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**Title** "What I think it means to me": university students' expectations and understanding of 'the student experience'

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### Introduction

In spite of the focus on 'the student experience', exemplified by the range of student satisfaction data and evaluative information used by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (Kovacs et al., 2010), the idea of 'the student experience' remains largely unconceptualised and under-theorised in the academic literature (Benckendorff et al., 2009). Much of what we know about the experience of students is based on quantitative data collected within and by universities, for example, the National Student Survey (NSS) which measures undergraduate students' satisfaction with their course but there is little published material detailing how students themselves understand their student experience. This paper reports on selected findings from 'Understanding the Student Experience', a project which examines how students, themselves, understand the experience of being a student. In addition, this paper focuses on students' expectations of the student experience and considers how these hopes and desires are shaped and heightened by society and the HE sector (Christie et al., 2008; Yorke, 2000) as well as the consequences of unmet expectations (Barnhardt and Ginns, 2014; Darlaston Jones et al., 2003; Townley et al., 2013).

### Methodology

Trying to conceptualise and define the student experience is risky (Scott, 2014) and paints a picture of a generic student disembodied from their circumstances (Sabri, 2011) in spite of inequalities in the student experience related to finance, housing, wellbeing and educational outcomes (Antonucci, 2016). While the project acknowledges the differences between students and institutions in terms of their experiences, it considers "*what they share in common*" (Brennan et al., 2010, p.13). Drawing on concepts from cultural and human geography, it reflects on the relationship between the student experience and place – how do students understand the student experience and how does this relate to their lived experiences as students?

This research adopted a qualitative approach using focus groups with students to help refine the research questions and to collect data; a series of six exploratory focus groups were held at a post-1992 campus university in England (Phase 1) where students were asked how they used the campus and how this related to their experience (Thomas, 2015). Fourteen focus groups were held in Phase 2 of the research at seven universities with almost 100 participants. HEIs participating in the project in terms of their formal groupings included two Russell Group, three University Alliance and two of the now disbanded 1994 Group. Students in Phase 2 focus groups were also given paper copies of their university campus maps to annotate during the discussions to help them consider how they used the campus.

The focus groups in both phases were audio recorded, transcribed and uploaded into the software NVivo for analysis. Phase 2 data have been analysed as a whole and by institution type and selected findings are reported here.

### Findings

'The student experience' was recognized by almost all of the focus group participants who tended to associate it university rankings and the NSS. They felt that the term was often used as a promotional tool and for some students it was relatively meaningless since it was employed so liberally by HEIs on websites, in prospectuses and in communications with students. In terms of defining the student experience there was some consensus that it should encapsulate the total university experience. Some of the younger students highlighted that their time at university was about becoming an adult and preparing themselves for the future. For them, the student experience was associated with becoming more independent, possibly because most of these students were experiencing university whilst residing in university accommodation away from the parental home. Their perception conformed to a traditional view of HE and their expectations of the SE were often shaped by school. As Holdsworth noted "*The transition to university is an important rite of passage, and one that is very much ritualised. For young people starting university there is no shortage of information about what they should expect and how to prepare for starting university, with the emphasis very much on how young people are starting a 'new' phase in their lives*" (2006, p.505).

Some of the students were aware that they were being fed idealized images of the student experience prior to attending university and detailed their disappointment when their experience had fallen short of what they had anticipated in relation to their course, accommodation, friendships, extra-curricular activities, sense of belonging and support, for example. The deficit between what one perceives an experience will entail and what it actually does consist of, or the 'is-ought gap' (Schact, 1994 In: Barnhardt and Ginns, 2014), in relation to the student experience can lead to "*feelings of disconnection*" (2014, p.) resulting in withdrawal, for example.

The focus group data highlighted that at the seven HEIs most of the students felt part of the university with discussions exploring belonging in relation to the institution, to course and group work cohorts, to societies and clubs, and to friends and connections made whilst at university. They enjoyed the familiarity of certain buildings and places whilst at university as well as who they interacted with when they spent time in them as well as the routine provided by timetabling but they had not considered their student experience in terms of what they did on a daily basis reflecting Edensor's (2010) understanding of everyday rhythms where a "*mixture of habits, schedules and routines*" provide an "*ontological*

*predictability and security*" (p.8) which if unsettled can prove uncomfortable for the individual.

### Conclusions

The findings of our research certainly suggest that defining the student experience is challenging since some students tend to associate the term with institutional marketing. Students' expectations of the student experience were varied and often shaped by family, friends, HEIs themselves and the media. For some students a discrepancy emerged between what they expected of their time whilst at university and the reality. There was some consensus as to the meaning of the student experience and in spite of the diversity of the student body, when they reflected upon their daily lives as students; they shared much in the way of their routines and relationships to place at each institution.

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