



Canadian Social Science
Vol. 14, No. 7, 2018, pp. 59-64
DOI:10.3968/10445

ISSN 1712-8056[Print]
ISSN 1923-6697[Online]
www.cscanada.net
www.cscanada.org

The Erosion of UK Higher Education: “Are Students Our Consumers?”

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Received 25 March 2018; accepted 26 June 2018

Published online 26 July 2018

Abstract

Given the rapid growth of the higher education sector in UK and the challenges it has faced in the past two decades, the government recognizes that a more concise, economical, and efficient management system for higher education should be established. This system requires all relevant institutions to locate students at the core of higher education services and treat them as consumers of higher education. The government has repeatedly stressed that students spend money to receive education and they must feel that they gain “value for money.” Students are involved in drawing up curriculum standards, quality assessment, and preparation of the syllabus. Such “student-centered” working philosophy, which is characterized by comprehensiveness, specialization and standardization, is deeply embedded in teaching, research, management, and student affairs. The current mainstream of world higher education development is market-based and student-centered. On one hand, the students’ willingness to consume and their actions determine the direction of higher education development. On the other hand, “students as consumers” are slowly eroding the traditional ethos of the higher education system. Module marks become a kind of good that can be bargained for, and the essence of education is slowly changing.

Key words: Student consumer; Evaluation; Teaching inspiration

Wang, W. S., & Wang, J. D. (2018). The Erosion of UK Higher Education: “Are Students Our Consumers?” *Canadian Social Science*, 14(7), 59-64. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/css/article/view/10445> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/10445>

INTRODUCTION

Given the rapid development of the higher education sector in the United Kingdom (UK) over the past two decades and the challenges it faces, it is believed that a more concise, economical and efficient system of higher education management should be established. The proposed system requires all relevant institutions to use students as the core of higher education services and treat them as consumers. Therefore, the government has repeatedly stressed that students spend money to receive education, so that the service should offer “value for money.” May 2016 Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) The white paper on higher education reform announced by the British government intends to further highlight the core position of students as consumers of higher education and the importance of management efficiency.

Therefore, there has been an increasing emphasis on “value for money”. Subsequently, teaching quality, curriculum design and student affairs in UK universities all share the “student-centered” working philosophy, which is characterized by comprehensiveness, specialization and standardization. Students’ role in school management and education will be brought into full play; the combination of academic orientation and administrative leadership will be strengthened, and communication between student and academics will be enhanced. The government funding policy for colleges and universities is largely based on students’ satisfaction and research outputs. The Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) recognizes excellent teaching in UK higher education institutions by ranking them as gold, silver or bronze medals. Excellent universities may consider raising their tuition fees and charging a “premium” price for the services they provide.

The UK’s system of “using students as consumers as the core” has had an unprecedented impact on its management and teaching. The management system

and curriculum design tend to be student-centered; in particular, *employability* becomes one of the main learning outcomes. Such working philosophy may slowly influence the UK universities’ classroom teaching and management systems. The student-centered approach and its system tend to bring great influence and enlightenment to Chinese universities.

THE ORIGIN OF THE STUDENT-CENTERED CONCEPT IN UK UNIVERSITIES

As consumers of higher education, students may be empowered in the education process. In a sense, this is also the embodiment of the “humanism” school of thought has developed into a universal value since the Renaissance. In the Robbins Report issued in 1963, the British government stated that higher education is a public product which is publically financed. The background of this Report is the post-war political compromise, economic prosperity, and the establishment of a welfare state, all of which have increased the support of public funds for higher education. Due to the government’s efforts to ensure the social and economic benefits of all citizens post-war, the country at the time was a “kind dictator” in the eyes of the public. As a relatively autonomous institution, most colleges and universities are not far away from national intervention until they are able to determine academic priorities, admission criteria, and overall goals more freely. Driven by the vision of publicity and promotion of public goods, the state’s funding support for colleges and universities continues to increase. As this funding increases, more higher education institutions have to be willing to accept government interventions.

Given the development and reform of British society, the public higher education system is too large and complex to be funded by the government alone. Universities are now treated as individual organizations where competition among universities can increase their efficiency. Models of quality control, and measurement and monitoring processes are adopted from the private sector. The government has not weakened its control over higher education but has increasingly regulated it in conjunction with the market. While the government provides conditions for the formation of a quasi-market, the market mechanism is also used by the government to achieve specific goals.

The concept “Students are consumers” appeared in the United Kingdom recently. Various competition mechanisms led to a rise in tuition fees. At the same time, due to the adjustment of funding policies, tuition fees are now one of the main sources of income. In the UK, when the government tried to transfer higher education costs from the state (in the form of taxpayers) to students (as buyers and beneficiaries), the marketization of education

such as consumerization emerged at the same time. Therefore, when the government withdrew financial support for higher education under certain ideological and economic pressures, the concept of higher education as a public product was also challenged. Today, more and more countries’ governments have advocated that higher education is a private product. Individuals benefit from it; thus they should pay for it. (Carpentier, 2010)

Since the Second World War, private higher education dominated in the UK. The costs of running a university and its economic benefits are the necessary factors to be considered first. Without adequate funding for education, there is no question of survival and development. A related assumption is that consumerism will have a positive effect on the academic behavior of teachers. Low-quality teaching will be eliminated from the market, and the diverse choices consumers then have access to will promote competition within the higher education system. Therefore, the main motivation for the commercialization of British universities is to increase monetary surplus, and this gives rise to the concept of “students are consumers”.

Students can have access publically to a large and diverse range of information on degree program materials, professional services, career counseling, psychological counseling and financial services, among others. Universities actively listen to students’ voices and collect their opinions. Some schools have institutionalized student surveys and used them as an important basis for formulating school strategies and policies.¹ Take a South West university in the United Kingdom as an example: The university has treated its students as customers through providing them with a friendly environment, helping them solve and overcome difficulties, and facilitated them to enjoy their time at the university. The pragmatism and individualism peculiar to Western society such as Britain and the United States have a natural utilitarian attitude toward universities, leading to a notable feature of American universities: higher education is a *commodity*. As a commodity, it must satisfy the market demands, and the demands of its consumers — students. (Cao, 2016)

The UK university respects the diversity of students’ needs and diverse values and affords everyone equal access to education and services. There is a “Equality and Diversity Committee” at the university to formulate equality and diversification strategies, with special emphasis on the interests of the minority. (Tong, 2009)

CURRICULUM STANDARDS AND QUALITY ASSESSMENT

British universities and colleges have an effective assessment method for curriculum development and evaluation. The general contents include: curriculum

1 <http://www.dundee.ac.uk/adviceguidance/> 2008-06-09

design, module learning outcomes; program learning outcomes; assessments; student progress and results; learning support services and guidance; and quality assurance and monitoring mechanisms (Ding & Xie, 2006). When colleges and universities in the UK are developing syllabi, there are student representatives who collaborate to establish QAA (Quality Assurance Agency) guidelines. This outline mainly consists of three parts: (1) Setting and maintaining of academic standards; (2) Assuring and enhancing of academic quality; and (3) Information about higher education provision. Each part of the QAA will set expectations for standard benchmarks. Below each standard, detailed and specific instructions for implementation are listed. The supervisory organizations of each university (consisting of the representatives of the various colleges and the chair of the student council) will establish assessment criteria in accordance with the QAA guidelines. The general university supervision group has three sub-groups, each of which is responsible for different quality monitoring. The first sub-group is an external cooperation development group. This group will report on the latest QAA standards like the supervisory organization of the university, conduct quality control on cooperative institutions, and supervise the annual report for each subject and the annual report for each professional. The university's steering group provides quality monitoring standards and recommendations, and encourages schools to share good executive policies with each other. This sub-group is generally composed of the university's Vice President in Education, Vice President in Internationalization, the person in charge of the school's quality supervision, and the chair of the student union. The second sub-group is the External Research Degree Committee. They are mainly responsible for the study of the enrollment standards for research degrees (research Masters and Doctoral students), and supervise and guide students' progress and assessment. The main task is to ensure that teaching, counseling quality and student experience meet the regulatory standards set by the school and the QAA, and to report to the school's supervision team in a timely manner. The third sub-group is the Student Admissions Team. They are mainly responsible for supervising the implementation of the school's enrollment standards; they establish these standards through research and analysis of the trends in the higher education sector, and then report updated policies and changes to the Vice President in Education and the team. Additionally, the team is also responsible for providing guidance on entry requirements for each faculty; for ensuring that each school follows the appropriate standards and processes; drawing up the language requirements for international students; and effectively promoting university open days. Due to the high standards of teaching quality and the integrity of the monitoring system in the UK, excellent teaching quality is guaranteed.

In addition to the QAA, the business school may apply for extra accreditation to obtain recognition from professional associations such as the AACSB (The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business). AACSB accreditation indicates the high-quality standard of business education through four aspects. (1) *Strategic management and innovation*. According to AACSB regulations, universities must have a clear strategic mission. School policies, academic contributions, and financial strategies must all align with this strategic mission. (2) *Students, faculty, and professional staff*. The AACSB has clear standards for student admission, progression, and career development. Faculty members must actively and deeply engage in the activities of the school in matters other than teaching responsibilities. (3) *Teaching and student learning*. Review professional knowledge standards to ensure that the program/module syllabus can encourage students to actively participate in their learning journey. The syllabus should facilitate peer learning; and opportunities for students to interact with academics should be provided. All programs are structured to ensure consistent, high-quality education for the same degree programs regardless of differences in technology and delivery modes. This commitment to consistent high quality is particularly important in light of pressures to shorten time to degree completion, as well as to reduce the time allotted for learning, engagement, interaction, and professional skill development. (4) *Academic and professional engagement*. The contents of the business school curriculum should be closely linked with their practical application. This close connection must be reflected in the school's goals. AACSB accreditation supports the business school to actively cultivate experiential learning and provide training for senior executives. Schools should actively encourage teacher-faculty interaction among academics.

UK universities attach great importance to the right of Student Unions to participate in the decision-making processes. The UK University Constitution clearly stipulates that school leaders such as Court, Board of Trustees, Senate and Convocation must have representatives of the AFL to participate in order to ensure students' involvement in university policy development. Students directly evaluate the teaching quality for each module, and the results will affect internal promotions and external appointments. The system guarantees the students' needs and interests — full attention is paid to the interests of students and consumers, and to realizing these.

EROSION OF COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES WITH “STUDENTS AS CONSUMERS”

If students are consumers, education is a product, and teachers are producers of education, then there may be

problems with cutting corners thereby affecting product quality. This may slowly erode everyday teaching work and ultimately the essence of education. The philosophy of student consumers will inevitably encourage universities to generate surplus in order to survive and invest in buildings and facilities. Thus, colleges and universities may be more willing to focus on applied research and education as these can bring in a healthy income. This could have a negative impact on those topics which are beneficial to the government but not necessarily to the individual. Eric Gould also shares a similar thought: the corporatized universities pay more attention to the knowledge of transaction value — that is, the knowledge that can play a role in the work — and seldom pay attention to humanistic knowledge with abstract meaning such as values, judgments, morality and cultural aesthetics, among others, that further highlight the core position of student behavior and increase the efficiency of scientific research activities. (Gould, 2015)

DIFFICULTIES IN STUDENT/ACADEMIC COMMUNICATION

Students and academics are continuously evaluating each other — students complete module evaluation surveys, and academics assess students’ learning results. When students enroll on a degree program, they will be assessed continuously to determine whether the learning outcomes are met. Students who fail a core module must re-attempt the assessment. Failing more than a certain number of credits will prohibit the student from progressing further. Students must continue to study hard to maintain a good academic record. Such common behavior for students in colleges and universities is not the same as that of consumers in the market place. In the context of *students as consumers*, both academics and students may not express their real intentions in order to avoid conflicts and penalties during the teaching evaluation process. “The bi-directional nature of assessments in higher education subtly alters the system. When they know that they may be punished later, will students or teachers tell the truth? The assessment mechanism in higher education environment is potentially more contaminated than those in private sector. (Koch, 2013) If the student is a “smart consumer,” after a rational calculation of costs and benefits, they may choose the modules on the basis of whether they are easy to pass, or on the basis of those teaching staffs who are likely to award high scores. Some students hope that the maximum return will be obtained with the minimum effort. As a result, the score becomes a kind of good that could be bargained for, and the meaning of education vanished from here on in. (Huang, 2008)

Bay and Daniel believe that once the consumer model is adopted, if students do not have time to do scheduled homework or reading, the teaching staff may be blamed

for setting too many tasks. Poor student performance may be due to the lack of effort among academics. More importantly, academics are also responsible for low attendance. Therefore, when students fail to progress, the tendency to pass on responsibilities puts academics in a difficult position.

POWER OF ACADEMICS

The provision of such quantitative information further commercializes education and makes it a tangible service. Obviously, the current environmental conditions and government policies have blurred the boundaries between higher education and external society. In particular, the pressure of direct government and external stakeholders has somehow undermined the autonomy of university teachers in teaching.

“Student as Consumers” has imposed great pressure on education. Academics may not be able to lead students to further explore knowledge and challenge their abilities. Instead, they may produce easier assessments to improve student satisfaction and to minimize complaints. Senior managers do everything they can to make schools receive better rankings, and academics are being pressurized to meet students’ requirements. For example, a head of department in a North West university in the UK was informed about students’ complaints in regards to poor-quality toilet paper. Following investigation, all toilet paper rolls in the building were replaced as a result of the complaint. In another example, an academic was on a deadline to submit his manuscript to a journal in one hour; thus he turned down an immediate meeting request from a student. A complaint was made even though the academic explained the reason for turning down the request, and scheduled an appointment on the following day. The “degrees of freedom” of academics are also gradually being eroded. The commercialization of the teacher-student relationship challenges teachers’ roles, and it becomes difficult for teachers to set challenging assessments. The role of students as consumers is slowly eroding the traditional relationship between teachers and students. The potential conflicts between academics and senior managers continue to increase. More importantly, perceiving students as consumers will emphasize the entertaining elements and encourage self-design core modules, leading to a potential inflation of marks. In particular, an important role of the academics in this new reality of ‘students as consumers’ is to entertain students, not focus on students’ learning and exploring scientific truth for teaching.

EXCHANGE BETWEEN ACADEMICS AND STUDENTS

The benefits of student-centered philosophy cannot be disputed. The new relationship between schools and

students is defined as the relationship between service providers and consumers. Students purchase education services provided by universities and universities are expected to provide services according to the needs of students. This leads to an exchange between teachers and students, and the “new” relationship has become increasingly apparent. Teachers are much more cautious about challenging students for fear of offending them. If challenged, students may negatively evaluate the teacher’s teaching quality. From this, it is clear that the relationship between teachers and students is slowly being eroded by the “commercialization of education.” The teacher has to cater to students in what is essentially a supplier/customer relationship, which in turn had led to the emergence of a series of problems with the decline of excellent academic teaching in colleges and universities.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE BRITISH HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM ON CHINESE HIGHER EDUCATION AND ITS ENLIGHTENMENT

Since the founding of the People’s Republic of China, Chinese students are often recognized as education beneficiaries. Chinese universities’ management systems and regulations are based on the concept that students are beneficiaries and they do not recognize the consumer identity of student. China’s higher education is traditionally elitist. The government is both a provider of higher education and an investor who is solely responsible for the enrollment, teaching and management of higher education. Students are not only exempt from tuition and miscellaneous fees, but they can also generally enjoy government grants. As a result, under the cultural, traditional and political systems of China, the social attributes of school education are inevitably strengthened.

The British education system and philosophy also influence the development of higher education in China. The current system of assessing students in Chinese universities is essentially a prerequisite of their identity as consumers. For example, students participate in the teaching evaluation process, and they are the direct “consumers” of education. They have the greatest say in the quality of teaching. (Dennis & Debra, 2005) In contrast to the higher education sector in the UK, Chinese university teaching is mainly academic-centered, focussing on imparting and inculcating knowledge, while ignoring students’ gains and development, and not paying attention to student development. The different approaches adopted by China and the United Kingdom are due to the different working methods formed by their respective working philosophy. Each has its own advantages and disadvantages.

The current mainstream mode of world higher education is market-based regulation and student-

centered. Students’ willingness to consume determines the direction of higher education development. Its core values are student-centered and promote the development of higher education in an environment of increasingly fierce competition. Therefore, in order to adapt to the needs of students and remain competitive in the market place, Chinese universities must make a fundamental change in ideological understanding, enhance service awareness, fully respect and safeguard the rights of student consumers, and do so while upholding the protection of students’ rights and interests, teaching, management, and the environment.

CONCLUSION

The current UK higher education system requires all relevant institutions to locate students as the core of higher education services and to treat them as consumers of higher education. Therefore, the government has repeatedly stressed that students spend money to receive education, so that they should feel “value for money.” The concept of “students as consumers” is also slowly eroding the teaching and management of universities. Marks may become a kind of good which can be used to bargained with, and the meaning of education may slowly disappear. More importantly, the current status of higher education in the UK also provides inspiration to higher education in China. It will allow educator and policy-maker to think rationally in the development of education in today’s world.

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