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Let me entertain you: the ambivalent role of university lecturers as educators and performers

Billy Wong[a] and Yuan-Li Tiffany Chiu[b]

[a]Institute of Education, University of Reading, Reading, UK; [b]Centre for Student Success, University of East London, London, UK

ABSTRACT

In England, higher education is more marketised than ever before as the difference between students and consumers is increasingly blurred, propelled by the rise in tuition fees. With students demanding more for their money, the role of university lecturers continues to change. This study explores the ways in which lecturers re-evaluate and reconstruct their roles and responsibilities in light of heightened student expectations. We draw on 30 in-depth interviews with lecturers from the social sciences, across two post-1992 universities in England, where tuition fees have tripled since 2012. We focus on lecturers' views and experiences of student expectations, as well as the support available to students as we shift towards a more consumerist approach in higher education. We find examples of tension between academic values and consumeristic student expectations as lecturers discuss their precarious positions as an educator as well as an entertainer. We believe that the expanding role of lecturers merits an urgent review at the institutional and national level, to promote and ensure clarity of the boundaries and expectations of teaching staff.

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Introduction

Higher education continues to change and be influenced by neoliberal policies. In England, the marketisation of the university system was intensified through the tripling of tuition fees in 2012, which has encouraged students to be more like consumers while universities are more akin to service providers, who adhere to the Consumer Rights Act (2015). While research into staff experiences and student expectations found limited changes in the early stages of the higher fees regime (Bates and Kaye 2014a, 2014b), universities have since allocated considerable resources to support and improve the experiences of students, who are "at the heart of the higher education system" (BIS 2011). A growing number of studies have found how students are now figuratively treated by higher education institutions as consumers with customer expectations and satisfactions (Ek et al. 2013; Brown and Carasso 2013). With the imminent rollout of the Teaching Excellence Framework[1] (TEF), which effectively governs tuition fee rates, universities are further incentivised to strengthen their position in TEF data

CONTACT Billy Wong b.wong@reading.ac.uk

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metrics such as student enrolment, retention, attainment, employment rates after graduation, as well as student satisfaction (BIS 2016a). The latter is typically measured through the National Student Survey (NSS), where final-year undergraduate students can rate their degree programmes on issues such as teaching, assessment and academic support. Although student experience and satisfaction are now central in university strategic plans, there are concerns that these criteria, which inevitably reflect student feelings and satisfactions, can potentially undermine academic integrity and rigour (Bennett and Kane 2014; Callender, Ramsden, and Griggs 2014).

Student voices have garnered increased importance due to higher tuition fees and the TEF, but the opposite might be the case for lecturers – the frontline teaching staff who provide students with the actual higher education. In 2015, an academic wrote anonymously in the *Guardian* (2015) blog on the new lecturer–student relationship, entitled "My Students Have Paid £9,000 and Now They Think They Own Me". The title alone paints a worrying picture of the teaching landscape in English higher education. Our paper is interested in the changing views and experiences of lecturers who teach undergraduate students. In particular, we focus on their shifting roles as subject experts as well as consumer-minded performers. The concepts of choice and consumerism are staples of research on the marketisation of higher education, especially from the perspectives of students. This paper provides an important insight into the "supply" and "service" aspects of the market, with the focus on lecturers and their changing identities due to higher tuition fees, which look set to rise further in the foreseeable future. Below, we begin with a brief review of research around teaching in higher education, with the focus on lecturers and their role as educators.

Teaching in higher education

Since the Dearing report in 1997, which introduced university tuition fees, the neoliberal seeds were laid for the full marketisation of the English higher education system (Rolfe 2002). University students are presented with a powerful parallel identity, that of a consumer (Munro 2011). Many studies have raised concerns about the impact of a market-driven higher education system, which has given rise to the importance of instrumental issues such as worthiness, employability and student satisfaction (e.g. Bates and Kaye 2014b; Morrison 2014; Sheard, Carbone, and Hurst 2010; Tomlinson 2012, 2017). As de facto consumers, university students are empowered to exert customer demands and expectations. After all, students are paying for a service in the form of a degree-level education, although it is not a straightforward transaction of buying a product or service with a promised purpose or outcome since students are still expected to earn their qualifications through individual merit. Yet, universities and staff are also expected to do more and ensure students feel that their degrees are good "value for money" (Koris et al. 2015; Woodall, Hiller, and Resnick 2014). Given the high tuition fees, the worthwhileness of a degree can often be interpreted through their exchange and symbolic values, especially privileged access into particular employment or further study.

Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion (2009) speculated that neoliberalism has created extrinsic degree hunters, rather than intrinsic aspiring scholars. The authors argued that university students may be more interested in *having* a degree, rather than *being* an intellectual. This shift in student approach can, in turn, change the ways lecturers teach, in that students may no longer be groomed as future scholars but rather as pragmatic individuals whose primary objective is to obtain a good degree outcome. Indeed, Bunce, Baird, and Jones (2016) found

that students may not only be more goal-oriented now but can also be more proactive to challenge or complain to lecturers, especially when their grades are below expectation. Tomlinson (2017) argued that while some university students do resist a consumerist ideology in their education, others are found to adopt a partial or even an active customer approach in their degree study, with high demands and expectations of their tutors and university. Perhaps in response, teaching content and pedagogy are sometimes redesigned with a stronger emphasis on instrumental value and assessment support (Arthur 2009; Bunce, Baird, and Jones 2016) to ensure that students are better positioned to score higher grades. Whilst Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion (2009) called for university staff to resist a student-centred consumerist culture, the further rise in tuition fees in 2012 is likely to have strengthened rather than weakened this market ideology.

Universities and lecturers are increasingly more conscious and concerned about student satisfaction (Daniels and Brooker 2014; Kinman and Wray 2013). Student voices are readily heard, especially their expectations of staff. Higher education research has focused extensively on what staff and universities should and can do for their students, rather than what students are expected to do for their degree education. Existing literature has gathered that students prefer approachable, organised and knowledgeable lecturers (Pozo-Muñoz, Rebolloso-Pacheco, and Fernández-Ramírez 2000; Voss, Gruber, and Szmigin 2007). Students also seem to value pastoral support, especially personal tutors (Tryfona et al. 2013), as well as specific academic provisions, such as assignment workshops (Brinkworth et al. 2009; Greenbank 2007). Unsurprisingly, timely and detailed assessment feedback is also appreciated (Robinson, Pope, and Holyoak 2013), or perhaps even expected or demanded. In a nutshell, recent research has focused more on what students want as universities strive to strengthen their position and appeal for potential students in the competitive higher education market. Student opinions matter more than ever before due to the NSS, the TEF and ultimately the income of universities who must compete for students (BIS 2016a; Skelton 2012b).

Although teaching is the traditional role of lecturers, many academics are also engaged in research, as well as administrative duties and student support (Archer 2008a; Billot 2010), such as recruitment (e.g. open days), data entry (e.g. student attendance and attainment) and/or pastoral support (Tryfona et al. 2013). Research on university lecturers has focused on changes in teaching practices as well as the conflict of values between staff and their institutions, especially between teaching and research (Billot 2010; Harris 2005). Historically, universities privilege research over teaching and staff are expected to generate research income as well as assessable publications (Clegg 2008). Concerns were raised about the "identity struggles" and work–life balances of academics due to their different commitments (Kinman 2014; Skelton 2012b), especially among early career researchers who attempt to navigate between research, teaching and administrative expectations (Archer 2008a, 2008b). Whilst the next Research Excellence Framework[2] (c. 2021) exercise continues to incentivise universities to support research (due to financial and symbolic rewards), the forthcoming TEF has also forced universities, and therefore lecturers, to be accountable service providers to their students (Wood and Su 2017).

As institutions, universities can shape and influence the ways lecturers approach and design their teaching (Beauchamp and Thomas 2009; Burroughs-Lange 1996; Fitzmaurice 2013; Martin 1997). Although personal and prior experiences often form lecturers' foundational pedagogical beliefs, institutional demands can also reshape, change or even govern teaching practices and subsequently lecturers' professional identities (Hockings et al. 2009).

Similar to Hockings et al. (2009), who drew on Wenger's (1998) conceptualisation of identity in practice to understand academic identities, we view lecturers' identity as being shaped by their academic participations, which in turn can shape their performances and practices (Barnett and Di Napoli 2008; Billot; 2010). According to Wenger (1998), identity is a negotiated experience through the lived experiences and practices of our environments. Whilst the people around us can contribute towards a collective sense of identity, say, within an academic community, the practices of individuals are also moulded by departmental and institutional forces and values, through gradual socialisation and normalisation (Fitzmaurice 2013; Kreber 2010). In other words, the identities and roles of lecturers are influenced by the communities of practice in which they are engaged, which can be particular to disciplines and universities.

Within the teaching domain, lecturers' freedom to design and educate in the way that they desire can be constrained by university structures, such as teaching space/timetable and available/allocated time for student support (Kreber 2010; Skelton 2012a). In a case-study of a research-intensive university, Skelton (2012a) found that lecturers employ a strategic compromise around the differences between personal values and institutional aims. However, the extent to which lecturers working in post-1992 institutions[3] – who are traditionally more teaching-oriented – can also resist, challenge or negotiate consumer-oriented institutional pressures merits further research (see Bates and Kaye 2014a). The concern here is that not only are lecturers losing teaching autonomy, there are also increasing expectations that lecturers should be mindful of student satisfaction, which can create tension between pedagogies for critical learning and teaching to just passing or pleasing students (Ek et al. 2013; Kreber 2010). Similarly, lecturers are also expected to promote, maintain and improve student engagement (Crosling, Thomas, and Heagney 2008; Kahu 2013). Following an extensive literature review, Evans, Muij, and Tomlinson (2015) noted the importance of "effective pedagogical designs" to promote student engagement as well as attainment. The review highlighted five themes of good pedagogical practices, which include using real-life examples, experiential approaches, object-based learning, advance student access to course materials, as well as the principles of effective assessment and feedback practice.

In our study, we explore the changing identities and experiences of lecturers in higher education, in response to the higher tuition fees in England. More specifically, we focus on the extent to which consumerist practices have infiltrated academic teaching and discourses. We are interested not only in the views of lecturers about their role as educators but also as accountable service providers. Given university students are paying high fees, we argue how lecturers may now have the precarious role of an entertainer as well as an educator.

Method

Participants

This paper draws on an exploratory study which looked into the experiences of 30 lecturers (18 women and 12 men) within the social sciences across two post-1992 universities in London, England. Existing literature indicates that universities and lecturers are now under pressure to excel in key TEF criteria, such as student satisfaction. Our study provides a qualitative and updated account of the contemporary roles and identities of lecturers. We are interested in how lecturers respond to the higher fees and, presumably, higher expectations

from students as well as institutions. We also wanted to understand the extent to which consumerism has changed the way lecturers approach their teaching. Given the scope of our study, our aim is not to generalise but to offer an insight into the current roles and identities of lecturers in light of rising neoliberal policies. Data were collected between 2016 and 2017, and staff would have experienced the full cycle of undergraduate students who paid the higher fees.

Institutions

The two London post-1992 universities both have a diverse student population in terms of age, ethnicity and entry routes into higher education. A high proportion of students were first-generation and "non-traditional". Our participants teach in the broad discipline of the social sciences, who were purposefully invited to participate through email invitations. Staff with a range of teaching experiences and backgrounds were recruited, from 1 to over 30 years of teaching in higher education, as well as being graduates themselves from Russell group, post-1992 and universities outside of the UK. Some staff were also the first in their family to have attended university while others previously had a career outside of academia. Collectively, our lecturers are involved in over 10 different programmes, mostly in undergraduate degrees, with some in postgraduate teaching and supervision. Contractually, most of our academics have research as well as teaching responsibilities. As an indication, our lecturers taught across social science subjects including criminology, economics, education, international relations, policies and sociology.

Data collection

Informed by our research focus, staff were asked to talk about their views and philosophies about teaching, as well as their experiences of teaching before and after the implementation of the higher fees in 2012. Lecturers were probed to discuss any changes in their teaching approach as well as their interactions with students, especially students' expectations of staff. For example, lecturers were encouraged to reflect and comment on the support provided to, but also demanded by, students. Interviews were audio-recorded and lasted an hour on average. Audio data were transcribed verbatim and staff details anonymised with pseudonyms allocated. To strengthen anonymity, the specific department and university of each lecturer remain undisclosed, alongside any sensitive details that could risk exposing their identities.

Data analysis

Data analysis is informed by a social constructionist perspective which understands social phenomena as socially constructed and discursively produced (Burr 2003). Interview data were organised using *NVivo* and preliminary coded by emerging concepts as we move "back and forth" between the data and analyses in an iterative process through which the dimensions of concepts and themes are refined and/or expanded through the comparison of data (Corbin and Strauss 2014). These themes were also analysed as communities of practices (Wenger 1998), with the focus on the ways in which lecturers' teaching roles and identities shift or consolidate due to wider institutional demands. We ended up with clusters of data

around *philosophies of teaching and learning*, *engagements with students*, *expectations of students/staff*, as well as the various *conflicts between personal and institutional values*. These themes included similar and different viewpoints, as well as possible tensions. Our focus is on the identities of lecturers as educators as well as performers or entertainers.

Results and discussion

Being a lecturer

Although the job of a lecturer includes the transmission of subject knowledge to students, our participants have stressed that being a lecturer encompasses a wide range of other responsibilities. For many, the objective of teaching is for students to develop academic skills and values, beyond subject contents. Rachel explains that "my philosophy is for students to think critically about what I am saying so that they can form their own ideas of how to think about it and why it is relevant". Essentially, the intention here is to generate interest and equip students with the necessary tools to search, critique and construct their own knowledge and understanding. Here, students are envisioned as future scholars (Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion 2009).

While Yasmine once held the vision of being "on a journey with my students … trying to discover things together", she conceded that her mentality has changed "a few years ago". Since the 2012 tuition fees rise, Yasmine felt that:

> The standard of students coming in, it's not so much their qualifications, it's just their ability to think about issues has changed ... My philosophy now is to try to help students who seem to me to be really struggling to understand some issues about the areas that we cover.

In other words, her focus is on better comprehension and ultimately higher attainment. Relatedly, Nicky observed a gradual change in teaching content, with "less and less emphasis on theoretical knowledge" because increasingly for students, "you just need to get a job at the end of the term". As such, the emphasis on degree outcome seems heavier (Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion 2009). Another role of lecturers, which is fast becoming a standard, is that of personal tutoring (Tryfona et al. 2013). Although the pastoral support system can vary across departments and institutions, our lecturers noted their responsibilities can include overseeing students' well-being and personal development. It is worth noting that there is dedicated support staff for student welfare and employability within these respective universities, although we appreciate that lecturers are often the first point of contact for students.

As elaborated below, our lecturers have certainly increased their provisions for students. However, a qualitative difference can be observed in relation to the ways in which lecturers approach student support. Whilst being a supportive tutor is largely accepted, some lecturers also articulated a more consumer-minded self-reflection of their changing roles and identities.

The supportive tutor

Our lecturers are acutely aware and self-conscious that the design and delivery of their teaching should ensure students can engage, understand and excel academically. We learnt that it is now expected for lecturers to make available their teaching materials in advance of teaching (e.g. module handbook, assessment information and lecture/seminar notes or

PowerPoints), on virtual learning environments such as *Moodle* or *Blackboard*, which are commonly used across British universities (Evans, Muij, and Tomlinson 2015). A dialogic approach to teaching is preferred among our social science lecturers, who agreed that the instructional method, such as a didactic lecture, is not the most suitable learning model for their current students. While most seminars are planned to be interactive, with group work or activity a staple feature, Steven said that even for lectures, he aims "to create as much space for interaction as possible to … encourage students to speak up". To promote student engagement, Tony said that: "In lessons, I would stop regularly and I ask them questions to ensure that they're following and [to make] as many students as possible to feel comfortable to participate."

Similarly, Yasmine "ha[s] tried different tactics, like getting them [students] to put questions on *Post-Its*" and she would then respond to these anonymous questions in class. In recognition of student diversity, Eva said she draws on different pedagogical approaches to explain ideas or concepts "from a number of different angles [and] to make it quite accessible" to students. Others, such as Una, include "loads of pictures in my *PowerPoints*" because "a lot of students are visual [and] students learn in different ways". Furthermore, the teaching of theory or concepts is often complemented with real-life examples or analogies. Una said she tries "to make it as much connected to people's lives and then relate the theory to other people's lives".

In addition to constructivist teaching methods, the supportive role of lecturers is perhaps most apparent in the design of modules which are increasingly tailored towards the assessments. According to Nicole, "we do devote I'd say 20% to 30% of the module to the assignment". William explains that:

> It is not unusual that the three or four lectures [are] spent going over assessment guidelines and giving advice on assessment preparation [because] if we don't do those things, often we get students complain that they haven't been best supported in preparing for their assignments.

Whilst William also acknowledges that "we probably spend far too much time preparing students for assessment", he recognises that some students are "obsessed with grades" and concedes that "if we're talking about creating a higher education system that is responsive to the needs and wants of students, that is something that we have to do".

Many lecturers go the extra mile and offer detailed workshops that may be seen as a step-by-step guide for assignments. Una explains that she would "write the essay question on top and then literally underneath the essay question", she would break down the question into sub-questions with her students in class. While she admits that the "external examiner on my module said I offer a lot of help", she appears convinced that "if you don't show someone how to do it, what it should consist of, how are they going to do it?" Likewise, Elizabeth reflects that:

> For us, we've been reading academic articles for years, I could just glance at that page and have an idea [but] the students are at the very beginning of that journey. We forget how much practice we've had and we underestimated how hard it is.

In sum, these lecturers empathise with the perceived difficulties experienced by students and respond with a range of support. Examples of previous assignments are often provided to or requested by students. As Nicole said: "Where we can, we show them exemplars, we pull apart the exemplar, we compare it to the criteria [and] we remind them about the readings."

Dependent on the module, some tutors are able to incorporate assignment preparations/tasks into each teaching session, such that students "do something every week that directly links into the assessment" (Rebecca). A number of lecturers also mentioned one-to-one provision, where individual feedback is given on students' assignment outline or work-in-progress. Anna said that: "I usually read up to one page of the draft and give them very detailed feedback on the way they write, the way they structure, their ideas, their comments, everything."

Across both institutions, lecturers tend to refrain from reading full drafts due to resource limitations. Yet, some lecturers such as Eva confessed that "sometimes I offer tutorials above and beyond the institutional requirement, because … I think people learn in different ways". Most lecturers are flexible towards student support, especially those with extenuating or mitigating circumstances. According to Rachel:

> I don't think that you can give too much support. Some people think that we shouldn't be spoon feeding the students. They get too much and they take advantage of it, but that is what we are here for, really, for them to learn.

Not all lecturers were comfortable with this empathic stance. In contrast, Anna feels that lecturers should actually reduce their support for students. Her rationale is that "if we step back a little bit… we will be promoting more independence… autonomy, discipline". For Anna, less is more. Similarly, Yasmine is concerned that the high level of student support can pose a risk to the future well-being and prosperity of students after graduation. She said that:

> It's like you've got to push them out of the nest and they've got to fly. They've got to do it at some point and the longer we keep them back they're just not going to have a chance to do it.

Others prefer a more transparent and equitable approach. Abby reasons that: "What I'm strict about is I don't offer extra support after the individual tutorials in order to make sure that all the students are having a very similar experience in relation to what they get."Ellen also believes that assignment support should be provided based on assessment type, such as an essay, rather than being tailored for each assignment. In other words, if first-year students received support for essay writing, then Ellen said she would be hesitant "to give that much [essay writing] support in year two and three unless the assessment is completely different from what they did before". Similarly, Yvonne admits that she can be "a bit stubborn" in one-to-one support if students just "give me a blank look" and merely request an answer or solution for their assignments. Thus, there can be occasions where the supportive tutor is reluctant to provide support, but often for reasons that are considered by lecturers to be in the longer-term interests of students.

In theory, the abundance of information and instructions provided by lecturers should support students to excel academically, at least for their assignments. Some lecturers have questioned the academic skills, or lack thereof, that students actually acquire when excessively supported. Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion (2009) noted that university students are increasingly pragmatic, with their primary target a degree certificate per se. Our findings suggest that perhaps lecturers are also becoming strategic teachers, driven by the shared objective of student completion and graduation. Lecturers seem to dedicate more and more time and resources to the assignments, most likely at the expense of content. The focus on pass rates, or even student attainment more broadly, is certainly important for accountability. However, with the level of help provided by some lecturers, which can be step-by-step instructions, we are concerned about the extent to which students are all encouraged to

develop broader academic and personal skills (e.g. criticality, organisation and independence, see Leathwood 2006; Llamas 2006; Wong and Chiu under review).

The higher education market appears to have encouraged lecturers, as well as students, into short-termism. The importance of life-long learning and transferable skills appears overshadowed by the marketised focus on the immediate, more foreseeable outcomes and returns. Not all lecturers agree with the assertion that students are increasingly "spoon-fed", but there is a fine line between supporting students to understand an assignment and providing students with the steps to pass an assignment. As detailed below, there can be tensions between the role of lecturers as an educator who equip students with the necessary tools and skills for learning, and the accountable service provider who presents students with the resources and instructions to complete their degrees (see Sutton 2015). Many staff acknowledge that they have now entered a new era of teaching in higher education and the duty of lecturers ought to change and adapt to new expectations (e.g. TEF). For teaching, lectures and seminars are already designed to be more engaging, with a stronger emphasis on student interactions (e.g. Steven) as well as the use of different media to vary the learning process (e.g. Una).

The service provider

In recognition of higher tuition fees, most lecturers acknowledge that students are entitled to expect more for their money, even though many are concerned that the neoliberal higher education discourse "jeopardises the whole learning environment" (Mandy). We note that the consumer discourse has not only permeated the mindsets of students but has also opened up the role of service provider among our lecturers. Furthermore, we find examples where lecturers extend their responsibilities in ways that might fall into the realms of an entertaier.

Like many, Abby is critical of the higher education market but senses that "students feel that they are the clients and that we should just provide them good customer care". Some lecturers, by choice or by encouragement, appear to accept or promote their changing roles. Nicky believes that "students are starting to understand they are customers and we are service providers and I think the expectation is increasingly that we provide a full-scale service". To cater for the needs of different students, especially those who fail to prepare adequately for a session (e.g. a required reading), Rachel said she would now "prepare [a handout of] some of the main points out of the readings" for these students so that her teaching is delivered as planned. Similarly, when William realised that: "Giving students chapters to read and journal articles doesn't work … so I started giving students online media articles or blogs ... that sort of bite-size approach [and] it's been quite promising." Their anticipations of ill-prepared students and the pre-emptive steps taken to address these projected issues seem to signal a departure from expectations of student responsibility. Instead, lecturers such as Rachel and William make contingency plans and additional resources to ensure that all students are given an opportunity to participate regardless of their preparation.

Outside of scheduled teaching, the ease of email communication has also generated particular student expectations and demands. While lecturers often engage in student email exchanges, Nicole said she has witnessed an increase in requests from absent students for an executive summary of their missed session. Nicole recalls that: "The email just says, 'I

missed last week's session, can you tell me what I need to do?'" Although infuriated, Nicole said, for the sake of students, she still provides the necessary support. Similarly, Nicky admits that: "I find myself telling my students, just email me at whatever time, whatever day… just like a customer service line." Nicky said that she "want[s] to resist that as much as possible" but recognises that "students are increasingly being told of what they should expect [from tutors] and that we're being held accountable to it". Here, Nicole and Nicky may be interpreted as caring and compassionate professionals, but it is also not difficult to draw comparisons to a service provider in a consumer culture, where lecturers effectively serve the needs of demanding students (irrespective of the tutor's own pedagogical beliefs and practices). Nicole also mentions a rise in student expectation for tutors to reply to emails almost immediately, otherwise "they'll just email somebody else with the same question and not even copy you in", which can waste staff time. Perhaps more concerning, Abby warns that the expectation of students, as well as some staff themselves, to have: "Everything delivered to students by their email 24 h a day … we provide very delicate information on everything." As such, more students, she feels, "will not even spend time looking for the references or articles", which could have a negative impact on students' academic skills and their ability to search or critique their own resources.

Yet, given the higher tuition fees, some lecturers feel that their role should duly change and adapt and be more accommodating for students. Dennis states his teaching philosophy is now "very simple … the student is the bottom line". He believes that:

> We [lecturers] should always be accessible and approachable for students… we have to adapt, it's our job [and] we have to bite our lip, provide students perhaps with more study skills … they're now paying £9000 per year to come in here.

Dennis claims that if he were a student now: "I'd be expecting a hell of a lot more from the institution, from the department, from the team, from all sorts of things, libraries, books, resources."

Our data also reveal that some lecturers are more sensitive about student engagement and satisfaction, especially if students enjoyed their teaching, or as David said, "had a good time". For instance, William said that "my aim is to make sure that by the time they [students] leave, they will say to me, 'oh, I feel a lot better now'". When students leave "feeling a lot more confident", he "feel[s] that's my job done, for that person, for that day". For most lecturers, it is a bonus if students have enjoyed the lesson or find it valuable. For others, it can be a more conscious objective. Mandy admits that "the times have changed" and cited "with the technology and everything, less and less people read boring academic articles and books". She observes that students can find lectures boring, especially if the lecturer is not that "enthusiastic about the topic". As such, she is aware of the importance for lecturers to make their teaching "more enjoyable and relevant" to students. Likewise, Victor concedes that: "Teaching nowadays is very much like entertainment. You need to keep students entertained so you really need to be a kind of *Instagram* in front of them … to attract attention." Ellen shed light into her internal conflict between the demands of students and her professional role as a lecturer. She said that:

> Students want to learn less, therefore we teach them less? Is that how it works? Because they're a consumer, we're the client support. It's all about making them happy, so if they want less then we need to give them less.

Ellen also shared her experience of being taught outside the UK, where lecturers were mostly "entertaining" even though "it was not a requirement". In England, where she

completed her doctorate at an elite university, she recalled that "most of the lecturers were completely boring". As a lecturer now in a post-1992 institution, Ellen finds that "there is a conscious effort or unconscious effort to make lectures entertaining", including herself. Although Ellen acknowledges that her current approach can resonate with the role of a service provider, she prefers to be entertaining because not only do students tend to find these lessons more stimulating, the fun factor can also promote her own morale and teaching satisfaction.

With the TEF, it is essential for English universities that their students rate favourably in NSS metrics such as teaching, academic support and assessment and feedback (BIS 2016a). Our lecturers are fully aware of this latest shift, which further strengthens the position of students as the important consumer. Given our lecturers provide plentiful support for students, we may be concerned that students might be presented with too much, rather than too little, help and advice. Some staff have made minor pedagogical changes in recognition of student diversity and learning styles. Others have made more significant adjustments to their teaching, perhaps in response or resignation to neoliberal demands and expectations. Despite the good intentions, we argue that such provisions can have a negative impact on students.

Universities and staff typically strive for better student engagement, participation and attainment. Yet, the strategies used to achieve these aims can have undesirable consequences. For instance, a common challenge faced by lecturers is the lack of student reading preparation for a teaching session (Grove 2017). To continue with the planned teaching, our lecturers have provided students with a concise summary handout of the assigned reading in class (e.g. Yasmine) or have directed students to shorter "bite-size" versions of the reading topic, such as a blog (e.g. William). Here, under-prepared students are offered a better chance to participate, but the availability of these additional and simplified resources can promote an accepted practice of low/no student preparation. Not only do these provisions reflect the role of lecturers as service providers, this ease of information access can also disincentivise students to read critically or to think independently in their studies. The ability of students to take initiative and scout for their own resources could also be impaired, who can, in certain cases, be spoiled with information overload as well as round-the-clock email support (e.g. Nicole, Nicky and Abby). Perhaps, as Anna succinctly stated, less is more, especially for the growth and future development of students as citizens.

There are also lecturers who believed that, due to the higher cost of study, students should always be provided with more support (e.g. Dennis). However, we argue that the empathy shown by some lecturers may be distorted or misplaced. Given that none of our lecturers has personally experienced the lived realities of a much higher graduation debt (c. £27,000 in fees alone), it is only through imagination and speculation that lecturers can empathise with the experiences of current students. One obvious difference between students now and in the past is the ever-larger cloud of debt hanging over their futures. Aside from finance, it is debatable the extent to which teaching structures and pedagogies have changed since the introduction of tuition fees. Most, if not all, social science degrees are still taught through lectures, seminars and individual or group tutorials, at least across our post-1992 universities. Yet, our findings reaffirmed that the role of lecturers is ever more multifaceted. The supportive tutor seems to be the current norm, with the identity of service provider the possible next phase. For lecturers, these identity shifts are steered towards greater student support (see Wood and Su 2017), even though, as we cautioned already, excessive support can

increase student reliance on staff and negatively impact on students' own skills development. While Hockings et al. (2009) found prior learning experiences often shape lecturers' own teaching approaches, lecturers in our study clearly recognised and responded to the emerging teaching expectations that are dominated by student support and satisfaction. These expectations – which can also be imagined – further constitute and extend lecturers' identity in practice (Wenger 1998) as the supportive tutor and the service provider.

Conclusion and implications

Educator and entertainer

The rise in tuition fees has not only repositioned students as de facto consumers, but the role of university lecturers has also changed in light of neoliberal policies and expectations. Many tutors have consciously increased their support for students, from teaching to assignment preparations. In principle, the extended role of lecturers as supportive tutors is unproblematic, which appreciates the unique financial challenges of current students and the consequential impacts on study commitments. However, there are no standardised practices or consensus with regards to the levels of support students should or ought to receive. There are concerns that academic values and integrity may be eroded by consumerist expectations, as well as the changing identities of lecturers into service providers in light of these changes.

To ensure teaching remains interesting for students, lecturers have signalled the importance of having fun, especially for students but also for staff. It is, of course, to the credit of tutors that they design and deliver lessons that are enjoyable for students, but we also wonder the extent to which lecturers now consider entertainment to be a part of their teaching role. For educators, it is usually self-satisfying to observe student enjoyment in their teaching (e.g. Ellen). It is not unusual for tutors to make conscious efforts to achieve this outcome. In essence, feeling entertained is not in conflict with intellectual learning (Arthur 2009). We can certainly learn with joy and enthusiasm, typically around topics that we find fascinating. However, the scenario darkens if lecturers feel compelled to satisfy or entertain students due to external pressures, such as the NSS and the TEF. We fear that consumerism has further penetrated the higher education discourse, with teaching and learning the casualty here as some lecturers (e.g. Mandy and Victor) recited growing student demands for more entertaining (rather than, say, stimulating or intellectually challenging) lessons. In addition to a degree qualification (Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion 2009), consumer-minded students may also want their learning experiences to be fun. We find evidence that some tutors have already immersed the role of entertainer into their lecturer identities.

Further research

The changing roles and identities of lecturers are heavily shaped by the higher education market. Harris (2005) highlighted over a decade ago that neoliberal policies have generated tensions and conflicts between academics and their institutions, especially the balance between research, teaching and administration. Even within teaching, the role of lecturers is also messier with the rise in supportive as well as service provider identities, including that of an entertainer. We did wonder the extent to which lecturers would feel obliged to support students in the same way as they currently do if tuition fees cease, such as in Scotland, or more recently, in Germany. More research is needed. In England, and perhaps

other market-driven systems, being a lecturer is as much about keeping students satisfied as it is the transmission of subject knowledge. The recent Higher Education and Research Bill (BIS 2016b) is likely to deepen this trajectory, especially if plans to allow the creation of new universities, to promote competition, takes off.

Perhaps more typical in post-1992 English universities, the profile of students in our study is diverse and traditionally underrepresented, with many first-generation, mature and minority ethnic students. It is therefore not unreasonable for lecturers to provide a wide range of student support, in recognition of diverse learner preferences. Although the market-driven issues we identified may not be specific to teaching-oriented universities, the identities of lecturers do seem to differ when compared to research-intensive institutions, which tend to prioritise research over teaching (Billot 2010). Rather than excessive student support, Skelton (2012a) found almost the opposite for lecturers at a pre-92 university, where the institution prescribed the teaching structure to mostly large lectures, with limited time and resources for lecturers to deliver content, promote interactions and maintain student enthusiasm. It remains to be seen how research-focused universities respond to consumerist teaching demands and provisions in light of the TEF, which, in a mock exercise, has already produced very different rankings for both teaching and research-oriented universities (Havergal 2016). At the time of writing, the "TEF Year 2" results were just released (June 2017), which confirmed anticipations that most research-focused universities would fare much worse than their comparative REF rankings. Further research could observe the extent to which different institutions would establish a priority on TEF metrics, especially on student satisfaction, and the subsequent impact on the identities and roles of lecturers as potential entertainers.

Final thoughts

This study contributes to our understandings of the changing roles and identities of lecturers. Our findings suggest that consumerism is very much embedded into the neoliberal structures of higher education. University lecturers may no longer be synonymous with teachers or instructors. The job specification of lecturers might mirror closer a consultant, where the student is advised, supported and sometimes even presented with a solution or answer. As a service provider, it is also important that clients (or students) are happy and satisfied with their provisions and support, which has opened up the identity of entertaining lecturers. We are unsure if this shift is healthy, although we appreciate the importance of enjoyment for both students and tutors. Thinking forward, we believe that the expanding role of lecturers merits an urgent review at the institutional and national level, to promote and ensure clarity of the boundaries and expectations of teaching staff. Until then, the identities of lecturers remain precarious, as the supportive tutor, the service provider and in some cases, the entertainer.

Notes

1. The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) is the UK government's assessment exercise which ranks universities based on specific metrics associated with "learning and teaching", which will also impact the undergraduate tuition fees chargeable by individual institutions in the future (BIS 2016b).

2. The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is the research equivalence of TEF (see earlier), where universities and departments are ranked based on the "quality" ("significance", "originality" and "rigour") of research publications submitted by academics.
3. Post-1992, or "new" universities are former polytechnics or central institutions which gained university status following the Further and Higher Education Act in 1992 in the UK. It is historically teaching-oriented.

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ORCID

Billy Wong http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7310-6418
Yuan-Li Tiffany Chiu http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1520-5637

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