

The myth of student choice

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The UK Coalition Government believes that the key to raising educational quality is to empower students in various ways, especially by providing them with substantially increased amounts of information about provision and quality. The Myth of Student Choice examines the thinking behind this policy in the light of the available evidence about higher education as a process and about the nature of student decision making. It argues that, so far from raising quality, the present push on student information will actually damage quality, not least by reinforcing the reconstitution of the identity of the student from apprentice learner to that of novice consumer.

Keywords

choice | consumerisation | information for students | Key Information Set | National Student Survey | private for-profit universities | private not-for-profit universities

‘The more information students have on courses and their outcomes, the more their choices will drive universities to improve’.

(Lord Mandelson, CBI Higher Education Summit, 20 October 2009)

‘Better informed students will take their custom to the places offering good value for money. In this way, excellent teaching will be placed back at the heart of every student’s university experience’.

(Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011b, paragraph 2.24)

‘Markets cannot discipline price without meaningful information about quality’.

(Massy, 2004, p.31)

‘People investing in human capital through a purchase of higher education don’t know what they are buying – and wouldn’t and can’t know what they have bought until it is far too late to do anything about it’.

(Winston, 1999, p.15)

‘Education is a process pretending to be an outcome’.

(Trow, 1992, p.9)

Introduction

One of the central planks of the UK Coalition Government's higher education reforms is the empowerment of students through the enhancement of student choice. This is on the basis that both quality and efficiency will be improved as institutions respond to students' decisions and 'raise their game' so as to attract or retain students and revenue. In this article I want to ask whether empowering students and strengthening student choice will actually deliver these benefits, or whether it will simply trigger a further set of costs, distortions and detriments.

I shall first describe the various ways in which the Government is seeking to achieve this objective, before considering the beliefs and assumptions on which it is based. Drawing on evidence from higher education and other scholarship, I shall then consider how far these beliefs and assumptions, derived essentially from the economic theory of markets, are appropriate to higher education. Finally, I shall look at the potential consequences. My conclusion is that, so far from improving the quality of student education, strengthening student choice is actually much more likely to damage it.

Before coming to the main argument, let me just say, for the avoidance of doubt, that I am certainly not opposed to students having and exercising choices about what, where and how to study. Nor am I against them having as much information as is feasible on which to base their decisions. My concerns arise from the weight being placed on this process as a driver of quality and efficiency, and from the very clear danger that, so far from improving educational quality, it will actually detract from the things that really do make for quality and efficiency, namely the adoption of the best educational practices within a well funded, diverse and integrated higher education system. There is also a moral aspect that I shall come to at the very end.

Enhancing student choice

Let us look first at how the Government is seeking to empower students as consumers of higher education. There are six main ways.

First, from this autumn (2012), the cost of teaching most subjects will be met entirely from the student fee, with institutions competing on price (within an overall cap) as well as on course quality and availability. This is in effect a voucher system. By mimicking as closely as possible a 'real' market where consumers choose with their own resources, voucher systems are seen by some economists as the best means of giving consumers leverage over publicly funded services (Friedman, 1962). However, so far the evidence about improved quality and efficiency is at best inconclusive (Belfield and Levin, 2005; Bekhradnia and Massy, 2009).

Second, the Government has removed the controls on the number of places for highly qualified students (those with AAB+ at A level and equivalent). This is intended both to increase competition and to strengthen student choice. Whether it will expand supply will depend on the universities' reactions: past experience in both Britain and America suggests that many prestigious institutions prefer to keep their numbers down in order to preserve their exclusivity. In any case, whilst this partial lifting of numbers controls may increase choice, it will of course only do so for applicants with those qualifications.

Third, to widen the choice of supplier, the Government is encouraging more Further Education (FE) colleges to enter the higher education market. More than half the marginal places created under the new 'core-and-margin' funding methodology for 2012 entry have been allocated to FE colleges, although these may be offset by places being withdrawn by universities under existing agreements (Matthews, 2012a). The core-and-margin methodology is essentially a device for keeping fees down although it has been presented by the Government as a means of increasing competition. As a result, 65 FE colleges now have direct funding agreements with the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) for the first time (Lee, 2012). The Government is also lowering the rules for provider entry. To be eligible for a university

title, a college with degree awarding powers now needs only 1,000 full-time equivalent higher education students compared with 4,000 previously; only 750 of these have to be studying at degree level. At the same time, students on over 400 courses at non-HEFCE-funded colleges are now designated as eligible to receive state subsidised loans compared with 157 only a couple of years ago (Morgan, 2012).

Fourth, to improve the quality of student decision making, the Government is further expanding the amount of information that institutions are required to publish about their provision. It is also encouraging private companies to use this information to provide fuller information and guidance. The Consumers Association Which? has recently announced its intention to provide such a service (Which? 2012). The centrepiece of this enhanced information drive is the so called Key Information Set (KIS), setting out no fewer than seventeen items of information that will be available at course level for each institution from this autumn. These include the proportion of time spent in various learning and teaching activities (by year/stage of study, with a link to further detail); the mix of summative assessment methods used (by year/stage of study); the destinations of graduates six months after graduation; of those employed, the proportion in managerial/professional jobs six months after graduation; and salary data (upper quartile, median, lower quartile) six months after graduation from the course concerned and for all courses in the subject across all institutions, six and 40 months after graduation (the final version of the KIS is at <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/whatwedo/publicinfo/kis>). Universities are also being 'encouraged' to publish anonymised information about the teaching qualifications, fellowships and qualifications of their teaching staff (HEFCE guidance is expected shortly).

Fifth, the Government is increasing the ways in which institutions are required or encouraged to consider student interests, strengthening the student 'voice'. Now in its eighth year, the National Student Survey (NSS) – a survey of third-year students' views on their institutional experience – is seen as a key indicator of

educational quality by students, institutions and the media (in spite of its many limitations for this purpose: Brown, in press, Chapter 6). Students are now full members of the review teams that periodically assess institutions' quality assurance arrangements. They may also have the power in future to trigger institutional reviews where there are serious concerns about quality.

Finally, the Government is strengthening the ways in which students can obtain attention, action or redress for what is perceived to be inadequate service. For example, all institutions are being required to publish student charters covering: diversity, respect and communication; teaching, learning, research and assessment; finance; complaints, appeals, discipline; personal development and employment; student services (non-academic); and community, sports and social activities (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011a). In fact, charters will play a dual role: internally, they will frame the expectations of existing students; externally, they will play a promotional role in presenting an image of the institution to potential students. Following the lead given in the White Paper, the Office of the Independent Adjudicator on Student Complaints (OIA) has consulted the sector on a number of ideas that could promote and deliver early resolution of complaints. These include the creation of campus ombudsmen and associated support networks; the creation of a good practice framework for complaints and appeals processes, including possible timeframes; the development of an OIA 'kite-mark' accreditation scheme; and a revised funding scheme that contains a case-fee element (OIA, 2011).

Of these various steps, the one on which I wish to concentrate here is the fourth: the enhancement of information (for a more general review of the reforms, see Brown, in press). This is central and crucial because, as everyone agrees, student choice is only meaningful if students are able to make well informed decisions about their future studies. Let us start by looking at the Government's rationale.

The rationale

The rationale was indicated in the earlier quotes from recent Government statements. It can be broken down into three propositions: (a) markets are the most efficient way of allocating resources; (b) higher education is basically a private good; therefore (c) a market-based system – or one as close to it as is politically and economically attainable – is the best means of providing higher education. If these propositions are accepted then the reform programme set out in the White Paper makes perfect sense. But if there are difficulties with them, markets may not be of the best and most efficient way of organising provision. As the formulation implies, the argument turns on the answers to two questions: (a) what sort of good or service is higher education? (b) who are the main beneficiaries?

What kind of good or service is higher education?

I propose to refer here to the work of a number of writers who have considered how far higher education can be seen as a good or service (see also, Dunnett et al., 2012).

Zeitaml et al. (1985, p.36) identified eight features that distinguish services from goods for marketing purposes: services cannot be stored; services cannot be transported; services cannot be mass produced; services cannot be protected by patents; service quality is difficult to control; service costs are difficult to calculate; demand for services fluctuates; consumers themselves are involved in the production process. Elsewhere (p.43) the authors speak of four unique features of services: intangibility; inseparability; heterogeneity; and perishability (duration of benefits to the consumer is also identified). Because of these characteristics, service quality cannot be measured objectively; instead the focus has to be on 'perceived quality', which results from a comparison of customer expectations with their perceptions of actual performance (Voss and Gruber, 2006, p.219).

Lovelock (1983) classified services, inter alia, by the scope for the exercise of customisation and judgement in delivery. Where, as in higher education, the service is created as it is consumed, and the customer is involved in the production process, there is far more room

for tailoring the service to meet the needs of individual customers or clients. But by the same token it can never be clear, either to the customer or to the professional provider, what the outcome will be. Many writers (for example, Rothschild and White, 1995; Marginson, 2004; McCulloch, 2009) in fact emphasise the role of students as inputs into, and joint producers of, their higher education.

How do purchasers judge the quality of a good or service? Economists make a distinction between 'search' and 'experience' goods. 'Search' goods are those where product characteristics such as quality can be established prior to purchase: most ordinary consumer goods fall into this category. 'Experience' goods are those where quality can only be assessed through consumption: restaurant meals, theatrical performances, holidays all fall into this category. However Weimer and Vining (1992) categorised higher education as a 'post-experience' good, the quality of which can only be established well after it has been 'consumed', and perhaps not even then (see also, Nelson, 1970 and Hamlin, 1994). In the same spirit, Kay and Vickers (1998, p.308) used the term 'trust' goods, the quality of which is not apparent even after consumption. Similarly, Lovelock et al. (1998, p.219) speak of 'credence qualities', characteristics that customers find it difficult to evaluate even after purchase and consumption.

Cave et al. (1992) drew attention to imperfect observability and infrequent purchasing as major difficulties in applying market theories to higher education, together with the difficulty of changing course or institution. As regards quality, they distinguished between the provenance of the degree awarded, the quality of tuition received, and differentiation in course content. Neither of the first two can be observed in advance. The third aspect – the construction of the course – is more readily observable before purchase. But even here the relative merits of the course for a particular individual are less easily evaluated and there may be high search costs.

Rowley (1995) identified three features that distinguish higher education from other services:

- Exclusivity of access: most customers must meet stringent academic and sometimes personal criteria.
- The customer is an agent in not only their

own education but that of others: the notion of 'exchange', what the customer gives to the service experience, which includes but goes beyond price.

- The longitudinal nature of the service: in measuring or assessing quality we need to consider not only the cumulative effect of the transactions but also the changes in students as learners, which may lead to developing or changing approaches to learning, learning styles and/or perceptions of the learning process (see also, Bolton and Drew, 1991).

Who are the beneficiaries?

Clearly, the student is not the only beneficiary of higher education:

'Perhaps the most important way in which education differs from simple consumer products is that it is not just the primary customer who benefits. The strangest aspect of the idea that the market can ensure quality is that it implies that there is only one customer, or type of customer... Schooling is unlike a consumer product because there are multiple stakeholders – multiple customers – who make multiple demands on schooling and also benefit from particular forms of schooling. Schooling and, more important, education, is not an individual benefit where quality can be judged solely in terms of the individual preferences of the person who is educated. Education is essentially a social and a moral affair. It is an activity in which the society within which an individual lives is actively involved' (Walford, 2006, p.60-61).

In passing, one could say that perhaps the most fundamental difficulty with the current reforms is that, like the Browne Committee Report on which they are based (Independent Review, 2010), higher education is essentially seen as a private good and, moreover, one where those private benefits are seen overwhelmingly in economic terms (earnings, employment, benefits). Per contra, the public interest is mainly seen in terms of ensuring that taxpayers' money is properly spent, as Dodds (2011) and others have pointed out.

To sum up this stage of the argument, we have a situation where (a) it is impossible for an individual to know in advance what quality

of education they will receive if they enrol on X course at Y institution in Z mode, not least because they will be inputs to, and co-producers of, that process and (b) the range of potential beneficiaries goes far wider than the individual student. A number of corollaries flow from this, and it is with these corollaries that the rest of this article will be concerned. Before we come to this, however, there are one or two further points that may be worth noting at this stage.

First, even if these problems could be overcome, there are many other reasons why market-based approaches have severe limitations when applied to higher education. These include (a) the need to protect the supply of public goods such as a skilled labour force, an active citizenry, etc (hence state subsidies, regulation and, sometimes, supply), and (b) the fact that universities cannot easily be left to close if there is insufficient demand for their courses (in spite of the rhetoric about failing institutions, not a single major, multidisciplinary, institution has so far been allowed to close by any administration) (for a full review, see Brown, 2011).

Second, there is an enormous amount of – mostly American – literature that attempts to specify the conditions in which effective student learning is most likely to occur. I will not attempt to summarise this here. But in view of what is said in a moment, it may be worth noting that it does not generally support the view that students will receive a better educational experience in a more selective institution. To quote Pascarella (2001, p.20):

'Within-college experiences tend to count substantially more than between-college characteristics. The quality of teaching, the extent and nature of interaction with faculty and peers, the effectiveness of student affairs programming, the focus and intensity of academic experiences, and the overall level of student engagement, to name several important dimensions, are much more important in defining excellence in undergraduate education than the reputation, selectivity or resources of the institution attended. This is not to say that such factors as student body selectivity or resources have no role in shaping institutional impact. In some situations they do, at least indirectly. However, the weight of evidence indicates that their impact is substantially less than what a college does with the students and resources that it has' (original author's emphasis).

In other words, it is exposure to effective educational practices that is the key to high quality student education (see also, Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991, 2005; National Survey of Student Engagement, 2001; Pike, 2003; Kuh and Pascarella, 2004; Pascarella et al., 2006; Ewell, 2008; Strauss and Volkwein, 2008; Lipka, 2008; Ro et al., submitted for review). The same message can be taken from two recent UK studies (Teaching and Learning Research Programme, 2008; Ashwin et al., 2011; see also, Brennan and Patel, 2011).

Next, even if we had valid, reliable and accessible indicators of educational quality, in every part of every institution, that could be economically customised in advance for every individual student or potential student (and the challenges of conveying such indicators in an accessible way that avoids distortion and does not mislead the user should not be underestimated – see Baldwin and James, 2000), there is little evidence either from the literature on consumer decision making generally or from what we know of student decision making in higher education that students would necessarily make use of them (Naidoo et al., 2011). On the contrary, we know that in reaching decisions about which product to buy, consumers generally, and students certainly, are influenced by a whole series of factors, of which perceived quality is only one. To quote one of the most authoritative surveys:

‘Our research found little of the calculative, individualistic consumer rationalism that predominates in official texts (Ball, Macrae and Maguire, 1999)’. (Reay et al., 2005, p.58).

Like many other consumers, student behaviour tends to be ‘adaptive’: students act in accordance with how they are normally expected to in the circumstances in which they find themselves (Hutchings, 2003; Jongbloed, 2003; Kay, 2003; Vossensteyn, 2005; Stothart, 2007; Cremonini et al., 2008).

Let us now turn to the corollaries of this fundamental problem with information about quality in higher education.

The difficulties with information for students: the consequences for educational quality

If information about product quality is not available and students would not use it rationally even if it were, should higher education be provided on market lines in the first place? As Jongbloed (2006, p.25) has written:

‘If individuals are fundamentally rational and the problems are [uncertainty, imperfect information] , the potential role for policy would be to try to address these market imperfections by helping students make the decisions they want. If, on the other hand, students are fundamentally irrational, then giving them more information or eliminating market imperfections will not necessarily improve outcomes. In the latter case there may not be a need to strengthen consumer choice in higher education, as it might be better to, for example, let educational authorities offer the programmes they deem best for students rather than let student preference drive programme selection.’

Following the Browne Committee, the Government has in fact accepted that student choices should **not** be the sole determinants of what is offered by continuing direct subsidies for some ‘strategically important and vulnerable subjects’ and certain other priority areas. This reflects the desirability of not simply leaving the choice of what subjects should be taught to students. As Williams (1999, p.149) wrote:

‘Higher education provision determined solely by the wishes of large numbers of individual students would be unlikely to meet their real long-term needs, or those of society as a whole, as effectively as a system in which significant resource allocation authority is held by a democratic government, advised by expert agencies that can interpret the economic and social processes with which tertiary education interacts’.

The second corollary, if higher education is to be organised on market lines, is that consumers will seek information substitutes. This happens in other situations where market forces are intended to operate but where direct information about product quality is hard to find (McPherson and Winston, 1993; see also, Kay and Vickers, 1998). In higher education,

it has been well established that it is prestige that typically acts as the substitute (Brewer et al., 2002; Eckel, 2008; van Vught, 2008). Hence price is a key indicator of (perceived) quality: with all the experience of what happens when institutions are allowed to set their own prices in education markets, the Coalition Government really had no excuse for being taken aback when so many institutions went for the upper end of the fee possibilities for 2012.

As well as charging the maximum the market will bear, the leading US institutions invest in improving admissions selectivity, lowering acceptance/yield rates and student consumption benefits: dormitories, eating facilities, fibre-optic networks, etc. (Dill, 2003). Other strategies to enhance prestige include renaming the institution and creating 'honors colleges' to attract higher scoring students (Newman et al., 2004). There is of course a very strong correspondence between institutional prestige, longevity and worth. In both the US and Britain there are huge differences in levels of institutional wealth: even after allowing for subject differences, Cambridge has over four times the income per student of Edge Hill (the differences in net assets are even greater). Calhoun (2006, p.25) has observed that the availability of elite status actually depends on huge inequalities of funding for different categories of institution. Current Government policies will of course increase these disparities (Thompson and Bekhradnia, 2011; Brown, in press). If input factors like resourcing levels or student qualifications matter, then equity suggests that any differentials should be reduced, especially as the more expensive and better funded institutions tend to attract students who have already had more spent on them than their less fortunate contemporaries.

A recent study of UCAS applications in 1996, 2000, 2004, 2006, 2008 and 2010 (Raffe and Croxford, 2012) confirms that in both England and Scotland there has been virtually no change in the hierarchy of Russell Group, other pre-1992 and post-1992 sectors. As Zemsky wrote in 2005 (p.287):

'What the faculty and staff of both private and public institutions have learned is that in the end there is really no market advantage accorded to institutions that provide extra-quality education...What happens in this market is not quality but rather competitive advantage'.

Hansmann (1999) argued that much in higher education can be explained by the notion of student education as an 'associative good', one where a major consideration for purchasers is/are the personal characteristics of the other customers. What a university or college is selling is therefore, in large part, the 'quality' of its students. This is still another consequence of the difficulty of obtaining direct information about product quality. Markets in such goods do not function like other markets. In particular, when not-for-profit firms produce such goods, there is a strong tendency for customers to become stratified across firms according to their personal characteristics. The incentive to sell by choosing only the best customers is especially strong for such organisations because they are effectively constrained to charge their customers, on average, no more than (and, often, much less than) the cost of producing the service. A private for-profit college would have a stronger incentive to use price as a basis for rationing admissions. At the same time, competition is dampened, partly because of larger gaps between the market segments and partly because of the high degree of inertia in the student body, over centuries in many cases.

The whole situation has been well summarised by Dill:

'Because the new competitive market is characterized by inadequate and inappropriate information, an ambiguous conception – "academic prestige" – comes to represent academic quality in the public mind, which can lead to a price-quality association that undermines productive efficiency. The distorting influence of prestige in both the US and UK markets means that the educational costs of elite universities provide a "price umbrella" for the rest of the system and present spending targets for less elite institutions that wish to compete by raising their prices (Massy, 2004). Competitive markets thereby encourage an academic "arms race" for prestige amongst all institutions, which rapidly increases the costs of higher education and devalues the improvement of student learning. As noted in both the US and UK, an unregulated academic market can lead to a situation in which no university constituency – students, faculty members or administrators – has a compelling incentive to assure academic standards. This is a recipe for a classic and

significant market failure in which the rising social costs of higher education are not matched by equivalent social benefits (Teixeira et al., 2004) (Dill, 2007, p.67).

The third corollary, as both Jongbloed and Dill have noted, is the need for effective regulation. There is a paradox here. The 2011 White Paper and associated official statements speak of the need to reduce regulation if market competition is to flourish, hence fewer controls on funded student places, greater price competition, lower market entry barriers, etc. There is also to be a 'risk-based' approach to quality assurance, so that some institutions receive less frequent or intensive assurance visits than others. But what if the resource squeeze on the sector as a whole (with a 40 per cent planned reduction in current spending to 2014-15) or on individual institutions (increasing disparities again) leads to more cutting of corners and risks to quality either generally or on the part of the most hard pressed universities? It certainly seems ironic that at the very time when institutions are, by Government decision, facing an even more risky environment, that same Government should be introducing 'risk-based' regulation.

There is a further difficulty. The regulation of quality in most higher education systems is a mixture of state, academic and market mechanisms (Clark, 1983; Dill and Beerkens, 2011, and in press). In reality, most experts agree that in developed systems the key mechanism is academic self-regulation within, usually, a state legislative envelope (Kells, 1992). But market competition shifts the balance of power away from the academic community as the primary custodians and judges of quality and standards. To quote Marks (2007, p.173), judgements shift from being 'authority-based' (merit judged by 'the authorities') to being 'market-based'. Moreover, quality is increasingly seen in terms of economic criteria such as fitness for the labour market. At the same time the focus of institutional quality assurance shifts from quality enhancement to reputation management (for the full argument, see Brown, 2009).

The final corollary is the amount of waste involved. Institutions put huge amounts of effort into producing, checking, manipulating, publishing and 'spinning' vast amounts of data, yet not one of the various moves to increase student information has been subject to a proper cost-benefit analysis. So for

example, the projected autumn 2012 HEFCE evaluation of the Key Information Set (HEFCE, 2012, pp.14-15) envisages looking at:

- The user experience of the KIS widget, the KIS and the new Unistats website
- Whether the process from HE providers' perspectives can be improved on
- An audit of the data provided by institutions.

No reference here to an analysis of institutions' costs in producing this information let alone the wider costs and distortions, or whether these are or could be offset by quantified or quantifiable benefits.

Similarly, universities and colleges invest increasing amounts of money in activities – marketing, branding, student recruitment – which have little to do with educational quality but are thought to be attractive to students and their sponsors. Hearn (2008, p.209) refers to Luetzger's (2008) estimate that the amount of money spent on marketing and communications by colleges and universities in the US has risen by over 50 per cent since 2000; this is the average: the recent Senate report on for profit colleges (Stone, 2012) found that such institutions spend an average of 23 per cent on marketing compared to 17 per cent on instruction. This may be why many American students pay far more in tuition than their colleges spend on educating them, something we shall increasingly see here as tuition fees take off after 2012. Much of this expenditure is of course in response to what students, as consumers, need or say they need.

In the UK, a number of writers (e.g. Rolfe, 2003) have drawn attention to increased expenditure on marketing and branding as universities seek to maintain and improve their position in the market, even though much of this is ineffective (see also, Matthews, 2012b). There has so far been less comment about dysfunctional expenditure on the US pattern but this can surely be only a matter of time. Most serious of all, however, is the waste involved where institutions invest resources in seeking prestige – for example, through increasing student selectivity or investing in expensive research 'stars' – when only a small number of institutions can ever be truly prestigious: a zero-sum game with

a vengeance. These are of course resources that could and should have been invested in improving educational practices and facilities.

Finally, we should note the contradiction between the idea of offering every student and potential student the widest possible choice, so that every student has the best chance of fulfilling their potential by studying on a course and in a manner that best meets their particular needs, and the clearly homogenising tendencies of having a single set of (mostly input-based) data to indicate institutional 'quality'. There are in fact several sets of paradoxes here.

First, partly because of the informational problems described, and in spite of government rhetoric about the beauties of competition as each institution finds its distinctive niche, a greater degree of marketisation in higher education actually leads to a lower level of institutional diversity, as many students, institutions, employers and national agencies 'migrate' to a single preferred model of a well-resourced, highly selective, research-based university (see Brown, 2011, chapter 3 for the full argument); the 'league tables' of course reinforce this. At precisely the same time as Ministers are preaching diversity and choice their policies are actually reducing it. Second, the governments that have been advocating greater student choice are the very ones that have been cutting public expenditure on universities, so that institutions' ability to offer a 'personalised' curriculum – for example, by increasing the amount of face to face contact between students and lecturers/tutors, reducing the size of teaching groups and/or improving the speed and quality of feedback (all things that surveys consistently put at the top of students' wishes) – has been significantly reduced (student/staff ratios in the universities are now, at 17.1, nearly two points above those in the state secondary schools, 15.3; in the private schools they are about half the state school figure). This is both a local management problem and a major strategic issue.

It is in fact strongly arguable that if the Government was really serious about student choice and empowerment, it would increase the resources for teaching in all institutions, something already desirable on economic grounds alone (McMahon, 2009). It would also require those institutions that obtain large amounts of public money for research to say how they are using that money to improve student learning and so justify the £9,000 fee: I think we can guess the answer from the reported comments of Sir Stephen Wall, Chair of the Council of University College London, in December 2010, that the institution would be using the increased teaching revenue to 'fund the shortfall in government support for science and other research' (Baker, 2010). The Government would also commit more of its own resources to develop information tools and dissemination: Thompson and Bekhradnia (2011, paragraph 84) pointed out that the Government proposes to spend £150,000 on information provision yet the running costs of the Student Loans Company and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs will increase by £10m per annum with the introduction of the new fee and repayment schemes.

Finally, and again contrary to the claims of market advocates, instead of empowering consumers' choices and potentialities, market methods of coordination actually reproduce the inequalities that consumers bring to the market place. As Ranson (1993, p.337) wrote:

'Within the market place all are free and equal, only differentiated by their capacity to calculate their self-interest. Yet, of course, the market masks its social bias. It elides, but reproduces, the inequalities that consumers bring to the market place. Under the guise of neutrality, the institution of the market actively confirms and reinforces the pre-existing social class order of wealth and privilege.' (see also, Hemsley-Brown, 2011).

Whatever else markets may produce it is not social justice.

Conclusion

It is impossible to avoid the conclusion that, at the very least, the current push on student information will increase stratification, both of the institutions and of the constituencies they serve (to the detriment of the notion of a diverse system where differences in resourcing and status between institutions are kept within a certain range); it will weaken self-regulation (the chief reason for our generally well-deserved reputation for educational quality); and will lead to a lot of nugatory effort on the part of institutions and students and their families, at a time of almost unprecedented economic pressures, without any corresponding benefits.

Even worse, though, is the reinforcement that it provides for the notion of higher education as a consumer product just like any other (Williams, in press). This is completely contrary to the vision which many of us still have of higher education as essentially a process of intellectual and moral transformation, where the end product, if there is one, is a more enlightened individual better able to stand on their own feet intellectually through participation in a community which is devoted to searching out and understanding what is believed to be the truth through established scholarly means. Instead of a vision of higher education in which students are essentially consumers of a pre-specified product, we should be talking about an engaged partnership, where the key information is not what students can obtain before entering but what all parties learn in the course of the process about educational aims and how students may best achieve them. This is what is at stake in the enhancement of student choice and information.

Finally, there is a moral dimension. Is it fair to load upon students, at the age of 17 or 18, the main responsibility for making a choice of subject, course and institution, and for correcting it if it turns out to be wrong? Surely it should be the responsibility of the academic community to protect students by ensuring that, whatever, wherever and however they study, they receive a worthwhile learning experience leading to a suitable qualification? The very worst aspect of the renewed push on student choice and information is that it weakens our ability to provide those reassurances without putting anything worthwhile in its place.

You may now be able to see why, on the basis of what we know about higher education markets, student choice is a myth, and a dangerous myth at that.

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