Motivating Students To Access Support Services In Higher Education: A Self-Determination Theory Perspective.

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Abstract

Helping students with their academic and personal problems is a priority for higher education institutions. However, students may not seek support for the challenges they face. Self-determination theory frames this resistance to access services in terms of motivation. Students who are experiencing problems are not motivated to address them because they feel incapable, incompetent and isolated. In response to this, self-determination theory would advocate a support service that offers choice, skill-based problem solving and a collaborative approach. This forms the basis of a proposed comparative study to explore whether these aspects of motivation correlate with engagement in student support services at the University of Lincoln. Qualitative and quantitative data will be gathered from undergraduate students, in various disciplines, to explore the barriers to support engagement. The study is planned to run from September 2018 to June 2019.

Introduction

Within the decade from 2006 – 2016, the number of students in higher education remained at around 2.3 million. However, there was a change in the demographics of this group, with an increase in younger undergraduates, students from a non-UK domicile and those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Universities UK, 2017a). The increasing diversity within the HE student population presents varying challenges for universities. For example, while there were record levels of applications from students from a lower socio-economic background in 2017 (Universities UK, 2017b), this population is actually more likely to drop out of university, than any other group (Universities UK, 2016). Higher education institutions do offer a range of support services to help their students navigate their university experience effectively, and these services, which range from education and careers advice, to emotional and financial support, have been found to improve academic achievement and decrease attrition rates (Cahill, Bowyer & Murray, 2014). However, the success of these

resources is inconsistent due to a lack of engagement by those students who would benefit most from extra advice or guidance (Hoyne & McNaught, 2013). This non-engagement is, in turn, connected to higher attrition (Hoyne & McNaught, 2013). There is a gap in our knowledge as to why this may be (Cahill, Bowyer & Murray, 2014). It is possible that some students feel alienated from the process, that the support is not suited to their needs or that they lack the drive to address the problem (Jacklin & Le Riche, 2009).

Self-determination theory (S-DT) (Deci, Koestner & Ryan, 2001) frames these help-seeking barriers in terms of motivation. It posits that people have either intrinsic or extrinsic motivational needs and if these needs are thwarted then the individual becomes more apathetic (Deci, Koestner & Ryan, 2001; Bonneville-Roussy, Evans, Verner-Filion, Vallerand & Bouffard, 2017). Extrinsic motivators include wealth, status and high academic grades; elements of elevated comparison with others. However, Deci & Ryan (2002) argue that intrinsically motivated goals, based on inherent values and passions, are more likely to be achieved successfully, due to the integrated, deeply personal nature of this drive. The three 'nutriments' (Deci, Koestner & Ryan, 2001) of intrinsic motivation are autonomy, competence and relatedness.

Autonomy

An individual who feels in control of a situation is more likely to demonstrate proactive goal-bound behaviour (Deci, Koestner & Ryan, 2001). Yet, there are numerous factors in the academic environment that take the control away from the student (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2017), such as examinations, deadlines, compulsory classes and assessments. There is potential for this lack of autonomy to be addressed through methods such as constructive feedback or proactive, rather than reactive, tutor-student interactions (von der Embse, Schultz & Draughn, 2015). Autonomy is also increased if there are opportunities for the student to participate in, and modulate their learning experience (Young-Jones, Cara & Levesque-Bristol, 2014). Correspondingly, it is the autonomous student, the one who feels in control, that is more likely to have the motivation to access support services (Ketonen et al., 2016); yet, it is the student who feels out of control, whether financially, academically or emotionally that is most in need of the services (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2017). As autonomy is likely to enhance student motivation to engage (Ning & Downing,

2012), we may need to find a way to frame support so that it is reciprocal, or at least provides some capacity for the student to be proactive in their development.   The greatest challenge, in this regard, would be for services that are traditionally viewed as structured, expert-centred approaches (Jacklin & Le Riche, 2009). However, there is certainly a need for some students, particularly when transitioning to university, to have structure and clear instruction about expectations (Leese, 2010). Greater levels of autonomy can be overwhelming and actually be a cause for concern. This may be the case for students who are transitioning from a more disciplined or authoritarian style of education, (Wu, Garza & Guzman, 2015) in which the teacher/educator has the control within the relationship. Such individuals may appreciate and require a more guided support service. It would be interesting to explore whether there was a demographic difference amongst students and their requirements for autonomy within support services. Identification of such potential group differences could enable wider targeting of services. Alternatively, it may be possible to develop a service that increases autonomy, whilst at the same, removing issues of control and dominance within the support relationship. Online support, for instance, has been shown to be beneficial (Lindvedt, Sørensen, Østvik, Verplanken & Wang, 2008), though there are still opportunities for development in research and application of this medium (Papadatou-Pastou, Goozee, Payne, Barrable & Tzotzoli, 2017).

Competence

It is logical to assert that support services are most useful to students who are experiencing difficulties, whether in their academic or personal situations. However, the less competent an individual feels, the more likely they are to avoid the situation (Rahal & Zainaba, 2016) and, therefore, avoid any kind of help to address the problem. This, as with issues of autonomy, results in the most able students being the most likely to seek out ways to improve further. Clearly, support should be available to all, but perhaps the focus should be on engaging the students who *need* it. One option to overcome this issue is to assess whether the service offered, inherently suggests that the recipient is so hapless or hopeless (Bartram, 2009), as to need the support. This issue may relate more intensely to aspects of day-to-day life beyond the institution as students are found to take pride in the way they cope with the demands of independent living (Jacklin & Le Riche, 2009). The process of

assessment and improvement is built-in to academia and indicates to students that proficiency is an ultimate outcome, not a starting point. There is a "possible self" (Huitt & Cain, 2005) which each student can become with guidance and assistance. It is reasonable to suggest that this realisation of skill development or this "possible self' may not translate to independent living; any problems encountered outside the institution (e.g. financial) are experienced as a more absolute indication of incompetence. In contrast, it could be suggested that emphasis on competency could lead students to feel the weight of expectation, that they are being presented with more 'challenges' that they will need to complete (Sebastian, 2013). Though, there is evidence to suggest that competence is a predictor of student engagement and relates negatively to burnout (Olwage & Mostert, 2014). Yet, it is possible, indeed likely, that some circumstances require a clear solution before developing skills to deal with future similar issues – debt-management would be one such circumstance. However, instead of using a deficit model of support (Bartram, 2009), self-determination theory implies that it would be more effective to employ an empowering or proactive approach (Rahal & Zainaba, 2016), with a view to developing competence, rather than highlighting incompetence. It would be relevant to explore whether this is more pertinent to challenges experienced within or without the institution.

Relatedness

A fundamental barrier to an individual getting help is that they consider themselves to be isolated in their problem (Jacklin & Le Riche, 2009). They view other people coping in situations that they, themselves are struggling with, which sets them apart. This lack of relatedness compounds the issue as individuals have more motivation to deal with a problem if they view others as 'being in the same boat' (Jacklin & Le Riche, 2009). The one-to-one approach to support further highlights this separation from others. It is suggested that the most beneficial form of support emanates from proximal interactions, such as peer groups (Jacklin & Le Riche, 2009) or constructive relationships with teachers and lecturers (Rahal & Zainaba, 2016). However, relatedness to distal contexts (Lei, 2016), such as the university culture is also important. Therefore, even when the support service may require non-academic advice, such as financial or health related, it is important to promote this using an inclusive and empathic approach (Cahill, Bowyer & Murray,

2014). If students consider themselves to be 'consumers' of an institution's support 'product', then the authenticity of the relationship is undermined (Bartram, 2009). Yet, there may be certain populations within the student group that prefer one-to-one support. Some students find it difficult or perhaps unnecessary, to integrate with classmates, such as overseas students (Smith & Khawaja, 2011) mature students (Kahu, 2014) or distance learners (Hew, 2016). In such cases, peer-led support would present a barrier to engagement.

In summary, self-determination theory would advocate a support service that offers choice, skill-based problem solving and a collaborative approach, yet this may not apply to all students and in all circumstances. This forms the basis of a proposed study to explore the undergraduate experience of support services at the University of Lincoln. The ultimate goal of this study would be to identify what elements of student support services are viewed as either barriers or incentives, and does this differ within distinct groups. This will raise areas of exploration such as, is support engagement school-based or university wide; which issues (e.g. academic work, emotional support, financial support etc.) are most prevalent; do students prefer on-line or in-person support; do students prefer informal (e.g. peer support) or formal resources; and what is the pattern or frequency of support engagement, i.e. to address a specific problem or on-going support. This understanding will enable more targeted promotion. The primary research questions are:

1. Is engagement with support services and resources influenced by aspects of motivation? Engagement will be defined as the *beneficial participation* (the activity was useful) in at least one session/appointment/online interaction. This will be defined clearly to the participants. Levels of engagement or active participation will be explored in more depth during focus group discussion (see below).

2. Is academic success improved through engagement with student support services? Retention/attrition will be one measure of success and, if possible, a measure of grade changes.

3. How do these findings compare across different disciplines?

Undergraduate students will be asked to complete both standardised questionnaires (Deci & Ryan, 1985) to assess the characteristics of their academic motivation, and focused demographic questions to identify any potential group

differences. They will also be asked to rate their engagement with support services, using a scale to identify levels and type of support. A key issue in this study will be that the students most likely to participate will be the ones who are also likely to engage with support services. However, incentive schemes will be utilised (such as the SONA credit scheme) to encourage wider participation. There is also the possibility of encouraging students with a financial incentive. The study will include 3 distinct disciplines and targeted sampling will be directed to these students. The comparison between different disciplines will highlight any differences in motivation, and whether this leads to distinct trends of support engagement. Also, small groups of students will be invited to participate in focus groups to gather qualitative information regarding their engagement with support services. Students who have not engaged in support will be included in these groups. Within these focus groups issues of autonomy, competence and relatedness will be explored. For example, how much agency do students feel they have in the support process? Do they focus on support services within their school or the wider university environment? Do they feel able to access support for problems experienced outside the institution? Are there any challenges to engaging with services? It is hoped that findings from this study could lead to more precise targeting of services and further research to assess interventions. This study is funding dependent, but is planned to run from September 2018 to June 2019.

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