

Cownie, F. and Nikolaev, A.

Working paper

Do alumni want to give back to their university?

Abstract

Alumni numbers are growing, but do alumni feel grateful for their experiences of higher education (HE) and if so, are they prepared to give back to their institution of study? This qualitative study examines the evidence of gratitude and intentions to give back amongst alumni from a UK HEI. Gratitude, appreciation stimulating a desire to reciprocate, is central to relational exchange. The study examines feelings of gratitude amongst alumni and alumni's willingness to give back through contributions towards curricula-based activities. The research seeks to provide recommendations to facilitate alumni to give back to their institution of study. This in turn is intended to enhance the experience of current student cohorts and sustain HEIs' relationships with their alumni.

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Do alumni want to give back to their university?

Introduction

Gratitude is a relevant yet under-researched idea within higher education. This research examines gratitude within an important and increasing stakeholder group within higher education, alumni. As alumni grow in numbers, their perspectives become increasingly important. Alumni can offer informed, reflective analyses of HE and are a potentially valuable resource within HE delivery.

An understanding of the willingness and intentions of alumni to reciprocate in response to feelings of gratitude is important. It may help to sustain relationships with alumni and provide valuable input into current students' learning experiences. Such input can enhance both students' and alumni employability. This small-scale qualitative study draws from the voices of alumni associated with a UK HEI. It seeks to explore alumni experiences of gratitude related to higher education and aims to discover issues related to alumni intentions to reciprocate through engagement within university's educational activities.

Gratitude within HE.

'I can't overstate the gratitude I feel to that University for enabling me to become me'.

Michael Heseltine, Radio 4, August 2016.

Heseltine's (2016) reflections upon the transformative experience of university highlight his feelings of gratitude. This research study argues that gratitude is an important yet under-researched idea within higher education. The reciprocal characteristics of education make HE a fertile context for gratitude's study and practice. However, as an Oxbridge graduate Heseltine benefited from a university education of the highest status, with grants and without tuition fees. Does gratitude have a place in HE within the context of modern universities without the benefits of top-of-the league ranking, and within a context in which students are estimated to be graduating with '£44,000 of debt, compared with the average of £16,200 of debt faced by those who graduated five years earlier' (Financial Times, 2016).

Conceptual underpinning

This study is informed by conceptual ideas examined within relationship marketing literature (e.g. Morgan and Hunt 1994; Palmatier et al. 2006; Raggio et al. 2014). Gratitude has emerged as an important concept within relational exchanges, sitting alongside trust and commitment and with important relational outcomes (Hasan et al. 2014; Palmatier et al. 2009; Morales 2005; Raggio et al. 2014; Soscia 2007; Ting and Huang 2015). HE has been examined through a relational lens within an increasing body of research (e.g. Bowden 2011; Bowden and Wood 2011; Cownie 2014; Cownie 2017a; Helgesen 2008; Raciti 2012; Southcombe et al. 2015) but gratitude is only recently emerging as a focus for study within

this context. This paper argues that such a focus is appropriate and may help explain behaviours of key HE stakeholders, specifically alumni. The small amount of research which has been conducted to date about gratitude in HE focusses on students (Cownie 2016; Cownie 2017; Fazal-e-Hasan et al. 2017; Howells 2017) and to a lesser extent, academics (Cownie 2016). Existing work suggests that gratitude may drive engagement within higher education (Cownie 2016; Howells 2017). If such engagement can be sustained or reactivated amongst alumni, then gratitude-based strategies may have an important contribution to universities' interactions with alumni.

This research conceptualizes gratitude as an emotional response to a perceived benefactor, which critically embraces a desire to act (Dewani and Sinha 2012; Raggio et al. 2014). Thus gratitude is seen as appreciation which stimulates an integral desire to reciprocate. Such a conceptualization acknowledges gratitude as a concept of some complexity. This study is underpinned by a central construct, 'feelings of gratitude', defined as a positive emotional response accompanied by an intention to demonstrate appreciation to the perceived giver of valued benefits. Two aspects of this definition are worth noting. The emphasis on the positive characteristic of gratitude emphasizes its distinction from obligation (Gouldner 1960) and indebtedness (Pelser et al. 2015). The intentional aspect of this definition is important: sometimes these intentions will not be manifest in behaviours. Emerging behaviours which seek to express gratitude are conceptualized as 'expressions of gratitude', and are enactments of 'feelings of gratitude'.

Thus this research seeks to develop an understanding of gratitude and explore alumni's reported feelings and expressions of gratitude related to their higher education experience. It seeks to uncover the opportunities for giving back which feelings of gratitude might stimulate within alumni.

Alumni as a focus for gratitude

As alumni grow in numbers, their perspectives become increasingly important to society's understanding of higher education. Research such as this, which focuses on alumni as participants has two merits: first alumni can offer an informed, reflective analysis of their previous and ongoing experiences of being connected to higher education institutions and stakeholders such as academics; second alumni may be a valuable resource to be incorporated systematically within the delivery of HE. An understanding of the willingness and intentions of alumni to give back to HEIs/tutors/current students in response to feelings of gratitude, is important. It may help to sustain relationships with alumni, alongside providing valuable input into current students' learning experiences. There may be an opportunity to draw sustained input (for example mentoring) from alumni as part of alumni 'expressions of gratitude'. Such input would enhance students' and alumni employability.

In summary, this research examines alumni experiences of gratitude related to higher education. It seeks to identify activities alumni might be willing to engage with to express their gratitude which would enhance students' learning experiences, in particular activities which draw from insights into post-university practice. Thus the aim of this research and focus of this working paper is:

To examine alumni experiences of and responses to gratitude, related to UK higher education.

Comment [EM1]: You may not have the space to summarise each section

Research method.

This research is based upon a series of exploratory in-depth interviews with alumni of a UK HEI. The sample of alumni graduated between 1 and 22 years before their involvement in this research (see appendix 1). This paper draws from 17 alumni who are in the majority, of UK origin, but some now live and work outside the UK, within Europe and Asia. The sample comprised 10 male participants; 7 female participants. The researcher had taught all participants. All but two interviews were conducted using Skype or Facetime. In the main the technological interface worked effectively, but for a small number of interviews there was some set-up and connection time required before the formal interview commenced. Interviews varied from 37 minutes to 77 minutes in length, generating a dataset of 15.5 hours to be analysed using NVIVO 11.

The study seeks to address two research objectives:

RO1: To examine alumni experiences of ‘feelings of gratitude’ and ‘expressions of gratitude’ related to their HE experience;

RO2: To identify potential behaviours alumni would be willing to engage in to support HE as a response to ‘feelings of gratitude’.

A semi-structured research tool invited alumni to talk about their experiences since graduation, their reflections on their university experience, their engagement with their university as a graduate. Notions of gratitude and reciprocity were introduced and alumni were given the opportunity to reflect on the relevance of these ideas to their experiences as a graduate. Finally participants were invited to speak about any experiences they had to date, or were willing to have, to provide input into the curriculum or support current students at their university of study.

Analysis will be conducted with NVIVO 11 which will be used for open-coding and thematic analysis. Creswell and Miller (2000) highlight the importance of prioritizing credibility when making inferences from data, with the researcher seeking to represent participants’ meaning regarding feelings and expressions of gratitude and intentions to engage with HEIs.

As a working paper, emerging themes of analysis are being developed and will be presented within the conference presentation.

Summary

This working paper highlights a new area of research with strong conceptual underpinning and important possible outcomes. Understanding the nature of the alumni relationship with higher education is increasingly important, given the growing number of alumni in our communities. Alumni have the potential to contribute relevant, informed insights to current university students. An understanding of alumni’s willingness to give back to HE and whether such willingness or lack of willingness is related to feelings of gratitude, can inform HEIs’ strategies of engagement with their graduates.

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Appendix 1: Participant characteristics

Participant	Gender	UK/EU/OS	NO	Duration Hr.min	Years since graduation at time of interview	Method of interview
A	male	UK	520	1.05	1	Face to face
B	male	UK	525	1.17	1	Skype/facetime
C	male	UK	532	0.46	2	Skype/facetime
D	female	UK	542	1.16	3	Skype/facetime
E	female	OS	538	1.01	4	Skype/facetime
F	female	UK	544	0.48	5	Skype/facetime
G	female	UK	530	1.01	5	Skype/facetime
H	male	UK	531	1.03	6	Skype/facetime
I	male	UK	527	0.45	20	Skype/facetime
J	male	UK	545	0.45	22	Skype/facetime
K	male	UK	534 535	0.38	22	Face to face
L	male	UK	529	0.48	22	Skype/facetime
M	male	UK	547	1.02	4	Skype/facetime
N	female	UK	549	0.56	9	Skype/facetime
O	female	UK	550	1.05	18	Skype/facetime
P	male	UK	551	0.37	5	Skype/facetime
Q	female	UK	552	0.37	9	Skype/facetime