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Negotiating the new normal: How senior decision makers in higher education perceive marketisation in the sector

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Abstract

This paper explores how decision makers in higher education perceive marketisation in the sector in relation to teaching and learning provision. The study is interested in the nature of relationships between public universities and other actors, particularly private companies, in relation to the creation, delivery and support of educational provision as well as public universities’ perspectives on these relationships. The study draws on 33 interviews with senior decision-makers and managers in higher education at six research-intensive and six teaching-oriented universities in South Africa and England. Questions we raise in this paper are: How do senior decision makers perceive the entry of private players in public HE? What are their experiences of working with private companies in partnership? What values do they associate with marketisation? What effect do they think the relationship is having on the status of the public university? How do they talk about the market actors? We argue that in both study sites there is a hybrid economy but that it is varied in its manifestation, with relationships more or less emergent or established. We discuss this in terms of alignment of practices and values which are guided by sometimes different roles and purposes; emerging and contested
business models for income generation; pedagogical imperatives that guide public-private partnerships; and polarized notions of partnerships that raise the question of quality and control. The paper concludes with reflection on policy implications.

**Keywords:** marketisation, public-private partnership, digitisation

**Introduction**

This paper considers how decision makers in Higher Education (HE) perceive marketisation in the sector in relation to teaching and learning provision. This is one of the questions which arises in a broader project which asks how unbundling and marketisation are changing the nature of HE provision in South Africa and England, and what impact this will have on widening access, educational achievement, employability and thus the potential for economic development. The study is interested in the nature of relationships between public universities and other actors, particularly private companies, in relation to the creation, delivery and support of educational provision as well as public universities’ perspectives on these relationships.

The study draws on 33 interviews with senior decision-makers and managers in higher education at six research-intensive and six teaching-oriented universities in South Africa and England. The perspective is that of decision-makers, those with policy and decision-making roles, rather than academics or students, thus shedding light on a key group of actors who are, according to the literature, engaged in forms of market-making in HE. Questions include: How do senior decision makers perceive the entry of private players in public HE? What are their experiences of working with private companies in partnership? What values do they associate with marketisation? What effect do they think the relationship is having on the status of the public university? How do they talk about the market actors?

The study considers marketisation as an umbrella term, incorporating a constellation of concepts including privatisation, commercialisation, commodification, corporatisation and financialisation, each of which bring empirical and theoretical resources to bear. The intention is not to arrive at a tight definition of marketisation in HE but to focus in and capture how decision makers in universities, government and parastatals perceive the inclusion and increased drawing into public universities of private sector actors as well as market practices and agendas. The assumption is that in both study sites there is a hybrid economy but that it is varied in its manifestation, with relationships more or less emergent or established.

**Framing marketization**

Marketisation in this paper is understood as a process of introduction of competition for the allocation of resources to actors and organisations operating within the public sector. In the HE sector, it means that traditionally wholly publicly funded institutions are competing with each other for state funding and other income, and with new providers, who may be operating with different business models, including for profit. This term has come to be a dominant discourse through the prevalence of human capital theory which has dominated HE policy making in many countries to varying degrees, and which is premised on the argument that education triggers “private enrichment, career success and national economic growth” (Marginson, 2017, p. 1). This has justified policy making that enables funding regimes to decrease public investment in HE and shift funding to students. Most national HE systems operate a hybrid funding model with the trend towards reductions in government subsidies and increases in student fees as well as other forms of income generation (Jungblut and Vukasovic, 2017).
Useful to this research is the “range of policy tendencies that can be understood as forms of privatisation [which] are evident in the education policies of diverse national governments and international agencies” (Ball and Youdell, 2008, p. 8). In particular the distinction between types of privatisation is relevant. Exogenous privatisation involves “the opening up of public education services to private sector participation on a for-profit basis and using the private sector to design, manage or deliver aspects of public education” (p.9); this describes the numerous relationships that have been and continue to be formed with a multiplying range of providers selling goods and services to public universities. Endogenous privatisation in public education, where the language, norms and processes of business are brought into public education, is also of relevance in this study through what has been termed market-making practices. Analysing the formation of practices enables the exploration of marketisation in universities through looking at how markets are dynamically made and constituted in HE (Komljenovic and Robertson, 2016). Through a case study analysis of an English research-intensive university, they identify the “spatial and temporal dynamics of market-making” and in particular the types and nature of “market exchanges” that emerge, with these exchanges leading to a proliferation of new firms with specialist products for sale to universities. These market exchanges involve the university both as a buyer and seller of services with exchanges and services being either for- or not-for profit. The direction of movement of exchanges as well as the profit motive is illustrated in the diagram below.

Figure 1: Markets in higher education (Komljenovic & Robertson 2016, p.626)

Komljenovic and Robertson's (2016) four domains in which market exchanges happen points to the diversity of types of markets and goods that are involved when considering what is meant by marketisation. Of the four domains presented, our particular interest is in those where profits are intended, or at least where income is generated. A university can be both a buyer and seller of goods and services and this constitutes market-making not only with the university as an agent but also with the emergence of specialist providers with a range of products to sell to universities. They point out that unbundling, the process of disaggregating educational provision into its component parts, which may be provided in partnership with external actors (Walji, 2018), is often a result of universities buying in services through these new market actors. Indeed market-making and market exchanges are dynamic, sometimes fragmented
and often contested processes (Komljenovic and Robertson 2016). Others (such as Marginson 2013, and Ntshoe 2004) argue that full commercialisation in HE is not feasible and has not happened entirely in any jurisdiction, due to intrinsic political factors and policy imperatives. Instead there are ‘regulated quasi-markets’ in which pure economic imperatives are subsumed through, for example, government subsidies, tuition through loans and set caps on amounts of tuition that can be charged while the entrenched position of elite institutions closes off entry to new market entrants.

Marketisation can also be understood at a meso level through analysis of what constitutes the goods or products of HE - what educational activities are ascribed value and sold - and who are the actors involved in these market-making activities. Marginson (2018) combines economic and political definitions of public/private goods in HE, offering an analytical framework comprising four quadrants that include both economic and political lenses. In combining economic and political notions of public and market in terms of goods and services offered, Marginson (2018) aims to make “explicit the political choices associated with economic provision” (p. 331). In making the point that activities are rarely located in one quadrant with activities located in different quadrants according to political choices, he posits that market-making is social and contextual rather than linear and absolute.

Thus, in some geographical contexts, such as the United States and United Kingdom, there is increasing opening up of the sector to market players, a diminished public role for HE and shift from (public) system to an institution. This risks “the non-provision of public goods” and while some institutions may be able to maintain a strong public mission, most institutions “must look to their own sustainability” (Marginson, 2018, p.324). Whether education results in the production (and sale) of ‘private goods’ or ‘public goods’ (or a combination) is a result of HE institutions reacting to national policies. While there is an inherent market ethos in HE given the notion of a degree being a positional good, the extent to which is this has become an explicit market is a point of debate (Marginson, 2018; Tomlinson, 2018) and one which is the focus of this paper.

Amongst the significant literature on the mechanisms and effects of marketisation, there is a long-standing body of critique from both the global north and south, with the main argument being premised on the social and public interest values being eradicated or risked in a marketised sector (e.g. Côté and Allaha 2011; Loughead 2015; Marginson, 2013, 2017; Slaughter and Rhoades 2009, and many others). It is posited that marketisation has undermined the principles of emancipationist humanism upon which universities were founded (Bertelsen 1998), social knowledge (Orr 1997), scholarship, creativity, and indeed critique itself (Lynch 2006). In the African context, it has been argued that marketisation has led to a decrease in the quality of education (Oketch 2009) and also that it perpetuates the learning divide (Robertson and Komljenovic 2016).

Overall, the literature offers contested views of the nature and impacts of marketisation and market-making in HE. The aim of this paper is to explore the perceptions of the senior management in several HE institutions in South Africa and England, including whether and how these echo existing scholarship and debates.

**Analysis and discussion**

In order to elicit the perceptions of senior decision makers, an analysis was undertaken of 33 interviews conducted in 2017, at six public universities in South Africa and six universities in England respectively. Qualitative content analysis was applied (Schreier, 2014) to explore perceptions of senior decision makers and managers regarding the entry of private companies in the sector, their experiences of the process, the values that they associate with marketisation and what they think these relationships should be like.
Marketisation as the ‘new normal’

It was clear from interviewees in both countries that marketisation has become an integral part of university practices, widely acknowledged, although variably accepted, as part of the HE terrain. The English HE sector has a longer history of regulatory frameworks encouraging marketisation, with the policy environment being restructured since the early 1980s (see Robertson, 2010) and the UK Government’s recent White Paper and Higher Education and Research Bill both aiming to decisively open up the HE sector to the market. It was perhaps unsurprising therefore that the marketisation discourse was more widespread amongst the English interviewees. They did however observe that the regulatory environment was still fluid, as observed by one respondent who said that the public private divide “depends what, what day you catch the Minister on how they see it, you know.” (Senior Decision Maker, English Research-Intensive University E).

In South Africa, the regulatory situation has engaged in a different way with private companies, as the policy environment has explicitly articulated higher education as a public good, with regulation to date designed to prevent the proliferation of those considered to be private ‘fly-by-night’ providers. The new scenario of public universities partnering with private companies to marketise their provision has not received a great deal of formal policy attention. Indeed, a policy maker observed that developing relevant regulatory frameworks is complicated. While the role of the private sector is considered necessary, there is still some wariness:

It’s not to say that higher education should be commoditised to the nth degree or something like that. There is a whole range of different possibilities, which is why we never came to a conclusion about what this regulation should be. And there was agreement that there needs to be further research. (South African Policy Maker X).

This hesitation regarding a commitment to particular regulatory frameworks illustrates the doubts that exist politically regarding the role of markets in public universities. Such ambivalence may give some credence to scholars, such as Lewidov (2002) who argued that African universities were forced into marketisation. This reluctance to commit to increased private sector involvement is not uniform though, as a colleague within state structures commented that there is an urgent need for change: “[regarding] the role of private companies the country is archaic. Our policies need to be more responsive.” (South African Policy Maker Y). This view that the involvement of private companies in public university activities would act as a catalyst for change, and to speed up internal processes, was evident in interviews from both countries.

As discussed earlier in the text, previous studies have argued that HE does not function as a fully capitalist market (see also e.g. Marginson, 2013). However, the points made by the respondents indicate that they are not fundamentally arguing against the market sector being involved but are concerned rather with how policy frameworks should shape the relationship. For those making decisions within universities themselves, the dawning situation has been made explicit:

We sat down and looked at the opportunities and possibilities of this whole new scenario and said there is a new reality here, what would it take for us to get involved in a way we would regard as being authentic that would not compromise the way we understand our role and function of a university, etc. (Management respondent, South African Research-Intensive University A)

In the English context, it was evident that partnering is growing and decisions are being made on the fact that others in the sector (within the country and beyond) are increasingly engaged in it, so it has assumed an air of normality:
I think that even in the last two, even two to three years ago, this type of arrangement wouldn't have been very palatable to many Russell Group universities in the UK. But that's changing for a number of reasons. I think partly it's because there are more commercial partners who are kind of touting their wares, going around to universities showing or demonstrating what they can offer. (Senior Decision Maker, England Research-Intensive University A)

Notably, it was the South African respondents who were concerned about the broader social context, raising questions about whether market actors, especially those from northern countries could fathom the local context.

There was some understanding for the South African situation, but not much. I don’t think they were quite as involved as we were in that stage with all the discussions around Fees Must Fall [student protests]. We felt it on our campuses, while they were sitting in America and not really feeling it as we were feeling. (Management respondent, South African Research-Intensive University R)

While there are disputes about the pervasiveness of market penetration into the public HE sector, and the extent to which agendas are shared, there was no questioning of whether the market actors have a role to play. The question was never “if” but “how”, with the UK policy frameworks clearly setting out to enable the participation of market actors, and the South African policy discourse - and the voices of the decision makers - suggesting its inevitability.

**Market-making: the negotiation of market players and public universities**

**Alignment of practices and values**

Senior decision makers at universities in both countries raised issues of the alignment of interests, goals and practices regarding the extent to which market players and HE institutions are guided by different set of rules and purposes. Interviewees in both countries described how their institutions’ brand, ranking and values are major determinants in who they work with, and what company they keep.

Respondents also reflected on the difference between public institutions and private companies in terms of engagement as well as business models. For example, one of the interviewees from a South African HE institution, stated:

So firstly, a consequence of a market is that the price determines who has access and then if the price goes up access is reduced. That’s not the case in our system, because we have a financial aid system, which completely compensates for the price if someone can’t afford it, so the price does not determine supply and demand and doesn’t determine the distribution of who gets access. (Senior decision maker, South African Research-Intensive University A)

This opinion is echoed in interviews with other respondents in South Africa and England. In their view, and echoing the argument of Marginson (2013, and others), universities are based on a different set of rules and objectives. They generally felt that there is a fundamental difference between the ways private companies and public universities operate. Interestingly, although this respondent is saying that the logic of the university is different from that of the market, they are using the language of the market to say so, connecting to the idea of market ‘inevitability’ described above.
In England, respondents were at pains to point out that universities could not be wholly subject to private sector practices because they are charities, with the concomitant consequences: as one respondent put it, "university [...] after all is a charity with those charitable purposes." (Senior Decision Maker, England Research-Intensive University C). Another participant observed that being akin to a charity influenced the purpose of income generation:

> there is a business model and we do see this being a profitable venture, just like it needs to be in order to invest basically. In a way we’re a charity, so we don’t make profit, we make surplus. (Senior Decision Maker, English Research-Intensive University E)

Indeed Marginson (2013, p. 360) has argued that universities do not compete for market share in their core business of mainstream undergraduate and postgraduate education, but they do compete for “emerging areas of activity and for non-core commercial revenues”. The distinction between profit and surplus here marks the university’s desire to set its values apart from those associated with the market.

Some respondents were comfortable with appropriating the language of the market if it served the interests of the public university, thus resolving what might have seemed to be a contradiction regarding the role of profits in the public sector.

> A public university to me is basically where any profit from the university is reinvested back into the university and not into the hands of shareholders. I don’t think it necessarily requires immense government funding in order to be a public university. (Senior Decision Maker, English Research-Intensive University A)

**Emerging and contested business models**

Whether it is called profit-making or generating a surplus, the issue of income generation is one that universities in both England and South Africa are confronting given that state subsidies have decreased in both countries - it has reduced to 40% of income since 2000 in SA (Cloete 2016), and to 15% since 1992 in the UK (Bolton 2017). What is at stake here is how relationships with private companies can be leveraged to make profits on behalf of and to serve the interests of public universities and what the implications of specific decisions might be.

The interviews suggest that public universities’ engagement with the logic and language of the market involves boundaries becoming more fluid between what can be considered a private or a public good as well as regarding who has primary responsibility for the core business of teaching. This fluidity means that there is still a great deal of variety in the nature of the intersection between individual private companies and universities in terms of provision.

In some cases, there is consensus and trust and a high level of alignment. One English respondent perceives the private company as a partner who shares their views:

> I think we're [the private company and us, the public university] quite on the same level here. So, they don't just deem success in terms of profitability, and neither would we. So, student experience is at the heart of everything. (Senior Decision Maker, English Research-Intensive University A)

In this case, the private company, which exists to generate profits, has persuaded the university that its priority is a good or product, the ‘student experience’. This is a case of what Komljenovic and Robertson (2016) (drawing on Çalışkan & Callon 2010) call pacifying goods, where an intangible is made into a stable and predictable commodity and assigned value -
thus the student experience is a commodity agreed on by both parties. In fact, student experience is now measured by Times Higher Education, in its ranking calculation, indicating its status as a pacified good (THE, 2017). In the case above, trust and legitimacy has been established in the relationship between the two parties regarding this good.

Such consensus is on one side of the spectrum. On the other, in stark contrast, a South African respondent said: “I have been to literally hundreds of presentations about products that could be sold to [Research-Intensive University] where the person who's presenting has no idea of our business needs.” This respondent is also using the language of the market by referring to the requirements of a public institution as “business needs”, and clearly perceiving the institution as a buyer of goods. But although there are numerous sellers, many of them new players, attempting to sell goods and services (an observation made by several interviewees), no relationship of mutual understanding has been formed.

It is not possible to comment on whether these two examples can be considered typical of the two countries where the study was conducted. It may be that, drawing on Komljenovic and Robertson (2016) and referring to Figure 1 (above), where a university is operating in an ‘inside-out’ market relationship as a ‘seller’ and where a partnership has been established and negotiated to enable this, attitude to market-making is more comfortable than a situation where an institution is a ‘buyer’ as in the ‘outside-in’ quadrant. It is perhaps in the ambiguities of the university and external companies’ roles as buyer and seller, and the negotiations between these positions that tensions can arise.

**Pedagogical imperatives**

While there were differences of opinion regarding whether private actors and universities share agendas, and to what extent they are able to develop working relationships of trust, there was unanimity among respondents regarding the priority of the educational mission. There was consensus across the two sites regarding their criteria for engaging with sellers of services. Both South African and English respondents stressed that their primary concerns are pedagogical:

> I have talked to a lot of the big commercial online providers, but their business model was much more fixed and it didn’t necessarily fit my pedagogy drive. (Senior Decision Maker, English Research-Intensive University E)

Indeed, the respondent commented that an expressed shared motivation was a reason that they had worked with a particular provider:

> The reason we signed ultimately with [Name of the Company] in this partnership is they sort of spent quite a lot of time waving their arms around and drawing pedagogy models and I quite liked that, it was nice, it wasn’t about business. (Senior Decision Maker, English Research-Intensive University E)

These interactions and intersections are called acts of market-making, happening in ways Komljenovic and Robertson (2016) consider to be dynamic, diverse and difficult, thus recalibrating and remaking the structures, social relations and subjectivities (P5). This is the formation of new kinds of flows (to use Ball and Youdell’s (2008) term), fluctuations and negotiations regarding priorities, ideas, practices, foci and intentions. These bring about a form of values, cultural shifts and organisational convergence, thus reshaping the context within which public sector organisations work. (Ball and Youdell *ibid*).
Notions of partnerships

A particular dimension of these negotiations pertained to the terms of engagement. It emerged that there is no established pattern of relationships between private companies and public universities. There are also a range of activities at varying levels of granularity that private companies are involved with when it comes to, for example, offering online courses. These can include marketing, providing a technical platform, sourcing teachers, course design and assessment as discrete services. Interviewees raised these questions in relation to their understandings of partnering with external providers.

The responses to notions of partnership were polarised. On the one hand there were examples of relationships, which, it was implied were on an equal footing. There was an instance where a respondent expressed great satisfaction with a close partnership where they believe that the arrangement to be fair.

So [Name of the Company] brings the willingness to take risks, they’ll share the profit, because which they ought to because if they’re taking the risk there has to be a decent return for them, but they also carry the downside risk of having spent a whole load of money and not getting it back on a course which turns out to be a dud. (Senior Decision Maker, South African Research-Intensive University A)

This language of partnership was used in both sites and was widespread but was also treated with caution: as a Senior Decision Maker at South African Research-Intensive University M put it, ‘So while partnerships are one way to go, one needs to be cautious of the challenges of partnerships and what that entails’.

Concerns were also raised, with interviewees being explicitly skeptical of some partnerships. Reasons for these doubts tended to be about quality. For example, one respondent queried the quality of one particular aspect of services provided - tutor training - provided by an external company, challenging the company’s interpretation of student development. Another respondent emphasised what he expressed as a “mismatch [between the private sector and the university] … about the provision of quality education” (South African Policy Maker). And a third, in England, expressing concern about the role of an external company, said simply, “I think we can do a better job in a number of ways.” (Senior Decision Maker, English Research-Intensive University F)

Concerns about the quality of private sector involvement is one of the issues raised in the critical literature. However, quality was not the only reason for questioning a relationship. Finances were also posited as a reason not to form a connection. In one case, the decision was made not to work with an external partner because of loss of revenue: “we will sacrifice therefore a very significant proportion of the income stream” (Senior Decision Maker, English Research-Intensive University E). This echoes the concerns raised elsewhere by university leaders expressing their desperation to counter reduced state subsidies. The implicit argument here was that the university should offer the services provided by the private actors itself, in order to reinvest all of the ‘income stream’.

At the heart of the relationship between private companies and universities was a tussle and constant negotiation about ownership and agency. Decision makers in universities felt strongly about the issue of control. Respondents in both locations shared their concerns about prioritising the educational imperative as well as asserting their agency in any relationship. This was expressed in different ways, in one instance financially:

I think for a traditional university like [name], which is very focused on its reputation and losing its reputation potentially, there’s much more control exerted over its
main source of revenue, which is education. (Senior Decision Maker, English Research-Intensive University A)

In another case, the issue was framed in terms of core business:

….. then you leave it to a non-expert agency or business, we start having major problems. So that's where we will start drawing the line. We are not against the use of technology. We're not against the innovation, but we want to make sure that there isn’t an abdication of any part of the educational process. No. (South African Policy Maker)

Another respondent expressed an even stronger sense of concern and urgency, arguing that by working with a private company, the educational work of teaching and learning would be turned into a product, which the university would lose control of:

and you no longer have a control over the quality of the final product. So basically, you’re selling a brand and yes, you’re selling content, but – but you’re selling a brand and I don't think that’s academically proper. I just don’t. (Senior Decision Maker, South African Research-Intensive University C)

It is clear that decision makers are having to manage and navigate which components of provision “belong” to which party, what can acceptably be handed over to a private company, and which aspects could be considered non-negotiable.

For some, the solution has been strong accountability and measures required from the private company:

So we're trying to adapt our pedagogies a bit, depending on how students, individual students or programs best want to be supported, really. The [name of the company] student support services are quite strong, in the sense that they have a service level agreement with them. So, students aren't left more than twenty-four hours without a response to their query. (Senior Decision Maker, English Research-Intensive University A)

In the process, the public university has adopted the language of the market, an example of endogenous privatisation where the language and practices of the market are incorporated into the public sector.

Overall, levels of comfort regarding how close or distant the relationship should be varied a great deal, with some viewing the connection as close, even equal, and several, especially in England, using the language of partnership. Others were more cautious or tentative. On the whole, participants emphasised the importance of the role of decision-makers at the university level negotiating the terms of engagement with private companies and potential partners. This is what Mamdani (2007) refers to as the ‘soft version’ of privatisation in HE, where the priorities of privatisation are set by the public institution, rather than the other way round.

**Conclusion**

Our data show that in the negotiations surrounding partnerships with external private companies, important questions are raised about the marketisation of HE in South Africa and England today. The interviews indicate how prevalent these kinds of relationships between public universities and private companies are as part of the HE landscape in both places. While respondents based in public universities expressed concerns about the nature of partnerships, they often employed the language of the market in order to express their doubts. Thus, while
at times, marketisation was seen as an unwilling necessity, particularly in the South African context of limited state funding, it was not questioned as a process in itself.

Our focus is on the provision of teaching and learning goods and services at public universities by external private companies. Respondents were cognisant of the need to prioritise student learning in choosing whether to partner, and who to engage as partners. In cases in which the university acts as a seller of goods and services, as discussed in the example of student experience above, there are also concerns about the implications of this kind of activity on the core business of the institution. Overall, however, the responses show that opinions regarding these changes are mixed, and no coherent position has emerged regarding profit-making by universities. While some see it as a necessity to maintain the ‘main’ business, such as teaching and research and to compensate for the lack of government funding, others are more skeptical regarding whether working with private companies can and should be an integral part of HE’s mission and work.

In the light of the variation in responses to our questions, the data are a useful reminder to regard the entry of private companies into public universities beyond a simple helpful/harmful dichotomy. Given their prevalence, it is important to begin to map the kinds of relationships that exist, in order for the engagements between these parties to be better defined and conceptualised in policy terms. In the South African case, where the policy in this area is less developed than in England, this could have important implications in terms of regulation. Policy regulations would also include considering the advantages and disadvantages of these kinds of engagements for all actors involved, including students and academics, whose daily experience will be impacted on/by these changes. Interviews with these groups may well tell a different story and will provide a fruitful avenue for future research.

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