

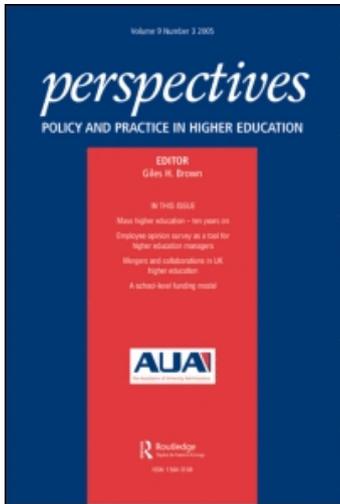
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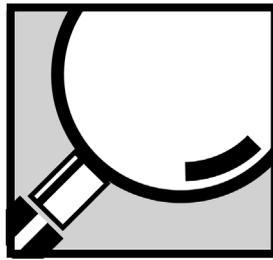
Managing student expectations

The impact of top-up tuition fees

Glyn Jones

Introduction

Since 2006 students have been paying top-up tuition fees and there has been much discussion in the sector about their impact on higher education institutions (HEIs). One of the main effects has been the frequently cited notion of the student as a fee-paying customer, seeking greater value for money not only for their fees but also for their overall student experience. As we are now in the fourth year of top-up tuition fees, it is an appropriate time to assess how HEIs are responding to a more 'consumerist' orientated environment.



informed by consumer notions (Fulton Philips 2004). The arrival of the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIA) in 2004 was viewed as making HEIs more accountable for their actions as well as being more responsive to their students' requirements. The effect of top-up tuition fees was anticipated as entrenching the notion of the

student as customer with HEIs being more responsive to students' needs in an increasingly competitive HE sector (Jones 2006).

The aim of this paper is to assess the impact of top-up tuition fees on HEIs from the perspective of a growing consumer culture in the sector and the response of HEIs to managing students' expectations. Accordingly, the paper is divided into the following sections:

- The student as customer
- The response of HEIs
- Rising tuition fees: future challenges.

Background

Prior to the introduction of top-up fees in 2006, the then chief executive of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), Sir Howard Newby, warned HEIs that the increase in tuition fees would require them to treat students as customers and to be more responsive to their requirements (Lipsett 2005). At the time, it had already been noted how rising tuition fees were impacting on the HEI-student relationship with a move away from the traditional scholarly partnership towards a more contractual association

The student as customer

The challenge for HEIs is to engage with the notion of the student as customer and to meet their expectations. Students now expect greater value for money and are more outcome-focused in relation to their studies. In the 2007 Unite Student Experience Report, gaining qualifications and enhancing employability prospects were cited by 70% and 65% of respondents respectively as being their primary motivation for studying in HE (Unite 2007). This finding is supported by a recent survey of UK and German students that revealed UK students were more materialistically orientated than their German counterparts – ie expecting their course to prepare them for the world of work and to provide them with the capability to earn substantial salaries (Pritchard 2006).

The application of the consumer analogy to students in HE is limited insofar as education is a participative activity which requires a contribution from the student in order for the desired outcome (ie qualification) to be

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attained (Kaye et al 2006). The emergence of a consumer culture in HE has been attributed to a paradigm shift, with education viewed as a legal right rather than as a privilege as traditionally perceived (Kaye et al 2006). The consequence is that the right to education can be misinterpreted as the institution taking responsibility for its students' learning rather than any ownership on the part of the student. This situation has led to unrealistic expectations by some students through their equating the 'right to education' with 'the right to demand a good degree with good grades' (Kaye et al 2006: 98).

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At the very least, students are demanding better value for money in return for paying increased tuition fees. In consequence, students are more inclined to complain if their perception of service delivery falls below their expectations. This is evidenced by students' demonstrations against plans to reduce lecture hours (Newman 2009) and Students Unions' campaign to encourage students to report on late or cancelled lectures (Attwood 2009a). Students are increasingly being supported in asserting their rights vis-à-vis service delivery by their parents who in many cases are funding their children's studies. References have been made in the media to the notion of 'helicopter parents' who will be involved in all aspects of their son's or daughter's HE experience and will act as their advocate in dealings with the institution (Coughlan 2008).

The dilemma for HEIs is how to manage a more assertive and demanding student body. Student expectations will often be informed by their previous educational experience of a greater learning dependency on the tutor which is at variance with the independent study expected in HE (Fearn 2008b, Thomson 2008). Furthermore, with the instantaneous nature of new technology, students have an expectation of an immediate response from their lecturers when they communicate with them, irrespective of the time or day (Attwood 2009b). These factors all constitute triggers for students making complaints. A student's complaint

can often be difficult to resolve because of the individual's personal investment in the process and the unrealistic outcomes being sought (Buckton 2008, Burke 2004, Lester et al 2004). The fact that students are able to access internal complaints procedures and the OIA at no cost encourages complainants to pursue an issue to the highest level in the hope of extracting maximum compensation from the HEI. Lester et al (2004) conclude that a normal complaints procedure operated by HEIs designed to 'provide conciliation through reparation and compensation' will often be unable to accommodate the unrealistic expectations of certain complainants.

However, HEIs will need to demonstrate that they are responding to student feedback and endeavouring to meet students' expectations. Student satisfaction is a key contributory factor to an institution's position in league tables for the sector. The 2007 Unite survey demonstrated the impact of league tables on an institution's reputation as a key deciding factor in a student's choice of university. The National Student Survey constitutes a key barometer of students' opinions of their courses and quality of teaching. A review of the National Student Surveys between 2005 and 2007 revealed that overall students were very positive about their courses with only 9-10% of respondents expressing dissatisfaction (Surrige 2008). The review also found that a student's socio-economic background, ethnicity, educational background and qualifications as well as the size of the HEI all contributed to the student's expectations. For instance, students aged between eighteen and thirty who had low A-level scores were more likely to express dissatisfaction with their course.

...A key source of students' complaints is a mismatch between their perception of the student experience prior to arrival and the reality of the course and services provided...

A key source of students' complaints is a mismatch between their perception of the student experience prior to arrival and the reality of the course and services provided (Longden 2006). Students increasingly cite prospectuses and course handbooks in addition to what they were told by academic staff at open days as examples of 'contractual' breaches in support of

their complaints. Feedback from 'student juries', organised by the government in Spring 2008 to gauge student feedback, criticised the misleading nature of prospectuses which were likened to 'holiday brochures' (Attwood 2008). The increasing volume of information about similar courses and range of services offered by different institutions is seen as leading to 'consumer confusion' (Drummond 2004). Consumer confusion can lead to students making the wrong choice about their course and where to study. The outcome can be a disillusioned student and one more inclined to complain.

The response of HEIs

In facing a more assertive and demanding student 'customer', HEIs have to try to manage student expectations in an environment where student feedback is a key determinant of league table places. HEIs will also need to demonstrate that they are providing the value for money and good quality services relating to the overall student experience which students (and their parents) expect. From a legal perspective, the HEI-student relationship is contractual insofar as it constitutes a consumer contract for the supply of a service (Oxcheps 2009). The legal aspects of the relationship are enshrined in a number of areas of the law including contract law, landlord and tenant law, discrimination law and tort law. With rising tuition fees, there is a corresponding risk of increased litigation if students do not feel they are getting value for money or their perception of standards and quality of services falls short of their expectations. Normally the judicial review of a HEI's decision will take place after the OIA has investigated the matter. HEIs have been subject to judicial review to clarify the fairness of their procedures and their application vis-à-vis the student body. Some institutions have also sought to devise a formal contract with their students which sets out the students' own responsibilities regarding their conduct and learning. However, there are doubts whether such contracts would be enforceable if subject to judicial review (OIA 2007).

In addition to legal obligations in the delivery of services, HEIs are subject to a number of regulatory controls to ensure that they are delivering a student experience commensurate with students' needs and requirements. HEFCE now requires HEIs to demonstrate how they are providing value for money (VFM) in their use of public funds. Accordingly, many HEIs have established steering groups to oversee VFM activities and to apply the key principles of economy, efficiency and effectiveness to their operations. Such schemes will involve a HEI evaluating whether its services are fit for purpose and ensuring that resources are being used to their full potential. However, concerns have been expressed by the University and College Union that such efficiency and cost-effectiveness exercises will have a paradoxical effect on HEIs in meeting

students' expectations, with such savings possibly being detrimental to the student experience by affecting staff-student ratios and class sizes (Curtis 2009).

The Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) has also had an impact on institutions in regard to meeting students' expectations. The OIA has seen an increase in the number of complaints it has received from 586 in 2006 to 900 in 2008 with £93,535 awarded in compensation to students (OIA 2009). However, in addition to its recommendations following a complaint investigation, the OIA plays an influential role in encouraging HEIs to make their processes more accessible and transparent to students as well as providing training and guidance to institutions in complaint handling and resolution. It has also encouraged HEIs to be pre-emptive in trying to resolve complaints and to minimise escalation. The OIA's annual reports provide anonymous summaries of cases it has dealt with together with the resolution it has advocated (OIA 2008, 2009). These have served as guidance to investigating officers in HEIs in handling complaints especially in suggesting appropriate resolutions to address particular issues.

...many HEIs are developing expertise in complaint handling and resolution with the emergence ... of their own complaints and ombudsman services...

As a result, many HEIs are developing expertise in complaint handling and resolution with the emergence in recent years of their own complaints and ombudsman services. The development of in-house expertise has also been supported by specialist training courses provided by the OIA and legal firms in addition to the emergence of support networks in the sector (Buckton 2008). Nevertheless, the need for training in handling complaints extends beyond departments specifically created for this purpose. The vast majority of HEIs have an informal stage in their complaints procedures where staff in faculties and departments act as the first point of contact in the process. As many complaints tend to be resolved at this level, it is important for staff to be equipped with the necessary skills to handle and to resolve student concerns. Indeed, a recommendation of the National Union of Students' review of complaints and appeals procedures was the provision

of appropriate training to staff and the delegation of relevant authority in order to resolve complaints at the informal stages (NUS 2009).

Training for staff in complaints handling and resolution is necessitated by the growing complexity of student complaints. Complaints will often comprise a multitude of issues, making a complaint more time-consuming and challenging to resolve for staff. An additional complication is a growing trend for the focus of the complaint to shift to the actual complaints procedure and the responses by staff at the respective stages of the process (Buckton 2008). The result is inevitably an extension of the timescale for completion of a complaint investigation, which was one of the main issues highlighted in the NUS review (NUS 2009). However, achieving an appropriate resolution can be problematic since the issues raised by the student may require other procedures, such as academic appeals, to be invoked.

...An adverse effect of meeting student expectations can be an additional workload and associated pressures for staff...

Staff also need to be provided with training and appropriate support in handling the workload involved in responding to student requests and complaints. An adverse effect of meeting student expectations can be an additional workload and associated pressures for staff. A 2006 survey indicated that the drive to meet student expectations was adversely affecting staff workloads and job satisfaction (Pritchard 2006). This raised the scenario of an inverse relationship developing between student and staff satisfaction. The challenge for HEIs is to encourage staff to view the majority of complaints in terms of an additional source of student feedback, a fact substantiated by responses from student surveys raising similar issues to those featuring in individual complaints. An initial defensive reaction to a complaint can often lead to a breakdown in the relationship with the student and to escalation to more formal levels including the OIA. In contrast, the reluctance of a student to make a complaint out of concern about damaging a relationship with a member of staff and affecting their marks should also be noted (NUS 2009).

HEIs have also been subject to the rulings of the Office of Fair Trading (OFT 2009). A review of the

OFT's website (<http://www.ofc.gov.uk>) reveals cases where the OFT has considered a university's terms and conditions to be in the institution's rather than the student's favour. Examples include the unfair enforcement of powers in relation to student accommodation, the use of discretion in how terms and conditions of contracts are being applied and not affording students sufficient time to familiarise themselves with contractual agreements. In its recommendations (OFT 2009), the OFT advocates plain and clear language in contractual agreements and clarity in the way in which HEIs apply their discretionary powers (OFT 2009).

As well as complying with legal obligations and regulatory controls, HEIs need to ensure that students' expectations of HE are realistic. Ideally, this issue needs to be addressed both at the previous educational level and when students first arrive (Appleton-Knapp and Krentler 2006). A report by the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS 2009) stressed the need for prospective students to be better informed about all aspects of the HE experience. Its recommendations to assist students in making the adjustment to the HE environment included a greater use of student ambassadors, a financial allowance to permit prospective students to visit HEIs and improved information on pastoral, financial and social support. As a result, universities need to work closely with schools and colleges in bridging the gap between FE and HE and helping students make the transition. Similarly, on arrival, students need to be provided with an appropriate induction experience so that they are informed of the institution's expectations of them in addition to the services and facilities that students can access. In this way, induction should be viewed as an ongoing process rather than as an event (Ramsden 2008).

Rising tuition fees: future challenges

The lifting of the cap on tuition fees is liable to accentuate the aforementioned trends. Students' expectations will continue to rise and they will demand better value in the quality of their tuition and in services to support them with their studies. This could lead to students requesting more information on how the monies from their fees are being spent and complaining if resources are not diverted to those areas that they consider a priority (Fearn 2008a).

An accentuation of the student as customer is seen as threatening to the ethos and intellectual mission of HE (Furedi 2009, Ramsden 2008). Ramsden (2008) advocates the notion of the student as a partner in the learning process rather than as a paying customer whose expectations need to be satisfied. Furedi (2009) envisages the perpetuation of the notion of the student as customer resulting in a validation of the student's efforts for assessment feedback and an increasing tolerance of any academic misconduct on the part of the student.

HEIs are also likely to develop further their expertise in complaint handling and resolution. In an attempt to prevent complaints from escalating and becoming more complex, greater expertise is likely to develop at faculty and departmental level in order to better equip staff to address informal complaints and prevent escalation to formal stages and to the OIA. Indeed, the OIA has recognised through workshops it has run the importance for institutions of developing their skills in informal complaint resolution. The case studies featured on the OIA's website and in its annual reports will continue to make institutions aware of appropriate case handling and resolution.

The OIA will continue to make HEIs aware of their commitments and responsibilities to students through the publication of relevant guidance in its annual reports, notably case studies of complaint investigations. The OIA's position as an external precursor to judicial review has been recognised by the High Court which criticised two students for bypassing the OIA and taking their complaints directly to judicial review (Newman 2009). Nevertheless, it remains to be seen whether any of its recommendations will be challenged in future by an HEI dissatisfied with the outcome of an OIA complaint investigation.

HEIs, therefore, need to manage student expectations without compromising the ethos underpinning the HE experience. Maintaining the careful balance between responding to students' needs and requirements as fees increase whilst delivering an experience which enables them to develop as autonomous learners is the challenge facing institutions now and in the future.

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