

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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First in Family Perceptions of Value for Money in a Marketised HE System: An English Perspective

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**Research Domain:** Higher education policy (HEP)

**Abstract:** Value for money has been a key policy topic in English HE. Whilst government policies have directed universities to show only the economic benefits of HE, there is limited empirical evidence of how students themselves conceptualise value, and if marketisation is affecting this judgement. Through the lens of performativity and market making, this research addresses a gap in our understanding of how the economic sociological literature of markets and consumers connects to what we know about the student experience through the eyes of first in family students. Data was collected through case studies and focus groups with students, and documentary analysis from English regulators and university websites. Findings show that the Government construction of the market were being performed by universities, but students roles of themselves were more complex than that of a customer, and judgements of value were more nuanced than simply subscribing to the commodification of knowledge.

**Paper:** The regulatory shift to create market order in the English HE system was solidified with the creation of the Office for Students and the legal status of students as consumers through the Competitions and Markets Authority and HERA 2017 (McCaig, 2018). There is much literature about the various conceptions of students as partners, consumers and investors (Tomlinson, 2016), and the ways in which students from disadvantaged backgrounds navigate the complex choices and experiences of studying HE (Callender & Dougherty, 2018; Reay et al., 2010; Thomas & Quinn, 2007), yet there is little modern empirical evidence exploring disadvantaged students perceptions of value for money (Tomlinson, 2018), nor how they may be influenced by the construction of the HE market. The theoretical approach taken subscribes to the view that markets are socially constructed, and can therefore be performed (Aspers, 2011; Callon, 1998). Furthermore the regulatory approach to value for money as described in the OfS Value for Money Strategy (OfS, 2019) aligns with the economic valuation model of the Net Value Equation (Woodall et al., 2014) My research, developed for my PhD thesis uses a multi-method research design situated in three English HEIs (a low, medium and high tariff institution) whereby university website data and student facing market tools (such as Discover Uni, TEF and CMA guidance) was analysed against the voice of 27 students from the three universities to understand whether students judgements of value for money aligned to the consumer and market logic being created through national policy discourses and university marketing materials.

First in family students have a unique challenge in navigating their HE choices and engaging in the student experience as their lack of familial experience means that they are often lacking advice and guidance to help develop their sense of value and expectations (Callender & Dougherty, 2018; Crozier & Reay, 2011; Davies et al., 2014; Thomas & Quinn, 2007). Looking at this policy problem from an economic sociology perspective coupled with what we know about first in family and the general student population enabled my work to see the policy problem from a new angle. Much of the empirical literature on students' perceptions of value is also situated within university business schools (Dziewanowska, 2017; Ledden et al., 2007; Woodall et al., 2014) and this study aimed to rectify this.

Analysis showed that there was a clear construction of market order and students as consumers through the regulatory approach, and that universities were complying with the dominant discourse of value relating to employment outcomes for their graduates. Whilst universities would argue that there are many more benefits to HE than simply a 'good' job, there was little indication provided to prospective students as to what else the student experience offers students. Regulators framed all students as rational actors through the development of information tools which whilst claim to "measure what students care about" (OfS, 2018), which amounts to sociotechnical agencement (Callon & Muniesa, 2005) through what is and isn't included and how they are ranked. This therefore has the ability to influence students (and public) perceptions of the value of HE to simply the onward economic benefits. Yet students in this study showed that there were multiple views of what HE is for and what value for money means. This was principally focused on the quality of the student experience, rather than the onward value. Salary data especially was largely discounted, and whilst league tables were a useful first step to understand what is on offer, university open days were vital in enabling participants to understand what HE study would be like and if they felt they fitted in.

Because they had little sense of what their tuition fees paid for, these students defaulted to degree attainment being the most important aspect of their experience and therefore focused their perceptions of value on the teaching, support and facilities available. However as the discussions went on, the safety and community of the campus were also felt important even though most had to deprioritise extracurricular activities because they had to work. These students therefore subscribe to the investment narrative of HE, but are not able to fully derive the most value from their experience through their financial constraints and were wary of independent study as they were not confident learners.

The label of consumer is also complex and contested (Korniljenovic et al., 2018). There was a mixture of participants feeling like passive consumers (Budd, 2020) or active partners, although as HE experiential it could be argued that active student engagement initiatives (student support, representation, surveys etc.) aligns to a service logic model of consumers (Vargo & Lusch, 2008) therefore the consumer concept in HE is more ideological than theoretically informed.

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