

## Economic freedom and the harm of adaptation

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**Economic Freedom and the Harm of Adaptation:  
On Gadamer, Authoritarian Technocracy and the Re-Engineering of English Higher Education**

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**Abstract**

The social democratic state pursued interventionism for positive political freedom, making markets adapt to the needs of a fair democratic society, with the provision of social rights. The Robbins Report, which inaugurated the expansion of state-funded higher education in the 1960s, held that access to higher education was a social right and that the ‘cultivation’ produced by higher education was a good in itself and the epistemic basis for a social democratic society. Despite rhetorical appeals to negative political freedom, the neoliberal state is interventionist, but with interventionism to promote the economic freedom of corporations. The state adapts the market to corporate needs and seeks to force individuals to adapt to this market. The current Conservative Government is seeking to re-engineer English higher education to make it adapt more fully to enhancing the economic freedom of corporations, using audit culture and changes to the Research Councils, with the former being presented as neutral-technocratic proxies for market signals. Using Gadamer, and his Humboldtian conception of higher education, which is similar to that argued for in the Robbins Report, it is argued that such changes cause objective harm to our ‘Being’, with this inaugurating an authoritarian technocratic approach to English higher education.

**Keywords**

Audit Culture, Authoritarianism, Gadamer, Technocracy

**Introduction**

Critical university studies is a rapidly expanding interdisciplinary research field responding to the increasing marketization of higher education. As Morrish (2018) notes, there are now a number of

journals, monograph series, blogs and research centres dedicated to it. The task here is to contribute to critical university studies, and the growing literature on neoliberalism's authoritarian aspects (see for instance: Bruff 2014, 2016; Davies 2016; Worth 2014; and the articles by Antonio and Hall in this special issue). It will be argued that neoliberalism is authoritarian not only to marginalised groups, which is the focus of current research into authoritarian neoliberalism, but potentially to the many, with its attempts to gear the production of knowledge and selfhood up to the objective of making people adapt to the market.

Foucaultians have made important contributions to the study of how neoliberalism shapes agents' motivations to encourage a ubiquitous market rationality. In terms of higher education, Gill's (2009) famous article on the disciplining of the academic self drew on Foucault to analyse how neoliberalism shapes academics into constantly monitoring themselves to improve performance in a situation of intense competition where their professional activities are measured and policed using audit culture. The 'responsibilised' subject is disciplined constantly to pursue the endless demands for greater productivity and excellence. The outcome of this is detrimental to physical and mental well-being due to constant stress, as the responsibilised subject seeks to be the efficient academic by working continuously to meet never ending demands. The substance of Gill's argument is accepted here, but the problem is the analytic framework.

Habermas (1990) famously criticised Foucault for being 'crypto-normative'. Habermas' case was that Foucault's work developed an analysis of the operation of power which was implicitly critical, but unable to be explicitly critical and unable even coherently to be implicitly critical, given the rejection of any notions of truth or objectivity. There could be no appeal to real harm or negative consequences, when the self and truth-claims were all epiphenomena of discourse. Furthermore, we can add that one could not sustain a notion of power being repressive rather than generative, because the lack of any notion of objective selfhood removed any object of analysis to define as repressed.

Power can be generative, in the sense that norms motivate us, but power is also repressive with objective harm caused by institutional and financial factors, together with norms defining one's worth in terms of continual improvements to one's 'performance'.

In place of crypto-normative critique, Gill explicitly articulated an explicitly critical case, but the problem is that this clashed with the analytic framework, which undermined any ability to motivate critique based on appeals to real harm, and power being repressive, as well as generative, because of the harm caused. Similarly, in her famous critique of neoliberalism undermining democracy, Brown (2015) argued that reference to discourse shaping a ubiquitous market rationality had to be complemented by a Marxist reference to the material-economic demands of corporations on states and workers, to increase their profits. This expanded the reach of the critique but again it did so by constructing an incoherent framework.

To turn from the Foucaultian analysis of the disciplining of the many to an analytically coherent explicit critique of the objective harm caused potentially to the many by an authoritarian aspect of neoliberalism, here the philosophy of Gadamer is drawn upon. Gadamer develops an ontology of our 'Being' which stems from the hermeneutic tradition in philosophy. Gadamer's hermeneutic philosophy and hermeneutic philosophy more generally is of increasing interest. (On Gadamer specifically see for instance: Costache 2016; Fuyarchuk 2017; Malpas and Zabala 2010; Warnke 2016; and on hermeneutics more generally see: Babich 2017; Forster and Gjesdal 2019; Malpas and Gander 2015.) Dallmayr (2001, 2009, 2016) used Gadamer's work to discuss the importance of 'inter-cultural' communication reducing political tensions; Clark (2011) used Gadamer to develop a theory of ethical decision-making in social work, and Svenaeus (2003) and Mitchell (2007) developed a Gadamerian approach to medical ethics.

The argument here is that Gadamer's importance can be demonstrated not just by showing how dialogue is useful to solve problems caused by a lack of inter-cultural or lay agent-professional understanding, but also to understand and criticise the significant potential harm to many caused by an authoritarian aspect of neoliberalism. Rather than see higher education as a case-study which a discussion of neoliberalism can be applied to, higher education is central to any understanding of an authoritarian aspect of neoliberalism and the widespread harm it can cause. The neoliberal re-engineering of higher education is referred to here as paving the way towards an authoritarian technocracy, which causes objective harm. It is technocratic because the state seeks to present state-controlled audit culture proxies for market signals as neutral-objective information. It is authoritarian because it entails the state's attempt to shape and radically truncate people's ability to develop as free, critically-minded and informed beings, by using higher education to shape the production of knowledge and selfhood in ways that require people to see their own worth and that of other people's instrumentally, as functionaries serving a corporate-dominated economy. In place of people who have been able to live with ideas and 'grow' through solidaristic dialogue with others to change their 'horizons', with this enabling a democratic culture to hold political and economic elites to account, people are required to see as natural and necessary the demand continually to adapt to market, with their worth and purpose being reduced to their use value for others. People are harmed objectively because who and what they can become is reduced to being a means for others to use. Definition of one's Being as a means for others to use undermines the possibility for a democratic culture to develop to challenge this. Neoliberalism causes material harm through increasingly polarisation of wealth, retraction of welfare and punitive approaches to marginalised groups (see Harvey 2005; Piketty 2014; and the literature on authoritarian neoliberalism mentioned above) and, furthermore, it comes to harm the development of personhood itself.

English higher education is focused on because devolution means that each component country of the UK has different higher education policies and it is in England that the neoliberal re-engineering of higher education by the state is at its most extreme. Drawing on a comparative study of

5 European countries' approach to university governance, Shattock notes the 'increasing role of the state' and the 'extent to which England was an outlier in its application of market principles' (Shattock 2019, np).

### **Economic Freedom, Authoritarianism and Technocracy**

One way to characterise the shift from post-war interventionist Keynesian-welfare state politics to neoliberal political economy would be to say that it was a shift from, to use Isiah Berlin's (1969) famous terms, positive freedom to negative freedom. Positive freedom was the freedom to act, while negative freedom was freedom from political interference in the form of bureaucratic regulation and higher taxation. The justification for post-war interventionism was not a purely instrumental one to avoid tumult with a technocratic regulation of capitalism that used 'scientific' knowledge to avoid the boom-slump trade cycle, which was Keynes' concern, but stemmed from a social democratic normative commitment to make society more equal and more humane. (While Keynes saw the importance of theory, he was still technocratic in the sense that he sought scientifically to control objective economic forces rather than engage in normative reform of capitalism.) The state was to regulate the economy and provide a range of public services including welfare and a free education system up to and including higher education. A technocratic epistemology was linked to a reformist normative commitment, with state funded education (and health care) being central to the latter.

The Robbins' Report (1963), which led to the rapid expansion of state funded UK higher education in the 1960s, identified four 'social ends' that higher education needed to serve (1963, 6, para. 22). First, education was to meet a skills need in the economy. Robbins noted that this was mentioned first not to signal its priority over the other social ends but to respond to a tendency to ignore this important but not exclusive end. Second, he held that '[t]he aim should be to produce not mere specialists but rather cultivated men and women (1963, 6, para. 26). The third end was the linking of teaching and research, because 'the process of education is itself most vital when it partakes

of the nature of discovery' (Robbins 1963, 7, para. 27). The forth end was 'the transmission of a common culture and common standards of citizenship [...] to provide in partnership with the family that background of culture and social habit upon which a healthy society depends' (Robbins 1963, 7, para. 28).

The commitment to enabling anyone with ability to enter higher education, irrespective of class and income, with the state paying, because of the public benefit 'of education as the cultivation of the mind and the role of higher education in facilitating cultural and democratic participation', were social democratic goals (Holmwood 2014a, 66). Strangely, as Holmwood notes (2014a, 66), Robbins was a member of the neoliberal Mont Pèlerin Society, which was founded by Hayek. Yet despite all this, Robbins recognised that 'liberal economic, civil and political rights require an underpinning of social rights to ensure their realisation for all citizens' (Holmwood 2014a, 66). Publicly funded higher education was a key component in the provision of social rights because it could create an active civil society by stopping privilege truncating access to the cultivation needed for a flourishing society, as well as enabling the liberal principle of equality of opportunity in education and the labour market. Robbins, in short, held that freedom should be seen in terms of positive political freedom, with higher education being central to this.

Hayek can be read as a critic of technocracy. The problem with Keynesian technocratic interventionism was that no experts could gain sufficient knowledge of how the market was operating. Hayek's (1945, 1978) alternative may be regarded as another form of technocracy, which will be referred to here as a decentred technocracy, in contrast to a technocracy of bureaucratic experts. In Hayek's view, the price signal in free markets was the only way efficiently to process information about supply and demand, because the range of activities of market agents' escaped the knowledge of any expert. In a 'catallaxy' one does not have to presume that integration occurs based on common normative commitments, because instead the price mechanism can give sufficient epistemic

information to agents to adapt successfully with this then leading to successful organisational forms with the division of labour and economic growth. Free markets were not only to be epistemically preferred to socialist societies based on epistemically untenable attempts at using planning to distribute resources, but normatively preferred too, because private property was held to be the basis for civilisation, and thus it needed protection from collectivist re-distribution (Hayek 1988, 2001). This led Hayek to distinguish authoritarianism from totalitarianism and to argue that the former was acceptable to protect private property as the basis for individual liberty. Liberal authoritarianism is to be preferred for protecting private property, in contrast to collectivist democracy, which destroys freedom and paves the way to totalitarianism. Democracy was always risky and only acceptable when detached from any form of collectivist re-distribution which would be difficult given popular pressure on the state. Hayek supported the military dictatorship in Chile in the name of freedom and saw unions as more of a threat to the free market than corporate dominance (Selwyn 2015). Given this, we may say that Hayek prioritised economic freedom over negative political freedom, because a dictatorial state is a long way from the condition of negative political freedom.

The practice of neoliberal political economy in the liberal democracies of the global north is that of prioritising economic freedom for corporations over political and economic freedom for individuals, with the state being seen as necessary to create and regulate markets to meet the needs of corporate capital (Brown 2015; Davies 2014; Van Horn and Mirowski 2009). In the US, the neoliberals of the ‘Chicago School’ argued that neoliberalism ‘is first and foremost a theory of how to reengineer the state in order to guarantee the success of the market and its most important participants, modern corporations’ (Van Horn and Mirowski 2009, 161). The Chicago School received significant support from the Volker Fund, which paid Hayek’s salary at the University of Chicago and which held that the Cold War US would be best placed to fight socialism by facilitating the unrestricted development of corporate self-interest (Van Horn and Mirowski 2009, 157–158). For most at the Chicago School, the price signal could be distorted by corporate dominance of the economy. As Davies argues, for the Chicago School, it was important to recognise that capitalist activity by existing



profit-seeking actors 'already was typically ideal' (Davies 2014, 50). The justification for this view being that corporate self-interest was 'more efficient in the aggregate' (Davies 2014, 50). The state would facilitate the development of a pseudo-decentred technocracy, with market signals distorted by powerful economic actors, so as to develop a powerful national economy.

After the Conservatives established neoliberal political economy in the UK, the Labour Party (the former social democratic party), then rebranded as New Labour, took office in 1997, and extended the neoliberal re-engineering of the public sector with audit culture being central to this. The idea was that free markets were efficient and thus ethical because they distributed resources fairly and quickly, and so audit proxies for market signals were sought to re-engineer the public sector, in the name of progressivism (Davies 2016). Davies describes this as follows:

According to this logic, all spheres of human activity should therefore be reconstructed around the standards of competition, so as to ensure valuable products, services, artefacts, ideas and people were discoverable. *The task of government was now to ensure that 'winners' were clearly distinguishable from 'losers'*, and that the contest was perceived as fair. In practice, this involved the constant modernization of administration, management and accounting. [...] It achieved what I have described as neoliberalism's disenchantment of politics by economics. [...] *Normative questions of fairness, reward and recognition became channelled into economic tests of efficiency and comparisons of 'excellence'* (2016, 127-128. Emphasis added).

So, we can say here that a post-social democratic progressive technocracy of audit data was modelled on the decentred technocracy of market forces. The normative concern with social justice was cut to fit the economic concern with efficiency, removing the earlier tension between Keynes' technocratic

concept of political economy and the social democratic re-distributive normative commitment to social justice as a good in its own right.

Now we can consider the post-Robbins neoliberal re-engineering of higher education. Holmwood (2014a, 65) notes that some see the Jarratt Report (1985) as inaugurating the neoliberal re-engineering of higher education in the UK, because it advocated the creation of internal markets and centralised management. However, Holmwood argued that it was the neoliberal 'reforms' set-in train by the 'Browne Review' (Gov. UK 2010), which was set up by New Labour and partially implemented by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government in the 2012-2013 academic year, that 'represent a thorough-going transformation of the system of higher education in England and the marketization of its different functions' (2014a, 65).

The Browne Review argued that the student as customer would be at the centre of its proposed reforms, by creating a market in higher education based on a free market of fees. The then fee cap of £3290 (grants had been phased out and replaced by loans in 2003 under New Labour) was to be removed with universities free to charge whatever the market would bear. In this new market environment the HEfCE (Higher Education Funding Council for England) recruitment cap on student numbers would be lifted with universities free to recruit as many students as they could. Those universities that charged higher fees were expected to support poorer students with scholarships. The hope was that competition, intensified by for-profit universities, would drive down prices on courses except at elite universities, with creation of an English 'Ivy league' (Holmwood 2014a, 69). Holmwood (2014a, 69) argued that this was an 'experiment', because '[t]he absence of any consideration of evidence reflects the axiomatic status attributed to the assumptions of market rationality' (2014, 69). Such faith in the markets ignored the serious problems with the for-profit sector in the US where only a minimal percent of students graduate, as the scathing Harkin Report (2012) illustrated (Holmwood 2014a, 69).

The Liberal Democrats had campaigned to remove student fees and the partial implementation of the Browne Review saw a policy setting a £9000 fee ceiling in the expectation this would only be justified by those winning in market competition. However, £9000 became the fee-norm (it became £9250 in the 2017/18 academic year) as universities did not want to be seen to be offering lower-quality ‘cheap’ degrees. Subsequently the problem of the RAB (Resource Accounting and Budgeting charge) arose, which concerns government borrowing to support the student loans, with many students being set not to repay their student loans in full (McGettigan 2013). In 2018, in response to post-New Labour - under the social democrat Corbyn - proposing to abolish tuition fees and pay for tuition through increases in corporation tax, the Conservatives changed the repayment threshold from £21,000 to £25,000 per annum and this increased the debt substantially. The Office for National Statistics then reclassified student loan debt as debt, whereas before it had not been classified as debt, because of the accounting assumption that all loans would be repaid in full. This could add £8.3 billion to the UK deficit (McGettigan 2018).

The Browne Review sought to create a decentred technocracy. New Labour sought to rely on the market rather than metrics as market proxies for their neoliberal re-engineering of higher education. However, the partial implementation of the Browne Review by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition failed to achieve the desired outcome. Consequently the Conservatives, once out of coalition with the Liberal Democrats, sought to use audit culture and changes to the Funding Councils to more fully re-engineer English higher education to meet neoliberal aims, moving us towards the development of an authoritarian technocracy. Harkin, as Holmwood (2014a) notes, showed how markets failed, and Davies (2016) argued that audits were discredited after the 2008 financial crash, but audit regimes have now been trusted with driving change in English higher education. The problem, for the Conservatives, was not just the unexpected creation of a £9000 fee-norm and the subsequent RAB problem, but the fact that many students still continued to choose social science and humanities subjects when the Conservatives held that STEM degrees were useful

for the national economy with there being a shortage of STEM graduates. The official documents concerning the changes to audit culture, along with the changes to the organisation of the Funding Councils, discussed later on, made it clear that for the Conservatives, higher education was to be re-engineered to make it adapt more fully to the needs of the corporate-dominated economy for more STEM graduates and commercially useful knowledge. Knowledge production in the corporate knowledge economy needs the state to intervene to direct that knowledge production and audit culture, along with changes to the Funding Councils, are used in the attempt to force students and academics to adapt to meet the needs of the corporate knowledge economy.

### **Gadamer and Higher Education**

Here we can consider Gadamer's ontology of Being and how a Humboldtian approach to higher education is central to this, before using this to assess the neoliberal re-engineering of English higher education currently underway. The ontological concern with Being for Gadamer is a hermeneutic concern because it requires us to interpret the socio-historical context, as mediated by language, which shapes who we are – it shapes our Being – and how we know the world, including how we know our own Being. The socio-historical contingent reality that shapes us is the tradition we are situated within and tradition furnishes us with prejudices and has authority over us. The Enlightenment and much subsequent post-Enlightenment thought juxtaposed reason to authority and held that freedom turned on the exercise of reason once people were freed from the authority of tradition. Against this, Gadamer (2013, 282) argues that such a juxtaposition stems from the Enlightenment's 'prejudice against prejudice'. His case is that any attempt to transcend tradition, its prejudices and its authority, only ends up re-inscribing the tradition but in a way devoid of reason, for the prejudices – and their authority – that define the Being of those involved remain unrecognised. As Gadamer argued:

A person who believes he is free of prejudices, relying on the objectivity of his procedures and denying that he is himself conditioned by historical circumstances, experiences the power of the prejudices that unconsciously dominate him as *vis a tergo* (2013, 369).

The recognition of the power of tradition avoids irrationalism because:

Even the most genuine and pure tradition does not persist because of the inertia of what once existed. It needs to be affirmed, embraced, cultivated. It is, essentially, preservation, and it is active in all historical change. But preservation is an act of reason, though an inconspicuous one (2013, 293).

What is vital for Gadamer is the recognition of finitude, that is, the recognition that our Being is shaped and limited by prejudices, which furnish us with a particular 'horizon'. How we understand the world stems from who we are and who we are, are beings located in traditions with a hold over us rather than transcendent entities. Here authority and reason can co-exist because reason is never context-free. 'Reason exists for us only in concrete, historical terms – i.e. it is not its own master but remains constantly dependent on the given circumstances in which it operates' (Gadamer 2013, 288). Reason exists in a dialogic relationship to tradition and the prejudices it furnishes, which means the authority of tradition can be rational. To be rational here means to see how a tradition shapes us and to be open to dialogue with others that will change our Being as we come to understand them and their tradition, with this changing who we are and how we respond to our own tradition and its prejudices. This prevents us being unthinkingly and irrationally motivated by a tradition because we do not recognise its authority over us. A 'fusion of horizons' occurs between people motivated by different traditions and their prejudices when they engage in dialogue stemming from the recognition of their own finitude (Gadamer 2013).

Education in the *sine qua non* for the solidaristic use of dialogue to enable the fusion of horizons. As Misgeld and Nicholson put it, for Gadamer, we need education to be:

a form of cultivation of the person which required a persistently maintained encounter with a subject matter, an encounter which would demand personal growth as much as the development of cognition and understanding, thus linking one with the other. [...We need] a form of education – Bildung [character formation] – which does not separate learning from its application to oneself (as happens in the case of technical or administrative knowledge and managerial action) but encourages a person's development through knowledge, learning as a form of self-encounter and encounter with what is other and different. This kind of learning still requires a presence, face-to-face and in dialogue, the teacher exemplifying to the student his or her presence to a subject-matter, as if he or she belonged to it, rather than its being in the teacher's possession (1992, xi).

Education helps people 'grow' dialogically by challenging their existing horizons in response to coming to understand the authority of an intellectual tradition, which of course, is not to say that the tradition has to stay the same, but that it can be changed by those who come to be able to live with it. Education, as the promotion of Bildung, is not about learning instrumental-vocation skills that are akin to tools external from the person. Gadamer (1992a) supported the outlook of Humboldt, who saw the purpose of a university education as 'living with ideas'. Living with ideas in the university meant eschewing narrow technical training for a profession in favour of combining the humanities and sciences and linking research to teaching. What was needed for Humboldt was a society of people who could understand problems from a range of perspectives having been immersed in different intellectual traditions that they could come to live with as part of who they were – as part of their Being. What was to be avoided was the creation of technocrat-specialists legislating monologically on

one domain in the name of efficiency born of epistemic exclusivity, while being unable to consider the socio-historically-intellectually contingent framing of all problems and their ramifications. Broadly educated people immersed in a range of traditions could create a culture of openness and questioning, whereas a society of specialists would shape the problem to fit their technocratic expertise.

Gadamer was concerned about the development of a technocracy, based on experts' monologically legislating on all domains. He argued that:

As social beings we must be able to have recourse to the knowledge and ability of others. [...]. Our society is not deformed because experts are consulted and recognized for the superiority of their knowledge and expertise. [...T]he delusion of the rationalistically oriented eighteenth century enlightenment as well the twentieth century is that there are experts for all decisions (1992b, 188-189).

Moreover:

Herein lies the greatest danger under which our civilization stands: *the elevation of adaptive qualities to a privileged status*. In technological civilization it is inevitable in the long run that the adaptive power of the individual is rewarded more than his [*sic*] creative power. Put in terms of a slogan, *the society of experts is simultaneously the society of functionaries as well*. In the scientific, technical, economic, monetary processes, and most especially in administration, politics and similar forms, he has to maintain himself as what he is: one inserted for the smooth functioning of the apparatus. That is why he is in demand, and therein lie his chances for advancement. [...] But this leads to the degeneration of practice into

technique and – through no fault of the experts themselves – to *a general decline into social irrationality* (1981, 73-4, emphasis added).

Gadamer's (1996) work on medical professional practice illustrates the rational dialogic use of expert knowledge based on the recognition of finitude. He argues that medical professionals need to engage with dialogue with patients to know not only the best course of treatment but more importantly when to withdraw from treatment.

Gadamer was aware that the Humboldtian conception of higher education is increasingly undermined by bureaucratisation but, writing before the rise of neoliberalism, he remained optimistic. He argued that:

Bureaucratized teaching and learning systems dominate the scene, but nevertheless it is everyone's responsibility to find his [*sic*] free space. The task of our human life in general is to find free spaces and learn to move therein. [...] Perhaps the most noble side of the enduring independent position of the university – in political and social life – is that we with the youth and they with us learn to discover the possibilities and thereby possible ways of shaping our own lives. [...] I think this small academic universe still remains one of the few precursors of the grand universe of humanity, of all human beings, who must learn to create with one another new solidarities (1992a, 59).

So, the rise of a technocracy would be harmful for Gadamer, because in place of a society that facilitated solidaristic dialogue leading to the fusion of horizons and progressive change, there would be a society that required people to become adaptive functionaries, defining themselves in relation to their narrow role or specialism. In this situation our 'essence' would become 'atrophied' (Gadamer



1981, 74). We would become objectively harmed, because we would have no recognition of finitude and thus no, or at least limited ability, rationally to engage with the authority that required such adaptation, accepting its monologic claims as absolute, and thus no, or limited ability, to step from monologic engagement with others to genuine dialogic engagement. We would become purveyors of technique to adapt to the demands of our narrow function in place of more open beings able to engage in practice which required openness to others. We would be harmed in this process and a flourishing democratic culture, as hoped for by Robbins, as a means to facilitate solidaristic dialogue leading to the fusion of horizons and, we may add, a means to hold elites to account, would fail to develop.

### **English Higher Education**

Now let us consider the recent changes that, it is argued here, are paving the way to an authoritarian technocracy in English higher education. The recent changes were initiated by the publication of a ‘Green Paper’ (policy discussion document) entitled ‘*Fulfilling Our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice*’ (BIS 2015a) and the subsequent ‘White Paper’ (proposed legislation document) entitled ‘*Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice*’ (BIS 2016). These led to the passing of the Higher Education and Research Act in 2017. In the Green and White Papers a tension exists between claims that the market will serve students as customers, once established universities are denied the ability to continue operating as cartel undermining the development of a market, and claims that students – and universities – need to better serve the market, meaning the national – corporate knowledge economy.

Established universities were accused of: restricting access to the market with new providers having to be validated by them for years; not doing enough to get students from disadvantaged backgrounds to enter higher education; and providing poor quality teaching, with the NSS (National Student Survey) now being used to support the latter point. The NSS is completed by final year undergraduates and it is important to note here that the NSS was designed by HEfCE as a non-

comparative data-collection exercise to assist reflection on improving courses (HEfCE 2001).

However, it is used to play a role in the construction of league tables by newspapers, and university managers take the NSS as a significant performance indicator of a department's teaching quality and competitive standing. As Cheung and Marsh (2010) argue though, the NSS data do not show statistically significant differences and its methodology does not allow valid comparison.

To solve the problems they claimed to identify, the Government proposed a number of 'reforms'. Entry to the market was to be made easier for 'challenger institutions' (that is, for-profits), who were held to be more amenable to targeting harder to reach higher education customers. HEfCE was to be replaced with a new Office for Students (OfS), which would be charged with creating a competitive market, that was amenable to challenger institutions. Whereas HEfCE was a funding body, the OfS is a regulator that can intervene in the working of a university, to ensure competitive practice and risk-avoidance compliance. The OfS would view 'market exit' (bankruptcy) in a positive light as serving student-customers, and thus offer no bail-outs, because such exit would be a sign that a free – competitive market was operating properly. However, in 2018 a 'small, modern' university in London received an OfS bailout loan of £900,000 (Adams 2018). Challenger institutions would be required to have OfS-approved contingency plans for students to continue their degrees in the event of bankruptcy. The TEF (Teaching Excellence Framework, now called the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework, although the original abbreviation is retained) was to be introduced to measure teaching quality using metrics (on satisfaction, job outcomes and contact hours, among other factors), a narrative statement and a panel assessment. The ability for universities to raise the tuition fee for each course was to be linked to the 'level' a course achieved in the TEF.

However, while a 'free' market, or decentred technocracy, would entail the market working for individuals who, as sovereign consumers, would determine what goods and services were sold and at what price, the Conservatives were critical of student-consumers making the wrong choice, in terms

of their need to serve the market. In a free market, paying, say, £20,000 per year for a non-STEM degree such as Sociology or Philosophy would be legitimate if that was the going rate, with the state in a condition of negative freedom not interfering with individuals' choice to consume those degrees. However, the Conservatives lament what they take to be the sub-optimal consumption choices of students, which entail negative economic consequences for the consumer, in terms of underemployment, and negative outcomes for the national economy, in terms of national productivity being undermined. The first problem mentioned in the Green Paper was the 'productivity challenge' which addressed the need set out in the Government's Productivity Plan, *Fixing the Foundations: Creating A More Prosperous Nation* (BIS 2015b), of increasing productivity to drive economic growth. The Green Paper stated that 'at least 20% of graduates are not working in high skilled employment three and a half years after graduation, and most employers of STEM graduates are concerned about shortages of high quality applicants' (BIS 2015a, 10). The report continues by noting that in other areas, 'almost half of employers report having staff with skills and qualifications beyond those required by the job' (BIS 2015a, 11). The task of universities, it states, is to:

provide degrees of lasting value to their recipients. This will mean providers being open to involving employers and learned societies representing professions in curriculum design. It will also mean teaching students the transferable work readiness skills that businesses need, including collaborative teamwork and the development of a positive work ethic, so that they can contribute more effectively to our efforts to boost the productivity of the UK economy (BIS 2015a, 11).

The White Paper made the tension clearer in its statement that:

Information, particularly on price and quality, is crucial if the higher education market is to perform properly. Without it, providers cannot fully and accurately advertise their offerings,

and students cannot make informed decisions. But there is currently little pressure on providers to differentiate themselves in this way. *This is a cause for concern as poor decisions by the student as to which course and institution to attend can prove costly not just for them but for the broader economy and the taxpayer.* The market needs to be re-oriented and regulated proportionately – with an explicit primary focus on the needs of students, to give them choices about where they want to study, as well as what and how. This Government has therefore chosen to put choice for students at the heart of its higher education strategy (BIS 2016, 11. Emphasis added).

The White Paper continues by stating that ‘[b]y enabling better student outcomes, we will also protect the interests of taxpayers and the economy’ (BIS 2016, 15).

At the time of writing we are moving from an institutional-level TEF in 2017, which caused controversy concerning what some saw as the arbitrary use of audit data, to a subject-level TEF in 2020 (Bagshaw 2017). The metrics for these are: ‘teaching on my course’; ‘Assessment and feedback’; ‘Academic support’ (all from the NSS); Non-continuation (from HESA, the Higher Education Statistics Agency, and from Individualised Learner Record data); Employment or further study (from the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education survey); Highly skilled-employment or further study (from the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education survey). The Royal Statistical Society has issued a statement saying that the proposed awards of ‘Gold’, ‘Silver’ and ‘Bronze’, based on the TEF, are invalid because they do not measure teaching quality (there are no inspections), and are unreliable because of the benchmarking process does not take account of differences between universities and is ‘trigger-happy’ in marking deviations from the norm (Cuffe [2019]). (See also the article by Liz Morrish in this special issue on the TEF and the White Paper.)

Following this in 2017 came another White Paper: *'Industrial Strategy: Building A Britain Fit For The Future'* (BEIS 2017). This also spoke of increase productivity, raising living standards and boosting incomes. The paper talks of 5 'foundations' which are: ideas, people, infrastructure, business environment and places. On ideas, it states '[w]e need to do more to ensure our excellence in discovery translates into its application in industrial and commercial practices, and so into increased productivity' (BEIS 2017, np). On people it states that 'we still face challenges in meeting our business needs for talent, skills and labour. In the past, we have given insufficient attention to technical education. We do not have enough people skilled in science, technology, engineering and maths' (BEIS 2017, np).

In 2016 the House of Lords refused to accept the linkage of TEF ratings to fee increases and the Government did not challenge this as Parliament was preparing to dissolve in preparation for a General Election. Following this, in February 2018, the Conservatives set up the Review of Post-18 Education and Funding, known after its chairperson as the Augar Review. This was meant to publish its findings in January 2019 but was delayed due to politics being dominated by the political crisis caused by Brexit. On 30<sup>th</sup> May 2019 the Augar Review was published (Gov.UK. 2019). It proposed a maximum fee of £7500 which could be introduced by 2021/22 and frozen until the 2022/23 academic year with it only rising in line with inflation after that. Lost income would be addressed by a teaching grant from government, although this would be focused on economically useful courses, and socially useful courses which led to graduates gaining important but not necessarily highly paid work such as nursing or teaching. The Review argues that an unintended consequence of the post-Browne fee increase was a shift of spending to 'subject provision that [is] not aligned with the government's industrial strategy' (Gov.UK 2019, 91). Taxpayers have been bearing the cost of the RAB charge problem for non-STEM / less economically useful (and less socially useful) subjects in the social sciences and humanities, which have had increased spending on them due to increased recruitment in those areas (Gov.UK 2019, 81 – 84). At the moment, the Report argues, STEM subjects and medicine, which are 'central to the government's industrial strategy' and which see student loans

usually repaid in full due to higher earnings, are not as extensively offered as they should be because institutions are ‘financially penalised’ for providing them (Gov.UK 2019, 81). Universities have been recruiting to less useful and cheaper-to-provide courses. The Report recommends that:

the OfS carry out a review of the funding rates for different subjects, to induce an examination of the reasonable costs of provision in the light of sector best practice, historical levels and international comparisons [...]. We expect that this study should rebalance funding towards high-cost and strategically important subjects and to subjects that add social as well as economic value. We would expect some subjects to receive little or no subject specific teaching grant over the £7500 base rate (Gov.UK 2019, 96).

In addition to this, legislation has been passed to allow accelerated two year degrees to have a 20% fee increase to £11,100 (Busby 2019). The aim here is to encourage universities to teach all the year round with STEM graduates entering the labour market more quickly.

Just before the Augar Review was published, Theresa May said she would resign as leader of the Conservative Party. Given this and the on-going Brexit political crisis, it is unclear how the Review’s recommendations will be acted upon. One possibility is that any OfS review is eschewed and instead funding priority is simply given to STEM subjects as these are taken to meet the industrial strategy’s needs. Indeed, it is interesting to note that early leaks from the Augar Review suggested increasing the fee for STEM subjects to £13,500 and decreasing the fee for non-STEM courses to £6,500 (Coughlan 2018), or £7500 (Coughlan 2019).

The TEF, arguably, was designed to link tuition fee increases to ‘excellent’ teaching, measured in part by student ‘satisfaction’ and by reference to employment outcomes. When the House

of Lords severed the link between the TEF and fee increases, the Augar Review was set up. It argued that courses with economic value, meaning STEM courses that are central to the government's industrial strategy, and socially useful courses (such as nursing and teaching), should have funding focused on them, to the possible exclusion of other courses in the social sciences and humanities, although ultimate responsibility for that was shifted to the OfS. The desire to incentivise the defunding of many or most non-STEM courses by university managers, is clear, arguably, but the government hoped this would appear to be the outcome of a neutral-technocratic audit regime (the TEF). The Augar Review, set up by the government, contrary to the leaks, ended up avoiding the suggestion for differential fees and passed much responsibility onto the regulator (the OfS). Possibly the overt argument for cutting funding could be politically difficult given the popularity of social science and humanities courses.

The Green Paper was published before the Nurse Review (the review of the Research Councils by Sir Paul Nurse) was concluded. The Green Paper stated that 'Sir Paul's review is considering how the [Research] Councils can evolve to support research in the most effective ways – reflect the requirements to secure excellence, promote collaboration and agility, and in ways that best contribute to sustainable growth' (BIS 2015a, 70). The importance of government investment, via the Research Councils grant-funding of research, was stressed, with the Green Paper stating that 'Government investment is vital and there is strong evidence that it "crowds in" private sector investment. Every £1 of government spending leverages in an estimated additional £1.36 of private funding' (BIS 2015a, 15). The White Paper, published after the Nurse Review, held that '[w]e will take forward Sir Paul's recommendation, and bring together the 7 Research Councils within a single body – UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). We will integrate Innovate UK within this body. [...This new single body will] take an holistic view of the public funding that supports research and innovation' (BIS 2016, 17).

The Chair of UKRI is responsible to the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, but is expected to ‘work closely’ on day-to-day matters with the Director General of the BEIS Business and Science Group (BEIS 2018, 27). The CEO of UKRI is tasked with ‘establishing, in agreement with BEIS, UKRI’s corporate plans. In doing so, the CEO should have regard to BEIS’s wider strategic aims (including those to boost earning potential and productivity)’ (BEIS 2018, 19).

UKRI incorporates a previously autonomous body called Innovate UK, which is a body tasked with increasing economic growth through the development of research that could be used for immediate economic gain. UKRI also includes a new council called ‘Research England’ that is responsible for overseeing research funding and ‘knowledge transfer’ in England. This means it is responsible for QR (Quality Related) funding connected to the REF (Research Excellence Framework) in England and also for developing another new audit regime called the KEF (Knowledge Exchange Framework). The first full KEF, which is purely metrics based, is due in 2019-20 and is based on metrics measuring research partnerships, working with business, working with the public and third sector and skills, enterprise and entrepreneurship, local growth and regeneration, IP and Commercialisation and Public and Community Engagement (Bothwell 2019).

The REF is held every 6-7 years. Funding outcomes and status are connected to the REF score for each academic department. The final grade is arrived at by assessing ‘outputs’ (books and articles), using metrics and / or peer-review (which count for 60% of the score), together with ‘Impact Case Studies’ (which count for 25% of the score for REF2014 – up from 20% for REF2014), and the ‘Environment Statement’ about the research activities of the department, including PhD student completions (which counts for 15% of the score). Outputs are graded 0-4\* with funding only attached to 3\* and 4\* outputs. Impact Case Studies demonstrate how academic knowledge made a demonstrable impact to commerce, politics or public life more generally.



For REF2014 academics needed to have 4 outputs deemed REF-able (that is, 3\* or 4\*), with universities running internal or 'rolling' REFs, whereby academics' outputs would be graded within the department, in an attempt to pre-empt the REF sub-panel's decisions for their discipline-based department. In an attempt to produce outputs that the relevant REF sub-panel may view positively, some departments produce lists of around 15-20 permitted 'REF-able' journals, meaning journals taken to be 3\* or 4\* journals. Officially there is no such entity as a 3\* or 4\* journal because the argument of each output is meant to be assessed on its own merits, with the status of the journal being irrelevant. For Sayer (2015), it was impossible for the REF2014's discipline-based 'Unit of Assessment' sub-panellists to read and grade 1000 books and articles in a year, and so, he argued, the source may well come to be used as an arbitrary proxy for the output's quality.

The estimated cost to universities of REF2014, according to the Green Paper, was £226 million in terms of staff time and resources used in the build up to the REF (BIS 2015a, 72). Departments that were deemed to have a REF-score that was too low relative to competitor institutions could be closed or re-structured by senior management, with these decisions entailing redundancies. The internal REFs used in the years approaching the REF are highly controversial given that the assessment is not anonymised, the people undertaking the grading may have no knowledge at all of the subjects being discussed, and the outcomes can have profoundly negative consequences for individuals. Whereas the official REF result pertains to a department or set of departments, and not individuals, the internal attempt to pre-empt the result is directly used to rank individuals, often using a traffic light system for managers to rate the 'REF-readiness' / 'REF performance' / 'REF-ability' of individuals. Academics deemed unREF-able could face punitive 'performance management' by being set targets that were impossible to meet, offered redundancy, or put on teaching-only contracts. (On these issues see: Holmwood 2010, 2011a, 2014b, 2015 on the link between audit culture and disciplinary action; Jump 2013 on redundancies linked to REF2014; Morrish 2019 on mental health problems in university staff increasing as a result of intensified management pressure stemming from

insecurity and audits; Morrish and Sauntson 2021 (forthcoming) on discipline and audit culture; Shin and Jung 2014 on the UK performing poorly on academics' job satisfaction due to audit culture.)

For REF2021 there have been changes following on from the Stern Review of the REF published as *'Building on Success and Learning from Experience'* (Gov. 2016). Stern was concerned with 'gaming the system' which occurred with international, often US, academics being put on fractional contracts at UK universities so their publications could be submitted, and with academics being not submitted if they had less than 4 publications (deemed, correctly or otherwise, REFable). Under the new system, all academics who have a 'meaningful contribution to research' in their contracts have to be submitted but with variable outputs ranging from 0 to 5 with the average being 2.5. While every academic with 'significant responsibility' for research has to be included, and the average to meet the threshold is 2.5 outputs per person, departments will seek to maximise their REF grade by putting in as many publications they deem, correctly or otherwise, to be 4\*. This can mean, for instance, that academics with minimal or no teaching (because they are working on grant-funded research) may have 5 of their (possible) 4\* publications included, while other staff face their 3\* rated outputs being removed, meaning that they were, from a management perspective, unREFable in the end.

### **Contingency, Contradiction and Control**

Many accounts of neoliberalism tend to present it as a monolithic force, especially the Foucaultian based literature. However, it is important to recognise that the development of neoliberalism is open to contingencies and contradictions as well as the ability to control populations and undermine democratic culture to assist the economic freedom of corporations in the knowledge economy. Here we can talk of political contingency with the Browne Review only being partially implemented (due to the Conservatives having to enter a coalition with the Liberal Democrats) and inadvertently creating a fee-norm from a review designed to create a Hayekian decentred technocracy. Political

contingency was also at play with the Government being unable to reject the House of Lords severing of the TEF-fee link. There is intellectual contingency in that the REF was originally meant to measure research and not become the main performance and disciplinary metric for the post-Jarratt increasingly hierarchical management of staff. There was contradiction: between a stated commitment to a free market serving the customer and statements that student-customers should serve the market; between seeking to liberalise the market to break a university cartel by making it easier for for-profits to enter the market and the stated need for more students to consume STEM degrees, which are expensive to provide and thus avoided by for-profits who want to maximise profits with cheaper subjects (and casualised staff); between audit-proxies for the price signal indicating the quality of teaching through the proxy of measured outcomes; and using data in a comparative way from an audit that was never designed to be comparative. Finally, there is the issue of control, which will be discussed in terms of research and then teaching (as research is meant to inform teaching in the views of Humboldt and Robbins).

The post-Jarrett development of auditing research and using this in performance-management and the disciplining of academic staff can be considered the necessary condition for the development of the authoritarian technocracy in English higher education, with recent changes presenting what is potentially the sufficient condition. The auditing of research started in 1986 and over time increasingly managerialist universities have come to use the measurement of research as a key performance and disciplinary measure. The 2008 RAE (Research Assessment Exercise) and subsequent REFs assign a grade to each output and over time management sought to pre-empt the grades awarded by running internal assessments of individual academics. Research performance took on such importance not only because of the funding attached to high scores but because of the enhancement of the 'brand' of a university, with good research audit scores being advertised on webpages and used in the various newspaper league-tables of universities. This led to what is termed here the problem of 'significance'.

Outputs for the REF are rated in terms of ‘originality’, ‘significance’ and ‘rigour’ and, arguably, the most important of these, as least in terms of the internal REF, is significance. Significance pertains to the academic impact a book or article is expected to have as measured by its citations. Many universities run workshops given titles such as ‘How to Write a 4\* publication’ and one factor that is stressed in such events is the way an output will contribute to existing debates and, consequently, get cited by those engaged in those debates. Indeed, one of the main reasons for having prescriptive lists of REFable journals is to ensure a high score not just by virtue of a journal’s reputation but by its deemed significance. Papers published in such journals are deemed more likely to be more highly cited because of the status of the journal and its ‘impact factor’. Whereas originality may be deemed too subjective and thus risky to prioritise in the internal REF, and too potentially irrelevant if an original argument fails to receive an audience because it cuts across debates and undermines them rather than contributing to them, significance can be more readily measured. Originality could then be read-off from significance – significance can become a proxy for originality in a fashion analogous to job outcomes becoming a proxy for teaching quality. While ‘celebrity’ academics may be able to find large markets for anything they write, other academics and especially early career academics seeking to move from a short-term post to a ‘permanent’ (on-going) post, tend to prioritise the need to make contributions that will be recognised within existing terms of reference, with the potential citations from this then making it a safer bet as a piece of work likely to be judged as 3\* or 4\*, in terms of significance and originality-as-measured-by-significance. The outcome of this, as Smith (2017), focusing on UK early career academics in the social sciences, is the production of ‘conforming subjects’ who, in adapting to continuous target-setting, fail to see academia as place to develop originality and creativity. Academics come to adapt to the market for jobs and the performance management of those in jobs by avoiding intellectual risks.

Further, academics are expected to apply for externally funded grants, to increase prestige and to reduce the salary cost in a context where staff are seen as ‘liabilities’ and buildings are seen as ‘assets’. Following the 2016/17 removal of the student recruitment cap, many universities borrowed

millions to renovate old buildings and erect new buildings, to improve ‘the student experience’. In this context, universities are seeking to reduce the salary burden through grant ‘capture’ and increased casualization, together with reducing the institution’s pension liabilities (Hale and Viña 2016; Lybeck 2018). At the time of writing 23 universities have major redundancy programmes or course teach-outs and associated job losses in progress (UUKSpin 2019). Grants from the research councils have full economic costing and applying for these means applying for grants whose priorities are being steered by the UKRI to more instrumental ends. There is no direct political statement on what is permitted research, but the Haldane principle (ensuring academic freedom / negative political freedom from political interference) is arguably being compromised by the influence of government on the new UKRI and the funding decisions it makes. One can speculate that the KEF will also intensify pressure for university managers and thus staff to produce more commercially relevant research. The REF already requires all REF-able outputs to be open access and this, arguably, is for capital to benefit from what in effect is free R and D from university research, with the view being that publicly funded research has to benefit the ‘public’, with the public truncated down to capital (Holmwood 2013).

Shattock took issue with the management of the REF and pressure for grant-capture. He argued that the REF:

Has contributed to a top-down organisational culture that involves the exclusion of individuals from institutional submissions, [...] demanding individual performance targets for research grant income based on a disaggregation of targets for faculties or departments and encouraging safety-first grant applications and publications. The stress on individual academics creates conditions unlikely to produce ground-breaking or innovative research [...]

But the operation of the REF is a symptom of a wider governance issue: the replacement of academic participation by executive authority (2019, np).

From these considerations we can discuss the link between intellectual conservatism and the nudging of research to become more technocratic.

The impact of the REF and the emphasis on significance generates an intellectual conservatism which can apply to all disciplines. Intellectual conservatism here pertains to the acceptance of the prevailing terms of reference of debate and the traditions that set its parameters. Drawing on traditions that are not usually engaged with or engaging with interdisciplinary work may well be regarded as too risky. In this context, drawing on radical theories can be a form of intellectual conservatism if a radical theory furnished the tradition, or the established terms of reference, for engaging in a debate in a particular discipline or sub-discipline. Indeed, as Bacevic argued (in this special issue), the production of knowledge based on radical theories does not necessarily equate to radical actions or indeed any significant change, but can well entail the reproduction of neoliberalism. Impetus for changing away from these traditions will come not from dialogue based on the meaningful recognition of finitude but from pressure to apply for fully economically costed grants which in turn means engaging in research questions the state deems important and appropriate, under pressure from management. Furthermore, increasingly early career academics seeking to move into their first 'permanent' post have to show in job interviews how their research could generate such grant income. Academics come to be adaptive functionaries, applying technique to solve problems set by the state seeking to advance the economic freedom of corporations, rather than people living with ideas, engaged in a practice informed by immersion in traditions and the dialogic development of them based on the recognition of finitude. Ideas as external tools will be applied to problems set externally by the state. Instrumental knowledge will be produced for instrumental reasons by increasingly instrumental beings. The use of audits in research led slowly to the production of conforming subjects, defined by an instrumental intellectual conservatism, with this providing the condition for academics to be pushed towards becoming technocrats, by becoming adaptive functionaries who did not live with ideas in the Humboldtian sense.

Students would be encouraged not just to consume STEM subjects but to see higher education as a means to gain an adaptive skill, that is, as a way to make themselves useful to the national corporate economy by having the right human capital. It would not be the case that education as a 'public good' would be reduced to a 'positional good' (that is, a commodity to use in competition with others), as Holmwood (2011b) argued, with students seeing others as competitors in a zero-sum competition for jobs and the human capital required to get jobs. Rather, more profoundly, it would be the case that students could come to see their Being as subservient to an external authority. Instead of students being conditioned by a ubiquitous market rationality to define themselves as rational choice consumers, seeking to maximise self-interest through the most efficient means to maximise their utility, students' adaptive activity would ultimately entail a fundamental passivity. Contrary to Foucaultian conceptions of power as productive of agency and neoliberalism motivating individuals to act as entrepreneurs or rational-choice consumers in all domains, state power would render students fundamentally passive, in the sense that their ability to develop their Being and solidarity with others would be replaced with the requirement to accept monologic authority in an unquestioning way. In place of any recognition of finitude and living with ideas embodied in the dialogic agency of others, there would be a requirement to adapt to the authority of an external technocratic regime. The authority of the TEF was to be taken at face value as a neutral objective information. And the greater supply of STEM courses, if post-Augar funding changes incentivise an increase in STEM provision and decrease in social science and humanities degrees, would be taken as an authoritative signal from the 'free market' decentred technocracy that such courses were in *greater demand* from student-customers (rather than in *greater supply* because of top-down funding changes). Further, once a degree had been chosen, students would come to see higher education as a matter of being trained for a job by having academics hand them bundles of knowledge that would be of use in the labour market. Ideas as external things would be accepted to assist the student adapt to the demands of the market.

A political commitment to positive freedom would entail a return to the principles of the Robbins Report and more generally a Humboldtian conception of higher education. Having the state pay for students' tuition in higher education would be a social right that helped the creation of Bildung and which would furnish the epistemic basis for an active, dialogic, public sphere. In this context, academics should live with ideas in the Humboldtian sense. The rhetoric of neoliberalism emphasises negative political freedom. If this obtained, with a 'free market' decentred technocracy filling the void left by interventionist politics, then the state would not seek politically to influence student-customers' choices when it came to consuming degrees, or academics' provision of educational 'products' in the market. The problem here would be that students cannot be considered customers who, as customers, should be 'satisfied' with the consumption choice because, as Collini (2012: 185), higher education should entail 'certain kinds of dissatisfaction'. His view is similar to that of Humboldt, Gadamer and Robbins, in that he sees higher education as a process of challenging preconceptions and prejudices and by extension challenging the sense of selfhood of the student entering higher education. Students should change through dialogic interaction with ideas and prejudices that have authority. The practice of neoliberalism sees the prioritisation of the economic freedom of corporations, with students and academics being expected to adapt to the needs of the corporate knowledge economy, contrary to rational choice and consumer sovereignty models of free markets serving individuals. Audit culture has been central to this with the re-engineering of English higher education. This is potentially authoritarian in its implication and thus harmful to the many, because it replaces Bildung with the production of adaptive functionaries whose 'essence' is 'atrophied' (Gadamer 1981, 74). Rather than grow dialogically with a rational response to authority, authority would be something external to adapt to in an unquestioning way, for both students and academics. Both would be reduced to passive conforming subjects and, consequently, the neoliberal state would face no restriction from an active, dialogic sphere, meaning it would be able more aggressively to pursue policies that were economically detrimental to many.

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### **Disclosure statement**

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