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What do students want from their learning experience? A mixed methods study of antecedents and outcomes of students' hopes (0462)

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Through surveys of engagement such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and offspring like the UK Engagement Survey (UKES), we have a growing body of knowledge on students' experiences. However, the behavioural model of student engagement underpinning these surveys neglects motivational constructs such as students' expectancies, values and goals (Kahu, 2013; Zusho, 2017). Thus we know little about what students want from and value about their learning experiences.

With tuition fee increases, students are being cast as consumerist, more focused on "having" a degree than the process of learning (Molesworth, Nixon, & Scullion, 2009). This assumption underpins recent research on student expectations (Balloo, 2017) and entitlement (Kopp, Zinn, Finney, & Jurich, 2011), emphasising students' effort-related expectations, rather than their aspirations.

This study addresses this gap. Drawing on Kahu's (2013) student motivation construct, we elicit the hopes students have for their overall learning experience at university. We first investigate the relation between those hopes and students' demographic characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity, first generation to attend university, and domicile, and environmental variables (campus, faculty, applied vs pure subject). We then examine which factors (demographic, environmental, and the nature of their hopes) predict whether their hopes have been fulfilled.

Methods

Undergraduate students (n=1772; 675 Male; 1083 Female) at "Blue University" were surveyed online in early 2018, with a response rate of 15%. Students were asked three open-ended questions, "1. When you decided to come to Blue University, what learning experiences did you want?" and "2. How has that turned out? Have you had this opportunity? Have your hopes or expectations now changed? How?" Their answers were retrospective accounts of their hopes upon entering university. Students were coded according to a variety of demographic characteristics and environmental variables, including whether they were studying a pure (n=960) or applied (n=797) subject (Biglan, 1973).

Using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), we coded each student's response to what they wanted from their learning experienced with one of the following codes: *Interest in the subject*, *Application-oriented* (career-related, real world connections, practice, hands-on learning), *Well-rounded* (both interest in subject and applications) *Personal growth*, *Nonspecific*, *Peer interaction*, *Interaction with staff*, *Interactivity in general*, *Affective experience* (e.g. wanting to be inspired), *Study abroad*, *Academic community*, *Facilities and resources* or *Other*. Question 2 was coded: *Fulfilled or exceeded*; *Partly fulfilled*; *Changed*; *Unsure or not yet sure* if it had been fulfilled; and *Unfulfilled*. In the analysis, *Fulfilled* and *Partly fulfilled* were combined and contrasted with *Unfulfilled*.

Frequencies for each code were calculated. Chi square analyses were used to examine the relations between demographic variables, environmental variables and each of the seven most common hoped-for learning experiences. Chi square analyses were used to test the relation between demographic variables, environmental variables, students' hopes and whether their hopes had been fulfilled.

Results

The most frequent responses to "What did you want from your university learning experience?" were: *Interest in subject* (20% of students), *Application-oriented* (16%), *Nonspecific* (12%), *Personal growth* (11.5%), *Well-rounded* (10%), *Peer interaction* (8%) and *Interaction with Staff* (4%).

Except by ethnicity, there were few significant relations between demographic variables and students' hopes for university learning experiences. More black, minority or ethnic (BME) students than white students described *Application-oriented* hopes $X^2(1, 1662) = 10.099, p = .001$. More white students described *Interest in subject* $X^2(1, n=1662) = 28.918, p < .001$. As BME students were significantly more likely to study applied subjects, $X^2(1, n=1722) = 60.354, p < .001$, and more students in applied subjects described *Application-oriented* hopes, $X^2(1, n=1696) = 24.243, p < .000$, we analysed these subgroups separately. In applied subjects, BME students were still less likely to report *Interest in subject*, $X^2(1, n=746) = 19.428, p < .001$, and more likely to report *Application-oriented* hopes, $X^2(1, n=746) = 9.332, p < .01$, than their white peers. In pure subjects, fewer BME students had *Interest in subject*, $X^2(1, n=915) = 5.489, p < .05$, though there were no significant differences on *Application-oriented* ($1, n=915) = .514, p > .05$).

The only significant demographic variable associated with *Unfulfilled* hopes was ethnicity, $X^2(1, n=1470) = 4.290, p < .05$. Overall, BME students were more likely to have *Unfulfilled* hopes. When disaggregating by subject focus, this trend only held for pure

subjects, $X^2(1, 818) = 5.144, p < .05$, not applied subjects, $X^2(1, n=746) = .142, p > .05$. Environment was not significantly related to whether hopes were fulfilled, with Campus $X^2(1, n=1494) = .312, p > .05$, Faculty (2, $n=1481$) = .331 $p > .05$, and Pure/applied subjects, (1, $n=1493$) = 2.775, $p > .05$ all nonsignificant.

Whether their hope had been fulfilled was more related to the nature of the desired learning experience. Those with *Interest in subject*, $X^2(1, n=1483) = 9.768, p < .01$, *Well-rounded* hopes, $X^2(1, 1772) = 8.996, p < .01$, or desire for *Personal growth*, $X^2(1, 1483) = 6.350, p < .05$ were more likely to be fulfilled. Those who wanted *Interaction with staff*, $X^2(1, n=1483) = 7.156, p < .01$, were more likely to be disappointed. Logistic regressions will also be presented.

Discussion

Contrary to predictions about students' consumerist orientations (Molesworth, Nixon, & Scullion, 2009), the majority of students (60%) expressed desires related to the process of learning. Some students were not specific in their desires (12%), suggesting they might benefit from guidance about what kinds of behaviours and opportunities promote positive learning outcomes. The extent of interaction with staff warrants further investigation since this desire is often unfulfilled. The different pattern of hopes among BME students has implications for addressing the ethnicity attainment gap (Equality Challenge Unit, 2017) in UK higher education.

This study is limited by its reliance on retrospective comments, a low response rate, and a single institution setting. Nonetheless, it makes a vital contribution by highlighting the need for a more holistic model of student engagement (Kahu, 2013; Zusho, 2017) that considers students' motivations, not just their behaviours. Given the link between students' hopes and whether those have been fulfilled, it behoves universities to understand what students want.

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