# Engagement And Employability: Student Expectations Of Higher Education[*]

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## Abstract

The rise in tuition fees and moves towards the privatisation of higher education has changed the relationship between tutor and student to what many see as one of 'customer' and 'provider'. As universities become increasingly concerned with attracting a student market there is a risk that education itself assumes an instrumental rather than a developmental focus, preparing students for employment in return for the fees they pay. Indeed employability agendas and the discourse of employability are to be found across higher education institutions, and often don't sit easily alongside a parallel but perhaps contradictory focus on social responsibility and community engagement.

This research article summarises the findings of a small scale project undertaken at the University of Brighton between 2012 and 2013. The project involved conversations with new undergraduates entering the university paying tuition fees that were three times as high as those entering the previous year, about their expectations of university life and their attitude towards social engagement and community based learning. Their responses, gathered through a face book poll, through surveys and through focus groups are supplemented by additional discussions with colleagues involved in employability or engagement programmes and with second and third year students who had undertaken engagement modules. Findings indicate that while undergraduates do come to university primarily concerned with themselves and their own futures, and looking for 'a good degree, a good time and a good job' these narrow views are open to challenge during their time there. It concludes that as educationalists we have a duty to confront narrow or instrumentalist views of higher education and should guard against a tendency to conflate 'social engagement' or an exploration of issues of equality and social justice, with notions of 'employability' or 'enhancing your CV'.

**Keywords:** Employability, student expectations of higher education, engagement

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# 1.    Two Competing Attitudes To Higher Education

The nature of Higher Education (HE) globally is undergoing a period of change. In response to rapid expansion over the past ten years and a broader global economic downturn the funding of universities has become a controversial issue, and in many countries there has been a move to reduce state subsidies and transfer costs to those participating.   The subsequent rise in tuition fees has led to what many describe as a market-led sector driven by a consumerist student body (Giroux, 2010). Concerns among academics globally who oppose the continuation of neo-liberalistic policies in higher education (Lea, 2009; Giroux, 2010; Miller, 2010; Ramsden 2011) have reopened questions about the role and purpose of higher education, suggesting the repositioning of students as consumers is having a detrimental effect on the quality of the education we are able to offer (Boden and Nevada 2010).

The trebling of university fees in England, from £3,000 a year to around £9k in 2012, seems to have brought into sharp relief the quality of facilities and the number of contact hours that students are paying for when they enrol on a degree programme. My own experience of overhearing student voices in the corridor has often included snippets relating to how long a particular lecture lasted, what its individual cost might have been and how far it was 'worth it'. It raises interesting questions about how 'worth' or value are calculated and the nature of the experience a university provides in return for the fees they charge.  Although the shift towards the marketization of higher education has been a gradual one, with the first market reform taking place during the Thatcher government in 1979 (Shattock 2012, p 160) it has been uni-directional; with student fees and accompanying loans first introduced for all UK students in 2003.

During approximately the same period community engagement and social responsibility have also been established as a priority for universities across the world (Delores 1998, Votruba et al 2002, Watson et al 2011). Originally outlined as a goal for higher education in the new

millennium, Service Learning in the US and Science Shops in Europe, (both forms of socially engaged learning in which students gain credits for working in or with community organisations as part of their degree programme), have seen a resurgence of interest throughout the 1990s and the early 2000s. The formation of the Talloires Network brought together a group of vice chancellors committed to the civic roles and social responsibilities of Higher Education in 2005, the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement established six 'Beacons for Public Engagement' across England and Wales in 2008 and UNESCO now has a chair of 'Community Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education'.

However, how far an ethos of engagement is compatible with the introduction of neo liberalistic policies within higher education is debatable. Foskett et al (2006), James et al (2001) and the Youthsight report of (2012) all suggest that student priorities have been changing over the past decade and evidence indicates that as jobs for graduates become increasingly scarce students' priorities globally have become 'employability' with a direct link between learning and financial gain. Ransome (2011) identified what he saw as a strong instrumentalism in students, partly he claimed, as a result of league tables in secondary schools and an assessment focussed approach to tertiary education. Tricker (2004) saw evidence of a cumulative change in student attitudes over the last three decades, leading to a student culture of 'doing the minimum for maximum reward' rather than any holistic approach to learning. Boden and Epstein (2006) suggest that the student experience has already become consumerised and Boden and Nedeva (2010) warn that 'employability discourses may be adversely affecting pedagogies and curricula, to the disbenefit of students, institutions, employers (and) social justice' (p 37).

Certainly the move towards outcome driven secondary education in the UK, the existence of league tables and a competition for higher grades have all served to accustom young people arriving at university to be more focussed on assessment than learning (Ransome 2011). Emerging from A levels and primarily concerned with 'what they need to know to pass' most of them don't need much persuading to play the role of passive consumers of higher education,

expecting tutors to provide them with right answers in the most efficient way possible (Ramsden 2011). Students primarily focused on an economic return would not necessarily be open to mutually beneficial community engagement and would be more likely to prioritise personal gain over socially purposeful education. Boden and Nedeva (2010) suggest this significantly reduces the quality, and therefore the value, of H.E.:

> *'If students are seeking an economic return in preference to an educational voyage of discovery then a degree becomes simply a means to an economic end. Students-as-customers may develop a goal rather than process-oriented attitudes to their learning. And if such students are treated as having consumer power their demands for narrowly focused, specialised education may start to have effect. Moreover, such narrowly focused students may be less likely to engage in the broader life of the university'* (Boden and Nedeva pg 51)

In 2003 after the first introduction of tuition fees, Ahier, Beck and Moore undertook a small scale empirical research study among students at British universities in order to understand their perspectives on their future lives as citizens and employees. The study was also prompted by the decision to include citizenship education as part of the National Curriculum in secondary schools and the authors were concerned to know how far young people, growing up during the years of the Thatcher and Major governments had embraced identities as 'investors in themselves' or 'entrepreneurs of their own futures' (Ahier et al, 2003 pg 3). However while their book problematises notions of citizenship and the role of the university in developing citizens of the future, their findings don't paint a picture of 'Thatcher's children' who are only concerned with their material futures. Despite finding that many young people felt disconnected from 'official politics', Ahier et al identified a strong sense of 'socially grounded mutuality' …..'concerns about justice and fairness'…..'people who are both socially conscious and concerned' (2003 pg 3).

## 2.      A Case Study at the University of Brighton

Ten years on I undertook another, very small scale study at the University of Brighton in order to see how far student attitudes might have changed in the decade since then. The study consisted of conversations with the first cohort of students to be paying £9,000 a year in fees around their expectations of a university experience both prior to and during their first year of study.   In the light of the research cited above, I was interested in how far they might have taken on the role of customers or consumers now that they were paying for almost the whole of their education. If this was true I was keen to find out how we might best work with them in order to introduce community engaged learning.   The University of Brighton is proud of its commitment to community and social engagement which, since 2006, has been a core part of its strategic plan. It committed itself to becoming 'recognised as a leading UK university for the quality and range of its work in economic and social engagement and productive partnerships' (Corporate Plan 2006 – 2012), and its Social Engagement Strategy (2007) aspires to  'prioritise the use of resources to facilitate work that addresses *disadvantage, sustainable development, citizenship and social justice'*. Its new strategic plan published in 2012 further promises that every student will have the opportunity for external engagement as part of their undergraduate programme. However how far this was compatible with student expectations, particularly students who looked forward to leaving university with debts approaching £50,000 seemed to me to be an important question.   I was keen to understand what entering into substantial student debt meant for them and how open they were to 'socially purposeful education'. I was also interested in how far these competing discourses of citizenship and employability might constitute a problem for the University of Brighton and those who worked within it and how far they might impact on the students we attract and the 'graduate citizens' we produce as a result.

The project was informed by a systemic action oriented approach (Burns 2007), following up on emerging leads and refining the research questions in line with issues participants raised.  The numbers involved were too small to be fully representative and the difficulty in attracting students to focus groups to discuss their expectations, or in getting them to respond to surveys handed out in lectures is in itself indicative of their lack of interest in activities that are 'non

assessed'. However my conclusions were also informed by conversations with faculty members tasked with acting as 'employability leads' for new students and by an evaluation of a second year engaged module undertaken on our behalf by a post graduate student who was also researching student attitudes to community engaged learning. Although this second year group were not part of the new high fee paying cohort their responses indicate something about how students interpret community engagement and how attitudes towards university held during the first year might be changed by the experience of working outside of the academy.

- A full research report is available elsewhere but the conclusions drawn below have been compiled from data gathered from:
- A poll hosted on a facebook site for new students before they arrived at university and which generated 105 responses (from a potential pool of 3,000 new undergraduates)
- Focus group discussions held towards the end of term one with 36 students from the three different faculties (Social Sciences, The Joint Honours Programme, Environment and Technology)
- 250 questionnaires returned from 500 handed out at the end of the year to students in the same three faculty areas
- In depth discussions with 5 staff members responsible for introducing 'engagement' and 'employablity' to undergraduates
- An evaluation of two second year modules incorporating community engagement carried out by a post graduate student through focus groups involving 30 people.

## 3.    A summary of key issues emerging from Brighton

Using thematic analysis of transcripts from the different conversations I was able to group responses into six key areas of concern. The phrases in italics are taken directly from transcripts of interviews and I have attempted to summarise the key themes below before going on to discuss their significance for us as practitioners of community engaged learning.

### 3.1.    A gradual rather than a sudden shift to a consumer perspective

On the whole students seem to have accepted the high fees they are paying and the new first years were not seen by my colleagues to be significantly different from their predecessors. Although many of them are acutely aware of the cost of each lecture and seminar and claim they want *'value for money'* , colleagues identified a shift in student behaviour that has been emerging over the past few years with an increasing focus on what they expect from a university and what they might get out of it for themselves. Lecturers commented on how students expected them to be available *'24/7 like a one stop shop'*; quick to complain if they didn't get an immediate response to emails. A third year student who had participated in engaged modules previously described her colleagues as seeing education as a *'transaction'* – *'a degree in exchange for a fee'*, while other staff members felt that despite or even because they were paying a lot students felt they could choose whether they actually turned up to classes. The brief period of politicisation that emerged in 2010 over the fee increase seems to have disappeared and students spoke more about their rights as customers than any political right to education.   There was no awareness that the new fee regime was not costing the government any less than the previous, subsidised education had done, nor were they particularly concerned when I told them I understood this to be the case. But while such attitudes were shared among many new first years, colleagues assured me that previous cohorts had been similar and that this was indicative of the broader consumer culture in which all of our students lived. Nor did first years appear overly concerned about the size of their debt, most having accepted the premise that if they did have to pay it back they *'would barely notice it from their salaries'* and many feeling they would never earn enough to have to. There was a strong sense of entitlement to an education for which students were paying, but despite new first years paying three times for their degree than the second years before them, there was no significant difference in their responses or sense that this was unfair.

### 3.2.    A tension between competing agendas of employability and social engagement

University agendas around employability, (which encourages students to focus on preparing for future employment), and social engagement, (which looks at values and issues of equality and citizenship) are not easy partners but are often linked together and confused. Staff seem

hesitant to talk about personal values with student groups and often try to *'sell engagement'* with phrases like *'it will look good on your CV'*. This plays into a consumer oriented transactional approach and can obscure the purpose of student community engagement. One staff member working on engaged modules felt her colleagues *'looked on (me) as having sold out to the establishment as they linked engagement to employability'* while she herself was more concerned with providing opportunities for students to get involved in local issues. Many students referred to engaged modules as *'the placement module'* and tended to expect the university to *'sort out a placement for me'* rather than seeing value in using their own initiative to develop local contacts. A third year student looking back on her involvement in an engaged module said *'it wasn't until I returned to it that I realised it was about citizenship, it seemed at the time that what I was mostly hearing was the module being sold from an employability point of view, so that is what I remembered of it. And it wasn't till I started looking back at it through the lens of citizenship that I saw there was something about that they were trying to teach, - I guess it just got crowded out, in order to sell it to the students'.*

### 3.3.    **Student and staff resistance to 'top down' approaches**

While those of us working in community facing roles were pleased about the incorporation of impact into the Research Excellence Framework and the inclusion of 'socially purposeful education' into the strategic plan, there was some resistance towards this on the part of lecturers and students. Students complained of *'enforced voluntarism'* or *'more work experience like secondary school'* while staff resisted being told how to teach by senior management, or having to prove the impact of their research in the REF. On the one course where the engaged module was compulsory students *'made up (our) minds to dislike it before it started, just because they were told to do it'* while those who already had some work experience felt patronised by thinking they were being asked to do more. One student who ended by being a passionate advocate of community engagement '*resisted being encouraged to work in the voluntary sector and took a private placement just out of contrariness really, because that's what they seemed to want us to do'.*

### 3.4.    A strong concern among students with personal outcomes

Unsurprisingly many undergraduates arrive at university primarily concerned with themselves, their university experience and the degree they might get from it. When asked about expectations from university at different points prior to starting and during the first year the same three topics emerged: *'A good time, a good degree and a good job'*. The only change that seemed to occur during the first and into the second year was the order in which these three were voiced, with a good time dominating in the first year and a good degree coming to the fore towards the second. One student talking about her peers said that *'I found that far and away people's highest concern is job prospects, followed by, knowledge or skills for a particular type of career field. A few people might be interested in knowledge for self- growth or critical thinking, that sort of thing, but much less'*.

Many new students spoke about their excitement at leaving home, living with peers, and though some were anxious about making friends there were strong expectations about a hectic social life.  They were reluctant to think about their responsibilities to their neighbours, let alone the wider community feeling that they had left all those broader responsibilities behind. However although many did not understand the term 'community engagement' those that had heard of engaged modules did feel excited about them and had a sense they would be of some personal benefit, some even saying they had chosen their course '*because of the opportunity to get involved with things outside of the university'….. things like equalities and disabilities and human rights and stuff because there are not many places where you can go to learn things like that'*.

### 3.5.    A belief in the value of experience and a thirst for experience

Despite coming to university with a focus on personal outcomes most student's priorities also included *'having a good experience'* or *'experiencing more of the world'* during their time there. They also recognised the value of learning from experience and how *'learning academically and getting a good qualification is just not enough these days'*. Many couched this in terms like 'employers want more than just a qualification' but also came to university hungry for exposure to new experiences and open to getting involved. Conversations with third year students and

focus group evaluations of the engaged modules all indicated that students began to grasp the value of community based learning in retrospect, learning as they progressed through the module and built relationships at community level not only how valuable the experience might be to them but also gaining a shaper sense of the contribution they might make in return. Exposure to academic partnership projects ('*the clean air thing that Dawn does*') also helped them to understand more about the contribution their own discipline area might make at a tangible and community level and in many cases inspired them to consider the social value of research.

## 4.    Conclusion

Newson (2004) Boden and Nevena (2010) and Giroux (2010) all talk about the importance of 'disrupting the student as consumer model' or challenging employability discourses and on the whole lecturers at Brighton agree that such approaches are not conducive to either good pedagogy or a healthy university. Current students are quick to calculate the cost of an individual lecture and to question whether they are getting 'value for money' but find it hard to grasp the significance of their debt and question whether they will either ever pay it back, or notice it if they do.  Consumer attitudes are prevalent, but have been for more than a decade and the concern with assessment mirrors a broader national focus on targets, that they have been educated into throughout their schooling. Students expecting a 24/7 response from lecturers are unrealistic, and those attitudes like 'I have given you my money don't expect my time too' make teaching difficult and limit what students are able to gain from a university experience. While it's important to understand student expectations it might be more important to manage than to meet them.

Much of the literature suggests that employability agendas and the preoccupation with targets and outcomes are at odds with notions of engaged learning and critical pedagogy. My own conversations with colleagues and students at the University of Brighton raise questions about the purpose of a university, the breadth of experience provided by a degree programme and what might constitute 'value' in terms of the offer we make to students. They suggest that

students are as concerned with meaningful work and meaningful experience as they are with employment and while they want a good degree they also realise that a degree alone is 'not enough'. While it may be easier to attract students to a engaged learning by talking about employability, this is as likely to devalue or belittle the scope of a programme that also deals with values and aspirations, rights and responsibilities and broader notions of justice and equality. Historically universities have dealt in the moral, and the philosophical as well as the intellectual and it was only the Humboldt universities of the 19th century that shifted the focus to positivism and scientific knowledge. The focus of the 1970s on critical thinking was met by a counter focus in the 1980s on transferable skills, the precursor perhaps to employability. But all of these are trends and need to be viewed as such, offering something 'in addition to' rather than 'instead of' the broader focus of higher education.

If universities are to honour their commitment to providing 'transformational' and 'socially purposeful education' this may mean resisting some of the current discourses of employability, focusing instead on the value of experience we offer students and expecting more rather than less from them in return. Experiential and community facing learning opportunities are not unrelated to employment and in many cases have enabled those participating to understand where or how they might want to work in the future. At best they can be transformational, encouraging a fundamental questioning of previously held beliefs about the world. But they can be easily collapsed into 'CV enhancing' transactions, offering little more than 'the skills employers are looking for'. As a result their value to students is minimised and their actual contribution to community partners undermined. For a university experience to be worthwhile it needs to connect to student concerns and priorities and move on from there, and student priorities do alter as their view of the world expands. Final year students and graduates often speak of the engaged modules they undertook changing their view of themselves and how they want to work and to be in the world fundamentally, and responses gathered as part of this project included phrases like: *'I didn't get citizenship until I did it, I kind of knew about rights but I never thought about responsibilities'*. Students might ask for experiences to be set up for them but if they are never given the chance to explore their own potential and challenge

themselves they are in the end being short changed (to use a market metaphor!). Much of university is about employability, holding on to the principles of engaged learning and critical pedagogy is an important opportunity to do something differently.

Mortiboys (2011) and Beard (2006) defend the existence of emotional literacy and affective learning as an important part of the higher education curriculum. While many university tutors are divided on this and some remain uncomfortable in dealing with personal and social issues, few would challenge the importance of critical literacy and critical citizenship as key elements of higher education, which according to Ransome (2011) are contrary to an 'instrumental education'. Challenging transactional or consumer attitudes among our students is critical if we are to hold on to higher education that creates thinkers and dooers – young people who are able to deconstruct and act in and on the world around them.

If we are to do this effectively we need to connect with the concerns and priorities of our students, but our role is to move them beyond a concern with themselves and their immediate outcomes to a broader understanding of the world, to build their resilience at dealing with it and their aspirations to changing it. This means starting where they are but not staying there, managing rather than meeting their expectations and rather than being overly concerned with what they expect from us, continuing to expect more from them.

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