

## ‘The customer is always right?’: Student discourse about higher education in Australia

Naomi Rosh White

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**Abstract** Changed funding arrangements and views of education have resulted in a re-prioritization of activities and practices in Australian universities. While considerable research attention has been given to the consequences of these changes for university policies and the activities of academic staff, less attention has been given to how students perceive these changes. In this paper, undergraduate students’ experience of the commodification of higher education sector are explored. The evidence suggests that the changed context is beginning to affect how students perceive university priorities and their effects on teaching and learning.

**Keywords** Learning · Teaching · Commodification · Students · Higher education · Australia

Australian universities have been undergoing significant changes over the past two decades. Tertiary teaching-only institutions have been merged with universities whose mandate includes both teaching and research. The number of students entering university has increased while government spending on education has been falling in real terms (King, 2001). Universities are now responsible for independently securing an increased proportion of their funding (King, 2001, Marginson & Considine, 2000, pp. 56–57). Although the greatest percentage of universities’ income is still generated through government funding for undergraduate student places, an increasing proportion is now required to be independently raised through matching government funds for externally awarded research grants, post graduate degree completions and publications. All students are now charged fees. Higher levels of full fee paying students, income generated by academics through consulting and funded research, and employment practices such as the use of casual staff and

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N. R. White (✉)  
School of Political and Social Inquiry, Caulfield Campus, Monash University,  
Caulfield East, Victoria 3145, Australia  
e-mail: naomi.white@arts.monash.edu.au

decreased administrative support provide the only leverage points for boosting and manipulating university income. These practices have been labelled ‘academic capitalism’ by Slaughter and Leslie (1997). While these changes may have been evident across a wide range of western countries including Canada, the UK and the US, their impact in Australia is arguably distinctive. As DeAngelis (1998) says, the suddenness, scope, and the degree of reversal of previous policies in the late 1980’s particularly through the introduction of student fees (partial for Australian citizens), indexed Higher Education Contribution Scheme loans and full fees for international students, together with the simultaneous significant expansion of student places and reduction in per capita operating grants constituted a sudden and significant change to the structure and ideology of Australian higher education.

These changes have been taking place within the broader context of the press of globalisation and the creation of new mass markets for learning. Globalisation finds expression through the ‘economic rationalist’ funding and organisational arrangements described above, and the commodification of learning and knowledge. Commodification refers to the process of valuing activities and their outcomes primarily, if not solely, with reference to their economic benefits (Shumar, 1997). Services, artefacts, events and people in every arena can be thought of as, and increasingly are, commodities for purchase or sale in the marketplace. All meaning is reduced to outcomes as ‘product’: to what can be bought, sold or made profitable. Education is one such service affected by this changing social climate, and increasingly has ‘little meaning outside a system of market relations’ (Shumar, 1997, p. 5, 11). The emerging culture of the university is one in which education is treated as a commodity (Delucchi & Smith, 1997; Delucchi & Korgen, 2002; Smith, 2000) and in which universities operate as corporate entities or ‘enterprise’ institutions selling educational ‘products’ (Currie, 1998; Marginson & Considine, 2000). Tertiary educational institutions are sites for the transmission or sale of cultural capital (Morley, 2003; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). They are becoming ‘businesses selling university places both overseas and at home, cooperating with industries and selling research products and professional services’ (Currie & Vidovich, 1998). Increased resources are being directed to get people to *buy* courses, programs, degrees, certificates and ideas. Consumers of ‘educational product’ are actively recruited on the world stage, particularly as full fee paying international students provide a much needed injection of funding.

In this climate, tertiary education priorities have been re-ordered. This drift from what might be reasonably be considered to be a core task of universities is evident in moves to quantify productivity. Attracting funding and efficiency have become key university performance indicators. Scholarship is now measured through weightings of different kinds of research publications; teaching/learning effectiveness is assessed with reference to student grade distributions or university completion and/or drop-out rates. This quantification can be seen as a mechanism that diverts attention away from the quality of teaching and research. The importance given to different kinds of teaching and to research is also changing. Funded research and post-graduate teaching are pushing undergraduate teaching to the margins. A range of policies and practices suggest the diminished status of undergraduate teaching. These include institutional incentives rewarding the introduction of mediated, web-based learning (Marginson & Considine, 2000, p. 59), large classes accompanied by overall reductions in staff–student ratios, the use of research funds to ‘buy’ permanent academic staff out of their undergraduate teaching responsibilities and the employment of an

increased percentage of casual teaching staff to whom core teaching activities such as tutorials, marking of student work as well as lecturing are delegated. The respective loadings various professional activities attract and the adoption of research output rather than teaching quality or performance as the primary criterion for academic promotion also suggest the lower status of teaching (King, 2001; McInnis, 1995).

In addition to affecting practices and priorities, the commodification process has a ‘discursive’ impact (Shumar, 1997) on universities, creating shifts in organisational culture, transformed understandings of universities’ primary tasks and of how education is to be delivered. The impact is evident in how procedures, rules and regulations are articulated and in how people in these organisations understand and speak about their tasks and activities. Practices and relationships are structured by, informed and given meaning relative to this changed cultural context. Where learning is a commodity, students are no longer constructed as scholars to be ‘handcrafted’, but as entities in an industrial process (Morely, 2003, p. 130). In a situation such as the one just described, the stage is set for high levels of student and staff disaffection and anxiety.

These broader contextual characteristics frame the generic underlying organisational psychodynamics of the everyday processes of teaching and learning, and of relationships between teachers and students in universities. From the psychodynamic perspective, organisations can be said to operate at two levels: to achieve their overt agreed upon specific tasks, and second, as structures that establish practices to deflect or defend against the avoided or denied feelings, perceptions and fantasies of the people in the organisation (Hinshelwood, 1987, p. 72). Attention to these psychodynamics draws attention to universities as sites whose processes, structures and policies serve to give defensive expression to the anxieties of their members (Jacques, 1955). Defensive processes of denial and transference become entrenched in organisational culture. On their own these defensive processes can result in a drift away from core tasks that are seen to be too difficult, and a move toward less relevant but seemingly achievable tasks. This drift is compounded in a climate in which education is increasingly viewed as a product or commodity and in which output rather than process is valorised. The generic underlying contradictions, struggles and tensions inherent in teaching-learning interactions must be managed at both organisational and individual levels in circumstances of reduced prioritisation and funding.

Considerable scholarly attention has been devoted to the consequences of globalisation and commodification on tertiary education policy and practice (Currie & Newson, 1998; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). Many of these studies consider the impacts of these changes on academics, on the shift from scholar to entrepreneur. In contrast with this previous body of research, the present study considers the impacts of these changes on students. It offers a preliminary exploration of some issues arising from the nexus of context and underlying processes as they are experienced and articulated by undergraduates. The question guiding the paper is as follows: How do undergraduate students experience teaching and learning at university in the current socio-cultural climate? While the psychodynamics of processes at university have been examined in greater detail elsewhere (White, 2006), the present paper specifically addresses the discursive impacts of the commodification of higher education with some reference to their connection to some of the relevant psychodynamic processes.

## Method

Seventy-nine full-time Victorian undergraduate students aged between 18 and 23 years participated in the study. They were recruited using a purposive sampling technique. Excluded from the sample were first year students, mature age students, postgraduate or honours students and international students. These categories of students were excluded because their status had the potential to raise additional and extraneous status-specific issues. For instance, first year students are dealing with the transition from school to university while mature age students are generally more highly motivated, directed and independent. Postgraduate and honours students are assigned individual supervisors on whom they can draw and with whom they meet regularly for one-on-one consultations. Finally, international students, particularly those from non-English speaking countries, are dealing with a range of cultural and linguistic challenges arising from their change of country.

Although gender has not been found to be a significant variable in perceptions of university experience (Brady & Eisler, 1999; Kerridge & Matthews, 1998), an equal number of male and female interviewees were included in the sample. The degree programs in which students were enrolled were Arts (40 students, 13 of whom were enrolled in Arts as part of a double degree), and professional degrees (39 students) such as medicine, law, business, journalism, IT, engineering and nursing. The students were enrolled in a range of five universities in Victoria, some more recently established and others with a longer history. Eighty-three percent of the students interviewed held paid jobs, with 60% of the total sample working for 11 h or more per week. A significant percentage of the sample (34%) was paying their HECS fees upfront, with 4 of these being full fee paying students.

The students were interviewed using a semi structured interview schedule. The interviews lasted between 20 min and 1 h and focused on how students experienced the university learning-teaching environment, their views about the purposes and outcomes of entering university and the role of peers. When completed, the interviews were transcribed in preparation for thematic coding. The analysis of the interviews was conducted with a view to identifying the clusters of responses that illuminated the perceptions of the experience of being an undergraduate student in the current university environment.

The analysis was conducted principally with reference to the theoretical issues guiding the study. While there were many general statements made by students about their university experience, either neutral, positive or negative, not all of these were articulated in ways that permitted analysis with reference to those theoretical issues. Bryman argues that qualitative research follows a theoretical rather than statistical logic of representativeness, stating that such research 'should be couched in terms of the generalizability of cases to *theoretical* propositions rather than to *populations* or universes' (cited in Silverman, 2000, p. 105). Furthermore, qualitative methodologists argue that analysis should be conducted in relation to 'the wider universe of social explanation in relation to which (one has) constructed (one's) research questions' (Mason cited in Silverman, 2000, p. 106). In line with this approach, the data analysis for the present study was conducted with a view to providing an intensive analysis using cases of interest, choosing them because they illustrated the feature or process constituting the focus of study in its social context (Denzin, 1994; Silverman, 2000).

## Findings

The interviews with the students reveal several key patterns in their discourse about universities. The first of these pertains to the impacts of the commodification of education on students' experience of teaching and learning at university. The second is an emerging positioning by students of themselves as 'customers'. These patterns of responses can be interpreted with reference to the changing cultural meanings and economy of higher education, as well as with reference to the underlying processes that also give these experiences meaning.

### Commodification of the teaching-learning process

The issue of low levels of confidence in universities' commitment to teaching and to providing them with optimal learning environments was mentioned by the students interviewed. Their responses suggested organisational interests of efficiency and 'the bottom line'. For some students the understanding was that the university assessed lecturers' contribution with reference to issues other than teaching and learning. This perception that undergraduate teaching had been marginalised was heightened by student placement in large classes and the associated difficulty of establishing meaningful relationships with teachers.

When you walk into a lecture theatre and there's 500 people of which one to two hundred aren't even interested—they're just sitting there as rabble... Students are perceived as a flock of sheep through university's eyes. I mean, we are just a bunch of numbers and letters. They treat you like you're in a bank or something. I think I get treated better in a bank, and that's a terrible standard to be compared to. (Male, Commerce)

In addition to the challenges this perception raises for administrators and teachers are the impacts on student attitudes to learning. As previous research has shown, students' involvement with teaching staff has been found to be positively related to the quality of their experience at university (Tam, 2002, p. 225). Moreover, large classes and more formal methods of teaching have been shown to be seen by students as ineffective (Sander, Stevenson, King, & Coats, 2000; Tam, 2002). Almost all the students spoke about how they feel they have no personal or individual identity in the organisation, and about lecturers (as opposed to tutors) not knowing their names, of their sense of being part of an anonymous mass.

The lecturers don't know you by name. They don't know how you're going. They wouldn't even know if you turned up to a lecture or not... (Female Arts)

The remarks of almost all the students in relation to these large classes and their impacts suggested that they were beginning to experience tertiary education as an impersonal efficiency driven industry. These large classes were shown to impact negatively on students' perceptions of their importance to the organisation and how in turn they believed they were perceived and valued.

I personally believe that the way universities are run today is not necessarily in the best interests of students, but rather in securing numbers to generate a wealthy university and to establish research programs and post graduate pro-

grams rather than focusing on the majority of student who come to study in undergraduate degrees. (Male, Law-Science)

In contrast to the prevailing situation, the students interviewed spoke about how they want their teachers to focus on them as people. They spoke about how they feel more involved if they are known by, or have some sense of a relationship with, their lecturers. This, they believe, contributes to a good university experience and to their motivation to learn: they will ‘try harder’ (White, 2006). The absence of a sense of connection with teachers means that when students are having trouble with a subject, they tend to either seek help from their fellow students, or to withdraw.

To be completely honest, if I have trouble with a subject, I usually don’t turn up to it. I try to avoid it if I am feeling like a failure... I tend to avoid that feeling. Often I do badly if I am intimidated by the lecturer or the class and that doesn’t make me want to ask questions. (Female Arts Education student.) I would rather talk to a friend (if I’m having trouble with a subject). I’m not scared to tell them that I don’t understand something or that I am not doing too well, whereas telling the lecturer that, I wouldn’t feel that I could or maybe that they would judge me. (Female, Education)

While adopting a strategy of independent or peer learning is not in itself of concern, the reasons students cite for choosing this option *are* of concern. That is, their view of teachers as distant and inaccessible is not a situation conducive to engendering student commitment and engagement. While universities have always adopted the practice of large lecture groups at undergraduate level, the current situation is distinctive. That is, there is confluence of the commodification of education, funding shortfalls and the relatively recent adoption of managerial and corporate models by universities. These factors provide the framework for the experience of distance and give it a meaning different from those it may have had previously.

Examined from the perspective of the psychodynamics of organisational life, this reliance on large group teaching can be seen to constitute a practice designed to manage teacher anxiety. The system overall prevents (or protects) teachers from having to confront what one writer has called students’ ‘ordinary fragilities’ as learners (Jersild, 1955). That is, large classes can be seen to preserve a structured, organisationally sanctioned distance between teachers and students, protecting teachers from having to deal at a personal level with their students in circumstances that are less than optimal for promoting student learning (White, 2006).

Furthermore, there has been a significant decline in the proportion of time given to teaching (McInnis, 1999). Some students expressed an awareness of its low priority.

(I want lecturers to) not be there because they’re there for their research—and lecturing is just a second part to what they do. Because a lot of them are there for research and some of them don’t actually care what they are saying. (Female Arts)

I had a couple of lecturers last year (where) you got the impression that they didn’t want to be there; they didn’t want to be teaching a first year subject and that comes off on the students. Their interest isn’t there so you don’t have the interest in what you are doing... (Male Arts-Law)

Students' perceptions of their situation are matched by lecturers' views of where teaching sits in the hierarchy of their responsibilities. Other studies have shown that while most academics have an interest in both teaching and research, twice the proportion who say they are primarily interested in teaching say they have a much stronger career interest in research, and the clear majority would prefer to spend more time on research if they could (McInnis, 1999, p. 50). The type of research in which academics engage is also changing. Merit now derives from success in activities with commercial potential and resource-generating capability, as well as the more traditional academic interest based publications that inform teaching (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). The former activities are less easily integrated into teaching programs.

The perceived low levels of commitment to the processes of teaching and learning stand in contrast to how students would like lecturers to perform. That is, students want 'passion' from their teachers.

My expectation of (lecturers) is to be passionate about what they teach, for them to be inspiring and for me to be inspired from them, for me to gain more of an interest and want to know more. (Male International Studies)

Being passionate about teaching was mentioned by almost every student interviewed as the quality they most valued in their lecturers.

#### Being a 'customer'

Paralleling the changes at government and organisational levels, increasing numbers of students are coming to see education as a consumable commodity to be 'packaged' and delivered by their teachers. For instances, students have come to expect lectures on the web, the provision of reading packs and access to relevant material that can be readily downloaded, and detailed specification of assessment tasks and requirements. Students speak about how lecturers should be responsible for capturing and holding their interest. While lecturers have a clear responsibility to offer appropriate guidance and support and to present their material in interesting and pedagogically sound ways, there is a passivity implied in some of the students' responses that raises questions about how students are seeing themselves as learners.

I need a bit more motivation. ...Basically, I don't want to study. I'm lazy... I want (the lecturers) to excite me and make me want to be passionate about learning that subject. ...If it doesn't grab my attention I'll just doze off, even though I might not be tired. My attention span is severely lacking in a subject that doesn't grab my attention at all. My overall experience at uni I'd have to say probably six out of ten lecturers have actually made me want to keep studying... (The others) lack charisma. (Male Arts)

It gets kind of frustrating when (the lecturers) are down the front and if they can't hold my attention. I don't understand why they should be so high and mighty and tell me off for keeping myself amused. ...I'm always the one in the class who gets picked on by a lecturer, but it's their own fault if they can't hold my attention and do an interesting lecture. (Male Accounting)

Implicit in these remarks is a positioning by students of themselves as ‘customers’. The shifting discourse from ‘learner’ to ‘customer’ was also evident in student attitudes to grades. Students are coming to regard their results and resultant degrees as private commodities for them as individual degree holders (Currie & Newsom, 1998).

We pay HECS fees, which are a lot of money going to the university, and have basically no say. We do the unit evaluation at the end (of the semester) I suppose and tell them how we thought that went, but we don’t really have much say on how things are marked or structured (Female, Education)

Also, roughly two thirds of the students interviewed felt it is acceptable to challenge or query a grade.

At the end of the day the lecturers are providing us a service and if we feel hard done by or we think there’s a lack of understanding then we have a right as students to express our concerns (about grades). (Male Arts)

Grades or marks are the tangible ‘product’ students take from their experience at university. The comments on grades made by the students interviewed were characterised by contradictions that suggested both the incompatible pairing by students of themselves as ‘customers’ on the one hand and ‘learners’ on the other, as well as the tensions of underlying related psychodynamic processes on the other (White, 2006). Grades (rather than learning) were seen by many students to be the key indicator of whether they were putting sufficient effort and time into university study. Most students aspired to grades well above a pass. The achievement of high grades was seen by students to be in part the direct result of the effort they themselves made, and in part dependent on the quality of their teachers and the marking standards of these teachers. Many felt that ‘effort’ should be rewarded in addition to quality of work submitted. However, almost all the students interviewed reported that they made minimal effort with their university work, except in the last minute. More than half the students interviewed described themselves as ‘lazy’ or not ‘good students’ who give little time to their studies. They reported that the time they allocated to study ranged from zero or five percent of the week for most of the study period and increases to 80% or 90% when assignments are to be submitted. Of those interviewed, 65% reported spending on average approximately 35% or less of their week on university work. They also reported that they do not complete weekly prescribed reading. The stance is of ‘the customer’ who has minimal obligation to engage and contribute a satisfactory outcome, and who irrespective of the contribution made, has an entitlement to satisfaction with the service being provided.

Looked at from a psychodynamic perspective, grading is an anxiety arousing process for both teachers and students. It is anxiety arousing for teachers because ultimately, explicated criteria notwithstanding, conclusively justifying a grading decision can be a difficult if not impossible task. For students, the process can be experienced as ritualised or routinised shaming. When seeking to understand students’ remarks in relation to psychodynamic processes, several possible explanations emerge (White, 2006). Students’ views suggest transference processes: namely, the fusing of dependency needs and need for affirmation with resistance to these needs and the desire to share in the authority figure’s (in this case the teacher’s) imagined omnipotence while preserving their own. That is, the comments overall can be read to reveal the contradictory struggle between the desire for *dependence* on authority,



the desire to *be* that authority while at the same time wishing to be *free* of that authority. Looked at from a socio-cultural perspective, this inherent struggle is compounded by the commodification of education with its positioning of educational outcomes as ‘products’ to be bought.

Students’ attitudes to university studies and to grades in particular have multiple origins. Among these is increased participation in the workforce by full-time students (McInnis, 2001). Research has shown that university studies are viewed as secondary to work commitments (Levine & Cureton, 1998, p. 6; McInnis, 2001). The students interviewed for this study conformed to these patterns, reporting that approximately 65% of their week was split between paid work and social activities. This leads to the second possible contributing factor, namely that undergraduate university studies most often coincide with the transition to adulthood. As a consequence, the social dimension of university life is very important to students (Levine & Cureton, 1998). For many students, university offers a time to consolidate a sense of self.

You’re so young when you get to uni. You’ve been so sheltered for all your life. You’re really building your social skills, independent of your family and independent of everything else. You’ve got to figure out what sort of person you really are and the different people that you meet at uni can really help you figure that kind of stuff out.... (Female Business)

Third, organisational factors contribute to inconsistencies in student attitudes and satisfaction with outcomes. For instance, student and teacher perceptions differ with respect to how much work is needed on assignments or assessment tasks. This results in unmet student expectations of high grades and perceptions of unfair staff and grades (Cerrito, 2000). Research has shown that students are much less likely than their lecturers to attribute good grades to factors within their control (Glass, Maxwell, McLean, & Stegers, 1997). While organisational factors such as inconsistencies in marking standards and grade inflation might contribute to this state of affairs, the recurring theme of education as a commodity is evident of many of the students’ remarks. These issues can result in expressions of dissatisfaction on both sides.

Fourth, teachers determine the subject matter, teaching mode and during classes, control who talks and when. Confirmation that learning has occurred is provided by teachers. Viewed from a psychodynamic perspective, this is a situation that has the potential to generate considerable student resentment and resistance. It is an arena for the expression of students’ struggle with dependence and independence, for the expression of the simultaneous desire for surrender and need for control (White, 2006). These are struggles of particular significance in early adulthood.

Finally, the deflection of responsibility evident in students’ remarks can be interpreted in relation to the changing context of education. The current climate legitimates a passivity evident in views held by some of the students interviewed, and brings to the fore a vocabulary and discourse that was previously unheard. That is, the educational process is emerging as one that can be regarded and spoken about as an exchange relationship in which payment results in the award of a credential. When the exchange does not occur as expected, the result is student dissatisfaction.

Students should have a say about a lot of things that are done at uni, because at the end of the day they're the client and they're paying for a service so they should have a say as to how that service should be conducted. (Male, Arts)

The transformation of the discourse of education referred to by Shumar (1997) was evident in students' expectations of service commensurate with their status as paying customers. Research has shown that students now expect the same things from university that they expect from other commercial establishments: quality, convenience, service and low cost (Coats, Stevenson, King, & Sander, 2000; Levine, 1993; Levine & Cureton, 1998). They also expect the university to fit into their lives rather than vice versa (McInnis, 2001). That is, students expect to be supplied with goods and services to satisfy their needs and/or wants. A new 'contractualism' has emerged (Yeatman, 1995) in which the perceived rights of one group (students) become the duties and responsibilities of another (teachers). This stance was articulated by several of the students interviewed.

You want lecturers to give you a good experience, especially when you are paying a fair bit of money for the subject. (Male, Arts-Law)

Sometimes the lecturers think that they can do what they want and instead of actually helping the student. The university is like a business and students are like the customer. In any other type of business relationship you do what's best for the customer because they're the customer, but in this case, it's what the lecturers want. Instead of supporting students so that they can go out there and get a job, they're just doing what is in their personal interest. (Female, Engineering and Business)

This connection between satisfaction and the provision of a service suggests the emerging positioning by students of themselves as 'customers'.

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If one pays, one is entitled to satisfaction with the service and outcome.

### **Concluding remarks**

Many of the teaching practices mentioned by the students interviewed for this study are not new. Large classes have been an enduring feature of university teaching practice. Academics have always conducted research. Teachers have always held the dual role of contributing to and judging student development. Students have always simultaneously juggled dependence on their teachers and the requirement to demonstrate independence of them. However what is new is the context and social climate within which these practices and processes occur, the shifting university culture within which undergraduate teaching is embedded. Students are now described as 'customers'; teachers have become service providers. Being a 'customer'

rather than a 'learner' is a disengaged position. It is also a position that relies on others to satisfy and to deliver (goods or services). This is consistent with a passivity and dependence that is antithetical to what we understand to be conducive to learning. The commodification of education, the positioning of the student as 'customer' and the marginalisation of undergraduate teaching are evident in students' remarks. These suggest a fundamental shift in institutional culture and strains in higher education practices arising from competing pressures. Furthermore, the marginalisation of undergraduate university studies is occurring at two levels: at the institutional level in how undergraduate teaching and learning is organised and practised, and second, in the everyday lives of students, where these studies compete with paid work and the personal exploration and development occurring at this life stage.

What has been lost in the restructuring of university education generally and in the positioning of students as customers in particular is the core role of the university as an educational enterprise. Many of the students interviewed did speak about core educational issues: the importance of being exposed to new ideas, being taught new ways of approaching problems and questions, and being challenged in ways not previously experienced. Furthermore, being a fee-paying consumer of university services was not at the forefront of all students' preoccupations. The relatively low salience of fees for many students arises in part from the fact that the fee debt can be repaid well after students have completed their studies. However, there is emerging evidence of the transformatory effect of student fees on how students regard their university experience. This changed climate is beginning to affect how students feel they are perceived by universities, and in turn, how they perceive higher education institutions in which they are enrolled. Education has become a consumable commodity for which teachers not students have primary responsibility. Accounts of core educational hopes and aspirations are matched by the sense of having to operate in a less than optimal environment that militates against student engagement in the learning process.

James (2001) makes a distinction between 'customers', which students are *not* and 'clients', which students might well be considered to be. That is, customers demand a service with outcomes satisfactory to them; engagement in the process is not a requisite. Clients, on the other hand, do engage in a process that is appropriate with respect to content, and that is realistic with respect to assessment (James, 2001). It is this sense of engagement that lies at the core of the educational enterprise. It rests in part on relationships among students, but also significantly on the quality of relationships between students and their teachers. Reprising these will require a fundamental shift in government and organisational priorities, and a systematic reconsideration of undergraduate teaching aims and practices in the university sector.

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