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Constructing the university student in British documentary television

Kay Calver and Bethan Michael-Fox

Introduction

In this chapter, we argue that an increase in documentary television detailing the lives of university students was coincident with the increase in tuition fees in 2012 and the removal of student number controls for England in 2013. These documentaries reflect and negotiate a range of prominent socio-cultural concerns about students. According to the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2016, p. 7), there has been a shift from a university sector ‘that serves only a narrow band of people, to a broader, more diverse and more open system’. The documentaries examined here are indicative of greater interest in this ‘broader’ and ‘more diverse’ population of students and their experiences, though the extent to which they actually reflect and represent them is questionable. We argue that these documentaries can be seen to reflect a broader shift in thinking about ‘the university student’ in contemporary Britain. The consequences of the high cost of university to both the student and the taxpayer are consistently at the fore and students are often conceptualised in terms of risk. The earliest documentaries examined tend to construct students in terms of perhaps more ‘traditional’ risks associated with the university student: binge drinking, a lack of independent living skills and promiscuity. More recent examples focus on mental health, sexual assault and the pressures of higher education. The chapter begins with a consideration of the approach taken and discussion of the complexity of the terms ‘British’, ‘documentary’ and ‘television’ in categorising the texts examined here. It then explores the documentaries in terms of their figuration of the higher education student as ‘at risk’ and ‘a risk’ in a range of different ways.

Approach

Television forms a space in which people engage with complex social understandings (Livingstone, 1998). Williams (2010, p. 170) has emphasised that:

media representations of students are worthy of analysis as they reflect back to society some of the dominant ways in which what it means to be a student is understood.

Williams (2010, p. 70) also suggests that representations of students in the media might play a part in constructing ‘ways of being’ for new generations of students. As Tyler (2008, p. 18–19) has pointed out, mediation should be recognised ‘as a constitutive and generative process’. The documentaries examined here offer a valuable space for the negotiation and consideration of the university student but are also active in the construction of the student in the popular imagination in particular ways. In outlining a figurative methodology for the analysis of media representations, Tyler (2008, p. 18) writes that ‘representational struggles are often played out within highly condensed figurative forms’. Tyler (2008, p. 18) utilises the term ‘figure’ as a way to describe how at particular historical and cultural junctures ‘specific “social types” become over determined and are publicly imagined (are figured) in excessive, distorted, and caricatured ways’. It is argued such figures are always ‘expressive of an underlying social crisis or anxiety’ (Tyler, 2008, p. 18). It is perhaps inevitable that these documentaries’ condensed representations coupled with the requirement to be ‘entertaining’ has meant that at times they reinforce the notion of there being particular ‘types’ of students. Roberts (2014) suggests that:

every fly-on-the-wall documentary or dramatic representation of British students casts the same collection of characters; ‘the lad’, ‘the slut’, ‘the introvert’ and ‘the geek’.

Tyler (2008, p. 19) states that it is through a figure’s repetition in and across media that it acquires both ‘accreted form’ and ‘affective value in ways that have significant social and political impact’. It is for this reason that we have examined a range of examples of British documentary television focused on the university student. We seek to identify the dominant ‘figure’ that emerges of the student while considering the shifts, complexities, contradictions and social anxieties evident.

The phrase British documentary television is far from straightforward. Though the channels these documentaries are featured on can be defined as British, their audiences might not be. The students they document are not representative of British students as a whole, nor of students studying at British universities, as this chapter will show. *Students on the Edge*, the longest ‘episode’ of which is 9 minutes, seems designed less for consumption on a television than on a device, problematising the use of the term television. The term documentary is also complex, with a range of competing meanings. The rise in television documentaries focused on students is reflective of a broader rise in hybridised documentary television. According to Dovey (2000, p. 232), in recent years, there have been ‘anxieties about “popular factual television” displacing or marginalising profound (or “serious”) documentary output’. Though Dovey (2000, p. 4) cautions against ‘stultifying binaries’, he suggests that ‘traditional’ documentary might be

associated with words like ‘authoritative’, ‘boring’, ‘elitist’, ‘argument’ and ‘investigation’, while ‘popular’ documentary might be understood in terms of words like ‘fun’, ‘reality TV’, ‘entertainment’, ‘video’ and ‘reflexive’. Most of the shows under consideration here can be seen to adhere more closely to the terms associated with ‘popular’ documentary. Many include video diaries, seeking to present the ‘truth’ of the student experience through this technique. *The Secret Life of Students* takes this effort to new levels by ‘employing a brand new technological innovation which enables students to share their digital lives’ (Channel 4, 2014). This is achieved by collecting the participants’ text messages and social media posts and incorporating this with documentary footage. This series imagines and constructs a particular notion of the student: a ‘digital native’ (Prensky, 2001) who is connected, on social media, and sharing their intimate thoughts via digital technology. Though not all of the documentaries examined here take this approach, the majority reflect a shift towards, as Dovey (2000, p. 55) writes, more ‘subjective, local and confessional rather than objective, generalising and rational’ formats.

When selecting the texts, a series of searches were completed via online search engines and the academic broadcast database Box of Broadcasts (BoB) for programming including the terms ‘student’ and ‘university’. We selected only shows that were included in the category ‘documentary’ by BoB or by the channel broadcasting them. Programming focused on a particular profession was excluded – for example, those focused on young vets, nurses or junior doctors as the emphasis was on the professional and placement dimensions of students’ study. We chose instead to focus on programming which feature students from across a range of different courses with an emphasis on a generic notion of ‘the student experience’ (a term we will critique at the end of this chapter). The documentaries discussed are outlined in Table 10.1 below.

We first became interested in the construction of university students in documentary television when we worked as lecturers at the University of Bedfordshire, which was the setting of the first iteration of *Freshers*. We experienced having camera crews on campuses and worked directly with a number of the students involved in the production. At open days, we began to hear that prospective students had been attracted to the university via this series, adding support to Williams’ (2010, p. 170) assertion that the representation of students in the media might play a part in constructing ‘ways of being’ for new generations of students. The anecdotal conversations we had with students and prospective students about *Freshers* suggested that they experienced the construction of the student within the series in a range of ways: as relatable, as contrastable with their own experience, as something they wanted to challenge, and as aspirational. As such, we became interested in the ways that different media can open up productive spaces for the negotiation of what, and who, a student is.

Table 10.1 Summary table of television programmes analysed

<i>Title</i>	<i>Place of Broadcast</i>	<i>Content</i>	<i>Date</i>
<i>Dispatches: Cashing in on Degrees</i>	Channel 4	Journalist Laurie Penny explores fee rises at British universities and focuses on the pay of top earning bosses and 'predatory' university recruitment practices, rather than on students themselves.	2011
<i>Freshers</i>	ITV2	<i>Freshers</i> begins a trend in 'reality tv' style documentaries focused on students, with series one filmed at the University of Bedfordshire and series two at Swansea University. <i>Freshers</i> follows a group of students during 'freshers', the term given to both the early weeks of the first year of university in Britain and a term used to describe those students who are participating in 'freshers', often with connotations of those students being young, drinking alcohol and engaging in sexual activity. It is related to the US term 'freshman'.	2013; 2014
<i>The Secret Life of Students</i>	Channel 4	Observational documentary series focuses on 12 students over three months of their first year at university. The documentary utilises students' social media posts, internet search histories, calls and text messages to provide insight into their 'secret' lives.	2014
<i>Freshers, Sex and Suspicious Parents</i>	BBC Three	Follows two 'freshers' embarking on their first days at university. Includes footage of the parents of students Cleo and Joe secretly watching their children on video from a local hotel, often shocked by their behaviour.	2015
<i>Death on Campus: Our Stories</i>	BBC Three	Thirty-minute documentary using interviews to piece together the last days of three students who died by suicide at three different British universities.	2017
<i>Panorama: Student Loan Scandal</i>	BBC One	Richard Watson investigates agents who recruit what are referred to in the programme as 'bogus' students seeking student loans to private colleges whose degrees are awarded by British universities.	2018

Table 10.1 (Continued)

<i>Title</i>	<i>Place of Broadcast</i>	<i>Content</i>	<i>Date</i>
<i>Students on the Edge</i>	BBC Three	Series of short documentaries taking a 'confessional' format as students, often anonymously, discuss their experiences of sexual assault, drug dealing, sex work, poor mental health, cheating and drug use at university.	2018
<i>Freshers 2018: In Our Own Words</i>	BBC Three	Shot entirely on students' own phones, this documentary follows seven brand new students as they experience freshers' week at different universities.	2018
<i>Student Sex Workers</i>	Channel 5	Devoted to students who fund their way through university with sex work, consisting of two episodes titled <i>Stripping to Study</i> and <i>Porn Star Graduate</i> .	2019
<i>The Warwick Uni Rape Chat Scandal</i>	BBC One and BBC Three	Thirty-minute documentary on the handling of a case at the University of Warwick where female students were targeted with rape threats.	2019
<i>Dying for a Degree</i>	BBC One	Features interviews with the family and friends of Natasha Abraham, one of 11 students who died by suicide at the University of Bristol over a period of 18 months.	2019

'At risk' or 'a risk'

The theme of risk emerges time and again in the documentaries. This is, in part, a consequence of the ways in which they focus without exception on students aged between 18 and 21. Kemshall (2009) argues youth and risk are increasingly intertwined in contemporary social policy, yet the relationship between young people and risk seems pervasive beyond this. Constructions of young people as 'at risk' or 'a risk' can be seen to reflect deep seated anxieties about the behaviour of young people and a desire to control them (Kelly, 2000). This persistent dichotomy emerges across policy, media representations and in research. We argue here that the 'at risk'/'a risk' dichotomy is also evident in British documentary television focused on university students. In reading the documentaries in terms of the categories of 'at risk' or 'a risk', we might be guilty of reiterating reductive understandings and constructions of students and young people. Yet we contend that, as Badmington (2003, p. 16) points out, repetition 'can be a form of questioning: to restate is not always to reinstate'. By analysing the breadth of these televisual texts and offering one way in which they might be interpreted, we seek to understand and critique the figuration of the university

student in British documentary television and to explore how constructions of the student as both ‘at risk’ and ‘risky’ function across these examples.

‘Cash cows’ and ‘bogus students’

Dispatches: Cashing in on Degrees can be seen as beginning a trend in documentaries focused on students, in particular in terms of risk and the high cost of education. Laurie Penny, who left university with a total of £9,000 in debt, investigates the rise in tuition fees and emphasises that going forward this would be a ‘drop in the ocean’. Current figures estimate that the average UK student graduates with £36,000 of debt (Bolton, 2019). However, a student featured in the 2019 documentary *Student Sex Workers* explains that they will be leaving university with just under £60,000 in debt, and this second figure appears frequently in news reporting (Fazackerley, 2017; Binns, 2019). The emphasis of *Dispatches: Cashing in on Degrees* is not on students but on the significant pay received by university bosses and the ways in which universities might be understood to be ‘selling’ education and exploiting students with both home and international fee statuses. International students are explicitly discussed in terms of being viewed by universities as ‘cash cows’. A significant focus on the cost of education is evident in all of the documentaries examined here, but the figure of the international student shifts from one of being ‘at risk’ of exploitation (‘cash cows’) in *Dispatches: Cashing in on Degrees* to one of posing ‘a risk’ as they become ‘bogus students’ exploiting the loans system for cash in *Panorama: Student Loan Scandal*.

This shift is reflective of the ways in which, in recent years, ‘students have become the latest object of fear and panic within the debate about immigration and global population mobility’ (Back, 2016, p. 33). Back highlights:

new phrases like ‘bogus students’ (accused of using higher learning illegitimately to gain visas) and ‘backstreet colleges’ (who are selling immigration and not education) are gaining currency. (Back, 2016, p. 33)

Both of these phrases feature heavily in *Panorama: Student Loan Scandal*. At the beginning of the documentary, the audience is told ‘at a time when student debt has topped 100 billion pounds, we reveal how student loan scams are costing us all millions’. The narrator positions an ‘us’, the tax-paying non-student, as ‘at risk’ from ‘them’, the ‘fraudsters’ and ‘bogus students’. International students are not featured in any of the other documentaries discussed here and as such their construction is limited to that of ‘cash cows’ and ‘bogus students’. This resonates with Brooks’ (2018a) findings in relation to the construction of university students in policy, where international students were mostly absent. When they did appear, a juxtaposition between the ‘brightest and best’ and those deemed a ‘sham’ emerged. In the documentaries examined here, however, there is no notion of international students as the ‘brightest and best’. Their

construction is almost entirely focused on financial risk. Initially, the risk posed to international students and latterly, the risk posed by them.

Dumbing down

In the majority of these documentaries, the students featured do not align with stereotypical notions of the 'ideal' university student. In Wong and Chiu's (2018, p. 8) study of lecturers' expectations of the ideal student staff expected students to be 'prepared, engaged and committed, as well as being critical, reflective and making progress'. Tomlinson (2017, p. 453) problematises this 'notion of the student as academic disciple, liberally immersed in intellectual pursuits' and suggests such a construction has always been a myth. In the first episode of *Freshers*, Anita does not know what course she has signed up for. As Cleo in *Freshers, Sex and Suspicious Parents* states, freshers' week is not about getting prepared, it 'is all about going out, that's why they created it'. Jane in *Students on the Edge* says that:

first year was really, really fun and there were parties going on all the time [...] I basically had vodka and MDMA [drug] for breakfast

suggesting that students continue to party well beyond freshers' week. Partying is positioned as what students do, with the narrator in *Freshers* describing drinking as 'what students do best'. One student featured in *The Secret Life of Students* tells audiences there are:

three things on everyone's mind when you come to uni, fun, action and friends, and that is all bolted together with alcohol.

Though students who are positioned as academically focused are featured, they are situated as an exception and associated with degrees such as medicine (*The Secret Life of Students*) and physics (*Freshers, Death on Campus: Our Stories, Dying for a Degree*).

Students are frequently constructed as at university to 'have a good time' and to delay their entry to adulthood, with academic studies being an unfortunate consequence of this wider 'student experience'. In *Freshers*, the narrator tells audiences that '73% admit to missing lectures because of a hangover'. The tension between academic study and partying is often emphasised. For example, Hassan in *The Secret Life of Students* misses lectures because he is too tired after a night out. He jokes 'they shouldn't have had freshers and lectures at the same time, it's not my fault they're fuckin' stupid... the university'. Abbie in *Freshers* asserts that 'you've gotta study but it's all about the partying isn't it'. In the same programme, Baileigh explains how far she is from the 'ideal student'. Visiting the bookshop she explains:

actually, I read one book once. On holiday I read the Madeline McCann book. Maybe I can do this, maybe I can read a whole book.

The value and importance of reading is seen to be integral to students' success at university (Wong and Chiu, 2018). The notion that someone at university has only ever read a whole book once jostles uncomfortably with:

a common-sense understanding of the student as a learner, an individual who is, above all else, dedicated to his or her studies.

(Brooks 2018b, p. 501)

Media representations of students lacking intellectual merit can be linked to concerns about the lowering of academic standards within UK higher education. Certainly, a number of these documentaries imply that some of those studying are not 'academically talented'. Since the initiation of the removal of student number controls in 2013, Bekhradnia and Beech (2018, p. 28) highlight:

there had been speculation that cash-hungry institutions might recruit more students than they had previously been allowed, in order to bolster their finances, and specifically that institutions might lower their entry demands.

The supposed growing ease of entry to higher education has led to concerns about illegitimate students who are unprepared or unfit for study. While there are significant costs to the student, each student is also entitled to a loan which is heavily subsidised by the taxpayer. In *Freshers*, Abbie says:

coming to university wasn't just about getting a degree it was about growing up and it kind of gives you life experience doesn't it and I think that's something I needed more than a degree.

Yet in a context where it is estimated that 70% of current full-time undergraduates who take out loans will not repay them in full (Bolton, 2019), university represents a financial risk to society at large. Audiences might justifiably question whether some of the students figured in these documentaries should be at university, and whether they are there for the 'right reasons'.

In Tomlinson's (2017, p. 463) study of students' own perceptions of the student as consumer, some expressed the view that other students were 'unclear on their motivation' for study and were going to university 'by default'. This resonates with Aiden's experience in *The Secret Life of Students*. Aiden is arguably a student who is at university 'by default' and not to pursue a passion for academic study. We learn that his knowledge of his course is inaccurate, suggesting he has done little prior research. He is disappointed with the infrequency with which other students go out, stating:

first year is about going out... just drinking so much... just enjoying yourself. But everyone takes their work so seriously here and it's kinda

shit. I thought there'd be at least like four or five who wanna go out every night. It's just such a weird situation it's just me. It's just not a uni...it just doesn't feel like a uni.

Aiden considers dropping out and his peers ask him what his options are if he does. He says 'go on the dole, grow a beard, drink frosty jacks [a high strength cider]'. Though Aiden is joking, this highlights a very real anxiety about what young people's options are should they not graduate with a degree, as well as about what a 'positive' outcome for a young person entering adulthood is. As Tanya, a single mum who appears briefly in the same series, states 'any job that's got any standing in society these days you need a degree'. Aiden and Tanya are not positioned as being at university for intellectual pursuit but because they need to be, because it is the only way to gain economic security and 'good standing' in society. The risk (of the cost to taxpayers; of the 'dumbing down' of academic content) posed by students studying for the 'wrong reasons' is here contrasted with the risk to young people of *not* going to university, the consequences of which are positioned as significant.

In light of the consumerist culture within higher education, it has been suggested that today's students seek to have a degree rather than to be learners (Molesworth et al., 2009). Brenda in *The Secret Life of Students* is one of the few black students featured in these documentaries. The absence of black students on some UK campuses is emphasised by Cleo and her friend in *Freshers, Sex and Suspicious Parents* when they approach a group of young men and say:

we saw you guys and thought we should come and talk to you cos you're the first black people we've seen, no offence!

Unlike the students around her who have financial support from their parents, Brenda is a first-generation university student whose family does not have the economic means to subsidise her time at university. Brenda worries about dropping out and explains that:

if I don't have a degree then I don't know what else I can do [...] I don't want it to be a thing where I end up still in the same circle, still being working class, still living in a deprived area and everything. I don't want that for myself. So having a degree is really important for me because then I can get out of that, but at the moment I can't see that happening because of money.

Failure at university poses a significant risk for Brenda's future but her lack of financial resources also puts her 'at risk' of dropping out. Again, the potential impact of not having a degree is central.

Skint or flush?

Brenda, discussed in the section above, is also concerned about the significant cost of university. She is called to meetings about her attendance and does not perform as well in assessments as she would like. She finds lectures boring, posting a video on social media saying:

what exactly am I paying for? I have seen a lot on Twitter about people and their lectures and how their lectures are so boring [...] lecturers should have a course in public speaking if you're asking me to pay 9 grand.

Here the significant financial cost of study is emphasised, as is what Brenda perceives as a disappointing return on her investment. In her failure to attend lectures, Brenda is positioned as in deficit of the skills and traits required to succeed within higher education (a commitment to study translated as the ability to endure what she deems lengthy and unstimulating lectures). Later, Brenda is unable to attend lectures due to taking on a 30 hour a week job at a retail store to pay for her accommodation. In one sense, Brenda shows significant commitment to her studies because without the job, she would have to leave university. However, with it, her ability to engage with her studies is significantly limited. Complicating her construction in the documentary further, Brenda is positioned as 'skint' (a colloquial term for having little or no money) when she needs to get a job to pay for accommodation. However, the series also emphasises one occasion when she spends £300 on beauty products and shoes, positioning her as 'flush' with money and irresponsible.

In *Freshers*, a member of staff regales the time a student complained of being in financial difficulty after having spent their loan on an expensive car, emphasising how irresponsible some students can be with their money. Yet students are not always positioned as financially irresponsible. For example, Amelia in the same series explains that she needs a job because 'my loan only just covers my accommodation', showing she has budgeted and is prepared to work. Michael, a first-generation student, has saved up for university, stating 'I see it as my responsibility, my burden'. According to Kelly et al. (2017, p. 106):

higher education policy in the UK increasingly conceives undergraduate students as individual entrepreneurs, transacting their way through higher education, preparing themselves for high-earning success in the global field of market competition.

Student Sex Workers and *Students on the Edge* are the documentaries that most closely adhere to a construction of the student as financially savvy, though not quite in the way that higher educational policy documents do.

In *Student Sex Workers*, one student explains that they undertake sex work because they want to ‘be able to earn enough money to be able to pay for [university] instead of getting a loan’. In *Students on the Edge*, a drug dealer explains his approach to finances:

I’m a student, I’m a drug dealer. When you’re a student everyone is on drugs around you and it’s easy to sort of capitalise off that market.

These students are constructed as financially aware, making considered choices about their income to debt ratios.

Sugar Baby on Campus, an episode of *Students on the Edge*, begins by foregrounding that Penny has been trying to get a job but finds:

so many jobs it’s like, you need experience, but then, you need a job to get experience so it’s just like, such a vicious cycle so obviously I just turned to other stuff.

Penny is shown in her accommodation which has not been well maintained and is a significant distance from campus, as she cannot afford anything closer. However, empty alcohol bottles and branded beauty products are scattered around. She complains of the house being freezing, showing the audience her goose bumps, but wears very little clothing, implying she might be lacking in ‘common sense’ or spending her money ‘irresponsibly’. When choosing ‘dates’ with ‘sugar daddies’, she explains:

I’d rather have a date and get food out of it rather than just go to a hotel room and have sex with them. I don’t really want that because that’s quite prostitution-y.

Penny is unaware of how much she will be paid by a man she is going to meet but does not mind as last time he gave her £80 worth of cocaine. Unlike many of those in *Student Sex Workers*, she is not a savvy entrepreneur:

I don’t know what I’m doing with my life [...] but I know that my student loan isn’t gonna get any bigger. I doubt I’m gonna get a good job where they pay really well...so I’m just gonna carry on doing it.

Her behaviour is positioned as risky, but she sees no alternative to undertaking sex work.

There are tensions in the documentaries that reflect broader notions about whether students are ‘skint’ or ‘flush’. In *Student Sex Workers*, one student says ‘you do live very close to the breadline when you’re at uni’ and this documentary repeatedly emphasises the high cost of university, stating that

many of those featured undertake sex work in order to pay for essentials. Yet in *Students on the Edge* a drug dealer suggests:

there is sort of a myth surrounding students and skintness, I think people have a lot of money they just spend it on nights out and not really what they should be spending it for. I know people who say they can't afford to eat, or they have to steal food, but they're still buying drugs every week.

Max in *Freshers* exemplifies this point when he is given a budget of £50 a week by his parents on top of his loans, but jokes that this will not be enough and that he knows they will provide more, explaining that his parents:

won't be annoyed at me as long as I don't spend it on stupid stuff and just spend it on necessities like going out at night and eating.

This arguably reflects a broader juxtaposition in the popular imagination between those who perceive students as well off and spending money irresponsibly and those who see them as 'broke' and 'on the breadline'.

Stress and vulnerability

Hayes (2009, p. 127) has argued that:

the changed conception of a student is not as an autonomous person embarking on the pursuit of knowledge, but as a vulnerable learner.

This construction of students plays out across the documentaries examined here. The title *Students on the Edge* implies the students featured are in an extreme situation, perhaps at the fringes of 'the student experience', or more broadly 'on the edge' due to high stress levels caused by academic pressure and financial cost. In one episode about drugs taken to enhance study skills, a student tells the audience:

some people are just naturally smart, I wasn't. I was smart but through studying rather than it being a natural ability.

The student is highly organised, is committed and seems to be performing well academically. He explicitly links his drug taking to the financial and academic pressure of attaining a degree, stating:

there's increased pressure on education. There's increased pressure in paying £9,000 a year for university students. People want more for their money. Whether they're pushing themselves to the limit by taking smart drugs, that's one way of looking at it, but is that not because of the pressures of university?

Williams (2010, p. 178) has pointed out that in news reporting:

the experience of attending university is presented to students as ‘stressful’ and it is the consumption model that is blamed by some for causing this stress.

The earlier documentaries examined here all have sections of varying lengths focusing on homesickness, students wanting to ‘drop out’ or being worried that they are not sufficiently academically talented to succeed. Yet these themes become much more prominent in recent documentaries where the focus shifts from a construction of students as ‘party goers’ to one more in line with the notion of a ‘vulnerable learner’, stressed and under pressure.

The confessional video diary format of *Freshers 2018: In Our Own Words* means that audiences get insight into the students’ anxieties, which focus both on the social and academic side of university. One student explains ‘I’m really nervous, I don’t think I’m very good at making friends’ and another states:

to be honest I’m actually shitting myself because I’m scared that I’m gonna sit down and they’re gonna start saying shit that I know literally nothing about.

Rue in *Student Sex Workers* has dropped out of university. She was attaining first class grades but felt the pressure to do so was overwhelming. In an episode of *Students on the Edge* focused on essay mills, from which students buy tailor made essays, a graduate who writes these essays to sell asks:

what makes [students] feel so much pressure to succeed that they have to go and literally purchase parts of their degree? It’s the system itself that is flawed. Having students that rack up 5 maybe even 6 figures of debt...essentially it requires them to succeed. They can’t fail so that is why they turn to services like this.

Here, the financial and academic pressures of university coalesce. In a *Students on the Edge* episode titled Breakdown on Campus, Amy, who has a diagnosed mental health condition, reflects on her university experience, saying:

people always say like oh it’s the best years of your life blah blah you have so much fun party, party, party but they don’t mention like the social pressure, there’s a pressure to join teams and be part of things, you’ve got like you’re work pressure, then your living arrangements, then your student loan and balancing money and finding a job and it’s just like so difficult [...] Sometimes you just need someone else to care for you.

Amy balances paid work with study, party-going and other social activities and achieves first class grades. Yet she feels like ‘no one listens, no one tries’ when it comes to her mental health. We are informed mid-episode that Amy attempted suicide. In *Students on the Edge*, a construction of the student as a ‘party goer’ extending their period of youth shifts towards a more complicated construction of the student as ‘under pressure’, expected to achieve, to earn, to enjoy themselves and to be an independent adult caring for themselves all at once.

Institutional failures

Concerns about universities are evident in most of the documentaries examined here. These concerns focus on universities’ recruitment practices (aggressively recruiting students, failing to detect ‘bogus students’, being more concerned with ‘bums on seats’ than standards), the broader structural issue of the cost of university to students and society at large and, finally, the issue of universities failing to safeguard their students. Institutional and structural failure comes to the fore in the 2019 documentary *The Warwick Uni Rape Chat Scandal*, which examines a high-profile case relating to rape threats sent in a Whatsapp group in 2018. The documentary’s focus is on the university’s mishandling of the case and failure to support the students at whom the rape threats were directed. However, it is notable that in this documentary the male students involved are referred to consistently as men, emphasising their adult status, and not as ‘lads’ or ‘boys’ as they often are in the earlier documentaries. This represents a shift from positioning sex and sexuality in terms of ‘fun’, ‘experimentation’ and students placing themselves ‘at risk’ (of sexually transmitted infections, of regret after a ‘one night stand’ or what one student in *The Secret Life of Students* eloquently calls a ‘smash and dash’) to an emphasis on sexual assault and misconduct which form the focus of later documentaries including *Students on the Edge* and *The Warwick Uni Rape Chat Scandal*.

The underlying argument made in *The Warwick Uni Rape Chat Scandal* is that the university was more concerned with its reputation than safeguarding students. Student Anna explains:

honestly at the start of this I really did have a lot of trust in my university that they’d be able to deal with it properly and that was broken down at every single point.

The university is positioned as failing to adequately manage risk towards its students. The theme of the university as posing a risk to students is also evident in *Freshers 2018: In Our Own Words*, though in quite a different way, when Beckett, a transgender student, becomes extremely distressed at having their birthname printed on their student ID card rather than their chosen name. At the end of this documentary, there is a note stating that the

university apologises and made an error, and that students could have any name they chose on their ID card. Ella in *Student Sex Workers* explains how she was bullied by peers at her university. She felt the university failed to support her or provide a safe environment, going on to complete her degree via a distance learning institution. In all of these examples, the university is positioned as failing to meet the individual needs of students.

The risk that university can pose to students is especially evident in documentaries focused on student suicide. *Death on Campus: Our Stories* focuses on three students and emphasises the academic, financial and personal pressures they faced. It features friends and families of the deceased as well as social media footage of those who died. *Death on Campus: Our Stories* and *Students on the Edge* both place an emphasis on the importance of students who are having suicidal thoughts ‘reaching out’ and speaking to others. We are told via writing on the screen in *Death on Campus: Our Stories* that ‘nearly half of students with a mental health condition do not disclose it to their university’, perhaps implying that in failing to disclose, students have failed to adequately protect themselves, or that students are reluctant to disclose this information for fear of negative consequences. Yet as student suicide has become a significant concern in recent years, universities have come under scrutiny for a lack of support for students (Morris, 2019; Shackle, 2019).

Death on Campus: Our Stories is careful not to criticise the universities involved, but the underlying argument seems to be that the high cost, high pressure environments of UK universities are at least partially responsible for these young people’s deaths. *Dying for a Degree* is much more explicit in its critique. It focuses on ‘one family’s fight for answers after their daughter took her own life’ at the University of Bristol, where there have been a high number of suicides in recent years. The parents of Natasha, who died by suicide at the university, are shocked to discover they have been sent a Certificate of Higher Education for her year one credits and insulted by the university’s offer of a plaque in the walled garden, questioning ‘have they got a plaque for every dead student? They’d need a big wall’. Her parents state ‘the people who were meant to look after her, whatever they did, tended to make matters worse not better’. They engage a legal team to try to prevent other deaths, seeking systemic ‘change on the national stage’. Natasha’s flat-mate Luke says that ‘everyone’s petrified coming to university’ and talks about the ‘the stress of first year’, where you have this ‘ridiculous pressure put upon you immediately’. In contrast to earlier representations, students are constructed as highly academic. Stress, a ‘toxic’ environment and pressure ‘to perform academically’ when surrounded by people who were the ‘smartest’ in their schools are all emphasised. The student is also constructed as vulnerable, stressed, under pressure and uncared for by an institution that has failed to support them. However, this construction jostles with the construction, in both *Dying for a Degree* and *The Warwick Uni Rape Chat Scandal*, of students as capable of protest. In both of these documentaries,

students can be seen as engaging in active protest about their universities, with *Dying for a Degree* featuring students chanting ‘people not profit’. Natasha’s parents worry that at the inquest into their daughter’s death, their evidence will be ‘glossed over by some sort of PR machine’, emphasising again the construction of the university as concerned predominantly with financial gain. Though the construction of the student seems to shift in these documentaries, that of the university as mainly concerned with income remains consistent throughout them all.

Conclusion

In a context of shifting understandings about university students in Britain and when the expansion, cost, ‘worth’ and ‘value’ of higher education are all under scrutiny, this chapter has analysed how documentary television makes prominent a range of socio-cultural concerns about both students and universities. The documentaries examined here are active in constituting and perpetuating particular constructions of the student, but the experience of the university student is represented as fairly homogeneous. Initially, as one where party-going is the norm and study is an unfortunate consequence of being a student. Later, one where students are under pressure to do it all: expected to achieve academically, to work for an income, to take part in activities and, of course, to party – footage or images of ‘nights out’ are featured in almost all of the documentaries.

The trend in documentaries focused on university students identified here begins in 2011 and is coincident with the announcement of an increase in tuition fees from 2012. All of the documentaries feature discussion of the cost of higher education in some form. This ranges from the financial risk students pose in terms of being a ‘burden on the taxpayer’ to the risks students can experience, with a focus on the concomitant pressures of a high cost education becoming ever more apparent in the later documentaries. Though we argue that all of these documentaries are notable for their figuration of the higher education student as ‘at risk’ or ‘a risk’, the ways in which students are constructed as ‘risky’ shifts and is, at times, complex and contradictory. The earlier documentaries tend to construct students in terms of more ‘traditional’ risks associated with the university student including binge drinking, promiscuity and a lack of life skills. The later documentaries focus on standards and the academic integrity of institutions and students themselves as well as the figuration of the student as vulnerable, under pressure, at ‘at risk’ of breakdown, suicide and assault. As such, we have argued here that documentary television can be understood to reflect, inform, contribute to and make sense of broader shifting constructions of the British university student in recent years.

Some things remain consistent, with all students featured in these documentaries aged between 18 and 21. As such, a range of students suffer erasure and are notable only by their absence, with no representation of

part-time, distance or mature students in any of these documentaries. There is some, but scarce, representation of students with caring responsibilities, international students or those declaring disabilities. Arguably, the representation and construction of the university student in these documentaries is based on a narrow understanding of what ‘the student experience’ is. Sabri (2011, p. 658) examines the normative notion of ‘the student experience’ and concludes that its ‘sacralisation’ in the higher education sector has led to the obscuration of the experiences of an ‘ethnically and socio-economically highly diverse body of students’ and, furthermore, obscured differences between institutions. Most of the documentaries examined here can be seen to do the same. As such, the analysis of the construction of the university student in British documentary television offered here has emphasised the ways in which media representations can both serve to highlight and to evade the complex lived realities of university students.

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