**University isn't just a business – and the student isn't always right**

Lord Browne thinks the idea of student as consumer should drive higher education, but Paul Greatrix thinks that approach is flawed

* Dr Paul Greatrix
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Lord Browne made the student as consumer the centrepiece of his rationale for change, but higher education is no ordinary marketplace, says Dr Paul Greatrix. Photograph: Murdo Macleod

In his independent review of higher education funding, Lord Browne made the student as consumer the centrepiece of his rationale for change.

Unfortunately things aren't quite as straightforward as they first appear. Higher education is not just like any other business and there are real issues with the information available to assist prospective students. However, student behaviour is changing and there is some evidence that they are becoming rather more demanding.

We are all consumers. We are all customers. In every aspect of our lives we are treated more than ever before like this. In choosing schools for our children, in hospital selection and which bus company to use we are expected to behave as consumers. And these are public services. Not to mention the bewildering choice we face when making a more straightforward product choice, for example for a vacuum cleaner or a tin of beans.

However, higher education is a slightly unusual kind of business and differs from other businesses in a number of ways.

* HE is usually a one-off transaction and there are few opportunities for repeat sales of the same product (except with under-graduate to post-graduate progression).
* Others, for example parents or sponsors, can be heavily involved in the purchasing decision.
* The purchaser has little knowledge of the product and generally is unable to test it before deciding to buy.
* Who the customer is makes a difference – students contribute to the quality of the product by helping to shape it (which is one of the reasons universities are selective in their recruitment).

**Informed purchasing**

There is a bewildering array of information available to prospective students, including the huge range of seemingly authoritative national and international league tables, various surveys of student opinions about their education, from the International Student Barometer (ISB) to [ratemyprofessors.com](http://www.ratemyprofessors.com/) and personal recommendations from current students or peers. According to Will Archer of i-Graduate (which runs the ISB) recommendations are the single greatest influence on students' choice of institution and country.

All of these point to a view of the student as consumer, but prospective students do not have enough knowledge to make an informed judgement – they cannot know what the course will be like. They can use the vast array of information available to them (and this will be added to under the government's proposals to require universities to publish details about each course including class contact hours, employment rates and average graduate salaries) to help them reach a decision, but the nature of the educational experience is such that it is only later that the student will discover whether or not they are satisfied with the purchase. Moreover, unlike many other purchases, the learning students are buying depends on their own efforts.

**Demanding students**

So, students will behave more like consumers and the argument runs that they will be more demanding. But will they? UK society has changed. In general, we expect better service and are less tolerant of poor provision. There is less deference to previously unquestionable authority figures and people are much more willing to complain. Indeed, it is arguable that the intolerance and readiness to complain combined with the ease of response through various social media has ushered in an era of endless unwarranted dissatisfaction with just about everything.

HE is different in many ways but it is not immune to these societal shifts and universities are particularly vulnerable to criticism, partly because we provide the tools to enable the online bombardment. Moreover, because we provide the weapons (and often the ammunition) universities find themselves seeking to provide more instantaneous responses to problems or queries. And we just can't keep up.

The culture has changed – universities find themselves dealing with many more complaints from students. We are also subject to other external routes for complainers: OIA complaints, FOI and, the latest one on the scene, Unileaks.

Some students may believe they have a right to a 2:1 because they feel they have paid for it. Others may feel that a helping hand or spending a little more to guarantee success is legitimate and this might account for the apparent rise in plagiarism cases, although the reality is that institutions are now far better at detecting cheating.

And of course it is often not the student who is being demanding or doing the complaining, it is the parents. If universities think students can be challenging with their demands, they are often pretty tame compared to the parent with a grievance.

**Rising to the challenge**

Universities do have to respond to these demands. We have to provide better service. There really is no excuse for poor service in relation to non-academic services but the new proposals around the Student Charter also identify areas in which academic and academic support provision needs to be addressed, including the academic advice and guidance provided for students, opportunities for students to undertake activities which will enhance their employability, student participation in academic development and access to a range of services including careers support, counselling, health and welfare advice, accommodation and finance advice.

Many universities are already pretty good at this stuff although there is undoubtedly scope for improvement in delivery. However, additional investment in these student support services is likely to be required to meet the new demands, particularly in relation to employability services and careers support where students are likely to become much more focused on the value of their degree in the employment marketplace. One other approach is greater spend on big shiny capital projects to demonstrate the high quality environment for students. This is expensive though and is no substitute for sustained improvement in high quality services. Whichever way you look at it, additional spend is going to be necessary to rise to the challenge of increasing demands from students for improved services and support.

**The customer is often wrong**

What are the consequences of all of this for universities? Many staff recoil from idea of student as consumer. Not just in relation to their education but more broadly. It feels alien and wrong. The very core of education is the contestability of knowledge and this sits uncomfortably with the notion that the customer is always right.

What the student as consumer concept fails to capture is the essence of what really makes a high quality education for students. The essential ingredients of outstanding staff and genuine student involvement are key. They are just not adequately recognised in this model. Treating students merely as consumers or failing to recognise the importance of quality service are both problematic for universities. It requires a more subtle approach. Perhaps something closer to the idea of membership, where the student is seen as a full member of the university community. Not in the sense of being a member of a London club but rather as a full and active participant in the learning process.

Finally, shouldn't we just be honest and tell students that things are, sometimes, sadly, just a bit crap. Part of the learning process is that they just need to accept it, by all means grumble a bit, and then move on?

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