

Student Alienation: A Marxist Analysis

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Abstract

The crisis of student alienation and the economisation of Higher Education (HE) are interwoven phenomena, with a wide range of existing perspectives suggesting that economisation estranges students from their studies and social lives. However, these perspectives tend either to analyse particular alienating processes in relative isolation, gesture towards a connection without a corresponding theoretical foundation, or ground student alienation in non-economic (often non-material) factors altogether. This dissertation contributes to the literature by analysing student alienation as a consequence of the student's material position within the university, and thus of the economic and structural changes UK HE has undergone since the 1970s. To do so, it draws inspiration from Marx's original formulation of alienation as a baseline framework, and further inspiration from R. Hall's *The Alienated Academic* in locating and assessing alienation in the academic context. By framing the student's position as consisting of two core material roles, that of the *consumer-student* and the *object-student*, this dissertation argues that student alienation emerges from the student's relationship with the university being mediated by these material roles, from both the perspective of the student and institution. This has impacted the institutional policy and academic character of universities, and along relational axes parallel to those described by Marx as affecting the worker, alienates the student from her studies, her degree, and her wider society.

Introduction

British Higher Education (HE) students are experiencing a crisis of alienation. Rates of anxiety, loneliness, and depression are rising (Thorley 2017; Diehl. *et al.* 2018; Ellard *et al.* 2023), campus engagement is declining, and students are adopting an overtly transactional perspective on their studies (UPP 2024). Simultaneously, the neoliberalisation of the modern British university has radically altered the student's material relationship and place within the university, relegating them primarily to their economic status. The relationship between the two phenomena has been alluded to and acknowledged frequently (Côté 2014; Nizioł 2022; Pyry & Sirviö 2024), but few have attempted an extensive material analysis of student alienation.

This dissertation explores this gap in the literature by materially connecting the economisation of HE and the student alienation crisis. It draws inspiration from Marx's theory of alienation, arguing that the prioritisation of the student's economic role within the university and the impacts of HE economisation invoke similar relational severances to those ascribed by Marx to the proletarian worker under capitalism. In applying Marx's work to contemporary academia, further inspiration will be drawn from R. Hall's 2018 text *The Alienated Academic*, itself a material study of alienation affecting contemporary academic professors.

This dissertation argues that the contemporary British HE student is defined by two increasingly prominent roles: the *consumer-student*, valued institutionally as a consumer of commodified academic products, and the *object-student*, positioned as a quantified opportunity for institutional and individual economic gain. C.1 addresses the crisis of alienation and the trend of HE economisation, examining where connections between the two phenomena have already been drawn and establishing the literature gap that this dissertation aims to fill. C.2 briefly sketches Marx's account of alienation, before drawing out processes of academic alienation applied in Hall's work to academic staff, and beginning to materially locate the student within HE. From there, three core interrelated processes of economisation are

examined: the economisation of HE relations (C.3.1), the commodification of the degree (C.3.2), and competition (C.3.3). Finally, the alienating effect of these processes on the student are discussed (C.4), accounting for her own distinct position within the university. By providing a theoretical connection between economisation and alienation and grounding this connection in contemporary HE, this dissertation provides a valuable framework that future research and development can build on, helping to understand and address the crisis at its roots.

C.1: Higher Education: Economisation and Alienation

For half a century, British universities have undergone economisation, as economic relations, motivations and mediators have come to dominate both the university's internal organisation and its relationships to political and economic facilitators, including students, states and sponsoring corporations (Gornitzka and Maassen 2000). Where universities had once been spared the need to be institutionally profitable, funding crises in the 1970s and the advent of neoliberalism in the 1980s pushed institutions to adapt to lower public funding, higher demand and productivity-centric political revaluation through an "orientation to the market" (Johnstone *et al.* 1998, p.3) that has prioritised their revenue-generating capabilities and compelled efficiency-minded restructurings. Public funds, which provided near-unconditional financial coverage in the 1960s (Scott 1978), made up just 11% of sectoral income in 2023/24 (Bolton & Lewis 2025, p.26); tuition fees provided around 50% (p.27), and additional sources, such as real estate management and corporate partnerships, made up the rest, tying the university inexorably to private capital (Engelen *et al.* 2014; Baker & Wetherbe 2013).

These processes have impacted institutional functionality. Cribb and Gewirtz (2013) argue that economisation has "hollowed out" universities, stripping away their core social and academic purposes by valuing profitability and competitiveness over "considerations of academic substance" (p.339). Nizioł (2022) and Najafi (2015) similarly argue that marketisation and defunding have pushed universities towards 'McDonaldisation'¹, pursuing the efficient mass

¹ Borrowing from Ritzer (2003), *McDonaldisation* refers to the process by which market forces encourage institutions to pursue efficiency, calculability, predictability and technological control, analogous to McDonalds' pursuits in the food industry.

delivery of standardised educational ‘products’ over academic quality and engagement. These products are sold both to prospective students as degrees, and to corporate stakeholders in the form of graduates, patents, and license agreements, driving staff “into entrepreneurial competition for external funds” (Levidow 2000, p.227). Universities will use these measures to directly generate revenue themselves (Castell 2022) or to make appeals to governments for increased state funding (Brazzill 2021), distorting hiring and policy priorities to maximise productivity (Banal-Estañol *et al.* 2023). Budget crises see ‘low value’ arts and humanities cut first (Moran 2022), privileging the more immediately profitable STEM subjects. Institutions, whether from financial desperation, to encourage growth, or through adherence to policy changes, have embraced economisation, and have adapted accordingly.

Throughout this period of economisation, British university students have suffered a growing crisis of alienation – “feelings of separation, meaningless, helplessness, hopelessness, powerlessness and estrangement” (Hall 2022 p.29), often accompanying declining mental health. Rates of mental illness among students are high and rising (Malagodi *et al.* 2024; Worsley *et al.* 2022), and student suicides increased by 79% between 2007 and 2015 (Thorley 2017). Students are also increasingly disconnected from campus life: 44% feel lonely in university, while 44% engage less with extracurricular activities than they expected and 25% report no engagement at all (UPP 2024, p.6). Academic malpractice is growing increasingly common (Côté 2014; Rahimi *et al.* 2024), as the intrinsic value of learning is being displaced by an instrumentalised perspective on education. In sum, students are estranged from their studies, their institutions, and their social surroundings.

Analyses have consistently linked HE economisation with this growing alienation. Nizioł (2022) associates HE McDonaldisation with the dehumanisation of student and staff alike, born from the “pursuit [...] of mainly making a profit,” a “contradiction of the academic ethos” (p.119). Pyyry and Sirviö (2024) argue that the instrumentalisation of HE has turned education into an unnecessarily competitive “field of struggle” (p.499), imbuing a sense of “powerlessness and alienation” (*ibid.*) among students. Researchers at UCL have linked students’ worsening mental health to “increased financial pressures and worries about achieving high results in the

wider economic and social context”, suggesting that both direct and indirect impacts of economisation negatively impact wellbeing (Hall 2023). UPP similarly link the widespread proliferation of “transactional relationships” in HE with increased rates of loneliness, disconnection and apathy among students (UPP 2024, p.3), denoting the “cost of learning crisis” (*ibid.*) as its primary cause. Côté (2014) further connects academic disengagement to the rise of the neoliberal university, as declining academic standards and the student’s diminishing intrinsic connection to her studies disincentivises effortful engagement. Across contemporary literature on the topic, the connection between economisation and alienation is well established.

Despite this, few accounts meaningfully analyse the fundamental relation between the two phenomena. Specific accounts of student alienation largely focus on the institution’s ideological and hierarchical role in maintaining and reproducing capitalist relations, rather than examining the impacts of changing material relations within the university as an institution (Tsang et al. 2021; Lave & McDermott 2002; Türk 2014). Meanwhile, studies relating to economisation, while often suggesting a connection between economisation and alienation (Pyyry & Sirviö 2024; Côté 2014), nonetheless tend to stop short of theoretically grounding their material relationship, and often focus instead on drawing individual connections between specific processes and consequences, as with Chowdhury’s (2018) insightful analysis of the connection between student financing and grade inflation. There is a lingering gap between economisation and alienation. Filling this gap requires revisiting Marx’s economic theory of alienation, as his theory provides the framework most suited to establishing a material connection between economisation and student alienation.

C.2: Marxist Alienation and its Application

2.1: Marxist Alienation

Subjective alienation (the emotional, personal experience of alienation) is, as argued by Marx in the 1844 *Manuscripts*, downstream of *objective* alienation: estrangement from one's essence, embodied through labour. Proceeding from his analysis of human essence, described later in his *Theses on Feuerbach* as an "ensemble of...social relations" (Marx & Engels 1978, p.145), Marx argues that man's "life-activity" (p.75) – their creative labour – embodies this social, relational essence. Under capitalism, private property and capitalist exploitation estrange both labour and the products of labour from the worker, making them dominating, impersonal forces under the control and ownership of the capitalist. This alienates the labourer from her labour/product, and thus, with labour/products embodying her human essence, from herself. Furthermore, the transference of the hostile qualities of alienated labour onto the owning capitalist drives social alienation, estranging the labourer from her fellow humans. This objective alienation is expressed subjectively: labour is shunned, social relations suffer, and the labourer experiences a sense of estrangement from herself and her pursuits. In Marx's initial formulation, this is a proletarian² alienation, born from the wage-labourer selling her labour-power. Capitalism transforms labour, labour products, fellow people and even oneself into something "alien, hostile, powerful, and independent" (p.78).

Necessarily for the present study, Marx's account of alienation holds relevance beyond this strict formulation. While he focuses on the proletariat, *all* classes under capitalism are alienated, though the "forms of alienation differ for each class because their position and style of life differ" (Ollman 1980, p.132). For Marx, it is class society in general, not merely the bourgeoisie-proletariat relation, that alienates labour. His analysis of the proletariat is therefore

² The "proletariat" refers to the majority working-class under capitalism, defined by a lack of personal ownership of capital and the sale of their labour-power to maintain self-reproduction.

the particular expression of capitalist alienation for that socioeconomic role, but is not the extent of capitalist alienation.

Ollman's (1980) *Alienation* summarises the core severances of Marxist alienation as follows:

Man is spoken of as being separated from his work (he plays no part in deciding what to do or how to do it) - a break between the individual and his life activity. Man is said to be separated from his own products (he has no control over what he makes or what becomes of it afterwards) [...] He is also said to be separated from his fellow men (competition and class hostility has rendered most forms of cooperation impossible).

(Ollman 1980, pp.133-134).

These severances comprise Marx's four estrangements: "the relation of the worker to his own activity as an alien activity not belonging to him", "the relation of the worker to the product of labour as an alien object exercising power over him", "the estrangement of man from man", and, resulting from Marx's perspective of labour as embodying man's species-being, the turning of "man's species being [...] into a being alien to him" (Marx & Engels 1978, pp.74-77). It is these relations that will be examined in the academic context, drawing inspiration from the work of Marxist academic Richard Hall.

2.2: Proletarianisation in *The Alienated Academic*

Hall's (2018) *The Alienated Academic* provides a vital Marxist study of academic alienation. For Hall, contemporary academics are undergoing 'proletarianisation', alienating them from their work, peers, institutions and students. This sub-chapter will explore what is meant by 'proletarianisation' in this context, and extract some key alienating processes of academic proletarianisation.

Hall's understanding of *proletarianisation* refers not to its typical usage – the reduction of distinct classes to flat wage labour³ – but instead is linked directly to alienation: the reduction of academics to “a utilitarian, dehumanised form of capital” (Hall 2018, p.82) and their resulting estrangement from their pursuits and institutions. For Hall, HE economisation has compelled the marketisation of academic output and activity, an externalised efficiency-demanding reorganisation of labour, and the reduction of agents in the academic field to their economic relations. Academic labour-power and labour products alike are “financialised and marketised for their exchange-value rather than their social utility” (p.12), while the academic herself has become “a self-exploiting entrepreneur” under conditions of “global competition” (*ibid.*), atomising the once-social academic pursuit.

Key elements of this proletarianisation include: the standardisation of homogenised curricula (p.58); competition over employment and opportunity (p.82); commodification of education and academic products (p.89); economised “rationalisation” towards efficiency (p.16); and a general experience of “overwork, insecurity and exploitation” (p.xxii). These reflect the severances of Marx's alienation. The commodification of the academic product detaches the academic from the specificity of her labour⁴, reducing her studies to their financial value. Standardisation diminishes the academic's control over her work and the potential for expression within it, particularly as this standardisation conforms to revenue generation: academic works become “increasingly homogenised, [...] denuded of [their] specificity” (p.58). ‘Rationalisation’ entails bureaucratic, corporatised centralisation of power in universities at the expense of academic freedoms and independence (Wolf & Jenkins 2021). The constant need to prove and improve oneself in an increasingly precarious field drives insecurity and facilitates exploitation, while acquiescence to this competition reinforces its hold on academia, at best temporarily displacing one's own insecurity onto others.

³ In an economic (and relatively broad) sense, academics, as waged labourers, have long been ‘proletarian’.

⁴ Marx and Engels considered mental and academic ‘labour’ to be labour proper, and relevant to their studies. *The Communist Manifesto* describes how capitalism converts “the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage-labourers,” (Marx & Engels 1978, p.476), while Engels' 1890 *Letter to Conrad Schmidt* describes scientists as belonging to “special fields of labour”, which remain “under the dominating influence of economic development” (Marx & Engels 2010, p.62).

The academic experience thus aligns with the alienation assigned to Marx's proletariat. The academic is removed from her labour and labour product, its specificity, independence and subjectivity made secondary to its profitability and managed efficiency. This in turn alienates the academic from herself, as her labour exists as a manifestation of her human essence. Institutional domination and intra-academic competition turn one's peers into agents of estrangement, furthering social alienation. Within Hall's analysis, 'proletarianisation' represents the *particular expressions of general capitalist alienation* expressed through the academic's context.

Two main inspirations can be drawn from Hall's analysis. Firstly, the university as a shared space occupied by the student and the academic will necessarily subject both to similar processes, suggesting that we may locate drivers of student alienation by examining these processes through the student context. Secondly, Hall's analysis effectively centres the specific material position of the academic while expressing the general qualities of capitalist alienation through this narrow lens. This extracts the relational quality of Marx's alienation while abandoning its specific expression in the *1844 Manuscripts*; a necessary adaptational extraction, and one this dissertation must also perform. Hall therefore provides suggestions for material processes to examine from the student context (summarisable as the *economisation of relations*, *commodification*, and *competition*), and a model by which Marx's strands of alienation can be recontextualised. However, this recontextualisation requires first materially locating the student within HE.

2.3: Student Applicability and Positionality

Although Marx's overall alienation framework and Hall's particular academic application serve as an invaluable foundation, accurately assessing the material roots of student alienation necessitates locating the student's distinct position within HE. Hall's analysis, though extending at times to the student, is focused primarily on the salaried academic professor, terrain more immediately applicable to Marx's wage labourer. Students and staff may experience similar ideological pressures and institutional barriers with potentially parallel alienating effects, but as their material relationships to the university differ, so must any analysis account for these distinctions, and thus must itself establish the student's material position.

A further examination of Hall (2018) demonstrates that certain alienating pressures are indeed directly shared between staff and student: both are bound to economised, debt-based institutional relations (p.202), and "denied a humane existence" through credentialised socioeconomic expectations (p.178). Metric-based quantification degrades the social potential of intergroup relations (p.82), and both are alienated from their peers by increasing competition for limited security and opportunities (p.124). But a close analysis reveals two distinct, dominating roles the student occupies within HE: their position as a consumer of academic products; and their objectification as 'product' themselves, human capital for the university to leverage for corporate partnerships and state funding. These two roles will be referred to as the *consumer-student* and the *object-student*.

Hall highlights the student's consumer role, though the focus remains on its impact on professors. Institutional reliance on student-sourced income is weaponised against the academic, "played off against each other" by universities (p.166): student financing dictates the "need to drive efficiencies in academic time" (p.91), while student satisfaction metrics are used to recalibrate teaching towards the lowest common denominator of predictable, de-individuated material (*ibid.*). This 'student-as-consumer' projection, drawn from Neary and Winn (2009; in: Hall 2018, p.21), positions the student as a paying consumer of commodified

educational products, driven by both the growing economic demand from expanding yet increasingly precarious universities drawing in as many ‘customers’ as possible, and by:

“the intensification and casualization of the graduate labour market, which demands not only students pay undivided attention to their employability, but also, at the same time, prepare themselves for periods of under-employability, un-employability, student poverty and debt” (Neary and Winn 2009, p.126).

Similarly, Hall’s discussion of student objectification focuses again on the impact this objectification has on the academic, rather than on the student herself. Hall decries the marketisation-driven “ideological narratives of student-as-entrepreneur or student-as-partner” that universities leverage for corporate investment as a facet of the coercive environment of contemporary HE (Hall 2018, p.36), identifying student objectification but primarily examining it as a control mechanism on staff. This perspective is suggested throughout: Hall’s discussion of oppressive data-driven assessment structures invokes the quantification of the student, “viewed in terms of debt, earnings and satisfaction” (p.82), that makes her “available to prospective employers” (p.119), while his discussion of the repressive, institutionally enforced prioritisation of the “productive development of the human capital of students” (p.17) indirectly highlights the institution’s objectification of the student as ‘human capital’. Student objectification is identified and acknowledged, but analysed primarily as a threat to the academic’s connection to her labour.

Although Hall focuses on the academic, he nonetheless insightfully identifies the role and significance of the student’s material position within academia. If the academic’s material relation to the university is that of the wage-labourer, comprised at once of economic input and output (labour-power and academic products), the student’s material relation is the combination of consumer-student and object-student, comprising economic input and output respectively. Attention to these roles situates the student within economic reality and facilitates a Marxist analysis of her condition. As will be discussed, these roles, both emergent from and influential over policy decisions and academic practice, have increasingly dominated the

student's relationship with HE, foregrounding economic relations while diminishing those social and academic.

This chapter has sketched the material roots of Marxist alienation and established the framework through which student alienation will be assessed, centring the material relations that ground the student within HE. In the next chapter, three processes fundamental to the student's economised repositioning will be discussed. These will be the *economisation of HE relations* (encompassing standardisation, rationalisation, and a primarily economic perspective on the purpose and functioning of universities), *the commodification of education*, and *competition between students*. As these processes derive from the encroachment of capitalist profit and productivity demands, they are naturally interwoven, and their textual separation, like Marx's own distinct strands of alienation, should not be interpreted as reflecting separate processes.

C.3: Processes of alienation

3.1: Economisation of Higher Education relations

Contemporary HE prioritises the economic value and character of universities. This prioritisation has impacted HE funding and structures, and has foregrounded the student's economic relationship to their studies and institutions. This is reflected institutionally, where revenue-maximisation and corporate management structures drive decision-making; in the relations between students and their studies, where socially encouraged economic prioritisation removes education's intrinsic value and incentivises disengagement and malpractice; and in the relations between students and their professors, where efficiency and cost-saving measures have distanced the groups through class size increases, course standardisation, and distanced online learning. These relational changes have severed the connections between the student and her academic labour and institutions alike, and laid bare the transactional nature of contemporary HE.

Before the 1970s, HE was rarely evaluated in direct economic terms. Although the economic benefits of an educated, highly skilled workforce were recognised, HE was "primarily expected to satisfy social and cultural demands", with economic gain acting as a "by-product [...] of [HE's] other roles" (Gornitzka & Maassen 2000, pp.226-227). By the 1960s, universities were sites of mass tertiary education, with institutional numbers growing and fees either heavily or entirely subsidised (Filippakou & Tapper 2016; Andrews 2021). However, economic shocks and IMF-enforced cuts through the 1970s eroded institutions' previously robust public support (Vernon 2018), and expansionist HE policies of the 1960s gave way to a decade of state interference and reassessments of the traditional university model (Scott 1978). With the 1979 election of Thatcher and the advent of neoliberalism, funding directives began to shift as profitability, low taxation and marketisation became political priorities (Anderson 2025). State subsidies for foreign students were removed in 1979, and heavy budget cuts from 1981 further reduced HE funding (Andrews 2021). While direct government influence over academic priorities had previously been uncommon (Filippakou & Tapper 2016), productive research

was now explicitly rewarded: research grants were separated from teaching grants in 1985 (Anderson 2025), allowing the state to selectively fund specific research activity deemed directly profitable (Kernohan 2024).

These adjustments would be maintained and continued by both Conservative and Labour governments through the following decades. Maintenance grants were steadily replaced with loans during Major's premiership, and, following the 1997 Dearing Report's recommendations, Blair's government introduced £1000 annual tuition fees aimed to supplement teaching grants, as well as effectively furthering all previous Tory neoliberalisation and marketisation policies (Lunt 2008). By 2010, these fees reached over £9000 a year, displacing public teaching funding and saddling students with debt post-graduation, justified by the wage premium qualifications provide (Brazzill 2021). Slowly, HE shifted from a publicly funded social good to a privately funded economic pursuit.

With a £9000+ annual investment and a sociopolitical prioritisation of HE's economic benefits, students thus approach their studies as opportunities for economic profit, diminishing the intrinsic value of education and driving transactional relationships between students and universities (UPP 2024). Economic prospects are increasingly a primary motivator to pursue a degree: UK students are significantly more motivated by post-graduation employment in their choice of university than by non-economic considerations such as teaching satisfaction (McManus *et al.* 2017), while the supposedly higher economic value provided by a STEM degree, both individually and socially, has driven falling demand for and social denigration of the humanities (Donoghue 2008; Ikpe 2015). In his findings that English students (in comparison to German and Portuguese) are "distinguished" in their predisposition to adopt primarily economic motivations for attending university, Bartram (2016) suggests that the "more dominant market-oriented version" of HE in England may contribute to a "heightened instrumental awareness among students" (p.402). Moran (2022) similarly argues that tuition fees, through priming a centrally economic understanding of HE, "sharpen the student consumer's knowledge of the market, increase competition between institutions and curb demand for the 'low value' courses" (p.18). Economisation "subordinates and trivialises

education that has no market value” (Lynch 2010, p.62), bleeding into students’ motivations and influencing their choice of subject, university, and their decision to pursue a degree at all.

This economised perspective encourages students towards academic malpractice and disengagement. Medway *et al.* (2018) suggest that social economisation and the financial burden of student loans instills in students “a felt need or desire to see a tangible return on that investment” (p.397), incentivising malpractice as an efficient means of achieving the desired goal: in their study, paid essay-writing services, which Rahimi *et al.* (2024) suggest could alone nullify 8-9% of rewarded degrees. The recent rise of AI misuse among students is further evidence of this economised perspective: with only instrumental, economic motivations to study, students are increasingly willing to trade diminished understanding and personal connection for a dramatic reduction in necessary workload (Shaw 2025). Beyond explicit malpractice, UK students are generally academically disengaged, spending less time studying and subject to lower standards than their European counterparts (Brennan *et al.* 2009; Searle 2007). Côté (2014), comparing UK studying rates to US students, finds that institutional neoliberalisation has driven UK student engagement down towards American lows: students’ “alienation from the process and product of learning” diminishes the intrinsic value of education (Côté 2014, p.216) while lower academic and oversight standards provide students with “high grades for their low effort” (p.217), incentivising malpractice and facilitating estrangement. The “culture of disengagement” in UK institutions (Searle 2007, p.329) compels students “to simply ‘get in to get out’” (UPP 2024, p.3), the distilled consequence of economised HE.

Economisation also takes on an institutional character, as universities come to reflect the neoliberal model and expectations. Under the widespread model of “New Public Management” (Ferlie *et al.* 2008; Tomlinson & Watermeyer 2022), budgets are hardened, quantitative performance measures dominate quality assessments, and leadership is drawn from the business sphere. Accompanying these changes, the vice-chancellor role has grown markedly more corporate, while distinct management layers and a developing bureaucracy have emerged as central to the institution (Shepherd 2018). Amidst this corporatisation and compelled by

‘massification’ – the rapid increase in student numbers, accommodated by technological and institutional adaptations (Outhred 2023) – student metrics such as attendance, standardised grade attainment and quantified ‘satisfaction’ have taken priority in policy decisions, structural adjustments, and outward advertising to corporations and prospective students/parents (Hall 2018; Wolf & Jenkins 2021), diminishing the student’s subjectivity within the university. Reflecting greater financial and bureaucratic influence, university decisions are made by “associations of policy makers, private equity fundholders, credit rating agencies, technology firms and publishers, and, indirectly, fee-paying students” (Hall 2018, p.54), the latter of which influence policy through their role as market consumers.

This has impacted the student’s relation to her institution, as these management structures are more attuned to economic than to academic concerns. Academic independence and research opportunities have relatively declined since the turn of the millennium, with a 60% rise in senior managers and non-academic professional staff from 2005/6 to 2017/18 accompanying a mere 16% rise in traditional academic ‘teaching & research’ roles, outpaced by student population increases (Wolf & Jenkins 2021, pp.25, 53). Massification within an efficiency-driven paradigm has greatly increased course and class sizes with a corresponding decline in seminar and tutorial focus, often outsourced to postgraduate students as institutions have increasingly relied on casual, insecure labour to plug the gaps (Najafi 2015). Students thus have less access to “those academics who teach but are actively engaged in research – the type of academic who is seen as central to university-level instruction” (Wolf & Jenkins 2021, p.58). In recent years, universities have pivoted towards online learning, the pinnacle of HE McDonaldisation (Carroll 2013), as a maximally flexible and efficient mode of education (Rowse 2025), further reducing the contact and connection between student and professor and instilling a standardised, “one size fits all” approach to education (Carroll 2013, p.347). Students have had little input in this pivot: while appreciating ‘e-learning’ as a supplementary resource, students report widespread dissatisfaction with predominantly online-based education, particularly its educational shortcomings and associability (Stevanović 2021; Chakraborty *et al.* 2021; Photopoulos *et al.* 2022). The economised, corporate structure of universities places sovereignty in the balance books, with

consequential institutional changes negating the potential for staff-student connections and for personalisation and innovation within studies.

The economic role of higher education has politically and socially taken precedence over academic passion or cultural enrichment. Economising processes have both been driven by and reinforced the student's position as a detached consumer of academic products, as funding alterations drove institutional reliance on student finance as a primary source of revenue. Individually, students have internalised this economisation and have withdrawn from their studies, engaging minimally with educational processes and pursuing the degree as an economic investment. Institutionally, this economisation has driven efforts to maximise cohort sizes while minimising costs: traditional academic roles have been lost in favour of insecure labour and senior management roles, e-learning has steadily expanded, and degree content has been standardised. These processes have reduced the student's potential for academic engagement and lowered institutional standards of oversight and availability, further incentivising malpractice (Rahimi *et al.* 2018). The student's economic relationship to the university is thus foregrounded, as both individual and institutional changes reflect the primacy of the student's financial investment and the university's prioritisation of massified efficiency. Further effects of this economisation can be seen by examining the commodification of the degree, and the impact of this commodification on the student.

3.2: Commodification

Under neoliberalism, degrees have undergone dual commodification. The dominance of profit-seeking⁵ in economised HE institutions has created an education market where access to degrees is determined by financial capacity (Hoogenboom 2015). This has led to the first form of commodification: degrees have grown into undifferentiated educational products, geared towards mass production and accessible primarily through purchase. Meanwhile, the marketisation of HE has created self-propulsive feedback loops between misaligned labour and education markets, where credentialist demands among employers, spurred by a supply-side boom, encourage standardisation and the commodification of degrees within a global marketplace (Tomlinson and Watermeyer 2022). This second commodification impacts the completed degree, or more specifically, the qualification achieved through it. Both forms of commodification will be discussed in turn.

As alluded to in C.3.1, the rapid expansion of HE availability, exacerbated by the repealing of cohort limits (HM Treasury 2013) and institutional reliance on student loans, has pushed universities towards massification. Record numbers of applicants are securing positions as the supply of spaces has increased faster than prospective student demand, creating a ‘scramble for students’ among universities (Rankine 2018). This has substantially decreased the average grade requirements universities require from applicants, as the ‘scramble’ inevitably looks to lower-achieving students to fill spaces: 75% of applicants with D-D-D or lower A-level grades were offered a place in 2025 (compared with 61% in 2005), and 9% of the 2024-25 intake lacked a single A-level, a near-doubling of the 2015 rate (Henry & Corfe 2026; Woolcock 2026). Within the university, the process of degree attainment has been standardised, reflecting a demand for students to be provided with sure returns on their investments. Declining standards in academic evaluation⁶ and an unspoken taboo against failing students (Lambert 2023;

⁵ As public institutions, UK universities cannot technically reap ‘profits’. Wolf and Jenkins (2021) note that the preferred term is “financial surplus” (p.22).

⁶ As noted by Lambert (2023), the UK Parliament’s ‘Innovation, Universities, Skills and Sciences’ committee acknowledged that “the worst-kept secret” in academia is that “for unseen examination papers, most tutors provide their students with the contents of the paper beforehand”, indicating the prioritisation of results over comprehension.

Harward 2008) near-guarantee students their qualification, with the vast majority (77.6% in 2022/23) passing with honours (OFS 2024): part of an upwards trend of grade inflation unrepresentative of “changes in student and course characteristics” (p.15), driven by transactional obligations for institutions to provide post-graduation employability (Chowdhury 2018). Universities have sought to maximise their student-derived economic inputs, and in doing so, have systemically eroded non-financial barriers to acceptance and attainment. The qualification – honours and all – has become a purchasable commodity.

The UK’s rapid increase in graduates since the 1990s did not, as was hoped, lead to an expansion in relevant high-skilled sectoral jobs (McKeown 2026; Holmes 2013). Instead, graduates have been “shuffled into lower-skilled jobs” (Horowitz 2018, p.791). As graduate supply outstrips demand, graduates are increasingly working in non-graduate roles (Xu 2023), from 31% in 1993 to 42% in 2023. But counter-intuitively, the importance of the qualification has grown. The oversupply of graduates without an expanding high-skilled economic sector to absorb them encouraged employers to prioritise graduates over non-graduates for roles that do not require degree-specific knowledge, perceiving these qualifications as markers of a candidate’s quality (CIPD 2018). Jobs like trainee real estate agent, sales administrator and shop assistant are frequently listed as requiring, or at least strongly preferring, graduate candidates, locking out non-degree holders who would, in many cases, be equally capable filling such positions (Wiltshire 2025).

The degree’s qualitative character is thus rendered irrelevant compared to its value as a generalised marker of a candidate’s quality. Its perceived value on the marketplace is non-intrinsic, is subject to supply-demand pressures, and is set and maintained by hiring companies. This in turn has diminished the specificity and particular value of degrees: the actual content offered and education provided is less meaningful than the qualification itself, a standardised marker of a ‘good candidate’. Tomlinson and Watermeyer (2022) refer to degree qualifications as “exchangeable goods for competitively sought-after economic rewards”, facilitating better job access but possessing “little significant intrinsic economic value on their own terms” (pp.175-176). This marketised homogeneity exacerbates the standardisation of

educational content and attainment (Mann 2008, p.77), leaving the degree both in form and content “denuded of its specificity” (Hall 2018, p.58) just as the commodity in capitalist production is made “uniform, homogeneous, simple” (Marx 1977, p.30).

This uniformity and near-boundless need for adaptability is enforced by the contemporary job market, subject to sudden technological or social changes that risk rendering one’s field of study oversupplied or underemployed post-graduation. Through the 2010s, ‘learn to code’ emerged as a memetic phrase referencing the perceived long-term security of IT-based careers (Kelly 2021); within a few years, AI and market recalibrations have decreased hirings for entry-level coding jobs by 50% (Sharma 2025), and demand has shifted to civil engineering, social care and construction graduates (Raval 2026). The chronic misalignment between the education and labour markets leads degrees to be valued less on their actual content, and more for the incidental, ‘soft’ skills students are expected to learn along the way. A vast range of degrees in humanities, social sciences or business-related fields all demonstrate the shared skills in communication that a PR firm may seek when hiring graduates; physics, maths, and economics majors alike are ripe for an insurance internship. While some degrees, particularly certain STEM-aligned subjects, offer relatively straightforward paths into consistently high-demand careers, most are subject to the whims of the market and the profitability of any given field, valued for the general qualities that a degree *of that sort* is likely to have provided, if discrimination between subjects is made at all.

The degree, the embodiment of years of academic labour, has been reduced to a purchasable qualification stripped of all specificity, individuality and intrinsic value, leaving behind an exchangeable (and increasingly inaccurate) signal of studiousness.⁷ Prospective students are approached as potential customers, and non-financial barriers to consumption are demolished so as to maximise revenue. While educational standardisation and efficiency-inclined course restructurings already serve to denude the degree of its individuality, its subsequent status as an

⁷ The unsustainability of this arrangement is noteworthy, as the inflated employer-end valuation of a degree is contradicted by the degree’s diminishing academic impartment, thus misaligning employer expectations with actual candidate quality. Emerging recognition of this may have inspired recent suggestions of a move towards ‘skill-based’ hiring (Bista 2025), although the longevity and impact of this trend is still uncertain.

interchangeable, unspecified marker of candidate quality strips it bare of any particular intrinsic value it may have possessed and renders its value entirely dependent on its relative position and scarcity in the labour market. The degree, much like the student whose labour it represents, is reduced to its economic input and output.

3.3: Competition

The relationship between competition and academic development is complex and contested. McGuire (2025) highlights the role of competition-based learning in encouraging engagement and developing lower-performing members of a cohort while stressing the sensitivity of the delivery mechanism in determining the method's impact, while DiMenichi and Tricomi (2015) find further evidence of competition's positive impact on engagement and attention, but found detrimental effects on retention. Chan and Lam (2008) conversely highlight competition's negative impact on self-efficacy, while Kristensen *et al.* (2015) suggest that competition is beneficial primarily when disassociated from significant consequences and implemented alongside co-operative structures. Considering these mixed findings, the strong correlation between competitive environments and stress, anxiety, and depression (Littlefield & Sellnow 1992, Zanzig 1997) should at least temper enthusiasm for competitive HE models, particularly during a global crisis of student mental health (Evans *et al.* 2018). Setting aside the impact of competition on academic attainment, the constant state of material competition that surrounds students throughout university is a prominent driver of student alienation.

This competition is not necessarily for grades. Grades are, in general, standardised to a common distribution, thus making high grades rivalrous: there is a theoretical competition between students for higher marks. In practice, however, this competition is limited, as grade inflation over the past decades has countered this potential standardisation by acting as a rising tide. With over three quarters of students graduating with honours, and with the intrinsic value of a degree diminished (limiting the perceived value of a higher grade for its own sake), grade-based competition is not necessarily a primary pressure on students' academic lives. This is not to

suggest that there is no pressure to achieve high marks, nor that this pressure plays no alienating role, but merely that it is not expressed primarily as a competitive drive between students.

Much more persistent, immediate and material is competition between students over current and post-graduation employment opportunities. The modern student is particularly financially precarious. COVID, a cost-of-living crisis and long-term economic stagnation have rendered the typical model of maintenance loan + parental funding unsustainable, with the maximum available loan now expected to cover just half of students' living costs (Barbosa 2025). This has pushed students into employment at far higher rates than previous cohorts. In 2025, 68% of students undertook paid employment (not including internships) during term times, compared to 35% in 2015 (Neves *et al.* 2025). Post-graduation, the job market for graduates is highly insecure and competitive (Hinchliffe and Jolly 2011), with middle-income positions and typical graduate roles in relative decline (OFS 2024, Abel *et al.* 2014). This insecurity has rapidly increased the popularity of internships as a safer career route, with over 50% of graduates having undertaken one as of 2025, up 12pp from 2018 (Holt-White & Cullinane 2025). As well as facilitating corporate exploitation – 35% of graduates report undertaking unpaid or underpaid internships – and adding to the existing pressures faced by students entering the workforce during their studies, these limited internships, and employment opportunities more broadly, create material dimensions of competition between students.

This competition has been situated within the modern university. As private funding has become increasingly vital, universities have turned to (and proudly displayed) their paid corporate partnerships, integrating these partnerships into campus activities and competitions (Miller 2018). The University of Manchester, for example, held the *L'Oreal Brandstorm Competition*, *True North*, *Accuracy Construction Competition* among several others in 2026, the key prize consistently being an internship position or some form of work experience. These partnerships aim to integrate students into the corporate pipeline through their institutions, as discussed in the preceding section on HE economisation. In this context, competition is directly established within the institution over access to post-graduation employment, further installing

a perspective that pits students against one another and perceives HE as an individualised financial pursuit.

More broadly, contemporary student life is overwhelmed by the pressure to ‘stand out’ from one’s peers. Despite signs that overall engagement in campus life is on the decline (UPP 2024), the pressure for students to take on extracurricular roles that benefit their employability remains. As discussed by Chapman *et al.* (2023), where intrinsic motivation may once have driven extracurricular participation, the transactional nature of economised HE has “shifted students towards more extrinsic explanations for participation” (p.139). This encourages students to not merely *join* clubs, but to *run* them, to “fully [exploit] the university experience” (Hinchliffe and Jolly 2011, p.18) and position themselves as a capable leader, financier or organiser alongside their degree. This creates incentives misaligned with typical perspectives of campus community life: if students cannot create a marketable “narrative of employability” (Brown and Hesketh 2004, p. 145) with their activities, then they are misusing their time. This further economisation of the student within HE objectifies the student, diminishes the social potential of student life, and widens the reach of competition into the student’s life.

Facilitated by institutional reliance on corporate funding and compelled by the demands of a stagnant labour market, material competition between students has positioned the students as “human capital”, considered and valued for their employability and profit-generating potential (Hall 2018, p.16). This process objectifies the student, prioritising her productive capacity and reducing her extracurricular activity to its economic significance. This competition is internalised as students acquiesce to objectification, mirroring the materially compelled “self-objectification of the labourer” through their submission to the capitalist labour market (p.89). This pervasive competition dictates the student’s university life, injecting even society participation with the same “ideological narratives of student-as-entrepreneur or student-as-partner” that universities advertise their ‘products’ to corporations through (p.36). Enriching the institutions benefitting from corporate partnerships and advertisable metrics while damaging the student’s social and academic capacities, competition further exposes the

gulf between the emotional and social needs of the student and the economic priorities of the modern university.

C.4: The Alienated Student

C.4.1: The Consumer-Student and the Object-Student

Before discussing student alienation directly, it is necessary to summarise and discuss the student's position within HE. Economisation has foregrounded the student's material relations to HE, both from the student's own perspective and from the university's, affecting the student's relationship with her studies, degree, institution and peers. The student's dual roles are the *consumer-student*, defined by the impact of marketisation, institutional reliance on tuition fees, and the commodification of the degree; and the *object-student*, emergent from performance metrics, corporate partnerships, productivity demands and labour market insecurity. Understanding these two roles establishes the student's material position within academia, aiding our understanding of the material processes driving alienation.

The consumer-student is built from the student's financial input into the university (Neary & Winn 2009). Their relationship to the university is transactional, assessed not by its educational quality or intrinsic reward, but by how effectively it rewards the student's investment with future financial gain, mirroring the *M-C-M'* model Marx discusses as dominating capitalist production (Marx 2013, p.99). Education itself is deprioritised as the degree neither necessarily requires nor imparts educational attainment, acting as a commodified token of 'candidate quality' to be leveraged for better employment opportunities. The standardisation of syllabi and reduction of subjective engagement with courses reflect this consumer positioning, as these efforts maximise the derived revenue universities receive by increasing institutional capacity while maintaining or driving down running costs, since mass lectures and online-based courses are more efficient to sustain large student bodies. Core to this role is the centrality of the student's financial support of the university, comprising the majority of university revenue and the relation encouraging massification at the expense of academic independence or quality. The student's consumer role is thus "a growing influence at universities" across the UK, diminishing her role as an academic participant (Rizvi *et al.* 2013, p.28).

Simultaneously, the student herself has been objectified, offered up to corporate partners and states as a return on their investment into the institution. Within the university, students are repackaged as quantified, marketable metrics, expected to prioritise their employability and potential as ‘human capital’. Corporations working with universities gain access to the human capital these institutions provide, and alongside patents and research results, graduates have been repositioned as another productive output of the university, sold off to vested interests. Social and economic pressures make this objectification willing on their part, as institutions leverage student anxiety and the instability of the job market to construe this objectification as a desirable reward. The objectification of the graduate student thus mirrors degree commodification in the labour market: objectification denatures her academic labour, rendering it undifferentiated “beyond its ability to generate abstract value” (Hall 2018, p.90).

These roles take predominance within institutional management, academic structures and personal incentives. The prospective student is motivated to study by post-graduation vocational prospects and present financial concerns (Bartram 2016; McManus *et al.* 2017). These concerns are reflected and encouraged directly by the universities, increasingly projecting employability and economic opportunity in external communication over more traditional cultural, social and academic standards (Knight 2022). The student’s studies are informed by dominant institutional models prioritising mass student uptake and private financing: her classes are moved online; her lectures grow more populated and impersonal; her contact with professors is reduced. Campus becomes a site of material competition as universities facilitate the student’s (self-)objectification, leveraging insecurity for corporate partnerships and metric tracking. Upon graduation, employment insecurity and labour/education market misalignment diminishes the specific character of her degree, while parallel credentialisation reframes her qualification as a generalised token of candidate quality. By demanding all actors, from students to institutions, engage in “the individualized pursuit of private return” as their primary activity within HE (Tomlinson and Watermeyer 2022, p.178), material processes of economisation and marketisation have fundamentally altered students’ relationship to their studies and

institutions, forcing education, social value and intrinsic connection to bend the knee before economic concerns.

C.4.2: Student Alienation

With this analysis of the student's material position, we can identify processes, parallel and often synchronous to Hall's academic proletarianisation, that alienate the student from the same core relations that Marx identified in his study of proletariat alienation.

As the proletarian's labour, undertaken for survival and controlled by external actors, becomes alien and dominating, something to be "shunned like the plague" wherever possible (Marx & Engels 1978, p.74), so has the student's, as her connection to her academic labour is mediated and denigrated by alienating economic terms. Curriculum standardisation, course massification and e-learning have shrunk opportunities for personalised engagement: the growing population of academic courses demands and provides less active input and engagement from each student, and the growing reliance on efficient distanced learning both literally separates the student from her studies and enforces modes of education and assessment designed to be impersonal and rigidly bound. On a more fundamental level, social economisation of HE has replaced the intrinsic value of education with a defined economic assessment, with financial concerns now dominating students' engagement with their degrees. This instrumentalist perspective positions education and its associated processes as an inconvenient barrier to be overcome with as little effort as possible. The student's labour is thus turned against her, education becoming a frustrating obstacle to be avoided instead of an opportunity for fulfilment and self-development.

This separation from their labour impacts the student's connection to the product of their labour, the finished degree (and associated qualification) itself. Commodification has rendered the degree impersonal and unspecific, representing little more than the student's capacity to pay their annual fees, while still typically – and unsustainably – touted in employment markets as a

signal of candidate quality, disregarding the degree's contents. Through commodification, the student's degree ceases to be of her, its value and character prescribed by the broad perception of the employment market rather than from its academic content or the student's personal fulfilment. Furthermore, declining academic standards and engagement detach the student's actual labour from this product, diminishing the connection and value perceived in the completed product. There is little pride to be taken in a degree achieved through slacking and ChatGPT; as necessarily entwined aspects of productive activity, alienation from labour and from the products of labour go hand-in-hand.

Social alienation is driven by three qualities of capitalist modes of production. First, the inherently social character of human essence means that alienation from this embodied essence in itself drives alienation from other people (Marx & Engels 1978, p.77). Secondly, the proletariat's alienated labour/product is owned and controlled by an external capitalist class, alienating that class and their institutions from the proletariat as a result. Finally, competition between workers drives them apart from one another, as the safety and prosperity of one comes at the expense of another. Setting aside the first, as this form of alienation is inherent in those previously discussed, the latter are clearly applicable to the student. Decisions around course sizes, study workloads, interactive priorities *etc.* are made by corporate and corporate-adjacent managerial structures, and interactions with the student consider her consumer role at the expense of their social and academic roles. The consequential drive towards massification and e-learning distances students from their professors and institutions further, as opportunities for meaningful academic engagement shrink. The contradictions between the demands of the institution and the educational needs of the student reinforce her powerlessness, whose only significant input into the university is her student loans and whose results and future vocational successes become "marketised or tradable commodities" in competition for funding, corporate partnerships, or prospective students (Hall 2018, p.38).

While massified e-learning enforces physical and social distance between students, it is the economically compelled material competition within HE that fundamentally alienates students from one another. Pressures to outperform other students in curricular and (particularly)

extracurricular efforts turn students into “ever-productive, self-exploiting entrepreneurs” (Hall 2018, p.119), positioning individual exceptionalism over social and collective pursuits. This competition is structurally enforced by the competitive, anarchic and unforgiving job market graduates find themselves entering, and in turn by the university’s acquiescence to those structures. On-campus competitions over highly valued internships and work experience opportunities provide universities a funding boost from the corporations sponsoring such competitions, exploiting student insecurity and pitting peers against one another. Social engagement for its own sake is disincentivised, reducing the potential for meaningful relationships between students to emerge and disconnecting them from the social spaces and relations that once made up the core of British institutions (McManus *et al.* 2017). Competition, described by Engels as “the sharpest weapon against the proletariat in the hands of the bourgeoisie” (Engels 2022, p.83) thus prohibits social cooperation in favour of profitable individualism, forcing a “break between man and man” (Ollman 1980, p.134).

In sum, the neoliberal university and surrounding society estrange students from core connections within academic life. Severances emerge literally – distanced learning, selective funding cuts – but more fundamentally impact the individuality and intrinsic value of the student’s academic pursuits, making her an economic valuation dispossessed of specificity and sociality. Symptoms like growing academic malpractice, declining campus life and worsening mental health can be understood as reactions to this fundamental alienation. The pervasive anxiety that clouds academic life develops from the very material insecurity of the student’s current and prospective economic position, and the resulting competition and self-objectification this insecurity demands. Malpractice is incentivised where education becomes a hurdle between the student and the central goal of the final qualification. Declining campus engagement, as well as reflecting broader trends of social atomisation and loneliness, indicates an approach to university dominated by concerns of employability over self-fulfilment or social engagement. Alienated from her labour and institutions, the student expresses this alienation through a detachment with all that university is supposed to provide and represent.

C.5: Conclusion

The crisis of student alienation is bound inexorably to capitalism, demanding profit and productivity from every institution and pursuit it wraps itself around. Treating it as a phenomenon independent of wider economic, political and institutional developments limits our capacity both to understand the problem and to address it beyond individual reactive policies. We may consider it a simple fact of life that students' core concerns revolve around their economic prospects and competitiveness, then wonder why students despair in their studies, turn to academic malpractice, and socially disengage. We may believe it only natural that institutions prioritise revenue and efficiency by pushing all possible engagement online, then try to address declining campus life with course-wide pub crawls and wellbeing surveys. Much as Marx criticised the idealist alienation theorists of his time for doing, we may "pretend away the alienated character of social life and, as a result [...] capture it only in a mystified way that conceals the real social processes that produce it" (Lave and McDermott, 2002, p.38).

This dissertation has examined the crisis of alienation through a Marxist lens, evaluating the material and economic factors that have driven instrumentalisation, disengagement and poor mental health among the UK student body. Necessarily, it has also established the student's material position and roles within the university, roles that have increasingly defined the student in policy and personal considerations alike. By foregrounding the contradictions between the student's socio-academic needs and the economising processes that disregard such needs in favour of maximising value extraction, this dissertation has developed on adjacent work from Marxist academics while filling a gap in the literature that has generally focused on isolated relations or universities' ideological and hierarchical roles. It suggests a continued and even expanded relevance of Marx's assessment of proletarian alienation: even in the absence of a direct wage worker-capitalist relationship, marketisation and commodification drives alienation from one's labour/products, society and, ultimately, self.

Significant further research would be required on this topic before practical suggestions could be made. Nonetheless, some general conclusions emerge. Most evidently, addressing the crisis

will require changing the student's structural and material position within the university. This may require exploring alternate funding models, intentionally curtailing massification, expanding the student's input beyond their financial patronage, or even more radical re-evaluations of the student role. More broadly, a reappraisal of the political and social conversation around HE, going beyond HE's economic benefits, may encourage greater campus and academic participation; a lack of accompanying policy changes, however, would maintain the same material incentives driving instrumentalisation, limiting the impact of a discourse-led intervention.

Although this dissertation has focused on the alienating effects of economisation, future conversations must account for the positive effects of these processes, such as financial gain, accessibility, and flexibility in engagement, and thus the trade-offs inherent to adjustments. The diverse, non-specific marketability of a degree may drive alienation from one's studies due to their apparent irrelevance to a degree's 'purpose' of economic gain, whilst simultaneously preventing students from being "locked in" to a career by providing a greater range of potential paths. Processes also cannot be evaluated in isolation: diminishing entry requirements may relate to the wider commodification of HE, but in themselves can help expand access to education. Simply negating processes or reversing individual decisions is no panacea. Nonetheless, to address the crisis of alienation and reprioritise the academic and social aspects of HE, politicians and institutions alike must be prepared to tackle the roots of the crisis head on.

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