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Abstract

This paper proposes a theoretical discussion of university welcome practices to facilitate the inclusion of and familiarity with incoming students. The research is based on a case study of three English universities in the London area hosting students from diverse social backgrounds; interviews were conducted with staff from various professional ranks who interact with or take care of incoming students. The core idea is that welcome practices shape the boundaries of universities by carrying out a social process of mediation within their respective environment. This is a twofold frontline mediation that implies what I call intermediation and mediatisation. Intermediation is face-to-face guidance and support for students, whereas mediatisation is the semiotic configuration of the environment in which the students circulate. Serving conflicting purposes, from democratic access to culture to heteronomous submission to business, frontline mediation orients incoming students and influences their choices in line with the overt and latent aspects of universities.

Keywords: support for incoming students, transition to higher education, care/caring, boundary-work, university staff.

Il contributo propone una discussione teorica sulle pratiche di accoglienza universitaria per facilitare l'inclusione e la familiarità con gli studenti in entrata. La ricerca si basa su un caso studio di tre università inglesi nell'area di Londra che ospitano studenti provenienti da contesti sociali diversi; sono state condotte interviste con personale di vario ordine professionale che interagisce o si prende cura degli studenti in entrata. L'idea centrale è che le pratiche di accoglienza modellano i confini delle università portando avanti un processo sociale di mediazione all'interno del rispettivo ambiente. Si tratta di una du-

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plice mediazione di prima linea che implica ciò che io chiamo intermediazione e mediatizzazione. L'intermediazione rappresenta l'orientamento e il sostegno in presenza per gli studenti, mentre la mediatizzazione è la configurazione semiotica dell'ambiente in cui gli studenti circolano. Servendo a scopi contrastanti, dall'accesso democratico alla cultura alla sottomissione eteronoma alle imprese, la mediazione in prima linea orienta gli studenti in entrata e influenza le loro scelte in linea con gli aspetti palesi e latenti delle università.

Parole chiave: supporto per gli studenti in entrata, transizione verso l'istruzione superiore, prendersi cura, il lavoro di confine, il personale universitario.

Introduction

As a consequence of the explosion of enrolments in higher education, educators, professional staff, managers and political authorities in Europe have been confronted with diverse categories of students over the last thirty years (Chevaillier *et al.*, 2009; Hinton-Smith, 2012). In addition, university governance has undergone rapid changes in terms of patterns of internationalisation and mobility (Brooks, Waters, 2011), quality assurance (Beerkens, 2015) and competition (Naidoo, 2016). In the context of increasing managerialism in higher education, universities have changed the way they go approach incoming students, stakeholders and institutions (Charle, Soulié, 2015; Watts, 2017).

Addressing the needs of different categories of students has implicated the challenge of ensuring intercultural and institutional conditions to welcome and support them, especially first-generation students and members of underprivileged groups (Kimura, 2014; Michaut, Romainville, 2012). In recent decades, British universities have provided an increasing range of services to facilitate the transition to higher education, particularly through orientation, advice, welfare and health support.

Focusing on the experience of both professional and academic staff, this paper examines institutional practices that are expected to help students become acquainted with their university and integrate into it. I intend "welcome practices" as institutional support and guidance for incoming students, that is, for people who arrive at a higher education institution as students, regardless of their academic trajectories and

performance in schooling. This includes first-year students as well as mature, half-time, transfer and international students. Staff involved in welcome practices try both to provide basic services to as many students as possible and to treat each student uniquely.

The question this paper answers is how welcoming practices are involved in shaping the boundaries of the university. Taking a comprehensive perspective, this paper proposes a theoretical discussion of the work done by frontline staff. The core idea is that welcome practices redefine external boundaries by performing a process of frontline mediation with incoming students from diverse backgrounds.

First, I will explore how the literature on transition to higher education is helpful in understanding the way universities take care of incoming students. I will then outline the main activities that English universities undertake for those students. Finally, I will define frontline mediation and show how welcome practices shape the boundaries of the organisation[1].

1. State of the art, approach and methods

I present here a synthesis of the literature on the transition to higher education, accounting for some of the theoretical limits of the notion of transition. I propose to explore welcome practices for incoming students by considering not only the experience of the beneficiaries but also the care taken by staff in interacting with them as well as the boundaries of the organisation.

1.1 On transition to higher education

British universities have been at the forefront of welcome practices in Europe since the 1980s (Nutt, Calderon, 2009). Some of them have been among the pioneers in carrying out initiatives for first-year students, people with disabilities and students in international mobility. In this decade, the British government and key educational bodies, such as the Office for Students and the Higher Education Academy

[1] For the purposes of analysis, we will take universities as organisations. Following Aldrich and Ruef, these can be defined as "goal-directed, boundary-maintaining, and socially constructed systems of human activity" (Aldrich, Ruef, 2006 p. 4).

have promoted this type of initiative in funding and support policies (Bourn, 2007; HEFCE, 2008; OFS, 2018; Thomas, 2012). Following some of the recommendations of new public management, universities have been urged to "put students at the heart of the system" to enhance the student experience, encourage retention and promote competitiveness (BIS, 2011). In this institutional context, the notion of "transition" has been widely used in research on what we call here "welcome practice".

According to McInnis *et al.* (2000), transition is an institutional process involving pre-entry activities – particularly those aimed at providing information to potential students and their families – and actions to help students achieve academic, social and administrative integration. Whittaker (2008) notes that an effective transition to higher education is easier to achieve when support is available from the first day and targets all students rather than just "at-risk students"; this prevents the latter from feeling stigmatised by such diverse treatment.

Key research about support for incoming students focuses on academic literacy. It shows that training in basic literacy skills, as well as the explicitness of teachers' academic expectations, are key factors in students' success (Wingate, 2015). However, by focusing on issues of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, this area of research tends to overlook the non-academic dimensions of student integration.

Taking into account the work of a larger number of staff teams and institutional arenas, there is a heterogeneous field of publications on the borderline between research and expertise. These pubblications report on initiatives that are expected to "work" to improve "student experience", ensure their "satisfaction" and reduce drop-out rates (see, for instance, Andrews *et al.*, 2012; HEFCE, OFFA, 2014; Tremblay *et al.*, 2012). The perspective of these – often interesting – publications is usually limited as the intention of the authors is practical and the tone is prescriptive, which is somewhat at odds with the disinterested, explanatory and comprehensive stance expected in research (Fernández, 2010).

As a result, as Gale and Parker (2014) note, the concept of "transition" itself remains under-theorised by literature. It is assumed that transition is a linear process from secondary school to university degree or employment that should be completed as quickly as possible

and without interruption (Breen, Jonsson, 2000). I agree with Gale and Parker, who argue for a critical and more complex vision of transition, including non-standard academic pathways and diverse temporalities. However, to achieve such a critique of "transition", as objectively as possible, I propose an original approach, namely on the experience of staff and the boundaries of organisation.

1.2 Boundaries and care work

Transition, as an institutional process, implies not only student experience but also the concrete work of frontline staff who interact with and take care of incoming students. They may apply, adapt or resist educational regulations. In other words, to better understand the transition experience, I argue that it is necessary to focus not only on the individuals but also on the organisation. To discuss how welcome practices shape the boundaries of universities, I will draw on the concepts of boundaries and care.

The concept of "boundaries" has been widely used in the social sciences over the last forty years. It has helped analyse social processes of differentiation and separation among groups as well as cooperation, crossing and hybridisation phenomena (Lamont, Molnár, 2002). Regarding higher education, two approaches to organisational boundaries are prominent[2]. On the one hand, many publications analyse how universities shift their boundaries by establishing competitive or collaborative relationships with other universities, secondary schools, state agencies or private stakeholders (Allouch, 2022; Reale, Primeri, 2015; van Zanten *et al.*, 2015; Westerheijden *et al.*, 2007). This focus on boundary shifts has been beneficial in identifying broad system dynamics and structure. On the other hand, the literature has explored how organisations manage boundaries internally. The main questions usually concern the maintenance of internal boundaries between disciplines and groups, and the preservation of memory and values against an environment perceived as threatening (Cribb *et al.*, 2017; Lantheaume, Simonian, 2012; Morley, 2003; Paye, 2013).

[2] These authors do not necessarily use the terms boundaries or organisation, but their research fits the meaning of these terms discussed here.

To explain the concrete work of frontline staff, I will draw on studies of the work and ethics of care that have gained visibility in education over the last twenty years (Fernández-Vavrik, 2017). All democratic systems implement procedures for the distribution of caring responsibilities, which are essential for maintaining and repairing social ties in groups, organisations and society as a whole (Tronto, 1993). In higher education, the terms "care" and "caring" have been recently used in two areas in particular. Some researchers have explored barriers for certain types of vulnerable students and academics, especially those who are sick or disabled (Dugas *et al.*, 2018; Riddell *et al.*, 2005) and those with family duties (Moreau, Kerner, 2015; Rubin, Wright, 2017; Stevenson, Clegg, 2012). There is also a rich literature exploring the links between teaching, supervision and care in academia (Barnacle, Dall'Alba, 2017; Bessin, 2016; Motta, Bennett, 2018).

To underline the boundary position of workers who interact with and take care of incoming students, I will refer to them as frontline staff. This paper focuses on the frontline activities of universities to investigate how institutional and practical concerns are articulated[3]. It considers boundary-work as a set of practices that maintain, extend or shift organisational boundaries[4]. This refers to institutional frontline work, including non-academic or professional staff. They exercise some form of care with respect to incoming students, ranging from simple attention to students' needs to taking charge of sensitive cases and emergencies.

1.3 Methods

Unlike much of the literature on transition, I do not limit myself to first-year students. Nor do I restrict myself to a particular type of staff – for example, only teachers or only the international relations team – or to a specific period in the beneficiaries' trajectories – for instance,

[3] I focus on incoming students and leave aside other possible stakeholders, such as families, government bodies or private corporations.

[4] The term "boundary-work" was conceived in the 1980s to analyse how scientists distinguish their expertise from common sense and know-how of lay people (Gieryn, 1983). In the field of education, this term has been helpful especially to account for the interactions between professional groups and non-educative actors (Papanastasiou, 2017).

the first six weeks of classes. Unlike most research on care, I use the term to explore frontline work. This concerns all incoming students, not just those identified as "vulnerable" by the institution. In addition, I use the concept of care to explore academic life without limiting myself to teaching or assessment. I assume, as do other researchers (Ibos, 2019; Tronto, 1993), that "taking care of" and "caregiving" are terms that describe activities rather than moral dispositions.

My research is based on the study of three cases using purposive sampling. In 2017 and 2018, I had the opportunity to conduct a qualitative inquiry in three English universities[5]. I observed welcome weeks and open days on campus and I conducted in-depth interviews with thirty staff – team members and managers who regularly or occasionally come into contact with incoming students. I also studied the websites of these universities and conducted observations of education fairs organised by the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) in different cities. For reasons of space, I limit myself in this paper to presenting the results of the interview analysis[6]. However, these data are the result of a prior process of triangulation with the other two methods, in order to ensure both their significance and the highest possible degree of validity.

I tried to ensure diversity in the selection of the cases. 'M University" is a post-1992 institution located in the suburbs of London, in an area with an over-representation of the working class and minority groups. Then, 'N University" is a London-based member of the selective Russell Group, with high international visibility and a presence of students from advantaged backgrounds. The third institution in my inquiry, "P", is also a member of the Russell Group but it enjoys less international prestige; it is a couple of hours by train from London.

[5] My research was funded by a Marie Curie Fellowship granted from the European Commission (« WELCOME-UNIVERSITY – Newcomers at the University. Welcome practices and staff involvement in the UK », grant agreement number 750444). It was carried out before Brexit and the Covid-19 health crisis.

[6] The semi-directive interview guide had three parts. Questions were about the person's roles in the university and their involvement specifically in activities to welcome incoming students, about working conditions and coordination with other teams, and about their overall perception of a welcoming environment.

One of the challenges of sampling was to gain the trust of interviewees in the context of growing commodification and competition between universities. In some cases, I had to make a major effort to get them to step out of their role as "promoters" of their university to talk to me as sincerely as possible about their work. To achieve so, I stated as clearly as possible the objectives of the research, explaining that I would ensure confidentiality as stipulated by the European General Protection Data Regulation (GPDR) and that I would not carry out a kind of evaluation of their university but as impartial an inquiry as possible of the staff's experience. The fact that the research was financed by a grant from the European Commission perhaps favoured their trust.

2. Support for incoming students at English universities

In this section, I present the results that will be discussed in the next section. It gives an account of how staff understand those dimensions of their work that are the most important in going about welcome incoming students. Control of information and control of students' attachment appear as key dimensions.

2.1 Overt end: various staff members caring about students' integration

In considering how universities care about incoming students, it is fruitful to distinguish between overt and latent aspects. The overt end is to take care of them and ensure their well-being, to facilitate their integration as quickly as possible.

In September, Welcome Week includes induction, as well as administrative advice, socialisation and entertainment activities. All incoming students usually complete the registration process and receive an identification card during this period. They also receive information about their programme, timetable and campus facilities. They may take part in city tours and evenings organised by societies or the Students' Union. Home students and international students usually attend the same events when arriving at their university, even though the latter have to take part in additional activities due to migration requirements.

After Welcome Week, universities usually try to frontload their resources. This is because, according to most respondents, the vast

majority of drop-outs tend to leave during the first term, particularly the first six weeks:

> Our well-being centre and our colleges report that students who might seem fine at the beginning of term, actually if they're going to be homesick and they weren't at the beginning, that they might start to wobble week six […] If anyone's going to wobble, it tends to be week five or week six and then immediately after Christmas, when they come back from being at home for Christmas (S., P University, managerial position, female)[7].

Like this staff member, the majority of my interviewees expressed some form of care for incoming students that included attention to their well-being, not just their academic performance. Staff present themselves as people ready to intervene in case of need, who are aware of the typical issues incoming students face:

> It's almost like, without trying to be too patronising, showing them the way of the world and how to live when you're at a university, because it is very different. It's most people's first time away from home. That's a big challenge in itself. Then having to manage your own money, that's a big challenge in itself. Having to cook for yourself. Having to shop for yourself. Living with other people. So, I think, over the past few years most institutions have got a lot better at this and recognised this a lot more (T., N University, managerial position, female).

As the following staff member explains, people from various teams are supposed to efficiently coordinate their expertise to take care of incoming students:

> Lots of the services are… feel very overworked at the staff turn, in particular the student services side of things which are really, like, the frontline. […] I think that we have to be careful of these students that maybe slip through the net. It may be that they've sort of… sent one email once and it got missed, and those feelings of sort of resentment can start to build quite quickly (E., N University, team member, female).

[7] Each excerpt of interview includes a random letter to identify the person, their university and their position in their team. To ensure anonymity, the service to which they belong is not reported.

According to her, it is not only Student Services who are accountable for the sort of newcomers. Staff with less responsibility is also supposed to intervene from time to time to ensure that all incoming students are supported. All staff need to be "careful" enough to prevent students from "slipping through the net" of the organisation and to avoid their "resentment".

In short, members of the Welcome Team and Student Services at English universities are the ones most involved in welcome practices. However, my observations confirm that staff working in very different areas have a role in activities or support for incoming students. For example, finance, disability services, widening participation, academic services, health and well-being, administration, migration support, career and employment, chaplaincy, sports, campus services, security, accommodation and marketing. Members of the Welcome Team are responsible for approaching every incoming student, unlike, for example, members of the International Student Support Team who naturally target only this group. In addition, a finance officer can deal with the specific financial/economic problems of some students without necessarily being aware of their psychological or social difficulties. Furthermore, most of the people I met with management responsibilities have little contact with students. They rely on the information and concrete actions of other members who are *caregivers* on a day-to-day basis. In Tronto's (1993) terms, while some officers do not *take care of* the personal problems of students, they are expected at least to care *about* them.

2.2. Latent ends

*2.2.1 Control of informati*on

Regarding potential and incoming students, initial contact usually takes place via the university website, social networks and during education fairs. Most of the information conveyed is standardised and rule-based but occasionally includes the testimonial of advanced students – without the reader being able to know how spontaneous or authentic this testimonial is. Marketing services have increasingly carried out this process during the last decades.

Education fairs are an essential means of providing information, the most important of which are organised by the governmental body

UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service). Their exhibitions are set up in large venues where posters, brochures and wall inscriptions with slogans and logos are prominent. This staff include "student ambassadors" in vividly coloured t-shirts, who are expected to give advice in a more informal way.

One of the concerns of staff at first contact with incoming students, at education fairs or on their campus, is to provide essential information. Information overload, according to staff, prevents incoming students from clearly distinguishing the degree of importance and urgency of each message:

> So definitely the overload of information is a huge problem. […] I've popped into a few inductions in September and you hear people telling them about, I don't know, plagiarism and some of the things. [These things] are really going to be key when they start to write their first assignments or sit their first exams [but they] probably won't be for a couple of months yet (E., N University, team member, female).

One of the causes of overload is the competition for staff from informal channels of communication. Staff seem to both rely on and distrust these channels between students:

> If we're going to make students feel comfortable, then I think we [staff in general] have to be more visible. […] One of the things I'm thinking about is we're going to have a pop-up desk twice a week. […] A lot of students have really simple questions, but they don't think it's worth signing up for. So, what they do is they then ask their mates, "what do we do about this?" And you see them in class and they've done something really silly and you say, "why did you do that?" "Well, my mate said". "Don't ask your mate, ask me; I'm the one who knows" (S., M University, managerial position, male).

The circulation of information among students seems to be a source of concern for staff, given the risk of misinformation and misunderstandings. That is why some staff members prefer to provide and collect information by personally meeting students:

> I'm a great believer in talking to people who are using your services because, funnily enough, you get to understand a lot more about whether they like what you're doing. […] And I think it's, yes, okay, you're just talking to a few students here and a few students there, so

> it's a bit anecdotal, but I think it does give you a bit of a sense of whether they're finding what you're providing good or not (J., M University, managerial position, male).

Control targets not only the influence of informal channels of communication but also the dispersion of official channels:

> [Some years ago] each academic department would have their own website, often each administrative department would have their own website, and we provided some central structure and sign-posting to that stuff, but we were not directly involved in managing that stuff. […] And that persisted for quite some time, and part of my role, was to negotiate, persuade and explain why that approach was necessarily limited and ultimately unsatisfactory. And that these were important communication channels, that needed to be managed professionally (R., P University, managerial position, male).

Control involves professionalisation and centralisation of information, in terms of the content and form of the messages conveyed to incoming students. These are supposed to reduce the risk of contradictions between bodies and overlaps of information.

Information overload, overlap and lack of information appear to be detrimental to both the recipient and the organisation. Information control is key to orienting and advising students according to their needs and the organisation's objectives. It is also important for the organisation to obtain feedback from students and to anticipate potential drop-outs. It is key to issues of image and reputation – in the context of increasing market competition. Overall, information management enables staff to maintain control of their work and to reduce the risk of interference in the relationship with incoming students.

2.2.2 Control of student attachment

I said earlier that caring about incoming students means, on paper, taking concrete measures of support. I then went on to say that, in addition to this overt end, work aimed at incoming students seeks to control the information that circulates about the university. The second latent end is to control the attachment of students to prevent them from detaching from the university:

> …engagement and drop-out are big things […] any student who drops out is actually more than likely a failure on our part, not to engage with them properly, to find out what the issues are… (T., P University, managerial position, female).

To monitor attachment, staff rely on specific know-how based on social categorisations. Whether or not they are in close contact with users, frontline staff work is based on categorising students' needs and demands. By welcoming and accompanying incoming students, frontline staff make the first decisions about the actual distribution of care, guidance and support:

> When I first started doing this, obviously I did have some training and I did have some work shadowing, so I knew kind of, how to run an interaction with a student. But all the times that I do it I get better at making judgments like, how does that student want me to talk to them? […] I think I get better at reading how people want to be treated, and I make judgments about how I feel interactions have gone (J., P University, team member, female).

As this interviewee argues, doing the job well means being able to judge what is happening to the student and, therefore, how and when to intervene. In other words, "making judgments" or "reading" a student here means categorising the type of need involved.

> So, any students who need support during their time here would go to any one of the student support offices. And we've got a well-being team that look after students who might have a physical or an emotional well-being need (S., P University, managerial position, female).

Each staff member is supposed to be prepared to quickly identify the nature of the need at stake, e. g., physical or emotional, and then know how to delegate tasks to, for example, the Well-being Team.

As the following staff member puts it, monitoring student attachment implies also relying upon an extensive network of inquirers:

> I probably don't come into contact with the students on a day-to-day basis. My teams will do. […] What is important is that the right people are there asking the students the right questions, to get the right

> answers out of them, rather than me intervening. So, I get an awful lot of feedback from my team, and we regularly talk about either individual students' issues, or more global issues when we're talking about student experience and events (T., P University, managerial position, female).

This network that monitors the attachment of incoming students rely on face-to-face interactions and telephone calls:

> These conversations [with incoming students] take place at times in the students' lifecycle when we know that they have particular challenges. […] In the first phone call, we may speak about how well they're settling in. Are they making friends? Did they know that there were all these different opportunities? (A., N University, managerial position, female).

They may include advanced students and private providers in the control process:

> …then we reach out to them by a phone call from our external company who does calling on our behalf if we request, and they do all our sort of, "Are you okay?" Then they refer them to services [of the university]. (N., N University, managerial position, male).

In a context where high drop-out rates are damaging the reputation of the university, frontline staff rely on networking to constantly assess students' attachment. They use their expertise in the "students" lifecycle and mental health to categorise those who may be "distressed" or experiencing "particular challenges" to "settle in". By paying attention to their needs, staff need to identify at a glance those users who are the most vulnerable here and now.

3. Frontline mediation

Frontline staff mediate between students and the organisation. In a broad sense, the term "mediation" refers to intervention in a process or relationship. While any member of university staff can be involved in mediation activities between the organisation and the environment, in this paper I focus on mediation with incoming students.

3.1 Mediation and boundaries

I define frontline mediation as the institutional activities that reinforce

or loosen the boundaries of the university. By welcoming new types of students, frontline mediation may contribute to the growing national, cultural and social diversity. On the contrary, by increasing the criteria for selection, boundaries are strengthened. I distinguish two types of frontline mediation in welcome practices: intermediation and mediatisation.

3.1.1 Intermediation and mediatisation

By "intermediation", I mean in-person services that involve direct interaction with newcomers. It can take place in ceremonies and rituals, such as education fairs and welcome weeks. As Oller *et al.* (2021) suggest, these spaces can be seen as devices that seek to reduce uncertainty about the opportunities and norms of higher education.

Another form of intermediation work, as an alternative or complement to institutional ceremonies, is the reception of students in special places when they need it throughout the year. Staff are expected to be visible and ready to help and support incoming students at any moment. As one staff member quoted earlier in this paper said, "If we're going to make students feel comfortable, then I think we have to be more visible [by using] a pop-up desk." Typical questions from newcomers trying to find their way inside the organisation are "how can I find this", "who can help me", "where should I go" or "when can I meet this person".

Therefore, intermediation is a mode of interaction that aims to reduce uncertainty in the environment by providing relevant information at the right time. Some prefer to give carefully selected information in face-to-face encounters or telephone calls, rather than simply providing information through the website, leaflets or conferences. However, this more artisanal method of communicating with certain individuals appears to be marginal to the massive marketing strategies that English universities have put in place over the last ten years (Watts, 2017).

Frontline mediation takes place not only in direct face-to-face contact but also indirect exchanges; I call this mediatisation. Although a wide variety of staff are involved in mediatisation, there is a trend towards professionalisation and centralisation in these areas. They are mainly the responsibility of Communication teams, as well as Marketing and IT teams.

Unlike "intermediation", I have borrowed the term "mediatisation" from socio-semiologists and analysts of discourse. In these fields, "media" is not restricted to "mass media". The term is understood as material supports of meaning that "display" traces, indices, clues, images or words, to be interpreted or "recognised" by the user (Veron, 1987). Drawing on these contributions, I call "mediatisation" the use of semiotic l and symbolic resources to carry out frontline activities remotely. On campus, mediatisation actions mark the boundaries of the organisation and help members and guests to find their way around. People with disabilities and non-native speakers of English, in particular, encounter fewer barriers to participation when signage is properly managed. In education fairs, various forms of advertising aim to promote the qualities of the university that (supposedly) distinguish it from its competitors.

To summarise, frontline mediation is carried out both through face-to-face support – intermediation – and through the semiotic configuration of the environment in which the students circulate – mediatisation. However, this distinction between types of boundaries and types of mediation is analytical. All these forms seem to be present and overlap in the exchanges between the organisation and its environment, as we will see below.

3.1.2 Forms of mediation in interplay

Intermediation and mediatisation are bound together in daily activities in the university. The first reason is that mediatisation and intermediation are mutually reinforcing. Mediatisation arrangements usually lead to intermediation activities. While websites provide information and guidance, they are also designed to channel interactions with staff through email or social networks. In addition, deficiencies in mediatisation, including lack of information or information overload, reduce the chances of productive face-to-face meetings. Staff regret that, in this case, students end up asking the wrong person for information or simply feeling let down by the university. Finally, mediatisation frames intermediation. In a social situation, any material object can be a medium as long as it supports and displays cues that help participants recognise where they are and find their way.

The second reason why intermediation and mediation are bound

together is because of the growing scope of projects in welcome practices in England. Unlike working in an isolated office, project work involves interdisciplinarity, even a certain hybridisation of purposes and competencies. The blurring of boundaries between teams and professions in "third spaces" (Whitchurch, 2013) seems to be a symptom of the transformation of the economy. It seems to result from the penetration of the new public management in English universities, the main principles of which were imported from the private sector (Allouch, 2022; Paye, 2013; Watts, 2017). Workers' careers are less about specialisation in one job than a succession of projects, each requiring learning and adaptation – and sometimes accompanied by instability and economic precariousness.

In short, mediatisation favours some form of intermediation to complete the communicative process, while intermediation relies on the semiotic arrangement of the environment to guide recipients toward institutional and/or market goals. In this sense, frontline staff both guide students and control their choices. On the other hand, project work around mediation and marketing constraints shows the porosity of the boundaries between universities and business. It reveals in a certain way how universities have been losing autonomy in relation to the demands of economic actors.

3.2 Conflicting goals

We will now look at other configurations in which the two forms of mediation – intermediation and mediatisation – interact with different goals. From my observations, staff understand frontline mediation in two relatively conflicting ways.

Some of them perceive their frontline mediation as a cultural contribution. Two classic meanings of the term culture appear in their discourse. Some emphasise the enrichment opportunity for foreign and British students who meet in a culturally diverse environment:

> …it's really important to us as an institution that non-UK students have an opportunity to celebrate their own culture here at the university to the benefit of the other students around them. (S., P University, managerial position, female).

Others emphasise the opportunity for cultural gain, in the sense of "refinement" or contact with legitimate culture:

> [We recruit] students who are in the first generation in their families to hopefully go to university. And they are academically talented, they've already achieved quite highly at school. […] And we do a series of activities with them, which focus on building their cultural capital […] developing their academic knowledge and academic abilities as well so they can think in an independent way that is required at university. (J., N University, managerial position, male).

Like this interviewee puts it, many conceive their work as a way of making culture accessible to underprivileged groups.

In short, some staff perceive themselves as "gatekeepers" not only of their university – what is evident since they welcome incoming students – but more globally of culture. Even if they do not necessarily occupy academic positions (research or teaching), they perceive their work as a way of facilitating access to culture. Such accessibility is understood either in a broad sense, as contact with various national or ethnic cultures, or in a narrow sense, as familiarity with a specific kind of culture – scientific, artistic, refined, etc.

While this position may be commendable, the truth is that this view seems to be in the minority. Most English staff members seem to understand their work in a different way. Caring about students primarily means satisfying customers and doing well in the National Student Survey. Most emphasise their commitment to attracting new students/customers through commercial methods.

They are ardently involved in educational fairs to attract as many candidates as possible. Indeed, education fairs display a wide range of commercial cues for framing encounters with potential newcomers. These cues aim to transform social occasions into market-led encounters. These semiotic materials can be seen as "packaging devices" (Cochoy, 2002; Oller *et al.*, 2021) and "glossy" material (Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995) that are displayed to attract the attention of participants and influence their choices. It is in such a marketed space that the first personal exchanges between candidates and staff may take place.

In educational fairs, therefore, the semiotic environment transforms the encounter between the candidate, their family and the staff into a kind of bubble of stimuli designed to transform the candidate into a new member. The presence of student ambassadors favours the

introduction of experience-based information and a certain degree of adaptation to the user's profile. Yet, as the purposes of these encounters are market-led, it does not make sense to consider testimonials or tailored services as disinterested, spontaneous or friendly.

For many of the staff dealing with new students, it is not the broadening of culture or the promotion of cultural diversity that counts as a priority, but rather the reinforcement of their university's prestige in competition with others. In this sense, they put at the service of this financial purpose the concern for the attachment of students and the control of information.

4. Conclusion

This paper has methodological and theoretical limits. On the one hand, it has limits in terms of the representativeness of the results – like any case study. However, the fact that I studied three universities with significant social and territorial differences has partially reduced this limit by favouring the diversity of the sample. On the other hand, this paper has limited itself to the analysis of the external boundaries of the university. It would certainly be important to analyse if/how welcoming practices affect the internal boundaries of the organisation, i.e. the relations between social and professional groups. Finally, I did not have space here to analyse how/if the position of respondents varies according to social class, gender and other sociological variables.

Despite these limitations, I think that data are strong enough. The paper has shown that universities care about incoming students by implementing academic and non-academic activities that I call welcome practices. They aim both to treat each beneficiary uniquely and to provide common services for the majority. Working with incoming students shapes and makes visible the boundaries of the organisation.

Welcome practices contribute to shifting the external boundaries of the university. Frontline mediation can take the form of intermediation – in-person services through face-to-face encounters – and mediatisation – semiotic arrangements. It serves to maintain or extend the boundaries of the organisation by targeting specific kinds of students – with this or that profile.

Frontline mediation serves conflicting goals: the profit of the university-business and the accessibility of culture at large. This implies different ways of understanding how their university expands boundaries. In the first case, it is about increasing the number of customers, in the second, it is about extending the culture to new kinds of users, including underprivileged groups.

However, it does not seem enough to claim that welcoming activities are likely to democratise the university by including students of different backgrounds and talents on an equitable basis. My research has shown that market-led goals seem to prevail among frontline staff. They tend to enshrine productivity, managerialism and profitability as maxims that not only take precedence over democratisation, but also seem unquestionable to them.

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