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Do HE students really want “value for money”? How 1700 students framed their hopes differently

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Research Domain: Student experiences (SE)

Abstract:

Students are increasingly being cast as consumers in search of “value for money”, particularly in recent English HE regulation and discourse. The current study sought to understand how important value for money is to students in a mid-ranked English university. We asked 1708 undergraduates open-ended questions about what they wanted from their university learning experience and how that has turned out for them. The open-ended questions were intended to allow students to respond on their own terms about their hopes for university. Hopes were thematically coded for content and coded according to whether they were fulfilled or not. All responses were searched for money-related key words, including “money”, “tuition”, “fees”, “paying”, “cheat” or “£”, and then read to confirm that they fit the concept of “value for money”. Fewer than 2% of students referenced “value for money”. Those who did so were more likely to have unfulfilled hopes. Nonetheless, the rarity of any reference to money suggests that the “value for money” construct does not do justice to students’ hopes or desires for university.

Paper:

Introduction

In many countries, HE has become commodified, with students increasingly being cast as consumers. In the UK, the discussion has particularly shifted in the past decade (Molesworth, Nixon, & Scullion, 2009). In 2018, the new Office for Students (OfS) became the central agency in a new regulatory framework for HE in England. The OfS ensures “the need to promote value for money in the provision of higher education by English higher education providers” (Office for Students, 2018).

The OfS immediately commissioned a report on what “value for money” means to students (trendenceUK, 2018), which surveyed 685 current HE students across 31 English universities, 534 recent graduates, and 410 school students. Respondents rated three statements: “1. The tuition fee for my course represents/represented good value for money. 2. Other charges/fees/costs at my university represent/ represented good value for money. 3. Overall my investment in higher

education represents/represented good value for money.”

44% of current students disagreed with the first statement, a third disagreed with the second statement, and 21% disagreed with the third statement. The factors related to dissatisfaction for question 1 were contact time, quality of that contact and not knowing where the money goes. For the second question, dissatisfied students referred to unexpected charges, unnecessary costs, a perception of being profited from, and concerns about hardship.

The OfS study uncritically adopts the assumption, now enshrined in the regulatory framework, that a main aim of HE is to deliver value for money to consumers. The survey results seemingly corroborate that students share this aim. It does so by framing all of the questions, and, therefore, students’ answers in terms of “value for money”. Cast as consumers, students become passive recipients of a service, in contrast to producers actively seek out resources and investing in processes of education (Guolla, 1999).

The current study began with the assumption that students, as motivated, proactive (co)-producers of their higher education experience, will engage in behaviours that match their own hopes, goals and motives for attending HE (Braskamp, 2009). We asked students open-ended questions about what they wanted from their university learning experience and how that has turned out for them to hear students’ hopes in their own words. In this secondary analysis, I investigated whether and how often students referred to wanting “value for money” and then analysed their concerns related to “value for money”.

Methods

Undergraduate students (n=1708) at “Blue University” were surveyed online in early 2018. The survey period overlapped with the University and College Union’s industrial action over pensions. Students were asked two open-ended questions as part of an online institution-wide survey: “1. When you decided to come to this university, what learning experiences did you want?” (Hopes) and “2. How has that turned out? i.e. Have you had this opportunity? Have your hopes or expectations now changed? How?” (Hope fulfilment).

Hopes. These responses were coded and reported on separately in (Quinlan & Salmen, 2019).

Hope fulfilment. Using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and consensus coding (Kuckartz, 2014), each student’s response was coded as *unfulfilled* or *fulfilled*.

Value for money. Responses were searched for references to “money”, “tuition”, “fees”, “paying”, “cheat” or “£”. All responses were read and confirmed as fitting the theme. Responses were then thematically coded (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Demographics. Students indicated which of the two university’s two campuses they studied at, their faculty, departments and discipline, gender, race, age, study year, UK/EU or overseas status, and first generation status.

Analyses

Descriptive statistics were computed for the value for money code and its thematic codes.

Results

Only 33 students referred to value for money (1.9%). Most of those (20/33) had unfulfilled hopes. In contrast, across the whole dataset, most students' hopes (69%) were fulfilled. Thus value for money is cited disproportionately among the minority of students who did not feel their hopes had been fulfilled (60.6% of those citing value for money had unfulfilled hopes versus 16% of all respondents). Nonetheless, most unfulfilled students (93%) still did not reference value for money.

Students on both campuses, men and women, those who were first generation and not, Home/EU and international students, BME and White students, and those under age 21 and those aged 22-25 were all represented among those who referenced value for money.

Among the 33 "value for money" responses, seven students complained about lack of contact time, with many citing just six hours a week of contact time. A further seven expressed discontent about the quality of teaching. Six students referred to teaching disruptions associated with the industrial action.

Discussion

Only 33 out of 1708 respondents mentioned any term related to "value for money" when asked what they wanted from their university learning experience. This finding suggests that "value for money" does not do justice to students' hopes. Rather, "value for money" was invoked more often when students' expectations about core aspects of service were not met, although it was still rare among unfulfilled students (7%). The points raised among those dissatisfied about value for money were consistent with the OfS commissioned report (trendenceUK, 2018).

However, the key finding is that fewer than 2% of the students framed their hopes in terms of value for money when given the space to describe their wants and hopes on their own terms. How we word the questions we ask students matters. The open-ended questions in this survey gave space for students to represent themselves on whatever terms they wanted – consumers, clients, producers or products (Guolla, 1999).

This study is limited to a single mid-ranked institution that acknowledges students as co-producers. Assuming that the student-as-consumer is a social construction, students' responses may be different in other universities depending upon the institutional culture and discourse.

Although regulatory documents and associated surveys are constructing students as consumers in search of value for money (Office for Students, 2018; trendenceUK, 2018), the rarity of students' comments on value for money in this study challenges that framing. It appears that the construct becomes salient primarily when something goes wrong.

References

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