Encountering the market: Marketization in higher education and hierarchy among non-academic staff at the University of St Andrews

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Abstract

Non-academic, or Professional Services, staff comprise 46% of the University of St Andrews' employees. Despite this, as a second-year student, I felt that my engagement with this significant portion of the University's staff was limited. Thus, I sought to discover what insights would emerge from ethnographic encounters with them. With interlocutors' repeated references to students as 'customers' and the University as a 'business,' the project's focus soon became the marketization of UK higher education. This paper contributes to "critical anthropology of the neoliberal university" (Gusterson 2017) from the perspective of understudied non-academic university staff. It situates interviews and participant observation with non-academic staff at the University of St Andrews in the context of the increasingly marketized UK university. It proposes that due to marketization, a hierarchy of valuation arises across types of University staff based on their proximity to the student-customer, then concludes with reflections on how students might leverage their 'consumer' status to effect change in higher education.

Introduction

One afternoon at the University of St Andrews Main Library, I opened Twitter to an announcement from the University and College Union (UCU): "EVERY SINGLE UK UNIVERSITY WILL BE SHUT DOWN WITH 18 DAYS OF STRIKE ACTION ACROSS FEBRUARY AND MARCH." Resigning myself to an amended deadline schedule, I considered my surroundings, where business was as usual: electricians surveyed a flickering light, cleaners propped up 'Wet Floor' signs, and front desk staff helped load a van full of books. I remember thinking – if all those people went on strike, they could take the 'shutdown' of the university to another level.

Staff at the University of St Andrews fall into two categories. Academic Schools host professors and researchers, while the other 46% of staff (in departments such as Finance, IT, Estates, and the Library) are classified as Professional Services (University of St Andrews 2022). Despite sharing an institution, my engagement with this entire other dimension of the university was incredibly limited. This project thus became an attempt to discover what different perspectives would arise from encounters between me, a student entrenched in the academic side of the university, and non-academic staff.

It did not take long for these differences in perspectives to become clear. David, a newly hired project manager in capital development, was one of my earliest interview-

ees. He seemed passionate and energized by the mission of his work, expressing a sense of purpose and contribution to a wider goal:

> *"I feel it's really important that we live up to the mission to make this a world class place, and to put the student at the front of that."*

Curious about his thoughts on educating future generations, I asked:

> *"Why do you think the student should be at the front?"*

He replied with some amusement:

> *"Well, fundamentally, 'cause you're paying the money, aren't you?"*

Perhaps I should not have been as taken aback as I was. After all, I had entered the field to highlight perspectives other than my own, and affirm that not everything was about me. But as fieldwork continued, it appeared that in the context of the modern university, everything is about me – as a customer. Emerging time and time again in my fieldwork among non-academic staff at the University of St Andrews was the concept of the university as a *business*, with the experience of its students – or *customers* – being of paramount importance to its continued funding. This framing is the result of a wider process of neoliberal marketization in higher education (HE), defined by Brown (2015: 4) as "the provision of higher education on a market basis, where the demand and supply of student education... are balanced through the price mechanism".

Hugh Gusterson noted this movement in his 2017 presidential address to the American Ethnological Society, and highlighted a lack of studies that explore "the reshaping of knowledge production and consumption in response to larger political-economic forces; the transfer of contemporary corporate workplace practices to the university; the changing structure of the university workforce in the context of··· increased economic stratification··· and the silent complicity of liberal faculty with many of these processes" (439). While these aspects have since been further and internationally explored (see Gupta 2018; Ahmed 2016; Macheridis, et al. 2020; Xiong, et al. 2022), only Magolda & Delman (2016) have addressed them in relation to non-academic staff, in their ethnography of custodians at American universities. This ethnography thus attempts to further fill the gap in "critical anthropology of the neoliberal university" (Gusterson 2017: 439), specifically examining the effects of the UK marketized university on experiences with hierarchy of non-academic staff at the University of St Andrews.

Method

I conducted my fieldwork through a combination of ethnographic interviews and participant observation at the University of St Andrews Main Library help desk. I met most of my interviewees through an email call for interest, to which four responded: Luke, an electrician; David, a project manager; and Xavier and Mary, both cleaners. From contacts at the Library, I was able to conduct another interview with Bernadette, an academic liaison librarian, and meet and speak informally with four library assistants – Katie, Paul, Eleanor, and Julia – during observation.

The lived experiences of these individuals are at the forefront of this ethnography, against the backdrop of neoliberal marketization of higher education in the UK. Here I will note that neoliberalism is a highly "polysemic" concept in anthropology (Ganti 2014:91), with a vast range of

analyses on its foundations (Harvey 2005; Ong 2006; Lemke 2001; Plehwe 2009) and definitions (Foucault 2008; Hilgers 2011; Mirowski 2009; Wacquant 2012, Eriksen, et al. 2015). In my analysis of the 'neoliberal' marketized university, I draw on Wacquant (2012), Mirowski (2009), and Treanor (2005) to define neoliberalism as a political-economic movement characterized by the reframing of the state to serve rapid economic growth. Specifically following from Treanor's (2005) claim that neoliberalism regards market systems as a primary instrument for efficiency, I use the term to underscore the wider historical context of the marketization of the HE sector, which will later be further explored.

Reframing the university

After the reality check from David, I entered subsequent interviews and participation observation with a new inquiry – what do you think is the purpose of the university? Another topic from David's interview served as a helpful entry point into this question: his recent staff induction, in which it was "made very clear" that student experience was "key."

When I asked other informants if they had similar inductions or were told similar rhetoric, they all affirmed they were aware of the priority of student experience. Bernadette, whose position as an academic liaison librarian is the most closely integrated into the academic side of the university, identified "the student experience" and "the continuing success of the university" as the "absolute core things that the university is here to do." David certainly agreed – in an attempt at conversation, I offhandedly commented to him, "we students think everything's about us." Fortunately for the integrity of my research, he countered, "well, it is about you!" When I made a similar comment to Katie at the help desk, she responded in turn: "It is about students. You are our bread and butter. The university wouldn't exist without students." Sharing this awareness was Mary, a cleaner, with wry resignation:

> *"All of us pretty much realized it when we realized that students don't get pulled up for anything… [the university] always seem[s] reticent to enforce anything that might impact the student saying, 'it's a wonderful place to be.' Because we depend on students, on the tuition fees. If that's the way the university sees it, that's just the way we have to work with it."*

Mary identifies exactly what wider discussions in anthropology and sociology about marketization in higher education have highlighted about the 'student experience' discourse. While a seemingly innocuous goal, the concept of 'student experience' has in practice come to represent the importance of student fees and the student as a consumer in the wider context of a higher education market. Her last statement speaks to Furedi's (2011) argument that "as customer, the student is expected to serve as the personification of market pressure...since according to the logic of marketization, the customer is always right, the university had better listen to the student" (3). I will now further explain the context and "logic" of neoliberal marketization of higher education.

Marketization in UK higher education: a brief overview

In the mid-to-late 1970s, economic recession and frustration with perceived ineffectiveness of social services created conditions for a vast expansion of neoliberal policies, such as the mass privatization of services and deregulation of markets, signaling changes to the administration of public services – including higher educa-

tion (Foskett 2011:28; Holmwood 2014:63; Holmwood 2016:65). Based on neoliberal conceptions of the state serving economic growth – with market mechanisms as the most effective facilitator of that growth – policymakers concurred that resources would be most efficiently used if universities responded to student-consumer demands directly, rather than through the intermediary of the government (Foskett 2011: 29). As such, for-profit teaching institutions were given degree-granting status to expand the HE market, public research councils were instructed to limit spending to encourage competition, and it was consequently argued that private contributions, in the form of unsubsidized overseas and domestic tuition fees, would become necessary to maintain the growth of this market (Holmwood 2016:65; Brown 2015:5; Department of Business, Innovation and Skills 2010).

Since then, rather than a publicly accessible education system, higher education in the UK has taken the form of an immense range of autonomous institutions competing for research funding and tuition fees, which have since become a significant contributor to income – in 2022, tuition fees constituted 43.8% of the University of St Andrews' revenue (University of St Andrews 2022). Despite some remainders of the "public" status of universities, including caps on domestic tuition fees and government regulation of market entry, it is evident that higher education in the UK has become effectively marketized sector (Brown 2011:17).

One appendage upholding this sector is league tables, a "ritual of commodification" (Furedi 2011:2) that have become of particular interest to the University of St Andrews with its recent success in the *Times* and *Guardian* university rankings. League tables have been criticized for their lack of credible assessment criteria, reinforcement of the hierarchy of elite institutions, ineffectiveness in improving teaching quality, and neglect of more intrinsic benefits of education (Furedi 2011:2; Jones-Devitt & Samiei 2011:96). However, left to the market, universities rely on performance in ranking scales to attract student-customers for funding, particularly in the international market (non-UK fees comprised 72% of the University of St Andrews' tuition revenue in 2022) (Foskett 2011:34; University of St Andrews 2022). As such, to improve rankings, universities are incentivized to divert resources toward attracting and enhancing 'student experience' through branding, outreach, and "glitzy" new buildings (such as those that David oversees) – arguably, an ironically inefficient use of resources (Brown 2015: 6).

The impacts of competition on teaching and research have led many to argue that marketization is antithetical to the educational goals of the university (Holmwood 2014, Brown with Carasso 2013, Gusterson 2017). For instance, some universities have concentrated focus on subject programmes that receive accolades and produce "useful" research, while neglecting and even cutting others on the basis of "low interest" and "lack of sustainability" (Brown 2015:9). Along with these challenges to the educational principles of the university, I will now explore the effects of marketization on economic and social hierarchies of non-academic staff at the University of St Andrews.

Ingrained Hierarchies

Over the course of conversations with informants about the personal and social aspects of their work, I noticed a categorization of staff arise – (1) academics, (2) 'higher-grade' professional staff (including academic support and capital development, like Bernadette and David) and (3) 'lower-grade' staff, or everyone else.

These categories became clear explicitly, with informants directly referencing these distinct positions in conversation; and implicitly, as patterns emerged across my 'higher-' and 'lower-grade' informants in responses to questions about work motivation and relationships.

I received a variety of answers from 'lower-grade' staff about their motivations for working. Mary, a graduate of the evening degree programme, told me she likes having a low-stress job that gives her access to academic resources to feed her love of learning – a benefit that Julia, library assistant and fellow evening degree graduate, also appreciates. Xavier, a cleaner, took up his job as a form of "self-anthropology" and a "confrontation" of his social class after becoming disillusioned with his work in the NGO sector following his law and International Cooperation for Development degrees. Because cleaning positions at the university are part-time, he also works as a lab technician, and has enjoyed learning new things through that role. Luke, an electrician, provided a more succinct response: "I don't have an endgame...I get paid to be here." His statement highlighted a commonality of these various motivations: rather than speaking to a wider mission, jobs were framed through their roles in contributing to informants' personal fulfillment.

Bernadette and David, however, did seem to have "endgames" – both were sincere about their feelings of contribution to a broader purpose. For Bernadette, being able to support the "amazing" work of students and staff and help them "reach their potential" reminded her on difficult days why she comes into work. David similarly shared that he enjoyed working toward a "mission" he was "passionate about," in that his day-to-day work directly "make[s] things better for the students."

This divergence between these two categories of informants also emerged in conversations around staff members' view of professional relationships with academics. Bernadette and David, working closely with academics as collaborators in their day-to-day tasks, told me that they "absolutely" regard academics as colleagues (David), and the branches of Professional Services and Academic Schools as a "partnership" (Bernadette). While other informants agreed with this view of the two branches, they had very different reactions to the question of whether or not they considered academics colleagues. The library assistants did not, with Katie attributing this to the nature of their position: "I'm seeing people over a desk – I don't see them in work, but to facilitate." Luke, Mary, and Xavier also rejected this premise, with Xavier adding, "I'm pretty sure not too many [academics] would think of *us* as *their* colleagues."

Conversations about relationships with academics usually then turned to interactions with people at the university more broadly. While everyone shared that their experiences were generally positive, all (except for Bernadette and David) did have some less positive interactions to mention: from "finger snappy" academics at the help desk, to "entitled" students ignoring 'no food' signs. I was assured these incidents were a rarity, but descriptors of their jobs like "lowly pay band," "*our* grade," "support," and "service" indicated a persisting awareness of systemic rank and hierarchy. As Xavier explained: "We are valued by individuals. But... being a cleaner puts you in a place which is what it is, and nobody tries to change that."

My observation in the library corroborated this dynamic. Every person who approached the help desk was polite, but comments from the library assistants ("That's a nice academic. They usually are.") indicated an 'us/them' relation-

ship seemingly facilitated, as Katie mentioned, by the desk separating us from the students and staff that would approach for questions.

Spheres of valuation

Evidently, hierarchies are felt between the Academic Schools and Professional Services, as well as within Professional Services itself, between roles in higher and lower pay bands. This social dynamic that informants spoke to is supplemented by organizational distinctions as well. First, while higher positions are full-time, the vast majority of library assistant and cleaner roles are capped at 25 hours per week. Disparities also exist in provisions for staff – I was told an anecdote about Occupational Health providing support for a struggling academic until they chose to leave the university, in contrast to the more regimented 'sick note' schedule of lower-level positions. This manifests itself in day-to-day forms as well, such as mandatory customer service trainings inconveniently scheduled during peak cleaning hours. Xavier, coming from a white-collar background and currently working as both cleaner and lab technician, was well-placed to make a connection between the valuation of different jobs and corresponding social dynamics. I asked if he has been treated differently between his various jobs. He responded:

> *"Since I am here I felt a lot different. You feel that [many people] treat you with some kind of contempt… What I felt is that of course, working as a low qualified manual worker gives you a completely different position in the public space. Even between the two jobs I have, I'm not treated the same."*

He explained that when someone has an issue with the cleaners, they direct it to the cleaners' management rather than the cleaners themselves. In contrast, if problems arise in the lab, they address him, the lab technician, directly. Xavier then offered an explanation for these disparities: "It all has to do with how society is organized…people's behavior reflects what society is."

In the context of the marketized university, this claim might explain why distinctions across informants in higher and lower grades emerged. With the university being organized according to a neoliberal market model, customer satisfaction (student experience) is key. As such, more value is placed on the work of staff more proximate to student experience (academics, academic support, capital development), as illustrated in the following diagram:

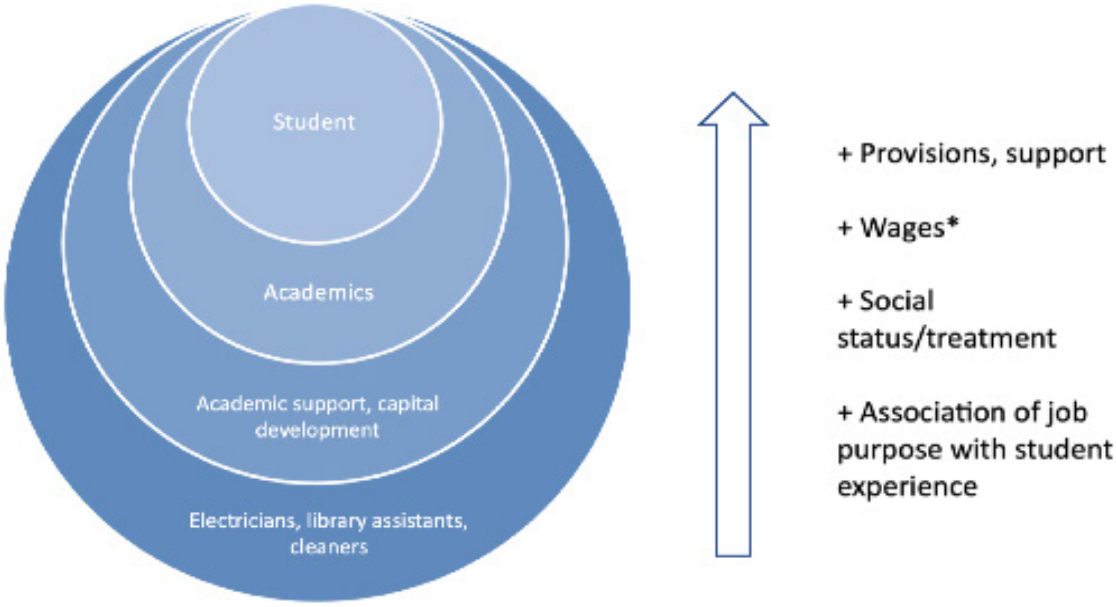

Fig 1. Different categories of staff at the University of St Andrews experience economic and social variations based on their proximity to student experience, placing them in 'spheres of valuation.' *(Indeed 2023; University of St Andrews 2022)

These 'spheres of valuation' may account for the disparities in structure and provisions across various jobs, as well as the social status that is assigned to certain roles. Consideration of academics as colleagues, association of the job's purpose with student experience, and respectful treatment increase with jobs in spheres closer to the student. This social hierarchy, constructed based on the priorities and goals of the neoliberal marketized university, has become ingrained in how non-academic staff experience and perceive their work, illustrating that marketization affects every aspect of the university, including beyond the academic dimension.

Conclusion: A New "Customer Empowerment"

Marilyn Strathern has stated that "anyone interested in the future of anthropology as a discipline should be interested in the kind of institution which reproduces it" (2000: 3). I certainly agree that the complex social changes taking place at the university, the host of academic study, warrant more of this very academic study – particularly in reference to their effects on wider society. Pressing aspects of marketization not addressed in this ethnography are the role of marketized universities in the reinforcement of socioeconomic inequality, the tensions between and implications of knowledge as a public benefit versus commodity, and dynamics of prestige in the HE sector: all questions to which the university is uniquely proximate through its societal role in disseminating knowledge and educating future generations.

Moreover, while the effects of marketization on the academic side of the university can and should be examined – especially in the context of UCU demands for equitable treatment of academic staff – it is also critical to engage in what Magolda & Delman (2016) call "border-crossing," or confronting and communicating across

hierarchies and categories of staff, if we aim to widen access within and to the university (258).

On that note, students, as the basis of the 'spheres of valuation,' may possess unique agency to change the principles of higher education – attributing new meaning to the market notion of "customer empowerment" – through facilitating more ethnographic encounters such as this one, or, like Mary, simply expressing our appreciation for education in itself:

> *"No one [goes to university] now simply because they like what they're doing! I'm sad for that because there's so much joy to be had in learning things. Do I sound mad?"*

Quite the opposite – with academics, students, and staff corroborating frustration with the turn that higher education has taken, perhaps it is time for a united effort to not only 'shut down' the university of the present, but 'build up' the university of the future.

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