

The rise of student consumerism

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Slumped in a chair at the back of the room – unshaven, dressed in a beanie and an oversized duffle coat – the student had just muttered: ‘Look, I pay tuition fees. I can sit here if I want’. If I hadn’t had a boisterous class of undergraduates waiting to be taught statistics, I would have loved a few hours’ lively debate with him. It was a time when, outside of teaching duties, I was up to my eyeballs in a research study on exactly this sort of attitude, so I was more fascinated by his retort than angry or frustrated.

Just about every academic working in higher education today has an anecdote along these lines – stories of students asking for the answers before they’ve even tried working it out for themselves, demanding to know deadlines that are publicised months in advance, generally feeling entitled to good academic outcomes but unwilling to put in the effort. But it would be simplistic to argue that this is all down to ‘laziness’ or ‘stupidity’.

People are often intrigued when I give presentations about ‘student consumerism’. How can we define it? Is a definition even possible? US sociologist Emily Fairchild has suggested that consumerist students ‘make demands on instructors that require controversial alterations of teaching techniques’, ‘expect to be entertained or amused in class’, and ‘do not want to... receive negative feedback, or have to put forth too much effort’ (Fairchild et al., 2007, p.1). She argues that student consumerism may be narrowly defined

by viewing the relationship between student and institution as similar to the relationship between customer and seller. However, Fairchild and colleagues also contend that a broader conception is possible – a complex set of interconnected attitudes relating to students’ expectations of what they are entitled to from lecturers and institutions, the importance they place on academic ends (e.g. answers, grades) relative to processes (e.g. engagement, learning), and where they situate the responsibility for their own education (e.g. themselves, lecturers).

Most literature on student consumerism is from the US, within the sociology of education. Empirical studies are extremely rare. One of the first explored the prevalence of student consumerist attitudes in sociology undergraduates (Delucchi & Korgen, 2002). Over 73 per cent of the students agreed with the statement ‘I would take a course in which I would learn... little or nothing but would receive an A’, while over 52 per cent agreed with the statement ‘It is the instructor’s responsibility to keep me attentive in class’ (p.103). Later studies by Fairchild and colleagues (2005, 2007) extended this work by developing the Consumerist Attitudes Toward Undergraduate Education Scale. Their validation studies showed that when assessed with this instrument, student consumerism appears to be normally distributed, suggesting its prevalence may not be as strong as appeared in Delucchi and Korgen’s (2002) data. The discrepancy

may come down to the need for a reliable and valid means of assessment.

Why might students hold consumerist attitudes towards their education? Delucchi and Korgen (2002) suggest that, over recent decades, free market ideologies have become increasingly influential in the higher education sector, embodied in developments such as inter-institutional competition, the emergence of league tables, and the move from state- to student-funded tuition. Many of these changes have been reflected to students through the development of sophisticated advertising programmes, including prospectuses, brochures and media advertising. Often, universities present themselves as providers of tangible products and services (e.g. housing, career services, degrees) – so it doesn’t seem surprising that students may take this as a cue to act as consumers.

Although sociological work is currently a rare example of empirical literature in student consumerism in the US, the phenomenon has a rich history there as a subject of anecdotal commentaries emerging since the 1970s (e.g. Pernal, 1977). Such literature has been broadly critical of consumerist attitudes, citing negative influences on both learning and lecturers’ integrity. D’Amato (1987), for example, notes that lecturers often feel under pressure to entertain students or dumb down academic material to comply with student demands. Moreover, in the US, some institutions take into account student ratings when granting promotions, which may encourage some lecturers to ‘give in’ to their students’ consumerist expectations. On the other hand, some have argued in favour of students as consumers. One argument is that adjusting teaching practice to suit student demands is necessary to change the ‘ivory tower’ reputation of academia (Gernster et al., 1994). Others contend student consumerism is useful for giving students a say in teaching practice, thereby democratising the education process (Obermiller & Atwood, 2011).

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Writing from a management perspective, Naidoo and Jamieson (2005) have called for a more active research agenda on student consumerism in the UK. This seems particularly important, as currently much attention is devoted instead to student satisfaction and experience. The focus of the National Student Survey, for example, tends to be on students' perceptions of whether their consumer expectations of institutions have been met, not factors central to the historical purposes of higher education – such as learning, development or human flourishing. In a similar vein, sociologist Frank Furedi (2009) has written extensively about the 'culture of complaint' emerging in UK higher education, with seemingly increasing numbers of formal complaints based on consumerist expectations. He argues positioning the student as a consumer may increase students' awareness and pursuit of consumer rights, even when these may be at odds with learning. Indeed, students' unions and the National Union of Students (NUS) are argued to be under increasing pressure to act as consumer rights bodies within universities (Attwood, 2007).

Apart from learning and lecturer integrity, student consumerism may also be associated with students' well-being. In one of my own studies, I collected consumerism and well-being data from first-year undergraduates from 30 universities across the UK. Results suggested a negative relationship between student consumerism and students well-being, with above-average consumerist students having significantly lower university-related well-being than their less consumerist peers. Given that data for this study were collected in late 2012, when the tuition fee cap for UK and EU students had newly risen to £9000, it might be speculated that this effect was due to the increase in the net tuition fee paid by the majority of undergraduates. However, some evidence suggests tuition fees have little to do with either student consumerism or student well-being. For example, the consumerism-well-being relationship observed in the increased tuition fee sample was also found to hold in a separate data set collected from UK undergraduates in 2011/12 who had not been affected by the new policy, and also in a sample of students in Australia and New Zealand, where there had been no substantial increases in tuition fee caps. The consistency of the effect across time and place suggests that student consumerism may be less related to actual

tuition fees and more to an evolution in the social role of higher education.

Psychology as a discipline has remained largely silent on the phenomenon of student consumerism, yet it could have a lot to offer in this emerging field of research. Psychologists working in the area of individual differences, for example, could examine whether there might be certain personality traits or values (such as materialism or a sense of entitlement) that might have different prevalence in highly consumerist students compared with their less consumerist peers. This knowledge may help us to 'target' highly consumerist students and



challenge their beliefs, and also to consider the ways contemporary marketing, service and teaching practices in the higher education sector may be contributing to the development of consumerist personalities in some students.

There is also much existing theory in psychology that could be used to help explain some of the cognitive and social processes by which student consumerist attitudes develop. For example, consumer psychologists could examine the ways different marketing strategies used by universities are perceived by prospective and current students. Both consumer and cognitive psychologists could explore metacognitive aspects of student consumerism, such as how students think about their own attitudes towards higher education, whether student consumerist attitudes are characterised by particular cognitive patterns, and, if so, how these patterns might be altered using alternative cognitive strategies. Theory and research on social cognition and group processes in social psychology could also inform research, exploring how students' understandings of their social practices in educational environments – such as

student/lecturer relationships – might influence, and be influenced by, consumerist perspectives in students' attitudes. In addition, critical psychologists could deepen and enrich existing research by questioning whether we are approaching students, academics or higher education sectors with a negative bias. For example, are consumerist students necessarily the 'culprits' in their own 'failures'? Are there systemic dysfunctions in the higher education sector – and in society at large – that perpetuate biased perspectives on consumer culture in universities? Does labelling certain students as 'consumerist' legitimise

a segregationist political outlook within education? There is also scope for psychologists working with qualitative/constructionist approaches to conduct ground-up inquiry on the lived experience of student consumerism. For example, they might explore how students make sense of the notion of student consumerism, how they position themselves in relation to the consumer discourse within education, and how they negotiate potential discrepancies between 'shallow' consumerism (as they might report on a scale such as Fairchild's) and 'deeper' consumerism (as manifests in everyday social and cultural practices in higher education campuses and classrooms).

Clearly, although the discussion on student consumerism is gaining momentum, there is still a lot we don't know. Its prevalence and social and cultural roles are in a state of constant change, being influenced in turn by market forces, education policy, and institutional and cultural practice. A fundamental point we need to debate, though – one that research alone can't answer – is what sort of ideals we want to pursue in higher education and how these might implicate, and be implicated by, student consumerist attitudes. Is student consumerism 'good' or 'bad'? Are there certain aspects of it that we need to encourage, and others that are harmful and should be changed? And whose responsibility is it to manage student consumerist attitudes in an effective way – students, academics, the government, the higher education sector, or wider society?



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