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Student perceptions of themselves as ‘consumers’ of higher education

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ABSTRACT

This article first offers a survey of what has become an area of increasing interest in higher education: the rise of the so-called ‘student-consumer’. This has been linked in part to the marketisation of higher education and the increased personal financial contributions individual students make towards their higher education. Drawing upon a qualitative study with students across seven different UK higher education institutions, the article shows that while there is evidence of growing identification with a consumer-orientated approach, this does not fundamentally capture their perspectives and relationships to higher education. The article shows the degree of variability in attitude and approaches towards consumerism of higher education and how students still perceive higher education in ways that do not conform to the ideal student-consumer approach. The implications for university relations and how policy-makers and institutions themselves approach the issue are discussed.

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Introduction

Far-reaching changes have taken place in UK higher education concerning the ways in which it has become funded and conceived as a public institution. Higher education’s move towards a part-public and increasingly market-driven mode of delivery has been gradual. This is reflected in a range of policy mechanisms that have both sought to regulate its activities more stringently and also liberate it with more market freedoms (Brown and Carasso 2013; Shattock 2011). These have intensified following the implementation in autumn 2012 of the Browne Review’s (Department for Education 2010) core recommendation of scaling-back the public funding of higher education by replacing the core teaching grant with threefold private student contributions fees in England.

From autumn 2012, teaching grants which have been the primary unit of state funding for programme delivery in English universities were replaced by a threefold increase in tuition fees. Whilst institutions were originally encouraged to compete on price, as well as quality and demand, there has been an overall fee cap and institutions have opted to charge £9000 per year. The higher fee rate is not paid up front and instead students cover the cost of their degree through loans which they then repay when they earn £21,000. The UK government

has remained confident that graduates' earnings will increase over time and that fee revenue will sustain the university sector longer term (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2011). The threefold increase in fees represents a significant continuity to the earlier fee increase in 2006. Moreover, this development is often seen as foregrounding the purpose of higher education as providing private goods whose benefits are referenced against their potential future economic exchange value.

The changes that have taken place in higher education have much in common with those across the UK public services under the remit of 'modernisation' and 'personalisation' of services (Middleton 2000). The most unifying reform features have centred on: the increased role of markets and large-scale marketisation of public institutions; a spirit of greater competition between institutions; the declining role of the state as the primary unit of resource; and a new mode of service responsiveness that meets the needs of service users (Clarke et al. 2007; Pollitt 2007).

In addition to the raising of tuition fees, there are a number of related market-driven levers that are designed to enhance higher education's responsiveness, as well as sharpen student expectations of what their institutions offer them. This includes the promotion of greater student choice through the lifting of capped places to highest achieving students and the dissemination of institutions' performance on a range of student-related matters. Such information, referred to as Key Information Sets, is intended to convey an institution's outcomes on a range of core performance criteria, including teaching satisfaction, student assessment outcomes, student contact hours and graduate employment rates. This is seen to allow fee-paying students to differentiate and then choose between institutions on the basis of their relative performance on key student and graduate outcomes that UK higher education institutions (HEIs) offer. Furthermore, students are routinely encouraged to rate the quality of their provision under the remit of increased 'student voice'. In addition to programme-level assessment, for the past decade UK students have been completing the National Student Survey which is designed to tap into their views of their institutional experience. The Browne Review clearly envisaged the suite of recent reforms as a vehicle for enhancing institutional provision:

Our proposals are designed to create genuine competition for students between HEIs, of a kind which cannot take place under the current system. There will be more investment available for the HEIs that are able to convince students that it is worthwhile. This is in our view a surer way to drive up quality than any attempt at central planning. (Department of Education 2010, 8)

How contemporary students make sense of these changes and, more significantly, how they shape their relationships to their institutions still remains underexplored, although recent evidence indicates students' expectations are shifting in the marketised higher education environment (Kandiko and Mawer 2013). The casting of students as 'rational' consumers and active choice-makers is closely linked to these new policy mechanisms and has been actively promoted in official policy discourses (see, for example, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2011). One of the main consequences of the changing landscape is how students perceive their relationship to their institutions. If the prevailing policy rhetoric is actively internalised and utilised by students, we might expect a significant manifestation of attitudes that resemble a more consumerist orientation with more substantial reference to the economic value of participating in higher education.

The idea that students' relationship to higher education has fundamentally altered tends to be based on a set of inter-related suppositions. Firstly, that all students see higher

education, and the outcomes it produces, as a 'right' based on the increasingly 'private' nature of their contribution. This is likely to place considerably more power in the hands of the 'paying customer' who expects their providers to deliver their services and products in ways commensurate with their demands. Secondly, that the value students attach to higher education is equated to the costs of participating and that all associated markers of value – teaching, learning, student experience – are based on matching these costs. The maxim of getting good 'value for money' effectively becomes a guiding principle in how higher education's core activities are appraised. Thirdly, that students make strong connections between higher education and the consumption of other goods and services. The transitory relationships that students may have with other products or services are comparable with their relationship with higher education. Finally, that students understand and respond to these matters in largely similar ways and that there is likely to be strong commonalities in their approaches to higher education.

This article first explores some key themes in the student-consumer literature and relates this to research on student experience in higher education in different national contexts, including students' shifting identity positions. The initial part of this discussion considers the issue of what students may actually be consuming, before engaging with some dominant literature in this field. The second part draws upon a recent qualitative study exploring students' attitudes and approaches to higher education in the context of recent policy changes. This involves a direct engagement with students' perception of themselves as 'consumers' of higher education, how they were approaching higher education in the context of recent policy shifts and how this, and related policy changes, impact on their perceptions of higher education. The article presents findings from the study and then discusses wider implications for UK HEIs.

Themes from literature on student consumerism in higher education

The idea that consumption, rather than production, has become the bedrock of economic and social relations has been much discussed in the social sciences (Bauman 1998; Goodwin, Ackerman, and Kiron 1997) and has given rise to various catch-all terms such as 'consumer society' and 'consumer sovereignty'. Consumerism is now taken to be at the heart of modern productive relations in late capitalism, given that much of the post-industrial economy is based on the consumption of intangibles in the form of human services and products that have largely perishable value. In the marketing literature, consumer behaviour has traditionally been understood as that which is orientated towards the acquisition of tangible goods, or the receipt of non-material experiences that facilitate varying levels of gratification (O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy 2002). There has been growing consensus that consumer trends have extended to other realms of public life; in particular, public services such as higher education that were once seen to service the wider public good (Deakin and Wright 2005).

The marketisation of universities has been most keenly felt in countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia and Canada, all of which have broadly liberal market economies. Analysing the emerging consumerist trend in US higher education in the 1990s, McMillan and Cheney (1996) discuss the problems with applying consumer principles to higher education given their antithesis to the core values of university education. They also point to the self-fulfilling character of the student-as-consumer: if students internalise

dominant messages of their consumer prowess, this will inform their behaviours when studying. This further takes away from more liberal conceptions of students as academic apprentices or critical agents on a path towards self-formation.

Much of the student-consumer analysis is framed within the broader context of the shifting institutional relationships brought about by mass-marketised UK higher education, and the changing institutional dynamics this has generated. This is also located in wider discussion of the changing student experience of higher education, which has seemingly transformed considerably over the past three decades. The move towards the student-consumer is often taken to signal the re-fashioning of student identities, and, more broadly, the changing student experience. A central argument is that conditions of massification, formally represented by greater student numbers and diversity, and informally by vertical institutional ranking, are compounded by marketisation (Brown and Carasso 2013).

One of the challenges in depicting the contemporary student experience has been defining what the student body represents, as well as unpacking varieties of their experiences given the many forms these might take (Ainley 2008; Brennan and Patel 2008; Crozier et al. 2008). A dominant theme in the reconceptualisation of students in mass higher education is the shift from university being a relatively distinct phase in a student's life-course towards a much more pluralised experience. Brennan and Patel (2008) have discussed how, in a mass context, higher education is just one of many different facets of students' on-going personal trajectories. The boundaries between formal university experience and other social experiences have blurred over time, and contemporary students are likely to be engaged in other life projects, including part-time study, outside interests and extra-curricular activities. Such discussions problematise the depiction of student as 'apprentice' as something of an archetypal myth; particularly the notion of the student as academic disciple, liberally immersed in intellectual pursuits (Bourdieu and Passeron 1979).

Bourdieu and Passeron's study was one of the first to reveal the prevalence of student instrumentality and 'grade fixation' at a time of supposed liberal orientations to university experience. Instrumentalism, then as now, has been based on goal orientations that are driven by the pursuit of economically advantageous outcomes, often at the expense of more intrinsically educational ones. The move towards mass higher education across Europe has clearly intensified these approaches, as the rise of more instrumental value orientations has also been shown to be increasingly evident in a less marketised higher education context (Wellense and De Beer 2012). The increasing policy convergence across European higher education following the Bologna process, with the spread and emphasis on modularised and 'employability' focused learning, appears to be influencing this trend (Prokou 2008). The extent to which this feeds into a more consumerist approach is less apparent in these systems, although evidence from more marketised higher education systems such as Australia indicates that transactional approaches and awareness of market positioning has begun to alter the student landscape (Baldwin and James 2000).

In a wide-ranging analysis, Naidoo and Jamieson (2005) develop strong connections between commodification of different forms of university knowledge and shifting rules of pedagogic exchange in terms of how this impacts on institutional dynamics between students and their institutions across what is a largely internally differentiated UK higher education sector. In their analysis, consumerism is a direct by-product of the global commodification of universities whereby economic capital has become the dominant marker of institutional value and esteem. When knowledge becomes reconfigured as a commodity

to be purchased and then exchanged, product (and outcomes-related) rather than process (pedagogic-related) field rules within higher education institutions emerge. The enactment of learners as 'commodity purchasers' and lecturers as 'information brokers', whose role is packaging and presenting the most useable and relevant information in the most efficient way as possible, means that foundational educational values and purposes are significantly marginalised.

Consumerism, however, is likely to differentially impact on universities depending on where they sit on the spectrum of prestige and esteem and the kinds of knowledge production they are engaged in. In short, prestigious institutions are more able to maintain the traditional institutional praxis (and habitus) that has defined pedagogic relationships within them. In such institutions, traditional academic capital is what defines the field rules based on 'scientific capital' or historical prestige, both for the academic and the student population. In turn, traditional forms of pedagogy based on the symbolic violence of elite universities are reproduced. Students receive the message that they are in receipt of elite education, whose knowledge is sacred and of high social value, and that conformance to the elite pedagogies is imperative if they are to succeed in this environment. In contrast, lower prestige institutions are more subject to the symbolic violence of consumer ideology given that their principal currency has been on providing students with a relevant and applied 'Mode 2' knowledge. These institutions are also in much stronger competition with other institutions for their share of students and may need to do more to extol the experiential and vocational benefits of learning in them.

In a similar critique, Ransome (2011) relates consumer-driven momentum to the growing instrumentality that has been actively endorsed within the highly performative cultures of universities. Links are drawn between consumerism and the increasing technical-administrative rationality of universities, characterised strongly by international, national and localised forms of comparative assessment and audit. Learning outcomes, and the evaluation of 'successful' forms of learning, have been systematised through the widespread incorporation of seemingly transparent, yet stringent, forms of institution-level and programme-level evaluation and performance data in terms of student attainment and satisfaction. As Macfarlane (2015) discusses, the problem of 'student performativity', based on students' public and behavioural engagement in higher education, has become an increasing feature of the contemporary student experience. Yet if there is limited intrinsic educational value to what students may formally 'engage' in, this may represent little more than a form of presenteeism.

Much of this critique sees the measures that universities put in place as largely fulfilling secondary order goals that feed into market-based information. Thus, the comparative dimension of universities' performance in the form of league tables and information sets is seen as crucial in information student 'choice'. Consumerism is portrayed as part of an increasingly subservient and defensive institutional climate that reflects a largely reactive position of professional accountability to external stakeholders' demands for transparent forms of provision that meet instant gratification needs. Morley (2003) had earlier discussed how much of the quality assurance framework in higher education reflects shifting power dynamics not only towards constituent state actors but also users/beneficiaries of university; namely students, who may misattribute pedagogic quality with transient levels of gratification. Students' 'satisfaction', however, can easily be conflated with the fulfilment of short-term goals which may involve the attainment of desired outcomes and have limited relation

to genuine quality or the intrinsic value of those experiences (Sabri 2011). Such processes are reflected in the essentially conservative and standardising practices that institutional audit entails, including mapping learning against fairly codified sets of learning objectives.

In exploring the shifting values that a more consumer-driven approach engenders, Williams (2012) has offered a critique of consumer values in higher education in relation to teaching–learning relations and student expectations. This may include more questioning by students of the value and quality of their university experiences; furthermore, an increasing culture of litigation, complaint and consumer sovereignty may have begun to emerge in recent years, and is likely to intensify with 2012's fee increase. The Office of the Independent Adjudicator (2012) has recorded higher levels of complaint and 'service' dissatisfaction amongst students in recent years, which appear to be reinforced by new fee structures. However, this may also derive from a conservative pedagogic structure, including a large lecture class and impersonal interactions between staff and students in a mass educational context, leaving some students to adopt more instrumental approaches.

Other researchers have explored the ways in which the increasing market order of UK higher education may impact on students' identity positions within higher education and their wider sense of what it means to be a student. A consumer-driven approach is one that reduces learners' roles to purchasers and delimits their role and agency within the pedagogic process. Drawing mainly on the example of vocational UK learners, Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion (2009) discuss how a marketised higher education system inculcates a largely acquisitive and possessive approach (a 'having' mode) to the learning process, as opposed to one which informs personal ontology (a 'being' mode). Whilst Naidoo and Jamieson based their analysis principally on institutions, these researchers used the example of subject areas to show how consumerism ethics can frame students' perspectives on the purpose of higher education and their role within it.

The literature on student consumerism has provided a rich body of critical analysis for the purported rise of a strong consumerist ethos amongst contemporary higher education. A core unifying theme in this analysis is that this has been a consequence of the increased commodification of universities and their shifting relationships to their external actors. As higher education is reconfigured from a largely public good to one that serves largely private interests and values, a dominant ethic of rights and entitlement has entered the fray. Such analysis certainly invites further exploration of how these issues are understood and articulated by contemporary higher education students, which this study therefore sought to investigate.

The study

This study draws upon a qualitative cross-national and cross-institutional analysis that involved focus groups and individual interviews with 68 undergraduate students from seven UK HEIs who entered UK higher education in 2011 and 2012 respectively. Given the rising tuition fees in England from the autumn of 2012, four English HEIs were chosen. Institutions were selected to represent the range and diversity of HEIs and the varied profiles and background of students within them. These included: a research-driven 'Russell Group' HEI; a 1994 Group HEI; a post-1992 university; and a Guild HEI. The fee regimes are different across the United Kingdom – both Welsh and Northern Irish HEIs charge domicile students the existing fee rate of £3500 per year, although they charge English

domicile students who enter them the higher English HEI rate of up £9000. Scottish HEIs do not charge fees, but like their Welsh and Northern Irish counterparts also charge English domicile students the full £9000 fee. Three additional institutions, including one institution in each of the three other UK countries, were therefore included in the study to obtain a cross-national perspective.

The study was conducted during the spring and autumn of 2013, and the sample comprised a combination of first-year students (i.e. those who had entered in 2012 when the fee increase had been introduced for English HEIs) as well as those who had entered earlier. This enabled the interviews to explore the immediate impact of higher fees, as well as gather the perspectives of students who had been in the system for a longer period. Three-quarters of the sample studied traditional 'academic subjects' ranging from natural sciences to humanities-based and social science-based subjects, and one-quarter of the sample (mainly based on newer post-1992 institutions) studied 'vocational' disciplines.

Questions covered the following thematic areas: challenges and pressures of studying in higher education; attitudes toward fees and its impact on thinking towards higher education; educational biographies and trajectories; attitudes towards the marketisation and commercialisation of higher education; goals and motivations towards higher education; views of teaching and learning; and future interests and orientations. The analysis was organised around sets of dominant and subsidiary themes emergent from the data, which allowed for the identification of both unified responses that cut across the whole sample as well as variations and nuances within the sample that helped capture and reflect a variety of perspectives.

Variations in attitudes to consumerism

The evidence from this study showed that whilst the student-consumer is a position that students are aware of, and feeds into their understanding of their relationship to higher education, it is not one that is universally subscribed to by students. Instead, the data revealed mixed and variable levels of identification with the notion of 'consuming' higher education. A number of core features, and related concerns, were evident in students' perceptions of their shifting role within a market-driven system. First was the view that fee increases were reinforcing greater overall expectations that their institutions were 'providing' a standard and quality which matched their personal contribution. The 'value for money' concern was a recurring issue, along with a desire for greater transparency over the resources provided from fee revenue. Related to this was the perception that students now had greater scope and authority in regulating matters relating to their programmes and wider university experience and that this approach was warranted by the more transactional relationship that they had with their institutions.

The study identified a variable range of attitudes towards the student-consumer position, which also reflected different value positions of students and broader views about higher education and how it should operate. The nearest approach to consumption of higher education amongst students in this study could be described in terms of an active service-user attitude. Such students were of the view that a more consumerist approach was both an inevitable feature of students' changing relationship to their higher education and was justified through the personal costs involved in participating in higher education. At the extreme of this were students who distanced themselves from the consumerist approach and rejected

it on the basis that this undermined their role as students and inculcated values that were in tension with the overall goals of academic development. In between were a core group of students who expressed a mixed and ambivalent attitude toward the consumer ethos: while they had internalised discourses of student rights and entitlements, they still distanced themselves from the position of consumer. However, their views indicate an emerging identification with the consumer approach in the sense that they perceived themselves to have increasing stakeholder and bargaining power in how their higher education was arranged and delivered. The increased personal contribution had reinforced this sense, but it was also balanced against a sense of having personal responsibility within the process.

Active service-user attitudes – rights and ‘value for money’

Active service-user attitudes were underpinned by a strong sense that increased costs needed to be matched by highly transparent and effective modes of delivery from institutional providers who were receiving the costs that students were incurring. These students were more inclined to view themselves as ‘paying customers’ and perceived the consumer position to be both legitimate and something that contemporary learners should embrace. A number of core features of this attitude were evident. First is students’ understanding of their position in the new higher education environment and their receptiveness to transactional discourse that depicts their role as rational agents. Students who identified with being active service-users in turn perceived themselves to have a potentially more substantial role in questioning and demanding an enhanced service in the quest to both maximise value and minimise so-called ‘faulty provision’. Dominant policy-related and institutional discourses around consumerism were more actively embraced by these students, as were the ways in which universities had been marketed and ‘sold’ to them. The notion of being a consumer was therefore seen as a legitimate approach in a context of increased personal costs and where institutions needed to ‘raise their game’:

I do see myself as a consumer. I’m paying money in and getting a service out. To me I’m completely a consumer. In a way, once you get higher up in the university it’s about numbers and money, so they see us as consumers. (Male, physics, English Russell Group HEI)

Second, this extended to students’ views about the nature of higher education, what it represents and how it should be best organised. Questioning what their institutions provided was not only based on wanting more effective and transparent modes of delivery, but also an overall sense that their institutions’ practices should be aligned to shifting student demands. Universities were positioned as service providers whose value and performance is largely equated with how well they conformed to the effective delivery of a service that promised to offer a positive experience and facilitate favourable future outcomes. In the absence of what some students viewed as clear and robust channels of accountability, it was only correct that they should demand and expect more from their higher education. The learning experience, including lecturers’ responsiveness and quality, could be appraised in terms of how well they performed in meeting the expectations of service quality and delivery. Underpinning such attitudes was a clear sense that universities should best facilitate student outcomes at a time when personal costs and future challenges and uncertainties are salient.

Such attitudes interact with other dimensions of students’ profiles and identities, which the views of the following mature student very much illustrate. The student had discussed at length a genuine enthusiasm for his subject and his own sense of intellectual development

over the course of his studies. His views, however, also point to a more stringent appraisal of his programme's and institution's service responsiveness, drawing unfavourable parallels with other industries which were perceived to be more responsive and efficiently organised. This student also perceived universities as still operating under a model of limited accountability collegial structures that were not in tune with students' changing expectations and demands. References were made to this students' wider social identity as a mature student with extensive employment experience, someone who had embarked on higher education in order to improve economic prospects. His experience of working in other sectors provided a lens through which the internal organisational of universities was appraised:

There's no command structure which is what I'm used to. Someone is responsible for the whole thing: this is your job, you're to deliver that module and this is how you're going to do it; this is your job and you're going to do it ... there's no overall control; the individual modules people do their best with, but the overall structure of the whole place, no one is balancing up all the different bits and making sure everything comes together. (Male, mature student, archaeology, English Russell Group HEI)

The perception that universities needed to be held to greater account for enhancing their activities at both institutional and programme levels was recurrent amongst such students, who were acutely aware of the increased personal contribution they were making towards their higher education. Those who adopted a service-user attitude saw it as fully justified to hold their institutions and lecturers under greater scrutiny, based on the rationale that universities' activities needed to be fully harnessed together with greater questioning of practices that were not concordant with students' increased personal costs. As such, they often drew analogies with other services where the quality and value is measured on how well this service was being delivered and received:

I know everyone disagreed yesterday (in the focus group) but I was sat there thinking, well we're paying for a service. And 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. (Female, history, Welsh post-1992 HEI)

Such views fed into understandings of the relationship with those involved in programme delivery. These students had clearly internalised the view that they were actively paying towards their degree and that their institution's activities and outputs should reflect this, both in terms of manifest improvement and practices that were commensurate with the private investment they were making. Practices that were perceived to be discrepant with a student's private investment were viewed as largely unacceptable in the current climate. Critical judgement of higher education practitioners' levels of professionalism invoked certain 'Golden Age' images of unaccountable and non-responsive educational context. This is partly derived from enduring depictions and archetypes of universities, and their professionals, as loosely coupled entities and not fully accountable to their external environment. Such attitudes have been evident amongst the younger generation of early career academics who perceived their own lecturers occupying a cosseted 'Ivory Tower' that was loosely regulated (Archer 2008). These students also referred to how the raising of tuition fees warranted stronger demands for transparency and evidence of 'where the money was being spent' and how this translated into enhanced experiences. There was very much a sense that higher fees would provoke students to challenge practices and modes of delivery that were not in keeping with increased personal financial contributions.

Service-user attitudes further signal a power shift from institutional provider to purchaser, and a reframing of the role of lecturers in more conditional terms. It was not

uncommon for lecturers to be referred to as ‘employees’ whose very institutional existence was contingent on both students’ enrolment as well the way in which their performance was appraised. Judgement of lecturers’ responsiveness and effectiveness and the questioning of their authority are linked to clientistic discourses around ‘paying lecturers’ wages’. This is predicated not only on higher scrutiny of lecturers’ effectiveness, but also the ways they produce their knowledge and the impact that that this might have. The performance and knowledge production of lecturers is partly equated with lecturers’ knowledge and enthusiasm but also how ‘effective’ it is in meeting expectations. Less effective practices are again associated with an earlier period when university education was free, but perceived as less tolerable at a time when private contributions are high:

You want to interact with the staff, because we are technically paying their wages, so I want to get lots out of them, because on my course they are so passionate about their subject and their field. (Female, English, English post-1992 HEI)

Service-user attitudes often equated value against measureable shares of their individual personal expenditure, and in largely calculation-based ways. The increased financial nexus that students had entered through fees informs a rationalist time–cost–value approach in the form of evaluating how much each formal learning session ‘was costing them’. Whilst in some cases the criteria for judgement of the value may be genuine educational experiences, the actual equation of learning time to share of expenditure indicates that some students’ appraisal of the value of formal experience has a clear utilitarian dimension. The following view was prevalent across the sample, but particularly so amongst those who saw higher education in service user terms and who expressed a desire to visible and immediate outcomes from formal learning experiences. The more vocational orientation of this student, making continued reference to universities ‘businesses’, appeared to colour many of his perceptions of value:

Yeah. I mean like, I mean like and I’ve noticed that a few people on certain courses, that they have like six hours per week, it’s just that’s like five hundred quid per hour ... Well each course is different, I would definitely agree on that, but it’s not just what you’re learning, it’s also the course hours ... If you’re shelling out nine grand a year, you want the degree to actually lead to something, to actually have a job at the end of it (Male, business and management, Welsh post-1992 HEI)

The rationalistic approach of calculating the potential economic value of formal learning experiences was widely used by students seeking measureable value from formal learning experiences. Whilst there were differences in the degree of application by which students made calculations, the very equation of a learning experience to a ‘price’ when appraising its experiential value indicates that private costs are marked against perceived quality. This clearly provides some students with clear grounds to assess whether such experiences were proportionate to their share in it. Whilst the judgements may be based on pedagogical grounds, a utilitarian logic predicated on achieving satisfactory return value clearly largely underscores such attitudes.

Positioned consumerism – ambivalence and partial identification

The majority of students interviewed expressed what might be described as a mixed, almost ambivalent position on the consumerism of higher education. At one level, they saw consumerism as an inevitable consequence of a marketised higher education system

and something that was justified through students' private contribution and the need for experience commensurate to increased costs. This further gave rise to a belief that they had considerably more 'rights' in shaping their institutions' activities and to question the value of their formal learning experiences and whether they were getting 'good value for money'. Like students who adopted a more stringent service-user approach, they expressed desire for a beneficial service and that higher fees had made them far less tolerant of practices not in keeping. However, whilst having a partial identification with aspects of more consumerist and service-user values, they also acknowledged the limitations of this approach. There were a number of sources of their ambivalence: the sense that higher education was not fully comparable with other services; that they still had to work within the authority structures of their institutions, including the work they had to put in towards getting their degree. Reference was made to the balance between students' stronger rights as fee-payers and their responsibility in the process of attaining their degrees; what was referred to as a two-way process of responsiveness and engagement between themselves and their institutions:

I think it's more that the value is probably determined by what you put in and how much you try. So I think whether you see it as a purchase or not then you could either get a lot out of, or you could not depending on whether you do make use of things like tutorage within your department, or you go and see your mentors, or you use student services (Male, geography and international relations, English 1994 Group HEI)

The issue of not being able to fully equate higher education to a product value, and the fact that many features of the higher education experience were not comparable with typical consumer-based activities, underscored many of these students' views. Yet a tension prevails in distancing oneself from consumerism on one hand and an over-riding perception that formal higher education is something that is 'paid for'. Higher fees in many cases had promoted a critical questioning of their provision, although still acknowledging the extant authority structures of their institutions and the required input of the student:

No, I don't see myself as a consumer ... Well actually I'm paying for this, you need to sort out my needs, and I don't feel like I have that kind of role, or influence. I do feedback, it's more gentle feedback, but I think if you think about consumerism you're going to lose what university is all about – it's all about sharing knowledge (Female, marine biology, English Russell Group HEI)

Yeah, it's strange because I would never think of it like that, but I suppose in reality we are really consumers because it is a service that we're paying for. But I think it's different because it doesn't feel like a product. When you use the term 'consumer' you're thinking of a product, whereas I'd never think of my degree as something I can put a price on. (Female, languages and international relations, English post-1992 HEI)

Jenny, a mature biology student at a Welsh post-1992 university, discussed how the idea of consuming higher education can be context specific and situated within different episodes of the university experience, which may also be contingent on particular modules and areas of interest. Tensions emerged between adopting a more proactive level of engagement in the learning processes, where levels of personal investment are drawn upon, and more passive forms of consumerism during periods of relative disengagement. Whilst certain formal learning experiences are evaluated in terms of their cost value, there was also a sense that some degree of responsibility and engagement was required in the learning process in order to gain relative value from these. At the same time, she acknowledged consumerism as a potential default mode of identification:

I am consuming education, yeah. But I think it varies on a day-to-day basis. You can see it as a chore, as in I don't want to have to get up and go to a lecture. You can see it as, like life development, that certain aspects of particular degrees that will enrich you more than you know just turning up to a lecture.

The theme of social positioning by significant others clearly resonates here. The perception of being positioned as a 'consumer' by institutions, wider media and policy discourses was therefore prevalent. In some cases, students referred to invasive marketing from their institutions and other media that affirmed their role as consumers. Several of these students described how the university experience had been marketed or 'branded' to them, linked to the drive for universities attempt to differentiate themselves and 'sell the product' of their unique experience, even if it did not quite correspond with the actual experience. The notion of being depicted as a consumer has potential to feed through to students' own sense of their relations to their institution, reinforced by higher fee structures:

It is sort of a business, 'cos that's why they've upped the prices, because once there's competition there's a load of people going to university, and they might want less people going; and then they want the competition between the universities. So I can see where we could be seen as a consumer. (Female, broadcasting, English post-1992 HEI)

However, 'entitlement' and 'rights' discourses were off-set by an acceptance of the role of the student in the higher education process, including their own levels of engagement and proactivity. Students in English universities who had entered in 2012 – at the time of the threefold fee rise – typically referred to the need to 'get the most out' of their higher education experience. However, whilst they held sharper expectations of their institutions' provision, they also made widespread reference to more proactive and focused approaches amongst students. Similarly, higher education was still seen to be largely incomparable with other products and services in more open markets, both in terms of different experience it engendered and the overall level of involvement in meeting expected requirements that were specified within their institutions and programme. The balance between rights and responsibilities tempers more brazenly consumerist approaches:

Like you're paying for a service, but it's a two-way street. You're not in secondary school and there a certain responsibility for you to ... But you're getting no value out of it for the specific reason that you haven't upheld your part of the agreement, like they've provided the hour of teaching and if you haven't done any work it's your fault that you have got anything out of it. Like there's rights and responsibilities on both parts. (Male, law, Northern Irish HEI)

A more widely applied economic metaphor that captures the more utilitarian relationship to higher education was that of 'investment'. As a variant of economically centred discourses, the investment metaphor conveys not only students' economic rationality to participating in higher education but also the justification for increased private expenditure. Rational investment discourses are largely predicated on the assumption that if markets work fairly efficiently then the return on the investment in higher education should be the same as the return on any other financial investment. Students' application of 'investment' discourses reflects are not only premised on anticipated labour market trade-offs and aspirations, but also the notion of higher education as an employment insurance policy that might minimise difficulties of finding desired jobs without. Perceptions of a graduate premium also appear to mitigate inevitable concerns about debt and other future financial pressures:

I do feel that yes, by coming here and paying the amount I do, and it's not even just the tuition fees, it's the costs that come with being at university and living costs and stuff like that. I see it

more as an investment I would say ... an investment rather than consuming. (Female, English and history of art, 1994 Group HEI)

Resisting consumerism

At the extreme of those who held a service-user attitude were those who challenged the notion of consuming higher education, and actively distanced themselves from this approach. This was premised on the belief that higher education was not reducible to a commodity purchase and that approaching it as such would both diminish their role as learners and their efforts towards achieving their degree. Consumption of higher education was perceived as a passive approach that delimited students' roles and input and signalled lower intellectual merit; which in turn could potentially devalue the social and economic status of their degree. The reduction of university learning to 'buying a degree' was not only seen to distort the learning experience, but also to weaken the levels of agency and engagement of the student. This further related to a perception that consumer attitudes were both in tension with the goals of higher education and that higher education students' experience could not be reducible to a transactional exchange.

A relationship emerged between this attitude and other educational values held by these students, which also reflected different motivations students have towards their learning. Students who actively resisted the consumer ethic tended to emphasise the intrinsic value and benefits of their learning and its role in nurturing self-development. Whilst expressing similar concerns to other students about standards, cost-related value and the need for greater responsiveness, they also emphasised the need for proactivity and independence amongst students. Such concerns were therefore foregrounded around substantive educational, rather than service-driven, values. The idea of active involvement in the learning process and engaging in a level of intellectual effort was seen to contrast strongly with the more passive and short-termist approach of consumer-oriented learning. This interacts with other values and influences, not least subject discipline and intuitional affiliation, and was clearly evident amongst students who had developed a strong disciplinary identity and whose motives were the intrinsic value of university. Katie, an English literature student in an English 1994 Group HEI, captures this view in relation to her values of active learning which she contrasts with the more disengaged consumer-orientated approach. Her choice to study a liberal arts subject, and at an institution which she anticipated as providing an intellectual stimulating context, clearly framed her position:

Consuming to me is passive. I'm not just sitting there in lectures with my eyes propped open watching; I'm listening and I'm thinking about it, and I don't just think about these things during lectures, I do outside reading, and I really do consider these points that come up in lectures deeply; I'm deeply interested. I mean if I really had to create a label, even the label I'd create would be open-ended, but it would be something like a person who is working towards a degree. It just states with it is with that active component with no other assumptions, it's just very plain. (Female, Year 1, English literature, English 1994 Group HEI)

Related to concerns such as these, consumer-orientated approaches were further associated with a lowering of the value of a formal degree qualification (a pervasive concern amongst all of the sample) as it is seen to represent a minimisation of cognitive effort and personal merit. This, in turn, conveys the wrong signals about students' level of engagement in the process and what this might further imply about the value of their qualification. Some of

these students challenged the more short-termist and ostensibly outcome-orientated and credential-orientated approach of their peers which was viewed as exclusively utilitarian. At the same time, they acknowledged that the higher personal costs of higher education had made them and their peers think about the value of the experience.

Alternative conceptions and metaphors of higher education are instead invoked, including 'personal development' and the university as a 'life experience'. Like all students in this study, concerns with 'good grades' and future employment figure large. However, there was also a significant emphasis on the pedagogic and developmental value of their university experience which a consumerist approach undermined, mainly because it marginalised students' role and agency in the process.

Contrasts were also drawn between higher education and other services, which were perceived to be largely incomparable both in terms of the relationships it engenders and the role of the student in the process. There was the perception that students still had to prove their intellectual worth and merit, particularly in competitive and academically challenging academic contexts. In some cases, consumer-orientated and more transactional approaches were seen to undermine the academic rigour and authenticity of learning and the related signifiers of cognitive effort. Moreover, the analogies between higher education, based on an effortful and engaged processes that are not always immediate, and other more explicitly consumerable services were seen as problematic. Duncan, an English fee-paying student in a Scottish HEI, made reference to the context of studying in an elite research-based institution where demand for places was far outweighed by supply as working against consumer complacency:

Even though it has changed a lot you almost don't feel like you can exercise your way to your degree, I don't see it as a service. So unlike if you were getting a haircut or something, you can't go: 'oh no I don't like this, think again, or something'. You feel like your privileged to be there, and you've earned that opportunity to be there, so you should work hard. It's almost like you're working for the university rather than the university is working for you, in some ways. (Male, Year 3, genetics, Scottish HEI)

Students who challenged consumer approaches also attributed increasing consumerism as much to mass higher education as rising personal costs, particularly the growth in students who were unclear on their motivation and were entering by 'default'. The relatively impersonal nature of contemporary higher education cultures and the diverse profile of students, combined with what some students perceived to be a less focused approach to formal learning, fed into a disposition of entitlement, even frivolity. There was evident frustration at challenging and meaningful modes of academic engagement being compromised by more misplaced attitudes of students studying for wrong reasons:

There are things that upset me about the people who are here who don't bother; can't be bothered to do the work and still get the good grades. And it's like the masses getting into university, and I have this thing about before it used to be the elite would go to university, and I have this conflict in my mind whether that should be open to everyone. (Female, Year 3, politics and international relations, English post-1992 HEI)

Those critically questioning student consumerism often drew upon various disciplinary-specific lenses in their criticisms of consumerism of higher education, suggesting forms of intellectual engagement that opened up reflection over the overall purpose of their higher education. In some cases, this also reflected the social and political views of students, some of whom were very critical of the move towards a market-based higher education system.

The following student, who attributed marked intellectual gain through his formal studies, illustrates the critical resources some students use to challenge dominant trends towards marketising higher education. In this case, consumerism of higher education is associated with new material imperatives that were inimical to the wider goals of universities. This reveals, to an extent, students' identity positions, their strong identification with a subject area and their self-perceptions and values as learners who wish to gain more from formal learning than 'just a degree':

No, I definitely don't like the term consumerism because – not just education but also with health and with a lot of social factors and anything that's not actually material, then I just don't like the idea that everything in life can be attributed to consumption, and can be analysed in the economical terms (Male, Year 1, physics, 1994 Group HEI)

Discussion and conclusions

Are contemporary higher education students now 'consumers'? The data presented here challenge this proposition and have shown that this is not an all-encompassing categorisation through which students think of themselves, their role within their institutions and their general attitude towards the higher education experience. This brings into question the view that a pervasive consumerist approach now characterises contemporary students' approaches, fundamentally disrupting pedagogic relations. References that the majority of students make to consumerism are largely notional and do not necessarily fully inform their approaches to, and behaviours within, higher education. This may reflect the continued distance between universities and other services (including public services) and the difficulty of fully reconfiguring universities into service utilities that easily accommodate students' immediate and demands. However, the study has illustrated that consumerist discourses have certainly become more widespread and are increasingly framing students' relationship to higher education. We might expect the more extreme sentiments to extend to a wider sample of the student population than the relatively small-scale data of the present study. Furthermore, consumerist identifications may be intensifying in the current climate of increased fees and the continued provider strain placed on UK universities in meeting numerous stakeholder demands.

This study has shown that there are variations in students' attitudes, even though there are many shared concerns; particularly around getting a beneficial and equitable 'return' and value from higher education. This ranges from students who identify with a consumer ethic and see this as fully legitimate on one extreme, and those who critically reflect on this process and disassociate themselves from it altogether. In between are those who occupy a ground that straddles the boundaries between their rights as higher fee-payers and their responsibilities as individuals who need to succeed in higher-stakes markets. This group of students reveals the complex and ambivalent nature of the contemporary higher education experience which also tends to embody a hybridity of outlooks and values. Different value and identity positions can intersect and become contingent on specific contexts and circumstances in an individual's on-going social and institutional experience (Bauman 1991). Ambivalence towards institutions, and finding different ways of appropriating meaning towards formal experiences, may be a symptom of marketised higher education where multiple (sometimes contradictory) messages are provided to students about their role in and response to a system offering to bestow significant future advantages.

Consumerist values appear to be a by-product of the increasingly transactional relationship that students have entered with their institutions, which has also heightened expectations about how beneficial their higher education experiences might be. We would also suggest that the degree to which consumerist approaches are mobilised is determined by the specific contexts and circumstances that students experience at different points in times. Further research would be needed to explore whether approaches which have a consumerist dimension are more prevalent amongst disengaged, disaffected learners. Is it also a fall-back position for those who feel that genuine educational expectations have not been met, who may have 'under-achieved' in relation to entry potential? Grade pressures may well intensify this if they confirm the notion that programmes and individual lecturers need to best facilitate desired outcomes and are in turn more prone to question the authority of those who have traditionally validated their performance. Recent policy changes are making students reflect upon their role within higher education and what higher education can do for them. Consequently, value is increasingly equated with costs. However, getting value from the university experience is a relative notion, and partly reflects the multiple ways in which value in higher education can be constructed, some of which is more materially driven than others (Woodall, Hiller, and Resnick 2014). If value is derived almost exclusively from higher education's role in facilitating individual economic gain, students may approach formal learning in ways that best match this. Approaches to university are themselves value laden in the sense that students have different interpretations of what university means as well as rationalities for participating in it, some of which may be strongly economically orientated.

What this and other studies have indicated is that utilitarian values and attitudes are framing students' approach to higher education as reflected in increasing concerns about their 'returns', relative academic performance (grades outcomes) and how their credentials may be consumed by others in the marketplace (their 'employability' and 'attributes'). Consumerism can be viewed as separate from increasing instrumentality but it is the other side of the same coin. The idea of higher education as a 'private good' in which students have invested and need to instrumentally work towards appears to be coming to the fore in market-driven higher education. There has clearly been a coalescence of different contemporary economic discourses around the individual and social-level value of higher education. Post-Browne discourses have utilised explicitly consumerist discourses that present students as stringent stakeholders who can demonstrably improve services through the choices they make and evaluations of their service.

Consumerist discourses propagated in official policy have in turn been actively incorporated at institutional level with practices borrowed from the corporate world. Thus, allegedly inclusive procedures with the goals of 'improving' student experience and 'voice' ('you said, we did') are at risk of imitating the customer sovereignty ethos of service hospitality industries. Terms and discursive positioning are considerably important in supplying individuals with modes of self-identification and behaviour within the contexts they operate. Consumerism is not a neutral term that objectively characterises social relations – it is instead imbued with numerous connotations and signifiers; some of which can be used to empower actors, while reducing the autonomy of others. It clearly provides individuals with loaded signals about what the institutions in which they participate can provide and how well it conforms to socially derived expectation of universities.

The data from this study point to some significant emerging attitudes which reflect dominant discursive positioning of contemporary university students. That the entire sample

had become familiar with the notion of student-as-consumer in part reflects the changing relational dynamic students now have to their institutions. Expectations of teaching and learning are clearly rising as a result and this was explicitly discussed by 2012 entrants. The equation of teaching time to monetary value implies that the financial nexus between students and institutions is framing many students' expectations of how their institutions are performing in a context of increased personal stakes.

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