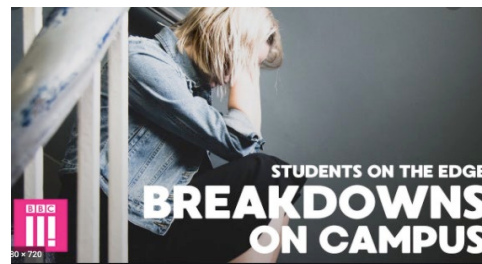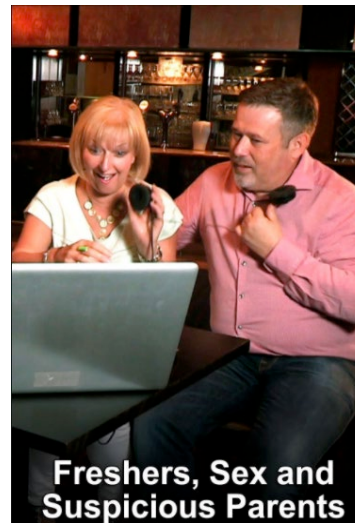# Students on Screen:
Shifting Representations of the Student on British Screens Since 2010

Dr. Kay Calver and Dr. Bethan Michael-Fox

Thanks for having us…

Dr Kay Calver, SFHEA

- Completed her PhD at Hull in 2016
- Senior Lecturer in Education at Bedfordshire, Course Coordinator for Education with Psychology
- Previously worked as a Senior Lecturer at Northampton
- Research publications focus on children and young people
- Professional experience in sexual health and youth work

Dr Bethan Michael-Fox, SFHEA, FRSA

- Completed PhD at Winchester in 2020
- Visiting Fellow at Winchester and at the Centre for the Study of Death and Society at Bath
- Work as Lecturer & Fellow for the Open University
- Work for journals *Mortality* (T&F) and *Revenant* (Open Access)
- Previously Senior Lecturer @ Bedfordshire
- Publish predominantly on TV and on reps of death, dying and the dead
- Co-host *The Death Studies Podcast*

Focus

- Number of university students in Britain has expanded - so has public interest in them expressed across a range of media

- Increase in television detailing the lives of university students arguably coincident with the increase in tuition fees in 2012 and the removal of student number controls for England in 2013

- Explore how the idea of 'the university student' is conceptualised, constructed, and negotiated in recent British television documentary, drama and comedy genres

- Examine how the representation of the university student on the British television screen has shifted in recent years

Inspiration for the Research

Research Approach

- Williams (2010, p.170) states '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'

- 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 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'' (Roberts, 2014)

Research Approach

- Media coverage can act as a barometer for how significant a particular social concern or interest might be in the public imagination

- Might also generate public concern about a particular issue and informs how it is interpreted and understood

- Approach focused on how documentaries 'make sense' of particular social issues and the ways in which they produce and reproduce social knowledge (Livingstone, 1998)

- Plural 'audiences' adopted to acknowledge the plurality of television audiences and the ways in which different audiences can experience, interpret and 'make sense' of documentaries in different ways

How did we choose programming?
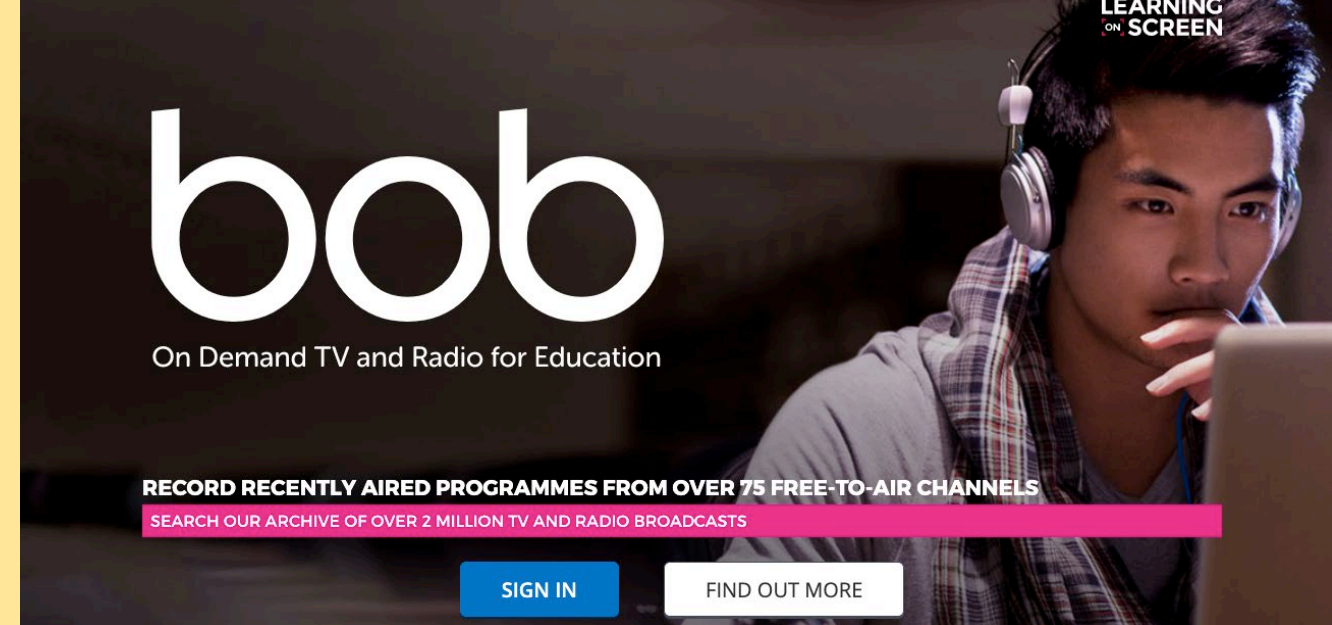
- Initially identified documentaries using Box of Broadcasts (BoB) and online searches

- Included programming tagged documentary, reality television and/or popular factual programming (for a discussion of the hybridised nature of documentary television see Dovey, 2000)

- Process of repeated watching and analysis looking for themes, similarities and differences, as well as researching wider contexts and reception

- Broadened out as project developed to drama and comedy genres

- Dispatches: Cashing in on Degrees, 2011, Channel 4
- Freshers, 2013; 2014, ITV
- The Secret Life of Students, 2014, Channel 4
- Freshers, Sex and Suspicious Parents, 2015, BBC Three
- Death on Campus: Our Stories, 2017, BBC Three
- Panorama Student Loans Scandal, 2018, BBC One
- Students on the Edge, 2018, BBC Three
- Freshers 2018: In our own words, 2018, BBC Three
- Student Sex Workers, 2019, Channel 5
- The Warwick Uni Rape Scandal, 2019, BBC One and BBC Three
- Dying for a Degree, 2019, BBC One

CHEAT

Two Women.

One Truth.

NORMAL
PEOPLE

CLIQUE

Sorry, this episode is not currently available

Covid on Campus

'At risk' and 'A risk' Dichotomy

Excessive, distorted and caricatured notions of the student have led to representations that are often polarised, with students positioned as either 'at risk' and in need of protection or as posing 'a risk' to themselves, to other students, and to the university sector.

A risk: focus on social rather than academic, broader cost to society, bogus students, cheating, drug dealing

At risk: poor mental health, stress, anxiety, assault, burnout

'Cash cows' and 'bogus students'

A significant focus on the cost of education is evident in some of the documentaries, 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*

Arguably moves against the broader current of change in this programming where students are increasingly represented as 'at risk'

'Dumbing down'

In *Freshers*, Bailegh explains how far she is from the 'ideal student'. Visiting the bookshop she states:

> *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.*

Media representations of students lacking intellectual merit can be linked to concerns about the lowering of academic standards within UK higher education. Many of the programmes 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.*

Skint or flush?

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

Some students represented as very irresponsible with money, others as being highly responsible – paid work plus university

Rising costs and risks associated with that – sex work in two of the documentaries, paying for study drugs and paying for essays

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.

Stress and vulnerability

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.*

Institutional failures

In *The Warwick Uni Rape Chat Scandal* the university is positioned as 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.*

Between 2007 and 2015 the number of student suicides in the UK increased by 79% from 75 to 134 deaths per year (Thorley, 2017) - significant increase in programming on this, shifting from BBC3 documentaries to BBC1 (wider audience)

Titles

- Shift from *Death on Campus: Our Stories* to *Students on the Edge's* 'Breakdown on Campus' to *Dying for a Degree*

- Student experience can be seen to become progressively more precarious. Suicide shifts from being concomitant with student status in the title *Death on Campus* to more explicitly positioned as the result of the high pressure, high stakes environment of university in *Dying for a Degree*

- Titles also reflect a movement that Euden and Sawyer (2015) have identified towards the commissioning of more controversial content in documentary programming

Shifting Representations

- Broadly, a shift from positioning students predominantly as fun-loving, promiscuous and irresponsible in *Freshmeat* (2011-2016), *Freshers* (2013-2014) etc. to emphasising the ways in which they are vulnerable and increasingly politically charged subjects in *Students on the Edge* (2018), *Student Sex Workers* (2019), *The Warwick Uni Rape Scandal* (2019), *Clique* (2017-2018) etc.

- Universities themselves increasingly forming part of the focus, represented as predatory and profit driven enterprises, reflecting broader concerns about universities (for example see Peter Fleming's *Dark Academia: How Universities Die*, 2021)

Project Publications
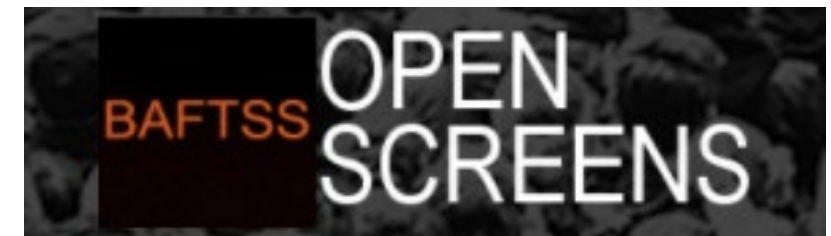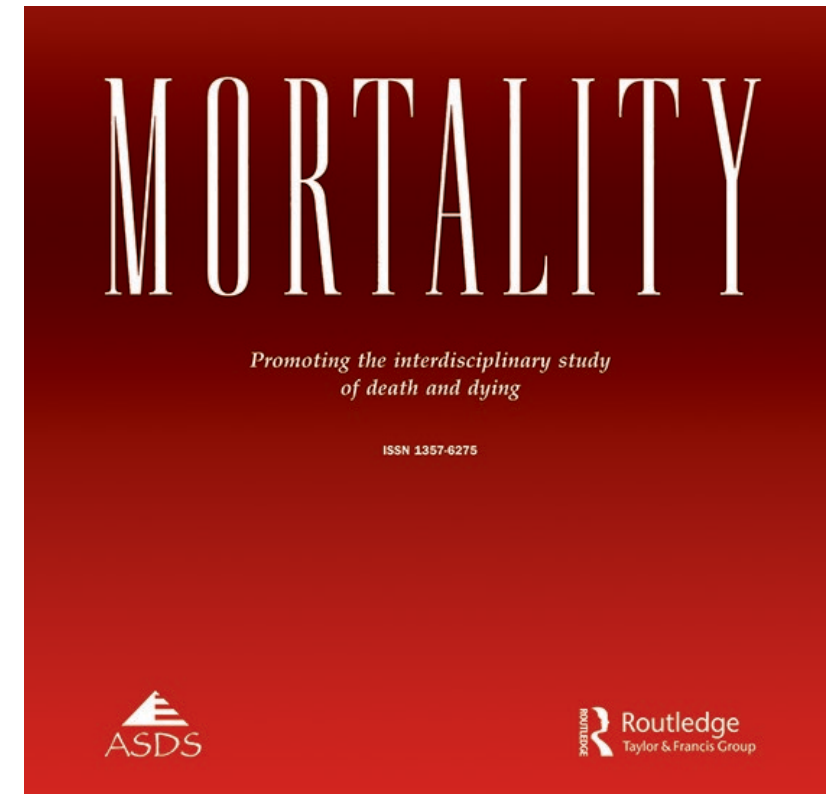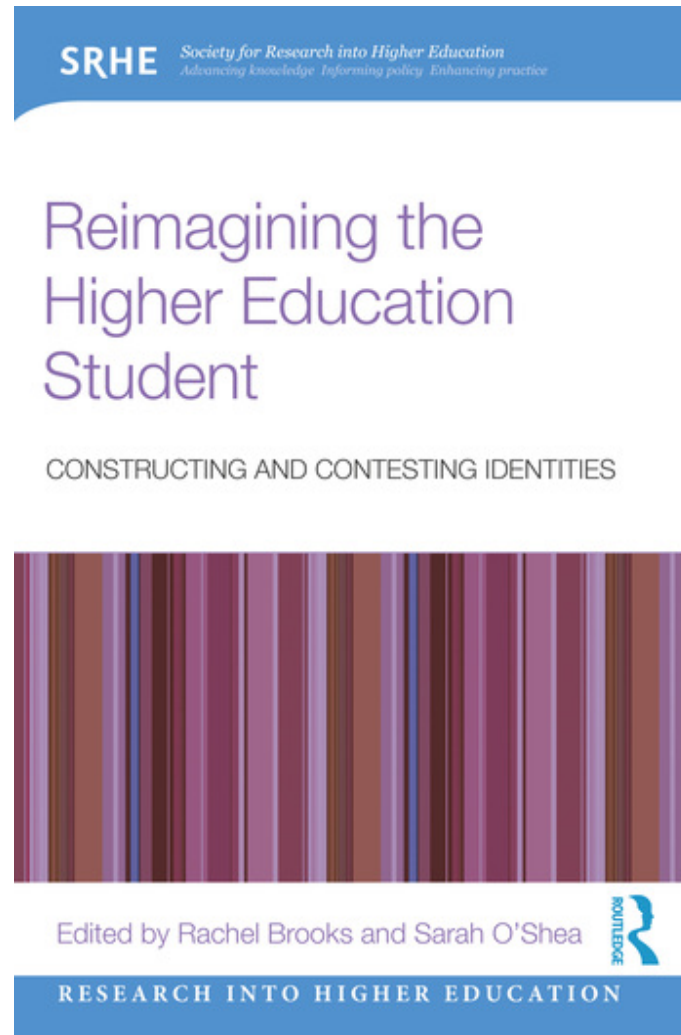
Want to get in touch?

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Any questions, watching suggestions, or recommendations?

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