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The construction of higher education students in English policy documents

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ABSTRACT
This article investigates the ways in which students are constructed in contemporary English higher education policy. First, it contends that, contrary to assumptions made in the academic literature, students are not conceptualised as ‘empowered consumers’; instead their vulnerability is emphasised by both government and unions. Second, it identifies other dominant discourses, namely that of ‘future worker’ and ‘hard-worker’. These articulate with extant debates about both the repositioning of higher education as an economic good and the use of the ‘hard-working’ trope across other areas of social policy. Third, it shows that differences are drawn between groups of students. Contrasts are drawn, for example, between international students, juxtaposing the ‘brightest and best’ with those who are considered ‘sham’. Finally, the article argues that the figure of the ‘vulnerable’ student and ‘thwarted consumer’ feeds into broader government narratives about its policy trajectory, legitimising contemporary reforms and excusing the apparent failure of previous policies.

Introduction

It is now widely held, in England at least, that students are considered by policy-makers, and perhaps also by other stakeholders in the higher education sector, as consumers (for example, Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion 2009; Nixon, Scullion, and Hearn 2016; Williams 2013). This assumption is based largely on the nature of higher education policies introduced over the past 20 years – particularly the requirement that most students make a substantial financial contribution to the cost of their higher education, and the availability of an increasingly wide range of metrics to encourage students actively to ‘shop around’ when making their choices about institution and course. While such analyses are important in delineating the broad direction of change within English higher education policy, they rarely explore the ‘messiness’ of policy and the internal contradictions that can sometimes arise. Indeed, most policies can be considered ‘ramshackle, compromise hit and miss affairs, that are reworked, tinkered with, nuanced and inflected through complex processes of influence’ (Ball 2007, 44). By adopting a fine-grained, discursive approach, this article examines the extent to which coherent understandings of students are formulated within current English
higher education policy and assesses the dominance of the ‘consumer’ construction, in particular. The article also explores whether alternative understandings of the student are advanced – beyond that of the consumer. For example, over the course of the past century, students have been constructed as, variously, important political actors, hedonists and dedicated learners (Williams 2013). In addition, the analysis considers the extent to which understandings – held by government and other key stakeholders (namely staff and student unions, and representatives of business and graduate employers) – converge. In doing so, it recognises that government policy pronouncements are rarely straightforwardly transferred into practice. Instead, they are enacted by relevant actors who interpret, translate and sometimes resist policy imperatives (Ball et al. 2011).

There is now compelling evidence that educational policies do not determine student subjectivities in any direct and straightforward sense. Indeed, Clarke et al. (2007) have argued that political subjects are not ‘docile bodies’; rather, they should be considered as reflexive subjects who can contest the way they are constructed in policy, sometimes offering their own redefinitions. With respect to higher education policy specifically, Nielsen (2011) has shown how the introduction of tuition fees for international students in Denmark had little impact on the affected students’ approach to education or their interactions with staff and peers. Similarly, evidence from Portugal has demonstrated that while a consumer metaphor is dominant in policy, it does not explain well how students go about making their higher education choices: social factors often exert a much stronger influence than economic considerations (Tavares and Cardoso 2013). Moreover, even in the United Kingdom, which has a much more market-driven higher education sector than either Denmark or Portugal, numerous studies have indicated that there is no simple relationship between the provision of information and the knowledge acquired (and decisions made) by prospective students (for example, Dodds 2011; Reay, David, and Ball 2005). Nevertheless, it is also the case that while policies rarely act in a simple, deterministic manner, their influence is often significant. Ball (2007, 41), for example, argues that policies are articulated ‘both to achieve material effects and to manufacture support for these effects’. They are ways of representing, accounting for and legitimating political decisions; a means of classifying and regulating the spaces and subjects they hope to govern (Ball 2007; Shore and Wright 2011). Policies can also have effects beyond those intended by the authors – what Shore and Wright (2011) call ‘runaway effects’ – actively reshaping understandings and practices in the environments in which they are introduced. Dominant constructions of students are thus likely to exert some influence. Indeed, a considerable number of scholars have argued that students’ relationships with higher education have been fundamentally altered by their positioning, within policy, as consumers, and the reshaping of the sector in general along market lines. Tomlinson (2017), for example, has contended that some higher education students, at least, have adopted what he calls an ‘active service-user attitude’ – emphasising both their rights and the importance of obtaining value for money, while Nixon, Scullion, and Hearn (2016) maintain that the undergraduate students in their research identified strongly as ‘omniscient consumers’. Analysis of dominant constructions within policy is thus important, not just in helping to understand in more detail how policy-makers (and other key policy actors) conceptualise students, but in exploring the representations that are likely to have at least some impact on the shaping of contemporary higher education institutions (HEIs).
Methods

This article draws on texts produced by four different groups of policy actors: government departments; senior politicians responsible for higher education; business/employer representatives; and students’ and employees’ unions. Four documents from each group were selected, from those publically accessible on relevant websites, on the basis that they were the most significant at the time of selection (December 2016) (see Table 1 for document details and identifiers used throughout article). As Table 1 shows, many of the selected texts relate to the proposed reforms to the higher education sector outlined in the government’s Green Paper of 2015. Furthermore, all four selected speeches were given by the then Minister of State for Universities and Science (Jo Johnson) and refer, in some way, to the proposed reforms. An inductive, thematic analysis was conducted on the 16 documents, exploring the ways in which students are represented and the conceptualisations of them that underpin the various policy measures. First, the documents were coded in NVivo – using codes derived, inductively, from the documents themselves, but which were also, in some cases, informed by the extant literature (see Brooks [2017] for a discussion of previous empirical and theoretical work on constructions of the higher education student, which informed the analysis). Second, the coded material was used to identify dominant themes across the data-set and make comparisons across the four different groups of document (i.e. speeches by politicians, and written documents from government, employers and unions). While the analysis was conducted in a rigorous manner, it is important to note my own positionality in relation to the data collected: I work within the English higher education sector, I am a member of the employees’ union which produced two of the analysed documents and I have previously conducted research that was funded by the National Union of Students (NUS) (which authored the other two union documents). The remainder of this article explores the principal constructions that emerged from this analysis – and also some of the notable absences. It starts by considering the extent to which a consumer discourse is prevalent.

Thwarted consumers, vulnerable children

While much of the extant literature on English higher education policy argues that a strong and unambiguous consumerist discourse has been established by UK governments over the past couple of decades (for example, Nixon, Scullion, and Hearn 2016), a close reading of policy texts reveals greater complexity and, in places, contradiction. The clearest conceptualisation of the student as consumer is provided by the guide for undergraduate students produced by the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) – a non-ministerial government department. Throughout this document, students are explicitly referred to as consumers. Moreover, being a good student is seen as synonymous with knowing your consumer rights. The CMA poses the question ‘Why is it important to know my consumer rights?’ and answers:

Knowing your consumer rights should help you to get the information you need when deciding which university and course to choose, get fair treatment once there, and help you progress any complaints you may have should you subsequently be dissatisfied with your choice or an aspect of the educational service. (Government document 4, 2)
Table 1. Policy documents analysed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of document (and identifier used in article)</th>
<th>Full title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Union document 1</td>
<td>University and College Union. 2016. <em>Higher Education and Research Bill: Public Bill Committee. Written evidence from the University and College Union (UCU).</em> London: UCU.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Union document 2</td>
<td>University and College Union. 2011. <em>High cost, high debt, high risk: Why for-profit universities are a poor deal for students and taxpayers.</em> London: UCU.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Indeed, the impression is given that a student is negligent if they are dissatisfied with their higher education experience and choose not to complain. Furthermore, student satisfaction, rather than learning, is presented as the ultimate goal of higher education. As numerous scholars have shown, while such assumptions are now common across the English higher education sector, it is erroneous to assume that student satisfaction is always a good proxy for learning (Sabri 2012; Williams 2013).

Documents and speeches produced by the government, however, do not always construct students in such a straightforward manner. Certainly, the consumer discourse is strong. The ‘investment’ students make in their education is emphasised frequently, the concept of ‘value for money’ is regularly invoked and ‘student choice’ is mentioned repeatedly. Moreover, assumptions are made throughout the government documents, and also those produced by the employer organisations in the sample, that simply providing more relevant information to prospective students, and increasing the number of providers from which they can choose, will inevitably result in ‘better choices’ and a more efficient functioning of the market. However, alongside such statements are others which construct the student, not as empowered by consumer choice, but as vulnerable in the face of not fully formed markets. Indeed, the vulnerability of students is a theme that pervades the speeches given by the Minister of State for Universities and Science and both the Green and White Papers. The following examples are illustrative:

For too long we have been overly tolerant of the fact that some providers have significantly and materially higher drop-out rates than others with very similar intakes in terms of demographics and prior attainment … it represents thousands of life opportunities wasted, of young dreams unfulfilled, all because of teaching that was not as good as it should have been, or because students were recruited who were not capable of benefitting from higher education. (Government document 2 [White Paper], 46)

… insufficient, inconsistent and inadequate information about the quality of teaching, means it is hard for prospective students to form a coherent picture of where excellence can be found within and between our higher education providers. (Government document 1 [Green Paper], 19)

… teaching has regrettably been allowed to become something of a poor cousin to research in parts of our system. I hear this when I talk to worried parents, such as the physics teacher whose son dropped out at the start of year two of a humanities programme at a prestigious London university, having barely set eyes on his tutor. (Speech 2, n.p.)

The reference to students as ‘children’ in Speech 2 (‘Inspiring academics … are the people who will change our children’s lives’; n.p.) further emphasises this construction of them as vulnerable dependents, rather than independent and powerful consumers. Students are positioned as vulnerable to ‘producer interests’ in particular, in which higher education staff allegedly devote insufficient attention to teaching, because of their preoccupation with their own research. The Minister of State for Universities and Science describes this as a ‘disengagement contract’, which:

    goes along the lines of ‘I don’t want to have to set and mark much by way of essays and assignments which would be a distraction from my research, and you don’t want to do coursework that would distract you from partying: so we’ll award you the degree as the hoped-for job ticket in return for compliance with minimal academic requirements and due receipt of fees’ (Speech 2, n.p.)

Students from disadvantaged backgrounds are portrayed as particularly vulnerable because of the supposed failure, on the part of many HEIs, to take widening participation seriously.
The proposed requirement for HEIs to publish their statistics on student admissions, progression and attainment by gender, ethnicity and social class (what is termed the ‘transparency duty’ in the government documents) is indicative of the government’s view that social mobility is being impeded by the actions of HEIs, rather than employers, the government or wider social structures.

The construction of students as vulnerable also pervades the union documents. The cause of this vulnerability is not, however, attributed to ‘producer interests’ or the failure to instantiate fully functioning markets. Instead, it is viewed as a direct result of the market reforms introduced by previous UK governments. For example, the NUS argues that students are in a ‘disadvantaged and disempowered position on issues such as hidden course costs, variable international tuition fees, [and] mis-selling of courses’ (Union document 4, 11). Moreover, the additional market reforms outlined in the government documents, particularly to make it easier for new providers (including those operating on a for-profit basis) to offer degrees, are presented as likely to further the vulnerability of students:

If commercial providers are allowed a quick, low-quality route into establishing and awarding degrees, those studying and working in the sector are seriously vulnerable to the threat from for-profit organisations looking to move into the market for financial gain rather than any desire to provide students with a high quality education and teaching experience. (Union document 1, 5)

Thus, while there is fundamental disagreement between the government and unions (both staff and student) about the impact of marketisation, both discursively construct students as vulnerable and in need of protection; the absence of the ‘empowered consumer’ is notable across both sets of documents. While in many ways this emphasis on students as dependent, in need of protection and even child-like reflects the findings of previous analyses of youth policy in the United Kingdom and elsewhere (for example, Lesko 2001), it brings into question assumptions that are often made about higher education policy being predicated on the notion of the authoritative student-consumer (Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion 2009).

**Future workers**

A second, and equally strong, construction of higher education students is as future workers. This pervades the government speeches and written publications, and also the documents produced by the three employers’ organisations. Both the Green Paper and the White Paper frequently assume that higher education is primarily about ensuring the work-readiness of students, and that this is also the students’ main priority. This is evident not only in the language used and assertions made throughout the documents, but also in their overall structure. Indeed, the very first section of the Green Paper, immediately following the introduction, is called ‘The Productivity Challenge’. Furthermore, it outlines three success criteria for ‘student outcomes and learning gain’ of which the first is ‘students’ knowledge, skills and career-readiness are enhanced by their education’ (Government document 1, 32–33). It is also assumed that students themselves are motivated primarily by employment-related considerations. Indeed, in justifying its proposed measures to require HEIs to publish more statistical data about their admissions process and the attainment of their students by specific social characteristic, the Bill factsheet makes this assumption clear: ‘This Bill will launch a transparency revolution, enabling students to make informed choices between institutions and courses that meet employers’ needs’ (Government document 3, 2).
This implies not only that employment-related considerations are uppermost in students’ minds when they are choosing their subject of study, but also, following the proposed reforms, all courses will be required to ‘meet employers’ needs’ (i.e. it will not be possible to make a choice between any other type of course). Assumptions are also made that the primary outcome of a degree is the additional pay one then receives in work. This is made explicit in the factsheet, which states:

While the graduate premium has remained substantial, even as student numbers have expanded in recent decades, recent research suggests there is a large variation in graduate outcomes across providers and subjects, and even for those that studied within the same provider. (Government document 3, 2)

Here, ‘graduate outcomes’ and ‘the graduate premium’ (i.e. the extra pay received by graduates in work) are presented as synonymous. There is also little recognition, here or elsewhere, that differences in ‘graduate premium’ may be attributable to specific employer practices, rather than only variations in the quality of teaching and employment preparation offered by HEIs. Given the significant literature on discrimination within the graduate labour market (for example, Li 2015), this omission is telling. Indeed, none of the government documents present any critique of employers; instead, the emphasis is very much on ensuring that employers (along with students and taxpayers) derive greater value from the higher education sector. The Green Paper, for example, articulates the aims of the reforms as ensuring the system promotes ‘the interests of students, employers and taxpayers to ensure value for their investment in education’ (Government document 1, 57). The employer-focused nature of the reforms is remarked upon – and critiqued – by the NUS:

There is an awful lot of mention of employers and their needs in the green paper. This is because government are convinced that employers need more information and more of a say in how higher education benefits them. This is problematic not least for the reason that it assumes that business and industry can think beyond their own short term interests in competitive market places and that their thinking somehow corresponds with what our economy and society actually needs. There’s plenty of reason to be sceptical about this. (Union document 4, 11)

Indeed, within the NUS documents, the student-as-worker discourse is largely absent.

There are, however, strong commonalities between the government documents and those produced by employers’ organisations – the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), the Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR) and the National Centre for Universities and Business. Indeed, in these texts, understanding students as future workers is treated as obvious and self-evident; no attempt is made to justify the assumption that the purpose of higher education is to prepare young people for the labour market. The four employer documents are replete with suggestions for strengthening the engagement of business and industry with higher education, and for encouraging both institutions and students to focus more intently on preparations for future work. The AGR, for example, puts forward a series of recommendations for the sector. For students, these comprise the following:

- Invest time and effort in career related learning and experiences at all stages of their education to build up their employability skills.
- Be proactive in getting work related experience whether it’s an internship, part-time work, volunteering or work experience.
- Reflect on that experience to develop transferable skills and knowledge.
- Consider a broad range of employers, large and small, in locations throughout the UK. (Employer document 2, 10)
The AGR also assumes that the interests of students, institutions and employers are identical. For example, it welcomes proposals for an Office for Students (a new single regulator for the higher education sector, replacing the Higher Education Funding Council for England and the Office for Fair Access) on the grounds that it will aid cooperation between employers and the higher education sector ‘and be more effective in developing tools that improve outcomes for students and employers’ (Employer document 2, 1). The CBI, however, takes a slightly different position on the Office for Students, suggesting that it recognises that employer interests may not align exactly with those of other stakeholders. For example, the CBI states that, ‘In shifting to a more student-centric body, a balance must be maintained between championing student interests and overseeing the sector as a whole’ (Employer document 1, 5). This potential dissonance between the perspectives of students and those of other actors is considered further later in the article.

The type of worker that is constructed in the employer documents is both nationally focused and relatively immobile. Indeed, the AGR notes the difference between the practices of employers in the United Kingdom and other countries (such as the United States and Germany), with the former typically placing much less importance than the latter on the degree subject that prospective employees have studied. This, the AGR suggests, should be noted by students, and they should therefore not worry about choosing a degree that is not explicitly vocational or particularly tailored to the area of employment they wish to enter. The assumption here is clearly that graduates will remain in the United Kingdom; otherwise, it would seem sensible to be at least cognisant of the different perspectives of employers elsewhere. It also suggests that only domestic students are being addressed; this is explored in more detail subsequently.

**Learners**

References to students as learners are notable by their relative absence across most of the documents that were analysed. Indeed, only one document (the CBI response to the Green Paper; Employer document 1) employs the term ‘learner’. Moreover, when ‘learning’ is discussed, and students as learners are invoked implicitly, the goal of such learning is tied very strongly to employment and ‘work-readiness’. In the following quotation, for example, learning for its own sake is positioned as marginal:

> Universities provide an environment for deeper and wider learning, allowing for the development of analytical and critical thinking, objective enquiry and primary research. But evidence suggests that for most students, the most important outcome of higher education is finding employment. (Government document 2, 11)

Moreover, in the vast majority of texts, reference to liberal goals such as ‘analytical and critical thinking’ are wholly absent (the NUS’ *Manifesto for Partnership* [Union document 3] is a notable exception). For example, in justifying the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), the Green Paper notes that ‘The aim is to improve the teaching that students receive, which in turn should increase their productivity and help them secure better jobs and careers’ (Government document 1, 21). While, as already noted, many of the documents assume a strong student-as-worker discourse and do not see any reason to justify it, part of the ‘State of the Relationship Report’ for 2016, produced by the National Centre for Universities and Business (Employer document 4), does attempt such a justification. Indeed, it argues that many of the graduate attributes outlined by Newman (1996) in...
his case for a liberal education can be achieved equally effectively through a work-focused higher education system. It suggests that while Newman:

would undoubtedly be horrified by the notion that work experience is a way of acquiring these characteristics...anyone immersed in real-world business and public sector challenges would recognise immediately – as would the students and masters of twelfth century Bologna – that engagement in the world of work is precisely a way of sharpening each of these attributes. (Employer document 4, 68)

Moreover, within the CMA document, the student, as a learner, is not portrayed as engaged in a collective endeavour to wider societal benefit, but in the individual pursuit of commodified knowledge, which may require legal protection. The document states:

In general, universities have no automatic right to the intellectual property (IP) generated by students, given that they are not employees. A term that allows a university to claim all IP generated by students during their studies – for example, all written work, creations, inventions and discoveries, regardless of circumstances of study or type of course – may be unfair. (Government document 4, 15)

Here, learning is recast as ‘intellectual property’, while the interests of students and their HEIs in the generation of knowledge are positioned as potentially oppositional.

While Biesta (2009) has argued that the term ‘education’ has been largely replaced by references to ‘learning’ within policy and practice across many countries of the Global North (as a result of, inter alia, the withdrawal of the state from various forms of social provision and the increasing emphasis on an individual’s own responsibility for self-development), the very limited number of references to even learning in these 16 documents is telling. This signals the marginal status of students as learners in the eyes of many policy actors, and serves to underline the purpose of higher education as conceived primarily as preparation for the labour market rather than, for example, the generation and transmission of knowledge or the inculcation of critical dispositions (Collini 2012; Nussbaum 2010).

**Hard-workers**

Reference is made, within three of the four speeches by the Minister for Higher Education and the Green Paper, to ‘hard-working’ students. For example, in Speech 2 (n.p.), the Minister of State for Universities and Science claims that ‘Our mission as a one nation government is to ensure everyone has the opportunity to work hard and fulfil their potential’. In this context, the importance of hard work and the figure of the hard-working student are invoked as part of the discourse outlined previously, which emphasises the vulnerability of the student to ‘producer interests’. Adverse outcomes on graduation from higher education are thus positioned as attributable not to a lack of hard work on the part of individual students, but to problems within HEIs, such as poor-quality teaching, undemanding courses and little employer engagement with degree content.

However, hard-working students are also invoked in other places to rather different ends. Indeed, in both the Green Paper and Speech 1, an implicit contrast is drawn between those students who work hard and are thoroughly deserving of their degree outcome and others who have not shown such commitment and yet have been unfairly rewarded with a ‘good degree’ as a result of ‘grade inflation’. The Green Paper states that ‘Students rightly want hard work at university to be recognised and for their degree to be a currency that carries prestige and holds its value’ (Government document 1, 25). It goes on to argue that
this is currently not the situation in England, and thus advocates a shift to a US-style Grade Point Average system, in which more fine-grained distinctions are made between students’ performance, and regular reports from HEIs outlining the action they are taking to prevent grade inflation. Such measures, it is suggested, are what hard-working students deserve: ‘The UK’s standard model of classes of honours is on its own no longer capable of providing the recognition hard-working students deserve and the information employers require’ (Speech 1, n.p.). While the term ‘hard-working’ is not used in the University and College Union (UCU) documents, we see a somewhat similar distinction being drawn between students who deserve to receive financial support for their studies and others who are not deserving. This is deployed as part of a broader argument against for-profit providers. For example, the UCU’s response to Public Bill Committee argues that financial aid is being erroneously claimed by students attending some for-profit institutions, stating:

The National Audit Office reported in 2014–16 on concerns about abuses of the student loans system by for-profit providers and found that: EU students at some alternative providers claimed or attempted to claim student support they were not entitled to. (Union document 1, 5)

In these cases, there are strong similarities to the discourse of ‘hard-working families’ used by other UK politicians and policy-makers (for example, Patrick 2014; Shildrick and MacDonald 2013). Indeed, Runswick-Cole, Lawthom, and Goodley (2016) have argued that the ‘hard-working family’ discourse conforms to the neoliberal trope, indicating that such families are independent, self-sufficient and not dependent on the state for their survival. It also differentiates such families from their polar opposite, the ‘troubled family’. In such ways, age-old distinctions between ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor are played out. Higher education clearly represents a different policy context. Nevertheless, the parallels are significant. First, as with family policy, the ‘hard-working student’ discourse assumes a neoliberal subject who should not be disadvantaged by the actions of others (whether that be HEIs that offer poor-quality teaching, or less hard-working students who nonetheless receive a similar degree result). Second, it presumes that societies function better when competitive individualism is rewarded; thus the state needs to intervene to help differentiate hard-workers from others, and ensure they reap proportionate benefits. Third, it privileges the market above the state. Hard-working students are thus assumed to benefit from increased competition between providers as HEIs are further incentivised to improve their teaching, for example. Finally, as with much family policy (Patrick 2014; Runswick-Cole, Lawthom, and Goodley 2016), it is assumed that all individuals have the capacity to work hard; little consideration is given to the factors (such as financial pressures and caring responsibilities) that may make it difficult for some students to devote long hours and high levels of energy to their studies.

**Political actors**

The ‘voice of the student’ is referred to several times within the government documents. Indeed, the Office for Students the new single regulator for the higher education sector is argued to be the means through which ‘We will put students and choice at the heart of the system’ (Government document 3, 4). Moreover, the Green Paper claims ‘This would be the first time that a higher education regulator has been explicitly designed to promote the student interest, and approach higher education through a student lens’ (Government document 1, 58). However, this apparent privileging of the student voice is in tension with
what is said about students’ unions (a more long-standing outlet for the ‘student voice’) in both the Green and White Papers. Concern is expressed about both the efficacy and representativeness of such unions:

We also asked [in the Green Paper] for views on what more could be done to improve transparency and accountability to students as members … At present, many but not all students’ unions and guilds are regulated as charities by the Charity Commission. This makes it difficult to determine how effectively the current oversight of the sector is working. There are some areas where further work can be undertaken. This could include establishing a central register of students’ unions, strengthening the rights of redress for students, and reviewing how effectively the existing statutory provisions regarding students’ unions are being upheld. (Government document 2 [White Paper], 60)

This tension suggests a paternalistic perspective to student concerns. The Office for Students (comprised mainly, of non-students) is seen as a more effective means of representing the ‘student voice’ than elected student representatives. While research has suggested that, in contemporary UK higher education, institutional students’ unions rarely take an oppositional stance, and can often be very supportive of university management agendas (Brooks, Byford, and Sela 2015), it appears that they are still viewed with suspicion by policy-makers.

The NUS response to the Green Paper consultation, perhaps unsurprisingly, says more about student representation and influence than any of the other documents. It expresses concern about what is said by government about students’ unions specifically, and also the role of the Office for Students in articulating students’ priorities:

It is unclear how the new Office for Students (OFS) super-quango will ‘empower students’ or ‘promote the interests’ of students, and a great deal of questions will need to be answered about how this new body will function … OFS will have a ‘duty to promote the interests of students’, but who is deciding what the student interest is? It obviously should be students and students’ unions, not government or their barrage of new metrics. (Union document 4, 3)

Nevertheless, the relatively circumscribed nature of student political engagement is also evident. While the NUS’ Manifesto for Partnership (Union document 3), written in 2013, advocates a shift to partnership working as an explicit means of contesting what is argued to be the construction of students as consumers within government policy (see Brooks, Byford, and Sela [2016] for a more detailed discussion), this stance seems at odds with the position delineated in the Green Paper response. Indeed, the latter positions students’ union leaders as close to both policy-makers and institutional leaders. For example, it notes the influence the NUS has had on previous policy formulations (thus clearly not wanting to dissociate itself from consumerist/market reforms entirely). Moreover, it encourages institutional students’ unions to respond to the Green Paper by putting together a joint response with their vice-chancellor: ‘Use resources to get your Vice Chancellor to agree to submit a joint response statement, which we have provided a draft for, on the importance of your union at their institution’ (Union document 4, 13). In this way, while students are constructed by the NUS as political actors to some extent, the nature of the political activity appears both limited and relatively compliant.

**Absent or ‘sham’ international students**

Despite the large number of non-UK students currently studying within the UK higher education system (around 19% of all students; Universities UK 2015), many of the documents
assume that they are addressing only domestic students. This is particularly pronounced in
the documents from the employer organisations. Here, not only are international students
not mentioned in any of the four documents, but an assumption is made by the AGR that
they are speaking to UK students only – who will choose to remain in the United Kingdom
on completion of their degree. Indeed, as noted previously, they explicitly contrast the prac-
tices of UK employers with their German counterparts, but suggest that is only the former
that students in English HEIs need to consider:

Unlike in other countries, the majority of employers do not care what subject a student hire
studied at university … Whereas a large accountancy firm in Germany or the US will only
target and recruit from a specific set of courses, the same firm in the UK will target an entire
campus … Arguably this makes the UK the most sophisticated graduate recruitment market
in the world. (Employer document 3, 3)

Thus, students are conceptualised as British and, as already discussed, unlikely to be inter-
ested in working abroad.

Within Speech 4 and Government documents 1, 2 and 4, reference is made to interna-
tional students but, in most cases, this is very brief. The only sustained discussion of such
students is in Speech 4. Here, the Minister of State for Universities and Science states that
he wants to ensure that the United Kingdom continues to attract the ‘best and brightest’
students from around the world, in order that they ‘contribute to the experience of domestic
students, strengthen the UK economy, and build valuable and lasting bridges around the
world’ (Speech 4, n.p.). This emphasis on recruiting only ‘the best’ international students
can be contrasted with the strong rhetoric that pervades most of the official documents
and speeches about the government’s commitment to social mobility and the importance
of opening up opportunities for a wider range of (domestic) students. Here, there is clear
evidence of strong geographical boundaries to social justice, with international students fall-
ing outside the nationally defined realm of demands for educational equality (see Tannock
[2013] for further examples).

A distinction is also drawn between ‘the best and brightest’ students, who are continued
to be welcomed to the United Kingdom, and those ‘bogus students’ who are deemed to be
responsible for shoring up low-quality providers:

… we have already stopped more than 900 colleges from bringing both low-quality or sham
students to the UK … Our approach to fake colleges isn’t just about migration numbers. It is
also about maintaining the quality of our HE [higher education] sector. Low-quality providers
don’t just damage the brand of this great sector. They also hold back social mobility and pre-
vent young people, especially from disadvantaged backgrounds who may be over-represented
at them, from realising their potential and reaping all the benefits they hope to gain from a
university experience. (Speech 4, n.p.)

The discussion here focuses not on the damage done to international students by low-quality
providers, but the harm to domestic students by the presence of ‘sham students’. Again, the
circumscribed nature of concerns about social justice is made clear.

Discussion

The presented analysis of the 16 English policy documents has demonstrated clearly that,
contrary to claims made by many scholars (for example, Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion
2009; Nixon, Scullion, and Hearn 2016), students are not simply constructed as consumers
in such texts. It has shown that a number of other understandings are also dominant, particularly the student as a ‘future worker’ and, to a lesser extent, a ‘hard-worker’. Indeed, the student-as-worker discourse is very strong across employer documents, government texts and speeches by the minister responsible for higher education. Within this conceptualisation, higher education is presented as a critical period of preparation for employment – articulating with the wider literature on higher education, which has argued that it is now often seen as primarily an economic good (for example, Collini 2012; McGettigan 2013). Moreover, overcoming potential disadvantage within the labour market is designated (within the government documents and speeches, as well as those from business/industry) the responsibility of HEIs, rather than employers. While ‘student choice’ and other facets of the ‘student as consumer’ construction are referenced frequently, students rarely take on the figure of the ‘empowered consumer’. Instead, as already outlined, they are positioned as ‘thwarted consumers’ (and even, in some places, dependent ‘children’), who have been vulnerable to various ‘producer interests’ and the failure of the higher education sector to work as a fully functioning market. This emphasis on the vulnerability of the student appears fundamentally at odds with the notion of the empowered consumer. It also raises questions about the efficacy of relying on student choice as a mechanism for effecting change when students are seen as currently vulnerable and in need of protection (e.g. by the Office for Students). In this positioning of students as key to reform (through the choices that they make) and yet vulnerable, dependent and not quite adult, we see the contradictory nature of policy (as discussed by Ball 2007) being played out; the texts analysed are far from coherent in their overall narratives and, in particular, in the ways in which they construct students.

The preceding discussion has also explored the degree of commonality in constructions of the student, and the extent to which they are shared by different policy actors. There is a high degree of overlap between government and employer documents: most obviously, both place considerable emphasis on students as ‘future workers’. However, while other constructions are evident in the government documents and speeches (e.g. the thwarted consumer and vulnerable child, discussed earlier), there is much less variation within the employers’ documents: the student as future worker is dominant throughout. The texts from staff and student unions, however, are notably different. In these, students are very rarely positioned as future workers, and the ‘hard-worker’ discourse is absent. However, they share with the government an emphasis on the vulnerability of students, albeit from a different perspective. For the UCU, in particular, students are vulnerable as a consequence of market reforms, and will become increasingly vulnerable if the changes proposed in the government documents are implemented. For government, the vulnerability is attributable instead to the partial nature of marketisation; the additional market reforms outlined in the green and white papers are thus seen as mechanisms for removing this vulnerability. The union documents also differ from those produced by government in the ways in which they position students as political actors. By emphasising the importance of student representation through the Office for Students, and raising questions about the role of students’ unions, the government implies that students are not always able to voice their own concerns (or at least are not effective in doing so), and thus need a government body to do this for them. This is underpinned by a very limited view of student political agency but one which is well aligned with the positioning of students as vulnerable, dependent and child-like. It follows that students with these characteristics need others to represent them, and cannot be relied on to run effective and accountable unions of their own. However,
while the union documents construct students in rather different terms, they also have a rather limited view of students as political actors – for example, in suggesting that the most appropriate response for students’ union leaders to take is to write a joint letter with their vice-chancellor. Moreover, contradictions are also evident in this group of documents: while the NUS’ Manifesto for Partnership presents a clear challenge to consumerism and market reform, its response to the Green Paper is much more accepting of some of the main tenets of marketisation.

It is evident in the documents analysed that not all students are understood in the same way. Indeed, some clear distinctions are drawn between them. In relation to UK students, as discussed, ‘hard-working’ students are distinguished from those who work less hard, with the latter group deemed to be unfairly benefitting from the alleged ‘grade inflation’ across the higher education sector. With respect to international students, however, the distinctions drawn are more extreme: here two specific groups are outlined – the ‘brightest and the best’, who will remain welcome in the reformed English higher education sector – and the ‘sham’ students, who are not deserving recipients of a British degree, and whom the government will take further action to exclude. As argued earlier, the frequent references to ensuring the social mobility of UK students and using higher education as a mechanism for tackling disadvantage were notably lacking in relation to discussions of those from outside the United Kingdom. Indeed, international students were absent from most of the documents analysed, except when they were positioned as problems in this way, or as important sources of revenue. Also absent from all of the documents (with the exception of the NUS’ Manifesto for Partnership) was the construction of student as learner, pursuing intellectual engagement for its own sake. Where being a learner was mentioned explicitly, it was closely allied to the worker discourse. Learning is thus understood as primarily about labour market preparation; it is something undertaken by workers in the making.

Shore and Wright (2011, 13) argue that policies ‘can be studied as contested narratives which define the problems of the present in such a way as either to condemn or condone the past, and project only one viable pathway to its resolution.’ The invocation of the ‘vulnerable student’ can be seen as a technique, deployed by policy-makers, as part of a broader narrative about the impact of previous market reform. As noted at the start of the article, higher education reforms introduced in England over the last two decades or so have established various market mechanisms within the sector – these have included relatively high tuition fees and a range of metrics intended to facilitate comparisons between institutions. The government documents and speeches analysed acknowledge that these reforms have not brought about all of the changes that were anticipated – for example, they claim that the quality of teaching and students’ work-readiness both remain too low. However, instead of using this evidence to critique the market model, it is employed as a justification for introducing further marketisation (the introduction of more metrics, via the TEF, and a range of new providers). The vulnerable student plays an important role in this narrative – suffering, the government claims, from too little marketisation, rather than – as alternative accounts, such as that of the UCU, may posit – too much. Similarly, the ‘student as consumer’ discourse can be read as a technique used by the government to legitimise its approach and minimise opposition to its proposed policies. This is perhaps most evident in the rationale for introducing the TEF and making it easier for private providers to operate. For example, it is claimed that:
As students now expect to meet more of the costs of their education through their future earnings, they rightly have a sharper eye for value, and higher expectations of quality … That’s why the bill will level the playing field for high quality new entrants, making it simpler for innovative and specialist providers to set up, award degrees, drive-up quality, secure university status, and give applicants more choice about where and how to study. (Document 3, Speech 3, n.p.)

Thus, as the policies are presented as stemming from student demands, rather than merely government officials, their apparent legitimacy is enhanced.

Conclusion

This article has investigated the ways in which students are constructed in contemporary English higher education policy. Drawing on an analysis of 16 documents, from four different groups of policy actors (senior politicians, government departments, employer organisations and staff and student unions), the article has made four key analytic insights. First, it has shown that, contrary to assumptions made in much of the academic literature, students are not understood as ‘empowered consumers’. Although the language of consumerism is deployed throughout many of the documents, both government and unions position students as vulnerable. However, whereas this vulnerability is attributed to processes of market reform within the union documents, for the government it is a consequence of insufficient marketisation. Second, the article has identified other dominant discourses – namely that of ‘future worker’ (for government and employers) and ‘hard-worker’ (government only). These articulate with extant debates about both the repositioning of higher education as an economic good, and the use of the ‘hard-working’ trope across other areas of social policy as a means of distinguishing between ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ recipients of state support. Third, and relatedly, the article has shown that important differences are drawn between groups of students. For domestic students, this is largely in relation to whether they are deemed ‘hard-working’ or not. More extreme contrasts are drawn between international students, juxtaposing the ‘brightest and best’ with those who are considered ‘sham’. International students are, however, largely absent from the majority of the documents, and particularly from discussions of social mobility. Finally, the article has argued that the figure of the ‘vulnerable’ student and ‘thwarted consumer’ feed into broader government narratives about its policy trajectory – legitimising contemporary reforms and excusing the apparent failure of previous policies.

Notes

1. The English data were collected as part of a larger, cross-national project, which explores constructions of higher education students across Europe.
2. Four documents per actor were selected to ensure that the analysis across the larger project was manageable (16 documents have been analysed for each of six different countries) but also that some different perspectives could be captured (e.g. by including both staff and student unions, and different employers’ organisations).
3. The criteria used to select the documents were as follows: national significance of the document (e.g. Green and White Papers were prioritised over others); relevance to the project’s focus (on higher education students); and date of publication (the most recent documents were chosen from those deemed to be most significant and relevant).
4. The TEF is an exercise to monitor and assess the quality of teaching in English HEIs. It has introduced new criteria and metrics upon which institutions are judged. Those performing highly are allowed to charge higher tuition fees than those that perform less well.

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