

An answer from research to the Teaching Excellence Framework – student engagement and graduate engagement to evidence legacy

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Abstract

At a time when the quality and legacy of degree education is a focus within the UK higher education sector, this paper explores the perception of value among graduates at differing distances from graduation. The relevance of graduates to support development of quality within the sector was identified by Nelson (1964) over 50 years ago. However political and hegemonic discourse in UK higher education has focused around value for money, and earning capacity. This paper draws on research with 202 graduates from one to forty-two years from graduation to identify the areas where they perceive value, and how that is created. It shows how, within this sample at least, degree value was seen to exist, although not in line with the hegemonic discourse. The research indicated two clear routes for enhancing experience and legacy for future generations by developing student self-authorship and engagement.

Keywords

Graduate perceptions; value of degree; self-authorship.

Introduction

Drawing on research with graduates this paper evaluates the impact of engagement during undergraduate study on lasting perceptions of higher education value, and argues for changes to the selected metrics being proposed to more effectively evaluate learning experiences. It also clarifies how graduate insight could enhance both our understanding of undergraduate learning and the sustainability of the sector.

A current imperative in Higher Education (HE) is the requirement to demonstrate impact, and to develop sustainable tertiary education through building a strong legacy in both research and teaching. In England this comes at a time when student fees are rising further and when the Minister of State for Universities and Science Jo Johnson was clear that: “Higher education should deliver lasting value to graduates...” (Johnson, 2015a, p. 8).

In England the value and impact of teaching from the 2017-18 academic year is being assessed through a Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) proposed in order to identify, reward and encourage “highest quality of teaching within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)” (ONS, 2016, p. 3). Two proposed sources of evidence for the TEF draw from student and new graduate bases for evaluation: student satisfaction from National Student Survey (NSS) responses gathered from final year undergraduates, and performance indicators collated by the Higher Education

Statistics Agency (HESA) in their Destination of Leavers of Higher Education (DLHE) survey. This gathers information from graduates six months after graduation, and is combined with a limited longitudinal survey of employed graduates, 42-months post-graduation. However, as can be seen this delivers limited regular and sustained engagement with graduate perception, which is important to the sector as Nelson (1964) identified over fifty years ago “One factor often overlooked is the final product, the graduate. This factor is perhaps the most significant determinant of adequacy of programs and measure of effectiveness” (p. 111).

Background

Evaluating value gain within HE has long been explored through three main lenses: academic (Newman, 1852 in Ker, 1976; Liu, 2011); *personal* (Hirst & Peters, 1970; Desjardin, 2015) and economic/financial (Caul, 1993, Rodgers, 2007). The latter are rather easier to quantify and thus offer a route to a politically expedient outcome.

Economic value of higher education subdivides into financial benefits (individual, corporate, public, national, and international) and worth (again: individual, corporate, public, national, and international). This has been articulated in the ‘graduate premium’ (the sum which a graduate can be expected to earn relative to a non-graduate). This graduate premium was recorded by Bill Rammell, the then Secretary of State for Education and Skills, at £100,000 across a lifetime (Rammell, 2006). However, in 2015, Jo Johnson revealed its diminution in his first speech as Conservative Minister for Universities and Science:

“Between 2006 and 2015, the graduate earnings premium decreased from around 55% higher to around 45% higher than the earnings of non-graduates.”
(Johnson, July 1st 2015b)

Independent research in 2015 indicated that although the average starting salary for a graduate had seen a rise to £22,000 p.a. some graduates were earning below £16,000 p.a. (Complete University Guide, 2015). Decreasing graduate premiums combined with increased fees of up to £27,000 for home students for a three-year degree, have resulted in greater political emphasis surrounding ‘value for money’ in higher education for students and taxpayers. However, it can be limiting to equate value in HE with purely financial benefit, when this is not always an expected, or if expected, cannot be guaranteed for all (Monteils 2004; Bell & Stevenson, 2006; Callender & Feldman, 2009). Economic/financial value as a sole indicator of value has long been the subject of warnings, from the individual’s perspective and their immediate developmental capacity. Such evaluation was criticised for its potential to *devalue* the impact of education (Gray, 1999). It is particularly important to seek contextual evaluation over a lifetime when employing the economic/financial lens. Income data for example will be subject, at times, to economic forces such as recession or life choices, which may have been enabled through obtaining a degree. Thus time out of employment to raise a family, or periods of low earnings during initial entrepreneurial stages, have the potential to be times when economic/financial data alone would indicate little or no value. Restricting value within a degree to economic/financial alone thus has the potential to produce a metric, which may obscure true impact.

The ‘personal’ value in higher education learning to be a force for individual and public good was clearly recognised in both of the UK’s two most significant

politically-instigated reports relating to 20th century HE, those of Robbins (1963) and Dearing (1997). For many this personal value of education lies in, and/or stems from, its transformative impact (Lange, 2004; Kear, 2013). Others identified how adults particularly through higher education learn through experiences that frame or reframe how they define their world and resulting actions (Cranton, 1994; Mezirow, 1996 & 2000). Mezirow (ibid) argued that such experiences in which individuals are required to actively engage, touch every aspect of an individual's life - transforming cultural, social, economic, political, psychological, and educational understanding, values and behaviour. Those individuals in turn transform societies (Durkheim, 1956; Freire, 1968).

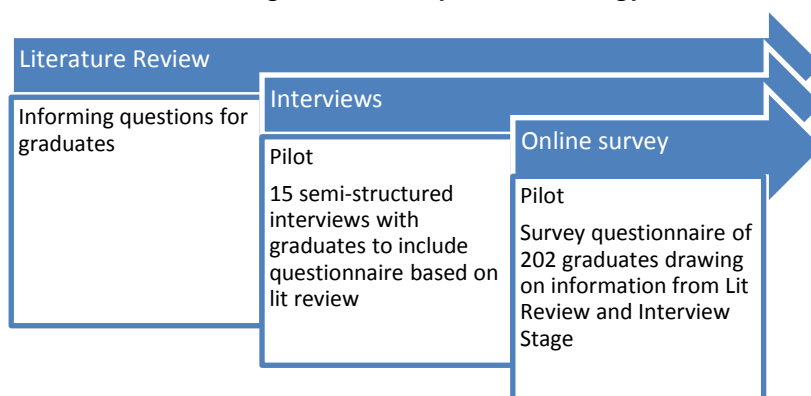
Previous studies have looked at this triadic nature of perceptions in HE (personal, academic and economic/financial) from a satisfaction rather than value perspective, and with an emphasis on students rather than graduates (Ledden, Kalafatis, & Mathioudakis, 2011; Fine & Clark, 2013). However what is lacking from previous research and metrics are effective approaches to regularly evaluating and describing the range of value and factors underpinning these that *graduates* perceive they acquire within and ascribe to their degree. Whilst recognising each individual will have a different perspective, and that institutions are constantly evolving, the current lack of systematic evaluation from graduates at different distances from the experience other than the DLHE's survey after a mere six months after graduation makes it impossible to identify areas of and factors creating lasting value.

This study seeks to remedy that defect by exploring the perceptions of the value of higher education in graduates over a more substantial interval since graduation.

Methodology

This mixed methods study was conducted between December 2011 and October 2013 involving 217 graduates of English universities who completed undergraduate degrees between one and 42 years before their involvement in the research. Fifteen graduates were involved in semi-structured interviews to determine value elements and factors which were then explored in an online questionnaire with a wider population. Whilst results were achieved from graduates of international institutions for this paper the research draws only on the contributions of graduates from English institutions, selected as having experienced the same fee increases across the research period. The international students' findings will form a second evaluation, outside the present scope. The initial research drew on McGivney's (2003) work exploring the potential breadth and scope of educational transformation with adult learners. McGivney (ibid) sought individual learner identification and evaluation of perceived value, drawing on elements of Schwartz's Theory of Basic Values (2012). McGivney's (ibid) findings were developed into a questionnaire explored, amended and expanded by participants in this study.

Figure 1. Study methodology

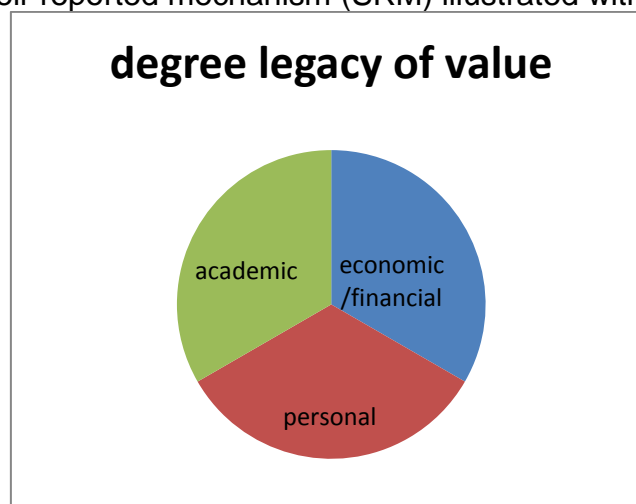


Graduates in both interviews and the online survey were asked to draw from their own experience to evaluate the three most prevalent legacy lenses in higher education degrees emerging from the literature (academic, personal and economic/financial) (Figure 1). Participants were additionally asked to rank degree aspects for importance using Likert scales, to identify the area they perceived most valuable, their motivation for undertaking degree study and to indicate whether they would recommend higher education to others. The methodological approach sought to develop new knowledge independent of government data. This was employed as a method to avoid the research pitfalls identified by Allen and Imrie (2010). They saw research based on government data could (often inadvertently) provide justification for political policies and/or practices.

Personal perception of value accrued socially, academically and personally is complex and can be recognised as only being known through individual interpretation. The intricate composition of a degree varies by individual, course, institution and is influenced by pre, during and post-degree experiences. It is not possible to view the full picture through cost/benefit analysis. For these reasons it can be deduced that determining perception of legacy demands a methodology that recognises the social complexity of value and judgments of value. Therefore research techniques that provided opportunities for deeper enquiry and development of understanding through triangulation of findings were employed. Thus collective knowledge through individual stories, and rich descriptions within the context of narratives and/or responses (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005a) were sought. This insight was utilised to identify whether the perceptions of the few were more widely recognised by participants in a larger population survey.

The interpretivist approach employed stressed the subjectivity of meaning and prioritises reality as seen by the participants who are both the subjects and objects of the research. In line with this epistemological position a flexible, participant-led approach to the data collection (semi-structured, qualitative interviews initially and open text boxes within a subsequent survey), was adopted to enable participants to articulate value in their own words. This was combined with a mechanism to allow participants to control their allocation of value which emerged from the pilot interview, when the interviewee sought a way of articulating the proportional elements of his perceived degree value. The resulting self-reported measurement of value weighting (hereafter referred to as SRM and illustrated in Figure 2, overleaf) indicated personal attribution of value across the three main areas identified by previous research.

Figure 2. Self-reported mechanism (SRM) illustrated within a pie chart



The SRM recorded participants' responses to the following question:

Q. If you were to divide your entire degree experience allocating a percentage value to each of the following how would you make that division? Totals normally amount to 100% - the value of an entire experience, but if you wish to indicate lower responses please do this in the comment box beneath each area for you to use if you wish to add further comments or explain your response.

Whilst valuable as an indicator of individual perception it is recognised that the SRM is subjective and cannot be used as a comparison of scale. Thus, it gives an opportunity for Participant Y to demonstrate that they consider one area to be 50% of the overall value they consider they have gained through their degree, it should be recognised that Participant X's 50% allocation may not equate to the same as Y's. It does however provide a 'gut reaction' instant response in a similar although slightly more detailed manner as that graduates provide when asked by prospective students or others whether they feel their degree has been of value.

Seeing the entire degree experience as a whole and allocating value within that was a non-scientific but practical approach all interviewees adopted without question. It was also taken up by most participants in the survey although three said that they found it difficult to understand. Two interviewees commented: "It's a really useful way of looking at it", and, "I never thought of it like that before, but those were the three main parts of my degree." The apportioning or allocation of value to the whole gave control of that allocation to the interviewee. Their resulting SRM is thus entirely the participant's own evaluation, (positive or negative) based on personal experience.

As a methodological tool to develop consideration by respondents, whilst not one which appears to have been used previously, this division of experience shares similarities with the contextual mind mapping approaches of Kandiko, Hay, and Weller (2013) where respondents delineated the approach and weighting of their responses. This tool exemplifies the importance of individual experience on which this study is based, exploring the value perceptions of interviewees through their own experiences, identifying similarities or differences between the attribution and articulation of value arising and factors of influence.

The SRM was combined with two groups of questions relating to recognition of academic value and an overall perception of value drawn from previous research amended and expanded by graduates during interview.

Results were analysed utilising SPSS software.

Limitations

These results are not used to generalize about the alumni population because the study does not reflect a statistically representative sample of graduates, but as a reflection of the sample under consideration. Achieving contact with alumni through alumni associations may be a targeted route to achieving higher engagement representative of an institution thus reflecting specific messages in terms of the value of undertaking and achieving a degree at that particular institution. However, the random approach adopted has less risk of manipulation of results that could result from targeted distribution.

A question remains as to whether the size of the sample enables inferences to be drawn from the collected data. Despite being drawn from a geographically, institutionally and chronologically diverse population the survey data appears to echo many variables identified by the interviewees and aligns in part with previous research indicating importance of family, peers, engagement and motivation (Vroom, 1964; Deci, 1975; Brooks, 2003 & 2004; Bryson, 2013). As such the research appears to have a breadth of relevance rather than being a statistical probability indicator, and it is in this that the usefulness of this study lies, just as Yorke (2014) indicated was the case with his exploratory studies for the 'student belongingness' project.

It is important to recognise retrospective bias, as well as the fact that nearly all graduates were employed. The low number of unemployed participants (n=7) and those who considered they had gained no value from their degree (n=7 of whom 2 were also unemployed) can be considered a limitation. Additionally all responses should be recognised in the context of having been given by achievers. These are individuals who have attained their goal, whether at the level they desired or not. As such they may be subject to Smith, Lewis, and Johnston's (1989) version of the dispositional theory of value, that because they have achieved their goal, individuals are then disposed to value it less than they would have done before achievement.

How graduates viewed their degrees

From the 217 graduates, two main forms of legacy emerged – direct (i.e. gaining a qualification, vibrant social life) and indirect (i.e. engagement, personal development, opportunities to learn, encouragement to learn and develop).

I honestly think that university was the best experience I've ever done, and that is from the personal side of it...I do not regret going to university at all. (A12).

I suspect it's probably far more about the social and personal experience over and above the academic experience, that's what I value above all, I value that immensely. It was a very positive, very enjoyable three years of my life and I thoroughly enjoyed it. (A14).

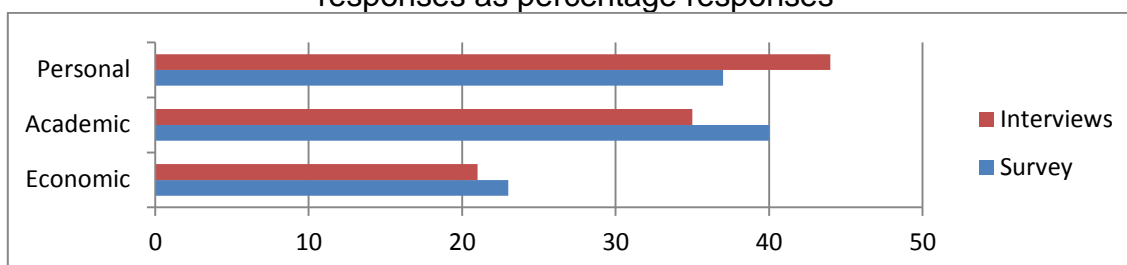
Distance from graduation, subject studied or institution attended appeared to have surprisingly little influence across overall value perceptions.

Table 1. Comparison of findings from interviews and survey

Research questions	Interviews	Survey
How do graduates attribute value across the academic/economic and personal elements of their degree	Personal highest 44%	Academic highest 40%
	Academic 35%	Personal 37%
	Respondents from both studies placed the economic/financial value lowest on the SRM (survey – 23%/ interviews -21%)	
How does this relate to the hegemonic discourse influencing HE policy and funding?	Results from both studies indicated similar percentages of 5-6% of graduates indicating agreement with the hegemonic discourse of economic/financial value.	

The SRM enabled identification of the areas where graduates attributed value (Figure 3). A common factor was that all participants allocated the lowest value to the *economic/financial* element with only 21% of the survey participants (n=42) and 23% of interviewees (n=3) recognising legacy in this area.

Figure 3. SRM (Self-reported Measurement) results of the interview and survey responses as percentage responses



Open text comments from the survey cast clearer light on these responses. Of the 187 text responses, only 13 (6.95%) indicated the economic potential of a degree had most value to them. These mirrored a finding from Brooks and Everett’s (2009) work that showed graduates saw value in the enabling potential of their qualification:

- “Stepping stone to other things”
- “It allowed me to go on to graduate study which was essential for my chosen career”.
- “I drifted for 10 years before getting a vocation to become a mathematics teacher. At the time I studied I did not think I would ever use that part of my degree (I did it for enjoyment) but if I had not done so becoming a teacher would have been much harder”.
- “Just having a degree has been a door opener for all jobs”.
- “Employability and earning potential”.

Engagement and challenge leading to academic value was identified by several students as most important, for example:

- “It demanded intellectual curiosity and rigour of thought from me”.
- “Ability to process large amounts of information and generate my own ideas from that in a very short time”.

Academic learning was not without critical evaluation as might be expected of graduates:

“I studied towards a degree in a subject which I wasn’t aware of before I applied and thought the University will teach me all I needed to know. The ‘dryness’ of teaching made me hate xxx and I don’t think I’ll ever work in that field because I don’t feel I’ve got the knowledge necessary to pursue it. I did, however, learn something from being introduced to all the theories brought up in classes and I believe this knowledge helps me make every day choices.”

This recognition of the importance of reflection at a distance from the experience, in order to recognise impact is not apparent in the current TEF metrics but was reflected by several graduates like this participant:

“... due to my work now, I realise that I gained a lot of project management skills during university; time management, working on multiple projects, managing people, working to deadlines, working with a range of people (and skill levels) and communication skills.”

Over half of survey respondents in open text comments n=117 (62.6%) said the most value in their degree came from personal development:

- “Confidence in myself”
- “Self-worth”
- “Confidence in my own abilities”
- “Gaining independence and living on my own”.
- “Added to self-belief”

Employing this individual lens encouraged consideration of a broader picture rather than the compartmentalised view prompted by employability, graduate premium or student experience. This resulted in pithy but powerful testimony of the value individuals recognised in their degrees.

- “My degree increased my self-belief – in academic terms, career terms and socially”
- “Going to university as a mature student after a 20 year absence in the education sector changed my life, opened me up as a person, developed my passion for learning”
- “I suppose what changed me most was the way of looking at society as if from the outside which my degree programme developed”
- “It changed my life in every way”.

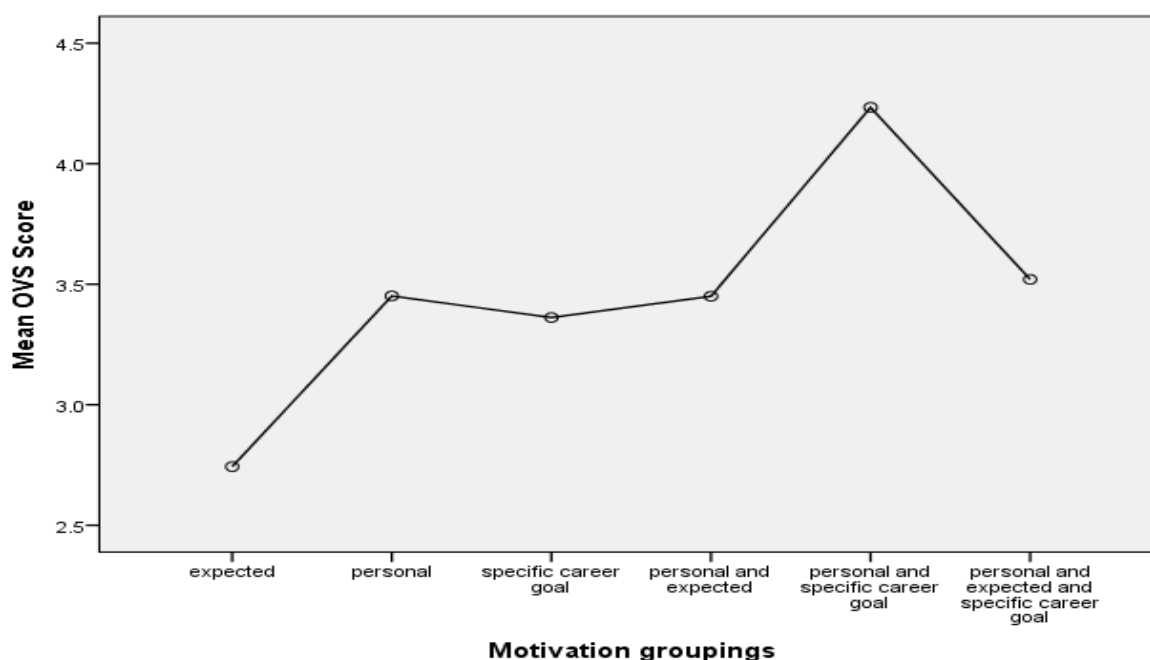
What factors influence graduate perceptions of degree value?

Survey participants indicated the original motivation of students to enter higher education was a significant factor influencing perceptions of legacy value. This was evidenced in a non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test identifying a statistically significant relationship between Overall Value Score (calculated from the SRM and responses to the questionnaire) and entry motivation. The null hypothesis that this relationship was the outcome of mere chance was rejected.¹

This showed that the largest number of participants within the study was those who entered undergraduate education to please others, and this same group recorded the lowest legacy value. They considered their only motivation in going to university had been to satisfy the expectations of others, including parents, teachers, peers and wider family reflecting research into the impact of family and friends on student motivation (Brooks, 2003, 2004).

On the other hand those recording the highest perception of value were actually the smallest group of respondents, those whose motivation to enter their undergraduate degree was personal aspiration combined with a specific career goal that required a degree.

Figure 4. Relationship between motivation groups and mean Overall Value Score



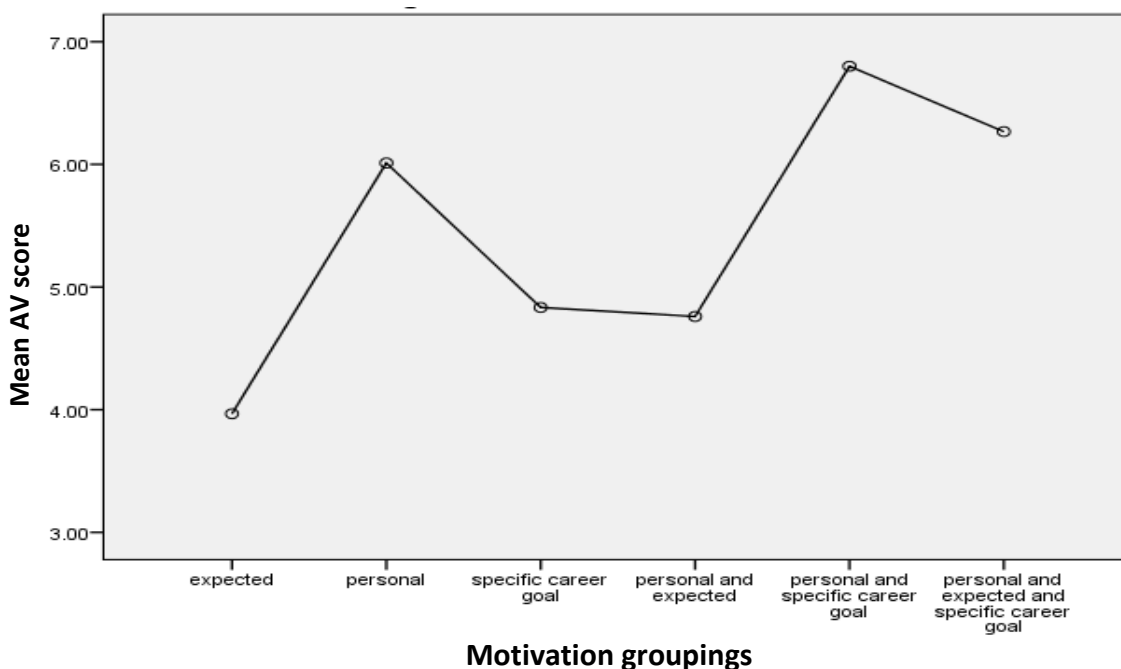
Entry motivation was also apparent as a key factor in perceived *academic value* (Table 2). A non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test indicated a statistically significant relationship between motivation groupings and graduate allocation of Academic Value [$X^2(5) = 21.236, p \leq .001$].

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for relationship between motivational groupings and Academic Value

Motivation correlation with Academic Value	Mean AV score	Standard deviation	n=200
Expected	3.97	2.29	30
Personal	6.01	5.58	90
Specific career goal	4.83	1.94	30
Personal and expected	4.76	1.94	25
Personal and specific career goal	6.80	2.04	10
Personal, expected and specific career goal	6.27	1.67	15
Total	5.43	4.15	200

Again it can be seen that graduates entering their degree for reasons of personal aspiration combined with specific career goals highly valued their academic experience (6.80 against a mean of 5.43) (Figure 5). Those who considered their motivation in going to university had been to meet the expectations of others recorded the lowest perceptions of academic value (3.97 against a mean of 5.43).

Figure 5. Relationship between motivation groups and Academic Value Indicator



Those with specific career goals identified that they entered university with aims that they sought to achieve during the experience. This self-determining approach to their studies (Deci, 1975; Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 2001) may explain the high overall value scores of graduates who reported changing institutions during their degrees and some who entered through clearing if they considered they had personal autonomy of choice. In their actions they exercised self-determination (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Those motivated by personal aspiration alone identified self-efficacy, belief in their own ability to attain their goals (Bandura, 1997). Those whose motivation were the

expectation of others (which in some cases had shaped their own personal aspirations in terms of achieving goals for others), indicated some level of passivity through their degrees. This was evidenced in having to retake elements and/or expressing relief that their degree was over. However, the statistically significant impact on value perceptions came from those who were motivated by a specific career goals and personal aspiration to take active control of their path through their degree to self-author their success and outcomes (Baxter Magolda, 1999; 2001; 2008 & 2009; Barber, King, & Baxter Magolda, 2013). In taking control graduates exercised self-authorship over their degree experience to achieve the outcomes for which they felt personally responsible and recorded high perceptions of value if not always high classifications.

The self-authorship they described mirrors Baxter Magolda's (2014) definition as evolution "over time from uncritical reliance on external authority to internal criteria for guiding one's life." (p. 2). A definition of student engagement which combines its dual nature as a meaningful concept to individual students and as something of crucial importance to educators in enhancing student learning:

"...about what a student brings to Higher Education in terms of goals, aspirations, values and beliefs and how these are shaped and mediated by their experience whilst a student. SE is constructed and reconstructed through the lenses of the perceptions and identities held by students and the meaning and sense a student makes of their experiences and interactions. As players in and shapers of the educational context, educators need to foster educationally purposeful SE to support and enable students to learn in constructive and powerful ways and realise their potential in education and society" (Bryson, 2014, p. 17).

Engagement can be seen in this definition to align with self-authorship in terms of student empowerment, control and being actively involved in shaping their own pathways.

This group amounted to 5% (n=10) of the survey respondents and represented graduates from all institutional mission groups. All actively developed self-authorship techniques during their degree which they indicated supported them to achieve high levels of value which they articulated in different ways:

- "Personal and professional networks that I set up both with my classmates and the staff of the University"
- "Developing ownership concepts"
- "It was a mixture of finding the real me and enjoying the present, while keeping a firm hand and eye on the requirements for the future".

Those who saw most value in their degree were also identified unsurprisingly as those who had the potential to contribute most to the sustainability of the sector through their active endorsement of higher education and if they were able, by employment of graduates.

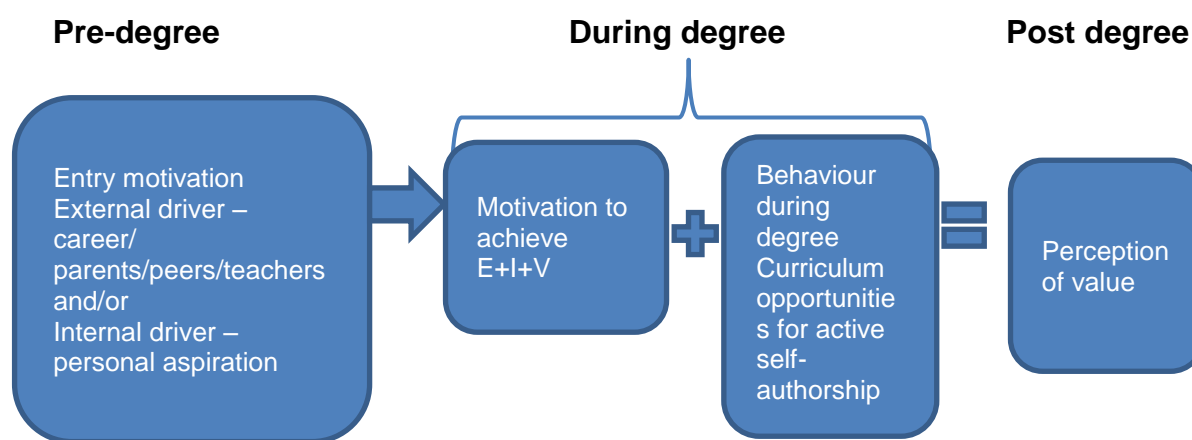
Developing a model to enhance perceptions of degree value

The study findings support anecdotal recognition among academics that motivated and engaged students achieve highly positive perceptions of their studies. Multiple

theorists have identified impact of motivation on behaviour and subsequent perception within multiple fields (e.g Vroom, 1964 & 1995; Alderfer, 1967 & 1969; McClelland & Pallak, 1985). Vroom's (ibid) expectancy model, whilst criticised by Deci (1975) and others for emphasis on extrinsic factors, nonetheless offers an outline which has been applied in multiple environments, and in light of the results of this study appears relevant to higher education. Vroom (ibid) identified that motivation (the amount by which a person will be motivated in a particular situation), as the function of three variables: E= expectancy (an individual's belief that the effort will result in success); I= instrumentality (an individual's belief that reward will follow their efforts); and V= valence (an individual's anticipation of the reward for their effort).

From the emerging data it is possible to identify specific elements that influence positive perception of legacy and impact. This enabled development of a model for increasing motivation through engagement and self-authorship, and perceptions of value within HE undergraduate degrees (Figure 6). As can be seen this model draws on Vroom's theory to recognise the importance of intrinsic motivation and individual action in perceptions of value. Thus by guiding individuals to consider that the effort they are asked to expend will achieve results (E); to believe the reward in whatever form they envisage (job, career, social life, friendships, post-nominal letters, knowledge, and/or recognition) will follow this effort (I) and to hold clear goals for anticipation of success (V).

Figure 6. My model of the stages of Perception of Value of a higher education degree



This indicates a potential opportunity to enhance perceptions of value for the majority of students (indicated in the research as 95% n=192) during their degrees for whom self-authorship through entry motivation is not evident, through development of structured self-authoring and increased engagement as part of academic programmes.

In developing a practical Perception of Value model for HE, behaviour during the degree was identified as an essential element in developing a positive perception of value (Figure 6). This element of a degree is common to all students, unlike sport or clubs, living in halls or involvement in representation which are variables for many students. Thus the taught, the curriculum element of the degree offers the potential to develop active engagement through developing self-authorship which emerged as

a common positive thread through the research. Autonomy is an attribute expected of graduates and can be developed through pedagogic approaches. Developing this whilst students through developing self-authorship appears from the research to have a positive impact on engagement and thus perceptions of impact. Fostering self-authorship requires approaches that empower students to drive their own learning with the educator as an informed and supporting facilitator as identified in many student-centred engagement approaches including peer instruction and students as partners/producers (Mazur, 1997 & 2009; Mezirow, 2000; Miller, Schell, Ho, Lukoff, & Mazur, 2015).

Recommendations from the research to enhance legacy perceptions and student learning experience

The research additionally indicated that actively engaging students and graduates in developing academic challenge within their studies and designing their futures was important. This is recognised as demanding both student and academic engagement (Bryson, 2013 & 2014; Ingham, 2011; Ingham, Habimana, & Walker, 2014). Festinger (1962) too recognised that individuals attribute to those things that demand greater effort of them:

“This suggests that organisms may come to like and value things for which they have worked very hard or for which they have suffered.” (p. 3)

This also endorses the pedagogic practice of ensuring supported challenge within curricula. Additionally this approach involving mutual engagement has the capacity to ameliorate the risks of the consumerist, employability-ready approach to higher education that could make HE susceptible to the vagaries of market place. Managing student expectations has become increasingly important for HE since the 2006 introduction of top-up fees. Since then the perception of students as customers has led to:

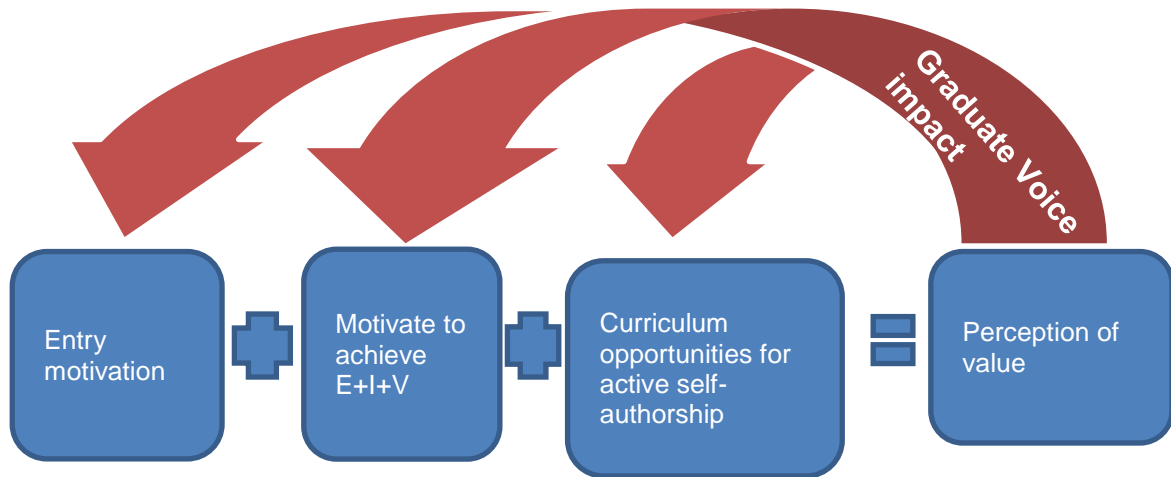
“...unrealistic expectations by some students through their equating the ‘right to education’ with ‘the right to demand a good degree with good grades’ (Kaye, Bickel, & Birtwistle, 2006, p. 98).

Many student complaints are identified as stemming from unrealistic expectations (Buckton, 2008). Indeed, Longden (2006) identified a ‘mismatch’ between students’ perceived expectations and the reality they find in HE. Preventing such mismatches through developing realistic expectations has become increasingly important for not only institutions but the sector. Jones (2010) acknowledged that institutions have a significant task “to manage student expectations without compromising the ethos underpinning the HE experience” (p. 48). He (ibid) underlined the prevention-rather-than-cure approach of investing in developing realistic expectations to engage student cohorts pre-arrival as preferable to the financial and human costs of complaint management and resolutions with the resulting potential for student (and staff) disengagement.

Thus whilst it is not possible to always influence entry motivation, institutions have routes open to them to develop strategies to enhance perceptions of value, and governments including that of the UK have routes to evaluate the role of excellent

teaching in creating legacy value. As can be seen from Figure 7 (overleaf) the long-view role of graduates in not only evidencing but adding value to HE degrees is fundamental. This recognises the opportunities of placing graduates – informed experts - at the heart of higher education.

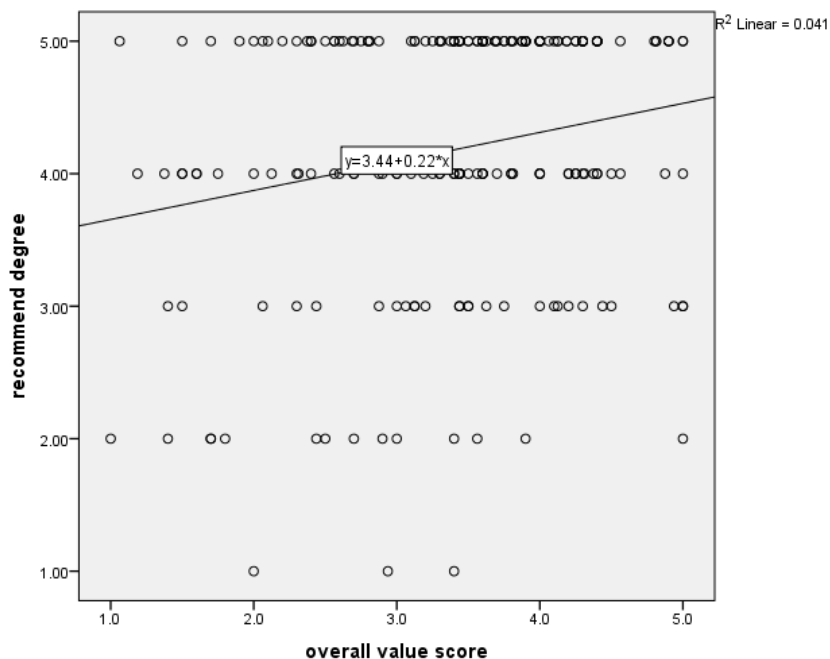
Figure 7. My model of Perception of Value of a higher education degree indicating the impact of the Graduate Voice on all stages



Graduate engagement

An additional finding from the research was that more engaged students were more likely as graduates to be positive ambassadors for higher education and their institution. A Spearman’s correlation was undertaken to determine the relationship between Overall Value recorded and graduates’ recommendations. This indicated a positive correlation between recommendation of a degree and Overall Value (= .175, n=200, p < .007). The resulting scatter gram (Figure 8) indicates this outcome, a contribution to the sustainability of the HE sector.

Figure 8. Overall Value Score relationship to recommending undertaking a degree



Conclusion

The findings indicated that the graduates who were most motivated to engage and develop self-authorship were those who would recommend a degree to others, and see value in employing graduates themselves. The finding that the group of students with a particular entry motivation perceived the highest value in their experience at university was relatively few in numbers provides an opportunity for educators. This argues that we should foster teaching approaches, to develop and enhance learning engagement and enhance the educational experience and outcomes for all students.

Therefore gathering evidence from graduates provides the important perspective of legacy value. This highly relevant indicator of the benefit of a degree. However this is not currently captured within the proposed TEF metrics. This evidence of legacy value can be shared to establish realistic expectations for prospective and existing students. These expectations are the benchmarks against which experiences will often be weighed and thus ensuring realistic expectations supports greater realisation of success. Eccles (2005) in Elliot and Dweck's 'Handbook of Competence and Motivation' said:

"... we proposed that educational, vocational, and other achievement-related choices are most directly related to two sets of beliefs: the individual's expectations for success and the importance or value the individual attaches to the various options perceived by the individual as available." (p. 105)

This research indicates that the desire to quantify the value in higher education learning in simple return-for-investment terms is restrictive and short-sighted as has been identified by others (Milne, 1999, p.85). From an individual's point of view and their immediate developmental capacity the economic evaluation is also criticised for its potential to devalue the impact of education as Gray (1999) warned:

"For most people the value of learning is the value it gives to the quality of life – the individual's social and economic milieu. The learning by the individual enriches the life of the community and collective learning builds stronger cultural and working resourcefulness as each member of the community shares their learning. Learning individuals help to build learning groups and learning groups compose learning organisations and whole learning communities." (p. 153).

However, the economic argument for attributing financial worth to establish value is one with which the sector has become familiar and, as has been seen, it is not one which graduates recognise as having relevance. If that is a lens of significant focus for the TEF then the research from graduates indicates that the TEF is identifying the lowest perception of value.

In light of diminishing graduate premiums, and increasing alternatives to degree education, the hegemonic discourse of economic/financial value or value for money was seen to be least important for graduates. Clear recognition of the positive impact of a degree in personal and academic development terms was identified in the research as significantly influencing not only individual perception of legacy but also a factor in graduates recognising graduates as valuable employees.

Graduate engagement in tomorrow's higher education, as these research findings indicate, has the potential to deliver significant evidence of value and to enable enhancement. Graduates offer first-hand evidence of a legacy, and the potential to demonstrate a heritage of value as shown in the research presented in this paper.

Fully demonstrating the breadth and scope of value, which it appears from this research graduates perceive, in their degrees is something that can only be achieved by engaging graduates in evidencing that value. This, together with the need for higher education to evidence more fully the impact it has on individuals, lies at the heart of the following recommendations arising from this study:

- a) Every student should have the opportunity to enhance their perception of value within their degree through fostering self-authorship within programmes of study. This development would enable and require more opportunities for student engagement within the learning experience which is fundamental to higher education.
- b) Institutions should seek to develop and sustain ongoing relationships with their graduates through engagement in diverse ways including graduates being at the heart of learning communities which allow them to contribute and gain with continuous involvement with their former university.

Graduates have a unique capacity to be informed contributors in the debate about the value of HE, about how and what is taught and indeed the purpose of research, teaching and enterprise for the learning community of HE. Some graduates are involved in this debate through other roles, such as academics or politicians. However systematic evidencing of the graduate voice at regular distances from graduation is not currently a feature of higher education research. Inclusion of the graduate voice has the capacity to move the consideration of the legacy and value of a degree from the cost-benefit analysis it has become to a broader evaluation. In light of the reducing graduate premium this would seem essential for the sustainability of the currency of a degree. Graduates within this research evidenced lasting, and in some cases continually developing, impact of the development of personal and academic independence, identity, knowledge, skills and competencies within the degree experience.

As the sector seeks to develop, and as political policy moves towards increasing the numbers engaging with higher education, the graduate voice, with its credibility of experience has particular relevance both for the widening participation student (recognised within the TEF), their family and connected stakeholders seeking to understand the value of an unknown pathway. Students looking realistically at a degree would through evidence of the graduate voice access research to enable understanding of the entirety of the experience on offer, and the potential it offers. This would be reflected not just for the duration of their degree, or the six months afterwards, but over a lifetime.

The graduate voice is about actively seeking opinions and evidence, asking not only what university did for them and how their perception of that value has changed over the years, what graduates can do for their university in this lasting relationship. It is about maintaining the engagement in which institutions invest when their graduates are students (Gallo, 2012 & 2013).

In summary this research showed that for 99 per cent of graduates in this study, their degree had lasting value. That value though was perceived as multi-faceted, lying in areas not neatly quantifiable by cost-benefit analysis. What was significant was that the legacy of perceived value in a degree was greatly enhanced by the challenges of engagement and self-authorship, a lesson from former students to the sector.

Two main areas emerge from this research as being unexplored and unidentified within the metrics for the proposed TEF to the potential detriment of the sector and its students: *student engagement* and its development through active teaching and learning approaches and *graduate engagement* in evidencing lasting legacy. Based on the research this paper concludes that these areas provide opportunities for higher education to demonstrate and deliver enhancement for all undergraduate students.

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ⁱ $\chi^2(5) = 25.546, p \leq .001$