**Generic Distinctiveness and the Entrepreneurial Self: A Case Study of English Higher Education**

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**Abstract**

Young people are increasingly called upon to invest in educational qualifications, experience opportunities and other character forming activitiesin order to stand out from the crowd. This fetishizing of generic distinctiveness is promoted throughout education in England, and particularly Higher Education. This paper considers the policy and theoretical implications of the quest to enfranchise distinctiveness in English HE. From a policy perspective the universal promotion of distinction reflects how recent neoliberal reforms in HE have been moderated by a commitment to a liberal ethos of equality of opportunity. Theoretically the mantra of standing out from the crowd is emblematic of the entrepreneurial self as a tool of governmentality. The expectation of compulsory distinction encapsulates the duality of individualisation and regulation that is central to the project of governmentality. This duality is also implicit in the activity of enterprise and how it is calibrated by competition. Being entrepreneurial stimulates innovation but the uncertainty of competition may simultaneously stimulate isomorphic behaviours. The paper concludes by reviewing what the promotion of generic distinctiveness infers for young people and how the promotion of distinction is also bound up with the mantra of confidence.

**Key Words**

Employability

Higher Education

Neoliberalism

Entrepreneur

Governmentality

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Discoursers of enterprise play a pivotal role in defining the responsibilities of both universities and students in promoting and developing employability. The enterprising student should aspire to be autonomous, self-regulated and industrial through acquiring appropriate experiences that foster these personal qualities to achieve academically and mark themselves out as suitable for graduate employment (Brown, Lauder and Ashton 2011; Cremin 2009; Davidson 2008). This normalisation of enterprise requires young people to develop ‘a form of personhood that sees individuals as being responsible for conducting themselves, in the *business of life*, as an enterprise, a project, a work in progress’ (Kelly 2006, 18 emphasis in original). An essential quality of this entrepreneurial orientation is that young people will be innovative and distinctive. The personal qualities and experiences that young people acquire through engaging in employability activities will enable them to stand out from other young people to secure employment. This promotion of young people’s responsibility for their own futures reveals an essential duality of the mantra of enterprise, in that it is simultaneously normative and individualised (Rose 1999; Dean 2010). Young people’s ability to foster the self as enterprise is not intrinsic; they require appropriate training to develop the dispositions and practices that will make them enterprising. The embedding of employability programmes into university curricula facilitates students’ capacity to become responsible, enterprising individuals. This duality between individual and normative is paradoxical as in providing a blue print for the curation of the entrepreneurial self, the capacity to be distinctive or innovative becomes generic and proscriptive. The limitation of the mantra that young people need to be provided with opportunities to develop skills and attributes to stand out from the crowd, is that if this is too widely enfranchised, the crowd will no longer exist. It is an oxymoron to claim that all young people can be distinctive.

This paper presents the phenomena of ‘generic distinctiveness’, which I define as the emphasis on universal, but similar, markers of distinction. In order to develop this concept, I consider it as a key characteristic of recent developments in employability training programmes in English Higher Education. Generic distinctiveness identifies the duality of employability in Higher Education that students are encouraged to develop distinctive personal attributes and characteristics; yet through providing a framework of how young people are made up into this enterprising self these forms of personal distinction become generic. This conceptualisation of generic distinctiveness reverberates with the interplay between individualism and regulation that is an essential feature of neoliberal governmentality. This account draws on recent theoretical innovations around neoliberalism, competition and the self that develop Foucault’s (2008) later writings on neoliberal governmental reason and the reorganisation of social relations around the centrality of enterprise (see for example Gane 2012; Kelly 2006, 2013; McNay 2009). The concept of generic distinctiveness is developed with reference to the case study of the marketization and promotion of employability in English HE. The paper begins with a brief empirical overview of how employability is embedded in English HE and its relationship with the marketization of HE and the entrepreneurial self. This relationship is examined with reference to the tension between neoliberal and liberal policies in HE. The second half of the paper considers the implications of the enfranchisement of the entrepreneurial self for young people. I outline how commitment to entrepreneurship can stimulate both innovative and isomorphic practices and conclude through considering what the implications of conforming to distinction mean for young people.

Student Employability and English HE: A case study of Generic Distinctiveness

Student employability provides a germane case study of generic distinctiveness and the relationship between individuals and institutions in facilitating self-promotion. Employability is embedded in higher education and had received considerable academic inspection regarding how it fosters young people’s responsibility to acquire the skills and personal attributes to compete in the labour market (Brown, Hesketh, and, Williams 2003; Cremin 2009; McQuaid and Lindsay 2005; Tomlinson 2008, 2012). The essence of employability is that it focusses on individuals’ potential to secure employment rather than their employment status and displaces the responsibility of securing work to the supply rather than then demand side of the labour market. Employability is not restricted to young people in education, according to Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) employability refers to a way of being, it is about personality and persuasiveness rather than an objective skill and shapes engagement in the labour force across the life course. This continual need for distinction and self-improvement is commensurate with organisations’ requirement to recruit and foster autonomous, responsible and self-regulating enterprising subjects (Du Gay 1996). Employability resonates with the motif of the entrepreneurial self which encapsulates how individuals must become responsible self-providers through being ‘entrepreneurs of their own labour’ (Bröckling 2015, xi).

The ascendancy of employability discourses is archetypal of Foucault’s (2008) examination of neoliberal governmental reason and the reorganisation of social relations around the centrality of enterprise (Kelly 2013). As McNay (2008) writes Foucault developed his account of the self as enterprise in the 1970s, prior to the election of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Regan and he appears particularly prescient in identifying the reach of neoliberal governance in remaking the self into a ‘a sort of permanent and multiple enterprise’ (Foucault 2008, 241). The significance of Foucault’s foresight is that the generalization of market principles beyond systems of monetary exchange can govern social relationships and individual behaviour as everything is framed in terms of interest, risk and freedom. In this entrepreneurial society competitiveness is the only form of justification and the need to maximise competition in all social spheres is necessarily seen as a good thing (Davies 2014). As the mantra of competition shapes individual relationships, young people are encouraged to maximise their own interests and to enter into continual processes of competition with their peers for school and university places, training, jobs and relationships. Thus the calculating, enterprising self continually has to work on itself to better itself (Rose 1990). This project of betterment is relative not absolute. For young people the challenge is to excel over their peers; it is not the intrinsic value of education and other activities that matter, but what they signify to others and the potential to offer more than their peers, to go ‘that extra mile’.

The promotion of employability is not just about advising young people about how they need to promote themselves, it also requires educational institutions, such as universities, to provide appropriate training and support structures to facilitate self-promotion (Shuker 2014). In English HE there has been a discernible trend towards investment in infrastructure to embed employability into the curriculum and students’ extracurricular activities. In recent years one approach to embedding employability into university practices it to establish award schemes or portfolio of activities that provide a mechanism for formally recording and recognising students’ non-academic achievements and generic skills. The genesis of these awards schemes can be traced back to the development of Graduate Attributes in the 2000s. These attributes were initially defined as generic skills and competencies that all students acquired in higher education and were developed to promote the social benefit of higher education (Barrie 2007). This commitment to a core set of generic skills has been absorbed into the concept of employability and these generic skills are also meant to provide students with relative advantage in the labour market. In England an important landmark in the development of institutional support of employability was the launch of the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) in 2008, which is supported by the Higher Education Academy to provide ‘a more comprehensive record of student achievement’ (HEAR 2015). The Higher Education Funding Council for England (Hefce) has developed the ethos of HEAR through the concept of ‘learning gain’ which is defined as ‘improvement in knowledge, skills, work-readiness and personal development made by students during their time spent in higher education’ (Hefce 2016).

Against this centralised support for mechanisms to formalise learning and personal development through both academic and non-academic activities, universities have also established their own branded-schemes to facilitate students’ self-development and promotion. The marketization of English HE requires universities to make the case that it is institutions, as well as students, that stand out from the crowd and the packaging of support into bespoke programmes is part of each university’s ‘individual’ offer. A survey carried out in 2013 by the UK Quality Assurance Agency (which also includes universities in Wales and Scotland) of 69 universities found that 75% offered an award scheme, and 16% were planning to introduce one in the future. By far the majority of these schemes (84%) had been in place for 5 years or less, reflecting the recent development of this approach to employability support. University award schemes recognise a variety of activities, though the most common ones that are incorporated into these schemes include: volunteering, student representation, community engagement and engagement in student groups and societies (QAA 2013). The data on student enrolment in these schemes suggests that engagement is more sporadic, with roughly 1/3 of respondents to the survey reporting that only 5% of eligible students participated in these schemes. This data reveals an important limitation to the enfranchisement of distinction; that normative discourses about the need to cultivate a distinctive profile continued to be resisted, or ignored, by many young people (Holdsworth and Brewis 2014).

Further details on how these schemes have been developed is provided in table 1, which presents a summary of how employability is promoted in a sample of eight English HEIs, four pre-1992 and four post-1992 institutions; this categorisation distinguishes between older more research-intensive universities and former polytechnics and newly established HEIs. Each of these eight universities provide an accreditation scheme to facilitate students’ employability. While some award schemes appear quite generic, such as Manchester Metropolitan University’s Future Skills Award, the distinctive branding of other schemes is more transparent, particularly Manchester University which embeds its award scheme in its overall programme of ‘stellify’ (Manchester University no date). On the University of Manchester website against a graphic of exploding stars the verb stel.li.fy is defined as ‘to change, or be changed, into a star’. In order to ‘stellify me’ students can take up the Manchester Leadership Award, develop new skills and engage in a range of experiences, such as student volunteering or enterprise activities. Through this programme students are encouraged to do and be more, with an emphasis of the acquisition of activities and experiences (Holdsworth 2015). The principle of programmes such as stellify is that they not orientated towards identifying intrinsic talent, rather that all students have the capacity to become a star, and it is personal motivation and innovation, rather than individual aptitudes, that will bring this about.

Table 1 about here

The doctrine of talent and the universal promotion of employability across the HEI sector acknowledges that the advantages afforded through education are associated with the acquisition of skills and personal capital, as well as formal learning. The sleight of hand employed here is that the system of social differentiation based on personal capital will be exploited by those most able to translate cultural capital into personal attributes (Brown, Hesketh, and Williams 2003), but this is justified as the cultivation of personal capital is, in theory, open to everyone. Generic distinctiveness appeals to the universal principle of talent, but this validation of talent masks its potential to reinforce social cleavages (Shuker 2014). Hence this endorsement of universal distinctiveness does not offer an alternative theorisation of distinction to that developed by Bourdieu (1984). His foundational conceptualisation of taste is that its acquisition is related to social position, and as such is a relative rather than an absolute trait. Embedding employability across the HEI sector enfranchises practices that were once more discrete and endorses a wider sharing of how personal capital can be acquired. However, students feel that are constantly having to play a game of catch up (Holdsworth and Brewis 2014). As badges of distinction become enfranchised through schemes such as university award programmes, they become less effective ways of demonstrating relative advantage. This is the dilemma that a governmentality interpretation of employability reveals: young people need to be able to develop and sell their unique personal brand, but these are not intrinsic, young people need to be made up into this entrepreneurial self (Rose 1999; Dean 2009). The relationship between these normative and individualised practices is ongoing and the embedding of employability into HE practices is symptomatic of the ongoing rhythms of neoliberalism and it is appropriate to orientate the ongoing development of employability in relation to the wider rolling out of neoliberalism in the HE sector.

Neoliberalism and Liberalism

The marketisation of higher education has not followed such a clear cut direction of travel and this reflects the very messiness of the project of neoliberalism itself. The mantra of neoliberalism is a commitment to ‘small’ state in order to let enterprise and autonomy flourish. As Peck (2010) reminds us this ‘rolling-back’ of state control might be persuasive and ideological, it masks a very different reality. Ungoverned market society would be both unworkable and unattainable and neoliberalism should be more properly thought of as a ‘self-contradictory form of regulation-in-denial’ (2010, xiii). Peck’s account of the ascendency of neoliberalism identifies its paradoxical quality: as the de-regulated state is unobtainable and ultimately destructive, the operators of neoliberalism have become fixers, engaged in ongoing processes of market-orientated governance. While neoliberalism has considerable currency in academic debate, its overuse disregards its development as a messy hybrid of political and economic creeds and policies (Peck 2010). The rise of neoliberalism is more ideological than practical. As Gane (2012) describes neoliberalism reverses the assumed relationship between market and state in *laissez-faire* politics; it is no longer the state that watches the market, but the market that has penetrated the state. As a result of this reversal the state is now ever vigilant to promote competition and to ‘manufacture marketized forms of competition where previously they did not exist’ (2012, 632). The project of neoliberal governance is to enhance individual opportunities through the mantra of ‘responsible self-management’ (McNay 2009, 61) and the autonomous character of individuals is retained rather than constrained (Miller and Rose 2008). In this way neoliberalism is producing new forms of subjectivity; it premises a form of government that simultaneously shapes individuals while retaining the primacy of autonomous political subjectivity (McNay 2009). Under neoliberal governance, individuals do not have to passively yield to standardised practices of consumption and mass spectacle, but are invited to innovate wherever possible and seek diverse forms of enterprise and individual enjoyment (Thrift 2005).

At face value recent changes to the funding regime of English HE would appear to be emblematic of neoliberal doctrine to remake all action as economic action regardless of context (Davies 2014). In particular English HE has witnessed the rolling back of state financial support and control through the replacement of state teaching grants with individual student fees and the more recent abolition of the cap on student numbers, allowing each institution to set its own targets for recruitment. Thus the case for HE as a public good and the societal contribution of education has been muted against the ascendency of self-interest and the presumption that individual students are the main beneficiaries of education (Calhoun 2006; Collini 2012). Recent reforms in English HE also promote student choice as the mechanism through which competition normalizes the education market (BIS, 2016). In order for the student-choice market to operate universities are subject to increasing scrutiny and regulation. For example, in order to inform student choice universities are required to produce 17 indicators of teaching quality, practices, support and infrastructure; student experience; and graduate outcomes. The rolling out of the Teaching Excellence Framework in 2017 (TEF) has generated another set of criteria against which university performance will be benchmarked (BIS 2016). The introduction of the TEF exemplifies the contradictory position of neoliberalism as the promoter of market-orientated governance. In order for student choice to operate freely, universities need to respond to further bureaucratic regulation and control. The promotion of choice also assumes that institutions will respond to student demand, and as such puts considerable faith in student agency as a mechanism of reform. However, the idea that students are necessarily the best judges and executives of teaching quality and outcomes is, as Collini (2012) suggests, similar to allowing children free reign in a sweet shop. This tension between consumer and subject creates paradoxical practices of choice and generates pendulum swings between treating students as individualised agents as well as collective subjects.

While the marketization of HE in England is prevailing there are some notable paradoxes in the remaking of education through economic activity and discernible limits to the application of neoliberal principles. The promotion of choice at all stages of education is not only imperfect but contradictory (Ball 2012) and the tradition of liberalism has not so easily been expunged from education principles. As Davies (2014) explains the relationship between neoliberalism and liberalism has always been ambivalent, and this observation is relevant for recent English HE reforms. The point of departure between liberalism and neoliberalism oscillates around the requirement that the liberal moral code of fairness necessitates a test of legitimacy that cannot be reduced to economic criteria (Davies 2014). The displacement of liberal principles of equality is a defining moral principle of neoliberalism; the moral trait of the market is that one person wins while another loses. The centrality of competition in Hayek’s economics is that it creates a small numbers of winners and a larger number of losers and its outcome cannot be known, it is its unpredictability that makes competition such a powerful force (Hayek 1948). HE reform is undoubtedly subject to the liberal critique of unfairness. Rawlsian principles of social justice remain central to the ethos of education; while there might be general agreement that the outcomes of education are unequal, inequalities in access are deemed as unfair and the liberal spirt of *a priori* equality has not been displaced by recent market reforms (Sammons, Toth, and Sylva 2015). The monitoring of the excellence of institutions is not based on universities’ efficiency in promoting competition among its students, but in HEI’s ability to instil common standards of excellence for everyone. The production of league tables that are essential to the application of market principles to education are based on the assumption of uniformity of outcome, not differentiation. Thus performance statistics for schools and universities are based on the percentage of *all* students who achieve certain criteria, to include a minimum standard in compulsory education for schools and the benchmark of an Upper Second or First Class degree at University. League tables reinforce the imperative that young people should not fail, as well as providing a mechanism to measure ‘competition’ between institutions. But the paradox here is that for students the outcome of competition is known, or at least assumed, in advance

The liberal ethos in education reforms is also manifest in the requirement that education should promote social mobility. This has been achieved by previous generations in the post-World War II era who benefited from the efficacy of general social uplifting through mobility (Paterson and Ianelli 2007). But what has gone wrong in recent years, so the argument goes, is that social mobility has declined and young people are not given the same opportunity for self-advancement (Goldthorpe 2013). Furthermore, the advantages of education are manipulated by families with greater economic and cultural capital and the enduring problem of the education market (at all levels) is that it is contingent on geographical and social contexts and intersections with other domains, particularly housing (Ball 2003; Brennan and Naidoo 2008; Reay, David, and, Ball 2005). In political discourses around education, and HE in particular, the failure of education to deliver social mobility does not refute the efficacy of market principles, but that the current market system is too easily manipulated by more advantaged groups. The mantra of universities as enablers of social mobility is repeated as much as that of student choice and the bureaucratic control of universities is equally directed to ensuring equality of access to promote social mobility (BIS 2016). The mechanisms for social mobility depend on the application of bureaucratic tests using data on students’ backgrounds and outcomes which are monitored by an independent body. The end result is that the need to ensure that the market cannot be manipulated by more advantaged groups is that rather than slimming down state apparatuses that govern education, equality of access has brought about more centralised regulation.

The enfranchisement of excellence can be understood a messy hybrid of both the liberal ethos of equality of access to education and neoliberal insistence on the primacy of competition. Young people are caught between these two ideological positions and are required to excel. The need to promote market principles in which there can be only winners rather than losers has dominated recent educational reform, and in its wake fashioned the paradoxical conditions for generic distinctiveness.

Entrepreneurship, innovation and isomorphism

As outlined above the development of employability practices exemplifies the normative and individualised components of governmentality, young people’s capacity to be enterprising in developing employability skills is not inherent but rather they need guidance and structures to facilitate being entrepreneurial. The marketization of higher education has not though fully expunged its commitment to a liberal ethos of equality and schemes to facilitate the development of the entrepreneurial self, such as University award schemes, are justified on the basis that they enfranchise all students to ensure equality of entrepreneurial activities. This tension between the individual necessity of distinction and the requirement that all young people should in theory have access to the resources and support in order to cultivate these markers is central to understanding the enfranchisement of the entrepreneurial self.

The development of support programmes to facilitate young people’s entrepreneurial self-hood do not provide much detail on the distinctive characteristics on entrepreneurship and tend to rely rather on rather loose statements about potential, starriness and talent. The literature on the entrepreneurial self also tends to take for granted that the concept of being entrepreneurial is relatively accessible and readily interpretable. Within the literature on entrepreneurship it is though possible to encounter a range of different interpretations on what being entrepreneurial means (Cunningham and Lischeron 1991; Low 2001; Sarasvathy and Venkataraman 2011; Shane and Venkateraman 2000). On the one hand entrepreneurial activities can be more narrowly defined as the capacity to set up a new venture and employ others. Yet this narrow distinction can be broadened out to embrace not just business activity, but the potential to be creative and innovative (Buchanan and Vanbergm 1991; Korsgaard 2013; Phukka, 2012). This latter definition more readily corresponds with the theorisation of the entrepreneurial self, rather than simply equating entrepreneurial activity with business practice. The development of a creativity paradigm in entrepreneurship has also coincided with debates about how entrepreneurship should be studied. Put simply should the development of entrepreneurship be understood in terms of who is an entrepreneur, and the individual characteristics associated with successful innovation, or is it more useful to analyse the process of how new business activities are developed and the economic significance of these activities (Gartner 1988; McKenzie, Ugbah and Smothers 2007)? The concept of creativity in studies of entrepreneurship has emphasized the latter and rather than seeking to identify the individual characteristics of what makes particular individuals creative, researchers have examined the nexus of opportunities that stimulate creative solutions (Alvarez and Barney 2007; Korsgaard 2013).

This emphasis on creativity as a process does not assume that innovation just happens from an instantaneous spark of genius that identifies a solution to a particular problem. According to Schumpeter (2010) entrepreneurial breakthroughs are characterised by disorder and rupture, yet these are also essentially collective events that need to be understood in their historical context (Hjorth, 2005). Furthermore, the capacity to be innovative does not necessarily correspond with acting to secure economic interests. The ability to bring new products or services to market does not necessarily depend on making rationale economic judgements (Dahms 1995). The development of the creativity paradigm in entrepreneurial research suggests a different set of practices from the calculating behaviour assumed in governmentality discourses (Rose, 1999). Rather evoking entrepreneurship as a creative act reveals how it ‘plays the very role of creating disruptions and breaks with normalizing and regulating forces’ (Hjorth 2005, 396). The thrust of the creative interpretation of entrepreneurship is that these activities cannot be assessed solely in relation to economic criteria, but foregrounds how these activities are open-ended and non-determinate (Buchanan and Vanbergm 1991).

As Schumpeter (2010) argues innovative entrepreneurial breakthroughs are rare events that succeed because they break with existing forms of regulation. The paradox of a wider enfranchisement of entrepreneurship is that the requirement to cultivate the self in the form of enterprise will foster innovation among some young people. The interpretation of entrepreneurship as a creative process emphasises how the making up of the entrepreneurial self will always be in development and this continual process of subverting and making up the enterprising subject will be individualised and regulatory. It is individualised as individuals engage in an ongoing project of self-development and innovate new ways of self-expression. New ways of curating entrepreneurial selves are not just designed for young people, but are also initiated by them. For example, young web designers have developed social media tools to visualise employability skills and interact with potential employers. One example of this is the platform visualize.me which was established in Toronto in 2011 and has now become part of a larger cooperation Parchment. This website provides an infographic approach to CV preparation, that transforms the resumé from text-based to a visualised format (Visualize.me 2011-14). The current trend for awards schemes in Universities can also be interpreted as formalising activities that young people have historically engaged in. For example, student volunteering is a core activity of these schemes, but it is not a new activity on campus (Brewis, 2014). What has changed is the development of formal institutional support rather than historical commitment to student community action. The original innovative activities of students to engage in social justice have been developed into more instrumental and institutional volunteering activities.

It is though reasonable to assume, as indeed Schumpeter surmises that the capacity for innovation will be constrained to relatively few individuals. As well as stimulating innovation the emphasis on economic rationality as a barometer of personal development has the potential to reinforce isomorphic practices. In particular the isomorphic properties of economic behaviour are a foundational principle of Weber’s (1992) conceptualisation of bureaucracy. Weber identifies the development of bureaucratic rationalisation not just with the requirement to regulate employees and citizens but also with the necessity for competition, both between states and firms. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) reworking of Weber’s argument about bureaucracy shifts the debate on from the drive for efficiency as the main engine of bureaucratisation. Instead they argue that current processes of regulation and conformity are not driven by internal pressures within firms but through ‘individual efforts to deal rationally with uncertainty and constraint’ which in turn may lead to ‘homogeneity in culture, structure and output’ (DiMaggio and Powell 1983, 147). DiMaggio and Powell’s analysis of isomorphism in institutions identifies three main forms: coercive, normative and mimetic. These three forms are not discrete processes but refer to ideal types that identify different sources of isomorphism, actual practices will be far messier. Coercive homogenisation refers to external requirements, specifically those laid out by state control. In education the harmonisation of qualifications and the establishment of universal standards of achievement are examples of this process. Normative isomorphism is brought about through professionalization and refers to the ways in which members of the same occupation seek to establish common standards of practice and conditions of work. Universities are implicit in this process in training students for certain occupations outside of their immediate practice, e.g., lawyers, scientists and teachers. The final form of isomorphism, mimetic, refers to the impact of uncertainty as a driving force of imitation. The intensification of competition does not necessarily stimulate innovation, as an economic rational response to the uncertainty of competition is to copy what other people (or businesses) are doing. Similar processes are applicable for young people. Faced with the requirement to make responsible choices for their future, without knowing what the outcome of these choices will be (Woodman 2009); young people may repeat what others are doing.

Young people’s response to the expectation of nurturing entrepreneurial selfhood will be varied. For some young people the uncertainty of competition will stimulate creative solutions, as Howie and Campbell (2017) suggest some young people’s response to the financial crash of 2007/08 has been to curate forms of selfhood between the boundaries of legitimate and illegitimate lifestyles. For others the mantra of competition and the expectation that they need to pull ahead of the pack will simulate uncertainties that generate isomorphic behaviours, as young people mimic markers of distinction.

Generic Distinctiveness and Young People

A final, though by no means trivial, concern is what this means for young people. From an empirical perspective this is the most significant question. One discernible trend is the mainstreaming of processes that facilitate the duality of individualised and regulated behaviours. The award schemes outlined in the beginning of this paper contribute to this rolling out processes, but there are other practices through which the duality of innovation and imitation are combined. In particular, the rolling out of mentoring would appear to fit this dual mechanism of control. Mentoring is now fully embedded in educational practices and it reasonable to assume that being either a mentor or a mentee is a requirement of being a subject in late modernity. Mentoring has a grip on education at all stages and its promotion assumes universal benefits, analogous to those identified with volunteering (Holdsworth and Quinn 2012): mentees benefit from smoother transitions through schools, colleges and universities, while mentors benefit from demonstrating an important people skill (the requirement to inspire confidence in others identified by Boltanski and Chapello 2005, 114) and that all important ‘distinctive’ experience to include on the CV. In universities mentoring is often targeted at students from non-traditional backgrounds, whether defined by class, familial experience of education, domicile, ethnicity, age or family responsibilities. Deviation from the assumed body of the undergraduate student is prioritised as requiring mentoring and support mechanisms are put into place to facilitate correct socialisation.

The benefits of mentoring are celebrated and endorsed in HE (Heirdsfield et al. 2008), though these claims are based on subjective endorsements. Mentoring is not just restricted to young people, but is increasingly seen as the solution to individual difficulties in negotiating the requirements of contemporary working lives across the lifecourse, and the endorsement of mentoring is manifest among staff at universities as well as among students. In some circumstances, and endorsed by particular ideological principles, mentoring can foster alternative practices and way of being. For example, feminist practice and scholarship of the self can provide a different framework through which mentoring can be effective practice against discrimination (Gibson 2004). The rolling out of mentoring programmes across HE institutions provides a platform for the enculturation of entrepreneurial selves. Mentoring champions the capacity for individual action while simultaneously minimising diversity, to facilitate those who in Bourdieusian terms might be a fish out of water, to fit in and become more like their peers (Reay et al 2010).

Mentoring is promoted as a way of providing support for young people navigating the uncertainty of entrepreneurial self-development. In addition to mentoring there are other support schemes that have also been expanded in recent years. Universities are reporting a substantial increase in young people seeking help for mental health problems, particularly anxiety (Coughlan 2015).  This intensification of anxiety may be an outcome of the emphasis on choice and freedom. As Kierkegaard proposed, over 150 years ago, ‘anxiety is the dizziness of freedom’ (2014, 75). For Kierkegaard anxiety is ultimately a source of creativity rather than a wholly negative experience, the creative potential of freedom is precisely that there is a choice between jumping of the precipice or not. For young people the tension between the creative potential of freedom and the mantra of compulsory, isomorphic success, may become a causal factor of heightened anxiety and uncertainty.

If young people are denied the creative potential of freedom, the alternative solution to the growing endemic of anxiety is that young people need to become more confident. Confidence is probably one of the most over used words in neoliberal discourses as commentators regularly talk about markets having or lacking confidence. The fetishizing of confidence underscores the emotional underbelly of contemporary capitalism (Illouz 2007). Being confident is about self-belief as a prerequisite for securing employment, forming partnerships and creating networks. For young people, confidence is evolving as the defining attribute of youth and its acquisition the quintessential marker of transitions to independence and adulthood. The language of confidence assumes that young people, by their very nature, lack confidence and it is their responsibility to acquire it. The repeated mantra for volunteering, work experience, internship and other ‘experience’ programmes is that these are transformative for young people in their ability to promote confidence and to challenge the assumed scourge of youth apathy and/or anxiety (Holdsworth and Brewis 2014). What young people are actually seeking to acquire is more elusive. It has become so taken for granted that young people initially lack confidence and have to acquire it, that what is being achieved through acquiring confidence is not articulated. The epistemological basis of confidence remains obscure, it is acquired through taking part in experience activities, ticking boxes and being appropriately reflective, though the actual transformation process from lacking to having confidence is not revealed.

The discourse of confidence can also be interpreted as a mechanism of control. The assumption that young people lack confidence and that it can be acquired through undertaking relatively straight forward tasks organised by universities or other formal providers (such as the National Citizen Service in the UK) is simplistic but persuasive. All young people need to do is sign up to the relevant experience programme in order to tick the box and they will move through the transition from no confidence to having confidence. Thus the need to acquire confidence is promoted on the assumption of lacking and incompleteness among young people, rather than what young people actually learn or experience in taking part in confidence building activities. Discourses of confidence underscore the status of youth as not adult and there is a clear demarcation here, rather than acknowledging youth as a time of liminality. Liminal experiences are a source of creativity for young people; as Worth (2009) explores there is considerable value in the messiness of young people’s transitions. However current fetishizing of confidence promotes clearly demarcated boundaries between having/lacking confidence that are distinguished by engagement in pre-determined and organised activities (Holdsworth 2015).

A final, but by no means insignificant, consideration relates to how the fetishizing of generic distinctiveness exacerbates inequality of opportunities for different groups of young people, rather than creating a level playing field. Despite the mantra that educational excellence needs to be achieved by all, the end result is ever expanding credentialism and ongoing redefinition of what constitutes excellence. Clearly young people with greater access to resources to engage in excellence activities will benefit most from the fetishizing of distinction and are better placed to pull ahead of the pack. Divisions between young people will be complex and multi-scalar, young people in more advanced economies will have more opportunities to invest in ‘project me’, within countries, regions, cities etc. diversity of experience opportunities will create more localised cleavages of advantage and disadvantage.

Conclusion

The rationale for the paper is that generic distinctiveness is a very pernicious contemporary oxymoron. It is very straight forward to point out that not everyone can stand out from the crowd and to expose the flawed logic of this argument; it is much harder to make the case that young people and HE practitioners should resist the mantra of distinction. As this paper has considered the reasons for the enduring appeal of generic distinctiveness are complex. One explanation is that enfranchising excellence softens the harsher reality of neoliberalism’s championing of competition; it seems fairer (and more liberal) to ensure that all young people can be winners at school and university in order to ensure equality in the labour market. The problem is that hybrid neoliberalism/liberalism only seeks to modify the former; it does not challenge its ideological foundation. The end result of this liberal appeasement - that all young people can be winners - is not a viable proposition, its illogical premise is though inherent to the wider project of governmentality. Being distinctive is not inherent and if it is rolled out *en masse* then this requires suitable training and resources to facilitate how young people can be made up to be distinctive. The awards schemes that have recently been developed in universities provide structural orientations to assist young people in developing their entrepreneurial self. Generic distinctiveness does not though play out a universal scale, as data on the uptake of HE student awards scheme demonstrate its reach among university students is limited and the mantra of standing out from the crowd remains rhetorical. The rolling out of the requirement to be entrepreneurial will be more hesitant and diverse as individual young people engage with this paradoxical ethos.

Being enterprising also encapsulates a duality of behaviour in that it can stimulate either innovation or isomorphic practices. On the one hand entrepreneurship is essentiality about innovation and bringing new ideas/products and services to market. Drawing on Schumpeter’s theorisation of enterprise, innovation may challenge normative practices as young people develop alternative lifestyles. For others the requirement to calibrate the self on the basis of economic criteria will stimulate uncertainty which in turn may encourage young people to act in isomorphic ways, through copying what others are doing, hence what was once distinctive will become generic.

Finally we have to recognise the implications for young people. There is, for example, much discussion of youth anxiety and it seems reasonable to equate this with the promotion of generic distinctiveness. The limitations of enfranchising excellence to bring about greater equality among young people should not come as a surprise to youth researchers steeped in the traditions of Bourdieusian analysis. This intensification of inequality may also have wider implications for solidarity among young people and it is these outcomes that practitioners, youth researchers and young people themselves need to be alert to. Ultimately one of the challenges to consider is how young people might resist generic distinctiveness. As Bröckling (2015) observes, if the requirement is to be different then it is much harder to deviate from this from this normative expectation. If resistance is to be fostered it is more likely to be through smaller scale, everyday practices of creativity and/or non-engagement rather than more transcendental forms.

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Table 1: Employability award schemes in four pre-1992 and four post-1992 universities in England, 2017.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Pre-1992 English Universities | | |
| Durham University | The Durham Award Scheme:  The Durham Award Scheme has been developed in partnership with employers and students to recognise the extra skills that Durham gives to students, beyond their academic degree. It is about standing out from the crowd and showing that you have the skills that make you employable. In January 2017, all first and second year students will be invites to take part in the two stages of the Scheme: the College Award and the Durham Award. | https://www.dur.ac.uk/careers/students/employability/award/ |
| University of Leeds | Leeds for Life:  We want you, as a Leeds graduate, to stand out by your ability to talk clearly and confidently about your knowledge, skills, attributes and experiences to benefit you on whatever route you take when you leave us. | https://leedsforlife.leeds.ac.uk/ |
| University of Manchester | Stellify:  The University of Manchester gives you the opportunities to do more and be more. We call it Stellify. It’s about broadening your horizons, understanding the issues that matter, and stepping up to make a difference to the local and the global community. | http://www.stellify.manchester.ac.uk/ |
| The University of Sheffield | Sheffield Graduate Award:  Get recognition for your extra-curricular activities, work experience or volunteering. In a competitive job market employers are looking for graduates who can demonstrate transferable skills and person qualities, as well as a good degree. The Sheffield Graduate Award can help you stand out from the crowd. | https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/careers/students/advice |
| Post-1992 English Universities | | |
| The University of Derby | The Futures Award:  So you want to go to university but you don't know what you want to do when you leave? Or, you know what you want to do but don't know how to get there?  Don't panic!  Once you're enrolled on a course here, our Careers and Employment Service will support you in finding the right path to choose, becoming industry aware and developing your career ambitions.  We want to support you in preparing for the world of work and make sure that you have the greatest possible chance of getting a job you want after graduating, this is how:  The Futures Award  Gain official recognition for your volunteering, employer mentoring, work experience, curriculum activity, student union involvement and more. | http://www.derby.ac.uk/study/careers/ |
| University of Gloucestershire | Future Plan:  From the moment you start your course, you’ll be carving out Your Future Plan. We’ll help you get where you want to go by providing support, information and opportunities. The [Future Plan portal](https://futureplan.glos.ac.uk/) and our expert teams will be here to help throughout your studies. Whatever your future plan may be, you’ll have plenty of opportunities to gain work experience, develop your skills and manage your career. | http://www.glos.ac.uk/life/support/pages/career-development.aspx |
| Manchester Metropolitan University | Future Skills Award:  The Future Skills Award gives you the opportunity to develop additional skills outside your course of study, and will help you to understand and articulate your experiences and abilities to employers | https://www2.mmu.ac.uk/careers/students/futures-skills-award/ |
| Plymouth University | The Plymouth Award:  The Plymouth Award recognises and celebrates your achievements outside of your studies.  Many Plymouth University students already make significant contributions to the life of the University and the communities in which they live and work. The Plymouth Award is one way of showing how valuable these contributions are and highlighting the learning and personal growth you gain from these activities.  When you complete the Plymouth Award you'll receive a certificate that is nationally recognised by employers. | https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/student-life/your-studies/plymouth-award |