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Stakeholders Conceptions of Value in Higher Education

Background

Research into value has noted its ubiquitous nature and the many attempts to define it (Francis *et al.,* 2014). In other research Ramsay (2005) argues that for many authors the term "value" is used as though its meaning is self-evident, although it mainly remains undefined. The indistinct and elusive nature of value is also discussed by Zeithaml (1988, p. 2) who argues that consumers use the term in ways that are 'highly personal and idiosyncratic'.

Whilst acknowledging that precise terminology has not yet been obtained, it is clear that there is no agreement over the nature of value. There does not appear to be an essence, something that is common to all instances of value. Instead, what is evident is that value means different things to different people. Differences in stakeholders' conceptions of value have been identified in Higher Education (HE) where Jones *et al.* (2014) point out that value means different things to university elites, teaching staff, students and prospective employers.

Value has assumed a new importance in HE in recent times with students being regarded as 'customers' (Finney and Finney, 2010; Watjatrakul, 2014). Therefore, understanding differences in stakeholders' conceptions of value is necessary in order to design, assess and evaluate educational programs effectively. In this research we report initial findings of stakeholders' conceptions of value in HE based on differences rather than a search for commonality.

Methodology

This is a qualitative study using a phenomenographic methodology and method. Phenomenography resolves the tension created by a fruitless search for an essence or necessary condition of value, by conceptualising value as experiential and idiosyncratic as proposed by Fisher et al., (2016). We achieve trustworthiness by collecting data using multiple methods, namely face-to-face interviews and qualitative narrative reports (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Opiyo *et al.,* 2013), where the narrative report is an instrument with open ended questions based on conceptions revealed in interviews. Different methods of data collection and analysis enhance trustworthiness through credibility, conformability, dependability and transferability (McCann and Clark, 2003; Silverman, 2010). Our research in this study is guided by Bowden's (1994) schema for conducting phenomenographic research

Identifying actors

In the first instance we used Mitchell, Agle and Wood's (1997) saliency model to identify stakeholders, resulting in five stakeholder groups: strategic academic, operational academic, administrative, student; and prospective employer. We then identified a pool of prospective contacts at strategic (PVC, Dean etc.), operational (teaching academics) levels and administrative staff at a UK university based on contacts of the research team. Initial contacts were also asked to supply further contacts thus using a snowball process (Kvale, 1996) to create a larger pool of potential interviewees. Contacts were then assessed against criteria developed to confirm whether they qualify as strategic or operational (as per Shivakumar's 2014 framework) or administrative staff. Final selection of actors was made on the basis that they were 'key informants' for data collection, that is they have an ability to supply trustworthy, observant and reflective information (Johnson, 1990, p. 30). We selected participants purposively by contacting prospective participants with an information sheet and request for participation initially by email. At the student level we use a convenience sample of postgraduate business students. Prospective business employers were selected on the basis of industry contacts of the research team.

Collecting data

Before conducting the first interview we developed a guide to assist with interview questions, as suggested by McCann and Clark (2003). We aimed to allow interviewees to talk freely about their experiences and conceptions of value, taking into account the first and second-order perspectives of interviewees. Phenomenographic data collection involved two primary questions: 1) *what* does experiencing the nature of value mean to the interviewee; and 2) *how* did the interviewee go about the experience, often explained by the participant being asked to provide situational examples (Marton and Booth, 1997). Interviews of approximately one hour's duration were conducted at an agreed time and place, and were audio recorded. After transcription and checking interviews were set aside until all face-to-face interviews had been concluded (six in the first stage, see below).

In order to make data collection a manageable yet robust process we used a combination of face-to-face interviews and qualitative narrative written reports; a technique previously used by Giorgi, (1985) in a study of people's lived experiences of learning. Both interviews and narrative reports were used to discover actors' conceptions of value, in two distinct stages of data collection. In the first phase, we conducted six face-to-face in-depth interviews of each of three groups of actors, the strategic and administrative areas remaining to be conducted at a future time. Kvale (1996) suggests that six to eight interviews are sufficient to get a flavour of concepts and themes as long as saturation of data is not the objective, which in our case it is not. We then analysed each group of six interviews.

The output from the interviews was used to construct a template for each group to guide further analysis (Crabtree and Miller, 1999; King, 2012). From the template and interview guide used for the face-to-face interviews a proforma for a narrative report was developed. Narrative reports were then used to collect data from the remaining 14 interviewees in each group during the second phase of data collection. Data from the narrative reports were combined with the templates for each group to construct a final template for each of the three groups.

Interpretation of results

Conceptions of value for the three groups are shown at Table 1 below.

Academic Staff	Students	Employers
Produce employable graduates	Price value of the award itself	Effective interpersonal skills
Transfer of knowledge	Greater access to jobs	Understanding aims of business
Value for money	The university experience	Ability to see the big picture
Student achievement	Effective time management	Willing to challenge status quo
Enrichment of society	Caring/competent academics	The customer is central to value

Table 1 : Conceptions of Value in Higher Education

Discussion

In the above analysis conceptions of value of academic staff were partly aligned with those of students in the areas of price value and employability, supported by staff conceptions of value in the transfer of knowledge. Conceptions of value associated with potential employers tended to be specifically oriented towards business attributes. The specific nature of employer conceptions suggests the higher level conceptions of value espoused by academics and students (e.g. transfer of knowledge, the university experience) are not sufficiently aligned with the specific requirements of the marketplace. HE does not appear to be preparing its customers well, and they in turn are not cognisant of the knowledge and skills they should place high value on. A more in-depth discussion is not possible given the word constraints of this paper, but can be provided.

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