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Neoliberal Governmentality in Irish Higher Education: The Shaping of Student Subjectivities

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Abstract

This research was a Foucauldian-inspired expedition concerned with examining how neoliberal governmentality manifests at the level of Irish higher education students. It sought to explore whether elements of neoliberal discourses were discernible in the meanings young higher education students ascribed to student-hood and the practices they engaged in. The research was comprised of three elements. Firstly, it involved a review of a recent national higher education policy, taken as an exemplar of current neoliberal discourses to which students are potentially exposed. Secondly, the local institutional practices and discourses of one higher education institution, University College Cork (UCC), were also examined in order to more comprehensively capture the neoliberal discourses at the meso-level to which students are possibly subjected. And finally, nine qualitative interviews with UCC students were conducted and the extent of subjectivity alignment with neoliberal discourses considered. A significant convergence with neoliberal subjectivities was revealed, although a divergence from neoliberal doctrines was at times apparent. Thus it was overall concluded that while neoliberal governmentality in higher education is a considerable force, it is not a totalising one.

Keywords: Neoliberalism; governmentality; higher education; student subjectivities

Introduction

Across the globe, the growing neoliberalisation of higher education has generated considerable concern among scholars. It is contended that a concern for civil society is being eroded by a concern for corporate endeavours, where higher education is now regarded as a vehicle for economic furtherance as opposed to a mechanism for public enlightenment. Such a path is seen as actively supported and indeed abetted by the private sector, government and higher education institutions themselves as they scramble to amass a greater share of the dividends associated with the global onset of 'knowledge economies' – where economic success is now seen as dependent on 'knowledge' as opposed to natural resources (Brown and Lauder 2006).

The neoliberal pursuit of commercialisation, corporatisation and privatisation is seen as justifying an individualistic and instrumental outlook in the higher education setting. At the student-level, this is seen as manifesting itself as a reconceptualization of higher education as an investment in one's own economic future as opposed to a platform for higher learning or civic engagement. Such assertions appear merited as various studies have demonstrated the instrumentality with which students view higher education, seeing it effectively as the means to enhanced 'employability' (e.g. Tomlinson 2008; Brown and Hesketh 2004). However, other studies have alluded to the broader conceptualisation of higher education students sometimes hold, where higher education can be seen as a means to enhancing personal development, furthering a love of learning, or as a way to 'give back' to communities (Fleming et al 2010; Reay et al 2002; Stone 2008; Pick and Taylor 2009).

It would thus appear that neoliberalism is a considerable force in higher education. However its presence does not necessarily translate into wholly neoliberalised student subjectivities. This research sought to investigate this matter further in the Irish context, drawing on the concepts and ideas of Foucault, an influential theorist in the field of power and subjectivity. Thus the overarching aim of this research became 'to explore how the subjectivities of Irish higher education students are shaped by neoliberal governmentality.'

Research Rationale

The exploration of how neoliberal governmentality shapes Irish higher education student subjectivities is capable of making three significant contributions to existing literature. Firstly, the majority of research on ‘neoliberal governmentality’ is characterised by an imbalance which favours discursive reductionist accounts over accounts of lived experiences. Such issues are evident in the field of higher education where discursive accounts (e.g. Tikly 2003; Suspitsyna 2012; Lolich 2011) have predominated over those which include the perspectives of governed subjects. Notable exceptions do exist (e.g. Varman et al 2011; Pick and Taylor 2009; Nairn and Higgins 2007), and this research, with its focus on the lived experiences of governed subjects, hopes to contribute to this latter body of work.

Secondly, this research can add to the limited amount of research conducted in the Irish context in relation to neoliberal governmentality in higher education. Work conducted through a Foucauldian lens in this field is limited to the insightful work of Lolich (2011). However, she too prioritises discursive accounts over those of lived experiences, leaving a significant gap in the literature which can be mediated by this research’s emphasis on the actual thoughts and actions of Irish students as told by students themselves.

The final contribution this research can make relates to its provision of a potential methodological template for empirical work from a governmentality perspective. As part of this research, a ‘unique conceptual scaffold’ (Marston and McDonald 2006) was formulated, fusing together relevant literature, research questions and primary research methods. Such a framework may offer future researchers a foundation from which they could build their own methodologies.

Literature Review

Foucault and Power

Foucault challenged the three main elements upon which traditional understandings of power rested (Olssen et al 2004). Firstly, he contended that power is not a top-down exertion. Rather, he proposed a bottom-up understanding of power, where power is scattered throughout society, existing in numerous relationships (Mills 2005; Hay and Kapitzke 2009). Secondly, he viewed power not as something which is possessed by

the powerful (e.g. the state or a particular class) and imposed onto the powerless, rather he saw power as something which was exercised – a set of relations ‘enacted at every moment of interaction’ (Mills 2005: 30). And finally, he argued that power was not merely a repressive force, rather it was also productive - creating particular subjectivities, identities and modes of self-awareness (Hearn 2012).

Governmentality

These understandings of how power operates underpin the concept of governmentality. Government is seen as a relationally dispersed phenomenon, exercised at the point of numerous interactions and intrinsically productive in nature. As a result, governmentality studies focus on the notion of ‘the conduct of conduct’ – which refers to any form of activity which endeavours to influence the behaviour of others for specific ends (Gordon 1991). This may refer to acts on the self by the self, or those within private relationships, social institutions or communities or those in relation to the exercise of political sovereignty. Thus, government is identified with numerous sites as opposed to resting solely with the constitutional state (Gordon 1991; Dean 1995). However, subjects can always resist such influences. Indeed, the very idea of attempting to conduct conduct is seen as indicative of the ability for individuals to act alternatively, thus eliminating the prospect of state domination and subjects’ passivity.

Neoliberal Governmentality

Neoliberal government believes that the most effective way to govern is to apply a market rationality to all domains of human existence (Dean 2010). A model of rational-economic action is used to justify or curtail government presence and government is re-envisaged as a form of enterprise tasked with creating ‘market-shaped systems of action for individuals, groups and institutions’ (Lemke 2001: 197). Neoliberal government attempts to create a distance between the decisions of political institutions and other social actors and occur instead through the ‘entrepreneurial’ choices and actions of the actors themselves (Miller and Rose 2008). Indeed, neoliberal government attempts to construct the ethical self as the entrepreneurial self, the self who makes appropriate consumer choices, such as investing in their health, education or employability, in order to protect themselves against various risks (Peters 2001).

Methodology

Creating a Conceptual Scaffold

This research employed Marston and McDonald's (2006: 4) idea that by drawing on individual interpretations of governmentality literature, a guide can be created for facilitating the development of a suitable methodology and research design. The emergent scaffold was comprised of three elements, each of which was tied to a number of research questions, informed by relevant concepts as identified in the literature and subsequently translated into an 'empirical application.'

The first element was concerned with identifying existing neoliberal discourses in relation to higher education and considering how these may relate to student subjectivities. In order to empirically research this element of the conceptual scaffold, the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (hereafter referred to as the Hunt Report) published in 2011 was selected and examined. The second element was concerned with exploring the types of discourses and practices in the context of one higher education institution (UCC), and considering how they also may relate to student subjectivities. It involved an examination of the 2009-2012 and 2013-2017 Strategic Plans of UCC (hereafter referred to as the 'Strategic Plans') in addition to web material published online by UCC. The final element was concerned with examining the extent to which students' subjectivities converged or diverged with those normalised or made desirable under elements one and two of the conceptual scaffold and exploring the 'technologies of the self' that students may engage in as a result. Nine qualitative, semi-structured interviews with UCC undergraduate students from a variety of disciplines were conducted.

In analysing the interview data, 'The Framework' (Bryman 2012) approach to thematic analysis was used. This involved a careful reading of the interview transcripts where a table was made for each individual interview depicting core points of interest. These initial tables were then collated, compared and contrasted and themes and sub-themes identified.

An Examination of the Hunt Report

Institutional Reforms

The Hunt Report was clearly informed by a particular problematization – that of establishing an internationally competitive Irish knowledge economy. To accomplish such a feat, an increased number of graduates of a high calibre are deemed necessary. These graduates are seen as more likely to emerge from a reformed higher education system- a system clearly based on neoliberal principles. For example, it is proposed that HEIs be subject to stringent performance management, engage in greater competitive enterprise and demonstrate increased productivity and accountability, with targets and priorities derived from governmental objectives.

Furthermore, consistent with neoliberalism, HEIs are compelled to become more proactive in securing alternative forms of funding in order to ‘reduce their strong relative reliance on exchequer funding’ (DES 2011: 16). A core way in which this is to be achieved is through an increase in student contribution fees, and, in seeking to legitimate such a neoliberal shift, a consumerist-student subjectivity is created. Drawing on a market rationality, it is essentially contended that as students derive significant private gains from investing in higher education they should, as with any other commodity, contribute to the cost. Moreover, it is effectively argued by the report that as consumers, students will acquire a better ‘service’ as HEIs endeavour to respond to their ‘customers.’

Curricular Changes

The types of high-quality graduates required for the creation of a knowledge economy are believed to be critical, analytical, innovative thinkers who possess the generic skills sought-after by business. Curricular changes are deemed necessary, with such changes ranging from increased use of problem-based learning and establishing greater links between research, teaching and learning. In addition it is hoped to increase the numbers who participate in work placement or service learning (community service) and ensure students become internationally experienced and knowledgeable of various cultures. These curricular changes can be seen as an expression of neoliberal governmentality where, as Miller and Rose (2008) assert, rather than endeavour to render individuals docile or passive, government attempts to

endow individuals with new attributes and abilities aligned with government objectives.

The Importance of Lifelong Learning

The Hunt Report also maintains that students must be instilled with a sense of enthusiasm for learning and an appropriate lifelong learning infrastructure established. This derives from the expectation that knowledge economies will generate new skill demands while leaving others obsolete, thus necessitating continuous engagement in education. Thus HEIs can no longer be just mere dispensers of degrees, rather they must ‘create mobile, life-long learners who are rational and calculating and able to provide for their own needs without burdening the nation or state’ (Jankowski and Provezis 2012: 2).

Some of the jobs that people will do in 2015 and 2030 do not exist now, and some cannot even be foreseen. For that reason, we now need to take a broader approach to knowledge and to foster the core enabling competencies that will empower future workers in whatever environment they find themselves (DES 2011: 37).

This form of responsabilization goes beyond however merely ensuring students choose to invest in their education in times of job-uncertainty. Rather, it also hopes to encourage graduates to take responsibility for their own future, taking a proactive lead in creating labour market opportunities for themselves and embrace ‘change as an opportunity’ (DES 2011: 37). Such aspirations can be seen as a significant manifestation of a neoliberal rationality which seeks to offload its responsibilities through the entrepreneurial attributes of students.

Whether as employers of established leading companies, as entrepreneurs in new start-up enterprises, or as social innovators, Irish graduates need to be job shapers and not just job seekers (DES 2011: 37).

An Analysis of Local Institutional Discourses and Practices

Consumer Students

It is evident from the Strategic Plans that UCC draws on a market rationality, seeing itself as operating in a competitive higher education market, describing itself as ‘the university of choice for growing numbers of students’ (UCC 2009: 17). Indeed,

students are viewed as autonomous consumers who make informed choices, selecting the HEI which appears to offer the best return on their investment. This compels UCC to respond to students' desires, whether in the form of improved student experience or enhanced job prospects upon graduation. These technologies encourage a level of instrumentality among students where the emphasis is placed on what they can 'get' out of their time in UCC relative to other HEIs, shaping students into individual consumers as opposed to social citizens (Marston and McDonald 2006).

Another way in which UCC practices can contribute to the creation of neoliberal subjectivities is demonstrated by the UCC Career Service. This service provides, for example an annual series of events designed to enhance employability such as CV writing and self-presentation workshops and a drop-in centre for career advice (Careers Service n.d). Fodge (2011: 78) describes such career coaching as a technology which encourages individuals to 'work on their enterprising qualities' throughout higher education, conceptualising themselves as 'ME INC' through emphasising the use of self-marketing strategies and the responsibility of individuals to market themselves appropriately.

The economic rationality of neoliberal subjectivities is also evident in recent prospectuses for UCC. Interweaved throughout course descriptions is a focus on that degrees relevancy to the job market and the ways in which various degrees specifically attempt to make students more employable.

An integral and key feature of the programme [Business Information Systems] is a six-month international paid business placement at the end of the third year...This placement gives them the extra edge when it comes to seeking employment (UCC n.da: 172-3).

Furthermore, a competitive streak is also apparent at times throughout the prospectuses where there is an emphasis on out-doing others. Indeed the mission of UCC is stated as being 'to inspire you to be better than the rest' (UCC n.db: 5). The prospectuses outline various ways in which this could be achieved, such as through participation in clubs and societies and studying or working abroad. Thus the prospectuses could be seen as promoting the neoliberal view that competitive

individualism is no longer ‘an amoral necessity’ but rather ‘a desirable and necessary attribute for a constantly reinventing entrepreneur’ (Lolich 2011: 272).

Irish Higher Education Students as Neoliberal Subjects

The dominant policy discourse in relation to higher education in Ireland has been shown to be primarily neoliberal in character, which is further consolidated by a range of discourses and practices employed by UCC. These strive to instil in students both the capacity and the desire to act out their freedom in ways consistent with the neoliberal values of entrepreneurship and rational consumerism. The interviews revealed that student subjectivities converge considerably with these neoliberal aspirations, although some divergences can be noted.

Higher Education as a Means to an End

As Petersen and O’Flynn (2007: 200) contend ‘in a neoliberal framework, activities such as education are subjected to narrow personal cost-benefit calculations, i.e., will this place *me* more advantageously in the market place?’ In terms of the participants involved, such thinking appeared pervasive. The primary motivation for attending higher education largely coalesced around its association with enhanced employability.

The whole point of coming to college is basically just to get a degree to get a job (Tom, Commerce and Spanish).

For the majority of participants this instrumentality did not extend as far as to completely dictate course selection. However, some participants did adopt a more moderate form of cost-benefit analysis where they were prepared to modify their choice within a core area of interest on the basis of perceived job prospects.

There was one I was going to do, Chemistry with Forensics, but then I knew there wouldn’t be much of a job prospect for a Forensic Scientist in Ireland (Laura, Chemistry).

However, one participant embodied the quintessential neoliberal subject, basing their course selection of Commerce and Spanish entirely on prospective economic returns.

If I didn't want a job from college I'd do something that I was really interested in like Ancient Greek or something like that you know (Tom, Commerce and Spanish).

The Relationship between Higher Education and Future Employment

While participants believed higher education was integral to securing financially rewarding and secure employment, this was not seen as a simple linear process. Similar to other studies (e.g. Wang and Lowe 2011; Tomlinson 2008; Brown and Hesketh 2004), participants were acutely aware of how growing higher education participation in unfavourable labour market conditions was undermining the value of their degrees. Thus, it was felt that the competition for jobs upon graduation would be considerable.

Today you just hear that there are no jobs and that everyone's against everyone (Ciara, Arts).

In light of such perceived competition, participants believed that their employment prospects were based on how they stood relative to other job seekers. Thus participants were engaging in a range of means to affect an edge over others.

Grades and Module Choice

For all participants good grades were conceived as a means to enhanced employability, rather than as a mark of learning.

I obviously want to get better grades for my C.V (Ciara, Arts).

The desire to get high grades in order to boost employability was an influential factor in module selection. Decisions in this instance were not always motivated by genuine interest but by which module appeared 'easier' to get a higher grade in. This was particularly evident in the case of Kate, a Commerce student, who was interested in modules relating to economics and finance, but feared it would be 'virtually impossible to get a 1.1 in them', leaving her to question whether it was the best decision for her.

Institutional Status

For the majority of participants, the decision to complete their degree in UCC was predicated on practical considerations such as location, course availability and the past or present attendance of friends and family. However, for some participants these concerns were intermeshed with a desire for the status that a university was believed to hold; and the edge in the race for employment that this was seen to confer. Moreover, some participants chose UCC because it was seen to hold more stature relative to other universities given its higher position on world rankings and its attainment of the title of ‘Five Star University.’

It always looks better that you were in university, it just sounds better. You know the way it was the first Five Star University and all that, little things like that always sound better you know (Kate, Commerce).

Postgraduate Study and Engagement in Lifelong Learning

Similar to other studies (e.g. Tomlinson 2008; Pick and Taylor 2009), postgraduate study was one of the most common ways in which participants hoped to obtain a competitive edge in the employability stakes.

I think it’s important to have a degree but then sometimes I think having a degree isn’t enough, everyone has a degree, you kind of need a masters (Kate, Commerce).

Many participants also envisaged a return to formal education in various capacities throughout their lifetime in order to remain competitive. In this regard, participants can be seen as fitting with the neoliberal ideal of viewing life as an enterprise, where individuals consistently strive for the ‘preservation, reproduction and reconstruction of one’s own human capital’ (Lolich 2011: 277)

You’re always trying to up-skill, do as much training as you can to kind of better yourself...There’s a lot of competition (Laura, Chemistry)

Work Placement

Participants viewed work placement as integral to gaining an advantageous position in the labour market. Work placement in particular can be seen as a powerful technology in creating neoliberal subjects. The process of securing work placement made

participants quickly realise the importance of being competitive and entrepreneurial, where any way of gaining an extra edge should be fully exploited.

I chose Mexico [to do a year abroad in] because I get to do work placement over there as well as Erasmus, so that's why I chose to do it because you get a bit of an edge over people (Tom, Commerce and Spanish).

Extracurricular Activities

Brown and Hesketh (2004) contend that as the labour market becomes increasingly inundated with higher education graduates, employers raise their threshold for employment, extending their criteria out to include particular personal attributes, such as drive, self-reliance and charisma. This appeared to be something of which the participants were fundamentally aware, manifest as it was in their endeavours to find ways of demonstrating the possession of a particular personality, such as through involvement in extracurricular activities. Thus their accounts can be seen as holding particular resonance with the concerns expressed by Cremin (2003: 126) who believed that the personality is increasingly becoming conceptualised as commodity and 'consciously shaped and promoted for its exchange-value.'

They want to see that you were involved in something else, that you had some other interests. It looks good to them 'coz then they know they're not just hiring a brain...they need people who are sociable (Sarah, Finance).

Participants engaged in numerous extracurricular activities, ranging from participation in clubs and societies and voluntary work or acting as a class representative. It often appeared that while selection of a particular activity may sometimes be based on genuine interest; overall engagement was consistently motivated by a concern for enhancing one's C.V.

All the extracurricular activities you do are for your C.V (Ciara, Arts).

Responsibility for Employment

Neoliberal governmentality encourages the formation of 'individualized and active subjects responsible for enhancing their own well-being' (Larner 2000: 13). Undoubtedly, the participants could be seen as taking a very proactive approach to ensuring their own well-being, striving to secure future employment through the creation of a competitive C.V. However, they tended to recognise the wider economic

constraints under which they currently operate. Thus they generally felt that once they reached a certain standard, subsequent unemployment would be the outcome of contravening economic factors over which they had no control, therefore rejecting a totalized neoliberal subjectivity.

If I had tried, if I had gone to college and got a good degree and gone looking for a job, then I would just think [unemployment is the result of] the economic climate (Ciara, Arts).

However the feeling of wider structural factors negatively affecting the chances of obtaining employment did not extend to all participants. Tom, for example was unwavering in his belief that should he be unemployed following graduation it would be the result of personal failure. In this sense, Tom can be seen as personifying the neoliberal subject, willing to disregard potential structural constraints and fully take the blame for undesirable outcomes.

More than likely, other people in my course would be able to get a job and if I don't, it's more on me, it's more on me for not doing enough so I'd take it personally (Tom, Commerce).

Higher Education as Public Good

Participants clearly viewed higher education instrumentally, seeing it as offering enhanced employability. However, participants did refer to the less instrumental benefits that individuals could also acquire from attending higher education, such as improved confidence, increased independence and exposure to alternative perspectives. These were considered as valuable goods in themselves, despite their possible irrelevancy to employability.

When you're in college ...you can just kind of think about your own opinions so I do think it's good like that it can kind of broaden your mind and your opinions (Laura, Chemistry).

Moreover, participants felt that these benefits should be available to all, irrespective of ability to pay. Indeed, while the current student grant system was seen as problematic, it was nonetheless seen as a worthwhile government endeavour. This belief in the value of government involvement can be seen as a considerable rejection

of the ‘consumer citizen’ identity the Hunt Report was attempting to promote, demonstrating that neoliberalism has not yet managed to eradicate the ‘social citizen.’

I just think if you don’t have the money then they [the government] can stand in, like it’s not fair not having an education (Kate, Commerce).

Conclusion

This research set out to explore whether Irish higher education student subjectivities were shaped by neoliberal governmentality, drawing on governmental discourses as contained in a national higher education policy, local practices as identified from UCC Strategic Plans and online material, and the perspectives of students themselves. Overall it found that the quest to create a knowledge economy has been defined in neoliberal terms, where HEIs are to emulate private sector corporations and students are to act in an entrepreneurial and rational fashion, enhancing their human capital. Local HEI practices as manifest in UCC strengthen the neoliberal shaping of students, implicitly encouraging them through the use of various technologies to act in instrumental and competitive ways.

The accounts of the participants clearly demonstrate how the subjectivities of students primarily align with the ambitions of neoliberal government, where they act out their freedom in entrepreneurial and rational ways in an endeavour to enhance their human capital in the race for graduate employment. Students engaged in higher education primarily on the basis of enhanced employment prospects. Indeed, all endeavours engaged in higher education appeared to be evaluated under a market rationality, whether in terms of studying for exams or engaging in voluntary work. However, not only did the neoliberal notion of individuals as entrepreneurs of themselves appear to colonise the ways in which students spent their time in higher education, it also appeared to be pressuring students to commodify their very personalities. It was believed that prospective employers would demand a particular ‘sociable’, ‘go-getter’ type of personality, and students were attempting to shape themselves accordingly.

However, it was evident that while neoliberalism is undeniably a substantial influence in the shaping of student subjectivities, it can be resisted, as demonstrated by participants' views in relation to the importance of governments taking an active role in enabling students to participate in higher education. Contrary to neoliberal discourses which hope to shape individuals into consumer citizens who favour the

privatisation of services, participants clearly felt that government intervention was a necessary, and indeed welcomed, aspect of education provision. Therefore it could be argued that while neoliberalism exerts a substantial influence on the shaping of student subjectivities, it may be premature to maintain that students are completely neoliberalised. Thus, the findings of this research could overall be seen to reverberate with Foucault's (1978: 95) assertion that 'where there is power, there is resistance.'

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