

**Exploring organizational processes that enable contrapower harassment in academia:
Study of UK higher education sector**

Abstract

This paper investigates the phenomenon of 'contrapower harassment' in UK higher education sector where students exert undue influence and hostility towards their educators. The research examines how neoliberal ideologies and the commodification of education have led to a shift in the power dynamics, enabling such harassment. Through in-depth qualitative interviews with faculty members from various UK universities, the study uncovers the various forms and impacts of this harassment, and importantly identifies the key institutional processes embedded in the UK higher education system that facilitate it. The findings also illustrate how academics and university staff accommodate this new power relations and hostile work environment. This study contributes to the discourse on the challenges faced by academics in a neoliberal educational environment and provides rich empirical insight into a growing, yet rarely-discussed aspect of academic life. These insights are important at a time when university claim academic well-being while undermining it in practice.

Keywords: Contrapower harassment, neoliberalism, higher education, consumerism, entitlement

Introduction

While “conflict has always been a part of the classroom” (Holton, 1999, p. 59), the last few decades have seen an increase in cases of challenging student behaviour experienced by academics (Christensen et al., 2020; May & Tenzek, 2018; Lampman et al., 2009; Wahler & Badger, 2016). These can include minor disruptions to more deliberate and sometimes hostile and aggressive encounters aimed at questioning academic’s position, professional standing and integrity (Christensen et al., 2020; May & Tenzek, 2018; Lampman et al., 2009; Wahler & Badger, 2016). Christensen et al. (2020) provide more concrete examples of such behaviors, the repeated occurrence of which is raising concern about the well-being of academics. These include yelling, swearing, hitting, slapping, stalking, character assassination on social media networks as well as sexual harassment episodes.

Studies have employed a range of terms to describe the behaviours mentioned above including counter-positional bullying (Misawa, 2015), teacher-directed violence (Longobardi et al. 2019), student incivility (Wahler & Badger, 2016; Sterner et al., 2015); contrapower harassment (Christensen et al., 2020; Lampman et al. 2016); cyberbullying against faculty members (Cassidy et al. 2016) and so on. These terms encompass a repertoire of behaviors initiated by students, yet there’s a notable overlap between them. There is also a difference in how academics perceive and label these behaviors. While some might have difficulty merging their experiences within their understanding of these terms, others might not realise that their experiences could be grouped within the boundaries of the existing phenomenon. For this study, we will be using the term “contrapower harassment”, originally coined by Benson (1984) to illustrate a change in power dynamics wherein a less powerful individual

seeks to assert influence or control over someone with high status and authority e.g., student over academics.

Although bullying in academia has been well investigated (e.g., Goodboy et al., 2022; Mahmoudi, 2023; Zawadzki & Jensen, 2020), there is less research on students targeting academics (see Christensen et al., 2020; May & Tenzek, 2018; Williams et al., 2022).

Previous research on contrapower harassment has looked at the narratives from the academics demonstrating the evolution of bullying and specific triggers (e.g., high-grade expectations, entitlement) as students seek to exercise power or dominance (May & Tenzek, 2018).

Research has also explored how these antagonistic behaviors impact academics' citizenship (Misawa, 2015) as well as their mental and physical states (Desouza, 2011; Lampman et al., 2016; May & Tenzek, 2018) with female academics experiencing notably more negative outcomes than their male counterparts (Gatwiri et al., 2021; Lampman et al., 2009). In our research we examine the conditions within the UK higher education sector which facilitate contrapower harassment. In so doing, we address the call to scrutinize such behaviors as an institutional issue (LaGuardia & Oelke, 2021; Zawadzki & Jensen, 2020) rooted in marketization of higher education linked to new managerialism and neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism is a political ideology which emphasizes that 'markets ... can best determine all allocative decisions ... [This] is to presume that everything can in principle be treated as a commodity' (Harvey 2005, p. 165). It basically requires universities to function like private sector organizations which is reflected in the fact that the UK universities now fall under the Department for *Business, Innovation & Skills* (Maisuria & Cole, 2017). Universities are now forced to transform themselves as "quasi- or pseudo-marketized entities competing for quasi-customers (such as students)" (Canaan, 2010, p. 57). It has resulted in establishment of quality control structures, rituals such as performance review exercises (e.g., Teaching Excellence Framework and Research Excellence framework), measuring student

experiences (e.g., National Student Survey) and discourses that compare practices of universities and its people to the production and delivery of good/services (Furedi, 2011).

A number of universities have unfortunately adopted the “student as customer” model. For example, the notion of students as customers was at the core of the ‘Enhancing the Student Experience’ policy statement by the 1994 Group which emphasised, “Students know how they want to be taught and have ideas about how techniques can be improved” (1994 Group, 2007, p. 6). Agreeing with Furedi (2011), adopting the idea that customers “know how they want to be taught”, diminishes academics to no more than mere service providers. Additionally, seeing students as customers gives them power over academics, leading them to shift the blame on the university for their own failings (Courtney & Courtney, 2012). Their personal shortcomings are often ascribed to the problems with the curriculum or teaching, discouraging academics from setting high standards (Courtney & Courtney, 2012; Mark, 2013).

Continuing commercialization encourages universities to cater to student preferences over delivering what is needed for students to genuinely learn and get educated (Mark, 2013). Following the logic of marketization which underscores customer infallibility, universities are forced to heed the voices of students over academics (Furedi, 2011) which often involves accommodating students’ demands, continuous negotiations, dealing with explicit complaints and disrespectful behaviours (Swanson-Hernandez, 2022). As consumers, students also assert their entitlement by resorting to harassing academics (May & Tenzek, 2018).

How neoliberalism affects academic life and work is a well-researched area (Garvey & MacKenzie, 2023; LaGuardia & Oelke, 2021; Zawadzki & Jensen, 2020) however, how it might facilitate harassment of academics by students is still under-researched. In this research, we look at the wider context within which contrapower harassment takes place.

Instead of merely focusing on individuals or specific groups, we look at how this unique and problematic dynamic might be facilitated by university processes, narratives and practices conditioned by neoliberal reforms. We address the following questions 1. In what way does the neoliberalization of the UK higher education system encourage contrapower harassment of academics and university staff eventually leading to its pervasiveness. 2. How do academics and university staff deal with it, given the power that students hold given the adoption of “student as customer” model by the universities?

Neoliberal reforms in higher education

Before discussing contrapower harassment in UK higher education institutions, it is important to discuss the wider political landscape of neoliberalism which provides ideal conditions for contrapower harassment to occur. In 1979, when the Conservative party led by Margaret Thatcher won the elections, the higher educational institutions were the main targets for the implementation of neoliberal reforms – often known as Thatcherism (Tight, 2019). With the rising economic problems and inflation during the 1970s, the higher education market growth experienced a slowdown (had slowed down) with university enrolment reaching a mere 13 percent by 1980 (Brazzil, 2021). Universities were accused by the Conservative Government for being too fixated on maintaining independence while not keeping up with the changing economic trends, deeming the entire sector as not meeting the nation’s actual requirements. The 1981 Education Reform Act, majorly affected university funding. The University Grants Committee responsible for the distribution of funding to universities was no longer allowed to operate independently and was controlled by the Department of *Education*, as funding to the universities was drastically reduced by 18 percent over a period of 3 years (Crewe, 2013). The Conservative government through the uptake of “new public management” reforms wanted to transform universities to “public agencies, paid to deliver the services wanted by the government’ (Goodman, 2013, p. 44). Funding became

dependent on achieving government set research objectives. Within a couple of decades after introducing neoliberal policies, it became apparent that a number of universities were experiencing a funding shortage. With limited budget and funding allocation contingent on research and teaching performance, only certain top universities were financially secure. To deal with this shortage of funds, tuition fee was introduced in 1998 by the Labour party so that students can contribute to the higher education costs. To meet the costs of growing higher education sector, student fee further increased to £3000 in 2006 (Hickey, 2024). After the Conservative Party came into power in 2010, student fee increased again to £9000 given the financial constraints imposed by the global financial crisis of 2008-2009 as well as publication of Browne' report that proposed ending the cap on tuition fee (Brazzil, 2021). This meant that funding for universities - a major percentage of it, would come from students (Paton, 2012).

With these changes, education which was initially perceived as “social good” and appreciated for its inherent value, turned into a “commodity” or a “product” that students buy for their personal advancement. As Saunders (2007) states, “In the neoliberal world...students are consumers of an educational product” (p. 4). Equating students to customers as well as the language employed to discuss this customer identity is not entirely neutral, as the way we talk and discuss concepts actively affects our understanding of these (Wueste & Fishman, 2009). As McMillan and Cheney (1996) argue, “language is powerful, both descriptively and prescriptively; in particular ways it can shape the way we think and act, especially in terms of the application of compelling labels and categories; it announces what we know and how we know it, often embodying or promoting the taken-for-granted quality of our collective understandings; and when collectively we come to share a linguistic construction, language shapes our institutions as well-in that the very distinctions and classifications we make come to affect our future thinking and behaviors” (p. 2). The

rationale and language of neoliberalism shape how students perceive universities as well as their role within these, further defining their educational experiences (Finney & Finney, 2010). More and more students seem to acknowledge the customer identity, placing more demands on the universities and academics (Tomlinson, 2017). The customer identity has implications beyond an individual student extending to wider campus community as it influences how academics interact with students, the way excellence and progress is evaluated and who is accountable for students' learning (Molesworth et al., 2009).

The customer identity has given more power to students. The increase in student fee has also made some students question teaching practices and delivery methods that they believe are not in line with the financial investment they make (Tomlinson, 2014). 'Student as customer' approach also reshapes the role of academics who are seen as dependent on student enrolment as well the way their performance is evaluated, for their institutional existence. Challenging academics' authority is intertwined with the "clientistic discourses" centering on the idea of paying their salaries. Students have more say over what they expect and they gauge services based on whether their demands were fulfilled (Tomlinson, 2014). For example, several government initiatives such as National Student Survey (NSS) seek to give students' more voice over their own educational experiences at the university. Additionally, universities have their own student feedback collecting mechanisms (e.g., Student Evaluations of Teaching - SETs) and publish the changes made based on students' opinions (Bunce et al. 2017).

However, student as customer' model might be problematic for universities who do not equate education to a product or service. It can also jeopardise academic standards (Furedi, 2009) e.g., students might complain against academics with rigorous content which they personally find challenging. As Sax (2004) describes in his study on the commodification of higher education, some students' grasp of academic integrity might be

limited, and they are often looking for amusement when attending a class. Molesworth et al. (2009) argue that customer mindedness might create a culture where students are more focused on getting a degree rather than learn. Furthermore, it might also lead to ‘defensive education’ which is dedicated to reducing conflicts that might result in complaint and legal action (Furedi, 2011). Defensive education makes academics refrain from using the professional judgement when giving feedback. Academics are becoming cautious and guarded when giving opinions in order to avoid negative feedback and hostility from students (Furedi, 2011). ‘Student as customer’ concept has also led to customer driven student entitlement translated through bullying and uncivil behaviours towards the academics (Christensen et al., 2020) more of which we discuss in the next section under the term contrapower harassment.

Contrapower harassment

Initial research on contrapower harassment mainly looked at sexual harassment and related behaviors, however studies have started expanding the conceptualization of academic contrapower harassment to cover a wider range of student behaviors (DeSouza, 2011; Lampman, 2012; Lampman et al. 2016). Contrapower harassment now includes, “student behaviors that are uncivil, rude, or disrespectful; challenge a professor’s authority; use bullying, threats, or intimidation; are hostile or aggressive; or involve racial/ethnic or sexual harassment” (Lampman et al., 2016, p. 169-170). Over the last couple of decades, studies have shown how contrapower harassment has become an everyday aspect of an academic’s life (Lampman, 2012; Lampman et al., 2016; May & Tenzek, 2018). For example, research by Albert et al. (2020) on pre-tenured academics found that most of them had experienced disrespectful student behaviour during their academic career. Taylor et al. (2015) also reported evidence of such behaviors including napping during class, using phones and challenging credential of academics. Research by Lampman et al. (2016) on 289 professors

suggests that women are more likely than men to be the target of hostile, aggressive, rude, disrespectful behaviors. Although, men were targets of sexual harassment through sexual bribery.

Contrapower harassment can be triggered by a number of factors such as student's overly positive perception of their academic ability/concern for grades, student entitlement and consumerism mentality, exposure to material that questions their fundamental values, and general expectation management (May & Tenzek, 2018; Seibel & Fehr, 2018). Concern for achieving a certain grade is common amongst students especially given the fee they pay (Bunce et al., 2017). Research (Finney & Finney, 2009; Tomlinson, 2014) suggests that students who identify as customers are more inclined to see themselves as entitled to achieve better grades. This can often result in bullying behaviours targeted towards the academics (May & Tenzek, 2018) especially when students have an exaggerated notion of their academic capability which might not match the reality (May & Tenzek, 2018). Additionally, to further their education, students can choose from a variety of universities which compete with each other for student numbers. This nurtures the customer mindedness amongst students, "fueling 'the underlying belief that as consumers, they should be catered to and given the opportunity to participate in the education process according to their preferences'" (Cain et al., 2012, p. 1). This sense of entitlement amongst students encourages contrapower harassment. Student loans also contribute to student consumerism by making students see their university and program choices through financial lens (Kotsko, 2018). Being in debt makes them do a cost-benefit analysis of their choices adding to their consumer angst. It's no surprise that with the mantra that "the customer is always right", students often react negatively when academics debunk this belief by, for example, giving them a poor grade, not giving them an extension for assignment submission or not writing them a reference letter (Muzzatti & Rothe, 2022).

Contrapower harassment can have long term consequences for academics as it affects their mental and physical states (Lampman, 2009), general satisfaction with academia and also leads to disengagement with the learning environment (May & Tenzek, 2018). As Grauerholz (1989, p. 790) states, contrapower harassment “affect the professor’s work and personal growth, undermine her sense of confidence and authority, and have damaging effects on relationships with students.”

According to Benson (1984), majority of the contrapower episodes happen discreetly often through teaching evaluations or notes, which in a way helps students escape consequences. Due to the anonymous nature of teaching evaluations, these episodes mainly remain unresolved thereby stripping academics of power which shift in favour of students (King, 2019). The impact of teaching evaluations which are often used as performance assessment and disciplinary tools in universities is intensified by the neoliberalization of universities (Gatwiri et al., 2021). Teaching evaluations nudge students to identify with neoliberal vision of higher education as a product or service, seeing their own selves as customers who assess academics based on whether they provided the anticipated experience for which the students paid (Butcher, 2018).

Research suggests that the negative teaching evaluations are mainly experienced by academics from minority backgrounds. According to Meritt (2008), “students’ contradictory and often hostile comments on evaluations of minority faculty, as well as their occasional direct references to gender or race, raise troubling questions about the role of bias in these assessments” (p. 236). In the same vein, research by Mengel et al. (2017) found gender bias in teaching evaluations. Fan et al.’s (2019) study confirmed this as they found bias against female academics from non-English speaking backgrounds. Despite research that shows flaws in teaching evaluations (Fan et al. 2019, Mitchell and Martin 2018) universities still consider these when making recruitment, promotion and tenure decisions. This puts

academics under a lot of pressure to deal with their own emotional responses as they respond to harm caused by student hostility as well as shield themselves from university pressures so as prevent student dissatisfaction (Gatwiri et al., 2021). Besides teaching evaluations, there are other bureaucratic control and quality assurance mechanisms such as staff student liaison committee (SSLC), Board of Studies (BoSSE) and so on which can facilitate contrapower harassment.

In this research, we explore how university processes and practices shaped by consumer influence on higher education might encourage students to target academics.

Methodology

Participants

This paper is based on an inductive study involving 29 academics faculty across different universities in the UK. The sample was varied in terms of participant gender (women: 22; men:6, non-binary: 1) and rank (ranging from teaching fellows to full professors), and academic disciplines (e.g. sports, management, history, law).

Given the difficulty of gaining access to individuals who have experienced contrapower harassment who are considered a hard-to-access hidden population (Faugier & Sargeant, 1997), we identified our initial interviewees from personal contacts and professional research networks. After five interviews, we used a snowball sampling technique, where we asked initial interviewees to suggest other individuals that they know from their networks who experienced contrapower harassment. This led to the recruitment of a more expansive network of participants. Although we cannot completely eliminate the possibility of bias in our sampling, the diversity in geography, and the varied experiences and positions of interviewees indicate that we were successful in reaching a broad spectrum.

Data Collection

To gather qualitative insights into the phenomenon of contrapower harassment, we conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews featuring open-ended questions. This approach is well-suited for delving into phenomena that are not well-understood (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Miles & Huberman, 1994). We conducted 29 interviews in by electronic communications (using MS Teams) between the period of 14 months from September 2022 to October 2023. The duration of our interviews ranged from 35 minutes to 120 minutes, varying due to time limitations and the depth/intensity of experience of the informants. We assured our interviewees of complete anonymity. We began each interview with a standard introduction about our study's objectives and emphasized that the study did not aim to judge any individuals or the institution's handling of any incident mentioned during the interview. The questions outlined in Appendix A helped guide the rest of the interview. The first half of the interview focused on general experience with education sector and how the perceive modern universities the second half focused on contrapower harassment episodes.

Data Analysis

All interviews were electronically recorded with permission and professionally transcribed. Our analysis and coding of these interviews facilitated the development of a conceptual framework, aiding in the synthesis and comprehension of our data (Charmaz, 2006). Figure 1 presents a summary of the relationships among first-order, second-order, and aggregate themes, following the recommendations of Gioia et al. (2013).

First, the transcribed interviews were then subjected to an open coding process (Locke, 2001), dissecting the content into various events, perceptions, and descriptions. This process involved categorizing the data into first-order codes (Van Maanen, 1979), such as direct quotes or informant-centric terms (Gioia et al., 2013), highlighting informant

experiences and perspectives. Examples of first-order codes that emerged were *'it's about making them happy'*, *'they already know what power that they have'* etc.

As the study progressed, we constantly compared and contrasted these first-order codes to form more abstract, second-order themes. This involved synthesizing similar concepts and examining discrepancies to enrich our understanding of the data. The iterative nature of this process allowed us to refine our codes and explore deeper meanings within the data. Throughout the analysis, we engaged in continuous questioning and theoretical probing (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), seeking to understand the underlying implications of the data. This ongoing analysis was conducted in parallel with data collection, ensuring that we could capture evolving themes and reach theoretical saturation. Once we observed that additional variation in the second-order themes ceased to emerge, we concluded that the particular theme had reached a point of saturation (Charmaz, 2006). When we no longer saw new variation in the second-order themes.

Our approach was further informed by literature on neoliberalism in higher education (Bunce et al., 2017; Muzzatti & Rothe, 2022), aiding in the identification of how the themes fit together into aggregate dimensions. The higher-order aggregate dimensions develop from the second-order themes, as described by Gioia et al. (2013). Finally, to validate our findings and enhance the credibility of our model, we implemented member checking (Marshall and Rossman, 2011), where we shared summaries of our emerging findings with a small subset of informants for feedback. This step ensured that our interpretations accurately represented their experiences and perspectives.

Findings

Types of contrapower harassment

Participants consistently discussed the incidents of harassment they experienced. These were of different nature ranging from physical threat, verbal and physical assaults, sexual harassment incidents and so on. Students employed these to show power and manipulate outcomes. R5 shared,

...dissertation student who was really only at best of 40s and 50s, but tried very hard to do a piece of work and I could tell that they had... in the literature review, but it was still rubbish so I gave them feedback about it and because they didn't like the feedback that had given them. They got hold of me by the neck and piled me against the wall. I was on my own in the office and they cornered me in the corner of the room you couldn't see from outside who was in there. Really, I just have to talk them down and stay. Stay calm really with them, but there was nothing I could have done in that scenario had they have chosen to follow through and hit me. If that was the case and actually I suppose when it comes to it, it would have only been their word against mine and that would have been the issue in the university. Probably wouldn't have supported me anyway.

For R5 even taking it to the department head didn't lead to anything as he trivialized the incident by telling her, "OK, I'll have a word with them next time he's in". It showed the lack of consideration for her well-being. Questioning whether university will provide support "it would have only been their word against mine", suggests how threatened academic feels as universities hesitate risking student customer's dissatisfaction.

R4 discussed his experience of physical intimidation with students invading personal space.

I'm a pretty big person and I had students when I first came trying to approach me, saying you will give me a good mark, will you and they literally coming up to you in

the physical threatening manner because they they must assume because you're new that you'll do what they want. And it didn't matter to him who the the grown up was in in the room. It was that they were just approach you in an aggressive manner, demanding what they want and they they hide behind the facade of “ohh, only joking”, but you sensed for them to have the confidence to say that to anybody in an academic field that you would that they believe what they're saying and they expect things to change in the manner in which they they want.

For R12, students resorted to blackmail when they didn't get the level of feedback they wanted

Um, I went out for a friend's birthday. I was supposed to go just for like that one drink and then we ended up going out out dancing. I was having fun and the club there were some students... That was the weekend... the Thursday after was my office hour. They all there came one after the other. That the last one was asking way too many questions about the assessment, and at some point, I was like... There was this idea of I'm a consumer, a paid for this... you supposed to tell me how I get the grade that I need. It was very much like almost spelling it out. I was like I'm not gonna write it for you. Asking a bit too much and he was like... ‘Um ohh yeah we saw you on the weekend dancing. We have actually videos.’ They were literally trying to blackmail me.

Threats of this sort are inherently wrong. They tell us about students' thinking process as well as the power they believe they have. In case of R12, students assumed that if they carry the threat out, it might harm the academic. Furthermore, taking videos without permission was also a gross invasion of R12's privacy. It's fair for R12 to label it as

blackmail. Students using these tactics aligns with student as customer model, which encourages students to push their interests and outcomes, seeing education as service.

Some of the participants illustrated how female academics are subjected to sexual remarks and made to feel uncomfortable.

a member of staff came to me as in my mentor capacity to complain about that students... it was a female member of staff and male students were making sexual comments towards her and she felt really awkward, uncomfortable and vulnerable... Unprotected... I've had every incidents where staff have been insulted and verbally abused where they again they didn't fill out. They can go straight to management where videos were being recorded in class and uploaded these to social media with derogatory comments made about them again with no repercussions whatsoever and generally staff at the point when again when I've spoken to just feel complete and utterly vulnerable they feel so violated (R4).

Universities not taking action when such incidents happen suggest how little they care about academics who are seen as cogs that keep the corporate machine working. It also shows permissiveness, the level of tolerance for bullying behaviors which is extended towards students as a way of delivering good customer service.

University processes and practices enabling contrapower harassment

Establishing the student consumerism narrative right from the start

Participants spoke about how universities reinforce the student consumerism narrative making it clear to students that as high fee-paying customers they can access commercial service. Given the high tuition fee that students pay which fund the universities, students' interests are put first. R5, for example, stated,

Everything that we do, so there's lots and lots of pressure in that sense of students are always a priority... And that's how processes and policies are really developed... I think here we invite negative attitude from some students in that they know they are “kings” from the start. As soon as they come here, we're falling over ourselves to say, what can we do for you and what you need and what you want and how can we help you in some way. That everything they could possibly want is here...and from that they get a sense of entitlement.

For R5 it's the sense of entitlement created by student consumerism that leads to contrapower harassment. Furthermore, student consumerism also shapes universities policies and practices that are catered to student preferences. In the same vein R4 complained,

The students have become very...very smart with understanding expectations. They get told from day one that you are a customer and we should provide them with a service. So, they come in with quite a heavy amount of power... So, I think from a student's point of view they feel like they are walking into an environment where they are kings or Queens of the environment and they can pretty much do what they want as long as they kind of tick the relevant boxes of attendance. But within that they kind of feel they have the power to do what they want.

For R4 this was reflected in the demands that student made about getting a certain grade. R4 also spoke in detail about how student explicitly threatened him with a negative teaching evaluation if not given a good grade. It shows that they are less aware of their own responsibility towards their learning and education. Instead they lay the entire responsibility on faculty who as service providers should make sure student customers are satisfied.

Teaching evaluations as tools of bullying

A number of participants spoke about the excessive use of teaching evaluations by universities. R8 elaborated on how her university encourages academics to try different methods of collecting student feedback. She explained

I currently use a QR code to gain instant feedback. Obviously, the overarching premise for that is to improve practise, which as a professional I understand the need for. However, to enable students to feel at ease, to fill in the feedback they are obviously giving this anonymously, so it's not tracked back that does leave room for comments from students knowing that they can't really be traced back. So, it's an opportunity to give critique, but not really through the correct lens of critique in terms of improving the content of the lesson or the approach or the module

Some of the participants equated teaching evaluations to internet trolling. R15 saw it as “just another mechanism of management surveillance”. R11 described how students use these evaluations to retaliate against academics for giving a poor grade.

I got very so so and then very very bad module reviews. So, things like ohh she doesn't care, ... So a lot of bullying comments on the teaching evaluations because they were not happy with their marks and their feedback.

Likewise, R26 discussed how contrapower harassment through student evaluations was initiated because of assessments

This module evaluation went out on the week that assessments...with the first assessment was due and it was their first time that they had to actually they must have really realized, Okay, we actually have to produce some work here... They couldn't do that transaction... if they have were transactional in their approach to the module, they were going to suffer for that first assessment. They used... some of them, used it at a space for anonymous personal attacks and accusations.

These evaluations align with universities' vision of commodification of education in which academics are rated positively only if they deliver what student consumer paid for. Creating assessments or atmosphere where actual learning happens is hardly assessed positively in these teaching evaluations as was seen in the case of R26.

NSS narrative contributing to bullying

Participants shared how universities sweep contrapower harassment complaints under the carpet because they want positive NSS scores. NSS scores along with TEF and REF scores are critical for universities in terms of getting funding. Academic performance is increasingly being measured through these national frameworks while they also experience excessive demands from students (Kandiko & Mayer, 2013; Tomlinson, 2017). Student consumerism which affects student expectations driving students to demand more from university and act out if the demands are not met (May & Tenzek, 2018). R4 scathed,

On the first day of their study they are told how important NSS is and it affects how universities rankings in the country. So already you're setting the scene that you need them to be positive...the narrative throughout the year is about we need good NSS scores. We need you to complete it. We need you to be positive...So that the whole language around what we do is so self-directed... to give the power again back to the students so that they know what they do at the end, impacts you personally and it impacts the institution. So, they already know what power that they have.

Universities in their approach to make students happy, often give them better grades as a way to get better NSS scores. R4 detailed that how students get away with harassing staff and making statements like "if I fail, it's because of you. If I fail it's because you haven't helped me... So if I fail, it's because your lessons are boring" as they very well know that they'll get a good grade.

This was also echoed by R12 who mentioned,

It's about making them happy. It's about making them more employable.... So in a sense, a lot of it's related to metrics. The way I was grading 8 years ago is very different from the way I'm grading now. Sometimes I feel like I'm like Oprah, 'you get an A, you get an A', 'like you got a car, you got a car'

R12 comment shows the pressure academics are facing to ensure student satisfaction, making them inflate grades. This compromises on academics' aspirations for high standards as they try to their best to not offend students.

Boards of study as platforms of bullying

Boards of study provide a platform for academics and students to come together to improve programmes. It also provides an opportunity for students to raise their concerns and for universities to collect feedback from student representatives. Some of the participants described how this platform instead is used to attack academics. For example, R16 explained,

The students are given an expectation that instead of this being formed to feedback and communicate good practise and positive experiences, the focus is on what are the negative issues? How do we resolve the negative issues and how do we make sure this doesn't end up part of the NSS?

The unfairness of these platforms was highlighted by R8 who called it a "moan shop". She discussed

One occasion when I was in the board of studies...A student made a direct claim against one of my fellow colleagues. The student was given ample time and opportunity to expand and explain upon this, which I did not feel was appropriate or professional, and it was clearly making the member staff feel extremely

uncomfortable. And when this member of staff tried to defend herself...she was closed down. We drew a conclusion that the NSS survey was currently online.

Not giving the academic a chance to explain was a way to avoid student customer dissatisfaction. It reflects universities' reluctance to go against students and shows the shift in power dynamics, as students have more power and are listened to more. It also shows the misuse of the system which can have repercussions for the academics' career.

Demanding customers and university advertising

To market any product, one needs to know their customers. This applies to higher education sector as well (Guilbault, 2016). Universities often advertise to students to improve their brand to impress students and increase student numbers (Ngo & Ismandoyo, 2018). Sometimes these advertisements don't provide students the exact reality of what education and learning entails for a successful career. R12 saw these advertising campaigns as damaging.

The sector is a bit of a mess... I've seen student asking more and more and more. The way they were advertising their courses, you would assume it would be like a shampoo advert like a cheap shampoo advert or something like that... that actually reflected in the whole dynamic of the university. The more commercial university appeared, the more you have that reaction of consumer of demanding something and trying to almost blackmailing for an assessment...that was crazy.

When universities oversell degrees in terms of support that universities provide to students, they create an illusion, an expectation gap. When these students join the universities, they lay the responsibility of their learning on academics and engage in tactics such as intimidation, blackmailing and so on to get what they want. R22, for example, shared,

They misunderstand our offer or because our offer is not communicated well enough, or because they wilfully misunderstand our offer because it fits in with their ability, with their, you know, lack of their apathy around their own learning. But I think there's definitely two kinds of students. There're students that engage with us and work with us as you know, we co-partner and they get, they get to the end of the degree and they do well. But there are definitely the students who see it as 'I've purchased this degree and this is what you've told me that you can give me, and I want you to deliver exactly that'

R22's comment shows a growing concern amongst academics regarding student expectations around their own learning. For students who saw themselves as purchasing a degree, it seems the demand, "Let me speak to the manager!" was likely to ensue (Searcy, 2017).

Dealing with contrapower harassment

Get on with it

A number of participants were candid about how university processes discourage them to report incidents of contrapower harassment and once reported refuse to address them labelling them as trivial or siding with students. Universities influenced by neoliberalism, see student-customer as innocent and thereby try to protect them at the expense of faculty disappointment. R9, for example, shared,

The university's seemed to assume, if member says that they're being bullied... the first action from my experience is that the university wants to sweep it under the carpet and ignore it, but they don't offer, any substantive support. They don't take it seriously. Because it's very often, "He said, she said". The assumption being that the academic member of staff in the situation wasn't being bullied, but the students were

innocent to start with. They take it incredibly seriously, if a student makes a complaint but never the other way around.

In the similar vein, R4 discussed how the label of being a student implies being innocent. Elaborating on the incidents of student misbehaving, R4 commented,

I hear many times, “Oh that they're just babies. Well, they're not just babies, they're 19-year-old young adults. To put it in perspective, I've served in two wars before I was 19, so I don't see a 19-year-old as a baby. But then in a lot of respect, it's like they are babies in the first year. They're kind of babies in the second year, but they're very mature cause they can tell academics what to do in the third year because they know better.

For R4, universities seeing students as “babies”, in a way dismisses academic complaints against student misbehaviour. R4 also sees it as contradictory. On one hand the perception of students as “babies” who are naïve and might not be aware of what they are doing, allows them to evade consequences when they misbehave. They are not seen as independent individuals who can take responsibility for their demeanour but rather defenceless customers who should be looked after. On the other hand, students are allowed to challenge academic approach to teaching as they know what they need better than academics. This indicates an unusual power dynamic which aligns with the ‘student as customer’ model. In the same vein, R3 discussed how universities make up excuses for student bad behaviour as they see it as youthful ignorance.

... giving them more benefit of doubt. Saying that you know they are younger or they're not that mature, they'll grow, and you know they'll be fine. So, let's not be too harsh on them. And you know it happens during this time. It's a difficult time for them or something like that. So, they try to come up with these sorts of excuses.

Most of the participants elaborated on how university leadership sees these incidents as an unavoidable or accepted element of being an academic. Comments such as “Just get on with it. It’s actually your job, that's what you’ve been paid for. Get on with it” (R5) communicate a problematic attitude. It shows an utter disregard for academics’ wellbeing making them feel unsupported.

Path of least resistance

A number of participants discussed choosing the path of least resistance essentially directed to avoid conflict or confrontation with students. This included diluting teaching material so that it’s less challenging for students, being lenient in marking and so on. As R16 mentioned,

Just take the path of least resistance. You know if you're marking something, just give loads of firsts and 2:1s. Just take the path of least resistance. Give yourself an easier life. And get a reputation for being a relatively easy marker and the students will be happy.

Making student happy has implications for teaching evaluations which are used to measure teaching effectiveness. Students often punish academics through low teaching evaluation scores especially, if they are not lenient or if they are too demanding or not entertaining enough (Crumbley et al. 2010). The deterioration of academic standards demonstrates the pressure that academics feel to make sure that students are satisfied (Steenkamp & Roberts, 2016). Grade inflation or diluting the content is a way for academics to also protect themselves and their jobs.

Some of the participant were honest about how complaining about student behaviors was futile especially when universities prioritise student satisfaction given its implications on NSS metric. They mentioned that if complaints are brought forward, universities would take

students' side. Speaking about a colleague who was subjected to bullying by students and did not raise it, R3 stated,

I think given that the senior management and it was clear that they didn't do much about it, so I guess it kind of proves the point why the staff member would not have explained the whole situation or demanded anything more... We are giving students more benefit of doubt and we do kind of, you know, listen to them quite a bit and.

Discussion

Universities have become corporate machines. The ethos and approach of neoliberalism has percolated into the institutional framework of higher education in terms of competition between universities (Furedi, 2011). This competition means that the universities need to think about how they position themselves as students have a number of options to choose from. Students are now seen as customers. Instead of being about learning, universities are becoming more about giving degrees. Higher education has now moved away from learning for the sake of learning and is now grounded in the capitalist market society and globalised neoliberal world to the detriment of learning (Furedi, 2011). The “student as customer” concept has transformed expectations of students having a major impact of academics who are now seen as service providers (Muzzatti & Rothe, 2022) and are often subjected to contrapower harassment. With education seen as service for which students pay a high fee, students embrace the belief that “the customer is always right” and as such often react negatively when they don’t get the outcomes they expect (Muzzatti & Rothe, 2022). Students bully academics in different ways to manipulate these outcomes. These include, physical, verbal, sexual harassment and even blackmailing behaviors. We recognize the changing power dynamics between academics and students, while condemning the recurrent tendency of university leadership to ignore or trivialize these incidents. This reflect that the

emerged context cares less about wellbeing of academics and more about student customer dissatisfaction. We found that organizational processes and practices such student consumer narrative, NSS narrative, teaching evaluations, boards of studies are subjected to abuse by students who target academics. University policies and practices are becoming increasingly student versus academics with universities mainly siding with students who are paying high tuition fee. Platform that were there to give students a voice as well as help academics improve their teaching practise and content are now being misused by students who are unhappy with teaching, grades or content. Although, its known how biased these can be, universities still stick to these as these appeal to student as customer identity and keep academic life in check (see Gatwiri et al., 2021).

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Appendix A

Interview template:

1. How has your experience in the higher education sector been so far?
2. How do you think universities are changing in the current times (if at all)?
3. What do you think their main focus is? And why?
4. How has your experience with the students been so far?
5. Have you ever experienced bullying or harassment by students? What happened?
6. How did you handle it? Did you escalate it? Why or why not?
7. How did the university handle it?
8. How was the process for you? Did you get any support?
9. How do you think inter-university competition (e.g. for enrolment, making it to the league tables) has affected student's attitudes?
10. How do you think it has affected university administrators' attitude towards students?
11. Do you think it plays a role in how university handles bullying and harassment by students? Elaborate?

Figure 1 Data Structure

