

## IS KNOWLEDGE PRICELESS? A CASE STUDY ON THE CHANGING FACE OF EDUCATION

Joanna Peksa, & Faith Dillon-Lee

*Library and Student Services. Middlesex University (United Kingdom)*

### Abstract

Current developments in the Western economies have turned some universities into corporate institutions driven by practices of production and commodity. Academia is increasingly becoming integrated into national economies as a result of students paying fees and is consequently using business practices in student retention and engagement. With these changes, pedagogy status as a priority within the institution has been changing in light of these new demands. New strategies have blurred the boundaries that separate a student from a client. We believe that this has led to a change of the dynamic, disrupting the traditional idea of the knowledge market and emphasising the corporate aspect of universities. In some cases, where students are seen primarily as a customer, the purpose of academia is no longer to educate but to sell a commodity and retain fee-paying students. By analysing a case study of the Student Success Festival, an event that involved academic and marketing teams, we consider the differences between the respective visions of the pedagogic arm of the university and the corporate. We argue that the initial concept of the event, which was based on the principles of gamification, independent learning, and cognitive criticality, was more clearly linked to a grounded pedagogic approach; however, when liaising with the marketing team, is a crucial step in creative process, it became apparent that these principles were not considered a priority in terms of their remit. This paper will consider these two opposing viewpoints, reflecting on the reality of maintaining a pedagogic grounding in an increasingly commercialised sector.

**Keywords:** *Economic pressure, commodification, pedagogy, gamification, higher education marketization.*

---

### 1. Introduction

Within capitalist economies, education has been driven into the sphere of economic activity. Governments that exist within a capitalist state are increasingly serving the interests of the market and responding to the demands of capitalist players (Shumar, 1997). This shift from public funding to private funding can be seen across Europe but has been particularly evident in the UK (Williams, 2016), with a 60% cut in public funding for Higher Education (HE) over the last 12 years, which has been replaced by a system of fees and loans developed through a collaboration between universities and the government (Privot et al., 2018). Furthermore, over the last five years, the income of UK HE institutions (HEIs) has seen an increase in tandem with increasing fees (HESA, 2019). This has led to heated discussions within both the academy and HEIs regarding the practical and conceptual impact of such financial commodification on student expectation and how this may affect recruitment, retention, and engagement.

As Williams (2016, pg. 135) states, from 2010 onwards, it is undeniable that HEIs within the UK have become primary “commercial institutions serving almost entirely private interests”. This is particularly apparent in the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government’s (2010-2015) decision to decrease public funding for HEIs by £3billion a year and increase student fees to £9,000 per year, a three-fold increase (Hillman, 2016). In addition to this, the coalition government also capped student loans for part-time study at £6,750, resulting in a significant decline in part-time students and, consequentially, a drive from HEIs to attract and retain full-time home and international students in order for them to remain financially viable (Hillman 2016). Thus, the situation now exists in which HEIs must both *attract* and *retain* increasing numbers of fee-paying students in order to remain operational.

Governing bodies, therefore, consider the need for universities to be managed and marketed, and implement policies that seem beneficial for the commodification of the institutions, but detrimental for the pedagogical nature of universities. As part of the strategy to attract students and increase visibility in the HE market, universities have orientated knowledge towards the demands of capitalist tendencies, such as adopting a market orientation (see Asaad & Melewar, 2013) in order to maintain functionality. This results in universities having to consider how to ‘sell’ and ‘export’ their services, despite education being primarily an intangible ‘commodity’—thus a situation occurs in which HEIs are forced to market their ‘product’ (access to knowledge) alongside more tangible benefits: employability, reputation, student support; even the town, city, or country in which the university is located.

At Middlesex University, the Student Engagement and Advocacy team helps boost the university's visibility and directs students towards career choices that are responsive to the needs of the market. This team, although related to student engagement and progression, is located within the marketing department, which is being primarily driven by market-related demands. It focuses its actions on generating profit, usually by supplementing the appeal of the degrees offered with Middlesex University's London campus, its multicultural student body, its support services, its library, and free printing and e-textbooks for all students. However, this clashes with the pedagogical nature of the institution and draws educational activities towards market-related trends. One such activity that has been affected by the actions of the marketing department is the Student Success Festival (SSF). The SSF's primary aim is to highlight the range of available support services for students and improve engagement and attainment. However, as a result of differing aims and objectives between the pedagogical remit of the festival and the marketizing of the same, a number of ideological and institutional challenges arose which affected the planning, coordination and ethos of the festival.

While the SSF may appear to be a largely uncontroversial project, we encountered numerous challenges regarding not only our approach (which was based on pedagogies of Task-Based Learning and Gamification) but also on how we communicate with the student body. This paper, therefore, aims to explore these challenges and analyse our responses to them, as well as offering a discussion on ways in which these two competing factions (pedagogy vs marketisation) interact with each other.

## 2. Institutional context

Middlesex University (henceforth MU) is a post-92 university, meaning that, along with other former polytechnic colleges, it was awarded university status as a result of the Further and Higher Education Act (1992). These new universities had the opportunity to attract students from previously untapped markets; specifically, for this paper, lower tariff home and international students. However, the introduction of new HEIs in the early to mid-1990s, along with the introduction of universities fees towards the end of the same decade, has resulted in a competitive field. For post-92 universities, strategic marketing, both nationally and internationally, has become paramount in the continued drive to attract students and maintain financial stability (Assad & Melewar, 2013), and, as Bates and Kaye (2014) have underlined, fee-paying students report an increased focus on employment potential. There are a number of avenues to employability: communication skills, problem-solving skills, team-working abilities, critical and creative thinking are all important for students to demonstrate *in addition* to their final degree qualification. Unsurprisingly, MU focuses on these areas when marketing itself to future students. The current (2020) online prospectus begins with the following, written in bold on a bright red background: "Real World Learning [line] Our undergraduate courses give you hands-on experience to get you ready for the future". Further down the same splash page, the next prominent piece of text states:

### 2.1. Personal study support

Get support to succeed, wherever you're coming from. You'll have a Personal Tutor, support from graduates and students in years above plus academic writing and numeracy support.

As this shows, MU is keen to not only promote itself as an HEI which provides its students with good career opportunities but will also offer them 'personal study support' in the form of academic writing and numeracy support, personal tutors, and peer support. Nevertheless, despite the variety of services offered, we have found that many students often do not take advantage of them. Student engagement is vital to retention and success, and yet students are often unaware of the range of support available to them (Karp, 2011; Trowler, 2010; Kuh, 2009). Moreover, it has been reported that students find the variety of services confusing (see, for example, the 2018 HEA report). As a result of this, the SSF was created to help students access the support that they are not only entitled to but which has been (and continues to be) marketed to them as a direct benefit of choosing MU. However, as will be detailed in the next sections, we encountered frequent conceptual and ideological clashes when trying to balance the pedagogic aims of the festival with the University's marketing arm, despite our goals being so similarly tied together: to better support our students, increase their skills base, promote engagement and retention, and ultimately provide students with better employability prospects.

## 3. Case study: The student success festival

The SSF was created to highlight the range of Middlesex support services available for students. The event was co-created by the authors, lecturers working in the Learning Enhancement Team, one of such support services. Our aim was to develop a series of engaging events which foreground how student engagement and attainment can be increased through a better awareness of support services and, crucially, the people who run them. The initial concept of the event was to incorporate the principles of gamification, independent learning, task-based learning, and cognitive criticality to engage students in 'putting a face' to the service, thus hopefully overcoming any reticence in contacting them or confusion as to their purpose.

This approach is clearly linked to grounded pedagogy theories, as this is our background in educational training. The SSF focuses on holistic success, incorporating academic success, career success and mental health and wellbeing, and facilitates over 20 support teams to promote their help and accessibility to students. In 2016/17, a decision was made to thematise the event, as it has been evidenced that theme-based learning boosts creativity and facilitates the acquisition of new material (Tessier and Tessier, 2015). Thus, the inaugural SSF was designed within the overall theme of an Adventure Island, which allowed us to work with a theme of ‘exploration’ and ‘adventure’, and align our games and tasks to this visual metaphor (see Peksa, Lawson and Dillon-Lee, 2017).

In the planning phase of the next (2017/18) festival, we were advised by the Deputy Head of our service, who had initially granted us the budget to run the 2016/2017 festival, to discuss the thematisation of future events with the marketing team, based on the feedback from Executive regarding Adventure Island. We discovered that the Marketing Manager and the Chief Commercial Officer had not understood why the SSF had utilised the Adventure Island theme and had been confused by the gamified and task-based learning elements. In an email dated October 2017, we were informed that “[Marketing Manager] and [Chief Commercial Officer] were concerned about the lagoon and the volcano in terms of looking ‘professional’ and representing the university. They also thought that “it was not immediately clear how the theme linked to student success”. The email concluded by saying, “we need the Exec to be totally supportive, so working with Student Engagement Marketing will ensure we are on message”.

What followed was a series of meetings with the Student Engagement and Advocacy team (we could not meet with the Executives who had voiced their concerns) in which we sought to justify the approach of the SSF. Initially, we had planned to redesign the event under the theme of ‘outer space’ as, based on the interviews with the Student Learning Assistants (SLAs) and the Student Union, it conveyed the motivational message of ‘reaching for the stars’ and extending boundaries, which we believed aligned with the university strategy and the festival’s ethos, as well as addressing the principles of theme-based and gamified learning in HE (Reardon, 2000). However, when we prosed this idea to our marketing liaison, we were informed that the Executive members still did not fully understand the link between gamification, task-based learning and information transfer, something which, we suggest, was encapsulated in their negative response to the outer space theme. Finally, the Executive decided that the Student Engagement and Advocacy team (henceforth the marketing department) should assume more conceptual control over the event.

This new coalition created a number of challenges. It transpired that in many ways, the SSF had become a victim of its own success: more students and support services were interested in the event, which meant it became the focus of the non-pedagogical marketing arm of the University. This resulted in a series of fraught meetings with our new stakeholders. We argued for and were able to retain the principles of gamification, task-based learnings and independent learning, but we conceded the Space theme, instead accepting the marketing department’s suggestion of a Music Festival theme. We quickly encountered issues from an organisational stand-point. While a Music Festival theme was certainly less conceptually difficult to grasp, it allowed very little room within which to insert our pedagogic metaphors (reach for the stars/travel to new places/explore the universe, etc.). We were also hindered by the limitations of our campus—the SSF takes place in the Quad, a covered space in the centre of one of the University’s main buildings, around which class are held. Due to the SSF occurring during term time, there are strict limitations regarding any possible disturbances to teaching. This meant that we could not include any music-related activities at the SSF. This new theme also presented issues for our participating stakeholders, who were unsure what exactly was meant by a Music Festival, many of whom made the connection with dancing, casual sex and recreational drug and alcohol use.

While some of these issues were easily resolved (for example, by stating that we were aiming for a calming, ‘in-touch-with-nature’ approach to the theme, rather than a large-scale Music Festival, such as Glastonbury or Coachella), others were trickier. One such example was the design of our promotional materials. MU follows a red, black and white colour scheme and all internal and external marketing materials are required to adopt this for branding purposes. Thus, we found ourselves bound by a colour scheme that, rather than promoting the ethos of the SSF as a fun and rewarding event to participate in, where dark and foreboding. After three rejected attempts, we were left with a final design which ourselves and our stakeholders felt was reminiscent of a battlefield—the torn flags combined with the wildflowers invoking the image of a poppy, the flower associated with both World Wars and the Armistice Charity (The Poppy Appeal) [see Figure 1].

Figure 1. 2017/18 'Music Festival' SSF marketing design journey.



We also encountered difficulties regarding how to 'decorate' the event. For Adventure Island, each area had been clearly delineated, allowing us to go to the Theatre and Arts Departments and commission students to design and create props for our event. However, the Quad is too small to host a 'festival-style' tent, and a stage seemed unnecessary given the fact we would have no performances. The marketing team suggested booking external sellers to run a vintage stall in order to 'liven' the space up, which we felt negated the purpose of the festival to promote student services and encourage student ownership of the event. Unfortunately, we were ultimately unable to utilise student products and instead hired decorations.

Following this, we again made a case to work creatively within a theme, explaining how the theme allowed us to 'market' the festival in such a way that we could include student productions (settings, technology, costumes etc.) and also place our services within a fun and memorable context, thus setting the event aside from the more traditional University offerings. Happily, we now have garnered some understanding between ourselves and the marketing department, and in 2019 we settled on the permanent theme of Carnival/Circus. Within this theme, we have been able to again use student made products. The theme also helped our stakeholders by giving them clear boundaries within which to create and present that games and tasks to students—guidance which also helped the creative team within the marketing department to design digital posters, web banners and social media shots for the SSF, all of which incorporated a circus tent and bunting in Middlesex colours. We were also successful in arguing for a slight adjustment to Middlesex's red, black and white branding, with the inclusion of a salmon pink shade.

In the next section, we will present and discuss some of our suggestions for why these conceptual and theoretical clashes occurred, and offer possible ways to avoid them.

#### 4. Discussion

The organisation of the festival was impacted by the factors that are closely related to 'education wars', a concept coined by Olssen and Peters (2005). We were brought into conflict with proponents of marketisation over the value of pedagogy and production of knowledge. As Michel Foucault (1991b, p. 165) argues:

We live in a social universe in which the formation, circulation and utilization of knowledge presents a fundamental problem. If the accumulation of capital has been an essential feature of our society, the accumulation of knowledge has not been any less so. Now, the exercise, production and accumulation of this knowledge cannot be dissociated from the mechanisms of power; complex relations exist which must be analyzed.

Although key players in the commodification of HE have developed strategies to govern core pedagogical activities, a conflict exists between the factions that are guided by principles of pedagogy and marketisation (Taylor et al., 2007). In the current climate, the factions representing the power (in our case, Executive and the Student Engagement and Advocacy team) have dominance over other stakeholders. Should educators act outside their remit to help engage students, as we did with the SSF, their authority is curbed and thus their expertise and understanding is significantly reduced. In this project, the strained relationship between the knowledge market and the financial market was evidenced through the response from the university's Executive and non-academic players, who, as it transpired, became a decisive factor in pedagogical initiatives and staff-student communication. This was first seen in the feedback from the Executive, where the pedagogic foundations of the festival were not understood and were instead seen to be deviating from the University's branding and image strategies. This resulted in both the above practical issues, but also, most fundamentally, in a lack of trust between us and the Executive and marketing teams, a result that has been seen in the response to commodification by other academic staff across the UK HE sector (see Molesworth et al., 2011; Brien and Guiney, 2018).

We have come to believe that our freedom of academic thought was curbed, which did not allow us to embed pedagogical values into an event designed to promote student development. According to the Education Reform Act 1988, Section 202 (2), academics should be able to "test received wisdom and put

forward new ideas”. In the case of the SSF, this guarantee was denied as a result of our pedagogic foundation not being understood and instead replaced by generic publicity that did not clearly communicate the nature of the festival and its uniqueness, the suggestion of inviting unrelated outside business to the event, and the misunderstanding of the principle of theme, gamification and task-based learning. Nevertheless, the marketing team did give us more room for the creativity and agreed to support the festival with their budget. In some sense, then, it could be argued that the differences in understanding between the marketing department and ourselves have not been, overall, negative. However, we are still feeling the effects of the mismanaged Music Festival in 2020, most notably in the memory of the conflicts we faced, which have the potential to fester and create further difficulties down the line. Ultimately, it is neither healthy nor productive to have two such essential factions—pedagogy and marketing—working against each other.

## 5. Conclusion

Although advocates of marketisation believe that this has enabled HEIs to respond to new financial challenges, the impact of this shift towards commodification has been far reaching. Not only has the affected how HEIs view themselves, but also the approach taken to extra-curricular support, such as our experiences with the SSF. We believe that the marketing department attempted to dictate a range of solutions that were directed by policies that aim to align with branding and market goals, rather than educational ones. While it is impossible to ignore HE’s need to survive within a marketised economy, it is also deeply problematic to prioritise this over the educational and pastoral needs of the student body; more so when such a focus on support is a significant marketing strategy. To that end, we believe that in order for pedagogy to play a valuable part in student achievement, academics and non-academic departments should reach a consensus that aims to preserve the value of education. While we believe in the power of pedagogy, we also think that a pact of concord is necessary between different stakeholders in order for students to benefit fully from their learning experience. Nevertheless, while issues of power prevail and whenever power is unevenly distributed, reaching a consensus becomes increasingly challenging.

## References

- Assad, Y. & Melewar, T. C. (2013) Universities and Export Market Orientation: an explorative study of UK post-92 universities. *MIP 31* (7) 838-856.
- Bates, E. A. & Kaye, L. K. (2014) “I’d be expecting caviar in lectures”: The impact of the new fee regime on undergraduate students’ expectations of Higher Education. *High. Educ.* (67) 655-673.
- Education Reform Act 1988, Section 202 (2) Retrieved 26 January from: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1988/40/section/202>.
- Foucault, M. (1991) *Remarks on Marx: conversations with Duccio Trombadori* New York *Semiotext(e)*
- Further and Higher Education Act 1992, c.13. (United Kingdom). Retrieved 13.01.2020 from: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1992/13>
- HESA (2019) *What is the income of HE providers?* Retrieved 16/01/2020 from <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/finances/income>.
- Hillman, N. (2016). The Coalition’s higher education reforms in England. *Oxford Review of Education* 42 (3), 330-345.
- Middlesex University (2020) *Undergraduate Prospectus splash page*. Retrieved 20/01/202 from <https://www.mdx.ac.uk/courses/undergraduate>.
- Olssen, M. & Peters, M. A. (2005) Neoliberalism, higher education and the knowledge economy: from the free market to knowledge capitalism. *Journal of Education Policy*, 20 (3), 313-345, DOI: 10.1080/02680930500108718.
- Peksa, J., Lawson, M. & Dillon-Lee, F. (2017) Volcanos, Mermaids, Castles and Forests: utilising creativity to enhance student achievement and engagement with university services. M. Carmo (ed). *Education and New Developments* (678-680). Lisbon: InScience Press.
- Privot E. B., Estermann, T., Lisi, V. (2018) Public Funding Observatory Report. *European University Association*. Retrieved on 03 February 2020 from: [https://eua.eu/downloads/publications/eua%20pfo%202018%20report\\_14%20march%202019\\_final.pdf](https://eua.eu/downloads/publications/eua%20pfo%202018%20report_14%20march%202019_final.pdf).
- Reardon, M. (2000). Problem-based learning and other curriculum models for the multiple intelligences classroom. *Roeper Review*, 22(2), 139. Retrieved from: <http://search.proquest.com/docview/206699871/>.
- Tessier, L. & Tessier, J. (2015) Theme-based courses foster student learning and promote comfort with learning material. *Journal for learning through the Arts* 11 (1) Retrieved 29 January 2020 from: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1087088.pdf>.
- Williams, G. (2016). Higher Education: Public good or private commodity? *London Review of Education*, 14 (1), 131-142