

Experience & Expectations Deliverables Disconnects and Connects

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Abstract

The notion of the 'student experience' forms prime rhetoric woven through educational literature; both students and staff form this experience through educational and social practices within the university context. The measure of an experiential worth is framed firstly from an expectation of that experience, this expectation becomes the meter by which the experience is gauged remembered and reflected upon. The Student experience cannot be framed solely from its singular present moment and must be integrated firstly with the expectations that contribute to a fuller understanding of that 'experience' in a measured manner. Koselleck notes: "No event can be narrated, no structure represented, no process described without the use of historical concepts which make the past conceivable" (Koselleck1985, P. 112). This research endeavour examines the temporal structures of experience and expectation. The finding of this research will provide a forecast of future student engagement where the connection of expectation and experience would be designed from an integrated user experience position.

This paper begins to unravel and discuss the idea of students expectations of tertiary study in the context of a changing higher educational funding model in the Australian university sector. Student expectations as a forecast of the student experience of tertiary study and how a shift in funding models in the Australian University sector may influence students evaluation criterion and approaches to an educational experience will be considered. It is through an understanding of potential disconnects between expectations and an assembled notion of experience, that mechanisms are developed to both clarify student expectations of a tertiary experience and foster positive outcomes around associated student experiences. This paper will act as a precursor to more specific individual student research in this field; students will be interviewed and data gathered to further understand and systematically evaluate both individual and student cluster tertiary educational expectations and experiences.

Potential students and their expectations of a prospective university degree, vary in there connection to the associated reality of that degree; some expectations are built on delicate illusions rather than facts and actual achievable course aims or pedagogical intentions. Hence categorising *experiences* based on *expectations* of potential study in a universal or consistent manner becomes problematic. Many tertiary student expectations of that potential experience are shaped around marginal or limited research of a potential preferred place of study, its learning and teaching structures, pedagogical stance or graduate outcomes; the reality of a degree. This is in part due to the nature of the constructs of a university and the mechanics of studying in a degree; where a true understanding of a degree cannot be gained until actively enrolled in that degree. Any system when viewed externally is viewed from a singular perspective; that perspective is the projected or marketed face of that potential experience, a public face versus a private face. Expectations are then further shaped around partial or implied realities impacted on by an individual's believe system or romantic ideals of what a university experience may be. That dream of a university education and associated experience is embedded with future aspirations of careers, friendships; a fruitful life beyond school, independence, the list is goes on. Such aspirations can be shaped with mirage like qualities.

The choices of a degree by students as a potential career path are formed by fundamental personal componentry. Eccles (Eccles 2009,p. 88) concludes there are three primary value models that influence and impact choice and models of behaviour where future roles, careers and identity are made.

These components are “(a) a value component that captures the salience, centrality, and valence a person attaches to specific individual characteristics and collective groups of which one is a member; (b) a content component that includes all of the beliefs the person has about which tasks, behaviors, mannerism, activities, and so on, are associated with the successful enactment of various personal and collective identities; and (c) an efficacy or expectancy component that includes the individual’s beliefs about his or her ability to enact these various behaviors” These three components interact with each other and a life’s experiences to influence choice. These are broad attributing groupings built around choice and shaped by preconceptions and expectations of a particular career path.

Expectations beyond the choice of a degree are influenced and then formed through a range of positions shaped primarily through a sense of future and desires beyond what can be seen in a forecast of a life’s experiences. Expectations are intrinsic to the appraisal and formation of perceptions of experience; expectations rightly or wrongly build the shape and worth of an experience. Koselleck provides thinking around this idea in the development of expectation, “No event can be narrated, no structure represented, no process described without the use of historical concepts which make the past conceivable” (Koselleck1985, P. 112). Experiences are then shaped and categorised through a referencing of that experience through a mapping and evaluation of associated previous expectations. The experience itself and its value ranking becomes a manoeuvring back and forth between original expectations and the value added or not added through the events of that experience; as was perceived or interpreted as experience. The two are then woven into one recollection of that event “No expectation without experience; no experience without expectation”(Koselleck1985, P.270).

For students entering a tertiary education these expectations are entrenched with hope, possibility and a past relationship to a future. A personal historic perspective of how and what an individual’s future may be. The *now* and *then* are no longer separate in the constructs of expectation as part of a student’s field of vision in the making or registering of an experience. The past’s relationship to a perceived future is temporally exploited to model ideas, opportunities and future possibilities both real and imaginary. These expectations become part of a horizon view of the world and that view becomes representative of a distant yet tangible point of exploration, aspiration and hope. This horizon view threshold is not stationary and translates to a suitable and conceivably attainable ambition, quixotically distant and yet achievable at the same time.

The horizon is a place where the new day starts and ends; of new beginnings hopes and possibilities of imagining beyond what we can see. A horizon view is expectation and experience in one view; though seldom is the horizon encountered in the same physical manner as experience. It is all expectation without the possibility of a negative experience; all hope and little risk of failure, a safe and alluring estimation of a potential career path.

In the Australian higher education university sector the state of flux and changing nature of the sectors funding condition; from a government assisted format, to a self-reliant student pay model will generate new relationships and mindsets for students and the sector itself. “Over the next five years, the Australian higher education sector is expected to undergo major change as the Bradley review recommendations are progressively implemented. One of the key elements of the reform agenda is the move to a demand-driven funding model, imposing greater dependence of universities on the power of student choice.”(Ernst& Young 2011, p. 4)

These funding changes will contribute to a shift in perception of service and an amplification of choice and attitude by potential students towards higher education. This shift in approach is underpinned by increases in higher education fees across a degree’s length and completion of degree debt. Fee increases further emphasise education as a service with fees attached and a university as a service provider, representative of a commodity with a consumer base. This shift towards educational commodification through revised revenue gathering models will augment the financial temperament, character and approach potential students utilise in the breadth of degree selection. The decision making process for potential students where a large commitment of a financial nature is concerned will be amplified and degree offerings scrutinised in a manner associated with any service or product viewed as costly or attracting a sizable debt. Additional cost and additional debt will exacerbate student attitudes as consumers and amplify scrutiny of the services promised and then provided.

In a United Kingdom report in reference to past Australian higher education funding changes; the report corroborates attitudinal change in students toward their place of study and chosen degree.

“Students are more demanding and forthright in voicing their disapproval about process or services they feel are sub-standard.

They are aware of what other institutions are offering and they are constantly comparing throughout the students journey” (Foskett, Roberts, Maringe 2006, p. 55) the same report documented “One institution had students asking for a refund when academic staff held a strike and classes were cancelled. Students complained that they were not getting what they paid for”.

Such an attitudinal disposition has a direct relationship to a user pay sentiment by a consumer for a service. A service as a commodity brings with it a value assessment rating connected to expectations; if the service has been provided or not provided in keeping with expectations that have been formed by an individual to form a rating of an event as experience. Expectations build predeterminations and assessable personal data, which is evaluated against an event to form the level the experience either met, or did not meet expectations. An interpretive judgement is then formed; the perception of the experience reflective, between expectations *versus* a perception of the event or situation that becomes the experience.

Not all events have outcomes that align or are easily assessed against expectations of that event. It is possibly a more complex process an individual undertakes in the interpretation of an experience from *unacceptable* to *acceptable*, if the expectations of that particular experience did not support the experience itself. This would require a process of re-interpretation or re-assessment of the experiences outcomes ranked in different terms of value added by the experience as not expected, versus the experience that simply met all expectations or preconceptions. This type of difference is discussed and interpreted by Wittgenstein (Wittgenstein 1953) as two forms of registering an experience, one attached to the concept of the experience and the other the experience itself. Wittgenstein describes this in two ways ‘*seeing-as*’ being the act of seeing plus interpreting; seeing and being aware of the different possibilities that are present as a choice within that experience and ‘*seeing*’ as the mere act of visual recognition. Wittgenstein asks questions around the two that raise important aspects of an experience.

Central to a questioning of the experience is the notion that experiences are both known personally by the individual and that this form of knowing is internalised and idiosyncratic; Wittgenstein states “*do not try to analyse your experience internally!*” (Wittgenstein manuscript from Schulte, J., 1995) This is explained by Wittgenstein in terms of experience as having limitations associated with an inward approach that is obscured by an individual’s self-analysis rather than an accurately independent outward reflection of an experience. Potential student’s expectations need to be carefully and precisely choreographed, where at all possible, by universities to foster both students own abilities; and institutions abilities to deliver and form accurately interpreted experiences based on expectations that have been established.

Education as Commodity

Changes in generational approaches and societal transformations, fiscal policy and globalisation are amending the mode of operation for universities. Increasingly the diminishing role of the state in university funding has determined that universities are intrinsically part of market forces and wider competition. This movement away from universities as *public good* and towards a model of a service provider has altered the way universities operate and both attract and retain their customers particularly while knowledge is increasingly cultivated as a tradeable global entity. The OECD in 2004 valued education as an export at “*30 billion US dollars or 3% of global services exports in 1998 – Australia with over US\$2 billion*” (OECD 2004, p.32) The shift away from universities as government supported entities; places of knowledge and societal benefit, to, importers and exporters of education as a service is also reframing the business model and operational aspirations of universities. Education and knowledge was and remains the currency, however the ways this currency is exchanged and marketed and the position universities occupy in a society is being reshaped through educational commodification.

“*Higher education contributes to the development and improvement of education at all levels and allows people to enjoy an enhanced “life of the mind”, offering the wider society both cultural and political benefits*” (TFHES 2000, P37). In a new complexity where university education is a commodity and is purchased and with potential contemporary students increasingly with the view that education is a product and can be purchased and used as required; expectations then become increasingly attached to a notion of commodity, “*a substance or product that can be traded, bought, or sold*” (Cambridge University Press 2014, online dictionary).

This idea of *traded* or *bought* infers a different type of engagement and expectations of the rights associated with such a purchase as a consumer. The expectations are also rights and attached to certainty, as with any purchase of any commodity or service through consumer law.

Education has formerly been considered otherwise to the notion of *a service*, however due to elevated fees and students debt and heightened competition from none university provider's student expectations and awareness of consumer rights will elevate. With reference to the Australian higher education system and proposed fee increases in the United Kingdom higher education system it was noted due to increased fees "*students are more demanding and forthright in voicing their disapproval about process or services they feel are sub-standard*" (Foskett, Roberts, Maringe 2006, p. 55.) The report also tabled fee increases as having an impact on student attitudes generally to development of expectations of higher education as a service. It noted that Universities will need to develop '*greater awareness*' of all claims made and implied in recruitment and prospectus literature and to ensure as organisations they are able to deliver fully on those claims.

This new type of exchange is part of a different relationship between a student and a university; a customer and a service provider are concerned with a purchase and an associated recompense rather than knowledge gathering and the examination of that knowledge in a quest for an improved quality of being. Whilst the shape of tertiary education is viewed by students within the consideration of a commodity and the rights of students as consumers is highlighted the balance where university education once rested as 'public good' evolves into a new paradigm. In this new paradigm existing connections are realigned and important nuances tested. The implied vector within an exchange between a customer and a service provider has inherently different qualities than universities have known in previous decades.

Student cohorts of universities are a transient population, bringing with them regular amendments to changing generational needs, attitudes and demands. The opposite of this transient student population is the more static academic and staffing component of the equation. The academic componentry of the equation is for the most the driver and shaper of the student experience; this component is cast with its own generational traditions and backgrounds and less able to adapt to a different mode of operation developed around education as a service. "*A challenge for all institutions was to shift academic staff thinking to a customer service model*" (Foskett, Roberts, Maringe 2006 p, 55.)

As a consumer; why would it be acceptable to make a purchase then not be provided with it, as in a case of paying for a subject at a university then failing that subject and therefore not gaining the credit for, or gaining that product? This type of student experience given a new understanding of consumerism by students is more likely to reflect the courses inability to provide adequate learning opportunities by which to gain a pass grade; then be a reflection of the students own dedication to a course. It could be interpreted, in a consumerist form, as failing due to inadequate services (teaching and learning) provided to that student or the supply of a good or service and its need to be "*reasonably fit for a purpose*" (TACL 2010) when that purpose is gaining a passable grade. The purpose of the service in university terms will need to address more than learning and teaching as the service alone; and venture towards what creates the interpretation of a fulfilled and positive educational experience.

The Future University

In a market where student's awareness's around degree costs are emphasized though higher fees, students positioning as consumers will heighten increases in competition and reshape existing business models and operational modes of tertiary education in an Australian context. "*As higher education in Australia moves toward a demand driven funding model and other potential market reforms are introduced, the business models of established universities will be challenged.*" (Ernest & Young 2011). Previous educational relationships between students and universities operated in a mode other than as 'customer' that mode being complex; historically shaped by the origins of universities as places of monastically hierarchical structure and respect based, rather than consumerist. Knowledge and a university experience historically operated in a mode other than commodity.

Historically universities also were the primary providers of degree based education for many fields of study with competition from none university sector degree providers in many tertiary markets none existent. This model has evolved and changed with many degree offerings from institutions other than universities in the educational market place. In some cases these smaller more agile business models that are not encumbered by unwieldy mechanisms of larger universities and provide a bespoke educational experience for a discreet part of the educational market.

In an educational market with a mentality of tertiary students operating as 'customers' and where competition and new relationships complicate demand and supply; new business models converging on tertiary education as a 'commodity' will provide a different competitive challenge for established universities.

"To survive in the face of increased competition, Universities at risk of losing market share will need a clearly differentiated market position and strong alignment of student experience and brand promise" (Ernest & Young 2011,pg. 4)The strength of time-honoured universities will need to be established clearly and those strengths translated into, on the ground action and the student experience, to compete with more nimble smaller educational offerings.

End Words

Where a precise equilibrium is required between attracting new customers and retaining existing customs a business as usual approach will not serve in this new higher educational paradigm. A different strategy is required; addressing a new paradigm in which, students have a more sophisticated mentality and understanding of their position within the university structure as consumers. *"Keeping customers frequently requires giving more than the basic product than initially attracted them"* (Larry J, Rosenberg John A, Czepiel 1984 pg. 47). Student needs, as customers in an increasing corporate environment of a large university will need to become central to future university business models.

Student expectations of potential degrees and universities will be increasingly built on reputation and expectations constructed around service levels provided as part of, and imperative to a degree and as fundamental to that particular educational experience. These reputations will be determined by the capabilities of universities to move to a new business models where service is valued and incorporated as a primary approach to the student educational experience. In this new business model where a consumer is seeking a service *versus* a student simply enrolled in a university degree; the impetus for customer focused skills as a key component of that service are likely to emerge as drivers for success of degree courses and institutions. *"It was critical to a student experience proposition in the market and to pre enrolment advice and conversation."* (Foskett, Roberts, Maringe 2006 p. 78) In a 2006 report Foskett, Roberts and Maringe identified an elevated consumerism amongst students as representative of a general public increase in consumer attitudes; that would drive a more regular and determined approach to *'questioning and complaints'* about educational and service aspects of higher education by students.

The speed and impact of reputational word of mouth that social media and technology provide has allowed student expectations of potential degrees to be developed on what could be false or flimsy information found on social media. *"According to Nielsen, 92% of consumers believe recommendations from friends and family over all forms of advertising. In a recent study, 64% of marketing executives indicated that they believe word of mouth is the most effective form of marketing."*(Fanning 2014)

Students shaping of experience based on expectations will need to be clearly framed by institutions providing potential students with clarity around what can genuinely be expected and more so crucially delivered. Clarity of communication to potential students will build *'the experience met and exceeded all expectations'* type feedback. Without a clear and concise ability to contribute to students expectations there is little likely hood of an ability by universities to build exceptional experiences particularly were student expectations have been misguided or incorrect from the outset. Delivery on these expectations, as experience, will depend on universities abilities to move the educational setting from an agenda driven by academics solely to a setting that is service capable with students as both learners and consumers. Precise clear and achievable expectations and knowledge conveyed to potential students must be created by accurate marketing, allowing potential student interest to be targeted and shape *real expectations* that can be supported and delivered by universities as the student experience.

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