

## **Looking for Love in the Student Experience**

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### **Abstract**

This chapter represents an early attempt to engage and think with the ethos that underpins the Manifesto for a Post-Critical Pedagogy (Hodgson et al. 2017), specifically from a sociology of education perspective. The Manifesto is an exhortation to move beyond the critical by also celebrating what we may love and therefore wish to preserve in education. With this in mind, the author undertakes a re-examination of the literature on the university student experience in the UK. They argue that, outside pedagogical research on students, there are three overlapping but somewhat distinct literatures, each of which focuses primarily on social inequalities, aspects of marketization, or geographies, in relation to higher education. It appears that there are gaps in each of these bodies of scholarship, with some dimensions of identity underrepresented in the first, surprisingly little empirical work in the second, while the third has attracted minimal attention to date. Furthermore, it seems that there is little to love in our current understanding of the student experience as the overwhelming focus is on dysfunctions in and around UK higher education. Applying the tenets of a Post-Critical Pedagogy does suggest that widening our scope would allow for an extension of the literature and a more positive appreciation of the UK student experience. At the same time, though, there may be some aspects of the Manifesto that require minor revisions.

### **Introduction**

This chapter represents an early attempt to engage and think with the ethos that underpins the Manifesto for a Post-Critical Pedagogy (Hodgson et al. 2017). It does so from a sociology of education perspective, to see how they might inform one another. This engagement takes place in relation to the experiential nature of 'studenthood', of what it is to be – and to have been – a student. While the Manifesto is perhaps oriented towards a positive repurposing of the relationship between educator and student, through a retrieval from its instrumentalised rendering, it is also essential to consider the broader socio-political conditions in which this relationship takes place. The point of (higher) education is that students may – indeed must – be somehow different as a

result of their studies, and that their education in turn has a cumulative (positive) effect on how they understand and interact with the world they live in. The world they live in, as students, is not posited as outside the pedagogical experience, but rather around and entwined with it. If post-criticality is above all else about love for the world, what is there that we can love in our current understanding of the contemporary student experience?

The current backdrop to the question of the student experience is well-documented in the academic literature on higher education, which has largely been dominated by discussions and analyses of a steady marketisation and privatisation of the sector in many countries. The attention given to this by scholars is understandable as university life, worldwide, has become more closely tethered to the 'hegemonic imaginary' (Jessop 2008) of the neoliberal knowledge economy. This imaginary is associated with varied but concomitant forms of governance through audit and competition, and a steady replacement of state support for universities with personal and private sector funding. The extent to which the precepts of the knowledge economy are hegemonic – i.e. widely accepted – is debatable given the volume of critical academic and student responses to it (Budd 2017b), but it is clear that it has had a significant impact on universities on a global scale. It has wide-ranging effects on the currents of knowledge production and dissemination in general (Auranen & Nieminen 2010), on the shapes that universities take (Krücken et al. 2007), on academic practice (Morrissey 2015), and how university degrees are framed and delivered (Naidoo & Williams 2015). It also reaches into the 'before' and 'after' of higher education, in to schools on the one hand, and into labour markets on the other (Ainley 2016; Meyer & Benavot 2015).

Much of the work in this area is normatively (and, I would argue, rightly) condemnatory of some of the changes associated with neoliberalism in the academy and beyond it. It is, in the main, passionate but soundly reasoned, although there is a dearth of empirical evidence in some areas, as we will see. Sociologists would also admit that, as academics, we are complicit through much of our behaviour in enacting and reproducing the 'managerialist' status quo, as the distinction between manager and academic is vague at best (Bacevic 2018). In the spirit of the Manifesto for a Post-Critical Pedagogy, which is based on a premise that there is good in a world that we should love and therefore preserve, this chapter will seek to transcend the normativity somewhat. As such, it will

try to look beyond the ‘inherent critique of societal institutions focused on their dysfunctionality [to create] a space of thought that enables practice to happen anew’ (Hodgson et al. 2017, p.3). This chimes with what Stengers (2005) describes as abandoning the ‘major key’ that is our underlying political or ethical project. By looking for dysfunction, our gaze may be distracted from other aspects that are important, and in turn this may foreclose some avenues for positive thought and action. This is not to say that this author is abandoning his critical stance (or that Hodgson, Vlieghe, and Zamojski suggest that we should) but that its – at least partial – suspension for a time might open up novel and useful spaces for discussion. In other words, rather than simply being critical of critique, we must also offer ways forward. The Manifesto is a timely reminder that we should not lose sight of the many aspects of education that we value, of that which we (can) love; maybe it has two major keys – love *and* undermining dysfunction – but looking both ways may reveal productive paths to follow.

The societal institution under review in this case is, of course, ‘The University’, and it is evident in much of the literature defending it against alleged and actual neoliberal incursions and colonisation that it is loved. That chapter will first explore where and in which ways students’ experiences feature in the (predominantly UK) literature, and this in turn provides a platform for considering where else we might look – or think – to broaden our understanding of students in contemporary higher education. It appears that that while we have rich understandings of some aspects of what studenthood entails, there are other aspects that have been largely overlooked. We will see that, in essence, there is little to love in the literature on the student experience; what we know does have value, but at the same time there is still much that we have yet to learn, and perhaps to love.

### **Looking for the Student Experience**

The study of higher education is particularly diverse, being inter- (or sometimes non-) disciplinary, researched by those who see themselves as higher educationalists *per se*, as well as by scholars who – sometimes only occasionally – address aspects of it in relation to their own disciplinary base (Harland 2009). Higher education research has thus been described in varying theoretical or metaphorical ways: as an ‘open access discipline’ (Harland 2012), as a Bernsteinian ‘region’ in the sense of a meeting place between disciplines, as a Bourdieusian ‘field’ of relational positions and roles (Clegg

2012), and as an ‘archipelago’ of somewhat disconnected thematic islands (Macfarlane 2012). Literature on higher education, as we might then expect, is diverse, which could be seen as a weakness if there is a lack of an agreed canon and if that body of knowledge is disjointed or incoherent. At the same time, though, this diversity permits a broader eclecticism through allowing a range of entry points and positions without privileging an orthodox stance; perhaps ‘anti-neoliberal’ represents the orthodoxy.

Both Clegg (2012) and Macfarlane (2012) distinguish two chief, discernible themes within research into higher education: teaching and learning in higher education, and research *on* higher education, which is usually related to the creation, implementation, and effects of, policy. Macfarlane places research on the student experience within the teaching and learning aspect and also, perhaps problematically, sees philosophy as a separate – and by implication disconnected – entity from pedagogy and policy. In a departure from this stance, this chapter seeks to conjoin sociological and geographical perspectives with the Manifesto’s philosophical position in explicitly considering the ‘non-teaching’ policy aspects that surround university students’ experiences. As mentioned earlier, the Manifesto is inclined towards thinking about the framing of the pedagogical nature of education; this is conceivably education’s central dimension. However, teaching and learning do take place *somewhere* (Taylor 2017), and the transformations that occur while at university are not limited to the formal educational aspects alone (Ashwin et al. 2016). Crucially, that ‘somewhere’ is characterised – and mediated – by and through the unique combination of cultural, political, and economic conditions in which it is embedded (Robertson & Dale 2015; Hüther & Krücken 2016). While it is primarily the UK context being considered here, there may – indeed will – be parallels elsewhere, but we cannot be sure where those parallels exist without clear evidence to support any such claims.

To sketch the line of enquiry in advance, there is a great deal of scholarship on the ‘policy side’ of the literature around the UK student experience, most of which derives from sociologists of (higher) education and, to a lesser extent, human geographers. This body of work could be categorised in a number of ways, but here it has been divided into the following three themes: The Unequal Student Experience, the Marketised Student Experience, and the Topographical Student Experience. Each theme varies in the extent and nature of its coverage, and an exploration of these now follows. The

intention is to discover whether adopting a post-critical eye might afford an opportunity to help us move forwards in our thinking about how and where we might find love in the student experience.

### **The Unequal Student Experience**

Empirical work on the student experience, in the UK at least, is dominated by a focus on the structural inequalities manifest in the underrepresentation of certain social groups in the student body. The largest literature is related to social class and the issues faced by 'non-traditional' or 'widening participation' students, typically working class, with non-graduate parents (Budd 2017a). This connects with the extensively documented observation that young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds score comparatively poorly in school attainment (Frederickson & Petrides 2008). This then translates into a lower likelihood of progressing to higher education (Chowdry et al. 2013), particularly at the most academically selective universities (Boliver 2013). Unlike in many other European countries, British universities select their own students, and the higher status institutions tend to be oversubscribed and have higher entrance requirements. Scholars have shown that they are therefore, by dint of being more academically selective, also more socially selective as those from more disadvantaged backgrounds are less able to mobilise the economic, cultural, and social capital (Bourdieu 1997) required for entry to these so-called 'elite' universities. In other words, they may lack the economic means to live away from home, the secondary school grades and other information about higher education, the latter of which is usually provided by family, peers, and teachers (Reay et al. 2005). This research shows how, in contrast, many middle class students – from university-oriented schools and with parents in the professions - 'delocate' (i.e. move away from home) to high status universities almost unthinkingly, as a matter of course.

The notion of the accumulation and mobilisation of capitals has also been brought successfully to bear on understanding where inequalities lie within and then beyond the student experience itself. In the first instance, working class students can find the transition into university more difficult as they know less about the lifestyle and what can be initially quite different modes of study (Pampaka et al. 2012). Second, they might focus their energies more on academic attainment while middle class students 'in the know' also dedicate time (and money) to amassing other forms of cultural capital

through often unpaid internships and what can be expensive extra-curricular activities which boost their employability (Bathmaker et al. 2013). Some universities also aggressively promote these activities by generating anxieties about the congested graduate labour market that the massification of higher education has created (Purcell et al. 2008; Budd 2017c). Furthermore, students from professional backgrounds possess and employ their social capital through family and other connections that allow them to access work experience more easily (Abrahams 2016) – and, crucially, can afford to work for low/no pay for a period. The ongoing effect of this is that students from higher status universities, and particularly those with the right – and most – capitals are more successful on the labour market (Chevalier & Conlon 2003; O'Connor & Bodicoat 2016). In this way, social inequalities are reproduced as the middle classes then go on to dominate the professions (Milburn 2012).

Alongside class, there is research on students – albeit much less – in the other ‘key’ sociological variables of gender and race (Francis et al. 2014), and work incorporating sexuality and dis-/ability is at a relatively early stage of development. Extensively covered are the disparities around gender and degree choice, where women are less likely to study science degrees, particularly around physics and engineering (Clark Blickenstaff 2005). This is despite the fact that they perform as well as boys in those subjects at secondary school and are now in the majority in UK higher education overall (Smith 2011). From the LGBT perspective, Valentine & Wood (2009, p. 10) decry a statistical ‘silence’ in an almost total absence of national and local level data around sexuality and gender identity in relation to admissions and degree/labour market performance which ‘implies that [this] is a “private” matter’. The educational outcomes in general and around higher education access and success across ethnic groups also vary, with some groups (particularly Chinese and Indian) faring comparatively well but others (such as Gypsy Traveller/Roma) performing poorly (Bhattacharyya et al. 2003). A relatively strong proportional representation of Black students initially appears to tell a positive story as they make up 6% of the UK student population compared with 3% nationally; they are, though notably absent from higher status universities, attain less well while at university, and are more likely to drop out (Runnymede 2015). The reasons for their lower attainment levels are not well understood (Richardson 2015), although it seems that Black students tend to feel less well prepared for higher education (NUS 2011; Smith 2016). Again, we can see absences of cultural capital within

certain social groups which undermines their ability to make as much of their time at university as others. There seems to be less of a hindrance in terms of attainment for disabled students (Richardson 2009), although they do face greater issues in terms of physical access to buildings, financial costs, and accommodations around their learning environments (Holloway 2001). There is a developing awareness of their needs, but they still remain underrepresented in selective universities (Richardson 2009; Hutcheon & Wolbring 2012).

It is perhaps surprising to note that, in spite of the presence of these broader trends, there is evidence that contemporary students reject the sociological view of structural inequalities around social background, race, and class. Rather, they see themselves as the primary agents of their own success (Francis et al. 2014). Some of this, the authors assert, can be connected to the rise of individualised discourses and the entrepreneurial self-understanding associated with neoliberalism (see e.g. Walkerdine 2011). Francis et al. (2014) did see a broader awareness of less distinct, more permeable boundaries around gender, class and so on, but at the same time there were still identifiable but somewhat submerged associations around gendered character traits and attitudes to education.

At the national level, large-scale data and analysis is useful because it allows us to discern patterns in admissions and university attainment but in itself tells us little about what it is actually like for students at university. However, that there is unequal participation in – particularly elite – higher education does provide indications of the potential experiences of marginalised groups, as ‘contexts in which individuals perceive that they have minority status are widely recognised to be negative and stressful (Woodfield 2017, p. 2). Indeed, research on social class (e.g. Reay et al. 2009; Addison & Mountford 2015) has drawn attention to the ways in which working class students may experience alienation or social (and financial) exclusion within universities dominated by their more affluent peers. This can, for example, create tensions between their ‘home’ identities and the ways in which they may feel expected to act in milieus that are initially unfamiliar in both social and academic terms (Reay et al. 2010; Abrahams & Ingram 2013). Similarly, LGBT students report issues of high stress and low confidence in higher education – and more in relation to staff than their peers (Valentine & Wood 2009) – although it also seems that university offers space for identity development for

these students that other spheres of life may not (Falconer & Taylor 2017). Identity is a key theme in the literature on women in the male-dominated discipline of engineering, too, and Powell et al. (2009) have shown the ways in which women feel compelled to enact or undermine their own gender roles in particular ways to establish or retain credibility in relation to their male peers. Comparable academic research on the questions around students' race and ethnicity in the UK are still relatively few and far between. However, a report by Runnymede (2015) documents indirect discrimination systematic within higher education, while work on the experiences of Black students in the UK by the National Union of Students (NUS 2011) describes widespread experience of institutional racism. More recent research by the NUS (2018) details high levels of anxiety about harassment for Muslim students, and a third of those surveyed reported experiencing some level of abuse.

In brief review, there is overwhelming evidence that structural inequalities in society and education more generally are reproduced and even magnified in and through higher education. In turn, this suggests – and there is some evidence to substantiate this – that those in minority groups are less able to engage and attain as those in the majority, and they may also feel less welcome in many ways, too. In other words, their experience of being a student is unequal. There is more literature on social class than other areas at present, but it would appear that the trends observed there also play out in somewhat similar ways, particularly for women, those of minority ethnicity, sexual orientation and identity, disabilities, and religions.

### **The Marketised Student Experience**

On the surface, the policy logic behind the marketisation of higher education is that it empowers students by placing the student experience centre stage, in that the entire system of degree provision becomes shaped entirely around students' needs and preferences. This has fundamental implications for the nature of the relationship between students and universities at both the national and local level. In terms of the national, students are expected to demand – i.e. choose – the degrees they like and the aggregate of their choices as a group then dictates which courses are supplied (Sabri 2011). Locally, student dissatisfaction at any deficits in teaching quality are detected and acted upon, ensuring that high standards (and therefore student satisfaction) are enforced and maintained (Naidoo et al. 2011). The national and local are connected in

that choice is guided by publicly visible measures of teaching standards such as student satisfaction (of which more in due course), employability, and retention rates. The assumption here is that students will vote with their feet, not choosing options that previous students have reviewed badly or do not have strong employment options, or leaving courses they are not enjoying. These assumptions are, however, flawed, as we will see.

Government policy does indeed appear to place students 'at the heart of the system' (BIS 2011, p.32) – implying that they have not previously been there – but Brooks' (2017) analysis of higher education policy documents paints a different picture. She found that the government and government agencies describe students not as empowered decision-makers but as childlike and vulnerable to being taken advantage of by universities because the market (i.e. the availability of clear indicators of quality) is insufficiently developed. By contrast, she found that student unions see students as vulnerable *as a result of* marketisation. Sabri (2011, p. 661) describes how the term 'the student experience' emerged from policy documents in 2009 that accompanied a rise in student fees, and has been used in 'repetitive and totemic form' since then. It represents, she claims, 'a powerful ... move [as a] challenge to (academic) vested interests' that champions consumer power (Ibid., p. 659). Furthermore, while potentially being a catch-all for everything that students do at university, 'the experience', is ontologically flat, assuming that students are entirely rational and their tastes and orientations static. This reflects the influence of economic models of an entirely asocial and selfish *homo economicus* that underpins neoliberalism (Marginson 2006). Research shows that students' preferences change over the duration of their degree (Ashwin et al. 2016) and their 'choices' around university can be a cocktail of the selfish, altruistic, ad hoc, and socially structured (Budd 2017c).

Key to determining the quality of 'the student experience' as conceptualised in UK policy is the National Student Survey (NSS) that final year undergraduates across the country complete towards the end of their studies. The NSS seeks to capture, at a single point in time, a representation of how well the university has served its learners across the entire duration of their degrees. This creates 'an imagined reality' by eliding a potentially broad set of experiences with a number of relatively abstract questions (Sabri 2013). The timing is also problematic, as these students are often caught up in

their most important assignments and will likely be thinking about their post-degree options. In spite of its obvious shortcomings, a great deal of energy is expended in pursuit of the optimised student experience – universities appoint senior positions with responsibility for it (see, for example, Bournemouth University 2016) – and many internal processes are geared around this (Naidoo et al. 2011; Sabri 2013). As Naidoo et al (2011) explain, though, where universities constantly monitor student perceptions of their degrees to detect any sources of minor dissatisfaction, this can in fact foster discontent by encouraging a critical dissection of every minor interaction with the university.

Further confluences are also made between ‘the student experience’ and student engagement. In connection with other external markers, such as degree outcomes (i.e. grades, employment rates, and probable salaries) and student retention rates that feature on university league tables, universities are encouraged to continually upgrade their students’ experience. They must, some say, in order ‘to safeguard their continued organisational existence ...[as] the higher education market has become increasingly competitive’ (ITSE 2016). Engagement, though, is difficult for organisations to capture, and the replacement proxies are the observable behaviours of class attendance and active involvement. The pursuit of maximising these in the (supposed) interests of the ‘student experience’ is resulting in a ‘tyranny of participation’ (Gourlay 2015); Gourlay points out that much of students’ most engaged activity occurs in private study. Within this, Macfarlane (2015) observes that students’ agency can become more limited as they are increasingly expected to perform according to what he terms ‘presenteeism’ (attendance), ‘learnerism’ (visible engagement), and ‘soulcraft’ (normative dispositions towards global citizenship). Furthermore, universities are assuming a strong connection between what they can observe and measure and the outward markers of ‘excellence’ when in fact these ‘may have only a limited relationship to teaching quality, student engagement and learning gain at the micro- or classroom level’ (Macfarlane & Tomlinson 2017, p.30). Also, as Fulford (2017) identifies, student disengagement in itself can represent an expression of agency through choosing other activities over attendance and in-class performance.

More broadly, there is compelling evidence that changes in satisfaction scores in the UK are very weakly related to demand for degrees (Gibbons et al. 2015), implying much of

this effort within universities is, in fact, wasted. It may be more a case that university reputation overall is a stronger predictor of demand, particularly as the UK has a highly stratified university system (Roberts & Thompson 2007), and university status is strongly related to labour market success there (Leuze 2011; Brown et al. 2011). As for attainment and retention, socio-economic background is the strongest indicator of both, and those from more disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to score poorly or discontinue their studies than their wealthier peers (Crawford 2014). Here we can discern the now familiar and enduring presence of a relative poverty of cultural and economic capitals.

The discussion so far has been about particular aspects of the policy and managerial discourse that surround the contemporary student experience in the UK. Within the ongoing and intense academic discussion around this topic, there seems to be a broad assumption that the nature of studenthood in this context is one where the market framing, in conjunction with tuition fees, has reshaped the relationship between universities and students (Naidoo & Jamieson 2005). That is, that instead of empowering students to improve the quality of their learning and other university-related experiences, there has been a shift in responsibility for personal development away from the student and towards the university. In short, students are becoming passive and instrumental recipients – i.e. consumers – of a university degree rather than active and intrinsically-motivated learners; this is potentially being fostered in parallel with an implicit expectation that students are present and perform what can be superficial ways. There is, though, a relative dearth of evidence to substantiate claims of instrumentalism and passivity, and we know little about the marketised student experience. It is also important to note that universities can play a number of simultaneous roles for students, such as landlord, partner in learning, or careers service, and the relationship can therefore take many different and concurrent forms. Higher education, where fees exist, surely presents one of the few occasions where the paying customer is largely responsible for the effort and subsequent outcomes of what they are purchasing.

The signs so far are that students do see themselves as the primary agents of their own pedagogical destinies. Tomlinson (2017) reports that students in his study rejected the label of consumer in the main and said that fees had encouraged them to make the most

of their 'investment' by working hard. This was tempered, though, by a realisation that paying fees gave them leverage over the university, a finding mirrored by Budd (2017c), who also found that students in England expected more from their university than (non-fee-paying) students in Germany did. This, however, had less to do with fees and more to do with the relatively close pedagogical relationships characteristic of the UK system. The role of German universities – for reasons of cultural history and perhaps overstretched resources – was more passive and students there felt distant and dissociated from academics.

In terms of instrumentalism, as indicated earlier, students may see university partly instrumentally but they are not pure *homo economicus*. Both Tomlinson (2008) and Budd (2017c) identify an instrumental orientation towards grades in that optimum degree outcomes were essential for post-degree success, but these were associated with a perception by students of a congested graduate labour market resulting from high student numbers, not necessarily as a marker of their own learning/development. The latter study also reported evidence of a UK university vigorously promoting the employability narrative around extra-curricular activities, work placements, and even recommending that domestic students would improve their career chances by interacting more with international students. It is important to question the motive here: the university is interested in its employability 'scores' and league table positions, and the students want to be successful, but this pressure to instrumentalise everything can engender anxiety in the students and overshadow other aspects of personal or intellectual growth. A UK-Singaporean comparison of the student experience by Muddiman (2017) opens up another dimension, that of the potential mediating role of academic disciplines. From interviews with students in sociology or business, it emerged that 'subject allegiance was more prominent than national context' (Ibid., p. 2) in that business students were more instrumental in terms of the end result of their degrees while sociology students were more altruistic and developmentally-oriented. As she points out, discerning whether this was a case of chicken or egg is difficult, i.e. whether students with a more (or less) altruistic bent choose certain kinds of subjects or the extent to which the subject might be a contributing factor. It has been seen elsewhere, though, that sociology students may develop a greater awareness of social justice and social relations, but this naturally varies from student to student (Ashwin et al., 2013). If the combination of fees, how universities are represented in league tables

and marketing literature, and how they may orient themselves around particular forms of student engagement and satisfaction, creates a passive disposition in students towards their own development, this produces an obvious paradox. It would entail that neoliberalism places the responsibility for lifelong success firmly on the individual, but encouraging universities to be competitive and more responsive to service users can simultaneously diminish their sense of responsibility for the development that enables them to be successful. There is, though, still insufficient evidence to substantiate the predictions of a passive and instrumentally-oriented student body, and the general lack of research here is perhaps surprising given the length of discussions around neoliberalism in the higher education literature.

### **The Topographical Student Experience**

There appears to be a concerted move in the social sciences towards more 'post-humanist' perspectives that seek to increasingly acknowledge and factor in the nature and agency of the non-human in a relational ecology with the human (Taylor 2017). Rather than this being altogether new, however, Whatmore (2006) points out that the current 'material turn' is in fact a 're-turn' in that this relationship has been noted in human geography for some time but that it is experiencing a resurgence there and across disciplinary boundaries. The two central concepts here, familiar to geographers, are those of place and space. Place corresponds with locations that have discernible boundaries, and it has long been observed how people's lived experience and opportunities vary depending on where they are, as well as by/through gender, social class, and so on (Mcdowell & Massey 1984). It is also possible to see how places themselves are socially constructed, enacted, and maintained or reproduced, as well as changed (see, e.g. Benson & Jackson 2012). Place, in other words, is structuring but also malleable. Space, on the other hand, is a more elusive concept, but relates to the ways in which people and/or physical/virtual resources flow (or are channelled) through a given territory, market, or other environment of less distinguishable physical form (Thrift 2009). As Thrift explains, thinking of space also suggests that we can consider the rhythms of particular spaces (and places) and how imagery and the way things look can be influential in our perceptions and thus lived experience.

Gulson and Symes (2007) consider education to be a latecomer to considerations of material aspects, and suggest that it offers a breadth of as yet relatively untapped

theoretical, methodological and empirical possibilities. As Taylor (2017, p. 428) suggests, 'all learning is spatially located—it happens somewhere—and that that somewhere is an intimate if unspoken and unacknowledged part of our bodily experience of education.' As already discussed, experiences of education are not solely associated with the exercise of learning in the formal sense, and this highlights the importance of questions around how the student experience might be different across a range of broader environmental dimensions. It has long been noted by sociologists that where you study matters, largely in terms of the cultural and economic capital associated with particular disciplines and school or university status (Ball et al. 2002; Chevalier & Conlon 2003; Chevalier 2011; Leuze 2011). However, less attention has been paid in higher education to the constitution of education in terms of its physical and social composition, outside the previously noted social minority perspectives. It is to scholarship on these two dimensions – the physical and social – that we now turn.

Ellsworth (2005, p. 123) asserts that 'both architecture and media are implicated in broader social and political issues involving embodiment, inhabitation, space, creating and constructing, desire, sexuality, and economies of exchange'. This would suggest that the concrete ways – both metaphorically and literally – that universities are constituted (and where) can have a real impact on how their students interact and engage, as well as with whom. Greene and Penn (1997) describe how Ivy League universities in the US were initially designed around a model of a central college green as nucleus, with clearly laid out axes connecting faculties to facilitate interdisciplinary and solidarity. However, not all universities are created from scratch or have the luxury of space, and as universities outgrow their original configurations and have to fit into and around their surroundings, the dynamics of the campus then necessarily change (Halsband 2005). This can, in essence, create or remove barriers between disciplines or social groups, and particularly for urban universities and satellite campuses, the patterns of movement and boundaries – and even noise levels – between different campuses (or universities) will vary and shift. The relationship between the locale and education can be political and potentially problematic, too. Research by Lipman (2007), describes, for example, how gentrification and local government policy in Chicago created significant issues for working class Latinos around access to schooling, community cohesion, and living costs. For universities, the historical interaction (and, at times, conflict) between 'town and gown' has been well-documented as universities occupy not only a physical

but social presence in their locales (O'Mara 2012). Some research suggests that the existence of green spaces on campuses may have some connection with students' quality of life and attainment (McFarland et al. 2010), and the use and appreciation of those spaces depends on the way the university is laid out and may also be gendered (Speake et al. 2013). Who students are, such as whether they live on campus, locally, or commute, also means that issues as central as communal spaces or as seemingly as banal as parking can all influence how students interact with their university and peers (Finn 2017). It seems, then, that the physical presence of a university can 'speak to' its staff and students as well as the broader population, but there is so far relatively little research that considers the physical issues of place and space for higher education institutions (Speake et al. 2013). It should also be acknowledged that not all of student-university (or student-student) interactions occur on a tangible campus, either. As universities provide more of their education online (or even all of it, see e.g. Anderson 2001), this has created a 'temporal and spatial expansion of educational processes and practices' that has attracted little scholarly attention to date (Selwyn & Facer 2014, p.486).

Incorporating notions of place and space in social terms adds further aspects to ways in which we can consider the student experience. As outlined earlier, we already have some understanding of 'who goes where' in the patterns around social class and ethnicity, and how minority students can be marginalised from aspects of university life. However, it seems that the patterns of mobility are more complex than social group alone, in that local (i.e. home) geography seems to have a steering influence on students' propensity to move. Research by Donnelly and Gamsu (2018) shows that students from particular regions of the UK are comparatively more or less mobile than each other. For reasons that may be associated with the differing fee regimes in the constituent countries in the UK, Scottish and Welsh students tend to study in their home country. However, students from the Northwest and Northeast of England are less mobile, as are those from the Southeast/London, where there is a greater concentration of universities. This raises questions about not only the social class and ethnic make-up of universities, but also the extent to which there is (or is not) a mixing of regional, domestic identities. (This is even before we consider the social composition of academic/university staff, see Deem & Morley 2006.) There are financial and social implications of post-degree mobility, too, with those moving to the Southeast/London experiencing a higher

'earnings premium' than those less willing/able to be or move there (Kidd et al. 2017). The UK also attracts a considerable number of students from overseas (around 20% of the overall student body), and this has implications for both the 'home' and international students (see Lillyman & Bennett 2014 for a review). How might the student experience differ, for example, between Bishop Grosseteste University and London Business School; both are of similar size, but in very different places, have contrasting disciplinary shapes, and where the international student body is negligible at the former but comprises nearly three quarters at the latter (see HESA 2018)?

Despite the long-term (largely middle class) 'tradition' of students moving away from home, it is puzzling to note that the experience of that delocation has received very little attention. Recent work in this area found that students living away from home may see it as part of 'the experience', and that the dynamics around student accommodation are complex and worthy of investigation in their own right (Holton 2016, 2017). Evidence is also emerging that the number of students who live at home is rising, perhaps linked to the increasing costs of studying (Thomas & Jones 2017). Thomas and Jones found that, in addition to the emotional and financial costs of being 'commuter students', they are more likely to engage in the academic side of university life rather than social and other non-academic activities. Their experience of higher education is therefore going to be very different from those who live on or adjacent to a campus, and this also indicates that their relative social and cultural (capital) enrichment will be different, too. Also, for universities where the majority are local and/or live off campus, the interactions and rhythms of the campus will look very different to those where a large proportion live on site, particularly where the university is relatively isolated.

We can see, then, that understanding place and space in university studies have attracted relatively little scholarship. It seems, though, that they can add fascinating and potentially important aspects to our understanding of what informs or shapes the student experience. How a university looks and functions in physical terms gives rise to considerations around how people think, feel, move, and interact, and with whom, or alternatively, how they are limited in any or all of those. It also opens up the possibility of exploring these relationships in and around the university, both in terms of which social groups are represented there and how these relate to each other and the broader environs of the university's shape and location.

## **Summary and Future Avenues**

The aim of this chapter was to review what we know about the (UK) student experience, informed by a post-critical perspective. This might, it was hoped, allow for conceptual and empirical gaps in scholarship on this topic to be revealed, as well as to see how the Manifesto for a Post-Critical Pedagogy in itself might be applied in practice.

In terms of the Unequal Student Experience, there is a rich literature on the inequalities that working class students encounter before, during, and after attending university. Other minority groups, though, are thus far underrepresented in higher education as well as in the literature on higher education, notably across dimensions of ethnicity, sexuality, disability, and religion. We can see patterns around uneven participation and attainment there, but we know little about the actual experiences and performances of studenthood in these groups. Empirically, undertaking further research on these relatively neglected areas is an obvious step forward. There may, additionally, be theoretical tools better suited to those groups that have as yet seen little application in higher education studies in the UK such as Critical Race Theory (Gillborn 2005), Disability Studies in Education (Connor et al. 2008), and Queer Theory (Renn 2010). From Critical Race Theory, for example, the notion of ‘intersectionality’, acknowledges and explores the complex interactions between race, class, gender, disability and so on, rather than focusing on one alone. This offers a richer way of considering those dimensions than a singular focus can, but it should be noted that it can also be appropriated to divert attention *away* from the issues experienced by particular groups (see Rodriguez & Freeman 2016).

Adopting a post-critical stance allows us to identify two conceptual issues with this body of literature. One is that the emphasis is overtly structural, and presents structure in a negative or limiting (rather than enabling or supporting) way, and as such it can sideline our view of students’ agency. Second, and leading on from this, there is a tendency towards a ‘glass half empty’ orientation, in that it produces an image of higher education – and the student experience within that – as consisting almost entirely of the sum of its dysfunctions. There is little identification of anything positive in marginalised students’ experiences, for example, and while we should not minimise or ignore the relative inequalities inherent in the system, we need to look beyond them, too. This is where the Manifesto for a Post-Critical Pedagogy is explicitly leading us, but there is

perhaps a parallel tension here. The Manifesto, in its exposition of its second principle - that of pedagogical hermeneutics - appears to assert that a space of genuine commonality in education, i.e. without power relations, can be created. It is not to say that this is not an ideal type towards which we should aspire and work, but literature on inequalities around the student experience would suggest that there will always be some degree of uneven power or unequally accumulated capitals 'in the room', so to speak, and we must be mindful of these. Identifying them is a strength of the critical perspective, and in this it offers much of value; while there is little evidence of good news - of love - in this perspective, it does afford an opportunity to see where progressive changes can be made. It could also be argued that the adoption of the critical sociological view, in defence of equality, is an act of love for humankind in and of itself.

There is much debate about how commodification and marketisation could affect how students are oriented towards their time at university. However, our understanding of the Marketised Student Experience is notable for the lack of evidence in this area, particularly as analyses and critiques of neoliberalism have dominated the policy literature in higher education for twenty years or more (Ball 1998; Macfarlane & Tomlinson 2017). This dearth of research does not reflect well on academia as there is, in contrast, a great deal of work on its potential and actual effects on academic practice and identity (Watermeyer 2015). The absence of historical work in this area, too, means that we cannot chart how the student experience might be changing, and we could accuse some scholars in this area of falling prey to their own confirmation bias since the little research there is shows that students are neither entirely instrumental nor passive. This means, in turn, that what we might profess to love in the intrinsic and transformational nature of higher education are not entirely absent in the neoliberal university, but the extent to which they may be being preserved or diminished remains to be seen.

In relation to this, though, it is also important to note that, firstly, a degree of instrumentalism is not necessarily inappropriate, and that academics themselves are not solely working in the sector for the greater good of humankind (Janger & Nowotny 2013). Secondly, universities do shoulder responsibilities towards their students regardless of fee levels, but how this is balanced can vary between countries (Budd

2017c) and universities (Klemenčič 2017). We might also question whether all aspects of neoliberalism are inherently 'evil'; despite the conceptual and methodological perversity of measures such as the National Student Survey, for example, the reflection it might encourage in universities' on their duty towards their students is not necessarily a bad thing. Other than the work by Sabri (2013) on the NSS cited in this chapter, we are also largely in the dark as to the ways in which individual universities imitate, translate, and edit (Sahlin & Wedlin 2008) national policy on students. Overall, far more research in this area is required to underpin any confidence in statements about the lay of the land, particularly around the different but simultaneously-held relationships between universities and students. We could also benefit by escaping from the 'major key' (Stengers 2005) of outright opposition to neoliberalism to allow for a more nuanced and balanced view of governance in the academy. Within and beyond this, though, it is imperative that we seek to preserve broader conceptualisations and social purposes of a higher education than are currently dominant in policy and public discourse.

Evidence of the Topographical Student Experience appears to be the slimmest of the three areas, with this aspect having attracted the least attention to date. Scholarship strongly indicates that the material structures of a university will inveigle themselves into students' experiences and opportunities in some way, tempering with whom (and what) they intentionally and accidentally interact – and avoid – within and outside the university. This makes common sense, too, in that being surrounded by dreaming spires, plate glass, or rolling fields, does not feel the same. Furthermore, this interaction with the tangible is further mediated by the composition of the student body as it moves through (or is diverted away from) individual disciplines, campuses, universities, and geographical locations. These can, in turn, only be properly understood within the broader patterns of im-/mobility in the local, national, and global sector as a whole. This set of perspectives offers much in terms of pure interest as what we might find is largely unknown, and the opportunities for new practices and spaces of thought are wide-ranging. There is an argument, too, that an examination of place is particularly pressing now that we are witnessing an almost unprecedented boom in capital investment in buildings in UK higher education (Dejevsky 2016). In what ways does this enhance (or diminish) the experience of students, a question which might be considered important by university leaders as they build and build while seeking to maximise the

‘efficiency, effectiveness, and value for money’ of their campus resources (AUDE 2015, p.2). As for universities and higher education as a social space, other than the minority experiences described earlier, missing to date is a more holistic sense of how/if majority groups might perceive and experience their dominant position in relation to the broader student body. Research suggests that a diverse student population, i.e. a *universitas*, in terms of domestic (Shaw 2009) and international (Luo & Jamieson-Drake 2013) students, can be intellectually and personally enriching. If universities are socially and geographically selective, and if international students are absent from some universities or do not interact with their domestic peers at universities they do attend (Campbell 2012), then these opportunities for enrichment are lost.

In closing, it appears that there is a significant gap in what we know about the Student Experience. The literature to date, being largely critical in orientation and directed towards minority experiences and neoliberalism, has the tendency to paint a somewhat demoralising and, it seems, limited view of the sector in which we work and think. Thinking post-critically – as the Manifesto suggests – has seemed to open up new spaces of thought, asking more questions of research to date than the scholarship currently answers. This chapter also raises a broader question as to where and how we might fruitfully combine the Unequal, Marketised, and Topographical – and other – understandings of the student experience. In order to do so, we may well have to employ methodological approaches rarely seen in studies of this topic, such as international comparative, longitudinal, and ethnographic studies. Comparative research can help us transcend assumptions we might make about our own contexts by identifying what is local, national, and global, such as Muddiman’s (2017) observation that discipline may have a stronger normative influence on students than domestic context. Also, rather than the temporally-limited ‘snapshots’ of students that most studies (and the NSS) provide, longitudinal work would allow us to see if, how, and where students change, in terms of their epistemological understandings and personal growth (Ashwin et al. 2016). Similarly, we know next to nothing about the ongoing ‘effects’ of having been to university other than the reductive view of earnings trajectories – what of the long-term benefits of the “old boys’ networks” (i.e. social capital) gained at university, for example?

As the first of two closing points, it should be acknowledged here that the authors of the Manifesto call for a renewal of practices in line with a post-critical pedagogy, and this chapter has largely discerned conceptual and empirical gaps in the literature. There will no doubt be much in future findings that allows us to satisfy our critical appetites by identifying new social injustices, but we must not forget to subsequently act to address these injustices, too. Second, and finally, there is something of an absence in the scholarship cited here that we might consider to be ‘good news’ in relation to the UK student experience. However, it is evident that scholars are seeking to defend, albeit sometimes implicitly, opportunities for students to exercise positive agency, and the preservation of university degrees that are not flattened into readily observable metrics. The contribution of a post-critical disposition here is perhaps to centre our attentions more on the freedoms and intrinsic personal and social transformations that a higher education can foster, for surely within those there is a great deal to love in the student experience.

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