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**MARKETS AND ACCESS: A CONTRADICTION IN TERMS?
9TH MAGGIE WOODROW MEMORIAL LECTURE**

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Choice mechanisms, if not limited by other policies, tend to have a clear tendency toward social stratification along socioeconomic lines, because of the way markets work for people with very different information, skills and resources (Orfield, 2000, quoted in Barry, 2005: 65) Just as capitalist markets generate inequality of wealth in the economy, market coordination in American higher education has tended to exaggerate financial inequality across colleges and universities and encourage social inequality in student access to educational opportunities (Geiger, 2004: 180).

The principle behind private sector services is that you get what you pay for, or, more precisely, what the supplier can make a profit out of. Private sector services are by nature discriminatory. Nobody suggests that Fortnum and Mason should lower its prices so that it receives a balanced intake of shoppers. Nor does anyone propose to prohibit the practice of charging higher vehicle premiums to people who live in poor urban areas. Unfairness is inherent to private sector services. (Wilby, 2006).

Introduction

The question you have asked me to consider is whether the marketisation of higher education is inherently negative for access. My answer to the question is a qualified “yes”. It is qualified because marketisation is only one of the things that is responsible for the underrepresentation of certain groups in higher education. But marketisation certainly is one of the factors that prevents higher education – both the student body and the teaching force – from being fully representative of the society in which it exists and which it serves. Moreover as marketisation continues the position is likely to get worse before it gets better, especially in the current economic climate.

I shall therefore be considering:

1. What is meant by the “marketisation” of higher education?
2. What do we know about its effects both generally and specifically in relation to access?
3. What do we do about it, if we assume that marketisation is basically negative for access?

In considering these questions I shall be drawing on material gathered for my soon to be published book *Higher Education and the Market* (Brown, in press). The case studies in my book cover a wide range of developed higher education systems, but most of the literature concerns the Anglophone systems which already incorporate some features of marketisation. This inevitably biases the discussion. Nevertheless since higher education seems generally to be moving in a market direction, it may be that a consideration of the experience of these systems will be instructive for other countries moving down this path, even if they do not have the serious, entrenched differences of race (the United States) or class (United Kingdom). I shall incidentally be touching on most of the listed Conference objectives.

Let me start by defining “marketisation”.

Marketisation

In economic theory, a market is a means of social coordination whereby the supply and demand for a good or service are balanced through the price mechanism. Consumers choose between the alternative products on offer on the basis of perceived suitability for them in terms of price, quality, and availability. It is often held that organising economic relations on these lines represents the best use of a society’s resources. Markets provide both greater “static efficiency” (the ratio of outputs to inputs at any point in time) and greater “dynamic efficiency” (sustaining a higher rate of growth over time through product and process innovation and better management of resources) than any alternative. In particular, markets are often contrasted with “command and control” economies where quantities and prices are determined by state action.

A Market in Student Education

A pure market in student education would be one where:

1. there is little or no regulation of market entry for providers;
2. there are no limits on the numbers of students enrolled or the prices charged by institutions;
3. the cost of teaching is met entirely through tuition fees;
4. there are no taxpayer subsidies to households to help meet the costs of fees or student living costs;
5. users decide what, where and how to study on the basis of information about the competing offers available.

Limits to Markets in Student Education

The fact that no developed university system has all of these characteristics suggests that there may be limits on the theory of markets as applied to higher education. The main ones are:

1. the fact that higher education confers both collective (public) and individual (private) benefits. Because of the risk of undersupply, both first cycle education and academic research are subsidised in most systems;
2. because of the key role which higher education plays as an accretor of knowledge, especially the knowledge required for the practice of the professions, market entry and competition are also regulated in most systems;
3. because of the difficulties of attaining and disseminating proper information about quality, there is a case for a mixed system of regulation, with important roles for the state and the academy, as indeed is the case in most systems;
4. further problems arise from the amount of product differentiation and the difficulty that institutions face, by virtue of the length of the product life cycle, in moving rapidly in response to market signals.

Marketised Systems

The result is that there is no higher education system anywhere that conforms to a pure market model. Nevertheless there are several systems that display a significant degree of marketisation. These are systems where

1. there is a significant amount of competition between institutions for students and research funds, and correspondingly a significant amount of choice for students and other funders;
2. tuition fees exist and represent a significant share of the costs of teaching;

3. private support for these costs represents a significant share of institutional funding;
4. there is a considerable amount of information available about the choices available to students and other funders.

The US, the UK and Australia are all examples, and most of the literature about the marketisation of higher education comes from these three countries (or from international organisations that have studied the phenomenon).

Marketisation and Privatisation

It may be worth distinguishing marketisation from “privatisation”, the penetration of private capital, ownership and influence into what were previously publicly owned and funded entities and activities. Conceptually, the two are distinct, and indeed the term “quasi markets” has been coined to describe the organisation of the supply of services on market lines where very little or no private capital is involved, the public funding of academic research being a case in point (Le Grand and Bartlett, 1993). In practice however marketisation will usually involve some degree of privatisation. This reflects the common origins of the two phenomena, the underlying beliefs of which were usefully summarised by the late Peter Self:

The “free market” and market-led growth are the principal and overwhelmingly the most important sources of wealth; large incentives are necessary to market efficiency; the wealth created by a free market will trickle down from the successful to benefit all members of society; the market is intrinsically more efficient than government; to create greater “efficiency”, government should be redesigned according to market methods and incentives (Self, 1999: 26-28).

[For a fuller exposition, see Brown, in press].

Markets and Equity

Economists appear to disagree about whether distributional inequity – the failure of markets to allocate resources in accordance with socially accepted standards of fairness – is technically a market failure (for a discussion, see Wolf 1993: 28-30). But there does seem to be a consensus that:

1. markets are driven by efficiency rather than by equity;
2. equity requires some sort of state intervention;
3. democratic societies are usually prepared to sacrifice some of the gains of efficiency for some measure of fairness, even if it is only about reducing excessive disparities in wealth.

The Impacts of Marketisation

Williams suggested that the marketisation of higher education was driven by three main beliefs:

- *that efficiency is increased when governments buy academic services from producers, or subsidise students to buy them, rather than supplying them directly, or indirectly through subsidy of institutions;*
- *that as enrolments rise, the private sector must relieve governments of some of the cost burden if acceptable quality is to be obtained;*

- *that many of the benefits of higher education accrue to private individuals, so criteria of both efficiency and equity are served if students or their families make some contribution towards the costs of obtaining the benefits.*(Williams, 1995: 179).

There can I think be little doubt that marketisation increases both the efficiency with which resources are used and the responsiveness of institutions to the demands of students, employers and other external stakeholders. In turn, institutions are able to achieve more with a given quantity of resources, which is a net gain for society. Marketisation may also mean that higher education is able to acquire more resources than might otherwise be the case. Finally, marketisation may also lead to increased innovation, a phenomenon sometimes associated with the entry of new providers, especially private and “for profit” ones, into the higher education market.

But there may also be negative impacts. These arise chiefly from the difficulty with information. One of the fundamental pre-conditions for a market is the availability of information that enables consumers to decide between different product offerings. Economists recognise that this condition may not always exist, and usually speak of “information asymmetry” whereby producers have more information than consumers (Weimer and Vining, 1992). But the problem in higher education is that **no one** has the information about educational quality that would enable a student, for example, to know (in advance) that this or that course or institution was the “best” for them. There are simply too many variables (see Brown, 2007a, for the full argument).

What this absence of direct indicators of quality then means is that purchasers seek, and suppliers try to provide, indirect or symbolic indicators of quality (McPherson and Winston, 1993). In higher education, institutional prestige, often supported by marketing and conspicuous expenditure, becomes the substitute. Who is responsible for this?

It is customary to blame university leaders like Rectors and Vice-Chancellors. But in fact many academic staff are also seeking to add to their own, if not their institution’s, prestige, very often through performance in research (Calhoun, 2006). These internal pressures towards prestige – as opposed to trying to meet the needs of students and other “clients” – are then reinforced by similar desires on the part of employers and students, who are equally anxious to be associated with what is perceived to be a high quality institution. These pressures for prestige are stronger than they were previously because of what Robert Frank has termed the “winner-takes-all” society.

Winner-takes-all markets are those where small differences in performance, real or perceived, translate into large differences in reward. Frank argues that such markets used to be comparatively rare, confined to cases such as opera singing. But the information revolution means that we can instantly find out who is rated the top performer in any market, reducing the rest to also-rans. As Frank says:

The market for higher education, always a winner-takes-all market, has become perhaps the quintessential example of such a market (Frank, 1999: 9).

The various institutional rankings/league tables are a clear illustration, as well as a response to, the information market failure in higher education. Incidentally, it is strongly arguable that institutional rankings/league tables tend to most advantage high income and high achieving

students and to most disadvantage minority students and those from low income homes (Clarke, 2007).

It follows that one inevitable consequence of the marketisation of higher education is the stratification – or at least the reinforced stratification – of institutions and the social groups they serve.

Before coming to the consequences for access, let me emphasise again that these perceptions have nothing to do with the quality of the education students are actually likely to receive at these institutions. There is in fact an enormous literature, most of it American, which finds very little correlation between institutional resources and selectivity, on the one hand, and the quality of the student educational experience, on the other (for example, Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). But as Bob Zemsky has written:

What the faculty and staff of both private and public institutions have learned is that in the end there is really no marketing advantage accorded to institutions that provide extra-quality education... what happens in this market is not quality but rather competitive advantage (Zemsky, 2005: 287).

I need not weary this audience with data about the differential participation of various social groups in higher education. This does of course have many causes, with which you will be as if not more familiar, than me. They include lack of finance; lack of the necessary entry qualifications; lack of aspirations; lack of information; and lack of social capital. How far is marketisation responsible?

Markets and Access

There seem to me to be a number of good reasons for suggesting that marketisation – the increase in market competition between institutions for students, resources and status – has been negative for access. In particular:

1. The failure of highly selective institutions to expand in line with the overall increase in demand;
2. Increased use of student financial aid as a competitive tool;
3. The effects of institutional stratification;
4. The parallel marketisation of the secondary school system.

Let us look at each of these more closely.

First, as the higher education system has expanded, the most prestigious institutions do not increase their capacity; indeed they cannot do so without risking a loss of prestige. Astin and Oseguera (2004) argue that many of the more prestigious American private institutions have little incentive to expand whilst the public ones are constrained by levels of state appropriations. This comes on top of, and reinforces, the selectivity practised by the highly ranked institutions that inevitably discriminates against less well educated (or prepared) students, who tend to come from poorer backgrounds. A similar phenomenon can be seen in Britain, which is why any increase in the fee cap must be accompanied by plans by the higher fee institutions to expand their numbers (especially of students from less favoured backgrounds).

Second, the increased use of student aid as a competitive tool. Eckel and Couturier (2006: 1-2) quote US Department of Education data indicating that the percentage of students in the highest income quartile receiving institutional aid increased between 1992/3 and 2003/4. At public institutions, close to 12% received aid, compared with 8% previously. At independent institutions, almost 55% of high income students received aid in 2003/4, compared with 30 % of their counterparts ten years earlier. In other words, institutions invest their resources in wealthier students.

This reflects the growing use of non-need-based aid (“merit aid”) alongside, and increasingly at the expense of, need-based aid, in order to boost institutions’ entry scores and thus their prestige (see for example Heller, 2007: 44-5). Heller and Rogers (2006: 110-111) comment that minority and poor students receive a disproportionately smaller share of such scholarships, while white and upper income students – the groups with generally the highest college-going rates – receive a larger share. In other words, prestige is replacing access as the driver of institutional aid. Tuition discounting, though easing the financial demands on middle income students, also reduces the amount of aid potentially available to low income students. In the UK, in spite of the restoration of maintenance grants, low income students are still worse off than they were before the introduction of fees in 1998 (Woodhall and Richards, 2006: 203). There is also evidence of institutions using their bursaries to attract better qualified students though so far the impact has been limited (Callender, 2009).

Third, institutional stratification. We know from work at London Metropolitan University (Archer, 2003: 128-130) that the very fact that the former polytechnics (which became universities in 1992) are generally less prestigious is in itself a significant disincentive to participation (further giving the lie to the claim of proponents of league tables that they are of particular benefit to students from less favoured backgrounds) (cf. Leathwood and O’Connell, 2003). Similarly, Reay et al (2005: 141) found that some working class students were put off applying to some of the post-1992 universities that advertise heavily, on the grounds that “good universities shouldn’t need to advertise”.

Finally, we need to bear in mind the fact that in America and Britain marketisation and its impact is not confined to higher education. Stephen Ball has charted the growing marketisation of the English school system (e.g., Ball, 2003). Even without privatisation, there remain glaring gaps in school performance, and these are often correlated with the schools’ social intakes: the same is even more true in the US, where local financing by district plays havoc with equity even without Charter schools and the like. Leathwood (2004: 33) quotes Gillborn and Mirza (2000) as suggesting that the gaps between class educational attainment levels actually increased in Britain in the 1990s.

Leathwood (2004) has also suggested that, as well as being a problem in itself, the increased stratification of higher education increases the pressure on middle class parents to choose private or selective schooling for their children:

Fear of failure or falling back, and “defence against uncertainty” (Walkerdine et al, 2001: 167) remain powerful motivators of middle-class success. The extended hierarchy of universities and the widening gap between the elite and the rest, therefore directly contributes to the sustenance of class divisions within the school sector, just as the divisions within schooling maintain the class divide in higher education (Leathwood, 2004: 41).

In other words, the stratification of higher education reinforces the stratification of the school system, and vice versa. This will be even more true in Britain if, as we expect, the cap on university tuition fees is lifted at the same time as greater competition is introduced into the school system through larger numbers of academies and “free schools”.

So what is to be done?

What Do We Do About Marketisation?

In my book I describe other negative impacts of marketisation for a healthy higher education system. These include a reduction in institutional diversity; the increasing internal differentiation of institutions: structures, activities, personnel; increasing consumerisation and commodification; and poorer value for money (ironically). I particularly emphasise the risk to higher education’s control of what I call the “academic agenda” (what is to be taught and what is to be researched), and the threat to the unwritten contract between higher education and society whereby universities receive certain legal and financial privileges in return for producing valued public goods such as a well educated citizenry. This is already coming under challenge in America and we can expect to see similar pressures here.

Against these impacts, I propose the following broad responses:

1. there should be a fuller understanding of the meaning of marketisation and its impact and potential impacts on the core activities of universities and colleges: student education and academic research and scholarship;
2. there needs to be a discussion and broad agreement between the institutions and the main external stakeholders about the purposes of higher education and the conditions that enable these purposes to be fulfilled (for example, adequate funding, suitable autonomy, appropriate regulation, a high quality workforce, effective leadership). This should encompass the desired balance between public and private purposes and benefits, bearing in mind the fact that marketisation tends to promote and emphasise private purposes and benefits, at the expense of public benefits and goods;
3. similarly, marketisation tends to focus attention on the characteristics and performance of individual institutions and groups of institutions. However, means must be found to assess and improve the effectiveness of the system as a whole in meeting both external and internal needs and requirements, such as equity;
4. agreement also needs to be reached on the desired degree of institutional stratification and diversity. Whilst some degree of hierarchy may be inevitable, and even desirable, too great a degree of hierarchy is not conducive to diversity, since genuine diversity requires some parity of esteem. This may require state action to restrain hierarchy and/or protect diversity. Resourcing and status differentials between institutions that are not based on “objective” factors such as local cost structures should certainly be scrutinised closely, as should variations in the intake of students from specific social groups;
5. given the way in which marketisation tends to separate them, means should be found of connecting or reconnecting the core functions of student education and academic research and scholarship so that each benefits the other, rather than compete unequally for scarce resources and prestige;
6. without reducing the pressure on institutions to use their resources efficiently, or to broaden their sources of income, agreement should be reached on both the level and

means of funding that will ensure that the key decisions about how to allocate funds to core activities continue to be made on both economic and academic grounds;

7. similarly, those responsible for governing and funding the system should ensure that academic and professional staff are trained, managed and rewarded in a way that recognises their role as key workers in a knowledge economy;
8. an appropriate regulatory balance should be struck between market competition (including information to students), state supervision and academic self-regulation. The state should ensure that academic judgements remain in academic hands subject to the need for accountability for those judgements and the giving of the reasons for them. All this suggests the following reform programme.

A Reform Programme

1. Market entry and participation, including the entry and participation of private and “for profit” institutions, should be controlled by the state through a system of institutional approval and accreditation covering governance, management, finance and educational quality. Diversity of provision should be secured through locally organised “divisions of labour” along the lines of some of the US State systems, with clear demarcation of institutional missions; these should embrace or articulate clearly with other forms of post-secondary education. A state controlled development agency should channel state funds to universities and colleges and, together with the regulatory agency, ensure that the institutions collectively deliver a range of public and private goods in accordance with the declared purposes of the system;
2. Academic research and inquiry should be funded on a dual basis. In areas where research is disproportionately costly to conduct, it should be funded on a competitive and selective basis using peer review and performance indicators such as citations and external income (the state, through the regulatory agency, should monitor and control the degree of concentration that results). All other research and inquiry should be funded pro rata to the staff effort involved, with performance being audited through an integrated process of institutional and departmental review. The regulatory agency should also monitor the implementation and effectiveness of safeguards on commercially funded or sponsored research and teaching;
3. Teaching should be funded through a mixture of institutional grants and tuition fees with the proportion of the latter capped at 45-50 per cent. Grants would be based on development plans showing how the institution concerned intended to contribute to the achievement of the objectives periodically laid down for the system as a whole. Fee competition should be limited (any significant local cost differences would be picked up through the grant mechanism). Overall resourcing differentials between institutions should be controlled by the state, with a guaranteed minimum (and possible maximum) of public funding for each student ;
4. A system of maintenance grants should be available to help students from low income backgrounds to meet their living costs while attending college (institutional need-based aid could supplement this but variations between institutions would be carefully controlled). Beyond this, income contingent loans would be available to help meet both fees and maintenance, with the loans repayable on an equitable basis, preferably through some form of “graduate tax”. There should be coordination between the funding of teaching and the funding of maintenance;
5. Quality should be monitored by a system-wide regulatory agency accountable to the state legislature. Institutional and departmental review should ensure minimum standards of

student learning achievement and high standards of academic practice. Both the agency and institutions should be guided by general statements about the characteristics of programs and awards likely to fulfil those standards. Particular attention should be paid in both forms of review to the ways in which institutions ensure that they have a workforce that is fit for purpose. The agency should have the power to recommend the de-accreditation of any institution that consistently fails to meet minimum standards of governance, management or quality;

6. Research and teaching should be linked through making the achievement of links a legal requirement for universities and degree granting institutions; making it a prerequisite for state research funding; auditing the achievement of links through quality review; and through the promotion of links through targeted initiatives and the identification of good practice;

In my book I describe this as the mix of policies designed to maximise the contribution of market competition – some of which I see as both desirable and inevitable – towards the creation of a healthy higher education system.¹ But how far would this programme assist with access?

Nearly everyone who has studied the subject agrees that the basic causes of differential participation lie deep in the social, economic and educational systems in our societies, and require interventions at all stages. But we need to avoid exacerbating the problem at a higher education level by, for example, using entry assessments that largely reflect socio-economic status and acquired social capital (for SAT scores, see Bowen 2004; for A levels, see Gorard et al, 2006). Funding institutions on the basis of strategic plans could be a means of incentivising them to recruit students from backgrounds unfamiliar with higher education. Reducing unjustified resourcing differentials between institutions over time would help less prestigious institutions to become both more attractive to, and better able to cater for, larger numbers of such students. Access would also be assisted by there being better and clearer progression routes both within the system and without, which a local or regional higher education “system” would facilitate. It is cardinal that higher education and further and school education (in UK terms) are not seen as distinct and independent of one another.²

Conclusions

The reality of providing a truly equal opportunity, with each pupil judged solely on his or her talents and willingness to work, would be that the children of the economically, socially or culturally advantaged would no longer enjoy special privileges: the privileges that turn the 7% of pupils attending private schools into the 50% entering the country's two most prestigious universities (Mortimore, 2008).

For all that we cherish our autonomy, universities and colleges are ultimately creatures of society and largely reflect that society. The starting point for any serious discussion of educational inequality, at any level, has therefore to be a decision about what kind of society we want. There is ample evidence that societies that are fairer, in that income and wealth are relatively more dispersed between the various social groups, are not only healthier but happier (e.g., Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009). There is also abundant evidence (from the OECD PISA studies) that countries with comprehensive, integrated school systems – such as Finland, Canada and Japan – are the most educationally effective.

If we want a higher education system that is reasonably reflective of our populations, therefore, we need to adopt policies for the distribution of income and wealth, and for the structure of our education systems, that will mitigate the disadvantages of the inequalities in economic and social capital that would otherwise accrue, and which are so evident in some of our societies. We in higher education should play our part, not least by pointing to the evidence of the damage that excessive and inappropriate competition can cause to the educational enterprise at all levels. The choice is ours.

Thank you for listening to me.

Notes

1. In my book I describe a healthy higher education system as having the following characteristics:

It will be valued both for its “intrinsic” qualities in creating, conserving and disseminating knowledge and for its “extrinsic” qualities in serving broader economic, social and cultural goals. Responsibility for determining the system’s “academic agenda” is shared between institutions and external stakeholders;

There is also a balance between the public and private purposes and benefits of higher education;

There is a balance between the interests of individual institutions and groups of institutions, on the one hand, and the system as a whole, on the other; a balance between institutional autonomy and freedom of action, and integration and common interests;

There is sufficient diversity of provision to enable the system to respond effectively to new kinds of demands, especially for new kinds of learning opportunities;

Any significant status or resourcing differentials between individual institutions or groups of institutions are confined to, and justified by, “objective” factors such as local cost differences;

The student population is broadly representative of the population as a whole;

The staff are well qualified, well motivated, and well managed;

There is a productive and mutually beneficial relationship between the core activities of institutions: student education and academic research and scholarship;

Institutions are adequately funded for their core activities whilst having sufficient incentives to diversify their funding and make the best use of their resources;

The system is effectively regulated in the public interest so that it produces worthwhile outcomes for both external and internal stakeholders.

2. One of the ironies of the post-1980s expansion of higher education is that at the same time as the proportion of the age group entering higher education has risen sharply in virtually every country, the higher education and school/college sectors may be drifting apart as a result of changes on each side especially the emphasis on measuring outcomes in the schools and the increasing diversification of higher education. Yet there should be some match between what schools and colleges expect from their graduates and what universities expect of their entrants.

In fact, both the schools/colleges and higher education have an interest in a close and productive relationship. Higher education obviously has an interest in having as many students who are well prepared for higher level study. This enables faculty to concentrate their efforts on a curriculum that is genuinely “higher” as well as maximising learner progression, achievements and satisfaction. It also avoids wasteful expenditure on remedial studies. At the same time, universities and colleges need to be ready to take us through a far wider spectrum of student abilities as was previously the case, as well as understanding the changes that have been taking place in the schools and colleges.

Equally, the schools and colleges benefit from being able to prepare their students for higher education, a preparation which will include an appreciation of the educational requirements of different kinds of courses and qualifications and the range of experiences now available. Schools and colleges also need to understand the increased complexity of the higher education system and the growing importance of the labour market.

Universities and colleges in many systems are already involved indirectly with the schools through the training of teachers. There is also a growing emphasis in some countries of university engagement with schools in order to facilitate access. However an appropriate relationship spanning full range of university and schools/college activity would seem to require proper coordinating mechanisms to oversee joint activity in other areas such as the curriculum (courses, content, assessment), learner progression and preparation for the labour market. These activities can extend to “early college” courses for students still at school and even to direct university involvement with individual schools and groups of schools (in Britain a growing number universities are acting as sponsors for Academies or Trust schools whilst in America universities can operate Charter High Schools in most states though so far the take up has been limited). However these mechanisms would need some degree of support from both the school/college and university/higher education authorities if they are to move beyond the fig leaf stage (Finn, 2006). (According to Michael Kirst (2008), as many as 37 US States have established “T-16” councils – groups of education, business and community leaders charged with developing strategies to better coordinate, integrate, and improve education from pre-school through college). The existence of such mechanisms would be facilitated by the sort of system structure advocated for higher (and possibly further) education.

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