

RECAPTURING ‘MARKETING’ FROM THE ‘MARKETISATION’ OF HIGHER EDUCATION DISCOURSE

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Abstract

Both ‘marketing’ and ‘marketisation’ are features of the UK Higher Education (HE) sector. Whilst there is a close and often symbiotic relationship between marketisation and marketing, they represent distinctive aspects of the HE managerial discourse. Nevertheless, they have become part of an indivisible vocabulary that habitually misunderstands these distinctive concepts. The aim of this paper is to recapture marketing from the marketization discourse and demonstrate its contribution as a valid ideological perspective in HE.

Keywords: Marketing, marketisation, higher education, transactional marketing, relational marketing

Introduction

Critics of marketing in higher education (HE) argue that a fundamental and inexorable conflict exists between the intrinsic purposes and values of education and what has been described as an increasing shift towards marketisation or corporatisation, that is treating HE as a commodity open to market forces with students as its primary customers (Bruce, 2006; Gibbs, 2001). Some have asserted that marketisation is an attack on the liberal structures and values that have enabled universities to flourish academically and intellectually (Smith, 1997; Pears, 2010). Others have maintained that the quality of HE, traditionally judged on the basis of inputs such as teaching and research excellence, are being undermined by the imposition of artificial benchmarks based purely on outputs and economic performance. Molesworth et al (2009) argue that the notion of a university as an agent for change, transforming the individual into someone who thinks critically has been replaced by focusing on the content students want at a market rate, decreasing intellectual complexity if this is not in demand, and increasing connections with the workplace if this is desired ‘Once, under the guidance of the academic, the undergraduate had the potential to be

transformed, but in our consumer society such “transformation” is denied and “confirmation” of the student as consumer is favoured’ (ibid. p. 277). Lynch (2006) concurs with this analysis declaring that the university is being pressurised to transfer its allegiance from the academic to the operational and encoding the values of the commercial sector almost without reflection. Hooley (Australian Association for Research in Education, International Educational Research Conference: Establishing Professional Identity: Narrative as Curriculum, Sydney Australia, 27 November – 1 December 2005, pp. 2) even claimed that marketisation was an assault on the academic profession itself ‘Do teachers still see education as a public good, of personal and democratic importance in its own right regardless of the socio-economic background of students, or is education a critical component of material gain and individual, competitive advancement?’.

The bleak canvas painted by detractors implies the existence of a once superior and fairer epoch, an apotheosis where universities focussed on pursuing pure intellectual enquiry with appreciative and compliant students, and in which state intervention was primarily directed at providing financial support. But is this rose-tinted perspective an accurate and indeed desirable interpretation of higher education or merely visceral rhetoric fuelled by perceived disempowerment - a sort of professional bereavement, or perhaps simply a fear of change?

In this paper, it is argued that whilst there is a close and often symbiotic relationship between ‘marketisation’ and ‘marketing’, they nevertheless represent distinctive aspects of the HE managerial discourse yet have somehow become part of an indivisible vocabulary habitually misunderstood by universities. The aim of this paper is to recapture marketing from the marketisation discourse and demonstrate its contribution as a valid ideological perspective in HE.

I.

Marketisation versus marketing....is there a difference and does it matter?

Wikipedia defines marketisation as a process that enables state-owned enterprises to act like market-oriented firms through reduction of state subsidies, organisational restructuring, decentralisation and in some cases privatisation. These steps, it is argued, will lead to the creation of a functioning market system. Opponents of marketisation often cite deregulation under the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, as a defining moment in the transformation of UK HE from public interest institutions into consumer-oriented corporate networks, whose public interest values have been seriously challenged (Rutherford, 2005). What is clear is that the post 1992 deregulation of HE, coupled with the subsequent introduction of

student fees following publication of the Dearing Report and government policy aimed at encouraging increased participation inexorably set in motion the wheels of marketisation in UK higher education, a direction which seems destined to continue for the foreseeable future. Molesworth et al (2009) underline this perspective 'Given the latest government funding cuts, the most prevalent outlook in Higher Education today is one of business, forcing institutions to reassess the way they are managed and promoted to ensure maximum efficiency, sales and "profits". Students view the opportunity to gain a degree as a right, and a service which they have paid for, demanding a greater choice and a return on their investment'. (Preface)

In many ways, marketing is a by-product of marketisation, an inevitable consequence of managing rapidly increasing competition and shifting stakeholder demands effectively. Early definitions of marketing reveal a mainly transactional orientation, 'Marketing is the management process that identifies, anticipates and satisfies customer requirements profitably' (The Chartered Institute of Marketing), or, 'The process of planning and executing the conception, pricing, promotion, and distribution of goods, ideas, and services to create exchanges that satisfy individual and organisational goals' (American Marketing Association). Most practitioners were comfortable with this definition right up to the 1990's. However, rapid changes in technology, an increased awareness of customer synergies, and a greater understanding of lifetime value compelled new ways of regarding the discipline. Marketing guru Kotler (2009, pp. 4) describes marketing as 'a social process by which individuals and groups obtain what they need and want through creating and exchanging value with others'. The American Marketing Association also redefined marketing as 'An organisational function and a set of processes for creating, communicating, and delivering value to customers and for managing customer relationships in ways that benefit the organisation and its stakeholders'. Finally, marketing had been recognised as a social process in which a mutually beneficial relationship exists between consumer and supplier and both are collaborators in the co-creation of value. More importantly, this reconceptualisation provides relevance and acceptability in a traditionally sceptical environment.

The notion and application of marketing may be regarded as an emerging field within HE (Hemsley-Brown et al, 2006), but arguably has resided within the consciousness of universities for centuries. Long before a recognition of marketing's role in identifying the issues and implications of global competition (Conway et al, 1994; Allen et al, 1999; Mazzarol et al, 1999; Mok, 1999; Ford et al, 1999; Armstrong, 2001; Coates et al, 2003), social segmentation (Ball et al, 2002; Reay et al, 2002; Brookes, 2003; Farr, 2003), research into student choice (Foskett et al, 2001; Baldwin et al, 2000), institutional image and reputation (Nguyen et al, 2001) or the development

of market positioning (Binsardi et al, 2003), universities intuitively understood the importance of key marketing concepts such as branding for example, albeit this was not publicly or formally articulated. Coats of arms, mottos, logotypes, proprietary livery and colours, even uniforms, have and are still used, not just to aid corporate identification, but equally if not more significantly, as powerful subliminal symbols to confer perceived status. Similarly, the concept of brand is not confined to the organisational level; individually academics have also appreciated the benefits derived from nurturing an illustrious reputation. Yet, despite this exploitation of marketing (inadvertent or otherwise) it is frequently maligned, or misunderstood, by those same organisations or individuals (Delanty, 2002; Fuller, 2005; Grey, 2001; Prichard et al, 2003; Trowler 2002; Willmott, 2003).

Disentangling marketing from the marketisation discourse is a tricky business. There is considerable internal resistance to marketisation in UK HE, manifesting itself in negative attitudes and responses to the idea of marketing. Moreover, universities have failed to domesticate the marketing idea and make it into a home-grown philosophy (Gray, 1991) resulting in the application of alien ideas borrowed from the business sector. Finally, the apparent inability of HE to identify itself with a specific offering, epitomised in the battles between competing positions on research versus teaching and learning, has exacerbated doubts about the relevancy of marketing in the sector (Maringe, 2005). However, as this paper has revealed, whereas marketisation is a relatively recent and to an extent organic societal phenomenon, marketing is not just a set of techniques designed to improve corporate competitiveness but a philosophical framework guiding the institution in the development of its offering and its relationships with internal and external stakeholders. From this perspective it is clear that reconceptualising marketing is key to its successful long-term survival and recapture from the current marketisation in HE discourse.

Reconceptualising marketing in higher education

Research undertaken on HE marketing in universities has identified that whilst senior executives value marketing, it is generally narrowly perceived as publicity or promotion and concepts such as relationship management, customer satisfaction and marketing research seldom feature in strategic discussions (Ivy, 2001; Maringe, 2005). In the majority of UK HE institutions responsibility for marketing is the domain of senior personnel yet often they do not possess relevant marketing qualifications. Similarly, few strategic university documents include marketing as an integral component, suggesting that it remains at the operational rather than the strategic level in the majority of institutions.

As previously discussed, a fundamental source of discontent is that marketing is regarded as a concept introduced from the commercial world or even an ‘American’ idea, and as such has limited significance within the UK HE sector. The prevailing perception and conceptualization of marketing in HE by and large echoes this notion of imported wisdom, consigning it to the margins of organisational policy and confirming its use as an effective response mechanism but not a key strategic tool.

Several marketing conceptualisations or orientations have been postulated and the extent to which institutions apply marketing practices is generally a reflection of their individual perspectives. A product led conceptualisation is one in which the institution develops its offering based on what it is good at doing, rather than necessarily what the student actually might want. This ‘expert’ model holds true for many UK universities driven by a desire to offer high quality and excellence. This approach can be seen in many research led institutions such as the Russell Group of universities for example. A production orientation is characterised by a primary concern for the creation of products and services e.g. courses. Institutions perceive the key challenge as developing and promoting these products and services in order to compete more effectively. This approach is often exemplified by newly emerging HE institutions, who typically also establish niches in specific subject areas or disciplines in a desire to become more competitive. A sales orientation focuses on the external promotion of the university and its offering. The emphasis is on managing image and reputation, providing information and maintaining applications through promotional activities such as external relations, advertising and even direct selling. Acknowledgement of this approach tends to be underplayed but yet is prevalent in the external activities of most institutions. A marketing orientation is an organisational philosophy that focuses on identifying and meeting the needs of its customers and believes success is most effectively achieved by satisfying these demands. In this respect it differs considerably from the other orientations discussed as it places the customer or student at the heart of decisions, making the institution more accountable. Initial research to identify student needs is a prerequisite in the development of courses and services as opposed to the ‘take it or leave it’ attitude characteristic of other approaches. Elements of a marketing orientation in HE are increasingly detectable at both institutional and national level e.g. graduate research initiatives and the National Student Survey. However, the wholesale application of this approach remains problematic as universities wrestle with whether students should even be seen as customers, whether HE should concern itself solely with delivering customer satisfaction at any cost without regard to what may be right or wrong, and whether embracing a customer centred focus will shift the balance of power from the educators to the

learners (Aaker et al, 1995). Nevertheless, institutions collectively and academics individually recognise and enthusiastically accept the need to satisfy external stakeholder demands (e.g. students, funders, business partners, government departments etc.) both as an ethical responsibility and as a business imperative. Presented and applied appropriately, this orientation may help reframe and reconceptualise marketing in an environment dominated by conservatism and apprehension. Two emerging orientations may also help reinforce a reconceptualisation of marketing in HE. A societal marketing orientation adopts the notion of ethical business and social responsibility, rejecting the idea of promoting products and services at any cost. Finally, a customised marketing orientation builds on the marketing philosophy of satisfying customers but treats them as individuals rather than homogeneous groups. This approach is likely to hold great appeal to HE as it would accommodate the idea of inclusion and differentiation simultaneously, in key areas such as individualised learning programmes and widening participation.

Applying a new marketing philosophy

Having reconceptualised marketing, the institution must now find a way to determine the appropriateness of its orientation. ‘Transactional’ models based on market efficiencies and exchanges and ‘Relational’ models based on involvement and relationships have been identified by several authors (Gibbs, 2002; Li et al, 2000; Hemsley-Brown et al, 2006) and these are now considered further.

Transactional marketing model

Conceptualised as a market, the primary role for HE institutions is the production of educational products and services for students in their defined target markets. The fundamental exchange at the core of this proposition is the acquisition of students and funding in return for products and services that increase the human capital of their customers (Gibbs, 2002). The underlying premise of this model is that HE is a commodity that can be managed through an exchange mechanism whose currency is purely transactional.

Typically the application of this transactional view of marketing is expressed through the deployment of a traditional 4 P’s model of the marketing mix i.e. product; price; place; promotion. Each element is emphasised and adjusted to optimise efficacy of the exchange and maximise value to the institution. The product element may include considerations such as the range of courses offered, the diversification and development of new courses and the structure and methodology of current provision. It may also cover issues such as the physical infrastructure (e.g. facilities and

resources, use and maintenance of display areas, signage etc.) and branding (e.g. is it clear and consistently applied across all media?, does it reflect and reinforce core values?, does it enable prospective students to quickly identify the institution and differentiate from other competing providers?). The price element may include ideas around pricing structures and variances to reflect perceived competition or different target markets (e.g. undergraduates, postgraduates, international etc.), discounts and incentives to encourage increased applications or conversion, and ordering and application procedures. The place element may include strategies on the location and delivery of courses, how to increase accessibility and convenience (e.g. modularisation, online delivery, flexible timetabling etc.) and support systems such as enquiry handling and web support. The promotion element is generally regarded as the ‘coal face’ of the institutions marketing mix and accordingly given prominence strategically and in the allocation of resources. Typically, it will include considerations about how to position the institution and make use of traditional publicity, mailing, public relations, events, branding, online marketing, advertising and sponsorship.

The 4 P’s marketing mix dominates current marketing approaches within HE institutions and with its organisational focus and simple and easy to implement solutions it is not difficult to understand why it has gained such widespread acceptance. However, the four P’s represent what Kotler (2009) describes as the ‘seller’s’ view of marketing tools. In other words it focuses on what the organisation wants to produce, how it wants to price its offering, where and how it chooses to deliver its products and services, and to whom and with what means it chooses to convey information. Given the resistance to the marketisation agenda discussed previously, it is clear that universities do not view HE as a market commodity but rather a learning community in which their role is to act as agents of transformation. It is little wonder then that many academics have shunned the concept of the 4 P’s marketing mix and its negative connotations associated with a product orientated commercial world. The application of marketing in HE therefore seems best built on relationships in which the institution assumes a shared responsibility alongside their learners for the choices and transitions they both make (Gibbs, 2002).

Relational marketing model

Conceptualised as a community in which both the organisations and its customers co-create mutually beneficial value, the HE institution seeks to develop deep relationships where the deployment of organisational capabilities and resources proactively embrace the notion of supporting the widest constitution of learners. This humanistic approach to marketing is founded on the premise that the purpose of the institution is to advance the

interests of both human experience and human capital. According to Gibbs (2002 pp. 329) ‘This differs from any neo-liberal definitions of markets and its derivative marketing in that learners’ interests are satisfied even to the disadvantage (in the financial sense) of the institution. This notion of a community rather than a market would not commoditise the learning experience but celebrate it as essential to humanity’.

The 4 C’s, a reinterpretation of the traditional 4 P’s marketing mix, has been suggested by Bruner (1988) and later Lauterborn (1990), as a means of applying the relational marketing perspective. Product becomes customer solution, customer value or concept; place is replaced by convenience or channel; price is cost; while promotion becomes communication. The customer solution element focuses on the underlying needs and aspirations of students and other stakeholders (including the institution itself) in order to identify how to create value across the whole learning and research community. The cost element recognises that the monetary price is only one part of the cost to satisfy and aims to understand the full cost of consuming the institutions’ products and services in terms of time, effort and even individual conscience. The convenience element turns the conventional view of location and distribution on its head and reframes this in terms of issues such as accessibility, user-friendliness and flexibility. The advent of the Internet has revolutionised traditional supply chains and universities are certainly familiar with idea such as e-learning and podcast lectures etc. The communication element rejects the notion of manipulative one way promotion in favour of shared and interactive two way dialogue and proactively listening to students and other stakeholders.

In an effort to create greater relevance to the HE context, Newman et al (2009) have extended the 4 C’s marketing mix model further by including three additional elements: Calibre (or Champions); Capabilities; Charisma (or Collateral). Calibre refers to people and maintains that the quality of an institutions staff plays a major role in attracting and retaining students. Capabilities refers to processes and suggests that institutional practices and procedures, exemplified by things such as good communications, ease of accessibility and the involvement of students in the institutions’ marketing, can build a significant competitive advantage. Charisma refers to physical evidence and is the visual representation of the institution as well as its tangible manifestation in buildings, facilities and amenities. Corporate identity and brand can be seen to represent an important part of the institutions charisma or collateral but in order to gain genuine credence this needs to extend beyond the use of a logo and corporate strapline and be part of its inherent values, or what Newman et al (2009 pp. 6) describe as a ‘value foundation’.

The 4 C's model of the marketing mix reflects a student oriented marketing philosophy, providing an enduring reminder of the need to focus on long-term relationship building in order to create mutual value. In terms of reconceptualising marketing in HE, one of its distinctive and desirable features is not only putting the student at the centre of marketing decisions but involving them as part of the process itself, Kotler (2009) describes this as the 'buyer's' view of marketing tools.

Can a relational marketing model work in practice?

In 2003 US researchers investigated whether there were benefits for universities in adopting a relational marketing model (Arnett et al, 2003). They examined the nature of the exchange relationship in higher education for individual students, and argued that for HE marketers, encouraging students to be actively involved in school activities and improving or maintaining a level of university prestige encouraged the formation and development of a university identity, which in turn encouraged students to engage in supportive behaviours in the future. Relationship marketing was considered to be a viable strategy but success required a focus on the social benefits of participation in HE such as emotional satisfaction, spiritual values and the sharing of humanitarian ideals and not just the economic rewards that may subsequently accrue as a result of obtaining qualifications. Similarly, Binsardi et al (2003) demonstrated strong support for applying the relationship marketing approach based on a comprehensive literature analysis which linked relationship marketing to the marketing of services. Hemsley-Brown et al (2006 pp. 329) also recognised the compatibility of a relational model with the nature of the HE services because 'It is an approach that promotes the involvement of students in the marketing and image-building of their institutions'.

The research highlighted certainly indicates that there is widespread institutional support and willingness to adopt a relational based marketing model, suggesting success in its practical implementation. However, whilst support for the relational model amongst theorists appears to be consistent, Gibbs (2002) argues that the complexity of the education product, the economic role of HE institutions and the current pressure to perform financially may inhibit the notion of relationship marketing and need to be considered before a reconceptualisation of HE marketing can occur. Gibbs describes three 'pillars' that support the notion of relationship marketing in HE i.e. learners' temporality, 'existential trust' and self-confidence, which are now critically examined.

Temporality - the perception and experience of learning is based on a future goal that extends beyond the present and therefore institutions need to go beyond normal temporal horizons. Gibbs proposes that an understanding

of the preferences and successes of learners in formal learning would offer an insight into both the phenomenology of the learner's own temporality and that embedded in the product or educational service being experienced. To develop a better understanding of students long term goals and attempt to harmonise these with those of the institution firmly resonates with the relationship concept of placing the student at the heart of decision making, however, it seems ironic that Gibbs is openly critical of the economic market philosophy in favour of a more humanistic approach yet surely a key objective for most students in HE is the currency it provides in terms of future employability.

Existential trust - Gibbs claims that the marketing of education has to provide the confidence that trust can be invested in teachers and their institutions to face learners' futures yet to be known or articulated, a trust built on mutual respect, empathy and compassion. Again, the notion of mutuality dovetails neatly with the relational model but the idea of students investing unquestioning confidence in their institution smacks of an archaic view that the institution knows best.

Learner self-confidence - Gibbs (2002 pp. 332) describes this as '... best achieved through the application of practical reason to establish what is feasible for one-self given the potentialities and competencies one has'. An understanding of students' self-confidence in relation to learning is clearly an important component in a relationship based model but, is only one element of something far more complex and multi-faceted, difficult to distil in terms of the practical application of marketing, and to focus on a single aspect may detract from other issues of greater significance within the relationship model.

Gibbs (2002 pp. 333) offers the marketer a useful insight into the nature of relationships and is right to suggest that marketing HE is 'best undertaken within a model of collaborative relationships whose vision is of a humanistic process of change not a transactional market'. However, marketers must also reflect issues of institutional background, the nature of the manpower base and the available resources (Gray, 1991). To this extent, HE marketing also needs to base itself in practicality and achievability if it is to succeed in repairing a damaged reputation. It is the author's view that the successful application of a relational model lies in the individual institutions' ability to domesticate the reconceptualised marketing philosophy as discussed earlier in this paper. The institution should reject any notion of slavishly following marketing practices designed for business organisations or reproducing the position and strategy of competing institutions, in favour of pursuing its own unique mission. Key requirements to support a developing marketing orientation include the creation of a distinct professional marketing structure, the introduction of robust communication

systems, the systematic collection of marketing information through research, the support of senior management, the propagation of internal marketing to garner collaboration and understanding from colleagues across the organisation, and the involvement of students and other stakeholders in marketing particularly in relation to brand building and reputation management.

The idea of domesticating the marketing into the strategic focus of HE is however further threatened by a failure within universities to identify with their real core product. This is largely manifested by the debate whether universities should be research or teaching focused.

Conclusion

Like it or not, marketisation is now a feature of UK higher education and will continue to polarise opinions and stir emotions. However, regardless of position on the debate, the unprecedented expansion of the sector over the past 20 years has brought about significant benefits to the entire learning community. In 1994 there were around 1.4M students participating in higher education, according to the most recent figures released by the Higher Education Funding Council this now stands at 2.5M, a staggering increase of almost 80%. Widening participation and diversity are also key features of this expansion. There are more students from state schools than ever before, a greater number of international students, greater cultural diversity in the home student population, more disabled students and the largest number of mature students than at any other time. This phenomenal growth has also resulted in massive investment programmes to support teaching and learning and develop the physical infrastructure. The range and variety of course provision is unrecognisable from a generation ago, choice was often limited to a relatively few well known academic or vocational subjects. 20 years ago it was unthinkable to have done a degree in Popular Music Studies (Liverpool), Hairdressing Salon Management (Derby), Fashion and Lifestyle Products (Southampton Solent), Watersports Science and Development (Portsmouth), Contemporary Circus and Physical Performance (Bath Spa), Surf Science and Technology (Plymouth) or Puppetry (Central School of Speech and Drama, London). And it's not just post-92 institutions who have exploited these new market conditions, Russell Group universities have also actively developed new courses such as Folk and Traditional Music (Newcastle), Profound and Complex Learning Disability (Manchester), Motor Sports Engineering Management (Sheffield) and Viking Studies (Nottingham). Seen like this, marketisation appears to have enabled new channels of intellectual enquiry and research rather than restrict academic freedoms and interests. A critical discourse on the marketisation of HE is desirable and essential in questioning the intrinsic nature and purposes of

education, however juxtaposing the arguments in opposition to marketization against the realities of some its outcomes as outlined seems tinged with a degree of irony. For example, the dismantling of elitism, so prevalent in HE, especially prior to 1992 (Woodrow, 1998), is surely a universal aim for higher education. According to staunch opponent of marketisation, Lynch (2006 pp. 12) ‘As Europe has become increasingly dependent on higher education to drive the social, political, cultural and economic infrastructure of society, access to higher education is increasingly becoming a prerequisite for survival. We need to challenge the neo-liberal agenda in education, not least because higher education is increasingly a necessity for the majority rather than a privilege for the few’.

Marketing in HE is still a relatively underdeveloped concept. Its strategic importance within HE has been widely acknowledged by Vice Chancellors and senior personnel but not matched by occupying a place at the strategic table within most institutions or becoming fully embedded within their strategic vision and operations. The potential contribution of marketing to the strategic agenda in HE is significant, it is about extending and defining choice, more accurately meeting the needs of stakeholders and enhancing quality in provision. From this perspective, marketing can be seen as expansive, innovative and responsive, not reductionist or intransigent. However, the prevailing view of marketing is narrow and dominated by a belief that it is based on imported ideas from the business world and whose fundamental purposes are to increase demand, beat the competition and achieve economic goals. Moreover, an emphasis on promotion and external relations activities remains dominant at key levels of university administration. Set against this background, marketing has become inextricably entangled within the marketisation discourse, encountering internal resistance and negative responses towards the concept of marketing.

Recapturing the relevance of marketing from the marketisation in HE discourse will largely depend on two key foundations: reconceptualising the marketing philosophy; and domesticating the concept of marketing at an institutional level. If marketing can drive the institutions’ agenda to build a learning community based on long-term relationships, open communication, and the co-creation of mutual value, it can justly assume its place at the strategic table.

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