

Students' orientations toward higher education in England: defining value for money

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Employability, enterprise and graduate careers (EE)

Abstract

Under the current student finance regime in England, university students are encouraged to think about the value for money from obtaining a degree and respond rationally to the benefits and costs of participating in higher education (HE). However, students' understanding of, and attitudes towards, the financial implications of HE choices have been the subject of relatively little research in England. This article critically examines the HE choice process through focus groups (N=14) with first-year students and offers a typology of student orientations. Our data show that students who have more concrete career plans tend to report that their degree provides good value for money. Contrary to the market-oriented perspective, students do not consider the information about graduate employability or salaries but rather make their HE choices based on their internalised assumptions.

Full paper

The way students perceive their degree is important for understanding their beliefs around the financial implications of studying at university and how they define value for money. In this study, first-year students who participated in focus groups described their degree as an essential requirement for their future career, as an investment, or as a desirable experience.

The first category of students in the typology of student orientations views their degree as an essential requirement for their career. Students in this category are enrolled in STEM or Medicine courses and have a clear idea of what they would like to do upon graduation. Their family background is diverse, with some choosing to follow their parents' footsteps, and others being first in their family to go to university. Students in this category shared views on employability, graduate salaries, and value for money. The findings here confirm that employability and career aspirations are important to first-year students transitioning into HE (Mullen et al., 2019). The fact that the degree of their choice has good employability metrics gave these students some reassurance and helped to narrow down their options. These students did not look for information about graduate salaries and explained this by studying for a degree that leads to in-demand jobs. They comment that information about graduate salaries was "already there" when they looked for other kinds of information about their degree. Students who view their degree as an essential requirement report that their degree provides good value for money.

The second category of students describes their degree as an investment. These students also have a career-oriented approach to their education, but their career plans are less defined compared with the plans of students in the first category. They study a wide range of degree courses and come from diverse backgrounds. When asked about their awareness around employability, some students reported that they came across information about it, whereas others said that they did not know much. When prompted to explain why they did not search for such information, they suggested their career plans have not crystallised yet, so they were not sure how to interpret such information and to what extent it is relevant to them. These students also report that they did not look for the information about graduate salaries. Similarly, they assumed this information is not relevant because they have not decided yet what they are going to do upon graduation. There is a mix of views on value for money. Some believed that their degree offers good value for money because it opens doors to many opportunities, whereas others had a different opinion. Poor value for money is related to instances when students' expectations have not been met. For example, a few students expected that there will be more contact hours. Others expected that their maintenance loan would cover the costs of their

accommodation.

The third category of students describes their degree as a desirable experience. These students are enrolled in Social Sciences and Humanities courses. Importantly, these students come from families where at least one parent holds a degree. The decision to study at university was driven by their academic interests or a belief that getting accepted onto a course would be easy. When asked about whether they considered employability metrics, these students said that they have not. They also did not look for information related to graduate salaries. One student reflecting on her decision to study at university suggested that prospective students have tunnel vision and are not concerned about their career prospects. A couple of individuals even looked down on other members of their discussion groups, who shared the view that their education offers knowledge and skills for work, and commented that education is not about jobs. There was a mix of views on value for money in relation to their degree. Social and wider personal benefits of studying for a degree were attributed to good value for money. Poor value for money was rare and came from unfulfilled expectations related to the contact hours.

In conclusion, student career aspirations, or lack thereof, played a dominant role in shaping students' views on their education and perceived value for money. Students in this study did not actively search for information related to employability or graduate salaries but rather assumed the economic value of their degrees. These findings challenge the consumer-oriented approach to HE because the focus group participants did not appear to act as informed consumers, which is problematic in the HE sector with market imperatives.

References

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