

Matt Mawer, Camille Kandiko  
King's College London, UK

Shifting concepts of value in UK higher education? (0176)

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Recent policy developments in UK higher education have enacted systemic change in the sector, particularly of funding arrangements for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). These structural changes take place in the context of broader discourses both within and outside the higher education sector in which the purpose of higher education and the status of HEIs in their current configuration is increasingly challenged.

Academic research – both in the UK and globally - has examined the positioning of students and academics within a higher education sector increased framed by market and consumerist rhetoric. Whilst numerous spirited critiques of neoliberal marketization have been offered (e.g. Canaan et al. 2010; Chanan, 2011; Collini, 2012), it increasingly appears that students' approaches to higher education quality are shaped by discourses that position them as consumers (Cardoso et al. 2013). Such analyses demonstrate the positing of notions of quality within rhetoric of financial investment and product-orientation, but they do not necessarily present a common vision of a high quality higher education experience. Different stakeholders within the higher education arena – e.g. governments, prospective students, current students, academic staff –characterise quality in radically differing ways (Udam and Heidmets, 2013), indicating competing visions for higher education. In particular, what is valued about, during, and as a result of higher education is both contested between stakeholder groups (Udam and Heidmets, 2013) and – in the UK at least – indicated to be less effectively represented in public discourse on quality for some groups (Ashwin et al. 2012).

## **Methodology**

This paper analyses the concept of 'value' as identified and deployed by students in their reflections on the experience of study. Findings are drawn from one aspect of a Quality Assurance Agency funded project into students' perspectives on quality and standards in UK higher education. Qualitative field research was conducted with Fifteen UK HEIs and one advisory group, selected on the basis of geographical diversity, institutional profile, and provider type. Most participant HEIs were UK universities; however, further education colleges delivering higher education

programmes were also represented in the data. A total of 153 individual participants completed the research, the majority of whom (115) were year one or year two undergraduate students. A broad range of disciplines were represented in the participant group, including physical and applied sciences, arts and humanities, social sciences, medicine and health professions. Participants completed a visual concept map of their 'student experience', including relevant processes, expectations, events, reflections, actors, and spaces. Subsequently, these concept maps were discussed in semi-structured interviews or focus groups, expanding upon expectations, key factors and critical incidents in students' perspectives on quality. Data were analysed through Grounded Theory coding (e.g. Charmaz, 2006), examining connections between key concepts underpinning perspectives.

## Findings

Findings have indicated that a consumerist ethos of value as financial return on investment is prevalent within perspectives on both education quality generally and critical incidents in students' experiences. This ethos was illustrated by the persistent equating of financial investment to academic contact hours on a weekly or yearly basis, with contact time being seen as a tangible measure of return for tuition fees. Low contact hours and perceived lack of transparency in how tuition fees were spent within degree courses were of concern to students. Similarly, institutional infrastructure and additional costs (e.g. books) were also frequently viewed through the lens of return for tuition fees already paid. Symbolic facets of value were also influential, with investments in campus buildings, student life, and even course-specific clothing being seen as additional contributions toward justifying the significant increase in tuition fees. Interestingly, the tendency to contextualise experiences within the increase tuition fees appeared to be diffuse across participants and not confined to the 2012-2013 starters, indicating that the symbolic impact of the fees change extends beyond the cohorts it directly affects.

## Discussion

Whilst value generally was most readily conceived as return on pecuniary investment, what was *valued about* a higher education differed widely between students. Perspectives on the purpose of higher education, priorities alongside higher education study, trajectories through education, and career aspirations all shaped the elements of their experience that students held in positive or negative regard. As such, the definition of 'value' in terms of higher education quality is more localised to particular student groups – or indeed particular students – than national debates tend to imply. Additionally, the *value of* a degree was widely perceived to have been eroded; often linked to massification of higher education. Within this context, the value of academic aspects of university experience was balanced alongside other valued aspects, such as employment and career development.

The complexity of value and implications of the findings are discussed in relation to students' experiences of study, defining quality, and the UK higher education policy.

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