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ABSTRACT

Building on existing critiques of contemporary arrangements in higher education, this paper focuses on the claim that the human capital model undermines the civic or public role of universities, restricts student engagement with learning and damages the capacity for critical thinking and empathy. Interviews with students studying either Business or Sociology at universities in Britain and Singapore reveal very different orientations to higher education, personal success and civic responsibility. Those studying Sociology emphasised the importance of developing empathy and critical thinking, and were more able to identify civic and non-economic benefits of their time at university, compared to those studying Business, who focussed on gaining individual competitive advantage and enhancing their job prospects. The paper concludes by considering the significance of these differences to argue that appealing more broadly to a fuller range of student motivations is necessary to counter wider trends of instrumentalism and individualism.

Introduction

The idea that students attend university to enhance their job prospects has become so pervasive that it largely goes unchallenged in public or policy discourses. This increasingly dominant framing of higher education (HE) first emerged in the USA during the 1960s with the idea that knowledge could be seen as a type of *human capital* that could be trained and mobilised for economic gain (Becker, 1994[1964]; Shultz, 1961). These ideas have since inspired the vast expansion of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) around the world (Brown, Lauder, & Ashton, 2012), along with rising student numbers in both developed and developing countries. Entry rates for university-level programmes increased by almost 20%, on average, across OECD countries between 1995 and 2012 (OECD, 2014) and in the UK, the percentage of 'graduates'[1] in the population has risen steadily from 17% in 1992 to 42% in 2017 (Office for National Statistics, 2017). In the British context, this 'learning-equals-earning' equation has justified both the expansion of the HE sector, and rising tuition fees, on the assumption that there is a demand for knowledge workers and that graduates will earn more than non-graduates (Brown et al,. 2012). HE, then, is believed to

play an increasingly important role in determining the fortunes of both individuals and nations, as many argue that in a post-industrial, globalised society, the most valuable asset we have is human capital. The perceived hegemony of this 'learning-equals-earning' model of HE is visible in both the contemporary educational policies shaping HE provision and the academic literature critiquing it.

This paper engages with a revitalised debate on the 'public' dimension of HE, focussing on the claim that current arrangements in HE undermine the social or 'public' role of education, restrict student engagement with learning and damage graduate capacity for critical thinking and empathy. It draws on empirical data from a study exploring the way that the public and private benefits of HE are viewed by university students, entailing qualitative semi-structured interviews with 40 final year undergraduate students, studying either Business or Sociology at HEIs in Britain or Singapore (Muddiman, 2015).

I begin by tracing the roots of contemporary orthodoxy in HE provision to the ideas of the human capital theorists in the 1960s, before considering the alternative vision of higher learning set out by advocates of the public university and the capabilities approach (CA) and how these can be linked to different conceptualisations of citizenship. I then outline the rationale for taking a cross-cultural comparative approach, followed by an in-depth description of two conceptually derived groups of participants: those studying Business who gave individualistic accounts of civic responsibility and fairness, and those studying Sociology who gave more social accounts, regardless of national context. The paper concludes by considering the significance of these differences, to argue that appealing more broadly to a fuller range of student motivations is necessary to counter wider trends of individualism.

Human capabilities: education as a public good?

A rising tide of scholars have expressed concerns about trends of massification, commodification and marketization that have accompanied HE's increasingly prominent position in national economic strategies (Barnett, 2013; Evans, 2005). Of course, these broad trends are not representative of *all* nation states, who may be more or less able to resist neoliberal pressures (Muddiman, 2018; Naidoo & Williams, 2015). Moreover, there are, of course, multiple neoliberal logics, interacting with 'existing state disciplinary regimes, cultural logics and subject positions' to generate relational and interactive subjectivities (Cheng, 2016, p. 294). In the UK, critics point to corporate behaviour including self-conscious university branding, international student recruitment drives, student charters, and industry partnerships (Beverungen, Dunne, & Hoedemaekers, 2013; Evans, 2005; Naidoo & Williams, 2015). In England[2] – the first European country to adopt quasi-market mechanisms and tuition fees (Naidoo & Williams, 2015) – practices of funding academic departments according to perceived profitability, and current debates about charging higher fees for particular degrees have raised alarm (Else, 2018; McGettigan, 2013). It is argued that these reforms significantly alter the ethos and culture of HE, with wide-ranging consequences for those involved in academia – including academics, student unions and students themselves (Raaper, 2018).

Those apprehensive about these contemporary trends often draw on traditional (and perhaps somewhat idealised) notions of the 'public university': characterised by

institutions dedicated to fostering experimentation, intellectual enquiry, imaginative thought, personal development and self-actualisation (Holmwood, 2011; Olin Wright, 2010). From this perspective, it is argued that a potent combination of social, political and economic changes over the last 30 years have reconstituted the concept of HE as a 'public' good (Naidoo & Williams, 2015), with important ramifications for the ways that students conceptualise the primary role of university, how they approach learning, and how they understand success, fairness and competition in society.

Contemporary supporters of this liberal arts or public model of HE argue that universities ought to provide young members of society with a broad general education in a space protected from economic imperatives, to develop socially and culturally. This is seen to benefit both the individual and wider society, which would profit from the social, cultural and intellectual nurturing of its citizens (Olin Wright, 2010). Similarly, advocates of the human CA call for more expansive discussions about what universities might and should be, beyond immediate economic imperatives (Boni & Walker, 2013). Drawing on Sen (2001), these thinkers put forward an alternative view of the university in which (re)prioritise the public, social and non-market values whilst also recognising benefits such as the economic opportunities afforded by investing in human capital (Boni & Walker, 2013). Importantly, they draw attention to the possibility for universities to act for *transformative* rather than *reproductive* ends (Boni & Walker, 2013). Academics in both the CA and 'public university' camps tend to position themselves, therefore, as defenders of citizenship against the market (Ahier, Beck and Moore, 2003).

Shifting constructions of citizenship

Academic responses to changes in the HE sector can be situated within broader governance reforms as nation states around the world respond to the challenges and opportunities afforded by neoliberalism. Ahier et al. (2003) draw attention to the socially constructed and historically contingent nature of citizenship and the shifting relationship between a state and its citizens, influenced by competing political mobilisations. They present three distinct models of citizenship in Britain: (1) citizens as subjects, (2) Marshallian social citizenship and (3) neoliberal citizenship. Specifically, the authors chart how forms of neoliberal governance restructured the previous social-democratic settlement in ways that sought to reposition the relationship between citizens and the state and to shape a new kind of *enterprising, individualised* and *consumer-oriented* citizen identity.

The partial displacement of the previous orthodoxy of social citizenship can be mapped onto tensions around the shifting character and mission of HEIs. Inherent in the accounts of would-be protectors of the public university and advocates of the CA approach is an unmistakably *social-democratic* conceptualisation of citizenship as under fire from neoliberalising discourses. Importantly, whilst previous generations had the opportunity to embark on a degree as an *entitlement of citizenship*, entry to university now requires 'individualised and familial economic calculation and risk' (Ahier et al., 2003, p. 34). Recent empirical research suggests that students are increasingly recognising the consumer identity (Bunce, Baird, & Jones, 2017; Tomlinson, 2016) but there is no consensus as to whether the wider shift towards neoliberal citizenship might alter student readings of 'civic mindedness' and 'responsibility'.

The shifting student experience and civic responsibility

A popular argument is that a consumer focus on becoming equipped for the labour market, and an increasingly *competitive* rather than *collaborative* environment at university (Barnett, 2013) may limit students' consciousness of their civic responsibilities (Nussbaum, 2010). Nussbaum argues that individualised approaches to learning may damage social cohesion by encouraging students to see others as 'objects' and promoting relationships of 'mere use and manipulation' rather than bonds of empathy and mutual understanding (2010, p. 6). She suggests these trends are exacerbated by the prioritisation of subjects that directly contribute to economic competitiveness, and the subsequent marginalisation of the arts, humanities and social sciences, and warns that if these subjects are overlooked, nations 'will soon be producing generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticise tradition, and understand the significance of another person's sufferings and achievements' (2010, p. 2).

The work of Abbas, Ashwin, and McLean (2016) lends empirical support to Nussbaum's claims that dispositions of instrumentalism and orientations to civic responsibility may be distributed differently across the student population according to degree specialisation. Their longitudinal mixed methods study revealed that undergraduate student transformations were affected by the disciplinary knowledge that they encountered. This led them to frame Sociology as a potential site for acquiring feminist knowledge and effecting change not only *within* the student population but *beyond*. Abbas et al. describe a non-instrumental approach to learning developed by social science students that is both transformative and potentially emancipatory in character, leading them to emphasise the importance of university curricula in shaping what students 'are encouraged and enabled to think about and how this relates to making contributions to society' (2016, p. 442). For Bunce et al. (2017), responsibility for paying tuition fees and studying in STEM were both linked to a consumer orientation to university. It seems, then, that some disciplines, alongside students' financial circumstances, may provide more space than others for non-instrumental learning attuned to social citizenship.

Building on literature suggesting that degree discipline or curricula may influence student experiences (Abbas et al., 2016; Budd, 2016), a comparison is therefore drawn between Business and Sociology. Both subjects share a *somewhat* non-vocational orientation in the sense that they do not *exclusively* train graduates for specific predetermined roles in the labour market. Aspects of Business – administration, marketing and communications – are taught as part of many vocational courses, but at 'public' universities in both Britain and Singapore the subject is commonly taught within a broader framework, by those who critically engage with ethical and social issues (e.g. Beverungen et al., 2013). Nevertheless, business-oriented studies are widely regarded to be more economically 'useful' than those in the social sciences and humanities, characterised by some as 'useless frills' peripheral, at best, to economic imperatives (Nussbaum, 2010).

Contrasting national mobilisations of HE and citizenship

Many of the critiques raised in the previous section emanate from Western countries where HE has a cultural heritage linked to social-democratic notions of citizenship.

Conversely, in many emergent countries such as Singapore – HEIs have developed with the specific goal of furthering economic prosperity, and without a juxtaposition between *new* and *old* institutional forms, this goal has gone largely unquestioned.

In Singapore, since independence in 1965, ideas about investment in human capital have been central to the development of education policy, and as such, educational institutions have been carefully shaped according to economic imperatives (Green, Ashton, James, & Sung, 1999) and individual subjectivities have been mobilised according to strong normative values (Chua, 1995). Education has played a key role in Singapore's much lauded 'developmental' (Johnson, 1982) approach. Indeed, those skills identified by Nussbaum as being central to healthy democracies have not, until relatively recently, been prioritised in a nation state where the ruling People's Action Party have sought harmonious consensus (rather than critical thinking and debate) via the meritocratic pursuit of prosperity (Brown et al., 2012; Chua, 1995).

The Singaporean developmental approach roughly aligns to the 'citizen as subject' model of citizenship – in that a strong narrative of nationhood was mobilised, and the social hierarchy was reputedly dependent on education and occupation. Education was a 'key pillar' of Singapore's nation building approach (Gopinathan, 2007) and the contemporary variant of neoliberalism prevalent in Singapore continues to encourage citizens to 'embrace a model of human capital that would take charge of his/her own development in a volatile economic world'. Contemporaneously, learning has accrued a 'new accent of self-actualisation through a moral investment in work ethic' (Cheng, 2016, p. 296). Here, citizenship is explicitly linked to academic performance as a manifestation of civic duty. In the UK, Ahier et al. (2003) question whether a new generation of 'post-social democratic citizens' are being created via this need to become competitively entrepreneurial 'active choosers', and resulting in 'an active, self-improving and competitive subject, whose actions benefit the society as a whole because they reflect on the ways of the world' (p. 90–91).

The UK education system has historically provided liberal arts courses and programmes that are less compatible with immediate market demands, but may contribute indirectly to the development of critical and creative knowledge workers (Holmwood, 2011). While an initial focus on engineering and scientific subjects in Singapore has been relaxed to embrace degrees in the humanities and the arts, in order to adapt to the changing demands of the labour market (e.g. Nanyang Technological University, 2016), in Britain concerns have been raised about the diminished funding for, and declining importance ascribed to, humanities subjects (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2012).

There is some limited evidence of student-led resistance to neoliberalising consumerist trends in HE – for example, the International Student Initiative for Pluralism in Economics (2014) argues for a reconsideration of the way in which economics is taught to include social science and humanities perspectives (there are a number of UK member groups but none in Singapore).

By selecting undergraduate students from two different degree specialisations with different reputations and relationships to graduate labour markets, and from two different national socio-economic contexts with different legacies and approaches to education provision, the study employed an interpretivist perspective to draw out a range of different student experiences and motivations.

The two host institutions chosen for this study were matched as closely as possible according to their size and international reputation, but they are not named here in order to maintain anonymity. In Britain, I interviewed 19 students (9 male and 10 female) studying in the social sciences ($n = 9$) or Business studies ($n = 10$) during the academic year 2011–2012. In Singapore, I interviewed 21 students (10 male and 11 female) studying Sociology ($n = 10$) or Business studies ($n = 11$) over a 6-week period in autumn 2011. In Britain this included joint honours students and one studying criminology and social policy. In Singapore 'Business' included joint honours with accountancy or tourism management. Whilst it is recognised that there will be some variation within these samples according to specific degree programme, for the purposes of this paper, those studying within the social sciences discipline are referred to as Sociology students, and those studying Business-related degrees are henceforth referred to as Business students. This purposive (rather than statistically representative) sample sought to achieve a spread across degree cohorts. The majority of Singaporean participants were Chinese, with one ethnically Indian and four Malay Singaporean participants. This roughly reflects the overall student body and approximates the demography of Singapore. All of the participants recruited in Britain identified as British. Participants were recruited via email, lecture 'shout outs' and word-of-mouth. The project was described as a study about 'individual and educational success in a context of economic uncertainty' and the interviews explored participants' educational backgrounds, experiences of university, post-graduation plans, perceived benefits of their degree, understandings of success, social inequalities, individual responsibility and the role of the state. It is important to acknowledge that those particular students attracted to participating in the project may have particularly strong views and that their accounts may not be representative of others in their cohort.

Universities in both locations have similar modular courses and draw on similar curricular, delivered via large lectures and smaller interactive seminars. Assessment is via exams, written coursework, and group projects and presentations. When these data were collected, the proportion of young people in HE in 2012 was slightly higher in the UK at 38% (OECD, 2013) compared to 27% in Singapore (Yung, 2012). Tuition fees were roughly the same at both institutions at around £3500 per annum.

Cross-national comparisons are becoming increasingly prominent in social research (O'Reilly, 1996), where they are both 'attacked as impossible and defended as necessary' (Livingstone, 2003, p. 480). In taking a comparative case study approach (Ragin, 1987), this study focusses on the relationship between 'systemic context' (Blumler, McLeod, & Rosengren, 1992) (educational/wider socio-economic context) and the subjective perspectives of social actors (students). I considered cases as configurations of characteristics (Ragin, 1987), taking an emic position in which the theoretical and empirical differences between the two research sites inform the collection and analysis of data (Carmel, 1999). All interviews were transcribed and analysed by hand. An initial thematic analysis enabled me to identify patterns in the data according to both deductive (theory-driven) and inductive (data-driven) logic and aided the development of conceptually driven analytical categories (Ragin, 1987). Given my positioning as a sociologist it was especially important to approach the analysis reflexively and to distinguish between participants' interpretations of the social world and my own analysis of the data[3].

Interestingly, whilst in some areas of enquiry, a strong national contrast emerged (e.g. approaches to learning and modes of preparation for the labour market), in others, including views on fairness and inequalities in society – there was a much stronger contrast between those studying Business and Sociology, regardless of national context. The following section summarises these students' approaches to learning at university and future employment (reported in more detail elsewhere – Muddiman, 2018), before focussing on their accounts of fairness, inequalities and social responsibility.

Business students: education for success

Participants studying Business in both locations unanimously expressed that the primary role of HE is to allow graduates to manoeuvre advantageously in the labour market. They described this as the fundamental driver for their learning, framing the learning process as the means necessary to achieve their goal of a degree qualification. While British Business students tailored their learning according to the belief that most potential employers would be satisfied with a 2:1 degree classification (Muddiman, 2018), Singaporean Business students described proactive efforts to maximise their employment prospects, much like the self-activated 'learning citizen' described by Cheng (2016). In this sense, they appeared to be collecting those 'bundles of skills' (Urciuoli, 2008) perceived to be most relevant in the labour market. Unlike Cheng's private university students in Singapore, these students' accounts seemed to *uncritically* align to the dominant representation of value in contemporary Singapore – they gave an account of the labour market as 'fair' and meritocratic, consequently emphasising the importance of being 'fit' to compete. These students generally described a benign matching process according to proven abilities, divorced from social background: 'they look at the grades…the first criteria is a first class honours, that says a lot, whether you are dynasty or not' (Ben, Singapore). They also asserted that companies were doing everything they could to 'attract the best talent' (Val, Singapore), using grades as a trustworthy marker of 'diligence and some kind of intelligence' (Ray, Singapore). Whilst these students all regarded the graduate labour market as highly competitive, they regarded social inequalities as part of the normal functioning of a meritocratic system:

> There is a very wide income gap in Singapore. There are people who are very rich, and … people who are very poor, but I think in every developed country this is just how things work. (Val, Singapore)

Arguing that everyone has the same chance for success, these students expressed little sympathy for others. For example, when I asked Ben whether he felt any less happy that there are people in Singapore who are poor, he framed the problem in terms of a lack of motivation:

> I just find it's a pity, as in, they are not making a full use out of their lives…it's not that they don't have that ability but they just don't have the attitude or they just don't want to help themselves. (Ben, Singapore)

These responses to social inequalities can be understood within Singapore's broader state emphasis on meritocracy, in which individuals are encouraged to take responsibility for their own development through education. The construction of the

'unmotivated' citizen appears to be a counterpoint to the prevailing normative ideal of 'self-actualisation through a moral investment in work-ethic' described by Cheng (2016, p. 296). For these students, the discourses of hard work, merit and effort are embedded in a construction of civic mindedness based in personal responsibility; personal investments in learning are linked to ideas of moral citizenship. This suggests that the student narratives discursively constituted through the business curricula do not significantly diverge from the dominant variant of neoliberalism in Singapore.

The accounts of British Business students were more complex. Whilst some conceptualised the labour market as fair, and argued that differences in income and prestige were justified, around half recognised social inequalities. Many said that they preferred not to think about them and focussed instead on trying to avoid being in an unfortunate predicament themselves. Whilst these participants argued that the precarious position of those on low incomes was not *fair*, they saw them as 'just the way things are' (Sarah, UK) and were uncertain how these inequalities could be addressed. Indeed, although most did not agree with the principle of using personal contacts in the labour market, they each told me that they would seize any opportunity they could: 'If I knew someone in a company and I knew that it would give me an advantage then I'd use that' (Glynn, UK). These participants felt compelled to use any means available to get ahead – echoing Ahier et al.'s (2003) enterprising, individualised, neoliberal citizen. For example, Nicole argued that a 'survival of the fittest' mentality is necessary, stating 'it's not fair but its reality'. Nicole expressed sadness when I asked her how she made sense of inequalities in society – 'to struggle for money or not be able to feed your kids…it's my worst nightmare'. As a result, she tried to blank it out: 'what the hell do you do? For me the way to get over it is just not to think about it'. Nicole went on to discuss a widening gap between rich and poor:

> It's a shame, but I suppose there are people like me feeding into it, that just want to make loads of money, but I just think I don't want to waste my time waiting around trying to do something about it, I just need to make money. (Nicole, UK)

Here, in Nicole's conceptualisation of individualised personal responsibility, a sense of risk and urgency crowds out any space for social citizenship. This suggests that the British Business students like Nicole are more aligned to neoliberal citizenship, and that this is reflected in their readings of civic mindedness and responsibility. However, the sense of tension between ideals and realities, not visible in the accounts of the Singaporean Business students, could also be seen as a manifestation of a partial (or *incomplete*) displacement of social citizenship in Britain (as compared to Singapore).

The sense of personal responsibility and individualised focus mapped on to these students' orientations to civil society. Business students in both locations expressed little desire to become involved with politics or social movements. Cherry, for example, describes an interest in politics as a matter of personal taste:

> You can't expect everyone to be interested in politics, because although it is how our country's run, if you're not interested you're not interested, like so many other things. Like, if you don't like dubstep music, you don't like dubstep music. (Cherry, UK)

Moreover, despite increasing wage polarisation in Britain and Singapore (Brown et al., 2012), prevailing class inequalities in the former (Causa & Chapuis, 2009; OECD, 2013)

and increasingly restricted intergenerational mobility in the latter (Ho, 2007), these Business students generally did not reference, or account for, these injustices as structural or systemic in nature. Despite having different understandings of the labour market and the job allocation process, both groups framed getting a job as a personal responsibility and viewed social problems in an individualistic way. This suggests that these students' sense-making was shaped by notions of neoliberal citizenship. That these accounts differed from those of the Sociology students, as will be seen, indicates that institutional as well as state-level influences may be at play.

Sociology students: learning for self and society

Sociology participants in both locations did not, on the whole, share the view that the main purpose of going to university is to become more employable. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the content of their degrees, almost all were sceptical of what they saw as the 'official' framing of HE in terms of employability, and argued for a more holistic understanding of higher learning. They emphasised the open-endedness of their learning and the value of encountering new and unanticipated ideas. Many said that they had become more critical, self-aware and better able to understand social inequalities, as a direct consequence of what they had learned. For example, Alice (UK) said 'you look at things more critically' and consider 'where power is coming from'. Similarly, Bridget (Singapore) said that her studies had helped her to consider different perspectives: 'you take on the views of others, you really start hearing what other people think'. Most of these students described a change in their mind-set as a result of both the *mode of learning* and the s*ubstantive content* of their course, becoming more tolerant and altruistic. For example, Bridget (Singapore) said that by being 'forced' to confront distressing issues like poverty and starvation, she felt compelled to 'be a better person…treat other people better, to understand what's happening to them and to offer help in…whatever way I can'. These students' accounts are in concert with public university and CA ideals, and support Nussbaum's assertions that studying Sociology can potentially help students to become more 'social' – more open-minded and interested in others around them. These forms of sense-making suggest that for these students, the orthodoxy of social citizenship has not been colonised by neoliberalising discourses.

The majority of students in this group were also able to identify benefits of learning at university that went beyond becoming employable. Female Sociology students in both locations said that their course had enhanced their understanding of gender politics. This included feeling more empowered in their own personal relationships and recognising discrimination. For example, Sadie (Singapore) had become determined that she would share 'equal roles' with any future partner, and 'wouldn't stand for' sexual harassment at work. Similarly, male participants in Singapore spoke about revising their own views and approaching personal relationships differently These experiences were described as emancipatory, and tended to be more of a revelation in Singapore where normative cultural ideas about gender are more traditional (for example, the expectation that women will resign from the labour market in order to raise children is widespread (Hodal, 2013). Many Sociology students also spoke about enjoying the learning process, emphasising the importance of having freedom to think

and open their minds to new ideas. So, whilst they were partially motivated by the idea of getting a graduate job, most were also motivated by a sense of 'personal satisfaction' (Felix, Singapore) or curiosity:

> I think it's just the pleasure of knowing something new…the spark when…you've read something interesting then you can relate it to society, it's just very interesting. (Rudy, Singapore)

These accounts suggest that Sociology students in Singapore were able to identify an alternative path to self-actualisation, through curious scholarship and personal empowerment that was somewhat divorced from their level of prowess in the labour market. However, while most agreed that their time at university was beneficial *regardless* of what job they would get afterwards, they were all, to a greater or lesser extent, hoping that their degree would make them more employable. Some were optimistic that their analytical and critical skills would be attractive to employers, but others were less confident. For example, Brigit (Singapore) suggested that whilst 'Sociology is useful in helping us understand society at large'; it is probably not as useful as 'a banking or engineering degree' in the workplace. For some, faced with contemplating their next steps, the lack of a clear vocational link between Sociology and a particular career path was unsettling. As a result, some students worried that they might have been better off studying a subject like Business. Participants seemed to be torn between allegiance to ideas of social citizenship encountered on their course, and the individual moral responsibility to 'succeed' promulgated by the neoliberal state regime in Singapore. These tensions and uncertainties reveal discord between students' own perceptions of the *social* value of their degree, and the more narrowly defined *economic* value that they assume others in society hold. One might argue that the perceived moral imperative to equip oneself for a volatile labour market is undermining the legitimacy of alternative forms of meaning-making around 'responsibility' and 'civic mindedness'.

When discussing the competition for jobs, Sociology students in both locations agreed labour market conditions are competitive, but most were able to identify structural problems that undermined the idea of individual responsibility. British students who had studied a module dedicated to exploring labour market opportunities and inequalities were especially keen to discuss this, but even the Singaporean students who had not studied a course devoted to these issues gave accounts of how opportunities in the education system are gendered, classed and racially structured. Some participants based their criticism on the role of patronage and personal networks, whilst others went further to challenge the idea of equality of opportunity in education. For example, Sadie (Singapore) argued that a system that rewards students based on how well they do misses the fact that 'they are already kind of disadvantaged if they don't come from a family with enough money'. Similarly, Alice (UK) suggested that an emphasis on degree credentials is unfair because of how some individuals are prioritised over others:

> The people who are coming out with the…best educational qualifications are the ones who have support and help…they have other things playing in their favour.

Some British Sociology students were also critical of the manner in which citizens are encouraged to think about employability as an individual responsibility, and expressed empathy towards the less fortunate in society. For example, Xena (UK) told me that it is

'wrong' for people to feel like they have 'failed' if they cannot find work, and Gwen (UK) said she felt conflicted about it having 'grown up in this kind of neoliberal mind frame':

> A part of me that I'm not particularly proud of thinks it's my responsibility, but then my rational side thinks the government should help as well.

The ambivalence voiced by Gwen speaks to the idea of the neoliberal colonisation of social citizenship described by Ahier et al. (2006), indicating that her understandings of 'civic mindedness' and 'responsibility' have been shaped by her degree specialisation, alongside broader socialising experiences. This ambivalence carried through to these students' plans for employment post-graduation: despite their awareness of structural inequalities in the labour market, or perhaps because of it, the majority of those studying Sociology in both locations said that they would use whatever tactics they could in order to get ahead. However, whilst they felt the need to maximise their own chances for success, they all shared a desire to help others, and many planned to pursue socially minded careers like teaching and social work. For example, Sadie (Singapore) argued that she wanted to use her 'keener awareness of the kind of social issues in the world today' to work towards solutions. It appears that something about the experience of studying Sociology, or the characteristics of those attracted to it, provoked a strong aspiration to foster positive social change amongst these participants:

> What I have learnt here is something that really ignites my passion to help other people…I feel that…as idealistic as it might sound, I have a mission to effect change. (Rudy, Singapore)

Whilst most participants in this group felt empowered to enact social change, a minority described feeling overwhelmed by the scale, scope and durability of injustices in society, and had to temper their ambitions in line with what they felt was realistic:

> No one really takes any notice of social scientists [laughs] when is the last time a social scientist has actually changed anything? (Gwen, UK)

For these students, there was a high degree of uncertainty about how they would negotiate neoliberal individualism and social citizenship upon graduation.

Making sense of student orientations to civic responsibility

In exploring how university students make sense of 'responsibility' and 'civic mindedness', a range of different orientations emerged, suggesting that students' perceptions of citizenship are being differentially influenced by neoliberalising processes. The analysis revealed key similarities between those studying the same subject in both Britain and Singapore: in general, whilst those studying Business made sense of competition and fairness in society in individualistic terms, those studying Sociology drew on constructions of moral responsibility and, perhaps unsurprisingly, gave more structural accounts of inequalities. These different negotiations of neoliberal individualism and social citizenship suggest that student perceptions of responsibility and civic mindedness were influenced by institutional and subject-specific as well as state-level discourses.

It is striking that participant accounts of education and civic engagement relate more to differences *within* national contexts between those studying different subjects. For the

Business students in Singapore, there was a high level of fidelity between their degree specialism and dominant understandings of success and responsibility in society. These students therefore gave straightforward accounts of individual self-actualisation through commitment to a strong work ethic. For those studying Business in Britain, there was evidence of some discord between the 'ideal' of meritocracy and the reality of competing for success in the labour market, but this was still articulated at an individual rather than collective level. This suggests that these students' perceptions of citizenship have been influenced by neoliberalising processes in a different manner to those in Singapore.

Conversely, those studying sociology were critical of neoliberal discourses and referenced structural inequalities when making sense of fairness and responsibility, and gave social accounts of citizenship that were more aligned with CA. It could be argued, therefore, that more space was made for counter-hegemonic understandings of society for those studying Sociology than Business. Indeed, taken together, the accounts of the business students suggest that their specialism does not necessarily cultivate space for critical engagement with neoliberalising discourses, either in Singapore or Britain. Of course, it is not possible to assess causality, and any claims must be suitably tentative, but the findings of this study are in concert with Nussbaum's (2010) claim that those studying in the social sciences and humanities are better-placed to develop empathy and critical abilities. That participants *in both national contexts* studying in a discipline that emphasises the importance of developing empathy and critical skills were able to articulate the civic and non-economic value of HE, compared to those studying Business, suggests that the practice of studying Sociology plays an important role in the development of these traits. Or, put another way, the discipline specific knowledge and learning practices of the social sciences provide some shelter from dominant neoliberal norms, and may contribute to a re-framing of student appraisals of individual responsibility, civic mindedness and fairness.

Of course, ascertaining definitively whether the distinctions between these two groups of participants lie with their individual predispositions or their experiences of studying a particular degree course (probably a mixture of both) is beyond the remit of the present study, but is an important avenue for future research. We must recognise that values underpinning young people's dispositions towards civil society are likely to be shaped (at least to some extent) prior to their university experiences by the state, familial ties and earlier educational experiences (Power, Muddiman, Moles, & Taylor, 2018). It is also important to remind ourselves that whilst these student accounts can be read as performative of a socially oriented or altruistic conscience, we do not know whether they transpire into particular types of behaviour. It is therefore necessary to proceed with caution to make some tentative claims about the accounts offered by participants in this study.

Fairness and responsibility

Those students in the study who subscribed most wholeheartedly to the human capital model of HE, also presented themselves as neoliberal citizens, viewing success and failure in individualistic terms. Conversely, those students who emphasised the non-economic benefits of the higher learning experience gave more collectively oriented accounts. It is perhaps unsurprising that an individualised, instrumental approach to HE that prioritises the attainment of a credential goes hand in hand with individualised understandings of social

inequalities. However, the highly individualised accounts of how to succeed in society given by the 'neoliberal citizens' studying Business in this research are at odds with OECD research (2001) stating that investing in human capital leads to increases in voluntary work, charitable giving and other increases in civic participation. Indeed, whilst the original advocates of human capital theory argued that widening access to HE would foster enhanced social justice and alleviate the circumstances of the less-fortunate in society (Becker, 1994[1964]; Schultz, 1961), the accounts of these students were highly competitive and, at times, elitist. This suggests that the original ideals espoused by the human capital theorists have been affected by neoliberalising discourses to create a type of *individualised* instrumentalism that supresses the capacity to engage with social issues and dislocates individuals from frameworks for achieving positive social change. Indeed, it might be argued that the (general) reframing of a degree away from being an entitlement of citizenship, towards an individualised choice that necessitates the management of risk, coupled with the (subject specific) knowledge and modes of learning encountered by Business students, creates an environment of urgency, uncertainty and competition, crowding out space for the exploration of alternative perspectives.

In line with the ideals espoused by proponents of CA and the public university, research participants studying Sociology positioned their studies as a lens through which to grasp the injustices of society and an antidote to common ideological understandings about labour market competition. That the Sociology students in this study were more able to identify limits to individual responsibility also suggests that they might be more protected from the injuries to self, resulting from un-/underemployment upon graduation (Cassidy & Wright, 2008) relative to those studying Business. However, whilst some students felt empowered by the discovery of social injustices and were energised by a desire to enact positive social change, others reported feeling overwhelmed by the ubiquity of these structures. Similarly, whilst these students were able to talk in abstract or theoretical ways about the various barriers to finding employment, and issues that trouble the idea of a meritocratic allocation of jobs and rewards, they still felt vulnerable to the stigma of potential unemployment. This suggests that students are struggling to negotiate two competing modes of citizenship, with ramifications for their constructions of responsibility and success. Their meaning-making acknowledges that their degree specialism may not be aligned to the dominant mode of self-actualisation through individual competitiveness, creating a tension between the social citizenship ideals that they have adopted and the 'reality' of neoliberal governance in both Britain and Singapore. This tension or ambivalence in these students' appraisals of success, personal responsibility and civic mindedness suggests that whilst for some, university provides a shelter from dominant neoliberal norms, enabling them to experience a sense of the 'civic', it is unclear whether they will be able to apply this *transformative* experience in their adult lives.

Concluding points

The argument that individualised instrumentalism has become the dominant prevailing ideology of university students is present both in educational policy initiatives and HEI advertisements to prospective students, and in the accounts of critics who raise concerns about the detrimental effect that instrumental learning has on civic engagement. Through an analysis of the ways in which degree specialisations shape student understandings of citizenship, this study builds on others finding that university students do not necessarily adopt instrumentalised consumer identities (Budd, 2016; Bunce et al., 2017; Saunders,

2015; Tomlinson, 2016). It goes some way to support the assertions made by critics that current arrangements in HE contribute to a restricted and individualistic view of education as a means to certification and that HEIs encourage students to understand learning as 'first and foremost an investment in human capital' (Beverungen et al., 2013, p. 114), making them more susceptible to 'diploma disease' (Dore, 1976). However, the analysis presented here also undermines the idea that these individualistic identities are universally absorbed and accepted by students. Optimism about the potential indicators of social citizenship must be tempered by these participants' evaluations that they might have been 'better off' studying Business rather than Sociology: as they approached graduation these students were under increasing pressure to view their education as a vehicle for enhancing employability. Indeed, in the British context, there is a danger that the 'user pays' model (McGettigan, 2013), alongside mounting pressures to maximise employability, will deter students from studying in the social sciences or humanities in the future, and will undermine the idea that the benefits of HE are more than just private. Moreover, those who do develop subjectivities more aligned with social rather than neoliberal citizenship may go on to promote civically minded social change in areas like gender equality, they may also face significant challenges and ruptures to their sense of self post-graduation as they navigate societies increasingly governed by neoliberal orthodoxy.

These findings suggest that the contemporary application of human capital theory to HE, situated within wider neoliberalising trends, undermines the broader purpose of learning associated with social citizenship and the CA approach. In exploring the manner in which some disciplines or subject areas may protect against, or be protected from, the full force of corporatisation and financialisation described by Beverungen et al. (2013), this analysis lends support to Nussbaum's (2010) argument that the arts, humanities and social sciences help to foster empathy and critical thought. It also calls into question the market-based prioritisation of university degree subjects according to direct contribution to national economic prosperity and individual employability. Diminishing the arts, humanities and social sciences, in terms of both funding and status on the part of universities and educational policy-makers, and appealing to young people to make choices about their degree course based on what might make them more employable, may limit opportunities for individuals to engage with learning and knowledge that helps to foster autonomy, responsibility and critical thought.

Notes

1. Classed as those who have left education with qualifications above A level standard.
2. There is some variation between the HE policies of the devolved nations within the UK.
3. For a more detailed discussion of these issues, see Muddiman (2015).

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