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Abstract

Grades are frequently used by academics as a measure of academic success. The literature has largely neglected to ascertain how students define this important concept. This study aimed to give voice to how university students define academic success and what they perceive as the contributing factors. This qualitative study used three focus groups with 16 undergraduate psychology students attending a London university. Experiential inductive thematic analysis (TA) was used to analyse the data. Students defined academic success as a combination of outcomes including grades and more holistic outcomes of personal development and achievements. Three themes emerged to summarise students' perception of the factors that influence academic success. The first theme student agency included two subthemes: setting goals and self-regulation. The second theme was aptitude, with two subthemes: self-evaluation and motivation. The final theme was type of support which included the subthemes institutional support and external support. This study adds the student voice to the definition of academic success and the factors that facilitate it.

The challenge for higher education institutions is to incorporate these student-defined attributes into the curriculum to facilitate student success, particularly targeting malleable elements such as study and social skills, financial and other tailored provisions especially for non-traditional students. Researchers also need to develop instruments to measure holistic academic success outcomes to assess if students are reaching these objectives.

Key words: academic success; personal development; achievement; goals; motivation

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Introduction

Student Voice

The contemporary student is imagined as consumer, producer, co-creator, partner, and change agent (Dollinger & Mercer-Mapstone, 2019), all seemingly positioning the student in a situation of power. However, the student voice is not always sought in ways that benefit the student. The neoliberal marketisation of higher education (HE) envisions the student as a customer of financial benefit to the university (Tilak, 2015), thus allowing the financial transaction to overshadow what is of value to the individual student. The consumer model also uses public markers of student satisfaction commercially to attract new 'customers', superseding the enhancement of the individual student experience (Canning, 2017). One such survey, the National Student Survey (NSS) in the United Kingdom, asks non-validated questions (Holligan & Shah, 2017) non-student authorities deem important, the same authorities who will then decide how to react to the survey results. These surveys therefore set boundaries on the student voice and how it is heard (Canning, 2017; Holligan & Shah, 2017). This is contrary to Nelson and Charteris' (2015, p. 213) definition of the student voice "as educational activity (including research and pedagogy) that operates to include students centrally in educational debate, design and decision-making pertinent to their interests." To this end it is imperative to ask students directly how they define academic success and the factors that affect it.

Definitions of Academic Success

York, Gibson, and Rankin's literature review (2015) highlighted that the student voice is often neglected by researchers in this field. They also indicate the difficulty of measuring and striving for academic success when it is insufficiently defined, and the meaning is user dependant. For example, academics may define it by grade, university executive boards by

retention, and students by personal development. Researchers investigating academic success have used a range of differing definitions for this outcome, including: academic achievements; satisfaction; acquisition of skills and competencies; persistence; attainment of learning objectives; and career success (York, et al., 2015). These studies frequently omit the student voice. Grades and Grade Point Average (GPA) are most used by researchers as a measure of academic success. These measures are easily accessible but omit other holistic components of academic success, such as personal development and life skills, that are of equal importance to students (Burger & Naude, 2020). Kenneth et al.'s (2011) Canadian study found that students' reasons for attending university varied from degree attainment to personal development and career objectives. Delahunty and O'Shea's (2018) Australian study and Burger and Naude's (2020) South African study concur. As benefactors of the HE academic experience institutions need to know how students define academic success in order to support students to attain their respective goals.

Factors that affect Academic Success

Undoubtedly, intellectual ability influences grade attainment (Busato et al., 2000). A growth-mindset is the belief that intelligence is malleable and can be developed through learning and effort, and that motivation can be nurtured (Ng, 2018). However, Sisk et al.'s (2018) metanalysis found only a weak positive correlation between growth-mindset and academic achievement in undergraduates. This may be context dependant as they concluded that at-risk students, such as those with low socioeconomic status, benefited from mind-set interventions. Similarly, Broda et al.'s (2018) growth-mindset interventional study found that the intervention was successful at increasing GPA scores in ethnic minority students but not in white students. However, to strive for growth requires motivation to pursue goals.

Students' fundamental goals will determine their motivations to succeed at university. An emphasis on intrinsic meaningful goals (such as group affiliation and personal development) over extrinsic goals (such as wealth and fame) is preferable and leads to better health, well-being, and performance (Vansteenkiste et al., 2004). As a result, students' drive to succeed will be determined by their ultimate goals. Self-determination theory (SDT) as first described by Deci and Ryan (1985) separates motivation into two categories of autonomous and controlled motivation. The former comprises both intrinsic motivation and elements of extrinsic motivation where an activity's value has been integrated into a sense of self. Controlled motivation consists of external regulation, where behaviour is determined by the prospect of reward or punishment, and introjected regulation. Amotivation is merely the lack of incentive to act. Students regulated by autonomous motivations experience better academic success and progression through HE (Kyndt et al., 2015). Hence, being motivated to broaden one's knowledge and gain greater competence is a better driving force than extrinsic motivational factors.

However, the effect of intrinsic motivation may be stronger for high socioeconomic status (SES) students who have fewer environmental pressures such as financial worries (Guiffrida et al., 2013). It is known that financial stressors can negatively impact on academic achievements and is one of the main reasons for student attrition (Bradley, 2017). Lower SES groups may experience unavoidable pressure to succeed academically for financial reasons, and this may adversely affect the role of intrinsic motivation on their academic goal achievements. Adequate support for students helps to improve goal attainment.

Academic support is important in determining student engagement, and influences engagement with assessments (Authors, 2018). Teaching factors such as classroom vitality, good support services (Próspero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007), and good lecturer-student relationships (Al-Kadri et al., 2012) all have an impact on grades and learning. The university

environment influences student satisfaction which is also a marker of academic success and is a strong predictor of student progression (Suhre et al., 2007). One of the predictors of student satisfaction is engagement with their university (Filak & Sheldon, 2008). Zepke and Leach's (2010) literature review found that higher student engagement not only leads to better student retention and higher grades but also improved employability after graduation. The "What Works? Part: 1" project (Thomas, 2012) highlighted the importance of students' sense of belonging at university to academic success. Student engagement means students show up, whether face to face or online, and therefore provides better learning opportunities. Academic and social integration at university is particularly relevant for first-generation university students who lack a family tradition of university attendance (Próspero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007). These first-generation students lack the cultural capital afforded to other students (Swartz, 1997). Therefore, their engagement is more pertinent due to their greater need for support. Devlin (2013) points out that there is an overlap between being a first-generation student and other sociocultural disadvantages such as low socio-economic status. She argues that socioculturally disadvantaged students lack the tacit knowledge required to navigate HE and that this constitutes discrimination, therefore the responsibility to improve this disadvantage should not lie solely with the student.

In addition to academic support, social support can affect academic persistence (Rayle et al., 2006). Reeve et al. (2013) found social support to be a legitimate strategy for dealing with course-related stress, and there is also evidence that poor social support can have a negative effect on academic grades (Hassaskhah, et al., 2015). Reeve et al. (2013) found support from peers, friends and family was more influential to student engagement than faculty support. Kirikkanat and Soyer's (2018) study suggests that academic coping, which includes the use of approach coping and social support such as family and peer group, influenced academic achievement as measured by GPA. Mishra's (2020) systematic review

concluded that social support networks, including family, peer and institutional support, positively influenced academic success of ethnic minority students. This social support was important in overcoming academic stresses and those related to discrimination.

Furthermore, students who attend university straight from school tend to seek social support from their peers while second-degree and mature students sought this support more from their family or significant others (Reeve et al., 2013). Therefore, age and academic experience of individual students may affect the type of support that is most influential to success. It is important that varied and positive social support coexists with other positive factors such as course motivation, otherwise excessive engagement with non-academic pursuits can be detriment to academic outcomes such as persistent and GPA (Guiffrida et al., 2013).

Moreover, Bandura's (2006) agency theory postulates that people are not just products of their life circumstances but are active contributors. Therefore, students have some power to shape their own successes. He defines human agency as "influencing intentionally one's functioning and life circumstances" (p.164). Bandura believes that the role of the agent in determining their future depends on personal resources, the activity in question and the environmental circumstances. This concurs with constructivist learning theory which describes the active process of learning that includes learning through socialisation (Bada, 2015). Students who are proficient self-regulators maintain higher GPAs (Heikkilä et al., 2011). For instance, high GPA attainment and personal goal achievement requires good time-management (George et al., 2008), while poor time management skills and procrastination were found to be linked with low GPA (Beattie et al., 2018). Learning approaches also affect academic outcomes. The surface approach to learning as defined by Marton and Saljo (1976) is the superficial learning of information, while deep learning is preferable as it is considered more permanent and involves understanding information in order to facilitate learning.

Students who use deep learning approaches have higher HE retention rates (Asikainen et al., 2013).

The ability to control and manipulate one's environment to achieve academic success is determined by several psychological variables including self-efficacy, self-esteem, and response to stress. A strong sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem are associated with high GPA scores (Krumrei-Mancuso et al., 2013; Li et al., 2018), and positive self-efficacy is a vital personal resource which is needed to effect change and realise ambitions. Lane, Lane, and Kyprianou (2004) also found a significant positive correlation between student self-efficacy and self-esteem. In addition everyday stressors and a perception of a high workload can have an adverse effect on learning (Al-Kadri et al., 2012; Naude et al., 2016). If students are better able to moderate their negative emotions and stress levels this could have a positive effect on academic success (Schroder et al., 2017). In addition, research assessing the relationship between positive affect and GPA have found a weak positive correlation between these variables (Chow, 2005).

Rationale for this study

A discussion involving one of the researchers and a student piqued the researchers' interest in investigating how students define and achieve academic success. The student's motives for attending university were career driven. Accordingly, they questioned where to focus their energy at university. To achieve their goal, should they concentrate on achieving good grades, adequate voluntary or paid work experience, or develop their industry network? As academics we had an assumption that academic success was measured by degree classification. This is also reflected in the neoliberal marketisation of universities that may not always have the interests of students at its heart. This encounter questioned our

meritocratic assumption and spurred us to investigate how students define academic success and the factors that influence it.

The cost of attending university, both financially and in time, is substantial, therefore it is imperative students are provided with the optimal circumstances to allow them to succeed. Previous research assessing the factors that influence academic success has mainly concentrated on assessing quantifiable measures such as GPA that may not reflect how students envisage their success. This study aims to give space to students who are engaged with their university course to express their perception of academic success and the factors that affect it. We recognise that this is only a fragment of the student voice and is filtered through the lens of academics. But it aims to open discussion amongst students and academics about how we define academic success and how we work to support students to attain it.

The research questions for this study were: How do university students define academic success? What do students perceive to be the factors that influence academic success?

Methodology

Design

This qualitative study involved three focus groups and utilised a semi-structured interview technique. This method of data collection best allowed the researchers to explore the research questions fully and allow participants to create their own collective narrative and definitions based on their lived experiences. The focus group methodology allows the group dynamic to stimulate discourse that is lacking in individual interviews (Freeman, 2006). Experiential inductive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013) was used, involving three researchers independently coding the data, to improve the validity of the analysis.

Participants

Participants were recruited from a psychology undergraduate degree programme in London using an advertisement on the university's virtual learning platform, Blackboard, and via the psychology noticeboard. A qualifier was that they must have completed at least one full year of study so that they had a minimum of two semesters' experience to draw from and discuss. Participants were given research incentive credits for taking part. These credits could then be used by the students to recruit participants for their own studies.

There were 16 participants (See Table 1) aged between 19 and 53 years of age (mean age = 29.2, mode age = 19). Eleven participants were female (mean age = 31.4) and five were male (mean age = 24.4). Four students had an average grade of a first (70% or above), eleven had an upper second (60% to 69%) and one had a lower second (50% to 59%). Nine (56%) of the students were white, seven (44%) were ethnic minorities. The participant demographics reflected the student demographics of the department and the university. The method of recruitment tends to lead to a sample of particularly engaged students, and the grade average of our participants would also indicate that this was the case.

Materials

A multi directional audio recorder was used. Semi-structured interview (SSI) questions were devised by the researchers to allow participants to openly discuss their personal interpretation of academic success and their perceived contributing factors. In line with Gill et al.'s (2008) methodology for SSI in focus groups, the questions were open-ended and non-leading, and moved from general questions to more specific. An example question is: "How would you define academic success at higher education?" The group dynamic shaped each focus group discussion. Therefore, the themes discussed were determined by the participants with the researcher facilitators ensuring the group remained focused on the topic and that everyone had an opportunity to contribute.

Procedure

The focus groups took place in a quiet room on campus familiar to the participants. The students read a participant information sheet and signed a consent form if they were happy to take part. The purpose of the focus group was explained. The students then completed a short demographic questionnaire. Two psychology lecturers, familiar to the students, together facilitated the discussion and took notes. Most of the participants were meeting each other for the first time. After a group discussion on how the students defined academic success, the participants were given a marker pen each and asked to write on a communal A1 (59.4 x 84.1cm) sheet of paper what they considered to be the factors that affect their academic success, followed by a group discussion on each of these factors in turn. Each focus group lasted approximately one hour. Students appeared at ease throughout the process and needed little prompting from the facilitators. Finally, participants were thanked, debriefed and given the contact information of the researchers.

The interviews were transcribed for analysis. The researchers used a systematic approach, as outlined by Creswell (2009), to read, reread and wholly acquaint themselves with the data. Experiential inductive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013) was used to extract pertinent codes and themes related to the research questions. The data was manually coded and the process of generating codes and themes was repeated until saturation of the data. Coding and theme selection was carried out independently by the researchers. The themes were also checked against the individual reflections recorded on the A1 sheet to check that all these factors were accounted for in the final themes. There was general agreement of the coding and the themes development was completed collectively.

Ethics

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the university's ethics committee. Adequate information was provided to participants before and after taking part and written consent was acquired, in line with the British Psychological Society guidelines. Participants

were reassured that their data would be anonymised, their participation would be kept confidential, and that they could withdraw at any time.

Data analysis and interpretation

The premise of this study was to understand students' perception of what academic success is and the factors that influence its realisation. Three themes emerged from the data to summarise the students' perception of the factors that influence academic success (see Table 2). The first of these is student agency which included two subthemes: setting goals and self-regulation. The second theme was aptitude with the subthemes: self-evaluation and motivation. The final theme was type of support which included the subthemes: institutional support and external support. These themes and subthemes together explained students' perception of academic success. The following interpretation is supported by extracts from the three student focus groups. (Fg1, 2 or 3 refer to the focus group number and P1, 2, 3 and so on refers to the participant number within that focus group).

Defining academic success

Students defined academic success in terms of measurable outcome markers, for example grades, together with less tangible outcomes, such as personal development and personal achievements. Achieving a degree and good grades were seen by the participants as only one marker of academic success: "it's not just about grade success, success as you as a person as well…and you're in university to get a degree" (Fg2, P2).

Participants viewed personal development in terms of becoming more open minded and open to opportunities along with doing their best and coping with university: "A successful student copes with it all" (Fg1, P4). Students strived to become lifelong learners: "keep on researching, keep on informing yourself. I think that that's the success" (Fg2, P1).

In addition, students defined academic success as knowing one's place in the world: "...knowing who you are, and your place in the world, and how you impact on other people and that kind of thing" (Fg2, P2). This learner explained that HE affords them the opportunity to expand their beliefs and attitudes about various concepts as well as about themselves:

> What I like is the fact that every day we have the opportunity to reconsider our ideas, our way of thinking about specific subjects, also how we see ourselves […] it's not only academic, but it's also a way of discovering yourself (Fg2, P1).

Students' perception of personal achievements as a marker of academic success included accomplishing their personal goals: "Achieving what you set out to achieve" (Fg1, P6). They also expressed that they aspired to become more independent. This student expressed how overcoming a challenge was a satisfying marker of success: "Challenge, yes, […] if you have to overcome some difficulties, this process is going to be more satisfying for yourself" (Fg2, P1).

For some, the perception of academic success is of both personal happiness and financial stability: "However you define success to be, it is not just about personal goals. It is about actually getting somewhere and being happy and financially stable. I think financial stability is really important as success" (Fg1, P2). An important personal achievement for this student that was shared with other students was aspiring to be independent: 'This degree is going to make me more independent and financially stable' (Fg1, P7).

Factors that influence academic success

Theme 1. Student Agency

Student agency refers to the actions students intentionally perform that lead to academic success. Students acknowledged that they needed to be proactive to be successful. The two subthemes identified within this theme were: setting goals and self-regulation.

Setting goals

Setting goals motivated students. Students' long-term goals depended on their definition of academic success and their future plans. These goals varied from achieving the desired grades or degree: "I think keeping long-term goals in mind and the grades that you want to achieve, or you want to leave here with" (Fg1, P5), to aspects of personal development and growth. Short-term goals were seen as more achievable and less overwhelming to allow students to remain focused without getting disheartened. This student rewarded their efforts in order to continue concentrating on their goals: "After that hour I'd give myself something to do and that was my treat […] then going back and doing a bit more feeling that I'm actually building on what I've done" (Fg1, P1).

Students perceived challenging goals to be inspirational. This student felt challenges kept them focused and helped them aim for their final goals: "The fact that I have a challenge, that it's difficult, that it's hard, and I have to put 100% of myself in it. That's what keeps the interest going and that's what keeps success a goal" (Fg2, P1).

Self-regulation

The self-regulation subtheme refers to the ability of students to control their actions in a manner that is conducive to achieving their goals and ultimately their desired academic success. This includes being organised and using their time efficiently, having self-discipline, good attendance, and the use of effective learning strategies.

Organised students managed their time constructively, made plans and stuck to them. Some students felt that being organised guaranteed success (as defined by the individual student): "As long as you are organised you can get yourself there" (Fg1, P4). Learners were also aware that time was finite and so they had to be realistic and disciplined with their time: "What I mean by time allowance is just to be realistic. I'm like, I'm going to do this for a certain amount of time, move onto another one" (Fg3, P2). Conversely disorganisation

hindered success: “All my coursework, I’ve never prepared for it. I’ve always been doing it three days, four days before, maximum, so my marks…have always been affected....” (Fg2, P1). Students appreciated the importance of attendance for their learning and development. This learner was motivated to attend as they feared missing important teaching: “I know it is very important for attendance to be good. I personally think it is vital. I’d hate to miss something in case it was an important thing” (Fg1, F6).

Self-regulation also involved the adoption of learning strategies, which influenced learning outcomes. For most students the most important learning strategy was consistent work and insight into their own learning as explained by this learner: “I worked and worked and worked and I found it, now I am getting the grades that I want to get, just through not thinking that I know it all” (Fg3, P8). Learners had a sense of achievement in developing a deep understanding of the subject area: “Actually I have gone past this and I’m into the realms of really understanding and can contribute as opposed to chasing the subject” (Fg1, P1). They had an understanding that superficial learning is not true learning. This student was happy with their high grade, but they realised that they had no understanding of the module: “I'm happy for the 70, but I don't even know what the module was about, to be honest” (Fg3, P1).

Theme 2. Aptitude

The previous theme of student agency refers to the actions required of students to achieve student defined academic success. The theme of aptitude refers to students’ ability to carry out these actions and includes the subthemes self-evaluation and motivation.

Self-evaluation

Self-evaluation is the way in which students viewed themselves. This is affected by self-esteem, self-efficacy, and their emotional state. When students had a positive evaluation of themselves, they had a strong belief in their ability to succeed: “I believe once you achieve a

certain success you feel more empowered in a sense, like, 'This was me. I did this'" (Fg3, P2). Students' self-efficacy further improved when they overcame challenges and could see themselves making progress: "The more difficult, the more challenging, the better the result at the end if you have tried hard, and the more you grow and the more you think, 'Crikey I can do that'" (Fg1, P4). One learner felt that overconfidence can hinder academic success by reducing the drive to work: "I think underestimating your abilities is a good thing sometimes" (Fg3, P8).

Students felt emotions affected their academic endeavours. Positive emotions were seen as conducive to academic success while negative emotions such as stress could have the opposing effect. Facing challenges was easier if students felt contented and unstressed: "The happier I am, the less stressful I feel; the less things I have to be stressed about, the less difficult it is to overcome obstacles" (Fg2, P3). Participants confirmed that they gained enjoyment from the learning experience: "What I enjoy most, obviously it's the learning aspect" (Fg2, P3). Others admitted that being academically successful required passion for the subject area: "You're going to have to have a passion for psychology if you want to achieve well" (Fg3, P2).

This learner acknowledged that last minute stress encouraged them to work but that it was not a pleasant experience. However, they were reticent to dedicate too much time to their studies since to fail despite a substantial time investment would have been difficult for the student to come to terms with: "…it's a horrible thing to have that stress, but I succeed under that, whereas I'm too scared that I'm going to f*** it all up if I spend too much time on it and how I would deal with that" (Fg2, P3).

Motivation

The drive for success was stimulated by the level of student motivation. Intrinsic motivation was determined by students' interest in the subject area and dedication to their personal goals. Extrinsically motivated students were driven to succeed for grades and other external rewards. Intrinsically motivated students reported self-regulation activities, such as being organised and appreciating a deep approach to learning, that were conducive to achieving their goals.

This student was driven by a desire for continuous self-improvement: "I'd like to see a steady incline so that I can see that I'm improving as opposed to staying the same" (Fg1, P1). For another learner, love of the subject matter made it easy to learn, in addition to their desire to help others and learn a new skill: "It makes it easier… I loved the historic aspect of it and the practical aspect of helping people" (Fg1, P4).

For some students extrinsic motivational factors such as financial stability pushed them to succeed: "we're in debt…sometimes it's deflating, but then sometimes you use it to motivate yourself" (Fg3, P2). For other students, good grades were incentivising: "Yes. I know how nice it feels when you get a pass with a good mark" (Fg1, P4). Some learners were motivated by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. This student appreciated the learning process but felt very satisfied by good marks: "I have to reach for a certain mark and I also have to understand the progress whilst I am doing that. While I am doing that I feel good, when I get the mark I'm feeling even better" (Fg1, P1). Poor learning strategies demotivated some students: "I think not knowing how to revise, that is what leads to it because I have nothing to motivate me to sit down and do it earlier" (Fg1, P1).

Theme 3. Type of Support

This theme refers to how support systems influence students' ability to succeed. It includes the subthemes of institutional support and external support.

Institutional support

Institutional support includes the communication between the tutors and students, the level of support offered by tutors, and the teaching strategies they use. Good communication between staff and students means students are clear about what they need to do to succeed. This communication helps connect the students to the institution. This student illustrated the importance of this communication and the interaction between the students themselves and its effect on their sense of belonging:

> For me that crosses the void between the staff and the students. Communication in what we are supposed to be reading and what we are supposed to be doing…but it is just connecting well with the organisation and with each other and with our work (Fg1, P6).

Clear explanation of what tutors require from student assignments was needed to avoid student anxiety: "I remember for Module X, I didn't know, until the last couple of weeks anything. I think I was freaking out more than it was actually difficult just because I didn't know what it was about" (Fg3, P3). Feedback from tutors is a vital form of communicating to students on how to improve their work. If feedback is not understood this learning opportunity is lost: "…because you read the feedback, you understand, but that's a subjective understanding and basically it doesn't have to be what the lecturer or the person who marks means. It can be two different things" (Fg3, P1). Supportive tutors were valued by students and they appreciated the positive impact this support had on their learning experience without reducing their independence:

> … being able to contact lecturers through the emails and stuff like that, they're really good at replying and they're detailed enough so they're not giving you the answer, you still have to think, but it points you in the right directions (Fg2, P2).

Teaching strategies impacted on student learning. Ineffective teaching practices frustrated students, while other positive practices improved students' experience and aided their path to academic success. Students were energised by passionate lecturers: "when you get someone you can tell […] this is their passion […] you kind of vibe off that energy in a sense" (Fg3, P3). Some students felt that poor teaching cheated them financially. A perception of poor value for money risked students disengaging**:** "They are just reading off the screen […] I am getting into a lot of debt for a substandard performance" (Fg1, P1)

External support

This subtheme refers to the effect of peer support and social interaction on learners' academic success. Students also valued the support of their families and its effect on their ability to study. Learners recognised the role of student finance, and its influence on their motivation and ability to progress academically.

A supportive peer group added to students' sense of belonging. This learner felt that their university peers were more helpful than their school peers: "Everybody is so supportive of each other... It is a lovely learning environment. Compared to college, compared to school, there is so much help" (Fg1, P4).

Attendance was also stimulated by the social interaction at university. Students were motivated to attend in order to catch up with their friends: "You come in and you get along with people, you're more driven to turn up to see those people" (Fg2, P3). However, friendships could also be distracting, and students needed to have strong self-control to resist the temptation to socialise in lieu of studying: "They are always calling you up. 'Do you want to come here? Do you want to go there?' You have to be really determined at what you are doing and really self-disciplined… But yes, that is really distracting" (Fg1, P5).

Students appreciated the support of their family whether this was emotional, practical or financial. First generation HE students were aware that their families did not always understand the HE experience and as a result were not able to support them in the same way. This student acknowledged that parental support is an important component of their academic determination: "It's not only economical, because it's support; it's an emotional support because they are always behind me, they are always checking…do I need something else? This support is a good 50% of what keeps me going" (Fg2, P1). This student appreciated the advantage afforded to them by their father's understanding of the process of HE: "My dad he's …done university courses…but I think he just understands the stress of learning in an intense environment and having all the deadlines and things like that" (Fg2, P2). This learner was frustrated by their family's lack of cultural capital and understanding of the work involved in academic learning:

> …people can get the idea that you're not really doing anything. "My job is nine to five; you try doing it." You kind of think, it's kind of the same thing; you're doing as much work. They don't quite understand that (Fg2, P3).

Financial worries can have a negative impact on some students' ability to get on with their work. This student acknowledged that financial insecurity can be a distraction. They appreciated that their student finance loan allowed them to concentrate on their studies:

> If you don't have financial stability then can't actually focus your mind on anything else… That is why it is really good that we get student finance to help us pay our way. We don't actually have to, like, work...we can spend the time revising and stuff (Fg1, P7).

Debt can adversely affect students' decision to pursue postgraduate studies: "There's no point in doing a masters. That's just more money. It's deflating" (Fg3, P2). However, student debt can have a positive effect. For this student the loan drove their ambition to get a good degree classification: "The idea that I have to pay it back and I am going to be even more upset paying it back if I didn't leave with a grade I was happy with. Yes, I think it does affect me" (Fg1, P5). This learner would rather that financial factors did not affect their degree, but they accepted that it is a factor: "Money shouldn't be a factor in terms of learning, I believe, but that's not the case. We have to pay" (Fg3, P2).

Discussion

Students' definition of academic success

The first aim of this study was to give voice to how students define academic success. We have fulfilled Nelson and Charteris' (2015) definition of the 'student voice' by positioning student perception as fundamental to defining academic success and the factors that influence it. Students defined academic success as a combination of measurable outcomes, for example grades and degree attainment, together with more holistic student outcomes, such as personal development and achievements. The participants' concept of personal development concerned becoming autonomous, self-aware, and open-minded lifelong learners, coping with the university environment and fulfilling their potential. The personal achievements students strived for included: attaining personal goals; learning to overcome challenges; and becoming financially stable and independent. The student participants felt that academic success was an ideal and that they had challenges to overcome to reach academic success.

These findings concur with other studies that noted the importance of personal development in students' definition of academic success (Burger & Naude, 2020; Delahunty & O'Shea, 2018; Kenneth et al., 2011). These multifaceted outcomes contrast with the more meritocratic

measures used in previous research studies, such as grade outcomes or other readily observable measures of academic success such as persistence and attendance (York et al., 2015). Such variables drive HE policy and funding but fail to take account of the other components of academic success defined by the participants of this study. Using grade-based end points oversimplifies what academic success is. And the ranking of universities based on such surveys ignores what students want from their university experience and calls into question the role of HE (Holligan & Shah, 2017). The challenge for HE academics and institutions is to acknowledge and incorporate student-defined outcomes of academic success into the curriculum in order to facilitate students to achieve these outcomes. Researchers also need to develop instruments to measure these outcomes to assess whether students are achieving these holistic objectives.

The factors that influence academic success

The second aim of the study was to gain an understanding of the factors that student perceive to influence academic success, as defined by the students themselves. These included the themes of student agency, aptitude and type of support. Student agency refers to the actions students needed to carry out in order to be academically successful including setting goals and the self-regulation activities that were required to achieve these goals. Aptitude is the ability of students to carry out these actions to gain academic success. Support was an important factor in assisting students to achieve their goals. It encompassed both institutional factors that help support and nurture students, and external support structures.

Bandura's agency theory proposes that people are the architects of their own lives (Bandura, 2006). The students in this study carried out specific actions which were conducive to their own learning by setting specific goals and regulating their actions. Students' goals ranged from extrinsic aspirations such as grade and degree success, financial security and employment, to intrinsic goals such as personal development and growth. Previous research

has established that an emphasis on intrinsic goals over extrinsic goals is preferable for well-being and successful outcomes (Vansteenkiste et al., 2004). The participants of this current study valued both categories of goals and felt that they could complement each other. For instance, students understood that financial stability would give them autonomy and that good grades would allow them to grow in happiness.

Other researchers have found that self-regulation is conducive to academic success (Heikkilä et al., 2011). Participants reported that being organised and using their time effectively was beneficial to their academic success, with less organised students admitting that this hampered their learning. The effect of organisation on academic success corresponds with other research studies (George et al., 2008; Beattie et al., 2018). Students are not always instinctively organised, and institutions need to provide them with opportunities to learn these skills.

Students used either deep, superficial or undirected learning approaches with differing levels of success. However, a deep approach to learning and passion for their subject was most rewarding in terms of reaching their learning goals and personal development satisfaction. Other studies (Asikainen et al., 2013) also found that deep learning is associated with academic success. Superficial learning or undirected learning styles frustrated participants' attempts at learning. HE institutions need to support students to uncover their passions to facilitate deep learning processes.

The current study found that learning, overcoming challenges and grade success enhanced self-esteem and self-efficacy. Positive academic outcomes made the students feel confident in their ability and worthy of attending university. Students with low self-efficacy have been found to lack confidence in their academic abilities and this can result in poor academic outcomes (Krumrei-Mancuso et al., 2013). In contrast, high self-efficacy (Schunk

& Zimmerman, 1994) and high self-esteem (Rayle, Kurpius & Arredondo, 2006; Li et al., 2018) are associated with successful academic outcomes.

Congruent with previous research (Chow, 2005) students reported that positive emotions enhanced their ability to learn. For some, negative emotions such as stress interfered with learning but for others it was a useful last-minute motivator. Previous research found that stress has an adverse effect on academic outcomes (Al-Kadri et al., 2012; Naude et al., 2016) but the ability to moderate stress has a positive effect (Schroder et al., 2017). Those who are motivated by last minute stress may be successfully moderating its effect and using it constructively.

Students' motivation to succeed was determined by intrinsic motivators such as their passion for the subject area. For some, the drive for success was enhanced by extrinsic motivators, for instance financial stability and independence, while for others it was a combination of the two. Amotivation hindered student engagement. In line with the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) autonomously motivated students have been found to be more likely to be academically successful (Guiffrida et al., 2013; Kyndt et al., 2015). However, if a growth-mindset is associated with goal attainment especially in non-traditional and at-risk students (Broda et al's, 2018; Sisk et al., 2018) it stands that motivation is also malleable. The higher education (HE) curriculum needs to incorporate carefully designed elements that facilitate the development of growth-mindset, especially in non-traditional students. Students deserve to be told that their cognitive ability is not stagnant and can be developed along with their motivation to achieve.

In line with previous studies students conveyed the value of family, social and institutional support in achieving academic success (Kirikkanat & Soyer, 2018). Similar to Reeve et al's (2013) study, social support outside of the formal institutional setting from peers and family members affected attendance and students' ability to engage with their

academic goals. Mishra's (2020) systematic review found that such support is particularly valuable to ethnic minority students, and this is reflected in the current ethnically diverse student group.

The current study also found that institutional support improved learning, reduced anxiety and fostered a sense of belonging at university. The importance of students' sense of belonging to their HE institution has also been established (Thomas, 2012). It is important that universities lay down the foundations of belonging in students early on, to avoid attrition and to help students feel comfortable in the university environment. Non-traditional students such as first generation and ethnic minority students experience many sociocultural disadvantages (Devlin, 2013). It is beholden on university institutions to ensure these students have a strong sense of belonging (Tinto, 2017) and can successfully navigate the HE system. This is achieved not by requesting the students to change but by adjusting the university culture to allow all students equal opportunities to achieve their personal ambitions at university.

Students need to be made aware of the support available to them and how to seek this support. As this study has illustrated support is an important factor in academic success. Learners also need to be encouraged to socialise within their institution and with their peers on their course for them to benefit from the support of their peers.

Previous studies have highlighted the negative impact of financial stress on student success and attrition (Bradley, 2017). Our study found that debt motivated some students to succeed but caused stress for others and deterred them from pursuing postgraduate studies. This conflicting perception of debt may be down to several factors including the level of financial shrewdness in students, their differing levels of risk aversion and sociocultural disadvantage. Non-Traditional students such as first generation students and ethnic minority students are at the greatest risk of financial insecurity (Devlin, 2013). As the majority of UK

students are now leaving HE with a minimal debt of £30,000, it is imperative that HE institutions educate their students in the basics of financial management and provide funding and scholarships to support students who are financially disadvantaged. This is particularly pertinent to non-traditional student groups including lower SES, ethnic minority, and first-generation students who are most adversely affected (Guiffrida et al., 2013).

Study limitations

The student participants in this study were engaged with their course and with research activities within the department. Most had an average grade of 60% or above which is the average grade for the university's subject group. Further research needs to look at the experiences of learners with contrasting profiles as their perceptions of academic success and the factors that affect or hinder it may differ. In addition, non-psychology students' experience might differ to this student group. Both the focus group facilitators taught on the psychology course, which may have affected student disclosure and biased the analysis. To improve the validity of the results a third researcher contributed to the analysis of the data. While the focus group dynamic was important to stimulate discussion, it is possible that some participants may have been intimidated by the group and this may have hindered their ability to contribute.

Future Direction

Researchers and policymakers in HE need to review how they define academic success and to use a student-relevant definition, as the definition used by participants in this current study goes beyond student grades. Students expect to leave university with transferable skills that prepare them for life and not just employment. They also envisage university as an opportunity to deepen their personal understanding of themselves and their place in the world. As such, it is beholden on universities to provide students with personal development opportunities.

In order to be academically successful students need to be reassured that the skills and personal characteristics they possess on starting HE can be nurtured and improved. This is particularly important in widening participation HE institutions as more of these students may have financial concerns. The curriculum needs to incorporate elements to enhance self-regulation skills by providing training in time management, organisation and study skills. Students also need to be empowered to feel confident in their abilities and to value themselves. Mentoring and personal tutoring schemes, as well as good staff communication and support help build student confidence. In addition, innovative assessments can be designed to help foster self-esteem and self-efficacy by helping students use their individual skills successfully. It is also important that assessments, feedback and teaching strategies are designed in a manner that nurtures student motivation.

Belonging encourages engagement, therefore students deserve to be informed of the supportive advantage of peer socialisation. HE institutions and Student Unions need to foster students' desire to socialise at their university and student induction events are a good opportunity to sow the seeds of belonging. However, engagement and progression can be negatively affected by financial stress and the opportunity to learn financial management at university may moderate this.

Further research is in progress to assess the role of academic feedback on student motivation. In addition, there is scope for this current study to be widened to include students with a more varied academic profile and from a variety of other study programs.

Declaration of conflict:

The authors have no potential competing interest.

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Table 1. Participant demographics

Demographic		FG 1	FG 2	FG 3	Sample total	Total %
Gender	Male	2	2	1	5	31%
	Female	1	1	9	11	69%
Age at start of degree	Under 21	2	2	5	9	56%
	Over 21	1	1	5	7	44%
Ethnic Group	White	1	3	5	9	56%
	Ethnic Minority	2	0	5	7	44%
Grade average	1st (70% or above)	3	1	3	7	44%
	2:1 (60 to 69%)	0	1	7	8	50%
	2:2 (50 to 59%)	0	1	0	1	6%
Student status	Home	1	2	10	3	81%
	EU	1	1	0	2	13%
	International	1	0	0	1	6%
Participants per focus group		3	3	10	16	100%

FG= Focus Group

Table 2. Themes, subthemes and codes derived from the data analysis and interpretation

Themes	Subthemes	Codes
Student Agency	Setting Goals	Long-term goals Short term goals
	Self-Regulation	Organisation and Time management Self-discipline Attendance Learning strategies
Aptitude	Self- Evaluation	Self-efficacy Self esteem Emotions
	Motivation	Intrinsic motivation Extrinsic motivation Amotivation
Support	Institutional Support	Communication Tutor support Teaching strategies
	External Support	Peer support and social interaction Family support Financial considerations