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Students as consumers: A barrier for student engagement?

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Abstract

Student engagement may be compromised by students identifying as consumers of their higher education, for example, by believing that their university owes them a degree because they have paid tuition fees. This type of attitude may conflict with a student's learner identity, which is associated with intrinsic motivation for learning and an inherent interest in studying. This chapter will present some research on the strength of students' identities as learners and consumers, and the association between these identities and various factors that affect student engagement. The findings suggest that a strong consumer identity is a barrier for engagement, particularly when it is accompanied by a weak learner identity. To increase student engagement, we present a teaching aid (www.brookes.ac.uk/SIIP) that enables students to assess and reflect on the strength of their learner and consumer identities, and develop stronger learner identities.

Introduction

The marketisation of higher education (HE) in several countries in the Global North, including England, the United States of America, and Australia, has transformed students into consumers and higher education institutions (HEIs) into service providers. In this neoliberal model of HE, the cost of education has been transferred away from governments onto individual students, who are now protected by consumer law and sector regulations (e.g., the Office for Students in the UK). Although marketisation is intended to drive down tuition fee costs and improve teaching quality by increasing competition, the extent to which this has been achieved is debatable. For example in England, UK, in the first year that students were charged the full cost of tuition (2012), almost all HEIs charged the maximum fees (Bolton, 2018) (£9000, approx. equivalent to approx. US$11,600 or €9,900). Furthermore, teaching quality is difficult to measure, and is typically assessed via student satisfaction or experience surveys which have questionable reliability and validity (Lenton, 2015). Many educators have expressed legitimate concerns about the impacts of marketisation, both on students' attitudes and behaviours relating to studying and educators' experiences of teaching (Jabbar *et al.* 2017; King & Bunce, 2020; Rolfe, 2002; Wong & Chiu, 2019). Students may be more likely to view their degree as a means to an end – with the end being a high-paying career – rather than as a process of intellectual growth and development. They may expect to be 'served' rather than challenged, and if they are not satisfied, this will reflect badly on HEIs in their feedback and evaluations of provision (Delucchi & Korgen, 2002). Consequently, some staff may feel pressured to engage in 'safe teaching' methods that involve simplistic assessment of pre-specified content, in order to reduce the risk of student complaints about challenging content and improve student satisfaction metrics (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005, p. 275).

The notion of students as consumers of their education has, once again, been in the spotlight during the pandemic caused by COVID-19. The pandemic led to campus closures in the UK in March 2020, and a switch to online learning and teaching which extended (to varying degrees depending on institution) into the academic years 2020-21 and 2021-22. Some students questioned whether they were receiving value for money during this time, demanding tuition fee reductions and refunds owing to their inability to engage with physical campus services. When the UK government debated one such student petition[1] on this issue, they concluded that as long as the HEI was maintaining academic standards and delivering a high quality education online, there was no cause for refunds. Understandably, students were

[1] The petition was entitled "Require universities to partially refund tuition fees for 20/21 due to Covid-19" https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/324762

frustrated by this decision, but it provides an example of students using their consumer voice and the potential power that it has in the sector (Bunce, 2019; Lygo-Baker *et al.* 2019).

What is a student 'consumer'?

The characteristics associated with students acting as 'consumers' of their education have been described by Saunders, and subsequently measured in his Customer Orientation Scale (2015). Saunders argued that student consumers may feel a sense of entitlement, for example, by feeling entitled to receive a degree because they are paying for it. They may also have a more passive approach to learning, believing that it is their lecturers' responsibility to make sure that they pass their course, and think that grades are more important than learning. They may also be more likely to view their degree primarily as a means to highly-paid employment. The Customer Orientation Scale comprises 18 statements to which students rate their level of agreement on a 5-point scale, where 1 = agree strongly and 5 = disagree strongly, e.g., 'If I'm paying for my college education, I'm entitled to a degree', 'I only want to learn things in my courses that will help me in my future career', and 'The main purpose of my college education should be maximising my ability to earn money'. Saunders (2015) gave the scale to more than 2,500 students at a university in the Northeast of the United States of America, during the summer before their course began. He found that the mean consumer score was 3.32 (SD = 0.64), and almost one third (29%) of students held some level of consumer orientation, although a strong consumer orientation was only seen in 9% of students. As these students were assessed at the start of their course, we do not know to what extent levels of consumer orientation may change during their time studying. However, a study using an adapted version of this scale for students studying in England, UK, with students across all years, found a similar mean score of 3.47 (SD = 0.85) (reversed here for equivalency) (Bunce *et al.* 2017). That study also examined whether there were differences in consumer orientation across year of study, and did not find any difference (they compared first year students with students combined across other years). Thus, it seems that in both studies, a significant minority of students were willing to express attitudes and beliefs that are commensurate with behaving like a consumer of their education (see also Finney & Finney, 2010; Haywood *et al.* 2011; Nixon *et al.* 2011; Tomlinson, 2014; 2017; White, 2007).

Impact of students identifying as consumers on engagement

While it is right that students should expect to receive a high quality education in exchange for their tuition fees, behaving as consumers will not necessarily enable them to develop

critical skills that they will need as graduates. Students who identify as consumers display a range of attitudes and behaviours that are not conducive to learning (Bunce & Bennett, 2021; King & Bunce, 2020) or achieving higher grades (Bunce *et al.* 2017). For example, Bunce *et al.* (2017) found a negative correlation between consumer orientation and academic performance. To explore further the impact of a consumer orientation on learning engagement, Bunce *et al.* (2017) developed a 20-item scale of learner identity, designed to assess attitudes and behaviours associated with intellectual engagement and approaches to studying. Students responded to statements on a 7-point scale, where 0 = strongly disagree and 6 = strongly agree, e.g., 'I want to expand my intellectual ability' and 'I think of myself as being at university to learn'. The study also measured academic performance by asking students to report their most recent mark for an assessed piece of work. The mean learner identity score was quite high at 4.77 (SD = 0.61), whereas the consumer score was substantially lower at 2.53 (SD = 0.85). This means that, on average, students tended to have a reasonably strong learner identity, which positively correlated with academic performance, and a weak consumer identity, which negatively correlated with academic performance. Bunce *et al.* (2017) then examined the mediating impact of a consumer identity on the relation between learner identity and academic performance. They found that a consumer identity negatively impacted the relation between a learner identity and academic performance, whereby a weaker learner identity was associated with lower academic performance, in part because it was associated with a stronger consumer identity. The authors suggested that a learner identity may 'compete' with a consumer identity, for example, where consumer identity is strong, the impact of a strong learner identity on academic performance may be reduced.

In a follow-up study, Bunce and Bennett (2021) further explored the potential impact of a consumer orientation on engagement with learning. They reasoned that student consumers may be more likely to engage with their studies in a superficial way, that is, by adopting a surface approach to learning, which is characterised by shallow processing of material with a focus on knowledge reproduction rather than understanding. In contrast, they may be less likely to adopt a deep approach to learning, which involves an active intention to draw meaning and understanding from material and to engage with it critically (Marton & Säljö, 1976). This reasoning was supported by data from almost 600 students, showing that a stronger consumer orientation was associated with more surface and less deep approaches to learning, which was associated with lower academic performance (see also Bliuc *et al.* 2011).

Thus far, this chapter has considered the extent to which students identify as consumers and the potential impact on engagement in terms of students' learner identities, approaches to learning, and academic performance. While these studies tell us about the *average* student, they do not, however, tell us much about any one individual student. To find out more about individual students in terms of the relative strengths of learner and consumer identities, we take another look at some data from our most recent survey (as published in Bunce & Bennett, 2021). Looking at individuals can tell us about the types of students at HEIs as categorised in terms of whether they have 1) weak or strong learner identities, and 2) weak or strong consumer identities. The two identity dimensions, alongside their strength (strong or weak) can combine to create four 'types' of student, e.g., one type would have a strong learner identity and a strong consumer identity (referred to here as the Striver). We will present the numbers of each type of student from our data, before exploring the demographic and psychological characteristics of students within each of the four types that may impact engagement. A description and summary of the four types of student can be seen in Table 1.

		Learner Identity Strong	 Weak
Consumer Identity	Strong	**Strivers** enjoy studying but are focused on learning material perceived as relevant for a specific career	**Consumers** view their degree as a financial investment for a career and expect good grades for minimal effort
	Weak	**Thinkers** gain a deep level of satisfaction from studying and are not especially driven by career ambitions	**Undecided** students are not particularly engaged with learning and may be uncertain about the value of their chosen subject

Table 1: A description of the four types of student based on the strength of their learner and consumer identities.

For this chapter, we analysed the data from 780 students studying at HEIs in England, UK, as collected by Bunce and Bennett (2021), to explore the numbers of students within each of these four categories. We considered a weak identity to be below the scale mid-point (<3.00, where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree), and a strong identity to be equal to or above the scale mid-point (≥3.00). As can be seen in Table 2, a sizeable minority of students had a strong consumer identity (340, 44%), although only 33 (4%) students also had a weak learner identity (Consumer), with the majority of them having a strong learner identity (Strivers) (307, 39%). The majority of individual students (411, 53%) were Thinkers, whereby they had a strong learner identity and a weak consumer identity. These data suggest that approximately half of our students are how we might traditionally define them – as Thinkers with strong learner identities – but that means that approximately half of our students are expressing other student types. Somewhat reassuringly, only a minority of students expressed a strong consumer identity and weak learner identity (Consumer).

What is intriguing is the rather large number of students (39%) who were Strivers – with strong learner identities as well as strong consumer identities. On the one hand, attitudes and beliefs associated with these two identities seem to be at odds with one another, for example, simultaneously holding the views that ‘I want to expand my intellectual ability’ (learner) and ‘For me, it is more important to get a good grade in a course than it is to learn the material’ (consumer). This supports the idea that learner and consumer identities may compete (Bunce et al., 2017), creating internal conflict and being detrimental to learning. It also reflects the findings of Tomlinson’s (2014; 2017) research, in which the majority of 68 UK

undergraduate students participating in focus groups or interviews expressed mixed and ambivalent views towards the consumerism of HE. Tomlinson (2017) observed how tensions "*emerged between adopting a more proactive level of engagement in the learning processes, where levels of personal investment are drawn upon, and more passive forms of consumerism during periods of relative disengagement*" (p. 460); he attributed this partly to a clash between students' own views of HE as an opportunity for learning and self-development, and their perceptions of being socially positioned as 'consumers' by HEIs, wider media, and policy discourses.

On the other hand, however, learner statements such as 'I take notes during class' and 'I make good use of my study time' may not conflict with consumer statements such as 'I only want to learn things in my courses that will help me in my future career'. Strivers may have a strong motivation for learning as well as high career aspirations, which work together to promote proactive engagement. A study by Brooks et al. (2021) examined undergraduate students' views of the purpose of HE by analysing data from 295 students in 54 focus groups conducted across Denmark, England, Germany, Ireland, Poland, and Spain. While the most common perception was that HE prepared them for the labour market, others frequently mentioned personal growth and enrichment (e.g., gaining new knowledge and/or developing new skills) and contributing to societal development and progress. This range of perceived purposes, which could align with students' own motivations and goals, do not seem incompatible; a student with ambitious aims for their career could, for example, also have high levels of engagement in learning due to a passion for their subject and a desire to develop strong skills for entering employment. In other words, while Strivers and Thinkers may differ in their aspirations (i.e., level of focus on future career), they may be similar in that they put in much effort and adopt deep approaches to learning (Marton & Säljö, 1976). To further understand characteristics of Strivers, and how these might affect engagement, we looked at some of the demographic and psychological characteristics of this group.

		Learner Identity		
		Strong	Weak	Total
Consumer Identity	Strong	Striver 307 (39%)	Consumer 33 (4%)	340 (44%)
	Weak	Thinker 411 (53%)	Undecided 29 (4%)	440 (56%)
	Total	718 (92%)	62 (8%)	780 (100%)

Table 2: The number of students categorised as belonging to one of four student types based on the strength of their learner and consumer identities.

Before doing so, it is important to bear in mind a few caveats to this data. First, they were collected from a voluntary survey, thus they are unlikely to be wholly representative of the student population despite the large numbers involved. Second, it is likely that we found fewer students in the Consumer category than may be true in reality, because students with a strong consumer identity and weak learner identity may be less inclined to take part in a voluntary study that did not offer financial gain. Also, the number of students in the Undecided category may be lower than in reality because they may be experiencing a general lack of motivation to engage with voluntary research.

Characteristics of Strivers

To understand the potential impact of the student type Striver (strong learner and consumer identities) on engagement, we examined some of the characteristics that may differentiate them from other student types (using data collected by Bunce & Bennett, 2021). These characteristics include gender, age, ethnicity, year group, grade goal (i.e., desired grade, grade aspiration), academic attainment, approaches to learning (deep and surface), participation in their course as a student representative or similar, and course (dis)satisfaction, measured as the extent to which they complain about their course on a 1-5 scale (see Taylor Bunce et al., 2021).

First, there was no statistical difference between Strivers and other student types according to ethnicity, with a similar proportion of white students being categorised as Strivers compared with students from other ethnic groups. There was also no difference according to year group, with a similar proportion of students being categorised as Strivers in their first year versus students from other year groups (see Table 3). However, there were statistical differences on all other variables we looked at.

In terms of gender and age, there were more males (54%) and a higher proportion of mature students (26%) in the Striver category than in any other category. Another difference was in grade goal (measured as a 1st class goal versus other). Forty percent of Strivers had a first-class grade goal, which was more similar to Consumers (39%) than Thinkers (47%). In terms of self-reported level of academic attainment, Strivers reported slightly lower attainment than Thinkers, but higher attainment than Consumers and Undecided students (see Table 3).

	Student Types			
	Strivers	Thinkers	Consumers	Undecided
* Gender: Male	54	31	39	45
* Age: Mature students	26	19	12	10
* Grade goal: First class	40	47	39	24
* Attainment	66.45 (12.30)	68.13 (9.06)	64.04 (10.64)	64.75 (10.03)
** Deep approach to learning	3.74 (.71)	3.81 (.72)	2.93 (.91)	2.94 (.81)
** Surface approach to learning	2.79 (.93)	2.25 (.95)	3.35 (.85)	3.19 (.81)
** Course representative	31	24	9	7
** Complaining	2.86 (.99)	2.48 (.89)	2.70 (.88)	2.59 (.95)

Table 3: The proportion (Gender, Age, Grade Goal, Course rep.), percent (Attainment), or mean (and standard deviations) (Approaches to learning, Complaining) of each characteristic for the four different student types. For the approaches to learning and complaining scales, the minimum score was 1 and the maximum score was 5. Attainment was out of 100. The association with student types / differences among student types were significant * $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$

To explore how engaged Strivers were in their learning, we looked at the extent to which they adopted deep and surface approaches to learning. Using the 20-item revised two-factor Study Process Questionnaire (Biggs et al., 2001), Strivers scored high on the deep approach to learning scale (3.74, min 1, max 5), which was a similar level to Thinkers (3.81) and significantly higher than Consumers and Undecided students (at 2.93 and 2.94 respectively). In terms of surface approach to learning, Strivers scored 2.79, which was significantly more than Thinkers (2.25) but significantly less than Consumers (3.35).

In terms of course participation, a similar proportion of Strivers and Thinkers were engaged in extra-curricular roles within their HEI, namely that of a course representative (31% and 24% respectively), whereas only a small proportion of Consumers were course representatives (9%). Finally, we looked at the extent to which each type of student was (dis)satisfied with their course, as measured by the frequency with which they made complaints about it. Strivers appeared to be the least satisfied, with a higher frequency of complaining (2.86) (min 1, max 5), and this level of complaining was most similar to Consumers (2.70). In contrast, Thinkers complained significantly less than Strivers (2.48).

Conclusions and Implications for Pedagogic Practice

In general, Strivers shared some important characteristics with Thinkers, notably, they were more likely to take a deep approach than a surface approach to learning, and they were more likely to be engaged in their course by being course representatives. However, they also shared some characteristics associated more strongly with Consumers, namely experiencing less satisfaction by making a higher frequency of complaints about their course, and they were somewhat less likely to have a 1st class grade goal than Thinkers. In terms of academic attainment, there was no significant difference between Strivers and Thinkers, or between Strivers and Consumers. Taken together, these data suggest that identifying as a consumer *to some extent* is not necessarily a barrier to engagement when this identity is accompanied by a strong identity as a learner.

Although these identities may create some tensions for these students some of the time (Bunce et al., 2017; Tomlinson, 2014, 2017), our data suggest that Strivers are, nonetheless, engaged in their learning and engaged in their course, for example by being course representatives. In contrast, students who have a strong consumer identity and a weak learner identity (Consumers) seem less engaged than Strivers: they are less likely to adopt a deep approach to learning, more likely to take a surface approach, and are unlikely to be course representatives. Although Strivers express a relatively high frequency of complaints, we might speculate that the motivation behind the complaints, and the nature of complaints, is qualitatively different to those of Consumers. For example, given that almost one third of Strivers were course representatives, they may have communicated legitimate concerns based on their own and other students' experiences, rather than unreasonable discontent based on consumer-like expectations (e.g., 'I deserve a better grade because I'm paying tuition fees'). Future research might explore these issues.

Given the challenging nature of the current UK job market, it may even be the case that Strivers are better prepared than other student types for entering the workplace. According to a report by the Chartered Management Institute (2021), many UK employers believe that graduates lack crucial workplace skills (e.g., flexibility and adaptability, initiative and self-direction, digital skills), and many students feel unprepared for graduate employment. While Thinkers may flourish in an academic environment, it is possible that they are less capable than Strivers in terms of preparing for life beyond HE. It could be, for example, that Strivers have lower grade goals and slightly lower academic attainment than Thinkers because they engage more in career-related activities (e.g., work experience and professional networking).

Ultimately, as educators, our goal is to motivate and engage our students, albeit as Thinkers or Strivers, and to minimise the extent to which students identify solely as the Consumer type. To this end, we have developed a teaching resource, freely available at www.brookes.ac.uk/SIIP, which provides material to run a 90-minute workshop. In the workshop, students and educators collaborate to develop a shared social identity as members of their discipline, which research shows improves engagement and attainment (see e.g., Bliuc, 2011). First, students self-assess the strength of their identities as learners and

consumers to establish their student type. Next, they learn about the research on the impacts of learner and consumer identities before engaging in discussions designed to build their social identities as student learners in their disciplines. Details of the workshop are described in Table 4.

Research behind developing a shared social identity

Haslam (2017), following Dewey (1916), argued that education is undeniably a form of group behaviour involving social processes, and that it "*centres on the capacity for individuals to participate in self-development through more or less constructive engagement with instructors and instructional systems*" (pp. 19–20). When people are encouraged to interact in ways that enhance their sense of shared social identity, this generally serves to increase their social engagement and subsequently their wellbeing and intellectual performance (Haslam, 2017). This social identity approach views learners not as isolated individuals, but as individuals who are influenced by others around them. It also suggests a role for educators in supporting (or challenging) identities that facilitate (or inhibit) learning and engagement. Educators have the capacity to do this by creating time and space in the learning environment to discuss and debate with students (Whannell & Whannell, 2015). With these issues in mind, the teaching resource was designed to enable students to develop a shared social identity as members of their discipline to enhance their engagement and academic success.

Identities workshop for small groups
• Students complete self-assessment questionnaire ('Student profiler quiz') to establish strength of learner and consumer identities and discover their student 'type' (15 minutes)
• Educator presents PowerPoint slides provided, describing the four student types and the impacts of identities on learning (15 minutes)
• In break-out groups students engage with discussion questions (35 minutes)
• Educator leads a plenary to co-create with students a summary of attitudes and behaviours that support learning, in order to create a shared social identity as an 'X student', where X = name of discipline (20 minutes)

• Students and educator complete relevant feedback form to evaluate their experience of the workshop (5 minutes)

Table 4: Key elements of the workshop with suggested format and timings

Initial feedback from the workshop has been positive, and it has already been adopted by several educators nationally. One student said: "*It helps you understand yourself better, your motivations, and perhaps even help[s] explain why you do well or not that well in your course.*" So why not give it a try with your students? As educators we have a duty to nurture students' natural motivation for growth and development, and counteract the damaging narrative of students being solely consumers of their higher education.

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