Resisting the Iron Cage of 'the Student Experience'

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A s higher education (HE) has come to be valued for its contribution to the global economy, priorities have been placed on study for a degree to directly meet the needs of industry (Hayes, 2015: p. 125). Furthermore, in UK policy, students have been defined as 'customers' by the government since the introduction of tuition fees (Dearing, 1997; Browne, 2010). Together, these developments have emphasized the role of a degree as a consumer 'product', purchased to secure future employment (Peters, Jandrić and Hayes, 2018a), rather than an experiential learning 'process', that continues well beyond student life (Hayes, 2015 : p. 130). We examine how the student-as-consumer approach in HE policy has recently developed into a strong rhetoric emphasizing 'the student experience' as a package, including leisure, well-being, future employment and other 'extras'. This could be perceived as positive, where all elements of student life are acknowledged. Alternatively, policy discourse concerning 'the student experience' could also be critiqued as a concept that now transcends the notion of a degree as a utilitarian product. A disturbing impression is then generated, where universities are now delivering a packaged experience of 'consumption itself', to students (Argenton, 2015: p. 921). What students would individually experience, such as a 'sense of belonging and pride in the university', is delivered to students, not developed by them. To examine such concerns more closely, we analyse a sample of 20 UK university 'student experience' strategies, via a corpus-based Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Drawing on themes from these texts, we question who 'the student experience' rhetoric really benefits? If a rationalized experience is constructed on behalf of students, then universities as 'cathedrals

of consumption' (Ritzer, 2010) align themselves with any other provider of consumer experiences, where the 'production' of academic life has all been taken care of. In such a discourse, students are not necessarily conceptualized as empowered consumers either (Brooks, 2017) but trapped instead within an 'iron cage', even before they set foot in the workplace. Yet, despite a distorted picture that neoliberal HE policy discourse may portray, a postdigital understanding of 'the student experience' could yet offer helpful insights into possible routes of resistance.

Introduction

The 'student-as-consumer' approach in HE policy has been critically examined by a multitude of authors in the last two decades (Driscoll and Wicks, 1998; Clarke, Newman, Smith, Vidler, and Westmarland, 2007; Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion, 2009; Brooks, 2017; Bunce, Baird and Jones, 2017; Peters, Jandrić and Hayes, 2018; Hayes, 2018a; Hayes, forthcoming, 2019). Students were described as 'customers' in *Higher Education in the Learning Society* (Dearing 1997) and since then, higher education institutions (HEIs) 'have increasingly had to operate under forces of marketisation which demand competitiveness, efficiency and consumer satisfaction' (Bunce, Baird and Jones, 2017: p. 1958). To place these developments within a broader context of 'neoliberalism', authors have suggested that this manifests as 'a specific economic discourse or philosophy which has become dominant and effective in world economic relations as a consequence of super-power sponsorship' (Olssen and Peters, 2005: p. 314). Whilst at an economic level, neoliberalism is linked to globalization, 'it is a particular element of globalization, in that it constitutes the form through which domestic and global economic relations are structured'. (Olssen and Peters, 2005: p. 314). It should therefore be understood as 'a politically imposed discourse' (Olssen and Peters, 2005: p. 314).

The rhetoric that accompanies neoliberalism in HE tends to comprise 'common sense' but powerful forms of reasoning. It has been described by some as the language of 'new capitalism', which is characterized 'by a 'restructuring' of the relations between the economic, political and social (Jessop, 2000; Fairclough, 2000; Simpson and Mayr, 2010). This term is helpful in the word 'new' because it demonstrates that significant changes have taken place in our language, in order to accommodate new corporate policies within UK HEIs (Hayes, 2019 forthcoming). This means that alternative values can become hushed, along with other ways of organising academic labour (Couldry, 2010: p. 12). Indeed, a neoliberal agenda in HEIs has been supported for some time now by commodified forms of language referred to as buzz phrases (Mautner, 2005; Feek, 2010;

Gibbs, 2014; Scott, 2014). In previous studies, it has been pointed out that buzz phrases do not 'act alone' so to speak. The linguistic arrangement of words around buzz phrases is also significant, as it is often inferred in policy statements that these socially constructed phrases enact academic labour, rather than human beings themselves (Hayes and Jandrić, 2014; Hayes and Bartholomew, 2015; Hayes, 2016; Hayes, 2018a; Hayes, forthcoming, 2019). What this means in practice is that it is not at all unusual now to find functions related to teaching and learning discussed in policy as if these were detached marketable entities, rather than the processes of human academic labour (Hayes, forthcoming, 2019). However, this is also a discourse that no longer resides within policy documents alone, but is amplified across media channels and digital fora, via processes that might be considered complex and cumulative in a postdigital society (Jandrić, Knox, Besley, Ryberg, Suoranta and Hayes, 2018).

These concerns have become enmeshed with the 'student-as-consumer' arguments that now include pressure on HEIs to demonstrate 'value for money' (Dickinson, 2018) in exchange for student fees. Though important, this logic can also become skewed. The press may focus on generalized impressions of students as complaining customers receiving a bad deal, whilst institutions may look to address a perceived under performance by academics. Yet the reasoning that students are part of a culture where they simply seek to 'have a degree' rather than 'be learners' (Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion, 2009) is far from proven. Some authors suggest there is a lack of empirical evidence about the extent to which students express a consumer orientation alone, and that where they do, this approach is often detrimental to their academic performance (Bunce, Baird and Jones, 2017: p. 1958). A more recent development still is the expansion of the neoliberal vocabulary and buzz phrases described above to incorporate a range of egalitarian ideas, including fairness, justice, equality of opportunity, diversity and well-being. This has recently developed into a strong rhetoric that emphasizes 'the student experience' as a package, including leisure, well-being, opportunity, future employment and other 'extras'. For example:

> Our commitment extends well beyond the student learning experience to embrace all aspects of a student's time at Newcastle (Learning, Teaching and Student Experience Strategy, Newcastle University).

An initial question comes to mind: *but should it?* Should universities 'realign their strategies based on changing government policies and pressures from the external operating environment' (Shah and Richardson, 2016: p. 352) to extend beyond learning experiences? If they do make such

fundamental changes, then it is also worth questioning: *who these changes are for*? Furthermore, we could ask: *does this change of policy alter what higher education is*? Before we know it, 'a packaged experience of consumption itself' (Argenton, 2015: p. 921) could be what is delivered to students by universities as a product that their fees have purchased. Yet the many important topics that now reside under 'the student experience' cannot simply be applied to students in equal measures, when students themselves arrive from different backgrounds, life experiences, levels of ability and resilience.

In this article, we examine firstly some parallels between the 'experience economy' (Pine and Gilmore, 1999, Argenton, 2015: p. 922) and the discourse of 'the student experience' in HE policy. Just as research on consumer behavior has revealed a shift from consumption as a utilitarian function, to a more experiential emphasis (Holbrook & Hirschman,1982), we note the way that extended patterns of consumption based around a 'student experience economy' have emerged in universities. We suggest that whilst prior concerns about commodified forms of language and buzz phrases in HEIs remains an issue, 'the student experience' discourse risks trapping students within 'an iron cage of control' (Weber, 1905/1958), as their experiences have become packaged for them into commodities. The human autonomy associated with personal and academic forms of experience are at risk if the only design available has been mass produced for students. Furthermore, in postdigital society, this entrapment within a neoliberal product is not pure bureaucracy. It may take the form of a 'velvet cage' (Ritzer, 2011), as it is delivered seamlessly back and forth between digital and physical sites of production and consumption, at the hands of human and non-human technologies. Here the labour of students themselves furthers 'the student experience' commodity. Students provide financially unrewarded labour yielding rich information by completing surveys and providing opinions, thus acting as 'prosumers' (Ritzer, 2015) manipulated by neoliberalism in HE.

Therefore, to better understand how 'the student experience' is constructed linguistically in policy (and how it might be otherwise...), we present some example extracts from a sample of 20 UK university student experience strategies we analysed, via a corpus-based Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). We then discuss these findings and we consider what it means to package human senses, experience and culture into 'the student experience'. On the one hand, it could be argued that this places students within a form of 'iron cage' where universities appear to be packaging experience itself for students. Yet, given the complexities of a postdigital society, this may be more of a 'velvet cage', where students and student

unions are co-creating 'the student experience' with institutions. Either way, given the growing number of human senses discussed in this endeavour, it is important to raise the question of exactly: *who the student experience is for?* Finally, as we draw some initial conclusions on what it means to package 'the student experience' for students to *consume*, we invite others to join us in considering whether as a society, we are prepared to actually allow time for students themselves, to *produce* diverse and creative contributions to their own academic experience.

The 'Experience Economy'

Argenton (2015: p. 918) argues that experience is 'one of the major paths to growth and autonomy and as such, is of outstanding educational value'. However, experience also has a much wider sociocultural context, rooted in life itself:

> It is about learning that which cannot be taught, learning to think, which precedes all other defined forms of education. It is an encounter with the unknown, where we learn to cope with uncertainty. Though, in the same way that growth does, experience takes time. (Argenton, 2015: p. 918)

These reflections on the nature of 'experience' itself suggest that it cannot be reduced to a predictable, scheduled and assessable programme of events. Indeed, attempts to control experience risk 'flushing the unknown away, along with the formative potential of experience' Argenton, 2015: p. 918).

These are observations that create a problematic for university strategies that are based on the notion of 'the student experience', particularly when such a concept seems to be closely interwoven with 'experiential consumption' (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). This is where commodities called 'experiences' or 'adventures' are provided through an extended service economy in a process that is closely related to the leisure and entertainment markets (Argenton, 2015). This experiential side of consumption has been said to be the hidden paradigm underpinning many aspects of modern life where even human feelings are commercialised (Bryman, 2004; Hochschild, 1983; Ritzer, 2010; Argenton, 2015).

These move from experiential consumption as concrete functions that goods can provide, towards experience-laden commodities that draw human senses into the market raises many issues, but Argenton points in particular to the issue of 'time' (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Argenton, 2015). If the contemporary consumer cares less about the quality of goods they can purchase than the quantity, then when this relates to appliances there may be implications for the environment. However, when an

enhancement of the senses is involved there are also time limitations to consider. If a consumer is concerned only with 'the quantity of experience-laden commodities one can consume in a certain amount of time' (Argenton, 2015: p. 922), then there are implications when this logic is applied to academic experiences. The experience economy appears to be extending such patterns of consumption into universities as a 'student experience economy'. Furthermore, the messy post digital era we now occupy in society enables an ease of 'delivery' seamlessly back and forth between digital and physical sites of production and consumption, at the hands of both human and non-human technologies (Jandrić, Knox, Besley, Ryberg, Suoranta & Hayes, 2018).

If universities have moved into the enhancement of human senses as part of their strategy, then this begins to alter what HE is. If the labour of students themselves also furthers 'the student experience' commodity, via students completing feedback online and participating in 'the student experience' committes for free, they act as 'prosumers' (Ritzer, 2015). In so doing, they may be extending their own entrapment in time-limited forms of experiential education. Argenton therefore asks an important question of his readers in modern society: *Do we still have time for experience?* We would like our readers to consider this question adapted to the HE sector, as we ask: *Do we still have time for the diversity and creativity of individual student experiences?*

What Themes are Prioritised in 'the Student Experience' Policy Documents?

To aid us in considering this question, we analysed a sample of 20 UK university student experience strategies, via a corpus-based Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). A corpus of words is 'net-like' (Hoey, 1991) and can reveal the values of those producing policy texts, whether the authors are aware of these or not. Searching a corpus (a large bank of words) does not explain why particular patterns occur, but it does yield significant empirical content to examine and discuss certain patterns in more detail. The university strategy documents we examined are freely available on university websites to download. The PDF files were converted into text files and these were examined through software called *Wordsmith* to observe patterns that emerged through corpus linguistics (Scott, 1997). Whilst not a particularly large corpus (54, 271 words), themes can be picked up via this form of analysis and then interpreted more closely through CDA to see what assumptions these grammatical patters reveal (Halliday, 1994, Fairclough, 2000). Although it is important not to read too much into the examples provided below, they do provide useful illustrative content from

current strategies to explore alongside theory. For a more detailed explanation of corpus-based CDA, please see Hayes & Bartholomew (2015).

In *Wordsmith* the frequencies of words can be examined in the form of keywords. Keywords are words that are statistically significant when measured against a comparison corpus, in this case, the British National Corpus (BNC) which contains 100 million words of written and spoken English from a wide range of sources for comparison purposes. Below the top keywords and their frequencies are shown.

The	2531
Students	874
Student	826
Experience	450
Strategy	312

It is interesting to notice that the top keyword is 'the'. The is a word that enables a certain generic quantification, when placed in front of other words. For example:

The delivery of
The development of
The enhancement of

These arrangements of words can be examined more closely in concordance lines, which show how words and phrases are ordered alongside each other in their actual context of use. The numbers at the side of the lines below are provided through the searches in *Wordsmith*, so that these examples are easily retrieved. So, it then becomes possible to see what patterns emerge across all 20 university student experience strategies.

Perceptions of 'the Student Experience' as Something Generic that can be 'Delivered'

When searches were performed to look at words that followed 'the delivery of' examples showed a form of 'strategic theme' or 'vision'

6   the delivery of the University's three strategic themes
19   the delivery of our vision

The student experience tends to be shaped within a corporate university vision or ambition. In this first set of examples, the student experience is 'delivered' with the ease of an online shopping order:

(14) It is vital that every member of staff fully understands their contribution and that of their colleagues in delivering the Student Experience

(24) The purpose of this Student Experience Strategy is to deliver the student experience ambitions of the University as set out in Strategy 2020

(78) Deliver an excellent student experience that is an exemplar of good practice in the higher education sector

In the concordance lines above, the examples are from different universities, but 'the student experience' is noticeable across all as a recognisable buzz phrase which can be 'ordered' (Hayes, forthcoming, 2019). In (14) it is emphasized that all colleagues should understand their contribution to this packaged experience. Universities can then ask the same question that any other commercial provider, such as Amazon or Argos, might ask: *what did you think of your purchase?* However, this also raises a problem in understanding staff contributions. How is such an expectation (to deliver a form of consumer experience) to be quantified and measured, when more and more features seem to be included in the deal:

(20) This wider student experience includes a sense of involvement in the life of the University, within its local communities and globally, an attractive social and residential experience, active participation in cultural, sporting and work experiences, and a sense of wellbeing and support

Indeed, how many of these features really come under a university's control, let alone under that of an academic member of staff to be able to 'deliver'? If, as an academic, I am to deliver 'a sense of involvement' or 'a sense of wellbeing and support', how will I (and indeed those responsible for my performance) know that I have delivered this across a diverse group of students? Unless there is another solution. Perhaps a 'strategy' will do it for me. As argued elsewhere, university documents are often accredited with human academic labour, as above in (24) where 'this Student Experience Strategy' is 'to deliver', rather than a person (Hayes and Bartholomew, 2015, Hayes, 2016, Hayes, 2018a, Hayes, forthcoming, 2019).

Perceptions that a Strategy or the University can do the Development for Us

When searches were performed to look at words that followed 'the development of' examples like the one below showed the intention for wider curriculum:

37   This strategy will support the development of a curriculum which makes links across and beyond the University

However, note that in (37) it is 'this strategy' (and not people) that will support the development. Furthermore, it is 'a curriculum' (and not people) that makes the links across and beyond the University.

As demonstrated in prior research, 'the strategy' or 'the student experience' is often said to enact something (Hayes, 2018a, Hayes, forthcoming 2019). Linguistically, we tend to place the student experience in the hands of entities like 'curriculum' and 'strategy', in our written policies, rather than explicitly reinforce the people (staff and students) whose individual labour actually effects change.

548   The Strategy targets the development of a high quality estate and an environment populated with facilities and services

In (548) it is 'the strategy' that targets 'the development' of a range of facilities and services. Exactly who will make this happen is not mentioned, but at some point, actual human labour is required to develop these facilities.

564   The University is committed to supporting the development of all its staff and to the enhancement of the staff experience

In (564) 'the university' is credited with the commitment to enhance 'the staff experience' too. People provide 'commitment' though, not organizations or buildings. Once more, in an age where so much emphasis is placed on metrics and measurements, it is important to ask exactly how enhancement of 'the staff experience' is understood, in relation to academic autonomy. Categories of staff contracts have never been more variable, leading to important questions on widening participation for progression of diverse university staff (Hayes, 2018b). Yet it is assumed in the discourse that something generic entitled 'the staff experience' can be enhanced across the board, by 'the university'.

In wider consumer culture, it is not unusual to find many commercial products such as cars, holidays and other posessions invested with human qualities in order to sell these. However, along with the notion that 'the experience' a university wishes us to have can be 'delivered' to students or staff, comes the concept that this can also be provided by an 'environment' and indeed that a 'sense of' something (whatever that may be) can be 'enhanced' by an environment (not by people) for all students.

Perceptions that Students' 'Senses' can be Collectively Enhanced

Instead of treating 'a sense' of something as personal and diverse, it is inferred in the next set of examples that students' senses are collective, rather than individual:

(13) We will seek to design and establish an attractive and sustainable environment that enhances students' sense of belonging and pride in the university

(23) Well-resourced, inclusive learning environments will support our educational provision and enhance student life

(25) The university will improve transition experiences to enhance students' sense of belonging to our university community

(39) Developing shared spaces to enhance the sense of community, encourage group learning, and support people from across academic disciplines to come together

In this set of examples, notice firstly, in (13) how it is an 'environment' (and not people) that enacts the process of 'enhances'. In (23) it is the 'well-resourced, inclusive learning environments' (not people) that will 'support our educational provision and enhance student life'. Then it is assumed that students as a collective group will have a 'sense of belonging and pride in the university' in which they study. It is indicated that it is this students' sense that is being enhanced. This is repeated in (25) when 'the university' (not staff) is credited with improving transition experiences. This is then expected 'to enhance' students' sense of belonging to a university community. In (39) it is 'shared spaces' (not people) that are expected 'to enhance' rather a lot of things: 'the sense of community, encourage group learning, and support people from across academic disciplines to come together'. If 'shared spaces' can really achieve all of these things then it is a wonder that we keep staff on the payroll at all!

Surely what a student 'senses' cannot be assumed, and certainly not placed collectively with what other students may 'sense'. In the example below an article describes a hotel as a 'teenager' and discusses the 'sense of grandeur' guests will experience:

> While it's a mere teenager as a hotel, the long history of the building provides it with a genuine sense of grandeur (Northamptonshire Telegraph, 2012).

There are similarities to be found in line (20) mentioned earlier. Not a sense of grandeur perhaps, but certainly the idea that 'a sense' of something that a human would 'experience' can be included in a social construct called

'the' 'student experience'. If university strategy comes to resemble hotel advertisements, then before we know it, 'a packaged experience of consumption itself' (Argenton, 2015: p. 921) could be what is delivered to students by universities as a product their fees have purchased.

Surely 'a sense of involvement' and 'a sense of wellbeing' are deeply personal and individual experiences and therefore can only be discussed in the plural. These 'senses' of something cannot be sprinkled into 'the student experience' buzz phrase, like ingredients into a cake.

Packaging Human Senses, Experience, Culture and Belonging into 'the Student Experience'

Human senses, in relation to experience and belonging, are a complicated matter. What students and staff encounter as 'experience' will be influenced by vision, touch, sound, smell and taste which enable people to give meaning to, and to form an attachment with, places and material things (O'Neill, 2001, Leach, 2002). What people 'see' is based on individual experiential knowledge of the world (Gibson, 1979). Together with sight, the other human senses help us gain multidimensional understanding (May, 2013: p. 134). Yet despite such complexities around what influences human experience, the broader context of 'neoliberalism' can yield rational, common sense discourse concerning what 'experience' entails and 'contains'.

Many important topics that now reside under 'the student experience'. Cultural experiences, for example, cannot simply be applied to students in equal measures, when students themselves arrive from different backgrounds, life experiences, tastes, levels of ability and resilience even. Taking the example of music as one cultural experience, what tunes we hear can evoke strong memories and emotions linked to places and situations. May suggests that music can offer a sense of 'embodied (in)security' with musical experiences playing an important part in identity, relational and cultural belonging (May, 2013: p. 135). Through digital technologies, music is now widely available alongside the devices and software to personalize our collections. Yet, the 'digital shift' or 'digital revolution' still happened 'under the watchful eye of capitalist rulers' and so this tends to serve and augment neoliberal capitalism (Mazierska, 2018). That said, 'manufactured' forms of music now exist alongside live performances in postdigital society. Just as 'digitalisation has made live music more important and has expanded its variations' (Mazierska, 2018), we will now speculate on how a postdigital understanding of 'the student experience' could offer helpful insights into routes of resistance.

The Iron and Velvet Cages of Policy Discourse in Postdigital Society

Fawns (2018) argues for a postdigital perspective to draw in all of education and not just that which is considered to lie outside of digital education. As such, 'the digital and non-digital, material and social, both in terms of the design of educational activities and in the practices that unfold in the doing of those activities' all need to be taken into account (Fawns, 2018). We suggest that HE policy discourse does not sit outside of these arguments either because discourse can frame human understanding within both iron and velvet cages. In times when quality is measured via excellence frameworks for teaching and research, policy must also be subject to scrutiny (Hayes, forthcoming 2019). This is even more important when policy discourse concerning 'the student experience' appears to encapsulate the very senses and experiences of human beings in HE.

These days many of us assume the role of a 'prosumer' (Toffler, 1980, Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010) undertaking both production and consumption in digital and material spaces, rather than focusing on either one (production) or the other (consumption). This is apparent in user-generated content online, where control and exploitation take on a different character than in other historic forms of capitalism (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010). The concept of the 'postdigital' helps to provide insights into our augmented realities as prosumers, who provide our unpaid labour to wealthy organisations. This takes the form of many voluntary activities people now undertake, such as generating our own customer orders, providing feedback on what we purchase, sharing opinions and 'likes' that constitute valuable information within algorithmic frameworks. Facebook, Amazon and Starbucks are examples amongst many, where people produce valuable demographic details for no salary, but in HE staff and students are also engaging with these forms of algorithms and analytics.

Yet, whilst these observations may sound negative, we understand the postdigital as a space of learning, struggle, and hope. In recognizing that 'old' and 'new' media are now 'cohabiting artefacts' that enmesh with our economy, politics and culture, we can gain valuable insights into the direction concepts such as 'the student experience' may be taking us in HE. Policy discourse and educational practice are deeply intertwined:

> In entering this postdigital age, there really is no turning back from a convergence of the traditional and the digital. However, this is not simply a debate about technological and non-technological media. The postdigital throws up new challenges and possibilities across all aspects of social life. We believe this opens up new avenues too, for considering

ways that discourse (language-in-use) shapes how we experience the postdigital (Sinclair and Hayes, 2018).

Given these ideas, even when time seems forever short, it is necessary to question who our written policies in HE are really for.

Who is 'the Student Experience' for?

In problematizing the buzz phrase of 'the student experience', we hope that we have given readers some reasons to pause for thought and consider who policy concerning 'the student experience' is really for. If it is really aimed at improving the experiences of students then the language needs attention. Discussing 'students' experiences' in the plural immediately makes it clearer that the intention is to address diverse needs and not simply deliver a packaged experience for one and all. As this discourse is currently presented, 'the student experience' is a construct to which all manner of expectations can be attached (Hayes, forthcoming 2019). It is also an entity that can be said to 'act' on behalf of people.

Articulated as 'a packaged experience of consumption itself' (Argenton, 2015: p. 921) this begins to change the very nature of HE when experience is delivered to students by universities, as a product that their fees have purchased. How many additional extras might then be attached to such a package is open to whatever government and media hot topics emerge. Yet this package deal then diminishes the realities of individual student experiences, such as bereavement, mental health and wellbeing, as these are experienced in diverse ways by people. The many important topics that now reside under 'the student experience' cannot simply be applied to students in equal measures.

Conclusions

We have examined through a corpus-based CDA of policy what it means to package 'the student experience' for students to *consume*. We have shown that instead of treating human senses as personal and diverse, HE policy discourse treats students' senses as collective, as if 'belonging' and 'pride' are experienced uniformly by all. We argued that these assumptions suggest that 'a sense of involvement' and 'a sense of wellbeing' can simply be included in 'the student experience' deal that gets delivered to students. As such, academic experience is treated as if it were any other generic adventure or leisure deal on offer at a local hotel.

In relation to manufactured forms of 'experience' provided by commercial organisations, Argenton asks an important question. In modern society: *do we still have time for experience?* We would like to leave

our readers with the same question, but adapted to ask: *in our universities do we still have time for the diversity and creativity of individual student experiences?*

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