'My Ideal First Day': Implications for induction from a three (London) university project

Abstract

This study sets out the initial findings from a mixed methodology approach which aims to research the experiences of first year, first semester students in three UK inner city Universities. Goodenow's (1993) Psychological Sense of School Membership instrument was utilised to collect quantitative data (n=1300), and Wengraf's (2001) Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM) was employed as a guide to gather the qualitative interview data. Below we report on one strand of the data collected, that of how the students would construct their own 'ideal first day'.

Keywords

student belonging, PSSM, First Year, UK HEI, BNIM

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Background

Within the UK higher education system, one consequence of Higher Education (HE) policies around internationalisation and widening participation is that students enter HE with increasingly diverse biographies, expectations and constraints (Holley and Oliver, 2009). For Kember *et al.* (2010) the main message for a successful first year transition relates to the importance of developing a concept of belonging. London Metropolitan University, Westminster University and Queen Mary University have been working on 'Student Belonging', a collaborative research project, partially funded by the Higher Education Academy. The Student Belonging Project has its origins in the Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) studies carried out at London Metropolitan University Business School, the Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) psychological tool (Goodenow, 1993) used for profiling and measuring students' sense of belonging in the USA and the research interests of colleagues at Westminster University who were seeking to engage students studying a mandatory first semester module, thus rolled out to all first year Business Studies students.

This study explores the effectiveness of different initiatives / practices for student induction within the three different institutions and their impact on students' sense of belonging using a measurement of belonging instrument, the PSSM, as a benchmark. The project adopted a cross-institutional approach with a view to developing an informed understanding of whether differences in institutional characteristics, curriculum design and students' background are determining factors in the development of the sense of belonging. Research carried out at London Metropolitan University shows the positive impact of curriculum initiatives on retention and attainment in first year undergraduates (Johnson *et al.*, 2009). A Queen Mary University pilot in the summer of 2009 utilised the PSSM instrument and semi-structured interviews to measure sense of belonging among undergraduate economics students. Westminster Business School has also addressed this issue in its curriculum redesign starting 2011/12.

Methodology

A literature review was undertaken to identify the key themes in the literature. The review covered literature in the UK, Ireland, Netherlands, USA, South Africa, Hong Kong, Australia and New Zealand and provided a foundation of knowledge from a range of peer reviewed texts. Consideration of the interrelated themes informed and supported the research strategy. Evaluation of the themes provided insights and further understanding of the specified research area of 'students' sense of belonging in higher education'. The overview allowed context specific discussions from the perspective of institutional research, and the formulation of further research proposals.

A mixed method approach was adopted using both quantitative and qualitative data. A questionnaire was drawn up informed by the PSSM (1993) instrument and the Australian National Student Survey (Student Services Australia Pty Ltd, 2013). The questionnaire was conducted with first year, first semester students during weeks 6 and 7 of the first semester 2010/11. A sample of 1346 students from across the three universities (i.e. London Met, Westminster and Queen Mary) completed the questionnaire. An obvious caveat is that only students attending seminar classes in those weeks completed the questionnaire.

The survey was supplemented by selected interviews with students from each of the three institutions, drawing upon research interviews interpreted within a qualitative tradition of 'cultural stories' (cf. Miller and Glassner, 1997). We were interested in how students narrate their experiences of belonging, the meaning they ascribe to their narratives and the insights these can offer our emerging understanding into the factors impacting on a student sense of belonging. Biographic Narrative Interpretative Method (BNIM) draws upon both German and, to some extent, US schools of thought from the early twentieth century. The method has been successfully used to draw out the 'stories' or narratives from interviewees' lives (Wengraf, 2001). What is of interest to the researcher is what the interviewee selects to share, and the way in which their individual story is portrayed. The interview is structured such that the interviewee has the time and space to develop their narrative contribution. The interview transcripts are then interpreted through separate analyses of the 'living of the lived life' and the 'telling of the told story' that are then brought together and their connections explored. Following Wengraf (2007) each institution selected three interviewees; three sets of rich data offer a complex and nuanced set of interpretations and avoids over simplistic 'compare and contrast' when two interview transcriptions are analysed.

The primary aim of the project was to identify some simple first steps from day one to emphasise the importance of promoting a sense of identity and a sense of belonging within the School and the wider university community.

This report summarises the data from two questions from the data gathered, and focuses on the student induction experiences (see Table 1).

The two open ended questions on the questionnaire:

3.15 What did you like most [about your first 6 weeks]?

3.16 What did you like least [about your first 6 weeks]?

Question 3.15: What did you like most so far?	Question 3.16: What did you dislike the most so far?
Groupings from student responses: • London factor • Social interaction • Learning experience • Subject specific interest • Being independent	Groupings from student responses: • Travelling, cost of travel, public transport, travel time • Halls of residence • Engagement with teachers • Teaching and Learning • Social
400 students cited meeting new people / friends / from different cultures	
Excitement around meeting lecturers, writing essays, their subject material	
The 'London Factor'	

Table 1: Summary of points raised in questions 3.15 and 3.16

And the final question from the interviews:

Looking back, what would your 'ideal' first day at university be like?

What students *liked* most by week 7

The questionnaire asked students to give an indication of what has given them the most and least enjoyment since joining university. The vast majority of students took the opportunity to briefly express their views and the tables below provide a rough summary of the main issues they raised.

Analysis of the students' responses allowed identification of five 'broad' categories describing the main reasons for the students' enjoyment at university. These are illustrated in Figure 1:
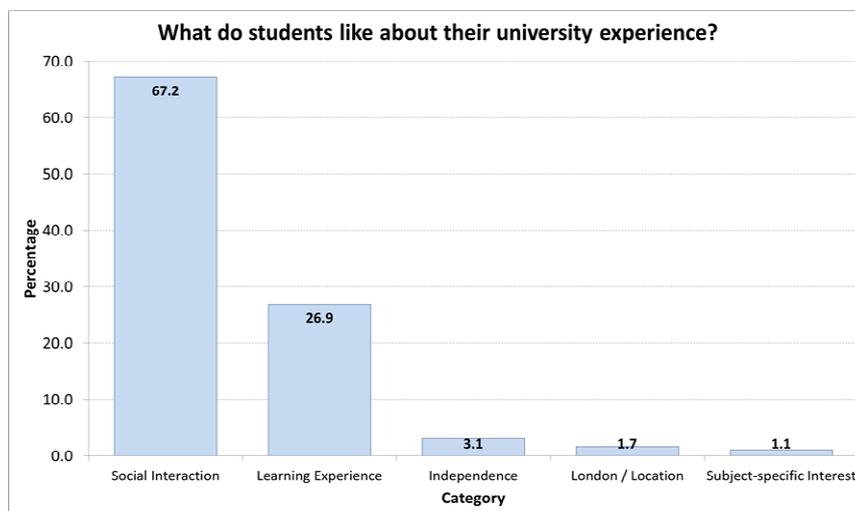

Figure 1: Five broad categories of student satisfaction

Social interaction is a key determinant of the students' experience at university. This was expressed in various forms by the students and the broad category 'social interaction' includes a number of different aspects/facets that are summarised below:

- Social interaction

- Group/team work

- Meeting new people/friends/from different countries/different background

- Having fun with friends and lectures

- Meeting different cultures

- Social events and the night life

- Fresher's/induction week

- Getting involved in Societies

The learning experience is another source of enjoyment for many students: the ability to learn about a new subject, engage with motivated and friendly lecturers and, more generally, just being an undergraduate student are some of the main drivers of students' enjoyment. A more detailed account of the factors mentioned by students is summarised below:

Learning experience

- Learning about the subject/new skills/new culture

- Studying at University/Improve my knowledge

- Interaction with good/friendly/relaxed teachers

- Ability to improve knowledge of English language

- The student life

- Writing essays

- Hands on activities/case studies

- Other people work hard and it has pushed me to work hard

- Attending seminars

- Relate more with my lecturers than it is possible in my own country

- The library resources

For a number of students London represents a new and exciting experience, and studying in such a diverse and international city represents a source of enjoyment for many.

The opportunity to learn specific subjects, such as fashion or marketing, is a source of enjoyment for many students. Moreover, the requirement of taking ownership of their own learning, i.e. of becoming a more independent learner, is mentioned by a number of students as a source of enjoyment and satisfaction.

What students *disliked* most by week 7

There are a rather diverse set of factors that can negatively affect the student's experience in particular in the early stages of their life at university. It is possible to broadly group these factors into five categories whose relative importance, in terms of frequency of mention, is shown in Figure 2:
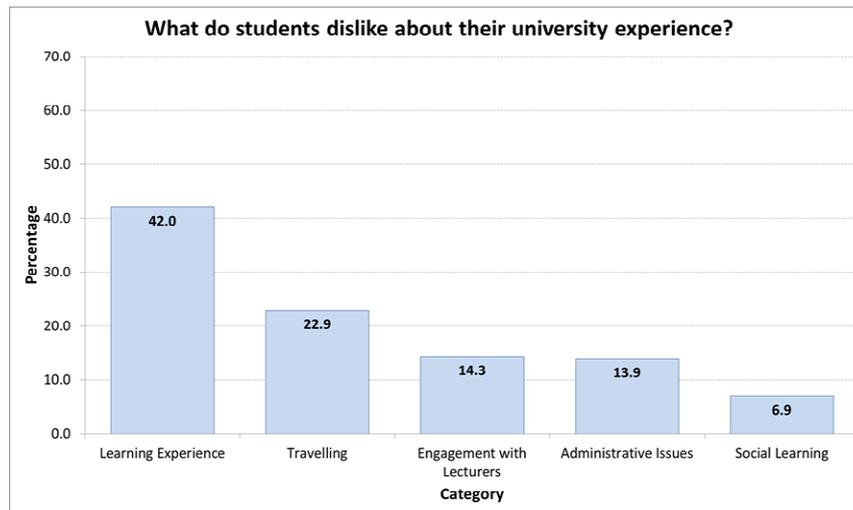
Figure 2: Five broad categories of student dissatisfaction

One of the challenging aspects of university life is learning to cope with a new and demanding learning environment. Many students raised various concerns about their engagement with studying at university. Some of the issues raised by students is summarised as follows:

Learning experience

• Poor timetable/long gaps between lectures and seminars

• Early start

• Difficult/easy/boring seminars

• Challenge of having to speaking front of other students

• Being prevented from attending lectures/seminars because of debt owed to the institution

• To give presentations is challenging

• Heavy workload

• To work in group is difficult

• Issues related to the use of the VLE (i.e. *Blackboard*)

For many students travelling is costly in various ways: either in terms of distance and time lost travelling, pure monetary cost or just the hassle of having to deal with public transport.

Engagement with lecturers is particularly important in the early period of the students' experience at university. Friendly and supportive, yet firm and fair, lecturers can help speed the process of settling down allowing students to develop a greater sense of acceptance and 'fit'. The main concerns expressed by students are summarised below:

• Engagement with lecturers

• Lecturers are not supportive

• Lecturers show a lack of knowledge of the subject

• Classes are large and lecturers cannot know everybody

• Poor teaching

• Feeling teachers are not interested in your personal development

• Seminar tutors not very helpful/respectful

A 'hidden' cost in the process of students' settlement into university life is the engagement with either an inefficient or confusing or unhelpful administration. These inefficiencies manifest themselves in various forms and are highlighted by students as:

Administrative issues

• Unhelpful/disorganised administration

• General organisation of university

• Getting lost around campus

• Lack of communication about cancellations or changes of timetable

Students put a lot of positive value on the interaction with their peers both inside and outside the classroom. Inside the classroom they dislike immature and noisy behaviour as well as the lack of attendance to lectures and classes by fellow students.

Current Institutional Practices

Anglia Ruskin University

Anglia Ruskin University review their induction processes annually, and build upon student feedback and experiences from across the Faculties. This year, the Student's Union was more heavily involved in the planning and delivering of sessions; a mobile 'app' was launched which addressed many students concerns about information being in different places. The personal tutorial system, piloted last year, was fully embedded with timetabled 'meet the personal tutor slots' arranged to really make sure students have the very best opportunity to settle in and commence their studies.

London Metropolitan University Business School (LMBS)

Students really liked that the staff had provided a photo and short profile on the website. More adventurous course leaders uploaded video clips, had links to staff members' books, images, and so on.

Students are asked to research what makes a good business leader based on business leaders from various ethnicities, especially those with humble beginnings. Twelve leaders are profiled, one for each month of the year, and students were asked to research the business leader for their birthday month (e.g. January - Anita Roddick, February - Levi Roots, and so on).

Other pre-welcome tasks included a new marketing initiative involving a campaign for February starters – students were offered places in February and there were concerns regarding 'hanging around'. Thus, February starters have a 2-day induction two weeks before the started, and 3-day induction the week before they started and then a 5-day welcome week. This was not popular with students who tended to work up until the week prior to their course commencing.

There is a drive to incorporate more social activities in inductions, and a budget of £10,000 was set aside for various initiatives, such as hiring a boat, for example; however central ideas and local delivery were problematic. A competition was suggested and only 20 students and very few staff participated in this excursion. The result was that more funding was poured into inductions: the course leader can choose an activity choice of Madame Tussauds, the London Eye or a boat trip. Centrally organised inductions tended to consist of PowerPoint presentations and/or talks, and were not popular. While inductions are still being centrally organised, there is a real need to include local staff with delivery far earlier in the process.

Westminster University

At Westminster the induction is over a 5-day period, and this is organised by school, not by campus. It is plagued with technical problems such as registering students, taking photos and entering data. The system crashed last year and was out of use for several hours. Due to the high numbers involved, the induction process can be overwhelming for the students. However, this is ameliorated by the students getting placed into 'cohort' groups of 25 from the outset, in which they remain for the whole of the first year.

Queen Mary University

In past years, induction was limited to a 30-minute welcome from the Head of School followed by a meeting with the academic advisors. Since 2008, the induction programme has been restructured and it is now delivered over three days (i.e. Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday). Induction is organised by the senior tutor in collaboration with the School's Student Support Manager and with support from student

helpers (i.e. volunteers from years 2 and 3). The student helpers also become 'buddies' for first year students during their first semester at university.

The format is as follows:

Wednesday: Welcome talk (about one hour) by the Head of School; presentation of the undergraduate team, talk by the Senior Tutor and the Student Support Manager. The talk ends with a discussion with students about the expectations (staff and students) of studying at university. After the talk, the students meet with their academic advisors (each advisor has about five to ten students per year of study). These are welcoming meetings during which the programme of study is approved. After the meeting with advisors the students are invited to a lunch that is attended by all School members. During lunch an icebreaker is organised (find someone who can swim/has an iPad/lecturer who teaches xyz). Enrolment follows at the end of the day.

Thursday: Students are divided into small groups and student helpers take the groups for a campus tour. Students then attend a compulsory diagnostic mathematics test. The test results are discussed by the mathematics lecturer in the first mathematics lecture. Students who perform poorly in the test are asked to attend support classes during the semester.

Friday: There are brief talks by the library, the careers office, the societies, the Student's Union, and the coordinator of the Peer Assisted Support Scheme (a mentoring scheme to support year 1 students). The 'trade game' is played afterwards, a business team building exercise, and staff provide the student teams with feedback at the end of the time allowed.

Welcome back talks for year 2 and year 3 students are also organised. These usually last one hour and are followed by meetings with the academic advisors.

Induction in 2012/3

This year the induction period was extended from three to five days to reflect the importance of induction on the student body. The new and extended programme now includes:

- Extra and longer sessions for careers and libraries;

- Story telling activity: on the Monday of induction week students are divided into small groups and are asked to investigate through pictures or videos any economic issue of their interest in the area around the university.

- On Thursday, a talk by a member of staff about a topical economic issue or, alternatively, a debate where two academics discuss current economic events;

    - Queen Mary would like to explore the University of Amsterdam approach – a sofa in the Atrium and every week, there is a talk or debate about current issues in an open space / forum.

    - Instead of student personal tutors in their offices, a large space is used with teas and coffees for a welcome week, once each in semesters A and B.

- On the Friday of induction week the students are asked to give short presentations of their work. The best pieces of work receive a small prize.

- Additional activities introduced this year included: getting in touch with students before they come to university and strengthening induction for latecomers.

Recommendations

The final question on the PSSM questionnaire ask students to identifying strategies that can help them settle in more quickly and develop a strong sense of belonging. Universities could, for example:

- Foster socialisation among students through social events, games, ice-breakers, virtual social networks, and so on,

- Make staff aware of the important role they play in establishing friendly, supportive, fair and firm relationships with the students inside and outside the classroom,

- Connect with the students' excitement and interest for their subject by offering engaging activities such as high-profile talks, involvement in research projects,

- Appreciate the transition challenges that students face when confronted with a new learning environment and support them in enhancing their communication, presentation skills,

- Appreciate that the cost of administrative failures has an impact on the students' perception of their learning experience and will have an impact on students' surveys of the quality of their education.

Three key issues are highlighted by the students in their answers to the final question. The first issue is around staff attitudes during induction. Unfriendly or disinterested staff are the biggest perceived problem by students coming to university to study – especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, who want support and encouragement from when they first set foot on the campus. Administration was reported as poor across participating universities, with students queuing or being unable to access the information they needed, at the time they needed it, and this was a significant barrier to the settling in process. The final issue reports on experiences later in the semester (our survey was carried out in week six or week seven) where students report a struggle to cope with their workload and would value some kind of additional intervention at this point.

Drawing together the selected data from the questionnaire and initial student interviews, we can conclude that there is a 'London Factor' at work, which both attracts and causes issues for students from widening participation backgrounds in their 'settling in' period. It is clear that more careful institutional thought needs to be given to induction policies, and that 'one size' does not fit all. There is a tendency, emerging from student narratives, which shows assumptions are made about the nature of the student body, and their needs. To be successful in retaining our students, we need to take the time to listen to their voice, and to create both formal and informal spaces for these conversations to take place.

Narratives from our first set of student interviews are available online:
http://www.slideshare.net/debbieholley1/my-ideal-firstdayfinal

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