

In the workforce landscape, individuals are employed as economic contributors, defined by the 1960's Human Capital Theory concept, widely accepted as an influential economic determinant (Cohn and Geske 1990) declaring that individuals need to acquire, for future employers, relevant marketable skills that, after time and effort, accrue rewards and benefits (Crook et al 2011). To keep up with economic requirements and developing human capital relevant to the global labour market, education systems have had to adapt to the shifting external influences (Molesworth et al 2009; Universities UK 2013). Recent adaptations have seen HE moving from the model of free education to a Neo-liberalistic paradigm that embraces open markets, deregulation and student tuition fees (Browne Report 2010). With the cap removed on student numbers and an agenda for widening participation opportunities, individuals are entering HE from multi-dimensional backgrounds, that some students are least suited to (Brown and Carasso 2013).

Whilst the picture emerges of universities behaving like corporations that aim to maximise student intakes against the minimum staff resources, many academics identify a decline in university standards. Pressures cited by the academic community relate to non-teaching commitments and reduced contact time. Meanwhile, student cohorts struggle to adapt to decreased contact time yet are the arbiters of quality based on student satisfaction surveys interpreted as a measure of 'quality'. The Browne Report (2010) accepts that as there is no national curriculum for HE courses and therefore courses are not consistently measurable but acknowledges the student satisfaction survey as a blunt measuring tool.

Furthermore, there are challenges for students who treat university as a business agent propelling them towards a tangible job and using grades as currency and may attempt to design their own route through the HE system and assume that academic criterion and study is not aimed at them, continuing to seek to 'have a degree' rather than 'be learners' (Molesworth et al 2009:278), whilst others are considerably more focused.

Whatever the student motivation, in the higher fee paradigm of £9000pa, service expectations are high. The 'Generation 9k' aka Gen9k student (Allen and Merrett 2013) or much discussed edu-consumer, continues not to 'read' for their course, but instead be 'entertained' (Delucci 2000:220). Fidler (cited in Grove 2014) points out that '*it's not about educating students, but pleasing them*' demanding better access to tutors, better teaching spaces and more resources against a backdrop of staff cuts, recruitment freezes and massive new building programmes (Burns 2014; Universities UK 2013). Furthermore, many students, particularly first years, find it hard to transition from being dependently 'spoon-fed' (Paton 2012), rather than the self-regulated learners (Schunk 2000 and 2012; Zimmerman 1990). Such learning requires both will and skill for success (McCombs and Marzano 1990) yet many students still flag and fall at the first hurdle particularly for those whose aspirations for HE, pushed by others, does not

exist (Read et al 2003; Reay et al, 2005, Paton 2013) as evidenced by disengagement and drop-out rates (Paton 2013).

Furthermore, individuals are being groomed into higher education by attractive marketing rhetoric such as '*a great student experience*' (University of Southampton 2015), '*where bright futures begin*' (Swansea University 2015), and 'shape your future' (Bournemouth University 2015). Students are left to interpret what the long-term value of a degree might be. Whilst institutions do not explicitly state that employment is a guaranteed progression, institutions are selling to a buyer's market loaded with many disadvantaged edu-customers who assume employment as an outcome.

Whatever the motivation for entering university, most students seek to achieve the perceived norm of 2:1, the measure of 'success'. For many, this is hard earned when barriers for 'succeeding' include economic survival, family commitments, health issues (Jones 2014; MIND 2013), and student performance (HEA-HEPI 2014). Knowing how to 'play' markets to maximize self-interest, based on experiences in commercial marketplaces (Molesworth et al 2009:279) students may be tempted to engage in cheating behaviours to achieve 'good' grades. Where not achieved, rather than pursue clarification or recourse through the cumbersome formal grade appeal process, students might attempt to persuade, informally, the staff, whose salary is paid by the student tuition fee, reducing them to buyer-seller transactional models towards gaining the degree product (Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion, 2010; Naidoo and Jamieson 2005).

Globally, anecdotes of corruption and bribery have surfaced in the media yet in the UK, little is evidenced. Mindful of graduate competition for professional jobs and a major hurdle to interview is the magical minimum of a 2:1 degree (Vasagar 2012), students are mindful of their next step post university. In a landscape where students commit to high loans in exchange for HE products, questions are raised as to whether more students will play a consumerist card for better grades. Whatever the perception, some students may feel pressurized to gain advantage seeking academic enhancement through the phenomenon informally known as 'grade grubbing' in which "students beg professors ... for higher grades with or without legitimate reason" (Hinton, 2008:npn)

Whilst the literature provides broad assumptions, grade-grubbing activity has been somewhat explored, mostly within the USA, however academics in the UK appear to be quiet on the matter.

This phenomenon was explored in a major pilot study at one post-1992 English university. Mixed methods gathered data from academics and undergraduate students who entered in the higher tuition fee paradigm.

Whilst there is no evidence to support tangible bribery or corruption The data identifies participants perceptions, reactions, moral and ethical attitudes towards grading amongst unequal Generation 9k cohorts and educators.

Alongside wider concerns around increased student tuition fees, grade grubbing is a factor with exponential impact with consequences for the validity of university degrees; the resulting potential debasement of HE qualification with an unchecked grade-grubbing culture will have a negative impact on the entire sector.

The trends around grade grubbing need to be acknowledged and understood in order to guard against lasting damage to reputation and academic standing of a University education in England.

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