Student engagement and the threat of consumerism: testing assumptions.

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ABSTRACT: In recent years, two potentially conflicting discourses have come to dominate higher education, namely student engagement and consumerism. Student engagement is based on a collegiate model where the student becomes a co-producer in the learning environment. Conversely, consumerism presupposes that the relationship between students and their universities will follow a conventional customer: provider relationship. There is an assumption that these are naturally contradictory. Moreover, students are increasingly positioned as consumers, even though there is little empirical evidence that they see themselves this way or act in a consumerist manner. This paper challenges these assumptions. Based on the survey of 1300 students in a UK University, the paper demonstrates that students do not necessarily see themselves as consumers. Furthermore, a consumerist perspective does not appear to be intrinsically hostile to engagement. An argument is presented that consumerism should be seen as part of a multi-faceted student identity and that university staff should take that into account in reviewing how they connect with their students.

KEY WORDS: student engagement, consumerism, marketisation, co-production, participation

1. INTRODUCTION: In recent years, expectations for greater and greater levels of student engagement have become a defining feature of higher education across the globe. The nature and expectations of engagement differ from place to place. The US system tends to focus on engagement in the learning environment (1). Elsewhere, the emphasis is often on participation in decision-making (2), with a growing body of literature also considering the impact of engagement on students' sense of association with their university (3). Hence, notions of engagement tend to coalesce around three key areas: learning, governance and identity. Whichever emphasis is taken, engagement is typically presented as a co-production between universities and their students that extends beyond learning and teaching to include quality assurance and governance activities. In this environment, universities are expected to encourage their students to become involved in a comprehensive array of enhancement activities (4). These transform the notion of studenthood from the view that students are primarily learners and novices in any associated community of practice, to a view that they are correspondents in how universities manage their intellectual resources. Paradoxically, as the discourse of engagement has flourished, so has the perception that students are increasingly consumerist (5). In this, education has become a commodity that the student purchases, with all the attendant assumptions of customer:provider relationship that this implies. Unsurprisingly, there is a compelling argument that consumerism is inconsistent co-production (6). In consequence, universities are in the difficult position of managing expectations for student engagement in an environment that is increasingly characterised by commercial relationships that are hostile to these endeavours.

This paper reports a small-scale study to test these assumptions. First, it explores the extent to which university students see themselves as consumers of higher education. This is in recognition of the fact that a consumerist identity has been imposed on students without exploration of how they actually feel about this issue. Second, the research considers whether personal perceptions of consumerism are associated with views about or actual participation in engagement activities. The research that informs this paper is based in the UK, specifically in England. However, with students expected to pay for higher education in most countries, it is anticipated that the findings may be of relevance beyond national boundaries.

2. RESEARCH AREA: The consumerisation of studenthood in the UK is often seen as an outcome of the marketisation of higher education (6). A central tenet of this is the creation of a competitive market that is driven by students asserting their consumer power. In this environment, perceptions of studenthood have shifted from traditional notions of the student as a 'novice' or 'apprentice' in an academic community to that of the student as a 'customer' of an individual higher education provider (7). Critics see this as detrimental the collegiality that characterises the contract between students and academics (8). Indeed, a discourse has evolved that presents consumerist students as malignant influences on the sector. They are increasingly painted as demanding clients rather than willing learners. Commentators have reported a new stridency of student opinion, reflecting 'a customer is always right' mentality that undermines any sense of education as a joint enterprise (9). In addition, consumerism is seen to have led to a growing culture of complaint and litigation that sets students against their

tutors (10). It is not hard to see how this could constrain engagement by undermining the relationships between students and their universities.

This argument is particularly compelling as fee-paying has become a feature of higher education across the globe. Giroux (11) maintains that the function of higher education as a public good has been replaced with the notion that it is a private investment. His argument focuses on the US, but there are clear parallels with higher education systems elsewhere, where full state funding for university students has all but vanished. However, even in countries such as Scotland, where tertiary education remains free, there is a perception that students are consumerist (12). Hence, it appears that the student has been recast as a consumer of an educational product regardless of whether they actually pay fees. Their time, intellectual resources and (in most instances) finances are invested for individual gain, with terms like 'investment', 'choice' and 'value for money' coming to dominate the lexicon of higher education.

There is little proof that students actually operate as consumers. When students arrive at the university they show few of the attitudes that would be associated with seeing themselves as consumers (13). This reflects a basic contradiction in arguments about the commodification of education; namely that education cannot be treated as a conventional product (14). Purchasing an educational experience involves entering into a contract that presents the student with a set of rights and obligations that are not consistent with accepted marketing practices. In education, therefore, students are in the unusual position of being a 'customer' who is reliant on the provider to grant them access to the product (14). This may explain why Saunders (13) found that much of the literature on students' consumerist behaviour is based on anecdotal evidence and personal experience. The authors, he maintains, rarely present research-based evidence. Indeed, one of the few available pieces of research on UK students' perceptions of consumerism (15) reports that students appear to be conflicted in how they view themselves. It found that they embraced the language of consumption, whilst simultaneously rejecting its implications. Yet, students operate in a culture that constantly reinforces the message that they are consumers. This has been expressed through government rhetoric and the media (7). Furthermore, universities are complicit with this, most notably in how they market their courses (16). Universities now see their students as a source of income and have used this to support the marketisation of their services (4). Arguably, students operate in an environment that has defined them as a consumer before they have even made the decision to enter higher education.

2.1 THE MYTH OF STUDENT CONSUMER POWER: It has been argued that consumerism has forced university managers to attend more carefully to their students' needs (17). The implication is that the balance of power has shifted towards students. However, there is little evidence that this is the case. Mann (18) compares universities to Goffman's notion of a 'total institution'. In this, she illustrates how the power of the university is retained and reproduced, even if its activities change. Reliance in the UK on student satisfaction data is an example of this. Free market logic suggests that customers make purchasing decisions based on how content they are with services (5). In a market-oriented university system, the assumption is that dissatisfied students will express their power through market decisions. This has resulted in growing emphasis on the National Student Survey. Its purpose was to reduce costs of review and provide standardised data to allow for comparisons between institutions. However, as a key instrument for enhancing consumer control, the Survey is notably lacking. First, data is collected at the end of the students' undergraduate academic careers, meaning that they will not benefit from any resulting action. Furthermore, manipulation of the National Student Survey is recognised and the value of data to reflect an authentic student experience is questionable (19). This is because the data contributes to a university's position in national league tables. League tables have become a feature of public sector management in the UK in recent decades. In 2005, Naidoo and Jamieson (20) predicted that that the introduction of university league tables would encourage institutions to manage data to protect or enhance their relative position. This was based on observations that wherever league tables had been introduced, distortion of data had followed. The clear implication is that any consumer power that student have is tentative. In light of this, it can be argued that consumerism has not re-articulated the power dynamics between students and institutions in a manner that signals an authentic desire to see the student experience as a central focus of university decision-making (12). It has simply provided a new set of criteria for universities to respond to. The shift in what universities teach is also illustrative of the relative lack of student power. Marketisation has led to growing pressure on universities to exploit the links between qualification and employment opportunities. Hence, there has been a shift from assessment of academic literacy to appraisal of employability and transferable skills (21). Nonetheless, the emphasis has remained on assessment, with the power balance inevitably favouring the assessor. Research has found that concerns about the impact on assessment and grading can discourage students from expressing their views (22).

2.2 THE CHALLENGE OF CONSUMERISM FOR STUDENT ENGAGEMENT: If the objective of commodifying education was to challenge to the power imbalance that favours university staff over their students, it appears to have failed. Indeed, the experiment might backfire as if consumerism creates a division between students and the university and engenders passivity in students that undermines their learning (6). This is in direct opposition with aspirations for widespread student engagement. Today's students are expected to engage in a range of activities that have no direct impact on their educational performance. Planas et al (23) have identified a trend to greater student participation in university governance across Europe and North America. Moreover, Pabian and Minskova (24) noted significant commonalities in mechanisms for engagement across national boundaries. A similar phenomenon has been recognised in Australasia (25) and South Africa (26). In the UK, for example, quality assurance guidance sees a role for student involvement at every level of quality enhancement (4). . In line with this, the notion of co-production has been applied to student participation in university structures and processes (26),

> *"…a model of co-production also implies student involvement at the collective level. It suggests that institutions should bring students into the decision-making process, ask students to help design the curriculum, and give students control of some parts of the learning environment. In addition, it emphasises the role of students' unions, course representatives, and so on, in influencing institutional policy by adding a student viewpoint in various contexts, or increasingly by running projects and services on the institution's behalf." (p3)*

This fundamentally challenges how students should work with their universities. It demands a level of student participation that extends way beyond a simple consumer relationship (12). This presents two key questions. First, do students actually see themselves as customers of their universities? Secondly, if there is a consumerist orientation amongst students, how will it influence engagement? This paper attempt to answer these questions by exploring data collected in a student survey.

3. METHODOLOGY: Data was collected from a survey in one UK University. The university in question is a large, city-based institution with a diverse student body. The voluntary and anonymous survey focused on a variety of aspects of student engagement. Questions were developed from a series of focus groups and interviews with students that explored various aspects of student engagement in university decision-making. The findings were used to generate 30 statements about student engagement. Some of these related to the extent to which students wanted to be actively included in aspects of university life beyond the direct learning and teaching environment. Other statements were associated with previous experience of typical mechanisms of engagement, notably through course appraisal, student representation and staff:student collaboration. The final survey tool included these statements with responses rated on five point, Likert-type scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree). This included a single item on consumerism, *"I see students as customers of universities, rather than learners in universities"*. The questionnaire was piloted with students from across a range of academic disciplines to enhance validity. Internal consistency was established using Chronbach's alpha.

Following ethical approval, the survey was disseminated in a selection of second and third year lectures. First year students were excluded, as they would have had few chances to engage in decision-making activities by this point in their university careers. To ensure a breadth student opinion, the survey was run across the university in 35 separate classes selected by network of learning coordinators. The final sample included representation from arts and humanities, social sciences, biological sciences, physical sciences, engineering education and professional studies. This provided a sample of 1379 students that accounted for approximately 10% of all students who met the inclusion criteria. Statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS (27). Statistical associations were established using the Mann Whitney U Test or Chi Square, with significance set at $p<0.05$.

4. RESULTS: The in-class dissemination method facilitated a very high response rate of nearly 95% (n=1309), with only 2 questionnaires spoiled. The demographic breakdown of the sample was broadly in keeping with university data. Just over 60% of the sample was female and a similar number of students were under 21 years old. Only 3.9% of respondents studied on a part-time basis and 5% had come to the university from outside the UK or Republic of Ireland. Again this aligned with University data. However, the sample was skewed in favour of second year students (64.3%). The sample was wide-ranging and included 25 different subject areas from across the organisation. Disciplines covered were organised into Biglan's Hard/Soft, Pure/Applied categories (28). This exposed an equal split between responses from students studying 'hard' and 'soft' subjects.

4.1. STUDENTS' VIEWS ON CONSUMERISM: Figure I shows students' response to the single survey item on consumerism. Only 19 students did not answer this question, giving an item response of 98.5%. Their responses indicate significant diversity of opinion. There was a roughly equal distribution between agreement, neutrality and disagreement. Indeed, the mean score for this item was exactly 3.00 - the neutral point on the Likert-type scale. Analysis showed little association between students' response and any recorded student characteristic. It was not related to age, level of study, part-time status or whether the student was from outside the UK/Republic of Ireland. There was also no apparent link with the students' disciplinary area. Only gender appeared to be a factor, with male students more likely to agree with the statement than their female peers (U=159590.500, Z=-3.905, P=0.001). Finally, students' perceptions of their consumer status were not influenced by whether they paid fees. The research did not interrogate students on their fee-paying status. However, some respondents were on courses that were fully subsidised, namely professionally accredited programmes in nursing, midwifery, paramedicine and social work. The views of students on these courses did not significantly differ from those of their peers.

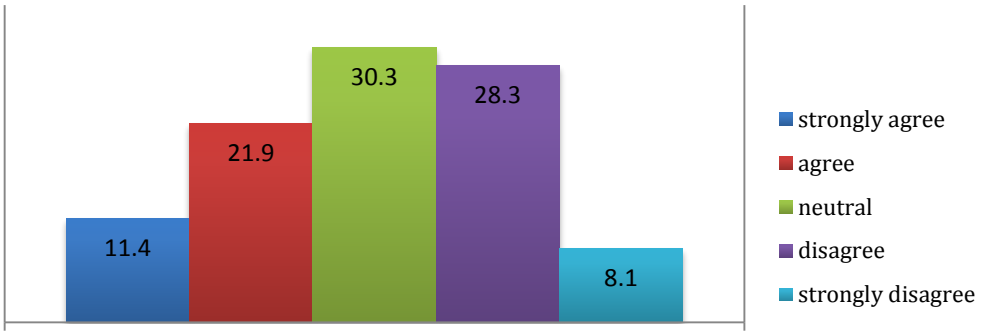

Fig I: response to engagement survey item on consumerism

4.2 STUDENT ENGAGEMENT: RESPONDENTS' VIEWS AND EXPERIENCES: The data indicated that there was broad interest in engagement, with nearly three quarters of the sample (73.7%) agreeing that more students should participate in decision-making. This was aligned to other data indicating strong agreement with the idea that the university would make better decisions for future students is it understood the individual student's experiences (62.9%). Furthermore, over half the sample (53.6%) wanted to be personally involved in decision-making processes.

The survey sought data on engagement mechanisms that are widespread across the sector. These are module (course) appraisal, student representation and staff:student projects. More than half the sample (54.2%) claimed that they nearly always completed course appraisal forms. Although nearly half (47.2%) acknowledged that they did not necessarily put a lot of effort into this activity. Over 100 respondents (8.4%) had acted as a student representative at some point. However, faith in the efficacy of the representative system was limited; with just under four out of every five respondents (79.0%) feeling that course representatives has little influence decision-making.

4.2.1 ASSOCIATION BETWEEN VIEWS ON CONSUMERISM AND ENGAGEMENT: There was no statistical relationship between whether students viewed themselves as consumers and their preferences to be involved in engagement activities. Likewise, there was also no correlation between this and their experiences of engagement. It was not associated with the completion of appraisal forms or the effort put into the process. Furthermore, students with a history of representation were no less likely than their peers to agree with the statement on consumerism. Nor was this linked to faith in representation. However, whilst consumerist views appeared to be unrelated to engagement, they were associated with satisfaction. A factor analysis of the 30 engagement items on the questionnaire negatively loaded responses to the consumerism with five statements that addressed satisfaction (see table I)

I am pleased with my course	0.785
I have positive relationships with most of my university teachers	0.748
Most of my tutors are genuinely interested in hearing what I have to say about my course.	0.722
I would recommend this university to my friends or family.	0.692
I am happy with the opportunities available for me to voice my opinions about studying at this university.	0.523
I see students as customers of universities, rather than learners in universities	-0.440∗

∗ *N.B. Negative association*

Table I: Student engagement questionnaire factor analysis: statements most closely associated with item on consumerism

This suggests that students who saw themselves primarily as consumers were less happy with their overall student experience. In this, there was a clear relationship between consumerism and the notion of having a voice, but the strongest factors appeared to be associated with personal relationships with staff.

5. CONCLUSION:

The findings of this study contradict the growing assertion that students are overly consumerist. If anything, they suggest a sense of ambivalence in relation to the notion of the student as a customer. Moreover, the evidence also counters arguments that consumerism will derail efforts to enhance student engagement. There are, of course, limitations to this study. First it was conducted in a single university. Institutional culture will have an impact on engagement (4). As a result, students in other universities may respond differently. However, the impact of this may be minimised in light of identified commonalities in mechanisms for engagement that extend beyond national boundaries (24). The most significant limitation of this study is that it measures consumerism through the response to a single survey item. This eschews a nuanced sense of what it is to be a student. The item presented a simple dichotomy between customer and learner, although the use of a Likert-type scale did offset this somewhat by allowing respondents to locate themselves on a continuum. Consequently, this question reflects the tone of much of the literature on the consumerism in higher education. Whether it is seen as a threat to education (9) or whether benefits are identified (17), a common feature is that it posits being a consumer is the primary identity of the students. This reinforces the idea that the 'student-as-consumer' is a singular concept; when a more sophisticated analysis acknowledges that student juggle a multiplicity of identities as they progress through their academic careers (29).

Despite these limitations, the data offers a useful perspective for the growing debate about the consumerisation of studenthood. This is especially important in light of the paucity of empirical evidence regarding students' views on consumerism (13). The research findings indicate significant diversity in students' opinions about their status as consumers. Indeed, the sample was evenly split between support for consumerism, neutrality and disagreement. This reflects findings from other research on this issue. In a small-scale, qualitative study, Williams (15) found that students had ambivalent views on their status as consumers. Their hesitancy is partly reflected in the study reported here, with less than one in five students demonstrating a strongly held view about the issue. This reinforces arguments that consumerism may be part of a student's sense of self, but it is not necessarily the dominant part (30).

Williams (35) argues that consumerism is not a given state for students. They appear to have some agency in their response to the issue, albeit influenced by the cultural, social, political and economic environment they inhabit. Therefore, consumerism will have a differential effect on students. Once again, this is supported by this data. It suggests that consumerism is not significantly influenced by the meta-narratives that are usually seen to define students. These include age, academic discipline, full/part-time status and whether the student is studying in the UK from overseas. The lack of association with age is perhaps most interesting. There was no differentiation between the responses of younger students and their older peers. This contradicts the assumption that Generation Y (born from the early 1980's onwards) is driven by consumerist attitudes (31). Only gender appeared to have an impact. Leathwood and Read (32) argue that female students are more likely to identify higher education as a gendered space and recognise the limitations of their power in that space. Hence, it may follow that they will also have less confidence in their consumer power. This suggests that a consumerist orientation is a complex multi-dimensional and cultural phenomenon that is not easily predicted. The lack of clear differentiation reinforces an argument that the perception of the students as customers is associated with their position in a broad culture of consumerism (15). They are *de facto* consumers, because everyone is. Comparative analysis of the responses of self-funded students with those on subsidised courses reinforces this. The latter group did not pay for their education, but held similar views to those who did.

This analysis also supports the view that consumer characteristics are only part of a multi-faceted studenthood (30). The university experience for most students is characterised by a continual negotiation between different identities as they progress with their academic careers (29). Students are adept at managing this, but that university staff often struggle with this diversity. Instead, they appear more comfortable with the idea of a unified and singular identity for their students. In a recent paper, Tight (7) offered a myriad of metaphors for how students are viewed. All of these help 'others' to make sense of their relationship with students, but none of them come from students themselves. In reality, students react will differently to the prevailing consumerist discourse (15). Arguably, some will recognise their any customer power is offset by their position in an academic hierarchy. Student life is bounded in a system of surveillance and regulation that the student has little control over (33). Hence, power other than that of the consumer also defines the relationship between students and their universities (18). It is manifest in notions of 'expert' and 'novice' or 'assessor' and 'assessed'. This reflects the fact that students depend on tutors to legitimate their knowledge and performance. Previous research (24) has demonstrated that students are very aware of this.

Streeting and Wise (26) argue that consumerism fails to explain the complex motivations that support engagement. Although this research presents evidence that a fair minority of students do see themselves as consumers, the paper challenges the view that this will necessarily threaten engagement. It found that, whilst these students were less content, there was no evidence that they were less engaged. This relationship between (dis)satisfaction and consumerism is interesting. The study does not indicate whether consumerist attitudes engender dissatisfaction by encouraging capricious, unrealistic and short-term assumptions about 'value for money'. Nor does it explore whether negative experiences could entrench a consumerist stance by providing unhappy students with a discourse through which to express their concerns (34). These are issues that are ripe for further analysis. Moreover, the work of Jary and Lebeau (35) offers another perspective. They suggest that academic staff struggle with students who have motivations that differ from their own. Hence, the consumerist student could feel alienated in an institution that had championed her/his views in its recruitment and marketing materials (16) and then side-lined them through the unsympathetic reactions of academic staff.

Understanding studenthood through consumerist discourse alone may signal an over-reaction the perceived threat of consumerism and will ignore other aspects of the student identity. The risk is that this may alienate students who do not see themselves as consumers as much as those who do. This paper offers some evidence that consumerism does not undermine engagement. However it is recognised that a great deal more research needs to be done to understand the varied motivations of more consumer-minded students. Therefore the intention of this paper is not to argue that consumerism does not present a risk to engagement, but that the sector may need to adopt a more sophisticated approach to understanding how students in a marketised system respond to the various discourses that are presented to them. The danger is that labelling students as 'consumers' encourages academics to see them as feckless, self-centred, hedonist and fearful of risk. These views infantilise students and damage student:staff encounters, so destabilising any sense of joint venture. It is this, rather than consumerism *per se*, that may undermine partnership working.

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