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Student Emotion Matters

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Student Emotions Matter: Understanding and Responding to Taught Postgraduate Student Experience Through the Lens of Well-being

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ABSTRACT

Increasingly, the taught postgraduate student experience is being recognised as a complex journey influenced by a multiplicity of interconnected factors that are institution-related, discipline specific, and socio-culturally informed. This emergent recognition of the complexity of being a taught postgraduate (PGT) student underpinned the research study reported in this paper. Well-being was conceptualised as central to the student experience and interconnected with five facets of the student journey. It was explored through the lens of emotion and as an independent variable. Guided by principles of pragmatism, the study followed an action research approach seeking the perceptions of PGT students engaged in academic study and in turn reports the findings relating to their student experience. This paper reports on findings from year 1 (2017-18 academic year) of a 3-year cross-sectional study. Data were collected in 2 phases using an online survey followed by focus group interviews and then underwent thematic analysis. Our findings reinforce and further inform the understanding that the PGT student experience is uniquely complex. Through our exploration we have come to understand PGT student experience as an emotionally rich process influenced by three dimensions of the student journey, degree of connectedness; effectiveness of supports; and quality of communication, that elicit threat or challenge appraisals based on perceived demands and coping resources, triggering emotion responses that impact well-being, and learner engagement.

Keywords: taught postgraduate student experience, well-being, emotion, action research

Introduction

Evaluation of student experience has become a significant data source in UK Higher Education (HE), informing innovation, accountability, retention, and attainment across the sector (Universities UK, 2016). However, Steuer, Marks and Murphy (2008) argue the conceptualisation of student experience is insufficient, narrowly defined by quality measures focused on economic interests associated with retention and attainment. They call for a sector-wide reprioritisation of quality measures designed to enhance both individual and collective well-being, suggesting the transformative potential of HE resides in an approach that acknowledges the interconnectedness of the learner with society, economy, and environment. Their notion of student experience as interconnected is echoed in recent literature that defines the taught postgraduate (PGT) student experience as a complex journey defined by psychological and sociological processes influenced by a multiplicity of interconnected factors that are discipline-specific, institution-related, and socio-culturally informed (Muijs & Bokhove, 2017; Quality Assurance Agency for HE in Scotland (QAA), 2018; Steuer, Marks & Murphy, 2008; Temple Callender, Grove, & Kersh, 2014; Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013).

This emergent recognition of the complexity of being a PGT student underpins the research study reported in this paper. The following model represents our conceptualisation, positioning well-being as central to the student experience and interconnected with five literature-informed facets related to subject-discipline, institution, and wider socio-cultural factors. The project followed an action research approach, underpinned by a commitment to seeking a shared understanding of the perspectives of students and in turn feeding these into institutional and programme level developments (Hardwick & Worsley, 2011).

This paper presents the methodological approach to seeking the perceptions of students engaged in academic study and in turn reports the findings relating to their student experience.

A multifaceted approach to understanding student experience

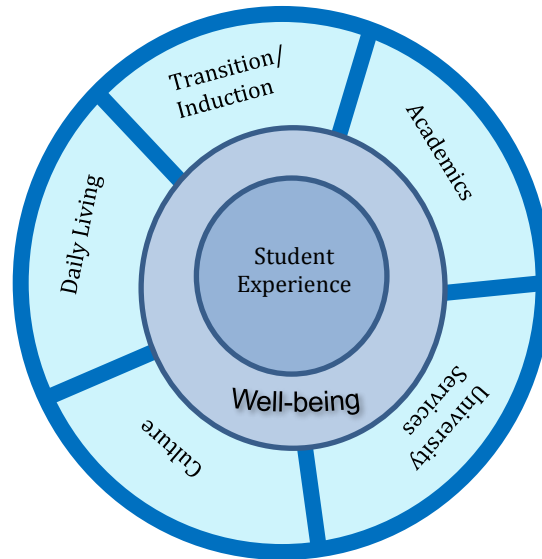


Figure 1 Conceptualising student experience as a multi-faceted student journey underpinned by well-being

Defining student experience

Building on a review of literature that presents student experience as a multi-faceted journey underpinned by psychological and sociological processes ((Muijs & Bokhove, 2017; Quality Assurance Agency for HE in Scotland (QAA), 2018; Steuer et al., 2008; Temple Callender, Grove, & Kersh, 2014; Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013) we identify five dominant and distinct facets related to subject discipline, institution, and wider-socio-cultural factors that interconnect with well-being to define the student experience. The follow sub-sections provide a review of literature informing each facet of our conceptualisation.

Student experience underpinned by well-being

Well-being is a multi-faceted concept consisting of hedonic and eudaimonic measures that indicate an individual's mental health, with implications for flourishing or languishing in life (Keyes, 2005). Hedonic measures reflect an individual's personal perceptions of happiness and life satisfaction, while eudaimonic measures gauge personal perceptions of psychological functioning in life (Deci & Ryan, 2008). The World Health Organisation (WHO) encapsulates the importance of well-being to human functioning through its definition of mental health:

Mental health is defined as "a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community" (WHO, 2014a).

In defining well-being it is important to acknowledge its close relationship with emotion and how the interactions of emotion and well-being influence capacity for learning. According to Lazarus and Smith (1990), well-being and capacity for learning are influenced by an individual's situational appraisals of threat or challenge. Through this lens, Jamieson, Hangen, Lee and Yeager (2018) discuss the biopsychosocial model of challenge and threat (BPS), positing a direct relationship between challenge-threat appraisals, coping resources, stress demands, emotion responses, and enacted behaviours. The authors suggest challenge-threat appraisals elicit emotional, physiological, and psychological responses that impact motivation for learning. This has significant implications for the PGT population whom research suggests enter study with significant challenges and stresses (Coneyworth et al., 2019; McPherson, Punch & Graham, 2017).

Steuer et al. (2008) argue a central focus of higher education must be on personal and collective well-being to support 'flourishing'; a state of optimal well-being that is directly related to learning, creative thinking, life satisfaction, and social responsibility. Drawing from positive psychology (Ryff & Singer, 1998; Seligman, 2012), they identify self-acceptance, positive emotion, engagement, personal growth, relatedness, autonomy, relationships, environmental mastery, and purpose in life as elements that support flourishing. Through this approach the authors posit an increase in learners' sense of altruism, satisfaction, meaningfulness, accomplishment, and feelings of competency, supporting a transformation that

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enhances learner well-being and “underpins their potential for enhancing the broader well-being of the economy, environment, and society” (p.29). Houghton and Anderson (2017) call for focused discussion of well-being as it relates to teaching and learning, arguing it predominantly resides outside of the ‘mainstream’, relegated to the responsibility of university and student support services. Within this study, well-being was conceptualised as central to the student experience (Figure 1) interconnected with five facets of the student journey. It was explored through the lens of emotion, and as an independent measure.

Transition and student experience

Gale and Parker (2014) emphasise transition is not simply a ‘point in time’ but is an interconnected process involving multiple hierarchical systems including individual, family, professionals, HE institutions, and national/international policies all acting to influence a student’s educational trajectory (Jindal-Snape & Rientes, 2016). O’Neill, Tobbell, O’Donnell and Lawthom (2007) indicate psychological and sociological processes impact transition and contribute to a student’s overall experience. They suggest PGT student transitions should be supported by a university community approach that supports building a sense of belonging, which is achieved when academic, administrative, and support staff promote PGT students’ academic identity and positive peer interactions. May (2011) describes belonging as “crucial to being a person” and involving an emotional element defined by a sense of “feeling at home” (p. 369). In our study we investigate transition as an ongoing process throughout the student journey and a contributing factor to the student experience.

Academics and university services: student experience of learning

Quality teaching is a multi-dimensional concept involving learning environments, curriculum design, course content, learning contexts, use of feedback, assessment, tutor-student relationships, and student support services; it relies on factors beyond the programme level and must include supports from wider university services (Henard & Roseveare 2012; QAA, 2018). This idea is echoed in The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF, 2017), a UK government initiative introduced into HE that measures an institution’s “teaching mission” (Gunn, 2018, p.135). The teaching mission is defined by a multi-dimensional view of the learning experience reflecting a four-part student lifecycle that includes input processes (pre-enrolment and entry experiences); in-study processes (teaching quality and learning environments); output processes (retention rates, and attainment), as well as outcomes (graduation destinations, personal development). Gunn (2018) suggests the multidimensional approach provides information to support both quality assurance interests and consumer market information. However, a number of authors suggest teaching and learning for the PGT population has been overlooked (Heussi, 2012; Morgan & Direito, 2016; Tobbell & O’Donnell, 2013). Within our study, we used a multidimensional lens to explore PGT student perceptions of academic and university services to better understand how they contribute to student learning experiences. These are categorised from two aspects:

- Teaching quality: tutor support; learning contexts, learning materials, use of feedback, assessment approaches, module design.
- Wider learning environments: support from university services including administration, library, IT, health, counselling, housing.

Culture, daily life and student experience

Founded on shared beliefs and values, culture is a source for understanding ourselves and the world within which we live (Macionis & Plummer, 2012). There is a close relationship between culture and identity, leading to a sense of being, and motivation for acting within any social entity (Bin Ai, 2017). Within the context of HE, Maassen (1996) introduces academic culture, a two-pronged term involving the organisational and the discipline specific institutional culture that exists in HE. Academic culture defines what is valued in the learning and social environment of a university and it is up to each individual member to adapt to it during their studies. Students who succeed are those who most quickly inculcate to the culture (Gale & Parker, 2014), a process that varies for students based on multi-dimensional factors that include the social and organisational cultures of the institution, and daily life issues including family and work commitments (Jindal-Snape & Rientes, 2016 p. 22). For students arriving at university from increasingly diverse ethno-cultural backgrounds there is the risk of culture shock (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2005), leading to a reduced ability to adapt, and having their progress and experience affected accordingly.

Greater focus on experiences of international students has informed a new discourse on how the university community should support PGT students to adapt, recognising they enter study with a diverse range of knowledge and experiences, learning styles, and cultural norms (Coneyworth, Jessop, Maden, & White, 2019). In our study, we explored culture from two aspects, students’ experience of academic culture and their experiences of their social context, acknowledging daily life challenges that each of these aspects present to the student journey.

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The aim of our study was to better understand and respond to student experience through an exploration of the interactions of well-being, and five facets of the student journey, which were defined in the following ways:

- *Transition/Induction*: student experience with admissions, initiation and orientation to their programme, transition into study;
- *Academics*: including quality of teaching, assessment practices, learning environments, resources, tutor-student interactions, feedback;
- *University Services*: interactions with various services including health, counselling, library, IT, student, and accommodations, all seen as having a role in the student journey;
- *Culture*: acknowledging both academic culture and local culture play a role in the student journey;
- *Daily Living*: includes aspects of daily life not connected directly with study but playing a contributory role in the student journey.

Two questions guided the research:

1. What are taught postgraduate student perceptions of their experiences in HE?
2. What is the relationship between well-being and student experience?

Methodology

Context

The study took place within a Scottish University. Our goal was to involve all PGT students participating in online, on-campus, or blended learning programmes within a faculty that delivers programmes relating to teacher education, social work and community education.

Study design

This paper reports on findings from year 1 (2017-18 academic year) of a 3-year, cross-sectional study exploring student experience using an action research approach defined by data collection, knowledge gathering and dissemination, and productive reflection (Boud, 2010). It is guided by principles of pragmatism, underpinned by abduction (Feilzer, 2010). Through this design we acknowledge action research is a process that should be conducted over time allowing for findings to be compared from year to year and from group to group (Callison, 2007). The following section outlines approaches to data collection and analysis adopted with in the study.

Recruitment, data collection and analysis

Participants were recruited using web-based advertisements broadcast through the internal communications system, and through announcements posted within programme specific virtual learning spaces. In line with Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2018), who acknowledge the use of a reasonable incentive to encourage student participation, participants were given the opportunity of winning a modest monetary 'prize'.

The participants included 40 students from four post graduate programmes (Table 1) in a Scottish university.

Table 1 Participant characteristics

Characteristics		Total Number (N) Participants (Phase 1: Online Survey)	Total Number (N) Participants (Phase 2: Focus Groups)
Year of Study	1	14	2
	2	25	3
	3	1	1
Gender	M	7	0
	F	33	6

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Phase 1 data collection used a three-part online survey consisting of Likert-scale and free-text questions addressing professional and demographic information; the five facets of student experience; and The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (WEMWBS). WEMWBS is a 14-item, 5-point Likert-scale including measures of eudaimonic, hedonic, and social aspects of well-being (Tennant et al., 2007).

Semi-structured focus group interviews, with representation from online and on-campus learners from three programmes (Table 1) were used in Phase 2 of data collection to enrich findings that emerged during phase 1 analysis and to garner student voice in the development of school-wide practices. Keeping in mind the vulnerable nature of action research to participants due to the potential day-to-day organisational interactions (Cohen et al., 2018) between participants and researchers, steps were taken to ensure anonymity of focus group participants. Focus groups were audio-recorded with notes taken by the host to capture evidence of facial expressions, and body language not evident through audio recording. Transcriptions were made, capturing various aspects of communication including spoken word, inflections, tone, and emotion as a way of addressing the opaque potential of verbal transcriptions alone (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2002).

Quantitative survey data from phase 1 underwent descriptive analysis (percentages) with data sorted according to positive (>56%), neutral (41-55%), and negative (<40%) responses to questions. Qualitative survey data underwent thematic analysis. Each member of the research team reviewed a selection of the qualitative data, negotiating and agreeing a thematic framework. The qualitative data was uploaded to Nvivo and coded according to the thematic framework. These themes informed the semi-structured focus group questions used in phase 2, from which the data was then coded using the same thematic framework.

The following section reports our key findings offering interesting insight into the relationship between well-being, emotion, and student experience.

Well-being and PGT student experiences

Building on previous research calling for focused attention on well-being in HE, (Steuer et al., 2008; Houghton & Anderson, 2017) we explored well-being as a central aspect in student experience. Participants completed the WEMWBS 14-item 5-point Likert scale measuring hedonic, eudaimonic and social aspects of well-being (Tennant et al., 2007). Categorical analysis was used in the interpretation of the data (Figure 2). Guided by the WEMWBS User Guide (2015) the total possible score ranging from 14-70 was categorised in three ways, according to high (60-70), average (43-59), and low (14-42) scores. Findings indicate participant well-being scores ranged between 28 and 60, with 17.5% reporting low well-being, 85% scoring average well-being, and 2.5% reporting high well-being. In light of the well-being literature that suggests a close relationship between well-being and learning (Boekaerts, 1993; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Seligman 2012), this finding is positive.

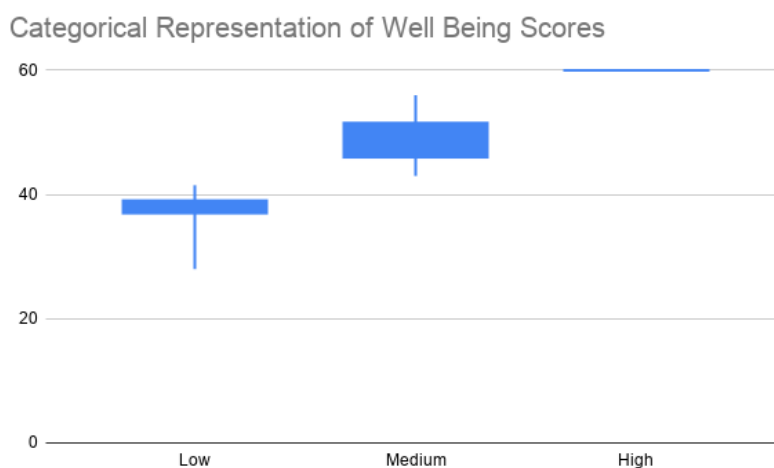


Figure 2 Categorical representation of well-being scores

A calculation of mean scores for each question provided a more granular level of analysis (Table 2). Findings indicated over half (52%) of participants reported 'none of the time' or 'rarely' having energy to spare and a quarter (25%) of participants reported 'rarely' feeling relaxed. In contrast 95% of participants responded positively (some of the time, often, all of the time) to being interested in new things.

Well-being scores**Table 2** Descriptive statistics for participant well-being scores

Question	MEAN	STD DV	MODE	MEDIAN
* I've been feeling optimistic about the future	3.7	0.64847	4	4
* I've been feeling useful	3.625	0.585618	4	4
* I've been feeling relaxed	2.875	0.822364	3	3
* I've been feeling interested in other people	3.55	0.845804	4	4
* I've had energy to spare	2.575	0.902631	2	2.5
*I've been dealing with problems well	3.475	0.715667	4	3.5
* I've been thinking clearly	3.625	0.740322	4	4
* I've been feeling good about myself	3.525	0.750641	3	3
* I've been feeling close to other people	3.425	0.902631	3	3
* I've been feeling confident	3.475	0.816104	3	3
* I've been able to make up my own mind about things	3.85	0.852974	4	4
* I've been feeling loved	3.775	0.861945	3	4
* I've been interested in new things	3.875	0.921259	4	4
* I've been feeling cheerful	3.5	0.751068	4	3.5

Being interested in new things is a positive finding, suggesting participants possess a degree of internal motivation for learning, which has positive implications for engagement, an essential element that supports learning, flourishing, and quality of experience (Steuer et al., 2008; Seligman, 2012). However, reported *low energy* and *rarely feeling relaxed* are disconcerting in light of WHO (2014a) indicator that connects well-being with one's capacity to cope with the normal stresses of life. These findings raise questions about the capacity students have for coping with the stresses of normal life when coupled with the stresses arising from study, and the implications for student experience. McPherson et al., (2017) report PGT students experience high levels of anxiety, with negative implications for engagement, critical and creative thinking, and productivity. Beer and Lawson (2017) suggest time and energy are two factors contributing to student attrition.

In our analysis we found emotion processes interact closely with psychological and sociological processes, influencing student experience. The follow sections provide further detail.

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Emotion processes and the PGT student experience

Our findings support the view that the student journey is defined by a multiplicity of factors and interactions, underpinned by psychological and sociological processes (Tobell & O'Donnell, 2013; Temple et al., 2014; Morgan & Direito, 2016; Muijs & Bokhove, 2017; O'Neill et al., 2007). Adding to this, emerging from our findings was the role of emotion processes as a central and defining theme to the student experience. Across their student journey, PGT students define the emotive nature of their experiences, indicating feelings associated with challenge or threat including, "trepidation", "pride" and "elation", "horror" and "frustration", as well as "shame" and "humility". One student described feelings of isolation and the impact it had on her study experience: "There were times when I would give up because I would be looking for something and not be able to find it and I have nobody to ask. It had a very negative impact". At the same time, another student describes positive emotion, arising through overcoming challenge, "Sometimes I get a good grade and I think, 'Wow! So I am smart after all.'"

According to the BPS model, individual appraisals of threat or challenge paired with demand vs coping resource appraisals trigger specific emotion responses that lead to concurrent behaviours, either enhancing or inhibiting learner engagement (Jamieson et al., 2018). Our findings indicate three dimensions of the student journey inform challenge-threat appraisals, each acting independently and multi-directionally to trigger varied emotional responses that impact student experience.

Degree of connectedness

The degree of connectedness dimension was defined by students' perceived sense of belonging, identity, and relationships, each influencing motivation, arising through a sense of membership, academic identity, and comradeship that promoted resilience during high stress periods:

The most significant thing actually is my friends. Every lunchtime we go for a walk ...past [--Hall] we visualise graduating. It has kept us going even at times when we felt ready to drop out... It's been the peer group.

Relationships are an essential aspect of well-being and quality learning (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Seligman, 2012), contributing to a sense of belonging (Matheson & Sutcliffe, 2018), which, according to Fisher et al., (2019) is a significant factor impacting a student's psychological processes, capacity to persist, and academic performance. Miller (2003) defines belonging in terms of establishing a connection through creating a sense of identity with the material, relational, and social surroundings. This idea emerged in our findings:

Feeling included as a student at the university is important - belonging is a huge motivator for me.

Identity as a student at the university is important. Having something, a cup, a lanyard - it makes a huge impact. I could feel like a part of the community.

Sometimes even when there is no class, I could work from home, but I just want to come to the library because having people in the same situation working - here I have motivation.

Whannell and Whannell (2015) highlight the importance of motivation, suggesting students who enter study driven by internal motivating factors such as self or professional improvement possess a higher emotional commitment for establishing an academic identity. This understanding is reflected in our findings. The following comment provides context:

This is what I've always wanted to do. In terms of ongoing motivation - passing all my academic portfolio has proved to me in first year I could do it. I worked really, really hard- probably a little too hard because I had a lot to prove to myself also to my local authority who are supporting me, and to life really.

Through a high emotional commitment Whannell and Whannell (2015) reason that students find resilience to overcome the negative impact of a threat to identity such as a poor grade, or negative interaction, enabling their continued student journey. Jamieson et al., (2018) suggest challenges and threats reside along a stress-response continuum, ever present in one form or another, and it is the students' appraisal of available coping resources vs demands that determine their position along the continuum. When a coping resource such as internal motivation, outweighs the demands of a task, the individual experiences positive emotions and behaviours that support immersive engagement (Jamieson et al., 2018), an essential element of deep learning, which is a defining quality of HE (Gunn, 2018).

Effectiveness of supports

A second dimension impacting emotion processes and student experience emerged from our findings. Defined by the perceived availability, access to, and quality of support, this dimension, when perceived positively served as a coping resource for students, leading to positive emotional responses and behaviours characterised by feelings of engagement, relatedness, and environmental mastery.

The level of guidance from disability services has been great - can't fault it. I felt very supported.

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I have become a huge fan of the regular online meetings. Being able to drop in if I have any questions or if I am confused about anything related to the Masters – I can bounce ideas off and get support from my tutor.

In contrast, ineffective supports triggered negative emotion responses:

It is comments like, 'You need to expand on this' when it is two words under the maximum word limit. - This is frustrating because I can't expand it because I have run out of available words. This sort of comment is not necessarily useful because they don't suggest where I could clip one thing to expand another.'

Heussi (2012) suggests teaching and learning for the PGT population has previously been overlooked, an idea echoed by a number of authors (Morgan & Direito, 2016; Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013). According to Tobbell and O'Donnell (2013) this approach has been justified by the assumption that PGT students enter study with established academic competencies, developed through successful completion of undergraduate degrees. Emerging literature indicates otherwise, suggesting challenges of PGT study have the potential to trigger anxiety, feelings of isolation, decreased persistence, and reduced engagement, all characteristics that support attrition (Coneyworth et al., 2019; McPherson et al., 2017).

Focus group data provided clarity on the impact of negative appraisals to the student learning journey. An exchange between two participants provides context:

There were times when I would give up because I am looking for online reading and I cannot find it and I have nobody to ask. It has a very negative impact.' (Participant 1)

And that can last for days or weeks ... if you hit one of those roadblocks - not finding a text; not having communication with everybody - it completely side railed me for weeks.' (Participant 2)

According to Henard and Roseveare (2012) quality teaching must attend to learning environments, curriculum design, course content, use of feedback, assessment, tutor-student relationships, and student support services. Houghton and Anderson (2017) call for a focused discussion of well-being as an essential element of quality teaching. Borrowing from Steuer et al. (2008) they suggest well-being is achieved in teaching and learning through supporting students to develop a sense of agency and autonomy, paired with strong relationships and environmental mastery leading to feelings of competence. Through this understanding, these authors argue the deep learning, and transformation that defines higher education becomes possible.

Sharing natural synergies with the aforementioned Effectiveness of Supports and Connectedness dimensions through its capacity to influence learning, academic identity, sense of membership, and self-efficacy, a third dimension: Quality of Communications, emerged from our findings.

Quality of communications

Defined by the students' perceived sense of efficiency of communication, tone of communication, and clarity of response, this dimension served as an important coping resource for PGT students. One student summarised this in the following way:

It is good to know, what is the purpose of the Enquiry Centre other than when I matriculate and to pay fees? What about Council Tax? How about the library? ...The fact that there is cold and hot water in the library - you know, boiling hot water upstairs... knowing that has been invaluable because our fees are £10,000 a year and we are self-funding, so every penny counts.

When information is not clearly communicated it is appraised as a threat, prompting negative emotion:

For me the biggest thing is getting the right information, the relevant information, to the right person. I get so confused at times.

There was very poor communication... Given the high demands of the course and given that most students work part time to be able to afford to study, this is frustrating.

Tutor feedback was a significant factor in student experience. Effective feedback was defined as "ongoing" and "specific" about the "strengths and next steps". While poor quality feedback was defined as "excessive", and non-content specific. Feedback of this nature triggered negative emotion responses explained in the following way "the students were completely demoralised, they were in pieces...In terms of their own self-esteem and self-worth they were rock bottom".

Temple et al., (2014) suggest feedback is a primary area of concern arising from student experience surveys. According to Cann (2014), and in line with our findings, PGT students are most concerned with the timeliness and relevance of academic feedback. QAA (2018) suggests optimal learning relies on students developing their understanding of and value for feedback, indicating provision should be made to ensure multiple means of engagement with feedback. We propose the use of feedback to support positive well-being has been overlooked in teaching and learning, and a redefining of the purpose and use of

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feedback to promote agency, strong relationships, and environmental mastery is needed. Through this lens it is possible to reason, feedback could become a primary coping resource to support students overcome challenge and threats during their study journey.

The following participant comment provides insight into the positive impact of quality communication on student sense of belonging:

All of the positive emotions I have felt have been when there has been communication and interaction with other people the negative emotions I have felt, are directly related to lack of communication.

Temple et al. (2014) signal the importance of effective communication during the application process, indicating it “sets the context for later experiences” and is a “crucial” aspect of the student journey (p. 13). Our findings indicate effective communication is important across all facets of the student journey, serving as a positive coping resource supporting positive emotions, engagement and student experience.

Emotion processes, well-being and transformation

Resoundingly, participants expressed a sense of transformation through their student journey:

The process has really made me feel that I am capable of more than I realised, and that is something that is going to stick with me for the rest of my life. It's been very empowering.

Emotional and cognitive challenges, paired with reflective processes were important in the process of transformation:

Emotionally I enjoy it. It is challenging, and at times I feel I can't do this anymore. I am done and everyone in the course feels that. Then there is the content of our course - it makes me question who I am and what I believe, so we talk about what is reality? We really drill down to our core beliefs... I think I know my stuff and it strips you back professionally and personally and then you rebuild....

This finding is in keeping with Mezirow’s transformative learning theory, suggesting the student journey equates to a process of transformation characterised by disorienting dilemmas; engagement with critical reflection leading to self-examination, and exploration of new ways of thinking, acting, and interacting (Mezirow, 2000). Through their experiences students acquired new knowledge and skills, developed competence and confidence, and shaped identities, leading to a sense of self-actualisation, which Ryan and Deci (2001) equate to optimal well-being. According to Steuer et al., (2008) transformation that enhances learner well-being has the potential to enhance the broader well-being of the economy, environment, and society. Evidence to this effect emerged in our findings:

I think this was a great opportunity for me to learn the importance of what growth means. I have taken this as an opportunity to grow both as a person, as a student, as a mother, as a wife, and a teacher. I feel that in all those aspects of my life that I have become a better person; it has helped me in so much understanding myself... I was able to see the benefits of this opportunity and use it in my life.

A common thread in transformation is the ability to overcome – be it a challenge, threat, or disorienting dilemma, (Jamieson et al., 2018; Mezirow, 2000). This idea was expressed by PGT students in this study. The following participant quote provides context:

I have learnt an awful lot. I have grown an awful lot - even in those times that were demotivating I also think, 'Well, I couldn't be doing all that bad because I have gotten through it all' and it is that feeling that builds you.

Taylor (2017) defines learning as a transformative process involving the acquisition of knowledge as a result of the transformation in knowledge structures, feelings, personality, and relationships with others. These student testimonies speak to the transformative potential of the student journey, signalling emotion processes and coping resources including relationships, effectiveness of supports, and quality of communication are defining factors that influence student experience.

Through this lens, and in keeping with emerging views (Muijs & Bokhove, 2017; QAA, 2018; Steuer et al., 2008; Temple et al., 2014; Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013) the current approach to measuring and understanding PGT student experience in terms of satisfaction is insufficient to capture the complex psychological, sociological, and emotional processes that define student experience.

Whilst the scale of this study places limitations on how broadly the findings can be extrapolated and interpreted, we can reaffirm the role of psychological and sociological processes (O'Neill et al., 2007) as well as conveying a clear indication of emotion as a third process interacting in student experience.

Conclusion

In this study we conceptualised the PGT student experience as a multifaceted student journey informed by five facets related to subject discipline, institution, and wider-socio-cultural factors all underpinned by well-being. Through our exploration we have come to understand PGT student experience as an emotionally rich process influenced by three dimensions of the student journey, degree of connectedness; effectiveness of supports; and quality of communication, that elicit threat or challenge appraisals based on perceived demands and coping resources, triggering emotion responses that impact well-being, and learner engagement.

Our findings serve to reinforce and further inform the understanding that the PGT student experience is uniquely complex (Beer & Lawson, 2017; Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013; Morgan & Direito, 2016; McPherson et al., 2017; Coneyworth et al., 2019). Characterised by intense and abbreviated study times, student experience operates in between a myriad of other commitments including family, and work, all interacting to impact well-being through stress arising as a result of time pressure and lack of energy, two factors directly attributed to student attrition (Crosling, Heagney, & Thomas, 2009).

Our findings suggest the quality of experience and capacity for learning is dependent upon each student's appraisals of three dimensions of the student journey, which serve to support or hinder their ability to overcome heightened emotion arising during study. Through this understanding resides the potential to redefine PGT student experience in terms of challenge or threat to well-being and learning, and to respond to dimensions of the student journey that can be developed to maximise coping resources while minimising threat.

We anticipate these findings will contribute to the wider discussion of PGT student experience within the HE sector, and prompt reflection and developments relevant to differing academic contexts. An illustration of this, and in keeping with the action research approach, the following programme developments have been inspired by the findings:

- Video recording of the Principal's welcome address for distance learners (identity and belonging)
- Enhanced Advisor of Studies role (pastoral care and emotional/cultural transitions)
- Assessment working group (quality of feedback)
- Programme focus groups (communication, belonging)
- Repeated induction (academic skills, language issues and supports)

Through the cyclical nature of action research (Callison, 2007) we will continue our exploration of student experience as a multi-faceted journey underpinned by well-being, allowing for findings to be compared over time and between groups. Whilst the themes emerging in this study and the associated conceptualisation of the student experience suggest some generic areas of focus and response, it is equally evident that student experience is by definition individualised and bespoke. This highlights the need for the HE sector to continue to meet the needs of their student population in a flexible, reflective and holistic manner.

Biographies

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