**Case study at the University of Manchester: the evaluation of the student-as-customer concept following the rise of tuition fees in 2012.**

Supervisor: Nick Turnbull

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**Abstract**

In 2012, as tuition fees of £9000/ year were introduced along with many universities becoming private, higher education started to be studied as a market where students are considered customers purchasing a product in the form of their education. This case study based at the University of Manchester aims to briefly establish whether higher tuition fees have lead students to act as customers by: choosing their university and degree in order to get a return of their original investment, taking advantages of additional services in order to maximise their time at university as well as enhancing their profile and finally by providing effective feedback. This article suggests that students surveyed do behave as customers on certain aspects such as the choice of their university but would require to be more aware of what university entails and the requirements of the job market in order to fit the customer analogy. The fact that most student are not aware of the cost of their education due to the use of loans is also discussed as an unfavourable reason to the use of the customer notion on the student population.

Key words: student's behaviour, student-as-customer concept, tuition fees, higher education

**Introduction**

Students' behaviour and the application of the customer concept have been widely studied related to the rise of tuition fees in 2012 (Wilkins *et al*, 2013). The analogy supposes that education or a degree can be bought. Students become customers by exchanging a substantial amount of money for knowledge through taking a course whilst universities become extremely flexible and responsive entities focused on providing the best customer service (Snare, 1997). It is extremely debated whether or not students can be assimilated as customers however the literature does settle on certain characteristic that the customer metaphor entails when applied to the market of higher education.

One considered as a customer should be able to complain about the product bought and expect appropriate feedback: it is one of its primary feature. In this case, it most usually regards grades received from assignments and examinations. It could also concern services provided by university such as the Students' Union or the structure and modules of the course taken. This point translates through the impact of the National Student Survey on aspiring graduates and the influence of peers. In fact, if the university does not respond effectively to the critics made by those who have purchased its products, its reputation and thus its worth to potential employers will go down among the students community (Eagle and Brennan, 2007; Svensson and Wood, 2007; Watjatrakul, 2014; Posner, 2002; Woodall et al, 2012; Collini, 2010).

However, there are multiple points of controversy on whether students can be considered as customers regarding their behaviour. One concerns the value that students attribute to higher education. Some studies assume that students as customers will choose courses that they consider the easiest to pass and excel in, regardless of the amount of work that they put in. Because of the capacity of students to complain on grades received, it puts pressure on institutions to lower their academic standards and penalize the education system (Clayson and Haley, 2005; Chonko *et al*, 2002). However, other academics emphasize how students do not wish for a less challenging environment. On the contrary, they wish for a better support in their studies in terms of infrastructures and contact hours by the university rather than depreciate the quality of their education, which they consider their primordial investment (Watjatrakul, 2014).

Another point concerns whether students can be considered as customers as most do not pay their tuition fees and thus are not the ones making a real investment. Once again the literature is divided between one side arguing that students are contributing more and more towards the cost of their education and thus should be considered as any other purchaser of goods and services (Kanji and Tamb, 1999; Eagle and Brennan, 2007; Bennett, 2003). On the other side, many argue that people behave differently if the original cost is less than its original value and thus students not paying the full cost of their tuition fees cannot be considered real customers. Even if they were, a bigger group made up of future employers, families, the government has to be taken into account. In fact, most students studying in the United Kingdom subject to £9000/year afford their studies through a loan by the British Government repayable under certain conditions. It means that although the increase of tuition fees will alter students' expectations of university and the anticipated return from it, the role of price might be cancelled out by subsidies and loans (Eagle and Brennan, 2007; Geven, 2015; Wilkins, Shams, and Huisman, 2013; Emery *et al*, 2001)

Finally, the literature is divided on whether or not students can be considered as customers as rational individual. A core group of academics argue that students are not adequately equipped to know which association of skills they require to deal with future work applications, neither do they realise the value of a bachelor or the work it requires (Clayson and Haley, 2005; Svensson and Wood, 2007, Eagle and Brennan, 2007). Studies find that important factors in students' decision to go to university apart from the price include quality of teaching and research, image and reputation of the institution, geographic proximity, friends and family effects and career prospects. However, they also show that students see any degree as a way to enhance their career, a better path without really knowing precisely what it involves and which choices will lead to certain outcomes (Wilkins *et al*, 2013). It is mentioned that complementary data especially of a qualitative nature would be required in order to understand how students respond to marketization (Geven, 2015).

This study aims to further investigate whether the rise of tuition fees in 2012 has led undergraduate students to behave as customers making rational choices when pursuing higher education. The case study takes place at the University of Manchester, which offers an appealing environment to investigate, as it is one of the biggest universities in the UK in terms of diversity of students and courses offered.

This article will most specifically assess the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Students' motives to go to university and their choice of a particular course are driven by the idea of the return of their original investment in terms of the value of the degree obtained on the work market.

Hypothesis 2: Higher market expectations lead students to take advantage of various additional services provided by the university contributing to their profile and thus taking the most advantage of the product they have purchased.

Hypothesis 3: Higher fees lead students to be more responsive and invested in the quality of teaching and services provided at university.

**Method**

A mixed method approach using both quantitative and qualitative data was adopted during this study. Both were collected over a period of three weeks at the University of Manchester through an online survey and semi-structure interviews. In order to take part, students had to be enrolled in an undergraduate degree and study full time at the University of Manchester as well as be subject to tuition fees of £9000/year. The participants recruited were therefore from the United Kingdom or the European Union. The terminology used here is the one adopted by universities in terms of separating students as either subject to UK or EU fees.

Study participants were recruited first using the author personal network and then a snowballing sampling strategy was used for both the online survey and the interviews. This method was selected in order to increase the response rate and was convenient in order to reach out to people from different backgrounds.

Before study inclusion, all study participants were provided an information sheet and those participating in interviews required consent for the data to be used. The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the Ethical Committee of the School of Social Sciences at the University of Manchester. Each survey answer was anonymously saved and stored safely online using a password-protected platform. Voice recordings of the interviews are set to be destroyed after the final analysis has taken place.

The quantitative data was collected through online surveys. The questionnaire contained 14 multiple-choice original questions and an additional section of 3 questions dependent of the answers selected.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted during the second week of the study. The questionnaire was first pilot tested with 5 participants, refined and finalised. The content of the interview questionnaire targeted the same points evaluated on the online survey but in more depth in order to look for reasons of the behaviour being observed quantitatively.

The quantitative data has been analysed using EXCEL and cross-tabulations were performed using the different variables collected. The interviews have been analysed using thematic analysis and light coding.

**Results**

A total of 78 study participants did complete the survey, among them 10 were not eligible as not compliant with the study eligibility criteria. The sample was composed of 65% female and 35% male. The majority of the respondents were UK students (68%), and the remaining part of the sample were from outside UK but from the European Union 32%.

A large proportion of the study participant (74%) reported that they benefited from a loan in order to afford their studies although they come from various financial backgrounds. The respondents are enrolled in various courses including social sciences, arts, languages, business, engineering, medicine as well as mathematics and chemistry (Refer to table 1).

14 people included in the survey sample accepted to take part to the semi-structured interview, among them 14% male and 86% females, 64% from the UK and 36% from the EU.

Table 1 – Characteristics of the study population

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Gender** | Male | 24 (35%) |
| Female | 44 (65%) |
| **Age** | 18 | 6 (9%) |
| 19 | 19 (28%) |
| 20 | 30 (44%) |
| 21+ | 13 (19%) |
| **Country of origin** | United Kingdom | 47 (69%) |
| European Union | 21 (31%) |
| **Degree** | Arts, social science and languages | 49 (72%) |
| Business | 6 (9%) |
| Engineering | 7 (10%) |
| Science | 6 (9%) |
| **Financial background** | Higher managerial, administrative and professional occupations | 29 (43%) |
| Lower managerial, administrative and professional occupations: | 17 (25%) |
| Intermediate occupations | 7 (10%) |
| Small employers and own account workers | 7 (10%) |
| Lower supervisory and technical occupation | 2 (3%) |
| Semi-routine occupations / Routine occupations | 6 (9%) |

3.1 Students' motives to go to university and their choice of a particular course are driven by the idea of the return of their original investment in terms of the value of the degree obtained on the work market.

From the general results obtained from the survey, students do seem to behave as customer looking to optimise their choice from the moment they select a university. In fact, the quality of education is the first reason selected by 80% of participants surveyed for choosing the University of Manchester. The rate of employability of graduated students published in league tables comes as a second factor influencing more than 50% of students' choice of university. Factors such as the cost of life in Manchester or how close the University is to home seem less influential (23% and 26% respectively) and do not compared to the primary importance of the first two factors. Consequently, students do not seem to minimize the original cost of their studies as the quality of education obtained through getting their degree from a reputable university is more important.

However, on the contrary to their choice of university, participants' choice of degree do not seem to be driven by career outcomes but rather personal interest for 93% of students surveyed. Career and job outcomes were only selected by 52% of students surveyed as influential characteristics when choosing their degree.

We can now infer that in general, students believe their choice of university to be more important towards their career than their choice of degree is. In fact, participants surveyed seem to consider a particular choice of degree mostly based on the interest they place in it rather than career considerations, which does not portray a customer attitude. That illustrates the fact that the reputation of the university brought by league tables is what transparent as the best employability indicator. When asked about their choice of degree, students interviewed said "I have always thought that studying in general would open up more doors" or that "I did not think in details, more the fact that a degree would lead me to a job". Others also mentioned that "the piece of matter from a good institution" proving that you are educated is what matters most. This argument connects with the one explored previously by Wilkins *et al* (2013) mentioning that the value of university resides in obtaining a generic degree and students do not think of what it actually entails. Nonetheless, if it does seem to be the general tendency, differences of behaviour can be observed among different groups fitting the customer analogy more.

For example, certain groups care more about the rate of employment when first applying to the University of Manchester, they are thus more confident in the outcomes of their degree.

If 88% students from both gender care equality about their level of interest in the subject, male students are 20% more concerned about career prospects and particular job outcomes than females. Thus, male students on a loan tend to be about 8% more confident that they will repay it entirely whereas women are not convinced. A student thinking that they will be able to repay the loan indicates that they expect to get a good enough job thus that their choice of university and degree will have paid off. In the same way, because students older than 21 years old now cared almost 30% less about the degree of employability than 18 years old when applying to university, they are almost 20% less confident that they will be able to repay their loan if it is the case. The same phenomenon is noticeable when differencing between students from the UK and EU. Students coming from the EU care 47% more about the rate of employability of graduated student and are thus 25% more confident that they will be ably to repay the loan. The fact that more than half of the students without a loan on this sample are from the EU influence these results. In fact, students without a loan consider 20% more the rate of employability of graduated students when applying to university. Career prospects are 10% more significant in the choice of a particular degree for students without a loan.

Students from various degrees as well have different motivation. 100% of business students surveyed chose their degree primarily based on the career prospects although their interest also played a great influence for 83% of them.

The first hypothesis cannot be said to be completely valid. Students do generally behave as customers when choosing their university as they rely on the quality of education and the rate of employability. This cannot be said when choosing a particular degree as participants base their choice on interest rather than career prospects: they thus regard obtaining a degree already a return of investment. However, certain trends can be observed among different groups of students surveyed notably male and business students who value the career prospects more when pursuing university.

3.2 Higher market expectations lead students to take advantage of various additional services provided by the university, contributing to their profile thus taking the most advantage of the product they have purchased.

At first glance, the most used service by students is the online platform Blackboard where information and resources related to students' degree are updated. Blackboard is used by the entire sample followed by the use of the library with 90% of use by students. 75% of students surveyed take advantage of societies and student spaces made available. Events organized by the University of Manchester or the Union as well as degrees related talk and sports facilities are less popular with 35% and 45% of use correspondingly.

It seems that services related to students' degree are of greater importance for respondents, indicating that their focus is primarily on succeeding academically. If students interviewed respond that they do not feel like they are maximising their time at university, it usually regards their degree such as the use of academic advisors and office hours. Whereas females make large use of their academic advisor (70,6%), not even half of the males surveyed do: they consider blackboard the most important service. This is shown by a 48% of difference of use between blackboard and the second service used being office hours. In general, BB is 40% more used than academic advisors and the opportunity of office hours. Tuitions fees provide incentives to use services related to the degree chosen in order to do better academically. It comes back to the idea that graduating with a good degree is still what student believes to be the way to become more employable. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that certain groups display a higher tendency of getting the most of the university.

Hence participants without a loan take 15% more advantage of the services provided at the University of Manchester on average. One of the reasons is related to the fact that half of the students interviewed not on the loan are from the EU and would pay much lower tuition fees if they had studied in their country of origin. When asked about the effect of tuition fees on their behaviour at, EU students all have the same answer: "back at home I would not have paid for uni. It is extremely expensive to be here so I should make the most of it". Thus, students without a loan are 12% more active at university by attending events organized by the university and taking advantage of societies. Also, the study abroad programme led by the University of Manchester and present in certain degrees is 20% more popular amongst students without a loan. It correlated with the fact that EU students take 15% more advantage of societies on average and are 20% more likely to go to talk organized by the University of Manchester and work at university.

However, not being on a loan is not the only persuasive variable affecting students' involvement and behaviour as customer: degree choices also matter alongside the economic factor. Business students use the career service 40 to 45% more than other humanities students. In average, business students use a lot more of the services provided at university when 90% of them are on a loan. Compared to other humanities degree, business students are more aware of market requirements and fit the customer analogy more. The following quotes from students studying business justify their behaviour: "there is so many people taking my degree and everyone is doing so well. It is though to differentiate between people so it is probably why I have taken so many extracurricular activities". Another adds: "This is why I am studying a language as well. Yes uni will help but certain subjects are overcrowded so you need to stand out more".

If both those three distinctive groups do use additional services to enhance their profiles, most students surveyed still consider their degree to be the most important part of their university years and what they are paying for. This is illustrated by the fact that services related to enhancing academic performances are 10% to 40% more used than nonrelated ones. For most students, maximizing their time at university is focused on attending lectures, seminars and handing in assignments on time. This relates to the argument expressed above by Watjatrakul (2014) mentioning the desire from students to get more contact hours and support academically considering the quality of education their primary investment. 70% of students interviews mention that "I could do more, you can always do more" but that "attending lectures and seminars and that is the base that you need: everything else is extra".

The analysis of hypothesis 2 shows that additional services are used to enhance students' progress and life at the University of Manchester. However, students without a loan to pay for their tuition fees as well as business students are more likely to use additional services outside of their degree in order to make their profile stand out from the crowd. In general, participants' focus remains centred on academic success and thus their use of university services is strongly to that purpose.

3.3. Higher fees lead students to be more responsive and invested in the quality of teaching and services provided at university.

From the survey, it can be inferred that students do not particularly act as customer regarding this aspect. Course Unit surveys and Students' Representatives are only used by 46% and 13% of respondents respectively. Academic advisors and office hours are slightly more popular with 58% and 56% of use by students. Also, the Students' Union elections are relatively popular with 33% of students getting involved. Moreover, course surveys are 20% more likely to be completed by students who are on a loan however student representatives are 15% more used amongst students without a loan.

One of the reasons for this seems to be that students are not fully aware in details of what to expect from the University of Manchester or the degree they apply for. Students focus on the fact that the University of Manchester "was supposed to have a good reputation and that was it" or that "there would be a lot of social opportunities". If students did have precise expectations, they mostly regarded vague assumptions linked to their degree about the number of contact hours, which is mostly overestimated as well as infrastructures such as the library and study spaces. When they first applied to a certain degree, most "did not look that deeply into it. I looked at the course description so that was the main thing". Something each student mentioned is the flexibility of being able to choose modules early on allowing them to focus on aspects they are most interested in. The structure and method of teaching are only important to students coming from higher economic background thus are criteria 10% more popular among students coming from the EU.

Another reason can be explained by the fact that students appear satisfied with the quality of teaching. Although they deplore the difference of contact hours between degrees when tuition fees are the same, 80% of student surveyed value the quality of lecturers and the fact that they are approachable. Nonetheless, a decent education seems to coincide with a good passing rate, as the customer analogy seems to imply. "Students do well on the course so it means that teaching methods are good" mentioned a student interviewed. Another mentioned, "when a group of us has done badly, it is down to the lecturer but when I do badly on my own, it is my fault. We actually complained once". It shows that participants do judge the quality of the teaching they are provided with depending on how much they succeed. This is also a criterion that prospective students take into consideration. Apart from employability, students interviewed mentioned having looked at student satisfaction ranking tables rather than academic ones as the later one tend to rely on research potential which students do not deem relevant at the undergraduate level. So, also they do not seem to relay their opinions through channels run by the university, they do impact the university image by giving their feedback and thus the university would be more likely to adapt itself to students' needs.

Students do not seem to be particular responsive neither invested in terms of actively providing feedback in order to improve the quality of teaching they are getting. One of the reasons for that is because from the start, students do not know exactly what to expect and thus only general expectations have to be met by the University of Manchester. An additional one seem to be that students are satisfied with the education they are provided with for the price they are paying and thus do not feel the need to heavily use feedback channels such as course surveys or students representative. Finally, students seem to base themselves on the university's reputation which students' opinion contribute to rather than critical research that could lead to them expressing feedback later. Consequently, respondents do not express a behaviour of customer in this manner.

**Discussion**

Results obtained through this study of each hypothesis are influenced by students' opinion of fees. However, the biggest reason as to why students do not act as the customers they could be, is that most do not actually realise the amount that they are paying. It is most obvious among students who are on a loan however students paying their tuition fees directly cannot still be considered as receptive. As previously mentioned, students are first considered as customers because they purchase a service (Kanji and Tamb, 1999; Eagle and Brennan, 2007; Bennett, 2003). The following quotes from students' interviews illustrate the point: "Because it is a loan and anything that comes with a loan you don't appreciate the true value of it", "I think that people that take loans have blindfolds over their eyes and don't realize the interests that you pay on it. People are not aware of the implications". These quotes reflect two reasons why loan are preventing students from acting as real customers. First, students interviewed mention that "I don't see the money coming out of my bank account" as tuition fees are directly paid from the government to the university. Every year, students apply for student a finance, which takes not even 10 minutes to complete online. During they whole time at university, participants do not feel like they are in debt at all. Even after they start paying it back, students interviewed do not consider like "proper debt or anything: it is not scary in the sense that they are not gonna take your degree if you cannot pay it back". Since they do actually feel like they are actively paying for their education, they do not feel the pressure to make the most of university in every sense of the term and act as a customer. The second quote reveals that students interviewed are not aware of the conditions implied in the loan. Some reveal not worry about being in debt because "I had the loan explained to me so it was not a big thing: I knew you were not crippled and there is no interests on it" or that they were not worried about it now but "later on when I need to get a job and because they are making so many changes like an amount of interests which was not there before". The interest rate although a bit lower than market value has always been a condition on a student loan since the rise of tuition fees in 2012 and does change every first of September (Student Finance England, 2016). This shows that undergraduates interviewed are not fully aware of the conditions in which they purchase their educations and thus are not fully able to rationalize as a customer would. This could change due to the pressure of a higher number of students, which keeps rising and could then encourage students to make more rational choices based on possible outcomes.

Moreover, the results found in this study are subject to certain limitations. First, because of the size of the sample and the sampling strategy used to select participants, it is not truly representative of University of Manchester students' population.

Secondly, the results obtained cannot be generalized to the total undergraduate student population studying in the UK neither to the students' population of any other university.

Thirdly, this study has only taken into account the behaviour of students when studying the customer analogy within the higher education environment. However, other actors such as relatives, university staff, the British government should also be included in the study of the customer analogy because they might also be themselves considered as such. In fact, anyone contributing towards the cost of entering higher education can be subject to the customer concept and thus their concerns should be included. This has been highlighted by a few studies done on the student-as-customer notion (Eagle and Brennan, 2007).

**Conclusion**

The customer concept has been greatly applied to students and the now so-called market of higher education. A deep review of the literature allowed the formulation of three hypotheses in order to estimate if students can be considered as customers making rational choices when going to university as a consequence of higher tuition fees. The first one assumes that students behave as customer if their choice of institution and degree are led by the desire to get a return on their original investment. It seems to be the case when choosing which university to apply to as students are seen to mostly care about the quality of education they are being provided as well as the rate of employability of graduated students. However, reasons for choosing a particular degrees resides mainly in the interest that students have in a particular subject. This seems to relate to what had been emphasized in the literature: students believe that obtaining a degree from a good university no matter the subject studied is enough to get good job prospects. Aside of the general trend, gender and the degree studied seem to make a certain difference in students' behaviour as male and business students seem to fit better the customer analogy in prioritizing career prospects. The second hypothesis regarded the use of additional services by students in order to enhance their profile and stand out when entering the job market. The results indicated that students do take advantage of services provided by the University of Manchester notably students without loan and business students. Still, the general tendency indicates that students valorise primarily their degree when purchasing a higher education and consequently are more likely to use services directly related to their success in academic matters. Finally, student can be considered as customer if they can give feedback on the product they purchase and get involved in the improvement of certain aspects of it. According to this paper, students cannot be considered responsive in terms of using available channels to communicate their feedback. It is either attributed to the fact that students are not fully aware of what university entails before starting their degree and have thus no precise expectations on which they could base their feedback. The second reason regards the fact that students seem to be satisfied with the quality of teaching they are getting and do not feel the need to be active in its improvement. In conclusion, this article argues that students can be considered customers on certain aspects such as the choice of the institution. However, in order for the customer analogy to be applied correctly, students would need to be more critical of the services they are purchasing and also be more aware of the job market requirement in order to do more extracurricular activities. The discussion tries to bring up reasons for which higher tuitions have not led to students committing fully to the customer behaviour. The article suggest that one point brought up by the literature saying that students cannot act as customer because they are not the one actually affording the cost of their studies seems to be correct. Most students enrolled at university are on a loan by the British government under certain conditions of repayment. Due to the fact that they never have any contact with the amount of money paid to the University of Manchester for their tuition fees and are not fully aware of the details attached to the loans, they do not realize the cost of their higher education. Hence, they cannot make decision that can be considered rational.

This paper has studied the extent to which students at the University at Manchester can be considered as customers when pursuing university as a consequence of higher tuition fees. It would be interesting to study how much the environment and activities surrounding the university affect students' choices as well. This study has been focused on services provided by the University of Manchester on site and mostly related to students' life within the institution campus. However, halls of residence and the social atmosphere around it for instance contribute to students' attitude to university and would be worth investigating.

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