and this is outlined in Chapter One. The language of the marketplace is employed here. Students will be empowered consumers whose discretionary purchase-making will drive up standards within the sector:

*This will...put more power into the hands of students. Institutions that can attract students, by showing them that they offer good quality and good value for money, should grow and prosper, and may well increase their overall income. Institutions that cannot attract students will have to change. (DBIS, 2011, p.15).*

As indicated above, the quid pro quo for the raising of tuition fees was the positioning of students as consumers of education. This theme of the white paper is worked through by use of different techniques. The key technique, detailed in Chapter Two, is the imposition upon institutions to provide easily accessible, transparent information across a range of data indicators such as workload, student satisfaction and employment destinations. Foucault's (2008) homo economicus needs choice, and information oils the wheels of choice-making:

*Our reforms aim to make the English higher education system more responsive to students and employers. This depends on access to high quality information about different courses and institutions (DBIS, 2011, p.27)*

The white paper is clear that, as consumers of education, students now have rights in relation to higher education institutions. The white paper notes approvingly the development of Student Charters which more formally contractualise consumer-provider relationships. Charters are a technology which permits some degree of standardisation and thus of comparison in consumer choice-making:

*Charters...must include clear information on what to do if expected standards are not met, and provide links to more detailed information in course handbooks and university regulations. They will help to provide consistency of practice across different subject areas...* (DBIS, 2011, p.33)

## **Markets and-Competition**

Of course, economic theory tells us that consumer empowerment requires, at a minimum, open competition between autonomous producers based upon price-related exchange between buyers and sellers (Marginson, 2013). However, English higher education has long been characterised by governmental management of supply through the imposition of controls limiting the number of undergraduates which institutions could enrol. The effect, however, has been to limit supply in a period of increasing demand. This issue formed part of the rationale for the Browne Report which called for a ten percent increase in the number of places available. The Coalition's response was a partial lifting of number controls whereby around 65,000 places for "high achieving" students with A-level grades of at least AAB (later lowered to ABB) were to fall outside of number control quotas from the 2012-13 academic year (DBIS, 2011, p.50). This was accompanied by the creation of a "flexible margin" of about 20,000 places in 2012-13 for institutions whose average tuition fee charge was at or below £7,500. The aim in doing this was to expand student consumer choice by creating a more differentiated and thus more competitive market:

*"...the current system of controls limits student choice, because institutions are prevented from expanding in response to demand from applicants. That in turn protects institutions with lower levels of demand, which fill their places with students who cannot get to their first-choice institution...Reform is essential if we are to secure the benefits of improved competition and diversity."* (DBIS, 2011, p.48)

A policy as text analysis tells us that all policies are interpreted and mediated by social actors in ways that do not necessarily correspond to politicians' intentions (Ball, 2005). And such was the case here as the partial lifting of number controls did not produce the diversified market the government had intended. The principle reason for this was that most institutions chose to charge at or near the £9,000 maximum thus leaving fewer providers to compete at the "budget" end of the market. Consequently, the government attempted to create a more liberal market for higher education places. On 5 December 2013, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, announced the cap on the number of undergraduates that English higher education institutions could recruit would be relaxed in 2014-15 and scrapped altogether in 2015-16. In practice, this was not thought to mean a completely limitless free market. Rather, Ministers expected the liberalisation of quotas to stimulate demand for approximately 30,000 more full-time undergraduate places in 2014-15 and 60,000 a year after that (Hillman, 2014, p.9). Nevertheless, it is clear that, within these calculation parameters, the Coalition government attempted to create something much closer to a free market proper than has existed hitherto: a clear example of Foucault's (2008, p.121) "active governmentality" in the service of a regulatory principle (though not in full practice) of "pure competition".

A second key element in the white paper's attempt to produce a quasi-market in higher education in England was the provision to make it easier for "alternative provider" institutions to compete with established universities. An "alternative provider" is an institution of higher education which does not receive government grants directly but which may obtain public funds through the student loans used to pay the fees of the students which they attract. They range from charitable organisations to large private companies. In truth, though, the distinction between public and private universities in England is an increasingly blurred one as the financial operations of the publically funded sector are now complexly

interwoven with the private sector, leading Ball (2012, p.24) to term public bodies "hybrid" institutions. Seeking to further blur the traditional public-private divide, the Coalition aimed to stimulate growth among the alternative providers and so the white paper announced that the maximum tuition fee loan available to students attending these institutions would rise from £3,375 to £6,000 per year (DBIS, 2011, p.47). The white paper expressed the belief that alternative providers may bring particular strengths to the sector, for example in teaching, or cover niche areas (DBIS, 2011, p.46). Although this policy was accorded relatively little space in the white paper when compared with the other themes discussed in this article, it is nevertheless an important component in the overall push towards marketisation. Greater diversity of provision represents an attempt to find the equilibrium of a smoothly functioning market order: different providers will meet the different needs of different sectors of the student market:

*Other alternative providers, including new entrants to the sector, may have different strengths. For example, they may offer particular well-honed teaching models that are especially efficient or cover niche areas. (DBIS, 2011, p.46)*

Since the changes were announced in 2011, there has been significant and fast growth of alternative providers. It is perhaps too early to say whether alternative providers will achieve the white paper's aim for greater diversification and sharpened competition in the longer term. Again, however, a policy as text analysis alerts us to the possibility of the unintended consequences of policy as it is mediated by social actors and it is, unfortunately, clear at this juncture that there have been problems identified with at least some alternative providers. In 2015, a House of Commons Select Committee of Public Accounts reported a series of failings. These included: £3.84 million in payment of student support to ineligible students; considerably higher drop-out rates than average at some providers (20% compared with a sector average of 4%); evidence of inappropriate recruitment practices and poor standards of

teaching (H.C, 2015, p.7). The prime factor behind these failings, according to the Select Committee, was an over-rapid implementation of the policy while alternative providers fell outside of the existing legislative framework to ensure quality provision (H.C, 2015, p.4).

## **Discussion**

Thus far, I have discussed the white paper in terms of policy as text, or in Ball's (2005, p.46) terms as a textual intervention into practice. However, a full analysis requires us to go beyond the text-specific language of the 2011 document and beyond social actors' intentionality and also adopt a policy as discourse approach, that is, to see policy within the "...frameworks of sense and obviousness with which policy is thought, talked and written about" (Ball, 2005, p.44). Taking this Foucauldian view, we can see that the active, self-interested consumer-citizen envisaged by the white paper clearly reflects a wider political rationality in the UK in which the extension of the economic form beyond simple monetary exchange operates as "...a principle of intelligibility and a principle of decipherment of social relationships and individual behaviour" (Foucault, 2008, p.243). In other words, the discourse of student consumerism expressed in the 2011 paper sits within a wider discourse of personal responsabilisation directed at young people. If we combine governmentality and Gramscian perspectives, and view responsabilisation as a technology of the self in the function of hegemonic capitalist relations, it is apparent that it is composed of two basic elements: a set of "negative" pressures towards conformance and a set of "positive" pressures towards seemingly active conformance--or what Raymond Williams termed "negative determinations" and "positive determinations" (Williams, 1977, p.87). Deep cuts to welfare provision are the state's attempt to exert negative material and discursive pressures. However, in modern liberal democracies hegemony is primarily to be gained through positive determinations, that is, *through* the aspirations of citizens rather than *against* them because,

“The self-steering capacities of individuals are now construed as vital resources for achieving private profit, public tranquillity and social progress” (Rose, 1992, p.153).

It is in this light that we may view the hegemonic power relations at play in the white paper’s positioning of students as consumers of education within a marketised H.E. sector. Higher education is a key site of private consumption (via tuition fees) and (potentially) offers individuals the chance to achieve "private profit" through the acquisition of credentials that function as positional goods within the labour market. Additionally, however, it is also seen to have a vital public utility as a weapon in the battle for international economic competitiveness (Brown, Lauder & Ashton, 2011). And, following this rationality, higher education becomes framed firmly as the responsible *consumer choice* of a rational, calculating individual who aims to optimise their own personal economic potential and, in so doing, is able to contribute to the greater economy of the wider body politic. This, then, is the premise of the "learning = earning" (Lauder et al. 2012) social contract between the state and the individual, which is now so deeply embedded within dominant educational discourses surrounding English higher education.

However, if we switch back to a policy as text analysis, and if we return to the “janus-faced” nature of hegemonic struggle, we can see that despite state-driven efforts at consumer responsabilisation, fee-paying higher education is far from being culturally normalised. Indeed, fees in England remain a site of contestation between the values of an older collectivist notion of social justice, as expressed through welfarist provision in education, and those of the new forms of neoliberal governance. Evidence of this was to be found in the wide-scale public protests against the fee rises in 2011. The Coalition government was acutely conscious of this, a fact that is apparent in the white paper’s forthright defence of the raising of fees. Here, the white paper attempts to manufacture a Gramscian "common-sense"

view of the need to raise fees by constructing a Thatcherite-like TINA (There Is No Alternative) form of argument in relation to the need to cut public spending:

*We inherited an enormous deficit which created significant spending pressures. We could have responded by reducing student numbers or the level of spending per student. But this would have deprived people of the opportunity to go to university or jeopardised the quality of their education. Instead our proposals for graduate contributions mean that good institutions will be well funded into the future, if they respond to student choices.* (DBIS, 2011, p.14)

Ultimately, the white paper attempts to resolve the tensions surrounding the fee rises by application of a meta-discourse of marketisation in which institutions compete for empowered student-consumers. For Collini (2011), the white paper's language of student-consumer empowerment represents a brilliant "semantic reversal" by which a negative (having to pay increased fees for that which was free to previous generations) becomes a positive. Furthermore, in this neoliberal imaginary, as Collini (2011) notes critically, students are envisioned as "elite commandos" who will exert market discipline upon the higher education sector. The almost Darwinian language of "survival of the fittest" that is employed here recalls Reay's (2001, p.343) rueful comment that, while the English education system has long produced "sink schools", we may now be witnessing the advent of "failing universities".

### **Concluding comments**

This article has discussed certain key themes that characterised the higher education policies of the UK Coalition government of 2010-15. This is not the first or only paper to have analysed these policies in terms of their drive towards marketisation and commodification of the sector; others have also made this case quite eloquently (Collini, 2011; Callender and Scott (2014). The contribution of this paper lies in the potential of the



two-part theoretical framework that I have brought to bear to illuminate important issues surrounding policy. A policy as discourse approach (Ball, 2005), drawing upon Foucauldian concepts of discourse, offers us a conceptually powerful way to understand how efforts to responsabilise young people into becoming entrepreneurial consumers of higher education study form part of a wider set of discourses of responsabilisation which are rooted in contemporary ethical presuppositions about the ways in which individuals should behave. However, by also pursuing a policy as text approach (Ball, 2005) that applies a Gramscian focus upon social structures and actors, we can see that responsabilisation towards higher education is no authorless discourse: power is located unevenly in social actors—within, for example, governments and other political agencies—who exercise this power with some degree of *intention*. Thus, this form of analysis has offered this study a degree of theoretical flexibility with which to approach the complexities of policy in contemporary neoliberalist England.

Thursday May 7<sup>th</sup> 2015 saw the election of a new Conservative government led by Prime Minister David Cameron. A green paper consultative document, published in November 2015, indicates a strong line of continuity with the policy themes that I have discussed in relation to the Coalition government. The green paper (DBIS, 2015) proposes that universities may raise tuition fees from their present £9,000 ceiling in line with increases in inflation but that this will be subject to their performance in a range of key “metrics” in relation to teaching quality, student experience, graduate job prospects and drop-out rates. While most of this information is already publically available, the aim of the Paper is that such data should be used to create a more subtly differentiated, hierarchised market in higher education through the leverage of student fees. Another key theme of the green paper is to make it easier for new higher education institutions to establish themselves. This falls squarely in line with the aim to create a more competitive market; but it is also premised upon evidence that such institutions

attract relatively larger numbers of working-class and minority ethnic students (DBIS, 2015, p.86). Opening up the higher education sector to new institutions therefore addresses the government's stated aim to improve social mobility, and I shall conclude my discussion with some remarks upon this last policy commitment.

Nobody with a commitment to the enactment of egalitarian values would deny that improved access to higher education for social groups who have historically been denied it is a good thing. And for decades young people, particularly those from lower socio-economic groups, have been enjoined to enter higher education in England on the basis of an informal but powerful "learning = earning" contract between the state and the individual (Morrison, 2014). Increased overall rates of participation, particularly among those from lower socio-economic groups (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service [UCAS], 2014), would seem to indicate the success of such responsabilising discourses. However, as I have argued throughout this article, discourses are not uncritically mediated. In fact, the more prosaic material reality behind discursive responsabilisation may be found in the apparent paradoxes of what Brown, Lauder and Ashton (2011) term the "opportunity trap". When higher education participation increases but the number of graduate-level jobs does not rise concomitantly (as at present in the UK) we reach a position of credential inflation whereby, paradoxically, a degree increasingly becomes an entry-level qualification to positions that did not formerly require them (Ainley and Allen, 2010). Although they may be aware of the hollowness of the "learning = earning" contract, when faced with such a congested labour market many young people will feel they have little option but to participate in the face of limited opportunities for fulfilling employment for those without HE credentials (Brown, Lauder and Ashton, 2011). When higher education is, quite literally, sold to young people on the basis of an increasingly tenuous promise, I believe it is an issue of ethical concern to all who work within and beyond the sector.

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