

## **Shaping student psychological contracts; what lecturers really have to say.**

### **Introduction**

In June 2011, the government published the higher education white paper 'Students at the Heart of the System.' The white paper highlighted the government's vision that included delivering an improved student experience. This vision had to be achieved alongside the introduction of fees up to £9,000 per academic year.

The proposed changes to the higher education funding system and its regulatory framework have the potential to alter the relationship between universities and students. The introduction of higher fees has attracted media attention and the influence that this publicity will have on student expectations is yet to be fully understood. This research explores the new relationships between being developed between students and universities using a theoretical framework that has mostly been used to explore employment relationships. Psychological contracts have been studied in employment settings in order to understand the informal obligations, perceptions and mutual beliefs that develop between employer and employee (Rousseau, 1995). The implicit understanding that develops influences how employees behave at work. Negative behaviour can follow if an employer fails to deliver the expected inducements.

### **Psychological Contract Framework as an Exploratory Tool**

Using psychological contracts to explore the changing relationships between universities and students at this time of change parallels the use of psychological contracts to explore "new" employment relationships that evolved as traditional systems of industrial relations changed. Different frameworks were needed to explore and understand these new working relationships and psychological research expanded rapidly. Research conducted in organisational settings has been important in understating employment relations and explaining job attitudes and behaviours (Guest, 2004; Zhao et al., 2007). Adopting this framework to explore university/student relations will enabled a deeper understanding of the evolving "new" relationship. In adopting this framework this study will address the scarcity of

research on the concept, origins and experiences of student psychological contracts in higher education (Koskina, 2011).

Before discussing psychological contracts it is important to understand the role that Student Charters play in defining expectations. Universities have been asked to develop Student Charters which include information about what they provide and how the experience at their particular institution differs from other universities. In addition to being a marketing tool it also serves as a way of defining expectations once a student has started their course. The hope is that Student Charters offer an explicit statement about what is on offer that will clarify expectations and define the relationship between students and universities.

Student Charters and other forms of student agreements provide clear statements of students' rights and responsibilities in order to clarify expectations. Student Charters also set out to explain what is required of students and them and what to do if things do not meet these expectations. The explicit contracts that are provided by Student Charters can be considered in parallel with employment contracts. Both seek to offer guidance about what is expected and what should be provided in return. Whilst explicit contracts exist individuals will develop their own understanding and interpretation of what they can expect from universities and their employer.

(Gaffney-Rhys & Jones, 2010) explore issues surrounding the introduction of formal

student contracts and conclude that a thoughtfully constructed agreement can '... potentially improve the service that students receive, promote the notion that a student is a member of a community, influence student expectations and thus increase student satisfaction.' They further suggest that the relationship between students and universities 'might be more like a relationship I might have with an employer rather than a consumer/business relationship'. How successful Student Charters will be in defining and shaping the relationship will only become apparent when they are put into practice. Student psychological contracts may be more influential in defining this relationship and this research will explore this area further.

Whilst psychological contracts have been identified as a powerful mechanism for shaping and influencing behaviour at work (Gellatly & Irving, 2001; Rousseau, 1990; Tekleab & Taylor, 2003) there has been limited research on student psychological contracts. Negative behaviours seen in the workplace may be replicated within universities. Drawing on psychological contract research which has been used to explore the employer-employee relationship in organisational contexts (Robinson, 1996; Shore & Coyle-Shapiro, 2003; Turnley & Feldman, 2000) this research will explore the unwritten, informal expectations that students develop.

## **Methods**

Understanding how student psychological contracts form and develop is the focus of this research and will be explored through a series of investigations. Themes that will be explored include; information that students use to develop student psychological contracts, student versus staff expectations, examples of when students feel that their expectations have not been met, examples of when students feel that their expectations have been exceeded, and comparison of student psychological contracts with psychological contracts developed in the workplace. These themes have been identified as key issues in the extant research literature on psychological contracts within organisations (Conway & Briner, 2006; Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000; Herriot, Manning & Kidd, 1997).

The first phase of the project considers the role that lecturers play in the formation of student psychological contracts. Using preliminary data from five in depth, semi-structured interviews this study identifies what lecturers really say to students. Interviews were conducted within an open framework (in-depth, face-to-face, individual, semi structured) so as to allow for focused yet flexible two-way conversations (Bryman, 2008). Interviews covered a range of ideas around what academics considered to be influential in defining student relations. Data was analysed using in keeping with (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) grounded theory approach.

## **Preliminary Analysis**

Preliminary analysis of the data indicates that informal and implicit messages were provided alongside more explicit sources of information such as Student Charters

and course handbooks. Academics promote the universities key messages but do so selectively and by using their own personal interpretation. This tentative finding suggests that academics have a key role in shaping student psychological contracts. Practice issues arising out of this research will be discussed.

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