Marketisation of education: marketing, rhetoric and reality

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Further and higher education have witnessed something of a paradigm shift in recent years. This article aims to examine the reasons behind, and the possible impact on, academic staff and students of one aspect of the so-called marketisation of education – namely, the increased importance of institutional marketing. Aspects of marketing theory are used to argue that gaps have developed in some cases between the marketing rhetoric and the experienced reality of staff and students. It is suggested that such gaps can create tensions and difficulties, that action needs to be taken to bridge any such gaps, and that there is a need to reaffirm some of the previously valued aspects of further and higher education.

Keywords: marketisation of education; marketing; further education; higher education; reality; rhetoric

Introduction

The last twenty years have seen an increased focus on the marketisation of both higher education (HE) and further education (FE). Any simplistic notion of the influence of marketisation should be rejected (Ball 2003; Beck 2007). In part this is because, as Ylijoki (2001) argues, staff within institutions, both individually and collectively, are likely to hold a varied stock of perspectives, the better to try to make sense of the different situations with which they are confronted. Another reason to reject a simplistic interpretation is that there may be some characteristics of HE and FE which are sufficiently distinctive to justify particular and distinctive marketing methods (Canterbury 1999). In addition, to juxtapose the contemporary situation with

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'a lengthy hymn to the departed university, a world of intellectual conversation, engaged students and limitless indulgence' (Evans 2004, 2) is to pretend that the past represented some sort of 'Golden Age', whereas (for Evans at least) this is very far from being the case. But it is Evans's view, and the view of the present authors, that a shift has taken place, 'a shift from a collective world in which independent and critical thought was valued, to a collective world in which universities are expected to fulfil not those values but those of the marketplace and the economy' (Evans 2004, 3). Colleges too are now run as independent corporate bodies, and encouraged to adopt many of the practices associated with the private sector (Whitty 2000, 3; McGrath 2003, 32).

In this article we argue that one effect of the marketisation agenda in education has been to increase the significance of marketing for HE and FE institutions. We open our arguments with a brief contextualisation of the marketisation of education; we then turn to consider the application of the 'marketing mix' to this context, and argue that the marketing of education, from both a seller's and a buyer's perspective, has had a profound influence on FE and HE. It is our contention that, in the application of marketing to education, there are often gaps between the marketing rhetoric and reality.

The marketisation of education

Smith has argued that the marketisation of higher education is nothing less than 'a concerted attack on the traditional structures and values' (Smith 1989/1997, 1) of university education, an attack that according to him began in the 1980s. For Smith, these traditional values were based on a broadly liberal approach, informed by educational theory, and capable of incorporating critiques of that approach (Smith

1989/1997, 1–2). Randle and Brady distinguish between professional and managerialist paradigms (1997b, 128); for them it is the former which characterises some of the values they consider were 'key features of post-war public service "professional" work' in pre-incorporation FE (Randle and Brady 1997b, 127). Amongst these values they include:

> the presence of expert, tacit knowledge and skills; professional autonomy over work in terms of decision-making and implementation; work perceived as socially useful and implicitly anti-commercial; the relationship with the client being one of loyalty whilst the locus of power rests with the professional; the attainment of high standards in the execution of work-related tasks; and the organisation of work on the basis of collegiality. (Randle and Brady 1997b, 127)

Ylijoki (2001) identifies four perspectives of academic work, characterised as the Humboldtian narrative, the ivory-tower narrative, the marketing narrative, and the misery narrative. For Ylijoki, 'the marketing narrative glorifies new kinds of values and ideals' (2001, 7), including: stressing the importance of academics being seen to meet the needs of society; attracting external finance; and ensuring that academic work is 'more efficient and results-oriented' (Ylijoki 2001, 6). Drawing on work by Power (1997), Randle and Brady (1997a), Simkins (1999), and Ball (2002), McGrath too argues that this is one of the fundamental changes that has been imposed on the educational system in England and Wales, and that whereas the traditional view of education believed that 'quality of provision should be assessed on the basis of inputs' (McGrath 2003, 29), the marketisation of education now emphasises that quality should be assessed on the basis of outputs (McGrath 2003, 28).

This change of ideological perspective in education, and a possible reason for it, have been characterised by McIllroy and Spencer (1988, 86) thus:

> The traditional conservative University generated a knowledge related broadly to the radical and ideological concerns of the ruling élites, not the majority of its citizens. Within those ideological boundaries there existed a degree of intellectual autonomy and the possibilities of a free and liberal higher education for a tiny minority. Now there is an attempt to relate Universities more narrowly to the material and ideological priorities of capitalism.

In the light of such changes, Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2006) state that the HE market is now well established as a global phenomenon, particularly in the major English-speaking countries such as the UK, Canada and Australia, and suggest that the value, effectiveness and potential benefits of using marketing theories and concepts which have been used effectively in the business world are now being discovered by many educational institutions that are using them in order to try to gain a competitive edge. Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2006) suggest that most educational establishments now recognise that they need to market themselves in a competitive market that is global as well as national or regional. An expression by the then Minister for Higher Education, Robert Jackson, as long ago as 1989 highlights the application of marketing tactics to education:

> Employ a market oriented approach. Not just up-front glossy brochures but a marketing which involves every member of staff. Delivery should not be determined by the competencies of staff. Rather the competency of the staff by the needs of the consumer. (DES 1989, 1)

Palihawadana and Holmes (1999) consider that some of the ways in which HE has become more focused on marketing include: giving marketing a higher profile in the management of institutions; viewing students as consumers of educational services; gaining a clearer perspective on what these 'consumers' need; and introducing ways of measuring their satisfaction or dissatisfaction. This marketing perspective 'implies a shift from a production orientation to a "customer-centred approach"' (Smith 1989/1997).

Here arises one difficulty in any attempted straightforward application of the notion of marketing to education – that of identifying the consumer and recognising the 'product' (Smith 1989/1997; Canterbury 1999). These aspects are explored by Maringe (2005, 567), who draws on the work of Sharrock (2000) to suggest, first, that the labelling of students as simply customers to be satisfied grossly oversimplifies

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their many roles and, second, that HE has failed to clearly identify a distinctive product, whether it be research or teaching (Maringe 2005, 564). Even if a distinctive product can be identified, it has been argued that, in HE, there is a multiplicity of markets (Jongbloed 2003, 111). For reasons such as these it has been argued that it is 'both regrettable and ominous that the marketing focus, explicitly borrowed from business, should be accepted and even welcomed' in education (Barrett 1996, 70).

Product, place, price and promotion: a re-conceptualisation of the mix

The 'four Ps' of product, place, price and promotion were suggested by McCarthy (1960) as key elements of the 'marketing mix' (Borden 1965). Despite criticism, McCarthy's model has retained popularity (Yudelson 1999, 60). We suggest that efforts must be made to avoid the blanket application to education of the marketing-mix elements in the shape of the ancient four Ps of marketing (namely, product, place, price and promotion). We also suggest that with the marketing of education has come an increased emphasis by many institutions on three further Ps of services marketing – namely, people, process and physical evidence (Booms and Bitner 1981). In marketing a service, the workforce makes up the 'people' element, while 'process' will signify the manner in which, for instance, a customer's order has been processed, from the placement of an order to the final delivery of a product or service. 'Physical evidence' refers to the entire corporate image in its physical settings as well as intangible evidence; thus, physical evidence includes such factors as buildings, the area in which the institution is based, the logo, livery, the overall ambience, culture and climate of the company, and so forth.

While the four Ps of marketing (product, place, price and promotion) have traditionally represented the seller's view of marketing tools, an alternative approach

suggested by Bruner (1988, cited in Gibbs 2002), offered the four Cs of concept, cost, channel and communication, with the emphasis on the consumer or customer or client. Kotler (2003) cites Lauterborn (1990), suggesting the buyer's view in the shape of the four Cs of marketing: Product becomes customer solution; place is convenience; price is customer cost; while promotion becomes communication. We believe the Lauterborn Cs to be more comprehensive and relevant than those suggested by Bruner.

In the absence of replacement so-called Cs for the extra three Ps (people, process and physical evidence) we, the authors, suggest that people be replaced by calibre and/or champions, process will be referred to as capabilities, while physical evidence can be renamed charisma and/or collateral.

Calibre, champions, capabilities, charisma and collateral

Calibre or champions

In education as elsewhere an institution's staff constitute the 'people' element of the marketing mix. Their calibre and quality can play a major role in attracting and retaining students. They are essential for the purpose of relationship building between the institution and students. In this context, the development of a market in education is closely linked to the increasing importance of associated concepts such as managerialism and performativity (McGrath 2003). McGrath argues that these concepts have 'produced a culture of surveillance and accountability in higher education (HE) that influences how managers and leaders apply the micro level theories of management and leadership that have been imported from the public sector' (McGrath 2003, 20). Ylijoki (2001) suggests that negative effects on academic

staff of the new values and ideals of the marketing narrative thus include increased workloads, less administrative support, and the loss of the hitherto perceived benefits of academic autonomy, but with a continuation of low salaries and insecurity. Even the most dedicated members of staff, be they support personnel or lecturers, will be unable to offer their best service if workloads become even heavier and further demands are made on their time, and if, in a related ploy, changes are promoted as a means of empowering staff whereas the reality is often that staff have additional responsibilities thrust upon them without appropriate time or remuneration (McGrath 2003, 37), or they are perceived as endlessly flexible in terms of delivering new courses, rather than respected as having autonomy and expertise in their own field. Such approaches are at odds with the view that 'one of the most critical changes in marketing thought that has occurred over the last two decades has been the recognition that "people are the brand"' (Peck et al. 1999, 408).

Another aspect of the way in which the marketisation agenda may have had an impact on academic staff results from changing student expectations; as Rotfeld writes, 'once students are told to see themselves as customers for education degrees, they expect customer service with a smile' (1999, 416). Combined with the use of the Internet, is there now developing an expectation of academic service '24/7', with feedback being expected immediately (or at least within 24 hours) after an enquiry being made or draft work being submitted? What are the implications of this expectation for academics to prioritise their work, to reflect on issues, and to prepare a coherent response to queries? And what are the implications when an immediate response is not forthcoming? Research evidence has indicated alarming levels of stress among staff as well as the occasional bullying of staff in some institutions (Offord 2007, 17). Needless to say, such treatment cannot be conducive to staff

retention or morale. Despite the existence of so-called champions in institutions (characterised here as individuals who, in the face of a heavy and demanding workload, still maintain standards and strive for excellence), many simply cannot cope. This will have a direct impact on the institution's 'customers'.

Another change is, McGrath considers, a change in management style, from a view which considered that managers and staff based their relationship on mutual trust and a shared understanding of their professional roles, and where there was 'respect for professional autonomy and [a] recognition that accountability should be to peers not managers' (McGrath 2003, 29–30), to a situation in which academic staff are more likely to be seen by some as employed to provide a service, to manage and, in turn, be managed rather than as people engaged, and engaging others, in intellectual activity (McGrath 2003, 29–30; Furedi 2006, 38–40). In such circumstances corporate 'development' events often 'consist of the presentation of information on a screen, which the presenter will then *read*' (Evans 2004, 87), and where 'participation' involves little more than listening quietly and receiving the accepted wisdom. Here are few, if any, opportunities for 'participants' (who are in fact little more than onlookers) to critically engage with the underlying assumptions and have an input into decision-making. Similarly, one of the constant critiques by the University and College Union (UCU) and academic researchers of the learning and skills sector is the scant attention paid to the 'voice of the professional practitioner' in the development and success of new qualifications and progression routes (Offord 2007, 17). Thus the marketisation of education, although often surrounded by the rhetoric of democratic openness and debate, is, in fact, 'part of a one-way process of coercion' (Evans 2004, 62), where any challenge to these new orthodoxies can be rejected out of hand as outdated or elitist as part of a 'discourse of derision' (Ball 1990).

Capabilities

As far as the process component is concerned, the ease of obtaining information, communication between the institution and the potential student, as well as enrolment and lecture provision may be included under this heading, as this is where the suggested 'capabilities' of an institution can become a major competitive advantage. The simple matter of, for example, offering an 0800 number to obtain information rather than one that costs a potential customer, publicising the opening hours for enrolment purposes, offering free photographs, refreshments, and so on, once combined, creates 'added value' that enhances the final product of an institution. However, even some of these basic and simple requirements can tend to be overlooked in an effort to save money. Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2006) emphasise the recognition, in recent years, of relationship marketing (RM) strategies within educational establishments. They view RM as being compatible with the nature of the HE (and FE) services since this approach promotes the involvement of students in the marketing and image building of their institutions. They add, 'After all, even the best marketers and advertisers could not promote a HE institution if the service staff (e.g. lecturers, office managers, secretaries) were not responsive to the students' needs, and expectations' (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2006, 8). The effective 'process' part of marketing can play a crucial role in this respect, by identifying students' specific requirements and responding to them effectively.

Charisma or collateral

The physical evidence part of the marketing-mix element is the visual representation of an institution as well as its location, facilities and amenities. It can be also referred to as charisma and/or collateral. The importance placed on corporate identity is, of course, not by itself a new phenomenon, even within education. Universities have, for example, long placed significance upon their coats of arms and graduation ceremonies. The latter, with their formal academic robes and processions, have provided the traditional corporate identify of an academic institution. Perhaps what is new is the insistence 'upon the use and implementation of a value foundation from which the brand is seen to summarise the additional values that are intrinsic in, or associated with, the corporation, its products and services' (Roper and Davies 2007, 76). The recent rebranding of one institution offering both further and higher education exemplifies this approach, where the 'Corporate Brand Identity … reflects what we represent … [and] embodies our values' (Bradford College 2006). The new corporate identity is intended by its advocates 'to raise our profile where it counts' (Bradford College 2006). Access to the brand logo is strictly controlled and enforced; use of the new guidelines is 'mandatory' (Bradford College 2006); any documentation failing to comply is automatically rejected or altered.

Intangibility, inseparability, heterogeneity and perishability

The marketing of services also has its unique characteristics, such as intangibility, inseparability, heterogeneity, and perishability (Hoffman and Bateson 2002). It is to the consideration of these four often-overlooked aspects of marketing a service that which we now turn our attention.

Intangibility

A service, unlike a product, cannot be touched and felt. This increases the risk of any purchase decision, as it is difficult to test before buying. One strategy employed by businesses to overcome this problem has been the offer of (more) tangible aspects or examples of the service. Marketing communications in HE and FE, in the shape of printed prospectuses, booklets and student guides, are examples, though it has been argued that in at least some cases, such documents fail to provide sufficient information about academic and practical aspects of the course (Hesketh and Knight 1999). In addition to marketing communications, corporate reputation and branding thus become important, as does the influence of any physical evidence, as in the case of a German student planning to take advantage of the free HE in Germany (the government introduced charging later) who, upon examining a course prospectus, was persuaded to invest his time and money into studying in the UK (Cockton and Hatton 2007).

A further approach to reducing the possible negative impact of intangibility is the introduction of 'open days' where prospective students can be offered a taste of the college or university life. In a highly competitive market, value-added components can contribute to the image of the final offering by the organisation. Heavy expenditure on buildings and infrastructure by many universities, purchasing of prime sites in city centres, and so on, are excellent examples of attempts at conveying a more attractive, seductive, appealing and stronger corporate image. Such approaches are, however, in the case of education, not without difficulties, as marketing which emphasises these aspects of education may do so at the expense of marketing aspects of higher and further education which are even more difficult to express in tangible form. As Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka argue:

> The study of marketing communications and information dissemination, however, seems to focus on issues that are hard to get in HE: Can, for example, universities publish the rank of their lecturers' effectiveness? Could we expect applicants to gain sufficient information on educational programmes that are virtually non-tangible, hard to define in terms of efficiency and learning expertise? … It is argued here that the examination of their marketing efforts on the basis of this orientation overlooks the fundamental nature of HE. (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2006, 6)

Inseparability

Here, the rhetoric of marketing stresses that the service is incomplete without the presence and participation of students, whereas the reality may include an encouragement of 'distance learning' and online courses in an attempt to obviate the attendance element. The increased use of packaged (often factually based) material and Internet-based learning materials in 'blended learning' is primarily driven by the supposed productivity gains these offer institutions, where lecturers can be asked to 'teach' more students but with fewer or shorter actual classes taught face to face, and with reduced pressure on accommodation (Randle and Brady 1997b, 131). Thus, although there is 'currently unquestioning acceptance of the existence of a place for internet-based training within the educational process … the discourse has centred around, not its validity within the process, but rather the way in which it can best satisfy teaching objectives' (Crowther 2003, 9). Whether the increased use of Internet-based teaching and learning leads to an enhanced experience for the students is less certain.

Recent protests by some students at the University of Manchester in England provide a case study of the dichotomy: the 'reality' as perceived by the General Secretary of the university's Students' Union Tom Skinner is that the university:

> is now run like a business. Businesses are always asking themselves two questions: how much cheaper can we do things without losing customers and how much can we charge without losing customers? Some students are on courses where 20 years ago they would have got 200 hours [of contact time with staff] a year – but now that's down to 86. (Haile 2008)

The rhetoric of marketing, however, as expected, stresses the participation of students; an anonymous spokesperson for the university is reported by Haile (2008) to have responded that students' views are 'incorporated wherever possible', that students 'play a major role in determining university policy and are represented on all the major committees and decision-making bodies', and that a recent student satisfaction survey had shown that 74% of students 'were satisfied with the experience at Manchester' (Haile 2008). None of these responses denies the claim by the Students' Union regarding contact time.

Heterogeneity

The promotion by institutions of the institution and their courses is but one aspect of the marketisation agenda. Another aspect is a change in the perceptions of some students, characterised by Evans (2004, ix) as the development of 'the hand-out culture', which encourages students to collect hand-outs and log onto websites, 'collecting and regurgitating course material' rather than involving themselves in 'critical engagement with a subject matter and its related literature' (Evans 2004, 59). This danger has been characterised elsewhere as one that promotes a culture in which 'students are frequently not expected to study but to learn' (Furedi 2006, 116), and where 'intellectual struggle and hard work' (Furedi 2006, 117) are displaced by 'the assimilation of information and the acquisition of skills' (Furedi 2006, 116). Perhaps these trends, allied to the readily available technology, help to account for the temptation to plagiarise – if academic work is regarded as 'information-heavy' rather than as 'thinking-heavy', then the Internet provides a very quick way of collecting information, whilst Internet sites that offer to produce academic work for a fee literally make academic work into a commodity which can be bought and sold.

With students having 'bought' the course through tuition fees, the marketisation agenda thus impacts on student satisfaction, closely related to whether student expectations are met, and where student satisfaction is often evaluated through the use of an end-of-year, or end-of-module, student satisfaction questionnaire, often processed centrally and where the results are then distributed to appropriate staff (Palihawadana and Holmes 1999). If students are led by the rhetoric of marketisation and marketing to see themselves as customers, are they likely to perceive any failure on the course as a failure not of their own ability to meet the reality of the demands of the course but of the institution, the staff, or the course itself (Rotfeld 1999, 416)? This at least is one possible interpretation of the increase in complaints handled by the Office of the Independent Adjudicator in 2006, according to a recent news report (Attwood 2007). Might such issues especially be the case if it is true that many students now see 'graduation as job certification, not a mark of education' (Rotfeld 1999, 416)?

Perishability

Services are perishable: production, distribution and consumption occur simultaneously. Lectures once missed cannot realistically be replaced, even by means of access to notes from classmates, although video or podcast lectures can offer a new way of distributing masterclass content to classrooms on a global scale. It can be argued that British businesses have been notorious (at least in the recent past) for being myopic, regarding short-term gains as far more important than long-term business prospects. This myopia is a business disease that unfortunately has infected educational establishments too. In terms of education, the rhetoric of choice and diversity may be compared with the reality of the closure of a course or department.

This may result in the saving of money in the short term, but will have serious long-term consequences. The institution will acquire a reputation for not offering certain courses following its decision to close them down in a particular academic year, and the appropriate staff able to teach such courses are likely to find appointments elsewhere. Resources will disappear, and the effect is likely to be that the costs of re-establishing the abandoned courses prove prohibitive.

Conclusion

We have argued here that the marketing of education needs to be considered using the broader framework provided by a view of services marketing. This perspective serves to emphasise that the marketing of education is not just about product, place, price and promotion (or customer solution, convenience, customer cost and communication) but also about people, process and physical evidence (which we have termed calibre or champions, capabilities, and charisma or collateral). We have also argued that a consideration of the notions of intangibility, inseparability, heterogeneity and perishability are helpful. We have, however, suggested that the introduction of the marketing mix into education has had some unfortunate consequences, and that the marketing rhetoric does not always match the educational reality.

Although it is perhaps too soon to judge the long-term effects of the marketisation agenda in general, and of the application of marketing to education in particular, early indications are that both are changing the perceptions of staff, students, and the nature of academic work itself. It seems clear that there is now an increased focus on the product, place, price and promotion of education in FE and HE, and on the people, process and physical environments involved. It has been argued

here that the focus on these latter three aspects needs to be developed to include

further consideration of the effects of the marketing of education on staff and students

in FE and HE environments, and that the reality experienced by staff and students

needs to match the rhetoric of marketing. We have also argued that there needs to be a

determination that education remains challenging and 'thinking heavy', and that

knowledge and skills are not to become regarded as mere commodities to be

accumulated by students, and to be sold as predetermined packages to those who can

afford them. Making these arguments in the current climate is not always easy

because, in the wider context, 'the "new" coercion involved in the marketisation of

education takes the form of the imposition of a general assumptive world (and

language) which it is impossible to challenge' (Evans 2004, 87).

> [In the] debate about effectiveness, flexibility, quality enhancement, accountability, autonomy, competition, evaluation, etc. … public discourse … [is] fuelled mainly by … attempts to establish these values as norms which could not possibly be refused and opposed by anyone not being out of his/her senses. (Sander 1998, 34)

The current situation and environment do not offer much cause for optimism. Too

often, perhaps, it seems as if the now apparently accepted orthodoxy that higher

education needs to be more involved with the needs of the economy is not itself a

subject for debate (Evans 2004, 43). It would be a sad irony if one result of the

marketisation agenda was that, whilst criticism of it became more necessary, such

criticism became ever more difficult to make, and ever more likely to be ignored.

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