

Entitlement: Its role within the marketing of higher education.

Introduction.

In this marketised HE environment, are our students developing a sense of entitlement? If so, is this problematic? As the literature about the place of gratitude within relational approaches to marketing, has increased (Palmatier et al. 2009; Raggio et al. 2014; Dewani and Sinha 2012; Dewani et al. 2016; Mischra 2016), entitlement, has been identified by Wetzel et al. (2014) as a parallel, important and possibly detrimental force within marketing. This paper starts to examine the evidence and nature of entitlement amongst students within HE and considers implications of entitlement for ongoing analysis of HE from a relational perspective.

Entitlement in HE.

Entitlement has attracted increasing attention from academics writing about their experiences of working with undergraduate students (Gresse et al. 2014; Fullerton 2013; Kelly 2010). Much of this work focusses on the North American context and suggests that entitlement amongst students is increasing with negative impacts on student achievement (Anderson, et al. 2013; Jeffres et al. 2014) behaviours in the classroom and demands on academics (Lippmann et al. 2009). Extant studies suggest that male students may be more entitled than females (Ciani et al. 2008) and that parenting may have some impact upon higher levels of entitlement (Gibson-Beverly and Schwartz 2008).

Academic entitlement has been defined as ‘tendency to possess an expectation of academic success without a sense of personal responsibility for achieving that success’ by Chowning and Campbell (2009: 982). Anderson et al. (2013) see entitlement as a sense of deserving success. Singleton-Jackson et al.’s (2010; 2010a) work identifies its facets as: accommodation; reward for effort; control; and product value. A series of items have been devised to measure this concept and have been operationalised within quantitative studies. Importantly, whilst the body of scholarship looks at entitlement as a negative concept, small numbers of academics (e.g. Kelly 2010) identify more positive characteristics of students’ behaviours which might be informed by entitlement: a more assertive approach; a requirement for organised educational structures; an expectation of transparency of process.

In the UK, students are now graduating under the higher fee structures introduced by the White Paper (2011). It is thus an appropriate time to engage with students who have studied within this context, to explore their views on and experiences of entitlement within higher education. This exploratory qualitative study examines students’ perspectives of entitlement with an aim to:

To explore students’ experiences of entitlement in higher education.

Research method.

This research is based upon a series of exploratory in-depth interviews with undergraduate and postgraduate students studying in a faculty delivering media education within a UK HEI. Voices of 22 students generated a dataset of 23 hours which was analysed using NVIVO 11.

Two research objectives were the focus of the study:

- *To understand how students conceive entitlement within HE;*
- *To identify drivers of entitlement.*

Inductive analysis generated a series of emerging themes which enabled the development of a nascent conceptual framework intended to be subject to quantitative testing in future studies.

Discussion.

Research objective 1: To understand how students conceive entitlement within HE.

Analysis of students' response uncovered three themes which addressed students' conceptions of entitlement: 'feelings of entitlement'; 'entitled to what?'; and 'expressions of entitlement'.

Theme 1: Feelings of entitlement.

Students reported feelings of entitlement as their internalised feelings about what they expect from the university and tutors. Some students did speak about entitlement in terms of deserving access to resource, but in the main, expectation appeared to be the dominant mode of discussing feelings of entitlement in line with Chowning and Campbell's (2009) work. Whereas Anderson et al. (2013) speak about students' sense of deserving success, such ideas were absent from the discussions of entitlement with this sample of students.

Some students spoke about what Kelly (2010) saw as more positive aspects of entitlement, responsibility and assertiveness, but these were mentioned in fewer conversations. Importantly conversations about feelings of entitlement appeared to be entirely related to delivery of and access to teaching and resources related to the curriculum. There was no reference to entitlement towards the broader opportunities which university might offer, and which are evident within prospectuses. The two mature students did not speak about entitlement.

Theme 2: Entitled to what?

Students categorized the aspects of their experience to which they felt entitled, into two broad categories: teaching, learning and assessment; and the broader student experience. Within teaching, learning and assessment students reported that they felt entitled to: contact time; effort from their lecturers; timely feedback; and an ability to provide feedback (including negative feedback) about tutors and resources.

Outside the core of the student experience, students spoke about a range of other aspects of their student experience to which they felt entitled. These included a 'nice graduation' and access to new buildings which they perceived were being built using 'my money'. Small things were also mentioned, such as printing credits.

Therefore this research proposes that entitlement might be defined as: *Students' sustained expectations regarding their access to resources and tutors' time and effort which relate to the delivery of the curriculum and achievement of learning outcomes related to the curriculum.*

Theme 3: Expressions of entitlement.

Feelings of entitlement are distinguishable from expressions of entitlement. However, whilst the emotional nature of feelings of entitlement may be internalized, the behaviours related to expressions of entitlement are likely to be the external face of entitlement, which academics use to assess evidence of entitlement within their student cohorts. Enactments of feelings of entitlement may include provision of feedback (including complaints) to other students or staff.

Expressions of entitlement can be defined as: *Verbal enactments of feelings of entitlement embracing provision of feedback including verbal complaints.*

Thus the conceptual framework emerging and expressed in figure 1, shows expressions of entitlement being driven by feelings of entitlement. The drivers of which are now considered.

Research objective 2: To identify drivers of entitlement.

Four themes were identified: three of which are proposed as drivers of feelings of entitlement; one a moderator of the impact of the drivers on feelings of entitlement.

Theme 1: Monetary investment.

Monetary investment appeared in all conversations to be the over-riding driver of feelings of entitlement. All participants referred to tuition fees and the implications of the magnitude of their financial investment in higher education. There was little sense of investment of time being part of the equation – no-one mentioned the other things they could be doing with the time they were spending at university (working; travelling): it was all about money.

My first year everything was “I’ve paid for this, all of this should come to me. I’m paying my fees, I should get all of this”, and almost sometimes being like over a lecture slide that’s what I’m paying for. And I was sort of really not bitter towards it, but feeling entitlement.

Participant B/male/ug/year4/UK.

There was no sense of opportunity cost. It was interesting to note that the final year students included in the sample were the first cohort to emerge from higher education paying the higher level of tuition fees. Many conversations included unprompted reference to previous cohorts: the sense that suddenly these students were paying far more for the same experience as others had benefitted from.

And you kind of think what else are we getting...are we getting anything more, or are we simply just paying an extra £6,000?

Participant C/female/ug/year4/UK.

The link to tuition fees also applied to postgraduate students and can be seen as problematic by the students themselves.

Especially when you are paying for it, your tuition fees, you can get trapped into this mentality ‘well I’m paying for it, so it’s my right. so give it to me’ that sort of aggressive attitude somehow.

ParticipantG/female/pg/overseas.

Monetary investment is defined as: *The perceived financial investment students make to enable their HE study. These perceptions may be informed by comparisons with previous cohorts who studied at their university.*

Theme 2: Parental voice.

The active voice of parents seeking to inform students how they should behave, learn, complain was evident in conversations with students. Parents' concerns appeared to be clearly related to the cost of tuition parents and/or students are paying for HE and thus it is possible that this is not distinct from monetary investment. One student commented about how her mother sees her daughter as an investment and the university experience to be a competitive environment in which there are winners and losers. The student is talking about supporting one of her peers:

I'll talk you through it, don't panic. But then it is strange I was talking to my mum and she was like you can't keep doing that, you've got to think about yourself, you can't do it. You can't think about other people, you've got to think about yourself and get to the top, you're my investment, kind of thing.

Participant A/female/ug/year1/UK.

It was interesting to hear one of the students who was hard-working but reported both feelings and expressions of entitlement, talking about her experience of the parental voice.

I remember my parents being really annoyed at the fact that we'd like not complained, but we'd gone to like give feedback and then they kind of knocked us down, and they were like "we're paying this much money, you should be able to voice your opinion and them to do something about it instead of just kind of brushing you to one side". Which was a bit frustrating.

ParticipantD/female/ug/year4/UK.

Parental voice can be defined as: *Assertive articulations from parents to their son/daughter about their son/daughter's behaviours within the higher education context.*

Theme 3: Organization and management.

Failures or inefficiencies in organisation and management of both people and systems emerged as prompts for feelings of entitlement. Thus there appears to be a negative relationship between perceived organization and management of people and systems and feelings of entitlement. One student comments:

One thinks of entitlement obviously, you know, when things don't work out very well, or things aren't very organised. You do sort of end up getting like thinking, instead of thinking "Oh, OK, normally they've given the grades out on time and this time they haven't, and it's just probably a fluke", you think "well I'm giving all this money and it's been five weeks, and if we can go in and put all this effort into doing this work, why can't they put effort into grading it? Or if it's the system, having it efficient for our grades to come out?"

ParticipantE/female/ug/year4/overseas.

Organisation and management is defined here as: *Perceived efficiency of the organization and management of people and systems which support students' learning experience.*

Theme 4: Affective commitment.

Students' sense of care about their HE experience appears to be a factor. The more that students report that they care about their HE experience, and feel affectively committed to that experience, the less entitlement they seem to report. There are exceptions, indeed some students speak about their effort and academic investment being the very thing which seems to justify entitlement. However it appears that students' affective commitment towards their HE experience may reduce entitlement.

I can see why other people would feel it [entitlement], but I feel like I'm just here because I want to be here and I want to take what I can from it. Which is why it makes me do better, whereas if people feel entitled to things they don't exactly appreciate them enough to do well.

ParticipantF/female/ug/year2/UK.

Affective commitment is defined here as: *A student's positive attachment towards their experience of HE based on feelings of inspiration, belonging, pride and identification and which in turn contributes to a sense of care towards that object and a desire to maintain an existing relationship.*

Theme 4: Change over time.

Many students reported that entitlement diminished over the time of their studies. Those on four-year programmes, returning in final year after a year's placement, seemed to feel that entitlement had diminished. This seems to link to an increasing understanding of higher education and the fact that investing effort (as well as money) is critical to success. One student speaks of a moment of realization in which entitlement entirely dissipates. Another corroborates these views, but then speaks about how lack of access to (basic) resource can result in entitlement kicking back in.

I felt like there was more entitlement in first year because there was that massive change and like well do I go to uni because it's so much money kind of thing, to now where obviously I don't really feel, I feel like I have to earn like my place, my place here, rather than me feel entitled to it, because I'm actually, even though I'm a final year now I feel like I have to really, really work, probably harder than I have done before, just because I've got so little left, I need to, I don't know, I need to, I don't really feel entitled any more I guess, I guess it's kind of gone, yes, gone down as such. And I think that's why maybe we feel more grateful in final year to, you know, tutors, you know, strong relationships, because that element of entitlement's just like gone. But then it's like little things when we go to the library and there isn't any space, that's when the entitlement starts to creep back because you think "actually we're entitled to find a seat in the library", that sort of thing because we do pay a lot of money. And that's when it starts to kick back again.

Participant C/female/ug/year4/UK.

Therefore the data suggests that time into study may be a moderator of the drivers of feelings of entitlement.

Proposed conceptual framework.

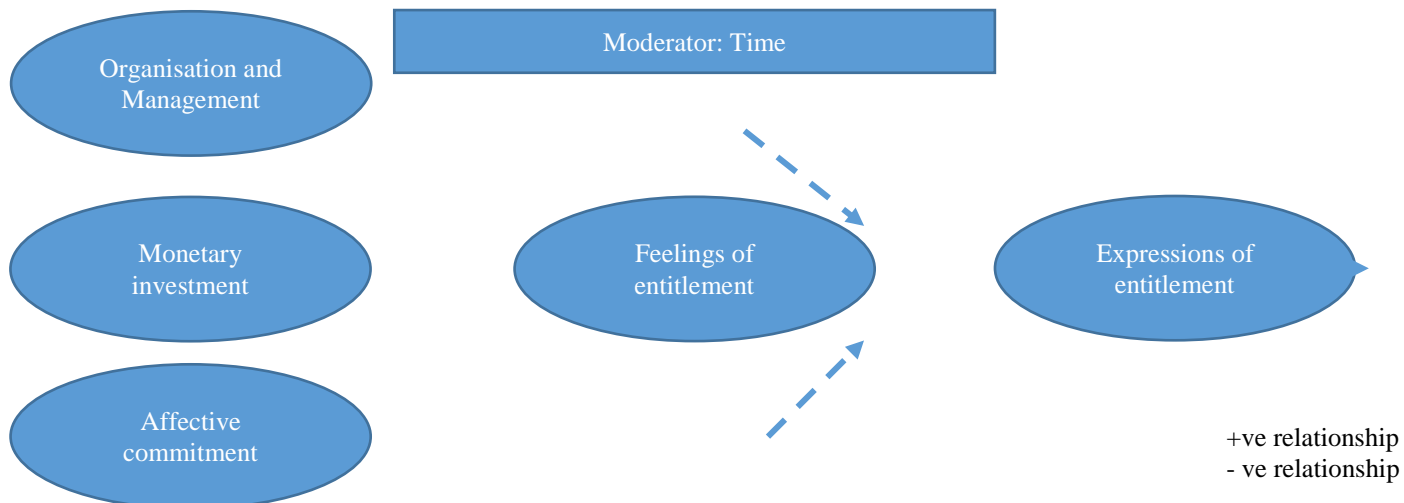
Figure 2 seeks to draw these themes together and propose a potential conceptual framework which synthesizes the concepts and connections which emerge from this analysis and helps explain the possible interactions between students' experiences of HE and entitlement.

Implications for practice.

The voice of final year students and alumni is an important factor in helping students in earlier years of study to understand the nature of higher education in order to manage feelings of entitlement. There appears to be opportunities to educate parents regarding the nature of higher education in particular its collaborative nature: this could be included in Open Day events.

Organisation and management are critical for the success of HEIs. It is critical that academics are equipped with skills of organisation and the training and time in order to implement these. Indeed institutions must recognise the implications of tuition fees on the expectations placed on themselves, but importantly, the academics who deliver the academic experience. Finally academics themselves should be encouraged to be self-aware as to whether they are communicating expressions of entitlement to their students as these may be powerful indicators of normative behaviors within HE.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework.



Conclusion.

The study finds evidence of entitlement amongst students, conceived as expectations of access to resource. All participants readily and unprompted link entitlement to tuition fees. However marketing activities associated with recruitment were not mentioned unprompted as factors related to entitlement. There appear to be reports of diminishing feelings of entitlement about academic interactions as students' undergraduate programme progresses, however expectations of access to resources remain. Importantly entitlement appears to be about the curriculum rather than extra-curricula opportunity. If we accept that in an

environment of high tuition fees, entitlement is likely to exist, then universities might help to focus students' entitlement towards opportunity, so that extra-curricular opportunities are more highly valued.

It is argued that reduced entitlement facilitates positive relational attributes to flourish. Academic-student relationships are central to HE's engagement with this new learning context. Indeed, the paper raises the issue of academics' own feelings and expressions of entitlement, and suggests that academics in rejecting entitlement as a driver of their own behaviours, can become powerful role models to students.

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