Lessons learned from self-determination theory for improving the first year student experience. (0065)

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A significant proportion of students who enter higher education (HE) struggle to make a successful transition into their new learning environment. In extreme cases of poor adjustment students withdraw from their studies: data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency show that 6% of students leave within their first year of study (1). Students experience a number of challenges upon entering HE including: becoming self-directed and independent learners; developing competence and confidence in the academic skills demanded by HE; and establishing relationships with both staff and students at the new institution (2). The modern HE sector compels institutions to implement support processes designed to assist students in making successful transitions into HE.

The literature exploring the first year student experience uses a range of theoretical frameworks: this paper utilises Edward Deci and Richard Ryan's self-determination theory (SDT) (3). SDT is an organismic theory that places the motivation for inherent growth and development within a social context. According to SDT, motivation is driven by three basic psychological needs: autonomy (alternately called self-determination), competence, and relatedness. Specifically, autonomy is the need to be the originator and controller of one's actions; competence is feeling able to control the outcomes from one's actions; and relatedness is having valuable interactions with others. SDT asserts that when these psychological needs are met then individuals will be intrinsically motivated to act, without requiring external rewards.

The challenges faced by students entering HE align with SDT's basic psychological needs. Consequently I propose that if fulfilment of these needs is thwarted, then students will not be motivated towards inherent growth and they are more likely to withdraw from their studies. Conversely, if the basic psychological needs are met, then students will be intrinsically motivated to engage in their studies, leading to retention and academic achievement. Indeed, studies have shown that self-determined motivation is positively related to deep processing of subject material and academic achievement in HE (4, 5).

This paper proposes that institutions can improve the first year student experience (and consequently student retention and academic achievement) by drawing on SDT theory and research to create environments that satisfy students' need for autonomy, competence and relatedness.

Autonomy supportive environments empower individuals to choose their behaviour. Research has shown that educators can learn to be autonomy supportive (6). Consequently continuing professional development (CPD) programmes could acquaint staff with the rationale for autonomy support and provide a safe environment for practicing autonomy supportive language (such as "you might" and "if you choose" rather than "you should" or "you must") and autonomy supportive behaviours (such as offering suggestions rather than solutions). Ongoing mentoring could support staff in the long-term integration of autonomy support in their professional practice.

Students realise that they need to develop competence and confidence in academic skills in HE. Academic staff could support skill development in a number of ways. First, staff need to clearly define expectations so students are cognisant with the criteria they will be assessed against. Next, staff could create opportunities for students to be assessed against these criteria. Initially this may be predominantly via formative assessments which allow students to develop an accurate perception of competency but with affecting official grades. Competency could be increased further through provision of feedback. Although peer assessment is a constructive learning activity, feedback

provided by peers has not been shown to improve self-perceived competence (7). Consequently the onus should be placed on qualified staff to provide constructive feedback which emphasises growth, rather than absolute achievement.

The final basic psychological need is relatedness, both with other students and with staff. The literature investigating the first year student experience is unanimous in emphasising the need to create social relationships between students, both within and outside the classroom. This is fostered, for example, by belonging to Students' Union societies. Somewhat paradoxically, the massification of HE has hindered the process or building relationships within taught sessions because students are increasingly taught in large lecture theatres that inhibit interaction between peers. Furthermore large cohort sizes impede the community spirit and concomitant sense of belonging that arise from membership of a discrete and definable group. Nonetheless teaching staff can encourage social interaction between students during contact hours, for example through the use of buzz groups in lectures or teamwork in practical and seminar sessions.

In addition, SDT research reveals the importance of relatedness with significant others, such as teaching staff. In HE professional relationships between staff and students can be created through small group teaching, field courses, staff-student societies and committees comprising both staff and students. Now that the generation of "digital natives" has entered HE, staff have adopted virtual learning environments to support traditional teaching methodologies. Typically these digital platforms include discussion fora; studies have shown online communication can facilitate a sense of belonging (8). Consequently, staff involvement in these fora may also improve staff-student relationships.

SDT proposes that intrinsic motivation arises from satisfaction of the psychological needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness. Studies within HE have demonstrated that satisfaction (or frustration) of these psychological needs fuels complex interactions between needs, motivations and outcome. Overall, the greater the satisfaction of psychological needs, the greater the outcomes. This paper outlines relevant SDT research and considers its implications for improving the first year student experience. Carefully designed research studies are needed to evaluate the impact and effectiveness of these interventions in HE institutions.

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