The Student-As-Consumer Approach in HE: Effects on Academic Performance in STEM Undergraduates

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Introduction

The recent UK government green paper on higher education has the student as consumer at its heart. It equates ‘value’ with economically-based outcomes and makes explicit students’ consumer rights and regulatory power. This may promote quality of service, but also encourage students see themselves as taking part in a financial exchange of money for a degree, and encourage a ‘tell me what I need to know approach’ to learning (Tomlinson, 2014).

However, there is a lack of evidence about the extent to which students self-identify as consumers and its impacts on academic performance (Sanders, 2014).

This research examines the effect of consumer orientation on traditional factors predicting academic performance, namely learner identity (Bluc et al., 2011) and grade goal (Eum & Rice, 2011), while controlling for level of fee payment and subject studied (STEM or other) (North, 2005). We expected that studying a STEM subject would be associated with higher consumer orientation because they may foster surface approaches to learning, and students may be more career focused.

Results

Statistical mediation analyses was used. The results supported our expectations: Learner identity and grade goal (first class goal vs other) were positively associated with academic performance, but levels of consumerist thinking mediated these relationships and in turn were associated with lower academic performance (see Figure 1), i.e. the less students identified as learners, the more they identified as consumers, and the lower their level of academic performance.

Also, being responsible for paying fees (vs. having a scholarship for example) and studying a STEM subject were not related to academic performance, but were related to levels of consumerist thinking, which in turn were associated with lower academic performance.

Multiple factors were controlled, including having a paid or voluntary job, year of study, age, gender, and extracurricular involvement.

Implications

Academics and universities should consider managing student attitudes and expectations to prevent high levels of consumer orientation, warning about the negative impact on performance.

Policy makers should avoid equating educational value with value for money (as is evident in the recent green paper) as this may foster consumerist approaches among students and negatively effect levels of academic success.

These implications are particularly relevant to staff and students in STEM subjects.

Method

Participants

608 undergraduate students studying at 35 different universities in England (mean age 21, 80% female, 92% white) responded to an online advert. There were approximately an equal number of students in their 1st, 2nd, or final years.

Questionnaire and Procedure

Several demographic questions, including level of tuition fee, level of responsibility for paying their tuition fees, subject studied and grade goal.

Students rated their level of agreement with 15 consumer statements, e.g., I think of myself primarily as a paying customer of the university; I think of my degree as a product I’m purchasing and 20 learner statements, e.g. I prepare for class; I enjoy studying.

Discussion

Figure 1: A mediation model of consumer orientation on the relationship between learner identity, grade goal, fee responsibility and subject on academic performance. Unstandardized regression coefficients (with standard errors) are provided along the paths. *p < .05, **p < .01, and ***p < .001

References


Get involved

Invite your students to be part of the research! Scan the QR code or type in this link to access the survey.

http://tinyurl.com/h060obr

We also want to know your view so if you would like to participate in an interview, please contact us:

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