

Chapter 4: The Voice of the Student as a ‘Consumer’

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Abstract

Bunce discusses the impact of students being defined as ‘consumers’ of their higher education. The chapter first considers when and why students came to be defined as consumers in England and Wales, UK, and then reflects upon the advantages and disadvantages associated with treating students as consumers of their education. This discussion includes the perspectives of both students and academic staff, and reviews empirical evidence about the effects of students themselves identifying as consumers on their approaches to learning and academic performance. The chapter concludes with a summary of the challenges for universities when listening to the student as consumer voice and emphasises the importance of striking a balance between making students feel heard, while resisting the notion that ‘the customer is always right’.

Emergence of the student ‘consumer’

In several countries around the world, higher education funding models are undergoing an ideological shift away from state responsibility towards student responsibility for tuition fees. This is changing the relationship between students and higher education institutions (HEIs) as well as the nature of student engagement and pedagogic relations (Cardoso, Carvalho & Santiago, 2011; Delucchi & Korgen, 2002; Ek, Ideland, Jönsson, & Malmberg, 2013; Koris, Örténblad, Kerem, & Ojala, 2015; Pitman, 2000; White, 2007). The impacts of this ideological shift have been increasingly felt in HEIs in England and Wales over the last two decades. Students now bear the major costs of up to £9,250 per year of their tuition through income-contingent loans. To put this figure in context, average graduate full-time earnings in

the UK for the year 2015-16 were approximately £23,000 (HESA, 2017). Before 1998, the state provided universities with funding for student tuition. Following much political debate and student demonstrations, students entering higher education (HE) in 1998 were charged a means-tested £1,000 towards their tuition, which subsequently increased to a maximum of £3,000 for students starting their higher education in 2006. Based on an analysis by the OECD, the media reported that the current cost of university tuition made England and Wales among the most expensive countries in the world in which to graduate (e.g., Espinoza, 2015).

The personal financial transaction that most students make with their universityⁱ in exchange for the opportunity to ‘get a degree’ (Molesworth, Nixon & Scullion, 2009) does, in many ways, make students ‘customers’ⁱⁱ and universities ‘service providers’. We saw evidence of this rhetoric from the experience of Alex in Chapter 2, and a student in Tomlinson’s (2017) study explained that “If we’re paying for it, that’s like you are a consumer more or less. So you know, I am paying for education therefore I am a consumer of education” (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 458). This shift towards students being defined and, in some cases, self-identifying as consumers is one reason why the student voice has been amplified over the last couple of decades. It has also resulted in HEIs believing that it is necessary to seek out, listen to, and respond to the student voice. Thus, the HE system in England and Wales represents a relevant context within which to focus a discussion on the impact of the student ‘consumer’ and their voices on learning and teaching in HE (Woodall, Hiller & Resnick, 2014).

Impacts of the Marketization of Higher Education for the Student Voice

The notion that students should contribute to the costs of their education was first announced in the Dearing Report, published in England and Wales, UK, under a Labour government

(National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education [NCIHE], 1997). That report stipulated that students should only contribute to the cost of their education if the “tariffs offer value for money to customers” (p. 210) and that “new approaches to quality assurance should focus on the consumer rather than the provider” (p. 60). Over the last few years, this approach to quality assurance has been enacted in several ways. Measures of student satisfaction have assumed substantial importance in the way in which the performance of HEIs is assessed, with the National Student Survey (NSS) in the UK (introduced in 2011) providing statistics on the quality of the student experience (Higher Education Funding Council for England [HEFCE], 2011). In addition, students are provided with Key Information Sets that give them information to help them to choose a course, including the number of contact hours, type of assessment, and levels of employability and income among graduates. These are now all key drivers in assessing the quality of provision in HEIs, fostering a spirit of greater competition among universities (Tomlinson, 2017).

Even more recently, the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) has been introduced to assess the quality of teaching that universities are providing to students. The student voice features in this metric (taken from the annual NSS) in terms of their ratings of teaching quality on their course, ratings of the quality of assessment and feedback, and level of academic support they have received. Universities were first ranked in 2017 as providing a bronze, silver, or gold level of teaching excellence, which somewhat upset the traditional university rankings provided by the Research Excellence Framework (REF). Although some would argue that excellent teaching is underpinned by excellent research (see Chapter 17), the introduction of the TEF was undoubtedly focused on offering quality assurance to students in a way that the REF was not.

Another change that has emerged in light of the shake-up of HE funding is the introduction of the Office for Students, which came into being on 1st April 2018. This is a regulatory body for HE in England that puts students at the ‘heart of the market’ (Boyd, 2018). It has been designed to encourage the growth of a competitive market that informs student choice and protect the interests of its customers. One of its four key objectives is to make sure that HEIs provide students with value for money. To help make this assessment, the annual student experience survey conducted by the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) has, since 2012, asked students whether or not they perceive their universities as providing ‘value for money’. Just over 50% of students in England rated their university as providing good or very good value for money in 2012, but this has since declined to just 35% in 2018. This is in stark contrast to home students studying in Scotland, who more consistently rate their (free) education as providing good or very good value for money. This concept of value for money is, however, a nebulous construct, and students state that they do not receive enough information about how their tuition fees are spent, so it is difficult to interpret their judgments. Nonetheless, the introduction of these ways of assessing the teaching quality in HE provide a voice to the student ‘consumer’. These changes are in line with the government’s belief that students are ‘intelligent customers’ and should be a major driving force behind improving quality (Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2003).

The principle of consumer sovereignty suggests students are enjoying a much louder voice in relation to the content and nature of their education. Some academics agree that treating students as ‘consumers’ has led to a greater awareness among themselves of students’ needs, and that this has encouraged staff to reflect on and improve their teaching practices (Lomas, 2007). Universities routinely listen to and act upon the student voice (or ‘customer feedback’) both at the level of individual modules or courses (see Chapter 16) as well as more broadly

across the range of campus services, including careers, sports, and even the canteen. Consequently, the teaching and learning environment has become more responsive to students' desires, which seems to be associated with having satisfied students. In 2018, the NSS reported that overall levels of student satisfaction remained high at 83%. This does not, however, necessarily mean that learning and teaching quality has improved (see Chapter 7), but, nonetheless, this would suggest that the student voice, as one of the predominant stakeholders in HE, is being heard and acted upon in a way that results in their satisfaction.

While student 'consumer' satisfaction metrics may be driving up the quality of the student experience, the shift in responsibility for tuition fee payment from the state to the individual student corresponds to a change in who is seen as the primary beneficiary of education. Traditionally, educating people at university level was a public good, paid for from the public purse, because of the contributions that those graduates make to the future economic, social, and health status of the nation (McMahon, 2009). Williams (2013) argues that HE has become disconnected from its historical purpose of seeking 'advancement of the mind', enlightenment, and understanding, which was the nature of education described by Newman (1852) in 'The Idea of a University'. Instead, HE is now seen as a private good, paid for by the individual beneficiary, supporting "non-collectivised ambitions of economic prosperity and personalised self-fulfilment" (Jones-Devitt & Samiei, 2010, p. 92). Universities are now under pressure to provide students with an education that translates directly into high-earning professional employment, which is another metric by which students can judge the quality of the services being provided by their university (see Chapter 8).

Undoubtedly, making a link between learning and earning is increasing the connection that students make between a wider societal culture of the unending consumption of goods and

services and their education. There are several reasons, however, why this parallel draws short because HE differs from normal kinds of business. Some of these were outlined by Paul Greatrix, Registrar for The University of Nottingham, writing in the *Guardian* (2011). First, he notes that HE is usually a one-off transaction, with minimal opportunities for repeat sales. Second, other people, such as parents or employers, may be heavily involved in the decision about which university a student should attend or which course to complete. Third, the ‘customer’ cannot try the product before deciding whether to buy. Finally, who the customer is shapes the quality of the final product, that is, the degree classification with which they graduate, and the student must meet particular criteria before they are eligible to consider buying the product in the first place. In addition, it is impossible for students to return the ‘product’, and almost impossible for them to get their money back. Therefore, the treatment of students as consumers may not be entirely helpful when applied to HE.

Perhaps most importantly, viewing students as consumers and degrees as commoditiesⁱⁱⁱ is considered most unhelpful when it comes to the nature of engagement that universities require from their students. It has been argued that the marketization of HE has created an environment in which students expect to be served rather than challenged, and this conflicts with many of the goals of effective pedagogy (Delucchi & Korgen, 2002). Many academics believe that academic standards are being sacrificed on the altar of student satisfaction, leading to a ‘dumbing down’ of academic content because lecturers are resisting innovation and avoiding making intellectual demands of their students (Lomas, 2007; Pitman, 2000; Williams, 2013). This so called ‘safe teaching’ (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005, p. 275) involves a straightforward transmission of pre-specified content followed by conventional assessment of that content. Furthermore, others argue that simply judging universities on the basis of the extent to which their graduates are ‘satisfied’ or how much they are earning, will create

overly passive and instrumental approaches to learning, and place students outside of the intellectual community rather than as active partners within it (Finney & Finney, 2010; Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005; Williams, 2011, 2013; Woodall, Hiller, & Resnick, 2014). This process may then become associated with students feeling a lack of responsibility for their learning, being resistant to engaging in education as a process rather than a product, and having a sense of entitlement, which are not attitudes that are conducive to “independent lifelong learning and innovation” (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005, p.276). Thus, a paradox results from listening to and acting upon the student-as-consumer voice emerging from metrics because students may end up with what they want rather than what that they need to bring about change in society for the greater good (e.g. graduates with creative and critical thinking skills alongside knowledge and understanding).

The Student as Consumer Voice: What the Research Says

Despite the pervasive treatment of students as consumers within the HE system, little is known about the extent to which individual students themselves identify as consumers and perceive their degree as a commodity. This second half of the chapter considers some emerging empirical evidence to explore these issues and try to answer questions including: How does a consumer identity impact on students’ approaches to learning? Does a consumer identity impact on their academic performance? Is the student-as-consumer voice a monolithic representation of the views of all students, or do individual voices align with a consumer identity to a greater or lesser extent? This section will also consider the experience of teaching staff in terms of the extent to which they hear the voice of the student consumer in the classroom and how they perceive its impact on pedagogic relations.

The first study to investigate systematically the extent to which students identify as consumers, or 'customers', was conducted by Saunders (2014) in the United States of America. After reviewing the limited amount of (largely North American) research, he developed a unidimensional customer orientation questionnaire comprising 18 items to assess students' level of agreement with educational priorities and planned academic behaviours associated with a customer orientation. These included items such as 'I think of my college education as a product I am purchasing' and 'It is part of my professors' job to make sure I pass my courses'. The questionnaire was completed by 2,674 first year students during the induction period at a large public research university. Students rated each statement on a scale from 1 – 5 where 1 = strongly agree and 5 = strongly disagree. While the mean customer orientation score of 3.32 was close to the midway point of the scale (neither agree nor disagree) there was some interesting variation, revealing that individual students accepted some elements of a consumer orientation and rejected others. For example, the majority of students (54%) agreed that their education was a product they were purchasing but 42% disagreed that their primary identity was that of a customer of their university. However, when it came to planned academic behaviours, many students (43%) agreed that 'As long as I complete all of my assignments, I deserve a good grade in a course' whereas only a small minority (6%) agreed that they would only try and take the easiest courses possible at university. Saunders concludes that while the dominant ideology in HE positions students as consumers, in general students themselves do not express a customer orientation, at least when they initially enter the HE system. These figures also serve to demonstrate that there is heterogeneity in students' perceptions of themselves as consumers, meaning that it is important to listen to individual student voices and not assume that all students think in the same way.

Similar findings have been emerging from recent studies conducted with students in England and Wales. Using an adapted version of Saunders' (2014) scale, Bunce, Baird and Jones (2017) conducted a survey of over 600 undergraduates studying in England and Wales during early 2015 (when the maximum tuition fee was £9,000). The aim was to explore the extent to which students identify as consumers of their education and its impact on academic performance. Students from 35 different HEIs took part, and approximately equal numbers of students were in their first, second, or final year of study. This sample was, therefore, more diverse and representative than the sample in the study by Saunders (2014). Bunce et al. (2017) also considered the extent to which students identified as learners, that is, whether they held a broad set of attitudes and behaviours relating to intellectual engagement. Students rated their levels of agreement on a 7 point scale, where 0 = strongly disagree, 3 = neutral, and 6 = strongly agree, for 15 consumer items, e.g., 'If I cannot get a good job after I graduate, I should have some of my tuition fees refunded', and 15 learner items, e.g., 'I want to learn as much as possible while at university'. Similarly to Saunders, the mean consumer score was close to the midway (2.53) indicating that, on average, students tended neither to agree nor disagree with a consumer orientation. However, students who were personally responsible for their tuition costs had a significantly higher consumer orientation than students who, for example, were in receipt of a bursary or support from family or friends. This also suggests that there was variation in the extent to which individual students expressed agreement or disagreement with a consumer orientation. The mean learner score was 'agree' (4.77), indicating that, on average, students tended to identify themselves as learners. Again, however, there was also individual variation, with some students expressing disagreement with some of the items. When looking at the impact of a consumer orientation on learner identity and academic performance, Bunce et al. (2017) found some interesting, and concerning results. Most notably, they found that the more that students held a consumer

orientation towards their studies, the poorer their academic performance^{iv}. Furthermore, consumer orientation mediated the traditional relation between learner identity and academic performance whereby a lower learner identity was associated with a higher consumer identity and subsequently poorer academic performance. It seems likely that a consumer orientation ‘competes’ with learner identity, which is consistent with Saunders’ (2014) finding that students agreed with some consumer statements and rejected others in favour of a more traditional learner attitude towards studying.

This broad patterns of findings is fairly consistent with results from a qualitative study conducted in England and Wales by Tomlinson (2014; 2017), in which only some students perceived themselves as consumers. Tomlinson interviewed 68 undergraduates from seven HEIs about their attitudes towards the marketisation of HE and the impact of fees on the way they thought about teaching and learning. The analysis revealed three sets of attitudes held by students that varied in the extent to which they held a consumer orientation. On the one hand, some students held an ‘active service-user’ attitude, recognising that a consumerist approach was inevitable given the level of fee they were paying. On the other hand, there was a group of students who explicitly rejected the consumer approach, recognising that it was a passive approach signalling ‘lower intellectual merit’ (Tomlinson, 2014, p. 11) and resulting in tension with the overall goals of academic growth: ‘...You’ve earned that opportunity to be there, so you should work hard...’ (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 12). Finally, there was a third group of students expressing a mixed or ambivalent attitude to a consumer orientation, having ‘internalised discourses of student rights and entitlements’ (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 6), however, these attitudes sat alongside a sense of personal responsibility for their education (See White, 2007, for a similar perspective among Australian undergraduates and Todd et al., 2017, for Canadian students).

An interesting study conducted with students studying at one university in Estonia sheds further light on the finding that the student 'consumer' is not a universal identity. Koris and Nokelainen (2015) explored whether there were elements of their university education in which students may expect to be treated more as customers than learners. Four hundred and five second- and third-year business students, both fee-paying and non-fee paying, completed a questionnaire to assess the extent to which they felt that they should be treated as customers in relation to 11 categories of educational experience. These included, among others, grading, classroom teaching, curriculum design, communication with staff, and feedback. Some students expected to be treated as consumers in some, but not all, categories. For example, students expected the HEI to collect and act on their feedback, that classroom teaching material should be presented concisely for ease of studying and that teachers should employ methods that are interactive and stimulating. In contrast, they did not feel entitled to receive good grades because they were customers, and did not feel that they should be able to graduate without putting in the necessary amount of work.

A consumer orientation, therefore, is not one to which all students universally subscribe, again, demonstrating the importance of engaging with the heterogeneity of multiple student voices. However, it seems that the direction of travel in HE is one of embedding and reinforcing the voice of the student consumer. The extent to which individual students will embrace or resist the consumer identity remains to be seen; however, research is beginning to emerge that suggests this voice may be having a negative impact on students' attitudes towards studying, and ultimately, their degree outcomes. Recall that Bunce et al. (2017) found that the more that students held a consumer orientation towards their studies, the lower their level of academic performance. In a follow up study, Bunce and Bennett (in press)

examined how levels of academic performance may be being impacted by a consumer orientation in relation to its impact on student approaches to learning. They assessed students' approaches to learning (Biggs, Kember & Leung, 2001; Marton & Säljö, 1976), their consumer orientation, and their academic performance. The findings replicated those obtained by Bunce et al. (2017) by showing that the more that students identified as a consumer, the lower their level of academic performance. But how did this relate to students' approaches to learning?

According to Marton and Säljö (1976), there are two major ways in which students may approach their learning: deep approach and surface approach. A deep approach involves using higher-order thinking skills with the intention of understanding, synthesising, and evaluating material to make meaning. In contrast, a surface approach involves reproducing material or simply learning information by rote with the intention of passing by expending the minimal level of effort. Adopting a deep approach to learning is largely consistent with enhanced academic performance (Diseth & Martinsen, 2003; Duff, Boyle, Dunleavy, & Ferguson, 2004; Marton & Säljö, 1984) while adopting a surface approach tends to be consistent with lower performance (Duff et al., 2004; Eley, 1992). Bunce and Bennett (in press) found that students who took a deep approach to learning had higher levels of academic performance, and did not identify as strongly as consumers as students who took a surface approach. Furthermore, deep approach to learning mediated the negative relation between identifying as a consumer and academic performance: students who identified as consumers reported lower academic performance because they were less likely to take a deep approach to learning.

These data thus provide a warning about the potential impact of students relying on their voice as a consumer to achieve a change in their educational experience, because a consumer voice may interfere with attitudes and behaviours that support a deep approach to learning. For example, a consumer orientation may create an ‘us’ (students as customers) versus ‘them’ (the university as a service provider) attitude, which is at odds with the pedagogic assumption that knowledge is co-created by students in partnership with teaching staff (see Chapter 18). This experience of some students holding consumerist notions of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ was also described in a study exploring the impact of the voice of the student consumer on staff perceptions of students’ motivations for learning (King & Bunce, under review). All ten academics that were interviewed by King and Bunce perceived some students as being intrinsically motivated: ‘There are still the *absolute* gems, the highly motivated, you know, students reading for pleasure’. Seven academics, however, perceived these students as being in the minority: ‘I seem to get more comments about, “I pay your wages”, “I’m paying for my degree”. [...] I think they’ve lost the... the feeling of... sort of collegiality’. Importantly, academics did not see this approach as being entirely the fault of the students, but as being associated with the political changes that have marketised HE: ‘I’m not having a go at students here, because I see them simply reacting to a culture that has been created years and years before they reach university’. Academics seemed to sympathise with students’ position, while also feeling challenged to maintain academic standards when students are being told to seek value for money above other forms of educational value. One academic summarised: ‘It’s a strange irony really, by them paying more [...] we give them more, but actually [...] the outcome for them is less’. This interviewee seems to be suggesting that students may well get better support services or a better student experience, but in the long term, their academic potential may not be fulfilled.

In summary, the available research into the extent to which students identify as consumers seems to demonstrate that, in general, students are not wholly resisting the student as consumer voice, and neither are they embracing it. Again, it is important to emphasise that individual student voices are not represented by average levels of agreement with a consumer orientation in large scale surveys. Instead, HEIs should also listen to individual student voices that are not captured in these metrics. It seems likely that students experience some tension between the traditional role of students as learners, that is, students who engage critically with new concepts and create new insights, and the modern role of students as consumers, that is, students who expect to be told what they need to know in order to pass. What is clear, however, is the impact of identifying as a consumer on how students approach their learning and their academic outcomes – the more that students identify as a consumer the worse their level of academic performance. This seems to be because they are more likely to adopt a surface, rather than deep approach to learning. Academic staff similarly see students engaging in some consumer behaviours some of the time, and are conscious of the negative impact of this on students' attitudes towards learning.

Conclusions

Given that students now bear the major costs of their university education in England and Wales, as is the case in several other countries, it is right that they receive an excellent university experience. But students, unlike customers on the high street, play a vital role in shaping that experience and have a responsibility to engage with teaching and learning. When the policy and media rhetoric, as well as national evaluations of higher education, focus strongly on the customer experience and consumer satisfaction, it is unsurprising that students experience conflict about what their role should be. It is clear that universities are listening to and responding to a student consumer voice, but acting as if 'the customer is

always right' may be sacrificing academic standards. Teaching staff should continue to provide students with an intellectually stimulating and challenging learning environment, and work in partnership with students to ensure that universities can continue to fulfil their role of producing graduates capable of the highest levels of critical and creative thinking. This will support not only the development of individual students but also the development of wider society. In this regard, perhaps students could use their voices to resist the notion of the student consumer.

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ⁱThis is not a literal transaction, rather, an income contingent loan, which students pay back once they start earning above a certain threshold, currently £25,000

ⁱⁱA consumer is someone who uses products or services whereas a customer is someone who purchases a product. Students can, therefore, be considered both consumers and customers of their HEI.

ⁱⁱⁱThat is, as an outcome that is referenced primarily, if not entirely, with reference to its economic benefit (Shumar, 1997).

^{iv}Performance was measured with respect to students' self-reported percentage mark of their most recent assessed piece of work