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Title Students' perceptions and motivations for studying an undergraduate degree in the Humanities
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Research Domain: Student Experience (SE)

Research outline

Introduction:

The aim of this research is to understand how students understand the purpose of studying for an undergraduate degree, specifically in a humanities discipline, by exploring their perceptions and motivations for studying their chosen degree, and to find out to what extent, if at all, this understanding incorporates the idea of study for 'itself' and 'learning for the sake of learning'.

Research undertaken in the value of a degree has tended to be heavily focussed either on whether students are getting "value for money" (i.e. the number of contact hours, quality of teaching and feedback etc.), or assessing the economic value of a degree and its currency in terms of labour market opportunities. Although it is important for students to make economically informed decisions when choosing what to study at university, the value of a degree cannot only be measured in terms of future employment and potential lifetime earnings (*potential value*).

The research will suggest that the motivators for attending university are complex and include both extrinsic and intrinsic stimuli.

Methodology:

Undergraduate Humanities students and graduates from seven discipline areas (Archaeology, English, Film Studies, History, Modern Languages, Music and Philosophy) were invited to participate in the research. An integrated methodological approach was used, consisting of quantitative data analysis using an online questionnaire, and qualitative data analysis through structured focus group discussions and in depth individual interviews.

Analysis:

The research focuses on 3 core themes- **Motivation, Value** and the **Purpose of Higher Education**.

Motivation

The survey results showed that the top two motivations across all years of study for current students was *To have a better chance of employment and get a good job* (78.4%), and *To learn more about things that interest me* (76.6%). This was reinforced through the focus groups as although students

acknowledged that going to university was important in terms of getting a job, there was a general consensus that it was still important to study a subject that you enjoyed, rather than for a job being the sole purpose.

Reputational prestige was also a key motivator, with both the current students and graduates acknowledging that all degrees are not equal. Strategic choices were made about which university to attend, with league tables playing a central role when choosing.

Data from both the current students and graduates indicated that in many cases there were other people who influenced their decision of what and where to study, rather than it being a solo choice. Influences ranged from parents, grandparents, siblings, as well as friends, teachers and other role models. There was also a strong sense of societal pressure in going to university, as it was seen as an expectation and a natural progression after school or college.

Value

When talking about the value of a degree the focus is often on the monetary value attributed to it and tied up with the debate around tuition fees. Although value and worth are sometimes used interchangeably, students were able to distinguish between them and recognise other benefits of going to university, seeing it as more of an investment than a debt.

Bol's (2015) research on the positional model of education argues that as a result of educational expansion a positional model of education becomes more important, whereby labour market rewards do not primarily depend on absolute skills levels, but instead on workers' relative positions in the labour market (2015: 105). This concept is reflected in the qualitative data, with *credentialising* being a very strong theme. The focus groups gave a sense that a degree in itself might not be sufficient to mitigate the competitive job market, with students understanding the extent to which they were competing with other equally qualified graduates for fewer jobs. As a result of this students were very aware of the importance of having work experience whilst at university, be it through internships, placements or volunteering.

Although intrinsic value as a core motivational principle was clearly visible in the data, there was also a very strong consumerist ethos relating to the value of their degree and quality of educational experience in terms of the return they expected for their investment. This has many similarities with Kandiko & Mawer's (2013) study in to student expectations and perceptions of higher education, where tangible measures of value such as contact time and new buildings (symbolic value) were often used by students as proxies to inform judgements about value for money.

The perceived purpose of higher education

Employability has become increasingly central to the mission and functioning of universities, spurred on by national and supranational agencies, and the demands of marketisation (McCowan, 2015:267), challenging the traditional purpose of higher education. Both the quantitative and qualitative data clearly shows that students do seem to understand university as having a multiple purpose- to

develop students as people, their subject specific knowledge, as well as prepare them for future employment.

Conclusion

A major outcome of this study will be a greater understanding of both the economic and personal value that students place on their degree. The data indicates that there is clearly a complex web of extrinsic and intrinsic motivations for going to university, with students believing their time at university, although perhaps cliché, is a voyage of discovery and personal growth, which is intertwined with a strong sense of importance to study a subject you are passionate about, but also a strong feeling that a degree in itself might not be sufficient to mitigate the competitive job market. The data highlights students' understanding of university as having multiple purposes- to develop students as people, their subject specific knowledge, as well as preparing them for future employment.

References

- Bol, T. 2015. Has education become more positional? Educational expansion and labour market outcomes, 1985–2007. *Acta Sociologica*, Vol. 58(2) 105–120
- Kandiko, C. B. & Mawer, M. (2013). *Student Expectations and Perceptions of Higher Education*. London: King's Learning Institute.
- McCowan, T. 2015. Should universities promote employability? *Theory and Research in Education*, vol. 13 no. 3, pp. 267-285