Immersed in the Transitioning Higher Education Sector: The Impact of Transitions in the Higher Education Sector in England on Staff and Students

POLICY REVIEW (RESEARCH)

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ABSTRACT

The increasing marketisation of the UK higher education sector in recent years has resulted in multiple transitions for universities. Student evaluations of teaching and university league tables have placed greater importance on both the quality of teaching and student experience. Arguably, these have become regulatory mechanisms for holding lecturers and university managers to account. More recently, new metrics introduced by the Office for Students have resulted in continuation, completion and graduate employment rates being adopted as a proxy for the quality of teaching. These metrics regulate the sector and have resulted in changes to course availability, recruitment practices, course design, assessment practices and student placements. The UK higher education system operates within a discourse of performativity. The university experience, which was once a space for critical thinking and debate, has been transformed into preparing workers of the future who can enter the neoliberal market as oven-ready graduates who can make a contribution to the global economy. Universities have had to adapt to take their place within a neoliberal marketised society. However, these transitions have also resulted in transitions for university students who have been re-positioned as consumers and future workers. This paper draws on Multiple and Multi-dimensional transitions theory (Jindal-Snape, 2016) to explore the implications of these transitions.

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INTRODUCTION

Higher Education (HE) in the United Kingdom (UK), and in particular England, remains in a state of uncertainty, the sector has had to adapt at pace in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, resulting in opportunities and challenges for HE providers and others. Such a complex HE landscape has involved navigating a great deal of unpredictability, at a time when the sector was, and still is, negotiating the outcomes of the Augar Review (Hickey, 2022) among other sector reviews, and the potential reprofiling of the sector (Ahlburg, 2020; Whalley et al., 2021). The HE Sector in England, as part of the Global Knowledge Economy, continues to be faced with challenges, from financial sustainability in an increasingly connected and marketised place, to regulatory regime shifts, resulting in HE providers working in competition to secure student numbers (Nielsen, 2015). Not only have such shifts been noted in the structures of the sector, but there has been a shift in legal frameworks for students, and interestingly there has been a shift in the HE sector's lexicon. With the extent and speed of changes to the HE sector, universities, their staff and students, continue to experience multiple transitions, and before those transitions are fully adjusted to, there are further transitions. In this paper, we draw on multiple and multi-dimensional transitions (MMT) theory (Jindal-Snape, 2016) to explore the multiple transitions that have impacted universities and staff who work within the sector. In line with this theory, we argue that these transitions have also resulted in transitions not only for universities, but also for students who have been repositioned as consumers of HE. Furthermore, building upon the works of Evans et al. (2018), to reiterate that there is a disconnect between contextualisation of data and metrics about English HE, there must be greater challenge regarding the purpose, aims and values of HE in England.

MULTIPLE AND MULTI-DIMENSIONAL TRANSITIONS THEORY

The transition to the neoliberal university is characterised by greater use of targets, performance criteria and the introduction of narrow performance metrics (Erikson et al., 2021). Within the neoliberal market, competition between universities is fierce and the machinery of performativity, including the emphasis on outcomes data, league table positions and branding, is mobilised to facilitate survival in the market.

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first paper that has applied MMT theory (Jindal-Snape, 2016) to HE transitions. The theory posits that multiple transitions can occur synchronously, and that transitions for individuals or institutions can trigger transitions for others that are connected to those individuals and institutions which are experiencing the transitions. We suggest that universities are experiencing multiple synchronous transitions which are impacting not only on universities but also their students and staff. We argue that the transition to the neoliberal university is resulting in transitions for students who are being re-positioned as customers (Adisa et al., 2022; Guilbault, 2016). In addition, we argue that the transition to the neoliberal university has led to a loss of professional autonomy for academic staff due to the introduction of high-stakes metrics which are used to evaluate teaching, research, and knowledge exchange (Erikson et al., 2021).

UNIVERSITIES IN TIMES OF TRANSITION

In 1992, the distinction between polytechnics and universities was removed following the Further and Higher Education Act that year. Since then, there have been a plethora of reviews including the Dearing Report (Dearing, 1997), the Browne Review (Browne, 2010), the Bell Review (Bell, 2017), the Higher Education and Research Act (2017), and the Augar Review (2020), resulting in shifts in funding, teaching, policy, and regulatory regimes for HE in England. There has also been a massification of HE providers. By the end of 2010, there were "108, 138 or 162, depending upon the definitions adopted" (Tight, 2011), whereas in 2021 there were 285 (HESA, 2023).

Today, the HE sector in England has and continues to undergo reorganisation and reorientation to meet the competing demands and expectations. The purpose of HE is up for ongoing debate depending upon the lens one takes (for example, Government, university, student, business, and industry) and at what moment in time that lens is viewed. However, the current model of HE in England means that universities largely are funded by student fees and business generation, leading to a highly competitive 'global marketplace'. In the UK and elsewhere,

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universities operate within a neoliberal discourse which is characterised by the market, competition and league tables and emphasises the role of education in producing workers of the future. Furthermore, the neoliberal shift to measures that have economic value and for data to be used to help with generating/identifying/being of potential economic value has led to a culture of audit and quantification (Morrish, 2019). Hence, this can be seen in the move of sector 'quality' moving towards three 'Excellence Frameworks' (Teaching, Research, and Knowledge). In themselves, these three frameworks have a common literacy of comparability for great ease of use (Pavlov & Pohrebniuk, 2020).

With greater mobility and accessibility of people and data, it has been important for providers to be proactive in (a) attempting to control their narrative, (b) establishing their niche in the market and (c) securing financial futures (predominantly through securing students). This reconfiguration, primarily because of the Browne Review (2010) and UUK Efficiency and Effectiveness report (2011), towards spending effectively and maximising income by universities, has reinforced the move towards neoliberal financial ontology and corporate thinking (Furlong, 2014). This has subsequently been articulated in sector body research and guidance, such as the UUK's Efficiency, Effectiveness and Value for Money report (UUK, 2015). Here, there was not a departure from everything that had constituted HE, but rather the inseparability of finance in HE. Indeed, finance arguably overshadows the HE sector in England and is the greatest threat to the sector due to long-term large gaps in future funding and hence the viability of providers (Bolton, 2019; House of Commons, 2023).

Within this context, measures of student evaluations of teaching have become proxies for teaching quality. The National Student Survey (NSS) is directed at undergraduate students in the final year of their HE studies. It was launched in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland in 2005 as a key element of a quality assurance framework for HE in the UK. The survey was designed to enable all publicly funded and some private HE institutions to gauge the quality of teaching and student experience, with the intention of improving students' satisfaction with their courses (Lenton, 2015). However, although the survey is a mechanism which serves the interests of students, it is arguably also part of the neoliberal machinery which allows institutions to focus on the market, competition, and consumer choice within a performative educational climate.

The massification of UK HE from 1992 led to the introduction of significant performance measures being introduced. Studies have demonstrated that the NSS has had a powerful impact on universities (Agnew et al., 2016) and their lecturers (Jones et al., 2014; Thiel, 2018). In addition, a more significant body of work has critiqued student evaluations of teaching in the context of the ongoing marketisation of HE (Jones-Devitt & Samiei, 2011; Molesworth et al., 2011) and neoliberalism (Grimmett et al., 2009; McGettigan, 2013; Giroux, 2014). Universities which were once seen as a public good have been reconceptualised as a service which can be purchased (Naidoo & Williams, 2014, p.1), through the introduction of student fees. Within this neoliberal discourse, the responsibility for ensuring a positive student experience has shifted towards lecturers (Thiel, 2019) who are held to account for the outcomes of the survey. Arguably, the NSS functions as a neoliberal governmental technology by establishing competition, regulation, and surveillance (Thiel, 2019). Universities, their departments, faculties, programmes, and lecturers are pitched against one another (Thiel, 2019) to attract and retain students, and judgements about teaching quality are based on student perceptions of the quality of the teaching rather than more reliable indicators. Universities are under continuous pressure to enhance student recruitment, and retention, and to improve their competitive standing. The outcomes of student evaluations of teaching are used to rank universities and employers use these rankings as an indication of the quality of graduates. Given that employers prefer to recruit graduates from more highly ranked universities (Dearden et al., 2019), this is problematic because (1) student evaluations of teaching are used as proxies for teaching quality and (2) overall university league tables lack specific details about the quality of individual courses.

According to Thiel (2019), the 'hierarchies between students and academic teaching staff are a relic of the past' (p.538). Beech and Wolstencroft (2022) argue that universities are now invested in simply 'keeping students happy', using a 'you said, we did' approach. However, this need to keep students happy has resulted in diluting academic standards and rigour in

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order to respond to students' demands (Beech & Wolstencroft, 2022; Pickford, 2013). Although reducing hierarchies between students and staff is likely to be a positive step, particularly in improving relationships between students and staff, the dilution of academic standards is a concern, and rigour must still be maintained to ensure the credibility of academic awards and ultimately the reputation of the HE sector. Many other countries take a fully post-experience approach (Sabri, 2013) because students may not realise the value of some aspects of their courses until they have completed them and after they have entered either employment or further study. The timing of the NSS is problematic in that it is implemented midway through the final year of an undergraduate degree before students have completed their programme of study. Courses which score low on the NSS are a risk to institutions and may be closed or reformed, thus transforming ways of working and/or placing jobs at risk (CPA, 2021).

This hostile policy context raises the question, what is the purpose of HE? HE has historically been valued for promoting critical intellectual thinking. Within the current system in Europe, and specifically England, HE has been reconceptualised as a direct route into employment (Brooks et al., 2021). Courses have been re-designed to embed employability skills and students are positioned as neoliberal learners – they are reconceptualised as able, productive, and skilled workers of the future who can take their rightful place within the world of work and help to secure the UK's place within the global economy (Goodley, 2007). This positioning of students as future workers is problematic given that, for some, this might not be achievable or desirable, particularly those with caring responsibilities, those with long-term medical conditions, those with disabilities, or those who simply chose to pursue degree-level study for the enjoyment of learning. Furthermore, positioning education as directly linked to employment erodes the possibility of education as a purely intellectual endeavour or part of a journey of life enrichment.

THE TRANSITION TO DATAFICATION AND QUANTIFICATION

The demand for HE provision in the UK led to structural and epistemological changes in the 1990s and 2000s, resulting in a shift towards metrics beyond educational attainment data, to data which include student progress, experience, financial indicators, and employability. This transition to a data-based sector has led to comparability tables and competition between HE providers and such ratings are being premised on consumer-orientated metrics (Tomlinson, 2017). HE in England has become a key part of the State's soft power projection, a key political attribute for spreading the UK's influence in the world, and UK universities are ranked highly in international league tables (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). Universities seek to negotiate and compete on various factors to become 'a top ten' in at least one metric, such as student experience and career destinations. Although this is not new per se, there has been an intensification of commercial league tables (Hefce, 2008). This new educational marketplace shifts perceptions of the purpose and position of universities, and institutions have become more visible with a clearer sense of milestones and outcomes.

However, such a thirst for data has led to the transition to a surveying culture, primarily the proliferation of surveying staff and students. This approach has been driven by the UK Government since 2011 following the publication of the White Paper, *Students at the Heart of the System* (Holmes, 2020). Students are frequently surveyed at the end of lectures to gauge their progress and usefulness of sessions, at the end of modules and years of their course, the end of the course and in addition to departmental/university surveying there is also 'crucial' NSS (for undergraduates) and the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (for postgraduate students). Not unsurprisingly there is a surveying fatigue among staff and students and thus, the quality and representativeness of data are questionable, therefore casting doubt on the robustness of government quality indicators (Holmes, 2020). However, this extent of data means there are hundreds if not thousands of metrics for which a university might be compared.

In the current HE context, datafication and quantification have become increasingly prevalent in universities in the UK, as institutions are encouraged (or required) to measure and report on various aspects of their operations and outcomes from university to module level (Holmes, 2020, OfS, 2023). This has led to the use of government-led and commercial-led metrics such as student satisfaction surveys (for example, the NSS), league tables (such as the Times Higher Education), measures of learning and teaching quality (TEF), engagement with business and industry (Knowledge Exchange Framework), and research impact measures

(Research Excellence Framework) (Hefce, 2008; Holmes, 2020). The availability of data has led to a transition in the way that universities are held to account and data are utilised to justify discourses of audit and improvement. However, the vast range of data may not present a clear picture of teaching quality in specific disciplines and metrics can be interpreted in various ways to suit specific purposes (Kaner, 2020). These measures may have some benefits, such as transparency and helping to choose the most suitable course, but there are notable limitations such as skewing of data when there is a poor response, gaming of a particular metric, and lack of focus on a holistic education in favour of becoming best in a particular aspect of the provision.

TRANSITIONS FOR STAFF IN UNIVERSITIES

With the changes in the sector and transitions in the purposes of education, there have been subsequent transitions in the construction of academic and professional services job roles. Academics now are no longer vessels for delivering specialist encyclopaedic knowledge in a passive transaction because access to technology means that a wealth of information is available on the internet (Gluckman, 2022). Rather, the role of the academic has transitioned to inhabit multiple identities and fulfil multiple roles. These identities are continually transitioning to meet the demands of the sector and universities (McCune, 2021). Academics now facilitate learning, focusing on supporting students to apply knowledge and develop new skills, and in keeping with the ever-changing graduate attributes students are repositioned as useful contributors to the economy. Within the neoliberal university, academics are required to be digitally literate to competently navigate university systems and role model expectations for students (Nikou & Aavakare, 2021). Additionally, academics need to be experienced in their industry to hold credibility and in most cases have a record of impact from their own research/contributions to the sector. Furthermore, more academics need to be competent administrators, managing the data on their students/modules/courses, developing resources and guidance, attending a raft of meetings for a variety of purposes, maintaining their own schedules and workloads, and managing budgets (Teichler, 2021). Academic staff have had to adapt to new ways of teaching to create more engaging learning environments but have also been required to implement various approaches to keep students happy (Adisa et al., 2022), resulting in a reduction of academic standards (Beech & Wolstencroft, 2022). Within a knowledge-rich digital world, academics no longer hold all the knowledge and the transition to a more digital format of education positions academics as lacking in expertise rather than experts (Pitchford, et al., 2020). Much knowledge is now easily discoverable and teaching therefore prioritises the desirable attributes that graduates require in the neoliberal workplace. Courses, programmes, modules, and assessments are re-designed to embed graduate attribute skills, at the expense of academic rigour, leading to a dilution in academic standards. Within the neoliberal, marketised university the academic is reconfigured as a facilitator with responsibility for nurturing the skills development that graduate workers of the future will be required to demonstrate when they take up their rightful place in the workplace (Ball, 2013). Academic courses which seemingly have no direct link with employment are threatened with closure (Bradley & Quigley, 2023) and therefore the academics who teach on these courses face the ongoing threat of redundancy. Their subjects and identities as academics are called into question, and reductionist approaches to evaluating teaching quality through using graduate employability as a proxy for teaching quality result in increased accountability for staff who teach on those courses.

The neoliberal machine of the university strives to do everything it can to recruit and retain students, and to develop a narrative around the fear of missing out on a unique experience (Gibbs, 2018). Recruitment events are re-designed to ensure that the university communicates its brand and provides students with the best possible open-day experience and a plethora of digital recruitment events are introduced to showcase the brand. Messages about student satisfaction data, employment outcomes and work placement opportunities for students are communicated to inculcate students into the brand and to get them to 'buy-in' to the neoliberal discourse (Reynolds, 2022). The shiny campus is sold to students as a crucial part of the neoliberal machinery and students are attracted both to its beauty and to the range of promised experiences. Students view the whole student experience as a transaction in which money is exchanged for the quality of the student experience and the academic award

(Lynch, 2015; Reynolds, 2022). The emphasis of the 21st century university is placed on *student experience* first and academic learning is given a lesser priority. The emphasis is on selling a product which offers students a rich range of experiences and ultimately secures students a highly skilled job at the end of the journey. Students buy into the trappings of neoliberalism – the university brand, the campus, the student experience, and the allure of a graduate job are key parts of the product they have decided to purchase, thus viewing HE as a transactional service (Lynch, 2015; Reynolds, 2022).

Since the focus is on the brand of the university, the physical estate is an important selling point as part of the student experience for attending a particular university (Rolfe, 2002). Additionally, the need for maximising efficiency has brought a renewed focus on how space is used (UUK, 2015). Hence, there are notable transitions in the way that the physical estate is considered. Now, university senior leadership teams are much more involved in the purposeful design and use of buildings. Architecture helps to denote what it means to be a student or member of staff at that university, providing a sense of rootedness in times of constant transition (Nielsen, 2015). The transition in the management of the university can be seen in the way that there has been a rationalisation and quantification of space (Watermeyer et al, 2021). It is less commonplace for each academic to have an office, instead, there has been a rise in shared spaces or hot desking. Similarly, student accommodation has become more modular and reminiscent of a budget hotel. The rationalisation of the estate for many universities has seen ongoing investment into new buildings to be able to deliver the student experience package in one location, helping to drive up student satisfaction and a sense of a one-stop shop (Jenkins & Wring, 2019). Additionally, there have been transitions in the role of study venues and libraries, libraries are more accessible as an online resource which was intensified during Covid-19 lockdowns (Martzoukou, 2021). As a result, physical library study spaces have become more orientated for group work rather than individual study.

IMPACT OF UNIVERSITY TRANSITIONS ON STUDENT TRANSITIONS

New roles have been established to ensure compliance with the regulators and new facilities spring up like mushrooms to increase the desirability of the product to students, thus feeding a sense of entitlement (Reynolds, 2022). However, these transitions have also resulted in transitions for students, which arguably have led to a reconceptualisation of what it means to go to university and the student identity. Specifically in relation to student identity, burgeoning research has explored the impact of student fees and marketisation on students' emerging identities as consumers of HE (Budd, 2016; Brooks et al., 2021; Silverio et al., 2021; Tomlinson, 2017). In addition, research has also demonstrated how students tend to view degrees as commodities to be purchased rather than investing in a programme of learning which promotes intellectual engagement (Williams, 2013).

Interest in students' academic transitions has increased, partly due to the expansion of HE particularly in the UK over the past two decades (Gale & Parker, 2014). This expansion has led to researchers emphasising the importance of transition (Heirdsfield et al., 2008; Hultberg et al., 2008; Kift, Nelson & Clark, 2010). Research on contemporary student transitions forms part of a broader body of work which focuses on life transitions, although the work on life transitions is dominated by an interest in student transitions (Ingram, Field & Gallacher, 2009). Interest in student transitions has increased in the past three decades (Bauman, 2001; Field, 2010; Giddens, 1990), although research on life transitions is still largely underdeveloped (Ingram, Field & Gallacher, 2009).

Policy imperatives have focused on increasing the number of students in HE from diverse backgrounds, improving student engagement and student retention. Although the massification of HE is not new, the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework in the UK in 2015 signalled a clear policy commitment to increasing access to HE for students from underrepresented groups, including those from areas of social deprivation and minority ethnic backgrounds. Institutions that succeed in recruiting and retaining students are rewarded for their efforts, particularly if institutions can demonstrate good outcomes in graduate employment. Research on student transitions in HE has progressed beyond its original focus on access (Belyakov et al., 2009; Gale & Parker, 2014) to increased emphasis on student outcomes (Osborne & Gallacher, 2007), particularly progression into further study or graduate-level jobs.

Consequently, the emphasis has shifted towards transitions throughout an undergraduate programme rather than focusing solely on the first year of undergraduate study (Gale & Parker, 2014).

Despite the emphasis on student transition, Eccleston, Biesta and Hughes (2010) have stated that 'there is no agreed upon definition of what constitutes a transition' (p.5). Recent perspectives on student transitions have begun to critically interrogate the concept of linear transitions (Jindal-Snape, 2016) although there is no universal agreement about what constitutes a transition (Gale & Parker, 2014). The variety of theoretical perspectives on transitions makes it difficult for HE practitioners to recognise transitions or to know how to support students when they experience transitions. According to Worth:

> Many researchers have discussed how transitions have changed – how they no longer follow a traditional linear path – but much of this research on youth transitions does not really provide an alternative to the linear path. (Worth, 2009, p.1051)

Traditionally, a transition has been defined as 'a fixed turning point which takes place at a preordained time and in a certain place' (Quinn, 2010, p.122). However, Gale and Parker (2014) define transition as 'the capability to navigate change' (p.737). This shifts the emphasis away from focusing on transition as a change (Colley, 2007) to an emphasis on students' capabilities to adapt to change. This process of adaptation is what constitutes a successful transition. However, the emphasis on students navigating and adapting to change shifts the responsibility onto the student and absolves the institution from its responsibilities to support students to adapt to the various transitions that they experience.

If transition is understood through a capability framework, it is important to consider both agency and structure, both of which will influence how effectively an individual can adapt to change (Ecclestone, 2009; Ecclestone, Biesta & Hughes, 2010). Although individual agency can be influenced by personal aspirations (Sellar & Gale, 2011; Smith, 2009), university structures can facilitate an individual's capacity to navigate change. In HE, the policies of the institution, the curriculum which students study and the assessment processes which students must navigate form the structural forces which can facilitate personal agency or mitigate against it. University policies which emphasise an employability discourse will need to be underpinned by fundamental changes to university curricula, assessment policies and opportunities for workplace learning.

Literature which emphasises transition as an ongoing process of *development* focusing on 'a shift from one identity to another' (Ecclestone, Biesta & Hughes, 2010, p.6) rather than transition as a culmination of experiences. In framing university transitions as a process of development, students develop their academic identities. However, university is also viewed as a transitional stage (Gale & Parker, 2014) which serves as a preparation for the development of a professional identity and thus, transition at university is also a process which includes students' progression into graduate-level employment and therefore a process of development from one life stage to another (Gale & Parker, 2014). Within the current HE landscape in the UK, the integration of employability measures into the NSS and the TEF, along with the embedding of employability skills into curricula, reflect the neoliberal intention that HE should be viewed as a preparation for employment. Students are encouraged to view themselves as future professionals within a competitive employment market and they gradually transition into a new identity which requires them to embrace the concept of *becoming* a future worker within a neoliberal marketised society. The concept of *becoming* is a concept which has been explored in social theory and philosophy (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Grosz, 1999; 2005; Semetsky, 2006) and critical psychology (Goodley, 2007), critical sociology and critical cultural studies. 'Becoming' as a concept rejects fixed identities and categories and opens the possibility for future growth and development. However, this conceptualisation of transitions is reductionist because it largely ignores the synchronous, multiple transitions that students experience.

MMT theory (Jindal-Snape, 2016) acknowledges that individuals do not only experience linear, sequential, and normative transitions i.e., transitioning from being a student to being a graduate-level employee. According to the theory, individuals experience several synchronous transitions which trigger transitions for others (Jindal-Snape, 2016). During their time at university, students are not only transitioning from being a student to becoming a future graduate worker.

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They experience social, psychological, and cultural transitions as well as academic, identity and professional transitions (Glazzard et al., 2020). These transitions are experienced either positively or negatively, but they ultimately trigger transitions for the institution. HE institutions themselves are also experiencing multiple transitions. They are adapting to a rapidly changing policy context, to new metrics and new ways of working. Universities are required to adapt to an aggressive and competitive HE climate which strongly emphasises student voice, student satisfaction, student experience and employability. This policy discourse results in transitions for universities as they strive to maintain their viability and position in the league tables. Examples of these transitions, are 'unpalatable' (Bradley & Quigley, 2023, p.1292) and include courses being closed down, new vocational courses being developed, re-designing academic programmes to emphasise employability skills, re-shaping the roles of lecturers and personal tutors to ensure that there is a greater emphasis on employability and the introduction of work-based placements on all programmes in some universities as a marketing technique (Bradley & Quigley, 2023). However, these transitions for the institution also result in transitions for students in that they are re-positioned as graduate workers of the future who can take their rightful place within a neoliberal, marketised economy. The trappings of the neoliberal machinery ultimately inscribe a new identity on students. They are repositioned as consumers with purchasing power. Students increasingly view themselves as buying a product (Guilbault, 2016) and ultimately, due to the emphasis on student evaluations of teaching and the threat of direct student complaints to the regulator, they hold greater power (Thiel, 2019). The effect of this is a repurposing of the role of the academic and a rebalancing of power between students and academics (Thiel, 2019). Although this is not necessarily a bad thing, it may not adequately prepare students to take up their future roles within hierarchical organisational structures, where there may be less capacity to act. Thus, providing students with a false sense of security, resulting in a negative impact on resilience in the workplace nor have the skills required for ways of working (Prospects, 2021).

Transitions to courses, modules, and assessments (university transitions) result in students experiencing academic transitions. They are quickly required to adapt to neoliberal curricula, neoliberal pedagogical approaches and neoliberal approaches to assessment that are different to what they have experienced prior to university. The reconceptualisation of students as customers (Adisa et al., 2022; Guilbault, 2016) and the repositioning of students as highly skilled workers of the future (Bradley & Quigley, 2023) also results in identity transitions.

Within this discourse, we remain concerned about those students who do not fit the required 'subject construction' – an able, productive, skilled student who understands their responsibilities to a neoliberal marketised society (Goodley, 2007). These students are reconceptualised as the needs of the university (to compete, to achieve good graduate outcomes) are transferred to students. These students are viewed through a deficit lens, and, with support, they are expected to transform themselves to meet the required subject construction. However, as Goodley (2007) puts it, 'Academic excellence is troubled by those who might never be capable of (nor interested in) such achievements' (p.322). Goodley's use of the phrase 'nor interested in' is particularly relevant to those students who have no intention of entering the graduate employment market. We remain concerned about the impact of the institutional transitions on students, particularly disabled students and those with long-term caring responsibilities who are more likely to be disadvantaged in career outcomes (Welch, 2021), and may therefore experience a sense of failure. We are also concerned about those students who choose to seek employment in non-graduate employment (for example, the third sector) and others who choose not to enter employment at all, given that the emphasis throughout their student experience is on students gaining highly skilled employment at the end of their courses.

IMPLICATIONS FOR UNIVERSITY POLICY

Universities have been required to adapt quickly to the various transitions that they have experienced. To survive within a neoliberal marketised HE context, universities have been required to implement changes to policies, and practices and to develop new structures to ensure that they achieve good outcomes on the metrics and ensure that the UK, and specifically England, has good standing in the global knowledge economy. The neoliberal discourse in HE has been characterised by the introduction of targets, metrics for evaluating the quality of teaching and research and a lack of professional autonomy (Erikson et al., 2021). International

students base their university choices on league table rankings (Bell & Brooks, 2016) and employers prefer to recruit graduates from highly ranked universities (Deardon et al., 2019).

Working in partnership with students by involving students in the design of curricula, assessment practices and their entire student experience will minimise power differentials with students gaining agency and staff losing agency (Ball, 2013). However, approaches to student partnership need to be deeply embedded rather than becoming tick-box exercises and universities may wish to consider developing a layered approach to student engagement which progresses from surface-level engagement to deeper engagement (Glazzard, Jindal-Snape & Stones, 2020). Through adopting an approach which is based on the principle of co-construction, students are no longer positioned as passive recipients of university transitions. They are involved in the process of change from the beginning. Universities should also develop bold strategies which outline the values they seek to develop in students. Curricula should extend beyond inculcating students with the value of future highly skilled employment by fostering the development of socially-just attitudes, values, and beliefs so that students are prepared for active citizenship in a global and diverse community. Finally, in addition to producing the skilled worker-of-the-future, HE curricula should emphasise academic debate and critical thinking, both of which are required in the workplace and in society generally.

Developing alternative approaches to funding students through university courses in England which serve to re-position students from consumers and reduce the burden of debt that students experience may be a positive step towards transitioning from a consumer identity to a student identity. Here, England might look to Scotland where home students do not pay anything, or to other systems as noted by Layzell (2007). Additionally, levelling access to funding may allow more students to pursue education as an intellectual and exploratory endeavour, rather than it being aligned for career pathways. This may help to provide renewed interest in the arts and humanities which has seen a rapid decline in student numbers and may help to provide a boost to the UK's creative industries.

CONCLUSION

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first time MMT theory has been applied to the context of the neoliberal policy discourse which affects UK HE. There is a need for further research, specifically research which explores the impact of the institutional transitions identified in this paper on students themselves. We have outlined the neoliberal context of HE in the UK. We have argued, drawing on MMT theory, that this has resulted in significant multiple transitions for institutions, including reconceptualising the university as a brand which can be purchased and that these transitions for the university have resulted in transitions for students. We have argued that the neoliberal discourse in which the university operates has resulted in significant changes to student recruitment processes, curricula, pedagogy, and assessment processes. In addition, we have drawn on MMT theory to argue that these university transitions have also resulted in transitions for students who have been repositioned as consumers of the university product. The transitions are ongoing as higher education policy continues to place greater demands on universities and their staff.

We have outlined the implications of these identity, cultural and psychological transitions for students. In addition, we remain concerned for those students who might not be able to 'buy in' to the worker-of-the-future discourse what universities inculcate students into. These include older students, those who are disabled and those with caring responsibilities, as well as those students who are simply pursuing a course to serve the purpose of intellectual or technical enjoyment. We are concerned about the ethical implications of these transitions for students who have different dreams and ambitions to those that the neoliberal, marketised university is inculcating. HE should serve a broader purpose than preparing students for the world of work. A university education should stimulate intellectual thinking, and critical debate and facilitate personal reflection. It should also shape students' attitudes about broader matters of social justice. The neoliberal discourse risks diluting the broader purposes of a university education and ultimately, we are concerned that the emphasis on students as future workers may arguably lead to a dilution of academic standards.

DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

This paper is a review of literature and policy as per the reference listed and has not involved empirical data collection. As such there is no data to disclose or store.

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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