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The impact of marketisation on postgraduate career preparedness in a high skills economy

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This study focuses on the consequences for high skills development of the erosion of the once clear demarcation between higher education and business. It contributes to the broader debate about the relevance of higher education for the wellbeing of the society of the future. The research explores the effects of marketisation on the postgraduate curriculum and students' preparedness for careers in public relations and marketing communications.. Interviews with lecturers and students in two universities in the UK and Australia indicate that a tension exists between academic rigour and corporate relevancy . The consequences are a diminution of academic attachment to critique and wider social/cultural engagement, with a resulting impoverishment of students' creative abilities and critical consciences. Subsequently, graduates of public relations and marketing communications, and to some extent those from other profession-related disciplines, are insufficiently prepared for careers as knowledge workers in a future high skills economy.

Introduction

A discernible fracturing in the traditional boundary between education and industry is now evident in the tertiary sector which in many instances has been colonised by the values and discourse of the market. How this is played out at postgraduate level in universities is not well understood although there appears to be an increasing tension between academic rigour and corporate relevance, especially in postgraduate programs. The broad effects of marketisation on education have been identified and debated (Fairclough, 1993; Naidoo and Jamieson, 2006; Ritzer 1996), as has the relationship between marketisation, academic knowledge and the labour market (Giroux, 2009) and business schools (Zell, 2001). We wish to contribute to these academic conversations by offering insights on student and lecturer experiences that occur at the confluence of higher education, industry and the global knowledge economy because it is at this point that the results of market colonisation are most pronounced. We investigate how the discourse and values of marketing have affected the academic development of postgraduate students preparing for entry into the business-related fields of marketing communications and public relations. We also aim to explore the relevance of postgraduate skills development for careers in a global knowledge economy which privileges intellectual capital.

Intellectual Capital in a High Skills Economy

Much of the western world, including Great Britain and Australia, now operates as a knowledge-based (or high skills) economy where the intellectual capital of the core workforce is a major source of innovation, value and competitive advantage. Brown (1999) and Lauder et al (2006) note that where physical labour and ownership once drove the economy, today the most important generator of wealth for nations, corporations and individuals is the knowledge produced from highly skilled work. Characteristic of the high skills economy are extensive entrepreneurial and risk taking

activities. These take place within established companies as well as new business ventures indicating the value of creativity, enterprise and personal development. These are embedded in social and cultural processes which value and galvanise learning and innovation. As a result, a notable feature of the knowledge economy is the upgrading of skills: generic and creative as well as occupationally-specific. Systematic skills upgrading - as in the acquisition of higher education degrees together with workplace development - increases a nation's social capacity for learning, innovation and productivity (Brown 1999).

Although the major source of developed nations' economic value is intellectual capital, this is derived from a minority of the workforce, which increasingly consists of university graduates commanding high levels of general and specialist knowledge. These 'knowledge workers' rely on high skills, advanced credentials and creative endeavour to perform their occupational roles (Brown, Green and Lauder 2001), and are distinctive in their creative and entrepreneurial abilities. Paid to find and solve problems and to regularly think autonomously (albeit within the constraints of frameworks of capital and economic profit), their roles and privileged positions allow them 'permission' to think' (Brown, Hesketh and Williams, 2003, 110). They include professionals, managers, advertising and communications practitioners, and researchers and analysts (Florida, 2002). While others also contribute to the high skills economy, their labour tends to involve peripheral or support activities which depend less on professional knowledge than technical or manual skills, such as in manufacturing the computer technology which is at the centre of the production and distribution of knowledge.

Governments in Australia and the UK have acknowledged the crucial relationship between higher education, the availability of appropriate intellectual capital as a national resource, and future prosperity. Symbolically, in both countries the government departments for higher education have commensurate responsibility for business-related skills development, thus acknowledging that the "quality and performance of a nation's higher education system will be key determinants of its economic and social progress" (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (Australia), 2008: xi). A report by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills in the UK on the future of universities in the knowledge or high skills economy stated that it is the 'sophisticated skills, high levels of creativity and intellectual confidence' of the workforce that produces competitive advantage in the global economy, and that the higher education system is central to the country's economic performance in the twenty-first century (2009:41). Concerned for its future citizens to be critically engaged with wider social and cultural issues, the British government indicated that it sought to foster the 'intellectual curiosity and self-confidence' (p.53) of its citizens. At the same time, it wished to encourage universities and businesses to work more closely together in order to ensure the country's future labour market is prepared for the 'increasingly complex challenges of the modern workplace' (p.53). In Australia, the government has set out to double the level of collaboration between Australian businesses, universities and publicly funded research agencies before 2020 on the basis that economic and social value will be generated through the production, dissemination and absorption of new knowledge (Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and

Research, 2010).

Critical Thinking and the Role of the University

Historically, the role of higher education has had less to do with directly servicing the economy than contributing to democratic society. A key imperative has been the development of responsible citizens equipped for full engagement in society as thinking beings (Barnett, 1997; Facione et al 1995), able to demonstrate open-mindedness and flexibility of thinking (Paul, 1994; Ennis, 1987). Mindful of this crucial legacy and the potential for its dissolution because of increasing corporate power, Canadian scholar, Giroux (2009), reminds universities today of the need to provide:

the education conditions for students to embrace pedagogical encounters as spaces of dialogue and unmitigated questioning, to imagine different futures, to become border crossers establishing a range of new connections and global relations, and to embrace a language of critique and possibility that responds to the urgent need to reclaim democratic values, identities and practices (p.691).

While such goals are not necessarily incompatible with the development and dissemination of professional disciplinary knowledge as appropriate for various occupations and workplaces, arguably the main emphasis of universities previously has not been to service the economy directly (Muller, 2009) but to develop individuals' critical consciences that they might participate actively and responsibly in society as well as in the workplace.

A critical conscience involves thinking critically, and this is associated with innovation and creativity in a knowledge-based economy. Although there are disagreements between academic disciplines about the enunciation of criticality (Egege and Kutieleh, 2004), nevertheless being critical is generally associated with evaluating the logic of another's argument, being sceptical of and challenging conventional wisdom, and recognising this as never value-free (Mingers 2000). Tsui (2002:743) defined criticality as an ability to 'identify issues and assumptions, recognise important relationships, make correct inferences, evaluate evidence or authority, and deduce conclusions'. Ennis (1987) identified a number of critical thinking skills that can be broadly categorised as questioning, evaluation, analysis, reflection, inference and judgement, these skills being evidenced in the organisation and logic of an argument. Facione et al (1995), building on Ennis' work, identified seven characteristics of critical thinking: truth-seeking; open-mindedness; analyticity; systematicity; critical thinking self confidence; inquisitiveness; and maturity of judgement.

Mindful of the importance of critique and imagination to the development of innovation and the future economy, critical scholars have encouraged the teaching of critical thinking for enabling 'a re-examination of management knowledge and practice', including taken-for-granted, largely unchallenged goals and assumptions (Caproni and Arias, 1997), and a problematising of knowledge itself. When engaging critically, students need to 'ask difficult questions that sometimes have no clear answers, to look at moral and economic imperatives of managerial practices, and to live with ambiguity and anxiety' (Caproni and Arias, 1997: 301). Critical thinking is evident in robust academic inquiry, having its source in dialogical debate and

academic argumentation. Critical thinking, therefore, appears at the nexus of higher education, industry and the knowledge economy.

Higher Education, Business and Marketisation

While higher education has always had a relationship with work, in recent decades, the once clear demarcations between learning and business have eroded and there is a new intimacy between higher education and the corporate sector. Universities have traditionally offered professional courses, such as medicine, law, and management, but arguably the dissolution of boundaries between academic rigor and corporate relevance is most evident in the newer universities, such as the former polytechnics in the UK or the former institutes of technology and colleges of advanced education in Australia. The mission of most of these institutions since the 1990s has involved building close links with industry and the professions. This enables them to tailor vocationally oriented offerings to meet the specific imperatives that are espoused by business and the professions. A number of scholars contend that such educational aims sit uncomfortably with the traditional role of the university because education and the labour market operate in different fields, as described by Bourdieu (1988, 2005), and therefore the ideologies, rules, norms, and rewards are quite different in the two fields (Lauder, 2009). Lauder writes that 'it is not at all clear that the systems of thought characteristic of an induction into academic knowledge relate to the many practical aspects of paid work' (p.158).

The notion that academic knowledge may not be compatible with the learning required to develop occupational skills is contested by those who argue that higher education promotes generic skills essential to the workplace. From this perspective, higher education acts as a means of both socialising individuals into paid work and developing a complex set of skills and dispositions appropriate for the workforce. These consist of technical or 'soft' skills such as interpersonal communication, team-working, reasoning, and problem-solving (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2009). Yet, as Lauder (2009) posits, academic problems may differ considerably from those in the workplace making the value of problem solving skills questionable. That universities have always been involved in developing professional disciplinary based knowledge suggests that there is a direct but often contested relationship between academic learning and occupations.

What is evident in recent decades is that university priorities and curricula have been penetrated by the norms of the market economy which include competition, accountability, massification, economic success, and a focus on the needs of the consumer. Thus the splintering of the boundary between academic learning and business that has occurred in recent decades is not surprising given the 'promotional' or 'consumer' imperative that characterises contemporary society (Wernick, 1991, Hearn, 2010). Universities are a typical case of how marketisation has affected the public sector specifically (Fairclough, 1993). In the 1980s and 1990s, the massification of higher education took place against a backdrop of neoliberal political imperatives and public opinion which resulted in government pressures to cut costs and expand rapidly (Hearn, 2010). Put differently, these outcomes were the result of political marketing strategies to achieve 'product' growth and capture market share. Today many universities are positioned as 'ordinary

businesses' operating in a market mode in order to competitively sell their products to consumers (Fairclough, 1993: 143). In many cases, knowledge has become commodified at the expense of the public good as university courses focus their attention on the needs of business and the workplace with less emphasis on the development of critical citizens and democratic agents. In many cases, academics have become purveyors of ideas that conform to the imperatives of the market economy, while academic administrators apply business tools to assess and quantify teaching and learning (Simon and Banchemo, 2010), and students expect to be treated as customers in the consumption of knowledge (Giroux, 2009; Zell, 2001). When universities become 'a component of the consumer society' (Ritzer, 1996) they dislocate from their role as providers of 'the modes of critical discourse, interpretation, judgment, imagination, and experiences' that enable [students] to engage actively in society (Giroux, 2009: 671) or to 'question the market as the hegemony it has become' (Gibbs, 2001: 93). In effect, universities become marketers themselves (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004).

What then are the practical outworkings of this more distinct connection between higher education and business, as evidenced in the embedding of a marketing discourse in university cultures? Arguably, the aims of education are narrowed and certain educational principles and values are compromised when commercial issues become more important in curriculum design and resource allocation (Ball, Bowe and Gewirtz, 1994). With students demanding their rights as customers, and the competition for advanced credentials increasing, students become 'acquisitive' rather than 'inquisitive' learners (Lauder et al, 2006), intent on learning in order to acquire job-relevant qualifications rather than seeking to learn out of interest and for its own sake. Ritzer (1996) notes that when universities are confronted with pressures for pragmatism and instrumentalism, the barriers to obtaining degrees become eliminated as evidenced in grade inflation leading to few failures (also Zell, 2001; Gross & Hogler, 2005, Rowbotham and Matchett, 2011). In this context, lectures and ancillary materials are made uniform, and education is required to be entertaining (Franz, 1998). Critical thinking courses, for example, are packaged and sold commercially (Ritzer, 1996). Quality is assessed according to student satisfaction, with monitoring based on the assumption that 'students' evaluations of teachers are tantamount to customer evaluation forms' (Hutton 2001, 11). Yet even in a business context, the customer's perception of quality may be perverse, and immediate satisfaction gained at the expense of the longer term interest of the customer.

Yet there are undoubtedly positive aspects to the marketisation of education, namely the increase in accountability of educational institutions, and the often more effective delivery of courses, for example, by using multimedia for more interesting, impactful and dynamic learning (Gross & Hogler, 2005). Other positive outcomes include greater participation by students in the educational process, although their appreciation of the responsibilities that accompany their role as learners appears to be diminished (Hartoonian, 1997). For example, the role of the student as a customer with rights places the onus for student learning on the lecturer. This displaces the role of student as independent learner who works in partnership with lecturers, and where the responsibility for engagement with learning rests with the student rather than the lecturer.

Practices derived from marketing such as those outlined above have resulted,

according to Giroux (2009: 684), in a shift from 'creativity and critical dialogue in the classroom to standardization and rote learning...'. In effect, marketisation may deter innovation and promote passive and instrumental attitudes to learning (Naidoo and Jamieson, 2006). In anticipating careers in a labour market which privileges intellectual capital, graduates of higher education are likely to be relatively well equipped with specialist and practical competencies but insufficiently prepared in terms of the theoretical knowledge and the creative and critical skills needed to deal with the intellectual challenges of a high skills economy.

Methodology

Having established through a review of the literature that the higher education context has become penetrated by the norms and discourses of the market, we set out through primary research to reveal how marketisation is evidenced at the postgraduate level in the UK and Australia. We examined the career preparedness of students based on the extent to which 'permission to think' is privileged by postgraduate students and their lecturers. We chose to focus on the role and emphasis given to critical thinking in postgraduate courses in public relations and marketing communications on the basis that practitioners in these fields are among those who have been classified by Florida (2002) as 'knowledge workers' and therefore are intrinsically important to the future economy. Because our data are associated with a particular context, it is possible that our results would have differed if we had interviewed students and lecturers involved, for example, in the humanities or sciences. For this reason, our results need to be treated with caution.

Sixty in-depth interviews were conducted with students and their lecturers in two universities, one longitudinal study taking place over four years in a British university, with an extension of this study being carried out over one semester in an Australian university. Participants included postgraduate home students (British and Australian), and international students, the latter comprising the majority of the cohorts in both universities. Forty five postgraduate students were interviewed, 33 in the original, longitudinal phase of the study in the UK and 12 in a second phase in Australia. Sixteen lecturers were interviewed, ten in the UK and 8 in Australia. Each in-depth interview lasted 40-60 minutes. The samples were achieved through a combination of purposive and self selection, and the sample size was deemed sufficient to achieve data saturation within the constraints of time and resources. Public relations and marketing courses were targeted in both case sites to ensure commonality in the degree content.

Through in-depth interviews and qualitative document analysis of unit learning guides, we focused on two overriding research questions:

- i) What is the value placed on critical thinking by those teaching university postgraduate courses and those about to enter the contemporary labour market with advanced credentials (i.e. postgraduate students)?
- ii) What is the impact of marketisation on how criticality is taught and learnt at the postgraduate level?

We recorded and transcribed all the interviews, analysing them together with the data from the document analysis. We undertook multiple iterations of the following steps: searching manually for common themes in the data, openly coding these, extracting patterns in the data and developing broader categories, such as relevance of critical thinking development to personal lives/careers, challenges in teaching criticality, factors influencing acquisition of critical thinking skills.) We had already identified inductively some early themes and categories in the British data before the Australian study began and we sought to compare and contrast these with the Australian data. We subsequently found the same patterns to be evident in both data sets, with few distinctions. We then obtained corroboration from the literature for the observed relationships which enabled us to develop a set of propositions.

In the following section, we support our findings with evidence from quotations culled from interviews with lecturers and students. Each quotation represents the views of more than a single individual, having been selected - except where specifically noted in the text - to illustrate the common opinions of multiple interviewees. On the whole, in attributing quotations to interviewees, we have used the universal term of 'lecturer' or 'student'. However, where it is important for illustrative purposes to identify the interviewee's nationality, we have done so - not to highlight cultural stereotypicality - but to clarify the interviewee's viewpoint and thus aid the reader's interpretation.

Engaging with critical thinking

Definition of critical thinking: differences and uncertainty

Students and lecturers define critical thinking differently and for many it is an ambiguous concept. On entry to postgraduate courses, many students have had minimal, if any, engagement with academic critical thinking, and therefore have little understanding of what it entails. Notably, many international students acknowledge the existence of culturally relative differences in academic learning, as illustrated in the comment of a Chinese student:

[In China], it's not really what you are supposed to do. Asking the 'whys? whats? hows? and wheres?' is not done.

Yet lecturers note that the problem is not confined to international students. For example:

Asian students are not used to questioning things, but our home students can't do it either. They can talk a lot, they can make their point, but they can't rationalise things. They never had to in school, so they're not used to it. (Lecturer).

Although such challenges are well documented with regard to international students (e.g. Ryan 2010), lecturers in our research observed that most students, whether home or international students, experienced difficulties notably because of the paucity of critical thinking skills development at undergraduate level.

For some students, critical thinking is 'just another set of rules' that needs to be learned and followed in order to pass a course. Others engage in what Paul (1982:23) describes as 'weak critical thinking' where they argue one side of an argument, refuting alternative views, without understanding how to synthesise perspectives into a convincing, well evidenced critical argument.

At first I thought it meant I had to challenge everything, but I didn't really understand what 'challenge' meant. I thought I had to just give my own opinions based on my common sense. But later, I realised that I needed to find evidence to support my opinions, but I didn't know how to (synthesise) others' opinions into my argument.

I thought it meant to say something opposite to what the author thinks, or to say there is something wrong with his theory. So, criticising the authorities.

Even by the time I did my dissertation, I hadn't really grasped it – I have done some critical thinking in the dissertation, but I don't understand it 100%.

These impoverished notions of criticality and argumentation continue to remain relevant for many throughout the whole period of study, indicating the lack of support to develop their skills further, or their unwillingness to grapple further with the concept.

To some extent, students' negative, bewildered or instrumental attitudes are an outcome of the different views and positions of lecturers towards critical thinking and its value in education. Less than half of the public relations and marketing communications lecturers who participated in the study had a well-developed sense of the possible meanings and applications of criticality (although there were proportionally more lecturers in the British university with a good sense of criticality because staff had been exposed there to training sessions and staff team discussions on criticality in learning and teaching). Others were unable to distinguish and describe the characteristics of critical thinking, or to articulate strategies for teaching and encouraging its practice. This suggests a neglect by some to engage in critical examination of their own pedagogy. Some lecturers wondered if they as well as their colleagues had failed in their ability to identify and nurture this important skill, as illustrated in the following quotation:

Argumentation is the unmentionable word when it comes to training lecturers. It's just assumed. Everybody thinks they know about it, but no-one talks about it. Some colleagues do not have a consciousness of what critical argumentation means, and therefore cannot articulate this to the students; other colleagues do have this consciousness and can share their good practice. (Lecturer)

In contrast to those unable to define or demonstrate their engagement with critical thinking, other students and lecturers clearly understood and valued the concept for the intellectual freedom it offered to generate alternative insights on their topic of study or teaching, or into their own, contextualised lives.

Critical thinking develops you personally. You don't accept everything at face value; you tend to question things more. It becomes part of you. (Student)

You problematise things in your mind and see different perspectives and angles, and how you can intellectualise and approach problems in a more complex way. This is really good, this is what academic life does for you – it helps you THINK.. (Student, our capitals to express the participant's emphasis)

Lecturers who were proficient in defining and applying the concept, understood it to include purposeful and evaluative reading, writing, oral debate, and reflection, all skills that could be taught and encouraged in seminars as well as through assessed work.

:

Students need to dialogue with and be engaged with the literature, not just reading it, but looking for inconsistencies, or for a different approach. It's not about seeing weaknesses, it's more about developing the argument. Students often think that an argument is just based on criticism, but it's about adopting a position – it's the idea of argument and counter-argument. (Lecturer)

Using sources from other disciplines encourages thinking outside the box – exposing students to different perspectives, approaches and debates. Part of critical thinking is being able to change one's mind, always being open to new information, raising questions, reflecting on and re-visiting issues, to see if one's perspective has changed. Part of this learning process is the lecturer giving feedback to students so that both skills and confidence in critical thinking increase together. (Lecturer)

The last participant had observed a marked change in students' learning behaviour when she actively encouraged critical thinking in class discussions. After this training, students became more motivated to ask questions, and to do pre-reading in order to take an informed and active role in class discussions.

Critical thinking, therefore, appears to be a confusing concept that some students and lecturers do grasp and employ, but which others fail to articulate, and, in the case of students, choose to shun, or only partially apply even after completing a masters program. To some extent, impoverished notions of criticality may be due to a number of factors including a lack of engagement by students with argumentation at the undergraduate or foundational level; a lack of support for skills development during postgraduate studies; and possibly more importantly due to the ambiguous or diverse understandings (whether positive or negative) that are conveyed by lecturers themselves.

The value of critical thinking: differences and tensions

Some interviewees, mostly students, see little value in acquiring critical thinking skills because of their perceived irrelevance to careers in communication and marketing, or because their home cultures did not condone criticality as advocated in Anglophone cultures. Those in this group who had previous work experience recalled how the communication function was driven by tight deadlines and the constant demands of

the media. Therefore:

There was not “the luxury, the time to weigh arguments, to think about different perspectives. We were expected to produce very simple messages and solutions, very quickly and make quick decisions. (Student).

Comments exemplified by this quotation highlight functional distinctions within knowledge work, i.e. at the technician level (Dozier, 1992) and in early career roles which involve little problem solving, there may be less call for critical thinking than at more strategic and managerial levels.

The cultural unacceptability of critique and challenge in the workplace was a concern for some international students:

I can't use critical thinking in the industry back home because they will feel that I am challenging and arguing with the managers, and it will seem rude and offensive. (Taiwanese student)

Similarly, in South Korea, according to a student from that country, those who have studied abroad have a reputation of ‘being difficult to work with’; they can appear offensive and disrespectful especially to older colleagues who may feel personally insulted when their ideas are challenged or when improvements are suggested by younger people who have studied abroad. Even in the UK, according to a British marketing lecturer, some industries do not encourage innovative thinking because ‘people who think critically can be a source of problems: they may question the authority’s existing systems’. Fears about appearing disruptive in the workplace, then, may not be confined to those anticipating careers solely in Asia.

Cynicism about the value of critical thinking in the workplace includes the concern that the concept itself may not be translatable to a different language. An Iranian student stated that: “When I want to translate critical thinking into my language, it doesn’t make sense. So I ask myself, is it a universal skill?”. In many countries with communist and authoritarian regimes, criticism has a negative connotation: “We grew up with our parents teaching us ‘don’t criticise other people’s opinions’ ” (Korean student). This prohibition would apply more keenly toward those in authority, or those who had officially published papers or books.

Perceptions about the cultural inappropriateness of critical thinking and the surfeit of potentially unwelcome consequences for returning students has led some to dismiss these intellectual skills as irrelevant for life and work. This has prevented them from experimenting with critical thinking. However, when required to demonstrate critical thinking in course assessment (and not all assignments do require this), some students may have appropriated such skills in order to achieve postgraduate goals. In such cases, these skills are likely to be rejected on returning home:

Here I know I have to think; I have to use my brain. But in Taiwan, I just follow everyone else. I don’t need to think. (Student)

In effect, the perceived irrelevance and the cultural unacceptability of critical thinking have

deterred many postgraduate public relations and marketing communications students from developing expertise in criticality. The issue is further complicated by second language and communication challenges. Yet student lack of interest in developing critical skills for professional careers is likewise evident in many home students. Lecturers commented on students' lack of appreciation for developing critical skills:

I try to teach critical thinking, but when I mention it to students they start rolling their eyes. Students who respond to critical thinking are in a small minority – the majority either hate it or have no clue about it. The thing that concerns me most is that they don't have a habit of questioning 'why?'. Everything is focused on getting jobs at the end, rather than developing a broader base of skills.

Many students, therefore, have focused on passing assignments but do not see the need to reflect critically on what they have learned. They have become 'acquisitive' instead of 'inquisitive' learners (Lauder et al, 2006). Together, these issues have triggered a dilemma for marketing and public relations lecturers whose ambitions for their students' intellectual development may be in collision with students' more pragmatic, vocational goals.

The data indicate that the majority of public relations and marketing lecturers regard critical thinking as essential for career advancement and, more broadly, economic wealth, considering that these skills should be taught at university. Not all lecturers, however, advanced the view that critical thinking is also a socially desirable trait that enables full citizen participation in the democratic process. Yet some students, especially those from abroad who had not been exposed to critical thinking at home, did state that the latter was a key expectation in postgraduate learning. Many prized the freedom of expression that they associated with study in Anglophone universities, regarding this as a major motivator for their choice of study in Britain or Australia, as Egege and Kutlieh (2004) also noted in their research. Their appreciation of the worth of critical thinking (even if they expressed the concept in different words), inspired some students in our study to step out and risk rehearsing their newly acquired skills: being sceptical about the conventional, exploring and arguing alternative notions of truth. A Croatian student echoed the views of some international students when she stated that:

Here you have absolute freedom to think whatever you want, you just have to argue it. I like that intellectual freedom.

In this and other cases, critical thinking was valued by lecturers and students not primarily for professional enhancement but because of its ability to facilitate critical engagement in wider social and cultural issues.

In the data, there were no explicit responses from lecturers about the irrelevance of critical thinking. A content analysis of unit learning guides associated with courses in public relations and marketing communications in the sampled British and Australian universities revealed that not all units encouraged dialogue and unmitigated questioning, the crossing of interdisciplinary borders or the embracing of critique and possibility (Giroux, 2009). While unit learning objectives in the British university tended to be more explicit about the requirement for criticality this

provided in some cases only a cursory nod to scholarly evaluation. On the whole, the content of public relations and marketing communications courses in both universities emphasised the achievement of practical skills, models and business-related solutions that were informed primarily by textbook chapters rather than wider, more scholarly reading. The key learning objectives of the following postgraduate course in the Australian university, for instance, bore little relationship to high skills development:

This course is designed for applicants wanting to develop a greater depth of knowledge in the marketing field. It enhances the ability of marketing executives to anticipate demand for projects by analysing the behaviour of competitors and customers. Students design, organise and control marketing strategies to reach a target market.

Within the same program, a unit in public relations sought to enable students' to:

Identify an organisation's key publics or stakeholder groups and predict their behaviour; identify and analyse ethical issues affecting organisational/stakeholder relationships; apply specialised PR concepts to real life business situations; prepare a public relations plan; differentiate between the role of PR and other major business disciplines, especially marketing.

To some extent, the apparent intellectual paucity of such courses may be influenced by lecturers' haziness about the nature of critical thinking or their hesitance to employ critical thinking because of their own vulnerabilities in teaching the concept. However, the evidence also indicates that despite the espousal by many lecturers of the importance of scholarly rigour and the development of critical intellectual capacity, some do not promote this on the basis that practical, work-based competences are more immediately valued by employing organisations.

This contrasts with the views of mature students with work experience, who correlated a critical conscience with career enhancement. They associated professional progression with the ability to read and listen sceptically but sensitively, in order to understand and evaluate different points of view, and to critique, debate and self-reflect from an informed stance. They considered that critical thinking enabled communications executives to "think outside the box" and appreciate "the bigger picture" surrounding an issue or problem, to "look a lot more critically" at whatever lands on the desk, and therefore to develop more convincing, evidence-based professional arguments "by drawing on different sources of information and comparing and contrasting them" (Student). Skills in criticality, therefore, were considered to motivate good decision-making at work, enabling often contradictory information to be analysed, evaluated and prioritised so that decisions can be made "with confidence" and opinions formed on the basis of sound evidence. Such skills were considered to be obligatory for an accelerated career.

In summary, multiple perspectives exist about the importance or otherwise of critical thinking, ranging from its value to personal and professional development, its crucial role in enabling engaged citizenship in a democratic society, to its lack of relevance for any capacity especially that related to the workplace. A combination of students' and staff attitudes cohere around each of these perspectives.

Challenges to teaching criticality

The impact of marketisation is perhaps most evident in the strategies that marketing and public relations lecturers use in their teaching to deal with the tension between the need to develop intellectual capacity and the requirement for practical, professional skills, the latter an intrinsic component of professional and industry-informed degrees. Some lecturers continue, despite many obstacles, to promote and teach critical thinking because of its perceived value as core to postgraduate development. Others succumb to both market forces and the demands of students as 'customers' to follow a more instrumental, vocational approach that, in effect, reduces intellectual confidence and creativity. The root of this differentiation may lie in the diverse meanings held by lecturers of critical thinking, and its value in education. As previously indicated, some lecturers are not able to articulate a clear understanding of what critical thinking entails, nor to describe how they would endeavour to teach or encourage it. This suggests that even though they might espouse the need to teach criticality, they themselves do not engage in critical reflection of or in their own pedagogy.

Those who are actively committed to the promotion and teaching of critical thinking identified marketization as having a detrimental effect on the quality of education, and, in the long run, on career preparedness.

At this university we've shot ourselves in the foot because we try too hard to align ourselves with industry. We don't really encourage students to think critically. So that while we are producing job-ready graduates who can hit the ground running, about two years down the line they hit the wall because they can't really think independently. As soon as they are promoted a little and asked to make decisions, to research something, to decide on the best option, to benchmark things, they won't be able to do it. This is driven by industry on the one hand, and also by the students because they want that first job. But we try too hard; industry doesn't even want this; they'd be happy for us to stretch students more.
(Lecturer)

Although, as noted in an earlier section, some lecturers highlighted that not all industries encourage critical thinking, nevertheless, they thought that it remains the role of the university to train students in critical skills in preparation for more senior management roles and responsibilities:

It is very narrow minded for universities to think that because industry doesn't require critical thinking, then we don't have to teach it.

Despite convictions about the importance of critical thinking in higher education, these lecturers considered that the marketization of higher education is making the promotion of critical thinking so problematic that they are waning in their enthusiasm for teaching it. There was a reticence to emphasise critical thinking in courses because this would necessitate 'lots of effort' and 'an unacceptable investment of time' in helping students grasp the principles of critical thinking, in light of the lack of motivation by some, the evident challenges facing many international students, and increasing class sizes.

Not many students appreciate critical thinking, because it is not something you can buy off the shelf. It's an ongoing, continuous struggle – you have to acquire a new habit of making informed decisions. But it's not popular. (Lecturer)

I've had to minimise the critical thinking element for my classes because of large class sizes which make individual feedback impossible. (Lecturer)

To motivate and enable students, lecturers agreed that detailed comments on each piece of assessed coursework is essential if students are to grasp the principles of critical thinking, but “it is impossible to provide this” when so many students have little, if any, prior experience of these principles, and class sizes are increasing, due to inter alia the massification of higher education.

Recognising that the problem may be insurmountable, some marketing and public relations lecturers have opted instead to deliver ‘customer service’ by providing students with full information and direction to achieve high grades without needing to critically evaluate the material, or engage in a rigorous, intellectual pursuit of truth. In this way, they teach to meet students’ consumerist expectations.

Students today are trained to be spoon-fed, where everything is given to them, and the marking guide is very explicit and spelled out. (Lecturer).

For many of our assignments we were spoon-fed. The lecturers pointed us in the direction they wanted us to go in, told us what information we needed. So we didn't really need to critically think. (Student)

Some lecturers claimed that assignment guidelines have become like checklists, to ensure that students know exactly what needs to be included and can ‘follow a formula’ to achieve good marks. Students were encouraged to rely on prescriptive model answers that leave little or no room for thinking creatively, even though lecturers acknowledged that “there's no such thing as a model answer in industry” and that “model answers encourage rote learning”. The result is that:

Theoretical frameworks and tools are not critiqued in courses, and pre-described frameworks are relied on. Case studies are used but whether critical thinking is encouraged or not depends entirely on the level of discussion generated in class. (Lecturer)

In summary, then, some lecturers in public relations and marketing continue to exert their pedagogical convictions, but at the same time they experience considerable tension when confronted with market forces that lead to “damaging” effects on teaching and learning in higher education. Others are more sanguine or instrumental, bowing to consumerist expectations and perceived corporate imperatives to prioritise practical, professional skills at the expense of the development of theoretical and conceptual knowledge.

Discussion

Our data, collected in Australia and the UK, revealed few distinguishable differences between

the countries. Understandings of critical thinking by those teaching postgraduate courses in marketing communications and public relations, or those about to enter the home or global contemporary labour market, are multiple and complex. For some, the notion is a perplexing or ambiguous one, difficult to articulate and therefore a practice to be avoided. The understanding of others is partial, their employment of 'weak critical thinking' (Paul 1982) indicating their engagement in a limited form of argumentation which is insufficient to demonstrate the acquisition of higher order skills. Staff and students whose grasp on criticality is well developed, are in the minority. For them, critical thinking involves problematising issues, gleaning alternative insights from the employment of multiple perspectives on contextualised issues and events, and being capable of argumentation including at a conceptual level. Within the discipline of public relations and marketing communications, then, the data indicate that there are no common understandings about the meaning of critical thinking.

Similarly, the value or otherwise of critical thinking is perceived diversely, ranging on the one hand to its importance in personal and professional development, and its fundamental role in motivating civic participation in a democratic society, to its contrasting irrelevance to employment in a global labour market. The views of both students and academics are associated with each of these. Some interviewees, mostly students, see little value in acquiring critical thinking skills because of their perceived irrelevance to careers in communication and marketing, or because their home or professional cultures do not encourage criticality. What they want (and believe they need) above all, are vocational tools for employment. In a highly competitive, global labour market, they naturally want to achieve advanced credentials, but they fail to see the relevance of critical thinking as an essential life skill for enabling creative and entrepreneurial endeavour in a knowledge economy. The majority of students of marketing communication and public relations appear to be content with their new role of customers of education understood as a commodity, but there remains a significant number who want to be challenged and stretched intellectually at university and who are not content with a narrow education focused on workplace-related skills.

Most marketing and public relations lecturers, whether or not they can articulate and operationalise the notion of critical thinking in their teaching, regard critical skills as essential for career advancement and, more broadly, economic wealth. They consider that criticality should be taught at university. However, a minority of lecturers as well as some students appreciate critical thinking not only for its relevance to productivity but also for its capacity to reveal inequalities, and to facilitate critical and creative engagement in wider social and cultural issues. It is this latter group of students and lecturers that is the most proficient and confident in its ability to conceive of and articulate critical thinking as a higher order skill.

The research indicates therefore that there is no consistency in the enunciation of or value placed on critical thinking in postgraduate courses in public relations and marketing communications in the universities investigated. While other studies have drawn attention to disagreements about critical thinking between disciplines (e.g. Egege and Kutieleh, 2004), our inquiry notes that even within a single discipline there are differences and contradictions.

The impact of marketisation on how criticality is taught and learnt at the postgraduate level in marketing and public relations

We have argued, and both the primary and secondary evidence suggests, that in penetrating the traditional boundary between education and the marketplace, the values and discourse of the market have caused an increasing tension between the teaching strategies required to maintain the academic rigour that is traditionally esteemed in higher education, and the applied relevance that has become the hallmark of professional and industry-informed courses. Lecturers who are pragmatists tend to succumb to the perceived demands of both industry and student consumers, downgrading or neglecting critical thinking in their teaching, course content and assessments, to the benefit of the development of vocational skills. In conceding to the forces of marketisation, their practices lead to a debunking of scholarly initiative and a diminishing of academic rigour in the curriculum. Students then become generally unwilling to confront alternative perspectives and contest existing knowledge. The outcome is an impoverishment in the development of students' higher order skills and their lack of preparedness for careers as elite members of the knowledge economy.

In contrast, purists who endeavour to resist the penetration of higher education by market forces continue to promote and teach critical thinking, doing so in the face of increasing pressure to marginalise its contribution to postgraduate development. Their frustrations relate to what they perceive as the 'dumbing down' of university standards and aspirations, and the smothering of universities as open spaces for democratic debate, critique and creativity. In the drive towards creating a knowledge economy, academics such as these ask the question 'What does, or should, this knowledge comprise?' and 'How can we best prepare students to be creative contributors (as elite members and citizens) in the knowledge economy?'

Conclusion

Public relations and marketing communications are critical examples of 'knowledge work' which, in privileging intellectual capital, is considered intrinsically important to the future economy of both Australia and the United Kingdom. Therefore, although our research is limited with findings that need to be treated with caution, the results may provide indicators of general trends occurring in the teaching of other profession-related disciplines, if not more broadly in higher education.

Previous studies have indicated that higher education has been colonised by the values and discourse of the market. Our research suggests that this has led to an exacerbation of the tension between academic rigour and corporate relevancy. In public relations and marketing communications there is a strong focus on workplace-related competences, to the neglect of higher order critical thinking skills, indicating a diminution of academic attachment to critique and wider social/cultural engagement, and a resulting impoverishment of students' creative abilities and critical consciences. Governments and employers have stated that they want more than highly skilled workers, trained in workplace competencies; they also need creative, entrepreneurial professionals with an intellectual curiosity that confounds and confronts the conventional (e.g. in the UK, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2009). In the high skills economy, practical, occupational skills may be sufficient for a first job, but these are insufficient for democratic participation and also for career progression in an economy that privileges intellectual capital. Universities are misguided

about what employers need when they neglect the teaching of criticality, and theoretical, conceptual knowledge. While postgraduates in public relations and marketing communications may be ready for the labour market at the entry level, they are likely to be insufficiently prepared for longer term careers as knowledge workers in the high skills economy.

Although the findings of this research apply specifically to the discipline and practice of public relations and marketing communications, if shown in further studies to be applicable to higher education more broadly, then there are implications for the availability of appropriate intellectual capital as a national resource. In the longer term, this will be jeopardised and not only will the future prosperity of the United Kingdom and Australia be put at risk, but the wellbeing of democratic society will be harmed also.

While limited to a focus on postgraduate students in one distinct field of study at two universities, our investigation nevertheless straddles two countries and also draws on extant research into issues of marketisation, criticality and higher education. Therefore, its generalisability is partial. Nevertheless, its findings and key questions may be transferred with caution to the tertiary sector more widely in order to offer insights into the penetration of higher education by the discourse of the market, and the implications for how – and the extent to which - postgraduates are prepared for careers in a knowledge economy. Future research might profitably explore these themes in more depth in other disciplines or through single case studies of the management and organisation of universities. Inquiry could be made concerning the intrusion of marketisation upon the formulation of policies, especially in relation to the university as an entrepreneurial enterprise; the implementation of and resistance to business strategies including those involved in monitoring and evaluating knowledge development; and the (business) leadership of institutional change. A longitudinal study could also be undertaken to gauge further change over time in perceptions, practice, and career preparedness. Such research would serve to highlight the processes of ‘academic capitalism’ (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004) through which the priorities of universities are shifting to embrace in varying degrees the discourse of the market.

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