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JOURNAL ARTICLE

FROM SPACE TO PLACE – STUDENTS' DESCRIPTIONS OF UNIVERSITY

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From space to place – students’ descriptions of university

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Purpose

There appears to be a lack of research into the intangible elements that affect how students form a relationship with their university. Research undertaken to explore this presents those marketing higher education to potential students the opportunity to reshape marketing communications to offer the students reassurance that they will be able to fit in to a particular university environment.

Method

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is employed to draw themes from interviews and a follow up focus group with current full-time undergraduate students. This approach was selected in order to ensure that the students’ voices would be heard – rather than the researcher’s assumptions.

Findings

The research proposes a conceptual model which demonstrates that the intangible elements that contribute to students developing a relationship with their university can be linked to research into place attachment, that is to say how ‘space’ becomes ‘place’.

Originality

This paper moves beyond concerns with measuring the objective criteria thought to influence student choice, which are increasingly common in higher education (HE) marketing. It considers how reference to theories of place attachment could be used to provide additional information to potential students about the intangible elements of the university experience.

Keywords: Higher Education, Student recruitment, Student decision making, Belonging, Attachment, Place Attachment, Sense of Place.

Article classification – research paper

Introduction

As the Higher Education sector in England comes under increasing scrutiny and the government introduces changes to how it is funded, managers within universities seek to ensure their areas of responsibility operate as efficiently as possible. One important element amongst this, for those universities whose funding is not entirely research based, is ensuring that targets for the recruitment of undergraduate students are met.

For those who are responsible for student recruitment, the question of how undergraduate students choose their university is one of great interest. A great deal of attention is focused on understanding and measuring the objective criteria that students declare as having a role in how this choice is made. The government, through the Higher Education Funding Council for England (Hefce) has introduced various measures to ensure that such information is provided (see below). However, it appears that there is a gap in knowledge regarding the nature of the intangible criteria that affect student choice. In an increasingly competitive higher education 'market' gaining greater insight into these issues could have significant implications for those who undertake marketing activity which attempts to encourage students to consider studying at a particular institution. Greater understanding would enable higher education institutions to communicate the breadth of what they offer to their students. It would also benefit potential students, who could gain valuable information to supplement the objective criteria that are already available.

In order to begin a consideration of this issue this paper provides a brief outline of what is known about how full-time, undergraduate, UK students choose their university, and what is not yet known. It discusses exploratory research which has been undertaken to establish how this gap in knowledge might be addressed. The selection of the sample for the research is outlined, and the coding of the

information gained is explained. A brief overview of the findings is given which includes a small number of quotations from the conversations with the students in the sample, in order to present the student voice in addition to the researcher's interpretations of what has been described. Further exploration is proposed, which might assist the sector in gaining greater knowledge regarding what is not known about student decision making. The practical value this could have for marketing professionals working in higher education is also discussed.

What do we know?

The objective criteria by which students choose between universities are well known to those in the sector – the top three issues are: location, course and institutional reputation (Brown, Varley, & Pal, 2009; Huddersfield, 2013; Moogan, 2011; Moogan, Baron, & Harris, 1999). In addition, the funding council, Hefce, commissions an annual independent survey of final year students not only to drive improvements in the student experience, but also to provide information for potential students about institutions they are considering. This is known as the National Student Survey (NSS) and was introduced in 2005. It asks students to rate their university on topics such as teaching, assessment and feedback, the academic support they receive, learning resources, and their overall satisfaction. Additional research undertaken by Hefce has established key information that it judges to be important to assist students in their decision making (HEFCE, 2014; Oakleigh & Staffordshire, 2010). The 'Key Information Set' (KIS) (Unistats, 2015) includes results from the National Student Survey (NSS) around satisfaction with the course, and also information regarding issues such as the proportion of time spent in lectures or seminars, costs of student accommodation, the type and amount of assessment on the course. The KIS also provides facts and figures regarding graduate employment rates and salaries.

What don't we know?

Facts and figures, while useful for students, and those who help them make their decisions, do not appear to address the whole of student decision making. That there is another part to this is clearly acknowledged in the higher education sector by universities' attempts to encourage students to visit their campus and see the institution for themselves. A whole series of recruitment activities take place within every university: open days, visit days, applicant days, taster days, and so on. The importance of such events in the students' decision making processes is acknowledged by UCAS, the body responsible for managing applications to higher education in the UK. Its advice to student regarding open days describes them as follows:

These are days where potential applicants can explore uni and college campuses and facilities. You can meet students and staff, ask questions and see if you think you'd be happy there (UCAS, 2015b).

UCAS goes so far as to produce a guide to open days (UCAS, 2015a). This contains suggestions about what questions to ask during a visit to a university, but it also includes a question for the students themselves "And perhaps most important of all: **do you like what you see?**" (UCAS, 2015a).

It is this intangible sense of being able to 'fit in' at an institution, to feel attachment to it, to feel a sense of belonging, or to 'like it', that does not appear to have been addressed in the academic literature regarding the marketing of higher education.

Gaining a greater understanding – methodology and method

An interpretive phenomenological analysis approach (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999) was adopted to gather data. This ensured that the findings were not influenced by any pre-conceptions, and that the data informed the findings of the research, rather than being

guided by pre-chosen theoretical approaches. That is to say, an approach was adopted that is “...inductive, emerging, and shaped by the researchers’ experience in collecting and analyzing the data” (Creswell, 2013, p. 19). The approach sought to ensure that the conversations held with students gathered their views regarding their university experience, described in their own words, around the themes that they chose, not those directed by the researcher. The sample was drawn from current full-time, undergraduate, UK students at a university that actively recruits students. It should be noted that some universities in the sector do not ‘recruit’ students, but ‘select’ them from the large number of hopeful applicants they receive (Brown et al., 2009).

The sample

A purposive sampling method was employed to ensure that all participants had experience of the phenomenon being explored. In this sense they represent a perspective rather than a population (Smith et al., 2009). In order to establish the sample the researcher consulted colleagues who suggested that those students who took on the role of student ambassadors were likely to be engaged with their institutions. Ambassadors are employed by the student recruitment team to help with recruitment activities, to give personal picture of what it is like to study at the University, illustrated by their own experiences. While the payment students receive is undoubtedly a factor in them taking on this role, it is unlikely that a student who was not engaged with the university would undertake the training, or wish to carry out these duties. Therefore the university’s student ambassadors were approached to see if they would be willing to take part in the research and thirteen students volunteered. One pilot and twelve subsequent conversations were held. Eight of the students were female and five male. Of the thirteen, three were available to take part in a further focus group, around ten months after the initial fieldwork had taken place. The courses being studied ranged across disciplines and included: social sciences, science, engineering, arts, business and humanities. The students were from first years to final years, and included one who had

recently begun Master's studies having just completed an undergraduate programme at the same university. This provided a useful cross section of students, but was not engineered.

Analysis

Coding was undertaken by noting, in the margins of a printed transcript of each conversation, striking themes or issues that were raised. There was no attempt to organise the themes from the conversations into over-arching concepts until each had been considered in its own right. Following this the process of looking for common themes began. In order to achieve this, the 'concept cards' technique developed from grounded theory approaches (Prasad, 1993) was utilised. This technique was selected as the research did not set out to count codes (Creswell, 2013, p. 185) and it fitted with the general guidance on conducting interpretive phenomenological analysis (Smith et al., 2009).

While the coding of the focus group took place after concepts had been identified the same approach was taken, and had new concepts emerged they would have prompted the researcher to re-visit the original conversation transcripts to check whether any topics had been overlooked. This was not necessary as no new concepts emerged from the focus group.

The findings

The topics raised by the students during the conversations about their university experience were wide ranging – and each began from a different area of their experience. Some talked first about their friends, those in halls, on their course, or in social contexts; some talked about the campus, or the experiences that the university enabled them to have.

Interpretation of the conversations held with the student led to the identification of a series of concepts, which were then linked into three overarching concepts: network and infrastructure, feelings, and behaviours.

Network and Infrastructure

This overarching concept was created to encompass the concepts of 'location, the town' and 'experience of the campus'. These resulted from the students' descriptions of how the town in which the university is located influenced their experiences. They described that the university was part of the town, that students were welcome. Also that for some, the fact that the town was not a lively city location led them to feel a lack of contentment with their choice of university. This was soon resolved by them making friends and developing a social life, but had been a problem initially. The students' experience of the campus, its physical appearance and the fact that it is compact, they do not have to travel large distances between buildings, was also important to them. The topics raised here were the most tangible things that students mentioned, and could be evaluated by universities; see the discussion of 'space' below. Examples from the conversations with the students include:

But the other thing I like about the university itself is it's a campus university and it's all in one place other universities are quite spread out over towns and cities whereas this one you're at the uni, you're in the uni environment everything you need is here so if you go from class to class you're going to be in the same 5 minute radius. (1)

Feelings

This encompasses the concepts of 'it's part of me' or 'I'm part of it', 'emotions', and 'it feels homely/it is my home'. The students were clear that coming to university is an important part of

their life, it is part of who they are. It links strongly with their emotions about the university – some talked of being proud of it, that they ‘love’ or ‘adore’ it. For example:

I’d say I’m proud to be studying, I’m proud to be expanding my intellect. I don’t know if it would be any different at a different university. I think I have a much bigger attachment to this university to the one in xxxx. Xxxx the experience I enjoyed for the people rather than the studying experience but I’ve always considered this to be my university (2).

For some it had become their home, in that this was the first place where they were really experiencing their life as an adult, as they themselves wished to shape it. There was also the issue of feeling at home in the sense that because they feel they belong at the university then they feel at home there, they don’t need to ask permission to do things:

xxxx is my home. I’m not sure if it’s because it’s the first place I’ve ever made my own home on my own if that makes sense? As an adult, but I enjoy the fact that it’s mine, and not my mum’s or my dad’s or my brother’s you know, it’s my place and I think that’s really made that attachment for me a little bit ... (3).

Behaviours

Perhaps the most striking elements of the conversations with the students are grouped under the overarching concept of behaviours. The two concepts within this are ‘it’s what you make it’ and ‘determination to succeed’. There was recognition from all the students in the sample that their university experience, and the development of a sense of belonging or attachment was in their own hands. One described it as follows:

... but I think it’s up to yourself, if you tell yourself ‘I don’t belong’ no one will actually invite you, you have to take your own approach and take your own stance and put yourself out there, no one will ever come up to you and say ‘do you want to do this’, ‘do you want to do that’, you have to be confident and put yourself out there that’s what I think, that’s what I’ve learnt growing up (4).

Another student made their awareness of their own role in their experience absolutely clear:

... it's what you make of it, if you try hard then you'll probably get the most out of it. Because you could go the best university in the world but learn nothing if you didn't put anything into it, or you could go to the worst and take the most out of it (5).

This sense of it being up to them was also demonstrated by the students' descriptions of how they dealt with problems: if the course did not initially seem to suit them they sought links with friends in their accommodation. If they were not initially happy in their accommodation they relied on the friends on their course or made links through social activities.

The focus group revealed that a concern about fitting in is something that each of the students in the group had felt very strongly before arriving at university. This has long been recognised by all those concerned with student recruitment and induction activity for new students. However, the intangible ways in which building a sense of belonging might be supported does not appear to have been explored in the academic literature with respect to marketing or student recruitment in higher education.

How does this link to published literature?

Initially it was assumed that links between the students' descriptions of their experiences would be found in academic literature regarding brand communities. Branding is an area of considerable focus for those marketing higher education institutions who seek to differentiate their organisation from the competition (Chapleo, 2010; Furey, Springer, & Parsons, 2014; Idris & Whitfield, 2014).

The study of brand communities, from the marketing perspective, largely relates to the marketing of consumer goods (Cova & Pace, 2006; Fournier, 1998), and luxury goods (Algesheimer, Dholokia, & Hermann, 2005; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). In the higher education sector it has been approached with regard to maintaining links with former students (also known as alumni) for higher

education institutions (McAlexander, Koenig, & Schouten, 2006). The consumer behaviour described in these studies was not apparent in the analysis of the conversations with the sample of students. However, discussions of brand community (Fournier, 1998) and community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) do make reference to theories of place attachment. A review of this literature identifies links to the concepts drawn from the analysis of the conversations.

Space

Place literature makes a distinction between 'space' and 'place'. It describes space as having features that can be measured, or catalogued (Tuan, 1969). In this respect this matches the comments of the students grouped under the network and infrastructure concept – they are aware of the size of the town and campus, and the physical facilities that it has to offer. These tend to be tangible things that can be evaluated and compared.

Place

The issue of how 'space' becomes 'place' is the subject of much debate, within which different definitions are used (Gustafson, 2001), those of place identity (Proshansky, Fabian, & Kaminoff, 1983; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996), sense of place (Pretty, Chipuer, & Branston, 2003) and place attachment (Brown & Perkins, 1992; Rubinstein & Parmelee, 1992). A key theme throughout this literature is that sense of place, place identity or attachment are complex issues – 'a theoretical quagmire' (Pretty et al., 2003), and that identity or attachment is developed through a number of themes (Relph, 1976) or related phenomena (Low & Altman, 1992). The common factor in these studies is that people are seen to have developed a sense of attachment to a place – it has become more than simply a space in which they exist.

Motivations and expectations

The role of the individual, their past, present and their future hopes is shown to be crucial to developing attachment (Bonnes, Mannetti, Secchiaroli, & Tanucci, 1990; Cuba & Hummon, 1993; Manzo, 2003; Seamon, 1979). Discussions of the role that an individual plays in the development of place attachment are linked to theories of motivation and human needs (Maslow, 1943, 1970) and discussions of how attachments are formed (Bowlby, 1973). It is argued that individuals will be more attached to places where their own values are present (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). In a development of Maslow's work on human needs three motivators have been identified – achievement, affiliation and power (McClelland, 1961). The findings of the research, in conjunction with the place literature, suggest that the first two are important in developing a sense of place and this is built into the proposed conceptual model (see Figure 1).

What does this mean?

A conceptual model is proposed (see Figure 1) which contains the intangible elements that contribute to students' developing a relationship with their university. This model is drawn from the academic research into place attachment, that is to say how 'space' becomes 'place'. The two columns 'course' and 'other influences' show those elements the researcher expected to feature in a student's description of their experience which, in line with the phenomenological approach, were set aside during the fieldwork and analysis to ensure they did not influence the research findings. The boxes around these columns, 'space', 'motives and expectations' and 'place' represent the topics raised by current students when discussing how they experience their university. It is assumed that potential students will move through similar processes as they develop their own

relationship with their chosen institution. If reassurance about these experiences can be offered to potential students during their decision making journey, it could provide additional information to support the declared objective criteria that is currently readily available to them.

The implications of the research findings

The student' descriptions of their experiences are all very personal, and begin from different aspects of university life.

It is salutary to reflect on the broad range of behaviours that are exhibited by students – at one end of the scale there are students who do not visit institutions before choosing them:

... the first day I came to Huddersfield was the day I moved into student halls and I came here because I was applying to universities, my dad had been to Huddersfield, and I was 'oh what's Huddersfield like' and he said 'yes it's alright' and I put that down and I got in and I was like, yes, I'll go there (6).

At the other end there are students who undertaken very thorough research:

... everywhere we went we had the same routine, we'd go to the open day, we'd go into town, we'd go out for a meal, we'd stay in one of the Premier Inns because obviously it was way too far to drive, to go home, so I think staying over as well and seeing it at night and in the morning and I asked her to drive me round residential areas as well so I had a feel for the town as a whole rather than just the campus because there were other universities I went to and the campus was great but the night, in the night time the town was horrible or the city was really threatening and uncomfortable ... (7).

Many issues influence students' sense of place, but these issues can be seen to cluster around the key themes that have been documented under 'space', 'motive and expectations' and 'place'.

Therefore, this model will assist those responsible for the marketing of an HEI in providing information regarding the intangible elements that go to make up university experience. This will provide potential students with increased confidence that they will fit in at their chosen institution.

Enabling potential students to see how the university they choose to study at can be transformed - from a 'space' they arrive at, to a 'place' they will feel attached to - can complement institutions' existing marketing activity. This currently tends to focus on detailing the objective criteria that students are known to consult, such as course offering and location. The approach will therefore assist in the marketing of what is a complex service - it allows marketers to seek to promote HE through "... shaping ideas of a service based on past experience and an expectation (or hope) of what will follow" (Furey et al., 2014, p. 101).

It is anticipated that the findings of this research can make a contribution to the development of marketing practice within higher education, in much the same way as the overall domain of marketing has been adapted to provide guidance for those working in relationship marketing, or social marketing (Peattie & Peattie, 2003). It is hoped this will help this branch of marketing continue to develop a professional identity.

Limitations of the research findings

The research undertaken with this purposive sample of students serves to highlight the complexities of their relationship with their university. The broad range of intangible factors which affect them has been explored. No definitive answers have been established as a result of this exploration. In fact, the research has served to confirm that this is a complex issue and it is probable that no

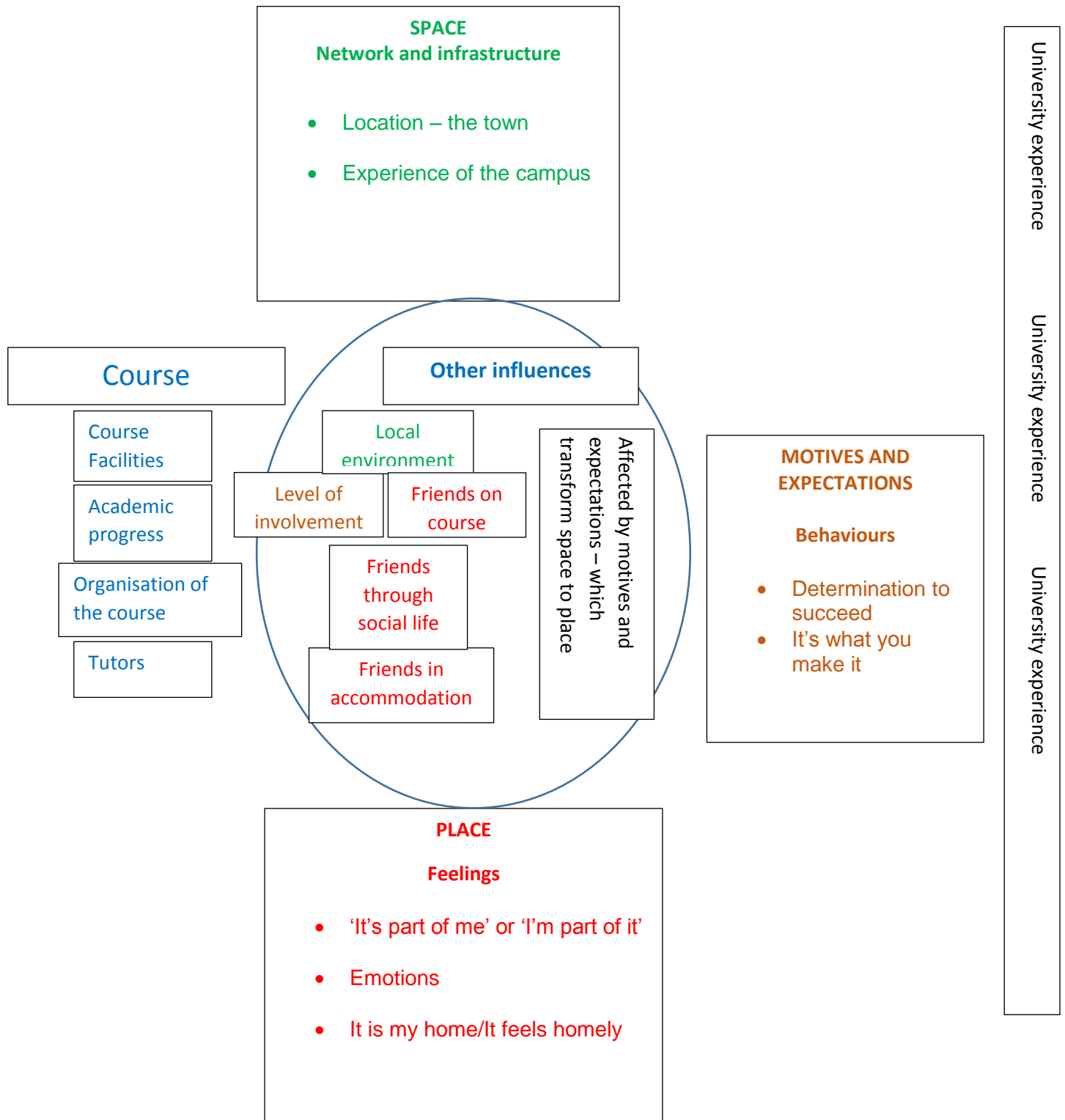
definitive solution could ever be established. Such confirmation is a valuable addition to our knowledge of how students experience their university. It has highlighted areas where it is clear that details are not known, and demonstrated why it is unlikely that they will ever be known conclusively. However, general themes have been identified which will be useful to those responsible for marketing higher education institutions. This new awareness of the great complexity of these issues will ensure increasingly informed consideration is given to marketing communications. Communication messages must continue to be created by marketing staff who use their professional judgement, and which are shaped by institutions' individual missions. This process can now be supported by the knowledge of the themes explored in this research, and equally valuably, an awareness of how much remains unknowable.

Note:

Quotations provided in the text are from individual students. Quotations 1 and 6 are from one student, quotations 4 and 7 are from another individual. All other quotations are from different students.

Figure 1 Expected elements of the student experience linked to elements of place attachment

The two columns 'course' and 'other influences' repeat those elements the researcher expected to feature in a student's description of their experience. Those 'other influences' that were mentioned by the students are linked (by colour) to the theme of the place literature they relate to.



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