

# The understanding and take on the blatant instrumentalism among university students

Reflections from an early-career academic

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The increasingly obvious instrumentalism among university students presents considerable challenges to early-career academics (ECAs). Many ECAs consider themselves to be inspiring educators, but they are merely fee-earning providers of educational services in the eyes of many students. This painful contrast can significantly disempower ECAs. To maintain their well-being and prevent spiritual burnout, ECAs need to understand that the blatant instrumentalism among many university students is not of itself a disease or disaster. Instead, it is a symptom reflecting some profound structural changes in higher education. In taking on this challenge, ECAs have the opportunity to rebut the consumerism discourse in higher education while improving the efficiency and effectiveness of their teaching activities.

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Being an early-career academic (ECA), I vividly remember what I did and how I felt when I was at the same stage as my students. As a result, I often find the generational gap between them and me shockingly wide regarding the attitudes towards learning. For example, I thought classrooms were venues for seeking pleasure or virtue – reasons that venerable sages such as Confucius and Socrates claimed teaching and learning should be all about. However, I soon realised that very few students walk into my classroom with a mission to transform themselves or to improve society. Instead, many students care much more about tangible outcomes such as scores and certificates and seem to feel no need to hide their instrumental pursuits.

The blatant instrumentalism among many of today's university students presents considerable challenges to lecturers – especially ECAs. Many ECAs, freshly transformed

from being good students to inexperienced educators, are ambitious to make a difference. However, they often soon find themselves perceived as fee-earning providers of educational services in the eyes of many students. This painful contrast can significantly disempower ECAs. To maintain and improve their personal and professional well-being, I argue that ECAs should understand that the blatant instrumentalism among many of today's university students is not of itself a disease or disaster. Instead, it is a symptom reflecting some profound structural changes that have altered the norms, behaviours and power relations in the higher education sector. By taking on, rather than walking away from, this challenge, I argue that ECAs can rebut the consumerism discourse in contemporary higher education and utilise the instrumentalism among their students to improve their teaching.

In this article, reflecting on my own experience and observations, I first depict some typical symptoms of blatant instrumentalism among many of today's university students. I also explain why this instrumentalism may significantly demotivate ECAs. I then discuss the structural factors driving instrumentalism to become increasingly apparent in contemporary higher education. Finally, I offer a few personal suggestions on how ECAs can better guide and support their students in the face of blatant instrumentalism in the higher education sector.

## Blatant instrumentalism in contemporary higher education

According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, instrumentalism refers to various views that regard an activity – especially education and scientific research – primarily or exclusively as an instrument or tool for practical purposes. In the field of education, Mellin-Olsen (1981) defines instrumentalism as 'a rationale for learning' which considers 'the role school has as an instrument for future schooling and employment'. In other words, university students with a sense of instrumentalism tend to view higher education as a means for gaining material returns, such as a well-paid job or an opportunity for further education in a prestigious institute, which offers even better income and prestige in the future.

It is not necessarily problematic for students to consider education as a means rather than an end. Confucius, for example, famously claimed that learning is a 'pleasure' (Shim, 2008). On the other hand, Socrates saw learning as an essential approach in seeking virtue (Flanagan, 2006). More recently, in the field of second language acquisition, instrumental motivation is widely regarded as an essential and effective driver for good study results (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1991).

As Allan (1996) observed, 'learning experiences in higher education are becoming increasingly outcome-led'. That said, according to my observations, students demanding explicit returns for their education is not necessarily in itself a reason why many lecturers – ECAs in particular – feel demotivated in today's higher education sector. After all, isn't it good for students to know clearly about their purposes of study? What bothers many colleagues and me is that many students seem to care very little about the learning content as long as they get an easy pass or a satisfactory grade. When asked about why they take my classes, many

students seem to have no problem letting me know that they are there primarily to collect credits. Many are not shy to 'bargain' for a lighter workload, either. Some even openly claim (often through half-cooked jokes) that they are paying for the new buildings on campus or perhaps even the salary of my colleagues and me. Many ask how they can achieve a good grade, but few care how to master a set of knowledge or skills. These experiences lead me to feel that many students see their academic credits and certificates – and, to some degree, myself – as what the Chinese call 'knocking bricks' – something you pick up to knock on the door and throw away as soon as it has served its purposes.

I am never too shy to confess that I took a few courses to boost my GPA during my undergraduate years. I knew the GPA was essential for my plan of going to a top-ranking graduate school. However, to reconcile the pragmatical need of getting a high score and the moral obligation of learning, I studied very hard in those courses. I also extended my knowledge and developed new skills from those courses.

Moreover, I never asked my lecturers to tell me how to get a good grade without studying hard because I thought that was wrong. However, many of my students seem to have no problem letting me know that they join my classes primarily for grades and credits rather than knowledge and skills.

I never blame my students for being honest, but their blatant instrumentalism constantly demoralises me. I sense that my uneasy feeling is shared widely by colleagues, especially those ECAs who, like me, take teaching seriously. In an era when research is valued significantly more than teaching in many universities, prioritising teaching is a conscientious decision for ECAs (Matthews, Lodge, & Bosanquet, 2014; Young, 2006). ECAs' devotion to teaching is often driven by their sense of professional duty rather than institutional incentives. In other words, many ECAs take teaching seriously because they perceive themselves as inspiring contributors to the great enterprise of social progression and human development rather than salaried professionals providing service to earn a living. Unfortunately, according to my observations, ECAs who are initially passionate about teaching are more likely to feel disappointed and disempowered when their idealist view on teaching contrasts with their students' passive and instrumental attitudes towards learning. Thus, I argue, for these ECAs (myself included), the first step to protecting their well-being and their passion for teaching is to change perspectives. As I explain in the next section, the blatant instrumentalism

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among many of our students is not necessarily a problem in itself but a symptom of some profound structural dynamics in the modernisation of higher education.

### Not the students' fault

What, then, are the reasons behind the instrumentalism among many of today's university students? The answer, I argue, lies in the profound social changes associated with the economic developments and technological innovations since the industrial revolution. In other words, the instrumentalism in contemporary higher education is not a unique problem of our time. Instead, it is merely the latest episode in an ongoing series of socio-economic changes that have fundamentally reshaped many aspects of human life, including the missions, status, and perceptions of higher education.

For hundreds of years, education – higher education in particular – was preserved as a privilege for a tiny proportion of elites who were more or less trained to reign. Medieval higher education was primarily an intellectual apprenticeship on general reasoning, rhetoric, and argumentation (J. C. Scott, 2006). However, modern labour markets require employees to have specific skills due to scientific and technological innovations (Peck, 1989). Meanwhile, in response to 'the "technological shocks" that swept the "knowledge industry" in the late 19th and early 20th centuries', higher education has also become much more affordable and accessible – at least in industrialised societies – since the end of the Second World War (Goldin & Katz, 1999). As a result, higher education has become a default step forward for many school leavers, especially those in the developed countries. To this day, the world's major advanced economies have all witnessed the transition from elite to mass higher education – and the problems associated with this transition (P. Scott, 1995).

The emergence of student consumerism during the transformation from elite to mass university systems has been widely noted by higher education researchers and practitioners alike. Concerns have been expressed that 'attempts to restructure pedagogical cultures and identities to comply with consumerist frameworks may unintentionally deter innovation, promote passive and instrumental attitudes towards learning, threaten academic standards and further entrench academic privilege' (Molesworth *et al.*, 2009; Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005; Svensson & Wood, 2007). It has also been flagged that, in the context of consumerism, university students are more likely to become 'more directly and exclusively focused on the utilitarian value of education, and its role as a gateway to occupational opportunities and social prestige' (Delucchi & Smith, 1997). As a result, many may become obsessed with grades and take part in unethical behaviours such as cheating (Wellen, 2005). Therefore,

some scholars argue that a significant number of universities have lost their sense of identity in the face of increasing consumerism in higher education, and the apparent successes of these universities are 'excellence without a soul' (Lewis, 2006).

Another essential reason behind the blatant instrumentalism in contemporary higher education is the neo-liberal paradigm adopted by many governments to manage, evaluate, and fund universities. By introducing funding models that rely extensively on tuition fees, many universities are 'marketised' into service providers, and students are transformed into 'consumers' (Molesworth *et al.*, 2009). Moreover, consumerist narratives are widely adopted by university management. The surfacing of consumerism has transformed many people's perception of higher education, making it, in many eyes, a marketable service that universities trade for financial returns (Michael, 1997). This perception is further aggravated by the fact that many university students are now paying expansive tuition fees through loans, which require decades of work after graduation to be paid off.

Consequently, the traditional teacher-student relationship is often replaced by something similar to the seller-customer relationship, where the former fulfils the latter's demands for financial and other returns. In business, customers are always right, or so people are often told. Therefore, unsurprisingly, as methods and discourses centred on customer satisfaction are widely applied to address student experience in higher education, many students feel that they are entitled to demand getting good scores for minimal inputs and effort.

Facing such blatant instrumentalism, ECAs who are devoted teachers may experience what Terry (1997) describes as the 'spiritual burnout', quickly losing their passion for inspiring a younger generation of thinkers and doers. To avoid so, ECAs need to understand the aforementioned structural reasons behind the blatant instrumentalism in contemporary higher education. In addition, they should constantly remind themselves and their peers that students' instrumental attitudes towards learning are the results of, rather than the cause of, the changing missions and discourses of modern universities. Equipped by such an understanding, I believe ECAs can positively impact the blatant instrumentalism in contemporary higher education.

### Supporting our students in an era of blatant instrumentalism

Even the most nostalgic ECAs should understand that many changes associated with the transition from elite to mass higher education are likely to continue, whether we like it or not. Therefore, however uneasy and unpleasant the initial feelings may be, ECAs should not walk away from the blatant instrumentalism among their students because we, as future

education leaders, have obligations and responsibilities to improve the institutional environment for teaching and learning. We should acknowledge the changing perceptions of teaching and learning among university students, develop a realistic and empathetic understanding of the changing teacher-student relations, and innovate our teaching styles and strategies to utilise certain aspects of instrumentalism among our students.

Existing research has demonstrated that instrumentalism is a double-edged sword to our teaching and learning efforts. For example, replacing the traditional hierarchy with equal status between teachers and students can empower students to take more active roles in learning activities, enabling innovative pedagogies such as 'flipped classrooms', which can further motivate the 'millennial students' (Abeysekera & Dawson, 2015; Roehl *et al.*, 2013). Acknowledging instrumentalism can also motivate ECAs to pay more attention to the students' needs and expectations and explain how their teaching can benefit students in the short and long run (Harvey, 2000; Lehmann, 2009). Furthermore, acknowledging and understanding the instrumentalism among our students allows ECAs to set up explicit, straightforward, and tangible (though not necessarily measurable) goals for students at the various stages of their study. These goals are more likely to motivate our students to take better ownership of their learning when traditional learning motivations such as to seek pleasure or virtue may be viewed as too vague, too big, or too abstract to achieve,

Drawing on my own experiences and reflections, I would like to offer two pieces of personal advice to fellow ECAs on how to take on the blatant instrumentalism among our students. Firstly, we should proactively engage with and redefine the consumerism discourse in higher education. As Svensson and Wood (2007) correctly point out, 'marketing buzzwords' do not bring 'a correct description or an accurate understanding of the student-university relationship'. However, the consumerism discourse will not disappear soon even if we ECAs choose to ignore it because the government, university managements, and many other stakeholders will continue using it (Mahony & Weiner, 2019).

Engaging with the consumerism discourse and redefining it from within, on the other hand, allows us to shape the perceptions of the teaching-student relationship towards a healthier, fairer, and more productive direction. For example, whenever my students joke that they have paid for academic credits, I continue the conversation by saying that they have indeed paid for the *opportunities* of receiving quality training and supports to pursue academic credits. I often go further by comparing taking my course with joining a gym scheme – in both cases, simply paying the fee does not guarantee a satisfactory result, and success can only be obtained after substantial inputs. Likewise, as a supervisor for research

students, I also sign 'contracts' with my students. In so doing, my students know what they can expect from me and what they are expected to contribute and deliver. These 'contracts' also remind my students that an equal teacher-student relationship means both parties have to commit a similar level of input to the process of teaching and learning.

Secondly, we ECAs should always set clear goals for our students, give them explicit incentives, be fair, and reward good practice. Under the right conditions, a sense of instrumentalism can motivate students to establish a rationale for active learning (Mellin-Olsen, 1981). Instrumental students are likely to choose to invest in the means that are directly relevant to their ends. To motivate these students, we should give clear articulations on how the learning outcomes of our courses can benefit our students either immediately or down the path of their career and life progression. For example, if attending seminar groups is essential for achieving a course's learning outcomes, participation in seminar discussions should be assessed explicitly. Many students do not like or are not good at interpreting what we expect them to achieve. Rather than assuming that students will automatically grasp what is good for them, we should design and put in place an effective incentive structure. Empirical evidence has also demonstrated that students' perceptions of distributive and procedural justice in a university course are significantly correlated with their motivation concerning the course, their effective learning in the course, and their aggression toward the course instructor (Chory-Assad, 2002). I find this is particularly true for students who appear to be more instrumental. To motivate these students, ECAs need to establish a clear link between good practice and rewards.

To conclude, blatant instrumentalism among university students challenges the perception that many ECAs have on the teacher-student relationship in higher education. If unaddressed, it may lead some devoted ECAs to feel disappointed, demoralised, and disempowered. To prevent spiritual burnout, I argue, ECAs should understand that blatant instrumentalism is not the students' fault but a symptom of some profound structural changes in higher education. Furthermore, ECAs should take on rather than work away from blatant instrumentalism in contemporary higher education. In so doing, we have the opportunity to reshape and redirect the consumerism discourse in our universities and improve our teaching.

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