

An alternative approach to exploring the student experience using psychological contracts. (0336)

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Introduction

The phrase “the student experience” has become part of everyday language. Understanding the student experience is important to Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) across the globe. Whilst there is recognition that the experience is important, less consideration has been given to how we conceptualise and evaluate this experience.

Student voices have been seen as a way to understand that the student experience. Student voice has been described as "any expression of any learner regarding anything related to education (Fletcher, 2014). This description is wide ranging and determining what aspects of the student experience need to be explored and the relative importance of various elements of the voice to listen to are not explicit. Student voice highlights a genuine desire to hear what students have to say in order to improve their experience but no clear methodology has been confirmed that will enable the voice to be heard.

The student experience is predominantly explored using questionnaire surveys. The Key Information Sets (KIS) are considered a means of covering issues that concern students when deciding where to study, but does the information collated give a fair representation of the learning experience students can expect? A quick analysis of this survey and the data shows that dissenting voices are not given the same prominence as supportive comments. The National Student Survey (NSS) is conducted in a similar way with institutions offering incentives for taking part and information guiding participants so that they can complete in the most appropriate manner.

In June 2011, the UK government published the higher education white paper ‘Students at the Heart of the System’ outlining the government’s vision of improving

the student experience. The government placed greater emphasis on improving the student experience, expanding choices and making universities more accountable to students than ever before. Tuition fees were trebled to £9,000 in 2012, which led to the fundamental changes in the relationship between the student and their university. Higher fees placed an emphasis on HEIs operating as a profit-driven sector (Neave, 2006), with feedback sought from the consumers in the form of surveys in order to consider customer satisfaction. It was widely claimed that higher education was becoming increasingly commercialised (e.g. Bok, 2003). Students were now seen as customers, (Korczynski, 2002; Longdon, 2006; Redding, 2005). Students as customers were becoming more and more aware of their rights as consumers (Sander, Stevenson, King, & Coates, 2000). Evaluating the student experiences therefore became important in order to satisfy consumers.

Alongside conceptualising students as customers, student contracts were developed. Student contracts were seen as a means of formally recording the expectations between HEIs and students in order to outline what each party should provide. These contracts offered a written statement but in addition students developed an implicit understanding that as they paid more they would receive an improved experience. These changes to the context of higher education have pushed student expectations higher up the teaching and learning agenda. However, with the change, expectations of what courses would be like may have been raised. And yet average teaching time barely nudges 12 hours a week. It is therefore more important than ever to consider these explore student expectations in order to understand the implicit understanding that is developed. Implicit understanding needs to be clarified alongside explicit contractual agreements and an alternative approach that includes an understanding of all these elements is needed in order to fully understand the experience.

Psychological Contracts: An Alternative Explanatory Tool

Psychological Contracts provide a means by which expectation and implicit understandings can be explored from the 'eye of the beholder' (Rousseau, 1995). Individuals hold psychological contracts which provide them with a schema for making sense of the world. Psychological Contracts have mainly been used to explore employment relationships and there has been limited research considering

student psychological contracts. Koskina (2011) explored postgraduate students' perceptions of the psychological contracts and identified how student psychological contracts differed from employment psychological contracts. This research noted the importance of the exchange relationship between academics and students and also the role that tutors serve as university agents.

Psychological Contract as a Framework

The Psychological contract has been defined as an individual's beliefs regarding the terms and conditions of an exchange relation with another party (D. Rousseau, 1995). The psychological contract has been used as a construct to describe the relationship between employers and employees and the subsequent behaviour of employees in studies of work and organisation (see Conway & Briner, 2005)

Psychological contracts are more than the expectation that each party hold regarding the exchange relationship. Psychological contracts are conceptualised as the perceived promises that each party holds regarding the exchange relationship.

Psychological contracts enable people to form a cognitive schema which organises and structures information (D. M. Rousseau, 2001; Shore & Tetrick, 1994). D.

Rousseau (1995) suggests that the psychological contract provides people with cues regarding the types of events they may expect and how those events should be interpreted.

The Efficacy of Psychological Contracts as an Explanatory Tool

This report will refer to the efficacy of this approach with reference to its application to a five year, longitudinal study, which is currently at its mid-point. The study considers student psychological contracts and in doing so provides an alternative insight into the student experience. The results to date have provided information that provides evidence to support this approach as an alternative way of exploring the student experience. Key findings to date will be discussed and include

- Subtle factors that define the student experience
- The unfolding nature of their experience
- Critical determinants in defining a positive experience

Preliminary findings support this approach and methodology and offer an enhanced understanding of the student experience that questionnaires fail to capture. Implications for using psychological contract in different countries will also be discussed in order to demonstrate the flexible and dynamic nature of this approach.

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