



## ALTERNATIVE PROVIDERS IN THE UK: UNDERSTANDING STUDENTS' SATISFACTION AND CHALLENGES

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### Abstract:

In the United Kingdom (UK) higher education policy changes, especially since 2010, focus on supporting quasi-markets by allowing greater institutional competition and student choice. The decision to open-up the higher education market to alternative providers has resulted in the remarkable growth of providers gaining access to public-backed funding. There has been very little empirical study on alternative providers and/or students within alternative provider institutions, especially in the context of students studying for a degree programme. Using both the education and marketing literature, this article examines students' perspectives on their educational experiences. This article reports on the outcomes of a small survey conducted with learners within alternative providers in the UK to capture learners' satisfaction with their educational experience.

**Keywords:** student satisfaction; quality; funding; alternative providers

### 1. Introduction

The Conservative-led Coalition Government's commitment to open the Higher Education (HE) market has led to the unsystematic expansion of alternative providers<sup>ii</sup>. In April 2011, the Coalition Government announced that alternative providers teaching on courses in 2012-13 would be able to access £6,000 in public-backed loans. Alternative providers who previously had no access to public-backed funding have been given millions of pounds of public funding.

Since 2011, the number of such providers gaining access to public-backed funding has increased in the UK. For example, the amount of tuition fee loans paid for 'designated

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<sup>ii</sup> "Alternative providers (APs) are higher education providers who do not receive recurrent funding from the Funding Councils or other public bodies and who are not further education (FE) colleges." (HESA, 2018).

courses' with alternative providers rose to £165.7 million in 2017/18 from £36 million in 2011/12 (SLC, 2018). This has generated much public discussion and scrutiny. A detailed study conducted in 2014, identified some 732 alternative providers of HE which between them had somewhere between 245,000 and 295,000 students (Shury et al. 2016).

On the other hand, the gradual distancing of the state with regards to the funding of universities has forced publicly funded (i.e., with recurrent funding from the Funding Councils or other public bodies) Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to source income from non-governmental means. In this context, HEIs have recognised that "*their course portfolio and awards have commercial value and have taken a decision to realise some of this value by marketing their courses through collaborative provision*" (Hodson and Thomas, 2001, p.102). In this article, the term collaborative provision is used for arrangements in HE for delivering learning and teaching opportunities with organisations other than the degree-awarding body (QAA: Chapter B10, 2012). Such arrangements involve HEIs with degree-awarding powers establishing partnership arrangements with alternative providers to deliver degree courses. There has been very little empirical study on alternative providers and/or students within alternative provider institutions, especially in the context of students studying for a degree programme offered in collaboration with UK HEIs, which this article focuses on. This article will report on the outcomes of a small study conducted with learners within alternative providers in the UK to capture learners' satisfaction with their educational experience.

## 2. The Service Perspective

HE could be regarded as a business-like service industry and HEIs are focusing more on meeting or even exceeding the needs of their students. The switch in funding from the general taxpayer to students has further revived the focus on understanding students' needs and their educational satisfaction. According to Oldfield and Baron (2000, p.86), higher education can be considered as a service and for Henning- Thureau et al. (2001, p.332), educational services fall within the sphere of services marketing. Education has several service characteristics: they are primarily intangible, perishable, heterogeneous, and the lecturer's teaching efforts are simultaneously produced and consumed with both lecturer and student being part of the teaching and learning process (Shank et al. 1995). Intangibility refers to the major difficulty in defining the nature of the service provided and the perishability of services means that they cannot be stored (Mazzarol, 1998). The heterogeneity of services offers challenges in terms of quality of services provided. There have been many studies conducted in the UK that, in general, examined students' perceptions of quality (Hill et al. 2003; Telford and Masson, 2005; Voss and Gruber, 2006; Angell et al. 2008), student satisfaction (Elliott and Shin, 2002; Thomas and Galambos, 2004; Douglas et al. 2006) and HE decision making (Binsardi and Ekwulugo, 2003; Maringe and Carter, 2007). Zeithaml et al. (2008) regard satisfaction as the broader concept with service quality being an element of satisfaction. However, it must be noted that in literature the focus is on perceived quality which results from the comparison of customers' service expectations and their perceptions of actual performance (Zeithaml et

al. 1990). In the context of HE, Elliot and Shin (2002, p.198) describe student satisfaction as “*the favourability of a student’s subjective evaluation of the various outcomes and experiences associated with education*”. They go on to note that the ‘campus environment is seemingly a web of interconnected experiences that overlap and influence students’ overall satisfaction (p.198). Thus, student satisfaction is a collective experience relating to campus life. Appleton-Knapp and Krentler (2006) suggest that students’ satisfaction with their educational experience should be the desired outcome in addition to learning.

Hill et al. (2003), using focus groups attempted to answer the question ‘what does quality education mean?’ Their results recognised the following four key themes: (a) quality of the lecturer; (b) students’ engagement with learning; (c) social and/or emotional support systems and (d) resources of library and Information Technology (IT). Rolfe (2002, p.174) on the other hand, found out that the lecturers at four UK universities felt that students expected a more vocational education to gain skills that gave them enhanced job prospects. Price et al. (2003) conducted a study on undergraduate student choice of university identified eight reasons: the right course, availability of computers, quality of library facilities, good teaching reputation, availability of ‘quiet’ areas, availability of areas for self-study, quality of public transport in the city and a friendly attitude towards students. Their study clearly highlights the importance of students’ perceptions of a university’s facilities on their decision to enrol. Appleton-Knapp and Krentler (2006) attempted to measure students’ expectations and the influences on student satisfaction; they identified a range of institutional factors (for example, instructor teaching style, quality of instruction, quality of feedback and class size) that have been found to influence student satisfaction. Their study has also reported on the personal factors that may have an influence on students’ satisfaction (for example, gender, temperament, and preferred learning styles). Yusoff et al. (2015) argued a case for academic staff to be approachable and accessible, as this may have an impact on student success at the educational institutions (p.97). In the context of Malaysian HEIs, Yusoff et al. (2015) identified that students expected a conducive learning environment which was described by factors such as the decoration, layout, furnishings, teaching and learning equipment, lighting, level and cleanliness and the lecture and tutorial rooms. Purgailis and Zaksa (2012) noted that academic staff, study content, readiness for labour market and acquired skills are seen as the key components of student satisfaction in HE settings. Meanwhile, research conducted in India supported this idea further and empirically proved that teaching skills, staff competence and reputation have a significant impact on student satisfaction levels (Sing and Jasial, 2020).

As Gruber et al. (2010) state studies on educational service offerings, including those that we discussed above, have always focused on understanding student satisfaction and this is particularly common in the UK, as HEIs are expected to offer their students excellent learning environments, well-supported lectures and appropriate support services, given the marketised HE landscape. However, there appears to be very little empirical evidence and/or research interest in understanding learners in alternative providers studying for degrees offered in collaboration with HEIs, even though as outlined in the introduction, student numbers in alternative providers are on the rise in

the UK, especially with learners from widening participation backgrounds. Moreover, concerns have been raised about student drop-out rates at alternative providers as compared to other HEIs (House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts, 2018). Students withdraw and/or drop-out of the courses they enrolled in for various reasons. Previous studies show that learning environment and quality of learning, including institutional resources (including online resources) play a significant role in influencing students' intentions to withdraw (Moslehpour et al. 2020)

In this paper the examination of students' perspective on their satisfaction will be largely driven by three pillars of students' service perspectives on educational offering: (1) the physical goods; (2) the explicit service; and (3) the implicit service (Douglas et al. 2006). For HEIs physical goods relate to facilities such as the lecture rooms and the overall standards of the learning environment, including the lectures, tutorials and module materials. Wilson and Cotgrave (2016) stated that "*students made more positive assessments of the teachers when the room was more orderly*" (p.256) and on the other hand students' perception of poor standards had a negative impact on their learning experience and satisfaction. The explicit service includes the knowledge and the expertise of staff, their ability to teach, the available interaction with staff and the relevance of the subject content. Gruber et al. (2010) highlight the influence of employee behaviours in the context of services provision and the significant impact these behaviours may have on the service perception (i.e., in the context of this study these refer to qualities and behaviours of lecturers). The implicit service includes friendliness and approachability of staff and their regard for students, and it may also include the ability of the university's overall environment and commitment to make the student feel comfortable. Kuh et al. (2005) stated that approachability and accessibility of the teaching staff inside and outside the class are important to attain high levels of student learnings.

### 3. Methodology

A quantitative survey was designed and used to elicit students' perspectives within the alternative HE provider context. The questionnaire contained 22 questions, in addition to questions addressing a series of demographic questions that allowed the sample population to be segmented. These included questions regarding gender, age, marital status, programme level, time in education and employment status. Previous studies on students' satisfaction within HEIs informed the design and use of questionnaire measurements, with amendments made to consider the specific alternative provider environments. Broadly, questions were subdivided into three pillars of educational service-product offerings, as described previously, and they include: (1) the physical goods; (2) the explicit service; and (3) the implicit service. Participation in the survey was entirely voluntary and anonymous.

The scope of this study was limited to the area of business and management programmes and other programmes and/or subject areas were excluded from the study, as business and management was the most popular subject area in the alternative provider sector. The survey targeted students pursuing a degree programme offered in

collaboration with HEIs but delivered by alternative providers. In total 91 useable questionnaires were returned as part of this small study representing around 63% response rate. All respondents were requested to complete the survey online and the questionnaires were administered over a 12-month period, starting from 15<sup>th</sup> of September 2019. Subsequent Covid-19 related restrictions on face-to-face contacts and visits to possible student sites have had an impact on the ability to follow up on sample respondents that led to a decrease in the number of responses.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

The purpose of this study is to determine learners' satisfaction with their educational experience at alternative providers in the UK. The student population surveyed were studying for degrees (both undergraduate/postgraduate) in business management offered by HEIs via the alternative provider(s). Understanding of the demographic profile might be necessary to make future comparisons in terms of the nature of students, in particular non-traditional nature of HE entrants at alternative providers. In the first section, respondents were asked to complete the demographic information. Table 1 shows the demographic information of the respondents. As a first analysis, Table 1 reports on the demographic mix of the sample respondents. The majority of the study respondents were mature students (nearly 73%) and were undertaking undergraduate studies with alternative provider institutions. Table 1 confirms previous large study findings (Hunt and Boliver, 2019; Shury et al. 2016) that reported on the nature of demographic characteristics of students enrolled with alternative providers where majority of them were over the age of 25 years old. Additionally, the majority (58%) of our respondents were enrolled onto complete their undergraduate studies. Altbach (2005) commenting on the global growth of private HE provision notes, private providers offer an alternative or a second opportunity to students who were overlooked by public and/or traditional HEIs for various reasons. Based on Table 1, it appears mature (nearly 73%) and non-traditional HE entrants chose alternative providers to return and/or continue their higher studies.

**Table 1:** Gender, Level of Study & Age

<b>Gender</b>	<i>n</i>
Female	34
Male	57
<b>Level of study</b>	
	<i>n</i>
Postgraduate (PG)	33
Undergraduate (UG)	58
<b>Age (in %)</b>	
	%
18-25	27.47%
26-30	14.29%
30-35	19.78%

36-40	10.99%
40-45	16.48%
45-50	6.59%
50 and above	4.40%

Three pillars of educational service-product offerings were measured through 22 questions using the 'closed' response items based on the Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Means of responses are reported in Tables 2 and 3. These are interpreted as 'above 3' being positive and 'below 3' being negative. Table 2 shows responses linked to explicit service elements and Table 3 reports on the levels of satisfaction scores linked to physical and implicit service elements.

**Table 2: Teaching and Learning - Academic Staff**

	Mean
Lecturers use in-class games to facilitate learning	3.00
Lecturers usually discuss their teaching and learning activities with us	3.21
Lecturers are available outside classroom	3.25
Lecturers provide online support in addition to the classroom teaching & learning	3.26
Lecturers use and encourage us to use VLE	3.53
Lecturers use a wide range of teaching and learning activities in class	3.54
Assessments used relate to practice	3.66
Lecturers understand our (i.e. learners) needs	3.75
Lecturers use real-life examples in their teaching	3.77
Lecturers' subject knowledge and expertise	3.88
Lecturers allow space for group work opportunities in class	4.02
Module teaching and Learning materials	4.15

**Table 3: College Facilities, Support, and Environment**

	Mean
Classroom physical environment and facilities	3.00
IT support and facilities	3.21
Issues are addressed promptly	3.33
Library facilities	3.36
Social and emotional support	3.40
Caring and supporting environment	3.43
College's support - feeling not left alone	3.57
College environment	3.58
College's flexibility to accommodate individual student needs	3.63

In Table 2, we show the results of Mean scores for our questions on explicit service elements. As stated previously, the student population surveyed were studying for a university programme via the alternative provider(s), in this context it is interesting to note that the students have rated their educational experience highly. This is again consistent with previous research (Shury et al. 2016).

The Mean scores for all teaching and learning variables is above 3. This clearly indicates that majority of the learners agreed with the items in the questionnaire. Notably, Means score for 'module teaching and learning materials' as the core component of students' overall educational experience, indicates strong agreement (i.e. Mean score > 4). This is significant given the context within which students' satisfaction is measured in this article. That is, students in this study have all been enrolled to complete a degree programme delivered by alternative providers in collaboration with HEIs. Thus, the module teaching and learning materials, are often as per the franchise and/or validation agreements, developed and readily made available by the awarding HEIs, moreover the materials are revised by the delivery academics at partner providers to complement local learners' needs and their previous learning experience. At the risk of oversimplifying, this closer focus and refinement of teaching and learning materials appear to have contributed positively to students' satisfaction with teaching and learning experience. This provides a rational for previous study findings that identified high student satisfaction scores linked to quality of teaching at alternative providers (Shury et al. 2016, p.103).

In Table 3, we report on the Mean scores that relate to implicit and physical elements of our questions, the results again show Mean scores of 3 or above showing agreement with the items in the questionnaire. Shury et al. (2016) identified in their study low agreement scores for learning resources and our study findings, as reported through Table 3 on implicit and physical elements of the service offerings show limited differences, as compared to teaching and learning scores.

**Table 4:** Mean Score per Attributes by UG/PG

Teaching and Learning - Academic staff	Mode	Median	Mean	Mean (UG)	Mean (PG)
Lecturers use in-class games to facilitate learning	2	3	3.00	3.21	2.64
Lecturers usually discuss their teaching and learning activities with us	4	4	3.21	3.10	3.39
Lecturers are available outside classroom	4	4	3.25	3.26	3.24
Lecturers provide online support in addition to the classroom teaching and learning	3	3	3.26	3.12	3.52
Lecturers use and encourage us to use VLE	4	4	3.53	3.31	3.91
Lecturers use a wide range of teaching and learning activities in class	4	4	3.54	3.43	3.73
Assessments used relate to practice	4	4	3.66	3.52	3.91
Lecturers understand our (i.e. learners) needs	4	4	3.75	3.69	3.85
Lecturers use real-life examples in their teaching	4	4	3.77	3.60	4.06
Lecturers' subject knowledge and expertise	4	4	3.88	3.74	4.12
Lecturers allow space for group work opportunities in class	4	4	4.02	3.98	4.09
Module teaching and Learning materials	4	4	4.15	4.12	4.21

In Table 4, we report on the Mean scores as per the levels of programmes (i.e. UG/PG), Mode and Median. Notably, Means score for the use of real-life examples in teaching, subject knowledge and expertise and the use of VLE were perceived more positively by PG students. Based on Table 4, the median for all categories is 4. This indicates that majority of the learners were in an agreement with the items in the questionnaire.

## 5. Conclusion

Evidence based on previous large study findings (Shury et al. 2016) and the data on public-backed funding made available to alternative providers suggest that there has been an exponential growth of alternative providers in the UK, post-2011. In the past, alternative or private providers managed to operate outside the academic and policy landscape in the UK due to two main reasons: (a) a significant number of private HE provider students were non-EU international students and the immigration system then favoured more international students; and (b) not many private HE providers were approved to access public-backed funding (Mariampillai 2014; 2019). There have been many criticisms made of the then Coalition Government and its use of public funding for alternative providers (University and College Union, 2014). However, very little have been known of the student population, their characteristics and more importantly their perspectives on their educational experiences at alternative providers. As other large studies recognised, gaining access to alternative providers and/or their learners can be challenging. There have been many studies conducted in the UK that examined student satisfaction in the context of HEIs, but there is a lack of perspectives presented with regards to students and their satisfaction with courses delivered by alternative providers. In this context, through this article we aimed to address this gap. Our findings show discernible attractiveness for alternative HE providers, especially from non-traditional HE entrants. Over 70% of our study respondents were mature students mostly returning to HE after a long gap. Notably, the student population surveyed have rated their educational experience highly, especially with measurements linked to explicit service elements.

Although this study has provided empirical evidence in understanding the educational experiences associated with learners within alternative providers, the results should not be overgeneralised. Further large-scale studies involving alternative provider students should be undertaken to understand and review policy implications in opening up the HE market for private providers and the value associated with such HE provision.

### Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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