Chapter 13

The Marketingisation of Higher Education

Paul Gibbs

Abstract This chapter does not stress the marketisation of higher education rather focuses upon the way in which this is done; the marketingisation of higher education. I do not deny that widening access to skills that can fuel growth is a logical extension of a consumerist ideology. What follows acknowledges these structural changes and then focuses on how marketing is a consequence and reinforce of such structural change. Indeed there is a substantial literature which addresses it (e.g. Molesworth et al. Having, being and higher education: The marketization of the university and the transformation of the student into consumer. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 14(3), 277–287, 2009; Brown R, Carasso H, Everything for sale? The marketisation of UK higher education. Routledge, London, 2013). Nor does it support that marketingisation has brought no or only limited contributions to higher education. The expansion of the privileges of higher education to the many from the few, the greater governance and transparency of the process and practices of higher education institutions in their compact with society and a clearer ways to evaluate these activities have, to varying degrees, enhanced higher education. These interventions have opened the market for world class universities (WCUs) allowing them global as well as local reach. Yet it is strange that these improvements are consequences of market interventions by Governments, by publishers in terms of league tables, and by employers in terms of preferred (mythical?) skill sets and not for educative purposes. The emergent practices encouraged by these interventions increase the influence of marketing and facilitate a metamorphosis of institutions from educational entities to market responsive service providers whose intent focuses on impact and enhanced return on capital. This leads WCUs into the endless and Sisyphean striving, often devoid of any ultimate worthy end but ends which are an inevitable consequence of managing rapidly increasing competition and shifting demands effectively rather than educative priorities. The chapter describes and discusses the consequences.

I distinguish here between marketisation (the application of neo-liberal ideology to education) and the marketingisation of higher education. The former is a necessary condition of the latter, as discovered in detail in Brown and Carasso (2013).

P. Gibbs (✉)
East European University, Tbilisi, Georgia
e-mail: P.Gibbs@mdx.ac.uk

A Framework (Not an Enframing) of the Approach

As a framework for organisational analysis, the model presented by Rämö (2004) can interestingly be applied to the university. He suggests that theoretical activity (*theoria*) results in knowledge (*episteme*), which leads to two forms of practice. The first concerns the process/learning part of practice (*poiesis*), which promotes skillfulness and proficiency (*techne*); and the second concerns the acting part of practice (*praxis*), which in turn promotes wisdom and judgment (*phronesis*). The acting part, he suggests, “is sometimes forgotten among contemporary scholars, whose focus of interest apparently is more on the improvement of skills and proficiency” (Rämö 2004, p. 851). In our context, the first approach to the development of theory manifests itself in new knowledge production, which is accompanied by (as suggested by Ramírez 2017) increasingly sophisticated technologies to measure, classify, track and rank research, researchers and research institutions. In Baudrillard’s terms (1998, 2013), this becomes needlessly visible, characterising our modern social-structural processes and forces. It is needlessly visible in that it ceases to have a function dependant on the real but rather it becomes a representation that *precedes* and *determines* the real values in the sense of; its visibility only hides the essence of what it was once meant to represent such as educative value rather than employability. In such a society in which anxiety dominates, categorised by unlimited and insatiable need, there is a constant sense that one does not have enough of consumer goods, academic qualifications, fame or security. We view things for their user value, not for their intrinsic essence. This is a technological ‘enframing’ of education, manifested in a particular claim of being determined by these strategies to achieve alignment with the metrics, which in turn leads to the quality of things being judged by their availability and manipulability. Heidegger explores these issues, although he does not relate them to higher education, in the Bremen Lectures, specifically in the rewritten lecture on positionality in *The Question Concerning Technology*. Heidegger (2003) suggests that technology is a way of revealing, and within “its domain belong end and means as well as instrumentality. Instrumentality is considered the fundamental characteristic of technology [---] Technology is a way of revealing” (p. 318). As Heidegger suggests in ‘Positioning’, it is a technological positioning of our being within the world, requisitioning things within it (including potentially ourselves) as technological objects that can be stored and utilised.

Derived from *techne*, technology thus “reveals whatever does not bring itself forth and does not yet lie here before us, whatever can look and turn our now one way and now another” (Heidegger 2003, p. 319). Thus, according to Heidegger, what is decisive in *techne* and the practice that it embodies is the negation of *poiesis*, in that it is not the process that leads to the revealing but the revealing itself; that is, what is the thing not in its essential unconcealing but in its function. As we will see, this thing, say education, is revealed in its instrumentality in the service to others, not for the intrinsic value that it brings to the learned. In this sense, education does not bring forth, in the way of *poiesis*; it takes different forms in practice (as suggested by Rämö, above). Heidegger suggests that education “is a revealing, and not a

manufacturing, that *techne* is bringing forth” (p. 317). In this sense the process, *poiesis*, is the educative process, and the outcome of this is building knowledge of something that concerns itself in skills and proficiencies. These skills are “a challenging, which puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy which can be extracted and stored as such” (p. 320). It is also claimed by Heidegger to be an expedition directed to furthering things whilst driving “the maximum yield at the minimum expense” (p. 321). This kind of unconcealment orders everything to stand by, to be ready at hand, to be rendered as “standing-reserve,” and that which exists as the standing reserve, something to be set upon, no longer exists as that thing but as something at people’s beck and call. Yet, as Heidegger points out, humanity itself is within the standing reserve evidence that he suggests by the “current talk about human resources” (p. 323). He concludes that technology enframes humanity, calling upon an ordering of nature as a standing reserve. Importantly, however, enframing “means the way of revealing that holds sway in the essence of modern technology and that itself is *nothing technological* (p. 325, italics added). The concern that should be felt by humanity is how to save itself from becoming no more than the standing reserve itself through careless acceptance of the technological enframing of our world. To save ourselves from such a destiny, whilst not ridding ourselves of technology we must seek to bring forth the essence of things in their own dignified essence. This includes the idea of enframing, and can be achieved through *poiesis*. *Poiesis* brings forth poetic thought through creativity and reflection reveals things in their true essence, while *techne* reveals things as a standing reserve. In term of WCUs, we need to question and reflect on why we encourage them, what their benefits are and they what are doing to our understanding of our being. We should not participate in the enframing narrative of indices through the abuse of a range of mechanisms that function as tools of enframing, concealing what might be revealed through *poiesis*, whereby “what presences come forth into appearance” (Heidegger 2003, p. 332). Although the function of ranking supports the mechanisms that facilitates entrance, participation, segmentation and recognition in the primary educational and employability markets for institutions, it also influences a wider set of stakeholders in its transfer of resources, converted into use when required by society; whereby the university is able to transform efficiently potential intellectual capital into operational capital and to transfer these skills to the workforce for use. In doing so, it constructs the standing reserve of a technological way of being.

Heidegger (2003) offers an alternative. Instead of fuelling the development of WCUs in terms of their use of resources for themselves and for economic reserves, he suggests that we should ponder over what we do and “watch over it” (p. 337). Furthermore, Heidegger offered a response a few years after the publication of the *Question*. In his *Memorial Address* (to Conradin Kreuter), he suggests that it is through poetic and meditative thinking in an inceptual way that we can find a release from the technological way of being. He suggests that:

Releasement toward things and openness to the mystery belong together. They grant us the possibility of dwelling in the world in a totally different way. They promise us a new ground and foundation upon which we can stand and endure in the world of technology without being imperilled by it. (1966, p. 55)

Building WCUs Without Watching over Them—The Technological Enframement as Marketingisation

Altbach and Balan (2007) described “world-class universities” in a more specific way, indicating that the key elements of a WCU are excellence in research, top professors, academic freedom, governance, adequate facilities and funding. University reputation, if based on position in the global ranks, can lead to instrumental development on the basis of correlation metrics that merely meet the institution’s requirements. Hou et al. (2012), for instance, suggest a complex strategic approach to how a university can prioritise its resources to gain leverage in four of the most important world ranking indices, but they caution that striving for performance can be improved by a clearer understanding. Knowing more about the features of global rankings is the first step to improving performance and making informed decisions, but:

On the other hand, it should be noted that a clear vision, institutional features, favourable governance and sufficient resources, which were not taken into consideration in the above model (or in the four global rankings themselves), are all crucial if a university is to rise and stay at the top in the rankings. (Hou et al. 2012, p. 856)¹

A review of the literature on WCU strategies seems to conclude that, to achieve success, an institution needs to feed the metric of international ranking, to enable progress (defined as upward movement in these rankings), and for its strategies to be fixed on achieving these goals, and any achievement of flourishing should be a by-product of these goals, rather than their core function. Hazelkorn (2009) shows the influence that these rankings have on strategies. She holds that higher education is considered an essential component of the productive economy, and claims that how higher education is governed and managed has become a major policy issue for Europe: global university rankings have “stimulated significant changes in European higher education policy” (Hazelkorn and Ryan 2013, p. 96). The quality of individual higher education institutions (HEIs) and the system as a whole (e.g. teaching and learning excellence, research and knowledge creation, commercialisation and knowledge transfer, graduate employability and academic productivity), provide a good indication of a country’s “ability to compete successfully in the global economy” (Hazelkorn and Ryan 2013, p. 94). Hazelkorn (2009) further argues that all institutions are drawn into the entire global knowledge market, not just WCUs, and that “[r]ankings are helping transform HEIs into strategic corporations, engaged in positional competition” (p. 4). However, recent research by Lim and Ørberg (2017, p. 105) suggests that rankings are only a productive entry point to understanding both the multidirectional and multipositional process of higher education reform.

Hazelkorn also identifies that, amongst other things, the ranking measure is of institutional reputation among peers, employers and students, ignoring aspects of

¹Forster (2018) suggests it is the very lack of these attributes in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region that prohibits the development of world-class universities.

education such as the student experience. Further, as David (2016, p. 170) suggests, an appearance in league tables misses the notion of quality. In serving local, national and global economic cultural, political and educational needs, quality may not be best measured by citations, reputation indexes, grant income, Nobel Prizes and so forth.

Marketing and Consumerisation—The Concealment of Enframement

Reaching all these stakeholders invokes communication and persuading them of the merits of the institution's production. To achieve recognition, a university needs to promote its image on the basis of its efficiency in the realisation and exploitation of the resources that it utilises, and this requires marketing. Finding any figures for expenditure on marketing for higher education is extraordinarily difficult, so the \$1.65 billion spend by US colleges in 2016 (Brock 2017) is only indicative, yet it gives an idea of the investment by the sector. Moreover, this seems to be intra-sector competitive positioning, as it has failed to prevent external influences from changing enrolment, either in the United Kingdom² or the United States.

The application of marketing techniques to achieve ranking goals, or the “marketingisation”, as I term it, presents the university and its funders with a dilemma: what should they seek? To facilitate flourishing, or to produce utility? Indeed, in their article on WCU practices, Deem et al. (2008) suggest that, at least in China, there is academic malpractice to meet government targets for the realisation of WCUs. Further, in this attempt to mirror the predominately Western position at the top of the world rankings, cultural heritage may be forsaken in what the authors consider to be a process of “re-colonization, resulting in reproducing learning experiences that do not fit the specific cultural and political environments in the East” (Deem et al. 2008, p. 21). This risks turning education into a consumer of resources since it concentrates on the best talent, starving other areas, concentrating power and ultimately leading to academic totalitarianism.

In the development of my critique I do not deny that widening access to the skills that can fuel growth is a logical extension of a consumerist ideology, at the lower levels, and indeed it can fuel the resources needed by the WCU sector. It is when looking at the wider picture, and how the standing reserve metaphor of educational achievement is championed by WCUs and mirrored by those who aspire to arrive and then rise up in the ranks, that an investigation of marketing is demanded and its lack of accountability questioned. It is strange that these improvements are the consequences of market interventions by governments, by publishers in terms of league

²As reported by Matthews (2013), “UK universities increased their spending on marketing to potential students by nearly a quarter in the run-up to the introduction of higher fees, a *Times Higher Education* investigation has found, yet suffered a 7.4 per cent fall in applications”.

tables and by employers in terms of a preferred (mythical?) skill-set, and not for educative purposes. The emergent practices of this league table culture (Shattock 2017), encouraged by these interventions, increase the influence of marketing and facilitate the metamorphosis of institutions from educational entities to market-responsive service providers whose intent focuses on impact and an enhanced return on capital. This leads WCUs into an endless and Sisyphean striving, often devoid of any ultimate worthy end. It is an end that is an inevitable consequence of managing rapidly increasing competition and shifting demands effectively, not educative priorities.

The use of ranking in leagues to ‘inform’ stakeholders in a market for higher education, as Scott (2013) has suggested, has been at the expense of older notions of public service, social purpose and academic solidarity to promote the ‘market’. Specifically, he suggests that one “effect of the market has been to encourage greater competition among, between and within universities; another has been to place greater emphasis on marketing techniques³, including ‘playing’ the league tables” (Scott 2013, p. 115). League tables, regardless of how sophisticated their underlying measures are, are compelling. They enable simple statements about institutions to be inferred and contribute to marketing messages.

To this end, the marketing of higher education has grown from some information in a prospectus or year book into a range of communicative and relationship communication practices designed to attract students, in the same way as consumers to cars, iPads and foreign holidays. The tangible benefits of fun and the economic promise of a university education have dominated higher education communications. Universities have promoted education as their product or service, offering hedonistic gratification and routes to careers, positioning it as yet one more thing to be consumed (Lawlor 2007). To achieve this they have embraced technology itself. In a recent study, one of many similar commercial reports on digital trends in marketing higher education, over 75% of respondents say that digital channels are a high priority for their institution. Email, social media, and website design dominate their marketing strategies to recruit students and build brand recognition (Digital Solutions 2016).

In Europe, state-controlled universities have introduced student fees and engaged in institutional marketing to distinguish themselves at a time when higher education has become available to increasing numbers of students. This seems beneficial and what one would expect from institutions that both have internal trust and are trusted by the public (although questioned by Tierney 2006, and Stensaker and Harvey 2011). Yet, in meeting this demand and securing their own financial futures as competition intensifies, institutions are “engaging in professional marketing activities” (Veloutsou et al. 2004, p. 279) rather than, perhaps, enriching the educational and the common good.⁴ These activities run the risk of displaying overwhelming

³A view similar to that expressed earlier by Marginson (2007).

⁴Hazelkorn and Ryan (2013, p. 84) suggest that this is viewed negatively by European higher education policy-makers.

consumerism (Naidoo and Jamieson 2005). As Gibbs maintains, this “marketingisation” of the university leaves the university and its funders with a dilemma: what should they seek—to facilitate wisdom or to produce utility?

The impact of these changes is summarised by Hassan (2003), who observes:

the commercialization of the university is primarily an economic and political process of transformation that has little if anything to do with education, knowledge production and the well-being of either staff or students. What is more, these changes are all being refracted through the prism of neo-liberal ideology. (p. 77)

A consequence of the move to the market has been a marketingisation of higher education (Gibbs 2002, 2011; Molesworth et al. 2009; Hemsley-Brown, 2011). There is increasing emphasis by universities on how they promote themselves to potential students. The approaches have not honoured the nature of education as a distinctive, transformative process of the human condition, but have treated it (for the most part) as undifferentiated consumption. They have adopted the marketing used by consumer market, best suited to selling chocolate, aspirin and supermarket discounts, albeit in a highly sophisticated and technical way. As Molesworth et al. (2009) suggest, “many HEIs prepare the student for a life of consumption by obtaining a well-paid job: a mission of confirmation rather than transformation” (p. 278). Moreover, they suggest that this is manifest through a consumer desire of having, rather than being. The anxiety of consumer society was revealed in a study by Nixon and Gabriel (2015). They describe this anxiety among those who sought not to buy as of two types: “moral anxiety, caused by the fear of being compromised or tempted to act contrary to their values, and neurotic, an anxiety that arises from being overwhelmed by their own unconscious desires, emotions and fantasies” (Nixon and Gabriel 2015, p. 48). What is more relevant is the need to be worth something as a resource to other. As previously mentioned, Heidegger recognises the idea of human resource and the development of education in its instrumental form provides just that.

Heidegger talks damningly and directly about how consumerism is abandoning Being, through letting one’s “will be unconditionally equated with the process [consumerism] and thus becomes at the same time the ‘object’ of the abandonment of Being” (Heidegger 1973, p. 107, brackets in original). The real danger, suggest Dreyfus and Spinoza (2003), is not “self-indulgent consumerism but [it as] a new totalizing style of practices that would restrict our openness to people and things by driving out all other styles of practice that enable us to be receptive to reality” (2003, p. 341, brackets inserted).

Heidegger (2003) continues in a prophetic attack on consumerism as the totalising power held by a few globalised leaders to negate our understanding of our being: the “circularity of consumption for the sake of consumption is the sole procedure which distinctively characterises the history of a world which has become an unworld” (p. 107). For example, if learning is consumption and consuming is a never-ending requirement of consumerism, then failing to learn fast is a failure of consumption, and to be feared. However, if failure to learn and understand quickly reveals issues about oneself that can be explored over time, this might bring about deeper understanding or even acceptance that something is personally unlearn-able. Either way, one is content with the educational struggle when one accepts its reality.

Can We Watch over Our Marketing and Enhance Our WCU?

What, then, is marketing of higher education about? Should it be encouraging consumerism, or might it begin to encourage a criticality that questions itself? If it takes the latter route, it does not rely on free gifts such as sports membership or laptops. It finds new ways of presenting higher education to a wider audience. These ways are compatible with the entity that it represents, not one that totalises through both reducing opportunities and hiding the anxiety of consumerism in the hedonism of consumption. In moderation, this may not be harmful. However, when universities embrace consumer techniques of marketing, they risk supporting an ideological norm that is hidden in our everydayness and that needs to be questioned. Williams (2013) suggests an irony here: “whilst the promotion of satisfaction may appear to be a response to students perceiving themselves as consumers, it also enhances trends towards the consumption model and constructs new generations of students as consumers” (p. 101). Moreover, we should question the decision not to query this, or to provide information only on the powerful, rather than powerful information, and often to students who are poorly prepared to make such choices. Questions need to be put by those who claim academic status in making the decisions, as well as those who make statements. Harrison and Risle (2015) argue that the effect of consumerism on the very infrastructure and functionality of higher education activities is that to revive student learning on campus demands us to forego the consumer model. This is because “it diminishes the likelihood that institutions will organize themselves in ways conducive to meaningful curricular and co-curricular educational experiences for students” (Harrison and Risle 2015, p. 73).

The notion that education as the provision of intellectual and emotional desire satisfaction has tended to become concealed in university strategy. Roberts (2013) writes that education now seems actually to be about promoting desire satisfaction, often in ways that are not implicitly edifying but that create satisfactory, pleasurable and measurable experiences. Satisfaction indicators are used to build reputation, inform educational policy and create conformity in support of this. Moreover, they make the university more marketable and tend to represent an agenda for desire satisfaction that is an extravagant, imagined sea of opportunity where advocates of the credentials of education find the intangibility of educative flourishing processes too difficult to promote. However, the tangibility of explicit ‘average’ starting salaries are easier and more measurable motivations even though often unreal. Such approaches are counter to a desire for settling oneself achieved through balancing capabilities and potentiality. Indeed, the current context of education seems to emphasise anxiety and fear for one’s future. This suggests commitments that form sympathies and commitments to people, principles and projects. It does this through the need to optimise one’s investment, to strive always to know enough to make the right decisions and to avoid any idea of sub-optimisation. This, of course, is an impossible task, and in the same class as achieving excellence.

What Might Be Done to Achieve Release from the Technological Control Exerted by WCUs?

Through the normalising notion of consumerism, what is taken for ‘good education’ is converted into what satisfies the desires of stakeholders, as consumers. These, in turn, are identified not as internal goods of civic responsibility—*phronesis*, *parrhesia* and *dunamis* (of developing the virtues of practical wisdom, truth telling and one’s potential axiological becoming—but as ‘value for money’, cost efficiencies, counts of academic papers per scholar, contact hours, turnaround times and the like. These notions drive, rather than follow, national educational higher education policy⁵ and cascade into institutional strategic directions. They are transitory and anxiety-inducing, through creating voids to be filled. They create an ethos of striving—not in the form of settling, but in the sense of Sisyphus.

Higher education is no exception. The claim is that the student is at the core of the consumerised notion of education, and its analytics of performance are indicators of desire satisfaction, prestige and value of the standing reserve that they accumulate. Is it the consumer who is able to decide what is best for her future? Or is it that under the enframing power of our technological ways of being, in terms of the accumulation of skills as resources for employment in a world of complexity, all that is guaranteed is that her fees will be taken and her employment left to an unregulated, uncontrolled marketplace. Under such conditions, education is an expensive gamble where different odds reflect privilege. The bookies (employers) hardly ever lose, because they continually change the conditions of the bet as the value of the resources changes.

Rather than an economic acquisition agenda for higher education, with the continued striving that denies students the potentially valuable educational experiences at its core, a university should challenge students to develop the capabilities to optimise their potential to make responsible, or at least informed, choices as privileged civic partners. This may often be achieved by having more space in the curriculum to ‘potter about’, to follow the byways of their curiosity and not to worry about learning outcomes or assessment criteria. In reducing the hegemony of learning outcomes and the associated assessment of them for a more flexible system designed to reveal what is chosen to be learnt we offer a different more ontological educative process where the educator is a co-producer rather than a monitor of mandated, predefined outcomes. Furthermore, predetermined outcomes enable a temporal form of competition in which students can compete to see who can achieve these outcomes the quickest (and then move on and be more busy) which creates the urgency of achievement and induces a fear of falling behind and using this ‘failure’

⁵For example, “many countries promote their higher education systems through national branding, using logos and slogans, such as Australia’s ‘Study in Australia’ and the United Kingdom’s ‘Education UK’ marketing campaigns” (Singh 2011, p. 5). Also see, for example, Huang’s (2015) discussion of the implementation of Chinese national policy to WCU development within that country.

to define oneself. Against this the adventures of ontological education may often be painfully uncomfortable yet, in and of itself, seek to strengthen students' resolve and resilience to create a personal identity within the context of being a member of society of their own determination. As Heidegger (1998) claims, "real education lays hold of the soul itself and transforms it in its entirety by first of all leading us to the place of our essential being and accustoming us to it" (p. 167).

Salmi (2009) suggests that there are three complementary sets of factors that strongly influence a WCU:

(a) a high concentration of talent (faculty and students), *(b) abundant resources* to offer a rich learning environment and to conduct advanced research, and *(c) favorable governance* features that encourage strategic vision, innovation, and flexibility and that enable institutions to make decisions and to manage resources without being encumbered by bureaucracy. (Salmi 2009, p. 20)

These features chime with work by Altbach, and with that of Hazelkorn and Shattock (2017, p. 9), who add the age of the institution, its physical location and the existence of an external political climate that gives full licence to free expression and academic freedom. These set up competitive forces. Elite universities are then steered by them, putting to work scarce resources (excluding others from accessing them), for what purpose if not the realisation of economic gains for the few in order to govern the many? In this sense, the notion of common good becomes fragile; and marketing adds to this fragility.

As David (2016) has suggested, even in apparently independent media reporting of the league tables that are used to promote policy initiatives, evidence is lacking to support the media rhetoric. Indeed, as Shattock (2017) suggests, "THE World 2015 Reputation Rankings virtually replicates the 'world class' (p. 10) ranking they produce".⁶ Without this balance to promotional claims of WCU, the future for marketing higher education is not to turn education into a marketable entity but to contribute to providing access to education as an edifying and transformative experience. It is, I suggest, its greatest challenge. It is one that, from my reading of the literature, is not being addressed. The edifying experience is being changed, if not downgraded, by marketing to the league tables and by the rather pointless striving to find ways to become a WCU, for the existing system is very stable. Again quoting Shattock (2017), the concept of "'world class' represents mostly a distraction from the issues that affect higher education [...] a market dominated by institutional ambition and self-interest may not always satisfy the needs of its customers" (p. 20). Moreover, it is harming our students by inducing anxiety. We are teaching our students not to be resiliently critical but to cope with the anxiety of the market through short-term palliatives. Ultimately, these just contribute to the reproduction of anxiety as the core of consumer culture. In so doing, they create a generation whose anxiety is founded on the guilt of not having been, or being, good enough.

⁶This remains true for the 2018 ranking, with four universities in the world's top 20 for reputation yet whose teaching and research is ranked lower than the top 20: one Japanese; one American; and two Chinese. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/student/best-universities/top-50-universities-reputation-2018>. Accessed 7 January 2019.

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