

Student Motivation For Entry to Higher Education: a comparative analysis of students' views in three different countries

David Andrew, Jan Bamford and Gary Pheiffer
London Metropolitan University
with

Veronika Artemyeva (St Petersburg University of Architecture and Civil Engineering)
and Chantal Roodt (Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University)

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Introduction

The aim of this research project was to investigate the motivation and attitudes of students on entry into higher education. There is a predominance of literature regarding students' motivations and goals for entering higher education, but there is little that considers a comparative analysis of these motivations (Crossley and Watson 2003). The comparative analysis presented through this project permits an attempt at cultural contextualisation of the motivational factors at play in the decision-making processes of students prior to going to university.

The increasingly globalised educational market (Halpin and Buckley 2004) requires higher education institutions to be informed of cultural differences in motivations that impact on students, in order to develop not only broader recruitment strategies but also retention, achievement and learning strategies.

Stead (2004) argues the importance of culture with regard to career psychology and the value of social constructionism for illuminating such cultural issues. Social constructionism is a theoretical approach that aims to account for the ways in which phenomena such as ideas, attitudes and behaviours are socially constructed in a 'matrix of interweaving relationships', with knowledge being a cultural process of meaning making (*ibid.*, p. 391). Whilst this paper does not attempt to explore issues of social constructionism in relation to choice of career, the relational aspect of this paradigm offers an insight into the importance of culture with regard to career choice and motivation. Certainly Bourdieu's (1993) theories highlight the importance of cultural capital in relation to education, which in turn predicates the imperative of comparative higher educational research in contemporary globalised economies (Crossley and Watson, 2004).

Against this background of the need for a comparative study of motivation, the research team embarked on this preliminary study with the intention of identifying themes in relation to motivation from a cultural perspective. The paper focuses on

two of the strongest themes that emerged from the initial results in terms of comparative differences, namely: preparation for university and attitudes to career choice.

Methodology

The questionnaire probed issues of students' aspirations, motivations and goals with questions centred on the broad themes of students' preparation for university, choice of course, and beliefs and perceptions that they may have had about higher education, for example: for future employment and self efficacy. The comparative context for the research was provided by issuing the questionnaire in London, South Africa and Russia.

The project was a descriptive survey of first-year undergraduate students that took place during the first few weeks following enrolment at their higher education institution. The survey involved the collection of data from similar institutions in the three countries: n= 222 from the UK institution, n=136 from the Russian institution, and n= 245 from the South African institution. All are urban-located universities that have a heritage of technical, vocational and professional education. The UK and South African institutions serve students from a wide range of social backgrounds.

Preparation for university

The research team considered that an aspect of students' motivation for study that any analysis should consider is the preparation that students undertook prior to entering the higher education forum. This would provide the team with an indicator of prior motivation. With this in mind, several questions were posed with regard to the preparation they undertook and the information that they were provided with prior to attending university. Volet and Renshaw (1995), in their paper on cross-cultural differences in university students' goals, argue that goals mediate the direct effect of entering knowledge and can be better predictors of academic performance than traditional background characteristics. In our project, one of the most startling findings in terms of country comparisons concerned the preparation students undergo. In response to the question of whether parents or guardians had paid for additional preparation for university, 91% of Russian students answered in the affirmative compared to only 19% of UK students. This conscious investment by students' families in preparation for higher education study is unsurprising when viewed in terms of cultural theory, as it is clear that education is an important means of social advancement (to compensate for lack of 'social capital', i.e. access to networks that open up socio-economic advantages) in certain communities (Green and Vyrionides 2005).

Among the student respondents, there was general agreement with the proposition that they would do well on the course; this was highest for the South Africans

where 85% of students agreed. Students' beliefs that they would do well sometimes coincided with their perceptions regarding preparedness for study. The international cohort among the South African students showed the highest affirmative response to the statement that they were well prepared for university, followed by the South African home students. Paradoxically, the Russian students showed the lowest level of response despite the vast majority of them being provided with extra tuition, paid by their parents. The highest response for knowing what to expect from university occurred among the international contingent of UK students.

On the question about the preparation that school had provided, the response was rather more mixed. Russian schools were perceived as providing the least amount of preparation at 41%, while 46% of the international UK students felt their schooling had prepared them for university. Russian students disagreed twice as much as UK home students with this statement

There was also a mixed picture regarding the role of the family. The South African international students generally agreed that their family had told them what to expect, and the Russian students most strongly agreed with this position at 54%. By contrast, only 23% of UK home students agreed. For international students studying in South Africa, it seems that their family and others had informed them what to expect more than their schools had; however the response for being told at school about what to expect was still quite high, although nearer to the middle of the scale of response.

Career choice

This paper argues that expectations are important to understanding behaviour, as illustrated in research into the role of expectations and the importance of psychological contract violation among new professionals (Sutton and Griffin, 2004). Cognitive factors such as expectations and beliefs have been shown to be key issues in explaining learning behaviour and specifically motivation to learn (e.g. Bandura, 1982; Entwistle, 1981).

Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1982) and theory of reasoned action provide a useful guide in exploring students' decisions to enter higher education. Reasoned action theory and the theory of planned behaviour (e.g. Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980; Ajzen, 1991) posit that a person's behaviour is determined by their attitude towards the outcome of that behaviour and by the opinions of the person's social environment. The expectation of the potential benefits is seen to be a factor in explaining the decision to enter higher education. In line with these cognitive theories, this study relates intention for higher education to human capital theory. Hence there is an expectation that students enter higher education primarily for economic reasons. This, of course, may have stronger resonance in post-communist economies. The results of the findings provided clear evidence of the

Russian and South African students choosing their studies on the basis of their career plans: among with both cohorts, students strongly agreed that they had chosen their course on the basis of their career plans (for example, lawyer, accountant, architect or a profession), particularly the Russians.

On the other hand, questions that associated students' choice of university or course with development of career possibilities showed no significant difference for the groups. This result could appear to contradict the earlier response on career certainty. However the supposition for this is that the wording of the particular questions was not as certain in terms of career focus and therefore all groups responded equally. Significantly, UK and SA students agreed that learning their subject was important while at university, and Russians a bit less strongly. This could be read as emphasising the economic motives for higher education study, as opposed to interest in the subject alone. In terms of future earning potential, 69% of Russians and 68% of South Africans agreed that studying would increase their future earnings; UK students also generally agreed but not as high a proportion, and 8% of UK students even disagreed. However, there was also strong agreement from all the groups for the idea of personal development being important whilst at university.

In terms of considering the importance of economic capital investment in students' motivation for higher educational study - as anecdotal evidence suggests the importance of financial considerations - students were asked a series of questions relating to finance. When questioned about whether the expense of coming to university is a good investment, there was no significant difference between the groups. Conversely, when asked about debt as a result of their studies the Russians substantially disagreed that they would be in debt as a result of their course (Russian students do not pay fees), whereas 62% of UK home students 62% expected to be in debt, as did 40% of the UK overseas students and 34% of the South African student cohort. These responses were further supported by the response to the question about whether students were receiving financial support from their parents. A large majority (79%) of Russians responded that they receive financial support from their parents or family, compared to 42% of UK home students, 58% of UK overseas students and 80% of South Africans.

Questions about self efficacy with regard to the skills to succeed on their course produced interesting results. The South African and UK students were more likely to strongly agree they had the skills to succeed on the course. This could relate to confidence issues, but when asked whether success depended on their skills, there was no significant difference between Russians and the UK students; both groups generally agreed that it was so. Could this finding therefore point to cultural differences in students' interpretation of the question – where for Russian students the focus of development in higher education is more on the institution and the teachers compared to the emphasis in the UK-based system on independent learning? This impression is reinforced by the fact that Russian students responded

more strongly to questions about success on their degree depending on the quality of teaching. All students, however, regarded motivation as important to success.

Conclusion

The preliminary findings of this research point to possible cultural differences regarding preparation for university and career choice, in particular the marked difference in the preparation, in terms of extra tuition, that Russian students undertake, in comparison with UK home students, and the clear vocational motivation for Russian and South African students.

While cultural and cognitive theories can offer some explanation for these differences, the team recognises that the questionnaire was only exploratory in nature and the need for further research into these differences is now required. It is necessary, for example, to establish whether parental investment in Russian students' preparation for university, in common with other cultures, occurs for reasons of social capital, as other research seems to suggest (Green & Vyronides 2005).

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Biographical note:

David Andrew (in the Centre for Academic Professional Development) and *Gary Pheiffer* (in the Department of Psychology) are members of the "Critical Learning Group" of staff at London Metropolitan University who are engaged as a team in pedagogical research (see research section of this journal). *Jan Bamford* is an Academic Leader and International Student Coordinator in the Department of Business and Service Sector Management. Contact: d.andrew@londonmet.ac.uk