

Get a life! Students' Strategic Development of Identity

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Abstract

This empirical study of first year undergraduate business and management students explores how they construct their identity on arrival at university. The study aims to generate fresh insights and understanding of the experiences of students, processes and practices in higher education.

The research explores the concepts of 'student as consumer' and 'identity as social comparison' and builds on the work of Usher, Bryant and Johnston (1997), who argue that it is a 2:1 degree classification being consumed rather than goods and services. Adding further complexity to this debate we suggest that students, through a process of social comparison, are also consuming the development of identity. Here we draw on work of Knights and Roberts (1982), Knights and Wilmott (1985, 1999) who argue that an individual or group's identity depends on how others regard and represent them.

This study surveys all first year students on undergraduate business and management degree programmes in a new university Business School. Data was collected from groups of 4-5 students who responded to three structured research questions. In addition a small number of semi structured interviews were carried out along with an online survey.

Working from an interpretive position, we argue that the research findings suggest that students construct their identity through comparative social processes in relation to past experiences, current understandings, and future expectations and aspirations. This draws together the interactive, systemic relationship between transitional experiences of moving into higher education, experiences of recognising they are a student, and expectations of learning in higher education. Consequently, we develop a framework describing the content and processes of identity formation that students undergo on their arrival into higher education.

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Introduction

Within higher education reference to students as 'consumer' is growing at an increasing rate. This debate is complex and controversial as students, educators, and managers' different understandings of 'consumer' come together.

Our study of first year undergraduate business and management students enters this debate through an exploration of the experiences of students. The paper firstly provides a contextual background outlining the relevance of this topic of study, then reviews the literature that the study draws on including the concepts of 'consumerism and higher education' and 'identity and social comparison'. Moving from here the paper outlines the methods used and our approach to research. The penultimate section explores the findings and draws on the data to present a conceptual framework. In the concluding section we build on the research presented within this paper and offer recommendations for further research.

The study surveys all first year students on undergraduate business and management degree programmes in a new university Business School. Data was collected in seminar groups within which several smaller groupings of 4-5 students were invited to respond to three structured research questions using a 'flip chart' method for recording thoughts and feelings. All seminar groups took place in the second teaching week of term. In addition a small number of semi structured interviews were carried out along with an online survey.

From an interpretive position we used content analysis to group data under distinct themes within each question and retained the language used by students in order to closely represent the students' perspectives.

The findings suggest that students construct their identity through comparative social processes in relation to past experiences, current understandings, and future expectations and aspirations. This draws together the interactive, systemic relationship between transitional experiences of moving into higher education, experiences of recognising they are a student, and expectations of learning in higher education. Consequently, we develop a framework describing the content and processes of identity formation that students undergo on their arrival into higher education.

The findings of this research are propositional, designed to inform future learning and teaching practice for colleagues engaged in the delivery of undergraduate programmes. We have gained increased insights and understanding of students' experiences and expectations in the development of their identity at university. As a result we are now in a more informed position to influence processes and practices in higher education.

Higher Education Context

In the United Kingdom (UK) there has been steady growth over the last 4 years in the number of students on full and part time undergraduate degree courses in business and management (Table 1).

INSERT TABLE 1

The steady increase in the number of students has been accompanied by increased competition evidenced by the growth in the number of business and management providers over the last 10 years from less than 60 to 160.

Our interest in this study stems from our experiences of teaching and researching with first year students and how they appear to be engaging with their studies. The challenge for teaching staff is how to engage the interests and energy of students and channel that interest into intellectual engagement with the subject of study. With large cohorts of students this challenge is particularly difficult as the curriculum tends towards repeat tutorials which require an element of standardisation and similarity to ensure that as far as possible all students receive a similar learning input. Identity becomes an important issue in a system where the potential for alienation as a result of mass higher education, which is unable to recognise individual needs.

We have become curious about what is happening to students in relation to how they create their identity. This understanding enables the development of insights into the processes of academic work and cultures in higher education.

Consumerism and Identity: A Review of Literature

This section reviews relevant literature in two key theoretical areas: that of ‘consumerism and higher education’ and ‘identity and social comparison’. The discussion developed throughout this review asserts that students are being viewed as consumers. Furthermore, that due to their anxiety in the light of new and unknown situations, students seek formation of identity through a process of social comparison. Thus, it could be argued that one of the things students are consumers of is their identity.

Consumerism and higher education

Driven by a programme of ‘modernization’ of public services in the United Kingdom, and a rationale that involves the need to maintain and enhance quality in a system of mass higher education, consumerist mechanisms have been applied to the development and delivery of curricula in higher education. This has seen the emergence of the ‘student-consumer’ where:

Education is likely to be reconceptualised as a commercial transaction, the lecturer as the ‘commodity producer’ and the student as the ‘consumer’. [These] Consumerist mechanisms have the effect of reforming academic values and pedagogic relationships to comply with market frameworks

(Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005, p.270f)

This shift towards the commodification of higher education sees the ultimate consumer goal for a student as being a good degree classification leading to a well-paid job. An argument supported by Usher, Bryant and Johnston (1997) who suggest that it is a 2:1 degree classification, that is being consumed rather than goods and services. From this perspective a university's task is to equip students with specific competencies. Within this paper consumerism is viewed as an exchange process between an organisation and a consumer, where the consumer receives some 'benefit(s)' in return for some 'cost(s)' (Brassington and Pettitt, 2000).

The distinction between students as consumers of services and staff as providers of services is growing. Dearing (1997) highlighted the emergence of the 'student as customer' who would not necessarily accept what the university offered as had often been the case in the past. There are therefore tensions surrounding the view of students as consumers or customers (Lomas and Tomlinson, 2004). Students are able to identify the means and gain access to acquire 'products' with minimal and instrumental engagement in a process that promotes strategic and surface learning (Saljo, 1979; Marton and Saljo, 1976). Thus, learning relies on memory, rote learning of factual information, and disjointed ideas, such surface learners are described as externally motivated viewing the task of learning as an external imposition (Biggs, 1987) an approach described by Freire (1996) in his 'banking-model' of education.

Conversely it could be (and is) argued that higher education is not just another service organisation as the provider of education is "doing something to the customer rather

than just doing something for the customer” (Harvey and Green, 1993, p.24). The rhetoric of consumerism and instrumentality, in part created out of the drive for an industrial model of quality through standardisation and modularisation of academic programmes, has overtaken a focus on scholarship (Furedi, 2003). Furedi argues strongly that students are not customers as they cannot be clear about what they need because of their lack of experience in higher education. Lecturers need to encourage students to question and challenge their values, assumptions and pre-conceived ideas, a notion supported by Freire (1996) in his ‘problem-posing’ approach to education. However, as discussed earlier, this can be unpopular with students (Grisoni, 2005) who prefer a more ‘banking-model’ (Freire, 1996) approach towards their education. Lomas and Tomlinson’s (2004) findings support the idea that lecturers dislike the notion of ‘student as customer’, and whilst lecturers in business and management appear more comfortable with the concept than lecturers from other disciplines, even they are still uncomfortable about the notion of students ‘driving’ the higher education process.

Furedi (2003) recognises that universities have become increasingly centralised and customer focused. He does not believe that this has led to greater efficiency or rationality but that it has resulted in an increasingly bureaucratised system. Thus, he considers that educational skill and competence is viewed as consumption rather than focusing on the ideals of knowledge. It could be argued that this view drives out creativity, complexity, ambiguity and ultimately learning as all participants in the process (both staff and students) collude with a cultural norm which tends towards instrumentalism and strategic approaches to learning (Tait and Entwistle, 1996; Grisoni, 2005).

The recent massification of higher education in the UK has attracted claims that it has become another mass production industry Scott (1995). Furedi (2003) argues that the drive for quantity over quality has led to the relationship of staff and students being mediated through an expanding bureaucracy. The informal relationship between staff and students has been turned into a contractual one, which results in a conflict of interest between the provider and the consumer. Leaving educators locked in a tension between providing the homogenous product required by contract and the necessary diversity and freedom they need in order to cater for the needs of diverse students. A recent study by Grisoni (2005) suggests students deal with this tension by developing the skills to manage their learning efficiently, but without engaging fully or deeply in the processes of learning.

In summary, this increasing, and often controversial, rhetoric of consumerism in higher education can be seen through the writings of several authors including, amongst Scott (1995), Lomas and Tomlinson (2004), and Furedi (2003). Moreover, Usher, Bryant and Johnston (1997) argue that it is a 2:1 degree classification, that is being consumed rather than goods and services. However, they then suggest that consumption in higher education is not so much about goods and services per se, but about signs and significations. Where consumer objects function as a classification system that codes behaviour and differentiates individuals, becoming markers of difference. According to Bourdieu (1984) consumption, or the active use, of goods and services, enables people to establish and demarcate a distinctive social space (Usher, Bryant and Johnston, 1997).

This consumer culture therefore becomes an economy of signs used by individuals and groups to communicate messages about social position and worth in comparison to other social groupings. Synthesising these two discussions, this paper offers further complexity by suggesting that students are also consuming the development of identity. The following section explores literature in relation to identity and social comparison.

Identity and Social Comparison

In order to ground the research within relevant theoretical frameworks the seminal works on identity and social processes by social psychologists Festinger (1954) and Tajfel (1974) are outlined and their respective notions of ‘social comparison’ and ‘social identity’ are built on.

Whilst not explicitly using the word ‘identity’ Festinger (1954) discusses an underpinning mechanism of identity which is comparison of the self to other. In considering the issue of social comparison Festinger recognises the concept of self-evaluation and suggests that social influences and some kinds of competitive behaviour are borne out of the desire for self-evaluation based on positive comparison with others, thus forming the basis of the ‘Theory of Social Comparison’.

Building on Festinger’s (1954) Theory of Social Comparison, Tajfel’s (1974) Social Identity Theory contains three central ideas: categorisation, identification, and comparison, and focuses on understanding group behaviour rather than individual behaviour. Tajfel considers Festinger’s (1954) theory of Social Comparison (and the issue of self-evaluation) as emphasising the ‘inter-individual’ and neglecting the

importance that multiple group membership has on an individuals' identity formation. As such, Tajfel attempts to understand the psychological basis of intergroup behaviour and outgroup discrimination (Van Dick, 2001) and not develop a theory of the self (Cinnirella, 1998).

Becoming a member of a group has implications for the way that we see ourselves (Brown, 1988). One of the most elementary aspects of group membership is the experience of common fate, the understanding that one's outcomes are bound up with those of others. Groups evolve systems of norms, which govern behaviours, they help individuals understand their environment and provide the means by which behaviour is regulated. They also facilitate the achievement of group goals and express aspects of the group's identity (Brown, 1988). Thus 'students' being categorised as such, or categorising themselves as such, enables a basis from which to understand them in relation to the social environment in which they operate. This is supported by Turner's (1982, 1984, 1987) self-categorization theory which, whilst retaining a focus on group processes, does have more than Social Identity Theory to say about the nature of the self (Cinnirella, 1998).

Within this study 'identity' is where behaviour is defined by reference to the norms of the group and characterised by the behaviours of those who belong to it. Group membership is a central part of 'personal identity' which, along with 'social identity', forms Tajfel's identification category within Social Identity Theory. Knights and Wilmott (1985) suggest that the aim of forming a social identity is to alleviate the anxiety and insecurity of uncertainty and unpredictability, where social relationships are a necessity of identity which "involves a securing of self through an instrumental

participation in social relations” (p27). As such, it could be argued that the relations formed between students entering higher education are made in order to cope with the anxieties raised by being in a new situation, with new and unknown demands.

In returning to Festinger’s (1954) theory of social comparison, which is also the third category within Tajfel’s Social Identity Theory, we compare ourselves with others to assess the correctness of our beliefs thus anchoring identity through group membership. This is supported by Knights and Wilmott (1999) who suggest that “the identity of an individual (or a group) is dependent on how she/ he are regarded and represented by others” (p.19).

As such it could be argued that this desire for self-evaluation based on positive comparison with others enables students to establish and demarcate a distinctive social space which, as outlined earlier, is signified through the consumption, or the active use, of goods and services Bourdieu (1984). Hence, if we argue that consumer culture is an economy of signs used by individuals and groups to communicate messages about social position and worth in comparison to other social groupings, we are in other words arguing that students are consuming their identity.

It is these concepts of ‘consumerism’ and ‘identity and social comparison’ which are explored within this study. This paper argues that the label ‘student’ enables individuals and groups to place themselves within a social framework, thus it is not just a degree that is being consumed but also the identity of being a ‘student’.

Methodology and Methods

Working from an interpretive position where “social reality is the product of its inhabitants; it is a world which is already interpreted by the meanings which the participants produce and reproduce as a necessary part of their everyday activities together” (Blaikie, 1993, p.48). We adopt an inductive and exploratory approach to generate theory, our position is abductive (Blaikie, 1993) with a concern for explanation and prediction where:

“everyday concepts and meanings
provide the basis for
social action/interaction
about which
social actors can give accounts
from which
social scientific descriptions can be made,
from which
social theories can be generated.”

(Blaikie, 1993, p.177).

We aim to develop ‘fuzzy generalisations’ as a way of “generalising the results of educational research...that does not exceed the level of confidence which can be reasonably given to them” (Bassey, 2001, p.5). Hammersley (2001) sees the value of fuzzy generalisations as the difficulties of controlling the multiplicity of interacting variables in social research making generalisation difficult. He acknowledges that it is possible to have theoretical knowledge of causal relationships when precision and

completeness might be impossible. Whilst we have been able to conduct a whole cohort study we would still have reservations about generalising our findings across other groups of first year students.

Methods

Our research inquiry comprises a number of different stages that have developed as a result of a planned intention to survey first year students' early experiences at university. We piloted an exploratory survey for first year students in their first few weeks of attendance in three tutorials out of 32 in 2002/3. This was followed in 2003/4 with 4 tutorials out of 36 (940 students). The survey was run as a seminar activity in order to examine the concept of 'psychological contract' which formed part of the module curricula. What emerged from this were initial findings and a realisation that the method of collecting data from a large number of students could be accessed through the use of flip charted responses in small groups of 4-5 students.

In addition, during 2003/4, six in-depth semi structured interviews were conducted with first year students in their first term at university. The purpose of these interviews was to develop a picture of first year students' experiences, together with their approaches to learning and study. Emergent themes from the stories contained in these interviews began to contribute a richness and depth to our developing understanding of students' identity and early engagement with university.

In 2004/5 a refined survey of all (849) first year students on undergraduate business and management degree programmes in a new university Business School was

undertaken. Data was collected in seminar groups within which smaller groupings of 4-5 students were invited to respond to three structured research questions using a 'flip chart' method for recording thoughts and feelings. All seminar groups took place in the second teaching week of term providing a data collection point from which to base our emerging findings.

To date, in September/October 2005 all (857) first year business and management students were invited to contribute to an on-line survey, which included open questions regarding their expectations of learning in a higher education environment.

Data Analysis

In relation to the survey data, content analysis (Morgan, 1993) was applied to group data under distinct themes using a basic A-Z thematic sort. The language used by students was retained in order to represent closely the students' perspectives. Narrative analysis (Manning and Cullum-Swan, 1994) was used to examine student interviews and online survey responses.

Data Presentation, Findings and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the data and findings. Three themes were identified from the data: 'exchange', 'cultural signifiers' and 'social comparison'. Each theme is discussed drawing illustrations from the data and with reference to the previous literature review. Whilst these themes are discussed separately it is not intended to suggest that they are mutually exclusive, as such, the final section explores connections between each theme.

Throughout the discussion the assertion that students are being viewed as consumers is explored. This considers the notion that, on their arrival into higher education, students are consuming the development of their identity through a process of social comparison which, as shown in Figure 1, is an interactive, systemic relationship of exchange between the three themes identified from the data.

INSERT FIGURE 1

Exchange

Within this paper consumerism is defined as an exchange process between an organisation and a consumer where the consumer receives some ‘benefit(s)’ in return for some ‘cost(s)’ (Brassington and Pettitt, 2000). In order to explore whether students perceive themselves as consumers the data is examined for references to: gains (benefits) and losses (costs); difference between new (benefit) and old (cost) environments; positive (benefit) and negative (cost) emotional responses; and the recognition of personal development (benefit or cost).

When asked about their experience of the transition to university students identified things they were gaining (benefits) and things they were giving up (costs). For example ‘gaining’ was often accompanied by adjectives such as more and lots and adjectives such as lack, less, and no, often accompanied ‘giving up’. These are illustrated respectively by the following student comments: ‘more freedom’, ‘more independence’, ‘lots of responsibility’ and conversely, ‘lack of money’, ‘no parents’, ‘less formal’. Thus students can be seen in terms of consumers as they are gaining some benefit (more, lots etc) in return for some cost (less, lack etc).

This process of exchange, with student as consumer, is also supported when students recognise their new environment in relation to their old environment:

“The university lifestyle is extremely different to anything I have experienced in terms of studying in this environment so far the greatest difference is going back to my halls of residence and not having my family there. Even though I am not missing them the reality that I’m living with five strangers is hard.”

(Online student survey)

Referring to learning environments many contrasts between school and university are drawn, these are in relation to approaches to teaching, student/staff contact, and structure of learning experiences:

“At school/college there is more one on one interaction with the teachers and also there are question and answer based lessons, but at university the modules are all taught in a very different way with less personal interaction between the student and the lecturer/professor/teacher.”

(Online student survey)

Both of the above quotes suggest that students recognise that they have given up something (cost) to gain access to their new environment (benefit), again supporting the idea that students operate as consumers.

The differences experienced by students in relation to their benefits and costs generate a mixed set of emotions including ‘fun’, ‘excitement’, ‘scared’, ‘daunting’, ‘lonely’, ‘hate’, ‘unsettled’ and ‘stressful’. These influence how students engage with learning.

“I am getting bored but I am getting more used to the student lifestyle. When I go back at Christmas I am starting my old job again so it’s going to be a bit of a shock going to bed early and getting up at 8 o’clock in the morning ... I never thought it would be like that actually. People said, ‘ yeah you don’t get up until late, you don’t go to bed until late’ and stuff like that and I was like, ‘ nah’... it’s a really laid back lifestyle which I didn’t think it would be. I don’t know why, I just thought you had more stuff to do.”

(Student interview)

As discussed it is possible to view students as being consumers, what they appear to be consuming here are the differences and emotional experiences that accompany the transition to university and the development of a new state of being. The data suggests that this state of being comprises of an overwhelming recognition of independence, financial expense, freedom, responsibilities, and a focus on self particularly in relation to organising.

“Its more empowered and more freedom, you can do whatever you want and its all your responsibility to study for your own benefit. There won’t be teachers forcing you to do so.”

(Online student survey)

In addition, students establish strategic and instrumental approaches to learning (Tait and Entwistle, 1996) early on.

“I’ll do enough to get through, its only 40% [to pass the first year] and worry about next year later.”

(Student interview)

The combination of benefits and costs, differences in terms of recognition of the ‘newness’ of university life, and the emotional responses provoked, is significant as it leads to recognition of a new state of being. This is represented by a range of signs and symbols (Bourdieu, 1984; Usher et al, 1997) that are identified as significant to students on entering university and developing their identity. The dominant cultural signifiers raised in the data are now explored.

Cultural Signifiers

Several signifiers emerged from the data as important to students in recognising that they are students, these related to the transition to, and engagement with, the university; and signs and symbols, including many issues surrounding money.

Data suggests that students know that they are students through a range of transitions that appear to influence the nature of their engagement with the university. When asked how they knew they were a student, a large response was in relation to transitions and the differences experienced in social groups to which they had previously been exposed (i.e. family, school, work etc) e.g. ‘more independent’, ‘more freedom’, ‘living away from home’:

“Being treated like an adult and having a lot more freedom.”

(Online student survey)

‘Responsibilities’ are also a feature of the transition which, when linked with ‘independence’, indicates a transition involving a shift onto the students’ individual resources for engaging with higher education and the experiences surrounding ‘attending’ lectures, seminars and university in general.

“It will be a less protected environment than what I have currently been used to, so I will be having to use my own initiative a lot more and rely a lot less on the teachers. Also, I will have to develop good time management skills as I realise with university life comes an active social life and I have to be able to balance both work and socialising. I realise that teachers will not keep on reminding us when work has to be in like at school so I will have to remember and stick to deadlines to make sure that my work is marked on time so that I do not fall behind in my work.”

(Online student survey)

Students' sense of identity appears dominated by a set of signs and symbols to a greater degree than Usher et al (1997) suggest, most noticeably these include official indicators of student identification cards and confirmation from UCAS. Coupled with official indicators, social symbols are also heavily represented, these include living in student accommodation, cooking and looking after themselves, socialising, and drinking alcohol.

“Balancing everything else such as money, food, social life is new”

(Student interview)

Money issues form a significant set of symbols important to students' identity. There is a strong sense of being 'poor' and 'in debt' with reference to 'loans' and 'overdrafts' featuring strongly. A focus on 'cheap' food, drink, and 'discounts' sits alongside the 'cost of text books', 'fees', and 'expenses' on household items such as rent and other expenditure. The sense of financial insecurity caused by high outgoings in relation to low budgets provides a dilemma over what to prioritise. Spending money on higher education seems to sit uncomfortably with preferences for spending money on socialising; this dilemma itself appears to be a strong cultural signifier for being a student

Students engage in transitions into a new way of life with new responsibilities, where tangible formal and social elements need to be acquired. Engagement with other

students in terms of becoming identified as a member (Tajfel, 1974; Brown, 1988) of the group is of primary importance. The ability to self evaluate the nature of the transition (Festinger, 1954; Brown, 1988) and be able to articulate the membership through the use of signs and symbols (Bourdieu, 1984) and other signifiers (Usher et al, 1997) forms confirmation of group membership. Data suggests that the ability to purchase commodities associated with student identity enable students to make comparisons with others in terms of their group membership. This process of social comparison ensures that expectations are reinforced and normalisation of group behaviours occurs and is explored further below.

Social comparison

Exploring the data for comparison between social groups includes statements that relate to the processes students go through as a consumer; the check they make to ensure that they are going through the process; and the ‘benefit’ that they expect to gain as a consumer. These aspects build together to develop our understanding of identity and social comparison (Festinger, 1954; Tajfel, 1974).

The type of processes students anticipate include ‘challenging’ ‘expanding’, ‘improving’, ‘increasing’, ‘self motivation’ and ‘independence’. These are processes of becoming and being able to perform in ways which are seen as improvements on current skills and abilities.

The check that they make to ensure that they know they are going through the process is one of anticipated comparison. Reference to words such as ‘harder’, ‘higher level

and standard', 'more'... '- independent learning'; '- laid-back'; '- responsibility' are used.

“I believe the greatest difference will be the standard of work which will be much higher as it will be in more depth than college or school.”

(Online student survey).

At this point the process of learning and becoming independent is referred to and comparisons are made to confirm group belonging and membership. For example, first year students tend to view each other similarly with similar expectations and this is reinforced by the university treating them homogeneously in a mass education system.

“Understandably due to the very large number of people in each lecture, individuals will not be given as much attention as I am used to.”

(Online student survey).

Significantly 'making' new friends and 'meeting' new people which will 'open' up 'doors', 'minds' and 'opportunities' forms part of the students' aspirations and also provides a valuable self evaluative check that forms part of group membership. (Brown, 1988).

“ I feel quite lucky about the people in my flat, I get on really well with them and I think that could have been difficult and

made things a lot harder, but at the moment I am quite pleased with the people I have been put with so that's made things a lot easier."

(Student interview).

Whilst each of the three themes has been discussed individually, the framework presented earlier (figure 1) reflects the importance of interactions between them. The following discussion explores these interactions and considers the implications for learning and teaching practice.

Discussion

This paper argues that students are consumers of the development of their identity, the sense that this process is happening is found in the interaction between the three themes of 'exchange', 'cultural signifiers', and 'social comparison'. The framework developed in this paper (figure 1) describes the content and processes of identity formation that students undergo on their arrival into higher education.

Students arrive at university with particular expectations of what it means to be a student. They rapidly establish their identity through processes that involve comparison with previous learning environments (i.e. school), experiences with other social groupings (i.e. fellow students, staff, etc), and reflections on the content of their new culture and environment.

Data in this study suggest that students anticipate ‘gaining’ and ‘getting’ a good degree, which will give them ‘good career’ prospects and a ‘high paid job’:

“I know very much what I want, I want to work in motor sport and I will not work in anything else unless I have to...I would love to have my own motor sport company.”

(Student interview).

“My aim is to get a first class honours degree and have high grades from all modules and I know I can do this.”

(Online student survey).

This supports the argument that students are consuming (or aiming to consume) a good degree classification (Usher et al, 1997). Adding further complexity to the discussion, this paper suggests that the process that students go through to reach this end point is one of social comparison through which they also consume cultural signifiers and the development of their identity as student. It could be argued that the role of student comprises two components; a social/personal element and a formal/professional element. Data suggests that students engage fully and deeply with the former and adopt an instrumental or mechanistic approach to the latter.

In relation to developing an understanding of the implications for learning and teaching practice the single most mentioned item across the research data refers to ‘independence’. The recognition by students that they will have more independence and become more independent in relation to their learning, suggests an expectation of

a ‘problem posing’ approach (Freire, 1996) to higher education which emphasises the importance of a dialogue between ‘student-as-teacher’ and ‘teacher-as-student’, and is different from their previous experiences. However, evidence for a student-driven ‘banking model’ (Freire, 1996) is desired in relation to approaches and attitudes towards learning and study.

“They [the tutors] tell you its going to be different but they don’t say how to go about it...There’s a greater expectation that you will study on your own and we should know how to do that.”

(Student interview)

A minimal approach to learning is also in evidence:

“We are asked to do reading before tutorials – not many do it because tutors just go over the stuff again anyway.”

(Student interview)

This suggests that there is tension in the education system between students’ expectations that they will have to work independently with minimal staff contact, and students’ demand for guidance to achieve results. This demand, coupled with a shift towards the commodification of higher education and resultant structure of lectures and seminars, emphasises a shift (back) towards what Freire (1996) refers to as the ‘banking’ concept of education, where education becomes:

...an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat.

(Freire, 1996, p.53)

The application of consumerist mechanisms within higher education lead to a student (consumer) driven desire for a ‘banking model’ of education where information is deposited, memorised, and regurgitated in exchange for a good grade. This is vis-à-vis a ‘problem-posing’ approach (Freire, 1996) and has wide ranging implications for learning and teaching practice. This paper argues that students adopt this consumer exchange approach to their learning also argues that their identity becomes shaped around acquisition and purchasing the trappings (cultural signifiers) of being a student. This includes not only obtaining a good degree, but also a way of life and thus the development of their identity.

Concluding Remarks

Reflecting on the findings presented within this paper, future research could explore the relevance of our framework with students from different academic disciplines, with other types of higher education institutions, and with other social groups. This would help us identify whether the framework developed is a peculiarity of business and management students or more widely held. Additionally, future research could follow students progression through their studies focusing on the ongoing

development of their identity, to further expand our understanding of the meaning of 'being a student'.

Having gained interesting insights into what being a student means in the first year of study we are left with a challenging dilemma. If students view themselves as consumers how should we as staff engage with them? Do we reinforce their identity as consumers in the learning and teaching approaches we adopt and create a closer alignment with the business and management world that students enter on completion of their studies? Or, do we challenge students' identity by promoting more independent approaches to learning and teaching, and risk student dissatisfaction?

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Table 1: UK Business and Management Student Numbers by Type. (Source: HESA, 2005).

Figure 1. Framework of students as consumers of identity

	Full time Undergraduate	Part time Undergraduate	Totals
2000-1	122,095	38,515	160,610
2001-2	124,925	40,065	164,990
2002-3*	148,160	41,950	198,125
2003-4*	149,965	49,350	199,315

Table 1: UK Business and Management Student Numbers by Type. (Source: HESA, 2005).

* The figures for 2002-3 and 2003-4 for full time students are significantly different from preceding years as a consequence of changes in the way in which joint and half award students are allocated to different subject categories. The introduction of ‘fractation’ has led to a significant increase in the number of UK domiciled half and joint award students (Association of Business Schools, 2004).

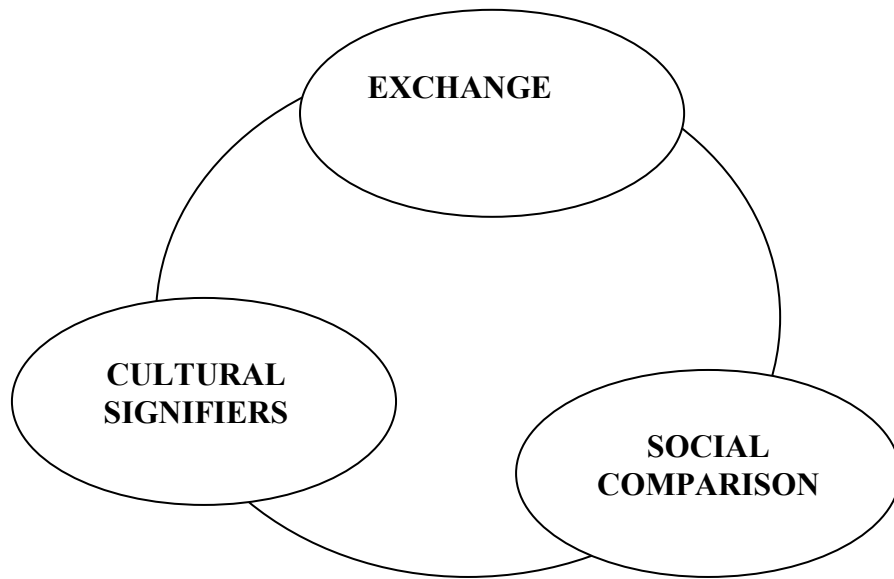


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