

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Telling the stories of what matters to Generation Z students in Higher Education

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Research Domain: Student experiences (SE)

Abstract: As educators in higher education, are we recognising who our undergraduate students are and what matters to them? Known as Generation Z, they are post-millennials with distinct values and characteristics. Are we making their student experience the best it can be whilst relating to their goals and beliefs?

Listening to their stories will enable the creation of a sense of meaning. Narrative inquiry will be used both as method of study and as the phenomena under study (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). The truth of their experience will be thematically analysed and considered alongside the work of generational researchers Seemiller and Grace (2016). An exploration of values theory will also be made.

Clandinin, D.J. and Connelly, F.M. (2000) *Narrative Inquiry. Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Seemiller, C. and Grace, M. (2016) *Generation Z: A Century in the Making*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Paper: The quest for high quality student experience is a continuing endeavour in Higher Education (HE). Massification and widening participation have enabled substantial growth in student numbers in HE and Universities UK reported that the ten years from 2001 to 2011 showed an increase of 28 percent. Inevitably, this is diversifying the student population entering HE (2011, p.2). This is a time when emerging adolescents are no longer adhering to parental and family boundaries - a context in which to develop their own values and find independence. We need to know who these students are and what matters to them in order to support their student experience.

Presenting a literature review and outlining my PhD research methodology outline, the poster will demonstrate three themes of related literature: Generation Z, student experience in HE, and values theory.

This new generation of students influencing our universities are known as Generation Z (Seemiller and Grace (2017); Twenge (2017)). Generation Z is the generation after Millennials (students born between 1977 and 1994 - the largest generation since the Baby Boomers), who were born between 1995 and 2012 (Seemiller and Grace, 2017). The small field of literature shows that Generation Z (or

'Gen Z') students embrace equality and diversity; having a sense of social justice, potentially expanded by the access via social media and the Internet to global news and issues (Seemiller and Grace, 2017; Zorn, 2017). Seemiller and Grace (2016) identify in their study what matters to this group with happiness, relationships, financial security and stability, meaningful work and helping others key features. Gen Z are relationally motivated to make a difference and not let others down. Values of open-mindedness, caring and diversity are also evident in their findings (Seemiller and Grace, 2016). The literature is notably American, and refers to college life (meaning undergraduate students). However, the reporting is a very positive presentation of this group, which needs to be explored further in a UK context to establish similarities or differences, and enable Higher Education Institutions (HEI's) in the UK to understand what matters to their students.

Importantly, Rue (2018) provides a useful critique of the generalisation of a whole generation. She rightly acknowledges variances of racial, ethnic, national and regional differences (2018, p.5). Rue (2018) also reports that there is little research about this group because they are still young; it is the marketing field that has taken an interest in these potential consumers. In conclusion, we need to explore what the new generation can gain from university life. We need to understand and listen to their individual voices, and consider their student experience.

The literature presents an inconsistent definition of the term student experience (Tan et al., 2016; Morgan, 2013; Tight, 2019). Marketisation of HE has resulted in practices that reduce the importance of the personal value of education (Tomlinson, 2015, p.571). Theoretically, the term student experience is largely associated with a student's identity as a learner at university (Tan et al., 2016; Morgan, 2013; Tight, 2019). It does not, however, consider the wider holistic aspects of a person and changes that may take place in their values during the university years.

Specifically in my project, I will examine Schwartz's values theory (1987) which identified ten values: power, achievement, hedonism, stimulation, self-direction, universalism, benevolence, tradition, conformity and security. These values were collated from a wide cross-cultural series of interviews that showed common identification of personal values. Subsequently, in a study between USA and England, Ryckman and Houston (2003) considered the values of two university cohorts in the mid-1990s. The research sought to define student values with data collected via Schwarz's values survey (1987). The results showed a range of values from individualistic to collectivist. Explaining societal values as individual and collective has prevailed for 30 years (Halstead and Taylor, 2000; Hatley, 2018; Schwarz and Bilsky, 1987). Schermer et al. (2011, p.233) illustrate that the university itself can play a positive role, impacting on retention and success for students, stating that: 'values are learned characteristics that are shaped by nurture (the environment)'. Schwarz himself (2012) questioned how values make a difference now, and considers that values do not change randomly, but through life experiences and conditions which become influential. Considering the identities and areas of importance identified by Generation Z research (Seemiller and Grace, 2016; Twenge, 2017; Zorn, 2017) it will be interesting to see whether Schwarz's values theory can adequately evaluate the current student values system in HE.

I will present the literature exploring Gen Z in the USA and present my methodology of narrative inquiry that will be used to explore Gen Z in the UK.

In conclusion, this poster, by closely examining student experience for Generation Z students, illustrates the next steps to be taken to gather a broader picture of what matters to our

undergraduate students and how we can, consequently, seek to improve the student experience.

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