

Conceptualising the student experience: a new framework. (0114)

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Introduction.

The student experience is central to the operation of our Universities, whilst much scholarly work considers the student experience, often critically (e.g. Staddon and Standish 2012) conceptualization of the student experience remains sparse. Dean and Gibbs (2015) identify happiness and satisfaction as relevant concepts. This paper contributes an alternative conceptualization of the student experience, which can be operationalized to stimulate quality enhancement.

A relational perspective to HE foregrounding ongoing relational exchange between students and their relational partners, is a valuable lens through which to consider the student experience. Such an approach informs the work of Bowden (2013), Bowden and Wood (2011) and Raciti (2012). This paper develops a framework identifying key relational concepts and inter-relationships, with the intent of a future quantitative study testing the framework's representation of the student experience.

Key outcomes.

Whilst the NSS identifies satisfaction as the key outcome of the student experience, the paper proposes two alternative outcomes. First engagement, taking a pedagogic hue. Vivek et al. (2012)'s work within the consumer context, sees engagement as connectedness and participation. Drawing from Vivek et al.'s (2012) ideas, engagement is defined in the context of HE as:

The investment of self and time, students give to the educational aspect of their student experience. This is manifest in students' participation in a range of activities, in-class, on-line, or out-of-class

study. Such participation is co-operative: reactive as a response to tutors' or other students' requests; or proactive, that is participation within activity which the students themselves see as of value to themselves or their learning community.

Thus the measures we might associate with engagement might relate to: attendance of scheduled sessions; time allocated to out-of-class directed activity including reading; investment of time into online tutor-directed activity; preparedness to participate within class-based discussions.

Word-of-mouth communication is identified as the second outcome of the student experience. This paper suggests that preparedness to speak positively to peers within the university and weak or strong ties external to the university, is characteristic of a positive student experience. In this context, drawing from the work of Arndt (1967), Harrison-Walker (2001) and Westbrook (1987) word-of-mouth is defined as:

Informal, interpersonal, planned or spontaneous non-commercial positive communication about higher education experiences, participants and institutions originating from students and orientated towards peers or external audiences.

Therefore the student experience can be defined by two key outcomes – students' engagement within study and students' intentions to speak positively about their HE experience. Identifying drivers of these outcomes provides an opportunity to develop strategies to enhance the student experience.

Key drivers.

Three key drivers are proposed, each in turn a consequence of relational investments (Palmatier et al. 2009). Commitment has been long been found to be a driver of word-of-mouth within the consumer context (Harrison-Walker 2001; De Matos and Rossi 2012; Brown et al. 2005) and more recently within the educational context (Cownie 2014). Seminal work within the HE context

by Hennig Thureau et al. (2001) suggests that the object of commitment can usefully be identified. Cownie (2014) found that affective commitment towards academics, defined as a positive attachment contributing a desire to maintain an existing relationship with academics, was the strongest driver of intention to emit positive word-of-mouth communication. Thus this paper proposes the hypothesis:

H1: Affective commitment towards academics has a positive relationship with intention to emit positive word-of-mouth communication.

Furthermore, an on-going connection with tutors based on liking and caring, will enhance the likelihood that students will invest time and energy into their studies. Thus the second hypothesis is:

H2: Affective commitment towards academics has a positive relationship with engagement.

Commitment balance (Cownie 2015) has been identified as a conceptual area worthy of consideration, with the construct commitment balance between students and institution emerging as a robust variable. A sense of balance reflects an on-going investment from the institution to the student body which mirrors the extent (if not nature) of the investment from the student to the university. This prompts the third hypothesis:

H3: Commitment balance between students and institution has a positive relationship with intention to emit positive word of mouth communication.

Whilst balance implies equivalent investments from students and university, such balance may well be a result of low levels of investment, therefore commitment balance is not proposed to be related to student engagement.

Finally, a new aspect of this research is to examine the role of gratitude within the student experience. Gratitude can be seen as the emotional core of reciprocity (Dewani and Sinha 2012), the innate desire to give back. Gratitude

has been a comparatively recent addition to the conceptual areas covered by key relational scholars (Dewani and Sinha 2012; Palmatier et al. 2009; Raggio et al. 2014), however Howells (2012) suggests that gratitude has an important place within education. A sense of gratitude for the actions and experiences provided to student by tutors and institution may be an important driver for both the investment the student is prepared to make within a realm of study and their propensity to speak positively about their experience of HE. At this stage gratitude is conceptualised in terms of gratitude to both academics and institution, but exploratory factor analysis may identify these to be distinct constructs. The following hypotheses are proposed:

H4: Gratitude has a positive relationship with engagement.

H5: Gratitude has a positive relationship with intention to emit positive word-of-mouth communication.

Conceptual framework

This research therefore proposes a conceptual framework defining the student experience as seen in figure 1.

Figure 1: Conceptualising the student experience.

Moving forward.

The proposed conceptual framework will be tested using a quantitative survey method gathering data from an undergraduate student population subject to the new fee regime. Structural equation modeling will be used to determine the fit of the framework against the data. The framework will be tested against a rival model which includes satisfaction as a third outcome. The analysis will seek to provide a contribution to the definition and understanding of the student experience and seeks to progress further a relational approach to higher education.

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