

Introduction

Many academic writers contend that defining 'the student experience' is problematic, arguing that the student body is diverse and can only be thought of in terms of a multiplicity of experiences rather than one student experience (SE) (Ainley, 2008; Kandiko and Mawer, 2013). It can also have negative connotations in the literature, associated with the marketization of Higher Education (HE) and the student as consumer (Cartney, 2013). Even if there is no definitive meaning to SE in the literature, there has developed a consistent notion of how it is constituted, in terms of behaviours and activities (Burdett and Crossman, 2010) and it is often conceptualised as a journey through a student's time in the HE environment (Baranova et al., 2012).

This paper reports on research being undertaken at a campus university which is seeking to explore how students themselves understand their own experience. It is part of a wider study examining historical and geographical comparisons of 'the student experience'.

Methodology

Using a qualitative approach, data was gathered at a total of six exploratory focus groups with undergraduate (UG) and postgraduate (PG) students. The participants were on different programmes, both male and female and included a number of mature and international students. They were asked about their typical day at university including mapping their movements (Thomas, 2015), exploring how they used space and spent their time on and away from campus. They were also asked what 'the student experience' meant to them. Characteristics of the SE which had emerged from the literature review including belonging (Thomas, 2012; Weissman, 2013), peer support and friendship (Wilcox et al., 2005; Wray et al., 2014), campus and facilities (Wong, 2015), learning and teaching (Buultjens and Robinson, 2011), pre-arrival and induction (Burdett and Crossman, 2010), integration (Townley et al., 2012), engagement

(Barnhardt and Ginns, 2014) and personal growth (Quinlan, 2011) were suggested to the participants for consideration.

Following analysis of the focus group data and literature review, the research questions will be refined for the main stage of data collection at different sites in different geographical locations over the next three years.

Findings

This paper will provide some comparison of the findings from the focus groups undertaken with UG and PG students and some indicative results from the main stage of fieldwork.

- Campus mapping

Nearly all the students in the focus groups had similar patterns of engagement with the university environment. In any week, as most students in HE these days, the UG students combined study with part-time work (Robotham, 2012) but most UGs and PGs came onto campus fairly regularly. Although there were similarities in the use of their campus; students spent the majority of their time in the buildings where they attended scheduled lectures, seminars or meetings, different patterns emerged depending on the students' own circumstances. Around their timetabled commitments most of the UG students tended to frequent learning spaces in the university library. A minority of the students also visited other buildings on campus such as the Sports Centre where they undertook extracurricular activities. Postgraduate students tended to study at home or in dedicated PG space. Using the analysis of space (Massey, 2005) the UG students engaged with activities beyond the classroom were more likely to have their needs met than others whose use of the campus were more peripheral. However, there were differences between those students, both UG and PG, whose time on campus was more constrained because of their other responsibilities and those who were more able to 'live' campus life. Having additional responsibilities outside of university life meant that they perceived themselves as different and felt their needs were often not catered for. This is not unlike other research into mature students' experience of HE (West et al., 1986).

Similarly, the PGs as a cohort tended to feel that the university focussed on the needs of UGs, for example, they felt unsupported in their transition

to PG study nor were they able to identify any specific PG support roles within the university.

- Understanding of the term

Amongst the students, recognition and understanding of the term 'the student experience' varied and it was generally associated with university league tables and rankings and the perception that students are consumers of HE: "*Sometimes you kind of feel like a bit of a consumer and they are sort of pumping these messages out*". The younger students highlighted that their time at university was about becoming an adult and preparing themselves for their future life, therefore the term SE meant 'growing up'. Most of the mature students and PGs understood it to mean the centrality of their academic experience especially their relationship with their tutor(s) and supervisor(s).

When components of a 'good' SE identified in the literature review were shared with the groups, students agreed these were important but had not thought of their experience in that way, rather, their experience was just their daily life. They were all supportive of the idea that a good SE should include a feeling of belonging although it was not necessarily something they had thought about before the focus groups neither had they considered the development of their identity as students: "*I think it's because everyone else is changing as well. It's kind of like the norm*"

Conclusions

The results at this stage lend some support to the suggestion that defining 'the student experience' is challenging since differences in engagement with the campus, for example, did differ amongst students interviewed. The research suggests a more nuanced approach is necessary which highlights the daily life of each student. We believe drawing on the work of Massey (2005) could assist in creating a way to explore students' experiences as they travel through the HE field (Thomas, 2015). This approach would highlight 'the existence of multiplicity' and 'a sphere in which distinct trajectories coexist' (Massey, 2005: 9) but could help establish a fluid and conditional set of boundaries which students and institutions inhabit and produce a more fruitful method of analysis of this slippery term, 'the student experience'.

998 words

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