The dominant subject position offered to students by the UK government’s White Paper, The Future of Higher Education (DfES 2003), is that of consumer. Indeed the document seems to take it for granted that students already occupy the status of consumers. The government first introduced a formal economic transaction between students and universities in 1997 when they made students pay £1,125 towards their university fees each year. The 2003 White Paper and the 2004 Higher Education Act not only raise student fees but, more importantly, they introduce an explicit market in higher education for the first time. In 2006, universities are to pitch their fees for each course at between £0 and £3,000 per annum according to how they competitively rank themselves against similar courses, and how graduates from that course prosper in the employment market. The Act aims to make universities more responsive to their market and accountable to their customers. It establishes students’ rights to information, their consumer rights, so that they can ‘become intelligent customers of an increasingly diverse provision’ (DfES 2003: para. 4.2). Through exercising choice, students are to be the drivers of change in higher education. This article will first analyse policy documents in order to ask where this discourse about students as consumers has come from, and how it fits in with the Blair government’s image of ‘modern Britain’. Second, it will draw on empirical research to ask how students at different kinds of universities respond to this discourse.1

**Global Knowledge Economy**

Tony Blair’s 1997 election mantra ‘Education, education, education’ was a sign that a thesis advanced by Robert Reich (1991), an academic who became US Secretary of Labor during President Clinton’s first term, was now influencing the British Labour Party. Reich argues that the future lies in what others have called ‘the global knowledge economy’. His argument is that, because of international competition, US corporations have shifted from high-
volume production to making bespoke, high-value products for individual customers. As witnessed by IBM’s recent sale of its home-computer manufacturing to a Chinese firm, producing computer hardware in the US no longer has sufficient value added; profits lie in designing software to meet a particular user’s needs. This market requires corporations to be agile, to switch direction to seize new opportunities. Corporations cannot operate with vast resources, armies of disciplined workers and predictable routines. Instead they need the flexibility of a small core and a network of short-term alliances with smaller businesses, subcontracts and joint ventures—partners who will share risks and returns.

This network is global and, as described by Reich, it is peopled by horizontally organised creative teams of symbolic analysts. Some team members develop new ideas and technologies while others identify problems in customers’ operating systems to which these solutions can be applied. In all, they manipulate symbols—data, words, oral and visual representations—using analytic tools to simplify reality into abstract images that can be ‘rearranged, juggled, experimented with, communicated to other specialists, and then, eventually, transformed back into reality’ (1991: 177, 178). Forming 20 percent of US jobs in 1990 and rising (ibid: 179), these are the people who can compete in a global labour market.

Reich identifies a danger that these individuals and corporations, forming what he calls a ‘global web’, threaten the very foundations of national economies and polities. Globally oriented symbolic analysts are tempted to slip the bonds of national allegiance and leave the less fortunate behind, threatening the social cohesion of nations. The economic well-being of a nation’s citizens is no longer shared, tied to a nation’s economic power, and dependent on the fate of flagship giant corporations. No longer is each national economy in a separate boat competing in a worldwide regatta (ibid: 5). The role of governments is no longer to control a national economy. Instead, Reich suggests, governments should act to increase the proportion of the population with tertiary education who have the skills of abstraction, system thinking, experimentation and collaboration required of symbolic analysts (ibid: 229). This will ensure the country can maintain its prosperity by attracting a good share of the global, high-income work. Then, he suggests, the gap between those involved in the global economy and those left behind should be bridged by the ‘quaint’ idea of progressive taxation (ibid: 245-247). Governments should use taxation to invest in the education of the ‘left behind’ in order continually to increase the proportion of the national population who can become symbolic analysts and sell their services worldwide.

British Government’s Version of the Global Knowledge Economy

The globalisation argument is an important aspect of the discourse New Labour uses to legitimise and depoliticise its policy options and its politics, especially when cuts in public spending are at stake. The global knowledge economy argument dovetails with New Labour’s pattern of legitimising neoliberal policies by attributing their necessity to the irreversible demands and the pace of the global economy that Britain has to keep up with. No wonder Reich’s argument was attractive to New Labour ministers. Echoing Reich, David Blunkett as Secretary of State for Education and Employment said, in February 2000,

The powerhouses of the new global economy are innovation and ideas, creativity, skills and knowledge. These are now the tools for suc-
cess and prosperity as much as natural resources and physical labour power were in the past century. (Quoted in Wolf 2002: xi)

Charles Leadbetter, one-time policy adviser to Tony Blair and major author of the Department of Trade and Industry’s 1998 White Paper ‘Building the Knowledge Driven Economy’, expands on the idea and the imagery:

The generation, application and exploitation of knowledge is [sic] driving modern economic growth. Most of us make our money from thin air: we produce nothing that can be weighed, touched or easily measured. Our output is not stockpiled at harbours, stored in warehouses or shipped in railway cars … That should allow our economies, in principle at least, to … be organised around people and the knowledge capital they produce. Our children will not have to toil in dark factories, descend into pits or suffocate in mills, to hew raw materials and turn them into manufactured products. They will make their livings through their creativity, ingenuity and imagination (quoted in Wolf 2002: xii).

The 2003 White Paper proceeds from this vision:

Society is changing. Our economy is becoming ever more knowledge-based—we are increasingly making our living through selling high-value services, rather than physical goods. These trends demand a more highly-skilled workforce. (DfES 2003: para. 5.1)

The chattering classes who promote this ‘thin air’ thesis will presumably continue to wear clothes and shoes, eat food and use other ‘physical goods’ produced through the toil of invisibilised workers exploited in other parts of the world. They will also operate from offices cleaned by the cheap labour of their own fellow citizens, but unseen, in the hours of darkness.

The 2003 White Paper, still in a prophetic, visionary tone, emphasises how economic growth depends on a shift to a ‘culture of lifelong learning’.

The pace of both social and technological change means that (…) ‘this is truly an era of lifelong learning. Today’s generation of students will need to return to learning—full-time or part-time—on more than one occasion across their lifetime in order to refresh their knowledge, upgrade their skills and sustain their employability. Such independent learners investing in the continuous improvement of their skills will underpin innovation and enterprise in the economy and society (DfES 2003: para. 1.24).

The citizen, as lifelong learner, has to continually ‘invest’ in their learning, paying for their tuition fees as a start, in order to ‘sustain their employability’ and survive in an ever more ‘flexible’, more insecure labour market.

The British version of Reich’s thesis has developed a slightly different description of the skills workers need in the new knowledge economy. The labour force is to be flexible, that is, workers engage in short-term projects without job security and have to be able to keep switching career track. Knowledge workers are adaptable, they are both team players and able to work alone as self-starters. They should have ‘learned to learn’. This means that developments are happening so fast that, according to government documents, subject knowledge quickly becomes outdated and irrelevant, and workers need to know how to find new knowledge. They are responsibilised: they know it is their responsibility continually to update their knowledge and skills throughout their life and to invest in their own learning to stay in the labour market. Finally, they are incentivised through debt. The values and behaviour of a credit card consumer are inculcated in young people, so that they are prepared to get into debt to support their life-long learning.

Government policy is to recruit universities into this project to create new kinds of workers for the knowledge economy. Ever since the Thatcher government
accused universities of having failed the economy (DES 1987), universities have acquired ‘serving the economy’ as a major function. But more recently, the government has inverted old Labour’s aim to moderate the economy in the interests of society, and has declared that the purpose of universities is to change society to meet the needs of the knowledge economy:

My central argument is that universities exist to enable the British economy and society to deal with the challenges posed by the increasingly rapid process of global change. (Charles Clarke [as Secretary of State for Education] 2003)

To achieve this, universities are to shift from an elite to a mass system and 50 percent of people under thirty years are to have been to university by 2010, according to Tony Blair’s target. Mass university education is an acceptance of Britain’s well researched failure to organise high-status technical and vocational education (Wolf 2002). Whereas in countries such as Denmark only 29 percent of school leavers go to university and a high proportion take a technical education as the route into a specific and well-regulated occupation, British school leavers are directed to obtain a degree as the general requirement for entry into the labour market but without specific skills or career prospects. Mass university education also means a very large part of the British population will be indebted and forced to display inventiveness, ingenuity and flexibility to use their non vocational university degrees to find employment. This ‘hidden curriculum’ will instil them with some characteristics of the new members of the knowledge economy and learning society.

The Learning Society

The lifelong learner is not just an economic construct. It is also a discourse about the citizen in new forms of governance. One of the roots of this idea in Britain is Mrs Thatcher’s famous statement ‘there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families’ (Keay 1987). She tried to make unthinkable the concept of society as a collective investment for mutual benefit, across generations and through time—which is the way education as well as other social investments used to be considered. Thatcher’s image was of individuals, each pursuing their own competitive advantage, in a space articulated through markets. The role of governments was to release individuals from the trammels of the bureaucratic state to exercise their own freedom within choices offered by the hidden hand.

This image of the individual reappears with new Labour in the guise of the lifelong learner in the learning society. As the Department of Education and Skills’ Green Paper ‘The Learning Age—Renaissance for a New Britain’ makes clear, the learning society is not just an economic project. It is equally a political project of nation building: ‘Our vision of the learning age is about more than employment. The development of a culture of learning will help build a united society (DfES 1998: Introduction [para. 8]). This echoes Reich’s vision that society is likely to become more divided between those integrated into the global web of the knowledge economy and those rumps of national labour forces left behind. There is a widespread fear that once the world is no longer organised in the form of national economies, nation-states will lose power and national governments will consequently become less significant. The British government perceives a more immediate and tangible threat to come from the European Union. The European Commission has integrated this same discourse about the learning society into its political project to build a transnational
state with what Shore calls a new demos
(Shore 2000). Edith Cresson as Education
Commissioner published a number of
papers on, for example, ‘Accomplishing
Europe through Education and Training’
and ‘Towards a Knowledge Based Europe’.
Martin Lawn (2003) argues that Cresson
projected an image of ambitious individu-
als who are frustrated by the constraints
imposed by their own national education
system and want to take responsibility for
their own learning. They want to choose
from a multiplicity of commercial and
state-funded providers of education, any-
where in Europe. These go-ahead, respon-
sible, flexible, mobile people would attract
employers and global knowledge indus-
tries with the result that they would create
an economically viable Europe. Such go-
ahead life-long learners would have the
shared values and common vision needed
to ‘deliver’ Europe. This will be a Europe,
superseding the nation-state, whose locus
would be in each individual citizen. The
Blair government faithfully echoes this
discourse and rationale but tries to twist
the go-ahead citizen/worker into the new
occupant of modern Britain. It is as
Britons, not as Europeans, that life-long
learners are to generate new shared values
which will unify society. These new citi-
zens are to feel that it is the British gov-
ernment, not the European Commission,
that shares their values, loosens up the old
rigidities of national educational institu-
tions, forges partnerships with commer-
cial providers and creates the competitive
environment that gives life-long learners
choice and quality in education provision.
In this version, life-long learners will see
the national government, not the EU, as
the agent that enables them to fulfil their
ambitions. To whichever political project
the ‘learning society’ is harnessed, the life-
long learner is an imaginary for both the
new worker and the new citizen.

Learning as an Industry

In the early forms of this argument, gov-
ernment maintained that learning was
important for success in the new global
knowledge economy. But now the argu-
ment has come full circle. As education
becomes not a collective investment
reliant on taxation, but a positional good
that responsible people pay for them-
selves, continuing to do so through their
lives, learning itself becomes a new, high-
ly lucrative industry within the global
knowledge economy (Wright 2004). From
the Dearing Report (1997) onwards, it has
been argued that life-long learners should
be able to choose from a range of pro-
viders that, besides universities, includes
corporate universities (e.g. McDonald’s
Hamburger University), of which there
were fifteen in the early 1980s, four hun-
dred in the mid 1990s and two thousand in
2002 (Taylor and Paton 2002: 4); work-
based training; specialised independent
training organisations; distance learning
packages through CD-rom or the Internet;
and private e-universities like the Univer-
sity of Phoenix. The argument goes that,
for universities to succeed in this new
environment, they should mimic the cor-
porations with which they will be compet-
ing. They should resemble corporations
both in terms of their internal manage-
ment, efficiency and productivity, and in
terms of their relations with their cus-
tomers. Universities should brand them-
selves (Johnson 2004) to attract customers
to their educational product, as a life-style
choice, just as Nike attracts customers to
its brand of training shoes. To succeed as a
brand, universities will also have to deliv-
er value for money as judged by the con-
sumer. They should deliver what they
promise in terms of learning outcomes
and they should make their products com-
mensurate across Europe, so that employ-
ers can be confident of the nature and
quality of the skills of workers wherever they were trained.

The White Paper and the 2004 Higher Education Act develop further this image of the university as an industrial corporation by trying to shift power from the supply side (what academics think are the important ingredients of a degree programme and interesting intellectual developments) to the demand side (what government thinks universities should be doing and what students are prepared to pay for). The White Paper explicitly links government through its grants and students through their fees as the two ‘principal funders of higher education’ (DfES 2003: para. 4.13, Tili 2003). The White Paper presumes that the demands of students and those of the knowledge-based economy are identical:

The economic case for expanding the provision of higher education is extremely strong. But as we expand, we must not compromise on quality, and we must make sure that the courses and patterns of study on offer really match the needs of our economy, and the demands of students themselves. (DfES 2003: Chap. 5 summary).

Underlying this argument is a simple economistic logic that students will demand what the knowledge-based economy needs, and indeed dictates. Thus, the happy side-effect of the universities’ positive response to the economy is the satisfaction of student demand.

Students are expected to think of their degree as a personal investment. Their fees and living costs mean students currently leave university with a debt of £10-20,000. They should expect a return on this investment of 11-14 percent in higher earnings during their lifetime—the so-called graduate premium.2 The White Paper says that by not requiring students to pay at the point of entry, and allowing them to take loans that they repay as a graduate tax when they are earning, the government is according students the status of adults, financially independent of their parents (DfES 2003: para 7.45). These ‘adult’ consumers are also expected to make sophisticated calculations about where and how much to invest in the higher education market. Should they pay higher fees for a more prestigious course in a high-ranking university, in order to get high returns in terms of better job prospects? Or will people with a lower-class or ethnic-minority background reckon that social constraints make such aspirations unrealistic? Do they minimise debt by paying lower fees for a degree at their local inner-city new university and by living at home to minimise maintenance costs? Critics say the latter calculation results in ‘perverse access’: previously excluded people can now obtain a degree, but of such low prestige that it will not give them the social mobility, job opportunities or financial benefits that ‘traditional’ students from middle-class backgrounds gain from attending an old university (Jary and Thomas 1999). The government denies this and claims the market will increase opportunities, not further exacerbate inequalities.

The White Paper, further, gives consumer choice an audit function and makes it the main mechanism to ‘drive up quality’. Both students’ choice of courses and their participation in evaluations, designed to influence the next cohort’s choices, are meant to reward quality and punish low standards:

The Government believes that student choice will be an increasingly important driver of teaching quality, as students choose the good-quality courses that will bring them respected and valuable qualifications and give them the higher-level skills that they will need during their working life. But student choice can only drive quality up successfully if it is underpinned by robust information—otherwise reputations will be built on perception rather than reality. And it must also be supported by
clear expectations about the standards that every university must meet, so that no student has to put up with poor teaching (DfES 2003: para. 4.1)

The government accords students a number of rights against the university, and especially the right to information needed to exercise choice and become ‘intelligent customers’. Universities are to publish an annual guide to courses (to be overseen by the National Union of Students), summaries of External Examiners’ reports on each programme, and reports on students’ views about the courses they have taken. These measures are intended to make students feel empowered as customers and investors, to whom universities, the providers, are accountable. Academic researchers, subject centres and polling companies are experimenting with methods for collecting information on students’ experiences that both future students can use to make their market choices of university and institutions and government can integrate into managerial processes to ‘drive up quality’. Since the 1980s, many universities have administered ‘course evaluation’ questionnaires which have been used internally in departments’ termly reviews of teaching, and in staff appraisals to identify any weaknesses in individual teachers. Now these evaluations may achieve Ramsden’s (1991) full purpose as published performance indicators, comparing degree programmes.

What Kind of Consumers?

The White Paper presents a picture of ‘the student’ as if all students’ motivations, ideas of choice, political voice and concepts of learning will be the same. To explore these issues, we chose two contrasting universities for an empirical study. The first is an old university, high in the league tables. The second is a new university, fairly low in the league tables. In both we chose students from a range of social-science subjects. We interviewed first-year students soon after their arrival at university to capture their fresh expectations and we asked final-year students to reflect on their experiences at the end of their first degree. These interviews took place in 2003, after the publication of the White Paper. We designed a group interview, lasting two hours. First, we sought to find out how the new students had chosen their degree course and whether this differed between the two universities. Second, we explored the notion that students’ ‘informed choice’ would drive up standards by asking about course evaluations and the mechanisms and politics through which their views are represented in university decision making. Third, we asked about their learning experiences at university, whether they accepted the notion of being consumers of education, and how they thought it might influence their learning. We conducted two group interviews with a total of sixteen first-year students at the old university and one group interview with five first-year students at the new university. We conducted one group interview with five final-year students at the new university, but were unable to assemble a group of final-year students at the old university and conducted twelve individual interviews, using the same schedule, instead. Though a limited sample, the data capture a wide range of opinions, motivations and contingencies that inform students’ experiences and already call into question many of the premises found in government’s discourses and policies on higher education.

Motivation and Choice

Whilst the White Paper speaks of the need for universities’ to diversify their provision to meet the variety of students’ needs,
this emphasis is undermined by a sweeping generalisation that students’ economic calculus overrides all other motivations and purposes for entering higher education. The White Paper assumes that students enter university in order to improve their job prospects. There is no room for students to have motivations other than an instrumental one—such as a thirst for learning or interest in a subject. In contrast, our interviews revealed several motivations for going to university. At the old university, the majority (all but three) were ‘traditional’ students, school-leavers whose parents had been to university, who came from middle-class backgrounds and whose schools had expected them to go on to university. Such students had not actually made a choice about whether to continue the family tradition of going to university, as one said ‘I didn’t really think about it, it’s just a natural progression’ between school and adulthood. Contrary to government discourse, going to university was a way of putting off adulthood, when they would join the labour market. University was a liminal stage where they used all the resources of social life and learning to fashion their own selves, live independently, establish their own style of social interaction and network of friends, all of which will shape their trajectory in the world afterwards. Their choice of university was based first on the reputation of the city and its social life, and second on, not the league tables, but the hearsay prestige of the university, where they would meet interesting yet similar people. The choice of course was a third consideration:

I think all the opportunities here and knowing that I was going to meet loads of people was actually the reason that I came to university. I didn’t know what I wanted to study. (...) I just picked a random degree because I knew I wanted to come here.

Most of the traditional students at the old university chose their course not according to an economic rationality but because it sounded interesting. Acquiring a substantial knowledge of a subject they knew little about at the start was a challenge and self-fulfilling. Sometimes they embarked on a social-science degree knowing they would not be particularly employable.

I wanted to understand how and why people do things, how they think, why they group together, why they don’t. Just a general understanding of how society works. (...) I think I always knew that doing a sociology degree wasn’t going to actually direct me in a specific career. (...) It sounds a sort of ideal romantic notion of the university; I just wanted to develop my knowledge.

One student acted on her father’s advice:

He’s a managing director so he says that most businesses are looking at where you went to uni and whether you’ve got a degree or not, not what you’ve done, so I just chose something that I wanted to do and found interesting.

Many accepted that their degree would not make them employable and they would have to take further training, or gain experience through voluntary work.

In contrast, going to the new university was a much more purposive, rational action. Many students came from the labour market and, apart from the views of one international student, the notion of maturing through higher education as part of a natural progression was completely absent. Prominent in these non-traditional students’ accounts was a definite decision to go to university because they and their parents believed it was the key to better employment prospects. Non-traditional families have adopted the ethos of upward mobility and told their children they would get nowhere without a degree: ‘Mum was always, like, you’ll get a better standard of life, and I was thinking the same.’

Not many had specifically chosen the town or the university. Some students’ family commitments meant they had to
study close to home, or they attended the local university because it was more economical. Others’ low grades limited their choice of university. None chose the university because of the town’s ‘fun’ potential. All had chosen their course for instrumental reasons, to improve their position in the labour market. They fitted more readily the government’s construction of students as rational actors and investors in higher education. As one student put it, they were paying for higher education services and looked for ‘value for money’ in return. By this they meant all degrees should have a concrete, hands-on, vocational element that would give work experience and make them employable.

The results of our interviews in two contrasting universities indicate that far from giving equal access to Blair’s meritocratic Britain, the university has become a site of social differentiation. This is clearly seen in the different motivations and expectations of the students. Traditional students at the old university did not expect to be immediately employable after graduation, but they chose a prestigious university that gave them the social capital and networks to fly high in the longer run. Non-traditional students at the new university sought the qualification, skills and work experience that would give them immediate access to a moderately improved position in the local labour market. The two universities are sites for reproducing differences in social class. This differentiation is disguised in policy documents by treating the student as a unitary category motivated by a uniform and purely economic calculus and entitled to expect similar levels of social and economic mobility as their return on investing in a degree.

Political Actors

The White Paper inscribes students as active authors of change in higher education. We explored two dimensions of this in our interviews: student feedback and student involvement in departmental, school and university committees. At the end of each course, students are invited to fill in an evaluation form. The assumption underlying this practice is that students’ serious evaluation of teaching is worth taking into account when designing and delivering courses. But the form resembles a customer satisfaction survey. At the old university, first years did not take the forms seriously: ‘just tick, tick, tick, tick and I didn’t really think about it’. Some of the third years spent time filling them in once their disciplinary identity had crystallised and they felt a commitment to the teachers and the programme. The new university was anxious to raise the student response rate before the next audit and had refused to return students’ assignments until they had completed the evaluation form. This did nothing to allay students’ suspicions that the course evaluation would not result in improvements.

Students at both universities disliked the standard 1-to-5 ranking exercises that make up the bulk of the form and thought it would be more useful to have questions seeking qualitative responses. Two students felt the format of our group interview should be used for an open-ended discussion with their tutor. In a way that epitomised the contrast between their stances on the student as consumer, the student from the old university saw such a discussion as a means to engage students in constructive debate about their learning while the one from the new university said it would be a good sign that the university had started ‘consumer research’. Meanwhile, students from both universities gained a strong impression from staff that student feedback was not important. The forms were made available in the last session of the course without time to fill them in. Students did not know where the
form goes or who looks at them, and only one student evaluation had resulted in much-appreciated follow-up and feedback from staff. Amid the general feeling of disempowerment, even the final-year students in the old university who took the evaluations seriously feared that they were just computed into a general result and nobody read them.

The readiness of students from the new university to step into the consumer’s shoes was to a significant degree conditioned by their dissatisfaction with their experience at their university. All students from the new university expressed a great deal of discontent, backed up by many concrete examples. They were disappointed that courses were not designed to give them the opportunities for employment that they wanted. This dissatisfaction was aggravated by feelings that they were marginalised, that tutors were out of touch and did not understand what they needed, and that administrative units dealt with them disrespectfully. Further, they were deeply discontented with the library, work spaces and other facilities. They were aggrieved by the way they were treated by the university, given that it was their fees that kept the university going.

People aren’t viewed as customers, and in the end of the day, the thing is you are not coming here to be handed a grant and ticket to sell to come in, you have to study hard, but you ultimately pay to come here. You are a customer. I’m quite lucky because work are already paying for half. And you don’t get treated as a valued customer, you get treated as if you’re lucky to be here sort of thing, and I think that’s the wrong attitude. [Q1]

Complaints and a sense of not being properly treated coloured virtually everything the new university students talked about. The fact that they had such collective grievances did not make them any more engaged with student representation. At both the old and the new universities there were students sitting on student-staff committees in a department or school. There they could raise ‘gripes’ about teaching and available facilities. At both universities, student representation was perceived to be of hardly any consequence and they knew of no positive outcomes. The students’ union provided some training for representatives but the students they represented had not been inducted into how they could make the system work. Students were largely uninformed about the representative mechanisms and sometimes did not even know who their representatives were. We encountered a feeling of disempowerment, insignificance and anonymity within the university’s structures that fostered a defeatist attitude towards the university and a ‘why bother’ position on student representation.

Experiences and Concepts of Learning

What then are the implications for learning? Does the government’s discourse about students as consumers invite them to see themselves as purchasing a product to be delivered by their tutors? How does this discourse accord with students’ becoming active learners, as employers are said to want? Students in both universities were very critical of poor quality and unstimulating methods of teaching through lectures and tutorials. First-year students at both universities felt anonymous, disenfranchised and dictated to, and that it might be an advantage to have consumer rights. At the new university, students felt that staff should deliver education to them, and they would use such rights to demand better lecture notes on the website, and complain about the academicism of what they are taught and its irrelevance to their employability. One student said: ‘In real life does it really matter that Marx said this or that about the media because that doesn’t make you do your job any
better.’ Despite their overriding preoccupation with employability and the irrelevance of a social-science and humanities degree to the ‘real world’ of work, some students at the new university conceded that they had benefited:

Well we’re doing now Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and you’re like: these boring people. But you do open your eyes; do later on think where did I got that idea from (…) when you read books, you feel hmm, you feel a bit more educated.

In contrast, students at the old university did not have the same sense of the economic cost of being a student or feel pressure to recoup the investment by immediately entering the labour market. They had a freedom from economic necessity which is perhaps a precondition for enjoying learning, engaging with ideas and exploring critical approaches for their own sake.

Students at both universities had a personal tutor charged with providing individualised pastoral and academic support outside the formal teaching hours. In the interviews it was revealed that students were reluctant to avail themselves even of the small allocation of time per student if the tutor was not approachable and encouraging. At the old university and in some parts of the new university that were trying to enhance their research performance indicators, audit pressures worked themselves out in the micro teacher-student relationship in such a way as to make students feel they were unwelcome encroachers on staff’s research time. Students sensed that research is prioritised by the university and by staff who ‘think students are a bit of a nuisance’. Students in the old university thought staff treated teaching as a burden that had to be completed in minimum time in order to get down to the real work that counts both in terms of income from the funding bodies and of the university’s symbolic capital.

By the final year at the old university, some students (but not all) had learnt how to engage with lecturers. They built a personal relationship with one or two staff, heard about their research, told them about their own dissertation research and achieved something akin to an exchange between peers. These students had searched for a way out of first-year anonymity towards recognition as individual learners. They, above all, resisted ‘being stitched into the government’s discourse’ of students as consumers. They did not want to be a generalised result on a course evaluation form, ‘a standardised result of standardised objectives’. Their search was for individual recognition. Initially anonymous, they had gradually learned the university’s style of interaction and set of dispositions (not necessarily in a conscious way) which accorded them value in the department in their final year. This was the social capital that they valued, that they had gone to university to acquire, and that they would carry into the world of work. Others in the old university did not succeed in this, and none in the new university had this aspiration. Final-year students in the new university still disliked direct contact with staff through dissertation tutorials and they were suspicious that university talk of independent learning was a euphemism for staff cuts.

The contrast between the dominant pattern of perceptions and views in the two universities should not be seen as a simple opposition, divorced from its wider social conditionings, between a pursuit of economic return and a pursuit of knowledge. The pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, much like investing time and money in aesthetic experiences for their own sake, presuppose freedom from economic necessity, and therefore a socio-cultural milieu, to a great extent class-related, where the pressing concern with securing and bettering one’s chances in life can take second
place and emerge from self-fulfilling pursuits. It seems that the combination of growing up in a relatively low-income social milieu with some degree of economic insecurity, coming to higher education primarily to improve one’s life chances, worry about the employability of a social-science and humanities degree and dissatisfaction with many aspects of one’s experience at the university predisposed students to adopt the notion of student as customer, and to mobilise it to make a strong demand for a ‘better deal’. The correlation, and arguably causal relation, between these factors was also evident from some of our fieldwork data at the old university where the few students who were prepared to identify with the category of customer expressed dissatisfaction with teaching, tutors, the facilities and the way they were treated by the university. Such students in both universities were attracted to the potential to politicise and mobilise the notion of students as consumers but did not connect with the traditional politics of student representation.

Conclusion

The White Paper’s notions of accountability to consumers in which universities are providers of an educational product to fee paying customers with consumer rights, is based on an assumed relation of contractual exchange. Paul Cooper (2004) argues on the contrary that just paying for something does not make it a commodity. His interviews with students exemplify his argument that education is much more like a gift exchange than commodity exchange, given that often elements of commodity exchange are included in gift exchanges. Our student interviews revealed a wider spectrum of views. Some at both universities embraced their role as consumers with rights against the university, while some at the old university resisted this massification as opposite to their quest to acquire the social capital that would give them individual recognition as a learner and that they would use for upward mobility in the world of work. Our research indicates that universities, far from providing equal opportunities to a global network of symbolic analysts, were a site of differentiation which was not only economic but social, and beyond that, rested on quite different ideas about the nature and purpose of education. This is directly contrary to New Labour’s claim, and hope, that higher education will play an egalitarian role. Indeed, with New Labour’s break with the egalitarianism of social democracy, education was enlisted to redeem New Labour’s continued appeal to the concept of social justice, now rearticulated as equality of opportunity and social inclusion. Education was represented as a major provider of a field of opportunities capable of developing and realising people’s latent ‘potential’, provided that they acted as responsible citizens and chose to take advantage of these opportunities. Many questions and issues already surround New Labour’s attempts to consolidate a new higher-education ethos as an equaliser of socio-economic differentials.

Where students perceive themselves as customers, as receivers of a service in return for a monetary investment, this undermines the principle that what education ‘delivers’ should—for well-known pedagogic and psychological reasons—follow from an interactive, cooperative investment of effort and endeavour between teacher and student. There is evidence that social-science staff in new universities are thinking hard about how to engage their new students in a critical pedagogy (O’Shea 2004). But, as already evidenced in our fieldwork, especially at the new university, students are beginning to narrowly con-
ceive of themselves as customers with
the—passive—expectation that they will
receive a tailor-made teaching performance.
Further, employability, as the most impor-
tant, and indeed most concrete, ‘return’ of
higher education, becomes for them the
ultimate criterion for evaluating teaching
quality. If students’ self-perception as re-
cipients of employable skills undermines
their active participation in education and
fosters a narrow, one-dimensional model of
the learning and teaching process, what
will be the spill-over into the wider society?
Cooper’s (2004) research argues that the
very fact of paying the fees does not neces-
sarily make a student into a customer of the
educational process which answers to other
criteria than the narrow exchange relation
between the university as profit-making
provider and the student-payer. Our re-
search reveals signs of an instrumentalist
rationality that endorses conformity of val-
ues, norms and cultural perceptions. Such
instrumentalism may militate against stu-
dents’ very capacity to think otherwise or
to negotiate and live with difference, which
is what the idea(l) of critical pedagogy,
democratic citizenship and democracy, and
some aspects of social justice are all about.

Our research raises further questions
about assumptions in the government’s
policy that students’ choices and views
can become the ‘driver of change’ in high-
er education. Students in our research dis-
liked the methods used to collect their
views and most were suspicious that the
results were just quantified to satisfy audit
inspections, but not actually used to im-
prove courses and teaching. Those from
the new university who most embraced
the notion of students as consumers also
had most grievances and the fewest expec-
tations that student representation on uni-
versity committees was effective, along
with the most worries about employability
and the irrelevance of their courses to
the demands of the labour market. As one
said, ‘students don’t have any input into
any of the management that sort of filters
down to what we actually get in the end of
the day. Not that I can think of.’ The
regimes of audit, now linked to notions of
accountability to consumers, seem to be
weakening a residual democratic ethos by
which students could engage with staff to
discuss the purpose and nature of their
education, help shape views on both sides,
and make students’ voices really ‘count’.

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Notes

1. This article derives from a project on Change in
Universities, funded by the UK’s Learning and
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Higher Education Academy). In addition to the
authors, the research team included Anne Jep-
son and David Mills.

2. These are the figures in the Dearing Report
graduates earn 64 percent more than non-grad-
uates (DFES 2003: para. 5.13).

3. The Higher Education Funding Council for
England commissioned research on how best to
collect and use student feedback (Brennan and
Williams 2004a and b) and the Higher Educa-
tion Academy’s Subject Centre for Hospitality,
Leisure, Sport and Tourism has conducted a
Student Course Experience survey (Wall 2004).

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