

**A snapshot of the student experience: Exploring student satisfaction through the use of
photographic-elicitation**

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Abstract

Student satisfaction is both an important, yet controversial issue within the Higher Education sector, which is typically measured through policy-driven metrics such as the National Student Survey (NSS). However, less is understood about the qualities of a satisfying student experience “as lived” from the perspective of the student, thus questioning the adequacy of such measures. In response to this, the current study used student-driven photographic-elicitation as a means of more adequately capturing the holistic student experience. This entailed nine final year undergraduate psychology students who each gathered a series of photos, which formed the basis for discussion in an interview. Thematic analysis of the narratives of the interview discussions revealed several main themes surrounding their experiences. These were: “Learning Environment”, “Work-Life Balance”, and “Wider University Community”. Findings are discussed with reference to the implications of student satisfaction, and national metrics used for measuring it, for institutional policies of recruitment and retention.

Keywords: Photographic-elicitation, Higher Education, student experience, student satisfaction; NSS

Introduction

Current context of Higher Education

Student satisfaction is an important, yet controversial issue within the Higher Education (HE) sector (Kovacs, Grant and Hyland 2010). Its importance is derived from the fact that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are ranked nationally from metrics of satisfaction from students, typically obtained through initiatives such as the National Student Survey (NSS), first introduced in 2005. NSS performance is a key metric for prospective students to be able to evaluate and compare institutions (Agrawal, Buckley-Irvine and Clewlaw 2014), which leaves HEIs under pressure to maintain their scores (Williams 2015), and position themselves accordingly in a highly competitive market (Jurkowitsch, Vignali and Kaufmann 2006).

The marketisation of HE through initiatives such as the NSS, concurrently occurred with a rise in tuition fees¹ in UK institutions. This resulted in concerns that there may be an increase in consumerist attitudes and students' expectations, which in turn will affect students' satisfaction (Douglas, McClelland and Davies 2008; Temizer and Turkyilmaz 2012). This notion is likely to be exacerbated further with the introduction of the proposed Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF; Department for Business Innovation and Skills 2016) in UK HEIs. Whilst some research has found minimal support for the idea students are more demanding (Bates and Kaye 2014a, 2014b; Kaye and Bates 2017), there is increased competition for HEIs to attract students (Jurkowitsch, Vignali and Kaufmann 2006). Thus, performance on the NSS, which is made publicly available, is considered a key metric to which HEIs are held accountable when providing a "service" to an ever-increasing

¹ Tuition fees in England were first introduced in September 1998, and after numerous incremental increases across the years, finally reached a premium in September 2012 whereby institutions were able to charge up to £9000 a year. The cap was lifted and 64 of the Universities in England stated they would charge the maximum £9000 with some opting to charge slightly lower fees. This legislation was not UK wide with Scotland and Wales having different policies on the use of tuition fees.

consumerist market. Therefore, understanding student satisfaction and the correlating factors is an area of concern for the HE sector.

Student Satisfaction

Student satisfaction has been defined as the result of an evaluation of a student's educational experience, when performance meets (or exceeds) initial expectations of the student (Elliot and Healy 2001). Others have described it more in business terms, as a "post-purchase evaluation of a product or service" (Temizer and Turkyilmaz 2012, p. 3802). Research has highlighted the multi-faceted nature of student satisfaction (e.g. Wiers-Jenssen, Stensaker and Grøgaard 2002) with many studies exploring it across a range of institutions and subject areas; it further varies both within and outside the classroom environment. That is, although academic and pedagogic quality have been found to be crucial, these should be considered in the context of the social climate of HEIs (Gruber, et al. 2010), such as the physical infrastructure (from an aesthetic perspective) and quality of administrative provision (Wiers-Jenssen, Stensaker and Grøgaard 2002). More recently, other scholars have identified that students form perceptions of their academic experiences from a number of perspectives, ranging from the fundamentals of quality of teaching, learning and assessment (e.g., Havergal 2016), to perceived value, and expectations, the quality of service provision on campus and institutional image/reputation (Douglas, McClelland and Davies 2008). Therefore, it is perhaps pertinent to consider whether "satisfaction" is better understood by exploring "experiences", as is typically the focus when universities discuss "the student experience". It seems therefore that student satisfaction is best conceptualised as simply being the outcome of complex and multidimensional experiences.

As a concept, the student experience has been defined in a number of different ways including experiences of all students, individuals' HE experience, and all facets of consumer

experience (Baird and Gordon 2009); the latter of which fits with the current use of such metrics as the NSS. It is clear that identifying a “one size fits all” approach to conceptualising and assessing student satisfaction is highly challenging (Douglas, McClelland and Davies 2008). Its complexity has led some to suggest that a composite satisfaction score may be more useful for decision-making and strategy, than a reliance on a single item of global satisfaction (Elliot and Shin 2002). It is clear that understanding satisfaction requires a multi-dimensional, flexible approach which is particularly important given previous research has found it to be determined differently at varying points across an academic year (Pennington et al. 2017), and across subject areas (Umbach and Porter 2002). This highlights the need for a holistic understanding of the key factors which are important when theorising satisfaction, and how these function in the context of a particular time-scale. These complexities in its conceptual underpinning have challenging implications towards its measurement. It remains questionable on the extent to which measures such as the NSS are adequate in capturing a holistic perspective of the student experience. This is not necessarily reflective of the “lived experience” of students and the influential aspects of their satisfying experiences. This is particularly relevant when considering that most of the items of the NSS are felt to lack context (Buckley 2012). The predominate quantitative approach of the NSS leads to the question about whether there are alternative or supplementary means of capturing these student-focused representations of university experiences (Buckley 2012; Kovacs, Grant and Hyland 2010)². Additionally, some scholars caution about applying a satisfaction approach to students in HE because traditional metrics often do not take into account emotive components

² Prior to 2017, the NSS included themes on course teaching, assessment and feedback, academic support, organisation and management, learning resources and personal development, in which respondents (final year undergraduate students in UK-based HEIs) indicate their endorsement with a number of statements under each of these themes (e.g. “Staff are good at explaining things”). Although there are also open-ended questions to allow further detailed responses, these are not readily used in publicly-available published ratings, in the same way the quantitative ratings are.

(Jurkowitsch, Vignali and Kaufmann 2006). This raises the question as to whether the NSS may be somewhat restrictive, calling for a more in depth methodology.

Whilst the NSS is a UK-specific metric of student satisfaction, there are a wealth of studies exploring the topic across a range of institutions and subject areas. This is a global interest, with research being published in countries such as Pakistan (Butt & Rehman 2010); Spain (Barbera, Clarà and Linder-Vanberschot 2013); Australia (Palmer & Holt 2008); United States of America (Childers, Williams & Kemp, 2014) and Turkey (Temizer and Turkyilmaz 2012). The wealth of research and breadth of geographical location indicates the global importance of student satisfaction as a measure of educational quality and “customer satisfaction” within HEIs. It further highlights that a holistic and contextualised study of student satisfaction will have interest beyond UK institutions.

The Current Study

Whilst the majority of student satisfaction metrics and research in this regard have used quantitative research approaches to address these issues (e.g. Gibbons, Dempster and Moutray 2011), qualitative research may offer a richer approach to students’ lived experiences. Photo-elicitation as a method of interviewing is simply the use of photos within an interview setting (Harper 2002). The photos are used as a stimulus to elicit richer accounts of the topic under study (Frith and Harcourt 2007). Using visual stimulants has been found to alter the tone of the interview, and prompt emotional connections to memories providing more meaningful accounts (Kunimoto 2004). Additionally, it may permit the development of further conceptual insights into a topic through the way it can lead to new perspectives and explanations of a previously understood topic (Hurworth, 2003).

In light of the paucity of research dedicated to this method to obtain “lived accounts” of the student experience, the current study aimed to explore the efficacy of this methodology,

specifically for gaining insight into indicators of student satisfaction. Given the exploratory nature of this research, largely due to no research having utilised this approach previously in assessing student satisfaction, we drew upon the NSS as a basis to assess similarity or disparity of themes associated with this area of enquiry. Thus, research questions were:

1. What emergent themes are central to students' accounts of "satisfying" experiences in HE?
2. More specifically, to what extent are the six NSS themes (course teaching, assessment & feedback, academic support, organisation & management, learning resources and personal development) evident in students' own accounts of their experiences at university?

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants were recruited through opportunity sampling of final year psychology undergraduate students ($N = 9$) at XXXXX and XXXX University. The study was advertised in departments and over university email to all relevant students. The overall sample consisted eight females and one male, in their final year of their degree programme. Participants were asked to obtain photographs (5-10) which they felt best represented their student experience. Once participants had selected the relevant photographs, they were invited to take part in an interview which lasted approximately 30-45 minutes.

Agenda

The interview agenda consisted of several guiding questions, developed to allow participants to begin discussing their thoughts and experience. The interviews focused

around the photos, using these as prompts for discussion; the session concluded by making reference to the NSS and whether participants felt it adequately captured all aspects of their experience. Interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. Thematic analysis was used since it is a useful way of identifying, analysing and reporting themes in qualitative data that are not restrained by theory (Braun and Clarke 2006). The data was coded on a latent level, without deeper interpretation of underlying meanings or motivations.

Results and Discussion

Analysis of the findings revealed several main themes surrounding their experiences. These were: “Learning Environment”, “Work-Life Balance”, and “Wider University Community”. There were a number of sub-themes present within each (see Figure 1), and these will now be discussed in turn below.

(Figure 1 about here)

Learning Environment

A common theme amongst all participants involved the learning environment itself, in respect of the sub-themes of; the tutor-student relationship, peer networks and physical environment

The Tutor-Student Relationship

One of the strongest sub-themes found was the importance of positive relationships with university staff. Participants discussed the importance of tutors in terms of support, subject expertise and feeling encouraged to seek opportunities. Participant 6 below discussed how the relationships developed with tutors had influenced her and feelings about her degree experience:

“...they're always accommodating so you always have that input from them and you have that support and it makes you feel secure within your degree” (*Participant 6, UoC*)

This seemed particularly pronounced at one of the two institutions in the current study due to the smaller cohort size:

“...all of the lecturers are there to give you all the time that they can and I think that that bit is brilliant...like you wanting to get better with them, and they're gonna help with you sort of working together with it cause its smaller” (*Participant 5, UoC*)

This concept of “working together” points to a specific, more collegiate power dynamic that is unique to the tutor-student relationship. The power and autonomy of the students, specifically in the final year, is contrast to pre-tertiary education (McCann and Bates 2017); at this stage in their degree, participants were reflecting on the nature of the relationships that existed with tutors. Indeed, another participant commented on the reduced barriers between students and tutors:

“Yes it is, it actually makes you feel like erm free to relate to your lecturer you know... like somewhere [else] you have a barrier like a hierarchy that exists that scares you away” (*Participant 9, UoC*)

This participant felt well equipped to approach tutors and this provided a catalyst for their approach to their subject more generally:

“...thanks to the staff and witnessing what they do and the amount of effort they put in this fed my interests in Psychology and gave me direction, how could you not want to aspire to that!” (*Participant 8, UoC*)

For some students, tutors had made a significant impact on their whole experience on the course. It is possible that this finding in some part is due to the relatively smaller nature of one of the institutions in the current study. With smaller cohort sizes, there is a capacity for more individual and one-to-one support with the students which may be what fosters this feedback. The UK HE system is heterogeneous in that there are a range of different sized institutions with different resources, levels of wealth, specialities and areas of focus. As a consequence, the students that are reflecting on their time at university reflect a diverse group with a varied range of experiences.

The importance of the academic staff in the student experience has been seen in previous research (e.g. Douglas, Douglas and Barnes 2006). The role of the educator in HE is different to that of teachers in school (McCann and Bates 2017), and this is seen here within these accounts to be an empowering factor for students. The role of tutors is often seen as multi-faceted; many students seek personal and pastoral support in addition to other health and well-being support offered. A personal tutor has been defined as the person that bridges the link between the personal and academic whilst at university (e.g. Jacques 1990), and someone who is supportive of their academic development. The data from this study supported that these figures were critical to the experiences of students. The NSS reflects “academic support” in respect of students receiving sufficient advice and support, being able to contact staff and that good advice is available to make study choices. However, this does not capture the essence of the tutor-student relationship per se, which appears to be more important in students’ accounts of their experiences.

Peer networks

Friendships and peer networks appeared to be very important aspects of participants’ social learning environment and derived experiences. These were discussed in many different ways,

in respect of their role in aspects such as social support particularly as a mediator during stressful times, sense of belonging and also academic support.

“...everyone sort of says oh well you find your lifelong friends there and we actually did cause we’re kind of a bunch of people who you wouldn’t put together...I would never be apart from them” (*Participant 5, UoC*)

Entering HE can be a significant adjustment and many find it to be a significant challenge (Murtagh 2012), the social connections formed during the transition and subsequent period of time will form an important support network. For those who had moved away from home, these friendships were often developed in their accommodation:

“Erm so I went round to their flat to say hi and meet all them and I met (name) in first year all well and we have just been like best friends ever since” (*Participant 2, EHU*)

One of the institutions in the current study fosters the development of these relationships pre-registration. The same participant described how the use of forums and social networking sites was used to try and foster connections prior to arriving:

““...basically it’s like an it’s like a forum page thing and...basically everybody who is living in them buildings like in (building name) had its own page...so I met a couple of people like through that before it’s just so you can get to know your...flatmates” (*Participant 2, EHU*)

This strategy clearly aims to foster peer networking at pre-registration which has been shown in previous research to foster successful transition into HE through a sense of belonging (e.g. Brooman and Darwent 2014). This creates a positive perception of the social environment which has been found to influence students’ choice of HEI (Kaye and Bates 2017). If there have been issues in developing social connections or any sense of loneliness or anxiety, then

this is likely to affect how students feel about certain aspects of their experience (Sawir et al. 2008). They may indeed respond more negatively or attribute the source of these issues to their HEI.

Friendships were also discussed in terms of general social support. That is, when these relationships become a central part of the university experience it is inevitable that the nature of peer relationships will play a role in the academic aspects of students' experiences;

“Erm just like support erm we have a group chat so all three of us are involved and if like any of us need a hand we can always just ask and if we've got an assignment due we can read each other's and see what they think...” (*Participant 7, UoC*)

The pedagogic literature includes a wealth of examples that detail how independent and group learning can facilitate achievement in HE (e.g. Prince 2004). Students who have strong social groups in their cohort are likely to engage more in these activities. Within this sample, the development of strong peer networks seemed to impact on both the enjoyment of the course as well as engagement in learning. The implications here would be for HEIs to ensure relationship-building is the focus of transition events, particularly at Induction into university. Those who are more satisfied with be more like to remain on the course (Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie-Gauld 2005), reducing attrition. Whilst this may not be seen as a responsibility of an individual HEI, it is something worth investing resources in as it seems to have wider ranging consequences and impact. Whilst it would not be appropriate to suggest including questions about friendship to the NSS (or other student metrics), items could potentially focus upon the relationships built whilst at university, the opportunities for networking, and include reference to their concept of “belonging”.

Physical Environment

The physical learning environment was an important sub-theme found within participants' discussions. This was important for promoting a sense of belonging both in respect of "place" and "people". Students at one of the HEIs discussed a small study resource which they referred to as the "psych lab". This is a small area with several dedicated computer resources and learning space for students to use. This was something students at this HEI referred to several times in terms of how it helped motivate them and how they felt about the learning community there:

"I feel like I'm more productive like in the psych lab, like I'm more productive in there than at home" (*Participant 7, UoC*)

"[other students]'re very helpful, it just makes you feel like not alone when you're in here" (*Participant 7, UoC*)

The learning resources available here were facilitating a sense of learning community by providing a space for students to work together and help each other. Pedagogic literature details the benefits of working together and learning as a group (e.g. Roberts 2005), but the participants' discussions suggest it is partly the resource offered and the relational support it afforded. In relation to the physical learning environment, other participants discussed how this created a sense of calm which made their experiences easier:

"I love it being round here in summer...I actually just love being able to see the ducks its sounds like a really petty thing but...you go out and feed the ducks when you're stressed...like there was nowhere really to just chill and then you come here and it's just peaceful...and I think that the environment makes things a lot easier" (*Participant 3, EHU*)

As above, it seems the physical environment provides the basis from which positive belonging occurs between people. Another participant commented on how this comes together to create a “sense of community”:

“It’s cause its brought you a sort of friendly place to go cause they’re so nice and er...I can relax and have a break its really helped me just unwind for a bit and knowing their support there and they’ll just come up and talk to you, you’ve got that sort of...another sense of community in the actual university” (*Participant 5, UoC*)

A students’ subjective sense of belonging at university has been found to be positively associated with their motivation and academic self-efficacy (Freeman, Anderman and Jensen 2007) and has also been discussed in line with retention (Hoffman et al. 2002). The discussions from the current sample indicate that the physical learning environment fosters a key sense of belonging, which appears to extend beyond the “classroom”. This notion is recognised within the literature (e.g. Entwistle 1991), and its role in fostering sense of belonging has been found to occur at a range of levels (e.g., classroom, campus; e.g. Freeman et al. 2007). Similarly, sense of belonging is a likely basis through which student identity is formed. Social Identity Theory (e.g. Tajfel and Turner 1979) posits that an individual’s identity is their sense of self in respect of their affiliation to their social group/s. Thus, in the case of an individual’s social identity as being a university student at a particular HEI, this aspect of group identity may function within this setting, to affect upon their university experiences. Indeed, Pennington et al. (2017) found that aspects of group identity at university significantly predicted student satisfaction at the end of the academic year in a group of first year students. This could be enhanced if the learning environment serves to remind and reinforce of this identity. There is clearly a need for HEIs to consider their strategies for promoting both prospective and current students’ experiences of belongingness at their institutions, and how NSS metrics may capture this accordingly.

Work-Life Balance

In this theme, a particularly salient issue was the importance of maintaining a university-work life balance, as discussed in respect of workload management, and how technologies were an enabler of this process.

University Workload Management

A common theme discussed by all participants was a need to balance the multiple demands of their university workloads, employment and personal life. A by-product of meeting their university workload demands was feeling satisfied with their university experience. They expressed increased satisfaction, when they were able to do this with a minimal effect on their other obligations. However, some participants expressed how prioritising university work came at a cost. Resource scarcity theory posits that individuals only have a limited number of resources (e.g. time, energy and finances) to attribute to each of their multiple life roles. As such, conflict occurs in instances of simultaneous, but incompatible roles (e.g. Butler 2007; Creed, French and Hood 2015), and as a result, participation in one role negatively affects another (Goode 1960). Participant 8 illustrates this, by discussing how they had to give up time socializing with their friends, as it was incompatible with the demands of the student role:

“... the pressure of work, you can you can cope with it if you organise your time properly but in organising that time you have to let other things go...because you can't...have a night out on the town and then you know write an essay the day before the assignments due" (*Participant 8, UoC*)

This was mirrored by other participants who discussed sacrifices which had to be made in prioritising university work. This idea of role overload and impact on experience was

particularly salient in students that would be categorised as non-traditional (i.e. Mature). For example, Participant 9 had a dual identity as a student and a parent:

“Yeah I actually need time to look after them and what they’re doing in school you know, because I haven’t had that time...because all this assignment and school things, I don’t really have too much time taking care of their work and taking care of them generally” (*Participant 9, UoC*)

These findings are consistent with the notion of “salience hierarchy”, which suggests that when an individual is managing multiple roles, one rises to take prominence (e.g. Stryker 1968). The student identity being the more demanding requires constant resources (Butler 2007), led to students buffering against the stress by making the decision to sacrifice aspects of their other roles (i.e. friends/family). This led to students experiencing role strain (conflict from simultaneous, incompatible demands), role overload (insufficient time to meet all demands) and role contagion (preoccupation with one role while performing another), which affected their overall student experience (Coverman 1989). These issues are not discussed explicitly on the NSS, however they suggest that they play a key role in satisfaction; time management strategies could be a key focus of transition events, as a means of supporting students practically.

Effects of Term Time Employment (TTE)

Several participants made reference to how working in paid employment was important to their university experience. There is a growing trend in the UK for students to combine term time employment (TTE) with their studies; many chose to do this out of necessity, realising student loans often do not cover the costs. The effect of participating in TTE has wider implications than just affecting time management:

“So on this Sunday I had been working in the shop so I had been there till eleven...so I had got in about half past eleven and the next day I had this snotty little note outside my door saying erm saying erm you have woken me up blah blah blah” (*Participant 2, EHU*)

Here, the participant made reference to work causing conflict. Subsequently, following this event the participant felt ostracised and chose not spend much time in her accommodation which could have affected their feelings about their university experience during that academic year. This experience is mirrored by Participant 6:

“...People always ask you if you're free at the weekend and you're like no I've got work and if you're free during the week and no I've got Uni work so it's just nonstop really” (*Participant 6, UoC*)

This is consistent with role-conflict theory (Goode, 1960). Working on the premise that university and TTE roles are independent and compete for the limited resources, focusing too much on work can interfere with university activities (Gareis et al. 2009), and affect the student role (Greenhaus and Beutell 1985). These findings are consistent with previous research that found employment-based demands were antecedents of university-work conflict, which in turn affected academic engagement, well-being, and university experience (Creed et al. 2015). The current findings highlight how external stresses can impact the students' experiences; this has important ramifications for the NSS, which tends to focus on student's satisfaction of their institution, as oppose to their entire experience. This could be captured within metrics by including reference to whether students feel they have managed their time well and balanced their various demands as a possible confounding variable that could be controlled for.

Adoption of Digital Technologies

In this subtheme, participants discussed how their laptops played an integral role in maintaining their work-life balance. Participants did not just discuss this in terms of increased productivity, but they also described how they had become pivotal to maintaining relationships with their family and friends. Participants felt satisfied in using their laptops as a source of convenience and an alternative form of communication to face-to-face contact. This is consistent with current literature, which suggests that students see digital technologies as a highly participatory social space (Wright et al. 2014). Participant 8 illustrated this by personifying their laptop by describing it as a pet:

“Oh that's my laptop. That is that is erm that's replaced my TV, that's replaced my sleep and its replaced my social life erm it hasn't replaced my meals... it contributes to my meals [laughs] erm and actually I feel lost without it, it's it's got everything, my life on there basically and it's got my whole three years of study so it it's like my its actually like a pet for me you know” (*Participant 8, UoC*)

This viewpoint was not shared by all participants; some felt that the heavy use of laptops was detrimental. Participant 3 illustrated this when discussing how heavy laptop use gave her headaches:

“I mean there is so much isn't it I don't know you just can't do it without being on a laptop so...maybe there should be other options where you could I don't know maybe write down things more...especially if you are prone to getting headaches like I am” (*Participant 3, EHU*)

This highlights how digital technologies have become integral to the university experience. This is consistent with research suggesting that students perceive benefits from using digital technologies in their learning, as it allows them to fit university role demands around other roles (Henderson, Selwyn and Aston 2015). Applying the depletion model of

role conflict, to the aforementioned findings suggests that the use of digital technologies mitigates the effect of role conflict (Lenaghan and Senguta 2007). Laptops were representative of the adoption of digital technologies, these technologies allowed students to minimise the effect of role conflict, as they were able to use the scarce resources available to them more effectively. This is an important finding in relation to the NSS, as it currently only asks about access to general IT resources, but not about their role in enabling productivity or mitigating workload management, which appear to be important.

Wider University Community

Engaging in the wider university community was important for participants with this feeling often starting within the course programme and team but extended beyond this:

“...it’s just that within being a part of this undergraduate programme I’ve felt like a part of the university as a whole as well erm and I think we’re made and we’re supported to be you know to be that and to embrace the experience that the undergraduate course is.” (*Participant 4, UoC*)

For this participant, their commitment to the university saw them want to contribute something back into the wider community. This links to the theme of “learning environment” whereby the sense of belonging felt by many students, extended beyond the course and was felt more widely across the institution. This feeling of being part of “something bigger”, feeling comfortable was also seen in their intended behaviour beyond their course. The satisfaction of the students in this sample was often going to impact on their alumni behaviour and their decision to continue studying at the institution:

“I’ve been accepted for a place on the [named] Masters programme...I don’t really want to leave ever...that’s how positive an experience this has been” (*Participant 4, UoC*)

This wider university community engagement often derived through extracurricular activities, supplements the academic work. For Participant 2, most of her discussion surrounded her involvement in the Cheerleading Society:

“I got onto the team... like that’s been one of my major parts of Uni really being on the [activity] team...I think it’s been quite an integral part of Uni with in terms of like social life...and erm making friends as well” (*Participant 2, EHU*)

The participants in the current sample discussed these activities as something extra that complemented or supplemented their course. Studies have suggested that these activities work to add value within a learning community (e.g. Zhao and Kuh 2004) that can aid and improve academic performance. Indeed, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) suggested one of their most important conclusions around the impact of college/university was an individual student’s personal involvement in the academic and extracurricular activities. They suggest that HEIs focus on ways they can shape these offerings and encourage student engagement. In a context where students are being treated more often as consumers, these activities may also impact on a students’ perception of the “value” of their experience at university. It is noteworthy to highlight that “learning community” has been recently been recognised by the NSS as these items have been added to the most recent edition (to be launched in 2017); it has previously been highlighted as important in other national surveys (e.g. Australia; Radloff et al. 2011)

Conclusion

The current research explored the student experience through the use of photo-elicitation as a means of gaining a more student-centric conceptualisation of student satisfaction. We advocate that many satisfaction metrics may not be adequate in capturing all indicators which comprise student satisfaction in HE. This has implications for the efficacy of these metrics for influencing selection of course and HEIs, and suggests these should be used concurrently with additional assessments to ensure a fuller, and conceptually-relevant account of student satisfaction is obtained. The narratives of the participants in the current study revealed that their experience on their course was influenced by a diverse range of factors – some of which are captured within the NSS but many which are not.

Impact for the UK and International Literature

The findings of the current study present a new understanding of a previously well studied topic. Rather than relying on national metrics, quantitative research design or researcher-led interviews, (e.g. Gibbons, Dempster and Moutray 2011), the current study utilised an empowering and novel method in this area. By using photo-elicitation, this permitted a more student-centric perspective, rather than the traditional approach which is largely framed by what the institution deems important or valuable to student satisfaction. One of the most important findings to emerge from the data was the importance of people (staff, peers, colleagues) in shaping positive experiences. People, and specifically the associated learning community (defined by people *and* place), does not readily feature as a central focal point within many models of student satisfaction. Indeed, it has only recently been recognised on the NSS (starting in the academic cycle of 2016-17).

The findings form a critique of the way we currently model and measure student satisfaction in the UK HE system. Although metrics capture some of the important aspects of student satisfaction, they are not entirely reflective of the wider factors which appear to be

fundamental to these experiences. There may be some suggestion that it is features of learning environments and “people” which form the foundation through which other aspects of student satisfaction (e.g., teaching quality, assessment and feedback) are realised. Perhaps metrics such as the NSS could consider differential weightings for sub-scales such as learning environment, given its relative importance. This may be modelled at the core of student satisfaction, with other facets as somewhat peripheral to a greater or lesser extent. Here it would also be interesting to run analysis on how NSS scores on facets such as learning environment are influential to the other NSS dimensions (e.g., assessment and feedback), which appear to be more peripheral factors in students’ own accounts. This could provide additional evidence of the central nature of this facet and its “knock-on” impact on students’ other experiences at university.

Impact for HEIs

The importance of the current findings surrounds the potential for impact in several ways for the HE sector. Developing a better understanding of the student experience and student satisfaction would be useful at the institutional level to enable specific strategies to be created and implemented. The findings of the current study are representative of two specific institutions within one area of the UK; it is likely that there would be at least some diversity in the findings in other areas or institutions. Student satisfaction should not always be considered the outcome measure; when satisfaction is maximised, teaching and learning is also at an optimum (e.g. Rapert et al. 2004). Furthermore, when students are having a positive and engaging experience it is more likely to be seen within their alumni behaviour (Jurkowitsch, Vignali and Kaufmann 2006) and their loyalty as an outcome (Temizer and Turkyilmaz 2012).

Whilst the HEI-specific nature of these findings is recognised, they do serve to highlight limitations with the NSS. Participants commented on the restrictive and ambiguous nature of some of the questions:

“I think the main thing that stood out...for me when I was filling it out it’s that they’re ambiguous...for example the first one says staff are good at explaining things...I’ve had really different experiences with different members of staff...”

(Participant 3, EHU)

In line with this, the NSS has been criticised for lacking the context that would allow us to understand the true picture of the student experience (Buckley 2012) which fits with criticisms of the one size fits all approach (Douglas, McClelland and Davies 2008). The nature of student satisfaction is much more multifaceted and diverse than these metrics allow, meaning generic national comparisons may be inappropriate (Williams 2015). Although the NSS focuses on several key areas, it ignores a wealth of other factors such as; the nature of tutor-student relationships, workload management, and peer networking opportunities; all of which we found to be contributors to students’ experiences. Recommendations here would instead be to employ a range of methods to understand the student experience and rather than focusing on comparing at a national level, to instead utilise these to improve satisfaction at an institutional level.

One of the strongest findings to emerge from the narratives within the current study was the importance of “place” and “people” and how, when these are mutually aligned, build positive community and sense of belonging in university, which in turn hold academic implications. It would be beneficial for HEIs to consider the strategies underpinning this fruition. A positive physical environment, with social learning space which may foster collaborative and community-related experiences would appear to be the key to students’ sense of belonging at

their university. The “language” behind these spaces (e.g., “Psych lab”) is thus fundamental to students’ collective experiences in respect of these physical and social spaces. Effective institutional marketing with the use of visible labelling for such spaces is one practical strategy to promote this, which may be greatly facilitated through institutional social networking sites.

Limitations and Future Directions

The current study had significant strengths in utilising a new method in a topic area that has received a significant amount of research attention. Using photographic-elicitation enabled our participants to guide the interviews and be empowered in discussing their experiences whilst at university. That said, there are some limitations that it is important to recognise. Firstly, the nature of qualitative methodology is to understand the experiences of the student in this sample, as a consequence there is a small sample size and it would not be appropriate to attempt to generalise the findings beyond the current sample and institutions. However, we feel it offers a significant insight into a group of UK based psychology students and their experience; it could serve as a model for other institutions or other subject areas to utilise to similarly explore a more contextualised experience of their students. Secondly, by using an opportunity sampling strategy, the students in this sample self-selected to discuss their experiences which likely means they are some of the more engaged and satisfied students within their cohorts. Future research could utilise this method to explore the experiences of students who are perhaps less satisfied or more disengaged from the learning community by using a different sampling strategy.

Finally, there is perhaps merit in understanding student satisfaction from a longitudinal perspective, given that personal experiences are arguably contextualised by time and place.

Although our data is cross-sectional in nature, photo-elicitation can serve as a means of better capturing the context of (previous) experiences rather than relying on standard self-report responses in the here-and-now. As such, although longitudinal research would be of greater benefit here, we suggest that the photo-elicitation method can serve an additive benefit to cross-sectional research in its efficacy to contextualise experiences and reflection.

Final Thoughts

We present evidence on student satisfaction and the student experience at a key point in time within the UK HE system. From 2017 onwards, the UK Government is introducing a Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) which has the goal of rewarding excellence within learning and teaching in the HE sector. The stated aims of the TEF are positive and include: to view teaching and research as having equal status, to ensure all students receive excellent teaching that prepares them for employment and to recognise institutions that support diversity within their students. However, criticisms of the initiative include its reliance on metrics around factors such as the NSS and attrition figures, which do not actually measure teaching excellence (Scott 2015). The findings of the current study suggest the student experience is based on a wide range of factors and is an individual journey depending on issues around work-life balance, feeling a sense of belonging and the relationships that are developed at the university.

Students within our sample did not use the language of “satisfaction” or indeed discuss this explicitly as a concept, but instead referred to their experiences. Considering the breadth of the topics that play a role in the student experience, it leads to questions around the utility of the concept of measuring student satisfaction, not just to include criticisms of the metrics used to measure it. With one goal of the TEF being to ensure all students receive an

excellent teaching experience, it may not be considered useful to know that on average 86% of the students in the UK are satisfied overall with their course (Minsky 2016).

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