

So just what is the Student Experience? The development of a conceptual framework for the student experience of undergraduate business students based on the themes emerging in the academic literature (0146)

Jones Rob¹, ¹*Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom*

Introduction

Based on an extensive review of the academic literature, this exploratory study proposes a conceptual model for the student experience of undergraduate business students at a large research intensive university in the North East of England. A further study is now in progress to test the validity and relevance of the conceptual framework via a series of focus groups with students.

The Literature, the Method and the Conceptual Framework

Paradoxically while there are many studies that consider aspects of the student experience, there are very few which attempt to define it. This paper looks for themes in the academic literature which can be amalgamated together to form groupings of key influences. Application of theory from developmental psychology is then used to develop a conceptual framework which models how the influences wax or wane in significance and how they interact.

What is the Student Experience?

Ainley (2008) welcomes the greater level of interest in the student experience as a concept but is disappointed that:

“studies have focused almost exclusively on classroom/learning examples, with fewer attempts to understand life more generally.” p619.

The 1994 Group of universities, 1994 Group (2007), defines seven priority areas for the HE sector to meet the challenges of student experiences and expectations. Excellence and enhancement in teaching and learning is just one of these priorities.

Astin (1999) advances a theory of student involvement and contrasts this with other approaches based around subject matter or content, resources and individualised theory. He argues that students they need to be involved or engaged with their programme of study and student life generally in order to have a good student experience. Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell and McCune (2008) and Palmer, O’Kane and Owens (2009) stress the broader emotional and developmental aspects of student life. In line with this broader perspective my review of the literature identifies seven main themes or groupings.

1) Students’ Expectations about University and Student Life

Hockings, Cooke and Bowl (2007) discuss the uncertainties of students before they come to university. They identify key themes to do with settling in and achieving a sense of belonging: money, debt and work; making friends, being alone and fitting in; identity; fair and equal treatment. Lowe and Cook (2003) identify a gap between expectation and reality. In most cases students adapt to the unexpected but some students find it difficult to bridge the gap between expectations and reality.

2) Transition

The search for a sense of belonging is also key to the transition to student life. The presence or absence of feelings of belonging form a reference point against which to judge their student experience. Palmer, O’Kane and Owens (2009) identify a state of “in-between-ness” where students are in transition between a sense that they belong at home and a sense that they belong at University. Tinto (1975) applies Durkheim’s (1961) theory of suicide to develop a theory of why students drop out of University. His work emphasises the central importance of integration.

Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell and McCune (2008) stress the importance of the emotional aspects of transition, arguing that joining University is:

“an emotional process that can incorporate feelings of alienation and exclusion, as well as of excitement and exhilaration.” p567.

Thomas (2000) found a strong degree of correlation between increasing levels of social inter-activity and a number of variables including academic performance, academic progression rates and levels of satisfaction.

3) Peers

Eggen, Werf and Bosker (2008) found that personal networks do contribute to academic achievement while Peat, Dalziel and Grant (2001) discuss the value of strong peer networks in contributing to enhanced study and self-motivation, as well as greater enjoyment of University life generally. Allen, McManus and Russell (1999) found empirical evidence of the valuable role that more experienced peers could serve in mentoring new students and enhancing new students’ sense of belonging and involvement, a process they refer to as socialization.

4) Others: Parents, Culture and the Media

Generally the growing independence of students means that parents wane as an influence even though new technology makes it easier to keep in touch. Byrne and Willis (2005), Cory, Kerr and Todd (2007) and Rothwell, Herbert and Rothwell (2008) look at how students form impressions about different careers/types of employment. Significant themes include the influence of family and peers as well as the impact of popular culture and the presence of stereotyping.

5) The Degree Programme

Authors discuss how the degree programme may be only a modest influence on some students, even though it may be the primary reason why a student attends University. They note that in order for the degree to have a significant and positive influence, the student needs to feel a sense of engagement with their studies and the academic is key to the facilitation of this.

Indeed, Mann (2001) argues that we should no longer seek to frame the student experience in the traditional terms of surface or deep learning but instead think in terms of an engaged or alienated experience of learning, urging academics to think about how they might contribute to this process of engagement or alienation.

6) Extra-Curricular Activity

Kuh (1995) discusses how extra-curricular activity can have a formative effect on students' development, referring to it as the "other curriculum". Atkins (1999) discusses the value of students' extra-curricular participation as a mechanism for learning, arguing that:

"it is likely that many of the gains in confidence and maturity reported by students as a consequence of being at university can be attributed to their lives outside the formal curriculum as much as their learning experiences within it." p276.

7) What Happens Post Graduation: Employability

There is no doubt that what happens after University, particularly in terms of graduate employment is an influence on Business School students' thinking. Evidence of this appears in a number of studies for example Tomlinson (2007) states that:

"the evidence further suggests that instrumental rationality is extending beyond the attainment of formal educational credentials. Students were increasingly aware of the need to develop and package their credentials in a way which highlighted their added-value attributes and "selling points"." p291

"for the careerists, work and careers formed a central part of their future aspirations. These students were beginning to define themselves largely around their aspired careers." p293

Developing a Conceptual Framework

Having identified these seven loose groupings of influences, this final section considers how the groupings can be brought together to develop a conceptual framework. There are some examples of attempts to draw together influences in the literature. For example, Jary and Lebeau (2009) apply the work of Francois Dubet to identify eight types of student orientation amongst UK sociology students.

However, rather than use a sociological perspective, I propose a framework drawn from developmental psychology. The reason for this is that I see the student experience as primarily a developmental process where students mature intellectually, personally and emotionally. This perspective is supported consistently by the themes emerging in the literature. In a development of the work of Renn and Arnold (2003) who apply the work of Urie Bronfenbrenner to add perspective to understanding the influence of peer groups, I propose to use Bronfenbrenner's ecological model as a framework in which to evaluate the student experience.

Bronfenbrenner (1994) proposes an ecological system to understand human development. Micro-systems examine the relationship between the individual and the immediate environment. Micro-systems may operate in the meso-system (the location of closest proximity to the individual and the area having greatest influence on development) or the exosystem (where further individual micro-systems operate but have less influence on the individual because of their lack of close proximity). To complete his model Bronfenbrenner also refers to macrosystems which are about the overarching pattern of systems and chronosystems which allow for the impact of time.

In the model below the seven groupings of influences that I have identified may be thought of as the micro-systems which influence the Student Experience. The relative strength of the influence is determined by whether the micro-system is located in the mesosystem (more influential) or the exosystem (less influential). This is represented in figure 1 below. Meanwhile as the student moves through the degree programme, their own experiences and personal development influences the extent to which the different micro-systems reside in the meso or the exosystem.

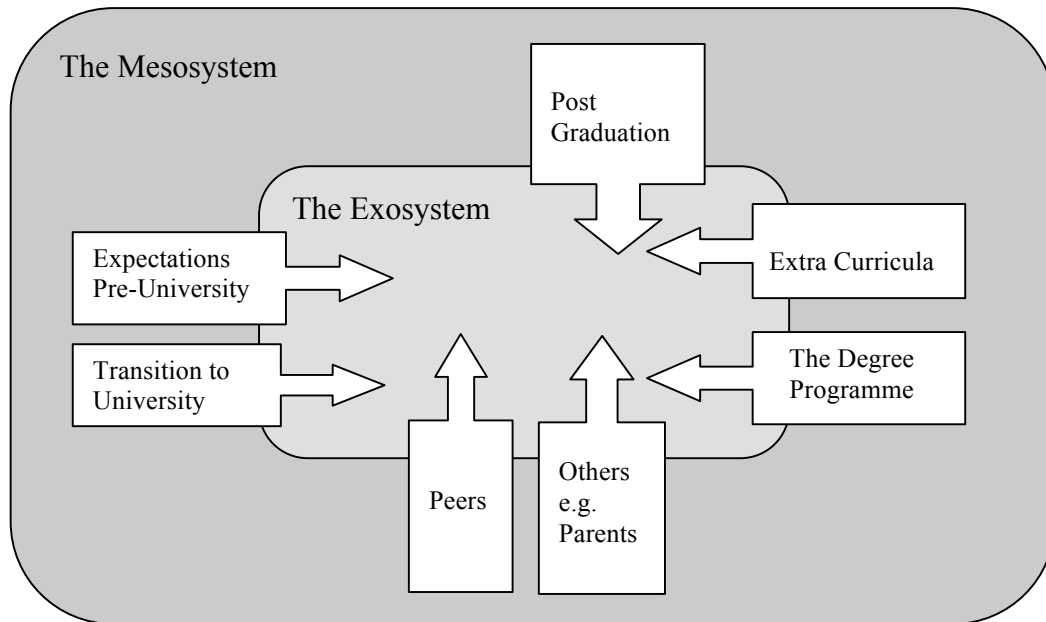


Figure 1: The Student Experience as a Function of the Interaction of Seven Micro-systems using Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Framework

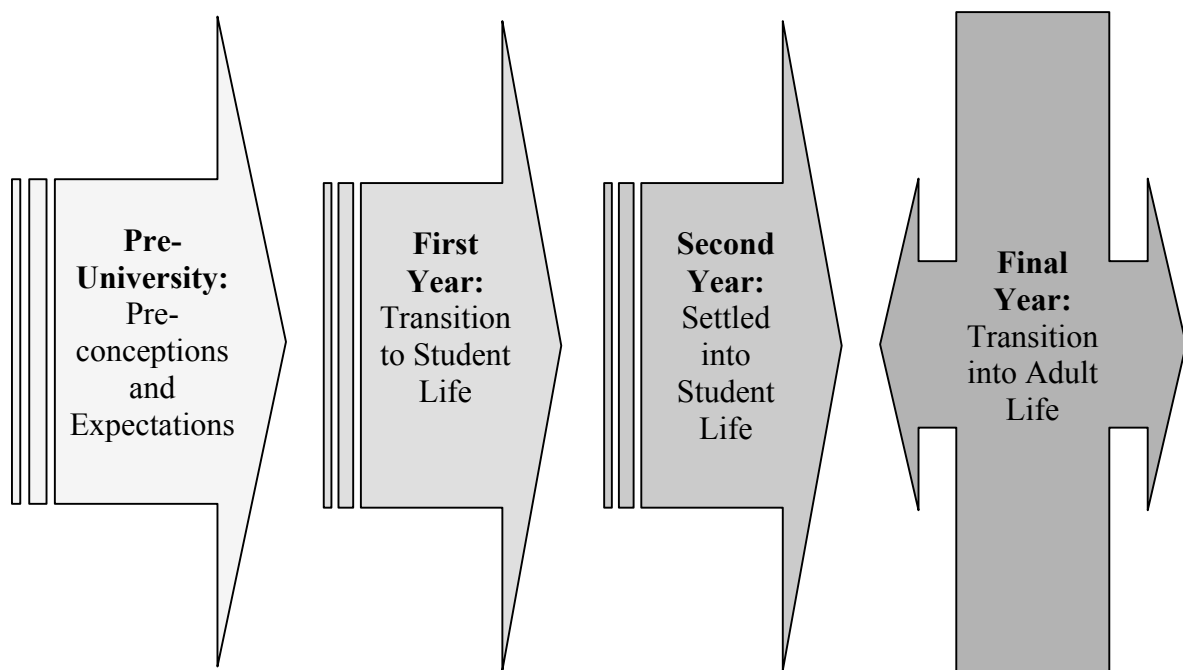


Figure 2: The student experience as a journey – a developmental process over time

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