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'It's more of a status thing to have a degree': An investigation into the extent of the acceptance of a neoliberal discourse in a group of foundation year students

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This study explores the experiences of a group of non-traditional students (n=14) undertaking a foundation year in the School of Education at a post-92 university in England. The study is located within the widening participation agenda, with foundation years becoming an increasingly popular way to access undergraduate courses. The research is situated within the context of the neoliberal economic and social policies that have been dominant in the UK since 1979 and explores the acceptance, or not, of a neoliberal discourse by the participants. Data was gathered from a series of four focus groups over the course of one academic year. It was found that participants expressed a range of views, and although an acceptance of a neoliberal discourse in relation to their studies was evident, findings showed that decisions were also based on subjective and emotional criteria, as well as through rational decision making. There was also evidence for established criticisms of neoliberalism, especially commodity fetishism. Findings suggest a challenge to educators of how best to support students, and to what extent teaching should reflect student expectations.

Introduction

Foundation years are situated in the context of widening participation, with an ambition of successive governments being to provide more choice for students and to increase the proportion of disadvantaged students entering university. Nationally, numbers enrolled on degrees with a foundation year have increased from fewer than 9,000 per year in 2011-12 to nearly 70,000 by 2021-22 (Department for Education (DfE), 2023a). The growing number of students enrolling onto foundation year programmes is seen as one way of fulfilling the aim of making the choice to enter Higher Education (HE) available to those who previously would not have done so

(Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), 2011; Sanders et al., 2016; DfE, 2023b).

Retention rates for foundation year students across the sector are low, with only 74% continuing in HE, compared to 91% of first year undergraduates who continue to their second year (Freeman, 2023). Also, many foundation year students are from non-traditional backgrounds, meeting one or more criteria set out by Wong (2018) of being first-generation students, mature (age 21 or over on university entry), from low-income households or being from minority ethnic/racial backgrounds, with retention rates at all levels being lower for such students (Petrie and Keohane, 2017; Office for Students (OfS), 2019; Hillman, 2024).

Widening participation and the growth in foundation years have occurred within the context of the neoliberal thinking that has dominated education policy over the last 40 years. This study examines the impact of neoliberal education policy and practice on the lived experiences of those entering a post-92 university in the West Midlands area of England, with a focus on students undertaking a foundation year. Specifically, the objective was to explore the extent to which students expressed attitudes showing an acceptance of a neoliberal discourse in relation to their studies, or whether they were resistant to this narrative. This led to the research question: To what extent do students express neoliberal ideology in relation to their learning experiences during the foundation year of their degree?

Literature review

Friedrich Hayek is most commonly associated with founding the principles of neoliberalism in his 1944 book, *The Road to Serfdom* (Sparke, 2013). Hayek (1991) argued that the welfare model of capitalism that was introduced in the UK and other western countries after the second world war, based on Keynes's (2007) policies of state intervention to manage demand, for example influencing markets through centralised planning, regulation, subsidisation and taxation, is both morally wrong and economically mistaken. Hayek (1991) believed that the market should be left to generate and distribute wealth, with state intervention reducing individual economic and social freedom and leading to economic decline.

Although there are different conceptions of neoliberalism, for example Foucault (Davidson et al., 2008) identified differences between Austrian, German and American models, they share the conviction that the aim of government policy should be to extend individual freedom, choice and responsibility to all aspects of life (Jackson, 2015), with the principle of individual freedom valued over more collective organisations of people such as trade unions (Boas and Gans-Morse, 2009). In putting neoliberal policies into practice, the turning point away from the post-war Keynesian consensus in the UK started in the 1970s when, for example, the Labour Prime Minister, James Callaghan, recognised the difficulties of maintaining these economic policies (Callaghan, 1976). This was followed by the election of the Thatcher

government in 1979, which undertook a programme of neo-liberal economic and social policies (Bettache and Chiu, 2019).

Neoliberalism is not merely a set of economic policies about reducing the role of the state through low taxation and deregulation; it is also about producing a certain way of living and relating to one another (Dardot and Laval, 2014). In the words of Margaret Thatcher, 'Economics are the method; the object is to change the heart and soul.' (Beattie, 2019, p89). People are re-cast as 'homo economicus' (Besley and Peters, 2007), who make rational decisions to increase their own wealth. This aligns to Rational Action Theory, which assumes that given sufficient information, individuals will be able to weigh up the costs and benefits in any given situation and make optimal decisions (Elster, 1989). In this enterprise culture, the state has a role in providing equality of opportunity, such as widening access to HE, but inequalities of outcome are justified as reward for hard work or punishment for laziness (Sparke, 2013). Therefore, although primarily an economic theory, neoliberalism has been applied to all areas of government policy, including education (Springer, 2012).

Springer (2012) identifies Foucault's (2007) concept of governmentality as being the most common theorisation of neoliberalism. Foucault (2007) argued that rather than being governed by obedience or coercion, people are governed by themselves through their own choices, with the art of governmentality being to establish widely shared social norms and moral values which allow people to manage their own behaviour. Once these beliefs are established, government policies can then be presented as common sense (Springer, 2012). The policies of widening participation and the belief that going to university is beneficial have been supported by a number of factors, including government policy and political rhetoric: for example Tony Blair's target of 50% of young people going to university (Blair, 1999) and the celebration in the media of this target being reached (Coughlan, 2019). Also, performance tables compare schools on the number of students who enter HE, including a measurement of those entering high tariff universities (DfE, 2024). Linked to this is the finding that careers advice in schools is focused on applying to university rather than pursuing other options (Burgess, 2023). Policies and practices such as these allow the discourse of the benefits of entering HE to be established.

Neoliberal policies are further supported by policies and practices that include the proliferation of different degree subjects, the rating and ranking of universities, and by such mechanisms as the National Student Survey and student voice initiatives. These strategies support the discourse of choice, autonomy and individualisation, with students cast as independent learners who make rational decisions about their education and their expected future benefits (Bragg, 2007; Lolich, 2011; Gale and Parker, 2013), with graduates typically earning more than non-graduates (Sutton Trust, 2021) and information available on which subjects and which universities lead to higher salaries (Social Mobility Commission, 2023). Tuition fees, first advocated in The Dearing Report (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997) and then increased as a result of the Browne Review (Browne, 2010), shifted the cost of

attending universities to the individual and allowed increased funding for HE without raising general taxation. Tuition fees can be justified as the transfer of power to consumers and the means of promoting higher teaching quality, with students demanding both more choice and better value for money (Besley and Peters, 2007; Johnson, 2017).

Ball (2015) reflects that the life of the university has been transformed by successive neoliberal government policies, with universities competing in the free market to sell knowledge and skills to consumers. Also, by emphasising the economic rather than cultural and social benefits of gaining an education, individuals are expected to be more likely to make decisions that benefit them financially (Besley and Peters, 2007; Ball, 2015). This has led to universities becoming increasingly employment focused (Ward, 2012), equipping students with employability skills and an entrepreneurial attitude (Burke, 2013). Pierce (2015) argues that individuals receive a clear and consistent message about the value of educational investment in themselves. Also, the discourse of individual responsibility means that problems such as non-participation and non-completion are seen as individual failings rather than structural problems (Jones and Thomas, 2005).

There is mixed evidence as to whether students do behave as rational consumers when making choices regarding their university education. Hassel and Ridout (2018) found that students largely had a realistic understanding of what university study involved, and so were able to make informed decisions on enrolment, although they tended to believe teaching would be similar to school. Woodhall, Hiller and Resnick (2014) found that students adopted consumer-like behaviour, weighing up costs and benefits when making decisions on enrolment. Ball (2015) observed students behaving more like consumers and lecturers like service providers, and Tomlinson (2017) found evidence of an increasing consumer-orientated approach in a study across seven UK universities.

On the other hand, Saunders (2015) found that only 28.9% of a sample of first year undergraduates expressed a customer orientation in their attitudes to their education. Clifford (2022), in a series of focus groups with foundation year students, found that financial rewards were only one of the perceived benefits of university study. More important was the personal development that occurred, including increased confidence and self-awareness. Millian and Rizk (2018) found that in choosing their courses, students rarely consulted official information such as university ranking tables and instead relied on informal networks of family and friends to assess the worth of different courses and universities. Dashper et al. (2020) found that students did consider their future careers and earning potential when making decisions about choices of universities and courses, but were more influenced by subjective criteria, such as whether they felt welcomed and whether they would fit in. Similarly, Winter and Chapleo (2017) found that more subjective criteria such as a pleasant physical environment and enthusiastic staff were important in attracting students. Also, social class plays a part in the amount of encouragement, access to information and support available from parents when applying to university, with those whose parents attended

university more likely to go themselves (Tan, Lyu and Peng, 2020). In summary, Ingram (2018) argued that students are consumers to an extent, but they are more than this and it is reductive to conceptualise them in this way. Most of these studies focused on first year undergraduates, with limited research found using foundation year students as participants.

Another way of examining whether students accept a neoliberal discourse is to see whether criticisms of neoliberalism are evident in their responses. There have been many criticisms of neoliberalism. In relation to education it is argued that rather than producing students who take individual responsibility for their learning and career development, neoliberal policies produce students who are dependent on external controls and who lack personal initiative. Two lenses that have been used to examine the negative effects of neoliberalism in HE are commodity fetishism and educational fundamentalism.

Commodity fetishism is a Marxist term for when the value of a commodity becomes separated from the labour needed to produce that commodity (Marx, 1990). The changing relationship between students and the university has been argued to encourage a form of this in education (Hill and Kumar, 2009) whereby the status of attaining a degree and the resulting expectation of a highly paid job are valued over the acquisition of the knowledge and skills that lead to being awarded the degree. Also, being at university and having the status of being a student become valued in themselves, removed from the academic labour involved in this. Molesworth, Nixon and Scullion (2009, p. 277) characterise this as students seeking to 'have a degree', rather than to 'be learners'.

This commodity fetishism also affects the interactions between teachers and learners. There is pressure to develop pedagogical practices that view knowledge as a commodity that is provided by the lecturer to the student, with assessment guides, assignment workshops, 'you said, we did' and other initiatives tailoring the university experience to the demands of the consumer (Jackson, 2015). Although strategies such as these are aimed at empowering the student as consumer, they are likely to encourage an attitude in students whereby they expect lecturers to provide for their needs rather than taking personal control.

Educational fundamentalism is an uncritical acceptance of the extrinsic benefits of gaining an education and the opportunities it provides (Alvesson, 2013). On an individual level, neoliberal discourse sees education as a means of getting ahead in a competitive market, with qualifications acting as gateways to employment opportunities. It is accepted without question that education will achieve this aim, with policies developed to pursue this. In a broader sense, this can relate to Gramsci's concept of dual consciousness (Gramsci et al., 1971), whereby people uncritically accept neoliberalism even when feeling dissatisfied with their day-to-day experience.

Although it is not expected that students will have any explicit knowledge of social and economic theory, it is important to understand how they respond to the neoliberal discourse surrounding HE, whether they accept this discourse as common sense (Springer 2012) and/or whether they show indications of the criticisms of neoliberalism. This improved understanding can offer insight into the student journey and the challenges encountered and help inform, for example, curriculum design, induction programmes, pastoral support and in the marketing of courses.

Methods

This article draws on a case study that was undertaken with a group of students on the foundation year of their degree course, in 2018-19. In relation to Yin's (2013) classification of different types of case study, this study is a 'representative' or a 'typical' case. Although it is not the aim of case study research to generalise beyond the specific case, the participants in this study were not extreme or unusual and were in a common situation, albeit one that has not been studied extensively. Therefore, the experiences of participants in this study may exemplify common experiences of other students in similar situations.

This study, which was approved by the university ethics committee, took place over one academic year. It consisted of a series of four focus groups at the beginning and end of each of the two semesters that made up the year, in which participants were asked for their opinions and experiences on a range of university and course related issues. Each focus group comprised between seven and eleven participants. There was an open invitation to all of the students in the cohort to participate in any of the focus groups. From this, there was a core group that participated in most of the focus groups but also some who participated in one or two groups.

In total, there were fourteen participants. Little previous research has been conducted employing sociological and psychological lenses of analysis to the topic of foundation years. Bryman (2015) argues that where there has been little previous research in an area of study, it is often beneficial to proceed with a small-scale exploratory study that is focused on understanding a particular situation.

Ord (2012) suggests that focus groups are good to use with students as they reflect the type of groupwork that is commonplace in their studies, so putting them at ease to express their views. To avoid the possible problems that can occur in focus groups – for example, that one participant can dominate the discussion or that some participants conform with the majority view (Barbour, 2018) – a metaplanning technique was used. Metaplanning was originally devised as a management tool in Germany to facilitate brainstorming (Habershon, 1993). It has mainly been used in business and engineering, but is being increasingly used in educational research owing to the potential to include participants' free comments and idea sharing (Baker-Oxley, 2019).

Metaplanning is a technique whereby an interviewer asks questions and participants write their answers on post-it notes. The answers given then form the basis of a more open group discussion and at different stages participants are asked to categorise these answers, decide which category is the most relevant, and to write further answers on post-its reflecting on this. Doing these different group tasks gives a structure to the discussion and ensures that all participants contribute, making it more difficult for some participants to dominate and others to conform to the majority view (Matheson and Matheson, 2009). The schedule used for this study was based on that of Davies, Osborne and Williams (2002). Based on Richard's (2015) model, thematic analysis was conducted on the data generated from the metaplanning exercises and more open discussions, with the computer package NVivo used to manage this analysis. All participant names were changed to protect anonymity.

A volunteer sample was taken from the foundation year students in the School of Education. Although a non-selective sampling method was used, the participants were typical of the fifty-eight students in the cohort of the year of the study. All participants fitted the definition of 'non-traditional' students as described in the introduction (Wong, 2018). This reflects the national picture where foundation years increasingly attract older students, many from disadvantaged backgrounds (Moreton et al., 2017; Nathwani, 2019; DfE, 2023b). The majority of the sample (n=13) were female, reflecting the gender difference of students on the course that participants were taking and also of studying education courses nationally (Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), 2023).

Findings and discussion

In relation to widening participation and the acceptance of the belief in the benefits of going to university, there was evidence that the objective of attracting students who would not otherwise have enrolled was being achieved, helping to meet successive governments' policies of appealing to a broader demographic of students (Johnson, 2017). Throughout the year, participants reflected that the foundation year allowed them access to university, as Steve commented:

> I never thought I'd come to university. I thought I would just work and … I've had a steady job for years. I've been working since I've been 17, I always had a steady job and never thought I'd [enrol at university]… (Steve, focus group 2 discussion)

It appears that Steve never doubted that university is something to aspire to, he just did not think he would be able to achieve this. Specifically, the foundation year was seen as offering flexibility compared to other options, which was important for those with work and/or childcare responsibilities:

> I started an access course at my local college but it was five full days a week and that was so I could get onto university. And I didn't know about any courses like this when I signed up for that. I just couldn't do five days. (Deborah, focus group 2 discussion)

Such comments suggest that undertaking a foundation year can help students gain access to HE, especially those from non-traditional backgrounds who cannot commit to being on campus full time and who need flexibility in their study patterns.

In their decisions to enrol onto the course, many participants displayed elements of neoliberal thinking, making individual choices to enrol based on predicted individual gains (Gale and Parker, 2013; Jackson, 2015). In the metaplanning activity at the start of the first focus group, the positive expectations were largely expressed as the personal gains that would be made from completing the course, especially that of career development. For example, 'better employment opportunity' and 'to lead a successful career following the course'. Also, in the more open discussion that followed this metaplanning task, all participants stated career goals as a reason for enrolling onto the course. This reflects the increased employment focus in HE (Ward, 2012; Burke, 2013) and Browne's (2010) view that one of the purposes of entering university is to gain a highly paid job. They are also similar to the findings of Woodhall, Hiller and Resnick (2014), Ball (2015) and Tomlinson (2017) who found students adopting consumer-like attitudes and behaviour. Some comments specifically expressed the view that the course would lead to financial gain, for example.

> It was because I had had enough of working as a carer. I really love my job, it's just that it's low pay. (Celine, focus group 1 discussion)

Other participants also stated financial reasons, with two looking forward to being able to afford to buy a house. This suggests an awareness that obtaining a degree does lead to better financial outcomes, although perhaps not that there are differences in the earnings of graduates from different courses and universities (The Sutton Trust, 2021; Social Mobility Commission, 2023).

Neoliberal thinking in education views qualifications as a product that can be exchanged for higher wages (Ball, 2015). Throughout the discussions with participants over the course of the year, there was a strong focus on the assessments that lead to these qualifications, with concerns about failing expressed throughout the year. Even in the first metaplanning activity, 'failing' was the most voted for category in relation to the potential concerns on starting the course, with comments including 'not passing' and 'worried about failing'. Throughout the year frustration was expressed when course material was not seen as directly relevant to the assessments. This was shown even at the start of the year:

> Because once you get into the swing of it you might have a better idea of how to do it [the assessment] … because now that we've just started, and the assignments are about to be launched. (Steve, focus group 1 discussion)

While participants accepted the need to cover introductory material at the start of each module, this was seen as separate from the real learning that they needed to do rather than as a foundation for this. This focus, so early in the course, on the

assessments suggests a neoliberal attitude where the product of the course, passing the assessments, was at the forefront of participants' minds.

However, if the participants were acting as 'homo economicus' agents (Besley and Peters, 2007), it might be expected that financial rewards and costs would be much more prevalent in their responses, especially at the start of the course. Although financial considerations were evident, similarly to Clifford's (2022) findings, personal development was also valued. From the first metaplanning activity, expected positives included, 'to get more educated', 'help me build communication skills', and 'to be inspired'. This was also seen in the more open discussions. Although in the first focus group many comments did relate to career aspirations, much of the discussion related to the personal satisfaction from studying rather than the financial gain. For example:

> I think it's a personal thing for me to achieve for myself. (Deborah, focus group 1 discussion)

Celine, who even though motivated by the hope of gaining a better paid job, was more excited at this early stage of the course by feelings of a sense of development in her learning:

> In thinking it's changed a lot. My way of thinking, my way of saying things, of writing some notes, of taking some notes, or reading some books. (Celine, focus group 1 discussion)

Also, no comments were made that related to the financial costs of studying, which might have been expected in a cost/benefit calculation when enrolling.

For neoliberal society to operate successfully, consumers need to be making informed decisions regarding the products they purchase. However, most participants were not very well informed about the nature of the course when enrolling:

> I didn't know what to expect. (Grace, focus group 2 discussion)

There was a lack of knowledge regarding the course content, lecture style, fellow students and the difficulty of the material. For example, although the marketing material stressed the common nature of the foundation year, with most modules being shared across a number of courses within the faculty:

> When I first started the course, I thought it was going to be more SEN straight away, so I was, really wasn't expecting this at all. It's been good, but it's just that the content hasn't been what I thought I'd signed up for. (Deborah, focus group 2 discussion)

This reflects the findings of Saunders (2015) and Millian and Rizk (2018), in that most students did not make full use of available information before enrolment. This lack of knowledge of the course content before enrolling highlights a problem for neoliberalism, and Rational Action Theory, in that if consumers are not making use of available information about the product, they will not be able to make optimal decisions regarding their enrolment.

There was also a misapprehension regarding the way that lectures would be presented. There was an expectation that university would involve formal lectures:

> Before I came at all, you expect some sort of battle-axe kind of person standing at the front of the room. (Steve, focus group 1 discussion)

> I did think I was going to come and literally fall asleep. (Nazreen, focus group 3 discussion)

This supports previous research by Hassel and Ridout (2018) who found that students expected the teaching at university to be similar to school. There was also an expectation voiced from several participants that they would be surrounded by much younger students, typified by:

> It's been a better experience than I expected to be honest because I thought I was going to be stuck in a room with 18-year-olds. (Rubina, focus group 3 discussion)

In relation to the level of work, participants did not realise how difficult they would find the work:

> I just expected it to be, coming in and slowly understanding what uni's about, how to write and this and that. Not be thrown so many different things at me. (Charmaine, focus group 4 discussion)

> I don't think A-levels were this tricky. (Steve, focus group 4 discussion)

This again suggests a problem with the discourse surrounding widening participation in that applicants do not consider how challenging university study might be. Also, although career progression was seen by all participants as an important reason for undertaking the course, some of the questions asked throughout the year showed a lack of knowledge as to progression routes following the completion of the degree:

> Can you do a Master's after this? (Nazreen, focus group 2 discussion)

> Can you go onto to a PGCE? (Rubina, focus group 2 discussion)

In relation to neoliberalism, although participants were acting as consumers, choosing from a range of educational options, they were not particularly well-informed consumers. These findings align to those of Winter and Chapleo (2017) and Dashper et al. (2020) who found that student decisions about enrolment were based on emotional, subjective criteria rather than on informed consumer choice. This is of particular concern for this study as previous research shows that non-traditional students are at greater risk of dropping out of university before completing their courses (Petrie and Keohane, 2017).

In relation to whether criticisms of neoliberalism were evident in their responses, there was some evidence of participants expressing a commodity fetishism towards their studies, where the status of being a student and attaining a degree are valued in

themselves rather than the skills and knowledge acquired from studying (Molesworth et al., 2009; Hill and Kumar, 2009):

> It does make you feel better in yourself by saying that you're at university (Stacey, focus group 3 discussion)

As well as the personal satisfaction felt, there was some discussion about the value of the degree as giving a status in the eyes of others. This can be seen as a sort of commodity fetishism projected onto others:

> Now that you go to uni, everyone thinks you're clever! (Saadiya, focus group 2 discussion)

> It's more of a status thing to have a degree, they know that you're studying for a degree and it's like you're on a level, a platform, you know what I mean, they give you a certain title as … the standard person, oh this person has a degree … it gives you a status. (Charmaine, focus group 1 discussion)

There was also an expectation that the status of having a degree would bring benefits to everyday dealings with people. For example, Deborah was frustrated that her son's schoolteachers would not listen to her and that having a degree would make them take her more seriously:

> My own children have got SEN and I have been let down big style by the system. I know what I'm saying but I haven't officially got the qualification. And so they'll listen, hopefully, with this behind me. (Deborah, focus groups 1 discussion)

These comments mostly suggest an extrinsic motivation, with the status of having a degree and the cultural capital that comes with this being valued over the learning and skills acquired from studying. While critics regard this negatively, advocates of neoliberalism would see the participants in this study as acting rationally, with a realisation that possession of a degree increases both employment opportunities and earning potential (The Sutton Trust, 2021), and also self-confidence and social status (Pierce, 2015).

There were also examples of educational fundamentalism, with an uncritical acceptance of the benefits of gaining an education (Alvesson, 2013). 'Qualifications' was written several times in the metaplanning activities as a positive of the course. The belief in the value of education was shown by participants throughout the year of the study:

> It's really been a great experience for me. I've been out of education for so long. Just to be able to take that step to get an education is a great achievement. (Dominique, focus group 2)

This somewhat unquestioning view of education was also shown in the guilt felt when missing a lecture:

> If I miss a session, I feel really bad. (Maria, focus group 3)

Even when participants can rationalise not attending lectures, they still had a deferential approach whereby they saw missing education as wrong:

> I did feel bad but when I speak to other people, and they were like, 'you know what, it's good you didn't come because you didn't miss anything'. And that's not just the one person, that's quite a few people that said that to me, and so I'm like, 'I'm glad I didn't go.' But I did feel bad because I don't like missing lectures, but it was just, and I can see from when I do come into the lectures it's just, literally I feel like crying because I just can't, it doesn't sink in. (Nazreen, focus group 3)

This sentiment of feeling guilty when missing lectures was common across the participants and shows an acceptance that education is beneficial. This also shows an element of dual consciousness (Gramsci, et al., 1971), in that even when participants were critical of the course content, teaching quality and assessments, there was never any questioning of the overall value of gaining an education or the system of formal education they had grown up in and had chosen to re-enter.

Conclusion

Although participants in this study showed a number of reasons for attending university and there were differences in their experiences of the foundation year, there were some commonalities expressed. Participants expressed attitudes that indicated a level of acceptance of the neoliberal model of education. The discourse that going to university is something to aspire to was shown in participants' responses, with the foundation year providing a route into university to students who would not have otherwise entered HE. In enrolling at university they were behaving as consumers, taking individual decisions to pursue a course of action that would lead to financial gain, choosing the foundation year over a range of other options. However, although acting as consumers, participants' responses indicate they were often not acting as particularly well-informed consumers, with evidence suggesting a lack of knowledge of the content of the course being studied, the demands of university study and of progression routes. Also, there was expression of the more intrinsic emotional gains and personal satisfaction that came from learning, with decisions explained as being based on these more emotional, subjective criteria, as well as informed, rational decision making.

In places, responses were contradictory. There was an emphasis given to the assessments, for example being frustrated when the course content was not seen as directly relevant to these. This demonstrates a focus on the extrinsic rewards of attaining good marks, with the anticipation of well paid work associated from attaining a degree. However, there was also evidence for the more intrinsic rewards and joy of learning that do not translate directly into financial gain. This perhaps shows a multitude of reasons for enrolment and the complexity of human decision making.

From this, the neoliberal model of seeing humans as rational decision makers, or 'homo economicus', appears rather reductionist and that there is a need to examine the psychological reasons, as well as the economic ones, to better understand the behaviour of students.

Throughout the year of data collection there was some evidence for the established criticisms of neoliberalism, especially that of commodity fetishism. For example, participants placed a high value on the status of being a student and the expected qualifications that they would gain. To a greater or lesser extent for all participants, these were valued in themselves and disconnected from the labour needed to achieve these goals.

Even given the limitations of this study in terms of sample size and scope, the findings reiterate the importance of understanding the changing nature and needs of non-traditional university students within a widening participation and neoliberal context. The findings of this study present something of a dilemma to lecturers. On one hand it might be recommended that educators recognise the neoliberal landscape that they work in and support students within this. In doing so it could be accepted that courses operate in a market and there is a need to cater to this with courses adapted to be more attractive to prospective students, and teaching focused more on assessment support and employability. On the other hand this could be resisted, with focus given more to the intrinsic value in learning the subject matter taught and the cultivation of a love of learning.

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About the Author

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