Strengthening commencing students' sense of purpose: Integrating theory and practice

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Abstract
This session outlines evidence in support of the proposition that commencing students' sense of purpose is a key factor in both their satisfaction and persistence at university. Sense of purpose would appear to be the key motivational foundation for students' academic and career self-regulation. The challenges and opportunities identified by students in sustaining a sense of purpose are also presented. Preliminary evaluation findings from a number of purpose-building activities are outlined.

Empirical foundations

A recent large scale cross-disciplinary whole-of-institution study of commencing students (n =2,500) identified a range of factors that contributed to students' satisfaction, academic achievement and retention. Commencing students completed a self-report survey of their experiences, intentions and expectations of university and these responses were matched with demographic (e.g., cultural, linguistic and socioeconomic) and academic achievement (e.g., TE score, GPA) and enrolment (e.g., retention) data. The structure of the survey was based on the 'five senses of success' transition framework (viz., sense of connection, capability purpose, resourcefulness and academic culture) (Lizzio, 2006).

Data was analysed using multilevel modelling and regression analyses in order to test predictive relationships between process (viz., student characteristics and experiences) and outcome (viz., student satisfaction, achievement and retention). Findings indicate that commencing students' sense of purpose (e.g., *right degree for me, lead to the career I want*) is a critical contributor to student success. Sense of purpose was the strongest predictor of commencing students' satisfaction with their degree program. In this sense, students' perception that they were studying the right degree, and the related belief that it would deliver the career outcomes they wanted, *predicted their level of satisfaction*. Beyond this, students' sense of purpose also had a positive influence on their academic persistence. While academic achievement (GPA) was the strongest predictor of student retention at the end of first year, student sense of purpose also made a significant contribution to their decision to stay at university. Findings indicated that *sense of purpose acts as a protective factor* in activating persistence. Students with a stronger sense of purpose for being at university are more likely to persist in the face of difficulty or even failure. In a real sense purpose is the fundamental fuel for both students' routine academic self-regulation (task engagement) and self-management when 'things get tough'. These findings provide a useful empirical basis for informing first year practice and would suggest that *purpose-building is a relatively neglected priority task* with the potential for significant return for both students and institutions.

What can we do to strengthen this apparently key ingredient in student success? We are currently investigating the impact of *three types of interventions* which we consider have the potential to contribute to purpose-building:
Psychological contract: What do I want from going to uni?
Degree fit: How did I choose my degree?
Identity development: How do I make sense of 'being at uni'?

Psychological Contract: What do I want from going to uni?

Students benefit from and value opportunities to clarify their psychological contract *(viz., What am I doing here? What do I hope to achieve?)* for university study. Such interventions are consistent with a focus of facilitating student self-regulation (Boekaerts & Corno, 2005). Using study contract and learning orientation theory (Honkimaki et al., 2004), we have developed an online tool *(Expectations@Griffith)* that students can use at the early phase of the academic lifecycle to clarify their 'expectations set" or 'learning contract' with university study. This purpose-strengthening tool is based on the six study contracts identified by Beaty, Gibbs & Morgan(1997): Intellectual Inquiry (*I am very curious about the ideas in my degree*), Social (*I want to take advantage of the social and recreational possibilities at university*), Academic Achievement (*My main intention at university is to achieve academic success*), Vocational (*My main aim in doing this degree is to be well-trained for my chosen career or job*), Personal Development (*I am looking for personal enrichment and development from my university studies*) and Community (*My main aim in dong this degree is to be able to make a positive difference to society*).

The internal structure of the scales has been established with factor analysis (n = 240). The concurrent validity and practical value of this approach has been established through correlations with standard measures of learning and engagement. Students with stronger motivations report deeper approaches to study, more overall engagement with university and feel more in control of their academic study. Students report that the process of completing a self-evaluation questionnaire is valuable in helping them clarify their motivation and engagement profiles (particularly the relative emphasis they place on intrinsic and extrinsic purposes) and in stimulating reflection on implicit assumptions or schemas about the *general purposes of a university education*. This tool can be used in three ways: individual self-assessment and planning, faculty facilitated class/cohort profiling and feedback and as adjunct to academic advising.

Degree Fit: How did I choose my degree?

Choice of degree or major has been identified as perhaps the most critical decision facing a student. Choices which are well-informed, personally owned and congruent with needs and abilities provided a sound motivational foundation for achievement and persistence. *Poor decision-making or degree fit* is significant threat to a student's sense of purpose.

Research has primarily focused on identifying the personality, academic and demographic factors that influence such decisions (Porter & Umbach, 2006). However our focus is primarily *enabling students to become intentional, adaptive and self-managing* in relation to their careers and to develop proactive strategies to self-regulate/self-direct their sense of fit/purpose (Briscoe, Hall, & DeMuth, 2006). Strengthening student sense of purpose requires us to position them as 'actors' in constructing a career identity and becoming competent self-managers of their careers. We were thus interested in a *process perspective* on student career decision-making.

Our aim was to identify students' experiences of degree selection, the basis of their decisions and their sense of confidence in the outcome. We conducted a series of focus group processes with a cross section of first year students (n = 45) in their first semester of university study. The focal task invited students to reflect on their recent experience of choosing a degree. Thematic analysis revealed four broad clusters of processes and factors impacting on degree

choices: information quality, external influence, timeliness and career maturity and management of opportunity (See Figure 1). Findings are consistent with previous research on adolescent identity development (Marcia, 1980) and career indecision (Guerra & Braungart-Rieker, 1999).

We have translated this framework into a *self-reflection tool* which students can use to self-assess their degree decision-making process profile. We find that students value this framework as an *awareness-raising* tool (explicating their decision-making processes), a *permission-giving* tool (legitimating reconsideration of choices) and a *choice-affirming* tool (reinforcing that they have made a considered choice). Overall, students report the process as strengthening their sense of purpose and their sense of agency as self-managing career actors.
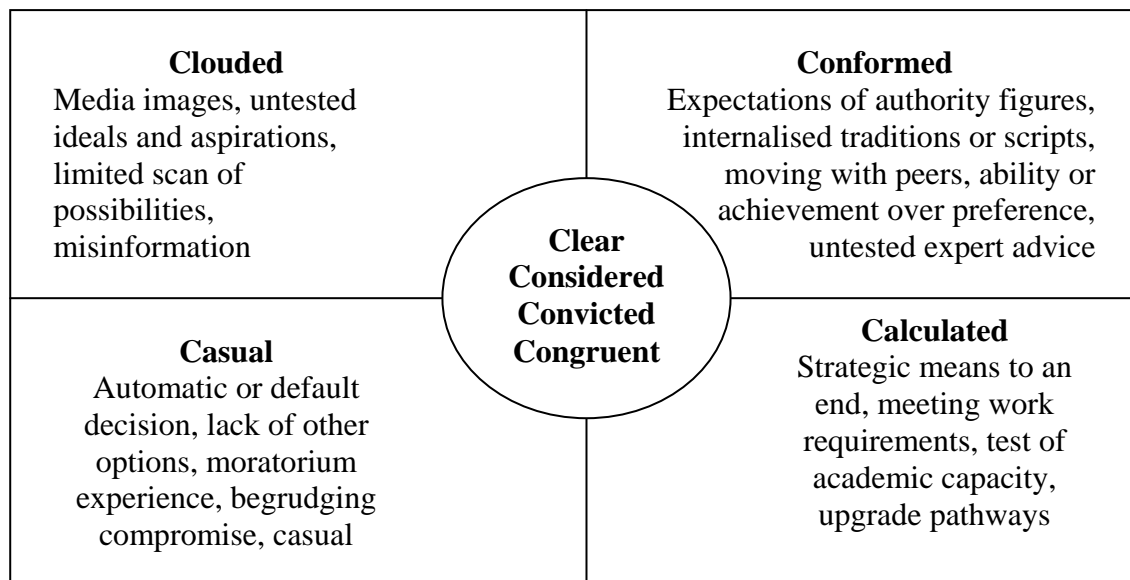
Clouded Media images, untested ideals and aspirations, limited scan of possibilities, misinformation	Conformed Expectations of authority figures, internalised traditions or scripts, moving with peers, ability or achievement over preference, untested expert advice
Clear Considered Convicted Congruent	
Casual Automatic or default decision, lack of other options, moratorium experience, begrudging compromise, casual	Calculated Strategic means to an end, meeting work requirements, test of academic capacity, upgrade pathways

Figure 1 Processes influencing students degree choices

Identity development: How do I make sense of 'being here'?

The third category of activity that we have been undertaking is *developing conceptual frameworks and a 'shared language'* to help both staff and students better understand and facilitate students' emerging sense of purpose. Who is responsible for motivation and purpose? Traditionally 'student motivation' has been construed as an almost exclusively within-student process *(viz., it's up to them whether they want do or don't want to do this).* There is some degree of staff resentment about having to 'motivate as well as teach' the current generation of students and to be required to make connections or explicate pathways that appear to be patently obvious or well signposted (but perhaps only to the experienced or initiated). We need ways to *legitimate purpose-building as part of the curriculum* and to position it as a valuable educational resource best facilitated through *mutual responsibility and contribution.*

A student's sense of purpose is a dynamic and changeable. Most importantly a sense of purpose is not just something that resides within a student or that they arrive with fully formed, but rather it is most certainly an interactive and emerging construct. Purpose can be conceptualised as the experienced 'sense of fit' or congruence between person and environment or more specifically between an individuals and an organisations/institutions goals (Schneider, Goldstein & Smith 1995). A sense of purpose or fit is fundamentally a

subjective and experiential process. For example, it doesn't matter that objectively a degree will eventually deliver the vocational outcomes that a student may desire, if they don't think or feel that it will right now, because they are less likely to stay to find out later.

We have gathered data from a number of sources (e.g., open-ended responses to institutional surveys and follow-up focus group discussions) with the goal of *better understanding the ways in which students gain and lose a sense of purpose* in their early university experience. Students' sense-making efforts and challenges can be categorised into four domains each with unique threats and opportunities (See Figure 2).

Students commented, both implicitly and explicitly, on their sense of identity and how studying at university stretches their identities in various ways. Many students demonstrated a degree of insight into the fact that strong motivation and *sense of purpose are the more visible facets of an underlying student identity* that 'makes sense' to them. For example, sense of purpose is more likely to be strengthened if an aspirational identity (a claimed future self) is validated or legitimated by staff and mentors. Students are more likely to feel purposeful if their life system (e.g., friends and family) do not discount their aspirations. Similarly, students report greater purpose and motivation if staff (university system) actively 'explain and engage' in the business of student-centred sense-making. In this regard, students' accounts often reflect that purpose and identity are in a state of dynamic flux as they manage tensions and tradeoffs and deal with ambiguity.
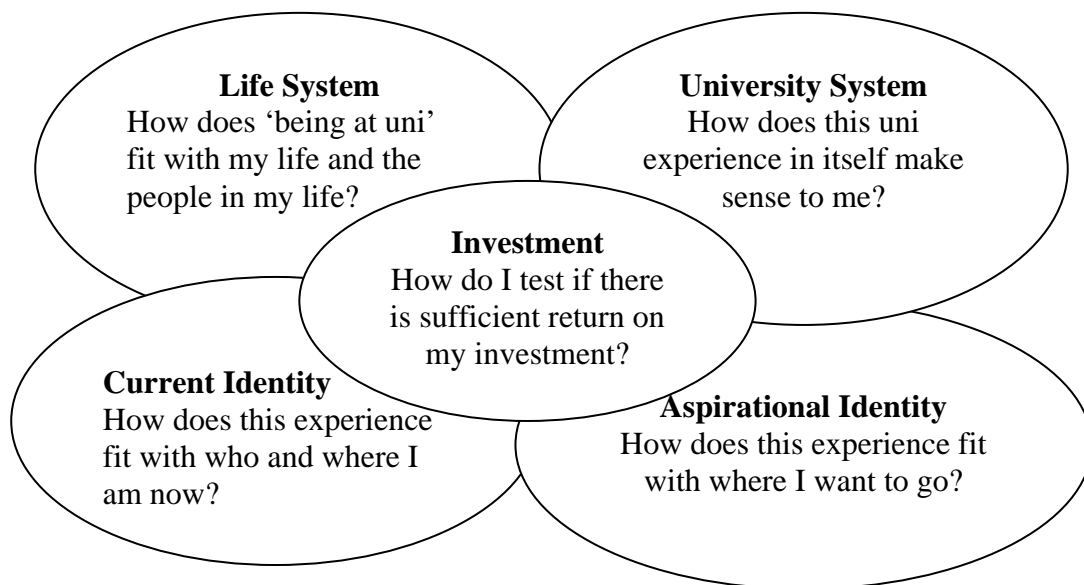

Life System
How does 'being at uni' fit with my life and the people in my life?

University System
How does this uni experience in itself make sense to me?

Investment
How do I test if there is sufficient return on my investment?

Current Identity
How does this experience fit with who and where I am now?

Aspirational Identity
How does this experience fit with where I want to go?

Figure 2 Domains of student identity and purpose

Student feedback also indicated the *types of activities* that they considered would help them become more motivated and purposeful in their engagement with university. Some examples include:
Sense-making narratives: Students consistently comment on the lack of narrative in the way academics describe degree programs. Too often we talk to our student in a language of course lists and program structures at the expense of a unifying coherent student-centred narrative.
Relevance: Students, not surprisingly, comment that they are more likely to engage if they can see the relevance of things. Establishing personal relevance (rather than assuming an inherent appreciation of disciplinary relevance), particularly for younger students, is a necessary

investment. Scaffolding motivation (until disciplinary socialization kicks in) is key to purpose building.

Accessible role models: Students want to talk with and listen to the stories and experiences of fellow travellers 'who have gone before them'. Most importantly these role models have to be accessible (i.e., within aspirational arms length). Thus peer mentors and early career are particularly valuable early in the lifecycle. High status professionals need to be used judiciously.

Meaningful work and contribution: Students are acutely aware of the perceived value (or otherwise) of the learning tasks we set them. 'Active, practical and useful' seem to characterize the preference of many students.

Active testing and reflection: Students are often not sure of their emerging identities and consistently revisit the underlying question "Is this right for me?" They value opportunities to put these issues on the table in a safe and supportive context.

Lifecycle progressive and cumulative activities: Students have a very clear sense that 'things change over time' and that they would benefit from different experiences at different stages of their degree trajectory.

Proposed Session Plan

1. **Brief power point presentation** of key first year purpose-building ideas and activities, including a brief Q & A to clarify any ambiguities (13 mins)
2. **Individual reflection and group discussion** utilising a *lifecycle focus* around two questions (15 mins):
   (a) *Understanding*: How might students' sense of purpose change or develop over the course of their degree?
   (b) *Intervention*: What purpose-building activities may be useful across the degree lifecycle?
3. **Final summary** of major themes from participants (2 mins).

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