Selling Sociology. A Comparison of Online Marketing to Prospective Students at English and Polish Universities

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Abstract: This paper provides a comparative analysis of the institutional on-line presentation of sociology degrees to prospective students in the UK and Poland. I consider the extent to which the nature of sociological knowledge is being altered to meet the perceived expectations of student customers within the context of an increasingly marketised higher education environment. My analysis suggests the discipline is responsive to a range of external drivers: in particular, the needs of the labour market. Sociology appears susceptible to the pressure on academic disciplines identified by Bernstein (2000) to turn outwards and respond to external economic and social demands thereby transforming purely academic subjects into more applied or multi-disciplinary areas of study.

Keywords: knowledge, higher education, marketization, sociology

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Introduction

The changed nature and purpose of higher education over recent decades has been well documented (Readings, 1997; Delanty, 2001; Barnett, 2000; Furedi, 2002; Kirp, 2005; Gumport, 2007; McGee, 2015; Altbach et al., 2016). This change has not been linear - competing narratives evolve alongside one another. Paradigms of both public and private good co-exist in contemporary universities which are influenced by economic objectives, national policy directives, changing disciplinary directions and the personal and political values and aspirations of staff and students (Sen, 1999; Altbach, 2001; Hayes, 2002; Bok, 2003; Baum & Payea, 2004; Lewis, 2006; Molesworth, Nixon & Scullion, 2009; Singleton-Jackson, Jackson & Reinhardt, 2010; Baum, Ma & Payea, 2013; Land & Gordon, 2013; Williams, 2013; 2016).

Over recent decades, universities have increasingly positioned themselves as part of a "knowledge society" (Gibbons et al., 1994; Castells, 1998; 2000; Delanty, 2001; Hornidge, 2007; Allen & van der Velden, 2011). Science, research, and knowledge are assumed to be central to national economic development, global competitiveness, politics, culture, and individual development. In this context, higher education is promoted to potential students as a vital component of their "human capital" (Becker, 1993; Drucker, 1998).

The last debates on knowledge and curricula appear dichotomous with apparent opposition between employability and liberal education; vocational and academic; pure and applied; Mode 1 and Mode 2 (i.e. Mode 1 knowledge which is discipline-based and represents pure science while Mode 2 is transdisciplinary knowledge); fragmentation vs. coherence; particularity vs. universality; openness and closure (Gibbons et al., 1994; Kraak, 2000; Becher & Trowler, 2001; Etzkowitz, 2002; Rhoades & Slaughter, 2004; Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005; Peters, 2007; Etkowitz & Viale, 2010). Two dominant orientations to knowledge emerge: conceptual or academic knowledge, on the one hand; and procedural or professional knowledge on the other ("know how" and "know that"). Such apparent oppositions suggest knowledge production in higher education is shaped by factors both internal to academic disciplines and external to universities. The latter places employability and transferable skills to the fore in the construction of higher education curricula. Changes to the labour market and the requirements of professional bodies influence the nature and significance of knowledge as much as research councils and disciplinary developments.

There have been many attempts at classifying and producing a typology of academic knowledge (see, for example, Biglan, 1973; Becher, 1984). Indeed, Maton (2013) suggests, the creation of knowledge typologies is a thriving cottage industry. In this paper I draw upon Bernstein's (1999) distinction between vertical and horizontal discourse as an approach to clas-

sifying knowledge that has been subsequently developed, most notably by Young (2004), Moore & Young (2001), Muller & Young (2014) Maton (2006; 2013), Luckett (2012), and Wheelahan (2005; 2010; 2014).

The aim of this paper is to bring together thinking about the classification of knowledge with research into the marketization of higher education, to evaluate whether the marketization of higher education has an impact upon the nature of knowledge students are offered access to. The provision of information about institutions has become a key tool for attracting new student-customers and managing the expectations of existing students. Information about course content, the knowledge potentially available to students, is likewise codified and presented to potential customers as the product of higher education.

In this paper I consider the information provided to prospective students about disciplinary specific content, or subject knowledge as presented on university websites. Sociology can be considered as either a 'pure' academic discipline or 'applied' to specific real-world social problems. It can be taught with either disciplinary knowledge or more generic or employment-oriented skills to the fore.

I compare the presentation of sociological knowledge at universities in the UK and Poland. I have selected these countries in order to compare a relatively established higher education marketplace (the UK) with a formally non-marketised higher education sector (Poland). The marketisation of higher education appears to be a global phenomenon but one that is more advanced in some countries than others. In the UK, students have paid university tuition fees at varying state-regulated levels for over a decade now and institutions are carefully branded so as to attract customers (see previous section on context). When taking funding into consideration, two groups of students may be distinguished: fee-paying and tax-based in Poland. All students from the former group either attend private universities or study part-time at public universities. However, since 2006, the number of fee-paying students has been declining, while the total number of students tax-based in Poland has been increasing (Kwiek, 2012; 2015). In other words, the majority of students does not pay any fees. Nonetheless the perception of the student as customer is recognised in discussions of Polish higher education (Hejwosz-Gromkowska, 2013). One impact of marketisation is that information about courses and institutions is rarely neutral but plays a role in attracting new customers and managing the expectations of current students.

Knowledge in the disciplines

In this paper I consider the way university websites market an institutionally distinct sociology course to prospective students through exploring

the classification of sociological knowledge. Wheelahan (2005) claims "the classification of knowledge refers to the way in which knowledge is defined in different fields and how these fields are distinguished and insulated from each other" (p.1).

Bernstein (1999) built upon Durkheim's classification of sacred and pro-fane knowledge by further distinguishing between vertical and horizontal discourses, i.e. between "systematic" and "everyday" knowledge. My clas-sification of the sociological knowledge students were being offered at dif-ferent institutions is primarily influenced by the scholarship of Bernstein with a particular focus upon his distinction between singulars and regions and upon vertical and horizontal knowledge structures. Vertical discourse may be called "formal" or "official knowledge" as it is "coherent, explicit, context independent and based on systems of hierarchical meanings that can be abstracted beyond their contexts of production" (Bernstein, 2000; Luck-ett, 2012). Such a discourse consists of "specialized symbolic structures of explicit knowledge" (Bernstein, 2000, p. 160). Moreover, vertical discourse comprises hierarchical and horizontal knowledge structures.

According to Maton (2006; 2013), horizontal knowledge structures have a limited capacity for cumulative knowledge building. Horizontal discourse, on the other hand, is everyday knowledge, characterized by context-depen-dent knowledge, which is functionally meaningful only within its contexts of production (Maton & Muller, 2007; Maton, 2013; Luckett, 2012).

Bernstein (2000) further distinguishes between singular and regional forms of knowledge. Singulars being specialized knowledge structures, with their own language, texts and rules of entry, protected by strong boundaries between other disciplines. Regions, on the other hand, describe the recon-textualization of singulars. Whereas singulars face inwards, regions face out-wards either to other disciplines or to practice entirely outside of academia. Bernstein's theory of knowledge enables us to understand the importance of generalization and hierarchy for knowledge acquisition and building "con-scious awareness" in students (Shalem & Slonimsky, 2010).

The widespread acceptance of the "knowledge society" has changed the status and perception of academic disciplines. Gibbons et al. (1994) argue that the process of research is being "radically transformed" through the "steering", commercialization, and accountability of contemporary research. They distinguished between Mode 1 knowledge which is discipline-based and represents pure science and Mode 2 knowledge which is transdisci-plinary, problem-oriented, applied and can be created outside of universi-ties (see Scott, 2006). To a certain extent there has always been a struggle between the role of pure and applied disciplines at universities, "the debate on Mode 1 and Mode 2 knowledge may be understood as another expression of this debate" (Wheelahan, 2014, p. 133). Collier (1997) argues disciplines

range in a sequence from abstract sciences to practice. Abstract sciences contribute to practice, thus, they are also key resources for applied knowledge. Applied or – referring to Collier's typology – concrete sciences are not an alternative to pure or abstract sciences or disciplines, but are instead complementary (Wheelahan, 2014, p. 128).

Delanty (2001) argues knowledge comes to be generated in its "context of application" with "commercial competition becoming the basis for the logic of discovery" (pp. 108-9). The perception of sociology as a subject which is responsive to the demands of the labour market supports the view of Gibbons et al. (1994) that Mode 1 or traditional disciplinary specific knowledge is being superseded by Mode 2 or multi-, trans-, and cross- disciplinary or even post-disciplinary knowledge. They claim that Mode 2 knowledge involves contextualisation, which means that the 'users' of knowledge (in this case, future employers) are expected to influence its initial formulation.

Muller and Young (2014) suggest the transition to Mode 2 knowledge represents not only an expectation that knowledge production should become more applied but, "for the traditional first step, basic science or Mode 1, to be skipped entirely" (2014, p. 130). The consequence of this, as they indicate, is that as the epistemic rules of the disciplines are weakened, the features of knowledge that made it a unique source of innovation are eroded. In this way, the blurring of the boundaries between skills and knowledge actually contributes towards the erosion of knowledge within academic disciplines as the intellectual and epistemic basis for critical thought is lost.

Wheelahan (2014) suggests that science "no longer has a one way dialogue with society – society now speaks back to science, by setting priorities, questions and problems to be solved, and by changing the social and institutional context in which science is practiced", (p. 129). The consequence of replacing Mode 1 with Mode 2 knowledge can be described as a greater opportunity for each and every member of a given society to be both a producer, and a consumer of new knowledge.

There remain many arguments for providing students with access to pure disciplinary knowledge. Bernstein (2000) argues that society constructs conversations about the future from abstract ideas and theoretical knowledge. Further, Wheelahan (2014) suggests that "the second reason that students need access to disciplinary knowledge is because they provide epistemic access to the aspect of the natural and social world they study" (p.134). Additionally, knowledge, which may be relevant to an individual's future occupation, is often drawn from complex bodies of knowledge "and students need to know how these complex bodies of knowledge fit together if they are to decide what knowledge is relevant for a particular purpose, and if they are to have the capacity to transcend the present to imagine the future", (Wheelahan, 2005, p. 5). Pure knowledge thereby allows workers and citizens to have

autonomy in creating their own knowledge and enables them to become independent thinkers.

Locating sociology in the contemporary university

Sociology, at its purest, can be considered a singular form of knowledge. It defines itself apart from philosophy or psychology for example, and new knowledge builds upon existing disciplinary knowledge. Sociological knowledge can also look outwards to work in other disciplines or to the world of work. It can be applied and embedded in, for example, social policy, social work training programmes or criminology. I began by considering sociology as a vertical discourse with a horizontal knowledge structure consisting of a series of specialised languages with specialised modes of interrogation and criteria for the construction and circulation of texts. As a horizontal knowledge structure, sociological knowledge is segmented; each segment having its own distinctive criteria. The discipline as a whole is therefore characterized by a weak internal coherence (relations among ideas) and weak grammars (external relations to data).

It is worth noting that since 1970s and 1980s, sociology – as an academic discipline – has changed its theoretical and empirical orientation by employing post-structuralist and postmodern theories, where social institutions are not at the heart of sociological inquiry (Deem, 2004; Burawoy, 2005). According to Maton (2013), "approaches informed by sociology and cultural studies focus on the effects of power relations for the experiences and the beliefs of different social group", "here, knowledge is reduced to a reflection of social power" (p. 9). This third way of sociology (Burawoy, 2005) brought fragmentation to sociology as a discipline and thereby allowed for the development ofsub-disciplines (such as sociology of food, sociology of immigration, digital sociology, women's studies, gender studies).

This paper seeks to locate the study of sociology within the context of an increasingly marketised higher education sector that positions students as consumers seeking a future return on their investment in higher education in the labour market.

Methodology

I explore how universities portray the study of sociology in their on-line information and marketing material in order to interrogate whether the nature of sociology as a discipline is changing in order to meet the perceived expectations of student customers. In examining how universities present sociology it is possible to discern the explication of instrumental motivations designed to persuade students not just to choose sociology as a subject for

study but to choose sociology at a particular institution. I consider whether the reasons offered for the study of sociology are presented in economic, personal or academic terms and if this in turn influences course content, that is, the nature of disciplinary knowledge itself.

The nature of sociology is that there are few "fixed" bodies of knowledge. Institutions have some flexibility to shape courses around developments in the discipline, the research interests of academics, the expectations of current students and the perceived demands of future students. As such, sociology is perhaps quicker to register market influence than some other academic disciplines.

The study focuses upon twenty universities, ten from the UK and ten from Poland. Institutions were selected randomly according to their position within popular league tables[1]. All research were conducted from May – September 2017 and university websites were accessed during this period. The relative league table position of an institution may have an impact upon the nature of the subject content on offer. It might be assumed that universities occupying places higher in the league tables are considered more prestigious and therefore do not have to work so hard to attract customers. They are perhaps then better placed to withstand market pressures and maintain a more pure and inward looking form of sociological knowledge. Lower ranked institutions, on the other hand, may have a greater need to present sociology as economically relevant and instrumental to students' need for future employment. Jon Nixon (2011, p. 12) suggests that "institutions of higher education are ranked according to a range of measures and that ranking results in a league table with research-led institutions invariably comprising the premier league, research-informed and teaching led universities constituting the upper echelons of the second league, teaching led institutions with little research capacity occupying the lower reaches of the second league, and the rest constituting a third league of institutions that are struggling to achieve any significant research output at all."

He also points out that the older universities in the UK have "permanent and undisputed" occupancy in the primer league, while the post-1992 universities can be found in the second league and the bottom league are occupied by the institutions that have gained university status recently (Nixon, 2011, p.12). Similar case can be found in Poland, where old, traditional and state-funded universities occupied the first league table, while the private institutions of higher education (founded after 1989) are located in the lower ranks of the league tables (Kwiek, 2015). Much of the research shows a con-

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[1] For England we used The Guardian University League Table 2016 -https://www.theguardian.com/education/ng-interactive/2015/may/25/university-league-tables-2016 - and for Poland - http://www.perspektywy.pl/RSW2015/ranking-kierunkow-studiow/kierunki-spoleczne/socjologia -, accessed 26 September 2017.

nection between institution and socio-economic status, however this is not the case for all students. For instance, Abbas and Mclean (2010, p. 243) note that "rankings are based on institutional status and wealth (for example, entry qualifications and staff-student ratio)" and that "students from lower socio-economic backgrounds – likely to be "first-generation' university students – tend to enroll in the less prestigious and less well-resourced universities." If this is the case then it could mean that students from different socio-economic backgrounds have unequal access to sociological knowledge.

Table I – The examined Universities in Poland and England

Rank	Polish Universities	Rank	English Universities
1	Uniwersytet Warszawski/ University of Warsaw (UW)	4	The University of Birmingham
2	Uniwersytet Jagieloński/ Jagiellonian University in Krakow (UJ)	8	Edinburgh University
3	Uniwersytetim. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu/ Adam Mickieiwcz University in Poznan (AMU)	20	The University of Manchester
5	Uniwersytet Wrocławski/ University of Wroclaw (UWr)	25	The University of Sussex
8	Uniwersytet Mikołaja Kopernika w Toruniu/ Nicolas Copernicus University in Torun (UMK)	35	Keele University
9	Uniwersytet Gdański/ University of Gdansk (UG)	44	Goldsmiths, University of London
25	Uniwersytet Opolski/University of Opole (UO)	59	University of Greenwich
+25	Uniwersytet Ekonomiczny w Krakowie/ Cracow University of Economics (CUE)	69	University of Derby
+25	Szkoła Główna Gospodarstwa Wiejskiego/ Warsaw University of Life Sciences (SGGW)	82	Birmingham City University
+25	Uniwersytet KazimierzaWielkiego w Bydgoszczy / Kazimierz Wielki University (UKW)	88	Anglia Ruskin University

Participating institutions were selected through a process which involved us dividing subject specific league table into quartiles and then selecting from within this list institutions which ranked most highly on the Internet search engine, Google. Through this I aimed to access the most 'popular' universities people access in each quartile. DeMillo (2015, p. 118) explains, "in a list of all Web pages ordered by popularity, the most popular websites are referred to about twice as frequently as the ones that are the next most popular. By the same token, the third most popular Web pages are half as popular as those in second place, and so on down the list of hundreds of millions of Web pages." He continues: "internet search engines like Google and Bing make use of this model to decide which search results users might be most interested in seeing first." By looking at the highest ranking universities from within each quartile I hope to focus on the sociology courses most prospective students are likely to come across.

I examined all the online information relating to sociology available on the website of each selected institution. I looked for points of comparison that could be made between the content presented by different institutions. With English universities this was relatively easy because of the national government's requirement that all institutions publish Key Information Sets about each course on offer so students can more easily identify courses appropriate to their needs. The information presented to prospective students at English universities focuses around answers to the following questions:

- What is Sociology?
- Why study Sociology?
- What do Sociology students do at university?
- What do Sociology students do after university?
- Why study Sociology at this particular institution?

In Poland, the provision of information is less formally regulated making comparisons less readily identifiable. However, common topics covered included: skills, knowledge and employability. My thematic research involved a close reading of the available information which was then analysed according to the categories identified above. The identified categories were used to draw comparisons, following further close readings of the texts, both between institutions and nations. My overall aim was to use this analysis to compare the perceived purpose of a sociology degree; the content or "product" on offer to students; and the perception of the student.

The results of my analysis show that in both English and Polish universities, sociology is presented primarily, as a course designed to prepare students for the labour market, and secondarily, as a means of personal development and transformation through involvement in research projects. My findings also suggest that sociology is becoming an increasingly value-driven discipline.

The findings suggest that sociology has added applied modules, perhaps in place of theoretical knowledge. In this way, information for prospective students emphasizes skills, while disciplinary specific knowledge is either obscured, or taken for granted. Only two of the institutional websites we analysed make specific reference to sociological theories (the University of Manchester; Edinburgh University). The University of Manchester is one of the universities which refer in their online overview more to the field of knowledge than to practice "*you will learn and use a range of theories and concepts to help understand topics of interest, and a set of rigorous and systematic approaches to gathering and interpreting information to help you develop reliable knowledge.*[2]"

Disciplinary specific knowledge is replaced by knowledge which is practically applicable to a range of other disciplines. For example, sociology degrees enable students to learn survey methods (the University of Manchester; Edinburgh University, UO, UAM), statistics, and data analysis (Edinburgh University; Keele University, UO, UW, UAM). The information provided for prospective students suggests that sociology employs knowledge from different disciplines, such as: psychology, criminology, urban studies, medicine, health studies, IT, economics, political science, and geography. For example, the University of Wroclaw informs its target audience that "*you will possess sociological knowledge and a basic understanding of other social sciences, as well as professional skills and competences, which allow you to communicate with the future co-workers and business environment while conducting social and statistical analyses as a part of empirical research*", (http://www.socjologia.uni.wroc.pl/Kierunki-i-specjalnosci-1/Socjologia, accessed 26 September 2017, translated by author). This interdisciplinarity is promoted as a means of allowing students to create their own study path according to personal interests – as it is suggested, for example, by the University of Greenwich: "*this programme will allow you to specialise in the study of sociology while incorporating courses from a range of options to allow you to build your degree around your interests and career aspiration.*[3]"

The website offers also provide information that students will acquire "*employability skill*" and other behavioral competences to meet the requirements of prospective employers. This may be illustrated by the following example: "*sociology students also develop a wider set of transferable skills like team working; verbal communication skills; showing initiative; being able to work in a way that is supportive of equality and diversity in the workplace, the ability for critical thought and analysis plus and skills in research, writing and*

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[2] Retrieved from: http://www.manchester.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/courses/2017/00678/bsocsc-sociology/all-content/
[3] Retrieved from: http://www.gre.ac.uk/ug/ach/i304

presenting.[4]" (Goldsmiths, University of London). My findings suggest that in the analyzed website offers communication skills and team-working competences are mentioned most frequently. At the same time, they are regarded as the most desirable on the job market. The following extracts may be a good confirmation of the value-oriented process of university learning: "*many people today study sociology for the personal enrichment it brings them, broadening their minds and enabling them to see their world in new and interesting ways.*[5]" (Birmingham City University). The University of Warsaw informs us that "*a sociology graduate is a person who combines broad knowledge about the contemporary world with unique analytical skills and the ability to think critically and constructively, and to solve problems through team work*[6]." This approach shows that although sociology students are equipped with some knowledge and skills, the values that are important on the job market are also mentioned.

As sociology students can exercise some control over the curriculum, they can create their own, individual study paths. An individual approach is also one of the recurring key words in the analyzed website offers. This could be illustrated by the following examples: "*the curriculum is module-based. It allows each student to elastically shape his or her course of study. Such a formula allows the students to adapt the curriculum to their individual needs*[7]"; "*you can create your own study path*[8]", "*personalized route through your degree*" (The University of Manchester), "*individualization of study*[9]." Sociology is promoted as a means of opening up numerous career pathways that individuals can follow upon graduation. Sociology graduates, universities tell us, can pursue a variety of careers or "*they are flexible and can find a job without problem*[10]."

Moreover, the offers promise a "*success in career*", "*no problem in finding employment*" (UW), or claim that "*sociology graduates are well prepared for later careers*", (University of Greenwich). Anglia Ruskin University asserts that [its] "*past students now enjoy careers in journalism and the media, business administration and management, health management, the civil service, teaching, social care, social research, the police, prison and probation services.*[11]" A similar statement is provided by the University of Sussex: "*A Sociology degree at Sussex can prepare you for jobs in fields such as social research, public relations, research, and for the health, social welfare, housing, charity and education*

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[4] Retrieved from: http://www.gold.ac.uk/sociology/employability/

[5] Retrieved from: http://www.bcu.ac.uk/social-sciences/sociology/employability/career-options

[6] Retrieved from: http://www.is.uw.edu.pl/pl/silhouette-of-the-absolwent/

[7] Retrieved from: http://www.socjologia.uj.edu.pl/en/study/studyinpolish

[8] Retrieved from: AMU, http://socjologia.amu.edu.pl/new/kandydaci (translated by author).

[9] Retrieved from: UMK, http://www.soc.umk.pl/dla-kandydatow/studia-i-stopnia/o-studiowaniu-socjologii/ (translated by author).

[10] Retrieved from: UO, http://www.socjologia.uni.opole.pl/praca/ (translated by author).

[11] Retrieved from: http://www.anglia.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/social-science-and-humanities

sectors[12]." On the basis of the analyzed website sources I found that future professionals with a background in sociology may be expected to work as researchers in public and private institutions, as clerks, in business (both, as owners or employees), in HR, media, government, local authorities, PR, advertising, public centers for opinion polls, marketing, social care, market research or pursue careers in higher education institutions, among others.

The skills most frequently listed in the online offers are: practical skills, transferable skills, necessary skills, skills relevant to job market, and theoretical skills. From this point of view, sociology may be regarded as a professional course rather than a purely academic one. The main aim of obtaining a sociology degree is to be prepared for the job market through: "*research and practice*" (UW); "*practical transferable skills that provide a strong foundation for future employment*" (University of Greenwich); "*gaining critical and analytical skills that will impress your future employers*" (Anglia Ruskin University); or *"gives you the* knowledge, skills and confidence to pursue a successful career[13]*.*" (The University of Derby).

Some websites listed more specific workplace skills, for example, "*the proposed curriculum included: development of analytical skills, basic statistic analysis skills, knowledge and skills of using IT[14].*" This might suggest that vocational skills are taught as academic subjects. Some universities, especially from England, include within sociology programmes work placements or other forms of cooperation with business (Anglia Ruskin University, the University of Derby).

We need to remember that professionally oriented education does not emerge in the vacuum. For Bernstein (2000) "the construction of the 'inner' was the guarantee for the construction of 'outer'. In this we can find the origins of professions". In other words, it is knowledge that shapes the practice (Young, 2014). From this perspective, even if references to knowledge are less visible in the offers prepared by universities, it does not mean that professional and vocational education programmes are shaped by a knowledge-free approach.

It seems that sociological knowledge is increasingly perceived as contextual and relative. This might potentially have an impact upon a student's identity. Whereas immersion in a disciplinary singular shapes a disciplinary identity ("to be a sociologist"), regional curricula a more likely to forge a professional identity related to a future career aspiration. Going forward, one challenge is to create curricula in higher education that would include the field of practice as well as the field of knowledge with equal diligence. This

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[12] Retrieved from: http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sociology/undergraduate/careers
[13] Retrieved from: https://www.derby.ac.uk/social-sciences-courses/sociology-ba-hons/
[14] Retrieved from: CUE, http://uek.krakow.pl/pl/uczelnia/wydzialy/wydzial-gospodarki-i-administracji-publicznej/ksztalcenie/socjologia.html

would necessarily be more complex than simply an academically-oriented programme where emphasis is placed on the structures of knowledge (Barnett, 2001; 2006; Wheellahan, 2014).

A majority of the universities I looked at emphasized the development of research skills through individual or group projects (UO; UW; UG; UJ, the University of Birmingham, Edinburgh University; the University of Manchester, Goldsmiths, the University of London). The emphasis on individual projects positions students, rather than a disciplinary impetus, as at the heart of knowledge production. Students are told they will have an opportunity to "*research on 'live' social issues*" or are assured about "*high quality research*" (the University of Birmingham, Edinburgh University). The University of Opole declares "*our graduates are ready to do research and to analyse qualitative and quantitative data*". Edinburgh University assures its prospective students that it puts "*a strong emphasis on doing rather than just reading about sociology[15]*." It is argued that research leads to innovation and new knowledge. Nevertheless, a researcher is still required to posses methodological and theoretical knowledge and tools. Maton's suggests students have a capacity to transfer knowledge. He writes that being equipped with principles and procedures will allow students to "demonstrably move between concrete cases and abstract ideas" (Maton, 2009, p. 54; Shalem & Slonimsky, 2010). It could be illustrated by the following example from the University of Greenwich: "*A broad foundation in sociological thinking and theory is offered while also supporting you to pursue your own ideas and interests through focused research*".

However, Stavrou (2009) criticizes the results of the contextual shift by pointing out that students are first confronted with the question of how to solve a problem instead of being provided with methodology and theoretical background to be able to define a social problem. Although the information for prospective students includes methodological courses and, in some cases, theory, the information about research projects and development of research skills are highlighted.

Discussion

Sociological knowledge increasingly emerges from the world outside of academia

My overview of web-based marketing material suggests students are presented with a perception of sociology as responsive to a range of external drivers such as social problems and the needs of the labour market. The world outside of academia increasingly appears to shape the nature of sociological knowledge. This suggests sociology is susceptible to the pressure on

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[15] Retrieved from: http://www.sociology.ed.ac.uk/studying_sociology

academic disciplines identified by Bernstein to turn outwards and respond to external economic and social demands. Bernstein regarded this development as being "a response to market conditions on the part of 'autonomous' higher education institutions, rather than as being politically imposed" (Beck, 2010, p. 86).

Sociology is becoming increasingly skills-driven and vocational

The most apparent form of external responsiveness is the marketing of sociology on the basis of the potential skills for employability students can develop to enhance their opportunities for future participation in the labour market. This moves undergraduate sociology away from academic and theoretical study and places an emphasis upon practical training for entry into the world of work. Bernstein (2000) defines "trainability" as "the ability to profit from continuous pedagogic re-formations and so cope with the new requirements of 'work' and 'life'". The aim of 'trainability', he suggests, is to "realise a flexible transferable potential rather than specific performances" (*ibidem*, p. 59). He also suggests that at the heart of the concept of "trainability" lies "an emptiness which makes the concept self-referential."

Dissemination of the Mode 2 knowledge resulted in trans-, inter-, and multi-disciplinary research and consequently a change in the nature of university curricula. It is argued that a radical shift towards interdisciplinarity in the academia has occurred. While some scholars criticize this shift, others support such a change as, according to them, "there is no alternative". For instance, Jon Nixon (2011) suggests that emergent fields of study – such as environmental or women studies – need the 'protection' of established disciplines to survive in academia. He points out that specialization offers "indisputable facts" and "quantifiable data" while breadth is understood in terms of "disputable findings", "qualitative data" and "discursive interpretation". In other words disciplinary research are 'hard' while interdisciplinary 'soft'. Thus, Nixon concludes "specialization builds on the firm foundations of what is known: breadth acknowledges the fuzzy and uncertainty future" (*ibidem*, p. 130). However, Young and Muller (2010), predict that disciplinary knowledge will be accessible only for a small group of people.

The production of knowledge is driven by the student as researcher

Many of the sociology courses I have reviewed advertise themselves on the basis that students can become researchers, "doing" rather than "reading" sociology, and through this research, engage with current 'real world' problems. This suggests that at undergraduate level, sociological knowledge is viewed less as a specific collection of works for students to read and master and more as something for students to construct themselves, or, more often, co-construct with their peers. As students bring their lived experience of contemporary social problems to the classroom they are often considered, in

pedagogical terms, to be both object of study as well as student. This means that sociological knowledge is no longer determined by the empirically-verifiable and nor does it necessarily have a theoretical and hierarchical basis grounded in the work of previous generations of thinkers. The shift towards pedagogic approaches that employ the subjective experiences students bring to the course as a source of data and understanding, leads to a further reconceptualisation of knowledge within sociology.

Durkheim differentiates between two forms of knowledge: sacred knowledge which is conceptual and held by people collectively and profane knowledge which is context dependent and determined by lived experience. The move to view sociological knowledge as being increasingly generated from the realm of personal experience implies a shift from the sacred to the profane. Bernstein (2000) suggests that one problem with knowledge generated from personal experience is that it can never transcend its dependence upon context. In pedagogical terms, Abbas and McLean (2010, p. 45) suggest this is a significant problem: "unthinkable and sacred knowledge traditionally produced and reproduced in universities, empowers the groups that possess it because it bestows on them agential capabilities: namely, to reflect on society or a particular aspect of it, to fully participate in the democratic process, and to act to change society."

A further consequence of this shift towards a more subjective and profane epistemological basis is to call into question the notion of the discipline as a scholarly community sharing a collective understanding of the nature of knowledge and similar methodological approaches.

Sociology is becoming increasingly values-driven

The move away from a specific body of disciplinary knowledge towards "trainability" on one hand and knowledge constructed by the "student as researcher" on the other leaves an emptiness regarding curricular content. My overview of sociology courses shows some departments filling the vacuum created by the absence of knowledge-content with the promotion of particular values. Often such values are evidenced through the discourse of "personal transformation" whereby one set of values is rejected and replaced with a different set of more "officially sanctioned" values. Abbas and McLean (2010, p. 249) note, "regardless of the type of university, the university lecturers expressed markedly similar aspirations for students: broadly, they are interested in individual transformation through critical self-reflective thinking and in the transformation of society through students' understanding of societal injustices and the workings of power." On the other hand Nixon (2011, p. 132) suggests that in the rapidly changing world "the need for flexibility in course provision and in the accreditation of diverse achievements

– at different levels of achievement – will be essential if higher education is to meet the needs and expectations of future generations of students."

Conclusions

This paper has explored the ways in which a sociology degree is presented to the prospective students via institutional websites. It appears to be an actual analysis in the age of prevalent crowded curricula, growing vocationalism, interdisciplinarity and the undermining of disciplinary knowledge.

Today's universities – in the UK, Poland and elsewhere – offer academic programmes which are vocationally oriented on the one hand, while on the other, they put students as researchers at the heart of knowledge production. Dissemination of Mode 2 knowledge created the possibility of a more student-oriented approach. It also allows students to have a greater control over their curricula. Disciplinary and theoretical knowledge is obscured in online sources, while skills are highlighted. The given information also allows to conclude that a sociology degree is becoming increasingly value-oriented, while the emphasis is put on communication and team-working skills. Marek Kwiek (2017) suggests that universities have developed a policy of 'the private goods logics (for teaching)' and a 'knowledge economy discourse (for research)'. Operating as public service institutions across Europe and elsewhere, universities experience three types of pressure: financial, ideological, and electoral (p. 40). In order to 'survive' on the global, competitive market of higher education, universities need to assure prospective undergraduates that they will help them acquire skills and knowledge that are easily transferable onto the labor market. In this case, the promise of future employment and individual wealth may be understood as 'tangible benefits' of science (Kwiek, 2017).

Not all university undergraduate sociology departments have moved away from teaching a distinct body of knowledge to the same extent. Abbas and McLean (2010, p. 248) suggest there is, "a complex interplay between how the sacred and profane knowledge is used which depends partially on the market position of universities, and, also on the position of lecturers within institutions." They argue, "most sociology lecturers are eager for their students to learn the specialised and potentially transformative discourse of sociology, despite such goals being harder to achieve in universities which appear lower down league tables" (*ibidem*, p. 242).

Finally, my findings also suggest that there are no significant differences between the offers delivered by the analyzed Polish and English universities. The English universities have developed more advanced marketing strategies than the Polish ones. However, this research suggests it is the case that the expectation that universities operate as businesses within a marketised

environment has had an impact upon the nature of research conducted and the development of disciplinary knowledge.

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