

English Universities in Crisis: Markets without competition
by J. Frank, N. Gower and M. Naef, (Pp. 1-197) (Pbk).
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Higher education has not tended to feature strongly in the undergraduate Education Studies curriculum. There has perhaps been an over-emphasis on 3-16 schooling and the learning and development of children and young people. I have always found this strange in that we are all teaching and/or learning in institutions of higher education, so that we can easily access first-hand examples of theory and practice.

Universities certainly make for interesting reading and this book makes a strong case for including them in our courses for students. The first thing to note about the recent history of higher education in England is that, unlike every other public sector including health, schooling and social services, it has not suffered the effects of the economic austerity policies of the Conservative and LibDem Coalition governments. Such policies were supposedly justified by the international banking crisis of 2008 with the ambition of reducing the nation's annual deficit. In contrast, following the Browne Report (2010) and the introduction in 2010 of annual student fees of £9,000, most universities have been, if not awash with cash, very comfortably placed financially. As the high fees built up over the years, universities have expanded in student numbers and resources. Almost any city you visit boasts spanking new academic buildings and towering student accommodation blocks.

Much of the current literature on higher education (Collini, 2012; Barnett, 2000; Ward, 2020) focuses on the effects of neoliberal economics on higher education. Universities are in competition for students in an increasingly cut-throat market, in which universities lose their traditional control of knowledge as academic students are converted into customers who choose from an offering of degree courses in which the most popular survive. Academic staff lose their roles of guardians of the integrity of knowledge in the subject to become 'professionals' who guard the role of the university in the market.

In their book, three academics of Royal Holloway University Frank, Gower and Naef provide a well written account of the economics of higher education. The Introduction and Chapter 2 (*How did we get here*) give the key points in a critical history of government policies which created the current neoliberal market context. While accessible, the chapters benefit from well-presented data on participation and finances. However, going beyond the usual complaints about marketisation, they actually critique the very nature of the higher education market.

Their subtitle, 'markets without competition' encapsulates the argument. They explain that a genuine market should see competition for a fixed quantity of goods, and the price is determined by the quantity available in the market. So if there are lots of bananas available the price will be low; with a shortage of bananas the price will increase. The Browne Report recommended capping the number of students in higher education. The rationale for the increase in university fees to a *maximum* of £9,000 was that there would be a variance in price according to the quality of the 'product' while universities competed for the fixed number of students available in the market. The 'elite' or the Russell Group universities would charge the maximum fee and the 'standard' institutions would be able to charge only £6,000.

However, Frank, Gower and Naef point out that the higher education market simply does not work like this since the government removed the cap on university numbers in 2014. It means that while there is no fixed number of students a market cannot operate. What has happened, they argue, is that the 'standard' universities have been able to maintain the maximum tuition fee simply by recruiting more students with lower qualifications who have been willing to pay the £9,000. So there is no real competition. They deplore this 'lowering of standards' with the admission of nearly 50% of the population to university courses, suggesting that it has led to grade inflation with the increases in first and upper-second honours degree awards. Again, their arguments are sustained by a range of relevant data.

They go on to offer suggestions for the improvement of the system with the return of the cap on student numbers and the lowering of the staff-student ratio (SSR). The book can be strongly recommended to students and tutors who are interested either in higher education or in the general marketisation of education. However, many will disagree with their proposition that a smaller proportion of the population should experience higher education.

References

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