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The competition fetish in higher education: Shamans, mind snares and consequences

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Rajani Naidoo
International Centre for Higher Education Management, School of Management, University of Bath, UK

Abstract
Contemporary education reform worldwide appears to be locked in a competition fetish. This article explores the varieties of competition, including traditional academic forms, contests sponsored by governments and international organisations, market competition and status wars intensified by rankings. Resisting interpretations of competition as naturally occurring, it presents various macro and micro actors, referred to as 'shamans', that breathe life into the phenomenon and that are responsible for its generation, constitution and reproduction. These include structural drivers associated with political and regulatory regimes; and symbolic drivers constituted by normative and affective pressures. The presentation focuses on the extent to which the varieties of competition reinforce, displace, mediate or counteract one another and reveals how powerful policy and symbolic drivers interact not merely to power competition, and how competition forecloses alternative means of educational reform. The unintended consequences of competition on social equity, on academic work and on global well-being are highlighted, and suggestions are offered on ways to escape the competition trap.

Keywords
Competition, excellence contests, fetish, neoliberal higher education, ranking, world-class

Introduction

Education reform worldwide appears to be locked in a competition fetish. The imperative for change in higher education (HE) is concerned more and more with the overriding economic imaginary of the knowledge economy, a hegemonic discourse inextricably linked to the idea of global competition that frames political, economic and intellectual strategies and affects a wide range of institutional fields (Jessop et al., 2008). The intensification of the struggle for positional advantage in the global economy, the enhanced global mobility of corporate research and development, and the competition for highly skilled knowledge workers have all contributed to fierce competition

Corresponding author:
Rajani Naidoo, University of Bath, Claverton Down, Bath BA2 7AY, UK.
Email: R.Naidoo@bath.ac.uk

within and between national systems of HE. In addition, powerful transnational configurations have entered the fray. Competition in HE is related to, and sits in parallel with, global economic competition. It comes with its own set of rules, established by those institutions and systems already judged to be 'the best' on an international scale.

This article explores the constitution, variety, drivers and consequences of the phenomenon of competition in HE. The HE literature has in general focussed on the analysis of specific types of competition such as market competition (Ainley, 2004; Bok, 2003; Brown, 2010; Marginson, 1997) and status competition (Hazelkorn, 2015; Locke et al., 2008). However, there has been little in-depth attention given to the combination of material and emotional drivers that power competition, and the ways in which various types of competition interact. This article begins by arguing that competition has become so prevalent in HE that it can reasonably be referred to as a fetish. The varieties of competition occurring in HE and their interactions are outlined in the second section. Resisting interpretations of competition as a naturally occurring phenomenon, the third section presents various actors that generate and reproduce competition; and key consequences of unadulterated competition on equity, on academic work and on global well-being are presented. The article concludes by outlining strategies for escaping the trap of the competition fetish.

Competition as fetish

Drawing on insights from anthropology, psychoanalysis and political economy, the term fetish is used to explore the displacement of fundamental issues in HE which are concealed by using the fetish as a surrogate (Pels, 1998; Tanaka, 2011). According to Pietz (1987), the term arose in anthropology during the late 15th century in the interaction between Portuguese merchants and communities living in West Africa. Fetishism as a concept had its origins in a spiritual discourse about objects that were considered to have special powers to make desires come true, to protect individuals and communities from harm and to secure insights into the future (Pietz, 1985; Pietz and Apter, 1993). From political economy, the fetishisation of commodities refers to screening the underlying relations of production and translating relations between people into connections between things (Marx, 1965). In psychoanalysis, fetishism refers to an inanimate object or a part of the body becoming the focus of arousal, resulting in the fetish acting as a substitute while simultaneously concealing the absence of what it is replacing (Freud,1950; Freud and Strachey, 1962; Gamman and Makinen, 2004).

Insights from these disciplines offer a particularly fertile intellectual constellation for understanding the phenomenon of competition as a fetish in HE. Drawing from these meanings, HE can be regarded as being trapped in a kind of magical thinking which results in the belief that competition will provide the solution to all the unsolved problems of HE. Competition is expected to increase equity, enhance quality, lead to efficiency and protect against risk. The understanding of competition as a fetish alludes to a two-fold displacement that endows it with some kind of extra presence in the process of denying a specific fact. Competition thus has the power to enthral and, at the same time, to distract attention from a disturbingly true state of affairs in HE (Tanaka, 2011). These accounts also allude to powerful emotions at work. Emotionally, the fetish invokes feelings of power and pleasure as well as desire. Most importantly, the invisible hand of competition provides the means by which no-one is responsible for negative effects apart from the victims themselves.

Varieties of competition

Competition in HE takes many forms, including intellectual and geopolitical, and various forms of status competition. It is important to differentiate these different types because the effects of

competition do not occur in a one-to-one relationship (see also Krucken, 2017). As I will illustrate in the following sections, there are complex interactions between different forms of competition which may reinforce or displace certain competitive logics or combine into new hybrid forms.

A deeply embedded and long-standing competition in HE relates to intellectual work. The sociology of knowledge indicates that scholars have long engaged in various forms of rivalry which has both undermined competing scholarship as well as enhanced intellectual advances in various fields (Collins, 1998). The essence of this rivalry has been captured by Pierre Bourdieu's conception of HE as a relatively autonomous field which has historically generated its own deeply ingrained rules, values and professional protocols (see, for example, Bourdieu, 1988, 1998a) that were relatively independent from economic and political pressures (see also Mangez and Lienard, 2015). Struggles relate to types of field-specific resource which Bourdieu termed 'scientific capital': these were symbolic resources invested with value by the elite in the field (Bourdieu, 1986). The hierarchical ordering of academics, faculties and universities was thus internally judged and then projected outwards, and accepted as legitimate by external stakeholders. In the contemporary era, the competition for scientific capital remains strong, but it is ever-changing and other forms of competition are beginning to jostle for dominance.

The second form of competition is the contribution of HE to geopolitical rivalry, in which powerful international organisations and global for-profit corporations intertwine in complex ways with governments to win geopolitical games. Universities have become important components of national innovation systems for global competitiveness (Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff, 2000; Mowery et al., 2004): they are expected to produce and disseminate economically productive knowledge and train innovative knowledge workers. The transformation of HE into a global commodity has also resulted in HE itself becoming an industry for revenue generation (Naidoo, 2011). In the United Kingdom and Australia the dominant rationale for attracting increasing numbers of international students is primarily to boost income at the institutional level and trade surpluses at the national level. In continental Europe and the USA, these revenue-generating aims are supplemented by the aim to attract, develop and retain talent to produce innovation and generate longer-term value for the economy (Robertson, 2008).

HE also plays an important role in the race for influence through which powerful groups in influential nations assert their own preferred political, economic and cultural models (Naidoo, 2011). The powerful nations of Western Europe, together with the USA, have been joined by countries such as China which have sufficient influence to create multi-polar nodes of power and challenge global power relations (Henderson, 2008). Cultural influence in education has always occurred between countries indirectly through the hidden curriculum and through organisations such as the British Council and Confucius Institutes. More recently, however, more explicit attempts have been made. In Iowa, USA, a Republican Senator proposed a bill to force public universities to consider political affiliation when hiring new faculty (Flaherty, 2017). The Hungarian government has threatened to close the research-intensive Central European University which has worked to promote civic freedoms and democracy and has offered an impressive range of scholarships for refugees (Abbott, 2017). Economic and political rationales are often mutually reinforcing: as Eva Hartman (2008) and Enders and Westerheijden (2011) reveal, the export of the Bologna process to Africa and Latin America was designed to increase both Europe's market share of HE and its sphere of influence. Susan Robertson and Matt Kedzierski (2016) also develop an important analysis of the multifaceted factors that have resulted in Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea and China becoming rival destinations for students from the West.

The third type of competition is generally termed 'excellence policies' and involves deliberate strategies by governments to develop or enhance vertical stratification in national systems. The core political aim is to identify those institutions which are, or have the potential to be,

'world-class' (Deem et al., 2008; Huang, 2015; Ma, 2013). Funding is diverted to these institutions to provide positional advantage for the purposes of global competition. The policy initiatives to build world-class universities originated in China in 1995, followed by South Korea in 1999, Japan in 2002, and Malaysia in 2008. The United Kingdom was the forerunner in the European context in applying competitive measures to allocate research funding. This process has steadily gained momentum since the first Research Assessment Exercise, launched in 1986, and through subsequent iterations to the present Research Excellence Framework (Macilwain, 2009). More recent excellence initiatives in the United Kingdom have required universities to demonstrate the 'impact' of their research beyond academia (Watermeyer, 2016) and to measure teaching excellence (Gourlay and Stevenson, 2017). In some countries excellence policies have marked a break with long traditions of equality. The German Excellence Framework was launched in 2005 with the aim of equipping German universities to compete on a global scale by targeting funding on a competitive basis. As Kehm (2013) notes, this initiative has broken the tradition of universities being considered roughly equal in terms of prestige, quality and political treatment.

Universities also compete in more overt status wars to shape speculative value through global rankings (Brown, 2015). The proliferation of global rankings includes the well known Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) by Shanghai Jiao Tong University, the Times Higher Education World Reputation rankings, and the Leiden University ranking. As Wedlin (2011) has noted, rankings provide rhetorical devices with potentially important material consequences – some of which become enacted as self-fulfilling prophecies. Enders (2015) has illustrated how rankings provide new tools for constructing legitimacy and positional advantage in the field of HE by favouring a certain institutional logic based on research reputation while subordinating competing field logics. Rankings also open up spaces for corporate and media influence (Stack, 2016) and stimulate investments by government policy makers in line with the rules of the ranking game (Hazelkorn, 2015). An important paper by David (2016) illustrates how rankings are used to fabricate a larger-than-life threat of global competition to support neo-liberal reform. He demonstrates how rankings position elite English universities between the superiority of the USA and 'Asian ascent' and argues that this is fabricated through discursive ratchets rather than adherence to real numerical indicators.

While there is resistance to the application of market competition in HE, there is less protest, with some important exceptions (see for example Ordorika and Llyod, 2015), about the competition associated with excellence policies and rankings. As Enders (2015) has noted, this is because excellence contests and rankings reinforce the traditional competition for scientific capital and research prestige and play to a sense of national pride. These factors reinforce dominant scientific capital in the field of HE, resulting in both legitimacy and power. However, it is important to note that excellence policies and rankings also follow logics and assumptions that have the potential to devalue traditional scientific capital by recontextualising scientific capital and subtly altering various relative weightings.

In the next section, I turn to the structures and actors that work to constitute and reproduce competition. In keeping with the competition fetish metaphor, I use the term 'shaman', a term which conceptualises a person in certain religions as having special powers to control or influence events and who often ceremonially draws on 'fetish objects'. I use the term to characterise the agent that breathes life into the competition fetish. I touch briefly on a small range of collective actors such as governments, international organisations and corporations, and individual actors such as university leaders, academics and students to illustrates how competition is co-produced at different levels.

Shamanic actors and structures

In many countries, government is a key shamanic actor. There is increasing evidence of the rise of the competition state – a state that has abandoned public welfare and focuses instead on promoting

returns from market forces in international settings (Cerny, 2010). Rather than tempering the market, increasing articulation between the state and the market occurs. While this articulation differs across time and space (see, for example, Marginson, 2011; Mok, 2005; Valimaa, 2005), global trends indicate that in general governments are moving in the direction of creating the conditions for quasi-markets in HE while market mechanisms are deployed to achieve political goals (Naidoo, 2008). In some parts of the world, for instance the USA, the neoliberal project has been linked to xenophobic identity politics combined with promises of new forms of protectionism against global competition for those considered 'real citizens'.

In addition, international organisations also play a shamanic role. The World Bank embeds neoliberalism through structural adjustment programmes, conditions attached to loans and prescriptions for what is termed 'good governance' (Bayliss, 2011). Low-income countries are urged to deregulate HE and open up to international competition (Klees et al., 2012). Organisations such as the OECD (Organisation for European Co-operation and Development) also shape the actions of key actors through global assessment, benchmarking and policy comparison (Luke, 2011). Manuel Cardosoa and Gita Steiner-Khamsi (2017) reveal how educational systems are made comparable through standardised measurements which then serve as projection screens to urge policy makers to move education reform in a neoliberal direction. This form of coercive social construction can be seen in the ways in which international organisations have shifted their perceptions of the education systems of Sweden and Norway. These countries were once positioned as role models in education for the rest of the world. In contemporary times, however, the equitable principles of such systems have been challenged by the hegemony of neoliberal competition: Sweden and Norway are now positioned by the OECD as countries in need of reform (Pettersson et al., 2017).

Finally, global corporations have become potent political actors, with a clear agenda: to push as deeply as they can to open up public sector education to for-profit provision (Ball, 2018). Powerful transnational corporations have penetrated deep into governments to influence the inner workings of democracy (Barley, 2007; Monbiot, 2013) and are now part of the policy community, where they attempt to influence regulation which enables their own expansion. In an era of neoliberal deregulation, global corporations gain greater power to change the HE policy space in their own interests by advocating and developing instruments of competition as internationally applicable for global efficiency (Shahjahan and Morgan, 2016).

Actors inside the university

The responses of university leaders to externally generated competitive mechanisms include recontexualising such pressures within the university, developing mechanisms to protect the university from some of the most corrosive forces (Swartz 2017), or amplifying such external pressures to further their own internal managerial agendas (Deem, 2004; McNay, 2008). In addition, the requirement for universities to respond to increasing levels of competition has led to a new category of professional administrators, conceptualised by Enders and Naidoo (2018) as 'audit-market' intermediaries because they are pivotal portals for the translation and enactment of externally generated audit and market forces. Equally, many also take responsibility for the protection of the public good function of HE and protect the academic heartland from corrosive market forces. As collegial governance and academic autonomy erodes, this group of new professional administrators takes on a key role in influencing structures and cultures.

The positions of academics in various forms of competition are varied and ambiguous. For example, while the submission of HE to market forces has been resisted by some academics (Decuypere and Simons, 2016; Naidoo and Pringle, 2014), for others it has been highly seductive,

leading to what Leslie and Slaugter (1997) have referred as to as 'academic capitalism' (see also Cantwell and Kauppinen, 2014 and Findlow and Hayes, 2016). Elite academics in general work to co-produce the drivers, structures and templates of status competitions since these are based on criteria dictated by the internal reputational hierarchies that already prevail. Their success validates the political and economic underpinnings of the game (Enders, 2015) at the same time as the academic elite is incorporated in order to stall protest and help with the pacification and depoliticisation of the sector as a whole.

The final group of actors implicated in the reproduction of competition comprises students. The reconceptualisation of the student as a consumer of HE has been legitimised by governments who regard students as a competitive force that will bring about increased efficiency, quality and diversity (Naidoo et al., 2011). Various consumer levers to enhance student choice and control over the education process have been introduced. These include mechanisms for greater choice and flexibility, student 'satisfaction' surveys and the institutionalisation of complaint mechanisms. Information required by government agencies, including performance indicators, benchmarking statements and student throughput rates, is also used to facilitate the operation of markets by placing such information in the public domain to strengthen the hand of consumers (Molesworth et al., 2009). In this scenario, league tables produced by the media play a significant role. The rationale is that students will use such mechanisms to demand high-quality provision and will apply pressures on academics to make courses more relevant to the skills they require for the workplace. The related assumption is that consumerist forces will have a positive impact on the professional practices of academic staff. High quality will be rewarded and low quality penalised, and consumer choice will foster competition between universities to result in more responsive, inclusive and better-quality teaching.

The strategies and practices of the powerful macro and individual actors discussed above rely on beliefs, values and emotions which must be broadly accepted and remain unbroken for competition to work as a fetish. In the next section I will introduce the concept of the 'mind snare' to outline how the belief in competition is maintained and strengthened.

The mind snares of competition

The anthropologist Pierre Smith analysed the importance of 'mind snares' through which shamans perform rituals to exert power over beliefs, desires, and emotions (Halloy 2015; Smith, 1982). Smith has explained that instead of a clear and exact meaning, the ritual involves an evocative process which simulates and keeps the inferential process idle. This allows the mind to slip and fall into the trap that was set for it.

The first mind snare is that competition is believed to be naturally occurring. Attention is often called to the fact that competition is found in biological evolution (Hodgson and Knudsen, 2006). While more recent research in biological evolution has also drawn attention to collaboration, the perceived all-encompassing competition that occurs in the natural world is fused with so-called common sense in the social world. In this way, competition becomes a socially approved method of distribution and deciding who has access to the best resources. In addition, neoclassical economics has led to the belief in the ability of market competition to solve economic and social problems. This includes the belief that the interests in a given society are best served by allowing citizens to pursue their own self-interest with little restraint (Dequech, 2007). The assumption is that market exchange will automatically channel individual self-interest into a form of collective self-interest; and that this in turn will lead automatically to the greatest efficiency and equity for society as a whole.

These deeply ingrained beliefs come together to elevate competition to the status of *doxa*, a term Bourdieu uses to refer to an unquestionable orthodoxy that operates as if it were the objective truth. In its presentation as ritual, competition is de-historicised and de-socialised in order to claim the status of an objective, scientific truth (Bourdieu, 1998b). To question competition is therefore likened to insanity; it is also perceived as an act of heresy, because competition – especially market competition – is positioned as central to democracy. The more areas of human life that are subsumed under market competition, the more democratic and civilised societies appear to be.

The second mind snare is that competition is legitimate and just, because all participants have an equal opportunity to compete. With regard to universities and countries, Riyad Shahjahan and Clara Morgan (2016) demonstrat very powerfully that this is a fallacy. They show how the OECD, in attempting to implement its Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes, created spaces of equivalence across countries with very different geographic, political and economic contexts. Such contexts were universalised, delocalised and depoliticised so that they could be presented as legitimate comparative measures. Adriansen et al. (2015), in their analysis of relations between high- and low-income countries, reveal how global competition valorises templates that derive from centres of power, resulting in the reproduction of the current geopolitics of knowledge.

Meritocratic competition has been positioned as a cornerstone of the university. However, research by Pierre Bourdieu revealed how decontextualised understandings of meritocracy, conceptualised simplistically as the outcome of innate talent, play a vital role in rendering social advantage invisible while reproducing inequality (Bourdieu, 1988). Meritocracy also endorses a linear, hierarchical system in which the top cannot exist without the bottom (Littler, 2013). Raymond Williams (1958) has argued that the classic meritocratic symbol of the ladder represents the opportunity to climb; but that individuals can only go up the ladder alone. He asserted that meritocracy has 'sweetened the poison of hierarchy' by appearing to reward talent rather than possession of monetary wealth or accident of birth, while it weakens community, solidarity and collective well-being (Williams, 1958: 331).

In many social democratic countries, measures have been implemented to create greater equality of opportunity for students from disadvantaged groups. However, even this is being rolled back and a version of meritocracy is rising which is opposed to financial support, to redress and to contextualised systems of merit. Rather, as Jo Littler argues (2013), meritocracy is unashamedly tied to elitism and plutocracy.

The fourth mind snare works through a potent affective economy (Ahmed, 2004; Wetherell, 2012). Katja Brøgger's (2016) research on how monitoring techniques ignite a strong competitive desire by instilling a fear of shame and the thrill of fame is seminal in this regard. Managers, academics and students all work to co-produce the drivers, structures and templates of competition, fuelled by powerful emotions which Espeland and Saunder (2016) have referred to as 'engines of anxiety'. In this way, winners and losers are entangled in an affective economy which incorporates various forms of peer review, but with the terms of the competition largely set from outside academia.

In addition, it is now a moral imperative to be willing to enter the competition. Academics and students are encouraged to pursue their self-interest and maximise their gains. Those who are unable to enter HE are described as lacking aspiration. Lauren Berlant (2011) refers to the affective state produced under neoliberal culture as 'cruel optimism'. It is cruel because it encourages an attachment to the idea of a better future while the reality of neoliberalism actively blocks the fulfilment of such aspirations for the majority of people. An important cohort study by Curran and Hill (2017) suggests a correlation between neoliberal governance (which has forced young people into ever-increasing competition with one another under the auspices of meritocracy and the watchful

eye of increasingly demanding parents), and an environment in which securities and insecurities of personal experience are continuously generated. The researchers note that this has led to unhealthy forms of perfectionism, with the potential to generate severe psychological difficulties.

Consequences

While competition can, under regulated conditions, enhance diversity, quality and access in some areas of social life, there is increasing evidence that unfettered competition can also generate extreme inequalities. Competition can lead to precarious communities and produce an unprecedented intimacy between capital and governments (Brown, 2015). Competition privatises some of the most important public goods including those related to health public goods and eliminates shared and equal access to them (Bourdieu, 1998b). The consequences are no less dramatic in HE as Holmwood and Balon (2018) have argued. I will focus here on three negative consequences.

The first consequence is inequality. The different forms of competition interact to reproduce old hierarchies and channel new forms of inequality within and across national HE systems (Dale, 2016; Marginson, 2016; Pusser, 2001). These are competitions that are always rigged in favour of the elite. At the apex of this competition the battle for 'world-class' university status rages on: it is a battle that is fought between the most elite universities in the most powerful countries (Naidoo, 2017; Ordorika and Lloyd, 2015). Barbara Kehm (2013) has shown how the German Excellence initiative has resulted in more stratification, a downgrading of teaching and an additional administrative burden. In highly stratified systems there is no downward trickle but, rather, an upward spiral of resources and status. The elite is consolidated while everything else is undermined. This results in what I have termed the combined and uneven development of HE worldwide (Naidoo, 2014). High status, well-resourced universities in poorer countries are intimately connected to the global power nodes of HE. At the same time, there is a proliferation of under-resourced universities in rich countries which recruit the most disadvantaged students and which are detached from power and confined to their locality (Brown et al., 2015; Naidoo, 2014).

However, the most important consequence of competition is the legitimation of inequality. Politicians never say 'we need more inequality'. Rather, they say 'we need more competition', even though there is increasing evidence that it is precisely the decades of competition policies that have been unthinkingly deployed in the absence of protective regulation that drives up inequality (Davies, 2016). Competition thus acts as a mechanism through which the wealthy and the powerful draw on deeply inscribed beliefs to reproduce inequality while at the same time concealing intergroup stratification. The so-called invisible hand of competition provides the means by which no-one is responsible for negative effects other than the victims themselves.

The second consequence is the impact on academic work. The various competition frameworks engage those working in HE in a struggle to define its very worth. Market and status competitions, for example, have the potential to colonise epistemic and professional frameworks linked to scientific capital (Alvesson et al., 2017). Collini refers to this as 'a kind of mercantilism of the intellect' in which academics internalise the centrality of national economic competitiveness and which, he argues, is detrimental to the intrinsically co-operative nature of scholarship (Collini, 2012: 26). Mark Olssen (2016) has shown how the research excellence framework in the United Kingdom militates against 'blue skies' research, encourages dubious research tactics for maximising citations, and over-encourages conformity to systems of external expectations. He suggests that the effects of introducing a measure of impact has devalorised certain disciplines, particularly the humanities.

The transformation of HE into a status and economic commodity is likely to de-professionalise and harden the stratification in the academic profession. Academic work is likely to be configured into standardised units which can be priced and sold; knowledge is likely to be codified, tasks standardised and outputs quantified. Research and teaching is also more likely to be subject to managerial principles for supervision and control. While an academic elite may be able to engage in symbolic compliance, resistance and buffering, a growing number of academics, particularly those who are younger, is likely to be perceived as exchangeable and disposable. They are likely to face work intensification, lack of autonomy and increased insecurity (Brennan et al., 2017).

The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in England is the newest entry in a cascade of neoliberal market reforms. Current metrics which act as proxies for teaching quality include students' employment after graduating and student satisfaction indicators from the National Student Survey. Universities deemed to have 'excellent' teaching are rewarded with the right to increase undergraduate fees. However, as Joshua Forstenzer (2016) has argued, the TEF is less about teaching quality and more about allowing universities to charge differential fees; and it is less about students and more about an imagined group of employers. It also ignores the impact of social class and university status on employment success as well as contemporary transformations in the global labour market which have an effect on graduate employment (see Brown et al., 2010). Of even greater, and fundamental, concern is that it avoids the question of how a focus on student satisfaction can actually lower quality. There are major anxieties that the reconceptualisation of students as consumers has the potential to result in students gaining a sense of false entitlement, abdicating responsibility for their education and opting for instrumental learning (Molesworth et al., 2009). David James (2017) has indicated the importance of professional identity in high quality learning. In this scenario, the professional identity of academic faculty is undermined and academics are likely to opt for safe, risk-free spoon-feeding teaching; there is also the potential for gaming strategies to enhance student satisfaction scores.

The competition fetish, with its imperative for universities to enhance the competitive edge of each country in the global marketplace, also threatens the capacity of HE to work towards global well-being. This combines with the obsession to move up the ladder of world-class rankings in order to achieve global esteem. As mentioned previously, all of this merely serves to feed the national competition fetish while legitimating the neglect of national systems of HE as a whole. This is also a major problem globally because many of the key issues facing humankind – such as the destruction of the environment, rising inequality and violence across borders – can only be addressed by countries and universities working together. In this sense, the question of how HE contributes to global well-being becomes very important. The competition fetish, which presents itself as nation bound and running largely on economic tracks, hinders the great potential that universities have to work together to solve the pressing problems which threaten HE as a global community (Naidoo, 2017).

In the next section I turn to an exploration of some of the ways in which we can respond to the most corrosive effects of the competition fetish.

Beyond the competition fetish

It is important to avoid adopting a nostalgic view of a golden age of HE that existed before new forms of competition entered the HE arena. HE has always contributed to enhancing equality as well as reproducing inequality. Teaching has often suffered because of the relatively higher status of research, and quality has been uneven as HE systems have transformed into mass systems. However, it is important to understand what has caused these issues and the extent to which competition can provide solutions to these problems.

It is also important to acknowledge that not all competition is negative. Traditional academic competition concerning scientific capital has resulted in major intellectual advances. More recently, new types of competition have been suggested which change definitions of success and reward universities for value-added work, such as recruiting disadvantaged students and enabling them to succeed.

This article, however, seeks to counter the proposition of competition as a fetish. I am arguing against the idea that different types of competition can be used, unthinkingly, to answer all the unsolved problems of HE. My concern is that competition has become so powerful that other ways of organising, such as collective action, co-ordination or planning, are rendered obsolete and described at best as quaintly old fashioned or, at worst, as anti-democratic. It is thus important to develop theoretical and empirical research which interrogates the idea that competition in all areas of HE will result in equity and quality. Evidence-based decisions need to be made in relation to which aspects of HE may benefit from what types of competition and which areas of HE need to be protected.

In relation to global well-being, while important research foundations are being signalled (see for example Marginson, 2017), robust theoretical resources to examine the relationship between HE and collective global goods are still in the early stages of development. We have not moved very far from economic definitions that are not very helpful, because global goods do not occur naturally in society but, rather, are socially constructed and always amenable to contestation and negotiation. Historically, analyses have also remained heavily reliant upon the role of the state in securing such goods, and many accounts depict state actors across countries working collectively. Research in general also remains wedded to the strong division in mission between public, private and for-profit provision. However, the diminishing role of governments in securing collective social welfare and the blurring division in mission between public, private and for-profit universities points to the need for the reconceptualisation of such relations.

Research is also required to challenge the neo-classical economic view that individuals are only capable of acting out of self-interest and that there is no alternative to competition. In his book *The Moral Economy*, Samuel Bowles (2016) argues persuasively that appeals made to our self-interest can undercut intrinsic moral impulses and cause institutions to work sub-optimally. Elinor Ostrom, the first woman to win the Nobel prize for economics, has, with her colleagues, documented thousands of cases of people collaborating for the greater good (Ostrom, 2015). She has challenged the idea that people are trapped in competitive, individualistic behaviour which in the end will destroy common natural resources. For example, two communities living on fishing by a great lake might be expected to compete to fish the lake until it is fished dry. Her own extensive field research in Nepal, Spain, Japan and Indonesia revealed that people are not the greedy, selfish actors of standard economic theory. Her work revealed examples of individuals coming together to decide on quotas of fish, or using fish nets with larger holes so that young fish were not caught. They developed rules and trust and sanctions. In these ways, a natural resource was made available for their children's children. Elinor Ostrom and her collaborators revealed to the world that individuals can organise themselves in combination with diverse polycentric organisations beyond the state and beyond the market, to share and sustain rather than compete and deplete.

In HE, day-to-day life shows hundreds of examples of compassion, courage and collaboration, despite the pressures that push individuals to be selfish and competitive. There are also inspirational examples of resistance in countries such as Mexico (Parraguez-Sanchez, 2016) while research-intensive universities in Colombia are collaborating to develop major peace programmes which include incorporating former illegal combatants into HE (Restrepo and Naidoo, 2017). In addition, the movement for cooperative universities stands as a very interesting challenge to the competition fetish. Winn (2015) and Neary (2014) have indicated the promises of co-operative education in the Social Science Centre at the University of Lincoln in the United Kingdom. A more

established HE cooperative is the University of Mondragón which was founded in 1997 in the Basque Country in northern Spain. A delegation of academics undertook a field trip to Mondragón and hailed the university as a highly successful alternative to 'neoliberalised university formations'. They stated, 'It is possible to create and manage successful universities that do not involve the exploitation of faculty as passive employees and the treatment of students as mere clients' (Wright et al., 2011: 54; see also Wright and Greenwood, 2017).

To conclude, HE is too important to be abandoned to a fetish of competition. Bourdieu has written very powerfully about how neoliberalism has systematically destroyed collectives (Bourdieu, 1998b). I have argued elsewhere that the funnelling of the lion's share of resources into building world-class universities starves HE systems as a whole and undermines the potential to build high quality and equitable systems that reward institutions with diverse missions. Rather than building world-class universities, the focus should be on building world-class systems which contribute to social and economic development for all (Naidoo, 2018). The HE community as a whole needs to find ways through research, teaching and community engagement to re-collectivise. The small and big acts of resistance need to be sustained. There is an urgent need to come together as policy makers, researchers, teachers, managers and students, to build new visions and alternative ways to teach, research and contribute to global wellbeing.

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ORCID iD

Rajani Naidoo https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2129-2095

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Author biographies

Rajani Naidoo is Professor of higher education management and Director of the International Centre for Higher Education Management in the School of Management at the University of Bath. She sits on the research and development steering commiittee of the European Foundation for Management Development and is on the editorial board of numerous journals including the British Journal of Sociology of Education and the Internationa Journal of Sociology of Education. Her research interests include new forms of imperialism and higher education; public sector markets and audits; universities and global wellbeing and the changing nature of the academic profession.