

A degree of studying – Students who treat education as a commodity perform worse than their intrinsically motivated peers



*One of the pivotal transformations in the marketisation of higher education has been the introduction of tuition fees. A degree from a higher education institution can now, to some extent, be purchased like any other commodity. In this post **Louise Bunce** presents evidence that students who identify as consumers of their education perform worse academically than students motivated by an interest in the content of their courses.*

If you ask an undergraduate why they have chosen to go to university you might hope to receive a response that suggests an underlying passion or intrinsic motivation for reading a particular subject, such as 'I love psychology' or 'I want to become a geography teacher'. However, you might instead receive a reply that treats a degree as a purchasable commodity – a financial investment to unlock a future career path that should receive greater remuneration than one that could be achieved without it. In other words, these students may be extrinsically motivated to attend university in order to secure a highly-paid job. While this in itself should not be dismissed as a valid consideration, it may adversely impact the nature of student learning and engagement if it undermines their intrinsic motivation for studying. For example, it may accompany a sense of entitlement characteristic of a consumer paying for goods or services, and a perception that they will be 'owed' a degree as a result of paying their tuition fees. Can we empirically explore the impact of students 'consuming' education on their approaches to learning and achievement?

I [surveyed](#) over 600 students across several disciplines and universities to systematically explore the impact of consuming education on academic achievement. This was the first study of students studying in England for which they personally, and not the state, were fully responsible for the cost of their tuition (at the time of data collection this was £9,000 annually, equivalent to \$11,700 or €10,500). Students completed an online questionnaire to measure their consumer orientation towards their education, adapted from a US study by Saunders (2015). They had to rate the extent to which they agreed with statements such as 'I think of myself primarily as a paying customer of the university' and 'I think of my university degree as a product I am purchasing'. We also asked them to provide their most recent mark for an assessed piece of work as a measure of academic performance. We found a negative correlation between consumer orientation and academic performance whereby the higher their consumer orientation, the lower their level of academic performance. This was after controlling for relevant demographic factors, such as age and gender, as well as situational factors such as year of study and grade goal. Furthermore, we found that consumer orientation mediated the traditional relation between identifying as a learner (e.g. by agreeing with items such as 'I want to expand my intellectual ability' and 'I enjoy studying') and academic performance: a lower learner identity was associated with a higher consumer orientation, which, in turn was associated with lower academic performance.



We subsequently replicated the finding that consumer orientation is associated with lower academic performance in a [second study](#). This study aimed to examine the impact of a consumer orientation on approaches to learning as a potential explanation for why consumer orientation has an adverse effect on academic performance. Although the evidence is inconsistent, it is generally believed that deep or strategic approaches to learning are associated with achieving higher academic performance than a surface approach. We tested the hypothesis that a consumer orientation is associated with a more surface approach to learning and a less deep or strategic approach, which would help to explain why student consumers achieve poorer academic outcomes. This hypothesis was largely supported (see Fig. 1): a deep approach to learning mediated the link between consumer orientation and academic performance whereby a stronger consumer orientation related to a less deep approach to learning, which predicted lower academic performance. A consumer orientation was also associated with a more surface approach to learning, but in our study surface approach did not predict academic performance. Strategic approach was not related to a consumer orientation.

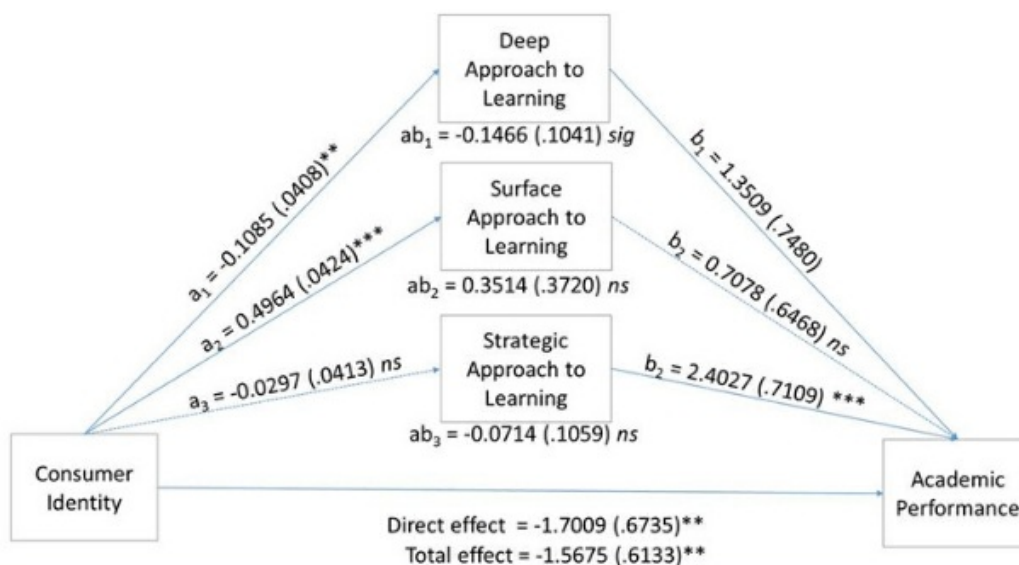


Figure 1: A mediation model of deep, surface, and strategic approaches to learning on the relations between consumer identity and academic performance. Unstandardized regression coefficients (B) are provided along the paths (with standard errors). * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

In summary, these studies suggest that students who have a stronger consumer orientation achieve poorer academic outcomes because they are less likely to adopt a deep approach to learning, which involves being motivated by an intrinsic interest in the material being studied with the aim to synthesise and make meaning. In contrast, they are more likely to adopt a surface approach, which involves being motivated by meeting minimum task requirements to avoid failure. Therefore, a consumer orientation seems to have the most negative impact on those students who are initially intrinsically motivated to read a degree owing to a passion for their subject.

Implications

These findings make a strong case for higher education institutions to avoid positioning themselves as service providers and students as customers. Instead, they should emphasise the opportunities they provide for personal growth and lifelong learning for both individual advancement and collective prosperity. For educators, the challenge remains one of supporting students' intrinsic motivation for learning by fostering deep and meaningful engagement with their subject through thoughtful teaching and assessment strategies. However, this is becoming increasingly difficult in a higher education context in which students are encouraged to seek value for money above other forms of educational value.

*This post draws on the author's co-authored papers, [The student-as-consumer approach in higher education and its effects on academic performance](#) published in *Studies in Higher Education* and [A degree of studying? Approaches to learning and academic performance among student 'consumers'](#) published in *Active Learning in Higher Education*.*

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