1. Executive Summary
   According to two large research studies that I have led, the more that students identify as ‘consumers’ of their higher education, the poorer their level of academic performance. This seems to be because students who identify as consumers adopt instrumentalist approaches to learning, putting ‘achieving a degree’ above a desire for any real intellectual engagement with their course. Student consumers also believe that they have not received value for money from their university compared to students who are engaged with their education. Thus, students’ perceptions of value for money may say more about attitudes of the ‘purchaser’ than the quality of the ‘product’. I call for this inquiry to reduce the emphasis on students as ‘consumers’ of higher education, and to minimise evaluating higher education on the basis of the financial relationship it has with its students.

2. I am pleased to be able to provide written evidence to your inquiry into value for money in higher education. I am a Senior Lecturer in Human Development at Oxford Brookes University, a Chartered Psychologist, and a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (Now AdvanceHE). The views expressed in this evidence are mine alone.

3. Over the last few years, I have led two large research projects, in collaboration with my undergraduate students, about the impact of the commercialisation of higher education on students. The aims were to determine the effect of students identifying as consumers of education on their approaches to studying and academic performance, as well as their perceptions of value for money.

4. The first online survey was completed by over 600 students studying at 35 different universities in England and Wales, with the majority being charged £9,000 in tuition fees. To assess their level of consumer orientation towards their higher education, students rated their agreement with statements such as ‘I think of my degree as a product I am purchasing’ and ‘I think of myself primarily as a paying customer of my university’. On average, students neither endorsed nor rejected these statements, and tended to be ‘neutral’ in their level of agreement.

5. We then examined the relation between the extent to which a student held a consumer orientation towards their education and their level academic performance. As expected, the more that students identified as consumers, the poorer their level of academic performance. This undermines one of the core purposes of universities, which is to serve the public good by producing graduates who are capable of critical and creative thinking to develop society.
6. This study is published in *Studies in Higher Education* – and is freely accessible here
https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03075079.2015.1127908

7. The second survey replicated and extended these findings using a larger and more diverse sample. Approximately 700 students from over 100 different higher education institutions in England and Wales completed the survey.

8. Similarly to the first survey, we found the more that students identified as consumers, the poorer their academic performance. We additionally examined why this might be the case by asking them how they approached their learning. Surface or instrumental approaches can be characterised by the use of reproductive strategies or learning by rote with the intention of expending minimal effort to pass.

9. As expected, the more that students identified as consumers, the more likely they were to adopt instrumental approaches to learning, which explained why they academic performance was lower. This undermines the purpose of higher education as being to produce active and engaged graduates, capable of critical and creative thinking to achieve economic and social progression.

10. In the second survey, we also asked students whether they perceived their universities as offering ‘value for money’. Students who were fee payers had significantly lower perceptions of value for money than students who were non-fee payers (e.g., they had a bursary or somebody else was paying their fees) (which is in line with national annual surveys, e.g., the HEPI Student Academic Experience Survey 2018).

11. Perceptions of value for money were lower the more that students identified as consumers of their education. In contrast, perceptions of value for money were higher among students who were engaged with their learning and did not take instrumentalist approaches to studying.

12. In summary, student ‘consumers’ are not engaged with their learning, and have poorer academic outcomes. Student consumers are also less likely to rate their university as offering good ‘value for money’, thus telling us little about the quality of the educational ‘product’, but more about the attitudes of the purchaser. I call for this inquiry to reduce the emphasis on students as ‘consumers’ of their higher education, and to minimise evaluating higher education on the basis of the financial relationship it has with its students.

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