

SATISFIED CUSTOMERS?

Interrogating 'the student experience' in the neoliberal
university



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Introduction

Marketization, organizational change, and managerialist audit systems have changed the culture, structure and meaning of universities, triggering widespread criticism of the present and future direction of UK higher education. Some of the most vocal critics are academics themselves, as witnessed by the dramatic rise of cross-disciplinary writings in the new field of 'Critical University Studies' (Docherty, 2015; Erickson et al, 2021; Fleming, 2021; Jones, 2022; Martin, 2016; Morrish, 2020). But to what extent does Critical University Studies reflect the full picture of a complex and diverse HE landscape? We know that many academics are disaffected with the sector's direction of travel. But is this view shared by students? Critical University Studies often privileges academics' viewpoints and opinions and either makes no comment on students' perspectives, or simply assumes these can be 'read off' as students become similarly disempowered 'customers' of an HE system increasingly run according to the constrained aims and norms of business and managerialism. Critical University Studies research that specifically portrays the perspectives of students is, so far, surprisingly limited.

This research project, conducted in the academic year 2022-3, aimed to explore UK students' perspectives on the marketized university. The aim was to develop a broad understanding of the complexity and depth of the university 'experience' that can contribute to conversations in the new interdisciplinary space of Critical University Studies.

Research Methods

The study collected data from an online survey and from individual interviews conducted over Zoom. Following a successful application for research ethics approval from the University of York, the survey was constructed and hosted on a secure website, with a link to participate distributed over social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, Tumblr and LinkedIn. The survey contained fix-response questions as well as text boxes in which students could type in their broader explanations and opinions. 280 completed responses were received from students who were either currently enrolled at a UK university or who had graduated from one in the previous five years. Where students had more than one degree, they were asked to comment on their most recent programme of study. At the end of the survey, respondents were given the choice to add their name and email address for the purpose of conducting a follow-up interview via Zoom. 25 students were subsequently interviewed over Zoom. Audio was recorded and transcribed by a third-party transcribing service. Interview data were analysed according to the core themes of the project (intellectual life of the university, the financial challenges of study, the notion of students as customers, and the political life of the campus).

Results

Of the 280 students completing the online survey, 203 were undergraduates, 63 master's students, and 14 at doctoral level. Degree subjects studied were extremely diverse, including engineering, plant science, sociology, music, urban studies and planning, English literature, dentistry, game design and children's nursing. This diversity was reflective of the spectrum of degree subjects taught across UK HE.

The following subsections outline the major findings from the survey and interviews. We start with students' perceptions of the academic quality of their teaching and learning, before going on to explore the challenges associated with the financial costs of attending UK university, students' views on the marketization of UK universities, their views on UCU industrial action, and finally the political climate of UK universities including the currently prominent issue of 'free speech on campus.' The report is largely descriptive in reporting findings across these five broad subsections, but some brief analysis and conclusions then follow.

The Intellectual Side of University Life

The survey indicated that students largely found the academic content of their courses interesting, useful and engaging. Over half the sample (55.7%) described their studies as 'very' or 'extremely' interesting. Around a third (35%) regarded the content of their degree as 'moderately interesting.' Just 26 out of 280 students selected 'slightly' or 'not at all interesting' (9.28%). As regards standards of teaching, over 77% of the sample regarded their teaching as 'extremely good', or 'somewhat good'.

Students were asked to provide qualitative answers to the question 'what has been the best part of being a student?' Answers ranged widely, but the following responses were fairly typical. It was striking that, in contrast to the notions of employability, skills and 'quality' that so often dominate the pedagogic agendas, the responses emphasized a somewhat classical 'idea of the university' based on free inquiry. A selection of answers is provided below; the 'best part of being a student' was given as:

- ✦ The independence and freedom in study
- ✦ being involved in a place where progressive thinking is valued
- ✦ The chance to study in greater depth really fascinating topics
- ✦ Hearing different life experiences from professors that help relate to and teach the course
- ✦ More relaxed and student-focused learning than in school

Many textual responses also portrayed university education as a kind of 'rite of passage', moving away from the family home and becoming independent and autonomous, forming themselves as an adult with their own viewpoints, identities, and aspirations. Some illustrative excerpts are below:

Getting away from home, having an opportunity to live my own life authentically. Being surrounded by like-minded people [...] Learning more about a subject I love. Having the opportunity to try new things that I never would have been able to at home.

The best part was meeting and working with so many new people. I loved living on campus or nearby and being so close to my friends.

Respondents were then asked to describe the worst parts of being a student. The following responses might be considered typical. Prominent problems were loneliness and isolation, workload pressure, and feeling academically inadequate:

Work load with a lot of assignments, managing finances, being one of the very few international students in a predominantly white cohort, etc.

Loneliness. The initial lack of support network. Having to do everything for yourself. Organising your own time. Not having someone invested in you and your work, worried if you don't turn up or turn in. Suddenly being stunningly... Average.

The tight deadlines cause a ridiculous amount of stress.

In what proved to be a recurring theme (see below), criticism of student support services was common, sometimes extending to a broader critique of the university as an uncaring, 'bureaucratic' or 'corporate' entity:

Dealing with the disability support services, the facelessness and obtuseness of the institution and the inefficiency of the bureaucracy within university

In the time I have spent at university, the administration has reared its ugly head to reveal it does not care for its students at all.

A small number of the qualitative responses were critical of the standards of teaching. Much more common were criticisms aimed at *the university as an organization*. Students felt 'disconnected' and their relations with the university 'transactional'.

While survey data indicated that the aim of becoming more employable was a significant factor in getting a degree, this was just one element of the reasons for attending university. Higher education boosted students' abilities to think critically. This was noted as very valuable, as were the broader outcomes of personal development mentioned above. Mean agreement with the following statements were as follows:

I have become a more rounded and more mature person as a result of studying at university'	70.25%
I believe that studying any subject at university is inherently useful, regardless of its possible economic reward'	64.87%
University study has sharpened my ability to think critically and to argue persuasively'	64.14%
University learning is overly academic and is largely useless and impractical'	34.88%

There was no agreement that university education had been 'dumbed down'. Rather, students saw their education as challenging and stretching. 17.20% believed the academic standards at their university to be 'very strong', 43% saw them as 'strong', and 31.54 as 'average', with only 8.24% stating 'weak or very weak'. When asked 'to what extent would you agree with those who say that university grades are being inflated and that it is now too easy to gain a good degree', 27.5% disagreed completely, 37.5% mostly disagreed, 22.14% neither agreed nor disagreed, and only 12.86% agreed mostly or completely.

Overall, the survey portrayed university life as intellectually interesting, academically stretching, and as a powerful process of personal development. There was little perception of 'dumbing down' or 'grade inflation'. The university as an organization, however, was often described as remote and uncaring. Even if the academic content of the degree was usually stimulating, the broader 'experience' of university has certain distinct limitations and disappointments which will be explored in more depth below.

Costs of Study and Accommodation

As expected, surveys and interviews indicated that the costs of study and living were very significant problems. Such were the scale of the challenge, that many of these points had already been raised under the question 'what is the worst part of being a student', above. Some of the students identified 'poverty' and 'balancing work and study to pay loans and rent' as the worst aspects of student life. The survey specifically asked about students working while studying. 101 of the 280 student respondents were in paid employment during term time, averaging 15.61 hours of paid work per week.

Students were asked to provide typed comments in the survey about their views of tuition fees and accommodation costs. Responses included the following:

Too high/should be subsidised/free, but also universities should be frugal with OUR tuition money instead of pissing it on the wall on projects that they don't really need

Postgraduate fees, especially for overseas students, were described as unjustifiably high, with terms such as 'extortionate' used. There were some complaints about how the Covid-19 pandemic was handled, often in relation to difficulties generated by very large student cohorts. A final-year Russell Group university student expressed the following comments in an interview:

I was told they were about 400 [UG students] in my second year. I wrote a very angry email to the uni, because I saw my timetable and I only had two things in person. I was like, 'This is not on. All my friends have their things in person, why do I not have my things in person?' I was very pissed, and they told me, 'Oh, well we had too many people. It's like a risk, a health risk, to put you all in one room for the lectures.'

Interview 7

There was considerable criticism of university-owned accommodation. Fixed-response questions about the affordability of university-owned accommodation produced the following outcomes. 59 students (24.89%) believed this accommodation to be completely unaffordable, 125 (52.74%) saw it as mostly unaffordable, and under a quarter (22.36% or 53 respondents) regarded it as affordable. Free-text comments including the following:

Uni-provided student accommodation is consistently regarded as unclean, uncomfortable and unpleasant to live in.

Safety could sometimes be debatable. Often mould or other issues were not fixed in a timely manner or ignored completely, i.e. black mould in student accommodation was painted over but not treated

These responses provide a mixed picture but, very often portrayed UK universities as organizations charging high fees while remaining unresponsive to students' needs. The following section explores the issue of 'customer service' in the marketized university.

The Marketized University

The survey and the interviews asked several questions about the marketization of universities and the related notion of students as possible 'customers' of a university. Responses revealed a range of opinion. One common trend was that students would reject – often strongly – the idea that they are customers. Many felt this term did not at all account for the complexity of their position. They don't think they have 'bought' their degrees. They have worked hard for them. Comments such as these two below capture that position:

I would not consider myself a customer that's ridiculous

I HATE the mentality of students as customers because it makes it seem like a very straightforward transactional relationship where the university/staff give the students knowledge, this attitude discourages genuine learning and innovation and is what led us to the poor state of secondary education in this country at the moment that is purely focused on teaching to the test. Nevertheless, I can see why people have this attitude because it's easy to feel like we should be getting something very obvious and tangible given the amount we're paying.

Others held an interesting position that they were, reluctantly, de facto 'customers', by dint of the huge sums of money they pay to universities. But they regretted this situation and felt it was wrong. To compound matters, not only are they customers, they are customers without any power:

I completely agree that students are nothing more than customers for the university which sells degrees for a hefty price.

I certainly feel that students are valued by university management purely as numbers and fee payers rather than as students. I don't believe we're considered 'customers' as that would imply more consideration of our needs and wishes than I believe we are afforded.

It's pretty demoralising to view everything in business terms.

Over sixty per cent of the students suggested that the 'value for money' of UK universities was 'poor' or 'very poor'. There were some concerning findings about the provision of pastoral support. Almost half of the survey respondents (44.96%) rated the pastoral support as poor or extremely poor. 23.02% rated it as adequate, and 19.69% as good or excellent.

Students were also asked 'Do you think university teaching staff enjoy good employment conditions (pay, security, pensions, welfare)?' Their answers are below.

Definitely not	28.95%
Probably not	36.84%
Might or might	15.79%
Probably yes	15.79%
Definitely yes	2.63%

This issue was commented on in the Zoom interviews. One of the students, a BSc student at a post-1992 university, put it this way:

...even our lecturers are overworked. There are not enough of them, and there's some of them that are doing PhDs but are having to put them on pause because they need to do the work of making the course happen. These two things are tied together [...] It'd be far better, I think, if my academic - if the academics that were teaching me were engaged in research and were doing their research.

Interview 12

To summarize this section, survey and interview data indicated that students were acutely aware of the debates surrounding the marketization of UK higher education. The issue of being a 'customer' of the university was fascinating, with wide disagreement about what this might mean. Whether accepting or rejecting the identity of a customer, the students felt that their huge expenditure on fees and accommodation is often not reflected in what they get back, in terms of decent accommodation, adequate pastoral care, and fair pay and conditions for academic staff. The latter issue is the focus of the next section.

UCU Strike Action

The academic trade union UCU has been involved in prolonged disputes with university employers and the USS pension fund. Strike action and other forms of industrial action have been commonplace every academic year since 2017-18. Students were asked about the extent to which these episodes of industrial action had affected their studies. Given the scale of the repeated actions, it was perhaps surprising that students reported relatively little disruption. 27.5% of the respondents claimed that their studies were 'not at all affected' by industrial action. 33.57% were 'affected in a small way', and 23.57 were 'moderately affected'. Only 15.36 claimed to have been 'strongly affected' by strikes.

Perhaps more surprising was the very strong level of sympathy that this sample of students showed towards striking staff. When asked to describe the extent to which they felt that strikes and other forms of industrial action were justified or unjustified, this sample of students overwhelmingly replied that strike action was largely or completely justified (88.93%)

Completely unjustified	0.71%
Largely unjustified	1.79%
Neither just nor unjustified	8.57%
Largely justified	25.36%
Completely justified	63.57%

Typed comments, such as those included below, explained these viewpoints in more depth:

I wish professors were treated with more respect by their directors. I understand that Uni is run as a business, but it seems absurd to prioritise profit and appearances over the quality of teaching.

It's rough on the students especially when it happens in exam term. However, it is clearly a matter of last resort and they wouldn't do it if they didn't feel there was no other way forward.

UCU action is justified because staff deserve better pay and working environment, but many students I know are upset that action takes so much time out of their timetable when we pay so much

Even if the impact of strikes was limited, students seemed to be well aware of the reasons why UCU members were striking. With the strikes in the higher education sector, and throughout education, health, retail and transportation sectors, this is perhaps not surprising, even if the strong degree of sympathy was unexpected. The final section explores the political climate on campus, another issue that has also been very high profile in recent political debate and media coverage.

'Free Speech on Campus'

Globally, universities have increasingly been subjected to criticism for perceived political biases (Docherty, 2016; Jones, 2022; Readings, 1997). Right-wing observers have accused universities of being in thrall to 'Cultural Marxism' or 'woke ideology' (Jones, 2022: 187-193). According to this powerful narrative, students and academics have been portrayed as political activists rather than objective researchers or learners, and universities have failed to allow robust debate and thus failed in their duties to 'protect free speech'. This research study included survey and interview questions on the broad topic of political

influence and 'free speech on campus.' The data indicate that students were aware of the broad discussions about a supposed 'crisis of free speech' but regarded this 'crisis' as a fringe issue of little concern. By their answers, UK university students appeared neither as vulnerable 'snowflakes' demanding protection from unwelcome viewpoints, nor as 'intolerant woke bullies' trying to shut down the opinions of those they disagreed with.

Students were asked how often they encountered manifestations of the 'crisis of free speech on campus.' Well over half of the sample (65.36%) reported having 'encountered none of this at all', or 'have seen very little of this.' Only a combined 12.76% reported seeing 'a significant degree of this' or that they 'see this issue constantly'. Students were then asked to record how often they felt their reading lists or teaching content contained material they regarded as offensive or harmful. The responses suggest that this issue is not considered serious:

Never	67.5%
Sometimes	29.29%
About half the time	2.86%
Most of the time	0.36%
Always	0%

In an effort to draw a broader picture, the survey also produced detailed information about UK students' views of the political climate of university campuses. Asked if they detect any broad political biases in their teaching, they responded as follows, suggesting that UK campus life skewed strongly leftwards:

Strong general left-wing bias	7.94%
Some left-wing bias	35%
No political bias	50.18%
Some right-wing bias	6.14%
Strong general right-wing bias	0%

In their written comments, however, this leftward skew was regarded as expected and unproblematic. The specific issue of 'disinviting' controversial speakers was visible and was commented on but was usually described as something deliberately overblown by right-wing commentators.

Political influences are bound to occur as human beings are teaching us and not robots

I don't think there is a 'free speech issue' - seems like propaganda to halt funding to universities by people that have no real knowledge of what universities are like. I have never been somewhere where I feel more comfortable engaging in open discussion, people are free to share any idea they may have so long as they are comfortable allowing others to exercise their free speech to respond.

Head of school is racist, but nobody dares to challenge him

Another aspect of the revolting culture wars stirred up by bigots in every aspect of our lives

I think in general it's a concocted issue

Views were mixed, complex, and often quite detailed. Some respondents noted that certain academics held racist or transphobic views and identified with a need for students to be 'safe' from any persons who might indulge in hate speech. Overall, however, the 'free speech on campus crisis' was widely portrayed as a right-wing media construct with little to no existence in reality. It was also confined to the issue of student union invitations to public events, and not to teaching that occurs in the classroom.

Conclusion

This research study has generated a large volume of new and detailed data that offers a range of implications.

Firstly, university academics should take some comfort from the findings that students found their studies to be stimulating, worthwhile, interesting and well taught. Also of interest was the perhaps surprising finding that: a) strikes were not particularly disruptive, and b) students were overwhelming supportive of university staff's reasons for striking. We must be cautious with a self-completed survey that may be unrepresentative of the student body as a whole (its method of distribution was uncontrolled, and its voluntary nature may have attracted a disproportionate number of students who are most committed to the traditional 'idea of a university'). But the findings nevertheless suggests that the UCU slogan of 'lecturers' working conditions are students' learning conditions' is widely believed by students. Students made similar comments to those of the UCU about the problem of universities 'wasting' student fees on 'fancy buildings'. This study suggests that students feel undervalued and disempowered by the structures and priorities of the neoliberal university. In that sense they have much in common with the academic writers of Critical University Studies. Academics and students see little or no accountability of senior leadership in confronting the problems that both populations face. The survey identifies much in common between academic and student criticism of how universities are funded, governed and led. It appears from

this study that student-centred research has great potential to strengthen the claims of Critical University Studies in confronting the neoliberal university.

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