

## **Subtle Transformers: How academics shape and influence student expectations.**

Osborn Julie, Kneale Pauline, Turner Rebecca, Bacon Alison, *Plymouth University, UK*

Recent changes in the funding of Higher Education in England have resulted in the student experience becoming a priority area. Measures of the students experience are perceived as playing a significant role in shaping their expectations. However, the 'value' of these data has been widely questioned. Student Charters were introduced as a tool that could influence student expectations. This paper reports on the initial phase of a longitudinal study that started in 2011 when student charters were being introduced for the first time. Eight academics from New University who had been involved in creating Student Charters were interviewed to understand the contribution they made to defining and shaping student expectations. Using Psychological Contract theory as an explanatory framework the emergent themes highlight the key role that academics play in the formation and ongoing negotiation of psychological contracts. Other influences play a role in defining what is on offer e.g. fairness.

### **Paper**

Recent changes in the funding of Higher Education in England have resulted in the student experience becoming a priority area for both universities and policymakers. Discussion surrounding the student experience have crystallised around specific issues (e.g. contact hours, complaints) and have received considerable media attention in recent months. Recently Brown, (2014) writing in 'The Times' commented

*Complaints to universities rose by a tenth to more than 20,000 last year with one group of students told they would have to travel 45 minutes to attend half their lectures and watch the other half online.*

Given this it is not surprising that measures of the students experience (e.g. National Students Survey (NSS) or the Key Information Sets (KIS)) are perceived as playing a significant role regarding student choice and in shaping their expectations. However, the 'value' of these data has been widely questioned. For example, Brown (2012) suggests the "*effort currently devoted to student information is at best a waste of resources*". Consequently, there is a need to find meaningful ways to explore the student experience and also to understand the best ways to manage student expectations.

Managing expectations by defining what HEIs offered was recognised by the Government's 'Student Chart Group' (January, 2011) who recommended that each HEI should have a "high level, succinct Student Charter drawn up in consultation with students which sets out the mutual expectations of universities and students". Student Charters were developed as a response to requests from government to

HEIS to provide information about what they offer and how the experience at their particular institution differs from other universities. Student Charters therefore sought

to *'influence student expectations and thus increase student satisfaction'* (Gaffney-

Rhys & Jones, 2010).

Student Charters were introduced at a time when a fundamental shift was taking place with regard to the position of students in relation to a university (Naidoo, Shankar, & Veer, 2011). Consequently, Student Charters played a pivotal role in negotiating this shift by offering a mechanism for managing student expectations. In 2011, when these changes were being implemented, a longitudinal study began which sought to examine the implementation and development of student charters, and their use with respect to managing student expectations.

This paper will present findings from the initial phase of this research and explores the role that academics played in defining and shaping student expectations.

### **Methodology**

This research adopts a methodology that has predominantly been used to explore employment relationships – psychological contracts (Conway & Briner, 2005; Conway & Coyle-Shapiro, 2012; D. Rousseau, 1995). Rousseau defined the psychological contract as an individual's beliefs concerning the mutual obligations that exist between him/herself and the employer. (D. Rousseau, 1995)

Psychological contracts have been studied in employment settings in order to understand the informal obligations, perceptions and mutual beliefs that develop between employer and employee (Herriot, Manning, & Kidd, 1997; D. Rousseau, 1995; D. M. Rousseau, 1989). Whilst the concept has been used to explore employment relationships the idea of a psychological contract can be applied to almost any interpersonal relationship (Conway & Briner, 2005). Psychological contract was used as a lens through which to explore the student experience.

Considering student psychological contracts at the inception of Student Charters was important as these processes are likely to interact so that formal and informal contracts are developed alongside each other. Research on psychological contracts has acknowledged the role of formal information (e.g. job description, induction packs) in the development of psychological contracts (De Vos et al., 2003). It is therefore likely that Student Charters will be influential in how student psychological contracts are formed and develop.

The research's exploratory purpose implied the selection of a design that allows an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under examination, thus a Grounded Theory, iterative design was used. (Charmaz, 2006)

Eight staff from New University who had been involved in developing Student Charters were invited to participate. They were selected as their involvement in developing student charters had given them the opportunity to reflect on what is offered to students.

Interviews took place over a two month period April 2012 – May 2012. A General Interview Guide Approach was used to allow flexibility whilst using outline prompts (Kvale, 2008). Interviews were recorded then transcribed and data analysed in keeping with (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) grounded theory approach.

## Findings

1. Academics **define** what **the deal** is for students when student psychological contracts are being formed

*What you do with this education that you have bought it up to you.*

This academic uses the term 'bought' and therefore acknowledges a consumerist approach but at the same time limits what is being purchased. This theme shows how the offer is being interpreted and defined in discussion with students.

2. Academics **negotiated boundaries** with students

This explanation typifies the complex relationship between staff and students described by all the participants. Ongoing negotiation of what is on offer is evident with a constant reappraisal of roles, acceptable styles of interaction and time that the academic can offer students. This negotiation is important in both the formation and maintenance of student psychological contracts. Academics act as the interface between the organisation and the student and as such play a powerful role in defining expectations, dealing with feedback and providing information that will impact student psychological contracts.

3. **Key influences can shape ill-defined boundaries.**

Students and staff operate within an environment of 'fairness'. When it is not clear what can be offered then academics will consider if it is fair on themselves and/or other students. One academic described the requirement to respond to emails within 3 working days yet felt frustrated that some students asked for information which was provided elsewhere. When consider their response they relied on principles of fairness and responded that they should read the module guide as this is what others had done.

## Summary and Conclusions

This study has important implications for developing our theoretical understanding of Psychological Contracts. In particular, the application of the concept to higher education has yielded an understanding of the role that academics play in defining and shaping student expectations. This reveals hitherto unexplored information that has not been captured by surveys methods.

The tentative findings from this exploratory research indicates

1. Academics are key in formation of student psychological contracts
2. There is an ongoing negotiation of acceptable boundaries in the student-academic relationship
3. Other influences play a role in defining what is on offer e.g. fairness.

## References

Brown, R., (2012). Student choice is a myth - and it's immoral. The Guardian [online] 19 March. Available at:  
<<http://www.theguardian.com/education/2012/mar/19/student-choice-higher-education-academic-responsibility>>  
[Accessed 27 June 2014]

Prynne, M., (2014). Student complaints to universities rise to 20,000. The Telegraph, [online] 3 June Available at:  
<<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/universityeducation/10871390/Student-complaints-to-universities-rise-to-20000.html>>  
[Accessed 27 June 2014]

Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis*: Sage Publications.

Conway, N., & Briner, R. B. (2005). *Understanding psychological contracts at work: A critical evaluation of theory and research*: Oxford University Press Oxford.

Conway, N., & Coyle-Shapiro, J. A. M. (2012). The reciprocal relationship between psychological contract fulfilment and employee performance and the moderating role of perceived organizational support and tenure. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 85(2), 277-299. doi: 10.1111/j.2044-8325.2011.02033.x

Corbin, J. M., & Strauss, A. (1990). Grounded theory research: Procedures, canons, and evaluative criteria. *Qualitative Sociology*, 13(1), 3-21. doi: 10.1007/bf00988593

Gaffney-Rhys, R., & Jones, J. (2010). Issues surrounding the introduction of formal student contracts. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 35(6), 711-725. doi: 10.1080/02602930902977749

Herriot, P., Manning, W., & Kidd, J. M. (1997). The content of the psychological contract. *British Journal of management*, 8(2), 151-162.

Kvale, S. (2008). *Doing interviews*: Sage.

- Naidoo, R., Shankar, A., & Veer, E. (2011). The consumerist turn in higher education: Policy aspirations and outcomes. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 27(11-12), 1142-1162.
- Rousseau, D. (1995). *Psychological contracts in organizations: Understanding written and unwritten agreements*: Sage.
- Rousseau, D. M. (1989). Psychological and implied contracts in organizations. *Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal*, 2(2), 121-139.