
Learning to pay for an education

November 2012

[Joanna Williams](#) and [Paul Taylor](#) introduced a discussion on the costs of a higher education



From September 2012, university students in England are paying up to £9000 a year in tuition fees. But the concept of the 'student-as-consumer' pre-dates these most recent fee-increases which have only enhanced the perception that students are consumers of an increasingly marketised university system. The cultural shift in how students consider themselves in relation to their studies and how they are perceived by others in society has been taking place for at least a decade. Even before the introduction of tuition fees directly paid by students, potential entrants to HE were often encouraged by teachers, parents and university marketing departments to seek out the best 'product'.



In the popular media, fee-paying is sometimes presented as a generally good development in that it gives students greater 'rights' and the power to hold universities to account if the service they are offered doesn't come up to scratch. Indeed, one reason for the government endorsement of tuition fees was the idea that a market in HE would help to drive up standards as institutions would have to get better at responding to customer demands.

There has also been much criticism of tuition fees with widely-reported student protests occurring in the winter of 2010/11. Such demonstrations could be interpreted as indicating students' rejection of the assumption that they are customers. However indicating one's unhappiness with fee-paying is not always the same as rejecting consumerist attitudes. Indeed, the opposite may be the case, and unhappiness with the level of fees may actually represent the mainstream adoption of a consumerist attitude.

Many protesters argued that HE, as a prerequisite for employability and social mobility, was a 'right', and that in making students pay more money they were being denied this entitlement. When presented in this way, HE is still perceived of as an investment product, it is just demanded that the product be made available to more of the population, at a cheaper price or better quality.

Yet despite the contradictions and uncertainties surrounding current debates about students and universities, there are some surprising points of agreement. Student protesters, academics, politicians and commentators all appear to agree that HE is essential for employability and is therefore a prerequisite for social mobility and social justice. Such social and economic goals mean that education is far less likely nowadays to be linked to a moral or intellectual vision of truth, enlightenment, knowledge or understanding. Given the paucity of intellectual purpose, students are perhaps left with few models with which to identify other than that of the consumer.

Listen again (frustratingly poor and variable quality, but useful for the content)...

Speaker intro and most of the discussion in one go - click on the Play button: {mp3}payin

g-for-an-education{/mp3}

Some background readings

[Power Struggle: Who said students today were apathetic?](#) by Paul Redmond, The Guardian 6 January 2009

[Why are students complaining so much, and do they have a case?](#) by Richard Garner, The Independent 20 May 2009

[Now is the age of the discontented](#) , by Frank Furedi, Times Higher Education 4 June 2009

[Browne's Gamble](#) , by Stefan Collini, London Review of Books 4 November 2010

[Toytown Trots, Twitter and the Trumpton Riots](#) , Richard Littlejohn, The Daily Mail 12 November 2010

[Student protests: today is our 1968 moment](#) , by Michael Chessum, The Guardian 9 December 2010

[The Wal-Mart ethos attracts few buyers among US lecturers](#) , by Jon Marcus, Times Higher Education 27 January 2011

[A. C. Grayling's Private University is Odious](#) , by Terry Eagleton, The Guardian 6 June 2011

[Students to get best buy facts and consumer rights](#) , by Sean Coughlan, BBC News 24 June 2011

[The university: still dead](#) , by Angus Kennedy, spiked May 2012

[What is education for?](#) by Patrick Hayes, spiked 19 June 2012

[The NUS President's 'Radical New View' Fails to Recognise the Real Importance of Education](#) , by Tom Newham, Huffington Post 10 July 2012

[Manchester Metropolitan: 'Bullying' university bans world-renowned professor who spoke out](#) , by James Legge, The Independent 24 October 2012

[Developing a radical, action learning oriented educational approach in the WEA...](#) by Greg Coyne, Regional Director WEA North West

Vox pop interviews by Dan Clayton and Paul Thomas from Leeds Salon with some students at Leeds University in October 2012..

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