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Students; Being and Becoming Consumers of Higher Education? (0436)

Anu Lainio¹, Jessie Abrahams¹ *University of Surrey, Guildford, United Kingdom*

Research Domain: Student experiences (SE)

Anu Lainio, Jessie Abrahams, University of Surrey

Extended abstract

Within an increasingly marketised higher education (HE) environment, there is a growing discussion around the student as a consumer of HE. The consumer orientation is mainly built around the introduction and increase of tuition fees and the creation of a number of performance indicators, league tables, quality assurance systems and competence frameworks that have an influence on the governance and funding of HE institutions (Naidoo & Jamieson 2005; Morley 2003). Research on policy documents across European HE systems indicates that the construction of students as consumers is robust at the policy level. However, the growing body of research on students' experiences show that the issue is more multidimensional and complex and far from the straightforward understanding sometimes put forward in policy documents (Brooks & Abrahams, 2018).

'A consumer', according to Clarke et al. (2017) is an economic construct and is established in economic relationships; exchanging money for commodified good and services. This definition implies that it is the economic exchange which renders the transaction as one of a consumeristic nature. Interestingly, the consumerist discourse is still apparent in HE policies in contexts in which tuition fees are not paid. One could ask whether, through being provided with a free education alongside a maintenance grant, some sort of economic relationship and an expectation of a consumerist behaviour is still established. To what extent is this something that can be related to Williams' (1983, 79) notion of consumer as a "more abstract figure in a more abstract market"?

This raises a question of what it actually means to consider students as 'being or becoming' consumers in respect to their education. To what extent can we understand students and consumeristic behaviour as on a continuum- becoming more consumeristic in a more highly marketised system with high tuition fees? Are students really exhibiting consumeristic behaviours or have we simply begun to interpret and respond to pre-existing behaviours (such as making a complaint within the HE context) as consumeristic due to the discourse now predominant in western society. Is the consumerist discourse exclusively apparent in the Anglo-American context or are there also signs of it in continental Europe's HE systems?

In this paper we seek to explore these questions through drawing upon data collected as part of a five year European Research Council- funded project: Eurostudents. The project is exploring the various ways in which undergraduate students are understood in six countries in Europe: Denmark, England, Germany, Ireland, Poland and Spain. Within each country we consider four different perspectives on students: Policy perspectives (comprised of data collected through interviews with policy makers and analysis of policy documents); HEI perspectives (comprised of data collected from interviews with staff alongside analysis of university websites); media perspectives (comprised of data collected from analysis of national newspapers) and student perspectives (comprised of data collected from focus groups with students).

In this paper we focus in on two of the countries in our sample: Denmark and England. These countries arguably provide an interesting contrast. Firstly they have very different welfare regimes; Denmark being a social democratic society whilst England is considered more liberal. Secondly the cost of HE for the student; in Denmark HE is free for students and they receive a maintenance grant from the government while in England students pay roughly £9,000 per year in tuition fees and must take a student loan for maintenance. As such they pose a curious point of comparison when exploring the extent to which students can be understood as 'becoming' consumers.

In this working-paper we seek to begin an exploration at a conceptual and theoretical level around discursive practises of 'the student consumer' in these two social contexts. This will be explored through drawing upon empirical data collected from all strands of the project in the two countries.