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## **The student as co-producer: learning from public administration about the student–university relationship**

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The dominant metaphor/model used to characterise the relationship of the student to the university, that is, the ‘student as consumer’, is partial and not appropriate to the realities of contemporary higher education. This article suggests that co-production, a concept drawn from the public administration literature, offers a more appropriate metaphor. In this metaphor, the student, lecturers and others who support the learning process are viewed as being engaged in a cooperative enterprise focused on the production, dissemination and application of knowledge, and on the development of learners rather than merely skilled technicians.

### **Introduction**

The relationship between the university and its students has been the subject of much discussion for a good number of years (Halbesleben, Becker, and Buckley 2003, 255). As higher education systems have faced both a process of massification and also pressures on funding, a number of relational metaphors and models have been suggested, including that of the ‘client’, the ‘customer’, the ‘employee’ and the ‘partner’ (Bailey 2000; Halbesleben and Wheeler 2008). These metaphors/models each bring with them an implied student role and have important implications for both student and institution. Over the last two decades, the dominant metaphor for the relationship has been drawn from the marketplace, and is that of the ‘student as consumer’ (Palfreyman and Warner 1998).

Metaphors are powerful, and serve to structure perceptions and, thereby, actions (Kuhn 1996). As Morgan wrote in his highly influential text on organisations:

Metaphor is often regarded just as a device for embellishing discourse, but its significance is much greater than this. The use of metaphor implies *a way of thinking* and *a way of seeing* that pervade how we understand our world generally ... metaphor exerts a formative influence on science, on our language, and on how we think, as well as on how we express ourselves on a day-to-day basis. (2006, 4)

In the metaphor, and the related model, of the ‘student as consumer’, the university acts as the provider of products and services, in the form of programmes of study and support for the pursuit of those programmes, and the student acts as a consumer of those products and that support. The notion of the student as consumer has driven much change within universities, not only within academic areas where ‘quality’, and its maintenance and its enhancement, have dominated agendas over the same period,

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but also in areas such as student support and institutional marketing. It has given a new perspective from which the university can be examined, managed and strategically developed, and has, undoubtedly, helped improve some aspects of the student experience (at all levels) in areas where they needed improving.

On the other hand, the consumer metaphor has also been the subject of much criticism, and has acted as a prompt for discussion, both formally and informally, in conferences, institutional committees and common rooms. Despite this discussion, no broadly accepted alternative has been developed, and those who have retreated into past characterisations of the relationship, such as the 'apprenticeship' metaphor, have found that the reality of reductions in the unit of funding mean that the 'small-class teaching' required by such a model cannot be delivered. The apprenticeship model was appropriate to a situation in which a small proportion of the UK's population progressed through higher education, in which institutions acted more or less independently of the state, and in which the contribution made by the student to their programme of studies was intellectual and temporal, but not financial. It is not appropriate to the situation in the early part of the twenty-first century. What is required is a new model which takes account of a situation in which university agendas are driven increasingly by the state and its interest in higher education as a driver of economic development, in which an imperative is placed on educating to degree level, and above, much higher proportions of the population, and in which students make a significant financial contribution towards the cost of their programmes of study.

This article proposes that the 'co-production' model is a more appropriate way of conceptualising the relationship between student and university in this new era in which higher education has been 'marketised'. While the article is written from the UK perspective, it has implications for higher education systems across the world. It is important to note that the literature the article draws on comes from public administration, rather than the separate literature in the area of business education which emerged out of the total quality management tradition. This latter literature has focused on business metaphors for the student-university relationship, and is not directly relevant to the current discussion (Halbesleben, Becker, and Buckley 2003; Halbesleben and Wheeler 2008).

The article begins by discussing the 'student as consumer' metaphor and the major criticisms to which it has been subjected, before outlining the development of the concept of co-production, and moving on to examine its potential contribution to our understanding of higher education in an age of mass participation.

### **The student as consumer: a unidimensional concept?**

As Kaye, Bickel, and Birtwistle (2006, 86) have noted, the notion of the student as consumer emerged as part of the broader development of the consumer society and has contributed to the commodification of higher education. McMillan and Cheney (1996, 2) date the concept's widespread adoption to the 1980s, but suggest that its roots can be identified much earlier. They offer a useful review and critique, arguing that, whilst 'initially appealing', as the metaphor 'has found its way into the vocabulary and practice of the educational institution', it has brought potential 'questionable practical and social consequences for all constituents'.

The appeal of the 'consumer' metaphor lies in its apparent challenge to organisational and institutional power, and its appeal to individual rights. McMillan and Cheney locate this development within the consumer rights movement of the early

1970s, and caution that, while there are undoubted benefits in the organisational adaptations that have resulted from the growth in consumer power, 'overcorrection in the direction of only one organizational constituency may compromise other critical aspects of the organization, such as goals, philosophy, resources and personnel' (3). Drawing on their discussion, the positive aspects of the adoption of the 'student as consumer' metaphor can be summarised as:

- encouraging universities to respond to changing social/cultural environments;
- encouraging universities to maintain financial stability;
- encouraging universities to recognise the reality that, for many students, study represents an investment from which the desired pay-off is a well-paid job;
- contributing to the university's long-standing role in developing the student's confidence and enabling them to find an authoritative voice. (3–5)

These are to be valued and encouraged, representing as they do aspects of the accountability and responsiveness that all universities should exhibit.

There are, however, a number of aspects of the educational process that McMillan and Cheney suggest are obscured or dismissed by the 'student as consumer' metaphor. The first of these refers to relationships, in that it 'suggests undue distance between the student and educational process', and can 'undermine other organizational relationships: notably, those between faculty and administrators' (5). By encouraging the student to assume the role of consumer of what is provided by the university, and by encouraging universities to adopt their market role of providing what students demand, the student's role in the production of learning is de-emphasised and thus learning itself may be diminished. Further, the adoption of the metaphor also has a tendency to lessen the autonomy and authority of academic staff, with a corresponding increase in managerial control.

These 'relationship' issues are important, because the university is a system which is driven, and held in check, by the balance between three groups of actors, each with different goals, bases of authority, length of time associated with the institution, and loyalties or identities: students, academics and administrators. In any institution, should power become imbalanced, particularly in favour of a group with lower periods of continuing identity with the institution, then it is likely to find itself driven more by external factors and less by its own strategic goals. McMillan and Cheney conclude that, 'because administrators, faculty, and students each have their own interpretation of their roles vis-à-vis the consumer imperative, the invocation of the metaphor does little to clarify or to harmonize organizational relationships' (6).

Another issue identified by McMillan and Cheney is that the metaphor 'excessively fosters the self-promotional activities of professors and at the same time promotes the entertainment model of learning' (6). While the authors' claim that academic careerism is related to the introduction of the 'consumer' model rather than to some other variables is excessive, their suggestion that academic staff can be pressured towards gimmickry and excessive simplicity by student expectation and the threat of bad feedback in annual evaluations is likely to find many sympathetic ears.

A fourth, more profound, criticism of the metaphor is that it 'inappropriately compartmentalizes the educational experience as a product as opposed to a process' (7). The argument here is that a curriculum driven primarily by student expectation (and also the expectations of those who pay the bills, for example, parents and employers) of high levels of employer-relevance will neglect the liberal goals

traditionally associated with higher education, at the expense of the more instrumental and career-oriented goals. This is despite some evidence that employers may actually value graduates with an appropriate balance between job-specific skills and the broader attributes inculcated by liberal arts degrees: that is, the higher-level attributes associated with knowing what to do, when and why in different situations with varying degrees of information available to them (Harvey and Mason 1996).

A further set of potential issues stemming from what is effectively a shift from educational process to educational product can be identified with regard to students. Students who have internalised the metaphor tend to act in a passive manner (Kaye, Bickel, and Birtwistle 2006, 86), waiting for the information needed in order to complete their programme of study successfully to be given to them. While it would be too much to suggest that the adoption of the student as consumer metaphor/model is solely responsible for producing such students, it is probably the case that such an adoption makes it more difficult for staff teaching students to challenge those who bring such a predisposition with them to the university, and thus involve them more directly in the learning process. The impact on learning is summarised by McMillan and Cheney as the development of a situation in which there is little deuterio-learning, that is 'learning how to learn' or 'deep learning', and in which there is an emphasis on learning for short-term outcome. In pursuing this short-term outcome, students primarily want certification and sufficiently good references to enable them to enter the job market at a relative advantage.

Finally, McMillan and Cheney suggest that the use of the metaphor 'reinforces individualism at the expense of community' (9). It is argued that the consumer model's emphasis on competition with other consumers, with coming out on top, and the message that cooperation is not the way to get on in the real world, are inappropriate to higher education. The promotion of possessive (Schmookler 1993), rather than communitarian, individualism (Etzioni 1994) has potentially negative consequences for society and also for the individual student in terms of social fragmentation and a decline in social capital.

To these criticisms may be added one more, relating to the role of information in consumer behaviour. Models of consumer behaviour place great weight on the 'consumer' being able to make informed choices, and on the role played by information in ensuring that those choices are the correct ones for the individual consumer. The significance of this in the British higher education system can be seen in the emphasis placed on information provision in the various parts of the UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's Code of Practice (Quality Assurance Agency [QAA] 2004). There is, however, a case for arguing that, as far as the learning process is concerned, students are not well placed to exercise 'informed choice', because they do not have the necessary information (and tools to use it) to do so. That information and the necessary tools are something that develops during a programme of study, but at early stages of programmes more control must lie in the hands of the higher education professional, and often the role of the lecturer is extended to include the provision of such information (Peters, Bradbard, and Martin 2005). The whole point of a higher education, and particularly one which uses learning outcomes, is to inculcate in students characteristics such that, by the end of a programme, they have the ability to make informed choices. Almost by definition, these will not be present at earlier stages of the educational process (Lomas 2007, 35).

Given these negative aspects of the student as consumer metaphor for the students themselves, for the university and also for those who work within it, it is important to

try to find an alternative metaphor or model. The article now moves on to consider one such alternative, 'co-production'.

### **The development of co-production as a concept**

Writing in 2007, Bovaird comments on a major shift which has taken place in the academic field of policy studies over the last quarter of a century. He says that:

In recent years, there has been a radical reinterpretation of the role of policy making and service delivery in the public domain. No longer are these seen as one-way processes. Policy is now seen as the negotiated outcome of many interacting policy systems, not simply the preserve of policy planners and top decision makers. Similarly, the delivery and management of services are no longer just the preserve of professionals and managers – users and other members of the community are playing a large role in shaping decisions and outcomes. (2007, 846)

The concept of co-production first emerged in the Public Administration literature in the early 1980s, as part of the reinterpretation discussed by Bovaird. This reinterpretation coincided with increased pressures on public finances, and with the increased emphasis being placed by economically liberal politicians of the era on the market and the solutions markets could bring to the much heralded 'crisis of democracy' (Crozier, Huntington, and Watanuki 1975). Whilst the period's politics, and much of the associated academic debate, were unduly simplistic, being characterised by dichotomous arguments centred simply on 'markets' or 'not-markets', co-production seemed to offer the prospect of 'breaching the great divide' between public and private provision of public services (Ostrom 1996, 1073). At its core, co-production 'conceptualizes service delivery as both an arrangement and a process, wherein citizens and government share conjoint responsibility in producing public services' (Marschall 2004, 232). Essentially, it involves a situation in which public services, which by definition involve the provision of public goods, are provided jointly by paid public sector actors with the voluntary involvement of the private actors who enjoy the output of the co-production process.

First applied to domestic waste collection (Whitaker 1980), and to the provision of public goods such as public safety (Percy 1983), the co-production model was found to have some practical success in suggesting ways of sharing the cost, and thereby reducing the cost to the public purse, of producing public goods and services. It involved active engagement in such provision by those who would benefit from the provision and, thus, drew on another great and enduring theme of the period, participation. It provided a corrective to the idea that public goods could only be provided through singular, large-scale public bureaucracies, and it recognised the high degree of discretion that 'street-level bureaucrats' exercise in their day-to-day activities. It also recognised that, without the participation of 'clients' or the public, the provision of the desired public good would be difficult, if not impossible. Essentially, the concept grew out of the recognition that, while public service provision requires the coordination of a variety of inputs in the form of resources (resources which are provided from a number of different public and private sources), not all of those resources are under the direct control of the public official or public agency charged with delivery of that good. What co-production does, therefore, is describe, and as a result assist in the explanation of, what goes on in the day-to-day lives of public sector workers on the streets, in offices and in classrooms.



An illustrative example from the early literature may be helpful. Whitaker (1980) was the first to outline the concept of co-production, and to discuss some of the issues that later scholars would have to address. In his discussion, he cites the example of the introduction by local authorities in the USA of 'curb-side garbage pickup' to replace the previous situation, where collections had been made directly from each house's doorstep. He explained the rationale thus:

Facing revenue limits, cities have sought to reduce the costs of garbage collection by shifting some of the labor from city employees to residents. By having residents place their garbage cans at the curb on collection days, a city can collect the same amount of garbage per truck in the same (or less) time and reduce staff by one worker per truck. This would result in a considerable saving of public funds, but citizen cooperation is essential for the success of this plan. (244)

In the current environmentally-concerned times, an example in the same area of activity would be the citizen's involvement, by sorting waste into different categories prior to its collection by public authority-paid workers, to assist the process of recycling and minimise the waste going into landfill or incineration.

While Whitaker identified three different types of activity as constituting co-production (requesting information from officials, providing assistance to public agencies, and citizens and agents interacting to adjust each other's service expectations and actions [242]), a more focused definition has come to be generally accepted. Ostrom, for example, defines co-production as 'the process through which inputs used to provide a good service are contributed by individuals who are not in the same organization' (1996, 1073). Bovaird labels this and similar definitions as 'trivial', given that 'partnership is now so normal in services', and prefers, 'the provision of services through regular, long-term relationships between professionalized service providers (in any sector) and service users or other members of the community, where all parties make substantial resource contributions' (2007, 847). It is this definition that applies best to the case of higher education in the early twenty-first century.

Following the initial flurry of discussion about co-production in the first half of the 1980s, the concept fell into abeyance for a decade, as attention switched from it to marketisation (Alford 1998), with a second phase of interest being initiated by Ostrom's 1996 article. Students of public administration have now applied the concept to a number of settings and examined a number of its dimensions.

In a review of a selection of the literature on the concept, Marschall (2004) argues that successful co-production requires 'ongoing involvement and activities that are not simply instrumental in nature but supportive of governmental efforts as well' (232), and that in essence it:

- (a) 'depends on both the voluntary actions of citizens and the existence of meaningful opportunities and arrangements for their participation';
- (b) that it 'is not simply the actions of citizens that matter, but their attentiveness and communication as well ... For coproduction to work citizens must be informed about important aspects of local public services, the responsibilities and duties expected of them, and the environmental factors that may affect the provision and quality of these services'; and
- (c) that it 'also underscores the critical role of institutional arrangements in fostering citizen involvement' (232–3).

Drawing on the public administration literature, the key elements of the co-production model can be summarised as requiring: a long-term relationship between professionalised service providers and consumers of the particular service; both service providers and consumers to share the cost of providing the resources necessary for the service to be delivered; ongoing participation on the part of the consumers of the service; shared objectives between the providers and consumers; customers who know and understand what is required of them in the service provision; and appropriate institutional arrangements.

### **The student as co-producer**

Drawing on the earlier discussion, the 'student as consumer' metaphor is inadequate because it:

- (a) overemphasises one aspect of the student's role and of the university's mission;
- (b) suggests undue distance between the student and the educational process, thereby de-emphasising the student's role in learning;
- (c) encourages passivity on the part of the student;
- (d) fails to encourage deep learning;
- (e) implies in the student a level of knowledge and information, and the possession of tools to use them, that are unlikely to be present;
- (f) serves to deprofessionalise the academic role and encourage the 'entertainment' model of teaching;
- (g) compartmentalises the educational experience as 'product' rather than 'process'; and
- (h) reinforces individualism and competition at the expense of community.

What this article suggests is that, by adopting the co-production model of the relationship between the student and the university, these inadequacies can be overcome. While there are hints in the extant literature regarding the concept's utility in helping us to better understand the education process, to date, these have not been explored. For example, in discussing the development of co-production research, Ostrom says that:

we realized that the production of a service, as contrasted to a good, was difficult without the active participation of those supposedly receiving the service. If students are not actively engaged in their own education, encouraged and supported by their family and friends, what teachers do may make little difference in the skills students acquire. (1996, 1079)

Unfortunately, this insight was not pursued further, nor was it picked up on by those interested in understanding better the university–student relationship. This is unfortunate, because co-production helps us to address the shortcomings present in the 'student as consumer' model. The article now briefly discusses each of those shortcomings in turn, and shows how using the model/metaphor of co-production would help address them to the benefit of all those involved in higher education.

#### ***(a) Overemphasis on one aspect of the student's role and of the university's mission***

While the student as consumer model places the emphasis on the university as provider and the student as consumer of what the university provides, co-production



recognises that both student and university bring resources to the educational process, and that both make demands and levy expectations on each other during that process. These demands and expectations include, on the student's side: that their programme should be of high quality with an up-to-date and relevant curriculum and delivered in broad accordance with what has been promised by the institution; that the appropriate resources are in place for them to pursue their programme; that the necessary information should both be provided and be accurate; that appropriate and accessible support should be in place in the event that they require it; that the standards expected for success should be comparable with those of other comparable programmes, and that they should be assessed fairly and equitably against those standards; and that there should be appropriate mechanisms and channels for them to provide feedback, instigate enquiries and appeal against decisions with which they do not agree (QAA 2004).

These issues, identified in the QAA Code of Practice, are largely process issues, and reflect the expectations of a 'student as consumer' model. They are, effectively, a set of customer rights that are being paid for, and this is reflected in that, with the exception of that section of the Code dealing with postgraduate research programmes, there is no corresponding discussion of the obligations of students and what universities can expect of them. While these process issues and their fulfilment by the university remain important in the 'co-production' model, using that model makes it possible to re-emphasise other aspects of the university mission, such as the development of knowledge. This is because co-production lays expectations on each of the actors, expectations that, if not met through active engagement, result in non-delivery of the desired outcomes – learning and graduates knowing how to learn. If the notion of 'co-production' is adopted as part of the discourse and practice of higher education, it provides a way of moving forward in the debate over the relationship between research and teaching (Jenkins, Breen, and Lindsay 2003). If it is acknowledged that both teachers and students are engaged in the activity of knowledge development, dissemination and application, then the current wide gap between teaching and research begins to narrow and, for the undergraduate, learning involves explicit engagement with knowledge and the processes by which it is produced. For the university and the individual academic, it helps to bring a greater degree of consonance between, respectively, the various elements of mission and role.

- (b) Suggests undue distance between the student and the educational process, thereby de-emphasising the student's role in learning; and,*  
*(c) Encourages passivity on the part of the student*

While the 'consumer' metaphor implies a degree of passivity on the part of the student in their role as the 'receiver' of the service and thereby the education that is being provided, co-production accepts that the student is 'consuming' the process, but requires that the student be an active participant in the learning process, and that that role should be ongoing. Co-production requires active engagement with the entire learning process on the part of the student, and sees the student as an active participant in the development of knowledge. This type of engagement is widely recognised as one of the requirements of successful learning, and is also believed to be a key factor in the retention of students.

One of the significant benefits brought about by a shift in thinking from student as consumer to student as co-producer is the clarity which such a move brings regarding exactly what it is that the student is buying or consuming. The danger with the

consumer metaphor is that the product being bought may appear to be the qualification, rather than the learning process which may or may not result in a qualification dependent upon the effort put in by the student. This is because the simple consumer model involves the university as seller and the student as buyer, and the object of the transaction focuses on the degree rather than the process whereby a degree (or other qualification) may be achieved. By bringing to centre stage the student and their contribution to the educational process, co-production re-emphasises process, and thereby learning, rather than the qualification as the output which university and student together achieve.

***(d) Fails to encourage deep learning***

It is generally agreed that deep learning approaches are to be encouraged as they are more fitted to the purpose of higher education. Deep learning was first identified as a concept distinct from 'surface learning' in 1976 by Marton and Säljö and it is generally accepted that, for deep learning to take place, there should be an ongoing engagement with what is being studied, with the process of studying and with the other participants in learning. In an article discussing socialisation, interaction between academic staff and students, and their effect on deep learning, Cleveland-Innes and Emes argue that such interaction is crucial to student performance. They say that '[a]ccording to higher education outcomes research, student–student interaction and faculty–student interaction are central influences in students' learning outcomes' (2005, 243). In summarising their review of the literature, they explain that individual

characteristics interact with the education context and result in a type of motivation and a set of strategies to generate learning outcomes. Variation in approach to learning varies the outcomes of the learning experience; using a particular approach to learning quite consistently results in particular outcomes. (244–5)

Deep learning is iterative in nature and requires engagement with both the subject and the others engaged in the process. These requirements are fully in consonance with the emphasis on the ongoing process found in co-production and much less with the various elements of educational 'product' focused on by students operating within the 'consumer' metaphor.

***(e) Implies in the student a level of knowledge, information, and possession of the tools to use them, that are unlikely to be present***

Acting as a consumer requires that an individual makes informed choices, and making these requires two things; access to good quality information and the ability to utilise that information (Lomas 2007). In the student as consumer model, making these choices falls fairly and squarely on the shoulders of the student, who is, frequently and especially in the early stages of study, not in a position to make use of the information provided by the university or by other agencies. Indeed, students frequently depend on information provided by their peers in making decisions about programmes of study. This can work to the disadvantage of working-class students and first-generation entrants to higher education, who have fewer sources of peer support on which to draw. They may also act on the basis of inaccurate assumptions (Harvey 2006, 2–4). The pre-eminence accorded to the student in relation to the other actors involved in

the process downplays the mentoring role that can be played by both academic and support staff within universities. By contrast to this approach, co-production recognises both the student role and also that of the service professionals, and foregrounds the different elements brought by the different actors to the learning process together with the achievement of jointly-held goals and objectives. This is in sharp contrast to the consumer model's overemphasis on the role of the student.

***(f) Serves to deprofessionalise the academic role and encourages the 'entertainment' model of teaching***

Overemphasis on the idea of the student as consumer has a tendency to turn the academic staff member into a figure who responds to demands rather than leads the learning process. From this perspective, the student is there to enjoy the process, a perception that is encouraged by the managerial emphasis on assessing the quality of experience by monitoring 'satisfaction with process', rather than a more difficult, complex and professionally-led monitoring based on outcomes. This view is challenged by Bramming, who argues persuasively that transformational learning of the type implied by higher education is necessarily a painful process, and suggests that the methods of evaluation currently used to assess student satisfaction do not necessarily 'give valid answers ... might distort the corrective measures of teachers towards a more short-sighted "edutainment" approach and...[do] not capture the transformative, ontological forces at play' (2007, 53).

The current argument is not suggesting in any way that students or institutions should put up with poor-quality teaching, but arguing that assessing quality by what can potentially encourage a form of lecturer 'beauty contest' is to devalue the higher education experience and all those who are engaged in it, including students. Co-production, by its encouragement and promotion of active participation, supports the devolution of authority and responsibility, thereby encouraging professional autonomy and militating against a culture of managerialism for its own sake. In this respect, it serves to reprofessionalise the academic role, refocusing the process on learning.

***(g) Compartmentalises the educational experience as 'product' rather than 'process'***

Whereas the consumer metaphor emphasises product, co-production places an emphasis on the process, which is seen as ongoing, and its maintenance, whilst also recognising that outcomes are important. In doing this, it does not tend towards a fragmentation of the experience into its various elements, nor does it overemphasise the production of specific aspects of the 'product' which emanate from the process at the expense of others. As mentioned above, Bramming makes a strong argument for the process view of higher education when she argues that its transformative nature means that learning at this level is 'a painful process as well as a state of being that students have to accept and see as not only necessary but desired' (2007, 45). In an approach which resonates with the current argument, she says that, in strong learning, the 'student is neither constructed as consumer or an entity under transformation but is seen as a nexus of learning in a process of crisis' (55). A focus on the qualification as product rather than the process will not encourage this 'strong learning'.

A further issue arising from the use of the consumer model has to do with the differing natures of the first year of undergraduate study and those that follow it. During their level 1 study, students are largely part of a mass experience 'as opposed

to the differentiated experience of later years' (Harvey 2006, 6). This mass experience is at odds with the rhetoric and the practice of a situation in which the rules of consumer behaviour are held to apply, as is the case when the student as consumer model is invoked. For those rules to apply, each consumer must be treated as an individual, something which happens in later levels of study, but which is largely missing at level 1. By actively involving the student in his or her learning, and by making the requirement for that participation explicit from the beginning through the use of the language of co-production, the co-production model encourages all involved to move beyond dichotomous positions and, through its requirement for active engagement with knowledge, to a focus on the learning process.

#### ***(h) Reinforces individualism and competition at the expense of community***

The consumer model places the emphasis on the individual and his or her performance vis-à-vis other consumers. Consumerism is 'relational' in that the final position of the individual is defined by reference to the performance of others. This leads to competition and militates against the sharing and collective activity through which much learning takes place. In contrast to this, by definition, co-production places an emphasis on community and the involvement of individuals in the process alongside other individuals. This emphasis on a relational rather than criterion-based position is at odds with the criterion-driven nature of assessment in higher education. Whereas, in a consumer model, the number of winners is limited by relational factors (Hirsch 1977), in a criterion-driven system such as operates in higher education, 'winning' is limited only by an individual's performance against a set of predetermined criteria. This means that, in theory at least, every student can win, the only limitation being the amount of learning which is achieved and demonstrated.

This implied emphasis on the individual and his or her performance, rather than on the 'collective' experience of the learning group and the importance of the group in encouraging learning, is also potentially detrimental to the learning of all students. It is generally held that cooperative or collaborative engagement involving groups of students helps to enhance learning, motivation, social interaction skills and learner competence (Panitz 1999). This type of active participation with others to enhance learning is encouraged by most higher education professionals, and is a required part of university curricula. It also fits better with the rhetoric and practice of the co-production model than it does with that emanating from the notion of the student as consumer.

#### **Conclusion**

This article has argued that the dominant metaphor/model used to describe the relationship of the student to the university, the 'student as consumer', is partial and not appropriate to the realities of contemporary higher education. It has suggested that a more appropriate metaphor/model would be that of co-production. In the higher education setting, co-production sees the student, lecturers and others who support the learning process as being engaged in a cooperative enterprise, which is focused on knowledge, its production, dissemination and application, and on the development of learners rather than merely skilled technicians.

The article has argued that the adoption of co-production would reduce the overemphasis on one aspect of the student's (and also the university's) role, reduce

the distance between student and education by engaging students more directly in a de-compartmentalised process, help to encourage deep learning, contribute to the reprofessionalisation of higher education staff, and reinforce community and a collegial approach to learning. In respect of the last, and by way of a concluding comment, it is worth recalling Levine's prescient observation that the debates over the value of the alternative modes of public service delivery:

have been conducted almost entirely on the basis of narrow economic and political criteria; i.e., how much money will be saved and how feasible will they be to implement in a political environment composed of people with strong stakes in status quo? Generally ignored in attempts to evaluate these alternatives are their potential contributions to improving citizens including: (1) citizen trust in government; (2) citizen efficacy; and (3) a shared conception of the 'common good'. (1984, 180)

These 'potential contributions to improving citizens' are almost always cited amongst the purposes of higher education, but are ill-served by the 'student as consumer' metaphor. In addition to the other benefits its adoption may bring about, co-production may well help to promote these highly desirable social and public goods.

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