

# Students in Marketised Higher Education Landscapes: An Introduction

Sociological Research Online  
2021, Vol. 26(1) 125–129  
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DOI: 10.1177/1360780420971651  
journals.sagepub.com/home/sro



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## Students and marketisation

Sociological research has documented effectively the ways in which the higher education landscape in many parts of the world has become marketised over recent decades (e.g. Baldwin and James, 2000; Holtta et al., 2011; Naidoo et al., 2011; Slaughter and Cantwell, 2012). This has highlighted, for example, the introduction, in some countries at least, of principles of New Public Management (Deem et al., 2007; Wright and Ørberg, 2017); tuition fees (Gale and Parker, 2018; Wilkins et al., 2013); metrics encouraging institutions to compete against one another (Sabri, 2013; Tavares and Cardoso, 2013); and consumer rights legislation (Tomlinson, 2018). These developments have typically been linked to the spread of neoliberal globalisation across the Global North. While there is now plentiful evidence of the ways in which such changes have been played out at the level of policy and institutional management, we know less about their impact on the everyday lives of students. This is particularly the case with respect to non-English-speaking nations. While studies in Australia, New Zealand, the US, and the UK have explored how various market-led reforms (often those related to changes in funding arrangements) have affected the experiences of students (e.g. Nissen, 2019) and, in some cases, their families (e.g. Zaloom, 2019), we know less about the impact of market pressures in other parts of the world. Moreover, even in Anglophone countries, there is not always consensus among scholars. For example, writing with respect to the UK in particular, while some researchers have argued that, as a result of paying higher fees,

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students have taken on the identity of consumers (e.g. Molesworth et al., 2009; Nixon et al., 2018), others have shown how some students actively resist such an identity, believing that it undermines the two-way nature of learning and their role as an active contributor to their own education (Tomlinson, 2017).

Our aim in putting together this special section has been to build upon these debates, to provide a fuller understanding of the various ways in which marketisation has affected the lives of students themselves, and how these influences are understood by others. The articles that make up the section explore empirically different dimensions of being a student – including their political activity (Raaper), study practices (Ulriksen and Nejrup), and relationships with staff (Gretzky and Lerner) – and how these have been reconfigured through the introduction of various market mechanisms. They also consider the extent to which marketisation has informed media representations of students (Silverio et al.). Moreover, we have sought to expand the geographical reach of this body of scholarship through focussing on a range of national contexts – England, Denmark, Spain, Israel, and China. In so doing, the special section highlights how the ways in which marketisation is perceived and experienced are closely linked to national context. For example, Jayadeva et al. describe how in Spain, staff and students experienced higher education as having been significantly transformed by marketisation in large part due to the manner in which the private cost of higher education is paid for by students in the country; dissatisfaction with the quality of education and pessimism about the labour market outcomes of having a degree in Spain; and the fact that marketisation is relatively less firmly established in the higher education system of Spain and therefore less normalised. Likewise, Yu discusses how students studying at a transnational China–UK cooperative university in Ningbo expressed disappointment with what they perceived to be their institution’s ‘consumerist approach’, but attributed this to what they viewed as a ‘utilitarian culture’ characteristic of China – because they viewed the British higher education system as superior and free of such neoliberal imperatives. In this way, the special section shows how, while marketisation has many common elements across nation-states, it is often spatially differentiated – and not always experienced in the same way by students across the world.

All six articles in the special section are based on papers that were originally given as part of a conference titled ‘Students in Changing Higher Education Landscapes’ that was held at the University of Surrey, UK, in June 2019. In exploring the lives of higher education students within marketised higher education sectors, we hope that the articles will be of particular interest to sociologists of education and scholars in the area of youth studies. However, we anticipate that they will also have a considerably broader appeal, given that many readers of *Sociological Research Online* will be engaged in teaching students, and thus have a professional interest in the debates with which we will engage.

## **An overview of the special section articles**

The first two articles of the special section focus specifically on the UK, which has one of the most highly marketised higher education systems in the world. The first article, by Rille Raaper, investigates the changing nature of student politics. It explains how policy changes in the UK higher education sector – that combine the promotion of efficiency and accountability with the need for enhanced competition and risk management – pressurise universities to take up an entrepreneurial role, and position students as consumers. The article builds on this discussion by exploring the implications of a consumerist discourse

for the political subjectivity of higher education students. Here, drawing on Michel Foucault's work, Raaper illustrates how, under a marketisation regime, students' political activities are likely to be reconfigured – with students focussing more on their private interests and deploying a personalised form of political engagement as opposed to supporting a more collective form of political representation.

In the second article, Sergio Silverio, Catherine Wilkinson, and Samantha Wilkinson examine the manifestations of a marketised UK higher education in a fictional setting. They provide an engaging analysis of the television drama *Cheat* (broadcast in 2019), a psychological thriller based in an imaginary UK higher education institution. By focussing on the interactions between the leading student character and the university staff, they explore representations of 'powerful student consumers' and 'commodified academics'. Their analysis demonstrates, for example, how a complaint is depicted as a form of consumer power for students, which can have detrimental consequences for the academics' career prospects. They also highlight the extent to which the depiction of the student consumer in the series is exclusively based on an image of a privileged student (able-bodied, upper middle-class, and white), which as such does not reflect the reality of the diversity of students in UK higher education institutions. They argue that their textual analysis of *Cheat* provides novel insights into the ways in which the student experience is depicted and understood in the marketised UK higher education system. Indeed, their paper is an important and welcome addition to the scant literature in the field of higher education research that analyses less traditional data sources.

The next two articles shift our focus to mainland Europe. The third contribution to the special section, by Lars Ulriksen and Christoffer Nejrup, focusses on the concept of 'study intensity', defined in Danish higher education policy as the number of hours per week a student spends studying. It argues that such an understanding of study intensity wrongly conflates learning quality with countable clock hours, and is based on a quantitative understanding of time, which fails to capture how students themselves perceive and present their study practices. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, and workshops with students studying at a Danish university, Ulriksen and Nejrup demonstrate how students exhibit a more multi-dimensional and qualitative understanding of time. For instance, they show how, in reflecting on their study practices, students made qualitative distinctions between work effort and mental effort; did not see their 'university life' and study as isolated from other realms of their lives; and were not always able to easily partition time spent on studying from the other activities in which they were engaged. Furthermore, the authors argue that being a full-time student might not be experienced in terms of the number of hours spent on studying, but the extent to which study was prioritised over other activities. The authors caution that policy initiatives that impose a uni-dimensional quantitative understanding of time on students, in an attempt to improve learning outcomes and educational quality, may do more harm than good.

The fourth article, by Sazana Jayadeva, Rachel Brooks, Achala Gupta, Jessie Abrahams, Predrag Lazetic, and Anu Lainio, sets out to explore two research questions: (1) to what extent (if at all) are Spanish higher education students viewed as being customers in a marketised higher education landscape? and (2) to what extent are policy and institutional understandings of students shared by higher education staff and students themselves? The authors illustrate how university staff and students believed that marketisation of the Spanish higher education system had dramatically and problematically transformed what it means to be a student today, forcing students to take on the roles of financial investors in

their education, student-workers, and ‘customers’. The authors highlight how staff and student narratives contrasted sharply with how Spanish students were conceptualised in policy and institutional narratives as well as in the existing scholarship, where the Spanish higher education landscape was discussed as being largely unmarketised. In explaining this paradox, the authors argue that the perceptions of staff and students are closely related to the manner in which the cost of higher education is borne by Spanish students and their families, dissatisfaction with the quality of education and pessimism about the labour market outcomes associated with a degree, and the fact that marketisation is relatively less firmly established in the Spanish HE system and therefore less normalised.

The final two articles broaden the analytical scope of the special section beyond Europe, to Israel and China, respectively. In the fifth article, Maria Gretzky and Julia Lerner offer insights into students’ emotional experiences in the rapidly commercialising Israeli higher education sector. Drawing on interviews with undergraduate students, they outline the complexity of participants’ views of their university education and their relationships with academic staff. Gretzky and Lerner show that students take on the identity of a consumer, evidenced through their expectation that they will acquire skills to facilitate their transition into the labour market. Simultaneously, though, students appreciate the transformative potential of a university education as they speak about seeking self-fulfilling and personally meaningful knowledge at university. These expectations also shape students’ views of the effectiveness of the pedagogical approaches that academic staff adopt in university settings. The article demonstrates how students value those members of staff who offer an emotionally gratifying and therapeutic university experience, and maintain a friendly, accommodative, and caring approach towards students. Gretzky and Lerner contend that this emphasis on the emotional aspects of pedagogical encounters is critical to comprehend fully the impact of academic capitalism.

Finally, the sixth article in the special section, by Jingran Yu, provides a case study of a UK transnational higher education institution in China: the University of Nottingham, Ningbo, China (UNNC). Drawing on interviews with Chinese UNCC students, Yu argues that the manner in which UNCC is perceived by its Chinese students is starkly mediated by their beliefs about UK and Chinese higher education and, more specifically, the symbolic power that UK higher education wields in China. While UK higher education was associated with advancement, humanitarianism, and commercial disinterestedness, Chinese higher education was seen as being characterised by a nation-building agenda. Yu illustrates this through discussing students’ lack of enthusiasm for Chinese patriotism education (a compulsory course); their valuing of ‘international’ pedagogical practices aimed at encouraging critical thinking; their reasons for choosing to study at UNCC; and their attribution of perceived moves of UNCC towards ‘utilitarianism’ solely to Chinese society. The paper foregrounds the persistent symbolic power of UK higher education in the transnational context and its reproduction within the hierarchically structured global field of higher education.

### **Acknowledgements**

We are very grateful to the authors of the special section papers for their contributions, and to all those who kindly reviewed the articles for us. We would also like to thank the European Research Council for the award of a Consolidator Grant to Rachel Brooks (Grant No. 681018\_EUROSTUDENTS), which funded the time we spent guest-editing the special section and organising the ‘Students in Changing Higher Education Landscapes’ conference.

## Funding

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The European Research Council awarded a Consolidator Grant to Rachel Brooks (681018\_EUOSTUDENTS).

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**Date submitted** 28 September 2020

**Date accepted** 13 October 2020