

Students in market-driven higher education: Challenges to identity and political agency

Bristol Conversations in Education

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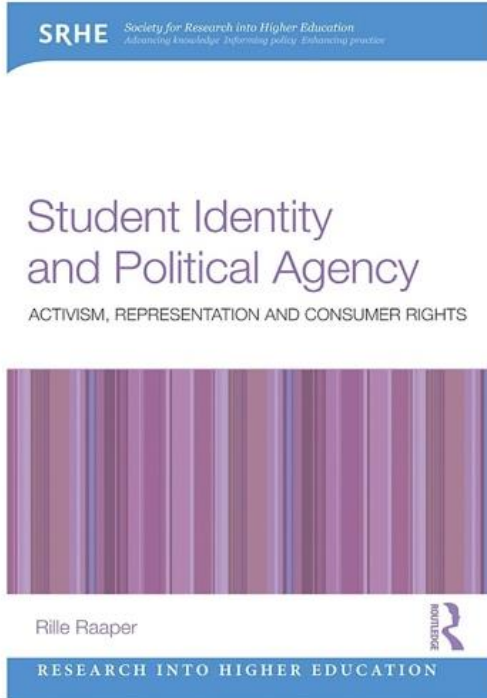
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Student Identity and Political Agency: Activism, Representation and Consumer Rights



- Marketisation and massification of HE;
- Homogenising model of consumerism in HE and the impact this holds upon the diversity of the student population.
- Intersections of youth and studenthood in HE, and the construction of student identity.
- Past and present forms of student political agency – activism, representation and consumer rights.

<https://www.routledge.com/Student-Identity-and-Political-Agency-Activism-Representation-and-Consumer/Raaper/p/book/9781032182605>

Book structure

Introduction

Ch 1: Higher education for sale: Exploring marketisation and massification

Ch 2: From diversity to a (dis)satisfied student as consumer

Ch 3: Youth and studenthood in a market system

Ch 4: Student activism and protest

Ch 5: Student representation and unionism

Ch 6: Student complaints as consumer empowerment

Conclusion



What does it mean to be an undergraduate student in today's universities shaped by market forces?

What are the possibilities for students to develop and practise their political agency?



Setting a scene

- ❑ HE worldwide is shaped by market forces (i.e. reduced/restricted state funding, managerialist tools, massification, offshore provision, competition)
- ❑ Unequal and competitive access to HE
- ❑ Rising tuition fees and student debt
- ❑ Graduate underemployment and unemployment (Alves & Tomlinson, 2021; Mok & Neubauer, 2016)
- ❑ Student wellbeing and mental health crisis (WHO, 2022)

Being a student is a challenging (if not distressing?) life stage for many contemporary students.

“Higher education plays a more prominent role in OECD member and partner countries today than it did a half-century ago. It educates many more learners, and it is increasingly expected to make key contributions to economic innovation, public health and social well-being.

Higher education is also much more costly than it once was [...] Burgeoning responsibilities and costs have brought **heightened scrutiny on the part of governments and households**, who expect higher education systems and institutions to demonstrate that they are sound use of the resources with which they have been entrusted.”

(Schleicher, 2020, as cited in OECD, 2020, p.3)

Returning to neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is **a mode of governance** that enforces market values to every sphere of life, constructing human itself as homo economicus (Brown, 2015; 2019; Foucault, 1978; 2004).

Neoliberal ideology today perpetuates inequalities and individualism under the **illusion of meritocracy** (Littler, 2018, 2020; Sandel, 2020).

Such dominant ideology dismantles HE; it also shapes our relationships to each other, and what it means to be a student today.

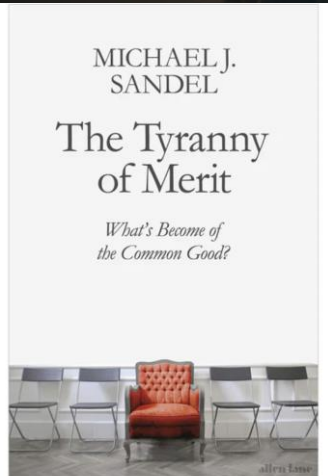
N FILM
OPERATION VARSITY BLUES
THE COLLEGE
ADMISSIONS SCANDAL

Operation Varsity
Blues: The College Admissions Scandal

2021 | 12 | 1h 40m | Documentaries

Reenactments drive this documentary into the heart of a scam to get the kids of rich and powerful into elite universities.

Starring: Matthew Modine



allen lane

EQ

The Washington Post
Democracy Dies in Darkness

Appeals court overturns convictions of two parents in 'Varsity Blues' admissions scandal

A circuit court judge wrote that prosecutors had failed to prove that the men had joined a broader conspiracy



By Susan Svrluga

Updated May 11, 2023 at 5:57 p.m. EDT | Published May 10, 2023 at 9:46 p.m. EDT



Constructing the student-as-consumer

- ❑ HE, competition and investment into one's future
- ❑ HE as human capital development (Brown, 2015; Morrison, 2017; Naidoo & Williams, 2015; Tomlinson & Kelly, 2018)
- ❑ Consumer capitalism (Kaye et al., 2006, Stiegler, 2015, 2019; Tomlinson, 2017)

Student-as-consumer is someone who develops a transactional relationship with their university, demanding that HE delivers clear economic outcomes in a context where student debt has increased and graduate under- and unemployment is on the rise.

Consumer rights in the UK

“The CMA seeks to empower consumers to exercise informed choice, using both competition and consumer powers to help markets work well. Good consumer outcomes rely on competitive markets to provide choice and value, while vibrant competition relies on consumers confidently shopping around.”
(CMA 2015, p.9)

60-second summary

Undergraduate Students: Your Consumer Rights



Make sure you have the complete picture

Choosing the right course and university is an important decision: you're investing a lot of time and money and it can be difficult to change if you're dissatisfied.

Knowing your rights under consumer law will help you get the information you need when choosing a course and university, and help to protect you if things go wrong.

What should you check when choosing a university and course?

Universities must give you the information you need to make your decision. This includes:

- the course's content, structure and length, the location of study and the award given on successfully completing the course
- total cost of the course, including tuition fees and any necessary additional costs such as field trips, lab equipment or studio/bench fees
- the university's terms and conditions, including rules and regulations and policies relating to student conduct. These must be accessible and clear

Before, or at the latest when you get an offer, universities must tell you about any changes to the information since you applied, and give you 'pre-contract information'. The pre-contract information should cover:

- course information and costs, arrangements for making payments to the university and their complaints-handling process
- any right you have to cancel should you change your mind

What should you expect when you get to university?

Once you start, the university's terms and conditions apply. These must:

- strike a fair balance between the rights and obligations of the university and the student
- not give the university wide discretion to change a course's cost or content.

What can you do if things go wrong?

You can complain to your university. Their complaints process must:

- be fair, transparent and easily accessible to students
- set out the process to make a complaint, how it will be dealt with and how you can escalate your concerns
- be clear about who deals with complaints, especially if courses are provided jointly with another institution.

If you are not happy with how your university handles a complaint, you may be able to refer it to an independent complaint scheme such as the Office of



Why is this important?

All institutions which provide undergraduate courses, including universities and FE colleges, must comply with consumer law. Consumer law may apply to other types of courses too.

Knowing your rights can help you avoid problems and resolve them if things go wrong.

If you have a problem, consider speaking to the staff delivering the course, those who deal with student problems or the student advice office or student's union.

You can also get advice from the Citizens Advice consumer helpline on 03454 04 05 06.

In Northern Ireland, Consumerline on 0300 123 6262

For more information on your consumer rights go to <http://bit.ly/HEADvice>

Tensions between diversity and consumerism

- ❑ Marketisation and massification of HE and diverse student populations (Macfarlane, 2020; Trow, 2010; Wong & Chiu, 2021)
- ❑ Student diversity vs. 'one-size-fits-all' approach (e.g., rights and complaints procedures).
- ❑ Short-termism and student experience as consumer experience
- ❑ Student satisfaction vs. dissatisfaction

Student-as-consumer is an economic construct that aims to divert attention from student diversity to a student who is primarily seen as an economic actor with homogenous (economic) aspirations and needs.



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WELCOME TO THE OIA

We are an independent body set up to review student complaints about higher education providers in England and Wales. Our service is free for students

[Can you complain](#)





ANNUAL REPORT 2022

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Foreword from the Chair

Introduction

Headlines of the year

A time of challenge and change: thoughts from the Chief Executive

Foreword by the Chair

Our vision is that students are always treated fairly. A shared commitment to fairness for students must be at the heart of a successful higher education sector that delivers for students and for our wider society. The context of the legacy of the pandemic and the impact on so many students of acute cost of living pressures is making this more challenging, and even more important.



Dame Suzi Leather | Chair of the Board

The OIA received 2850 complaints in 2022, the rise of over 70% between 2016 and 2022 (OIA, 2022).

Final compensation recommendations of £1,050,114: highest was just over £48,000, and 49 students received amounts of or over £5,000 (OIA, 2022)

Make sense of it all

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Students are suing UK universities over Covid disruption. Do they have a case?

About 120,000 people are seeking compensation but lawyers say they face an up

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WAS YOUR UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE AFFECTED BY COVID-19 OR STRIKES?

Our legal team is helping thousands of students claim fair financial compensation through no win, no fee group court claims.

[JOIN THE CLAIM](#)

WHY?

Students have been let down by their universities. They paid full fees for a university experience that they were not sold. They're frustrated, disillusioned, even angry.

Students have tried to fight back but they've been no match for these powerful institutions.

That's where the Student Group Claim comes in. We exist to address the power imbalance between those students and graduates affected, and the universities.

By bringing claimants together under a Group Litigation Order, they stand a fighting chance of getting the compensation and justice they deserve.

Student identity. A poststructuralist take

Student identity is always evolving, situational and shaped by dominant societal forces and discourses

Undergraduate student identity: studenthood, marketisation, youth transitions



Borrowing from Foucault and Stiegler

- ❑ The student as subject is always 'subject to someone else by control and dependence [and tied to their] own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge' (Foucault, 1982, p. 331).
- ❑ **Individuation and transindividuation** (Stiegler 2010, 2019). Individuation refers to how identity is formed (becoming oneself), and transindividuation refers to how identity is formed intersubjectively across generations and communities (Stiegler, 2010, 2019).

Consumer capitalism individuates by economic interests and market forces, resulting in students becoming less able to imagine their futures and develop a sense of purpose and belonging.

Student identity positions: Scholarly exaggerations

- **Lost and lonely subject**
- **Futureless consumer subject**
- **Commodified subject**




The lost and lonely subject

Marketisation and massification →
Unimaginable and unreachable graduate
destinations

Consumer society and transindividuation
(Stiegler, 2015, 2019) → The breakdown of
intergenerational and intergroup connections

Individualism, loneliness and the declining state
of student mental health?





The Student Academic Experience Survey (2022): **one in four students (23% of respondents, n= 10,000) felt lonely most or all of the time**, compared to the 5% statistic for general UK population (Neves & Brown, 2022). **In 2023, this figure was 26%.**

In 2020, **over 21,000 UK HE applicants disclosed an existing mental health condition**, equating to nearly one in 25 and marking a 450% increase in declarations since 2011 (UCAS, 2021).



The futureless consumer subject

Production of youth as consumers and pathological consumer behaviour (Stiegler, 2010, 2019)

Human capital development, competition and the tyranny of merit (Littler, 2020; Sandel, 2020)

Transactional idea of HE and relationships, competition and complaint?

The commodified subject

The neoliberal self and hypervisibility
(Foucault, 2004; Han, 2015, 2017)

Achievement society: self-regulating
oneself to increase one's economic worth
and competitiveness

Students themselves become the
commodity with economic value attached
to them?



From bleak scenarios to political agency

- ❑ Student agency as ‘the quality of students’ self-reflective and intentional action and interaction with their environment’ (Klemenčič, 2015).
- ❑ Political agency **‘refers to a variety of individual and collective, official and mundane, rational and affective, and human and non-human ways of acting, affecting and impacting politically’** (Häkli & Kallio, 2014, p. 181).
- ❑ Political agency is ‘the subject’s action when in a state of becoming prompted by future-oriented demands and contingencies of social life’ (Häkli & Kallio, 2018, p. 57).
- ❑ It includes the agentic possibility (‘power’) and agentic orientation (‘will’) (Klemenčič, 2015).

Some insights into students' political agency

- ❑ Student protest is less visible; however, when it occurs, it is more commonly related to identity-based and single-issue campaigns (Ch4)
- ❑ Student activism and diverse spaces: off campus and digital spaces (Ch4 and Ch5)
- ❑ Student representation and unionism as an incredible infrastructure for students' political agency (Ch5)
- ❑ Consumer complaints as individualised forms of political agency (Ch6)



Concluding thoughts

In its pessimistic tone, this book is optimistic:

While opportunities for students to enact their political agency may have changed, students are still agentic beings with power to act.

- Individual vs. collective agency
- The intersection of studenthood and youth
- The powerful position of the student as consumer
- Global trends with local caveats



Thank you

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