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Motivation and university experience in first-year university students: A self-determination theory perspective

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ABSTRACT

The present research examined the influence of motivational profiles on the experience and engagement of first-year undergraduate students at a UK university. In two separate cohorts, three groups of students emerged who varied in their reasons for attending university across autonomous motivation (for knowledge, accomplishment, and stimulation), controlled motivation (to demonstrate intelligence and/or later financial reward), and amotivation (are unsure or do not know). When comparable levels of autonomous motivation and controlled motivation were accompanied by low amotivation, students reported more positive experiences and higher engagement. In contrast, when lower levels of autonomous motivation were accompanied by higher controlled motivation and amotivation, students reported a more negative experience and poorer engagement.

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Over 100,000 full-time and part-time university students do not complete the first year of their degree programme and dropout rates amongst a large number of UK universities have increased (National Audit Office, 2007). It is possible that this trend is symptomatic of a wider motivational problem amongst a small number of students. Research suggests that the reasons for attending university varies among students and that initial motivation predicts future academic performance and persistence (Ratelle, Guay, Vallerand, Larose, & Senecal, 2007; Vansteenkiste, Sierens, Soenens, Luyckx, & Lens, 2009). Consequently, while students may appear similar at the outset of university study, some may already be more motivationally vulnerable and susceptible to dropout than others depending on their initial reasons for attendance. The purpose of the two studies presented in this paper is to examine the motivational profiles of first-year undergraduate students at a UK university and how they influence student experience and engagement.

Research suggests that Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) can be used to explain motivational issues in students (see Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991). Within Self-Determination Theory, motivation can be considered to vary along a continuum from autonomous to controlling motivation. Intrinsic motivation refers to behaviour that is energised by the pleasure derived from engaging in the activity. Students high in intrinsic motivation will engage in tasks because of curiosity, a desire for challenge and a sense of enjoyment associated with study. This is the most autonomous form of motivation as behaviour is completely initiated and regulated by the individual. The least autonomous and most controlling form of motivation is extrinsic motivation. This refers to behaviour that is energised by internal or external contingencies. These include the possibility of rewards and punishment from others (extrinsic) and personal imperatives associated with the avoidance of guilt and shame (introjected). When energised by these forms of motivation students engage in tasks because of a sense of obligation and coercion. Extrinsic motivation can also be more autonomous. That is, it can include behaviour that is energised by the sense that the behaviour is consistent with personal values and goals

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(identified or integrated). Finally, this model also includes amotivation which represents the absence of motivation and is associated with feelings of incompetence and helplessness (Vallerand et al., 1992).

The desirable consequences of more autonomous motivation among students are well established (see Reeve, Deci, & Ryan, 2004, for a review). For example, in comparison to controlling motivation, autonomous motivation is related to more positive emotional experiences associated with study, deeper level learning, greater use of proactive study strategies (e.g., planning and time management), higher grades, and lower levels of course dropout (e.g., Vansteenkiste, Zhou, Lens, & Soenens, 2005; Black & Deci, 2000; Vallerand & Bissonnette, 1992; Vansteenkiste, Simons, Lens, Sheldon, & Deci, 2004; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2005). However, although revealing, to date this research has largely focused upon examining the effects of individual motivations (i.e., a dimensional or variable-oriented approach). Vansteenkiste et al. (2009) recently argued that a focus on the organisation of these motivations within students (i.e., a person-centred approach), rather than individual motivations, might have a number of practical and theoretical advantages. In particular, because such an approach can identify naturally occurring groups that are qualitatively different (i.e., groups of students who have different profiles across the range of motivations), it has greater utility in terms of tailored intervention for motivationally vulnerable students. In addition, because some forms of motivation are positively related, assessing their influence simultaneously provides greater insight into their consequences (Ratelle et al., 2007).

Unfortunately, to date only two studies have taken a person-centred approach when examining the consequences of these motivations for first-year undergraduate students (Ratelle et al., 2007; Vansteenkiste et al., 2009). Both of these studies found that the range of motivations can be used to identify profiles among students and that these groups were distinguishable in terms of study related outcomes (e.g., management of learning behaviour, academic performance, and persistence). Of especial note is that both studies have provided evidence that the presence of at least comparable levels of autonomous motivation relative to controlled motivation is associated with more positive outcomes in undergraduate students. In addition, Ratelle et al. (2007) also found evidence that suggests when levels of amotivation are comparable to other motivations, students are vulnerable to lower academic achievement and are more susceptible to course dropout. The broad aim of the current research was to extend these studies by further exploring the motivational profiles evident within first-year undergraduate students and examine the influence these have on the experiences of students at university.

1. Study 1

The purpose of study 1 was to identify the motivational profiles evident among a cohort of first-year undergraduate students. After doing so, these groups were compared in terms of their university experience during the first 6 weeks of study. University experience was assessed via emotions associated with study (enjoyment, boredom, and anxiety), perceived academic ability, and satisfaction with university life. The approach to establishing motivational profiles replicated Ratelle et al. (2007). Unlike Vansteenkiste et al. (2009), this entailed using a range of individual motivations to establish motivational profiles, including amotivation. The inclusion of amotivation is particularly important, not only because of the findings of Ratelle et al. (2007) but also because it has proven useful in other domains when seeking to identify groups that are motivationally vulnerable (e.g., Chain & Wang, 2008; Ntoumanis, 2001; Wang & Biddle, 2001). As the analytical approach used to establish motivational profiles (viz. cluster analysis) is exploratory and heavily reliant on sample characteristics, predicting the motivational profiles that will emerge is difficult. However, based on the findings of Ratelle et al. (2007), tentative hypotheses can be formulated. Specifically, it was expected that three groups with differing motivational profiles would emerge:

- (1) The first group will have a motivational profile characterised by truly autonomous motivation (high levels of intrinsic and identified motivation in combination with low levels of introjected motivation, extrinsic motivation, and amotivation).
- (2) The second group will have a motivational profile characterised by a combination of high levels of both autonomous and controlled motivation with low amotivation (high levels of intrinsic, identified, introjected, and extrinsic motivation with low levels of amotivation).
- (3) The third group will have a motivational profile characterised by a combination of low-to-moderate levels of autonomous motivation, controlled motivation, and amotivation (low-to-moderate levels of intrinsic, identified, introjected, and extrinsic motivation with amotivation).

Based on the findings of Ratelle et al. (2007) and Vansteenkiste et al. (2009), differences between these groups can also be expected in reported university experience depending on the degree to which more autonomous or more controlled motivation is present. Specifically, in comparison to the other groups, the truly autonomous motivation group would report the most positive university experience (higher levels of perceived academic ability, enjoyment, and satisfaction with university life, as well as lower levels of boredom and anxiety). In contrast, in comparison to the other two groups, the low-to-moderate autonomous, controlled and amotivation group would report the least positive university experience (lower levels of perceived academic ability, enjoyment, and satisfaction with university life, as well as higher levels of boredom and anxiety). Finally, the group characterised by high levels of both autonomous and controlled motivation

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