

# Students' unions attempts to oppose consumerism are rarely successful, new research finds

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A new study, published in the *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, has found that while students' unions often try to oppose the rise of consumerism at their universities, they are rarely successful.

The team of researchers at the University of Surrey arranged various focus groups at 10 higher [education](#) institutions, with both students' union leaders and university managers. They found that the nature of relationships between unions and their university often makes it difficult for students' unions to reject consumerism - either because they have little independence to develop their own agenda due to financial dependence on their institution, or because they are dependent on their own consumer activities (e.g. bars, clubs and shops) to retain some independent income.

In recent years, government policy and the media have seen students increasingly positioned as consumers. Various higher education reforms have been based on the assumption that students will actively 'shop around', comparing institutions and courses to secure the best possible education.

"Indeed it is this form of 'educational choice' that has been seen by politicians as an important mechanism for promoting competition between institutions and, consequently, for raising standards," said lead author Professor Rachel Brooks from the University of Surrey.

"However, the National Union of Students has tried to develop an alternative political agenda, which rejects a consumerist approach to education. Anti-consumerist positions have also been taken up within individual students' unions.

"Our study found that though that this approach has not been successful. The irony for students' [unions](#) is that one of the main means of retaining independence and being able to resist consumerist agendas, is by embracing commercialism and providing services to paying [students](#)," added Professor Brooks.

Provided by University of Surrey

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