Does it have a price tag? Student perceptions about value-for-money in higher education (0247)

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Background

The broad context for this study is the explicit consolidation of a customer model of higher education that has been promoted by the UK government. The government's aim has been to create a higher education system in which students are conceived as both beneficiaries and consumers of their education, while higher education institutions are positioned to compete with one another under albeit quasi-market conditions for these students' custom (for recent critiques, see Collini, 2010, 2013; Molesworth *et al*, 2011; Brown, 2013; McGettigan, 2013; Williams, 2013).

The specific focus for the study relates to the concept of a higher education that offers 'value-for-money'. This phrase has been adopted both within and outside the university sector to assert that students should not just expect a return for their money, but a return that offers them good value within a competitive market framework. As a recent example, the HEPI-HEA Student Academic Experience Survey 2015 asks students specifically about their perceptions of value-for-money.

Theoretical/methodological approach

Promoting higher education in terms of value-for-money sits uncomfortably with many who have academic responsibilities towards both students and particular subject disciplines: stressing an exchange relationship of any description potentially portrays an overly reductive understanding of complex educational processes and outcomes (Standish, 2004), and this understanding becomes all the more reductive when attempts are made to specify exactly what students might be getting for their money. A central objection is that the customer model 'wraps-up' higher education in economic terms at the expense of a more fully rounded understanding of educational experience (Love, 2008; Williams 2013).

Our study turns the spotlight onto students' responses to the notion of value-for-money. We begin by recognizing that there will be a need over the coming years to supplement crude data gathered via student experience surveys with more complex research that explores how the consumer model is being adopted, adapted, or even rejected as it is superimposed on more entrenched beliefs and wishes about higher education and educational relationships between students and their disciplines, and students and their teachers.

More particularly, we highlight that there is a strong rhetorical dimension to the notion of value-for-money whose impact merits investigation. Students are being encouraged to think about their university experience as an exchange for money when in fact many will never part with their own money to pay for their studies, any loan having a metaphorical quality in being deducted at source from salaries subsequent to graduation. Our aim is to gain a fuller understanding of if and how this rhetoric is influencing students' perceptions and behaviours. A methodological influence is the field of economic psychology, whose proponents aim to bridge the disciplines of psychology and economics and who assert that, "it is not the abstract concepts – like money, inflation, or unemployment rates – by themselves that influence each other – but that concrete people act and interact in a given economic environment and thereby change it" (Hoetal and Kirchler, 2010).

Finally, we draw from the field of psychology more generally to explore how particular attitudes to money might influence students' perceptions about a value-for-money higher education. While some claim that the psychology of money remains under-explored – even taboo – a series of studies have categorized attitudes towards money and debt. Scales have been devised to assess key money-associated emotions such as power, security, love and freedom (Furnham *et al,* 2013), along with attitudes towards uncertainty and risk (Bachan, 2013) that may informatively intersect with students' attitudes towards paying for their education.

Method

This project aims to supplement a recently published study into student expectations and perceptions of higher education completed by Kandiko and Mawer (2013) and commissioned by the QAA. Using a grounded theory approach and involving 153 students across the UK, the authors identified that students across all year groups, institutional types and subjects had a "consumerist ethos towards higher education" and wanted 'value for money'. Study participants commonly cited contact time and new buildings to inform their judgments about value-for-money, and interviews revealed that their wish for more contact time related to wanting more high quality contact time rather than more contact time *per se*.

In contrast to Kandiko and Mawer's wide-spanning investigation, ours is a mixed-methods case study that focuses on second year undergraduate students at a single Russell-group university across four discipline areas. The first phase of the study involved four group interviews which were partly designed to assess whether students at a single university reflected the same pre-occupation and understanding of what counts as value-for-money as those in Kandiko and Mawer's study. Students were invited to discuss the relevance of the notion of value-for-money to their experience of studying, identify what they they thought their fees were paying for, recount their attitudes towards accumulating debt, and reflect more fully on the qualities they most sought and appreciated from their educational experience.

Data from the group-interviews were used to design a survey that was subsequently completed by 255 students within the same four discipline areas during April and May 2015. Questions related to financial status, what students thought they were paying for, what students thought they should be paying for, the impact of payment on study, attitudes towards debt, and how much they would be prepared to pay to study at university. This questionnaire was completed alongside a validated money beliefs scale (Furnham 1984).

Indicative results and implications

Analysis of all the data collected is underway. Initial qualitative data from the group interviews suggests a more mixed response than reported by Kandiko and Mawer (2013). Although all students were able to identify with the concept of value-for-money in relation to their study experience without hesitation, a number reported that they didn't think in terms of value-for-money very often and that they were unconcerned about paying a debt for money that they will never see. While students were generally able and willing to list a range of items and facilities covered by their fees, many were also able to identify aspects of their student that didn't come with a 'price tag'.

Final analysis will provide data that adds to existing empirical research on the impact of promoting a consumer model of higher education on the student experience. Sufficient data has been collected to enable comparison of attitudes between students within different subject disciplines and between students with different attitudes towards money *per se*. From a more theoretical perspective, it will be interesting to discover how students continue to respond to and adapt the consumer rhetoric in relation to their non-economic aims and aspirations.