Consumerist views of higher education and links to student wellbeing and achievement: an analysis based on the concept of autonomy as depicted in self-determination theory

Karen V. A. Morris

Department of Education and Childhood Studies, University of Winchester, Sparkford Road, Winchester, Winchester, SO22 4NR UK

ABSTRACT
Consumerist views have increased in English higher education. At the same time, the wellbeing of university students is of growing concern. Some research suggests that consumerist views amongst students link to lower wellbeing and achievement. This prompted the current paper which speculates that the concept of autonomy (as depicted in self-determination theory) might provide a useful lens through which to analyse consumerist attitudes in UK higher education and their possible effects on students. Self-determination theory posits that people are fulfilled and have optimal motivation when their basic needs for competence, relatedness and autonomy are met. These three basic needs are complementary. Each could provide a lens for examining the facilitators or barriers to optimal motivation within higher education. This paper focuses on autonomy and explores possible links between a consumerist orientation and student wellbeing and achievement in English universities. Using self-determination theory, autonomy-enhancing ways of framing policy and managing the student experience and teaching and learning are outlined. The concept of autonomy offers a useful framework for potential enhancement of student motivation and wellbeing at policy, institutional and programme levels. Further empirical work could usefully explore and refine the hypotheses advanced.

Introduction
In English higher education, as elsewhere, not all students are flourishing. There are widespread concerns about students’ mental health and wellbeing. Whilst the prevalence of mental health problems and the need for greater support is being recognised across all ages and backgrounds in the UK (e.g. Independent Mental Health Task Force 2016), the issue is particularly acute within the university student population (Departments of Health, & Education 2017; Royal College of Psychiatrists 2011; Universities UK 2015). Thorley (2017) reports that ‘levels of mental illness, mental distress and low wellbeing among students in higher education in the UK are increasing, and are high relative to other sections of the population’. There are also well-documented concerns about achievement gaps for various groups of students (Advance HE 2019). The reasons students fail to flourish will be many and varied. This paper considers the possibility that lack of autonomy may be one amongst many factors.

The rise of consumerist views of higher education has been widely noted (e.g. Gokcen 2014; Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion 2009; Temple et al. 2016; Tomlinson 2014, 2017, 2018). Consumerist views reflect ideas of education as a purchased service where the purchaser (student) is entitled to
a high quality ‘product’ (degree). Consumers choose which goods to buy and their brand loyalty depends on continuing to receive what they want. Activity as a consumer concerns making choices and demanding high standards. Interactions with the producer/supplier carry the undercurrent that customers who are not getting good value will take their business elsewhere. These discourses are apparent in English higher education although evidence suggests that a minority of students regard themselves primarily as consumers in their interactions with their universities. Tomlinson (2017), in a study involving 68 students across 7 UK institutions, found that slightly under 25% of the sample had ‘active service-user attitudes’ and approximately 25% ‘resisted consumerism’. The majority indicated some resonance of ideas such as ‘value for money’ and expectations of efficiency, accuracy of information and quality of teaching but also acknowledged their personal responsibility for engaging actively to derive full benefit from university.

Gokcen (2013) found a negative correlation between students’ consumer scores and their subjective wellbeing scores (p < .01). To explore this further, Gokcen (2013) classified students scoring below the mean as low on consumerism and those above as high. Wellbeing scores between these groups differed significantly (p < .004), with higher consumers reporting lower wellbeing. Bunce, Baird, and Jones (2017) reported that a ‘higher consumer orientation’ towards their degree was associated with lower academic performance by university students. These findings are correlational with both Gokcen (2013) and the Bunce, Baird, and Jones (2017) studies having a single point of data collection, thus rendering the direction of any putative causation unclear. Students experiencing low wellbeing or low achievement may become concerned about the cost of an experience they are not enjoying and adopt a consumer orientation. This proviso must be borne in mind. It was, however, the possibility of causal links between consumer orientation and reduced wellbeing and achievement that prompted the analysis reported here as it resonated with established empirical links between lack of autonomy and poorer wellbeing and achievement in SDT research (e.g Deci and Ryan 2008; Orsini, Binnie, and Wilson 2016; Teixeira et al. 2020).

There is a great deal of empirical work demonstrating links between quality of motivation as defined in SDT and both wellbeing and achievement in various populations. (e.g. Deci and Ryan 2000; Reeve 2002 for findings in the educational sphere; Teixeira et al. 2020 for health-related interventions). Concentrating on one element of higher education, ‘health professions education’, Orsini, Binnie, and Wilson (2016) published a systematic review of the ‘determinants and outcomes of motivation in health professions education’ based on SDT. They concluded that autonomous motivation is positively correlated with wellbeing (e.g. life satisfaction, adaptation to university, positive emotions) and learning/achievement (e.g. academic engagement, ‘deep’ learning strategies, academic performance).

This paper first provides some background to self-determination theory, followed by detailed consideration of autonomy. The development of consumer attitudes to higher education in England is then outlined, analysing changes at the policy, institutional and programme/tutor levels through an autonomy lens. Practical strategies to promote student autonomy at each level are indicated. Finally, the potential to explore the analysis empirically is outlined.

**Self-determination theory**

Self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan 2000, 2002) is a psychological theory of motivation. The theory posits three universal needs – relatedness, competence and autonomy- and proposes that goals lead to fulfilment and flourishing to the extent that they meet these universal needs. The three basic needs can be likened to a three-legged stool: all three legs are needed and must be of equal length for the stool to balance. Not all motivations meet basic needs and so not all goals link to health and fulfilment. In the academic sphere, an example would be a student whose true interest and passion lie in artistic endeavours but who studies law through family pressure and precedent and a perceived need for a high-income career. The external goals of pleasing family and attaining wealth are interpreted within SDT as substituting for basic needs satisfaction, with negative effects
on wellbeing in the long term, even if the law degree, family approval and wealth are attained. Self-determined/autonomous motivation – where individuals freely choose a goal or activity primarily for the interest and pleasure of the challenge it offers – is the form of motivation that best meets the basic need for autonomy and so enables people to flourish. Being self-determined/ autonomous, rather than controlled by external factors, is at the heart of SDT.

Self-determination theory regards wellbeing and healthy, autonomous motivation as strongly interlinked (Deci and Ryan 2008; Ryan, Huta, and Deci 2008). In SDT, the reasons why someone strives for a goal determine the quality of motivation (Deci and Ryan 2000, 2002). Emphasis is on the quality of motivation rather than the quantity or strength of motivation. Drives that contribute to meeting the three basic psychological needs are considered healthy and fulfilling.

The three basic psychological needs within SDT hold equal importance and complement one another. Arguably, the claim could be made that English universities are attempting to address the needs of competence and relatedness but that autonomy has received less explicit attention. Autonomy is therefore more fully explored here.

**Competence**

Producing academically competent graduates is the core business of universities and they have invested considerably in support services and curriculum design to help students develop academic skills (Turner et al. 2017). Initiatives to build students’ competence include bridge programmes (Pennington et al. 2017; Strayhorn 2011), summer schools (Sutton Trust, n.d.) and foundation years (Braisby 2019).

**Relatedness**

The importance of relatedness, a sense of belonging, has been increasingly recognised in universities, especially as diversity in the student body increases (e.g. Bliuc et al. 2011; Humphrey and Lowe 2017; Ostrove and Long 2016; Slaten et al. 2016; Thomas 2012). In a comprehensive report for the ‘What Works? Student Retention and Success’ programme, Thomas (2012) examines projects designed to nurture student belonging and engagement.

**Autonomy**

Núñez and León (2015), working within an SDT framework, define autonomy as ‘a form of voluntary action, stemming from a person’s interest and with no external pressure’. Reeve and Cheon (2021) state that ‘SDT’s central explanatory concept is the psychological need for autonomy’. In SDT, autonomy contrasts with control. Controlled actions are chosen to fit in with other people’s expectations or to meet an external goal. If students are interested in a subject and their goal is to increase their knowledge and understanding, their motivation is autonomous. If they are primarily concerned with attaining a certain grade category, and seek shortcuts and hints to do this, their motivation is less autonomous and more controlled.

A basic distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation is well-known but SDT offers a more detailed taxonomy of motivation as indicated in Table 1.

Self-determination theory divides extrinsic motivation into four types: external regulation, where rewards and punishments control behaviour; introjected regulation, where individuals remain ‘controlled’ by purposes such as avoiding shame/embarrassment; identified regulation, where an activity’s value is recognised but engagement is more for its benefits than enjoyment; and integrated regulation, where the rationale for an activity is adopted and it becomes enjoyable and virtually indistinguishable from intrinsic motivation (Deci and Ryan 2002). In SDT, the key distinction is not between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation but rather between
Table 1. Self-determination theory and motivation.

| Quality of motivation | Example                                                                 | Example                                                                 |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Increasing self-    | Intrinsic motivation – interest, challenge and wonder drive behaviour    | I am fascinated by this topic and can’t wait to learn more’            |
| determination ↑      | Integrated motivation – the match between the individual’s values and the | I admire this tutor’s published work so although I’m not finding the initial concepts easy, I’m going to trust that perseverance will eventually give me the buzz of mastering the material.’ |
| Autonomous           | goal of the behaviour drives continued participation.                    |                                                                          |
| motivation            |                                                                          |                                                                          |
| Identified motivation | – at times when the interest is not there, the behaviour and what it     | This is known to be the hardest course in my area of interest and I’ve always wanted to be amongst those that have it on their cv, so I’ll maintain the effort. |
|                       | represents is so valued by the individual that they continue to perform it. |                                                                          |
| Controlled            | Introjected motivation – internal rewards and punishments drive behaviour (e.g. I’ll do this so I won’t feel guilty) | ‘I know I should be capable of passing this subject so I’ll be mad with myself and embarrassed if I fail’. |
| motivation            |                                                                          |                                                                          |
| External motivation   | – external rewards and punishments drive behaviour                       | ‘This is a compulsory course and I’ll be thrown off the programme if I don’t pass’ |
| Amotivation           | Amotivation – person lacks drive, sees no link between behaviour and outcomes | ‘I don’t know where to start or what to do on this course. I’ve spent ages already and got nowhere’. |

self-determined/autonomous and less self-determined/controlled motivation. The model includes amotivation, referring to the absence of acting intentionally, feeling unable to achieve a desired outcome or according it no value.

Table 1 provides an overview of these types of motivation, with examples related to university students. ‘Identified’ motivation is defined by Koestner and Losier (2002) as motivation in which ‘people accept the value of an activity as their own so that they can more easily assimilate it with their core sense of self’. Identified motivation deserves particular mention because Koestner and Losier (2002) report some evidence that it may be the type of motivation most linked to longterm achievement and wellbeing. These authors speculate that, whilst intrinsic motivation is important, success in any sphere requires some uninteresting effort, such as revising for academic examinations, so students who endorse these aspects (thus exhibiting ‘identified motivation’) are well-placed to flourish (Koestner and Losier 2002).

A further important distinction within SDT’s concept of autonomy is between control and structure. Control reduces autonomy and is not limited to overt control such as high stakes testing and rigid progression requirements. Pressure to behave in a certain way – even if well-intentioned and even if it involves rewards – can also reduce autonomy (Deci and Ryan 2008). Expected contingent rewards can undermine intrinsic motivation (e.g. Lepper, Greene, and Nisbett 1973; Deci, Koestner, and Ryan 1999). If students are beginning to access academic articles to support their written work, and finding this interesting and informative, a tutor who sets a criterion that students can only pass the module by bringing a given number of articles to share at the seminars,
may inadvertently reduce the number of articles read by initially keen students. It was a counterintuitive empirical finding of this type that stimulated the development of SDT and the key role of autonomy within it.

Structure refers to information or support that clarifies requirements and is autonomy-enhancing (Núñez and León 2015). Clear information on the timetable for the programme and its assessments would be an example of useful structure, as would timely provision of reading lists.

Autonomous motivation is associated with benefits to wellbeing and deep engagement. characterised by flexibility, vitality and perseverance (Deci and Ryan 2002). Projects and changes deriving from SDT aim to move people towards self-determined motivation. The amount of autonomy experienced in a given context is influenced both by the degree of autonomy an individual is used to expressing in similar situations (which will have helped form the individual's internalisation/regulatory style) and, by the balance of autonomy-enhancing or -diminishing aspects of the current situation (Deci and Ryan 2000). Promotion of autonomy is more likely to be successful when the other two universal needs – relatedness and competence- are met. Applying this in higher education, it will always be important to ensure students have the prerequisite skills for a topic (one aspect of taking account of competence needs) and to promote respectful and trusting relationships between lecturers and students (an aspect of responding to relatedness needs). In terms of autonomy, as already indicated, if people’s motivation is ‘identified’ or ‘integrated’ (such well-internalised forms of extrinsic motivation that they are classified as autonomous), SDT holds that they share many of the benefits of intrinsic, fully self-determined motivation. The way a sector, institution and individual lecturers convey aspects of higher education can all influence whether students adopt self-determined/autonomous motivation towards their studies.

Autonomy-enhancing environments are those that provide a clear rationale for activities, choice, optimal challenge and appropriate structure (Kusurkar, Croiset, and Ten Cate 2011; Ten Cate, Kusurkar, and Williams 2011). Table 2 indicates some key features of autonomy- enhancing or -diminishing

| Autonomy Diminishing Learning Environments                                                                 | Autonomy Supportive Learning Environments                                      |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Students are present because they feel it is necessary for attaining an external goal                      | Students are present of their own volition and because of inherent interest in the programme |
| Power features inappropriately in relationships (whether this be that the institution, or the student consumer, is always right) | Respectful relationships                                                                 |
| Feelings do not feature – following a carefully designed curriculum is key                                | Feelings acknowledged and responded to by e.g. building on topics that spark interest and which are enjoyed, ‘normalising’ feelings of challenge and discouragement. Choice allowed |
| No choice                                                                                                 | Rationale provided for activities                                                 |
| Activities required but no rationale given                                                               | Occasional misunderstandings and errors expected as part of learning experiences. |
| Reward systems instead of a rationale                                                                    | Encourage risk taking and experimentation with ways of studying and learning     |
| Pressure to be right e.g. ethos or system where grades are of paramount importance                        | Students can take some initiative and influence the programme                    |
| Highly directive and discouraging of alternative approaches.                                             | Active participation in learning encouraged                                       |
| Tutor led content, ‘closed’ questions and activities. Little development of content or teaching approaches over time. | Students trusted to take responsibility for their own learning. Structure through choice of readings, clear deadline. |
| Highly specified work programme with specified readings, tight timetable, monitoring of attendance and use of virtual learning environment, frequent deadlines | Optimum challenge                                                                 |
| Lack of challenge in material or material over-challenging                                               | Feedback informative and constructive                                             |
| Feedback judgemental only (grades) or negative                                                           | Provide ‘structured freedom’- guidance without strait-jacketing.                |
| Either very tightly structured or completely unstructured                                                |                                                                                  |

Table 2. Environments that diminish or promote autonomy [based loosely on Kusurkar, Croiset, and Ten Cate (2011), Ten Cate, Kusurkar, and Williams (2011)].
environments in a higher education context. This sets the scene for ideas that will be developed in the next section where the development of consumer attitudes in English universities is analysed through an autonomy lens.

Contextual factors will not have uniform effects. Individuals’ interpretations of situations influence the extent to which they integrate their own interests and desires with those expected in the university environment and in so doing succeed in satisfying their needs for autonomy, relatedness and competence. The analysis of contextual features through an autonomy lens presented in the next section makes use of an autonomy-enhancing to autonomy-diminishing continuum as a way to reflect on promoting student autonomy. The analysis is underpinned by the hypothesis that greater autonomy is likely to encourage wellbeing and achievement, a hypothesis that, as noted earlier, aligns with established experimental results.

The ‘marketisation’ of English higher education

This section outlines how policy development has resulted in major changes in how universities are viewed by society, how they relate to one another and to their students. It tracks the emergence of ‘student as consumer’ discourses and considers how best to promote student autonomy within a marketised system.

Higher education policy and the emergence of marketisation

The discourse around student consumer orientation is situated in the wider context of many policy and social changes in English higher education in the last 20–30 years. Universities are open to many more people than in the past. Higher education participation increased by 93% between 1988 and 1996 (Canales 2013). The 1992 Further and Higher Education Act granted university status to the former polytechnics. The Dearing Report (1997) stated as a key principle that ‘there should be maximum participation in initial higher education by young and mature students and in lifetime learning by adults, having regard to the needs of individuals, the nation and the future labour market’. When numbers participating in higher education were small, public funding was feasible but the expansion of participation required much more money than the government was able or willing to provide. A main purpose of the Dearing Report was to solve the urgent funding crisis (Barr and Crawford 1998) and to do so in a way that would continue to widen participation. Amongst the solutions proposed, the report (Dearing 1997) argued that ‘there is a strong basis for seeking an increased contribution from graduates in work towards the cost of their higher education’. Fee paying by English students began in 1998. Initial costs of £1,100 per annum (p.a.) rose to £3000 p.a. in 2006 and to £9,000 p.a. from 2012.

From 1997 UK government policy documents reflect a move away from referring to universities’ overall contribution to the economy and re-interpreting this in the form of each graduate’s individual gain from achieving a degree. At a policy level, the benefit to the individual increasingly became framed in instrumental terms (employability and future salary) rather than self-development terms (acquiring the ways of thinking and the knowledge within a chosen academic discipline) (Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion 2009). Dearing (1997) urged universities to ‘encourage the student to see him/herself as an investor in receipt of a service and to seek, as an investor, value for money and a good return from the investment’. This epitomises a consumer approach, as does the inclusion of university services in the provisions of the Consumer Rights Act, 2015. Table 3 provides an overview of policy development relevant to the increasing marketisation of English higher education.

The government sees a consumer identity as empowering students, as placing them ‘at the heart of the system’ (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2011). Improving the information available to students and offering them informed choice have been part of policy. Various initiatives allow comparison between institutions and programmes e.g. since 2005, the
Table 3. Changes in higher education in England relevant to increasing marketisation of the sector.

| Year | Event | Description |
|------|-------|-------------|
| 1992 | Further and Higher Education Act | Former polytechnics became universities |
| 1997 | Dearing Report | Government and universities should 'encourage the student to see him/herself as an investor in receipt of a service and to seek, as an investor, value for money and a good return from the investment' (Dearing 1997, 22.19) |
| 1998 | Teaching and Higher Education Act | Tuition fees £1,100 p.a. |
| 2003 | White paper *The future of Higher Education* | Proposed |
|      |       | - National Student Survey (NSS) (implemented 2005) |
|      |       | - Variable fees of up to £3000 |
| 2004 | Higher Education Act | Introduced variable fees (up to £3000) in English universities (implemented from 2006) |
| 2009 | 2009: White Paper 'Higher Ambitions: The Future of Universities in a Knowledge Economy' | Proposed |
|      |       | - closer links between universities and employers’ knowledge of the skills required for the economy |
|      |       | - more information for students. ‘The burden of financing higher education will need to be more equally shared between employers, the taxpayers, and individuals’ (BIS, 2009:22). |
| 2010 | The Browne Review *Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education* | Proposed |
|      |       | - reducing the public funding for university teaching and replacing it with increased tuition fees. |
|      |       | - removing the ‘cap’ on the number of full-time students at institutions |
|      |       | - Universities to publish Key Information Sets (KIS) (implemented 2012) |
| 2010 | Student protests | Demonstrations in London by students from all over England. Students occupy Conservative party headquarters. |
| 2011 | White paper *Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System* | Tuition fees at up to £9,500 p.a. |
|      |       | Increasing competition between institutions |
|      |       | Improving student experience |
| 2015 | Consumer Rights Act | Students included under the Consumer Rights Act (CRA) |
| 2015 | Green Paper ‘Higher education: teaching excellence, social mobility and student choice’ | Proposed |
|      |       | - Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) linked to fees |
|      |       | - New providers of higher education |
| 2016 | Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) introduced | Ratings published to inform student choice |

National Student Satisfaction Survey (NSS); since 2012, Key Information Sets (KIS) – data on the contact hours and types of assessment for every programme; and, piloted from 2016, the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), which grades institutions using metrics including graduate employment or further study.

Recent English higher education policy thus provides students with more comparative information about universities and accords them informed choice. This policy could be autonomy-enhancing. However, some of the framing of policy diminishes autonomy. Presenting the payment of fees as a direct investment in a student’s future earnings replaces an autonomy-enhancing view of studying a subject for its interest and the personal development of rising to the intellectual challenge with ideas more akin to purchasing a commodity. Discussions about varying the fee structure for degrees by subject to reflect the future earnings of graduates (UK Government 2018) also portray degrees as commodities. A more autonomy-enhancing portrayal of fees is as means of accessing the opportunity to study a degree. Emphasis should be on choosing a subject that is intrinsically motivating and appropriately challenging if students are to have a successful and fulfilling experience. The message that degrees confer both subject-specific and generic skills (such as analysing and critiquing) and that many career paths are not tied to particular degree subjects, might enhance autonomy in subject choice.

Table 4 captures ways that policies relating to fees, employability, value, choice and widening participation might be presented to enhance or diminish autonomy.
Table 4. Framing policy to influence students’ autonomy.

| Framing that diminishes autonomy                                                                 | Issue                        | Framing that enhances autonomy                                                                 |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Borrowing to pay for a commodity (degree). Acquisitive. The investment should more than pay for itself in future earnings. | Fees loans                   | Fees as a necessary way of making a high-quality learning and personal development experience accessible to all with a strong interest in learning. Inquisitive. Opening up opportunities. |
| Choose the degree that leads to the best paid job on graduation.                                | Employability                | Choose the degree that you find most interesting. Any degree should develop your critical thinking skills and offer a host of opportunities that you can enjoy now as well as creating future possibilities. |
| Value defined in terms of contact hours and future earnings.                                    | Value for Money              | Quality of taught experience more important than quantity. Is the teaching intellectually stimulating and does it prepare students to engage in fruitful independent study? Is it a transformative experience? |
| Students can vote with their feet, choosing universities that offer the types of courses, forms of delivery and outcomes they want. ‘[S] he who pays the piper, calls the tune’. Going to university is essential to avoid being at a huge disadvantage in the jobs market. | Competition between Universities/Student Choice | Explore options thoroughly and find the best fit with academic interests, entry qualifications (competence) and fellow students with shared interests (relatedness). Universities are open to all and are a positive option for those excited by learning and keen to challenge themselves intellectually. It will not necessarily be the best option for all school leavers. Some will take other routes and there is always the possibility of doing a degree programme later. |

Higher education institutions and students as consumers

A range of factors, including widening participation, demographic trends, publication of comparative statistics and the lifting of government controls on student numbers, has resulted in competition between universities to attract applicants. Income to sustain an institution depends on sufficient student numbers. At senior management level, the importance of appealing to students as consumers now underpins much decision making (Temple et al. 2016). Ways in which institutions have reacted to the competition to attract students include: centralisation of administrative functions (Temple et al. 2016); slick branding and marketing campaigns (Lomas 2007; Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion 2009; Tomlinson 2017); canvassing student opinions regularly and being proactive in addressing concerns (Lomas 2007); reacting rapidly to the perceived market in terms of programmes on offer, axing those with low recruitment and using market research to inform programme development (Lomas 2007); and standardisation across modules and programmes e.g. standard contact hours, set timescales for providing feedback to students (Temple et al. 2016).

The approach of most higher education institutions can be summarised as led by customer satisfaction concerns. There is a danger that an extremely heavy emphasis on this approach neglects the development of student (and lecturer) autonomy. With regard to student recruitment, there was a period when unconditional offers and/or various material inducements (e.g. a mobile device for each student) were made to encourage students to confirm acceptance at particular institutions. Such inducements, whilst superficially attractive, may exert an autonomy-diminishing influence as they are essentially means of trying to influence applicant behaviour to the benefit of an institution. Within the popular press they were referred to as ‘bribes’ (e.g. Robinson 2020). Indeed, ‘conditional unconditional offers’, a practice of making an unconditional offer on the condition that the student place the offering institution as first choice, were prohibited by the Office for Students from July 2020 until at least September 2021. The Office for Students (2020) said such offers ‘put pressure on students and distort their decision making’.
If institutions adopt a stance that the customer (student) is always right and are driven by fear that any negative social media coverage may result in loss of custom (student applications), the scene is set for the types of defensive controls over processes and practices that SDT suggests may diminish autonomy. Temple et al. (2016) report an example of one institution imposing standard contact hours for every module. As a result, contact hours were reduced in some modules where tutors designing the modules recognised a need for considerable contact to deliver the module successfully. Hours were increased in other modules where lecturers had felt that students could cope with a greater degree of guided independent reading. Providing and discussing rationales for differences between modules tends to be more autonomy-promoting than centralised standardisation.

The ‘branding’ and marketing of universities is big business. Autonomy-supportive marketing would aim to attract students who will flourish through attending a particular institution as opposed to attracting as many as possible, irrespective of the ‘fit’ between the individual and the institution. The question arises of whether universities should be more discerning about accepting students who are likely to flourish i.e. students who understand what study involves and are keen to embrace the challenge and who have the underpinning competencies and feel comfortable in the environment and amongst the fellow students of an institution. Marketing which accurately represents what an institution has to offer and what students need to succeed is the most likely to recruit students who will flourish there.

Many institutions monitor student attendance at lectures and seminars, indeed the government requires this for international students on ‘Tier 4’ visas. If students are required to sign in and are aware that statistics are monitored and may result in consequences for those whose attendance fails to reach certain thresholds, attendance monitoring can be regarded as attempted control and so diminish autonomy. A highly engaged student who has looked at the pre-seminar material and is confident she understands it, but who is short of time for reading a relevant advanced article that she has just located, might prefer to retain the autonomy to prioritise her reading over the seminar and interpret the attendance monitoring an obstacle. Heavy emphasis on an attendance policy can also result in students equating full attendance with guaranteed achievement, regardless of engagement within and beyond the taught sessions. This, too, can diminish autonomy and responsibility for learning. An approach where attendance is expected and where taught sessions are designed to engage and extend students but portrayed as only the most visible part of the student’s engagement, may promote greater autonomy.

Table 5 captures these and further examples of ways that institutions might present information to enhance or diminish autonomy.

### Academic staff and the student as consumer

With students cast as consumers, academic staff become service providers. Many regard this as highly problematic (e.g. Tomlinson 2014, 2017, 2018; Williams 2013) seeing an ideological mismatch between a market model and what many academics understand as the purpose of higher education. Degree level study is intended to be transformational, to challenge and stretch students, enriching their outlook in ways that may not be apparent to them or fully appreciated for some time (Lomas 2007; Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion 2009). Tomlinson (2018) argues that the marketisation of higher education results in pressures away from inquisitive learning and towards acquisitive study. The vision of education as transformation accords student/customer satisfaction a more minor role than does a model of higher education as a marketised commodity.

Temple et al. (2016) provide examples of lecturers who feel that central standardisation of some aspects of curriculum design and delivery has not been in the students’ interests. Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion (2009) argue that the marketisation of higher education has ‘pedagogically constrained’
teaching. Negative anecdotal accounts of student consumerism abound, for example students expressing disappointment to lecturers about grades when they had ‘paid so much money’ (Anonymous Academic 2015).

King and Bunce (2020) suggest an unfortunate predicament whereby national and institutional policies on the one hand, and student attitudes on the other, converge on academics. The result is reduction of academics’ own autonomy, impacting on their creativity and freedom to teach in a way that meets students’ basic psychological needs.

Tutors should, of course, model the competence assumed in their job description and be timely with preparation, teaching and marking. Students should be able to take such competence for granted and not have to adopt a consumer stance to address shortcomings in these areas. Discussions about aspects of delivery can then be more meaningful and tutors can consider student feedback and decide whether to respond by changing behaviour or providing a rationale for current practice.

There is a balance for programmes to reach in respect to the way they respond to student requests for clarity and direction regarding assessments. Some structure is necessary and desirable, but a degree programme should build student autonomy and provide challenge. Whilst many English students seem to crave direction and step-by-step guidance, possibly because they have been taught this way at school, acceding too much to such requests may not only infantilise students (Williams 2013) but inadvertently threaten their autonomy, even damaging some students’ intrinsic motivation (Ten Cate, Kusurkar, and Williams 2011). Dialogue between lecturers and students where all can express views and be listened to is important but the agenda, apparent as the National Student Survey has increased in importance, that students should automatically be pleased/appeased, can be unhelpful. It should not be assumed that students are unwilling to engage in robust debate about teaching practices. Adopting a default placatory attitude may be doing them a disservice.

Table 5. Influencing autonomy at the institutional level.

| Framing that diminishes autonomy | Issue | Framing that enhances autonomy |
|---------------------------------|-------|-------------------------------|
| Videos and other media conveying university as a fun, exciting experience – almost a constant party or adventure holiday – with minimal reference to study. Material incentives to join certain programmes. NSS results matter as comparative ratings affect recruitment so students will be constantly asked for feedback and programmes required to produce action plans to address them. ‘You said . . . we did . . .’ approach from business. Entry is possible with significantly lower qualifications than used to be the case and Student Services can provide support. Learning is broken into small, continuously assessed ‘chunks’. Learning Outcomes are very clearly specified. Follow the rules and success is assured. Students are required to attend and, if they fail to do so, have themselves to blame if they do not do well (plus the implication that those who do attend, ‘deserve’ good grades). | Advertising | Seeking Student Views | Student voice is important, so too are other voices including those of tutors and managers. Respectful discussion involves all parties being able to contribute and to provide rationales in support of their views. No one party has automatic right on its side. Entry qualifications properly reflect the levels of competence that allow students to participate and benefit fully from the programme. Programme Design | Student voice is important, so too are other voices including those of tutors and managers. Respectful discussion involves all parties being able to contribute and to provide rationales in support of their views. No one party has automatic right on its side. Entry qualifications properly reflect the levels of competence that allow students to participate and benefit fully from the programme. Programme Design | Student voice is important, so too are other voices including those of tutors and managers. Respectful discussion involves all parties being able to contribute and to provide rationales in support of their views. No one party has automatic right on its side. Entry qualifications properly reflect the levels of competence that allow students to participate and benefit fully from the programme. Programme Design |
| Attendance Monitoring ||

King and Bunce (2020) suggest an unfortunate predicament whereby national and institutional policies on the one hand, and student attitudes on the other, converge on academics. The result is reduction of academics’ own autonomy, impacting on their creativity and freedom to teach in a way that meets students’ basic psychological needs.

Tutors should, of course, model the competence assumed in their job description and be timely with preparation, teaching and marking. Students should be able to take such competence for granted and not have to adopt a consumer stance to address shortcomings in these areas. Discussions about aspects of delivery can then be more meaningful and tutors can consider student feedback and decide whether to respond by changing behaviour or providing a rationale for current practice.

There is a balance for programmes to reach in respect to the way they respond to student requests for clarity and direction regarding assessments. Some structure is necessary and desirable, but a degree programme should build student autonomy and provide challenge. Whilst many English students seem to crave direction and step-by-step guidance, possibly because they have been taught this way at school, acceding too much to such requests may not only infantilise students (Williams 2013) but inadvertently threaten their autonomy, even damaging some students’ intrinsic motivation (Ten Cate, Kusurkar, and Williams 2011). Dialogue between lecturers and students where all can express views and be listened to is important but the agenda, apparent as the National Student Survey has increased in importance, that students should automatically be pleased/appeased, can be unhelpful. It should not be assumed that students are unwilling to engage in robust debate about teaching practices. Adopting a default placatory attitude may be doing them a disservice.
Table 6 captures some ways that programmes and tutors might interact with students to enhance or diminish autonomy.

Whilst SDT suggests that enhancing autonomy supports wellbeing, the intention is not to imply that there should be total adoption of the autonomy-enhancing aspects outlined in the sections above and complete rejection of the autonomy-diminishing aspects. An element of balance may be appropriate, for example, although choosing a degree subject mainly for its inherent interest is autonomy-enhancing, students might be unwise to totally disregard future career prospects. The balance to be struck may vary for different students and different programmes.

From theory to empirical evidence

This article has used SDT, and in particular the aspect of autonomy, to analyse ways that the messages arising from the marketisation of English higher education might be presented in ways that are relatively autonomy-enhancing for students. Based on established SDT findings in a variety of fields, the argument is made that greater student autonomy should be associated with greater wellbeing and achievement. At present, the analysis is based solely on theory.

One of the strengths of SDT is that the hypotheses it generates can be tested. As yet there appears to be no data set combining English students’ feelings of autonomy, their consumer orientation and their wellbeing and achievement. Various measures exist that could be used or adapted to tap these aspects. The research would need to take measures longitudinally at the start and at a series of points during students’ university experience. Qualitative comments from students would be important to enrich quantitative information from measures such as the Academic Motivation Scale (Vallerand et al. 1992).

Evaluation of initiatives within universities to promote autonomy could probably best be approached by qualitative studies investigating feelings of autonomy and general wellbeing and, whilst being focused on students, could usefully collect data from lecturers about both their perceptions of student autonomy and their own autonomy.
Conclusions

Self-determination theory offers lenses that suggest how higher education policy and practice can best promote student flourishing. This was illustrated with a focus on the marketisation of higher education in England and possible effects on student autonomy. One lens – autonomy – was the focus in this paper. Use of all three lenses – autonomy, competence and relatedness – could provide a useful and constructive means of analysing a wide range of issues that potentially impact on student flourishing.

Limitations

This article focused on using SDT to consider autonomy-enhancing or -diminishing ways of presenting current policy. Self-determination theory could be used to guide policy creation and this might be even more constructive.

Psychological approaches that depend on ‘nudging’ people towards particular perceptions, albeit ones with evidence of being beneficial, are sometimes criticised for taking attention away from structural inequalities that should be addressed (Ikizer and Blanton 2016). The intention of this article is not to detract from the recognition of social justice issues in higher education, but to suggest constructive ways of addressing the current situation which could complement activism for change.

The analysis of autonomy in higher education and its links with wellbeing and achievement was driven by theory but the particular strength of SDT is best realised when hypotheses are rigorously tested empirically.

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Notes on contributor

Karen V. A. Morris had careers as a primary teacher and an educational psychologist before joining the University of Winchester as a Senior Lecturer in Education in 2010. Karen led the FdA Childhood Studies for 10 years, working mainly with mature, workbased students. She now leads the professional doctorate in Education. Whilst working at the University of Winchester, Karen completed a doctorate (DEdPsy) at UCL. Karen’s research interests include self-determination theory and child development, children’s friendships, executive functions and autobiography for continuing professional development.

ORCID

Karen V. A. Morris  http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0957-8592

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