



Deconstructing the Student Experience: A Conceptual Framework

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The notion of the student experience has risen in prominence in response to changing student cohorts, reforms to the higher education system and broader societal and technological trends. Indeed, contemporary notions of the student experience extend well beyond the traditional focus on curriculum, assessment and pedagogy to include the extracurricular activities of students and how universities respond to help students manage their external commitments. Yet, while the term is frequently used, definitions remain elusive. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to deconstruct the student experience by considering the various factors that influence the experience of students in the higher education system. Based on a review of the wide-ranging literature in the field, this article presents a conceptual framework of dimensions that impact on the student experience. The identified dimensions include: institutional factors, student factors, sectoral factors and external factors, each encapsulating a variety of dimensions. The objective of the article is to provide educators in tourism, hospitality and related fields with a contemporary understanding of the key debates and themes related to the student experience in the higher education field.

Keywords: student experience, higher education, engagement, learning

The phrase 'student experience' has become firmly entrenched in the vernacular of higher education institutions in Australia and elsewhere, however, a definition of the student experience is elusive. An understanding of what constitutes the student experience is likely to vary considerably from one institution to another because the concept is influenced by factors such as the composition and particular needs of different student cohorts. While there has been a tendency to discuss the student experience as a universal concept, each university must understand the needs and experiences of its own students (Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001). Notions of the student experience are also likely to differ depending on the perspective and role of different actors in the university setting. Academic staff members are likely to have quite a different view of what constitutes the student experience and the relative importance of its various elements from those of professional, administrative and support staff. Likewise, student expectations and perceptions of their own experiences are likely to be markedly different to the perspectives of the university staff.

Many academics base their understanding of the student experience on their own experiences, but the

higher education literature suggests that the current generation of students are experiencing university study in quite a different way to previous generations (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005; Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005). In the Australian context, students are often working 20 hours or more a week in paid employment, they have high expectations about the provision of IT infrastructure and they are motivated largely by a desire to obtain a professional qualification that will secure a well-paid job as quickly as possible (Brennan, Patel, & Tang, 2009). These students can become disillusioned with their 'student experience' when they are unable to organise their classes around their work commitments. Contemporary notions of the student experience therefore extend beyond the traditional focus on curriculum, assessment and pedagogy to include the extracurricular activities of students and how universities respond to help students manage these commitments.

The purpose of this article is to deconstruct the student experience by summarising the various factors reported in the higher education literature as influencing the student experience. The article uses a broad review of the literature to develop a framework of dimensions that impact on the student experience and, in doing so, emphasises that notions of the student experience are complex, multifaceted and difficult to define. Given the depth and breadth of the wider literature on the student experience, this conceptual review is by no means exhaus-

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tive but it is intended to provide educators in tourism, hospitality and related fields with a contemporary overview of the major themes and topics that have been discussed in the higher education field. The article also provides a framework for positioning and locating the more focused tourism and hospitality studies presented in this special issue.

Deconstructing the Student Experience

Harvey, Burrows and Green (1992) are credited with first coining the term student experience in response to a report finding that claimed this factor is the most important in assessing quality in higher education. Harvey et al. (1992, p. 1) note that 'this is not restricted to the student experience in the classroom but to the total student experience'. Internationally, institutions have adopted the term student experience as a phrase that encompasses not only the academic aspects of teaching, learning and curriculum but also student lifestyle and extracurricular activities, academic advice, support and mentoring, and work experiences (Purdue University, 2004). For instance, the City University of Hong Kong (n.d.) acknowledges that learning in a higher education setting not only takes place in the classroom but incorporates a whole range of experiences. Similarly, research on the student experience undertaken by the United Kingdom's Higher Education Policy Institute in association with UNITE (2005) reflects the notion that the student experience encapsulates both academic and nonacademic activity. Their survey addresses a range of issues considered to underpin the student experience including: student life, accommodation, paid employment, academic life, finances and postgraduation expectations. In the United States, academic research on the topic of the student experience is grounded in campus-based experiences. In summarising the broad literature in this field, Terenzini and Reason (2005) identify two broad dimensions that underpin the United States student experience research: an intra-individual dimension, that is, the nature, structure and processes of individual human growth; and an interindividual dimension, referring to aspects associated with student behaviour and change including demographic and other student characteristics. The literature therefore suggests that a range of interacting personal attributes as well as institutional practices impact on the student experience (Thomas, 2002).

In deconstructing the student experience, the range of factors identified in the literature that appear to influence the student experience can be grouped broadly into four dimensions:

- Institutional dimensions — a growing body of research has focused on how universities and staff can better manage the learning experience and this represents by far the largest focus of research into the student experience (Krause et al., 2005; McInnis, 2003; McInnis, Griffin, James, & Coates, 2001; Terenzini & Reason, 2005).
- Student dimensions — the higher education literature also suggests that the perceived quality of the

student experience, as well as outcomes such as retention and student satisfaction, are strongly influenced by individual student characteristics (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2009).

- Sector-wide dimensions — universities themselves are part of a broader system of institutions and are therefore influenced by sectorwide trends that emerge as a result of competition or cross-institutional collaboration (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009; Brennan et al., 2009; Richardson & Skinner, 1990).
- External dimensions — as is the case with any system or phenomenon, the student experience is also influenced by external trends and changes such as government policies, technological innovations and economic pressures (Altbach et al., 2009; Brennan & Bennington, 2000; McInnis, 2003).

Figure 1 summarises a range of factors developed from the broader literature that influence the student experience using these four dimensions. The growing interest in the student experience has been fuelled by the realisation that they are linked closely with a range of outcomes, including student engagement, satisfaction, retention and employment outcomes. The figure indicates that the four dimensions interact to create highly individual and dynamic student experiences, and this experience, in turn, influences a range of outcomes. The framework in Figure 1 provides the basis for the review of the student experience literature provided in the remainder of the article.

Institutional Influences on the Learning Experience

Despite a growing body of literature focused on how institutions can manage and improve the student experience there is a dearth of studies examining internal university organisational influences on the student experience (Terenzini & Reason, 2005). These influences include institutional structures, curricular configurations, budgetary and staffing issues, policies relating to course sizes and staffing of introductory and first-year courses, and faculty recruiting and reward policies. Terenzini and Reason (2005) claim that all of these factors are important in directly or in indirectly shaping students' learning experiences.

A pragmatic starting point for trying to identify the myriad of institutional influences is to examine some of the instruments and constructs that are used to measure various elements of the student experience. There have been many attempts in Australia and overseas to measure the student experience. The most prominent instrument used to measure the student experience across the Australian Higher Education sector is the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ).

The CEQ gathers data on the teaching and learning experiences of graduates of all Australian universities. The CEQ is normally mailed to every person completing an undergraduate qualification in Australia in the year following completion of their course. It must be noted at the outset that CEQ does not pretend to measure every aspect of teaching, nor does it explore all of the dimensions that make up the student experience (McInnis, 1997). It is not the purpose of this article to provide a detailed critique of the CEQ; rather the discussion will focus on the con-

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