Chapter 6
The Distrust of Students as Learners: Myths and Realities

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Introduction

The decline of trust in professional and public life is closely associated with the audit culture and the increasingly performative expectations placed on public sector professionals such as teachers, doctors and medical staff, social workers, and university academics. Performance indicators and targets are now an established part of the lexicon of public sector work. However, the decline of trust may be equally observed in relation to the treatment of university students as well as those entrusted to teach them. There are many symbols and dimensions of this phenomenon that may be linked to the growing distrust of students in higher education. In addition to attendance registers at lectures and other classes, there is now the ubiquitous use of anti-plagiarism software in respect to student assignments, theses and doctoral proposals, along with the increasingly widespread use of learning analytics to purportedly track levels of student 'engagement' (Glendinning, 2014; Slade & Prinsloo, 2013).

Drawing on illustrations from the historic literature on British higher education, this chapter will demonstrate that contemporary concerns about the extent to which students can be trusted as learners, in the wider sense, are nothing new. They are largely based on a mythology about a Golden Age of hard working and intrinsically motivated undergraduates that never was rather than empirical evidence. The chapter will also explore the way trust is being undermined through the changing relationship between universities and their students. A shift has occurred from a culture of trust based on a reciprocal exchange to one that is more akin to a negotiated exchange as more commonly found in a business context. This, it will be argued, demonstrates a decreasing level of trust in students as learners on the part of institutions.

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P. Gibbs, P. Maassen (eds.), *Trusting in Higher Education*, Higher Education Dynamics 57, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-87037-9_6

A Question of Trust

In 1936, a report of the British university grants committee (UGC) rejected the idea that attendance at lectures should be made compulsory for higher education students stating such a requirement is "appropriate to a mental age considerably younger than that of University students" (UGC, 1936: 22). 28 years later the Hale report (1964) on university teaching methods stated that, "…the main purpose of a university education, apart from the acquisition of knowledge, should be to teach the student to work on his own and think for himself" (Hale, 1964: 76). This was one of the reasons why the report contended that the long vacations were important to retain in order that students could develop intellectual independence. The report went on to argue that, "if one of the main purposes of a university education is to teach students to work on their own, reading by students must be preferable to attendance at a lecture unless the lecture is superior in presentation or content to the available literature" (Hale, 1964: 96).

These examples from the history of British higher education illustrate that rules on student attendance at university classes were quite different to the way in which this matter is treated today. Independent learning was seen as the ultimate purpose of a higher education and students were trusted to use their time in a way that was going to be most constructive in achieving this goal for them. Moreover, the UGC and Hale reports on British higher education date from a time prior to the lowering of the age of majority from 21 to 18 at the end of the 1960s before which the University was in loco parentis to the student as a minor. By contrast, today compulsory attendance is much in vogue both in the British university and internationally, a standard part of so-called 'student engagement' strategies principally designed to improve retention rates. It is a trend symbolic of the decline of trust in students and their capacity for learning independently as mature persons. Compulsory attendance is just one element of a much wider phenomenon that will be illustrated in this chapter by reference to a definition of trust incorporating competence, benevolence, integrity and predictability.

The Trust Literature

Although there is a common sense understanding of trust as a word in the English language, there is a further literature that seeks to analyse or break down its constituent elements in the context of using the term within interpersonal relations. Butler and Cantrell (1984) provide a synthesis of previous literature in identifying five components of trust: integrity, competence, consistency, loyalty and openness. Trust, as this synoptic analysis suggests, is largely about moral values (i.e. integrity, consistency, loyalty and openness) in addition to the knowledge and skills to accomplish a task (i.e. competence). A relatively similar synoptic set of trust dimensions – competence, honesty, openness, reliability and benevolence – are identified by Van

Houtte (2007: 826) in relation to school teaching drawing on organisational theory. These two sets of trust components are self-explanatory and largely overlap – e.g. openness is common to both definitions – with some semantic differences. Butler and Cantrell refer to integrity, while Van Houtte uses the term honesty. In the context of interpersonal trust relationships integrity means making good faith agreements, telling the truth and keeping promises, essentially a proxy for integrity. Benevolence means a sense that the person in whom trust is placed cares and acts in the interests of the trust giver rather than selfishly or opportunistically. Reliability and consistency are relevantly similar components that appear in the two definitions of trust. A number of authors point to the central relationship between trust and risk given that trust depends on taking a risk with the trustee. Here it has been argued that trust is in fact a subcategory of risk (Williamson, 1993).

Much has been written about trust in relation to a range of academic disciplines including psychology, sociology, political science, and business and marketing. Some of this literature relates directly to the higher education context where it can be conceptualised both at the institutional and the individual level. At the institutional level trust is sometimes approached on the basis of considering why students might be more likely to trust an institution as a means of understanding how to market universities (Ghosh et al., 2001; Carvalho & Mota, 2010). Several studies have focused on macro and meso level relationships of trust within higher education systems with relevance to governance (Tierney, 2006; Vidovich & Currie, 2011). Trust may also be understood as about an interpersonal relationship between students and university teachers without which the former will never reach their true potential as learners (Curzon-Hobson, 2002). Hence, trust is a topic attracting considerable interest in higher education at the heart of which is the relationship between students and their institutions. Yet the focus of most writers and researchers has been on the extent to which students trust their institutions from a business or marketing perspective (e.g. Harris et al., 2008). These types of studies are interested in exploring how to build trust with the customer. My concern in this chapter is to examine the question of trust from a different angle by asking: Why is it that students do not appear to be trusted to learn by their universities anymore?

The Elements of Trust

It is clear from the literature that trust is a meta-term that consists of various elements. These can be summarised as competence, benevolence, integrity/honesty, and predictability (Butler & Cantrell, 1984; Van Houtte, 2007). The remaining part of this chapter will consider how these components of trust can be understood in the context of the relationship between universities and their students and how confidence in students as learners appears to have been eroded.

Competence

Competence may be understood as someone possessing the abilities to complete a task or job. In a higher education context there is a need for confidence in the intellectual capacity of an individual to undertake studies successfully at university. An individual's cognitive competence to be at university is normally determined on the basis of their prior qualifications sometimes allied to work-based experience. However, competence may also be interpreted as possession of the necessary psycho-social capacity to cope with being at university and managing the various demands that this entails. It is widely recognised that university life can be a demanding experience personally especially for those students who are less mature, have not previously lived away from home or have pre-existing mental health issues. Hence, students also need emotional competence to cope with the mental demands of studentship in a higher educational environment that can feel both lonely and competitive.

Critics have long expressed concerns that students may not possess sufficient intellectual capacity to benefit from a higher education. As systems of higher education have expanded this has invariably been accompanied by recurring anxieties about whether the additional students enrolled will have the ability to cope with the demands of a university education. This is the 'more means worse' argument (see for example, Amis, 1960). In other words, there is nothing new in the notion that students may lack the cognitive competence for higher education study.

> The majority of students today enter university with little idea how to organise their studies and the first year in the university is a critical one (Holliman, 1968: 100).

Holliman's statement has a timeless quality to it inasmuch that it might have been made at more or less any time over the last few hundred years on the basis of the almost constant expansion of enrolment and matriculation from university. John Venn's analysis of matriculation statistics from Oxford and Cambridge between 1544 and 1906 indicates that matriculation rates for these institutions rose steadily from the 1800s (Saunders, 1947). In terms of both the numbers of universities and students attending them, the move from an elite to a mass system in the UK has been very gradual indeed. Full-time students in British higher education were just 25,000 in 1900/01, 61,000 in 1924/25, 69,000 in 1938/39, 122,000 in 1954/55, and 216,000 in 1962/63 (Robbins, 1963). Further expansions have occurred in the wake of the Robbins report (1963) and again in the 1990s and the 2000s. As these figures indicate, there were quite dramatic expansions of the system that took place between the two World Wars, as well as in the 1950s following the recommendations of the Barlow report (1944). By today's standards, the numbers in higher education before the early to mid-1960s may appear modest and the expansions all took place when considerably less than 10% of young people went to university. However, each of these expansions represented a very large percentage rise in student numbers. This is why debates about expansion, and with it the suitability of students to enter the system, are nothing new.

The definition of a 'mass' higher education system, arbitrarily defined by Martin Trow as between 15% and 40% enrolment (Trow, 1973), has long been surpassed in many developed systems, such as the UK, by what he described as a universal one (i.e. beyond 40%). Hence, although Trow asserted that 15% as the tipping point that ends an elite system this is purely a subjective figure. As Scott (1995) recognised, the feeling that a system is elite takes a lot longer to disappear than the reality. Hence, as new waves of expansion have occurred in British higher education so have predictable anxieties about lowering of standards and lamentations about the ill-preparedness of students entering it. Despite this trope about standards, graduation statistics indicate that degree results have steadily improved.

In addition to conventional concerns about the cognitive competence of students, there is a wide range of indicators that students are regarded by institutions as lacking emotional competence as well. Universities promote the availability of counselling services and justify their attendance policies, at least partly, on the basis of a social welfare argument that they wish to ensure that absentee students are not 'at risk' (Macfarlane, 2013). There is now a growing literature about 'well-being' tapping into anxieties about the extent to which students are able to cope emotionally with university life. Concerns about the extent to which students can manage the stresses and strains of studying at university though are nothing new either. The mental health of students, including analyses of incidents of suicide, was a focus for a number of researchers and writers in the 1960s and early 70s (e.g. Atkinson, 1969; Ryle, 1969). The notion of an 'anxious campus' dates back to at least the 1960s if not well before. Ferdynand Zweig's book entitled *The Student in the Age of Anxiety*, published in 1963, commented on "a more harassed, more anxious and more worried type of student, and a more harassed atmosphere at the university" (Zweig, 1963: xvi).

One of the most visible symbols of the decline of trust in the emotional competence of students is the trend toward compulsory attendance rules at lectures and seminars. This has become a routine element of the culture of surveillance at university and is commonly used as a pre-condition affecting student progression and graduation even though attendance is rarely, if ever, included as a learning outcome or objective within the curriculum. Universities tend to justify the monitoring of attendance on the basis of concern for student well-being but it has also become a convenient means of grading students. This is part of a wider trend for universities to assess students on the basis of their "academic non-achievements" (Sadler, 2010: 727) or "bodily performativity" (Macfarlane, 2017).

The extent to which the student population consists of mature individuals and those with other indicators of life experience has always been neglected in assumptions about their emotional competence. There is little or no evidence to suggest that students are less able to manage the demands of higher education now than they ever were. Indeed, the growing proportion of students who are mature or combining full time work with part time study might very reasonably be considered as a contradictory indicator to any such assertion. Nevertheless, the myth prevails that students are infantile learners with little or no life experience often lacking the commitment or skills needed to survive at university.

Benevolence

This moral value in an interpersonal relationship means that the person in whom trust is placed acts selflessly rather than selfishly and without regard to the trust giver. In higher education, trust is placed in the student by the university teacher as someone worthy of his or her place at the institution. Part of a positive relationship between university teachers and students is the extent to which the former feels she/he can trust the latter to be studying in the 'right' way. This means working hard on their studies and adopting a 'deep' approach to learning by trying to understand the underlying meaning of ideas and concepts as opposed to taking a 'surface' approach more concerned with passing examinations than understanding the structure of the subject (Marton & Saljo, 1976). The emergence of the popular dichotomy between 'surface' and 'deep' learning has, in effect, provided an intellectualised shorthand for accusing some students of lacking benevolence in their attitude to learning. Here, if students are perceived, or perhaps more accurately labelled, as acting instrumentally by not engaging 'deeply' in learning the subject or being lazy this is akin to a breach of trust demonstrating a disrespect for the virtues of academic life at the heart of which is a desire to pursue truth and understanding. Students are accused of lacking motivation or, perhaps more accurately, the right type of motivation (i.e. an intrinsic as opposed to an extrinsic one).

Students are increasingly distrusted or demonised in higher education as having the 'wrong' attitude to learning, something often attributed to the effects of massification and the pressures that have come to bear on students in terms of results and obtaining a graduate level job. However, there is little evidence that there was really any kind of Golden Age when students went to university purely for the love of knowledge and plenty of testimonies to the contrary. Remarking on his time as an undergraduate at the University of Leeds before the First World War, the English art historian and poet, Herbert Read (1940: 75), commented:

> It astonished me to find when I first entered the University of Leeds that the ambitions of ninety out of every hundred of my fellow-undergraduates were crude and calculating. They were interested in one thing only – in getting the best possible degree by the shortest possible method. They were anxious to memorise and eager to anticipate the testing questions.

Writing about his impressions of undergraduates in the 1940s under the pseudonym Bruce Truscot (1943: 162), Edgar Allison Peers came to a relatively similar conclusion,

> It is comparatively easy, as anyone who moves among undergraduates knows, to divide them into the apathetic and the keen; and it is probably not an exaggeration to put the proportions at five to one.

Meanwhile, modern-day historian William Whyte (2015: 237), commenting on students in the expanded higher education system of the 1950s and 60s, states:

> There were still lazy and disengaged students, and many who had ended up at university by default, with no real sense of commitment to academic study.

Herbert Read and Bruce Truscot, both writing in 1940s, together with William Whyte, a historian looking back at the 1950s and 60s, question the commitment of university students to deep as opposed to a surface or instrumental view of learning. An editorial in an issue of Universities Quarterly from 1950 similarly bemoans the fact that, "we are still told that the student of today likes to be spoon-fed and that he tends to get from the university little more than one can get by spoon-feeding" (Editorial, 1950: 321). These comments about students relate to a time when going to university was only open to an elite few, a period when, it might be presumed, students were more intrinsically motivated and less concerned about pragmatic concerns connected with getting a job. Yet, this is perhaps another example of golden ageism.

Hence, there is very little evidence that students of past generations worked any harder than their contemporaries and are in any sense less trustworthy on this basis. Suggestions otherwise would appear to buy into a myth about the past as a time when students, who enjoyed the privileges of an elite education, were somehow more likely to engage in deep rather than surface learning. If anything, students now study for longer each week. Doris Thoday's survey work from the early to mid-1950s shows that undergraduates studied formally and informally for an average of 36 hours per week during term time and a quarter of all students did no work at all at the weekend (Thoday, 1955, 1957).

Integrity/Honesty

Perhaps the strongest contemporary symbol of the declining trust in students as learners is the almost ubiquitous use of electronic plagiarism detection software in checking the originality of their academic work. Ten years or so ago such software was seen as having the potential to change the nature of the relationship between university teachers and students in a positive way. It was originally introduced and justified as a 'developmental' tool, but such software is now routinely deployed for both undergraduate and postgraduate work including the submission of proposals for doctoral degrees. The use of plagiarism detection surveillance has institutionalised the distrust of students as learners and made it the norm (Evans, 2006). In effect, this means that it is the electronic detection service that is trusted rather than the student and it is up to the students to prove that they are not cheating when a high proportion of 'matching' material is detected by the software in one of their assignments.

There is a substantial academic industry around plagiarism detection, both administrative and academic, including a large literature on the subject, specialised networks and conferences dedicated to the subject. This is almost exclusively concerned with discussing ways in which student cheating can be defined, detected, punished and deterred. Reflection about the role of plagiarism in wider society, among academic faculty and other creative professionals, though is in much shorter supply. The historical context of plagiarism is also overlooked and assumptions

prevail that cheating behaviour has increased due to access to the internet and the associated use of 'cut and paste' techniques. Very few researchers seriously address the question as to whether plagiarism has grown or whether the use of software has, in itself, simply uncovered behaviour that previously went undetected. Moreover, flying in the face of this received wisdom, research indicates that there may be less plagiarism now than at the dawn of the internet age (Ison, 2015).

There are many other symbols of the presumption that university students are dishonest: the use of hand-in sheets attesting to their authorship of an assignment being submitted, or the insistence of some institutions that students provide written evidence in respect to any absence requests, including death certificates when this might involve attending a family funeral. These are the depths that higher education institutions have plummeted to in their treatment of students. While it would be naïve to imagine that any groups of individuals – including university students – are incapable of acts of dishonesty, the onus appears to have shifted from trusting students to distrusting them as a default position.

Predictability/Reliability

There are many popular tropes or myths based on folklore about students in higher education. Three of the most powerful of these myths appear above, namely that they are ill-prepared intellectually and emotionally for university, have the wrong attitude to learning, and are prone to cheating behaviour. They constitute a negatively minded interpretation of the predictability of student behaviour: students will not 'do the reading' before the seminar, students will willfully refuse to participate in class, students will only study for the examination and not for the love of the subject, students are not interested in reading assessment feedback on graded work, and so on.

A good interpersonal relationship depends on positive predictability (e.g. 'she/he will keep their word') as opposed to negative expectations. Such assertions are now increasingly linked to the notion of the 'student as customer' as an explanatory narrative linked to market-driven reforms to the higher education system in the UK, symbolised at the beginning of the last decade by the Browne Review (2010). The phrase 'neoliberal' has become a practically ubiquitous term used as a shorthand pejorative to describe the spread of a market-driven approach to higher education globally. Few writers acknowledge that the phrase 'student-as-customer' dates back at least to the 1960s and possibly much earlier. Shulman (1976: 2), Joan Stark (1975) and Pernal (1977: 2) were all writing about 'student consumerism' in the 1970s, while as far back as 1949, the industrialist Ernest Simon writing as Lord Simon of Wythenshawe, contributed an article to *Universities Quarterly* entitled 'University Crisis? A consumer's view' (Simon, 1949). This article referenced his commercial identity as a 'consumer' of both university graduates and research. Perhaps again, less has changed than we might imagine.

There is also nothing new about students working for a grade as opposed to taking a deep love or interest in their subject. It is a timeless phenomenon. What is new is the blame culture that has emerged on the basis of the 'student-as-customer' trope. This phrase appears frequently in the contemporary literature and has become practically a received wisdom (e.g. Delucchi & Korgen, 2002). Another aspect of supposedly consumer-like behaviour is referred to derogatively as 'grade grubbing' where the academic judgement of a university teacher marking an assignment is questioned by a student. There is a strong sense of defensive indignation about the way in which this behaviour is condemned even when it might only involve a small minority of students in a mass higher education system and in the context of a less deferential age.

Whatever Happened to Trust?

The question that is really interesting is why universities demonstrate a declining level of trust in students given the almost complete lack of evidence that students are any less trustworthy than in the past. The answer to this question appears to be closely related to the introduction of risk management systems associated with mass (or universal) higher education and the way this has converted the nature of the trust relationship between the institution and the student.

There has been a shift from a reciprocal exchange culture to a negotiated exchange culture in higher education. A negotiated exchange takes place where each party agrees upon a set of benefits and responsibilities that will flow from an agreement (Molm et al., 2000). This is typically the case with most business contracts and is based on a bilateral agreement. Indicators of this contemporary culture are things such as strictly applied institutional rules and penalties in respect to attendance and standardised penalties in relation to missing an assignment deadline. The student side of the coin of this contractual learning culture might involve things such as learning and teaching materials made available online, return dates for marked assignments and better publicised and supported appeal procedures.

The negotiated exchange is strictly binding on both parties symbolised in higher education by students being required to sign statements that they have not plagiarised every time they hand in an assignment. This negotiated exchange has replaced a reciprocal exchange, one where there is no explicit negotiation or contract and each party to the relationship initiates individually without expectation as to how or whether the other party will reciprocate. For example, in a reciprocal exchange culture a tutor may offer a student a tutorial discussion if they think they might benefit from it without being compelled to do so, whilst in a negotiated exchange culture the tutor is now required to offer one or more tutorials to a student as an entitlement that forms part of university or course regulations. This change is significant as what was an essentially personal relationship, based on reciprocation between the parties, has been replaced with an institutional one, based largely on a negotiated exchange. Theorists who have written about these different types of

relationships agree that trust is much more likely to develop in a relationship based on reciprocation than on a negotiated exchange.

The distrust of students is now institutionalised and has become something akin to a 'moral panic' in society (Cohen, 1972). The youth culture represented by so-called 'mods' and 'rockers' in the 1960s, paedophiles, cheating in sport, and dangerous dogs have all been the subject of moral panics. This does not mean that, like dishonest students, such problems do not exist but simply that their scale has been exaggerated and significance in relative terms. The scale of student dishonesty and cheating needs to be understood in the context of the massification of higher education. Secondly, in relative terms, there is little evidence that students are significantly less trustworthy than previous generations.

At the beginning of this chapter, I quoted from the Hale Report on university teaching methods published in the early 1960s and referred to the interim report of the committee, which argued that the long vacation in the summer months was essential as a means to allow students to develop their intellectual independence. Here there was a sense of trust that the time away from university, and hence little in the way of regular surveillance of their learning, would be used fruitfully. In February, 2017, the UK government announced plans to introduce 'fast track' two-year degree programmes, an indication not just that the purpose of university education has changed dramatically in the intervening 50 years but come full circle in respect to the extent to which students are trusted to use their time to learn independently.

Conclusion

The distrust of students as learners is rooted, to a large extent, in folklore. This presents itself as a series of unsubstantiated tropes about their collective lack of intrinsic motivation, inability to adapt to the 'rigours' of university education, and preference for cheating over honest intellectual endeavour. These myths underpin popular images of 'the student' in terms of their (lack of) competence, benevolence, integrity and negative interpretations of their predictability. In a marketized environment that conceives of a higher education as a private rather than public good, this urban myth has resulted in increasingly defensive and litigation-conscious university policies. These have, in turn, altered the basis of the relationship between student and institution (and between student and university teacher) from a reciprocal to a negotiated one, essentially a business exchange. Higher education institutions increasingly risk-manage their student population on the basis of principles derived from the assumptions of marketization and new public management. This has eroded the basis of trust in students as learners who are treated as customers even if there is limited evidence that they act like one.

Even though students are contractually attached to institutions, the basis of trust is an interpersonal relationship between the university teacher and the student. In marketing terms, this is sometimes described as 'the moment of truth' when the

customer meets the front-line employee. All the marketing hyperbole is then put to the real test. If someone is not a name, or perhaps not even a face, it is much easier to distrust them and their motives for studying in higher education.

The argument I have made in this chapter is that we do not trust students to learn anymore. Instead, they are required to be seen to be learning in various ways such as attending lectures and participating in class. By 'we', I am referring to universities and their academic staff in a chain of distrust that stems from governments funding of higher education systems downwards. Governments do not trust universities, who no longer trust their academic staff as professionals to teach who, in turn, no longer trust their students to learn. It is a sad state of affairs.

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