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Student Relational Bonding – the key to focusing on needs of the individual – a UK study

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ABSTRACT
The marketisation of Higher Education (HE) has created a rhetoric of individuality in terms of how students are defined and the extent to which they as individuals ultimately benefit and flourish. Yet as we propose, the system is actually based on a notion of commonality driven by financial imperatives which affect both the university and the student. To recognise this is not to be controversial but to confirm the rhetoric of what is delivered by universities. We suggest that the recognition of the inherent tensions can have benefits for students and for the university itself and suggest a notion of relationship might provide a worthwhile conceptual framework to effect this. We argue that a fundamental remit of universities should be to implement policies to nurture diversity amongst the cohort and to develop the individuality of each student and demonstrate that the feeling of being treated as a valued individual by academic tutors is fundamental to the symbiotic relationship between students and university. Our findings reveal that the feeling of being treated as an individual is highly significant to the student's experiences. We briefly discuss the managerial implication for this through the lens of relationship marketing.

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Individuality; marketing; students; relationship

Context

As universities, particularly those in the USA and the UK, face an increasingly global market for highly mobile international students, they must also deal with falling public funding (Stephenson & Yerger, 2014) and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Reductions in research grants and falling international student numbers, along with a decline in accommodation, conference and catering income due to Covid-19, have placed significant strain upon the income of some prestigious UK universities (Adams & Carrell, 2020). Further, universities are facing increasing operating costs and have consequently become more reliant upon private donations (Cunningham & Cochi-Ficano, 2001; Dean & McLean, 2021; Weerts & Ronca, 2009; Tsao & Coll, 2005). Indeed, the Covid-19 pandemic comes at a time when the transition of students from dependent learning to co-

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producers and problem solvers has coincided with the concept of students as customers (Furedi, 2011; Olssen & Peters, 2005; Salter & Tapper, 2002; Sines & Duckworth, 1994) who have rights[1] which determine how their teaching is delivered and what level of personal engagement is part of that delivery, especially during the Covid-19 restrictions, when a more assertive narrative of 'customer rights' based on a value-for-money discourse supported by a market-friendly government held sway. The ideological rationale for this support for value seems to contradict the economics of mass higher education provided on an individual basis which has formed part of this debate.

The pandemic has masked much of this argument but the rolling back of Covid-19-related restrictions will not diminish calls for better 'service' at lower prices. This research does not attempt to offer solutions as to how this problem, essentially a marketing one, can be solved, other than to support the rather obvious compromise of blended learning. However, it does attempt to look at student needs in a more nuanced way than do many previous studies (Gibson, 2010; Giese & Cote, 2000; Grove, 2014).

Introduction

We develop our argument firstly by considering the issues of sameness and individualism, with the aim of identifying ways in which universities address both concepts through their educational and service provisions. After stating our theoretical position, we go on to consider student experience based upon the student as an individual. The literature is not very helpful on this subject matter. Much consideration has been given to the concept of the 'student voice' and student-centred programme delivery (see Ashwin, 2020 for a discussion). But to whom does this student voice belong in any particular homogenising discourse and what exactly are institutions seeking to 'satisfy' in terms of individuality? Our argument is based on the premise that a positive student experience and its descriptive attributes, for example the student voice or student-centred teaching, are not about students' individuality and well-being but rather about their artificially constructed sameness[2] which, in this sense, is commodifying (perhaps necessarily so in neo-liberal mass education), and, we might suggest, the pressure for a range of common skills for employment may be alien to their cultural and desired purpose of students when they enter a learned institution. Moreover, we suggest this may affect and create marginalised groups within a university environment. We support attempts to use student surveys at the macro level to indicate where common needs of the student body need to be improved and question whether the use of this collective data is of more value to the institutions' attempts to obfuscate its changing statutary responsibilities than it is to the individual student's needs. We provide indicative evidence that such an approach can work against universities' long-term sustainability, since it contradicts the feeling of individual care that is valued by students, their feeling of belonging and their preparedness to support the university after graduation.

Our position

We begin with an understanding of the difference between sameness and individuality[2] and will try to resist reducing 'difference' to disqualification and exclusion rather than inclusion and absorption. Further, as Deleuze (2014) suggests difference is distinguished

from diversity and otherness by its inter-genus nature and by the resemblance upon which it depends. As regards the concept of the student voice, Young and Jerome (2020) explore what Fielding (2004) and Thiel (2019) have highlighted as institutional power that stifles the notion of student voice such that students are not liberated but rather suffer from the perpetuation of an existing imbalance of power in the higher education sector. This suggests a rather homogeneous, uncritical view of students who can be treated and managed most efficiently as a poorly differentiated whole.[3] Thus, 'student voice' is based upon a concept of what a student is, whereas an individual student's voice is created through acquaintance; not just any student, but this particular student. The personal tutorial approach required to generate such a level of understanding of the individual student voice is expensive, and is improbable given the constrained financial and resource imperatives of universities and neo-liberal government policies. But, in the new normal, it is a challenge we ought creatively to rise to.

We might, for example, ask why a particular female student should be interested in the student experience of commercialised campus events based on consumption of things alien to her culture, such as certain food stuffs? It is her individual voice, not a student voice ascribed to her by the university or the Students' Union, which we need to hear. To hear her directly we need to provide for her self-expression and give space for self-creation of her own identity, one which is more than an example of 'a student' and is a unified and distinct entity in its own right, though it may share certain features with the ubiquitous other which enables her to describe and to autopoiesis or self-style herself as a student (Braidotti, 2013). To do this we need, as we will suggest, a student-centred pedagogical approach that seeks to facilitate, at different levels, both the sameness in terms of a class or genus of student potentiality (in that they have the potential to be engineers, physicians, teachers, artists, etc.) and the way in which students might generate their self-identity, as they perceive it, in their individual 'becoming'.

The potentiality of an individual is an ontological driver of the actuality of becoming what one desires to be, will be or could be. To achieve this liberty requires activities full of political, social and economic power. As individuals, we make our being feasible by questioning the reality of our everyday experiences, in the context of the knowledge we have of ourselves, and with a preparedness and courage to imagine, accept and create new knowledge. Freedom resides in our choice to act on our potential, and potentialities are aligned with the properties of our individuality that determines powers to act. Thus, not all the properties of a thing are equally important to the understanding of the specific activities, relationships, commitments, etc., which give meaning to an individual's identity, yet all of which contribute to our potentialities.

The exploration of our being provides the potential for us to understand our life project and to seek it; to understand being as our becoming is not deterministic but is also emergent. It is not unencumbered: it requires a blending of knowledge and realities in order that we might have the power to reflect and deliberate about the potential impact of our actions. These expressions of individuality are not primarily self-absorbed, for, as Johnson suggests, individuality is 'grounded in an ethical existential commitment to work out one's identity in relation to greater surrounding forces that comprise the individual's horizons of significance' (2014, p. 71). Most importantly, this process is not static but is in constant motion, in flow with complexity and causation.

The acceptance of a dominant societal discourse restricts and enframes our ability to see the openness available to us and imposes an existential horizon where none need be. Realities are thus the foregrounding of entities as manifestations in their actuality based on individual capabilities. Ontologically, several irreducibly distinct mechanisms and potentially emergent levels of reality combine to produce a novel student whose commonality allows for collective teaching based on specific common purposes. However, if education is about flourishing in the context of others (some of whom are themselves seen with homogeneous and often marginalised identities, such as Muslims, BAME, LGBTQIA, scientist, academic, etc.) and the realisation of one's capabilities to evolve, a freely distinctive identity, willed by oneself, then we need a pedagogy which enables this. This would be a pedagogy that enables individuals to be content within themselves, which reflects this specificity and avoids the alienation of self in sameness. It would be a truly student-centred and not a students'-centred pedagogy. A pedagogy of actualisation of our capabilities, we suggest, is through supported self-cultivation (see Gibbs, 2021). Finally, Symonds (2020) makes important observations based on the work of Naidoo and Jamieson (2005), Maringe (2011) and Naidoo and Williams (2015) when she states 'the impersonality that characterises the consumer subjectivity breeds antagonism, which is emphasised by institutional documentation that exacerbates the opposing interests of undergraduates and academics' (Symonds, 2020, p. 5). Further, '[P]ositioning undergraduates as consumers has the potential to lead to a distancing from the pedagogical process' (Symonds, 2020, p. 6).

Much of the work that has been published around the needs of students has appeared through the results of student satisfaction surveys. As we have said, these are useful for sector and institutional macro-decision making but we believe that some of this research contributes to our own work. Early literature has pointed to the importance of student satisfaction as influenced by a range of interconnected and overlapping experiences. Sevier (1996) argued that a university journey is the sum of the student's academic, social, physical and even spiritual journey. While universities have focused on the academic dimension it is important to recognise that students may value their educational dimension by expanding their evaluation to include the social experience, findings supported by Browne et al. (1998). Elliot and Shin (2002) recognise that a composite satisfaction score that incorporates multiple attributes/factors may prove to have more diagnostic value for strategic decision making by the executive leadership team of a university, especially when evaluating resource investments to enrich the individual student experience. Weerasinghe et al.'s (2017) review identified only two studies of student satisfaction which focus on the concern for the individual; these being Elliot and Shin (2002) and Elliot and Healy (2001). Elliot and Healy assess levels of perceived importance and satisfaction and conclude that the 'results of [their] study also show that what students report as being important to them in their overall educational experience is not necessarily the same dimensions that most significantly impact their overall satisfaction with their educational experience' (2001, p. 8). Our premise is that it is individuality, not collective identity, which might help to explain this divergence. Green et al. (2015) identified a range of individual differences that moderated student satisfaction. These included appreciating the expectations of the students from the course, aiding students to develop self-efficacy in their studies

and tailoring engagement to match students' preferred thinking/learning style. Poon (2019) investigated the individual demographic factors on student satisfaction and revealed that age, attendance type, mode of study and proficiency in English were all significant for the student satisfaction factors on an individual basis. Finally, Symonds (2020) makes important observations based on the work of Naidoo and Jamieson (2005), Maringe (2011) and Naidoo and Williams (2015) when she states 'the impersonality that characterises the consumer subjectivity breeds antagonism, which is emphasised by institutional documentation that exacerbates the opposing interests of undergraduates and academics' (Symonds, 2020, p. 5). Further, '[P]ositioning undergraduates as consumers has the potential to lead to a distancing from the pedagogical process' (Symonds, 2020, p. 6).

Research questions

The research attempts to provide preliminary insights into the following statements:

(1) Being treated as an individual manifests itself differently from other student experiences.
(2) Factors affecting students' own positive experience may vary over time and across genders
(3) The student experiences are interwoven but aspects of a student's own experiences of their treatment as individuals is dominant.

A discussion of the results and what they mean for marketing in universities and what it says about the intimate links between administration and academics in the sustainability of the university is then discussed.

Methodology

A draft questionnaire of over 60 questions relating to students' university learning and social experiences was derived from the literature. The questionnaire was scrutinised for its relevance by representatives of two students' unions as well as two focus groups of current students. This robust approach resulted in the acceptance of 42 questions being adopted in our data model. The questions were divided into eight themes: Teaching and Learning; Assessment; Course Administration; Skills Acquired (transferable skills to help secure employment after graduation) at university; Learning Resources; Social Experiences; Aspirations; Individual experience and happiness; Intention to Donate. As a final check on the wording of the questionnaire it was administered to a small pilot sample (30) of students of various backgrounds and ages revealing acceptance of the instrument.

General descriptive results

The administration of the survey instrument resulted in 518 reliably completed questionnaires from four English Russell Group universities in the North of England. The research focused on full time undergraduate students who resided in the UK, which resulted in a final sample of 427 students accepted for analysis. The responses revealed a fairly equal distribution by gender, year of study and age, as can be seen in Table 1.

Statistical considerations

Before beginning work on inferential data analysis, tests are run to consider whether the data are parametric or non-parametric, as this determines which statistical analysis tools will be relevant to the data sets under investigation. Initially, all 42 variables were evaluated for their suitability for parametric analysis. The results in Table 2 confirm that our data meet the conditions of parametric acceptance and thus inferential analysis can be applied as both the skewness and kurtosis values are in the range of −2 to +2, as advocated by George and Mallery (2010). However, a more conservative approach is advocated

Table 1. Sample demographics.

Sample Characteristics	Percentage
Gender	
Male	47.8%
Female	52.2%
Year of Study	
First	36.8%
Second	33.7%
Final	29.5%
Age	
Under 20	36.18%
20	28.89%
21	20.85%
22+	14.07%

Table 2. Means and skewness and kurtosis values of factor groups.

		N	Mean	Median	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Factor 1	Q1 Tutors are friendly and approachable	427	5.36	6	1.07	−0.71	0.39
	Q2 Tutors concerned for student wellbeing	427	4.91	5	1.33	−0.46	−0.20
	Q3 Tutors inspire me to achieve my potential	427	4.76	5	1.34	−0.34	−0.30
	Q4 Lectures and seminars are interesting	427	4.01	4	1.38	−0.03	−0.60
	Q44 Happy with learning experience	427	5.38	6	1.27	−0.90	0.89
	Q48 Treated like individual	427	4.49	5	1.61	−0.59	−0.29
Factor 2	Q5 Tutors amenable to contact	427	5.47	6	1.22	−0.96	0.80
	Q7 Sufficient online learning materials	427	5.43	6	1.27	−0.78	0.46
	Q11 Assessments are relevant to course	427	5.67	6	1.28	−1.00	0.67
	Q12 Assessment guidance given	427	5.23	5	1.26	−0.70	0.72
	Q13 Assessments dissemintated early in the semester	427	5.27	5	1.37	−0.62	−0.15
Factor 3	Q22 Confident in generating creative solutions	426	5.07	5	1.33	−0.58	0.09
	Q23 Confident in delivering presentations	427	4.99	5	1.59	−0.64	−0.22
	Q24 Improved Team working skills	427	5.06	5	1.50	−0.76	0.16
	Q25 Confident in reviewing and critiquing my work	427	5.16	5	1.29	−0.71	0.31
Factor 4	Q32 Confident to try SU clubs / societies	427	4.93	5	1.44	−0.51	−0.11
	Q33 Prices to join clubs are reasonable	427	4.63	5	1.42	−0.24	−0.49
	Q37 Expect career success upon graduating	426	4.69	5	1.36	−0.31	−0.18
Factor 5	Q38 Expect international career	427	4.49	5	1.66	−0.29	−0.69
	Q39 Intend to pursue career in subject studied	427	5.10	5	1.79	−0.75	−0.38
	Q40 Intend to pursue further HE study	427	4.67	5	1.88	−0.38	−0.97
Factor 6	Q27 Global issues awareness	427	5.03	5	1.72	−0.70	−0.32
	Q28 Ethical issues awareness	427	5.22	5	1.57	−0.77	0.04
Factor 7	Q41 Future income influenced course choice	427	4.05	4	1.94	−0.08	−1.12
	Q42 Future income influenced uni choice	427	4.21	4.00	2.013	−0.193	−1.180

by Tabachnick and Fidell (2013) who state that an acceptable range for skewness or kurtosis is below +1.5 and above −1.5. Regardless of which measure is adopted, the data meet the criteria for normality.

Factor analysis results

Orthogonal Varimax rotation was applied to the 42 questions in our survey instrument. The factor results revealed a high Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin factor of .858 and Bartlett's test for Sphericity with a significant chi square value of 5821.16. These results confirm the suitability of the data for factor grouping. The factor analysis test was calibrated to reveal factor loading greater than .49 and this yielded seven-factor groups with 25 items and a combined accountability of the variance of 45.07%.

The seven factors that were identified were:

(1) Student Relational Bonding
(2) Assessment Guidance
(3) Transferable Skills Acquired
(4) Social Experience
(5) Career Aspirations
(6) Awareness of Ethical Issues
(7) Future Income Expectations

In terms of variables associated with each factor, Factor 1 was clustered with a range of pedagogical approaches that tutors adopted to ensure they inspired and remained approachable to students as well as showing concern for students and mentoring them to achieve their potential. This factor also included the variable of 'being treated as an individual' and students being 'happy with learning experience'. The combination of the tutor pedagogical delivery, student well-being orientation and treating students as individuals has culminated in the researchers labelling the factor group 'Student Relational Bonding'.

Testing for multicollinearity

To ensure that the data analysis does not result in any biased findings, especially under regression analysis, it is prudent to test for multicollinearity between the dependent and among the independent variables. Multicollinearity can become a problem in the estimation of linear (or generalised linear) data models (including Cox regression and logistic regression). It can occur for numerous reasons, such as inaccurate dummy variable usage, repetition of similar variable types and the inclusion of one or more variables computed from other variables included in the same data set.

When testing for multicollinearity, it is generally held to be true that the correlation coefficient results should be no greater than 0.9. The results in Table 3 provide evidence that there is no issue of multicollinearity in our data set as all but one of the correlation coefficients between any two variables are less than .5, which Evans (1996) defines as a modest correlation. Thus, regression analysis can confidently be undertaken to identify the key themes that significantly influence overall student experience in higher education.

Table 3. Correlation between factors and Treated like a Indivdual and Satisfaction with Learning Experience.

	Fac1_Student Relational Bonding	Fac2_Assessment Guidance	Fac3 _Transferable Skills Acquired	Fac4_Social Experience	Fac5_Career Aspirations	Fac6_Awareness of Ethical Issues	Fac7_Future Income Expectations	Satisfied with learning experience
FAC1_Student Relational Bonding	1							
FAC2_Assessment Guidance	.476**	1						
FAC3_Transferable Skills Acquired	.390**	.262**	1					
FAC4_Social Experience	.273**	.252**	.314**	1				
FAC5_Career Aspirations	.316**	.157**	.255**	.159**	1			
FAC6_Awareness of Ethical Issues	.162**	.211**	.314**	0.075	.147**	1		
FAC7_Future Income Expectations	0.052	−0.048	0.037	0.031	.264**	0.010	1	
Satisfied with learning experience	.663**	.434**	.284**	.209**	.212**	.176**	−0.028	1

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Research question 1

The analyses above reveal the importance of the student bonding experience as a significant and distinctive factor based on the student attributes of students being treated as individual. As such, it supports the assumptions implicit in the first research question.

Identification of key factor groups that influence the overall student experience

Initially, regression analysis was undertaken to determine which of the seven factor groups most influenced overall the student learning experience. The overall regression model revealed a significant model (F = 58.15 and an R square of .494). To enhance the findings, regression analysis was undertaken for each of the demographic groups to reveal patterns of importance and significance. The regression estimates for each factor group, by demographics, are highlighted in Table 4. The significant beta coefficients have been highlighted in grey and it can be seen that there are five-factor groups: (1) Student Relational Bonding; (2) Social Experience; (3) Assessment Guidance; (4) Career Aspirations and (5) Awareness of Ethical Issues that are important to almost all the demographic groups.

To offer clarity on the importance of each factor group in the regression model a second table has been constructed that highlights the ranking of the top five factors for each demographic group.

The results in Table 5 reveal that the most important factor group, for all the demographic groups, is Student Relational Bonding which has a beta and t value that is more than twice as high as other significant factors (see Table 4). It is interesting to note that Social Experience is the second most important factor group for males and students in their second year and age group under 20 and over 22. It is not surprising to discover that for final year students 'Career Aspirations' takes second place in terms of factors contribution to the learning experience.

The factor analysis values were converted into factor scores to enable the researchers to identify any significant differences based on Gender, Age and Year of study.

Table 4. Overall student regression model.

	Overall model	Gender		Age				Year of Study		
	All	Male	Female	Under 20	20	21	22+	First Year	Second Year	Final Year
(Constant)	5.39	5.42	5.42	5.41	5.40	5.35	5.44	5.31	5.39	5.45
FAC1 Student Relational Bonding	0.62	0.63	0.61	0.68	0.53	0.52	0.65	0.77	0.44	0.59
FAC2 Assessment Guidance	0.27	0.20	0.33	0.28	0.36	0.15	0.23	0.27	0.25	0.28
FAC3 Transferable Skills Acquired	0.05	0.01	0.06	0.02	0.13	−0.04	0.03	0.02	0.11	0.05
FAC4 Social Experience	0.31	0.34	0.28	0.37	0.21	0.18	0.34	0.37	0.24	0.32
FAC5 Career Aspirations	0.26	0.28	0.25	0.17	0.28	0.37	0.35	0.25	0.25	0.35
FAC6 Awareness of Ethical Issues	0.17	0.23	0.12	0.09	0.26	0.24	0.03	0.14	0.23	0.13
FAC7 Future Income Expectations	−0.17	−0.19	−0.13	−0.21	−0.17	−0.25	−0.03	−0.22	−0.14	−0.08

Table 5. Ranking of the top five factor groups for each demographic segment.

	Overall model	Gender		Age				Year of Study		
	All	Male	Female	Under 20	20	21	22 +	First Year	Second Year	Final Year
FAC1 Student Relational Bonding	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
FAC2 Assessment Guidance	3	5	2	3	2	5	4	3	2	4
FAC3 Transferable Skills Acquired										
FAC4 Social Experience	2	2	3	2	5	4	2	2	4	3
FAC5 Career Aspirations	4	3	4	4	4	2	3	4	3	2
FAC6 Awareness of Ethical Issues	5	4	5	5	3	3	5	5	5	5
FAC7 Future Income Expectations										

The results in Table 5 reveal several significant results. For instance, females are far more concerned with being aware of Ethical Issues and Males with a focus on Future Income Expectations. However, it is predominantly first and second year students who are preoccupied with Future Income Expectations. It is interesting to note that Males rated assessment guidance more highly than females. However, the regression results revealed that when you consider other factors in the analysis then Assessment Guidance is much more important to the university experience for Females.

Research question 2

The analysis reveals the importance of the student situation-ness within their experience of higher education albeit that the bonding experience remains the top issue for all groups. As such it supports the assumptions implicit in the first research question

Finally, by way of the financial impact of treating the students as individuals, we considered how all the attributes revealed in the study would correlate with a potential donation to the university (see Table 6). This is admittedly not the only indicator of post-graduate affinity to an institution but provides a tangible concept for the student to identify with, although not common practice in the UK. We compared student Bonded Relations with the other 6 factors. The most significant second Factor was satisfaction with the learning experience and the results are shown below.

Table 6. Correlations with intention to donate.

	Treated like individual	Satisfied with learning experience	Intend to donate to University
Treated like individual	1	.416**	.517**
Satisfied with learning experience	.416**	1	.277**
Intend to donate to University	.517**	.277**	1

Note: The most significant correlation was found with treating students as individuals.
*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Research question 3

The use of the proxy – intention to donate to the university to suggest a financial reason why Student Bonding Relationships are important tended to support the proposal. As such it supported the assumptions implicit in the first research question.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to identify which university experiences influenced students' experience and the findings reveal that the student's individual Student Relational Bonding with staff and other is the most important factor. This factor was maintained over all the demographics and time spent at the university. Other factors which also influence the experience varied again by gender, age and year of university experience. Finally, when we used the proxy of donations to affinity with the university Student Relational Bonding which again was the most significant factor. These results shine a light on the value of the development of Student Relational Bonding for individual student gain as well as the potential institutional gains and not at the level of the individual where care and development are key to the student experience. There is some indication for relationship advocacy and this paper provides support to these moves based upon Freirean philosophy of pedagogy and other models of relational and relationship-rich education (e.g. Bovill, 2020; Felten & Lambert, 2020).

Bovill (2020) argues that research literature suggests that it takes time to build relationships and for this to create a sense of community is central for students to have a positive experience and successful outcomes at university. Building on this, Felten and Lambert (2020) advocate fostering meaningful and sustained relationships that are key to students' college successes not only at exclusive elite, resource-rich institutions but can also be replicated at all other institutes. This journey starts with having well-timed conversations and seizing everyday opportunities to support, elaborating on the power of meaningful and multiple learning-oriented relationships in undergraduate education to address the challenges many colleges are facing to sustain, retain and grow their recruitment with the shift to online education that COVID-19 has brought.

There is a wide range of issues that this research might pose to institutions and their marketing strategies: we discuss only one here and how it applies to institutional practices of recruitment and progression of students. An early example is Raciti and Mitchell (2006) who adopted a relationship model of marketing to students and found that students could articulate a definition of relationships, and most desired a relationship with their lecturer/tutor and that these relationships were best initiated by the lecturer. In this journal, two early examples are Yang et al.'s (2008) finding of the variant intertwining relation of relationships and institutional reputation and Basheer (2006) who found, amongst other things, that higher relationship quality resulted in better relationship continuity. In Japutra et al.'s more recent article (2021 and again in this Journal) they found that for new recruits to higher education self-congruity with the university brand enhanced involvement and the benefits that bring. They suggest that higher education institutions should position themselves as experts in enhancing students and this requires the engagement of all members of the university staff and academics.

Important as these marketing approaches are, their fundamental grounding requires a more nuanced underpinning to understand the student both prior to and within the institution. This would bring into reflection the recruitment marketing regarding claims in advertising, school visits and in discussion with potential students and staff. The potency of this marketing would be predicated on an ethos of the individual and would be evident in the institution. We suggest themes such as individual flourishing rather than economic return on investment. This would require managerial influence to mobilise the institutional resources on individual well-being and flourishing in an academic environment in ways other than, but not excluding, economic value of the higher education experience. This would be a skilful message to deliver one, which does not lose the distinctiveness and purpose of the institution, but focuses on the different forms of student relationship that they might desire. Any such message must be fair and truthful and recognition of such a strategy ethos puts further pressure on the time for academics and their scholarly duties. Such pressure was evident in the Covid-19 crisis and lessons can be learnt. It also challenged institutional strategic priorities at a time of financial pressures on income and spending. Indeed, the UK Minister of State for Higher and Further Education, Michelle Donelan, has indicated her desire for such veracity in the use of 'transparent advertising; by universities which would include non-continuance data at the university (16.2.2022, Speech to UCAS). This would be a huge challenge for many universities to put relationships at the centre of their teaching and learning.

Conclusion

This research has revealed the significance of treating students as an individual at university, rather than just as a number. This is new to the UK sector. However, the current trend of adopting a hybrid model of learning in many higher education institutes in a post-Covid world may result in a greater contact or disconnect between students and academics. The researchers would recommend that further research is undertaken on the importance of students being treated as individuals and how this can be achieved at all academic levels for all demographic groups. We believe that if the academic imperative is to remain dominant in higher education then managements must find ways of recognising individuality in both its academic and non-academic practices and at a price which makes student well-being sustainable.

Limitations of research

It is recognised that all research projects have limitations to some extent and this research project was undertaken with every precaution to limit any undue factors that could impinge upon the integrity of its findings. One limitation of this research project is that the data gathered by the questionnaire came from students at only a relatively small number of universities: thus, it is recommended that this study be replicated among a wider sample base, and also internationally, to confirm and enrich the findings. We also would suggest widening the mythological approach to incorporate individual phenomenological interviews.

Notes

1. See The Office for Students https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/for-students/student-rights-and-welfare/.
2. In Chapter 7 of Book 1 of the *Topics* Aristotle considers the concept of sameness and divisibility.
3. This pertains even when the student body is crudely differentiated mainly on demographic and socio-economic segmentation.

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