

Higher education and nation-building after Empire: Migrant students in post-war Britain

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Abstract

Sociological literature increasingly turns its eye towards the colonial entanglements of British welfare state institutions. Nevertheless, mass higher education in the 1960s and 1970s tends to be considered as a universal service, unconnected to processes of racialisation and bordering. Sociologists discussing the neoliberal marketisation of higher education tend also not to draw connections between these processes and racialised exclusion. By reading policies on international student fees since the 1960s through the lens of racial capitalism, this article illustrates the connections between the political economy of higher education and the production and management of racialised difference; in particular, in relation to nation-building processes after the Second World War. Using Parliamentary Hansard as a primary data source, the article traces the shifting relationships between universities, capitalism, nation and race through key policy changes between 1962 and 2011. These policies illustrate how universities became implicated in processes of racialised capital accumulation, and show that the migrant student played a key role in these processes.

Introduction

In May 2023, the UK's then-Conservative government announced that it would ban families of most migrant students from accompanying them into the country (Seddon, 2023). Commentators were quick to speak out against this policy. King's College London professor Brian Bell, discussing earlier suggestions for curbs on migrant student visas in 2022, argued that such restrictions would risk lowering migrant student numbers: a financially reckless move since 'most universities for most courses lose money on teaching British students and offset that loss by charging more for international students' (PA Media, 2022). After the government had removed funding for Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences in 2012, these in particular subsequently relied on tuition fees, including international fees. Discussions surrounding curbs on migrant students however rarely question the fact that these students are held responsible for plugging the gap in university finance in the first place.

Indeed, migrant, 'international' or 'overseas' students¹ have been at the centre of the political economy of UK Higher Education (HE) for decades. While sociologists of education discuss the increasing 'internationalisation' of universities and the experiences of international students at UK institutions (Kehm & Teichler, 2007), discussions of the marketisation process tend to only mention the role of migrant students in passing, if at all. Most studies of contemporary UK HE narrate its history as a move away from the social-democratic consensus formalised by the 1963 Robbins Report, to a marketised, neoliberal system (e.g. Slaughter, 1997). Many also discuss increasing 'managerialism' (Deem, 2001) and 'audit culture' (Strathern, 2000) in universities. These tend to be considered connected to marketisation, but rarely to immigration, racialisation and bordering.

Gerrard et al. (2021) underline the need to analyse education through a lens that is attentive to the logics of dispossession, accumulation and extraction of racial capitalism. This, they argue, connects analyses of epistemic inequality, racism and HE access to education's links with the capitalist economy. In this

article, we read policies on international students in UK HE since the 1960s through such a lens. This illustrates that UK HE is a constitutive part of a racialised, capitalist political economy, and needs to be understood in relation to nation-building and bordering after the Second World War. We trace the development of policies on migrant students between 1962 and 2011, using Parliamentary Hansard as a primary data source: 1962 marks the abolition of fees for most ‘home’ students, while in 2011, Social Sciences and Humanities ‘home’ students in England were first made to pay for the full cost of their degree programmes (see Holmwood & Bhabra, 2012; Universities Wales, 2016). We show that migrant student policies during this period contributed to reshaping the racialised boundaries of the British nation-state, and that migrant student fees facilitated racialised forms of accumulation, in both HE’s social-democratic and marketised configurations.

We begin the article by illustrating why ‘racial capitalism’ is a useful lens to understand the role of the university in relation to capitalism and racialised forms of difference. We also consider why the ‘overseas student’ is a productive empirical entry point for analysing these interconnections. After discussing the article’s methodology, we trace policy developments between 1962 and 1967. Here, parliamentary debates are taken as an analytical starting point to explore shifts in HE funding regimes. While the 1962 policy to subsidise ‘home students’ included migrants who came to Britain between 1945 and 1962 and their children, and did not explicitly exclude ‘overseas’ students, the 1967 decision to charge differential fees to new migrant students contributed to redefining Britain as a nation, and to drawing its borders. This included a racialised differentiation into those who belong and those who do not: those who were and those who were not entitled to ‘the spoils of Empire’ (El-Enany, 2020). The next section discusses developments leading to the 1979 decision to charge migrant students for the full cost of their degrees. We argue that this aided the consolidation of the British nation-state, clearly delineating it from its post-Empire responsibilities. The last section focuses on New Labour’s policies on HE diversity and ‘internationalisation’, and the parallel move towards increasing border controls. We discuss debates on post-study work visas in 2011, arguing that the construction of the ‘overseas student’, established in previous years, laid the groundwork for universities’ contemporary role in regimes of accumulation. This involves selectively including, and at times

celebrating, difference, thereby disavowing neoliberal universities' implications in racial capitalism. Migrant students' presence in universities increases the institutions' capacity for gaining income through student fees, while migrant student fees specifically provide essential plugs in university finance.

We conclude that conceptualising UK HE as deeply entwined with race and nation deepens our understanding of the political-economic dimension of issues such as racist discrimination in HE, border controls in universities, and coloniality in knowledge production. Activism and scholarship for HE funding and access must also challenge HE's racial capitalist entanglements.

Racial academic capitalism in Britain and the 'overseas student' after Empire

Most scholarship on the contemporary university emphasises its moves towards the market, and the prevalence of managerialism and 'audit culture' (Nash, 2018; Pereira, 2015; Power, 1994; Strathern, 2000). Marketisation is here understood as the process of aligning research and teaching with monetary goals. Cuts to government funding, in a context of austerity, combine with increased student fees, creating precarity for students and staff (McGettigan, 2013). Generally, this move is understood to have begun under Thatcher, accelerated under Blair and consolidated in subsequent Conservative governments (Holmwood, 2016). Literature also discusses the increasing 'internationalisation' of HE (Altbach & Knight, 2007). 'Internationalisation', or 'the process of integrating an international, intercultural, and global dimension into the purpose, functions (teaching, research, and service), and delivery of HE' (Knight, 2004, p. 11), tends to signify a shift in HE policy inaugurated by New Labour. While UK universities are widely understood as always having been international (see Pietsch, 2013), scholars emphasise the acceleration of these tendencies and their market-orientated character. The relationship between social-democratic HE and capitalism tends to be understood as one of decommodification – universities, alongside other welfare state institutions, provide non-capitalist spaces within a capitalist market. Meanwhile, the role of

the nation-state in UK HE policy remains to be fully theorised. Further, many analyses of neoliberalism rely on a neo-Foucauldian frame, which disregards race as a crucial accumulative mechanism (see Issar, 2021). Overall, many analyses of HE marketisation tend to utilise a narrow understanding of accumulation, which is challenged by a wealth of scholarship on the relationship between capitalism and race, and on racial capitalism (see e.g. Bhattacharyya, 2018; Kundnani, 2021; Melamed, 2006; Virdee, 2019).

A racial capitalism lens recognises that capitalism produces and benefits from differentiation; race and gender must thus be central to political-economic analyses (see Robinson, 2020, pp. 26–27). While in a classic Marxist framing, capitalism is characterised by relations of exploitation, a racial capitalism lens insists on the dual nature of capitalism’s relations of production, consisting of both exploitation and expropriation (Fraser, 2016; Kelley, 2017). Crucially, expropriation – functioning amongst other mechanisms through settler-colonial land extraction and regimes of unfree labour, including slavery and gendered reproductive labour – is facilitated by, and simultaneously produces, difference (Issar, 2021). There are debates about the role of expropriation as an ongoing necessary condition for capitalism in Marx’s writing (Go, 2021; Ralph & Singhal, 2019). Here, we consider this process an expansion of Marx’s understanding of ‘primitive accumulation’ (Marx, 1990 [1887], Chapter 26) to form not merely an ‘original’ fuelling for capitalism but an integral part of it (see Coulthard, 2014). Whether or not capitalism must necessarily be racial (see responses to Wacquant, 2023) is here less important than the fact that in its real existing form, it is ‘expressed through race, racial subjection, and racial differences’ (Lowe, 2015, p. 149). Studies analysing racial capitalism in the UK emphasise the differential exposure of minoritised populations to death, including through racialised geographies (Danewid, 2020), and illustrate processes of racialisation in different institutions and industries in relation to accumulative logics (N. Ali & Whitham, 2021; Saha & van Lente, 2022). Racialisation shifts in relation to historical changes in accumulation: while post-war social democracy can be characterised by a socialist nationalism (Virdee, 2019, p. 19), the advent of neoliberalism as a ‘raced market’ (Tilley & Shilliam, 2018) intensified capitalism’s differentiating logics (Kundnani, 2021).

Increasingly, studies of HE consider how its political economy is entwined with the production of racial, gendered and sexual difference. Gerrard et al. (2021) conceptualise racial capitalism in education as consisting of three interlocking structures: (1) the enclosure and dispossession of land and people; (2) the racialised division of labour through education; and (3) the extraction of value. Positioning universities within this analysis does not imply that they are purely capitalist institutions, or that facilitating capitalist forms of accumulation is their sole imperative. Boggs et al.'s (2023) conceptualisation of universities as 'infrastructures' of capitalism is useful here. For them, universities are partly understood as 'material systems constructed under the auspices of state and capitalist planning and regulation, for the purposes of organizing the movement of people, ideas, and other entities over time and space' (pp. 509–510). Importantly however, they simultaneously inhabit and can give rise to alternative, including anti-capitalist, relations, and forms of being, knowing and acting.

Studies in the North American context have shown how here, public and private universities, built by enslaved labour on stolen land (Wilder, 2013), further settler-colonialism at home and abroad, and facilitate militarism, climate change, gentrification and the extension of the prison-industrial complex (Boggs et al., 2023; Chatterjee & Maira, 2014). Boggs et al. (2019) analyse US universities' historically shifting modes of accumulation; capital accumulation is here, alongside theorists of racial capitalism, understood to consist of exploitation and expropriation. Crucially, universities' accumulative functions here go beyond the accumulation of capital; Boggs et al. (2019) highlight their 'particular function in the disciplining and management of non-capital surpluses, such as population and living labor' (n.p.). Ferguson's (2012) and Melamed's (2011) work draws out how US universities, in their interactions with the nation-state and capital, are active agents in the creation of forms of minority difference. The post-1968 university is considered central in the development of liberal and neoliberal multiculturalism, understood as modes of governing minority difference that rely on the selective affirmation of racial, sexualised and gendered difference in order to disavow the economic system's unequal distribution of premature death (Gilmore, 2007, p. 28; see also Hong, 2015).

Theories of racial capitalism underline that the interrelations between capitalism and race are global but manifest differently depending on local contexts (Bhattacharyya, 2018). Gerrard et al.'s (2021) tripartite framework can be applied to the British metropole. In the contemporary neoliberal UK university, enclosure of land and knowledges functions not, as in the North American context, through settler-colonial dispossession 'at home', but rather through facilitating appropriation abroad. This includes branch campuses, many of which are placed in former colonies (Dear, 2018b), as well as investments in, and partnerships with, extractive industries and warfare. At the time of writing, students protesting their universities' implications in Israel's genocide in Gaza, apartheid and settler-colonialism draw out the racialised underpinnings of universities' investments and funding links, and their settler-colonial effects (see LSE Palestine Society, 2024). A focus on racial capitalism's processes of enclosure, however, also illuminates the connections between universities' property expansion and racialised gentrification, understood as a form of accumulation through dispossession (Deptford is Changing, 2019). Knowledge production in universities continues to rely on racialised and spatialised epistemic hierarchies (Bhambra et al., 2018; Sukarieh and Tannock (2019). In turn, knowledge produced in universities can reproduce racialised, gendered and classed divisions of humanity, which then serve as a foundation for divisions of labour within and beyond universities. Campaigns such as 'Justice for Cleaners' have highlighted how British universities under neoliberalism rely on, while simultaneously reproducing, such a division of labour. Work by Unis Resist Border Controls (2018) emphasises that migrant students are both subject to exploitative fees and, due to their precarious immigration status, particularly vulnerable to labour market exploitation; the interconnected regimes of racialisation, bordering and marketisation position migrant students differently than home students in relation to neoliberal academic capitalism. Aligning with Gerrard et al.'s (2021) focus on valorisation and value extraction, scholars have begun to apply a racial capitalism lens to explore how diversity and inclusion regimes in contemporary UK universities interlink with neoliberalism (Phipps & McDonnell, 2021). 'Diversity and inclusion', such studies argue, relies on the extraction of the symbolic value created by the selective inclusion of those considered 'diverse', while continuing inequality is upheld through this very process (Phipps & McDonnell, 2021; see also Ahmed, 2012; Saha & van Lente, 2022). In Gerrard et al.'s (2021) words, 'diversity and inclusion' becomes valorised. As this scholarship demonstrates, universities, despite being not-for-

profit institutions, are complexly implicated in racial capitalism's accumulative dynamics.

These studies provide insights into UK HE's deep entanglements with race and capitalism. However, there remains significant scope to explore the role that racialised difference has historically played, and continues to play, within shifting UK HE funding regimes over time. This is particularly urgent as other welfare state institutions are coming under scrutiny for their relationship with racialised nation-building (Bhambra, 2022; Bhambra & Holmwood, 2018; Fitzgerald et al., 2020; King, 2022; Meer, 2022; Shilliam, 2018; Virdee, 2019). Bhambra's (2022) intervention into analyses of the British welfare state provokes a paradigm-shift in social scientific analyses of its institutions: Bhambra underlines that accounts of these institutions which fail to take Empire into account can only offer a partial picture. In Britain, welfare state services were funded by imperial resource appropriation alongside domestic taxation; in turn, many colonial subjects did not have access to the redistributive properties of the state (Bhambra, 2022). After formal decolonisation, Britain shifted from an imperial to a national self-understanding, which included a racialised reorganisation of who should and who should not have access to imperial wealth, including services deemed universal (Bhambra, 2022; El-Enany, 2020). While scholars of nations and nationalism tend to understand nation and Empire separately (Hansen, 2022), interventions such as Bhambra's underline that post-Empire nation-building in the metropole, closely entwined with decolonisation, was a fundamentally racialised process. In post-war Britain, welfare itself became 'controlling, pathologizing and excluding; [its] intersection with new immigration laws reproduced the threat and reality of expulsion in the manner of the earlier imperial state' (F. Williams, 2022, p. 27). This contributed to an overall structuring of access to wealth and resources, which were partly accumulated through colonialism, along the lines of whiteness (El-Enany, 2020).

Policies on migrant students are a productive site of enquiring into the relationship between HE, race, capitalism and the nation-state. However, with some notable exceptions (e.g. Lee, 1998; Raji, 2023; Walker, 2014), scholarship discussing these policies historically does not discuss their implications for

configurations of nation and difference. Some have explored this in other national settings: Megarrity (2005) shows how shifts in desirability of migrant students in Australia were closely linked to racialised immigration policy. P. Williams (1984), in exploring the 1979 UK policy, takes the category of ‘overseas students’ for granted, but offers important insights on the role of international fees in inaugurating marketisation. Walker’s (2014) discussion of the 1967 and 1979 policies helpfully establishes how attitudes to migrant students were tied up with wider policies on immigration. However, Walker focuses on situating contemporary policies rather than exploring the historical relationship between migrant students, political economy, race and nation-building. Lee (1998) discusses the categorisation of overseas students as ‘foreign’, situating it within the context of ‘fundamental difficulties encountered in the attempts to retain Britain’s place in the world’ (Lee, 1998, p. 306). Lee however only discusses the policy changes in the 1960s. Raji (2023) positions migrant students as essential to marketisation, and the political economy of HE more broadly. Drawing out key interconnections between migration control and policies on migrant students, this lays the foundation for our article.

Methodology

While this article pivots around two policy changes – the 1967 differential fees, and the 1979 full fees – and analyses the Commons and Lords debates surrounding these, it contextualises the policies within broader developments regarding migrant students and HE funding regimes. Therefore, we draw on relevant debates from 1962 to 2011 as supplementary data. Author 1 found relevant debates, including oral questions, through searching Hansard for the keywords ‘overseas student/s’ and ‘international student/s’. If debates did not concern migrant students directly, and the term was only mentioned briefly, a word search allowed her to select appropriate sections. Overall, the dataset consisted of 32 questions or debates. Not all debates surrounding these policies are accessible in Hansard, so this study focuses only on those available. After copying available debates into NVivo, Author 1 coded them thematically in the first instance. Inductive coding, with a particular focus on the relationship between migrant student fees, categories of foreignness and belonging,

nationhood and colonialism/Empire brought order into the dataset and highlighted relevant passages, which she analysed in further detail. Here, guiding questions were:

- How is the overseas student spoken about?
- How do discourses of belonging, foreignness and nationhood feature?
- How is colonialism and Empire understood and spoken about?
- How do colonial attitudes, tropes and discourses feature in the debates?
- How do discourses surrounding ‘overseas’/‘international’ students change over time?

This required us to engage reflexively with our reading and writing practices. Author 1’s EU residence and resulting classification as ‘home student’ allowed her to study in Scotland and ultimately migrate to England. This privilege stems from the very racialised logics discussed in this article. Author 2, who joined work on this article at revision stage, became politicised as a migrant woman of colour and a dual US–Iranian passport holder in the UK. While the US passport granted her relative ease in gaining a visa to come to the UK to study, she was consistently ‘othered’, both by UK Visa and Immigration and predominantly white UK universities. Experiencing and witnessing the effects of marketisation and border violence through the Hostile Environment policy, and the expansion of the border and counter-terrorism policies by Labour and the Conservatives, shaped her resolve to foster a critical exploration of UK higher education through the lens of racialised migrant students. Both authors’ involvement in the student movement for free education further illustrated the importance of engaging with the interconnections between HE, borders, nation and difference. As such, our investment in this research is underpinned by a commitment to dismantling border regimes in and outside universities.

Parliamentary debates do not directly reflect the behaviour of universities, nor do they give unmediated insights into public discourses at the time. Postcolonial and Black feminist thinkers have demonstrated the violence of the colonial archive, and the impossibility of ‘recovering’ lost voices and narratives

from its documents (Hartman, 2007; Lowe, 2015). However, Hansard provides access to justifications for, and contestations surrounding, political decisions – it is a relevant data source because it reflects hegemonic discourses about nation, self and other, while also shaping these discourses in conjunction with policy decisions. This article situates these debates within a broader, theoretically-informed analysis of policy developments.

The Robbins Report and post-Robbins fee regimes

The 1960s marked an important shift in Britain,² as it moved from an imperial to a national idea of itself (El-Enany, 2020). The 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act began structuring the category of Britishness around whiteness by introducing controls on immigration for Commonwealth subjects for the first time. Discussions revolved around public funds serving as attractions to those now defined as immigrants (El-Enany, 2020). For example, soon after the establishment of the NHS in 1948, ‘health tourism’ became a rallying cry for anti-immigrant sentiment, and debates surrounding access to these services hardened a sense of Britishness for those deemed to belong (Fitzgerald et al., 2020). In 1962, the Robbins Report recommended a significant expansion of UK HE. For most scholars, the report represents an opening, a ‘social democratic knowledge regime’ (Holmwood, 2016, p. 64) which moved away from the elitism of HE’s previous iterations. Aligning elite institutions with civic universities and polytechnics, the Report created a system of public HE, nominally ‘available to all who qualified by ability and attainment’ (Holmwood, 2016). Accordingly, the new categories of belonging inaugurated by the Commonwealth Immigrants Act were not yet formally inscribed in HE policy.

Most scholarship discussing Robbins does not place the policy into conversation with developments related to Empire. Holmwood (2018) describes the Report as a ‘race-blind project of modernisation’ (p. 43). Holmwood claims that the Report identified problems of HE access for women, but that it did not discuss ethnic or racial disadvantages, thus equalising access at least in formal terms. Holmwood thus argues that, while the development of the UK welfare

state should never be considered outside of the context of Empire, it was only in 1981, with the introduction of full fees for migrant students, that the university reinforced the differentiation between (majority white) British citizens and (majority non-white) migrant students. However, differential fees for migrant students were first introduced in 1969, with the motion passing through the House of Commons in 1967 (Lee, 1998; United Kingdom, 1967). This decision, we argue, brought the category of the ‘overseas student’ legally into being; a racialised category which should be read as arising within, and contributing to, the transition from Empire to nation, and the constructions of belonging that accompanied this.

The decision to charge differential fees was made by Harold Wilson’s Labour government, with Anthony Crosland serving as Education Secretary. Five years prior, the 1962 Education Act had introduced government grants for all students resident in local authorities. Fee bursaries and means-tested maintenance grants replaced the previous, less comprehensive system of localised grants, scholarships and bursaries, making HE a de facto cost-free system (P. Williams, 1984). Migrants who had arrived in the UK since 1945, and their children, were included in this settlement. With eligibility based on residency, new migrant students were generally not eligible for local authority funding; however, this was a practical rather than a formal matter. In the debate about the 1962 Act, Conservative Lord Newton makes clear that local authority funding should not indeed apply to ‘overseas’ students (United Kingdom, 1962). However, it was only in 1967 that the distinction between ‘home’ and ‘overseas’ students was formally inscribed in policy.

Between 1962 and 1967, growing right-wing activism led the Conservative Party to make immigration controls central to their platform; immigration was restricted further with the 1968 Commonwealth Immigrant and 1971 Immigration Acts (El-Enany, 2020). Aiming to decrease public spending, the 1967 policy introducing differential fees for ‘overseas students’ created two categories of students, as well as paving the way towards marketisation some decades in the future (Lee, 1998; Walker, 2014). As Lee (1998) argues, ‘The decision reinforced the legitimacy of controls over immigration from the Commonwealth introduced by the Conservative government in 1962, because it

treated Commonwealth students for the first time as if they were foreign' (p. 305). The policy was vehemently opposed by MPs across the political spectrum. Debates surrounding the policy reveal the malleability of categories of belonging and non-belonging – categories which were both racialised and racialising, and which justified the differential positioning of migrant and 'home' student vis-a-vis HE funding. The language used in the Commons debate on the policy reflects a sense of responsibility towards former Commonwealth subjects, and the conditionality of such responsibility in light of the perceived necessity of cutting university finance.

Richard Hornby, Conservative MP for Tunbridge, for example argues:

I believe now, more than ever, that it is good long term for Britain that these students should continue to come, because we are trying to feel our way and to understand what it means to be a medium-sized Power which wishes to exert influence and to play a proper part in the world. (United Kingdom, 1967)

Education Secretary Anthony Crosland on the other hand, defending the policy, states:

Of course I have a responsibility to overseas students. But I have other responsibilities as well – to slum and handicapped children in Britain and, if we are talking of people from overseas, to immigrant children in Sparkbrook and Southall. I hope in this context that no hon. Member will argue that £2 million or £5 million is chicken-feed or a trivial sum. It would build a host of new nursery or infant schools in Plowden areas. ... I thought it right to strike a balance, and not to continue to pay an indiscriminate subsidy of 90 per cent to all overseas students, rich or poor, from America or Nigeria. (United Kingdom, 1967)

Crosland, alongside others speaking in support of the policy, here justifies differential fees on the basis of a hierarchy of needs. Underlying this is the conception that while significantly subsidising some 'overseas' students – students considered 'exceptional' who could not afford to otherwise study in

Britain – may be justified,³ this amount of subsidy should not be provided unconditionally. Rather than a matter of practicality, the deservingness of the student now marked as foreign becomes a matter that must be interrogated and financially justified.

The racialised consequences of the decision to charge differential fees are noted in the debates. MPs and Lords, responding to charges of discrimination note that differential fees do not discriminate based on skin colour, but on residence. Labour Peer Lord Judd however warns that within the tense political atmosphere in which the decision was made, one is easily mistaken for the other:

It is wrong for anyone to suggest that this measure has been motivated by racialism. ... However, we must look at the way in which this could be interpreted in the country. The easily identifiable overseas students are the coloured ones, and we must realise the significance of the Government's proposals to an already undermined public opinion on this issue of racialism. (United Kingdom, 1967)

The discriminatory nature of the policies is pointed out by numerous MPs and Lords, and several oppose the policy on the basis of principles of Higher Education. However, migrant students are, throughout the debate, understood as outsiders. When differentiation between Commonwealth and non-Commonwealth students is made, this is with reference to Britain's responsibility towards its former colonies; the 'foreignness' of the students is not questioned. The highly politicised debate about, and subsequent introduction of, differential fees can be understood as contributing to the racialised UK nation-building process, Britain's redefinition from Empire into Commonwealth, and the establishment of itself as a power vis-a-vis other industrialised nations (Lee, 1998). Fees here act as a means for racialised differentiation, and this differentiation in turn gives justification to unequal fee regimes.

In the same debate, Robbins himself argues against the introduction of differential fees, noting the importance of overseas students both for intellectual

development and economic benefit of elite HE institutions (United Kingdom, 1967). In practice however, the post-Robbins HE opening of universities was a partial one; the ‘public’ that the social-democratic ideal referred to was already limited and relied on and produced racialised categories of belonging and deservingness. This conditionality then paved the way for differential accumulation as HE moved to a marketised, neoliberal system in the decades following. Further, while one might interpret the Overseas Student Fees policy as the erosion of a social-democratic consensus soon after it came into being, investigating Hansard debates shows that migrant students’ status within the HE funding regime was never taken for granted since the introduction of local government subsidies in 1962.

From quotas to full-cost fees

In the late 1970s, HE policy began its steady move towards the market. The emerging processes of commodification and marketisation were entwined with racialised differentiation, relying upon and reproducing the categories of belonging first established in 1967. As Holmwood and Bhambra (2012) discuss, the introduction of the full-fees policy in 1981 marked a significant advance in both marketisation and the racialised regulation of the student population. Policy changes surrounding ‘overseas student’ fees from the period evidence Britain’s shift away from Empire and towards nationhood. Britain, in this period, also began orienting itself towards Europe, joining the EEC in 1973 (El-Enany, 2020).

Since the introduction of the fee differential, migrant student fees had increased regularly until the mid-1970s, but against policy-makers’ expectations, numbers of migrant students had not declined (P. Williams, 1984). At this point migrant students’ fees in most cases did not cover the whole cost of their degree programmes. Parliament discussed the introduction of quotas or, alternatively, raised fees, as means to remove or limit the remaining state subsidies. This was framed largely as a decision between aid, soft power, and responsibility towards former Commonwealth countries on the one hand, and

the need to fund education for Britain's own students on the other. Crossbench Peer Lord Cairgovern for example notes:

I heard again the other day that phrase about Britain losing an empire but not yet finding a role. Part of that role now must surely be a contribution to the world, and particularly the developing world, through our transmission of knowledge and skills and, in part, our culture and educational experience. It is to our benefit, and the benefit of those we seek to help, that this Government and the next should not be afraid to make generous provision for overseas students. (United Kingdom, 1978)

This responsibility is very rarely tied to a critique of colonialism and Empire per se, nor is it acknowledged that the construction of migrant students as 'foreign' was still a relatively recent phenomenon. The discriminatory nature of the policy is pointed out, and some suggest the removal of fees altogether. Lord Milford, Communist Party of Great Britain Peer, stands out in framing the responsibility towards international student as a form of reparation (United Kingdom, 1976):

We must have a sense of guilt towards these people. ... We took the wealth from those countries and we did not bring them into the modern world. So that I think we have now a tremendous moral sense of bringing those people up, saving them from starvation. The way to do this is through education. (United Kingdom, 1976)

1977/78 saw a cap on the numbers of migrant, non-EEC students entering the UK. These quotas, it turned out, were not enough to alleviate the economic pressure that migrant students were seen to cause. In another highly controversial policy move, Parliament asked migrant students to pay the entirety of their fees from 1981, pre-empting a system that came into place for home students only decades later. This was in response to a government decision to cut grants to universities by 13%, even though those opposing the policy insisted that it made little financial sense (United Kingdom, 1979). In the House of Lords, most peers across the political spectrum opposed the policy. Colonial

nostalgia was rife, as was a sense of geopolitical instrumentalism, with Labour Peer Lord Stewart of Fulham for example emphasising:

... the political advantage, the desirability of having in the future people in important political and governmental positions in their country who have had their university education here rather than elsewhere. (United Kingdom, 1979)

Liberal Peer Lord Gladwyn claims that the UK was ‘turning its backs on the great civilizing mission which this nation has long performed’ (United Kingdom, 1979). These statements do not address the pre-1962 British status of Commonwealth students; the overseas student is transformed into a diplomatic tool, and a subject of postcolonial paternalism.

In the House of Commons, the policy was widely opposed, with MPs noting its discriminatory nature and its potential effect on universities. A radical critique of the relationship between nation-building and overseas student fees is offered by Plaid Cymru’s Dafydd Elis-Thomas, who notes:

The decision has racist and deeply ideological overtones. We must consider the educational implications of those decisions in the context of the historic relations between the United Kingdom—as a former imperial Power—and the former colonial dependencies [...] If the dependency created by the imperial system on the imperial centre for services that are not made available on the periphery, particularly services of specialist postgraduate higher education, is to be transformed into a system of Commonwealth participation, it must include the maintenance of the cultural and political links, particularly in the education service (United Kingdom, 1981).

The relationship between migrant student fees and nation-building is illustrated by the anxieties of opponents of the full-fees policy, about the potential loss of diplomatic and financial influence caused by the policy. Members of the Commons and Lords across the political spectrum, expecting a fall of approximately 30% of migrant students, noted that the fees would significantly harm British influence abroad, and would lead former Commonwealth students to turn towards Russia, where they would be indoctrinated into Communism. The Bishop of Chelmsford for example notes:

They find themselves in lands committed by their Governments to atheistic philosophies which are strange to them. ... They find themselves among proponents of Marxist-Leninist Communism, with an avowed aim to convert the world to their way of thinking and acting. These young men and women will go back to their own places again, bearing this message in many cases. (United Kingdom, 1979)

On the other hand, the few representatives speaking in favour of the policy highlighted the importance of cutting public spending and underlined that it would be impossible for Britain to continue financing every qualified student who joins its universities from abroad, to the potential detriment of working-class 'home' students. Empire, by both camps, is largely portrayed as a past event resulting in certain responsibilities; shifts in categories of deservingness, nation, self and Other, arising in its wake, are rarely thematised. Remaining subsidies for migrant students accordingly are widely understood as leading to return-on-investment through soft power and economic influence abroad.

The racialised underpinnings of the 'full-fees' policy did not escape those debating it. Liberal Peer Lord Gladwyn, when noting the advantage of 'overseas' students for 'making propaganda in favour of Britain when they return to their own lands' (United Kingdom, 1979), says:

Unfortunately there has always been a prejudice in this country against overseas students. The great majority, after all, are coloured, and many in this country believe that we have too many coloured people here as it is. A well-disposed

earnest overseas student, intent on succeeding in his course and then returning to his country, cannot easily be distinguished from an unemployed citizen of Great Britain of Asian or Caribbean descent, and unfortunately is often treated in the same way, irrespective of the great efforts of the Race Relations Board. (United Kingdom, 1979)

This quote constructs a hierarchy resulting in divisions of labour. The ‘well-disposed earnest overseas student’ is desirable, as they do not take advantage of state resources, contribute economically during their stay, and return home to further British interests abroad.

Due to EEC regulations, European students were to be exempt from full fees. As El-Enany (2020) argues, the EEC bolstered the global inequality left by colonialism and served as a means through which Britain could continue its global influence after Empire (see also Holmwood, 2018). While the EEC required that HE should be provided to European students under the same conditions as to home students, it was Britain’s decision to establish a fee gap between non-EEC overseas and home/EEC students – indeed, it would have instead been possible to lower migrant student fees to bring them in line with EEC/‘home’ fees.⁴ The conversation surrounding this new differentiation in the Houses of Lords and Commons provides a glimpse into the porousness of national boundaries and categories of belonging. Lord Gladwyn for example notes:

The possibility that by largely exempting EEC students from fees two or three times those charged even in America, we may expose ourselves under the Treaty [of Rome] to the necessity of admitting students from the Lomé Convention⁵ countries on similar terms does not seem as yet to have occurred to the Government. No doubt they would be absolutely horrified if it ever did. (United Kingdom, 1979b)

In a debate deploring the full-cost policy in the Commons, MPs underline the discrimination inherent in exempting EEC students from fees while charging Commonwealth students. In the House of Lords, the status of students from Hong Kong specifically was a matter of contention: despite the country's status as a British dependent territory, the students were to pay fees as overseas students. While Labour Peer Sir Edward Rowlands describes these aspects of the policy as 'absurdities and abnormalities' (United Kingdom, 1979) in the debate, they indeed can tell us much about both the fragility of nation-state-based systems of classifications of citizenship and belonging and about the role of the full-fee policy in consolidating them. The decision to charge full fees to Commonwealth students while positioning EEC students as 'home students can be understood as part of the reorientation of Britain away from its colonies and towards the EEC; a way of, in El-Enany's (2020) words, further separating the spoils of Empire off from its producers.

Despite widespread opposition, the policy passed its readings and became law in 1981. Peter Williams (1984) explains that 'in the first years of full-cost fees new entrants from developing countries [*sic*] dropped by 36 percent (13,600) to 24,300; while those from developed countries [*sic*] dropped by only 10 percent (700) to 6,100' (P. Williams, 1984, p. 271). The policy changes that followed soon after the introduction of full fees clearly signified HE's turn towards the market. By the mid-1980s, HE had suffered a range of cuts, and funding per student declined steeply from 1981 onwards, with the 1985 Jarratt Report recommending managerial reforms and introducing the notion of students as customers (McGettigan, 2013). Remaining subsidies for migrant students were amongst those early cuts signifying HE's move towards a marketable asset, and had been completely withdrawn by 1983 (Walker, 2014, p. 331). International responses to the fee increases were negative, with diplomatic relations between Britain and Malaysia and Nigeria particularly strained. Recognising the diplomatic challenges that this move had created, the government introduced the 'Pym Package' in 1983, consisting of a range of scholarships seeking to incentivise specific groups of migrant students to study in the UK. The package also included £100,000 aimed at the promotion of UK

HE overseas. However, this did very little to reverse the effects of the full-fees policy (Walker, 2014).

From Blairite multiculturalism to contemporary neoliberal difference management

Kapoor (2011, p. 1029) argues that since the publication of the 1999 Macpherson Report, ‘there has been a drastic escalation of the muting of “race”, which makes it near impossible to name, to identify and thus to redress racisms’. Blairite multiculturalism constituted both a privatisation of race, and a folding in of difference into the state’s regulatory mechanisms. As such, Britain’s normative whiteness remained intact but was glossed over by a mixture of assimilationism, selective representation and commodification of difference (Hall, 1997). Blairite HE policy should be understood in the same vein; focused on diversity while eliding it with ‘choice’, it can be placed squarely within logics of marketisation. While New Labour instituted a range of policies targeted at widening participation in HE, it built on the market-orientation, managerialism and ‘audit’ initiated by the Thatcher government (Lunt, 2008). When tuition fees for all students were introduced in 1998, fees charged remained highly differentiated by ‘home’ vs ‘overseas’ status, and differentiation widened in subsequent years (Murray & Gray, 2021). Students, conceived as making choices about their own HE provisions as ‘critical consumers’, were to be guided by metrics, increasingly on an international level through the introduction of league tables (Lunt, 2008).

The move towards ‘internationalisation’, including an increase in migrant students, formed a significant part of this policy. The economic foundations of this move were openly communicated: international fees were to subsidise access to HE for domestic students (Tannock, 2013). Indeed, under New Labour, non-EU migrant student numbers rose from 70,600 in 1997 to 117,200 in 2004 (Somerville, 2007). This positioned migrant students as a source of capital accumulation within a context of ever-decreasing cuts to state funding. The differentiation between ‘home’ and ‘overseas’ (or ‘international’) students,

cemented amongst others through the policies discussed above, justified this differential positioning. The Labour government targeted former colonies with significant numbers of wealthy individuals, such as Singapore, Hong Kong and India, as well as the emerging middle classes in China, Russia and Brazil for increased recruitment. At the same time, Labour tightened immigration controls: a points-based immigration system was conceptualised under Blair in 2005 (Somerville, 2007). Under this new system, universities were forced to apply as ‘highly trusted sponsors’ for overseas student visas, shifting the responsibility for immigration controls towards educational institutions (Dear, 2018a; Jenkins, 2014; Raji, 2023). London Metropolitan University was the first university to lose its ‘highly trusted sponsor’ status in 2012, with tabloids quick to portray the university’s migrant students as attending ‘sham courses’ for the purpose of migrating to the UK illegally (e.g. ‘Daily Mail Comment’, 2012).

Racialised categories of belonging served to justify the combination of differential fee regimes and aggressive border controls, while these policies in turn further reified these categorisations. In debates surrounding the policy changes on migrant students’ visas in 2011, Conservative MP Richard Bacon notes:

There is of course an issue – a very real issue – to do with whether students actually leave and, more to the point, whether those who call themselves students are nothing of the kind but in essence migrants by a different name, playing the system to come to this country for the purposes of long-term settlement. (United Kingdom, 2011)

In the same debate, Damien Green, Conservative Minister for Immigration, argues:

Genuine international students make an important financial contribution to the institutions that they attend, including our universities, where their continued contribution will be all the more important in the light of changes to the way in which those institutions are funded. (United Kingdom, 2011)

The category of ‘bogus students’, pre-empted in previous decades, circulates through this debate, coexisting with the understanding of migrant students as income streams, and as potential ambassadors for Britain abroad (see also Raji, 2023). Overall, the 2011 policy debate justifies migrant students’ admission to British universities purely in economic terms. This economic function is particularly salient as the 2011 White Paper *Students at the Heart of the System*, in addition to tripling tuition fees in all nations but Scotland for ‘home’ students to a maximum of £9250/year (McGettigan, 2013), set out the removal of all direct funding for undergraduate degrees in Social Sciences and Humanities. Luciana Berger, Labour MP for Liverpool at the time, notes in defence of softer immigration rules for migrant students:

The university of Liverpool has 3,000 international students, who generate not only £30 million of income for the university but a positive, knock-on effect for our local economy. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that if we do not ensure that those students can come to the UK, we will see, at a time when we are seeing cuts to our university budgets, massive impacts on local economies? (United Kingdom, 2011)

Framed as essential to the political economy of HE, there is no room for discussion on aligning migrant fees with home fees. This is despite the fact that with the introduction of full fees for home students, the original justification for the fee differential was void. Migrant fees have indeed been responsible for an increasingly high share of university finance since 2009: a share which is predicted to rise further in coming years (Office for Students, 2022). In this context, they become discursively portrayed as ‘cash cows’ which lower the standards of UK universities. A 2024 *Sunday Times* investigation sparked outrage by suggesting that ambitious migrant students’ parents can buy their low-achieving children’s way into prestigious degree programmes. Rather than considering this a symptom of marketisation, the programme echoed previous racialised and individualising discourses surrounding ‘low quality’ migrant students (see Unis Resist Border Controls, 2024).

However, these differential fee regimes are not the only way that the division of ‘home’ and ‘international’ students facilitates capital accumulation. Gerrard et al. (2021) discuss how contemporary neoliberal education regimes extract value through the commodification of diversity and inclusion, including through the diversity of its student and staff body. Indeed, universities and departments now commonly use the ‘international’ outlook and student and staff body as a marketing tool (Stein, 2017). Numbers of international students and staff form metrics determining league table positioning, including for the influential Times Higher Education and QS rankings (Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2015). As such, the representative politics of contemporary neoliberal universities combines the selective inclusion of those constructed as different – including ‘international’ students – with material and epistemic violence, while ‘rely[ing] on their effectiveness on the very market structures that produce racial exclusion’ (Rao, 2020, n.p.). Institutional racism, sexism, homophobia and (dis)ableism tend to remain despite ‘inclusivity’, ‘diversity’ and ‘equality’ initiatives (Ahmed, 2012; S. Ali, 2022), while practices of ‘everyday bordering’ (Yuval-Davis et al., 2018) are solidly instituted in universities. In collaboration with Islamophobic policies such as *Prevent*, these shape not only who can enter HE institutions and under what terms, but also what kind of knowledge can be produced by whom. Since August 2021, EU students are required to pay international student fees; the move towards national isolation and bordering thus increasingly bolsters HE finance.

Conclusion

The position of the migrant student in social-democratic and neoliberal HE funding regimes illustrates the relationship between HE governance, nation-building and racialised political economy. Shilliam (2018) notes that ‘a quintessentially “national” arrangement, Britain’s “welfare state”, was actually bound up in imperial determinants that racialized those deserving and undeserving of social security and welfare’ (p. 57). Debates on fees for ‘overseas’ students reveal that Post-Robbins HE provision was both conditional upon raced categories of belonging and contributed to producing, reproducing and stabilising these categories, thus tying into Britain’s project of moving from

Empire to nation. The construction of the ‘home’ and ‘overseas’ students allowed for differential positioning of these students regarding accumulation through education as the HE system moved from a social-democratic to a neoliberal, marketised one. In a neoliberal HE system, migrant students produce value through fees, as well as through the valorisation of their racialised difference.

Alongside studies of other public institutions, our article positions HE in the context of colonialism and post-Empire nation-building. As such, it contributes to sociological debates thinking through the legacies of these institutions in relation to racialisation and bordering (see e.g. Bhambra, 2022; Fitzgerald et al., 2020; Shilliam, 2018). An analysis combining political-economic developments in HE with an investigation of racialised bordering is particularly urgent given the increasing calls to conceptualise the contemporary UK university in a postcolonial manner: authors discuss the imperial foundations of disciplines (Bhambra, 2016; Steinmetz, 2013) and explore how decolonising universities might look like (Bhambra et al., 2018, 2020). This article, alongside such analysis, forces an engagement with the way in which universities are critiqued, both in theory and political practice. As university workers resist increasing cuts, departmental closures and precarity, we may retort to actions that defend the university-as-is from further marketisation, or alternatively, that hark back to the pre-marketised, post-war university as a template for progressive action. As this article has shown, developing critiques of universities that challenge their entanglements – regardless of funding regimes – with racialised extraction is imperative in envisioning free education beyond carcerality and border violence.

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Notes

1. We refer to ‘overseas’ or ‘international’ students when this language is used in the policy under discussion. We use ‘migrant student’ to refer to these students more generally, indicating their position *as migrants*.

2. Following El-Enany (2020), we use ‘Britain’ to refer to the sovereign, bordered nation-state which developed into its post-imperial form in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s.

3. Indeed, the vehement opposition to the policy led to the introduction of a £500,000 hardship fund for migrant students.

4. After devolution, Scotland further broadened the gap between EU students, who were to benefit from the free education offered to ‘home’ students (here designated as Scottish), and non-EU migrant students.

5. Aid and trade agreement, signed in 1975, between the EEC and 71 African, Caribbean and Pacific countries.

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