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**Competition, innovation and diversity in higher education: dominant discourses, paradoxes and resistance.**

**Abstract**

This article explores the powerful yet contradictory role of neoliberalism, its competitive mechanisms and emotional logics Theoretically, it reviews the shifting state-higher education-market nexus through the lens of a critical cultural political economy paradigm. Conceptually, it closely examines Davies’ work on the ‘logic of competition’ (2014) and Naidoo’s idea of ‘competition fetish’ (2011, 2015, 2018) to expose the material and discursive *dispositifs* through which nation-states, institutions and individual actors mobilize universities to position themselves in the global knowledge economy. The discussion is informed and supported by empirical evidence drawn from a doctoral project (2013-14). The article aims to contribute to the extant critique of (higher) education by introducing the paradox of ‘polarized convergence’ as an instance of differentiation without diversity in the contemporary English university. Such paradox urges the re-visitation and broadening of the idea and practice of the entrepreneurial university to reinvigorate the link between competition, innovation and diversity.

**Keywords:** neoliberalism, competition fetish, university, polarized convergence, innovation

**Introduction**

Contemporary higher education is a theoretically challenging creature. It is animated by a variety of institutional actors and processes that are connected with one another and engaged with the global, economic, political, and cultural environment that has historically generated it and continues to shape it. What makes this ‘ensemble’ at once fascinating and problematic is the fact that, according to Robertson and Dale, ‘[its] constituent elements and internal relations…have causal powers which are emergent from, though not reducible to, its parts’. (2015, 3). In other words, if the higher education-state-market *nexus* reveals their co-dependence (Clark, 1983) and ontological mutuality, the political nature of the construct – its historical and spatial contingencies- materially and discursively dooms the sector to incessant making and re-making.

With this in mind, this paper broadly adopts a cultural political economy (CPE) approach (Jessop 2008; Jessop 2009; Sum and Jessop, 2013; Robertson 2011) to the neoliberal turn in higher education (Giroux 2014; Holmwood 2011, 2012; Docherty 2011, 2015), while preemptively acknowledging the potential ethnocentric pitfall of analyses that tend to reduce the ‘political/economic’ essentially to capitalist modes of accumulation and the ‘cultural’ to Western modern hegemonic policy discourses (Robertson and Dale 2015).

The following sections introduce the English entrepreneurial-competitive university as a case study, highlighting the contested role of market mechanisms in its ongoing reshaping. To illustrate the latter, William Davies’ work on the logic of competition (2014) and Naidoo’s notion of ‘competition fetish’ (Naidoo 2015, 2019) are evoked as the structural-cum-discursive *dispositifs* through which state-, institutional, and individual actors mobilize universities to position themselves in the global knowledge economy. An empirical case study conducted in England in 2013-14 (doctoral project) is further deployed to substantiate the claim that marketisation produces normative paradoxes and negative, unintended institutional consequences. It is hoped that the analysis will contribute to clarifying the perils of a fetishized competition *qua* sole driver of innovation agendas within contemporary universities, at the same time urging a semantic re-visitation of the entrepreneurial university, in an effort to imbue institutional differentiation with existential diversity.

**State-University-Market: A Shifting Construct.**

Competition and competitiveness within contemporary higher education preserve a certain conceptual elusiveness, that is why analytical and theoretical lenses are vital to reveal their structural, discursive and cultural undertones. In this respect, at a systemic level, the Regulation Approach (RA) (Jessop 1990, 1993, 1995) provides a key foundation to embed Western higher education transformations within the broader *spectrum* of theories of state restructuring. This allows to align globalization, neoliberalization and the re-scaling and restructuring of the post-Keynesian capitalist state with the transformation of higher education. It does so by clarifying how tensions and contradictions which characterize the ever competitive, innovative, marketized university emerge from and mirror the problematic antinomy of accumulation and legitimation faced by the neoliberal state in its attempt to promote and prioritize capital expansion over social justice and cohesion.

Furthermore, and in line with regulationist analyses, Cerny’s notion of ‘competition state’ (1990, 1997) connects state transformation with *exogenous* pressures stemming from globalization. The latter exerts its influence on the state in three key areas: international market structures and economic networks arising from the international mobility of capital; rapid and diffuse technological change (especially in communication, due to the information revolution) that promotes cross-border interpenetration and interdependence; and the formation of international networks and discourses of power legitimating new types of governance. Together, they urge the rearticulation of the national domestic political economy along these lines: deregulation, flexibilization, liberalization of public policy and of the state apparatus. This has produced a structural transformation of the role of the state *vis-à-vis* education, whose main consequence, especially felt in the case of higher education, has been the progressive withdrawal of the state as only reliable guarantor of the public good functions of education.

By connecting state theory with neoliberal globalization and education reform, a conceptual framework thus begins to take shape. In a context dominated by hegemonic neoliberalism and the reconfigured competition state, with Keynesian policies substituted by Schumpeterian workfare, accumulation and legitimation are collapsed at a discursive and structural level (Dale and Robertson 2002): within higher education these processes are evident in policy reforms that emphasize marketization and competitive entrepreneurialism. That is, the state removes itself from many areas of previous social interventions in an attempt to depoliticize them and thus reduce its legitimation burden. This gives rise to contradictions that are visible in highly marketized (higher) education systems: depoliticization cannot happen through reliance on market mechanisms because state intervention in higher education is necessary in order to avoid the chronic market failures (Brown 2011; Brown and Carasso, 2013) that have historically characterized the field. The market itself, to recall Karl Polanyi’s *The Great Transformation* (1944) is socially and politically ‘instituted’, that is shaped by patterns of state regulation. The apparent contradiction between state tight regulation (be it through traditionally centralized or de-centralized steering at distance governance mechanisms) and commodification is thus not only integral to the neoliberal mode of capital accumulation and regulation, but lies at the heart of the higher education restructuring agenda. These centrifugal tensions, arising from the combination of late capitalism and neoliberal ideology, are necessary to anchor the following discussion on commodification/marketization of higher education.

One attempt to theoretically recast the macro changes at the heart of the state-education restructuring agenda is offered by Susan Robertson’s call for a “new spatial politics of (re)bordering and (re)ordering of the state-education-citizen relation (2011). Robertson firstly problematizes the notion of “border” by addressing the mobility and spatial turns powered by globalization and presenting a so called “contra-flow” speak that critically engages with and re-prioritizes borders as central to the understanding of our societies. Globalizing processes and in particular the widespread diffusion of neoliberalism, have not only generated new forms of territorial bordering (e.g. the European Higher Education Area) but have produced new categories which are “constitutive of education sectors and subjectivities” (Robertson 2011, p. 281): in this way entities such as state, nation, public sector, citizen and knowledge acquire new, often contested meanings, and develop “fluid” identities. These phenomena of “novel borderings”, as defined by sociologist Saskia Sassen, do not simply refer to the scalar re-articulation of state activities (local, regional, global), but describe the ways in which the national state authority is being affected and penetrated by “the proliferation of sub-national re-scalings of global processes and institutions” (Robertson 2011, p. 289). Globalization becomes thus “enacted” and performed at various scales and in different institutional domains,inside national territories.

**English higher education at a glance: a complex ecology***.*

If the previous section illustrated the concomitant role of globalization, marketization and neoliberalisation in the reshaping of Western mature higher education systems, a cursory look at the trajectory of recent policy interventions in the English higher education (2010 Browne Report; 2011 and 2016 White papers; 2017 Higher Education Act) is sufficient to warrant conceptual alignment with those considerations. Since 2012 the liberalization of the sector has in fact proceeded inexorably notwithstanding uncertain outcomes and diffuse institutional distress: tripling of the annual tuition fees (capped at £ 9,000) to be backed by a (financially unsustainable) Income Contingent Loan system – offsetting the substantial cuts in the public funding of the teaching function - ; partial relaxation of student number controls (AABs, ABBs policies), to become totally deregulated in 2015-16; launch of a new research assessment format, the Research Excellence Framework (2014), to distribute quality related public research monies pending an evaluation of the universities’ research impact on the wider society (impact agenda); creation of a level playing field for alternative providers (private and for-profit education providers); increased reliance on metrics (e.g. Key Information Sets, National Student Survey, multiple ranking devices) to evaluate performance and produce accurate information for the student-consumer, to be placed ‘at the heart of the system’ (White Paper 2011).

Finally, the Higher Education and Research Act (2017) marked a dramatic and consistent intensification of the processes initiated by its predecessor: introduction of a Teaching Excellence Framework, to be independently reviewed by 2019, that will pave the way for variable tuition fees in connection with outcomes after 2020; creation of a new powerful regulator, the Office for Students, which merges the functions of the existing Office for Fair Access (OFFA) and the formerly Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE); increased reliance on metrics (student satisfaction, graduate employment, retention) for performance evaluation and future creation of new measures for evaluation; merging of the seven research councils, Innovate UK and the research and innovation responsibilities of HEFCE within a new quango, the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), that will also control a “common research fund” destined to boost cross-disciplinary impact; easing of the entry and operational requirements for alternative providers[[1]](#footnote-1); evaluation of a case for switching university courses more flexibly; more transparency in admission processes by demanding the publication of gender, ethnicity and socio-economic background of the student body.

This snapshot is instrumental to extract the underlying cultural-cum policy paradigm at play here: the increased choice ensuing from institutional competition[[2]](#footnote-2) allegedly results in enhanced quality, responsiveness, diversification and competitiveness within the sector, in keeping with the spirit and demands of a globalised knowledge-based economy. By strengthening sectoral competition through informational, evaluative practices and ‘controlled deregulation’, the government invokes the potency of the market to cultivate, incite and harness knowledge transfer and innovation within universities. Competition emerges thus as the symbolic and material engine at the heart of neoliberal marketisation. The following section unpacks its material, discursive and emotional mechanisms while highlighting its contradictory impulses.

**Unpacking competition.**

Will Davies’ analysis (2014) illustrates neoliberal connections with, as well as departures from, both classic liberalism and Austrian ordo-liberalism. He locates the ultimate source of authority and legitimation that explains neoliberalism’s exceptional ability to withstand a state of seemingly permanent crisis in the logic of competition, defined by classic liberals and ordo-liberals as the quintessential normative characteristic of the markets. The latter in particular grappled with a number of theoretical paradoxes of competition, that emerged as central to the current articulation of the relationship between state, education and markets.

First, the promotion of competition entails a role for the state that is both active and disengaged. Second, competition paradoxically combines equality and inequality: ‘the structure of an organized competition (including, in the liberal imaginary, a market) involves contestants being *formally equal at the outset and empirically unequal at the conclusions.’* (Davies 2014, 41). Third, competition, as a socio-economic practice, is both an object of investigation and a policy, thus transcending the disciplinary division between sociology and neoclassical economics.

Yet it is the following question that prompts the crucial shift towards a theorization of competitiveness as the ultimate source of authority and legitimation within what Davies terms ‘contingent’ neoliberalism: ‘is market competition necessary to deliver competitiveness*?’* (Davies 2014, p. 44).

Schumpeter’s theory of competitive agency grants, in this respect, empirical justification to non-market competitive activities by re-directing attention from the characteristics of the market arena to the psychological attributes of the competitors. In his view, the long term viability of capitalism is threatened by oppressive bureaucracies and rationalistic attempts to control the future, that can be found both within governments and private enterprises. In other words, narrowly defined efficiency imperatives hinder creativity undermining the possibility of future productivity improvements. In order to bring uncertainty (as a condition of possibility) back into the capitalist system, the mentality of exceptional individuals - the entrepreneurs- is required: they are in fact capable of defying existing institutional norms and logics, - *via* creative destruction- to create novel productive landscapes that will reinvigorate the capitalist system. In order to do so competition must be viewed as a long term future-oriented strategic gamble, whose reward is a provisional monopoly. The arena of competition is thus expanded to include sociological, cultural, political and technological factors: while orthodox neoclassical economics treated technology and culture as *exogenous* factors to the calculations of *homo economicus*, ‘The entrepreneurs, by contrast, strategically draw on social networks, scientific research, technological insight and imagination to make their “new combinations”’(2014, 53).

If competition in the classical tradition is seen as a natural positive occurrence to be constrained by norms that guarantee a sense of fairness, Schumpeterian competitiveness is rooted in an ‘existential fact of radical difference’ (2014, 65). Rajani Naidoo’s theorization of the ‘competition fetish’ in higher education complements and develops Davies’ distinction between classic competition and competitiveness. Taking issue with the idea that competition is a ‘naturally occurring’ phenomenon, the scholar shows how various actors or assemblages thereof (Bacevic 2018), at different levels (institutional, national, supra-national, individual) effectively generate and sustain competitiveness. These players include structural drivers with a vested interest in influencing and altering political and policy regimes in ways that support the ‘competition state’ thesis (Cerny 1990, 1997) with the promotion of widespread marketization in and of education. Governments, international organizations such as the OECD or the World Bank, and global corporations, the latter pushing the for-profit agenda within public sector education (Ball, 2007) are key exponents of what Naidoo terms the ‘Shamans’ of competition (Naidoo, 2018). However, competition inside the university is relayed, internalized, reproduced or *resisted* with the help of institutional ‘audit-market’ intermediaries (Enders and Naidoo, 2018), that either facilitate the transmission of market forces by modifying internal organizational structures and cultures to accommodate them, or act as buffers/negotiators, by stemming those competitive tides. This point illustrates the ambivalent relationship of academics, especially the elite, towards competition. One that testimonies its deep-seated nature when it comes to the rivalry for advances in one’s intellectual work, at the heart of struggles for ‘scientific capital’ (Bourdieu, 1986) that have contributed to the hierarchical orderings and borderings of modern and contemporary academia. Naidoo adds other varieties of competition in higher education, such as the geopolitical and race for cultural influence, that instantly remind us of Burt’s triangle of coordination (state-market- higher education) and Etzkovitz and Leydesdorff’s triple helix model of innovation (1995). The third and fundamental layer of Naidoo’s conceptualization revolves around symbolic, affective drivers of competition: her anthropological take on the magic workings of the ‘fetish’ through a series of ‘mind snares’ (Naidoo, 2018, p.6) adds analytical strength to Davies’ examination of the Schumpeterian innovator’s psychological traits. The exceptionality of latter serve as a form of legitimation for the pervasiveness and intrinsic goodness of competition. Naidoo proceeds to expose the fallacy of the alleged naturalness of competition arising from a translation of the Darwinian biological analogy (survival of the fittest) to the social world (Meek et al., 1996), debunking the classic liberal myths of equal stakes in the game and meritocracy in contemporary higher education and revealing the affective economy that reproduces the fetish of competition in higher education via (self-)monitoring techniques and ‘engines of anxiety’ (Espeland and Saunder 2016). These, in turn, lock academics, managers and students in an endless oscillatory cycle powered by ‘fear of shame’ and ‘thrill of fame’ (Broegger 2015). From a cultural/affective, political economy standpoint, many scholars unite behind Davies and Naidoo’s critique of neoliberal competition as essentially hindering diversity and innovation, exacerbating pre-existing inequalities, creating new zones of exclusion (via institutional stratification) and fundamentally altering the nature of academic work (Dale, 2016; Marginson, 2016; Ahmed, 2004; Burrows, 2012; Burrows & Knowles, 2014; Gill, 2009; Collini 2012; Olssen 2016).

The following section will present empirical evidence from a doctoral project that corroborates and substantiates these theoretical claims by highlighting the contradictory and paradoxical outcomes of the practice of competitiveness in the English higher education.

**Competition and Innovation in the English higher education: voices from the field.**

My doctoral research project observed the initial sectoral responses to the 2012-13 English reforms, looking for evidence of increased institutional differentiation or convergence in six English higher education institutions characterized as research intensive, teaching intensive and mixed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with senior leaders at the six HEIs, with the intent to capture their views, reactions and analyses regarding the transformation of the sector at a very turbulent, uncertain time. In line with the literature and theory presented here, the study concluded with a diagnosis of institutional isomorphism powered by procedural and ideological conformity; academic, innovation and globalization drifts that coexisted uneasily with evidence of increased polarization (institutional, socio-economic stratification). The latter was strongly signaled by the formation (2012-2013) of strategic research-oriented partnerships that were essentially dividing up the elite segment (Russell Group universities) into regional competitive-collaborative alliances[[3]](#footnote-3), designed to become research and innovation powerhouses with local and global ramifications. The efficiency gains obtained through the local sharing of equipment and the disproportionate advantage in concentrating public research funding embedded them organically at regional and national level, and virtually ‘deterritorialized’ them in their pursuit of global competition, thus corroborating the Emerging Global Model (EGM) of the entrepreneurial competitive research university (Mohrman et al. 2008). I therefore introduced the concept of ‘polarized convergence’ to illustrate the intrinsic contradictions stemming from a case of ‘marketization by the state’. This in turn clarified two crucial aspects concerning the rhetoric and reality of competitive markets in education. First, those ‘imperfections’, rather than failures, intrinsic to the implementation of market mechanisms, unearthed the ‘institutedness’ of the market (Polaniy 1944), as a *de jure* and *de facto* regulated entity. Second, the subjective tensions and analytic discomfort surrounding the meanings and interpretations of marketization were unanimously expressed by the participants in the study (senior managers, university leaders) and by a conspicuous literature (Brown 2011; Brown and Carasso 2013; McGettigan 2013; Williams 1995; Collini 2011; Holmwood 2011; Scott and Callender 2013; Palfreyman and Tapper 2014). In their view, commodification, metricization, liberalization and privatization acknowledged and defined –with different accents- the material and discursive nature of the contemporary entrepreneurial, competitive university. The analysis was intended to offer a sector-wide perspective of the changes underway, however the conversations with senior leaders, often sharing their thoughts in dual mode (managerial *and* academic), revealed the intricacies, ambiguities and tensions that we have seen reflected in Naidoo’s account of the structural, symbolic and affective levers of competition. They also vividly expressed the emotionally unsettling reality of uncertainty experienced against the imperative of producing effective and timely strategic planning. In other words, the exceptional psychological attributes of the visionary, disruptive innovator/entrepreneur envisaged by Schumpeter and expected of them *qua* senior administrators (in turbulent times) weighed heavily when it came to assessing professional, academic and personal risks and opportunities.

The following excerpts focus in particular on the participants’ views, justification, and experience of competition and entrepreneurialism against the backdrop of the sectoral turmoil experienced in the wake of the 2012-13 reforms. Their understanding of marketisation, competition and differentiation highlight paradoxes and the emotional logics intrinsic to processes and mechanisms of intense commodification.

When asked about how their institutions respond to the imperatives of competition and differentiation, for instance, the Schmittian-Schumpeterian trait of a friend-enemy like confrontation emerges vividly, as can be evinced from the following extracts:

We are in deadly competition for research funding already.[…]Most of the academics around the place will understand that about competition… I’m trying to get the grant rather than you but it doesn’t mean we cannot work together, it doesn’t mean we cannot have a joint grant and bring in income for both our universities. […] And if you and I were working together at different universities, we’d be quite happy to say: “hey Bristol and Boyle, let’s put a grant application in, you know, let’s shaft everybody else who wanted that grant”…(Pro VC Research & Knowledge Transfer, Boyle)

We gotta compete whatever. Davies is small enough to be swallowed up, really…

(Pro VC, Davies)

...I think everyone’s position is threatened by competition.

(Pro VC, Boorman)

One of the things that is clear is that we are going to always have competition: the margins of surplus of income over expenditure that we’ve historically operated at will look foolishly small, so that will be an unintended consequence I would expect.

(Pro VC, Leigh)

It’s very cut-throat competition and there is a kind of…you gotta win. Yeah…it’s very competitive, it’s an increasing trend. It’s very much about trying to feed your own institution.

(Chair, Daldry)

In the words of these senior academics competition emerges both as cause and solution to the predicament faced by their institution: its opaque contours and strong emotional connotations (‘cut-throat’, ‘feed your own institution’) drive symbolic and strategic action, notwithstanding the lack of a clear promise of educational or financial gain. In accord with Naidoo’s analysis, the competition fetish produces the psychological ambience of the university and becomes more or less actualized in excellence policies aimed at increasing productivity, potentially causing a trail of real consequences, such as the re-positioning of the institution in the national ranking and/or noticeable changes in work ethos, practice and culture.

The same sense of urgency and nervousness arises when the participants are asked to reflect about the meaning of enterprise, innovation and distinctiveness in their institutions. Most of them candidly admit that they cannot clearly define what makes their institution distinctive or what exactly means to be entrepreneurial, excellent and innovative, and yet they all accept the challenge by embarking on a variety of third mission activities, irrespective of their reputation, prestige or market positioning.

So we lose the battle before we start if we say that terms like innovation and entrepreneurialism are only about business because they are not. So we need to be really clear […] that we are innovative, we are entrepreneurial, we do all sorts of exciting things that create new opportunities, you know, sometimes with economic benefit but also with a political, social, cultural, ethical benefit and that too is innovative and entrepreneurial so I really don’t think we should give the innovation agenda away before we start.

(Dean, Leigh)

Yeah, and there is another word which is kind of used like that which is “excellence”…everything has to be excellent….[…] I think at Daldrywe are kind of excellent in many things but it’s very easy to say these things, very easy to say we will aspire to be this and this and this or that our strategy is this and this and this but strategies are actually aligning ambitions with resource and so it’s not just an aspiration, it has to be realizable and I think…yeah…sometimes we are very loose with the language we use without really knowing what is distinctive and what is excellent about what we do. (Chair, Daldry)

It really hard to be different. We…in 2015 the institution will turn 50 years old. […] We hired a consultant and we said….here we are, Boyle turning 50 years old. What can we celebrate? Why are we special? Why are we different? And they really struggled. They reaaaally struggled. […] It’s all tricky. It’s tricky for us as a Business faculty to, you know…there’s a theme at the moment I’m addressing…which is “how can we be distinctive as a faculty?” All business schools are the same! They do the same stuff! And so it becomes really hard…

(Dean, Boyle)

I’ve challenged my team ever since, to reflect on their approach [entrepreneurial]. I got a presentation which shows that a visionary leadership, delivering to set target priorities, staff that are inspirational and students that can adapt and perform effectively in an ever changing environment…...you see, we need to reflect those priorities…[…] This is our aspiration, we haven’t delivered it yet…to have a series of links with enterprising academies around the country […] So we’re just having to innovate continually to stay ahead of competition.

(Strategic Director, Davies)

So we are continually questioning ourselves about that. And that’s really important because that leads you to try and be innovative and I think that is really the secret of a university being successful. Is that you work cleverly, you work creatively, you work openly.

(Senior administrator, Boorman)

Here, the tensions and ambivalence of academic leaders regarding goals and ambitions that are explicitly and increasingly framed in business-like jargon can be fully appreciated. The underlying paradigm shift in the source of governmental authority that Davies historically traces back to the ‘violent threat of management’ is also evident in their desperate attempt to affirm the existential fact of radical difference, whereby each institution ought to prove distinctive and excellent to outcompete the rivals. Whether this will occur, significantly, becomes of secondary importance; yet it marks the theoretical distinction between competition and *competitiveness,* where the latter paves the way for forms of fetishization, often combined with counter-productive drives that could be summarized as a ‘frantic standstill’ (Rosa, 2013).

Furthermore, the participants’ responses confirm Ngai-Lin Sum and Bob Jessop’s reflections on competitiveness, higher education and the knowledge-based economy (2013) with respect to increasing trends towards innovative regional partnership models. Competitiveness and innovation certainly play a major role in the changing nature and purpose of the university. Competition, once again, subsumes real processes that work through the ‘invisible hand’ of the market and symbolic references that orient economic actions without fully understanding neither the totality of the factors that animate the competitive process nor –significantly- its outcomes. This semantic and semiotic ambivalence is mirrored in the respondents’ views on what the corporate, marketized university *is* and *does*. Once again, we find varying degrees of internal critique and justification:

In terms of the rise of corporate identity, yeah I don’t feel altogether comfortable with that. I think that the university should be a place where we cherish the quirky, the unusual, the distinctive, the oddball, the people who would be probably more challenged by a corporate environment. Often they are the people who would make the discoveries because they are different. So put it in a different way…we have to be slightly more corporate because we have less resource and so we have to allocate that resource more centrally; we have less resource to devolve to individuals but we have to maintain a culture where the individuals, the quirky, the difficult, the oddballs are actually cherished and still valued cause they are the ones that make the great discoveries that last four hundred years.

(Dean, Leigh)

Well we are in a corporate university but it is not the only thing going on…[…] I was resisting the claim that commercialization is the only process at work so I do think the university to quote a colleague “is being turned inside out” but I don’t think the market is the only direction in which we are being turned inside out. […] And personally I am very invested in not just making visible those other ways but actually thinking about ways in which they can be supported much more proactively.

(**Dean**, **Leigh**)

[Marketization] is doing strange things to the university. It does make us chase….It can encroach upon curriculum design simply to get yourself up the league table rather than as you said just thinking about the intrinsic academic content. I wouldn’t say it is a totally distorting thing but it’s influencing the way we do things.

(**Chair of Faculty**, **Daldry**)

We talk a lot about marketization, I’m not sure what is marketization in that sense…it’s metricisation…that everything has to have a metric and that’s the language about things. So another example is employability. So students through the student unions or whatever are now very vocal about employability. So what, so universities have to get students jobs, is that what it means? I mean what is that connection? Or is that the REF sort of represents the quality of the institution? Obviously you get a job if you’re at a higher league table position….so all these things come in and are talked about and the grammar is the grammar of the metric, that’s the discourse now. And that’s been the radical shift of the last five, four years perhaps? (**Pro VC**, **Daldry**)

Marketisation is variously identified with financial shortage/redistribution, liberalization, commercialization and metricization. Yet what all these definitions imply are the material and discursive implications of the market as a trope: what do universities do, *in the name of* the market, however interpreted? Powerfully, one respondent sums it up: ‘it makes us chase…’.

‘Chasing’ translates the condition of continuous improvement and dynamic management that can degenerate into forms of competition fetish. Generated by the demands of the knowledge economy and reinforced by hegemonic discourses linked to global competition, this idea keeps gaining traction because it conjures up the irrational and unwarranted belief that competition in higher education will provide the solution to its current predicaments.

The unevenness of competition within and across national borders, however, demystifies the classic liberal belief in a principle of equivalence whereby all competitors start equal and become unequal as a result of the contest: within neoliberalism not only do competitive mechanisms get fetishized, but also – and increasingly – the ever steeper hierarchies they produce. The fetishization of the hierarchy, in turn, instigates de-differentiating thrusts through mimetic mechanisms. Katja Brøgger (2015) illustrates how competitive, mimetic desire gets ignited by the politics of naming shaming and faming resulting from particular monitoring techniques in cross-national comparisons: using the Bologna Process as a case in point, she examines the affective nature of steering instruments such as the scorecards used in the Bologna stocktaking reports (a follow-up mechanism):

In this way, the OMC[[4]](#footnote-4) – the ontology of the Bologna Process- institutes a new mode of governance in which states are made to co-opt themselves into the process by being encouraged to obey a competitive, mimetic desire. (Brogger 2015, 74)

Significantly, these mimetic, affective practices reinforce the fetishized competitive mechanisms that lead to conformity. In the English HE sector, mimetic desire operates within segments/tiers (arguably in a more visible fashion) but also across them, as demonstrated by academic, innovation and globalization drifts. The latter exemplify competitive isomorphic tendencies that lead higher education institutions and organizational cultures to converge on the prioritization of research activities (academic drift), innovation agendas (innovation drift) and internationalization activities (globalization drift), irrespective of their status, prestige and market positioning. If we add to the mix the fundamental role of information strategy (e.g. marketing, branding tools) in connection with reputational race as the privileged vehicles for institutional competition, we can fully appreciate the unintended consequences of increased exposure to market forces in higher education. As the voices from the field have unequivocally evidenced, differentiation and excellence are perceived as imperative, yet remain elusive, contested and problematic, both conceptually and practically. While the “corporate university” is intellectually resisted, its managerial ethos, practices, metrics, power structures, surveillance apparata and narratives are internalized and reproduced by all universities with a sense of unspoken ineluctability. The increasing reliance on marketing, branding and information strategies curbs the diversity and richness of the linguistic expression which is in turn part and parcel of a cultural variety that should find its veritable expression in a (mass) higher education system. Through standardization, conformity and compliance, core functions, missions and unique institutional *esprits* are diluted and sacrificed to similar, empty slogans. When institutional differentiation is equated to its reputational divide and market positioning, in-segment convergence is favoured and systemic, functional differentiation sacrificed, thus producing the ultimate paradox: differentiation without diversity.

**Concluding remarks: Re-creating Innovation.**

Competitive, mimetic desire and the ‘affective’ nature of its consequences can therefore pose a serious challenge to the current higher education systems’ ability to effectively and substantially diversify their structures and contents, thus compromising the achievement of its intended goals: innovation and positional advantage in the knowledge-based economy. This reinforces three observations. First, the binary logic of success/failure that is so ingrained in pecking orders institutionalizes competitiveness by conflating means with ends to the detriment of the diversity and richness of educational experiences and philosophies. When institutional and educational differences become commensurable, the space for diversity and innovation inevitably shrinks. Second, mimetic desire, existential anxiety and shame are powerful emotional instruments through which neoliberalism, *via* the logic of competition, finds its internal source of legitimation and reproduction, swallowing its own critique and accommodating paradoxes. Finally, and most importantly, the link between semiosis and affect should not be overlooked: that is, the fetishization of calculative practices in education is built upon and justified by certain constellations of feelings.

The profound *impasse* candidly admitted by all institutional leaders when asked to define diversity and distinctiveness has in fact revealed the semantic limits of a “university discourse” now overwhelmingly framed in economic terms. There is a certain irony in the incapacity to compellingly define the British universities’ “unique selling proposition”: that is the impossibility to capture, let alone measure, a cultural, intangible and emotional trait such is diversity. A quality that is *felt* rather than explained and that pertains more to the mystery of the human, than to the certainty of the metrics. Yet the analysis of the unintended consequences of marketisation in education, to which the paradox of ‘polarized convergence’ contributes; Davies’s analysis of competitiveness as neoliberalism’s ultimate source of authority; and Naidoo’s exposure of the mind traps offer more than diagnostic tools. They offer a potential solution. Ambiguities, tensions and paradoxes reveal the cracks in the shamans’ armours, and are there to invite intrusion and change. In the empirical evidence presented, for example, the linguistic discomfort of the participants demonstrates a frail if not dubious allegiance to the corporate overtaking of higher education. The business-like jargon fuelled by performative anxiety can trap creativity in a series of empty slogans but can and is increasingly being contested. In this respect, this analysis argues that change could and should be instantiated by counteracting competitive symbolic orders with forms of re-signification and re-bordering. Student as producer (Warwick and Lincoln universities); the Reinvention Centre (Warwick university), the Cooperative University project in the UK (Neary, 2014; Winn 2015); the University of Mondragon (Basque Countries) represent powerful cases in point. Perhaps the strongest example of re-signification and re-bordering in praxis that weaves together the structural, symbolic, linguistic and emotional facets of competition/innovation is offered by the work of a group of Scandinavian researchers and educators who suggest that we should understand entrepreneurship as an everyday practice (Schumar and Robinson, 2018). Relying on Spinosa, Flores and Dreyfus’s metaphor of ‘disclosive spaces’ (1999), entrepreneurship then becomes ‘being sensitive to one’s own environment and practices…dealing with the limitations we experience in our current world and imagining solutions to problems that bring about a new world’ (Shumar and Robinson, 2018 , p.88-89), a view incidentally held by one of the participants, who vocally remarks that ‘we are entrepreneurial, we do all sorts of exciting things that create new opportunities, you know, sometimes with economic benefit but also with a political, social, cultural, ethical benefit and that too is innovative and entrepreneurial…’.

This article has therefore argued that a counter-narrative to the fetish of competition and a remedy to the loss of innovation starts from a subversion and re-signification of meanings, practices and spaces.

The genealogical/hermeneutic approach illustrated by Davies; Naidoo’s conceptual framework, and Robertson’s metaphoric and material invitation to harness the fluidity of borders to re-constitute spaces and subjectivities in higher education lend analytical strength to the central argument that competition should be limited and regulated: it is possible to provide forms of empirically knowable, socio-economic objectivities, and to normatively limit excessive inequality of outcomes and ‘zones of non-being’ (Shahjahan and Morgan, 2015) by guaranteeing effective spaces of equivalence without sacrificing the uncertainty and vitality that constitute the human condition of possibility and imagination. To put it differently, it is possible and necessary to reaffirm the difference and reclaim the space between uncertainty and insecurity. After all, Hayek described competition as a ‘discovery process’ and as the ‘process of the formation of opinion’ (Hayek 2002).

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1. They will be allowed to award their degrees from the day they open (on a probationary basis); they will be able to obtain full degree awarding powers (DAP) within three years and to apply for university title three years after that. DAP and university titles will no longer be granted by the Privy Council but overseen by the new Office for Students; it upgrades their access to state student loans (currently set at £6,000) to £9,000 pounds; it reduces the size threshold (currently set at 1,000 students) necessary to apply for university title (Times Higher Education, [https://www.timeshighereducation.(com/news/higher-education-white-paper-key-points-glance](https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/higher-education-white-paper-key-points-glance) ) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. intended as efficient cause and desired outcome. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. These are: M5 (Midlands 5: Warwick, Nottingham,Leicester, Birmingham, Loughborough and successively Aston); GW4 (Great Western Four: Bristol, Bath, Exter, Cardiff); and the most powerful: SES-5 (Science and Engineering South Consortium: Oxford, Cambridge, Southampton, Imperial College, King’s College and UCL). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Open Method of Coordination. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)