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Confronting well-being and mental health in the 'therapeutic university': implications for educators, students and the curriculum

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ABSTRACT

This is a conceptual paper that examines the emergence of the 'therapeutic university' and considers its potential implications for policy and practice in Higher Education (HE). Concern over the wellbeing and mental health of university students both in the United Kingdom (UK) and internationally has recently intensified in media, academic and political spheres, to the extent that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are increasingly offering a diverse range of ad-hoc initiatives and practices based on the language and techniques of an equally diverse popular psychology. An emotionally oriented 'therapeutic university' (TU) is emerging from a complex intertwining of policies of social liberalism, specifically widening participation, and policies of economic liberalism which seek to cultivate the higher education (HE) sector as a competitive marketplace. While the TU might appear to offer the potential to alleviate mental health conditions, these therapeutic practices are frequently conceived as self-evidently good and rarely subjected to any critical scrutiny. This article explores three inter-related sets of concerns regarding the implications of the TU for educators, students and the curriculum and, through an exploratory account, illustrates these trends from our own lived experiences of working within a TU. Framed by insights from critical pedagogy, we critically analyse the current well-being agenda in the British HE sector and how this positions educators as 'agents of well-being' rather than 'agents of criticality'.

1. Introduction

Myriad cultural, economic and political changes are re-shaping the Higher Education (HE) sector in contemporary Britain. Long established political projects related to social inclusion, notably widening participation (DfES 2003), continue to encourage non-traditional groups of learners to pursue degree courses. Arguably, these student groups are likely to require and/or demand more intense forms of assistance from HE staff to sustain their academic progress whilst also maintaining high student satisfaction ratings in an increasingly neoliberal educational marketplace (Williams 2013).

In parallel to this are concerns raised by researchers and policy-makers, frequently expressed in the media (Smith 2016; BBC 2018; Weale 2018) over the declining mental health of young people. Data from the Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey (NHS Digital 2016) reveals an increase in the prevalence of anxiety and depression amongst the 16–24 year-old age group. More specifically, there has been a fivefold increase over the last decade in the number of students disclosing a mental health condition to their university (Thorley 2017). Official figures show that the suicide rate for HE students in the academic year ending 2020 in England and Wales was 3.0 deaths per 100,000 students, or equivalent to 64 deaths (ONS 2022). Research suggests that the COVID pandemic – with severe disruption to campus-based teaching and increased social isolation (see Burns et al. 2020; Chen and Lucock 2022) – has further contributed to a crisis over student mental health.

Emerging from this complex and changing HE sector is the 'therapeutic university' (TU) (Ecclestone and Hayes 2019; Furedi 2017b; Hayes 2017) which places a well-being agenda centre stage, along with a strong emphasis on psycho-emotional support. This parallels the emergence, since the late 1990s of therapeutic initiatives in primary and secondary schools which have typically focused on the explicit teaching of a range of emotional skills, including empathy, motivation and self-regulation (Humphrey 2013). While no universal or mandated provision

currently exists in the HE sector, the landscape has changed substantially over the last 5 years or so following the UK government's announcement that student mental health was to become a key priority within HE policy (DfE 2018). This was followed with the subsequent development and publication of a student mental health charter (Student Minds 2023).

The focus of this paper is twofold. First, we attempt to critically discuss the rise of the TU within a wider socio-political context from the vantage point of teaching in UK Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) over the past decade or so. These are further illustrated through detailed reference to an HEI at which both authors of this paper have been employed to explore certain key practices and emerging trends. Second, by examining three inter-related sets of concerns we share about the TU, in relation to its implications for educators, students and the curriculum, we further extend the critique of therapeutic education developed elsewhere (see Ecclestone and Hayes 2019).

2. Conceptual approach

Our approach draws on an eclectic range of conceptual ideas with their roots in critical traditions which reflect the authors' different disciplines (psychology and philosophy), along with the paper's broad scope. First, our stance is heavily informed by critical pedagogy (Boler 1999; Biesta 2013; Zembylas 2013; Giroux 2014). Broadly speaking, this means that we are interested in how the socio-political context sets the agenda for educational policy, and, how we as educators respond through critically reflective practice. As Biesta (2013, 55) observes, 'to see learning as something constructed and artificial makes it possible to expose the political "work" done through the idea of "learning".' The well-being agenda is therefore of acute interest to us, insofar as whilst it purports to put student health at front and centre, its proliferation within educational settings is symptomatic of turning political problems into learning ones. Thus our approach seeks to critically analyse the well-being agenda that has been developed, and rather uncritically taken up, as a socio-political response to a climate of increasing social inequality and rampant neoliberal competition (Dorling 2015; Lansley and Mack 2015; Standing 2016; Wilkinson and Pickett 2010, 2018). Grounded in critical pedagogy, we are interested in critically analysing the context in which we work, and investigating how it impacts our ability to undertake our role as educators.

Second, we draw on the work of certain critical sociologists who have challenged discourses around mental health diagnosis, as part of a wider critique of therapeutic culture which, as we argue below, underpins the TU (see Lau 2012;

Furedi 2004; Brunila 2013). For example, Raymond Lau acknowledges 'the abuses of [psychology and psychiatry] in the pathologization of normality' (Lau 2012: 83). Here, Lau notes the increasingly problematic nature of applying diagnostic labels, both informally (or casually) and more formally, to 'normal psychological disturbances' (Lau 2012).

We will explore in this paper how these diagnostic trends, when applied in educational spaces and settings, can have the effect of reconfiguring normal student experiences as something that require emotional or even therapeutic support (Furedi 2017b).

Finally, we are influenced by certain post-structuralist ideas related to identity construction. Of specific interest are the ways in which identities are made (and re-made) in and through language and other discursive practices (Søreide 2006). According to Biesta (2009, 41), the subjectification function of education is concerned with '[what kind of subjectivities are] made possible as a result of particular educational arrangements and configurations?' Current discourses around student mental health make available certain historically and socially situated 'subject positions', within which individuals – both educators and students – actively position themselves, such that certain constructions 'take hold' while others are discarded (Søreide 2006; see also Brunila & Rossi 2018). While this implies a level of agency, we acknowledge here that individuals are simultaneously positioned by those who have more power to shape the discourse. Limitations of space circumvents our analysis to what we consider to be the dominant subject positions within the TU.

3. Explaining the rise of the therapeutic university

As alluded to above, a complex intertwining of forces is re-shaping the British university, and our paper turns now to an examination of these influences. One significant cultural shift within late modernity has been the well-documented 'rise of the therapeutic' in Anglo-American culture (Rieff 1966; Nolan 1998; Furedi 2004; Illouz 2008; Wright 2010). According to certain sociologists, modernity is characterised by a lack of ontological certainty or security (Giddens 1991) and construed through the prism of risk, with a kind of 'free floating' anxiety and fear predominant in the human affective repertoire (Furedi 2002). The emergence of a therapeutic culture has been mirrored by the rise of the 'psy-sciences' (Rose 1999) – psychology, psychiatry and psychotherapy – and the expansion of their authority over the internal terrain of affect. Those working within these disciplines, or 'psy-professionals' (McLaughlin 2011), are deemed to have the necessary knowledge

and ability to help individuals make sense of their lives in late modernity. According to Ecclestone and Hayes (2019), the relational/emotional aspects of life have increasingly come to take centre stage, not only in broader culture but also in educational settings and spaces.

Wider political reforms within the HE sector have also been significant. Specifically, there is a tension created by policies of economic liberalism (or what many would call neo-liberalism) and policies of social liberalism. A global phenomenon since the 1980s, neoliberal reforms have reconfigured many aspects of HE. Although these have not necessarily been manifested in a uniform way across all educational systems (Ball 2016), one common theme has been to turn universities into educational marketplaces where students are primarily 'consumers' of their own education. The language of mission statements, research outputs, student satisfaction ratings, retention rates and so on, constructs a powerful business discourse that now underpins the way that 'HiEdBizPlc' (Collini 2012) routinely functions. At a more profound level, is the emphasis within HEIs on cultivating 'transferable skills' or 'graduate attributes', with employability a key illustration. In this, social and emotional skills become part of well-being and mental health as integral to employability (see also Kotouza et al. 2022). One consequence of these reforms has been to re-conceptualise learners as highly sought after and value-for-money-seeking 'consumers' of education (Williams 2013), with HE students in England and Wales responsible for paying tuition fees since 1999, rather than critical agents engaged in a, often unsettling, reflective process of learning.

These trends are particularly illustrated in the introduction of the highly debated Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF), now administered by the recently formed Office for Students (OfS 2018). Framing HE primarily as an investment is borne out in the manner by which the TEF is awarded. Whilst ostensibly labelled the Teaching Excellence Framework, three of the six main metrics consist of measures of student satisfaction and are measured through responses to the National Student Survey (NSS). Since only HEIs with a TEF award can charge above £9000 of fees (per student, per year), a clear link between student satisfaction and outcomes with the marketisation of HEIs is evident.

Sociologists of education have acknowledged that neoliberal reforms co-exist alongside and compete with other educational discourses (Ball 2016). As part of New Labour's 'third way' approach, social inclusion became a key policy goal with the then UK government announcing plans to extend HE opportunities to 50% of all young people (DfES 2003). Widening participation policies aimed to increase access to HE for 'non-traditional' or first-generation students. These under-

represented groups are often characterised as lacking in parental, financial and/or cultural support (Furedi 2017a). While a highly laudable goal in and of itself, when seen through the prism of neo-liberalism, widening participation becomes inextricably bound up with a project of creating more consumers of higher education. Viewed from a utilitarian approach, HE is reconfigured in such a way to meet the needs of the economy/employers (Jones and Thomas 2005). Additionally, we have witnessed what Ecclestone and Brunila (2015) call the 'therapisation of social justice'; that is, social exclusion has come to be understood as a state of psycho-emotional rather than social/structural disadvantage, characterised by a lack of self-esteem and low aspiration (see also Reay 2005; Williams 2011). Concerns over young people, and HE students specifically, in relation to well-being and mental health have engendered a therapeutic turn within the HE sector that requires educators to recognise and respond to vulnerability in psycho-emotional ways.

4. An exploratory account of a therapeutic university

Until recently, state-sponsored initiatives designed to foster student well-being and promote mental health had yet to be systematically integrated into the British HE sector. However, following the concerns outlined above, the UK government signalled a shift towards a more coherent approach (DfE 2018). Most notably, this included the development of a charter (Hughes and Spanner 2019) that positioned university mental health services as a strategic priority. The website for the charity behind the charter reports that 61 HEIs in England and Scotland are signatories, showing their commitment to embedding the charter in their student support services as of the 2022–3 academic year (Student Minds 2023).

In this current climate, our aim is to present an exploratory account, rather than an empirical investigation, of the therapeutic practices engaged in at one university in response to these widespread concerns. This particular HEI – which we loosely anonymise in this paper – is one at which both authors have recently been employed on different degree programmes as visiting tutor (CR) and lecturer/former Learning Development Tutor (SD) respectively. An emphasis on this university enables an in-depth insight into how a TU typically responds to and further reinforces the student mental health crisis. We intend to use this exploratory account as a space to consolidate our own reflections of working within this TU, use these to further develop a critical stance on therapeutic education, and also give impetus to a future research agenda (which is beyond the scope of this paper).

This HEI is a new university, receiving its charter in 2012 and is located in the East of England. The university prospectus markets the institution on the basis of being 'small and friendly' with all teaching and learning centred on a single-site campus. The university has a small student population, 45% of whom are mature learners. 'Education for all' is declared as a central mantra within the university's mission statement, and echoes both a strong widening participation and inclusive agenda. While seemingly objective ratings position this HEI some way down the university league tables the prospectus acknowledges the high employability rates for graduates, along with equally high student satisfaction ratings.

During the 2016/17 academic year, and as part of an annual Teaching and Learning conference at the university, a researcher from the former Higher Education Academy (HEA, now Advance HE) delivered a workshop to raise awareness of student well-being. Informed by the work of Neves and Hillman (2016), this workshop included a graph which demonstrated that the UK HE student population self-reported lower levels of life satisfaction, worthwhileness and happiness, as well as higher levels of anxiety, than either the general population at large, or the 20–24-year-old demographic not within HE. The inclusion of this visual display strongly asserted a need to embed student mental well-being across HE curricula, with implications for both academic and support staff. Over the subsequent academic year (2017/18) the message of this conference came to be translated into a range of therapeutically oriented practices and events. Most notably, the university hosted a 'well-being week' which involved a series of mental, physical, and emotional therapies on offer to all students and staff. The week included laughter yoga, chakra dancing, aerobics and small animal therapy, as well as sessions on time management. With student retention being financially paramount given the size of the institution, as well as student satisfaction being a measure for the TEF (for which the university was awarded gold, 2017), the university well-being agenda has been growing, signified by the recent hire of a 2-year fixed term 'well-being coordinator'.

Across the UK, and arguably in response to the widening participation agenda, HEIs have been increasingly institutionalising academic support services. This university is no exception, and in 2017 launched a Centre for Enhancement in Learning and Teaching (CELT). The centre was created to be a one-stop shop (with 'shop' being the operative term, given the consumerisation of HE) for academic support. It also organised the well-being week, as discussed above, and, crucially, also the NSS survey process. It is, therefore, evident that the financial investment into such a centre was in response to a TEF culture; that is, one in which HEIs are judged on their value-for-money offer, as well as ability to satisfy students by

providing wrap-around support. Whilst the centre is qualified as being concerned with enhancing learning and teaching, and primarily provides academic support, that its staff also administer the NSS survey, as well as organise and co-deliver the well-being week demonstrates how its operation is very much TEF informed, as opposed to pedagogically shaped.

Having considered the key influences which might account for the rise of the TU and illustrated these with reference to our own experiences, our attention now turns to an exploration of the wider implications of the TU for staff, students, and the curriculum itself. The section below is necessarily tentative and speculative in places since, as acknowledged by other critics of therapeutic education (Ecclestone 2017), empirical investigation from a critical perspective in this field is somewhat lacking (for some notable exceptions see Brunila 2012 and 2013; Rawdin 2016).

5. Implications of the rise of the therapeutic university

5.1. Implications for HE staff: 'Agents of well-being'

We would argue that one dominant subject position for educators in the therapeutic university is the 'agent of well-being' (Dhillon 2018). This positioning centres on the enactment of a 'caring performance' where the prime motivation is to enhance student well-being. This typically relies on educators managing the feelings of their students through investing significantly in emotional labour (Hochschild 1983). This is frequently imbued with an undercurrent of maternalism in attempt to support students. In the current climate of concern over mental health, this appears to be widely construed as a positive positioning amongst most educators (Søreide 2006) and may accord with a 'preferred professional identity' (see Avis and Bathmaker 2004). There is, however, a sense in which more senior HE staff are increasingly positioning educators, both implicitly and explicitly, to relate to students in overtly therapeutic ways in their varied contact with them through informal conversations, tutorials, e-mail support and assessment feedback.

Some educational research evokes the notion of 'agent of well-being'. A case study of a Scottish FE college found that a 'caring performance' by lecturers employed on child-care programmes was an overarching aspect of their work (Chowdhry 2014). Central to this is the lecturers' recognition and concern, expressed through semi-structured interviews, that their students often experience personal problems which may represent an obstacle to their academic progress. Additionally, focus group research based on FE trainee teachers at a British university, revealed shared concerns over whether they were 'doing enough to help' (Avis et al. 2011). This was in spite of trainees showing that they cared by,

for example, making toast for students in the morning and providing them with mobile numbers in order to offer extended support. The ultimate implication of adopting this stance is that, if a student fails, it is because the lecturer did not care enough.

As critics of the therapeutic turn in education, we would argue that this is a negative positioning (Søreide 2006). Instead, we prefer the notion of an 'agent of criticality' (Dhillon 2018). Those who adopt this alternative subject position represent a source of powerful knowledge (Young 2013) and critical scrutiny in relation to their respective disciplines, rather than act as a source of 'therapeutic authority' (Furedi 2004). For Young, knowledge is powerful in both being specialised (in how it is produced and transmitted) and differentiated from those experiences that students bring with them to university. For 'agents of criticality', subject knowledge contributes heavily to their professional identity and informs a pedagogic approach which centres on encouraging students to develop critically reflective understanding. The HE sector appears to be recognising the need to parse academic support from a more overtly psycho-emotional variant, as evident in the creation of new vacancies as we witnessed at our own university. While to some extent this might be perceived as a welcome 'out-sourcing' of therapeutic work to (hopefully) individuals who were more specially trained and possess greater expertise, it is still a problematic trend since it points to a widely perceived demand for mental health support in HE. Others have been critical of the way in which a burgeoning well-being industry is creating a diverse range of new 'experts', many of whom have little, if any, training in mental health or counselling (see Ecclestone 2017).

5.2. Implications for HE students: the 'vulnerable student'

As alluded to above, the emergence of therapeutic culture in late modernity produces the 'vulnerable student'. Underpinned by a lack of ontological security (Giddens 1991), this is predominantly a psycho-emotional form of vulnerability (Ecclestone in Ecclestone and Goodley 2016) in which the individual's sense of self is under siege, rendering them inherently fragile, 'at risk' and unable to cope without psychological intervention. It is important to note that this notion of vulnerability is not specific to any one generation or age group. Indeed, a central claim underpinning the therapeutic turn is that we are all potentially vulnerable now (Furedi 2004). Indeed, policy analysts have argued that the concept of vulnerability has been re-moralised in ways that align it with principles of social

justice, or more specifically social inclusion, with the effect being to emphasise protective and therapeutic responses (Brown 2012).

Advocates of widening participation frequently portray it as requiring a successful 'transition' from FE to HE (e.g. Leese 2010) which is assumed to be more negatively/severely experienced by non-traditional students. Indeed, the charity behind the mental health charter has recently published its own research on the theme of student transitions which features a guide to enable new undergraduates to smoothly navigate university life (Student Minds 2018). As outlined earlier, one illustration of 'normal psychological disturbance' (Lau 2012) might be adjusting to the academic requirements of HE, along with the change in domestic living arrangements. Non-traditional students become construed as 'victims of exclusion', who are more disadvantaged emotionally than materially or structurally through their seemingly collective lack of aspiration and self-esteem (Williams 2011; Reay 2005; Ecclestone 2007). Critics of the therapeutic turn have acknowledged that 'transitions' are, however, simply normal points of adjustment that, for most learners at least, will not require psychological intervention (Furedi 2004).

Non-traditional students who are struggling academically might adopt the vulnerable student subject position as a positive and desirable positioning (Søreide 2006). This involves a process of discursive framing (Maclure et al. 2012) in which an individual's actions come to be read as indicators of a more enduring condition. Through this process, students might draw instrumentally on either a casual or more formal diagnosis related to a mental health condition; in short, students may see themselves as vulnerable, and encourage both their peers and educators to do so, to engender a sympathetic, lenient and, we would argue, therapeutic response. This is potentially a powerful narrative positioning and echoes broader claims from within critical psychology that sees vulnerability as connected to a wider politics of recognition. In short, a therapeutic culture is aligned with a victim culture and victimhood offers a certain kind of cultural capital (Sugarman and Martin 2018; see also McLaughlin 2011).

The notion of 'vulnerability creep' (Ecclestone 2017) may also explain some of the worrying trends in student mental health outlined above. Utilising Haslam's (2016) notion of 'concept creep', Ecclestone (2017, 448) claims that meanings of vulnerability have increasingly become diffuse, vague and slippery to the extent that 'mental illness [is elided] with much vaguer references to mental health problems or issues.' This implies that self-diagnosis and widespread self-reporting of 'mental health issues' by HE students may itself be sufficient to prompt a therapeutic response, without the need for a more formal or official diagnosis.

There is also the concomitant possibility that the vulnerable student subject position may potentially render learners infantilised, passive and disempowered: therapeutic support is preferred over any political action redolent of students in previous generations. In line with the critical pedagogical stance, we have adopted in this paper, we acknowledge that the emphasis on psycho-emotional vulnerability draws crucial attention from its material/structural dimensions. In an age of rising student debt, zero hours contracts, increased wealth inequalities, the recent cost of living crisis and what one advocate of a basic income for all, Guy Standing (2016), coins the era of the 'precariat', HE students and young people more generally are facing very real socio-economic disadvantage.

Notwithstanding the historically and culturally diverse purposes of formal education, the underlying assumptions of vulnerability might come to fundamentally re-shape the goals of education. For example, Williams' (2011, 465) work on how the therapeutic turn has manifested in the FE sector claims that it has become fundamentally a 'pastoral system offering services akin to counselling'. It is to these more profound issues in HE that our paper now turns, with a consideration of the ways in which the TU is likely to influence what is taught, associated pedagogy and assessment practices.

5.3. Implications for the curriculum

According to Ecclestone and Hayes (2019), therapeutic education centres on and further reinforces a 'curriculum of the self'. This is an education which is self-centred rather than subject-centred, inwardly oriented and preoccupied with the domain of emotions rather than the domain of ideas (Furedi 2017a). Underpinning the curriculum of the self, and promoted by advocates of widening participation, is the idea that a university education is fundamentally exclusionary since it is likely to feature complex ideas and abstract concepts that will inevitably induce 'anxiety' in students who are exposed to such knowledge (Ecclestone 2007; Young 2013). Seemingly, for many who work within the TU, especially when occupying the 'agent of well-being' subject position, a key task is to alleviate or even eliminate negative feelings related to the curriculum and its delivery which might further reinforce psycho-emotional vulnerability in students (Ecclestone 2017).

In seeking to manage risk, an increasing number of Anglo-American universities now routinely introduce 'trigger warnings' before delivering potentially sensitive material that might cause harm or distress to students (Furedi 2017b). Arguably, the use of trigger warnings is particularly relevant in the teaching of the social sciences where there are numerous topics that could be considered sensitive.

However, concerns over the risk of harm are such that some curriculums are now being stripped of their sensitive content. For example, Furedi (2015) notes how the topic of suicide – once featured on A-level psychology and sociology specifications – has now been removed altogether, seemingly because it is considered too distressing for students. With a degree of irony perhaps, staff in some UK universities now use the term 'content notes' rather than 'trigger warnings', as the phrase itself is considered too provocative (Dickinson 2022): seemingly, trigger warnings are themselves triggering.

An increasingly risk-averse HE culture is likely to have implications for pedagogy. Specifically, might intellectual debate through discussion, with ancient roots in the Socratic tradition, be seriously curtailed within the TU? We have both experienced as educators a discernible unwillingness and/or inability amongst many students to express their thoughts and opinions in front of their peers and lecturers. In a similar vein, Furedi (2017a) observes an increasing trend towards censoring 'controversial' speakers on university campuses aligned with a broader project of creating 'safe spaces' which has aimed to protect students from exposure to emotional harms and dangers in the form of ideas and opinions that might be ideologically opposed to their own (see also Hayes 2017 for a critique). For certain psychologists, a cultural 'flight from conversation' is inextricably linked to the rise of the digital era (Turkle 2015). Communication through digital devices may be preferred by today's Generation Z over the immediacy of face-to-face encounters which preclude editing/revising opportunities. The idea that a university education should help students to feel positive and be 'well', by limiting their exposure to uncomfortable ideas, amounts to a 'pedagogy of comfort': it means students are less likely to be able to critically engage with hegemonic power structures (Amsler 2011, 57). Instead, seeking to expose students only to 'comfortable knowledge' will more likely result in 'well-adjusted' subjects to what is an empirically iniquitous socio-economic context (see Dorling 2015 as cited above).

The TU also shapes the forms of communication between students and teaching staff in relation to assessment. In an investigation which analysed e-mailed requests for assignment extensions, Bartram (2015) has revealed how emotion is tactically and instrumentally deployed as a bargaining tool by HE students. In using language such as 'not coping', 'shattered' and 'suicidal' students discursively created 'emotionalised self-declarations [that were] developed with great detail and colour' (Bartram 2015, 8). Furthermore, there was an element of social learning, whereby students shared successful instances of Affective Strategizing (AS) which were 'incorporated into their peers' behavioural repertories' (p. 11). Arguably, another illustration of AS is evident in the (unsuccessful) attempts of an

Oxford history graduate to sue his HEI for not awarding him a first class degree (BBC 2017) by claiming that examiners had not been fully informed that he was suffering from a combination of insomnia, anxiety and depression at the time of his finals: as a consumer of education, this student was alleging that his 'complex needs' were not being met by his university as service-provider. This unsuccessful case contrasts with another in which disability legislation was successfully utilised by parents, following the suicide of their daughter, to support claims that her university did not make reasonable adjustments to assessment schedules (BBC 2022).

We would argue that these assessment practices are underpinned by a culture of flattery, where student work is over-praised, positive aspects are over-emphasised, and constructive use of criticism in feedback is severely restricted. Providing students with a positive experience of assessment is perhaps particularly important in the TU where it can facilitate a culture of not allowing a student to fail, as we ourselves have personally experienced within moderation meetings. Any experience of failure would undoubtedly be construed as further reinforcing the sense of fragility and vulnerability we outlined above. Where flattery becomes 'an important institutional norm' (Furedi 2006, 116), it can lead to grade inflation and a weakening of academic credibility. Recent figures show an increase by almost 90% over the last 8 years in the proportion of students being awarded a first-class degree in England (OfS 2020). Crucially, however, a culture of flattery helps to keep students happy and placated, which, in turn, is likely to enhance satisfaction ratings.

6. Conclusion

As we asserted in the opening section of this paper, the emergence of the TU is likely to raise profound questions about the purpose of HE. We acknowledge here that there is no quick and easy resolution to the tension between policies of social liberalism and economic liberalism. Echoing the stance taken by other educationalists, we also accept that no one, single response to the question 'What is a university for?' now exists (Barnett 2011; Collini 2012; Furlong 2013) if, indeed, it ever did.

Understood through Aldous Huxley's dystopian novel, Brave New World (first published in 1932), the current centrality of a well-being agenda might be construed as similar to soma: a pill that is administered to the populace free of charge by the governing powers-that-be to induce a sense of contentment with the socio-political reality (Huxley 1977). Doing so, the powers-that-be nullify any critical engagement with material conditions. As we have argued above, in

placating students' negative feelings through their narrative positioning (Søreide 2006), and through cultivating a pedagogy of comfort (Amsler 2011), academics and support staff are being asked to nullify any threat to the status quo. Therefore, in promoting the proliferation of soma-esque coping and/or avoidance techniques we argue that the well-being agenda not only distracts from critical social engagement but is problematic insofar as it is opaque to a wider social, political and intellectual framing.

Our position should not, however, be read as ignoring the role of affect within education. Rather, we heed the concerns expressed by certain educationalists of the need to move beyond a binaried way of thinking about the affective turn as either wholly benevolent/positive or malevolent/dangerous (Leathwood and Hey 2009; Ecclestone and Goodley 2016). The stance we adopt in this paper is heavily influenced by critical pedagogy and particularly the notion of pedagogy of discomfort (Boler 1999; Amsler 2011; Zembylas 2013). We would like to expound upon the benefits of this approach before ending this paper.

Encouraging students to ask awkward 'why' questions foster critical thinking. In so doing, students will be better equipped to challenge inequality and injustice in its different forms. This process is an uncomfortable one. As a critic of what he deems the 'Happiness Industry', Will Davies (2015, 199) claims that 'once people are critical or angry, they can also be critical or angry about something which is external to themselves'. It could be argued that well-being activities which result in an increase in self-esteem, for example, address the ontological uncertainty (Giddens 1991) students face, and provide a more secure foundation from which to tackle the epistemological uncertainty experienced through critical engagement with learning content (Barnett 2011). That said, a key problem of the contemporary therapeutic culture is that it reduces well-being to individual engagement with strategies and practices offered by HE providers. This distracts attention from critical engagement with the conditions that have resulted in the need for a greater proliferation of wellbeing initiatives in the first instance. The implication is that, as educators, we need to carefully select both our subject-matter and teaching methods in order to promote and reinforce a critical, politically-informed dialogue with our students.

In terms of practice as academics, whilst we in these roles may not all be trained counsellors, to ignore, or seek to nullify, the affective quality of HE would be to do a disservice to the transformative power of pedagogy. We are not agents of well-being, but, rather, professionals that can encourage independent, and critical thinking. Henry Giroux is particularly instructive here in arguing that we have the capacity to encourage students to take risks, engage in thoughtful dialogue and

address what it means to be socially responsible. According to Giroux (2014: 289), a critical pedagogy is

> not about training; it is about educating people to be self-reflective, critical and self-conscious about their relationship with others and to know something about their relationship with the larger world. Pedagogy in this sense … enables people to act effectively upon the societies in which they live.

If students reside and study in a state of fear then they cannot act upon societal conditions, but, instead, merely survive within them, perpetuating a 'survival mentality' acknowledged by critical psychologists and sociologists (McLaughlin 2011; Brunila 2014). If, however, pedagogy in HE is about encouraging self-reflection, then in our professional roles, we can be 'agents of criticality'.

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