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Myths about students in higher education: separating fact from folklore

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ABSTRACT

Myths about students in higher education pervade both popular and academic literature. Such folklore thrives due to the belated development of systematic enquiry into higher education as a field of academic study, the neglect of an historical perspective, and an over-reliance on opinion-based scholarship and interview data drawn from University lecturers as a proxy for interpreting student attitudes. This paper analyses three popular myths about University students: expansion of the participation rate lowers academic standards ('more means worse'), students in the past were more intrinsically motivated ('loss of love for learning'), and learners apply market-based assumptions in engaging with higher education as a commodity ('student-as-consumer'). These myths have an enduring verisimilitude but the evidence underpinning such claims cannot be empirically substantiated. It is argued that, taken collectively, these myths constitute a recurring moral panic about University students and that the veracity of such claims needs to be evaluated critically on this basis.

KEYWORDS

Myths; students; academic standards; student-as-consumer; moral panic; higher education

Introduction

Much of what passes for knowledge in higher education (HE) could be described as 'folklore'. There are a number of reasons for the abundance of HE myths and one of the most significant is that HE is understood principally as an object of experience rather than an object of study. As a result, it has long been a struggle to get universities to take the study of HE seriously. Edward Shils (1961, p. 14) commented about the absence of organised sociological study into HE in the early 1960s in the following, ironic terms:

The contemporary University takes the universe and all that goes on within it as its object of study. Why should it not also take itself as an object of disciplined enquiry?

There was little in the way of systematic enquiry into HE before the 1960s, and the emergence of research centres and empirical work were largely stimulated by the mass expansion of national systems. Prior to this, the study of HE was essentially the preserve of curious amateurs from a range of other disciplines, University leaders such as Charles Eliot and Eric Ashby, or philosophical thinkers such as John Henry Newman and Karl Jaspers. It was not until the late 1950s that the Centre for Studies in Higher Education was established

at the University of California, Berkeley. Martin Trow and Sheldon Rothblatt acted as influential figures within this Centre in the 1960s and 70s, but few other research institutes were founded until the 1980s and 90s. However, while research into higher education is now an established field of enquiry, it is still a divergent community of scholarship in the sense that it attracts academics from many different foundational disciplines such as economics, political science, sociology and philosophy (Macfarlane & Burg, 2018).

Another reason for the pervasiveness of myths is that very little contemporary HE research or scholarship delves substantially into historical sources. Sheldon Rothblatt commented that, while universities have gained considerable scholarly attention from both academics and administrators, the literature 'is mainly fugitive, descriptive, sociological, programmatic, polemical and educationalist; it is only infrequently historical' (Rothblatt, 1968, p. 16). This ahistoricism is not helped by the lack of digitisation of some journals before the early 1990s. *Universities Quarterly*, first published in 1946 and the leading British HE journal of its time, is one such example. As the specialist journals and books about HE have expanded, and the field has become more established since the 1960s, this may have had a limiting effect on the vision of researchers beyond specialist journals for data and debate about HE (Macfarlane & Burg, 2018). Research into HE is a broadly-based sub-field of education. This remains one of its strengths but also a significant weakness, as the horizons of those who research and write about University education tend to be confined to one of the social science disciplines such as psychology or sociology but without an historical understanding of the broader HE literature.

The over-use of the word 'traditional' by HE writers and researchers has served to further entrench a number of myths. The problem with the use of this adjective is that it encourages misconceptions about the origins and history of HE. While the phrase 'traditional subject', for example, usually implies one without direct vocational relevance, most ancient universities focused on training the clergy and later, in the nineteenth century, the medical and legal professions as new demand emerged following the industrial revolution. Understanding the nature of what is 'vocational' is complex. Some degrees prepare the student directly for a professional qualification – such as nursing, engineering, medicine, dentistry, veterinary science, or law – while others, it has been argued, do so in an indirect fashion (Silver & Brennan, 1988). An example of the latter might be the high proportion of students with a music degree who become teachers. Traditions can change, sometimes quite rapidly. The notion that a University is based on a small residential community, considered a 'traditional' feature of British institutions in the 1960s (Halsey & Trow, 1971), is now a rare exception rather than the norm as reliance on the private sector to provide student accommodation has become a more common feature (Tight, 2011). Phrases such as 'traditional student', implying a young person who has recently left compulsory schooling, is also an outmoded representation of the diverse contemporary body of learners.

These factors contribute to the many myths about students in HE. It is often assumed, for example, that students will evaluate a teacher or a course more favourably when they have received, or expect to receive, a high grade. Yet, as many as 24 studies have reported no correlation between marks received and course ratings (Aleamoni, 1999). A further example is that Asian students, especially those from Chinese cultures, are commonly characterised as rote learners who eschew deep approaches. However, studies have shown that there is little evidence to support such a stereotype (e.g. Watkins, Reghi, &

Astilla, 1991). These are exemplars of the way in which students tend to be labelled as lacking in academic integrity or being committed to deep learning. Such tropes about students may be understood as part of a wider social phenomenon of 'moral panics' about young people as originally identified by Cohen (1972). This may be defined as a widespread fear about the general well-being of society normally centred on the activities of young people. In an HE context these moral panics previously centred around the extent to which students were intellectually capable (e.g. Amis, 1960). They are now more focused on fears that students are not adopting the right attitude to study (e.g. Molesworth, Nixon, & Scullion, 2009).

This paper will examine three central myths about students in HE: 'more means worse', 'loss of love for learning', and 'student-as-consumer'. All three perpetuate a negative image about students' intellectual capacity, motivation to learn, and attitude towards a University education. The intention is that the foregoing analysis will help to separate the fact from the folklore. In doing so the paper will explore the evidence that underpins these claims, question the research methods used by those making these declarations, and map the history of each debate.

Myth 1 – more means worse

As participation rates have risen across the globe since the 1990s, anxieties about whether this will lead to a dilution in the quality of the students entering University has become a familiar theme. Yet, this is not a new debate; it is almost as old as the University itself. This is because, while the expansion of HE is often perceived as a recent phenomenon, it has been going on for several hundred years. John Venn's analysis from the turn of the twentieth century demonstrates that matriculation rates from Oxford and Cambridge rose during the nineteenth century (Saunders, 1947) and the expansion of HE has continued to take place steadily ever since. In 1900/01 the number of full-time students in British HE stood at 25,000. By 1924/25 this number had more than doubled to 61,000 with a smaller proportionate increase to 69,000 by 1938/39, at the eve of the outbreak of the Second World War (Robbins, 1963). The case for University expansion post-1945 was tied to the need for economic and technological advancement as the role of institutions as research institutions in the service of the economy started to take hold in the US (Bush, 1945) and, more slowly, in the UK. The Barlow report published in 1946 recommended an expansion in the number of graduates to meet Britain's needs for more scientific manpower. The resulting debate about expansion came into sharp focus and filled many of the pages of *Universities Quarterly*, one of a mere handful of HE journals at the time. By 1954/55 student numbers had risen to 122,000, more than double the 1924/25 level (Robbins, 1963).

By 1962/63, student numbers in British universities stood at 216,000 (Robbins, 1963), again representing a very substantial increase. From the perspective of the twenty-first century these numbers may look modest with under 10 per cent of young people attending University. Yet both the pre- and post-1945 expansions were significant and led to a doubling of student numbers in a still relatively small University system. In addition to the maintenance of academic standards concerns also related to the preservation of the residential model, seen as a special feature of British HE (Halsey & Trow, 1971). Subsequent expansions took place in the UK in the 1990s and in the 2000s bringing

in its wake the familiar recapitulation of worries about a decline in academic standards. However, worries about the rising participation rate have been expressed consistently since the mid-nineteenth century. Charles Robertson, writing in 1930, states the case against expansion in familiar terms voicing worries about the lowering of academic standards, a case that has been made repeatedly:

If the universities are to be 'democratized' by increasing the lower level by twenty or twenty-five per cent the certain result will be before long a lowering of the standard of intellectual values and achievement throughout the whole community. (Robertson, 1930/1944, p. 78)

In the immediate post-1945 period the established universities had taken on rises in student numbers, but the Robbins report (1963) signalled a need to increase the number of institutions as well. Kingsley Amis, author of the hugely successful post-1945 campus novel, *Lucky Jim*, spoke for those who were stridently opposed to University expansion seeing it as inevitably lowering academic standards.

More will mean worse. The delusion that there are thousands of young people about who are capable of benefiting from University training, but have somehow failed to find their way there, is of course a necessary component of the expansionist case. It means that one can confidently mention a thing called *quality* and say it will be *maintained*. University graduates, however, are like poems or bottles of hock, and unlike cars or tins of salmon, in that you cannot *decide* to have more good ones. All you can decide to have is more. And MORE will mean WORSE. (Amis, 1960, p. 9)

For Amis and other critics of University expansion the main issue, as they saw it, was that any growth would inevitably lower academic standards. Halsey and Trow (1971), drawing on a large-scale survey of British academics in the immediate aftermath of the Robbins report, characterised this debate in terms of the division between 'expansionists' and 'elitists'. The concern of the elitists was that there was a small and finite gene pool of talented young people capable of benefiting from a University education. Opening the door any wider would only lead to a dilution of standards as it would mean that students would enter University without the cognitive competence to cope with its demands. There was also the more general notion that students lack the organisational skills to cope with University:

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, p. 100)

Holliman's statement – made more than 50 years ago – has a timeless quality to it, in as much as it might have been made at more or less any time over the last few hundred years, on the basis of almost constant expansion of enrolment and matriculation rates from University. Yet most British academics who opposed expansion in the 1960s were more fearful of 'the unknown problems that significant expansion may bring with it' rather than believing that the issue really lay in the quality of the students entering the system (Halsey & Trow, 1971, p. 274). The expansionists – who wanted to see a doubling of the intake – were more likely to have a left-leaning political perspective committed to widening access on the basis of democratic principles (Halsey & Trow, 1971). Around two thirds of British academics surveyed by Halsey and Trow did not regard the post-Robbins expansion as having had any significant effects on the quality of the student intake and a further, smaller proportion (of 13 per cent) felt that their ability had even risen.

The Robbins report (1963) rejected the notion that more means worse and argued persuasively that the expansion of higher education was justified on the basis of the rising numbers of students qualified to enter University via achieving a minimum of two A Level pass grades. While moral panics in the press about grade inflation in British universities are still common (Lambert, 2019), the evidence since 1963 supports the assertion of the Robbins report. A powerful counter-narrative to claims about grade inflation is provided by the rising quality of the student intake (Johnes & Soo, 2017); more innovative teaching, learning and assessment methods (Gibbs, Haigh, & Lucas, 1996); improved faculty development and student support systems (Boretz, 2004); and harder working students (Macfarlane, 1992). What was referred to by Halsey and Trow (1971) as the politically left-wing case for expansion, on the basis of reducing inequality, entered mainstream political thinking about higher education by the late 1990s; as demonstrated by the chapter on widening participation in the national committee of enquiry into higher education, chaired by Ron Dearing (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education [NCIHE], 1997). British universities are now held accountable for the extent to which they are achieving widening participation targets under the auspices of The Office for Students (OfS), created in 2018.

Lamentations about the erosion of academic excellence and students too callow or ill-equipped to deal with its demands have been around for a very long time indeed and probably always will be. While politically the case for 'more means worse' is now passé, there is little empirical evidence that expansion has lowered academic standards in terms of the qualifications of entrants or the degree results they achieve (Black & Sykes, 1971). What is certainly true is that the unit of resource per head has not kept pace with rising student numbers and the fears of those who opposed expansion in the 1960s have proven well founded in this respect. However, more means worse continues to figure prominently in the debate about the continuing contemporary expansion of HE. The prospect of quotas of students from ethnic minority backgrounds has been opposed by Lord Patten, the Conservative politician and Chancellor of Oxford University, on the grounds that it will erode academic standards (Espinoza, 2016). Perhaps, as Scott (1995) observed, this is the result of elite instincts co-existing with mass systems of higher education.

The OfS has taken a critical interest in the growth of 'good' degree results – i.e. first class and upper second degrees – in UK universities (The Office for Students, 2018). In a pattern repeated elsewhere in myth making, the 'problem' – the growing proportion of good degrees awarded – is presented as a comparatively recent phenomenon dating back to the 1990s (Richmond, 2018), when the historical evidence indicates it dates back much further than this (Macfarlane, 1992). There is considerable press attention on so-called 'grade inflation' as indicative of pressures on University staff to award higher grades – student consumerism – and a decline in academic standards in universities (e.g. Alderman, 2003; Marsh, 2017; Richmond, 2018). By contrast, more benign explanations such as the rising quality of the student intake, more motivated learners, improved quality assurance mechanisms and greater use of criterion-referenced assessment rarely get the same level of attention (e.g. Gibbs & Lucas, 1997; Johnes & Soo, 2017).

The growth of interest in research into learning and teaching means that there is now much greater awareness of the effect of changes in the way in which students are assessed in higher education since the 1970s, as a result of the institutionalisation of learning outcomes and criterion-referenced grading, resulting in more transparent and

fairer approaches to assessment (e.g. Biggs, 1996; Bloxham & Boyd, 2007). Over the last twenty years, the growth in postgraduate certificates in learning and teaching as a mechanism for training new lecturers means that these changes have largely been adopted and accepted as good practice by the academic profession (Kandlbinder & Peseta, 2009). It is now more unusual to hear fears about ‘more means worse’ voiced in stark terms, but the underlying fear that the growth of the student population is somehow damaging academic standards is still present through debates about ‘grade inflation’.

Myth 2 – loss of love for learning

More means worse is closely allied to another popular trope about University students: that they have become more orientated towards learning for reasons connected to careers and employability rather than the intrinsic love for learning (Rolfe, 2002). It is widely asserted that students are now more instrumental – or vocational – in their attitude towards their studies and have become less motivated with respect to academic learning. This ‘vocational’ orientation to learning is commonly contrasted with an ‘academic’ approach, two of the four orientations identified by Clark and Trow in the 1960s (Clark & Trow, 1966). In a UK context, the effect of the introduction of – and subsequent increases in – tuition fees in 1998 is frequently cited as a key factor in suggesting that students are taking a more pragmatic, jobs-related attitude to their studies (e.g. Williams, 2011). This type of claim is commonly made in both opinion-based pieces and empirical studies about higher education, the latter of which often rely on interviews with academic staff as a means of establishing the ‘evidence’ for this assertion. For example, in their study of British academics from the mid-1960s, Halsey and Trow (Halsey & Trow, 1971, p. 270) quote an economist at a London University as stating:

I have ... thought sometimes that there are people already at a University for whom a University education is rather a waste. I think ... some ... come just in order to get a degree to get promotion and a higher salary ...

Forty years later, this time taken from the work of Rolfe (2002, p. 171), another academic makes a very similar claim:

a higher proportion of students enter higher education for career reasons than in the past; students are less interested in the intellectual content of their subject than in vocational aspects

Graduate unemployment and associated anxiety about obtaining a graduate level job may be regarded as an explanatory reason for students to adopt more ‘vocational attitudes’. Yet, high levels of graduate unemployment are not a new phenomenon. It is simply a reflection of the state of the economy at any point in history. For example, between 1979 and 1984 unemployment in the UK increased more than twofold, from 5.5 per cent to 13.1 per cent respectively, leading to higher levels of graduate unemployment among the relevant cohort(s), such as the class of 1981 (Burgess, Propper, Rees, & Shearer, 1999). Hence, there are aspects of the debate that are comparatively new (e.g. tuition fees for English HE students, for example, since the early 2000s) and other aspects that are much older (e.g. graduate unemployment).

Part of the difficulty here, with claims about ‘vocational attitudes’, is that studies suggesting this rarely include any comparative data on which to make such an assertion. Interviews are a tried and tested method for generating qualitative data in social sciences research and are relied on extensively in educational research. Better triangulation and the use of interviews with students would aid balance and reliability, as evident in some other studies (e.g. Brooks & Abrahams, 2018; Tomlinson, 2017). The lack of any historical context (or data) means that studies about students that rely exclusively on lecturer perspectives ought to be treated with caution. Academics, researchers, and other public policy commentators tend to make the assumption that what is sometimes spoken of as the shift from an elite to a mass higher education system since the 1960s has led to a decline in the proportion of academically motivated learners. Here there is a failure to understand that the ‘transition from elite to mass higher education’ (Trow, 1973) has been going on for a very long time indeed, depending on how ‘mass’ higher education is defined. British higher education has been expanding – in terms of student numbers and universities – since at least the end of the nineteenth century, with one or two brief interruptions due to the two world wars. Although a purely arbitrary figure, Trow (1973) defined ‘mass’ HE as between 15 and 40 per cent enrolment. Most contemporary developed nations have over 40 per cent enrolment, a figure Trow defined as ‘universal’. There is a further tendency to conflate the tertiary enrolment rates, as provided by international organisations such as UNESCO, with figures for ‘higher education’.

Associated with the belief that students in mass (or indeed universal) higher education are more likely to be instrumentally minded is a fear that this will lead to a lowering of academic standards. Trow (1973, p. 35), writing over forty years ago, identified the way this simplistic dichotomy has taken hold:

At one extreme we think of a group of learned and imaginative scholars teaching highly selected and motivated students in a situation of rich intellectual resources, cultural, scientific and academic. At the other extreme are institutions staffed by less well-educated and less-accomplished teachers, teaching less able and less well motivated students under less favorable conditions marked by lower salaries; a poorer staff-student ratio, a smaller library, fewer laboratory places, and all in a less stimulating and lively intellectual environment

Embedded within this popular dichotomy is the belief that elite institutions were likely to attract ‘motivated students’, whilst mass access ones would be populated by ‘less well motivated students’. The quotation from Trow also needs to be understood in the context of the former binary divide in UK HE, between the universities and the polytechnics, which was ended in 1992. While the formal divide between research-based and access-based institutions has ended, the sense of a dichotomy in the quality of academics and student intake remains largely in place, perhaps ironically compounded by the further expansion of HE provision and the popularisation of national and world rankings of universities. Trow (1973, p. 38) reflects on the way in which this belief was firmly embedded in thinking about HE in the early 1970s despite the absence of any proof to substantiate this assertion.

some observers suggest the new students are, if not less able, then less highly motivated, or less well prepared in their secondary schools, for serious academic work. This feeling is widespread, even if there is no good evidence to support the hypothesis ...

Here, there is a sense in which there was a golden age when students went to University in order to study the subject they loved. Yet the evidence does not support this claim.

Indeed, it seems all too apparent that writers about higher education have always bemoaned the fact that students are mainly fixed on passing the examination rather than learning for the joy of it. A love for learning is not necessarily incompatible with a desire to be employable and to do well in examinations. Yet, these two dispositions have always tended to be presented in oppositional terms. The English art historian and poet, Herbert Read, makes the following acerbic observation, remarking on his time as an undergraduate at the University of Leeds before the First World War:

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. (Read, 1940, p. 75)

This was a time when little more than one per cent of 18–30 year olds went to University. Relevantly similar remarks can be found in the post-1945 period, in an editorial in *Universities Quarterly* from 1950, mourning the way in which ‘the student of today likes to be spoon-fed’ (Editorial, 1950, p. 321). Truscot (1943, p. 162), whose book *Red Brick University* was one of the most influential in the post-war period, came to a relatively similar conclusion arguing that undergraduates could be neatly divided ‘into the apathetic and the keen; and it’s probably not an exaggeration to put the proportions at five to one.’ Similarly, the historian Whyte (2015, p. 237) – writing about students in the expanded British higher education system of the 1950s and 60s – states that ‘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.’ Yet, Truscot’s contribution to the HE literature was essentially a highly engaging polemic, while Whyte relies on others who were writing about HE as an object of experience rather than systematic, longitudinal study.

HE research was in its infancy during the immediate post-1945 period. This may, at least in part, explain the lack of empirical evidence available. However, as empirical research started to appear in the 1960s, it also tended to show that undergraduates were likely to place employment or occupational motives above intellectual, social or personal ones in explaining their reasons in going to University. Richard Startup’s study of undergraduates – drawing on data collected in 1969 – demonstrated the pragmatic motives of students, 90 per cent of whom in his study indicated that future employment contributed to their reasons for entering higher education. Startup (1972, p. 319) quotes one of his questionnaire respondents in reinforcing this key point:

I came to University for two reasons – to get a degree so I could (I hope) get a better job and to have a good time. I didn’t come here to become an intellectual, a student revolutionary or to go on demonstrations as some people seem to have done.

Hence, the attractiveness of the notion that students in the past were more intrinsically motivated is essentially a piece of folklore. This belief though remains fixed in the popular imagination and has become, if anything, even more entrenched in recent years, as market-driven reforms have led to the phrase ‘student-as-consumer’ being oft-repeated particularly following the Browne review (2010) of UK HE funding. The popular distinction in the teaching and learning literature between ‘deep’ and ‘surface’ learning, established

by Marton and Säljö (1976), has become a dualistic and unfair tool for labelling students. Those who do not approach their studies with sufficient love for learning (or 'deep learning') and prefer to focus on passing the examination are labelled as 'surface learning'. It is conventional to blame students for surface learning on the basis that they focus their learning on assessment tasks rather than wider reading and scholarly curiosity. Yet the responsibility for creating the conditions that reward surface learning needs to be placed with academics who produce assessments that demand recall of knowledge rather than its critical evaluation.

The deep/surface dualism creates the impression that students in the past used to work harder. Yet, analyses of the 'working week' of a typical undergraduate from the 1950s through to the present day do not support this thesis. Doris Thoday's survey work from the early to mid-1950s showed 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 week-end (Thoday, 1957). These figures fly in the face of misty-eyed romanticism about students in the past demonstrating more commitment to study.

It is further clear that there has always been a desire to 'cram' for examinations. At Cambridge during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries a culture of private tuition – or coaching – was widespread as the main means of passing the University Tripos.¹ According to Sheldon Rothblatt, the function of a coach was much more than an additional tutor and their success 'was the measured by his ability to cram an undergraduate, to drill him intensively for a high place in the examination lists' (Rothblatt, 1968, p. 199). Moreover, far from being intellectuals in love with their subject it is estimated that, prior to the twentieth century, two-thirds of Oxford students enjoyed their sports, did little academic work, and were awarded a pass degree despite their lack of academic application (Soares, 1999). As Hurst (2013, p. 57) concludes in a penetrating analysis based on evaluation of historical sources 'the "academic" student was an historical rarity before the twentieth century'.

Myth 3 – student-as-consumer

Student-as-consumer has been described as 'the most dominant metaphor in higher education today', having attained a hegemonic status (Emerson & Mansvelt, 2015, p. 1874). It is a metaphor that describes the way in which the marketisation of higher education, as part of the neo-liberalisation of public services, has impacted on the behaviour of students. Here, there is a suggestion that there has been a change in expectations that has led students to internalise and practice the values of the market in their relations with universities. This sense of a shift, from an understanding of HE as a personal development experience rather than a commodity, permeates much of the work that has been published about the student-as-consumer. It is summarised by the title of an edited book called *The Marketisation of Higher Education and the Student as Consumer*. The editors of this book claim that this marketisation has led to the 'transformation' of the University student into a consumer (Molesworth et al., 2009). However, while the contributing authors to this edited volume are strong in demonstrating how the HE system has become more marketised, they do not provide any evidence that this macro-level trend has automatically led to an attitudinal change among students even though this view is widely asserted as a given. Similar assertions, made without evidence,

about the attitudinal shift of students into consumers pervades much of the rest of the literature. Woodall and colleagues, for example, state that ‘students are increasingly demonstrating customer-like behaviour and are now demanding even more ‘value’ from institutions’ (Woodall, Hiller, & Resnick, 2014, p. 48). While a small number of studies have sought to demonstrate that consumerist attitudes exist among students, they have not shown that this behaviour marks a *shift* from that of previous generations.

Student-as-consumer, in common with the two other myths discussed in this paper, is reinforced by the lamentations of academics about the way HE has ‘declined’ and is not ‘what it used to be’. Delucchi and Korgen (2002, p. 101), in seeking to give further ballast to their argument about the growth of student consumerism, state that ‘faculty members across academic disciplines have written articles lamenting the prevalence of a consumer-oriented student on college campuses.’ This statement begs the ‘so what?’ question. While it is certainly true that there is no shortage of articles authored by academics complaining about a consumerist mentality among students, this does not constitute evidence of a change in disposition. Academics working in universities represent former University students for whom their discipline became, in effect, their life’s work. As such, it is hardly surprising that they express disappointment about the extent to which students do not share their depth of passion since the vast majority will not go on to become academics. It is also telling that the main title of Delucchi and Korgen (2002) article – ‘We’re the customer – we pay the tuition’ – is derived from a newspaper article in the *New York Times* published four years previously. It is not based on any evidence collected by the authors and the phrase is taken from a newspaper article. Delucchi and Korgen’s paper is typical of most other studies of the student-as-consumer metaphor, focusing on lecturer perceptions (e.g. Emerson & Mansvelt, 2015) or offering a meta-level analysis of marketisation and neo-liberalism without specific evidence of student views (e.g. Wellen, 2005). As such, this collective body of work concerned with the student-as-consumer literature largely represents a golden ageism in its lamentation about student attitudes. Meaningful evidence as to whether there has been any real appreciable shift in the behaviour of students over time is thin on the ground.

‘Grade grubbing’ is commonly identified as a symbol of student consumerism. This is essentially a pejorative term that refers to students questioning the award of a grade at University. It is widely interpreted in a negative manner, as a consumer-like behaviour; however, it is a phenomenon that could equally be interpreted in a more positive way, as indicative of a shift to a society that is less deferential of professional power. Moreover, students’ concern with grades is nothing new: competitive attitudes, and a belief that their final results will make a material difference to their future career and life prospects, have always existed. Yet, academics – perhaps unsurprisingly – regard so-called grade grubbing as an assault on their professional judgement and as indicative of a ‘new’ consumerist mentality. A large number of opinion-based articles express indignation at the behaviour of students who question grading decisions, though there is little evidence that grade grubbing is necessarily widespread or inconsistent with the expansion in the numbers of students studying in higher education. Grade grubbing is also an amorphous term that appears to condemn all forms of student enquiries into grading decisions, including the desire to be graded fairly. Maringe (2011, p. 163), for example, is typical in stating that ‘staff are likely to be pressured to award better grades in order to satisfy the customers’ without producing any evidence to support this assertion whatsoever.

The length of the student-as-consumer debate dates back much further than is acknowledged by those who write about this subject. Woodall and colleagues state that the debate about the consumer concept in higher education emerged in the 1990s. However, its origins have been traced back to President John F. Kennedy's address to Congress in 1962 (Green, 1978), when he linked consumer rights to those of the individual to be properly informed, to be heard and to the right to choose (Stark, 1976). Dykstra (1966), Green (1978), Pernal (1977), Shulman (1976), and Stark (1975, 1976) were all writing about student consumerism in the 1960s and 1970s, in a US context. Moreover, the instrumentality of students as learners, and their fixation with grades, was an argument put forward by Bourdieu and Passeron (1979) at a time when the University experience was still associated with a liberal rather than a marketised environment (Tomlinson, 2017).

Many of these earlier contributions to the debate about the student-as-consumer were concerned with the implications for universities of extending the concept of consumer protection to students. In the UK, such views were being expressed even earlier. Lord Simon of Wythenshawe, the founder of *Universities Quarterly*, referenced his commercial identity as a 'consumer' of both University graduates and research as a leading industrialist in 1949, in an article entitled 'University Crisis? A consumer's view' (Simon, 1949, p. 73).

Perhaps, then, less has changed than we might imagine. As with all myths, student-as-consumer is based on very loose assumptions. In this case, assumptions that student attitudes have changed – or been 'transformed' – by the more market-based environment of higher education where, in a UK context, tuition fees have been part of the landscape only since the late 1990s. While it is certainly true that the UK government has sought to bring about market-based reform to the higher education sector, it does not necessarily follow that the behaviour of University students has been radically altered as a result. Where contemporary research has focused on the views of students it has revealed a more complex and nuanced understanding of the notion of student-as-consumer. For example, Tomlinson's (2017) study based on interviews with 68 undergraduate students found that many students do not subscribe to the student-as-consumer metaphor. Even though the student-as-consumer might appear to be an apposite metaphor connected with the marketisation of the University, aspects of the debate unfairly caricature students as entitled and insensitive to the special nature of the educational relationship as a learning partnership. The majority of papers about the student-as-consumer devote more attention to the way in which universities have been subject to marketisation and regulatory policy changes than in providing evidence as to how student attitudes have changed, if at all. There is a very strong sense in which many opinion-based contributions to the student-as-consumer debate represent little more than idealised and defensive expressions of academic professionalism.

Conclusion

'More means worse', 'loss of love for learning' and 'student-as-consumer' are popular myths about students in higher education. Like all myths, they have gained considerable traction due to their intuitive appeal. The field of higher education studies is still relatively immature and much writing and research about it, by academics from a range of disciplines, lacks broader historical understanding and perspective (Macfarlane & Burg,

2018). Considerable recent attention, for example, has focused on student well-being at University. The tragedy of student suicides has tended to headline these concerns. Yet, nearly all of this debate has presented the issue as a new issue rather than in its broader historical context. In this context, the suicide rate among students has long been recognised as a cause for unease, tending to be higher at elite institutions such as Oxford and Cambridge (Atkinson, 1969). Some studies have found that the suicide rate among students is similar to that among young people in the general population (Collins & Paykel, 2000), and that the rate of attempted suicide is lower among University students than their counterparts not studying in the sector (Hawton, Haigh, Simkin, & Fagg, 1995). The fact that students suffer from mental health issues is not a myth, but the fact that it is a long-standing issue has been overlooked.

HE researchers need to shoulder some of the responsibility for folklore. Personal reflections about higher education that are devoid of understanding of the historic literature can compound myths, rather than question conventional thinking or deepen understanding. Empirically, there is an overreliance on exploring lecturer perceptions as a means of explaining student attitudes. As Hurst (2013) has argued, there is also a failure to appreciate the effects resulting from social desirability reporting, with savvy students understanding that an ‘academic’ approach to study is the one that is looked upon more favourably by HE researchers acting as interviewers. Middle-class students have learnt to downplay their career concerns and ‘decry the excessive vocationalism of her peers’ (Hurst, 2013, p. 54). This, according to Hurst, has led to working-class students being labelled as ‘vocational’ and middle-class ones as ‘academic’. It demonstrates that students can play the role required of them in an environment which is still highly sensitive to the consumer metaphor, despite the growth in the formal power and influence of students as stakeholders.

More worryingly, the three myths examined in this paper peddle negative stereotypes about students: that they are incapable of benefiting intellectually from a University education, lack intrinsic interest in learning, and act as overly assertive customers rather than ardent learners. These tropes amount to a collective moral panic (Cohen, 1972) that students cannot be trusted to learn in good faith. It is a moral panic now represented by the student engagement movement, which institutionalises distrust of students as learners. Like all moral panics, they recur from generation to generation; however, the focus has now shifted from claims that only an elite few have the intellectual ability to go to University, to the contention that students have ‘consumerist’ attitudes and adopt an instrumental approach to learning. While the focus of the moral panic might change, the general trope remains much the same.

Note

1. An examination that qualifies a student to receive a bachelors’ degree.

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