

Lecturer “deeply regrets” offence caused by post

“I think Guy’s message was both quite offensive and completely undermined the point he was making.”



By [Amy Blumsom](#), Arts Editor (2013/14)
Tuesday 4 December 2012



The announcement was posted on the VLE for all the students studying the module to see

Professor Guy Halsall has apologised for an announcement posted on the VLE which offended second year history students.

In the post, Halsall describes himself as “probably the most significant historian of early medieval Europe under the age of 60 anywhere in the world”.

The faculty member then went on to state; “that’s not (just) me being cocky, but a pretty sober assessment of the range and quality of my work”. The History Department assured students that Halsall “sincerely and deeply regrets any offence his comments may have caused.”

The post was uploaded in response to approximately “only 60%” turning up to his lecture enrolled on the ‘End of the Roman World’ module.

Students were told: “Given that, for your money, you get the chance to hear (probably) the most significant historian of early medieval Europe under the age of 60 anywhere in the world give 16 lectures on his current research, and given that people pay said lecturer large sums of money and fly him around the world to talk to their students, or to give key-note lectures at conferences.”

The historian then implied students are failing to appreciate an education which “Mummy and Daddy” are compelled to pay “obscene amounts of money” for.

One second year History student told Nouse: “I think Guy’s message was both quite offensive and completely undermined the point he was making.

“He had every right to be annoyed about lecture attendance, but to criticise us by saying how he was the world authority on his subject and that we were there by the grace of “mummy and daddy’s money” is absurd and appalling. I actually find his seminars to be engaging and interesting, but he has utterly destroyed his reputation in my mind by presenting himself so smugly.”

Halsall responded: “the comments made by the student you quote are entirely fair and justified. S/he is quite right that my comments undermined my general point; I should not have made the comment in the way I did. It was indeed unprofessional and offensive. I unreservedly apologise to my students and to my departmental colleagues, who take their teaching extremely seriously and should by no means be tarred with the same brush as me. I am very sorry to have lost their respect.”

He went on to explain the cause of the outburst, stating it was “born of frustration. I care deeply about my courses and I care deeply that my students learn something important from them that they can take away from the course into their later life. I also care about the students getting value for their money – as I too clumsily said in my message.”

“I think it is obscene that students have to pay fees for higher education and I have published my view on this many times. That was what I meant by ‘obscene sums’; it was not intended as a comment on students’ wealth or otherwise.”

An anonymous student commented, “his apology on the VLE posted last night has gone an enormous way to restoring my faith in him.

“I certainly hope he doesn’t face any kind of disciplinary action for what he wrote.”

In a joint statement, Stuart Carroll, History’s Head of Department and Simon Ditchfield, Chair of the Board of Studies, described the lecturer as “among the most highly rated” lecturers according to student feedback forms.

Carroll and Ditchfield then went on to explain that “In this context, Guy’s strength of feeling should be seen perhaps as frustration directed at the unfamiliar predicament he found himself in – as a world-leading scholar and excellent lecturer faced with a noticeable degree of non-attendance – rather than anger directed personally at students.”



30 comments

Dan Ross

4 Dec '12 at 3:26 pm

I can completely understand the lecturers annoyance, and it’s ridiculous that almost half the students didn’t attend the lecture. At the end of the day, University is for work, not meant to be a massive doss off from real life and work. Students should stop getting wound up over little things and start working. If you can’t handle going to Willow on a Monday night and then making it to a 9.15 the next day then don’t.

Done.

[Report](#)

Russell Green

24 Dec '12 at 1:42 pm

Last time I checked work was where somebody pays me for my labours. University on the other hand is a service that I pay a lot of money to receive. I hope this story serves as a timely reminder to those whose ego is so large that they forget who is paying their wages and who is supposed to be serving the needs of whom.

[Report](#)

To be fair...

4 Dec '12 at 4:09 pm

Dan Ross is 100% right, and in all honesty, Guy Halsall IS one of the world leaders in Early Medieval

history. The points he is trying to make are extremely valid, though he has perhaps not put it across in the most effective manner.

Can only imagine its very frustrating for lecturers to have so few people bother to turn up to lectures.

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Anonymous Post-Grad

4 Dec '12 at 8:26 pm

I'm a current MA student doing a module with Guy, and if I were in his position I'd be pretty damn frustrated too. The new intake of undergraduates are paying 3x what I paid, and if they want to miss a lecture from a scholar of Guy's accurately self-assessed character so they can get pissed, they're bloody fools (to be honest, that's not even an excuse. I had many a drunken night at undergrad where I still managed to make it in for a 9 am the next day). Guy's class is one of the toughest, thought-provoking and interesting I have ever had the benefit to study.

Not being funded, I have received some additional financial help from my parents to be able to do my masters and although I'm also working to fund it and have worked for my entire life (state comprehensive kid, first to go to university, etc), in my case his comment about 'mummy and daddy' is fairly apt. In my case, I'd feel like I'd be wasting an incredible opportunity if I didn't try to make the most out of the time I've been fortunate enough to have here so far, and there's no reason undergraduates shouldn't feel the same.

[▲ Report](#)

Anonymous Post-Grad

4 Dec '12 at 8:27 pm

*most thought-provoking and interesting.

[▲ Report](#)

TW

4 Dec '12 at 8:57 pm

My friend did the maths a while back, and he worked out that the average second- or third-year History student is paying about £70-100 per contact hour. Triple that for first-year students. Just a bit of perspective to think about when you skip that 9:15 lecture.

Also, just conjecture on my part, but possibly the problems with non-attendance this year are partly to do with the fact that the department is allowing freshers to audit second-year modules for the first time. Since they don't do the exams, a lot of them have just stopped bothering to turn up halfway through term.

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2nd year historian

4 Dec '12 at 9:24 pm

Who ever decided to go to nouse about this story should be pretty ashamed of themselves. Guy had every right to say what he did and other lecturers have expressed the same concerns about lecture attendance. His email has also been taken out of context and makes it look a lot worse than it actually is. Also to be fair his comment about “mummy and daddy” paying peoples fees is not actually that unreasonable if you simply look at the people doing history.

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Anonymous Post-Grad 2

4 Dec '12 at 10:00 pm

Halsall is a brilliant lecturer and a genuinely world class historian. It's pretty sad to see people not bother

attending his lectures, especially considering the amount they're paying for the degree. I don't think it justifies the exact way he phrased his comments, but the sentiment seems to suggest he just wants the best for his students.

It's a shame more lecturers don't have his passion for everyone gets the most out of their education.

[▲ Report](#)

Anonymous Post-Grad 2

4 Dec '12 at 10:01 pm

*It's a shame more lecturers don't have his passion for ensuring everyone gets the most out of their education.

[▲ Report](#)

Tom

4 Dec '12 at 11:47 pm

This article is absurd and whoever made this complaint should be absolutely ashamed of themselves. I have Guy Halsall for my third year specialist subject module and the guy is comfortably the most well informed seminar tutor I've ever come across and he is in the very top echelon of his chosen field of history.

The fact that Nouse have got a comment off Guy irritates me beyond words that he is being forced to apologise for something he need not apologise for. If people can't be bothered to turn up to lectures, then shame on them.

Also, I fail to see what could possibly be offensive in that email apart from the exposure of a couple of home truths. Halsall wants the students to get the most out of their degree. How offensive.... Farce.

[▲ Report](#)

Nick

5 Dec '12 at 12:31 am

I would echo Tom's comments. As a second year student of his, not only was the announcement rather hilarious, it would hopefully have got a vital message through to students who perhaps are taking higher education for granted (whether that be due to significant financial backing, or other reasons).

I would hazard a guess that unfortunately, one of the people who should have taken his message on board was the one who complained to Nouse.

[▲ Report](#)

Mike

5 Dec '12 at 11:48 am

I think it's indicative of the high esteem with which Guy is held by his students that so many have commented to defend him. But Nouse are able to make an article on this, and even worse force an apology from him, just because one person complained about him giving some factual home truths.

As a special subject student and supervisee of Guy, I have nothing but praise for him. He is an engaging and extremely knowledgeable tutor. Some people may think it to be egotistical for him to criticise students for not using his knowledge by skipping lectures. But having been in numerous seminars with him, it's actually a very valid assessment.

Only a fool would pay so much money for a university education, then have the good fortune to be taught by a world-leading historian like Guy, and not make the most of it.

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Lalila

5 Dec '12 at 9:18 pm

He seems cute and passionate. Is he good looking? I wouldn't mind having a student-lecturer relationship with him.... We could talk about history in bed.

 Report

Another 2nd year Historian

5 Dec '12 at 9:49 pm

To be honest, like a lot of other people who've commented, I was absolutely disgusted that someone thought it was a good idea to report this to Nouse. Opportunity to make fun of the University: the post was clearly sarcastic, and he obviously didn't intend to insult anyone, it was designed to make people uncomfortable. That and the fact he is one of the best historians in his field, without a doubt, should have made people far more appreciative of his efforts.

Shame on whoever decided to publish this and force an apology out of the History department and him. If only we had more lecturers of his calibre. But then I suppose we would be spoiled...

 Report

Lalila

5 Dec '12 at 10:58 pm

I just googled him: <http://www.york.ac.uk/history/staff/profiles/halsall/>

He is rather dashing, I must say. Potential husband?

 Report

Ben

6 Dec '12 at 9:10 pm

What a ridiculous article. Admittedly the way Guy referred to himself was a bit OTT but I doubt it was meant entirely seriously. The fact that any of his students would take offence from this shows worrying immaturity.

 Report

Anonymous Post-Grad 3

6 Dec '12 at 11:48 pm

I don't think he should have apologised. I thought his original comment was both accurate and funny. If people were offended, good!

 Report

top bloke

7 Dec '12 at 3:33 pm

definite top bloke, should have never apologized, the person who complained is probably in for a nasty surprise when they work out who it is and they get a 3rd in this module (the history department knows more than you think, as I found out to my surprise once)

 Report

anon

8 Dec '12 at 3:38 pm

I'd rather see an article about the far, FAR worse which have gone on in the English Department over the

years....

[▲ Report](#)

Anonymous Post-Grad 2

9 Dec '12 at 10:39 am

Lalila, wouldn't we all?

Top marks on grammar and use of the word 'dashing' by the way...

[▲ Report](#)

The Hobbit

29 Dec '12 at 8:09 pm

I'm at a loss to see how any of his comments were offensive. Granted, his comments don't demonstrate a lot of tact or modesty, but from the headline I had assumed he had said something homophobic or racist. Some precious souls take offense at every possible (and in this case well-founded) criticism. This does not mean he has anything to apologise for.

[▲ Report](#)

The Hobbit

29 Dec '12 at 8:19 pm

@ Russell Green

What an idiotic post. How do you expect to do well in your degree if you refuse to do any work, on the grounds that no one is paying you for it? Look on his comments as a 'consumer awareness announcement' if it makes you feel more comfortable, i.e. you have paid for a service you're not using.

He's under no obligation to try to shame students into going to lectures, by the way. Most lecturers would be happy to let the stupid stay away and have only the committed students attend.

[▲ Report](#)

Russell Green

29 Dec '12 at 11:33 pm

Of course it would be idiotic to suggest that one should refuse to work on ones degree because one was not being paid for it. The point is that the only person with the right to judge and criticise student for not putting in the work is the student himself. His obligation is to noone but him/herself and he succeeds or fails by virtue of his own efforts. You simply do not ever insult your customers, no matter how frustrating their behavior might be. It's like the chef insulting the diner who fails to clean his plate because he feels his efforts are unappreciated.

[▲ Report](#)

The Hobbit

30 Dec '12 at 3:17 am

@ Russell Green

What a novel approach to higher education. Do you also think students should grade their own exam papers and decide their own degree classes? After all, how dare a mere lecturer (read: employee) criticise you for doing a half-arsed job on an essay or for not attending lectures? You're paying, so therefore your actions are beyond criticism. (I think you'll also find that potential employers reserve the right to judge your work ethic, using degree results as a rough barometer.)

Back in the real world, however, education is not a commodity like a meal in a restaurant. For many

people it's a life-altering experience. We pay for it, but that doesn't mean we control the purse strings; for every person who gets into a top university in this country there are dozens who miss out. Put simply, you're replaceable; your world-class lecturers aren't. If they think students are being irresponsible and not taking full advantage of an opportunity which many people in this world would literally kill for, they're under no obligation to keep silent. Whether you take their advice or not is your own affair, of course.

By the way, no one becomes an academic for the money. They've gone into a relatively low-paying profession because they're passionate about their subject. Why they should kow-tow to people who are too stupid to reap the benefits of something they have already paid for is beyond me.

[▲ Report](#)

Russell Green

30 Dec '12 at 11:22 am

I think you will find that in the “real world”, rightly or wrongly, education is in fact a commodity and that everyone is replaceable. However, there is a big and significant difference between offering advice and encouragement or constructive criticism in the proper context, and insulting your students. It isn't a question of kow-towing, it's a matter of treating students with respect and behaving in a professional manner. Yes an employer judges the quality of an employees work, but the only thing that gives him the right to do so is that fact that he is paying for that work. Since we are the ones paying for the services of our lecturers we are fully entitled to demand a high degree of professionalism from them.

[▲ Report](#)

top bloke

3 Jan '13 at 4:54 pm

@Russel Green

So education is a commodity, let's change this into a straight forward commodity then steel (BA level education). In this case let's say Guy Halsall produces some best type of steel from York (one of the top medieval historians), and you the customer knowing this ask to buy some (application to University of York and his course). Guy Halsall has many people who order from him but having heard that you have used Iron effectively to produce good results he chooses to supply you over another person (the university accepting you and him taking you on his course). However after this promising start you consistently fail to collect the steel from him (failing to turn up to lectures), which is of course frustrating as he has to take time out of his day from producing the steel and perfecting his steel's mix of elements, and production techniques (his research and writing). This happens repeatedly. Also part of the contract was that you would build him another warehouse (an essay), now this warehouse wasn't for his own good but an act of kindness to help you learn and think through how best to use this steel while he was able to explain to you it's limitation and capabilities so that you could become a better workmen (historian and then for future work better researcher, interpreter and presenter when working on some project for academic purposes or the working world). At the same time he will appreciate any work done as he can see what you have tried to do and may learn more about his steel and what he can do with it.

Your failure to collect the steel meant that the warehouse you produced was not largely different from what you produced before and so you didn't learn much. So not only had he made less money (less time reading and writing, which does impact his actual money made directly from if he used this to produce a book, to indirectly as it slows down his production of general academic work which could affect his position within a department at york or at any where else he chooses to work), but also the time he has wasted doing this was further wasted by when he offered further help in the construction at unlikely gain to him it was essentially wasted, further reducing his possible money made. Now most commodity produces would tell said buyer to not bother anymore, and probably chuck some insults at them at the same time.

Before you say this doesn't happen I have seen it happen in business where one company/person/group is

messing around another when being offered a pretty sweet deal as this is being told to piss off, in a similar manner to how he treated the students.

So commodity purchase like this is actually more complicated than a direct sale and purchase.

[▲ Report](#)

Russell Green

4 Jan '13 at 12:58 pm

@top bloke

Good point, well made. Indeed, the supplier always has the right to choose his customers and it would be unwise underestimate the value of a good supplier. I probably overreacted in the first instance. The “wasting mummy and daddy’s money” remark raised my hackles. I worked damned hard to finance my education so it was easy to understand why the student who brought this issue to our attention was offended. That having been said Professor Halsall has acknowledged that his remarks were offensive and apologised. Which was, I believe, the right thing to do. I accept that what was said, was said with the best of intentions and now since I have no intention of wasting MY money I should really get back to studying for my exams.

[▲ Report](#)

me

4 Jan '13 at 11:16 pm

@russell green

you are a buffoon of a man. That is all.

[▲ Report](#)

yourgirlfriday

27 Jun '13 at 9:53 pm

I’ve had the misfortune of being obliged to read one of Mr. Halsall’s books for a course, and I have to say, that if his lectures are as tedious and insufferable as his book then I would not attend his lectures either. It is after all university, and students can in many cases decide if they get enough out of a lecture to wish to attend or not. Some times, I have learned more studying on my own than by attending an awful lecture, with an even more awful lecturer. Further, it seems that the only thing grand about Mr. Halsall is his ego.

[▲ Report](#)

Simon

1 Jul '13 at 10:58 pm

Having had the privilege of being taught by Guy as an undergraduate and a postgraduate when I was a student at York some years ago I am surprised that only 60% turned up. They were fantastic and thought provoking. I will certainly be buying Guy’s book reassessing ‘Arthurian Briton’ to read this summer.

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