

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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“I Mean I Didn’t Come to Uni and into 60k of Debt not to be Challenged”: Hard Work, Opportunity and Student ‘Consumerism’

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Research Domain: Student experiences (SE)

Abstract: One mainstay in discussion of the university fee regime in England has been the notion that today’s students are, variously, passive, demanding, utilitarian and transactional: in short, that they are consumerist. Drawing on interviews with academics and students, and on discourse analysis of universities’ promotional websites, this paper argues that while university websites and some senior academics present common-sense views of students as economic rationalists obsessed with individual choice, students themselves tell much more thoughtful stories. As a number of critical scholars have argued, education is not a material commodity to be possessed; and many students make similar claims. I draw an analogy with gym membership to show that students instead regarded their fees as the purchase of an *opportunity* which they hoped to maximise through their own hard work. Far from asking to be spoon-fed, students in fact considered a passive or easy educational experience a waste of money.

Paper: This paper adds to the debate on student ‘consumerism’ in English higher education, by demonstrating differences between the views that some senior university managers attribute to students, and the views expressed by students themselves. It seeks to contribute to a sociological literature which problematises simplistic readings of the student as consumer by speaking directly to students about their experiences (Brooks and Abrahams 2018; Budd 2018; Tomlinson 2017).

The findings presented come from a project exploring the emergence of interdisciplinary degrees branded as ‘liberal arts’ in English universities. There are currently twenty-four higher education institutions (HEIs) offering liberal arts degrees for a 2022 start in England, most of which began recruiting in the last ten years. This striking trend is part of a global (Boyle 2019; Godwin 2015b; van der Wende 2017) but very uneven (Godwin 2015a) movement toward what appear to be American models of general higher education, which stress disciplinary breadth, curricular optionality, and generic skills training for the knowledge economy. The research involved interviews with twenty-six students and nine academics at a range of old, post-war and new HEIs, as well as discourse analysis of the promotional websites of all twenty-three HEIs offering liberal arts degrees in 2019.

The project uses new liberal arts degrees to interrogate a series of tensions at the heart of English higher education today. One of these, to be explored in this paper, is the question of student identity in the current tuition fee regime, and the extent to which students regard themselves as consumers of education foregrounding their individual right to choose, specifically in the context of complex interdisciplinary degrees which are sold to them as bespoke offerings limited only by their personal

interests: *'Liberal Education is timely. Its emphasis on individualism and freedom of choice coincide with the spirit of our time'* (post-war HEI website).

The paper makes a series of distinctions between this narrative of individual consumer choice found on institutional websites, the ways in which senior managers imagine student consumerist mentalities, and students' own experiences (Nordensvärd 2010). The notion of the student as consumer was generally celebrated on websites, although this was more true at very elite HEIs; more teaching-focused institutions could be more complex in their framing of prospective students (Telling 2018). Here the idea that students could avoid even an occasional, slightly uninteresting experience by choosing a bespoke degree was stressed: *'This wide range of subjects allows me to not only be able to build a degree tailored specifically to my interest, but I have never once been bored in any module I have taken!'* (student testimonial, post-war HEI website).

For senior managers, there was an equally unproblematised, common-sense view of the student as consumer, although this was generally presented with world-weary inevitability. Here students' consumerism was particularly connected to their apparent belief that they were buying a particular employment outcome, and an expectation that they would be highly instrumental in making educational choices that would lead to well-remunerated work (see Hurst [2013] on this framing of the regrettably careerist student as inherently classed).

For students, on the other hand, the consequences of high tuition fees were conceptualised very differently. Far from expecting a pre-purchased outcome (whether endlessly enjoyable educational experiences, as on the websites, or particular employment outcomes, as managers imagined), students tended to understand their higher education as an (expensive) *opportunity to work*. They tended to centre their own role as active participants in their education, and felt like co-producers of hopefully positive outcomes alongside their lecturers (Tomlinson 2008). More like buyers of an expensive gym membership than of a holiday in the Seychelles, they hoped to receive opportunities for self-improvement, and I argue that students' frequent disappointment with, for instance, low contact hours may be helpfully understood in reference to this analogy.

The narrative of the student as consumer, whether approving or critical, tends to imagine students as the shot-callers in higher education. This is a reversal of the power actually experienced by students: for example, all sorts of barriers are placed on optionality when students actually get on to a liberal arts degree, despite the claims made on websites. By contrasting the *complexity* of students' own conceptualisations of what it means to be a student today with more *simplistic* messages coming from senior managers and institutions themselves (Ahmed 2015), this paper seeks to show that the 'consumerist student' narrative is in fact an inversion of power, in which ideas that are actively fostered by institutions are subsequently attributed to relatively powerless students.

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