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My students have paid £9,000 and now they think they own me

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The government has turned students into customers who have no respect for academics and refuse to work for their grades



Learning has shifted from an intellectual achievement to a commodity, says our anonymous academic. Photograph: Alamy

**A**s I made my way to my office at 7.30am last Thursday, I noticed an A4 poster stuck to the lift door. Then I noticed one on the wall. And one on the notice board. Then one on my classroom door. In fact, they were tacked to nearly every available surface along the corridor. And they all bore the same statement: “All I’m asking for is a little respect *seeing as I pay you £9,000 a year.*”

I still don’t know what prompted this flyer campaign - rumour has it that it’s linked to a group of students who were denied assignment extensions - but I could not help but become annoyed at the blunt, consumerist language.

I started to think about the ways that my students act and speak, and the way I acted and spoke during my time at university. I will admit that I didn't do all of the readings, and yes, I may have missed a couple of lectures throughout the year, but I completed all assignments, followed the guidelines presented to me and understood the consequences of disengagement, without expecting my lecturers to chase after me like I was back in school. I wish I could say the same for my students.

As I walked through the car park with a colleague at the end of the day, we discussed the unrest that the posters had caused: "If you ask me," he said, "all universities are going to need a customer services department before long." And there it was, plain and simple, the issue that I hadn't been able to articulate: these young people weren't behaving like university students, they were behaving like customers.

Later, I spoke to a colleague from a university I used to work at - he had experienced the same thing. "They seem to think they are buying a degree, rather than working for it," he said. Learning has shifted, we realised, from an intellectual achievement to a commodity.

We compared notes. He gave an account of a student who had requested a tutorial at 8pm, because his office hours of 9-11am were not convenient - and because he had missed two hours of lectures at the start of term due to illness, he was effectively in debt to her. This young woman had calculated that my colleague's absence had cost her £160 worth of learning and decided that the recuperation of this time should take place when it suited her most.

I recalled the student who told me he was disappointed with his low grade because he had "paid so much money". My colleague topped it: when one of his students was asked to leave a seminar for not completing the reading, they retorted: "I pay you to teach me what's in the article, not the other way around."

Last week I sent out the first round of grades for a module and had 12 emails of complaint within an hour. One in particular stood out for its misunderstanding of what it means to be a scholar. The student said the grade must be incorrect because he had turned up to all the lectures - as if simply regurgitating what I had taught him deserved a 70+ grade.

As I attempted to formulate a diplomatic, polite and supportive response, I pondered a few things. When did it become an expectation that turning up to lectures is worthy of reward in itself? Moreover, when I was studying would I have ever had the balls to contact my lecturers and not only question their ability to grade my work appropriately but imply that my low grade was their fault?

I find that as the year progresses, my students become increasingly reluctant to engage in any academic behaviour that does not impact directly on their assignment grade. That is, after all, what they are paying for. And so I am not regarded as an academic. I am not an expert in my field, a practitioner with 10 years' worth of industry knowledge. I am a service provider.

I wish I'd had the gusto to reply to those posters. "Hey student - all I'm asking for is a little respect, seeing as how much you pay makes no difference to my wages, yet the level of support I am forced to offer you takes up 80% of my time despite the fact that teaching still only equates to 33% of my workload. But I'll be in the office until 9pm anyway because if I don't publish two papers by the end of the year, I'll be fired".

Good job I thought better of it.

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