

UK students cut back on boozing as study costs help focus minds

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Sobering facts

Undergraduates on tight budgets are demanding more of themselves and their tutors, writes Sarah O'Connor

"We Are Young" a pop anthem about a drunken night out, plays softly in The Lost Hour, a sunny pub near London's Greenwich university. A year and a half ago, it would have been all too appropriate in what was then a sticky-floored student bar. Now it is an echo of a former life. This is one of five student bars the owner has converted into more traditional pubs amid a quiet shift in the psyche of Britain's university students.

Stonagate Pub Company, which owns more than 500 pubs and bars including these five, has been quick to notice a change among its student customers as they adapted to higher tuition fees and a tough economy. "There is no doubt at all that higher tuition fees have impacted the way students are behaving," says Ian Payne, the company's chairman. "I'm appalled to admit they drink less and study more."

Peter Marks, chief executive of Luminar, Britain's biggest nightclub operator, has noticed the same thing. Students are still partying but "there's definitely less emphasis on alcohol", he says. "Pre-exams we've been quieter this year than in prior years as people have really put their heads down and studied - £9,000 is a sobering enough number for anybody."

This time three years ago, students were flooding the streets of Britain's big cities to rage about the government's decision to triple tuition fees to £9,000 a year. But academics and students say a new mood of seriousness has taken hold since then, instilled by the new price of degrees and the difficult jobs market.

Instead of behaving like helpless victims of circumstance, students are

demanding more, both from their universities and from themselves.

David Bainbridge, an admissions tutor for arts and humanities at St Catharine's College, Cambridge, fears this has come at a cost. "Being a teenager is a time to try new things, to be self-involved and foolish," says the academic, who is also author of *Teenagers: A Natural History*.

He adds: "I do think we might be creating a generation of prematurely middle-aged people."

There has been a steady and well-documented decline in alcohol and drug use among the young over the past 15 years. But on top of that trend, which is taking shape in many countries, Shabna Zaheer has noticed a more sudden transformation during her three years at university.

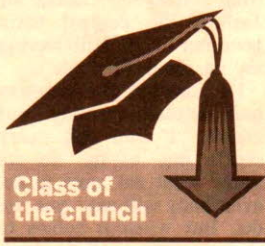
In her first year at the University of Greenwich campus in Medway, she rarely went to the library and did not know many others who did. "This year, just everyone's there, even the first and second years - it's just where you hang," the 20-year-old says. In contrast, the student bar is "completely empty most nights".

She moved into student accommodation this year after living at home for the first two years of her degree. But she has found herself short of money and snowed under with her studies and a part-time internship. "It's just not as fun as I thought it would be."

A recent study of 17,000

people who graduated in 2009 suggests that students are right to worry about their grades. More than 20 per cent of graduates with a 2:2, a lower second-class degree, had gone on to suffer six months or more of unemployment, and about 40 per cent had wound up in non-graduate jobs. For those with first-class degrees, the proportions were 10 per cent and 20 per cent respectively.

Students are pushing



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their universities harder too. Francesca, a third-year at University Campus Suffolk who did not want her last name published, says she feels sorry for her lecturers, who are on the receiving end of students' determination to get "value for money" from their degrees. It is not uncommon for students to break down their fees and figure out exactly how much they are paying for each lecture.

"If you bought a packet of

eggs from the supermarket and they were all broken, you'd take them back, but that's something you can't do with education," she says. "So if you can do anything to change the poor education that you're getting, then you will."

Student unions are struggling to figure out how best to handle students' new sense of themselves as consumers. "You don't want to be setting people against each other in a combative way; you want students to think of themselves in partnership with the university," says Richard Brooks, the president of Hull university's student union.

Students are more assertive about their education, he adds. "From the two years I've seen so far [of students paying £9,000-a-year fees], they want different things from their education. It's about the quality as well as the quantity - having more face-to-face time, more choice."

The most tangible expression of the changing dynamic between students and academics is the website Michael Bulman set up this year after he returned from a year at an American university. "Rate Your Lecturer" was inspired by similar websites in the US where students write reviews of their lecturers.

Mr Bulman's site has had about 100,000 views since it started in April. He says it should help students to pick courses based on teaching quality. "It's a huge amount of money now so you really have to pay more attention... And I think it's only right and proper that there's more information out there." About 85 per cent of the reviews so far have been positive, he says.

But the site has already stirred up some resistance and disquiet among lecturers. A blog post by Professor Bill Cooke, who teaches management at Lancaster University, has gone viral around the academic community. It is called: "We Are Not Dancing Bears."

Additional reporting by Helen Warrell



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