

The consumption values of and empowerment of student as customer in higher education and its implications for higher education policy

Introduction – The debate on the student as customer/consumer has its roots in the 1950s American literature on higher education (Barr, 1968, Corson, 1960, Damon, 1966, Johnson, 1953, Wilson, 1968). Since the 1990s, it has become a prominent debate because of its association to the commodification of education and academic knowledge (see e.g. Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005). In the 21st century, the concept of ‘student as customer’ has been gaining strength in Europe. In the UK, consumer power will likely impact the survival of universities and their departments. The Browne Report (2010) argues that ‘students are best placed to make the judgment about what they want to get from participating in higher education’ (ibid., p. 25) and that ‘their choice will shape the landscape of higher education’ (ibid., p. 4) as they ‘will direct where that money goes through their choice of course and institution’ (ibid., p. 27). The White Paper (BIS, 2011, p. 2) claims to be putting student experience at the heart of higher education. It intends to empower students by ensuring that universities be more responsive and accountable to students and provide better information on their courses, and by creating greater diversity of provision of higher education and modes of learning.

Over the years, much has been written about, or rather against, the concept of student as customer/consumer in higher education, but little empirical research has been carried out and, more often than not, research lacks a solid theoretical framework. As a consequence, little is known about the actual experience of the student as customer/consumer with regard to their experiences. We look at the students’ experiences at a particular UAS through the lenses of *Consumption Values Theory* developed by Sheth et al. (1990, 1991) and a *Framework of Power Relations* developed by Bótas (2000, 2004, 2008a, 2008b, 2009), based on the works of Foucault (1974, 1977, 1980a, 1980b, 1982, 1991, 1994), Burbules (1986) and Lukes (1974, 1978, 1986).

The debate about student as customer/consumer in higher education, as mentioned earlier, has become prominent since the 1990s. In this literature (see e.g. Franz, 1998, Helms & Key, 1994, McMilan & Cheney, 1996, Molesworth *et al.*, 2009, Riesman, 1998, Schwartzman, 1995) the dominant perspective is one of strong reservations or outright resistance against accepting students as consumers. As Redding (2005, p. 409) put it, ‘calling student as ‘customer’ often elicits very strong reactions among academic circles. More often than not, these reactions are negative’. The student as customer/consumer sees teachers as vendors of educational credentials and products (degree and grades), who are there to serve students, provide choice in the curriculum. Consequently, students become passive consumers, lose their responsibility for their own learning, reject anything they think is not relevant to their careers or interests and transform the pedagogical relationship into a commodity in a market transaction (see e.g. Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005).

The main key elements of the discourse are: consumerism/ commodification transforms students into passive consumers; it distorts the teacher-learner pedagogical relationship; it inhibits genuine learning; it leads students to making wrong choices; and thus it puts educational quality and the idea of academic professionalism at risk. However, Barnett (2011) argues that markets actually may lead to students as consumers taking a heightened interest in his or her learning, it might lead to a greater effort towards and energies in the learning required and to a heightened attention to the teaching functions on the part of lecturers and tutors, mutually reinforcing attention to the pedagogical relationship by both students and teachers.

One of the key elements of commoditized higher education is the ‘move towards structured, consumable education through modularisation, semesterisation and self-directed learning’ (Gibbs, 2001, p. 87). In the Netherlands, commodification has taken shape through demand-driven education that aims to enable students to “customise” their programme of

study. In demand-driven education ‘the student is the principal arbiter in making judgments as to what, when and how learning will occur’ (Hannafin, 1992, p. 54). Not only are the curricula (more) in line with what students want or need, the materials are also more tuned towards specific student demands or characteristics (Kirschner *et al.*, 1999). In this paper, we investigate students’ perceptions and behaviour in a context of demand-driven education. Our objectives are to explore students’ choice in curricular matters and their sense of empowerment through the exercising of their choice as customers in higher education.

Research design – We used a mixed-method approach to our research (focus groups and survey). However, this paper reports mainly on our qualitative (focus group) data, but adds some quantitative (survey) evidence to support the analysis.

Findings – The findings of our research indicate that when students have the authority to make decisions, their choice is based on either emotional, epistemic or functional values or a combination of these. We did not find one case where students based their decision on either social (peer pressure, issues of identity) or conditional values. Epistemic, functional and emotional consumption values are directly related to students’ sense of having autonomy and being empowered and also to elements of intrinsic motivation. Conditional and social values – those values implicitly and explicitly expected to be dominant by those opposing the idea of students as consumers – would directly relate to students’ sense of feeling powerless and being controlled by teachers [see table 1 below].

Table 1 – Theory of consumption values

Value	Definition (Sheth <i>et al.</i>, 1990, 1991, p.^pp.)	Examples (Stafford, 1994, p.^pp.)
Functional	The perceived utility acquired from an alternative’s capacity for functional, utilitarian or physical performance	Specific course is seen as avenue to a job Course will enhance students’ employability in the job market
Social	The perceived utility acquired from an alternative’s association with one or more specific social groups	Class is taken by friends as well Course selected due to persuasive influence from parents or trusted others Course is chosen based on good report from reference group members
Emotional	The perceived utility acquired from an alternative’s capacity to arouse feelings or affective states	A liking/disliking for a certain class Communality between topic and interests and preferences
Epistemic	The perceived utility acquired from an alternative’s capacity to arouse curiosity, provide novelty, and/or satisfy a desire for knowledge	Course is new and interesting Contributes to a broader intellectual experience in the curriculum
Conditional	The perceived utility acquired by an alternative as the result of the specific situation or set of circumstances facing the choice maker	Certain course is required in order to qualify for a degree

In general, in our research, participants feel very strongly about their ability to make autonomous decisions. Although participants do seem to value the opinion of other students and/or teachers, they emphasize that they feel that it is their own decision to make and that they feel empowered by this. We found that students want and trust information sources that do not have vested interests. Contrary to Schwartzman’s (1995) and Dill and Soo’s (2004) claim that judgments of students as customers may be immature, our participants appear to act in a mature way. Also contrary to Deming’s (1993) argument that students do not have the knowledge to provide adequate input on what they should be taught, our participants demonstrate that they do possess that knowledge. Students talk to each other, and look websites of other universities, compare curricula from different universities. They also talk to

professionals and employers, as they have to do their work placement, and get impartial information about their studies, skills and courses they should be taking to prepare themselves for a job. The examples above indicate that the participants' freedom to exercise their autonomy has a positive impact on their motivation to study and, as a consequence, it might also positively affect their academic achievements. These findings are supported by the results of the survey that show that students seem to be very able to decide for themselves what they want to learn, as 84.5% of the students stated that they enjoyed the fact that they could choose their own education.

Conclusion – Our findings demonstrate that epistemic, functional and emotional consumption values or a combination of these values are directly related to students' sense of empowerment and control over their own education and future, as this sense that leads to commitment to and engagement with learning from the part of students. We argue that students make rational choices and that their choices are informed by their educational, professional needs and intellectual interests. We further argue that when students as customers are enabled to choose what, when, how and where learning will occur, it results in students having a strong sense of control and empowerment. However, students' choice-making process seems to be caught on a power struggle between students and UAS, where students' sense of control and empowerment meets powerful others, i.e. UAS' academics and administrators, imposing institutional constraints. Our findings have huge implications for higher education policy as the exercise of students' choice does not 'threaten innovation and academic standards' (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005, p 279), but it is a driver for innovation in the curriculum and in research and that, per se, is a driver for quality of academic standards. Therefore, we argue that students are the main customers of higher education and higher education policy must ensure that higher education institutions treat their customers, i.e. students, with the respect and dedication that they deserve.

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