

DiSA Briefing Paper

The Student Psychological Contract

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Overview:

The Psychological Contract is the unspoken expectation an individual has of the organisation with which they are involved. The impact of psychological contract (Rousseau, 1996) in the learning relationship has been previously recognised but research has primarily focused on the cognitive and behavioural expectations of an implicit learning contract. This briefing highlights the affective aspects of student psychological contract and a differing psychological contract that exists between student and organisation.

Abstract:

Through data collected via student Consensus Oriented Research Approach (Cureton & Cousin, 2012) and student interview, the importance of the affective aspects of student psychological contract in learning relationships, arose as a dominant theme pertaining to student attainment. Furthermore, it is evident that students have a differing but equally significant psychological contract with the institution as a whole.

Rationale:

The importance of psychological contract to the quality of learning relationships is recognised (Gregory, 1996) and the implicit cognitive and behavioural expectations within the students' perception of learning relationship have been explored to some extent (Gregory, 1996; Jarvis, 2006, Charlton, Barrow & Hornby-Atkinson, 2007). Much of this research has been applied to first year students and impact of perceived psychological violations on engagement, satisfaction and retention (Bryson, McDowell, McGugan, & Sanders, 2009). However, the importance of the affective aspect of psychological contract and its relationship with attainment has received little attention. Moreover the presence of a student psychological contract with the university that differs from the learning psychological contract has also remained unexplored.

Generation of Evidence:

A number of student focused Consensus Oriented Research Approach (Cureton & Cousin, 2012) were held to discuss issues pertaining to the attainment gap. The data collected was analysed and the dominant themes that arose were followed up in one to one interviews with current students.

Research findings/ New Evidence:

The relationship between student and lectures is crucially important to attainment and is prioritized by both students and lectures in their attempts to achieve good attainment, However, this relationship is muddled by low cultural and social capital which leaves some students unsure of the rules of engagement for Higher Education learning. Psychological contract is an implicit part of this relationship and violations of elements of a student psychological contract negatively impact on the quality of the learning relationship and ultimately, it negatively impacts on student attainment.

The importance of the affective aspect of psychological contract and the impact of violating this aspect of psychological contract arose as an important factor in the understanding of attainment and disparities in student attainment and is a major finding of this research.

The affective components of student psychological contract appear to relate to being seen as an individual, non-categorisation, respectful interactions, being treated as an adult, fairness, trusting the lecturer and emotional availability.

It is also apparent that students have a different but equally as important psychological contract with the institution as a whole, which is more specifically focused on practical and behavioural expectations.

The student psychological contract with the university appears to relate to provision and accessibility of resources required to gain good degrees, such as access to the learning centre, adequate books, papers or equivalent electronic resources, access to computers and computer programmes that are required as part of assessed work.

The behavioural aspect of the student psychological contract pertains to quality of service and their relationships with services that the university provides: registry, learning centres, academic support services, university shops and café/cafeterias. In interactions with these areas of the university, students no longer identify themselves as students, but identify themselves as customers. As a result the psychological contract they have pertaining to these areas relate to good customer service, being responded to, expecting respectful interactions, speedy resolution of the issues raised and being treated like an adult.

Outcomes/implications for policy and practice:

Further research is required to ascertain what constitutes a violation of student psychological contract as outlined above.

In the meantime, it is important to ensure that expectations of students are addressed several times: such as during induction and at significant milestones in the academic year.

Unrealistic student expectations can arise if students have little prior knowledge of what to expect at University or have little social and cultural capital. Ensuring that resources are available to support the development of HE social and cultural capital is important.

Further research is required to explore the impact of the student 'dual identity' on the elements that are incorporated in the student psychological contract. This should include developing a better understanding of the nature of the student psychological contract with the university and how the differs to psychological contract in learning relationships.

References

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