Supporting students' motivation for learning by challenging the student 'consumer' identity
Dr Louise Taylor Bunce (Oxford Brookes University)

Summary
Research co-produced with my students over several years provided the first empirical evidence regarding the negative impacts on learning of students identifying as consumers. This work has culminated in the recent development and successful validation of a teaching resource (see www.brookes.ac.uk/SIIP) to support students' motivation for learning by enabling them to critically reflect on the extent to which they identify as consumers. Our first publication on this topic (Bunce et al., 2017) found that a consumer identity is associated with lower academic attainment, and it is the highest cited paper in this area (371 citations according to Google Scholar). The open-access teaching resource has already been adopted by several universities nationally and internationally.

Reasons for introducing this teaching method

Rationale: Several countries have monetised higher education, turning universities into service providers and students into consumers (Williams, 2013). Students who identify as consumers are more likely to feel entitled to their degree in return for financial, not academic investment, and view their education purely as means to future employment (Saunders, 2015). The COVID-19 pandemic has further reinforced this problem, with students (unsuccessfully) demanding tuition-fee refunds over concerns about value for money.

Research co-produced with my students has shown that students who identify more strongly as consumers have more extrinsic motivation for learning (King & Bunce, 2020), use less effective approaches to learning (Bunce & Bennett, 2019), identify less with other students in their discipline (Bunce et al., 2021), and have lower academic attainment (Bunce et al., 2017). King and Bunce (2020) also found decreased motivation among staff teaching in a marketised context. In my own teaching, I have witnessed first-hand these barriers to learning that are caused by students identifying as consumers, and heard from frustrated colleagues many examples of students acting like consumers. My teaching practice is unapologetically influenced by my desire to support students' innate intrinsic motivation for learning (Ryan & Deci, 2000), and to foster enjoyment from studying.

Description: To address these issues, I recently developed a workshop (available at www.brookes.ac.uk/SIIP) for students and staff, designed to support students' identities as learners and to enable them to reflect critically on their identities as consumers. It is suitable for students across all levels of study, including those transitioning into university, and can be used by students individually, or in groups (online or face-to-face). The main component is an online self-assessment tool for students to measure the strength of their identities as learners and consumers, using pre-existing validated questionnaires (Pintrich et al., 1993; Saunders, 2015). When students submit their questionnaire responses, their scores are calculated automatically and they are categorised as one of four student 'types' (see Figure 1). The elements of the resource for students using it individually and for educators running a group workshop are shown in Table 1.
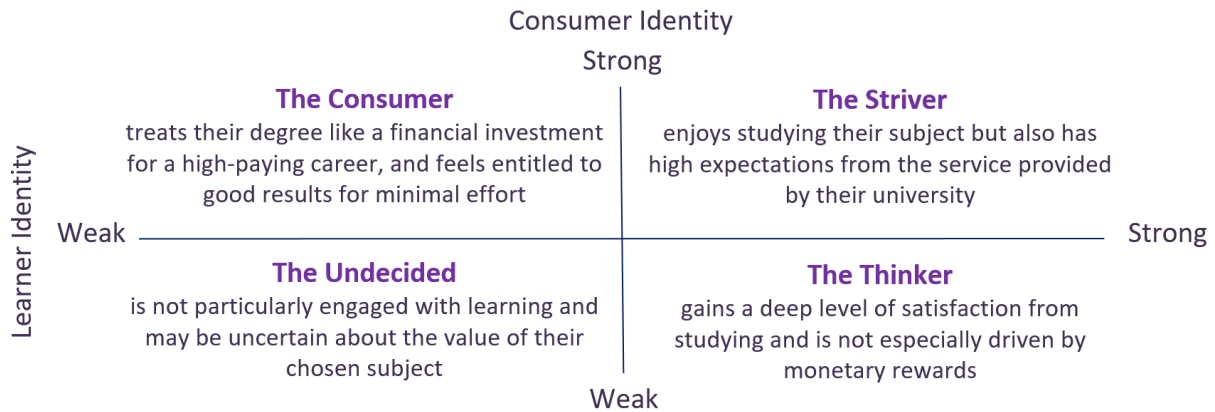
Consumer Identity
Strong

The Consumer
treats their degree like a financial investment for a high-paying career, and feels entitled to good results for minimal effort

The Striver
enjoys studying their subject but also has high expectations from the service provided by their university

Weak ———————————————————————— Strong

Learner Identity

The Undecided
is not particularly engaged with learning and may be uncertain about the value of their chosen subject

The Thinker
gains a deep level of satisfaction from studying and is not especially driven by monetary rewards

Weak

Figure 1: The four student types according to the strength of their learner and consumer identities

For Individual Students (30 min)	Group Workshop led by Educators (1 hr)
• Complete questionnaire to establish strength of consumer and learner identities and discover their student 'type' (10 min) • Read the blog explaining key findings from the research (5 min) • Reflect on the discussion questions, considering how identities impact learning and attitudes towards university (15 min)	• Students complete questionnaire to establish strength of consumer and learner identities and discover student 'type' (10 min) • Educator presents research findings using PowerPoint slides provided (10 min) • In breakout rooms / small groups students consider suggested discussion questions, with a short plenary (30 min) • Students re-take questionnaire to assess extent of change in identities (10 min)

Table 1: Key elements of the resource with suggested format and timings for students and educators

Benefits

The benefits of the teaching workshop are that it provides a framework for students and educators to understand the research, and it enables students to measure and reflect on their consumer and learner identities. A validation study of the workshop with 69 first year UG students found that 51% of students reported that their learner identities increased and 45% reported that their consumer identities decreased. In addition, 100% agreed/strongly agreed with the statements "My intention to study to the best of my ability has increased" and "My intention to work hard for assignments has increased". The majority (91%) said that they would recommend the workshop. One student said: *"It helps you understand yourself better, your motivations and perhaps even help[s] explain why you do well or not that well in your course."* Student feedback confirmed that it reminded them about attitudes and behaviours needed for effective learning, and one student said that knowing their identity scores "*may benefit the way I study and approach my work in the future."*

These benefits were also noted by staff running the workshop who witnessed students engaging in the discussion and understanding the consequences of a consumer identity for learning. One academic said: "*This is a really well-designed workshop […] students were very engaged and the questions sparked excellent group discussions. Several students reported never thinking about university study in this way before. Others said that, having taken part, they could now see the importance of self-motivated study if they wanted to do well at university".* So far, 379 students have

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taken part in workshops at my university, and the workshop is being adopted next academic year by at least 23 institutions nationally and internationally.

The benefits of co-creating research with students are that it enhances student engagement and motivation for learning (Walkington, 2016). The research experience for one student supported her to achieve a first-class degree and consider a career as an educational psychologist. She said: *"Louise involved me in every aspect of the project, from literature searching, questionnaire design, data collection and analysis, to encouraging me to present at a conference and writing up for journal publication. She showed willingness and enthusiasm to teach me not only about Psychology but how to approach work as a whole. I am grateful for her support and encouragement"*.

Issues (limitations/difficulties)

Although the student-as-consumer identity is associated with poorer motivation for learning and academic attainment, the marketisation of higher education has empowered students to use their voice and, to an extent, made them partners in the creation of their educational experience (Lygo-Baker et al., 2019). Universities and educators need to be mindful that, while students could be considered consumers of their university experience in some areas (e.g., IT facilities, accommodation, or the canteen), learning cannot be consumed.

The experiences of staff and students who have delivered and participated in the workshop to date have been positive. No difficulties in delivery emerged, other than it being difficult to complete the workshop within one hour with larger groups of students. One issue, as is typical with any type of psychological intervention, was that it was not effective for all students. Although it is not clear why this should be the case, future research and development needs to consider how the workshop may impact different types of students. For example, students studying particular subjects that are often concerned with financial matters, such as business and marketing, may have a stronger consumer identity than students studying subjects where this is not the case, such as health and social care. As another example, students from ethnic minority groups or widening participation backgrounds may experience a lack of belonging at university, which may have a negative impact on their identity as learners (Bunce et al., 2019; Gibson et al., 2016). These issues need further research to understand the impact of the workshop on learner and consumer identities of diverse student groups, and I will continue to involve students in carrying out this work.

Another issue concerns establishing the best time in the academic year to deliver the workshop to achieve greatest impact, for example, should it be delivered in welcome week, or when students receive feedback after their first assessment? Relatedly, should it be delivered as a stand-alone workshop, or integrated as part of personal tutoring or study-skills modules? These questions need investigating in further research and the answers will have practical implications for tailoring the support we provide to particular groups of students to enhance their learner identities.

Student's perspective

This is representative feedback from four first year undergraduate students who took part in the validation study of the workshop.

"I found this workshop very useful and engaging! Thank you for running it."

"It was interesting to realise that there was a correlation between consumers and poor grades. This has made me re-evaluate whether my poorer grades are because I expect to be taught everything I know, rather than forcing myself to go out there and do more. So thank you for that."

"It enables me to get my priorities in order. I have a lot of work to do on that one."

"[I now understand that] my progress and ability and drive to pass this degree to the best of my abilities remains my responsibility. I expect a high level of teaching and learning opportunities in order to be achieve my degree but understand that, if I am not responsible for further reading and expanding on the teaching given, I will not receive a high grade."

Reflections

Co-producing research with my students is among the most rewarding aspects of my role as an academic. Not only do I regularly work alongside students on formal research projects, I also approach my class teaching in a way that positions students as researchers. My experience of treating students in this way is that it engenders a strong learner identity, with high levels of commitment and perseverance. It often has tangible results, which, in this case, have been internationally recognised (Bunce et al., 2017).

I found the experience of developing, validating, delivering, and disseminating this workshop immensely interesting and satisfying. The workshops gave me the first opportunity in a formal educational setting to engage with students on the issue of consumer identities in a structured and evidence-based way. I was delighted to see students engaging with the topic and debating the nuances of identifying as consumers and learners on their university education and experience. I heard some unexpected viewpoints, such as students' beliefs that they are not treated as consumers by their tutors, but that they feel treated as consumers by the university more broadly. This has made me reflect on and advocate for removing the commercial language that has been adopted by some university processes that reinforce the notion of students as consumers.

Dissemination and publication

I have used my network of contacts and social media to disseminate the workshop globally. Although it was only developed this academic year, it has already been adopted by several universities, including for new and returning students this September. I will work with the Heads of Educational Development Group Network to continue national roll-out, and it will be included in the next revision of the Teaching Toolkit produced by the Division of Academics, Researchers, and Teachers in Psychology. I presented the workshop at a recent network meeting for academics interested in student mental health (SMaRteN) to consider the ways it may be used to support student wellbeing. I will also present the workshop at international conferences on higher education this year (including Advance HE's Annual Learning and Teaching Conference, the British Psychological Society Education Section Annual Conference, and the Society for Research in Higher Education Annual Conference). I am submitting the validation study to a special issue for Frontiers in Psychology on the Marketization of Higher Education, and I have described the workshop in invited book chapters for Springer Nature (Taylor Bunce, in press) and Routledge (Taylor Bunce et al., 2021).

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