

Information and Markets in Higher Education

Janja Komljenovic

Higher education is increasingly marketized around the world. Yet, for higher education markets to work, it is not enough to change a law or introduce tuition fees. In my recent chapter published in the book *Changing Higher Education for a Changing World*, I examine the role of market devices. While this is a broad category and includes anything from price tags to shopping carts, from computer screens to data analytics, from formulae to rankings, and much more, I examined market information tools in higher education. Through four illuminating vignettes, I trace how these tools *do* market making work.

The Four Vignettes

The market information tools that were examined include Unistats (now Discover Uni), a British webpage providing information on study programs to prospective students. Unistats had a user-facing visualization to highlight particular traits of programs and universities, while making other information hard to find, or not available. The second examined vignette illuminates Coursera's marketing messages to its corporate clients. The numbers and messages that Coursera communicates to its clients frame a particular kind of reality in which quality is determined by university brands and their reputation, and the value of MOOC courses by the monetized calculation of acquired skills. The third vignette tackles the brokers of international student recruitment agents. Events organized by these brokers act as market information signalling reliability that universities can trust. Finally, LinkedIn's data and analytics on labor and skills are examined. LinkedIn's algorithms, based on network effects, present the value of particular skills, match candidates with jobs, and enable various learning and working opportunities. While various devices showcased in the four vignettes are each distinctive in the way they work, they also have more in common than one might think at first glance.

Market Devices Make Actors Calculate

Market information tools equip market actors with ready information expressed in a particular form. Devices themselves are calculating and comparing, and provide individuals with ready solutions. For example, think of LinkedIn's data and suggestions on people, their skills, courses for training, employment suggestions, all based on its algorithms. The very nature and logic of these devices become essential for the nature of higher education markets because they intervene in individuals' rationalities, meaning making, and decision-making. We are not born as *homo economicus*, but we are made one with the help of such tools. Even more, we are made a particular kind of *homo economicus*, the kind calculating with information and solutions offered by market devices.

Market Devices Are Opaque

While market information tools are meant to bring transparency into the system, and they do to some extent, they are at the same time opaque. They rely on multiple steps of classification before publishing certain information. For example, university rankings and league tables rely on compound, multifaceted measures. In the end, they are promoted as being objective and reliable in representing the world, but in reality, they are also interpreting, classifying, and structuring the world. While, on the one hand, market information tools are serving the function of informing market actors and enabling their calculative choice, they are, on the other hand, also devices for scoring and classifying individuals and institutions.

Abstract

Higher education marketization needs a supportive state and friendly legislation. However, more is needed for markets to work. Markets need market actors, who calculate and behave in line with the economic logic. Market devices help turn students, staff, employers, and others, into such actors. In this article, I look at the case of market information tools that make us calculate in economic terms, organize what we consider valuable, and construct social futures.

While market information tools are meant to bring transparency into the system, and they do to some extent, they are at the same time opaque.

Janja Komljenovic is lecturer of higher education at Lancaster University, UK. Email: j.komljenovic@lancaster.ac.uk.

This article is based on a chapter in Changing Higher Education for a Changing World, edited by Claire Callender, William Locke, and Simon Marginson, Bloomsbury. The book is a product of the Centre for Global Higher Education, funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council, Office for Students and Research England.

Market Devices Interact and Structure New Criteria for Value

Each in their own way, market information tools determine and structure new criteria for value. For example, with their criteria, university rankings and league tables determine what we understand as university quality. Or another example, Coursera, offers a monetized view on the value of its MOOC courses for its corporate clients. This way, the economic value of its courses is foregrounded before other possible forms of value that it brings to staff who are taking its courses, such as knowledge itself or personal growth.

Market devices found in higher education around the world often interact to some extent, or may be shared across, markets' settings. For example, Coursera's and LinkedIn's infrastructures interact by Coursera, enabling its course attendees to put earned and paid certificates on their LinkedIn profiles with a click of a button. Another example is where recruitment agents use the Discover Uni webpage in advising students on where to study. As market information tools often have a global reach, the power struggles between different framings and logics of these devices become global too. Collectively, it seems that the higher education market tools picture the value of higher education in ways that are individualized, flexible, unbundled, measurable, and utilitarian.

Market Devices Construct Social Future

Market information tools portray a particular future. As they aid individuals in their calculations and decisions, they contribute to the materialization of this imagined future. For example, Unistats offers information on graduate salaries for particular study programs at specific universities. While this will have been information from the past for future graduates, it might still be understood as illuminating the actual future in the present. Each market information tool portrays a future of its own. But the kind of future that is proposed collectively seems to be increasingly competitive, digital, quantified, and networked.

Where Next?

Higher education market information tools are expanding in size (more issues that they cover), scope (the elements that are covered are broadened), span (different tools drawing from the same datasets but doing different combinations of the data as well as adding some of their own), and temporality (historical and into the future). Therefore, it is vital that policy makers, stakeholders, and other users understand how these tools work, as they are contributing to creating the higher education sector in its marketized forms. It matters which classifier is used in a list, or which formula is used for a calculation. These are not apolitical choices. As different devices have different consequences, critically scrutinizing their nature and effects enables us to discuss how higher education markets can promote or worsen social equality and social justice more generally. ▲