The promise of higher education

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The present article is aimed at exploring the ongoing shift in what Higher Education 'promises' to students, weaving together an historical retrospective and insights from a series of activities exploring students' perceptions of precarity that took place in Coventry University and Deakin University (Geelong campus).

These activities (organised face-to-face, before the pandemic) invited undergraduate students to explore worries and images of precarity through a mix of methodologies (Lego Serious Play, in-depth interviews and a shared Instagram account). For the purpose of examining how undergraduates envision precarity, and more generally their transition into the world of work, Coventry and Geelong constitute particularly relevant fields: post-industrial cities where the biggest employer shifted from the automotive industry to HE in a matter of years, and where the discourses of widening participation and employability are central to local universities' institutional identity. In this context, universities are behaving quite deliberately in terms of rhetoric and employability pathways. Through the article, we will explore how students are experiencing and adapting to this rhetorical scope.

The series of workshops helped students reflect on ongoing tensions between public framings of 'the promise of HE' and its subjective internalisations, drawing on public discourse in the form of policy and 'slogans', and the subjective experiences of precarity among undergraduate students. The use of visual approaches such as Lego Serious Play* and Instagram posting - where participants shared creative content in response to basic prompts about their feelings of precarity, is relevant in how it allowed participants to make their individual perspectives visible and tangible, and therefore more open to shared reflection.

But before exploring today's students' perspectives, it is necessary to historicise their context.

Human capital theory and the massification of HE

The current framing of HE in terms of economic orientation is not something inherent to the institution, but has indeed to be contextualised historically. While universities, until the first half of the 20th century, were still institutions mainly attended by (and attending to the needs of) the elite, and therefore more independent from immediate economic concerns (Williams and Filippakou, 2010), the 'promise of higher education' then was explicitly about Truth and Knowledge, and only implicitly about upholding a hierarchical status quo.

Soon after World War II, this framing started experiencing a deep shift. Together, a few different factors led to a reframing of HE: the Cold War competition with the socialist block in terms of productivity and technological arms race, the rise of expectations towards heightened social mobility, the Baby Boom. All of these contributed to the emergence of human capital theory, formalised by American economists Jacob Mincer and Gary Becker at the end of the '50s, but already implied in many policy documents of the same years (see Broadberry, 1996).

The promise of HE from the 50s to the 70s became then mainly one of social mobility and (closely and explicitly linked to it) democratic participation. The progress made by these policies to provide access to basic and higher education can't be dismissed. However, levels of achievement remained extremely uneven across different sectors of the population (working class, women, migrants), while also leaving developing countries completely excluded.

Even when looking within the labour market, heightened access to instruction did not reshape industrial structures and relationships: there was no reshaping of the workplace to accommodate more educated people, or less people with a lack of qualifications. Indeed, these trends very often heightened overqualification and skill mismatch, particularly when ethnic minorities and international labour mobility are taken into account (Landholt and Thieme, 2018).

Capitalist realism and the marketisation of HE

In the 80s the '2nd promise' discussed above was starting to show its cracks. While societal

prosperity had, on average, undoubtedly increased, its distribution showed no signs of becoming more equal - in fact, quite the opposite.

As HE seemed to be failing at delivering its promise, subtly the promise shifted from broader societal improvement to individual survival, coherently with the Thatcherite mantras of 'there is no such thing as society' and 'there is no alternative' to deregulated market competition.

On the backdrop of this capitalist realism (Fisher, 2009), the discourses of university recruitment and success are then increasingly more focused in terms of economic return of interest: a university degree is framed as a buttress against a rising tide of precarity, and a future which can only be perceived as uncertain. The promise becomes then: 'We will help you, as an individual, survive within the uncertainty'.

Students, however, do not seem to feel reassured by this individualised promise of survival. The activities of this project opened a collective space in which to share personal perspectives, allowing a number of themes to organically emerge. One of these is indeed the sense of anxiety brought about by transitioning into HE and then in the 'real world' of the labour market. Both their Instagram posts and their Lego models convey this feeling in very visible ways.

These transitions were often represented as 'jumps', less-than-stable bridges, or even cliff-edges from where they contemplate a larger and still very much scary world, uncertain as to how to enter it without metaphorically falling to the sides.

Another recurring metaphor of this transition is that of walls - the marketised, success-oriented university is perceived as a constraining space on one's intellectual curiosity and a funnel towards a pre-determined future. However, as more than one student admitted, 'the world outside the walls is scarier'. These metaphors reflect a general framing of the world as complex and uncertain, but also one which is used to obfuscate a climate of enforced competition between individuals in neoliberl societies.

The signalling paradigm
and the dissolution of HE

In the current, fraught historical moment, it's interesting to see human capital theory being critiqued from both sides of the political spectrum. While leftist critiques have been prominent and ongoing (eg Bowles and Gintis, 1975) recently the libertarian economist Bryan Caplan has advanced an entirely different critique in his controversial book *The Case Against Education*.

Caplan's work does a useful job of spotlighting how simplistic versions of human capital theory have driven policy in ways that are both deeply internalised and perceived as dysfunctional. His suggestion is simple: to shut down public funding for education, as, he argues, investment in it provides negligible effects in terms of improving human capital, and instead to focus on a very narrow definition of vocational education as individual preparation for work.

While Caplan's 'solutions' completely miss the point of what education should be about, it has to be acknowledged that he has correctly diagnosed how education is implicitly shifting away from human capital models, and towards a signalling paradigm.

This shift is externally exemplified by the proliferation of (and the race for) increasingly specialised and discrete micro-qualifications and micro-credentials, aimed at the signalling of emploability (see, for example, Gibson et al's discussion of digital badges, 2015). However, it is also important to discuss the internal consequences of the signalling paradigm as a technology of the self. Signalling becomes internalised in the form of an entrepreneurial self (Peters, 2001), burdened with exaggerated solitary agency. The current shape of the promise of HE is therefore: 'We will make your skills visible, so that you will be ahead'.

From the gaze of others to seeing each other

But ahead of whom? It became evident during the interviews and workshops that students did not necessarily feel in a competition with each other. They feel like they are struggling, yes, but against an immutable system, not against each other.

As a direct expression of this system and how it configures relationships, 'The Gaze of the Others' was also a recurring theme in the participants' conversation. It often involved representations of being 'looked down' at, by people who are higher up on a societal ladder, or having to present oneself in different ways so as to start cliimbing the ladder. A section of an interview poignantly illustrates the relationship with this 'Gaze':

> 'How would you describe yourself?' [the student discusses their family's heritage and history of migration, and how this has influenced their choice of studies and their personal ethical orientation]. 'Thanks. And how would you describe yourself to an employer?' 'Oh, that would be completely different!' [the student then discusses a series of buzzwords - goal-oriented, good communicator, committed, taking initiative].

It is important to highlight how participants were all undergraduate students, most of them had very limited workplace experience, and in some cases had never attended an actual job interview - these adaptations of the self do not therefore stem from lived experience. Rather, the one above is a dramatic example of how the signalling paradigm has become unreflectively embedded in common sense, in HE curricula, and, by no fault of their own, in the attitudes of many students.

Students are very aware of the duplicity they have to carry - their authentic self and their 'employability/entrepreneurial self' are clearly distinct.

Linked to the notions of obfuscation of individual competition and duplicitous selfhood, a particularly poignant finding of the Lego workshops was how participants often found themselves surprised by how closely many of their models resembled each other. In their own words, only through this activity they discovered 'they were in it together'.

The societal fragmentation enacted by individualised and marketised narratives of education, together with the signalling paraigm, can make it very difficult for students to share their worries. Even the simple act of showing vulnerability can be understood as 'falling behind' in the dog-eat-dog narrative that shapes their engagement with HE. This not only translates into heightened loneliness (which can be easily linked to the ongoing student mental health crisis; Jenkins et al, 2020), but, importantly, makes it harder for students to understand themselves as collective and political subjects.

It was therefore a powerful source of solace for participants to discover how their worries and concerns were not rooted in individual psychological states or 'weaknesses', but rather a collective reaction. This realisation is akin to a proto-political consciousness, necessary to establishing an examined link between individual psychological states and shared socio-material conditions.

We argue that similar creative sharing activities can play a powerful role in understanding the structural, collective and political nature of the struggle of precarity, and normalising the feelings of vulnerability that accompany it. Rather than making individual skills visible, HE can therefore play an important role in making vulnerability visible, shared, collectively examined, and ultimately transform it into a denunciation of systemic inequality (Doxtdator, 2018). HE could then adopt a more Freirean perspective and promise: 'By collectively reading the world, we can collectively imagine how to change it'.

*Note

Lego Serious Play is a structured facilitation methodology developed by the Lego group, based on building models to support collective storytelling, idea-sharing and problem solving. As the methodology is available under an open source and community-based model, it has been adapted and repurposed to address our research focus.

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