Student satisfaction or happiness? A preliminary rethink of what is important in the student experience

Abstract

There is an influential, but not uncontested (Tsinidou et al., 2010), literature concerning Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) as education service providers, functioning like any other business, (e.g.DeShields, 2005). Eagle and Brennan (2007: 4) argue that academic staff, as service providers, are thus vital to delivery. Using a service model and traditional corporate quality frameworks, there is temptation to measure how a service ethos serves recipients and co-producers – students, donor, industry and sponsors – negating education's transformative and uncertain nature, rather than taking the externality of process delivery as a guide. We investigate the purpose of the complex open system of higher education and explore this transformative experience as personal flourishing, where students come to terms with a way of being, matching their potentiality with their agency and leading to profound happiness.

Keywords: Higher Education, Happiness, Satisfaction, Quality

What is the essence of quality education, how do we know it exists, how can we judge the extent of it, how can it be acquired and what are its subjective or objective properties? These are fundamental questions which we contend have not been readily addressed in the literature on

quality of higher education. In a seminal paper by Harvey and Green (1993) it is suggested that quality is used in five ways in the higher education debate: excellence, perfection, fitness for purpose, value for money and transformation. This notion is not readily suspect to generalised forms of assessment but to professional judgement. This expert activity is deemed inadequate by those who, in this epoch of managerialism and instrumentality, need a way to show 'progress' to justify consistency and funding. This has led to a simulacrum of quality in the form of constructed antecedents of quality, measuring various functions that education can claim to influence in personal flourishing. These attributes we claim are predisposed to a notion of humanity that is consumerist (Baudrillard, 1998; Bauman, 2008).

At the core of the consumerised notion of quality and its analytics of performance indicators of desire satisfaction is the student: not as a Newman scholar, learner or inquirer, but as a consumer, a theme that Eagle and Brennan (2007: 44) have identified as being increasingly accepted in higher education, partly due to the tuition fees. This view is supported by Williams and Cappucci-Ansfield (2007) who believe that the introduction of tuition fees will force universities to act as 'service providers' and thus become responsive to student as consumer requirements. Watson (2003) and Narasimhan (2001) assert that fee-paying students may expect 'value for money' and thus behave more like consumers. The concept of customer orientation has been gaining traction in higher education (Douglas et al., 2006). This approach views students as the primary consumers of the higher education (see Sanders et al., 2000; Gremler and McCollough, 2002; Kotze and Plessis, 2003). Such a position has lead, wrongly, to a policy of educational consumerism seeking to satisfy tangible, identifiable external manifestations of a satisfying consumption experience. This is an experience that can be readily and often immediately evaluated by the consumer using their prior experience or, in terms they are quickly taught to appropriate, of education's entertainment value, potential employment benefits and the ambient quality of the university lecture theatre. The outcomes from the annual National Student Survey (NSS) have shown these 'hygiene factors' demonstrate that results

improve annually but do not equate to an enhanced learning experience for the students and, once over a certain threshold, will not contribute to the ongoing experience.

Through the normalizing notion of consumerism, what is taken for good education is converted into what satisfies the desires of stakeholder as consumers. These in turn are identified not as internal goods of civic responsibility - *phronesis* and *parrhesia* - but as value for money, cost efficiencies, counts of academic papers per scholar, contact hours, turnaround times and the like. These notions drive, rather than follow, national educational higher education policy and cascade into institutional strategic directions. These economic control mechanism of performance can be seen in the metrics at the core of:

- The Research Assessment Exercise;
- Review by the Quality Assurance Agency; and
- The National Student Survey (NSS).

Cullen et al. (2003: 6) assert that these initiatives have a significant impact on how senior management identify key success factors and prioritise activities, especially since the findings of the external audits are used to establish league table ranking of universities which become the focus of poorly informed consumer choice. Indeed, Filippakou suggests that '(Q)uality regimes in higher education, one might say, influence the ways in which the meaning of higher education is interpreted, and perhaps defined, by limiting other interested parties' power to influence the debate' (2011: 17). Moreover, Doherty (2008) argues that the concept of quality is often misrepresented and/or misunderstood by many academics. Furthermore. Tsinidou et al. (2010: 228) highlight that the factors of quality are intrinsically linked to the subject of satisfaction, thus education becomes 'being satisfied'. This is a dangerous assumption, if correct, for ways of being that might have different objects, such as a common good, personal well-being and the seeking of moral way of being (Baum, 2008). The authors suggest that the idea of quality in

3

higher education should extend beyond satisfaction and develop a notion of student happiness as one of the attributes by which educational provision should be judged, if not measured.

Indeed, because of the conflation of the terms 'happiness' and the more measurable and explicit term 'satisfaction', the idea of happiness has become hidden and used as a convenient yet inaccurate substitute for satisfaction. Even in the dedicated quality assurance academic literature such conflation is common (see Wiers-Jenssen Stensaker and Grogaard, 2002 – well-being and happiness – and, more recently, Edwards, Van Laar Easton and Kinman, 2009 – everyday happiness and satisfaction). Consequently, this research proposes a more complete understanding of the key influences of the student learning experience and their influence on both satisfaction and happiness that the authors advocate will yield a more detailed insight into the student experience in higher education.

In this paper we wish to explore the notion of happiness, not as short-term period of joy and ecstatic eruption of pleasure, but as the finding of a life course. We have termed this profound happiness and discuss it at length elsewhere. In summary this approach differs from well-being judgements made on retrospective and accumulative life-long desire satisfaction (accumulative hedonist well-being approaches to happiness) and to the explicit and normative directives of what is prudently good for one. In this sense, profound happiness is not strictly Aristotelian *eudaimonia*, which prioritises well-being based on moral, wealth or health imperatives, although it does retain notions of agentic directed growth, meaning and purpose. It also differs from desire and pleasure satisfaction, hedonism, as the sustainable notion of happiness – although it certainly finds a place for the presence of joy and momentary outbreaks of expression of delight and pleasure. Profound happiness, then, is a blend of both these traditional forms of happiness theory, realised through one's temporal being and requiring a willed life plan that becomes attuned to one's being within the consequences of one's agentic capability. This exploration of our being provides the potential for us to understand our life project and to seek it. This happiness has intense irruptions of joy and prolonged periods of cheeriness, yet it

4

is no easy task to will one's being, to take a stance on one's being that is existentially

sustainable. To achieve this profound attunement within one's world requires education, vision,

courage and tenacity to establish how one's being best fits into the world alongside others,

whilst avoiding compromising one's being for the sake of simply 'fitting in' for the temporary

benefit of others. Given the dominance of studies on the satisfaction of the student experience of

higher education this study attempts to identify if there is a difference between happiness and

student satisfactions and, if there is, what are the key factors influencing student happiness.

Having revealed these, the aim is to consider whether factors influencing happiness offer

potential to rethink institutional resources allocations towards facilitating students'

achievement of profound happiness. The investigation, therefore, considers if profound

happiness yields different referential contexts, if this use of the term 'happiness' can be

differentiated from satisfaction and where the locus of control for each can be found.

Methodlgy

This research used previous studies by Mangeloja and Hirvonen (2007) and Chan et al.

(2005) as a basis of gaining an understanding of the factors influencing student experience in

higher education. Mangeloja and Hirvonen (2007, p.37) recommended that future

researchers investigating student satisfaction and happiness should adopt a likert scale with

more than five categories and expand the previous research undertaken by Chan et al. (2005).

Consequently, the authors, of this research, adopted a seven points category scale to not only

capture the ratings of students but also 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. open ended interview survey, 3. focus groups, 4. pilot

testing of questionnaire) which resulted in a richer appreciation of factors influencing student

satisfaction. The analysis of the results permitted us to develop a questionnaire based on this data.

Students came from two universities in the north of England with different mission groupings: post-92 (65%) and Russell Group (35%). The questionnaires were distributed opportunistically regardless of students' year of attendance and their subject area. Questionnaires were not distributed in class, to avoid bias, but over two weeks in commonly used areas such as the library, computer laboratories and university cafes. Reponses were collected immediately after completion by the students. After reviewing them a total of 308 responses were acceptable for analysis including 128 male (43.2%) and 168 (56.8%) female responses; this difference is reflective of greater and increasing numbers of female students in higher education. The age distribution was 87.6% between 18 and 22 years and 12.4% mature students ranging from 23 to 32, mirroring the distribution within the general university population in the UK.

The preliminary research had identified 41 variables highlighted as important to their academic experience in higher education. Cronbah's Alpha revealed a very high internal consistency of the responses of .882. The significant differences based on gender are highlighted in Table 2. The results clearly reveal that female students are happier with their university experience than male colleagues, and how the students ranked the 10 most important and the 10 least important factors is shown in Table 1.

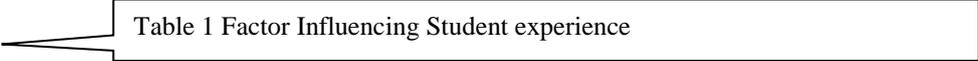Table 1 Factor Influencing Student experience

The results reveal a number of social factors (having good friends and feeling safe at university) as being highly important, followed by recognising that higher education is a worthwhile investment. There seems that issues related to academic tutors ('there is sufficient contact with tutors', 'enjoy teaching by tutors 'and 'find seminars engaging') rated low in the

experience of students. This is of major concern as the NSS results on student satisfaction have continually revealed that issues relating to teaching have the most impact on student satisfaction (Dean, 2011). This is surprising if education is an edifying experience not a taught service experience. Moreover, if teaching is conceived as a service, students have referential points against which to judge service, albeit in different context. Whether policy then responds to these referential models of education as a service provider becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. In allowing this to happen, issues of accountability for public money, moral leadership and integrity come under consideration. Certainly, the frame for inspection is different from the value for money lens, but the issues are equally important.

To investigate the preliminary descriptive results the authors undertook non-parametric analysis to reveal significant differences by gender (see Table 2).

Table 2: Significant differences in the mean rating of variables influencing student experience at higher education

Amongst the differences were levels of confidence by gender of students and their level of confidence, namely that the female students significantly lacked confidence in their ability. This may lead to differences in happiness between the groups, but as a finding it suggests that the student experience must not be taken as a homogeneous set and that policy should be addressed to specific groups. This is currently undertaken for ethnic groups and foreign students and perhaps needs to be extended more generally to gender.

Happiness

Students were asked to offer their own definitions of happiness. The most frequent responses revealed a number of common themes, by gender and type of university. These centred on being

content, having a supportive family, being positive, avoiding stress and maintaining a balanced life. Moreover, happiness is associated with an ontological issue, one that concerned their enduring notion of becoming happy – not external institutional structural influences such as quality housing, campuses or sport facilities, all offerings made by the university. The definitions provided by students are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Student definitions of happiness

Having identified a cluster of issues that students relate to in their description of an enduring happiness, we turn to consider this form of happiness with the level of student satisfaction of their student experience. Correlation results showed a significant association with satisfaction. Figure 1 shows that the results from the post-92 students show that the level of happiness exceeds that of their overall satisfaction. Russell Group students were less happy than satisfied, but with smaller divergence than the post-92 students. Generally, female students are happier than male students at university, regardless of their type of institution. This might reflect their lack of confidence in the expectations of satisfaction yet great assurance that the experience will lead to their profound happiness. Indeed, the results indicate that females at both Russell Group and post-92 universities have a higher median value in their optimism about their future careers, which might be taken as a proxy for future happiness (see Figure 2).

Insert Figure 1: Happiness results based on gender and type of university

Insert Figure 2: Influence of satisfaction and happiness on future optimism about career

We next consider the motivation of students as an indication of student happiness, achievement and future planning. As a proxy for this we considered the number of hours committed to private study, assuming this reflects both engagement with their learning process and concern for their future, a future that the student had an existential intent to control. The average number of hours that students spent in private study is 13 hours (slightly higher at 16.6 hours for Russell Group students). The results reveal that student happiness increases as the students spend more hours on private study (see Figure 3). Furthermore, female students at both post-92 and Russell Group universities significantly commit more time to private study.

Figure 3: Measure of student happiness based on hours spent on private study

Our final concern in this section is the influence of happiness and satisfaction on how students feel about the quality of their future life decisions. Females, were the most certain that both happiness and satisfaction (especially at a post-92 university) significantly influenced by their ability to make better decisions than males for the same levels of satisfaction and happiness (see Figure 4). This finding did not extend to the whole of the student cohort at the Russell Group university where satisfaction and life decisions were more linked.

Figure 4a and 4b: Influence of satisfaction and happiness on making better life decisions

To seek more underlying themes factor analysis was undertaken on the 41 student experience variables in higher education, to reduce the number of variables into a smaller number of themes. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy revealed a very high value of .854, which indicates that the data is likely to factor well, based on correlations and partial correlations. Extraction of factors was determined through principle component analysis and Eigen values greater than one. Furthermore, rotation was computed using Varimax. The

results revealed 12 distinct categories of student experience, which were accepted and labelled by the authors. The regression analysis of the variables associated with the student learning experience revealed major differences between the factor themes associated with satisfaction and happiness. The key findings are conveyed in Table 4.

Table 4: Factor analysis themes associated with satisfaction and happiness

The results in Table 4 indicate that the key difference in the factors associated with happiness relate more to student engagement and desire to learn than to factors associated with the external issues that surround the learning process: external satisfaction. Moreover, this analysis shows the relatedness of the two concepts. Recognition of their overlap and potential contingency is important in how policy might be developed for the issue of quality education, as distinct from a quality educational environment.

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, 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 5, which provides evidence of the Psuedo R Square values and the model fit test. Two different link functions (Logit and Probit) were used to undertake the regression analysis and both results revealed complimentary findings. Significant overlap was found in both approaches, as Table 5 shows.

Table 5: Comparison of different ordinal regression methods

10

Finally, we consider how the ordinal regression analysis results revealed major differences in the variables that influence student satisfaction and happiness (see Tables 6 and 7). The regression modelling shows that the key influence for student satisfaction reflects a 'value for money' desire satisfaction premise, in that higher education is framed as a worthwhile investment.. Moreover, as the culture is predominately one of consumerism, students have the skills to critique experience in their role as consumers.

However, in our model for student happiness it is important that students engage with higher education as an existential experience. The emphasis is personal agency as a learner, attending lectures, motivating themselves and believing they are doing well as indicated by their

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

externally 'deliverables' from others in their interaction with the student and more of a customer–service provider relationship.

Insert Table 7: Regression analysis of key influences on overall student happiness

The ordinal results revealed high Pseudo R square values and significant Chi-square values (see Table 8). This result supports the proposition that the two modules have internal consistency and show real difference, thus adding confidence to our proposition.

Insert Table 8: Pseudo R Square and Model Fit test results

We are aware of the design limitations of our model and so offer the results as indicative of what might be a significant and important attribute of student experience: their happiness.

Conclusion

The findings from this research suggest differences between variables associated with the student learning experience, and with student satisfaction and happiness. Basically, those students who rated their own happiness as high in their overall student experience were also more optimistic about their future, females especially were in this group. Female students spent more time in private study and considered that a university education would help them make better lifetime decisions. Our premise that satisfaction and happiness are different traits is supported by our ordinal regression results. These revealed a number of common and different factors influencing student satisfaction and happiness, the key difference being the loci of control. In other words, 'happier' students were more content with how they engaged with the edifying experiences, while those who were 'more satisfied' seemed to be more concerned with external loci, that is, on how things done to and for them were delivered, rather than in their engagement with the process.

The findings of this research might have serious implications for how universities manage the quality of the student experience and how their resources are used to enrich the student learning experience. We contend that identifying profound happiness as a goal for student development, rather than just satisfying their needs (the two are not exclusive), help to focus the edifying mission of the university and so keep its distinction. We do not underestimate competition from others who might offer learning or training consumption experiences on terms that the university cannot match. Indeed, that might be the goal of the new profit providers encouraged by government policy to enter the market. One distinctive mission that universities themselves can foster is an environment where the students are allowed to let learn. We recognise the real world in which the universities operate, but advocate that they take a stance themselves on what they want to offer the society that cherishes them and demands of

them, not just employees but well-rounded citizens, willing to act on their own accord. This is central to a notion of autonomous educated people, regardless of what actions they embark upon.

Should these results have resonance with policy makers, we argue that we need not ignore the legitimate needs of consumers. What they pay for may be adequate time-keeping, marking within reasonable times and with adequate feedback and whether lecture theatres, cafe and sports area are clean, but these are not the only, or indeed the most important, attributes that need to be nurtured in an edifying environment. Some of these can be seen in our use of the profound happiness construct, and so we argue for more appreciation of what contributes to the student experience and how this might be understood and nurtured, even if it is not currently measured or tracked.

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16

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