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Student Psychological Contracts: An exploratory framework.

There is a growing public and policy interest in the experience of and outcomes for students studying at university. This interest stems from Government and the public who want assurance that the sector delivers value to students, wider society and the economy (UK, 2016). Measuring expectations and outcomes is essential in order to ascertain what students in higher education (HE) want. Quantifying expectations provides opportunities to deliver the best possible experience (Kandiko & Mawer, 2013).

Radical and fundamental changes in UK HE were driven by recommendations made in The Higher Education White Paper on HE reforms (Department for Business & Skills, 2011), and the Browne Report (Browne, 2010). The UK Government reforms were implemented against a backdrop of austerity and the perceived need for accountability in the HE system. Higher Education Institutions were tasked with delivering a 'better student experience' alongside wide-ranging changes to the system of university funding including removing the cap on the level of fees that universities can charge and increasing the income level at which graduates must begin to pay back their loans for tuition fees of £9,000.

New mechanisms, such as student charters (Student Charter Group, 2011) and student feedback systems, a revised Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Assurance Agency, 2012) focused attention on student expectations in order to understand how best to compete for students. Meeting student expectations become synonymous with student satisfaction and improving quality which in turn heightened a need for consumer feedback (Woodall, Hiller, & Resnick, 2014).

Student feedback is habitually collated via large, cross-sectional questionnaires. The UK National Student Survey (NSS) is aimed at mainly final-year undergraduates and consists of twenty-seven questions on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) Likert scale. More than seventy per cent of students completed the survey (NSS, 2017). The Key Information

Sets (KIS) includes some data from the NSS and 'comprises the items of information which students have said they find most useful when making choices about which course to study'. These surveys provide valuable information based on large data sets yet fail to provide an understanding of how expectations, student satisfaction and service provision are interlinked. We argue that there is a need for an alternative approach to explore student expectations that includes information about their formation and development; psychological contracts offer an alternative explanatory framework.

Psychological Contracts have been used by researchers as a framework for understanding employee relationships and has been defined as "individual beliefs, shaped by an organization, regarding the terms of an exchange agreement between the individual and their organisation" (Rousseau, 1995: 9). Psychological contracts consist of perceived obligations and expectations and are subjective and individual (S. Bordia, Hobman, Restubog, & Bordia, 2010). Beliefs refer to the way the employment contract is interpreted, understood and enacted by employees (Millward & Brewerton, 2000) and forms a psychological filter between working conditions and employee's responses (Lub, Bijvank, Bal, Blomme, & Schalk, 2012). When broken, or breached, due to perceived unfairness, satisfaction and performance decline and workforce turnover increases, consequently impacting attitudes and behaviours (Bordia, Restubog, & Tang, 2008). Whilst the theory of psychological contracts developed for the workplace, the idea has important implications for educational environments (Dziuban et al., 2015; Koskina, 2011).

Drawing on data from semi structured interviews conducted with students at a post-1992 institution and analysed using Constructivist Grounded Theory this research offers an alternative approach to understanding student expectations.

Data collection commenced in 2011 when tuition fees tripled to £9,000. Phase one included conducting six focus groups from which fifteen students were recruited to take part in the next phase of the study. Phase two involved follow up interviews with undergraduates over a three-year period. Eleven students remained with the study for all three interviews and this provided unique data that offered insights into how expectations changed and evolved over the course of the degree programme. Forty recorded interviews were obtained and these were transcribed and analysed in keeping with a grounded theory approach (Corbin &

Strauss, 1990).

Three core categories emerged; The first theoretical category, expectations, identified what happened when an individual's beliefs and hopes were exceeded, met or denied. The second category, exchange, identified a range of activities and events that developed and maintained student psychological contracts e.g. positive relationships with tutors. The third category, influences, identified effects that moderated student psychological contracts e.g. resilience, socio-political environment. The theoretical categories offered insight into how student psychological are formed and maintained and the influences that continue to shape their evolution.

Key findings regarding expectations included; expectations constantly evolving a concept which is support by a study of student expectations in Hong Kong (Willis & Kennedy, 2004); employability is a key an enduring expectation (Tymon, 2013); prior experiences e.g. sixth form, preview days, are influential in shaping expectations for first year undergraduates (Aponte & Perez, 2016); information and/or meaningful conversations moderated expectations (Omillion-Hodges & Baker, 2014).

The findings from this research raise a number of important considerations. The study contributes to the limited literature of psychological contracts in educational settings. Exploring expectation through the psychological contract lens has provided information that potentially allows HEIs to use this framework to develop their understanding of the student experience thus providing opportunities for responsive interventions that enhances the quality of the provision. Overall, the research suggests that adopting a student psychological framework merits further attention.

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