Chapter 8

NEOLIBERAL POLICY, QUALITY AND INEQUALITY IN UNDERGRADUATE DEGREES

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Introduction

In this chapter we analyse two contradictory framings of ‘a high-quality undergraduate education’ and reveal how neoliberal higher education policy is in danger of increasing inequality in England. The first framing, which is found in policy documents, sees the marketisation of the higher education system as essential to high quality. It views student employment as the key measure of high quality and suggests that disadvantaged students would prefer to pursue degrees that focus on employment training rather than study academic disciplines. The English university system is class-divided and most disadvantaged students, along with members of the lower middle class, attend lower-ranking universities (Roberts 2009). The policy documents definition of high quality has implications for curricula in these universities. The second framing is in current social science students’ accounts of what they value about the education they are receiving. These students, who are from diverse backgrounds and are based in higher- and lower-ranking universities in England, value the ways that engaging with disciplinary knowledge transforms them personally, empowers them socially and prepares them for employment.

Basil Bernstein’s (2000) term ‘pedagogic rights’ provides a definition of ‘a high-quality undergraduate education’ that helps us evaluate these two very different perspectives. ‘Pedagogic rights’ signifies what higher education should contribute to democratic societies. Two elements of ‘pedagogic rights’ (enhancement and inclusion) map what students say they gain from studying
social science at four universities which have been given pseudonyms to protect the identity of departments and students (see section on methodology). If neoliberal policies are successful, students in lower-ranking universities may be deprived of these rights, which come from learning social sciences. Enhancement and inclusion are necessary for students to acquire Bernstein’s third pedagogic right (participation) which denotes political empowerment; but equal participation also requires that graduates from all universities access opportunities to exercise political power. The policy documents’ definition of high quality, which is presented as increasing fairness for disadvantaged students by improving employment, will not give more political power to students in lower-ranking universities.

This chapter contributes to academic analysis of the potential and limitations of higher education quality systems in tackling national and global inequality (Amaral and Rosa 2010; Brennan et al. 2010; Abbas and McLean 2007, 2010; Morley 2003). It provides a pertinent example of the limits of neoliberal policies’ economised conceptions of high-quality undergraduate education (Gidley et al. 2010) in a specific national context and answers calls to bring empirical data and social theory to bear on the policy problems associated with quality systems (Blackmur 2010). We achieve this by applying Bernstein’s concept of pedagogic rights to students’ descriptions of a high-quality undergraduate social science education. This sheds light on what is to be gained from disciplinary education and what is at stake if certain sections of society lose access to this type of education.

Neoliberalism, Quality and Inequality

It is imperative to evaluate the impact of changing higher education policies on the most disadvantaged students, because in England and globally, universities have only relatively recently begun to play an explicit role in tackling inequalities associated with class, ethnicity, age and disability (Reay,
Crozier and Clayton 2009a, 2009b) and they need to build on the limited success they have had so far. The specific problems they face in trying to do this must be understood in their national and global contexts (Gidley et al. 2010). Literature on the English university system draws attention to the role of universities in producing middle class and upper class advantage (Reay et al. 2009a, 2009b) and the need to track universities’ role in creating new and unjust hierarchical divisions in novel social, economic and political contexts. Roberts (2009) suggests that English universities may be involved in creating new divisions within an expanding middle class. Middle class students have taken up most of the new university places which have accrued since the 1980s, but the upper middle classes (who attend a few elite universities and occupy the best paid and most politically powerful jobs) have continued to benefit most from higher education. All other middle class groups have significantly lower levels of participation and the inclusion of those from disadvantaged groups remains comparatively limited and is largely restricted to lower-ranking universities.

Two consecutive British governments have represented their goals for an expanded higher education system as both economic and social. They claim that it is important to tackle social inequality by having more disadvantaged students participating in higher education (Blair 2004; Willetts 2011). It is suggested that individual students and the country will benefit economically from it. However, critics are sceptical as to whether the neoliberal policies these governments have introduced are motivated by a desire to tackle inequality (Ainley 2004; Canaan 2008). The British government has imitated countries like the United States and Australia in claiming that the cost of funding a mass higher education system is too expensive for the state and that marketisation and privatisation are necessary for growth to continue (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004). Neoliberalisation has been represented as the only option for extending the benefits of higher education to a wider population (Collini 2010). However, higher education is a business worth billions of dollars (the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), legally framed education as a product that can be traded between nations (Knight 2003), and critics suggest that the prime motivation for privatisation is to allow businesses to profit from the expanded global demand for knowledge and education (Abbas 2011). These contradictory claims about neoliberalisation make it imperative that evidence is gathered to evaluate the impact of neoliberal policies on equality.

Governments and higher education organisations have tended to see quality assurance procedures as vehicles for equality, ensuring that all students receive acceptable standards of teaching (Cheung and Tsui 2010). However, the effectiveness of quality processes depends on how ‘high quality’ is conceptualised and measured (Blackmur 2010). A critical body
of research suggests that the underlying meaning of high quality currently underpinning quality systems is based on the interests, values and practices of the powerful, and that as a consequence, they tend to maintain inequality rather than ameliorate it (Abbas and McLean 2007, 2010). Much of the evidence for the role of quality in (re)producing inequality comes from an analysis of league tables (the most widely used and cited form of quality data), showing that nationally and globally, institutional wealth and students’ social backgrounds, rather than quality, determine league table positions (Singh 2010). When ‘quality’ is equated with league table ratings, it has an ideological function: less wealthy students, universities and nations do badly in the tables, which represent them as failing. From this perspective, the high value attached to high-ranking institutions like Oxford and Cambridge results from their historical association with the upper middle classes rather than the quality of the education. The fact that so many British politicians, well-known media figures and business elites went to these universities constructs a powerful cultural myth about the quality of the education received there and their ‘excellence’ is taken for granted. Research that critically explores the qualitative differences between undergraduate curricula, pedagogies and students’ experiences in differently ranked universities supports this viewpoint, because it finds that that the variation in quality reported in league tables might be spurious (Abbas and McLean 2007; Brennan et al. 2010).

The lower-ranking universities have been pivotal in the expansion of the university system in England and in widening access to universities to the lower middle classes and students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Crozier, Reay, Clayton and Colliander 2008). In 1992, when former polytechnics (classified as lower-ranked universities) were granted university status, new quality systems were introduced to try to ensure equal standards across the higher education sector (Harvey 2005). Quality assurance processes apply to the whole sector but their impact is stronger in lower-ranked universities. While governments have gained increasing control over almost all universities by rewarding and punishing them through financial (dis)incentives and quality information is used to inform these decisions, the power that institutions feel the government has varies according to the wealth and status of the university (Naidoo 2004). Universities with large independent sources of wealth and large numbers of overseas students are less malleable. The financially poorest universities, which attract most disadvantaged students, are the most susceptible to changing notions of high quality because they are obliged to chase the financial incentives.

Governments’ conceptions of what counts as a high-quality education are important because they shape what universities offer, what students study
and what contribution graduates can make to society (Barnett 1992). Current academic research often defines existing quality systems as a problem, suggesting that they (1) are a mechanism for control rather than improvement and say little about university learning and teaching, (2) provide crude and distorted measures, (3) undermine learning and teaching by making universities spend too much time and money producing quality data, (4) hinder communication that could help develop good teaching because reporting success becomes the focus and (5) encourage game-playing rather than genuine improvements (Morley 2003; Blackmur 2010; Gibbs 2010; Harvey and Williams 2010). However, it is important to have some way of evaluating and communicating about what universities do and what students and other stakeholders can expect from them.

**Recent Developments in English Higher Education**

The conceptualisations of quality that we explore in policy documents were initially developed by the previous Labour government (1997–2010) and are more recently being elaborated and implemented by the British Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government (elected in May 2010) in their first 18 months in office. There is a radical speeding up of neoliberalisation (Collini 2010), and institutions, educators and students are increasingly encouraged to conceptualise higher education (HE) as providing a service (the education) and a product (the degree) which students consume. The changes are positioned as necessary to save the state from financial ruin (McGettigan 2011). Beginning in the academic year 2012–13 universities’ funding will become more strongly dependent on the choices of students. The debt that students acquire in order to pay their fees is about to triple because money that was once paid to universities through government agencies (80% of the teaching budget) will now be borrowed by students who will pay back the fees to the state after they have graduated, that is if they earn over a pre-specified amount. The government argues that access for disadvantaged students will be improved because they will not have to pay back the money borrowed if they don’t earn sufficiently high salaries afterwards. There will also be some grants and additional support for students from poorer backgrounds, particularly the few who qualify for highly ranked universities. However, critics argue that disadvantaged students will be put off by the large debt and government number capping will ensure there will be fewer places available in the lower-ranked universities which are much more frequently attended by these students.

There has been a gradual shift in the English university system. An elite publicly funded university system that paid the fees of very few,
predominately upper middle class, home students (5 per cent of the school leaving population in the 1960s), taught alongside fee paying international elite students, has given way to a mass system in which an increasing proportion of the fee is paid by students and approximately 45 per cent of school leavers attend full-time undergraduate courses (Brennan et al. 2010). The nature of what is taught has also changed. Initially, universities educated students in traditional disciplines and trained higher professionals (doctors and lawyers); now, there is a wider range of academic disciplines and a diverse range of more vocationally orientated degrees. In this context, there has still been an official sense that English universities work to a similar standard (ensured by a cross-institutional, external examining system and explicit statements of standards by quality assurance processes) and that they aim for broadly similar outcomes for their students, for example, by all working to subject benchmarks. However, there has also been an unofficial but prevalent understanding that students in high-ranking universities get a better education. The new changes to funding, the policies examined for this chapter and the forthcoming higher education white paper (due in the summer of 2011) appear set to modify definitions of ‘high quality’. Early indications from the government elected in 2010 are that they will represent a speeding up of an existing neoliberalism rather than a change of policy direction. Hence, the definition of high quality we reveal here is likely to be informing the future role of higher education.

Methodology

The empirical data underpinning this chapter is drawn from a mixed-method project called Pedagogic Quality and Inequality in University Undergraduate Degrees funded by the Economic and Social Research Council which is systematically exploring differences in quality between four differently ranked social science departments. It has produced a wide range of data sets from each department and an analysis of relevant national and international documents. For this chapter, we analyse national documents, 98 interviews with first-year students from diverse backgrounds (50 in lower-ranking universities and 48 in higher-ranking universities; 60 are the first in their family to go to university), and 32 follow-up interviews with a subset of these students in their second year (18 in lower-ranked universities, 16 in higher-ranked universities; 21 are the first in their family to go to university).

Edderhall and Draystone are post-1992 universities which are persistently ranked in the bottom quartile, and Yaddon and Nilesbrough are pre-1992 universities persistently ranked in the top quartile of the main league tables for English universities.
We selected policy documents that illuminate the current and future directions of higher education policy.

1. Two major white papers published by the last Labour government
   a. Department for Education and Skills (DfES) 2003
   b. Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) 2009
2. A policy document which sets out a view of how higher education might expand (Department for Universities, Innovation and Skills (DIUS) 2008)
3. Some initial indications of the position of the new coalition document from two impact assessments
5. Some guidance published by the Office for Fair Access (BIS 2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2011)

One-hour semi-structured interviews explored students’ experiences and perceptions of their first and second years at universities, including what they value about their university education. Biographical interviews using a life grid methodology (Wilson, Cunningham-Burley, Mulburn and Masters 2007) preceded the one-hour interviews and gave a broader insight into the role of higher education in students’ lives. The second-year repeat interviews built on our familiarity with the students. All data sets have been analysed using NVivo software (Bazeley 2007) and our analytical process has involved research team members generating coding themes and using rigorous cross-validation processes and inter-coder reliability checks (Driedger, Gallois, Sanders and Santasso 2006).

**High Quality in Policy Documents and Students’ Perspectives**

In this section we outline and contrast, in government documents and in student interviews, the core ideas that constitute a high-quality undergraduate education. Fundamentally, the government and students present two markedly divergent understandings of what undergraduates should gain from higher education. High quality in the policy documents highlights the importance of students making choices based upon different forms of post-graduation employment and proposes that a marketised system, increased privatisation, institutional diversity, diverse funding, competition for students, clear information about institutions and degrees, ‘fairer’ access to elite institutions, employment-focused curricula (in lower-rank institutions), and employment-focused evaluations of quality (in terms of employment outcomes) are integral to achieving this. There is no mention of the content of curricula or the role of disciplines in achieving these goals, but implicitly and explicitly, the documents
indicate that higher-ranking institutions will continue to teach academic disciplines, and vocational curricula should be taught in lower-ranking institutions. By way of contrast, the overwhelming majority of current first- and second-year social science undergraduates in our study conceptualised high quality in terms of the degree to which universities facilitate personal transformation. Several factors were identified as fundamental to this process and central to high-quality provision: interesting and challenging disciplinary knowledge (curricula), appropriate learning opportunities (pedagogy), social, learning and living spaces which facilitate relationships that support an effective transformation (infrastructure and location), and the degree to which personal transformation turned them into effective, valuable and employable people. This prioritisation of personal transformation was shared by students regardless of which university they went to.

In order to present and contrast these two conceptualisations of high-quality undergraduate degrees, we begin with the representation in the policy documents which is framed in terms of a high-quality university system; in relation to high-quality educational provision; and finally, according to how high quality benefits the wider society. Next, we flesh out Bernstein’s (2000) notion of pedagogic rights, because this provides us with conceptual tools to help us evaluate and frame what students value. We examine those elements of the student data which focuses on high-quality provision and high-quality benefits to wider society. Finally, we consider the implications of the students’ perspectives for the high-quality university system presented in the policy documents.

**Documentary Analysis**

**A high-quality higher education system**

The current quality system was ostensibly set up to ensure that all students get a similar standard of teaching. In the policy documents we analysed, good teaching is represented as important to high quality for all students. In 2003 it is indicated that rewarding teachers would improve teaching.

It (the higher education system) must also be supported by clear expectations about the standards that every university must meet, so that no student has to put up with poor teaching. There must also be clear and visible rewards for the best, to spread good practice in the system, as well as sending important signals both to students and to institutions about the value of teaching in its own right. (Department for Education and Skills (DfES) 2003, paragraph 4.1, 47)
However, none of the documents really discuss what good teaching entails and in later documents, the way of ensuring good teaching changes. It is implied that it will emerge from a correctly organised marketised system. According to the documents, the marketised system should be made up of a diverse range of providers of higher education which includes existing universities, further-education colleges and private organisations. It should also be funded from a wide range of sources including state funding, private capital, student fees and alumni contributions; and it should be organised to mirror a commercial market with different providers competing for student fees by providing high-quality teaching and curricula at a low cost. Competition between the institutions is represented as ensuring that the best institutions flourish and poor-quality institutions change or close. Competition is presented as wholly positive and there is no mention of inherent difficulties, such as the inevitably poor state of universities whose finances are declining because of their poor market position.

Student choice is represented as pivotal to high quality and to driving overall direction of the current system.

Their (students’) choices and expectations should play an important part in shaping the courses universities provide and in encouraging universities to adapt and improve their service. (Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) 2009, 70)

Well-informed student choice will be the most powerful force for change over the next decade. (BIS 2009, 79)

Students are represented as being driven by employer choices (of students for jobs) and it is assumed that both student and employer choices will be based upon the information provided by universities (rather than on status or reputation) that will accurately mirror the quality of what is provided.

By requiring course content and outcomes to be more transparent, students and employers will be enabled to make informed choices that increase competition between institutions. No student should ever be misled into believing that a course will deliver employment outcomes that it will not. (BIS 2009, 4)

Previous research suggests many problems with these assumptions; for example, a range of complex factors influences students’ choices of university and these tend to push students from disadvantaged backgrounds and the lower middle classes towards lower-ranked institutions (Hernandez-Martinez, Black, Williams, Davis, Pampaka and Wake 2008; Christie 2009; Mangan...
et al. 2010). However, this is not seen as a difficulty; universities are implicitly positioned as having created the main obstacle to high quality – providing misleading information.

Despite the government’s purported faith in student choice to create a system that will ensure universities prioritise high quality degrees, it also wants to shape the system and influence what students and universities do. Hence, it is a controlled market. This diminishes the students’ role in shaping higher education provision. For example, government will prioritise funding for degrees which it believes will contribute to the nation’s economy.

We will give new priority to the programmes that meet the need for high-level skills, especially for key sectors including those identified in the New Industries New Jobs strategy of April. This will mean enhanced support for the ‘STEM’ subjects – degrees in the sciences, technology, engineering, and mathematics – and other skills that underwrite this country’s competitive advantages. (BIS 2009, 12)

The documents position the national economy as needing particular (largely yet to be conceptualised and written) degrees that will emerge from a high-quality marketised system.

**High-quality undergraduate provision**

High-quality educational provision is characterised as being constituted by institutions which have diverse and distinct focuses. To elaborate implicitly and explicitly, the documents suggest that a variety of institutional identities and curricula will emerge from institutions differentiating themselves and their products in niches of the student-consumer market. It expects universities to ensure that their degrees result in employment by co-constructing degrees with potential employers. Diversification in modes of delivering degrees is also important for high-quality provision (e.g. two-year degrees, online degrees and shorter vocational training courses). There might be a mix of courses. Some universities should focus on training local workforces, specialising in two-year degrees and diverse delivery for employees, while others concentrate on international research and teach academic disciplines.

**High-quality contribution to wider society**

In the documents, two particular contributions to wider society define what constitutes high quality: providing a trained and economically valuable workforce and furthering social equality (sometimes termed ‘fairness’).
Employability skills and knowledges have increased in importance over the time span of the policy documents analysed. In DfES (2003), universities are encouraged to build employability skills into what they already do.

Higher education already makes a huge contribution to the development of the higher-level technical skills that are so vital. Many of the newer universities have a strong vocational focus and have led the way in developing new courses aimed at supplying students with the skills and knowledge they need for jobs in the new, expanding areas of the economy.

As well as improving vocational skills we need to ensure that all graduates, including those who study traditional academic disciplines, have the right skills to equip them for a lifetime in a fast-changing work environment. (DfES 2003, paragraph 3: 23: 44)

However, in BIS (2009) there is a strong sense that all undergraduate education should change its purpose to being mainly focused on preparing students for employment.

[I]t is a top concern for business that students should leave university better equipped with a wider range of employability skills. All universities should be expected to demonstrate how they prepare their students for employment, including through training in modern workplace skills such as team working, business awareness, and communication skills. (BIS 2009, 13)

Equality is also constructed as a central aim throughout the documents, but again its meaning and the strategies to achieve it have changed over time. In DfES (2003) the government proposed that it should ensure equality by guaranteeing all students good teaching.

All students have the right to good teaching, and some may not be able to exercise their choices as easily as others… So as well as making sure that students can make well-informed choices, we must seek to guarantee good-quality teaching for everyone. (DfES 2003, paragraph 4: 13: 49)

And by facilitating participation for disadvantaged students,

The Government’s commitment to fair access will not waver. All those who have the potential to benefit from higher education should have the opportunity to do so. This is a fundamental principle which lies at
the heart of building a more socially just society, because education is the best and most reliable route out of poverty and disadvantage. (DfES 2003, paragraph 6.1: 8)

In BIS (2009), there is a considerable shift and ‘non-traditional’ student-consumers are constructed as a distinct market segment – workers in need of training.

We will give priority to growing a diverse range of models of higher education most attractive to non-traditional students. These include options such as part-time and workplace-based courses aimed particularly at mature students or those from non-conventional backgrounds. (BIS 2009, 11)

Here, the notion that employment-focused degrees are more appropriate than disciplinary degrees for disadvantaged students is apparent. The move can be seen in different elements of the documents. For example, DfES (2003) portrays further education colleges (FECs) as important in delivering access courses, which are underpinned by academic disciplines and foundation degrees, which can be vocational or academic. However, in BIS (2009), FECs importance lies in offering a local, accessible and flexible higher education that is more responsive to business needs. The link between low-ranking institutions (FECs lay below former polytechnics in higher education hierarchies) and more disadvantaged students means that this statement is making assumptions about students’ backgrounds and the type of higher education they want.

High-ranking universities’ curricula are assumed to be already high quality and they are instead encouraged to focus on ensuring fair access.

We need to treat these world-class institutions for what they are, and the institutions themselves need to recognise their own obligations to UK undergraduates, in terms of excellent teaching and fair access on merit and potential, regardless of family background. (BIS 2009, 21)

The overt aim to increase equality is undermined by implicit and explicit assumptions about different students. The policy documents’ definition of high quality focuses on the level of the national system, and so long as there is an overall achievement of economic prosperity for the nation, it does not seem to care that diverse students would gain access to different types of knowledges and curricula.
Pedagogic Rights

We briefly elaborate the term pedagogic rights here, because we use it to conceptualise the student data and to contrast the underlying values represented in students’ accounts with those in the policy documents. Bernstein (1974 and 1990) developed a host of interrelated concepts over a long career. We present a more comprehensive overview of how the critical application and development of these concepts might help us understand quality and inequality in higher education elsewhere (McLean, Abbas and Ashwin 2010). Bernstein (2000) sees higher education as important in constituting effective, fair and inclusive democracies, but believes that it will only contribute successfully if all students feel they have a stake in their education and if higher education is organised and executed in a way that will help them to realise it. He suggests that for this to occur, three interrelated pedagogic rights need to be accessed by students: enhancement, inclusion and participation. Enhancement denotes the development of individual confidence, which arises when students can think independently. This is gained by learning and accessing particular kinds of knowledge which Bernstein suggests shapes consciousness. Confident personal action is facilitated by acquired knowledge, which helps create independent thoughts and actions. This independence of thought and action is necessary to ‘inclusion’, which refers to the ability to participate in society and to speak out in an autonomous way. Participation occurs when students (or perhaps more usually, graduates) can participate politically and can influence what happens in society. Bernstein implies that all students should be gaining access to pedagogic rights regardless of where they study and access to this type of education should be spread equally across society.

Students’ Perspectives

High-quality provision

In contrast with the view suggested by the policy documents, students appear to value similar provision regardless of their institution or background. Their conceptions of high-quality provision focus on whether it facilitates a transformation of their identities and ways of seeing the world and, as Bernstein’s concept of enhancement suggests, knowledge (learning academic disciplines) dominates their conceptualisations of high-quality provision. Social science gives them access to enhancement by giving them new insights into society and allowing them to have independent thoughts.

Knowledge, it has made me question things, challenge things. Instead of just saying ‘Yes, alright then’, it has made me query things: ‘No, that does
not sound logical, that does not sound right’. I think more clearly than I have ever done before. It has changed me. (Draystone, Year 1)

Before university…I never kind of knew anything about any of this, I never quite realised how much influence outside factors have on the individual. You assume that you’re autonomous, but then in reality, everything affects the way you are, so I think it’s made me a lot more angry about things, when I see on the news some new policy that they would enact and…the evidence shows that that’s completely the wrong way to do things. (Yaddon, Year 2)

These students’ claims that they have changed their relationship with the world are typical. Students believe that universities should help them to develop their own opinions, and to be able to question, challenge, and argue.

Because you have to take a stand, you can’t sit on the fence, you have to have an argument. And you have to either agree or disagree with something. I like that aspect to it. (Nilesbrough, Year 1)

In this way, they appear to be confirming the importance of enhancement and demonstrating the confidence it gives them, and they attribute it to their social science education.

Students’ understanding of high-quality knowledge and learning and teaching provision seems unrelated to the economised view provided by the policy documents. The students focus upon the conditions needed to achieve learning the discipline: reading, writing, discussion and developing the appropriate skills.

I’ve learned to write a lot faster, I think, at university. During the lectures…you have to scribble it down quickly before you forget it. Generally, I think [reading] academic texts is the greatest skill I’ve learnt, and it’s how to use them properly rather than having that fear of… or…thinking it’s all above you and you can’t really understand; but reading and actually understand[ing] what they’re saying and simplifying it in a way to let it make sense to you. (Yaddon, Year 1)

They appreciate tutors’ efforts to facilitate learning, whether it is being funny, or showing passion for the discipline, or trying out new teaching methods. They also emphasise the importance of good relationships with students and with other tutors in the learning process.
I really enjoy the seminars because they’re interactive, I love interaction, you know, asking questions and raising a topic and then someone challenging you – it’s just really interesting and insightful as well because someone could raise something and you think, ‘I didn’t know that, I didn’t really understand that’. (Draystone, Year 2)

In the first year, everyone was shy and nervous and didn’t want to speak out of turn, so the lecturers were sort of trying to encourage us on and build up our confidence to talk. But this year, we’ve all been a lot more involved… And I feel that the lecturers, the tutors [are] getting us going, I feel that they’re taking in our arguments and respecting our opinions as well. (Edderhall, Year 2)

Students’ accounts imply that high-quality provision is about facilitating enhancement (personal confidence through knowledge) and through teaching methods that will encourage them to strive for it.

Students claim that the transformation they seek also requires ‘good enough’ resources and facilities, including physical locations and social spaces that maximise opportunities to make friends, a campus/location that students can identify with and find attractive (whether a bustling city or a beautiful campus), and, they want to be able to study sufficiently near to or far from home according to their needs (for some, this is about being able to continue existing living arrangements; for others it is about the right combination for the individual to promote the growth of independence from family and friends and to allow contact). If there are insufficient books, or students don’t have opportunities to make friends, there are problems. Students want to be able to read what they need to read, discuss their ideas with peers and develop the personal space needed to develop independent thinking. Students’ diverse views on location provided some support for the government’s notion that varied provision is important; for example, opportunities to study locally or away from home. However, dissimilarity between students is not a ‘natural phenomenon’ and there is a danger in seeing student-consumers as being equally free to choose. It is unjust to represent a student who has chosen to study near home in order to care for a relative, or study part-time for financial reasons, as making a ‘free’ choice similar to students with wealth and personal freedom. In sum, the picture of a high-quality provision drawn by the social science students we interviewed is that which provides an environment in which they grapple alongside tutors and other students with the knowledge and performance of discipline in order to transform themselves, or in Bernstein’s terms, they try to gain access to enhancement.
High-quality contribution to wider society

Students from all four universities concur with policymakers that one of the goals of university is to provide them with skills and knowledge that will equip them for post-university working life. However, their notions of being transformed into workers are more holistic than being trained for a job. Students believe that the social sciences are a basis for going into work that helps people. A high proportion indicate that they want to use their degrees to exercise their expanded minds and to contribute to the improvement of society. Students believe their discipline gives them knowledge relevant to their future working lives.

When you are helping people from different cultures, you can understand the problems and where they are coming from. Especially, a lot of women who have been oppressed, I feel I have been apprised [by] education and I think I would like to be an advocate for those women. (Draystone, Year 2)

However, Bernstein’s term ‘inclusion’ is more apposite than ‘participation’, because while for students having, in Dewey’s (1916) words, their ‘minds developed’ as integral to developing employment skills, the amount of participation (the ability to influence politically) will depend upon the social arenas they access. For most students, this will depend upon employment.

Feeling confident and able to participate socially is also aided by students having a degree they are proud of. Independent of what employment they might secure, many students (in particular those who are the first in their families to go to university) point to how a degree makes them and their families proud.

You feel like you’re doing something with your life. I feel like I’m working towards getting a better future for myself. I’m proud to say that I’m a university student and you get to develop your ideas and your learning habits… And I think it gives me a sense of worth. I think I am going to get my degree and my parents will be proud and I can say that I have a degree. (Draystone, Year 1)

Generally, students do not allow external measures of quality which, as stated above, already undermine the value of their degrees, to undermine their pride and the sense that they have a good education. External measures of quality, rather than the quality of their education, provoke either satisfaction or disgruntlement. Students at high-status universities appreciate the ‘social cachet’ they will bring to the labour market. Some students at Edderhall and Draystone, both post-1992 universities, indicate that they think it unfair that
their university is not seen publicly as ‘good’. However, they do not experience their education as not good. So, at the lower status universities, students’ conception of quality is at odds with the league tables, which undermine the potential of these students after university. While it is not the focus of this chapter to discuss comparative quality, it is worth noting here that so far in our project, variation in pedagogic quality is not by institution; that is, university status does not appear to be related to the quality of teaching and learning.

Concluding Discussion

Contrasting these two markedly different views of what constitutes high-quality undergraduate education reveals that inequality will be perpetuated if the neoliberal approach to high-quality undergraduate education is implemented and disciplinary undergraduate degrees are restricted. Interpreting students’ perspectives through the lens of Bernstein’s notion of pedagogic rights helps to conceptualise what is at stake. Some students are in danger of losing their right to experience personal transformation (enhancement), their social empowerment (inclusion) and their potential for participation. Disadvantaged students and the lower middle classes are more negatively impacted by the policy definition of high quality, which is attempting to make employability, knowledge and skills central to undergraduate education. The social science knowledge discussed here, which is valued by students from all backgrounds and institutions, could be distributed according to wealth and social status and reinforce and exacerbate existing inequalities. There is already some evidence that this is happening in response to the funding changes (Morgan 2011).

At the moment, social science undergraduate education can be seen as an equalising force. In a related publication (Ashwin, Abbas and McLean 2012), we have challenged Bernstein’s view that universities in England currently distribute different forms of knowledge to social students of different status. Bernstein’s notion of the pedagogic device suggests that access to social science knowledge is stratified within society, and this implies that the students in our study who are from lower-ranking universities would be getting access to different and less powerful forms of knowledge. However, despite some differences between institutions (as an example, in terms of particular curricula or forms of assessment), our early analysis suggests that our first- and second-year students are getting access to similar forms of knowledge. Here, we have suggested that this also gives these students access to the first two pedagogic rights (enhancement and inclusion). As outlined above, Bernstein positions access to knowledge as essential for equality because it shapes consciousness and the ability to act autonomously and to contribute socially and politically. This chapter adds to evidence from the United States (Giroux 2001) suggesting that neoliberal policies undermine disciplinary-based undergraduate education and

Bernstein’s concepts have helped us to explain why this unequal distribution of knowledge may lead to increased inequality. Our analysis also indicates that the contribution that other disciplines make to societies should be made explicit in order to understand the impact of neoliberal policies.

The neoliberal definition of high quality is strongly focused on how students are employed after obtaining their degrees. Bernstein’s notion of participation suggests that this could be important for alleviating inequalities. However, even this element of neoliberal policy is in danger of exacerbating existing inequalities. Our student accounts demonstrate that current undergraduates in all four institutions are developing the potential to participate politically in society and that many wish to use their newly found knowledge to think independently and to have political influence. Disadvantaged and lower middle class students are not likely to have the strong social and political connections which help them gain access to such arenas, so they are dependent on employment to do this. If degrees in lower-ranking universities are too tailored to employer’s immediate needs, the long-term need for greater equality will be compromised because students will not gain access to the powerful knowledge described above. While neoliberal policies will aim to encourage a few ‘gifted students’ from disadvantaged backgrounds to attend elite institutions, this strategy will not tackle overall levels of inequality. The social, cultural and economic factors underlying student choices will not be tackled if disadvantaged students attend universities that try to teach curricula which focus on the needs of the local economy, unless they also incorporate knowledge which promotes independent thought and overall development. In addition, lower-ranking universities are likely to be further undermined, because they tend to be more locally focused and graduate employment statistics might be more dependent on the local economy than the quality of degrees. These and a host of other problems suggest that the marketised system proposed by the neoliberal policy documents will not tackle inequality. Bernstein’s notion of pedagogic rights provides an alternative way of thinking about what undergraduate education can contribute to the personal, social and political life of students and the nation.

Notes

1 We focus on England rather than the United Kingdom because Scotland, Ireland and Wales have some policy independence which allows them to modify the effects.
2 The hierarchical divisions within the English university system are characterised in a number of different ways (Brennan et al. (2010) provide a discussion). We use the terms higher-ranked and lower-ranked here because our discussion is focusing on the role of quality systems and the ranking of universities.
3 The British government is responsible for policy for the English higher education system.
4 This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (Grant Number: RES-062-23-1438).

5 Further information about the project is available at the project website http://www.pedagogicequality.ac.uk/.

6 Fifty-two per cent of first year students are white British, 9 per cent are black British, 6 per cent are Bangladeshi British, 28 per cent are a mixture of mixed race British, black African, Chinese, East Asian and white other; 69 per cent are female (reflecting the gender balance of the disciplines), 16 per cent are mature (over 24) and 9 per cent have disabilities.

7 Nineteen are white British, 2 black British, 2 Bangladeshi British and 11 are a mixture of mixed race British, black African, Chinese, East Asian and white other; 22 are female and 12 male, 7 are mature (over 24) and 6 have disabilities.

8 We thank Xin Gao and Alison Kington for their meticulous work in coding the interviews. We thank Ourania Filipakou for first-year interviews and for her work on the policy documents, and Martina Daykin for her tireless support in organising all of the interviews.

References


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