

# Undergraduate orientations towards higher education in Germany and England: problematizing the notion of 'student as customer'

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## References.

## Abstract

There is a great deal of discussion in the academic literature around how the current conditions in higher education frame students as customers. Observers are of the view that rankings and marketing, an increased focus on student satisfaction, and particularly tuition fees, encourage an instrumental, passive attitude towards a university education. Given the volume of attention directed towards this topic, it is perhaps surprising that there is relatively little scholarship that examines it empirically. Some who have addressed it presumed a customer/consumer orientation in students and have been somewhat – but not entirely successful – in generating evidence to confirm those assumptions. It appears that the expectations of this instrumental, passive orientation are being realised in part, but that this is also mediated by other dispositions. What could be considered to be missing from the analysis thus far is an exploration of how students make university-related decisions (not simply what choices are based on) and how they understand the respective roles of the student and university. This study begins to fill that gap, exploring the orientations towards university of undergraduates in Germany and England, two countries where the diffusion of market conditions in higher education policies has been somewhat contrasting. Distinctions between the German and English students did emerge, but these were less based on those countries' unequal engagement with tuition fees and rankings and more to do with other aspects of their university cultures and the world beyond their degrees. This suggests that how people approach their time as students is more complex than some of the literature assumes. Furthermore, at the very least, any consideration of this topic must include an analysis of how students themselves understand and experience their higher education and broader social contexts.

## **Introduction**

Students do not expect higher education to involve effort, challenge, or constructive criticism. Rather, they expect to be...amused...to feel comfortable and to put forward little effort. (Delucchi and Korgen 2002, p. 101)

That students may be positioned as customers has been a feature of the academic literature for over 20 years (e.g. Ranson 1993; Tight 2013). This topic is situated within broader discussions around the partial reordering of universities' modus operandi, whereby the sector is becoming larger, more financially oriented and less publicly funded than before (e.g. Readings 1999; Marginson 2004). The focus of this paper, while acknowledging these wider debates, centres specifically on the issue of the student as customer, a theme much discussed but on which there is relatively little research. By taking a microsociological view of how German and English undergraduates oriented themselves towards—and, importantly, also experienced—their degrees, two arguments will be made. Firstly, what underpins students' actions is more multi-dimensional than some of the literature seems to suggest, and secondly, understanding how they view and negotiate higher education must be considered in the light of their local and, crucially, national settings.

This paper will consider the literature—empirical and otherwise—that addresses the 'student as customer' issue. Following this, it will be argued that Germany and England, in comparison, offer illustrative national contexts in which to investigate the themes that emerge from that literature. This leads into a description of the methodology and theoretical framework, after which the findings are outlined and then discussed before some conclusions are drawn.

### **Student as customer, consumer, or...?**

A range of authors have suggested that some of the hallmarks of universities subject to neoliberal policies such as tuition fees, rankings, and student surveys, encourage students to orient themselves in particular ways towards their degrees. The emergence and growth of these features, they argue, represents a philosophical realignment in how a higher education is framed, that is as a means of reaching immediate, instrumental goals rather than as a component of one's long term, intellectual development (Schwartzman 1995). As such, the metaphor of customer is seen as inappropriate in relation to what the role of the student is, or should be. As Tight (2013) describes, a range of metaphors have been applied to the student position, from customer, consumer, client, and co-producer, to apprentice. He also offers a disturbing new one—that of policy pawn—where students are encouraged to see universities in a certain way and in turn shape them in that image from within. Tight explains that neither 'consumer' nor 'customer' are entirely accurate: the first chiefly because students are not simply recipients of an education but are actively involved, and the latter because—unlike other services—the ongoing benefits of a degree are not immediate and as such can only be assessed over the longer term. Tight in

fact considers none of the proffered metaphors to be a perfect fit, suggesting that our penchant for neat but inherently simplified analogies in itself creates part of the problem. Much of the scholarship on this topic, though, often assumes a trend towards a crystallising customer/consumer orientation in students characterised by a concomitant rise in instrumentalism and a reduction in the extent to which students feel they should participate in the learning process (Brennan et al. 2009). It appears that there is a paradox here, in that neoliberal discourses focus on the financial value of a degree and, importantly, place the onus on individuals to actively make themselves employable (Walkerdine and Bansel 2010), but at the same time this may be leading to a fall in engagement with the means of achieving those ends. In other words, choices are being actively made for instrumental gains, but some of those gains may be diluted if students do not seek to develop in the process. Although this topic has been debated for some time, several scholars (Delucchi and Smith 1997; Johnson and Deem 2003) have noted a real lack of research investigating it. This shortage of empirical work means that we are unable to observe the purported change in students over time and as such cannot presume that a shift is, or has, taken place, regardless of the ongoing and well-documented policy developments in the sector (Marginson 2006).

### **Instrumentalism**

In terms of student instrumentality, tuition fees frame a university degree as an 'investment in the self', presupposing that learners behave as 'homo economicus', primarily making decisions around university with a view to future employment and particularly income (Marginson 2006). Some instrumentality may be apposite as attending university does have some tangible outcomes (McCowan 2012), but there is a concern that this may come to dominate all other purposes. Instrumentality seems to be defined in the literature—although not explicitly—as an orientation towards the twinned consequences of good jobs and earnings from having a degree. Graduates can often command higher salaries, what the OECD (2012) describes as the 'earnings premium' from a university education, and this provides a justification for levying fees, as can be seen in the following extract:

There is of course far more to higher education than financial benefit... Nevertheless, graduates do, on average, earn more than non-graduates and their higher education is one reason for this. So it is fairer to finance the system by expecting graduates to pay, if and when they are in better paid jobs. (BIS 2011, p. 17)

This is taken from a UK Government White Paper that preceded a trebling of the costs levied on undergraduate degrees there and which, incidentally, applies the consumer metaphor to students (see p. 32). Some research suggests that, due to massification, an oversupply of graduates to the labour market in fact depresses graduate earnings to all but the elite (Brown et al. 2011). Others have highlighted the fact that the earnings premium varies on a number of dimensions such as

subject and university status (Chevalier and Conlon 2003; Carnevale et al. 2012), but it seems that the notion of the graduate premium still carries sway at the policy level.

There is little research exploring the extent to which students are instrumentally oriented; much of that is from the UK, even though many of the same policy trends in HE can be seen worldwide. Davies et al. (2013) surveyed nearly 1400 school leavers and report that males and certain ethnic groups were more likely to justify going to university on labour market and income grounds, but that they and other groups also cited additional factors such as job status, creativity, and altruism as driving their decision to study. Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2015) systematically reviewed the English language literature on university selection and found over 40 'choice factors', of which only a handful would be considered employment or financially oriented. Two further studies (Jary and Shah 2009; Mann 2010) incorporated interviews in their studies and again found students citing altruistic, intrinsic rationales for studying alongside instrumental ones. Combined with other work which has found students' decision-making to be not entirely rational (Reay et al. 2005; Williams 2000), it seems that fears of an overbearing strategic instrumentality are not being realised. As mentioned earlier, whether these are more prevalent than before is not possible to ascertain due to a lack of historical evidence.

### **Passive students?**

The second key theme in the student as customer literature relates to the observation that fees, fierce competition between universities, and the increasing presence of student satisfaction surveys may create a 'distortion of pedagogic relations' (Naidoo and Jamieson 2005, p. 272) in that students come to feel entitled to enjoyment and a degree in exchange for their fees. This can be understood as a shift in the burden of responsibility for learning and engagement away from the student and towards the university (Delucchi and Korgen 2002). As inter-organisational competition within the higher education sector is fostered by rankings or 'league tables' and other external assessment mechanisms, universities seek to address their own comparative weaknesses (Hazelkorn 2008) and then utilise good 'scores' as part of the marketing material to 'woo' potential students and research funders. One of the metrics often applied in rankings, student satisfaction, serves as a proxy for course and facility quality. While the effect of student satisfaction scores on individual degree demand may be positive but relatively small (Gibbons et al. 2013), some universities ask for continuous feedback with a view to improving service delivery and in turn maximising their overall satisfaction figures. This, though, may have the opposite effect in that a relentless focus on identifying shortcomings can make students more aware of them and in turn more dissatisfied (Naidoo et al. 2011; Carey 2013). Some see the 'rise' of student satisfaction measurement as an opportunity to focus on enhancing co-productive pedagogic practice (Mark 2013) but others (e.g. Hughey

2000) seem to take an uncritical view of placing student/customer wants at the centre of everything universities do. The voices in this latter camp seem to be in the minority, with more agreeing with Love's (2008) assertion that university should be enjoyable but not at the expense of what – at times – can be a period of uncomfortable intellectual struggle and development.

Studies in this area are, as with student instrumentalism, somewhat thin on the ground. Two studies in the US (Delucchi and Korgen 2002; Fairchild et al. 2005) assumed a passive orientation and sought to capture it through questionnaire with items such as:

If I'm paying...I'm entitled to a degree.

I would take a course in which I learned little...but would receive an A.

It's the instructor's responsibility to keep me attentive.

(Delucchi and Korgen 2002, p. 103)

These questions are not as clear-cut as the authors seem to suggest, and allowing only a yes/no response excludes alternative or critical responses. Feeling entitled to a degree when paying does not assume that no active participation in that education is preferred, and those who would take an A grade for little work might rather learn something than not. Similarly, it is not unreasonable to wish lectures to be engaging rather than dry and monotone. Fairchild et al. (2005) asked participants to agree or disagree with statements such as the following:

My relationship with the university is similar to the relationship between a customer and a seller (Fairchild et al. 2005)

As the literature reviewed by Tight (2013) highlights, students do pay for and receive a service from their university, and in this way there is a similarity to a seller-customer relationship, but there are also subtle dissimilarities. Fairchild et al. (2005) did establish – perhaps unsurprisingly – a 'consumerist orientation' within their sample, but did find it to be evenly distributed within their sample and some students rejected that position altogether. White's (2007, p. 601) Australian study, which included interviews with students, identified a 'deflection of responsibility' in students' accounts which she attributes to 'the current climate [which] legitimates a passivity evident in views held by some of the students'. There was, though, also evidence of students wanting to learn, to be challenged, and to develop. Overall the research on this topic suggests that students do, perhaps not unreasonably, see the university as having some responsibility for degree provision, but exactly where that balance lies – and whether this is moving – is unclear.

### **Germany and England: contrasting contexts**

Germany and England may be considered to offer apposite locations in which to investigate this issue. In some ways, the global trends of rising student numbers and changes in funding and governance are evident in both, but not in identical ways. The student bodies in each have grown in the last two decades, but 27 % of 25- to 64-year-olds have a tertiary education in Germany compared with 38 % in the UK (OECD 2012). The funding solutions that have accompanied

this growth have been markedly different. German universities are still almost entirely state supported for research and teaching (Auranen and Nieminen 2010): while tuition fees were introduced in some parts of country in the 2000s, they have since been abolished altogether (Spiegel 2014). The UK's four constitutive nations each apply their own tuition fee models, but England – where the data in this study were collected – introduced fees in 1998 and they had increased ninefold by 2012 (Crawford and Jin 2014). Furthermore, as Pritchard (2011) documents, contrasts in the relative structural rigidity of the German and English university systems have hindered the advance of neoliberalism in the former and enabled it in the latter. Rankings including student satisfaction exist in both countries, but organisational agency/autonomy and competition are relatively new concepts for universities in Germany (Krücken and Meier 2006). Furthermore, there has until recently been a de facto assumption of status parity in the German university sector (Kosmütsky 2010). The UK, in contrast, has a long tradition of university autonomy and competitive hierarchies (Teichler 2008). Given that that fees and rankings are seen to contribute to the student as customer orientation, it might be expected that English students would be more instrumental and passive than their German counterparts. This did transpire, but not principally for the reasons suggested by the literature.

## Methodology

The data presented in this paper was collected as part of a study exploring how undergraduates in Germany and England understood, experienced, and negotiated their higher education contexts (Budd, 2014). Seeking breadth in the sample, thirteen undergraduates from a range of disciplines and year groups at 'Mill University' in England and 'Feuerbach Universität' in Germany (see Table 1, below) were interviewed twice – in their own language – in the spring and summer of 2012; this was just before annual tuition fees in the UK rose from £3000 to £9000.

Table 1: Sample Composition

	Name	Age	Year of Study	Main Subject of Study	Graduate Parents	Pre-University Education
Feuerbach	Ahmed	25	3	Politics	0	Vocational
	Anna	22	4	Electronic Engineering	1	Academic
	Lisa	22	4	Sociology	0	Academic
	Maxi	25	4	Sociology	0	Vocational
	Michael	25	1	Sociology	1	Vocational
	Thomas	25	4	Sport	1	Academic
Mill	Chili	23	4	Civil Engineering	0	Academic
	Elizabeth	19	1	Civil	2	Academic

h			Engineering		
Gemima	19	1	Sociology	1	Academic
Jack	19	1	Civil Engineering	2	Academic
Jo	19	1	Psychology	0	Academic
Marie	21	4	Physics	3*	Academic
Zachary	19	1	Maths	0	Academic

Each interview explored three areas: the participants' understanding of the roles, practices, and values of higher education, as well as the wider context in which they saw higher education as situated; the decisions or actions they undertook in relation to this context; and their backgrounds and pre-university histories. Half of the Germans had attended vocational education, not a traditional route into the academic/research-intensive Universität in Germany, while all of the English students had followed the standard academic upper secondary route into university. The relative difference in average age between the groups is explained by the fact that the Germans were largely further into their degrees and all but two had a year or more of work experience behind them. None of the English participants had, and this is partly explained by the fact, had the first-year students waited another year before enrolling, the cost of their tuition would have trebled.

It is not possible to provide extensive details of the universities without compromising their identity. Organisational anonymity was a condition of access for Mill but not, interestingly, for Feuerbach, perhaps reflecting a greater importance attached to university profile or image in the UK. However, the following details can be provided: both are research-intensive universities founded in regional towns during the period of higher education expansion in the 1960s-1970s, both have 15-20,000 students and are comprehensive but with a marked STEM<sup>1</sup> subject inclination. Mill, however, is academically selective and prominent in domestic and international rankings, while Feuerbach has a more inclusive admissions policy and is not considered to hold elevated status. It could be argued that these latter distinctions mark them out as somewhat typical in their own national settings: English research-intensive universities have demanding entrance requirements, dominate the upper sections of the domestic rankings, and feature frequently in international ones. In Germany, perhaps a third of the Universitäten are considered elite on the national and international level but even their courses tend not to have particularly stringent admissions criteria.

The overall focus of the analysis here involves the two key themes emerging from the student as customer literature, namely instrumentality and issue of students' active involvement or potential passivity. Rather than

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<sup>1</sup> Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics.

assuming what students' orientations might be, a more open line of enquiry was adopted where participants were encouraged to describe their own rationales and positions. The data were 'postcoded' (Cohen and Manion 1994), i.e. after transcription, around three 'interrelated analytical levels' (Srivastava and Hopwood 2009): context, identity, and actions, where the former two were included to help understand the latter on an individual level. Each of these analytical categories had multiple internal components such as local, sectoral, and societal layers for context, and experiences, preferences, and background within identity. These categories were developed as part of a decision-making model drawn from a perspective within neo-institutional theory outlined by March and Olsen (2006). Neo-institutional theory in various forms has been applied by a range of scholars in higher education studies (Krücken and Rübken 2009), and it broadly considers institutions to be distinct organisational fields within which actors—organisations and individuals—align with roles and activities appropriate to that field. Much of the neo-institutionalists' focus to date has been levelled at the organisational and sectoral level rather than individuals, but March and Olsen have developed the notion that actors' behaviour can be understood as following logics of 'appropriateness' or 'expected consequences' (March and Olsen 1998). They posit that any actor, when faced with a situation, will tend to enact an internalised, institutionalised script considered appropriate to their role and the given context (Olsen 2007). There may also be some leeway to operate strategically, though, to achieve a preferred outcome—or expected consequence—within the available options. This formulation has not previously been operationalised, and the examination of students' decision-making towards higher education offered an opportunity to investigate these twinned logics this in practice.

## **Findings**

### **Choices**

The participants attributed a number of actions—deciding to study, what to study, where to do so, and what else they did at university—to a spectrum of rationales. These could largely be divided into two analytically distinct but overlapping categories: strategic, as in leading to a desired outcome, and unconsciously or unthinkingly made.

#### *Rational calculation*

Strategizing was evident throughout the students' accounts, but seeking to achieve financial outcomes only surfaced in two of the interviews (one German, one English), and in those cases was combined with other reasons. In one of these, Michael (Sociology, Feuerbach) described the pay in his first career as a nursery nurse as 'terrible'—insufficient to raise a family in the future—and was deeply committed to his own intellectual development. His decision to study was thus:



Naturally [because] I wanted to earn more money but that is an additional reason...on the other side I wanted to improve my knowledge, to have the opportunity to learn again. I found that to be personally important.

He and others talked at length about university being oriented around the development of critical, systematic 'ways of thinking', and enhancing these was cited by six other students as a key motivation for studying.

Enjoyment of/interest in the subject was cited by all but three participants as the main driver of degree choice, and this was usually coupled with a parallel intention to be positioned favourably on the labour market. Eight of the thirteen students saw their degrees as providing access to either particular professional roles or improved access to certain types of jobs characterised by promotion opportunities and varied work tasks. Marie (Physics, Mill) was passionately interested in both physics and history but chose the former because there was a higher likelihood that it 'could get me a job', while Ahmed (Politics, Feuerbach) explained that graduates could choose from a 'palette of opportunities' as opposed to being 'nailed fast' to the limited options attached to vocational training.

A contrast did emerge between the two national groups in the rationales they associated with aspects outside the degree itself. All of English students talked about the importance of extra-curricular activities in terms of making friends and having interests outside the degree, but four of those also saw them as having an instrumental value, as Zachary (Mathematics, Mill) explained:

They sort of drill this into us...that extra-curricular things are really fun and enjoyable as well so it's not just for [employment]...you get all of these skills and you develop as a person still and meet loads of new friends and have a really good time, but...when it comes to filling in your application form, you've got something to write in that box.

We can see here the university actively promoting an employability agenda, and this formed part of a common narrative in the Mill students.

For example, both of the English first-year Civil Engineering students at Mill – independently of each other – described how mixing with international students was important: 'our lecturers said [to] take advantage of understanding of different countries, cultures... because we're expected to work internationally afterwards' (Jack, Civil Engineering, Mill). Three of the English students also saw work experience as crucial for competing in a congested labour market:

Friends who are trying to find jobs who haven't done placements are really, really struggling...It's probably to do with the current economic climate, but also I reckon maybe just more people are going to university. (Marie, Physics)

This connected with the view held by five – i.e. most – of the English students that the graduate job situation was highly competitive, and four of those felt that there were more – or too many – people going to university. The effect of this was a deflation in the relative status of a degree (Elizabeth, Civil Engineering). Furthermore, the English students were unanimous in the view that an upper

second<sup>2</sup> degree was an absolute requirement 'because that's what employers want' (Chili, Civil Engineering)

As mentioned earlier, all of the German students did make a connection between a degree and the labour market, but there was no sense of urgency or pressure to promote one's employability other than through completing a degree. All of the Feuerbach group discussed the importance of extra-curricular activities but solely in relation to personal well-being. As Lisa (Sociology), for example, saw it, 'you should have something that you're interested in outside the degree...to switch off or distract you but I don't think it is relevant to your career'. International students, too, were seen unanimously by the German students as intrinsically beneficial, in that a mixed student body provided 'fresh air' on campus and the opportunity to 'learn from other people...because we get input from different nationalities' (Thomas, Sports). It is perhaps surprising that only one of the six discussed work experience given that all university students in Germany undertake a Praktikum, or placement, as part of their degree, and then only in passing. Grades were not seen as externally valuable by any of the German participants, rather as a personal indicator of performance.

#### *Non-decisions*

There were two chief instances where actions were automatic or scripted. The first, at least for some of the students, was in the 'non-decision' to read for a degree in the first place. For one of the Feuerbach group, Anna (Civil Engineering, Feuerbach), progressing on to a higher education was 'unquestioned because I had good grades at school...it was clear that I was going to study'. It is also important to reiterate that half of the German group had already been through vocational training and subsequently worked before enrolling at Feuerbach. The other two, who had completed academic schooling, both considered a range of options before deciding to study. For the English students, all high achievers, all but one went to university as a matter of course. For example, as Marie (Physics) explained, going to university:

was always drummed into me as long as I can remember... by my parents, and by school. It was only a few years later that someone asked me: "Was that what you wanted?" I'd never really thought of it.

For these students, a combination of school, peer, and parental influence contributed to their straightforward transfer from upper secondary to higher education. As Jack (Civil Engineering) explained, his entire milieu was populated by people who intended to study or had already done so:

The background I was brought up in, that was the standard. I mean, everyone I knew went and did A-Levels and everything...I can't think of anyone I knew who didn't want to go to university...[it] was just the natural progression.

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<sup>2</sup> English Degrees are graded, in descending order: first, upper second, lower second, third, pass, fail.

This notion of university as a 'natural progression' featured in two of the other Mill accounts (Elisabeth, Civil Engineering, and Zachary, Mathematics). Zachary, it should be noted, came from a working-class background but had been identified as a gifted mathematician at a young age and over time was involved in a wide range of university outreach activities. These, though, were only limited to the top sets in his school.

The second area of non-decision was in the English students' choice of university: they all applied to, and visited, universities in the top fifth of the 'league tables' without question. They then made their final decisions based on a combination of other reasons such as geographic location—five of the seven lived within a few hours of Mill, the town itself (two of the seven cited this), subject rankings (two), departmental character (two) and general university atmosphere on the open day (five). In contrast, none of the German students mentioned rankings in their selection of university and were near unanimous in their view (five of six) that they were unimportant. Thomas (Sport) described them as:

[Nothing but] hot air...we've not had this elite uni thing in Germany for long, it's only come up in the last few years. Before, all of the universities were the same, and I think they still are.

The German students' choice of university was more to do with being local to their home town (two of six) or federal state (one), the specific course (one), being willing to admit those with vocational upper secondary qualifications (three), or simply the first to admit them out of those applied to (one). Only one of the Feuerbach group visited the university beforehand; Lisa (Sociology) had already made up her mind where to study (in her home town) and was curious about what subject she might study so attended 'taster' lectures on an open day. It was also evident that chance played an occasional role in some of the participants' choices. Gemima (Sociology) included Mill on her list of five possible options when completing her UCAS<sup>3</sup> application purely on the suggestion of a friend and then liked it when she visited the campus. Maxi (Sociology) applied to a number of universities that accepted her vocational certificates for entry and simply opted for Feuerbach as the first university that accepted her. One student in each group also chose their respective subjects by chance. Lisa (Sociology, Feuerbach) attended a sociology lecture on an open day, found it interesting enough and thought 'I'll give that one a go'. At Mill, Chili (Civil Engineering) enjoyed art and mathematics at school, and a teacher suggested civil engineering. He applied for that subject even though he 'didn't actually know anything' about it.

### **Role of the student/university**

There was, in the data, no evidence that the fee-paying (or non-fee-paying) students were passive in relation to their learning: references to

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<sup>3</sup> University Colleges Admissions Service, which manages UK undergraduate applications centrally.

the need for diligence, self-organisation, independent study, and solving one's own intellectual problems were ubiquitous in both sets of accounts. There was, though, a clear sense that the English students saw the university as taking a far more active role in their time there than did the Germans, and that this was connected to differences in their local/national university cultures. This manifested itself in a number of ways.

Firstly, all of the students at Mill were exposed to a wide variety of teaching formats, from large lectures to classroom-based sessions, practicals, as well as individual and small group tutorials, nearly all of which were led by academic staff. For those at Feuerbach, lectures and smaller classes were delivered by academics, practicals were rare, and tutorials by postgraduate students. The sociologists had some variety, but lectures were the sole method of course delivery in Engineering and Business Studies—the latter of which two students took as their second, or 'minor' subject. Both sets of students described how the format of a lecture inhibited interaction because the delivery was largely unidirectional (what the German students termed 'frontal teaching') and asking questions came with an element of danger: 'you don't want to make a fool of yourself in front of a ton of people' (Jack, Civil Engineering, Mill). This difference in the modes of teaching also overlaps with the opportunities that the students had to interact with academic staff. Students at Mill came into contact with academic staff in smaller classes, had all been allocated personal tutors for the duration of their degrees, and were actively encouraged to approach their lecturers outside the timetabled teaching hours: 'they have an open door policy...they say, "whatever you want to ask, just come in"' (Elisabeth, Civil Engineering, Mill). This was common in all five academic departments that the Mill students were recruited from. The German students' ability to access teaching staff, on the other hand, was significantly curtailed in comparison, being limited for some to timetabled 'Sprechstunden', or 'speaking hours', which, in common with other German universities, were often limited to an hour a week and had to be booked with the academic's secretary. In essence, some of the Feuerbach students could have completed almost their entire Bachelor degrees without speaking to an academic, but for those at Mill this would simply have been impossible.

All of those at Feuerbach also described a pronounced sense of hierarchy and formality between them and the academic staff, which they attributed to German culture. From Thomas (Sport): professors 'have a certain distance and...should demonstrate a degree of professionalism and not be too chummy. You use sie, it is German culture'. This 'sie' refers to the formal 'you' language conventions and forms of address in German that contrast with the more familiar or informal 'du' forms. There was also a separation at Mill, but it was more permeable and often—although not always—conducted on first name terms. This would be unthinkable in Germany. Some of the Mill students even attended informal social events hosted by the academics.

Finally, beyond the academic activities of the respective universities, it became clear that the English students spent much more time on campus than their German counterparts. Nearly all first-year students lived in university accommodation, and there were extensive social, sporting, and other activities available. At Feuerbach, the vast majority of first-year students lived in rented accommodation in town, and while the university did have a few cafes, a refectory, and limited sporting facilities, and this offered few reasons to be on campus outside taught classes. Three of the German group saw this as contributing to a lack of a community sense on the campus, while four of the English students talked of a 'family feeling' at Mill. Jack (Civil Engineering, Mill), for example, said 'I was at my school for 7 years. But I didn't feel as close to my school as I [do] to the university...already I feel closer to the university in half a year'.

## **Discussion**

As the literature (e.g. Jary and Shah 2009) already suggested, the students' decisions were not solely motivated by post-degree income and employability; if anything, homo economicus was perhaps notable by its relative absence. Also, as Reay et al. (2005) have documented, some decisions may not consciously be made at all. There are, though, within the findings, some observations that provide both substantive and theoretical novelty. Where strategies were applied, the students were partly instrumental towards later employment but this was more often directed towards certain kinds of jobs rather than salaries, or at least not explicitly. It was expected, as others (White 2007; Mann 2010) previously found, that personal preferences – such as enjoyment of learning and intellectual development – would feature in their rationales. That people are motivated by a combination of extrinsic and intrinsic factors has long been known by psychologists (Ryan and Deci 2000). Here, we can see how these combine, and while there were observable patterns, the combinations themselves were always personally unique. It is also worth noting that not all extrinsic goals, such as wanting to contribute to social progress/justice, could be viewed as instrumental but not in a self-serving sense. It is interesting to see that – and how – some of the English students were much more employment-oriented than their German peers. Furthermore, the sense of urgency that permeated their non-academic activities was not driven by fees, as the literature on students as customers in general seems to assume, but by fears associated with intense competition for jobs. This has been observed elsewhere (Tomlinson 2008), and it appears that the participants from Mill have become victims of the 'opportunity trap' described by Brown et al. (2011) where UK government policy – underpinned by human capital theory – has driven student numbers up to or even beyond the point of labour market saturation. It has also been possible to see how their university, perhaps 'encouraged' by the rising visibility of post-degree employment rates on rankings and university websites, may foster an anxiety in students around

optimising their individual marketability at every possible turn. Extra-curricular activities and international students have long been a feature of the English/UK university system, and this appears to be early evidence in the academic literature that universities themselves may be 'instrumentalising' them. In one sense, it helps the students get jobs after graduating and this also benefits the universities' data sets, but the heavy presence of the employability agenda was a permanent feature in the interviews of all but two of the English students.

In terms of the non-decisions, Reay et al. (2005) have shown how 'embedded choosers'—those with graduate parents, attending university-oriented schools—are shepherded into high status universities. This was prevalent in the English group and this was also visible, albeit less clearly, in the German one. It may in part be due to the fact that only half of the Germans had been to academic schools, but even those who did reported very little input from their teachers or parents on whether and/or where they should study. It was encouraging to see how one of the English students, Zachary, on paper a non-traditional student, came to see university as a 'natural progression' but at the same time it is a shame that this transformation was not fostered across the school. Leading on from Reay et al.'s finding that embedded choosers automatically apply to the upper echelons of the university league tables, it is possible to see how structure and agency interrelated as the English students applied both ex- and intrinsic rationales to make selections within that strata. For the German students, on the other hand, the status of the university was almost entirely irrelevant, regardless of whether the participants might be considered embedded choosers or not. This group may be atypical as research in this area has found that up to 60 % of German students consider rankings when choosing their university (Federkeil 2008), but analysis by Leuze (2011) provides evidence that university status has, at least historically speaking, little influence on careers and/or earnings trajectories in Germany. Another addition to the 'non-decision' dimension is the observation that the actions of some students, such as the choice of a university or subject, can be the result of happenstance or an instinctive response to a suggestion.

When seen through March and Olsen's (1998) neo-institutional actor framework, it has been possible to see both logics of expected consequences and appropriateness come to life in the participants' accounts as rational calculation and script-following. Other than seeming to be the first reported operationalisation of the logics, this research contributes a number of findings to their model. Firstly, different strategic orientations can and do operate simultaneously within actors' decision-making. Secondly, that the two logics can also intertwine, as in the case of the English students' choice of a particular kind of university—: logics of appropriateness suggest what kind of university one attends, while the logics of consequences allow some freedom to choose a preferred option within that grouping. Finally, it was evident in some instances that actions may be neither scripted nor pre-planned but represent an

individual's decision made primordially or off-the-cuff. Further work is needed to frame these findings more concretely within institutional spheres, with a more detailed delineation of how roles and scripts are characterised and vary, but it seems that there is value to be added from developing this line of enquiry.

Prophecies that the paraphernalia of a marketised university sector would undermine the responsibility that students feel for their degrees appear to be overegged, at least in this study. All of the students interviewed saw themselves as the principal actors in their degrees, with little evidence of the 'devolved responsibility' that White (2007) described in her research. The analysis has highlighted, though, that understanding how students see the role of the university—and in turn the balance of their own responsibility—is an essential consideration, and developing a sense of that balance provided a real contrast not predicted in the literature. As Michael (Sociology, Feuerbach) explained, 'I don't think the university cares if you fail or not', and it was clear that Feuerbach Universität was less engaged with, or provided a different kind of experience for, its students than Mill. This may represent a difference in underlying university cultures, but the relatively passive German university could also be connected to the well-documented 'student mountain' there where student numbers have accelerated far faster than increases in funding (Bloch 2009). It may be the case that universities simply do not have the capacity to provide students with a more intimate learning experience.

## **Conclusion**

In brief conclusion, through exploring and comparing the orientations of students in two somewhat contrasting national university settings, it has been possible to establish both common ground and differences in students' accounts. Students in both groups were to differing degrees ex- and intrinsically, instrumentally, and altruistically motivated—sometimes all at the same time. Many of the English students, though, felt that the graduate labour market was highly competitive and this strongly flavoured some their decisions. There was, though, no sense that fee-paying students in England saw themselves as not being responsible for their studies, but their university—in this study at least—can be seen to play a more active academic as well as non-academic role than the German one. It is possible that these findings could have been observed within a single country, but the international comparison has perhaps allowed some of these issues to be drawn in sharper relief. The observation that the English students were more instrumental in some ways and understood the university to be more active, based on a reading of the 'student as customer' literature, might have been attributed to some of the more obvious differences in those countries' university sectors around fees and rankings. However, by incorporating the students' descriptions of their immediate and broader contexts, we can see that the differences between the groups were rooted in more subtle variations in those contexts. This reinforces the observation by Tight (2013) that the metaphor

of customer associated with students is too crude and that, furthermore, any relationship between issues such as fees, rankings, and student orientations are more complex than some of the research in this area has assumed.

All the observations made here must, of course, be tempered with an acknowledgement that the samples in this study were very small. As such, any claims as to broader representativeness would not be justified. It is also important to note that the two universities were different in terms of status and admissions criteria, and it is possible that samples drawn from more comparable universities may have been less dissimilar. A larger-scale study in both countries across different types of university might prove an interesting avenue for further research and would help position these findings more precisely within the broader field. What is apparent, though, is that the themes discussed in this paper have featured in the literature in a number of countries and as such these findings could offer some wider resonance.

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