

**‘The Student at the Heart of the System’¹: Rationalities of
Student Loans in England**

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Submitted to
Central European University
Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of MA in Sociology and Social Anthropology

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Budapest, Hungary

2019

¹ ‘Students at the Heart of the System’ is a title of a White Paper published in 2011.

Abstract

My thesis analyses political rationalities and justifications of student loans in England in major education reports and White Papers. I question what discourses in these documents created a common consensus on the necessity of the student loan system. Even though these education documents are a frequent point of analysis for economic or education policy papers, they are rarely embedded into larger neoliberal ideology and marketisation processes. In my analysis, they emerge as part and parcel of the neoliberal turn in English politics. Thatcher's and the New Labour governments enabled student loans by embedding them into larger higher education marketisation processes. Justifications for student loans also utilize the notion of the student to create a common consent on the implementation of the loan system. I used thematic analysis informed by discourse analysis to analyse my data. My findings show that student loans were made possible by a reconceptualization of the aim of higher education as an economic asset for the state and the personal benefit for the student. Even though higher education is largely framed as a sector providing high economic gain for the state, the rationalities of student loans are largely focused on the benefits for the student. The conception of the student as the beneficiary, the investor and the customer are largely used to justify the necessity and the benefit of student loans.

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Introduction

Student loans have been accepted as a normal part of student experience in many places across the world. Most prominently in the USA, the practice of student loans has also been adopted in varying degrees in countries such as Canada, Australia and Sweden, and, as a focus of this paper, in England. Student indebtedness is related to the wider neoliberal turn in politics that sees national institutions more and more privatised and run as services. Marketisation, therefore, has not bypassed higher education either and has radically transformed the sector. It has raised foundational questions of the purpose of higher education anew that disclose an ideological struggle between a welfarist understanding of education and a neoliberal one. In the United Kingdom, the struggle is especially noticeable. On the one hand, education is still seen as a common social good that brings wealth and benefit to society as a whole. On the other hand, education is a tool for employment and economic success that ultimately benefits the graduate the most. The differing notions of higher education also collide in economic issues of expansion and the rising costs of higher education on public funds. This mess of economic and political disagreements has led the United Kingdom into decades of arguments, disagreements and policy changes, resulting in radical changes in higher education financing and rising student debt. In my thesis I am seeking to disentangle and analyse these political discourses and rationalities of student debt in the case of England specifically.

The case of higher education in England is interesting for several reasons. First of all, it does not have a very long history and, as such, is a fairly recent phenomenon. The Anderson report in 1960 and the Robbins report in 1963 established higher education as a common social good that should be accessible for all based on merit (Anderson, 2016 and Hillman, 2013). Higher education was perceived as an extension of secondary education; therefore, it was only acceptable and necessary for it to be free of charge. Universities were seen as adding to the

common good, participating in the creation of social welfare and a more progressive society. Fully funded tuition fees and maintenance grants for all students became an implemented and acceptable practice. However, rising student numbers and costs lead to contentious economic problems. The question of higher education funding became a central problem and a need for reform was visibly needed. It ushered the public acceptance of more neoliberal understandings of education that were able to provide a solution to relieve public funds from the burden of higher education funding. Thus, in 1998 Tony Blair's Labour government introduced up front tuition fees of £1000 per year. In 2004, the fees were raised to up to £3000 per year and up to £9000 per year in 2012 (Hillman, 2013). The change in higher education funding policy in such a relatively short time is stark. As Hillman writes,

‘The journey from grants to loans was a slow one. A majority of the Anderson Committee thought any means-testing of student awards covering fees and maintenance “cannot fail to act as a deterrent and prevent a number of well-qualified persons from seeking to follow a university course”. Half a century later, the Conservative and Liberal Democrat Coalition government considered a tuition fee loan of £27,000 (sufficient to cover the full cost of many courses) plus a maintenance loan of £16,500 for three years of study as something that would not generally put people off studying in higher education, just so long as there was a progressive repayment mechanism, a maintenance grant targeted at students from less well-off households and greater efforts by universities to attract applicants from under-represented groups.’ (Hillman, 2013:263)

The rationale on higher education funding changed from mandatory grants for all to loans for all. Lack of public and political support for loans prevented them from being implemented for half a decade. However, this half a decade was enough for a complete change in the perception of higher education. The conversation shifted from higher education being perceived as a common social good to an individual investment that benefits the graduate. Student debt became merely a cost for the entrepreneurship of self, while universities became market driven institutions that need to attract students and adjust to their needs to collect enough funds.

Understood this way, student loans appear to be at the centre of political, economic and ideological struggles. Justifications for them are tied with wider discourses of marketisation and economic gain. Moreover, they attempt to place social justice and the welfare of the student in the middle of political rationalisations. They create a practice that manages the population through political discourse and financial necessity. They radically change the relationship between the state, the student and the university, slowly turning higher education institutions into service providers, students into customers and investors, and the state into a more distant agent in a market driven education system that, nonetheless, reaps the national benefits of education. As such, student loans are an increasingly important neoliberal political practice that often evades academic debate. Therefore, in my research I will concentrate on the development of political rationalities that led higher education from state funded to student funded. I will analyse:

- How are student loans justified in governmental education papers and reports?
- What role did the notion of the student have in the justification and consequent governmentality of student loans?

I will flesh out my analysis in 4 chapters. In Chapter 1, I will provide theoretical background for my research. In Chapter 2, I will provide historical background and analysis of economic justifications on student loans. I will analyse the expanding higher education sector that created a political and economic riddle that persisted for decades. In Chapter 3, I will analyse the marketisation of higher education through the analysis of governmental education reports and White Papers. I will show how education was framed as a national and economic asset – the discourse that encouraged privatisation of universities and implementation of tuition fees. In Chapter 4, I will analyse how the conception of the student was placed at the centre of political justifications concerning the funding of higher education. I will analyse how the framing of the

student as the main beneficiary, investor and a customer justified tuition fees and transformed the relationship between the state, higher education institutions and the student. I will show how the neoliberal conception of free choice was crucial in justifying transformation of universities and implementation of student loans.

Methodology

Research Objective

The general objective of this thesis is greater understanding of the rationalities involved in the creation, entrenchment and perpetuation of the student loan system in England. As an objective, in terms of the research questions defined above, the research will provide a theoretical contribution to the understanding of the justifications involved in the introduction of student loans. In terms of an empirical contribution, this project will provide an analysis on how the notion of the student helped to create consent for implementation and changes in the student loan system.

Analytical framework

The analytical framework that has been used in this project is Thematic Analysis (TA) with reference to certain elements of Discourse Analysis (DA), most notably the work of Michel Foucault. This section will outline the analytical framework as Thematic Discourse Analysis, reflect on the methodological framework more broadly and provide an overview of the research process.

Thematic Analysis is a method for ‘identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data’ (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 79). Themes are understood as ‘commonly recurring’ patterns within the data that emerge out of qualitative analysis (Braun and Wilkinson, 2003: 30). In other words, a theme is something that captures or reflects something important about the data in relation to a specific research question or literature. Moreover, themes can be understood to be either semantic or latent (Boyatzis, 1998) – they are, respectively, either analysed only at a superficial and explicit level of writing or speech, or at an implicit and interpretive level. As Braun and Clarke (2006) note, all TA should include an element of interpretation and an effort to situate meaning in the wider literature and a theoretical

framework. In this particular project, however, I am focusing on the latent level of analysis, as I am seeking to identify and examine underlying rationalisations of student loans, as well as assumptions and ideological conceptualisations that are, in turn, informing the semantic, explicit level of the data (see Braun and Clarke, 2006: 84). Understood this way, the process of defining themes has been an already interpretive exercise; as such, the analysis to be presented is theoretical, rather than simply descriptive.

However, it should be noted that the language of emergent themes can be obfuscatory, since it,

‘can be misinterpreted to mean that themes “reside” in the data, and if we just look hard enough they will “emerge” like Venus on the half shell. If themes “reside” anywhere, they reside in our heads from our thinking about our data and creating links as we understand them.’ (Ely et al., 1997: 205-6)

This is important, since this thesis is an example of a theory-driven TA. The themes have not simply ‘emerged’ out of the data, but have been identified as relevant according to a set of research objectives determined by ‘the researcher’s theoretical or analytic interest in the area, and is thus more explicitly analyst-driven’ (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 84). That being said, the research questions themselves have been refined and attuned to the data in the process of research.

I used a thematic discourse analysis (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Burman & Parker, 1993; Singer and Hunter, 1999; Taylor and Ussher, 2001) to consider common threads and contradictions embedded in the narratives of several government reports and White Papers on the higher education sector in England. Earlier work on such documents has tended to focus on economic and policy making issues effectively omitting the dimension of governmentality that is so central to the phenomenon. Work on governmentality and debt more broadly, however, has tended to focus on either the case of USA or measured effects of student loan system on students, such as debt deterrence, largely ignoring such key governmental documents. For the purposes of this study, the forms in which justifications and rationales for changes in the higher

education sector and student loans in particular were examined. The interest was primarily in examining how, in the official reports and White Papers, the discourse of marketisation justified and rationalised the new mode of governance. The aim was to be faithful to the documents while situating them in relation to each other and the wider literature. As such, this project has privileged documents rather than parliamentary debates. The documents are understood as the original sources of meaning. Although thematic analysis could not help to identify the agency of the document in the given institutions, committees, or debates, it could highlight the main themes that are present in the main report of interest – the Dearing report – as well as identify patterns across the several additional documents examined.

Data

My main data is major education reports and education centred White Papers from 1963 to 2011. The types of documents I focused on allowed me to research consolidated perceptions and visions of higher education. Moreover, the time frame of the documents allowed me to understand and analyse the radical shift of political rationalities regarding student loans. I was able to trace and extrapolate any changes in meanings and aims of higher education that shaped and justified the implementation of tuition fees and loans policies. Moreover, these documents provided me with consolidated perceptions and rationalities regarding higher education that guided subsequent policies and changes. Through these documents I was able to re-trace the shifts in discourses and political imaginations that made certain realities to come true.

The central document in my thesis is the Dearing Report (or The National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education) published in 1997. It was established under Sir Ron Dearing with a goal to consider,

‘how the purposes, shape, structure, size and funding of higher education, including support for students, should develop to meet the needs of the UK over the next twenty years’ (The National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education, 1997 quoted in Stevens, 2004:88).

It is the largest report published since 1963, consisting of 17 members in a National Committee. Moreover, it had additional Working Groups and Committees which had met 90 times during the preparation of the report. They also produced 445 papers, the Secretariat prepared 13000+ documents, 840 individuals and organisations submitted written evidence and 6000 pages of evidence were written in total (The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997:14). The report consists of 24 chapters, out of which four are directly dedicated to higher education funding. Moreover, it was the first education report to propose tuition fees backed by student loans to fund higher education. The scope and the content of the report provided me with the main source of political discourses and justifications regarding student loans and the transformation of the higher education sector. It is rich in political and economic justifications of the loan system and sheds light on the history of commodification of higher education and the rationale that enabled it.

Besides the Dearing report I also analysed documents that were published before and after it. I examined the Robbins Report released in 1963 as well as White Papers released after to explore any changes in rationale towards the funding of higher education. Moreover, I analysed documents released after the Dearing report that were often used to implement varying student loans and funding policies. The Browne report submitted in 2010 and partially implemented in 2012 was one of the more important documents I analysed. It suggested a government funded loan scheme that would cover the majority of tuition fees and maintenance grants costs (Hillman, 2013).

It is also important to reflect on the discursively networked nature of the various reports, as, although they are separate documents in their own right, they are intrinsically linked by virtue of their purpose, their position in the discourse of higher education, and neoliberal ideology. Therefore, connections between themes that have emerged in one document and another are

sensible in so far as they address the pattern of meaning that this thesis is interested in examining through the posing of the research questions. For instance, the role of the student (see chapter four) is something that especially prominent in the Browne Review and White Paper of 2011, however beginnings of such conceptualization are retraceable to the Dearing Report.

Analytic Strategy

Following the work of Braun and Clarke (2006: 87), TA has been conducted in six main phases.

Those are: 1) familiarising with the data; 2) generating initial codes; 3) searching for themes; 4) reviewing themes; 5) defining and naming themes; 6) producing a dissertation. In the first stage, the data that has been outlined above was read and re-read and initial ideas were noted down. At the second stage, any interesting features of the report were coded in a systematic fashion as well as emergent codes were collated. At the third stage, a thematic map was produced in order to clarify the relationship between the themes and the coded documents and extracts. At the fourth stage, the themes were refined on two levels (Braun and Clarke, 2006). First, the themes were scrutinised for consistency and coherence in relation to the coded extracts of the reports and documents. Second, as per Braun and Clarke, ‘the validity of individual themes [were examined] in relation to the data set, but also whether [the] candidate thematic map ‘accurately’ reflects the meanings evident in the data set as a whole’ (2006: 91). At the fifth stage, the names of the themes were reconsidered and refined in relation to both the data and the relevant literature. At the final sixth stage, the writing up of this report has reflected the analytical process as themes have been further refined and clarified. Care has been taken to embed extracts from the primary sources that best illustrate the findings of this research project as well as allowing for going beyond simple description of the data and making an argument in relation to the set research questions. The last two chapters are largely based on the two main

themes discovered, while the preceding two chapters provide theoretical and historical background that situate the findings.

Theoretical background

From the welfare state to neoliberalism

According to Rose and Miller, neoliberalism emerges as a reaction to welfarism and, consequently, reactivates liberal principles such as the ‘scepticism over the capacities of political authorities to govern everything for the best: vigilance over attempts of political authorities to seek to govern’ (Rose and Miller, 1992:198). As such, it reverses the political values of the welfare state and places the market as a self-regulator principle for the state to follow and sustain. The principle of the free market, subsequently, replaces the notion of public good as a political aim. However, it has to be maintained in order for it to function as intended. Therefore, neoliberalism requires strategies, discourses, and practices that maintain the perceived superiority of the free market. Political decisions which used to be justified by social good or social fairness now shift towards individual responsibility. The political subject is individualised and the responsibility of a good life that is equated with financial and economic success is placed on the individual’s shoulders. Health care, education and insurance against unexpected adversities are not expected to be freely provided by the state, but something an individual should take care of oneself, in order not to burden society. Entrepreneurship is meant to replace passivity and dependency on welfare programmes, as well as encourage the work on one’s self as a way to a better life. As such, neoliberalism emerges not as a system of political government that can be understood through the analysis of institutions. It requires understanding of political rationalities and, consequent governmentality, that are imposed on political subjects.

Political rationalities

In my research I will be predominantly interested in the production of these political rationalities. As Rose and Miller note, they are not merely rhetoric,

‘Language is not merely contemplative or justificatory, it is performative. An analysis of political discourse helps us elucidate not only *the systems of thought* through which authorities have posed and specifies the problems for government, but also *the systems of action* through which they have sought to give effect to government.’ (Rose and Miller, 1992:177)

Language and political logic are powerful tools for making realities imaginable, conceivable, justified and, consequently, achievable. It is an ‘intellectual machinery’ (Rose and Miller, 1992:179) rendering reality thinkable and opening ways for certain political deliberations and implementations. It constructs and defines a governable sphere, through pretences to expertise, and, consequently, establishes its nature and purpose. According to Burchell, governmental reason does not set out concrete solutions or answers to particular cases, but define ‘problem-space of government’ (Burchell, 1996:25). These spaces, consequently, become liable to governance and problematization. As Rose and Miller notes,

‘Government is a *problematizing* activity: it poses the obligations of rulers in terms of the problems they seek to address.’ (Rose and Miller, 1992:181)

Thus, government not only divides and defines spheres of life to be governed, but also has a power to identify problems and failures. As such, it also possesses a prescriptive character; it imposes responsibilities on the governors to enact changes through ‘*technologies of government*’ (Rose and Miller, 1992:183). As such, neoliberal governmentality is not punitive, but rather creative,

‘modern forms of neo-liberalism define positive tasks for a governmental activism.’ (Burchell, 1996:27)

That is, political governmental reason not only problematizes spheres of life, but also creates projects and strategies to govern and guide them. As such, rationalities are inseparable from these technologies of government and enable them through justification and production of moral and political subjects.

Governmentality and the production of the subject

As Gordon (Gordon, 1991) notes, Foucault utilizes the concept of governmentality in two ways. First of all, governmentality is all the ways we regulate, shape and guide our behaviour in everyday life, the ways we reflect on and think of ourselves and others in the light of certain principles and aims. The second utilization of the concept directly addresses the domain of political by the analysis of the variety of political reasons. In my research, I use the concept both ways to embrace the complexity of student loans. It is important to note that the sphere of the political and the social are never clearly separated or divided, that is, political reasons in the era of neoliberalism are doomed to shape the social life of its political subjects. Therefore, as a government of free and responsible citizens, neoliberalism governs through productions of subjectivities,

‘By means of expertise, self regulatory techniques can be installed in citizens align their personal choices with the ends of government. The freedom and subjectivity of citizens can in such ways become an ally, and not a threat, to the orderly government of a polity and a society.’ (Rose and Miller, 1992:188-189)

Government of subjects, thus, becomes a central point in neoliberal politics. It emerges as a necessity to govern populations not through repression, but through the production of consent. In his lectures ‘The Birth of Biopolitics’ (2008) and ‘Territory, Sovereignty, and Population’ (2007), Foucault explains liberalism as a totalizing political and economic system that produces populations as its objects of management. Neoliberalism, as a re-emergence of liberal values, works on the same principles. A population becomes a thing of nature that can be calculable, controlled and predicted. It appears simultaneously as a natural fact and as a product of governmentality. It is natural so far as it is there and is, thus, open for calculation and regulation. It is produced so far as it can be moulded by certain regimes of practices and systems of truth. Thus, government is executed through political rationalities and technologies of government (Rose and Miller, 1992).

As Burchell writes,

‘As in the case of early liberalism, neo-liberalism seeks in its own ways the integration of the governed into the practices of their government and the promotion of correspondingly appropriate forms of techniques of self.’ (Burchell, 1996:29)

Neoliberal governmentality produces actively responsible subjects whose choices and decisions made by their own free volition inscribe them further into the system of market competition and efficiency. By attempting to achieve success and maximize their own happiness, they invest into their own human capital that can be exchanged into a better job or a higher status in society. As such, they do the work for the very neoliberal machinery itself by treating themselves as commodities. In this way, the very personal wishes and activities of individuals are integrated into hegemonic machinery that is sustained through the free choice of its participants. As Rose writes,

‘such lifestyle maximization entails a relation to authority in the very moment as it pronounces itself the outcome of free choice.’ (Rose, 1996:59)

Choice, thus, becomes a central node enabling governance of subjects. As Rose observes, marketization specifically seeks dissolution of the distance between expert and political power of above and decision making of consumers from below,

‘In its ideal form, this imagines a “free market” where the relations between citizens and experts are not organized and regulated through compulsion but through acts of choice.’ (Rose, 1996:54)

Student loans as a mode of governmentality

Foucault (2008 and 2017) was the pioneer in the analysis of the production of subjectivities and human capital through constant work on self. Even though, he pioneered in the discovery and analysis of biopower through the governance of populations, he did not foresee debt as a mode of governmentality. As Lazzarato writes, ‘debt reconfigures biopolitical power by demanding a production of subjectivity specific to indebted man [sic]’ (Lazzarato, 2012). He argues that debt produces a particular type of neoliberal subjectivity that not only submits to

biopolitical scrutinization, but also improves it. It requires a constant work on self, a certain morality, and a form of conduct. Moreover, this subjectivity opens itself to scrutinization even more by inviting pastoral control. That is, to take out a loan, one has not only their financial situation investigated but is also subject to evaluation of their life plans and choices. The product is an indebted person whose relationship to self and others is transformed. Thus, in my research I intend to analyse the rationality regarding students' loans and what methods of governance it implies.

Finally, it should be acknowledged that,

‘Whilst we inhabit a world of programmes, that world is not itself programmed.’ (Rose and Miller, 1992:191)

Political rationalities are spaces of imagination and as such, cannot produce realities that are perfect embodiments of those imaginations. Government is an ever changing, succeeding and failing operation. Solutions to one programme inevitably create problems to another. Bodies and objects escape their boundaries and spheres of knowledge and regulation. Unexpected problems are produced and discovered, unplanned circumstances and consequences take place. Subjects that are supposed to be mere operators of programmes and technologies of government refuse or become creative. Foucault says, ‘things never work out as planned’ (Foucault, 1991:80). Thus, my study is limited since it deals with only a facet of reality. My research is focused on the political rationalities and justifications and not the actual effects of policies on people. However, these rationalities are not passive, but active agents in the production of realities and act as enablers to social policies and laws. And as such, they penetrate social and political imaginations of societies.

Historical background and economic rationalities

The expansion of higher education

England as well as many other European countries saw a massive expansion of the higher education sector after 1945 (Anderson, 2016). The system that was constructed as elite, catering to a very low percentage of the population became massive in a short amount of time.

The Robbins report was already aware of the expansion costs,

‘We have seen that in 60 years the number of full-time students has increased more than eight-fold’ (Committee on Higher Education, 1963:21)

Moreover, it was already predicting the further rise in student numbers, but saw it as inarguably positive change, socially and economically. For the Robbins Committee the expansion of higher education appeared as a natural development after the expansion of primary and secondary education, therefore, rising numbers of students merely signalled a modern and progressive society. Such a massive change was expected to be heavy on public funds,

‘on the assumption that public expenditure in this sector will account for a constant proportion of all expenditure, we estimate that total public expenditure on full-time higher education will increase from £206 million in 1962/3 to £742 million in 1980/1.’ (Committee on Higher Education, 1963:201)

The Robbins report admits that the costs for the proposed free education are considerable. It is aware that keeping education free would involve an increase in the national income devoted to higher education. However, it does not dwell on detailed economic calculations, but rather claims that economic worries should not interfere with educational goals. Educational costs should be met and,

‘Whether we have them or not is a question of choice. It is not a question of any technical or economic inability to achieve them.’ (Committee on Higher Education, 1963:216)

In other words, education costs in the Robbins report are a political question. It overlooks economic issues and claims that they can always be solved by a re-distribution of public funds or increased taxation. The money is there, the questions is what it is used for. A similar line of thought can be seen in the Anderson Report that was released a couple of years earlier in 1960. It argued for mandatory grants for all students but was reluctant to look into financial costs of such system in detail. As Hillman (2013:254) observes, the significance of the report resulted from this lack of attention to the availability of public money. Both the Anderson and the Robbins reports came to define the welfarist vision of education and created a public consensus for the free and fully funded higher education system. However, this consensus became increasingly unaffordable once higher education extended from an elite to a mass system. Thus, the reports' reluctance to discuss the economic side of higher education system paved the way for considerations of a loan system that appeared as the only one viable solution. In this regard, the Robbins report differs a lot from subsequent education reports and White Papers that consider the financial side of education in more detail.

For example, the White Paper 'Education: A Framework for Expansion' (Department of Education and Science, 1972) published in 1972 by Margaret Thatcher who was the Secretary of State for Education and Science at the time was explicitly worried about increasing costs. It advocated for the further expansion of the higher education sector and predicted a 5 per cent real terms annual increase in public spending on higher education. The strain on public funds that was predicted in the 1960s already was becoming more real and pressing every year without a clear solution or action plan. From the mid-1970s expansion costs were compensated by reducing public expenditure per student that threatened the quality of higher education and strained universities. Margaret Thatcher's government was not prepared to solve the situation by cuts elsewhere, higher taxes or radical transformation in the delivery of higher education.

Her successors were not ready either (Hillman, 2013:252) and the problem of higher education funding dragged through years of ideological fights causing further strain to universities.

Loans as political and economic problem

Thus, the foundation for the loan system was built on inability to solve the higher education funding problem. As Hillman writes,

‘If the 1960s provided the intellectual arguments for loans, the 1970s provided the practical reasons for them.’ (Hillman, 2013:256)

The ideological arguments for the loan system became supported by and grounded in economic rationalizations. Even though they were getting increasingly more support, the struggle was long. Negotiations regarding student loans were recorded by many education historians (e. g. Hillman, 2013, Anderson, 2016, Farrell and Tapper, 1992). One of the most influential cases for the loans was given as early as 1955 by Milton Friedman who argued that education is an investment into one’s self and individuals should be ready to bear the costs themselves. Even though proponents of student loans were commonly on the political right, even the Labour party was open for considerations of them once in a while. In 1967 a Labour cabinet agreed to consider loans and a labour member Shirley Williams consulted universities regarding them (Hillman, 2013:250). The author of the Robbins report also had a change of mind and expressed regret of not having considered the loan option more in depth, ‘it is a matter of regret to me, personally, that I did not at the time [of the Robbins Report] sufficiently appreciate the advantages of the Prest scheme²’ (quoted in Barr, 1989:412). Thatcher’s government put student loans on mainstream political agenda in 1979 (Farrell and Tapper, 1992:270). However, proposals for the reform were rejected several times. In 1984 Secretary of State for Education and Science Keith Joseph, a member of Conservative party, attempted to close the fiscal gap

² Prest scheme proposed loans with income related payments.

and push for more money for science by announcing lower thresholds for means testing for maintenance grants, which meant that the affluent would pay more. He also announced that university fees would be paid by the richer parents. His attempts ended with an outcry from other members of the conservative party who were afraid to lose middle class votes and declared him a ‘secret socialist’. Thus, Keith Joseph closed the fiscal gap by cutting the funding for science research (Stevens, 2004:50). After this fiasco, not many politicians dared to suggest changes in funding. When Jeff Rooker, the Labour spokesman on higher education, suggested to consider a graduate tax, he was fired (Stevens, 2004:80).

Success of maintenance loans

In 1988, the White Paper ‘Top-up Loans for Students’ was published after two and a half years of wait and many postponements (Barr, 1989:413). It advocated for further expansions and the widening of access for more students. The White Paper noted that the cost of maintenance grants had risen from £253 million in 1962/3 to £829 million in 1987 and the student number was expected to rise by sixty-seven per cent between 1988 and 1993 (Stevens, 2004:62). The proposed solution was to replace a part of the maintenance grants with loans. The loans proposed were not means-tested, accessible to all, and to be offered at a real interest rate of zero. The loans would be uprated each year in line with inflation and would not start until students complete their courses. Deferment of repayments in case of low income was also available. However, the White Paper also proposed to end social security benefits for students (Student Top-Up Loans (Hansard, 9 November 1988)).

However, the White Paper was not received positively. Neither the Conservative nor the Labour party supported the system laid out in the paper. As Farrell and Tapper noted (1992) the paper destroyed the already existing consensus on student loans. By 1988 pressed by cuts in higher education funding many Labour politicians were open to consider some type of loan

system. The proposal became more widely accepted instead of being seen as a right-wing agenda (Farrell and Tapper, 1992). Therefore, income related loan systems would have been accepted, by most, however, the White Paper proposed mortgage type repayments. The economists Nicholas Barr, who wrote extensively about student loans systems and made numerous proposals to the government, noted that the paper was fundamentally flawed and unable to provide additional public funds (Barr and Crawford, 1998a and 1998b). The unresolved battles in the government were pulling solutions to different sides. While the Department of Education and Science sought expansion and access, the Treasury was concerned with manpower planning and central control of higher education. The result was that even,

‘The Archangel Gabriel could not write a White Paper to achieve both. Hence the delay, and a scheme (the result of Treasury pressure) which does virtually nothing for access and expansion.’ (Barr, 1989:413-114)

Therefore, the White Paper was met by a wave of dissatisfaction in the House of Lords on the day of the presentation. It was met by the wave of worries about student debt, debt deterrence, disadvantaging poor students and a lack of attention to schools. The only response that John Andrew Davidson, the presenter of the paper, was able to provide, was that the loans will be voluntary and carry on no interest and, therefore, would be accessible to all. It is also, only right, that those benefitting from education should contribute. However, that was not enough to change the dissatisfaction of the House of Lords. As Lord Glenamara, a Labour politician exclaimed, 'All the Minister can offer is to extend the misery for a longer period.' (Student Top-Up Loans (Hansard, 9 November 1988)). The White Paper was declared to be a disappointment.

Despite the amount of criticism that the White Paper received, it was largely implemented in 1990. As Hillman writes,

‘maintenance loans (...) were Margaret Thatcher’s last significant social reform. For the first time, younger beneficiaries of higher education (as opposed to their parents) were expected to contribute to the costs. Students could borrow up to £420, which had to be repaid—usually in 60 equal monthly instalments—once their poststudy income surpassed 85 per cent of national average earnings.’ (Hillman, 2013:258)

Introduction of top-up loans asked students for the first time to contribute to the costs of higher education since 1960s. They allowed for further expansion of higher education sector, however the basic problem of higher education funding remained unresolved and was pushing the sector further into decline (Stevens, 2004:62).

The Dearing Report

The participation rate rose from 5 per cent in the early 1960s to 30 per cent by the mid-1990s. The number of students almost doubled between 1990 and 1996, while the funding per student fell 30 per cent (Barr and Crawford, 1998:72). Higher education institutions faced a challenge of maintaining quality while admitting ever larger number of students. It created such a stretch for academic institutions that,

‘The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) reported for example that, in the 1996 forecasts, 78 (or nearly 55 per cent) of English higher education institutions were expected to be in deficit by the end of 1999/2000.’ (The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997:263)

This funding problem created by a massive expansion of universities was not overlooked or surprising. As George Walden, a former Higher Education Minister, explained,

‘Open discussion of where the money was to come from was impossible during the entire period of expansion, and remains so till this day. To all intents and purposes Parliament has side-stepped the issue entirely.’ (Walden, 1996 cited in Stevens, 2004:81)

Both Conservative and Labour parties were conscious about grossly underfunded higher education as well as that Treasury alone cannot remedy the situation, unless taxes were increased. Therefore, there was a tacit agreement during election in 1997, that ‘there would be no mention of maintenance grants or loans, fees imposed by the government or top-up fees’

(Stevens, 2004:88). Instead, a committee under Sir Ron Dearing was commissioned to consider how higher education system should develop in the next 20 years. As Stevens observes, the Dearing report itself was intended to avoid serious discussions of the future of higher education during election season (Stevens, 2004, and Barr and Crawford, 1998b).

Reading the report, it becomes clear fairly quickly, that the Dearing's Committee was operating within predetermined financial bounds. It was asked 'to have regard, within the constraints of the Government's other spending priorities and affordability ...' (The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997:263). In such conditions, the proposals the Dearing report could make were already limited. The Committee 'looked critically at all the potential demands for additional funding' (The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997:263), because it was aware that the funding would not be granted or would be very restricted.

³Therefore, if additional money needs are unavoidable, they have to be paid by other sources than public funding.

Therefore, the Dearing report provides four options for student loans and discusses their dangers and benefits to the public funds. It is interesting that even though, the Dearing report was the first one to introduce tuition fees, it was still careful to do so. There is quite a lot of deliberation regarding accessibility of education and the problems that tuition fees might cause to poorer students. Therefore, the proposed student loan system only asks students to 25% of tuition fee backed by income contingent loan. It also leaves 50% means tested grant intact and instead of freely accessible 50% maintenance loan, the report proposes to make it income contingent as well.

³ The Dearing Report did end up asking for additional funding to keep the quality of higher education until loan repayments kicked in. However, the Treasury, keeping with conservative spending plans, denied it (Stevens, 2004).

Marketisation of Higher Education

In this chapter, I will present a close reading of the Dearing report, complementing it with other education reports and White Papers regarding the marketisation of higher education institutions. During my research, marketisation emerged as an intrinsic political, economic and ideological process in understanding the rationalities of student loans. Neoliberal marketisation discourses and policies created an ideal environment for the implementation of the new norms of higher education funding that were guided by principles of economic efficiency and the individualisation of students. These discourses produced a fertile ground for political consensus towards transformations of the higher education sector. In this chapter, I am going to demonstrate how the turn from welfarism to neoliberalism changed the understanding of the value and aim of education and its role in society.

Education as an economic and national asset

Foskett (2011) observes that even though, universities always operated in the markets as providers of non-compulsory education, universities since 80s were forced into the enhanced marketisation process, where market mechanisms are seen as an efficient and effective way to expand higher education. Market and market competition became key words not only in the economic debates of higher education, but also in official education papers. Marketization, thus, has been a central concept in critiques on neoliberal turn in higher education. Market, as a political and economic, concept became prominent in classical liberalism. It represents,

‘a social space in which rational individuals exchange things freely. It determines what is convenient for all without the need of an external decision-maker, through a demand-and-supply mechanism that functions as an ‘invisible hand’, achieving balance and regulation without the need for enforced governance actions.’ (Özgün, Dholakia and Atik, 2017:194S)

As such, the market in classical liberalism was understood as a natural state of affairs that would exist without state intervention. People, understood as individuals with their own needs

and desires, would exchange things freely and create a naturally moving and developing economic system. As such, the market would be able to include everyone and take care of their needs. Such an understanding of the economic, and otherwise, relationship frames market competition as a highly desirable state of affairs. High competition indicates the health of the system, which intends to promote social and economic good of individuals. As such, neoliberalism and marketization are not merely an economic theory, but a social one. The market became not only an economic device but constituted ‘a socio-political model for industrial capitalism’ (Özgün, Dholakia and Atik, 2017:195S). It includes social life under the umbrella of economic interactions and assume that the latter would promote the former. Ultimately, it assumes that economic success leads to the social good.

Thus, in political discourses a good competitive economy becomes equated with a good society. The market replaces the notion of common good in political and economic discourses ((Özgün, Dholakia and Atik, 2017:194S). The wellbeing of individuals and society is measured by the growth of the economy and the wealth it produces (Massey, 2013:12). Market theory assumes that the prioritization of private economic interests will provide the space for everybody to seek their own desires and achieve wellbeing, provided they enter the market. This perception of the economic and the social relationship also altered the perception of higher education. In the 1960s higher education was seen as an extension of secondary education - free, accessible and creating a benefit for the whole of society. This perception shifted with neoliberal policies of the ‘New Right’ government in 1980s led by Margaret Thatcher (Özgün, Dholakia and Atik, 2017, 2017:192S). Higher education came to hold value only in as much as it allows individuals to enter the market and benefit economy and subsequently themselves. Having such a role, education had to succumb to the principles of the market itself. Education had to be economized, optimized and standardized. It must be made to respond to the needs of the economy and produce agents that are able to produce economic value. As such, education

is expected to become part and parcel of neoliberal ideology and educate agents that are not only active supporters, but also reinforcers of the system.

Thus, economy and education become strongly interlinked. In 1982 already William Waldergrave, the Higher Education Minister, argued that ‘government, industry and higher education must work together to match the output of qualified personnel with industry’s needs’ (Pratt, cited in Stevens, 2004:50). A White Paper published in 1987 under conservative Thatcher’s government also clearly promotes closer ties between industries and higher education. According to it,

‘Higher education should:

- serve the economy more effectively
 - pursue basic scientific research and scholarship in the arts and humanities
 - have closer links with industry and commerce, and promote enterprise.’
- (Department of Education and Science, 1987:iv)

The promotion of communication between academic staff and industries is especially emphasized. The White Paper promised rewards for the universities with close relationships with businesses and seeks to ‘foster the positive attitudes to enterprise’ (Department of Education and Science, 1987:2) for students. The Dearing report consolidated this vision by proclaiming that,

‘There is an increasing emphasis on the role of higher education in serving the needs of the economy.’ (The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997:68)

Education becomes necessary for a competitive economy, because it can provide a labour pool that corporations and industries can use. Having qualified manpower allows for competition in the global market. England would preserve the leading position, both in education and the labour market by providing education accepted by employers and, therefore, attracting a wide range of students from all over the world. It would also produce a large labour pool that is beneficial for employers. The narrative around the global market is framed by competition.

Competitors' performance (such as China, Japan, Germany, etc.) is frequently compared to that of England. The report often refers to them as already investing into education as a national asset,

‘many of our international competitors are aiming to improve the contribution their higher education systems make to their economic performance’ (The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997:4)

Thus, there is a need, for the education in United Kingdom to become competitive, in order not to lose the status of economic power globally.

Moreover, higher education would bring a national profit by ‘attracting and anchoring the operations of global corporations’ (The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997:55). The national benefit is an important part of the Dearing Report’s vision. Education must bring profit by providing a labour pool for corporations and businesses to use. In such a framework, people become a valuable national resource. In the global world, in search of competitive advancements businesses are free to relocate and move wherever they see more fit and profitable. Innovation and technology also allow more fluidity and easy access from everywhere in the world. In this environment, ‘the only stable source of competitive advantage (other than natural resources) is a nation's people’ (The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997:9). The justification is then, that people as resource must be invested and guided to provide more economic advantages.

Thus, it is clear that the state has a lot at stake in terms of education. The discourse in the report indicates that the market competition and the state are not the polar opposites – in contrary, they co-exist and interact together. Even though, neoliberalism draws from the market conceptions of classical liberalism, there is an important difference. While for liberalism the market is a natural social phenomenon, for neoliberalism it is an ideal form (Özgün, Dholakia and Atik, 2017:197S). Therefore, the market cannot be expected to develop freely without

additional intervention through everyday interactions; on the contrary, it should be cultivated and maintained by political interventions. While liberalism possesses a negative conception of the state as a power that interrupts the market logic, neoliberalism possesses ‘a positive conception of the state’s role in creating the appropriate market by providing the conditions, laws and institutions necessary for its operation’ (Olssen and Peters, 2005:315). Neoliberalism determines its governmental activity ‘by reference to artificially arranged or contrived forms of free, entrepreneurial and competitive conduct of economic-rational individuals.’ (Burchell, 1996:23-24). Even though, the Dearing Report still advocates for the state as the main source of funding, it does so not only to promote education as a right of equal access to everybody. The state must still provide funding for higher education in order to control it and guide it to bring more economic benefit. It has an interest in,

‘ensuring that the United Kingdom has the level of participation in higher education which it needs for sustained economic and social viability’ (The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997:288).

The state also cannot leave higher education on its own, since

‘[t]here is (...) a danger that, if left to employers or individuals, the nature and level of higher education will not best serve the long term needs of the economy as a whole; and there will be under-investment’ (The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997:288).

As Foucault writes, ‘One must govern for the market, rather than because of the market’ (Foucault, 2008:121). The state has a role in providing conditions for the market to develop and function. Policies and reforms must lead to competition between institutions, even those that were considered public. In this way, education is framed as both economic and national asset. It produces a valuable resource – graduates that make the economy more efficient and competitive in the global market. Even though the state is presented as having high stakes in keeping higher education of high quality and expanding it further, most political rationalities on transformation of universities fall on the attendees of the universities – students.

The Learning Society

When higher education is equated with a good economy, the conclusion is the more education there is, the better the economy would be. Even though it is exactly the growth of student numbers that caused financial problems for higher education institutions, further expansion was insisted on. Stevens notes how this circuitous argument was used on throughout the 90s. The assumption that more graduates will simply make a country richer was widespread and often used to shut down further conversations on the topic (Stevens, 2004:82). While the Robbins Report argued for expansion in terms of equality, the latter papers and reports insisted on an economic imperative. In 1972 already, a White Paper argued that the expansion must continue in order to ‘make a full contribution to the vitality of our society and our economy’ (Department of Education and Science, 1972:1). A White Paper in 1987 argued for expansion in terms of manpower (Department of Education and Science, 1987). The White Paper in 1991 (Department of Education and Science, Department of Employment and Welsh Office, 1991) on further education argued that education should be more aligned with manpower needs to provide better career opportunities for graduates, better employees for employed and more wealth to the economy and nation. The Dearing Report embraced this reasoning as well; it proposed the vision of the learning society.

The Dearing Report argued that expansion should continue and a student cap on student numbers would be unsustainable ‘in relation to potential national needs beyond the short term’ (The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997:263). ‘Potential national needs’ appears as an interesting concept. It expresses an inability to predict the future needs and the demand of manpower. As such, there should be as many graduates as possible to answer that demand in the future. It also points to the need for people to get re-qualified and re-educated. This is what the learning society refers to,

‘In the next century, the economically successful nations will be those which become learning societies: where all are committed, through effective education and training, to lifelong learning.’ (The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997:7)

Learning society is a society that constantly re-educates itself to adapt and support the changing needs of the labour market. Knowledge and technology are advancing so rapidly that a competitive economy depends on the ability to generate and engage with that knowledge. Therefore, the market is not likely to need people staying in the same professions their entire lives, it needs people that can adapt quickly and change their skills accordingly. However, the concept of the learning society was not a completely new invention. As Olssen and Peters (2005:333) observe, references to ‘learning economy’ and ‘information society’ were already in an OECD report ‘The knowledge-based economy’ published in 1996. The report claims that,

‘The need for workers to acquire a range of skills and to continuously adapt these skills underlies the ‘learning economy’ (Olssen and Peters, 2005:333).

Moreover, the report argued that knowledge and knowledge distribution are increasingly important for good economic performance. In other words, knowledge emerges as capital (Olssen and Peters, 2005:330). Foucault has understood this turn much earlier,

‘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.’ (Foucault quoted in Olssen and Peters, 2005:340)

Knowledge production and accumulation, learning itself becomes a product. In the knowledge economy, where information is intrinsic for the functioning of the market, the generation of knowledge must be controlled, since it is intrinsic for the economic performance. As the Dearing Report claims,

‘Knowledge is advancing so rapidly that a modern competitive economy depends on its ability to generate that knowledge, engage with it and use it to effect.’ (The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997:51)

Thus, the vision of the learning society appears as a mechanism that diverts the attention from the state to the people. The expression itself possesses positive associations with knowledge and people seeking to learn more throughout their lives. However, it glosses over the real reasons of the need of such a society and presents it as a naturally positive change. The benefits for the state remain hidden in the background while the students are placed as the real stakeholders and benefactors of such a system.

The Success of the Market

It is these rationalisations that achieved the implementation of student loans. The Dearing Report recommended an income contingent loan system. However, the proposal was ignored by the newly elected New Labour (Stevens, 2004:97). It was rejected by the government in what has been described as ‘policy-making chaos’ (cited in Hillman, 2013:260). Eventually, in 1998 New Labour introduced up-front student fees of £1,000 paid at the beginning of each academic year. The fees were means tested, so that roughly one-third of students paid the full price and one-third a reduced fee. Maintenance grants, however, were scrapped and turned into interest-free loans with repayments starting with £10,000 per year (Stevens, 2004:92). Thus, as Hillman writes,

‘Tony Blair remains the only post-war British Prime Minister to have overseen a student support system with no maintenance grants, and he is the only one since the 1970s to have compelled students or their families to pay upfront tuition fees.’ (Hillman, 2013:260)

It signified a significant shift in traditional Labour policies. New Labour sought to resolve social problems through the strong state and the market. It continued with Thatcherite policies with the focus on economic efficiency and competitiveness, only with a stronger emphasis on social justice. Thus, it continued with the neoliberal policies that had started before them,

‘New Labour, as it was then called, followed what has become known as the Third way – a position which supposedly stood in the middle between liberal economic policies (first way) and left-wing socialist policies (second way). (...) New Labour thus (...) subscribed to capitalism and free market enterprise.’ (Troschitz, 2017:133)

However, the system was short-lived, and changes were numerous. As the Dearing Report prognosed, up-front tuition fees acted as a clear deterrence to enter higher education and the expansion of the higher education sector was not increasing as expected (Troschitz, 2017). In 2003, a White Paper proposed the re-introduction of maintenance grants and the replacement of up-front tuition fees by a variable fee capped at £3,000 paid through an income contingent loan. The threshold of repayment was raised from £10,000 to £15,000 (Hillman, 2013:260). These changes were implemented in 2004, but once again did not hold long. The Browne Review in 2010, published when the new coalition government of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats was already in power, proposed to remove fee caps that caused massive student protests in November and December 2010 (Troschitz, 2017:142). The fee cap was not removed entirely but raised to £9000 per year. The repayment threshold was raised to £21 000 per year repayable in 30 years. As such, the Browne Review appeared as ‘a symptom of pathology of an ideological hegemony’ (Vincent quoted in Troschitz, 2017:142).

Student loans were a significant step towards the marketisation of universities. The rationalities to justify them were largely borrowed from economic market discourses that emphasized greater competition as a greater good. As such, student loans fit comfortable with larger neoliberal changes by being justified as more efficient and good for the economy. Education being a national asset, student loans appeared as the only acceptable way of maintaining that asset and using it to benefit the state. However, as the vision of the vision of the learning society showed, the biggest beneficiaries – the state and the market were often left in the background, while the student was said to be the focus of the reforms.

The Role of the Student in Higher Education

As Troschitz observes, throughout the history of higher education, the notion of the student changed many times. During the 80s, the ambiguity about the role of the student became especially prominent,

‘No matter whether students referred to themselves as class or consumers or whether academics compared students to apprentices or patients, all of these analogies were attempts to define what a student was and to prevent the higher education discourse from disintegrating.’ (Troschitz, 2017:107)

Confusions about the notion of the student signified the disintegrating consensus of what higher education is for. These changing notions of welfarist education and consequent marketisation, provided the ground for the reconceptualization of the student. Thus, in the education reports and papers examined, the student is claimed to be at the centre of the discussion. It is argued that the reforms and policies that are being proposed are all done for the good of the student. The Dearing Report in 1997, already proclaims that, ‘that student choice should be the main shaper of the system’ (The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997:82). The White Paper in 2011 claims to be putting ‘students in the driving seat.’ (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011:2).

In this chapter, I am going to analyse the changing notion of the student in the governmental reports and papers. I will show the perception and the framing of the student was crucial in changing political imaginations towards neoliberalism. The student emerges as the central notion of discussion, and rationalizations of student loans are framed and defined in terms of the welfare of the student. As already discussed in the previous chapter, the marketization process is closely tied to a neoliberal logic. Therefore, the student is also presented as a neoliberal subject through political discourse. As Massey writes, ‘[t]he language we use is one of the sources of the political straitjacket we are in.’ (Massey, 2013:9) The language that is being used to frame the student is not only descriptive, but also possesses political logic that

acts, governs and shapes its political subjects. It makes certain realities conceivable and possible. As such, it works at the governmental level; it governs free subjects through common consent of what reality is or should be. I am going to analyse these discourses around the notion of the student and their implications on implementation of student loans.

The Student as a Beneficiary:

Individualization and Neoliberalism

As Foucault writes, one of the aspects of biopolitics is that it uses ‘technology in which the body is individualized as an organism endowed with capacities.’ (Foucault, 2003:249) Societies are not seen as communal bodies anymore, but rather as groups of individuals run by their own desires and needs, exploiting and using their abilities, skills and talents for their own gains. Such a perception of individuality is a key element of neoliberalism. The individual is seen as a largely economically interested subject that seeks to rationally optimize her gains (Olssen and Peters, 2005:314). As such, one is also ‘an economic maximiser’ (Lynch, 2006:3). Therefore, one is the best judge of one’s own needs and interests and should be given a free space to act on them. It is only natural to allow individual interests and desires to run the market and benefit economy in such a way. It is assumed that competition between individuals is natural and has created more wealth and economic growth.

This shift from community to individuality can be seen in education documents as well. While the Robbins Report in 1963 emphasized academic community, the reports and papers after increasingly emphasize the student as an individual. Freedom and the free choice of the student is put on a pedestal. However,

‘Personal autonomy is not the antithesis of political power, but a key term in its exercise, the more so because most individuals are not merely the subjects of power, but play a part in its operations.’ (Rose and Miller, 1992:174)

An emphasis on freedom and autonomy does not necessarily mean that all choices and all options for the students hold the same value. In a society that proclaims itself to consist of free individuals, new forms of governance are created through establishment of new political subjects. In this case, the individualizing power does not oppose, but merely reinforces marketization and conceptions of neoliberal education. Instead of enforcing these, it creates consent and dependency upon which subjects act and interact with. As Beck writes, ‘Individualization means market dependency in all dimensions of living.’ (Beck, 1992:132)

Student Loans in the Robbins Report

The Robbins Report, being written in the times of a welfare state, briefly considers student loans, but is quick to reject them. Even though aware of the rising costs of higher education, the Robbins Committee proposes to consider higher education funding as an investment,

‘To devote resources to the training of young people may be, at first, as much entitled to be considered a process of investment as devoting resources to directly productive capital goods. (Committee on Higher Education, 1963:204)

Even though students are compared with capital goods, the report still insists on the role of the state in the funding of universities. Since graduates bring economic benefit to the country, it should be the public funds that invest into this benefit. Moreover, the Robbins Report was already familiar with the arguments for student loans. The report agrees that there is a substantial benefit to having a degree, but it claimed that this benefit cannot be measured, or, more so, compared to the economic benefit that the state receives,

‘All that we are contending here is that a solution of the problem of allocating resources should not be sought on the basis of narrow notions of the nature of the economic return and of measurements which, if they are comparatively easy to make, omit elements of fundamental value.’ (Committee on Higher Education, 1963:206)

That is, the social and moral returns of education are considered of ‘fundamental value’. They cannot be calculated or compared to any economic benefits. The two spheres are incomparable

and cannot be measured by ‘by the same yardstick as investment in coal or electricity’ (Committee on Higher Education, 1963:205). The Robbins Report claims that higher education brings more integrity, adaptability, an increased capacity for technological advancement and symbolises a civilised society in general. These benefits cannot be calculated, even more so compared with economic returns. Therefore, this argument for student loans is rejected and it is feared that such a system would deter students from entering higher education. This perception of education changed with the introduction of the student as the main beneficiary of higher education.

Student as the Main Beneficiary

The White Paper in 1988 proposed the first student loans in England ever by asking students to contribute to their own maintenance. The central argument of the document was that loans should be introduced to ‘share the costs of student maintenance more equitably between students themselves, their parents and the taxpayer’ (White Paper, 1988 quoted in Troschitz, 2017:120). As Troschitz observes, rhetorical strategy to refer not to society or community, but to ‘taxpayers’ was decisive. It moved away from Robbins conceptions of communal good and presented people as individuals paying taxes and paying them for somebody else’s education. This individualised view of students and society persisted and was consolidated further by the Dearing Report in 1997 that proposed student loans for tuition fees for the first time. It claimed,

‘There is overwhelming evidence that those with higher education qualifications are the main beneficiaries from higher education in the form of improved employment prospects and pay.’ (The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997:288)

The report argued that it is unfair to ask general population to pay for graduates that already benefit later in life with higher salaries. Therefore, students should make a contribution towards the fees. This discourse was repeated later with more intensity. Besides work benefits White Papers in 2003 and in 2011 named social and health benefits for graduates as well,

‘Higher education also brings social benefits – there is strong evidence that suggests that graduates are likely to be more engaged citizens. For instance, one Home Office report found a strong positive correlation between the cohesiveness of local communities and participation in higher education.’ (Department for Education and Skills, 2003:59)

‘Graduates enjoy substantial health benefits – a reduced likelihood of smoking, and lower incidence of obesity and depression. They are less likely to be involved in crime, more likely to be actively engaged with their children’s education and more likely to be active in their communities.’ (Independent Review Panel, 2010:14)

It is interesting, how arguments of social and health benefits of education, that would be commonly used to justify the state’s investment into the general welfare of the society, started being used for the opposite purpose. Being an engaged citizen, a healthier and less crime prone individual is reframed as an individual’s responsibility. The social relations and effects are disappeared from the discourse and benefit is defined strictly in terms of individual wellbeing. Thus, higher tuitions fees and higher student loans emerge as a fair price for the good status in society. Moreover, they create ‘a sense of collective obligation among individuals and gratitude not least for the opportunities and benefits higher learning has bestowed upon them.’ (Neave, 2005:21). The reader of such documents is being made to feel, that higher education is an obligation to oneself, in other words, an investment one should make.

The Student as an Investor:

Education as an investment

Once it is agreed is that it is fair to ask students to pay, further discourses on the benefit of such a solution emerge. It is claimed that besides evening out the contribution to higher education between taxpayers and students, student loans would also have a positive effect on the loan takers. As the Dearing Report puts it,

‘This would encourage the student to see him/herself as an investor in receipt of a service, and to seek, as an investor, value for money and a good return from the investment.’ (The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997:351)

This perception has many implications for students. First of all, it also encourages students to think of themselves as human capital. Investment becomes a key word in the description of tuition fees and student loans. It is framed as not only a payment for a service provided, but also an active participation in the building of one's own self and one's wellbeing. It is a choice to be a responsible and good citizen. While the Robbins Report encouraged the state to view higher education funding as an investment, the Dearing Report frames investment in terms of personal gain. The individual, being responsible for one's own life, has to put in an effort to be one's best self. This framing of paying for higher education as an investment into self emerges as an important moment in the perception of neoliberal education. According to Foucault, it signifies the return to *homo economicus* – the entrepreneur of self (Foucault, 2008:225). Neoliberalism replaces the original notion of *homo economicus* as a person of exchange to a person that treats oneself as 'his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings.' (Foucault, 2008:226). As such, a person becomes one's own enterprise conducting a number of processes in everyday existence in order to manage oneself as a project to achieve a better self. An individual life becomes embedded within the multiplicity of interrelated networks, such as work, household, pension, education etc (McNay, 2009:61). They must be managed in such a way as to produce as much wealth, health and social status as possible. In the case of higher education, the student needs to be rational and forward-thinking when choosing what to study - a degree must add tangible benefit to one's life.

Secondly, loans are meant to be instruments to actively change how students view themselves and their role in higher education. This is already seen in a White Paper in 1988 that argues that loans could 'increase economic awareness among students' (quoted in Troschitz, 2017:121). Thus, loans are meant to shape the behaviour and choices of students, guiding them to think in economic terms and returns. Paying for education with your own money or getting into debt by taking a student loan is meant to make students more concerned with their

education and its benefit after graduation. In other words, student loans are meant to reinforce a type of governmentality that makes students into calculating enterprises making choices on behalf of their wellbeing.

The Choice of Employability

Choice, is a central notion in neoliberal discourse. It emerges as a central notion in education documents as well, especially so in the Browne Review in 2010,

‘We want to put students at the heart of the system. Students are best placed to make the judgment about what they want to get from participating in higher education.’
(Independent Review Panel, 2010:25)

This vision is even more reinforced in the White Paper of 2011 that is even titled ‘Students at the Heart of the System’. Both papers argue that students should be placed in the middle of higher education transformations. Since they are paying for their education, students’ expectations are rising, and they should be able to choose what and how they want to study. The higher education institutions would be forced to transform to respond to student choices - in order to attract more of them. In this way, the papers argue, the student choice would be made more meaningful. Thus, the student as an investor appears as a concept strongly reinforcing neoliberal market logic that universities should follow. Education gains a monetary value through student loans and becomes a service whose worth is measured in economic gain.

The ability to choose comes to signify a healthy system or society that provides the freedom for individuals to act as they like and create a market that operates based on their desires. Therefore, a White Paper in 2003 and later documents significantly push for more provision of information regarding universities. It is crucial for student to be informed in order to make good decisions,

‘To become intelligent customers of an increasingly diverse provision, and to meet their own increasing diverse needs, students need accessible information.’ (Department for Education and Skills, 2003:47)

A White Paper in 2003 argues that more information should be accessible about university courses as well as national surveys of students' experience. Teaching standards are heavily emphasised as well and external examiners are suggested to report on them. The White Paper, therefore, suggests to include all the information in one Guide to University overseen by the National Union of Students (Department for Education and Skills, 2003:46). The choice also extends to employers. The information should be available, so that employers can choose from which institutions they want to employ graduates. Informed choice is promoted even more in latter papers.

Both the Browne Review in 2010 and the White Paper in 2011 are strongly set on providing more information to the students,

‘We encourage higher education institutions to publish anonymised information for prospective and existing students about the teaching qualifications, fellowships and expertise of their teaching staff at all levels.’ (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011:9)

However, even though, the individual freedom of choosing and investing into self is promoted, not all choices are equally good. Education papers since Dearing actively promote techniques for students to make the right decisions. They make it very clear that good education is defined in terms of employability. There is a wide-ranging assumption that students will choose courses that will make them more employable. Good value for money is defined as good economic return from the investment,

‘Better informed students will take their custom to the places offering good value for money.’ (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011:32)

The White Paper in 2011 also claims that the main purpose of higher education is to prepare ‘students for a rewarding career’ (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011:38). Thus, economic benefit becomes a defining feature of education. The fact that the paper on

higher education is published by Department for Business, Innovation and Skills is already telling, showing where education is being driven to.

Even though the notion of choice is used to create the appearance of freely choosing and deciding individuals, the direction of these choices is set from the very beginning. As Troschitz writes,

‘students have been put in the driving seat, they have been given a navigation device on which “employability” appears as the only possible destination.’ (Troschitz, 2017:202)

Thus, the notion of employability is constructed as a common desire for both student and society in general. As Bauman writes, ‘the secret to all successful “socialization” is making individuals *wish to do* what *is needed* to enable the system to reproduce itself.’ (Bauman, 2007a:68). To enable the efficiency and competition in the labour market, people need to wish to do so. Of course, economic necessity is one of the main enforcers of participation. As Beck notes, ‘(t)he key to livelihood lies in the labor market’ (Beck, 1992:133). Getting an education that enables you to get a job can be a condition whether one enters or drops out of society. However, employability is as much an economic as it is a social desire that provides social status and allows one to be an efficient consumer. This desire is constructed as a natural one and naturally justifying the efficiency of the system. It allows the government of economy through ‘the choices consumers make in their quest to fulfil themselves.’ (Rose, 1996b:162)

Therefore, political discourse in education papers devices techniques and policies that are meant to teach the student how to view higher education. The student becomes a political subject who is being guided to become an intelligent customer and a good investor for the sake of her own good. Free choice emerges as a hidden mode of governance that works through common understanding of what a good choice is. As such, the student is shaped into the agent that works on the behalf of economy by its own choice and desire.

Risk society

It is important to note that the notion of the student as an investor emerged as an opposition to the values of the welfare state. When student loans for maintenance grants were introduced in 1988, the House of Lords saw the proposal as pushing against what conservatives called ‘dependency culture’. The political right-wing believed that student grants, as well as full funding of higher education for students, was promoting over-reliance on the state, instead of encouraging individual responsibility and reliance on self. It was claimed student loans,

‘represent an important step away from the dependency culture. Students will have a financial stake in their own future, and this will encourage greater economic awareness and self-reliance.’ (Student Top-Up Loans (Hansard, 9 November 1988))

It was met with much opposition and dissatisfaction by labour politicians who saw the policy as targeting poorer students and creating a negative and unacceptable discourse on students. Lord Preston, an economist and labour politician, called it, ‘a most insulting document and one the Government would do well to withdraw.’ (Student Top-Up Loans (Hansard, 9 November 1988))

Such a conception of social securities as dependency culture were going hand in hand with neoliberal rationalities and policies. The document also proposed to remove security benefits (such as housing) and replace them by loans as well. It pushed and envisioned, what can be called a risk society - a society of individuals not only making their own choices, but also taking risks to increase their wellbeing. As O’Malley defines it,

‘risk is a source or condition of opportunity, an avenue for enterprise and the creation of wealth, and thus an unavoidable and invaluable part of a progressive environment.’ (O’Malley, 1996:204)

Risk is a signifier of a free society conceptualised by neoliberalism. Risk taking to increase one’s wellbeing is encouraged as an opportunity and self-reliance, the ‘motto of liberalism is: “Live dangerously”’ (Foucault, 2008:66)

Taking out a loan becomes an expression of a society of free and self-reliant individuals who work to be better versions of themselves. They still have some security mechanism, such as income contingency, however, the very principle of going into debt to gain education and employability signifies a radical turn in personhood and its governmentality.

The Student as a Customer:

Transformation of universities

Documents after the Dearing Report unanimously agree that higher education institutions must improve their efficiency and quality to adjust to the labour market needs. This can be done through competition that is created giving more financial power to students. There is ‘an imagined line of causation from competition to consumer sovereignty to better efficiency and quality that is the virtuous ideal glowing at the core of micro-economic reform in higher education’ (Marginson, 1997 quoted in Olssen and Peters, 2005:326) It is believed that having students partially fund higher education institutions would have to find ways to attract more students by improving their services. Student choice of where to study is expected to drive these changes and transformations,

‘In our proposals, we are relying on student choice to drive up quality. Students will control a much larger proportion of the investment in higher education. They will decide where the funding should go; and institutions will compete to get it. As students will be paying more than in the current system, they will demand more in return.’ (Independent Review Panel, 2010:29)

The White Paper agrees with the Browne Review and adds that the system would become more responsive to the students’ needs. Moreover, since, the assumption goes that students would choose courses that make them employable, universities would have to increase their communication with businesses and provide courses that teach skills that employers want. Thus, employability is the key,

‘Courses that deliver improved employability will prosper; those that make false promises will disappear.’ (Independent Review Panel, 2010:31)

Therefore, the argument goes that student loans would provide more freedom and independence to both students and higher education institutions. Students receive larger diversity of courses and more value for the money and universities are free to control their own courses and choose where to invest the money received. Universities are encouraged to operate more as private companies,

‘to be really successful, universities must be free to take responsibility for their own strategic and financial future. Strong leadership and management, freed from excessive red tape, will help them not just to respond to change, but to drive it. And more financial freedom will allow them to fund their plans, and unleash their power to drive world-class research, innovative knowledge transfer, excellent teaching, high-quality, greater and more flexible provision, and fair access.’ (Department for Education and Skills, 2003:76)

As neoliberal ideology goes, success lays in more independence from state control. The freedom to participate in the market is deemed to improve quality and motivate universities to provide better services, better teaching and better research. While education sector was seen as something to be excluded from the market logic in welfare state, in neoliberal ideology market is seen as the ideal running principle for education.

Transformation of Students

Students – by being placed as the ‘drivers’ of running higher education - willingly or unwillingly participate in its neoliberal transformations. By responding to surveys and evaluating universities, they enabled market driven education as well as built a ground for the fee system. As Troschitz says, ‘(s)tudents were empowered, but they also became allies in the new market system of higher education.’ (Troschitz, 2017:140). Moreover, the freedom that students are given is not as free as it is supposed. The Dearing Report that advocated for the learning society, did not do so to promote general learning or knowledge for students. Learning

society was advocated for to transform society into more fitting for new neoliberal market logic. It is not run by a general desire to learn and know more, but by the requirement,

‘The pace of change in the work-place **will require** people to re-equip themselves, as new knowledge and new skills are needed for economies to compete, survive and prosper.’(The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997:9) (my emphasis)

In order to survive in a high paced work market, people constantly need to reinvent themselves career wise, be flexible and willing to re-educate themselves according to what the market needs. Thus, as Bauman notes, ‘flexibility’ becomes a slogan in the labour market signifying working life ‘saturated with uncertainty.’ (Bauman, 2001:147) The risk drives people to calculate their choices better and make ‘good’ investments. Thus, the appearance of free choice is elusive. The diversity of higher education courses that is being promoted does not actually signify difference; ideally all the courses would lead to businesses and capital accumulations.

As Lynch writes,

‘Choice is the carrot with which people are duped into believing that they will have freedom to buy what higher education they like in some brave new market.’ (Lynch, 2006:3)

Commodification of Students

Finally, it is not only higher education that is transformed into a service or a commodity. As Bauman writes,

‘Members of society of consumers are themselves consumer commodities.’ (Bauman, 2007a:57)

In a commodified higher education system students become traded between universities and employers (Troschitz, 2017:156). As Hungarian philosopher Lakatos remarked in response to student protests in the 60s, the actual consumer is the state and students just “the goods to be delivered” (1969:29 quoted in Troschitz, 2017:104). Higher education becomes the entrance to a higher paid job market, there is no lack of people wanting to attend universities. As Marginson says,

‘The leading schools and university faculties have long waiting lists. These institutions choose the student-consumer, more than the student choosing them. They do not need to become cheaper, more efficient, or more responsive to gain support, and to expand would be to reduce their positional value. (Marginson, 1997, quoted in Olssen and Peters, 2005:327)

Thus, the student becomes a commodity – a seemingly natural resource to be manipulated to bring more economic benefit and national wealth. By working on themselves and increasing their human capital and, consequently, employability, students are doing work for the economy. It is economy itself that is being placed at the heart of higher education system. The universities and students are shaped and conditioned to bring as much economic benefit as possible. Student loans, consequently, serve as a mode of governmentality introducing and reinforcing the market logic in the higher education system. Ultimately, student loans work as reminder and a guideline for students to choose and to choose right.

Conclusion

In conclusion, student loans emerged as a part of a neoliberal shift which started with Thatcher's policies and continued into New Labours government. Even though there have been many attempts to introduce student loans into public and political debates, they were continuously shut down until 1988 with the emergence of the proposals of loans designed to cover part of maintenance grants for students and 1997 with the proposals of tuition fees. In my research, several reasons for consensus on student loans emerged. First of all, since the 40s higher education saw a rise in student numbers unparallel to anything before. The higher education sector was deemed to be transformed from an elite into a mass system. The funding system was not prepared to accept that many more students that soon and that quickly. Fully funded degrees and maintenance grants recommended by the Robbins and Anderson Reports in 1960 and 1963 were stretching out funding per student and affecting the general quality of higher education. The values of the welfare state started disintegrating with political inability to create an alternative to deal with the economic crisis in higher education. The sector saw decades of disagreements and ideological fights, that came to an end with further cuts to the funding and a consensus that students should contribute to education costs. The Dearing Report in 1997 consolidated this perception.

In my analysis of education White Papers and major reports, it emerged that ideological justifications regarding student loans draw heavily on wider marketisation processes that were inflicted on the higher education sector. Neoliberal economical terminology was swiftly applied to education and the vision of a market driven education became largely promoted by educational documents. Education became a sector of national importance, but not because of its abilities to increase social or moral wellbeing, but because of the revenue it created. Economic calculations of the benefit of higher education presented the sector as of crucial

importance in keeping in pace with global competition and leading competitors. As such, higher education's importance was defined in terms of economic growth and wealth accumulation. To maintain the growth of the economy through the supply of graduates, further expansion of the sector was promoted. Moreover, the vision of a learning society was presented in the Dearing Report that argues for the needs of a society whose members are in a constant re-education and re-qualification process, in order to catch up with the changing labour market. The vision presented individuals as the central concern of the report and argued that the transformation of higher education is needed in order to allow them to re-equip and enrich themselves through education. The emphasis on the benefits of higher education for individuals, retracted attention from the state and economy as the major beneficiaries and enforcers of the funding system. The vision of a learning society also changed the perception of the student who became a central concern in the documents after the Dearing Report.

White Papers in 2003 and 2011, and the Browne Review in 2010 envisioned an intensified marketisation process for the universities. Justifications for a student loan system and its further transformations were also largely framed in terms of the student. The notion of the student was largely changing since the expansion of the sector, and, also, there existed a certain lack of consensus of what the student role is. This confusion regarding the student topped with economic justifications for a changed funding system opened a way for the neoliberal reconceptualization of the notion of the student that was used to justify the loan system. First of all, education papers used a core neoliberal principle – that of the individualization of people. Discourses on society are mostly absent, however, the individual that reaps the benefits of higher education is the dominant one. The student is framed as the main beneficiary of education; therefore, it is only fair for one to pay for it. Secondly, the student is defined as the investor, or more accurately, student loans are meant to enforce the student to see oneself as one. The documents name numerous benefits of seeing education as investment and enforces

what Foucault called an enterprising self. Higher education becomes a tool to increase one's capital, on which individual wellbeing can be built on. Therefore, the documents excessively emphasize the choice as the driver of the economy and the tool to enrich individual lives. However, as I demonstrated, the discourse of free choice only works as a rhetorical tool, while many recommendations and proposals push for greater relation with businesses. Employability becomes the key word, that 'investors' into higher education must strive for. Finally, the student becomes a customer in the reformed higher education. Marketisation fundamentally changes the relationship between universities and the students, turning them into service providers and customers respectively. Student loans are meant to transform the higher education sector by making it more responsive to student needs and desires. In this way, the transformation is presented as done for the benefit of the student, hiding the fact that economic return is the main reason for transformations. In the market system, students themselves become commodities traded by universities in a global competition. They not only buy the service of education, but also are treated as goods to be exchanged to increase the accumulation of private and national wealth. Thus, student loans use neoliberal rationalizations that rely on economic and ideological premises. As such, they envision a certain political and social reality that is enforced with their implementation. Student loans become a governmental tool to direct and guide the population of learners through their own choice and desire towards the ends of the economy.

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