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Troubling the notion of satisfied students

Abstract

This paper investigates whether students' personal happiness is different from student satisfaction and considers if this may have consequences for university policy and management. It does this by comparing happiness and satisfaction in two cohorts of students from two United Kingdom universities. One is a distinctive research university and the other a university whose heritage has been in the polytechnic sector prior to its charter, referred to as a post-1992 university. The results, although preliminary, do appear to show that satisfied students are also happy students. However, what contributes to these states of being is different. The implication for institutional policy is discussed and a warning that to assume satisfaction (measured by satisfaction survey results) as happiness might be problematic in addressing improvement in the student experience.

Keywords

Happiness, higher education; satisfaction

The driver for this research is a concern that happiness is not the same as satisfaction. This paper investigates whether the dominant discourse of customer satisfaction used to describe student engagement with higher education hides a more nuanced and relevant notion of student happiness, and what that might mean for university education. Certainly there seems to be conflation of the terms of satisfaction and happiness in the United Kingdom (UK) specialist press. For example, in reporting findings from the UK National Student Survey (NSS), in a special supplement the *Times Educational Supplement* led with the headline 'For happy students, listen and then action'. This illustrates how the two notions of satisfaction and happiness are taken as substitutes even when addressing an informed audience. Other examples include 'Happiest university and college students revealed', from *Which* in 2103, and a plethora of university websites claiming that students are 'happier than ever'. The fact is that the NSS is aimed at current students and, in the survey, undergraduates are asked to provide honest feedback about satisfaction with their study on their course at their institution:

it does not refer to 'happiness' at all. The paper explores if there are student-perceived differences in the two concepts and what these might be.

In more academic literature there is also confusion and conflation between the two concepts of satisfaction and happiness. For example, Easterlin considered that 'the terms well-being, utility, happiness, life satisfaction, and welfare [are] interchangeable' (Easterlin 2005, p. 29). More recently, Watson (2011) continued this carelessness by referring to 'satisfaction derived data' (Bekhradnia *et al.*, 2006), clearly using satisfaction, in a chapter entitled 'Unhappy Students'. Furthermore, Castellani *et al.* (2010) and Edwards, Van Laar Easton and Kinman (2009) also tended to conflate the two distinct concepts. This is more than journalistic licence, and it is not overly pedantic to question the semantics for, if there is a difference between happiness and satisfaction in the student experience, then happiness may be important to university and educational policy. However, recent literature has begun to indicate that there are distinctive features to both. While suggesting that non-economic conditions similarly affect happiness and life satisfaction; in more general terms Peiro (2006) suggested that economic conditions show a different relationship to happiness and to satisfaction.

There is a small literature dealing with satisfaction and happiness in the student experiences that is pertinent to our study and argues for distinctions. Chan *et al.* (2005) in Australia and Hirvonen and Mangelaja in Finland (2006) found that most students were both satisfied and happy for different reasons. However, both studies tended to be less than rigorous in the use of the terms 'happiness', 'life satisfaction' and a notion of the good life. Also, there has been some recent work on student happiness *per se*. For example, Martin *et al.* (2010) provided an excellent review of the psychological literature on happiness and investigated the nature of student happiness, which might be explained in three distinctive forms. This study attempts to concentrate on identifying and then comparing satisfaction, or rather desire satisfaction, with happiness. It argued that some of the benefits for an edifying experience are lost and supplanted by process re-engineering if policymakers themselves concentrate exclusively on what satisfaction surveys tell them about the student experience.

This paper does not object to satisfaction surveys of the student experience when used for the purposes designed but considers what might distinctively make students happy, how this affects their expectation of their experience and what this might mean for them existentially as individuals experiencing the impact of their own educational context. Okun *et al.* (2009), for instance, found that a positive happiness disposition was associated with higher academic success. The study asked if satisfaction is indeed about the external

environment and happiness is about how students experience the learning; not the structures, process and potential emotional labour of tutors but the ontological changes that education may provide for them? To do this, the research extensively surveys neither the literature on satisfaction nor student satisfaction (see section on methodology below). The study accepts Gruber *et al.*'s 2010 contention that service quality and customer satisfaction 'are fundamentally different concepts. While quality is a general attitude, satisfaction is linked to particular transactions' (Gruber *et al.*, 2010, p. 108) and are concerned here with satisfaction. There was an extensive literature on student satisfaction in the 1990's (such as, Harvey, 1993, Harvey *et al.*, 1997), and, more recently, includes Brown and Mazzarol (2009); Garcia-Aracil (2009); Bedggood and Donovan (2012); van der Velden (2012) and Mark (2013).

The literature on happiness supports the temporal and emotional structures of happiness (Diener, 1984; Shmotkin, 2005), from a newly established agenda of positive psychology (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and from a narrative psychological perspective. Notwithstanding, Zimbardo and Boyd (1999), Drake *et al.* (2008) and Şimşek (2009) in particular, have proposed a construct of subjective well-being as 'one's evaluation of life in both past and future time perspectives in addition to the present' (Şimşek, 2009, p. 505), a life project created and maintained in a temporal perspective. Moreover, by evoking Heidegger and his own notion of ontological category he argued that time, 'when considered as a basic ontological category, transforms the concept of 'life as a personal project' into one more abstract, "life as a project of becoming", which is the chief good as the indicator of a happy life' (Şimşek, 2009, p. 511).

Literature on the student experience is less prevalent in the education literature; while the notion that happiness is desirable for education is claimed by Noddings (2003) to be an aim of compulsory education, it has yet to fan the flames of higher education pedagogy. Evidence to support the importance of happiness alongside satisfaction is the main issue that this study would like to rectify, beginning by looking at this aspect of individual and student experience. In passing, it should be noted that the study is not considering the idea of teaching happiness. This approach has some leverage in the USA and, although is symbolic of the positive psychology movement, it is not the subject of this paper and not without its detractors (Smith, 2008).

Current higher education policy has concentrated on the expedient of developing capabilities for the real world of work. This led to increased interest in happiness among economists after a paper by Easterlin (1995) suggested that this, rather than economic growth, income or consumption, should be a policy priority. Valuable as this focus may be as

a way to satisfy politico-economic policy imperatives, it strays from a view of education as an edifying process where personal development as a questioning of the role in society unsettles individuals seeking to find a place in the world. That unsettling is supplanted by an instrumental, fixed trajectory for desire satisfaction. Castriota (2006) proposes that the positive effects of education on happiness result from a variety of intermediary processes and, as a consequence:

the quantity of material goods a person can buy becomes less important. It is reasonable to believe that a low education level reduces the chances of achieving a high level of job satisfaction and the probability to have a stimulating cultural life, and makes the purchase of material goods a more important determinant of the life-satisfaction. (Castriota, 2006, p. 3)

Of course, whilst educational institutions could support the desirability of education for economic, ideological and spiritual reasons, the questioning of the institutional structure, let alone the desirability of what they packaged, assumes a certain worth for education, in and for itself. As Dearden (1968, p. 27) pointed out, 'education may be broadly defined as the process of learning through which we come to an understanding and appreciation of what is valuable or worth pursuing in life, and happiness is no more than one among several final ends worthy of pursuit'.

Moreover, as suggested by Deci and Ryan (2008), hedonistic happiness may be the natural result of a eudemonic wellbeing and share a common genesis but it is not the same for what we might enjoy may not be beneficial for us—a glass too many of sherry perhaps? Citing the works of Hale (1993) and Boniwell and Zimbardo (2004) amongst others to support his case that an ontological construct of happiness has value, Şimşek's research suggests that its temporal-emotional form can be conceptualised as nothing-ness, hope, regret and activation yet of a wellbeing (albeit a composite) interchangeable with happiness. Indeed, Raibley (Şimşek, 2012), who might be sympathetic to Şimşek's blending of the intentional and emotional, draws a distinction between episodic happiness—intense as joy, disinterested as cheeriness—as subjective wellbeing and a more pervasive happiness although retaining a eudaemonic approach.

Such an approach differs from desire satisfaction, which has at its core hedonism as a fundamental and sustainable notion of happiness, although it certainly finds a place for the presence of joy and the momentary outbreaks of expression of joy and satisfaction. It also differs from an Aristotelian eudemonic approach to wellbeing that tends to be prescriptive

(Bognar, 2010). This is, that there is a normative nature to well-being that should be taught and observed rather than allowing individuals to take a stance on what is required for their own well-being given the observance of the principle of non-interference with others. A different notion of happiness is proposed in this study; a fundamental and existential process of becoming what one wills one being to be, in that it has a mediating goal for life (Garcia, 2011). This requires that happiness is directed by a life plan that becomes attuned to one's being when within the capability of the agent. This is no easy task and requires education, vision and tenacity to find how one best fits oneself into the world and to avoid compromising one's being for the sake of simply fitting in for others. This echoes Seneca, retorting to his detractors in 'On a Happy Life' by justifying his riches as enabling him to enact his virtues, and defending such a life by his claim that, 'I own my riches, you own you' (Seneca, 2008, p. 157).

To investigate aspects of how they conceived of their happiness and satisfaction of their student experience, students were asked about what made them satisfied and what made them happy, and what the university could do about increasing both.

Research Aims and Methodology

To investigate the proposition made above, namely that satisfaction and happiness are different notions effected by different referential contexts and that happiness was related to how universities shaped and directed expectation, a four-stage approach was adopted in developing a survey instrument to identify student academic experiences at universities in England. This research used previous studies by Hirvonen and Mangelaja (2006) and Chan *et al.* (2005) as a basis for obtaining an understanding of the factors influencing student experience in higher education. Hirvonen and Mangelaja (2006, p. 37) recommended that future researchers investigating student satisfaction and happiness should adopt a Likert scale with more than five categories and expand previous research undertaken by Chan *et al.* (2005) and following Harvey *et al* 1997. Consequently the authors of this research adopted a seven-point scale, not only to capture the ratings of students but to increase the reliability of the regression models. Furthermore, the list of items relating to student satisfaction were developed through a four-stage approach (1. literature review, 2. focus groups, 3. open-ended interview survey, 4. pilot testing of questionnaire), which resulted in a richer appreciation of factors influencing student satisfaction. Students were asked to rate their satisfaction and happiness on a 1 to 7 Likert scale, as the premise of this research was that this would yield

significant differences and, as the regression results reveal, there are significant differences in aiming to satisfy or making students happy.

The findings from the literature on satisfaction and happiness (Chan *et al.*, 2005) and focus groups findings were used to inform the construction of the open-ended questions and administered to a hundred randomly-selected students. The analysis of the results permitted the development a questionnaire based on the data collected on student happiness in higher education.

The sampling took place over two weeks. Students based at the central campus of two with contrasting mission groupings, namely post-1992 (65%) and Russell Group (35%) in the north of England were targeted at specific times and locations (library, computer labs, refectory and outside large lecture theatres) to capture a variety of student views. No specific course or programme was targeted as the research intended to generalise findings to student experience in higher education, not a specific course. The sample profile of students revealed that slightly over half the sample comprised students from the business school (Table 1):

Table 1 Courses areas of the 296 survey respondents

School	N	Valid per cent
1.00 Business Studies related		51.2
2.00 Social Sciences		30.4
3.00 Art/Language related		15.2
4.00 Engineering related		3.3
Total		100.0

After reviewing the final completed responses, 296 responses were accepted for analysis. This included 128 male (43.2%) and 168 (56.8%) female responses; the small difference reflects the increasing number of female students in higher education. The age distribution was 90 per cent between ages 18 and 22 years and 10 per cent mature students aged from 23 to 29 years. All were enrolled on undergraduate programmes and similar numbers were captured to represent the varying years (Year 1, 2 and Final) at university.

Results

Educational experience at university

The preliminary research had identified 41 variables that students highlighted as important to their academic experience in higher education (Figure 1). These were utilised in the student questionnaire.

[INSERT Figure 1: Mean rating of variables influencing student experience in higher education ABOUT HERE](#)

Cronbach's Alpha revealed a very high internal consistency of the responses of 0.882. The frequency results revealed several variables that were highly rated from their positive influence on student experience. These variables can be clustered into personal agency and organisational processes of gaining a degree, the significance of which is revealed below (Table 2).

[INSERT – Table 2: significant variable cluster by external organisational influences and internal personal considerations ABOUT HERE](#)

This separation of key variables for the student experience offers an early indication that the student experience is being judged through the lens of social infusion within a structured university system and a second, more personal and perhaps deeper evaluation of the experience as it relates to the individual, not as student but as a person, as identified by Garcia (2011).

In an attempt to understand how these emerging structures might influence the satisfaction and happiness of students, respondents were asked to offer their notion of 'happiness'. This was done as it seems that happiness is a more insubstantial concept than satisfaction. Certainly, it is a less frequently asked about concept of student experience. This approach was not undertaken in previous studies of happiness and satisfaction with students, when happiness was considered to be homogeneous and self-evident (Chan *et al.*, 2005).

Definition of happiness

Students were asked to write definitions of happiness and these were clustered into categories (Table 3). The findings reveal that student happiness is associated with being content, having supportive family and friends (a major factor for female students, regardless of where they study) and enjoying what they do. Moreover, it is associated with ontological, not structural, offerings made by the university. This is borne out by an analysis of the student experience.

Moreover, this supports the conceptual idea of happiness that has its roots in Dearden (1968) and Raibley (2012).

[INSERT Table 3: Definition of happiness ABOUT HERE](#)

The students were then asked to compare their own happiness with their satisfaction with their university experience. The results show that post-'92 students were more happy than satisfied, that Russell Group students were less happy than satisfied but with a smaller divergence than for the post-'92 students, and that female students are more happy than male students at university, regardless of their type of institution. This finding is counter to that of Chan *et al.* (2005) in Australia and Hirvonen and Mangeloja (2006) in Finland, who found no gender differences in their cohorts (Figure 2).

[Insert about here Figure 2](#)

Regression analysis of factors influencing satisfaction and happiness

Ordinal regression analysis was undertaken to determine the significant variables that influenced overall student satisfaction and happiness. The test of parallel lines revealed non-significance, which is a measure that the categories, within the outcome variable, are fairly homogenous and therefore appropriate for ordinal regression analysis. Further tests of validity of the regression models are highlighted in Table 4, which provides evidence of the Pseudo R Square values and the model fit test.

[Table 4: Pseudo R Square and Model Fit test results ABOUT HERE](#)

The ordinal regression analysis results revealed major differences in the variables that influence student satisfaction and happiness (Tables 5 and 6).

[INSERT Table 5: Regression analysis of key influences on overall student satisfaction ABOUT HERE](#)

[INSERT Table 6: Regression analysis of key influences on overall student happiness ABOUT HERE](#)

The key influence for student satisfaction is related to students engaging in the processes offered by the university. These are not replicated for student happiness; here, the concerns are with how they particularly benefit from the experience of their management of self and the system. In both, the component of how the institution itself is valued (and hence the increased social capital it brings) is important, for it defines their personal identity through affiliation to the brand and the value added that the educational experience provides.

Regression analysis of factor groups

The regression values of each factor group was computed so that regression analysis could be undertaken for student satisfaction and happiness to the groups identified by factor analysis. The R-square values and Anova (goodness of fit) of the regression models are highlighted in Table 7, which indicate high values and confidence in the regression results.

[Table 7: R Square and Anova values ABOUT HERE](#)

The regression factor analysis results reveal that, for student satisfaction group assessment, planning time, meeting deadlines and contact with tutors has no significant impact on student satisfaction or happiness. The most important factor groups influencing student satisfaction are related to social experience and tutor engagement. The results for the most important groups influencing student happiness are related to university reputation and social experience. This supports Raibley's 2011 contention that happiness in both these senses is conceptually, metaphysically, and empirically distinct from wellbeing.

Regression predication of happiness based on satisfaction

A simple regression of happiness by satisfaction reveal high R Square and Anova results (Table 8).

[INSERT Table 8: R Square and Anova results from overall happiness regression calculation ABOUT HERE](#)

The regression computation reveals that high satisfaction scores have a significant impact on student happiness as indicated in the formula below:

Overall Happiness = 1.996 + .637*Satisfaction Rating

The impact of satisfaction on happiness is consistent between genders at both universities.

Student expectations from university

There are a number of expectations that students have from their university experience (Figure 3).

[INSERT Figure 3: Rating of student expectations from university experience ABOUT HERE](#)

Female students have significantly higher expectations than their male counterparts for how higher education can shape their futures. It is interesting to note that there were no significant differences by type of university to student expectations.

Importantly for this research, it also seems that students indicated that their increased satisfaction and happiness scores were correlated to the fact that university had helped them identify what will make them happy in life and being optimistic about their future career prospects. This combination of abstract personal becoming and more concrete career development has imparted implications of the spatiotemporal role of the university in the ontological development of the student, especially in how they take a stance on the person they will seek to become (Figure 4).

[INSERT- Figure 4: Satisfaction and happiness based on expectations from university and future career prospects ABOUT HERE](#)

Conclusion

These results contribute to a better understanding of the student experience and one not dependent on satisfaction alone. The concepts of satisfaction and happiness have isolated in a preliminary way and indicate that there is a difference, although often highly correlated, between happiness and satisfaction. Moreover, the results not only suggest that while it is the structure and process things that satisfy and therefore draw the attention of university management, there are different issues that contribute to a happy student. Further, happy students will enhance the level of satisfaction they exhibit. Indeed, the findings suggest that

happiness within students as individual learners seeking to find their place with the university is different from the satisfaction they feel about fitting in to the student body. In this rather gross sense, the results offer support to the notion of profound happiness being different from 'whatever' happiness and from being a satisfied member of the student body. It is proposed that there remains a more existential phenomenon called happiness that contributes, but is not reducible to, satisfaction, with the second concept being related to the social practices of being a satisfied student.

The policy issues that flow from this research can only be indicative, given the limitations of the survey. However, the findings point towards two distinct educative areas for higher education. The first is that the university, like any other provider of products and services, needs to educate customers in what is reasonable to expect for their money and how to assess that as part of the student body as consumer. This consumer satisfaction can be made tangible and it is worth measuring and competing upon. However, it is not enough. There remains an expectation for happiness and there is an edifying role for the university in helping students grasp their potential and their happiness. Roybens offered what seems to be a valuable mission for happiness in higher education when she wrote that, it 'should be conceptualized in terms of people's capabilities to function; that is, their effective opportunities to undertake the actions and activities that they want to engage in, and be whom they want to be' (Roybens, 2005, p. 95). This requires a pedagogy for university teachers that Walker (2010, p. 915) advocated should be 'concerned with educational, processes and valued achievements. Selected capabilities would shape and inform conditions, practices and the evaluation of outcomes of university education which is for rationality and freedom, higher learning and agency of students' and thus to reveal potential for profound happiness.

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Table 2: Significant variable cluster by external organisational influences and internal personal considerations

External organisational influences	Internal personal considerations	Difference in relationship
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I have good relationships with students on the course 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I have good friends at university 	functional advantage compared to personal engagement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I have a good social life at university Feel safe at university 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Education is a worthwhile investment I am confident with my intelligence I am aware of the benefits of higher education 	Social context as distinct from personal educational purpose
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tutors post material on the online system I meet university deadlines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tutors are friendly 	Educational process competency rather than personal engagement

Table 3: Definition of happiness (most popular responses)

Category	Post-'92		Russell Group		Count	Percentage
	Male	Female	Male	Female		
Being content	22	38	13	15	88	36.36
Supportive friends and family	8	22	1	11	42	17.36
Enjoying what you do	15	17	2	4	38	15.70
Having a positive state of mind	2	6	4	7	19	7.85
Having a stress free life	8	6	1	4	19	7.85
Achieving a balanced life	5	5	2	1	13	5.37
Good social life	2	3	2	4	11	4.55

Sense of achievement	4	2	1	1	8	3.31
Having confidence	1	2	1		4	1.65
					Total	242

Table 4: Pseudo R Square and Model Fit test results

Regression Model	Pseudo R square		Model Fit	
	Cox and Snell	Nagelkerke	Chi-Square	Sig.
Satisfaction	.446	.463	174.713	.000
Happiness	.392	.409	147.373	.000

Table 5: Regression analysis of key influences on overall student satisfaction

			Satisfaction		
			Estimate	Wald	Sig.
Threshold	[Q42= 1]		5.634	42.92	0.00
	[Q42= 2]		6.745	65.901	0.00
	[Q42= 3]		7.929	87.427	0.00
	[Q42= 4]		9.288	108.852	0.00
	[Q42= 5]		11.202	136.16	0.00
	[Q42= 6]		13.248	166.737	0.00
Location	Q40	Education is a worthwhile investment	0.444	28.048	0.00
	Q17	I have good friends at university	0.381	18.101	0.00
	Q5	Enjoy teaching style of tutors	0.315	12.102	0.00
	Q37	I am happy with the reputation of the course	0.294	12.684	0.00
	Q19	I have a good social/academic balance	0.262	12.045	0.00
	Q8	Tutors treat all students fairly	0.233	8.061	0.01
	Q13	Tutors post notes onto online system	0.155	6.292	0.01

Table 6: Regression analysis of key influences on overall student happiness

			Happiness		
			Estimate	Wald	Sig.
Threshold	[Q43= 1]		3.843	24.542	0.00
	[Q43= 2]		4.82	43.404	0.00
	[Q43= 3]		5.701	61.226	0.00
	[Q43= 4]		7.122	88.278	0.00
	[Q43= 5]		8.934	118.975	0.00
	[Q43= 6]		11.071	153.777	0.00
Location	Q16	I am doing well in comparison to others	0.506	23.277	0.00
	Q7	I enjoy learning experience at University	0.372	16.185	0.00
	Q37	I am happy with the reputation of the course	0.37	19.342	0.00
	Q33	I am a highly motivated person	0.29	12.14	0.00
	Q41	I have good attendance at seminars	0.253	11.028	0.00

Table 7: R Square and Anova values

			Anova	
Regression Model	R	R square	F	Sig.
Satisfaction	.676	.456	19.66	.000
Happiness	.682	.465	20.37	.000

Table 8: R Square and Anova results from overall happiness regression calculation

			Anova	
Regression Model	R	R square	F	Sig.
Overall happiness based on satisfaction	.674	.45	255	.000

Figure 1: Mean rating of variables influencing student experience in Higher Education

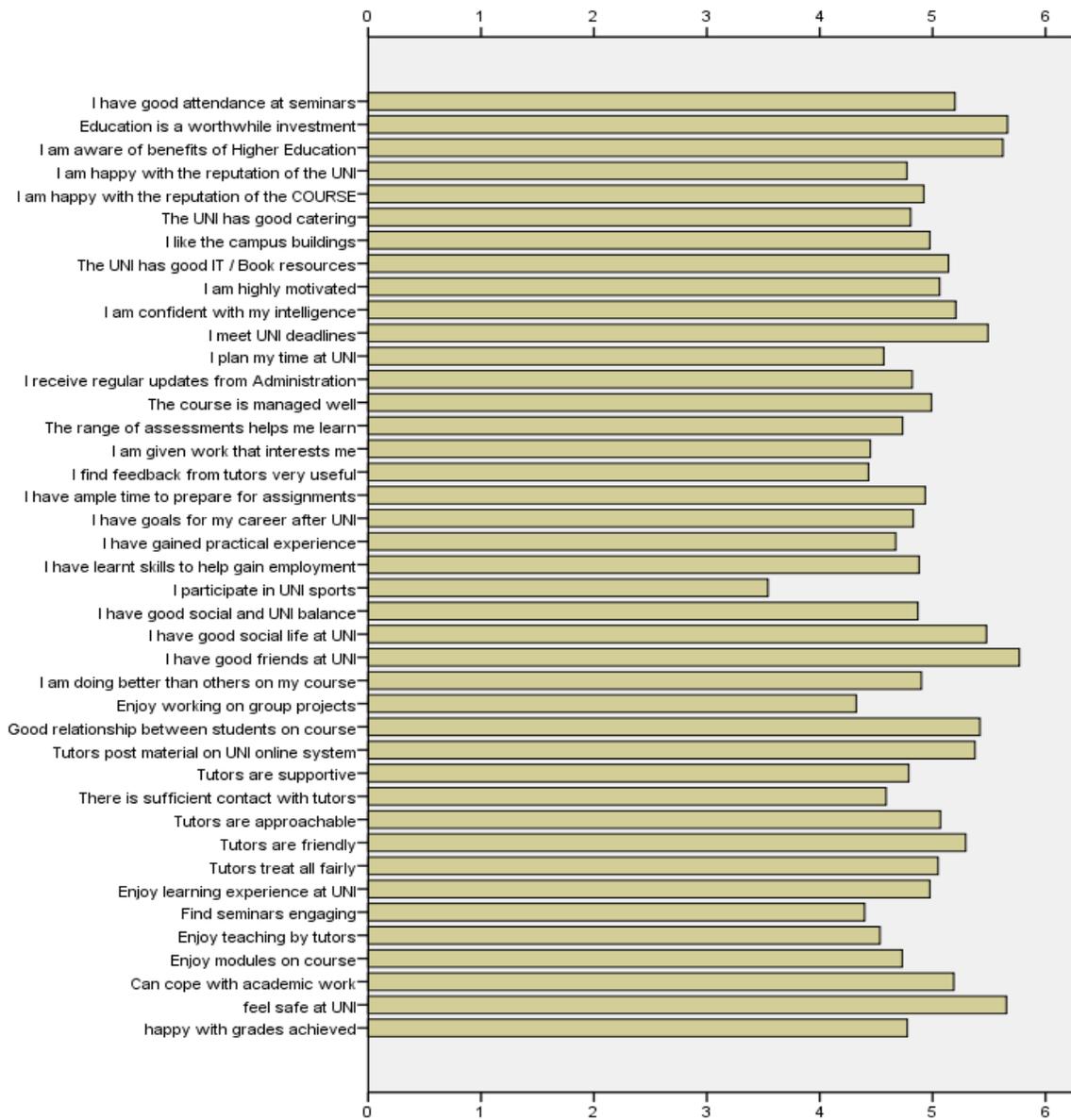


Figure 2: Happiness results based on gender and type of university

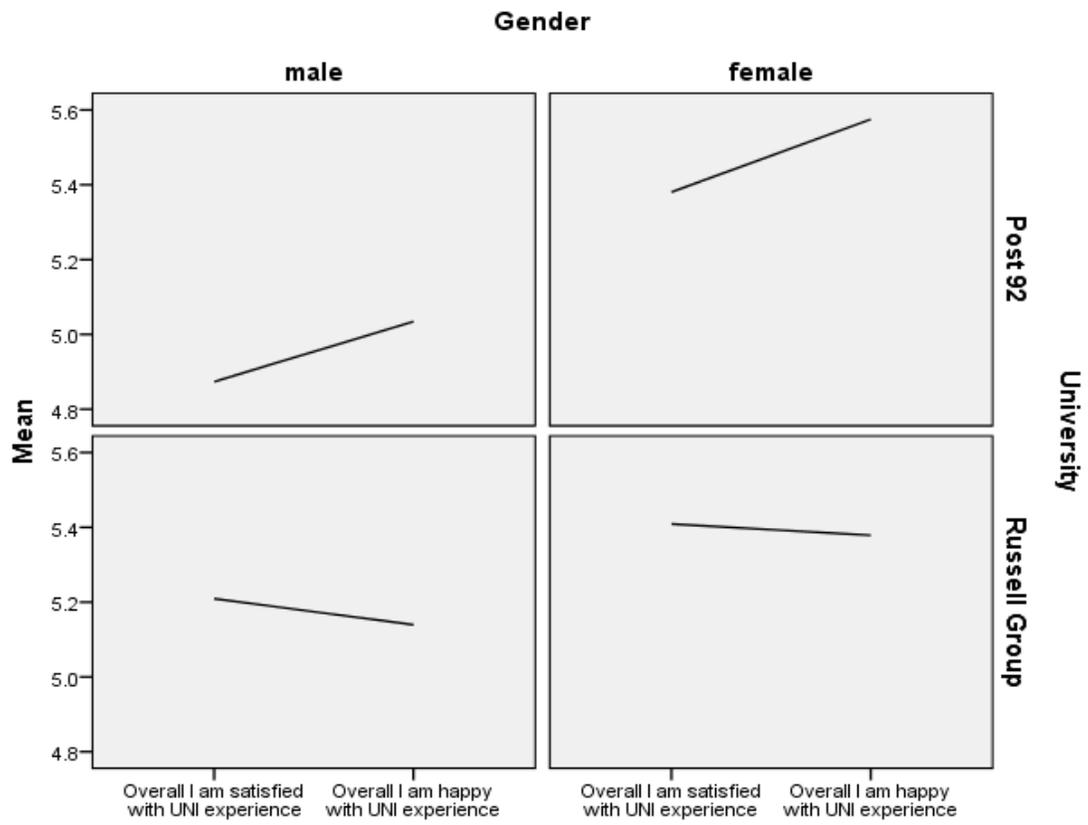
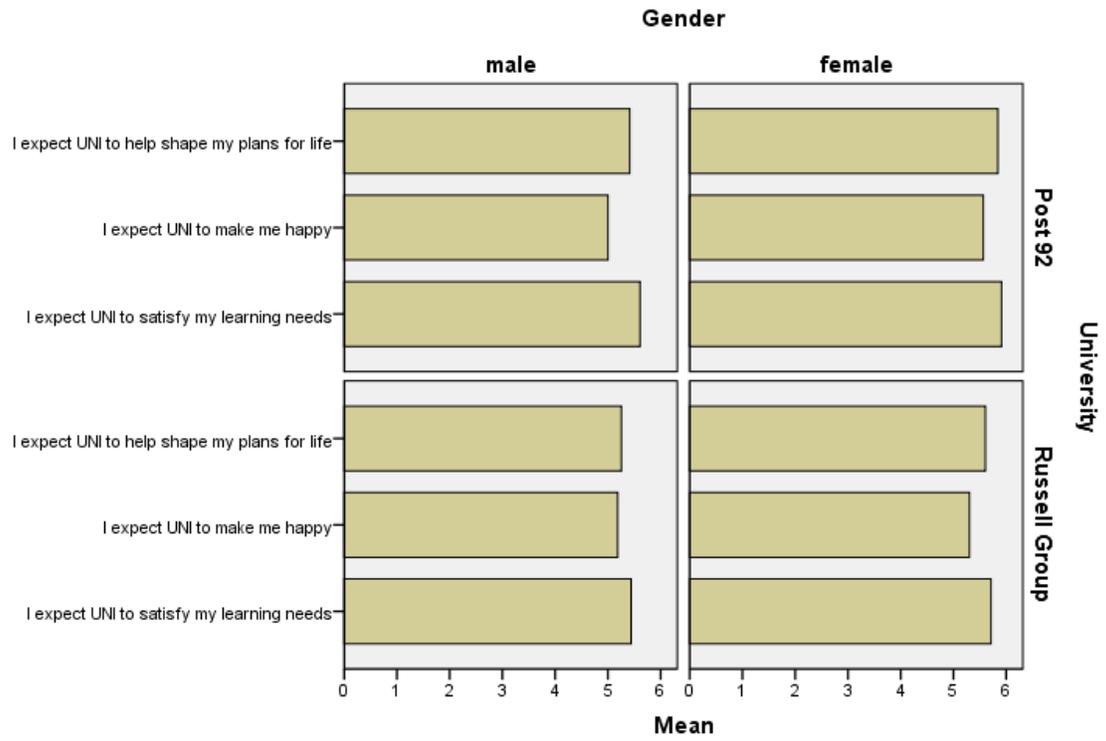


Figure 3: Rating of student expectations from university experience



I SUSPECT THE TINY TYPE FACE WILL NEED TO BE AMENDED. IS IT POSSIBLE AT THIS STAGE BEFORE GOING TO TYPESETTER?

Figure 4: Satisfaction and happiness based on expectations from university and future career prospects

