Mapping the interrelationships between self-concept, motivation and university experience among students of self-financing higher education institutions in Hong Kong

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Abstract This study explores the interrelationships between self-concept, motivation and academic and social experience among students from self-financing higher education institutions in Hong Kong. Although prior studies have investigated different aspects of self that drive various types of motivation in students' academic and social experience, most of them are related to publicly funded universities only. This study aims to extend our current understanding to the context of self-financing higher education, which is an alternative to students whose academic results are not good enough to secure tertiary placements at publicly funded universities. Using qualitative approach and the technique of friendship pair, 26 students from 12 self-financing higher education institutions in Hong Kong were recruited for semi-structured interviews. Data analysis revealed that participants constructed two dimensions of the self: the personal (i.e. the actual academic self, the possible academic self, the spiritual self and the extended self) and relational (i.e. the familial self and the social self) dimensions in the light of their university experience. The findings provide a better understanding of the contemporary university experience in relation to self and motivation among students studying at self-financing higher education institutions.

Keywords Self-financing higher education · Self-concept · Motivation · University experience

Introduction

As only 25% of secondary school students were eligible to pursue their studies in one of the eight publicly funded universities in Hong Kong in 2013, secondary school graduates with less satisfactory results may choose alternative routes to continue their studies in self-financing higher education institutions at post-secondary level (Joint University Programmes Admissions System (JUPAS) 2015). They are the group of students whose academic results are less satisfactory and thus study at the less privileged non-publicly funded institutions. Their perception of inferiority (Kember 2010) and the feeling of being academically weaker (Ng and Galbraith 2016) could affect their self-perception and in turn their motivation in study and overall university experience. However, we have little knowledge on how this might happen as most prior studies on motivational goal and self-concept have focused on publicly funded universities only. Little attention has been directed to understanding these areas in the self-financing higher education sector. In addition, studies that examine how students' sense of self influences their academic motivation and achievement are prolific (Cokley 2000; Osborne and Jones 2011). However, academic experience is just one part of students' higher education experience. Although students' experience is found to consist of both academic and social components (Wilcox et al. 2005), studies on the interrelationship between these two important components of university experience are limited, not to mention those that devote to understanding cases in self-financing institutes.

To address the above research gaps, this study draws on literatures from higher education and psychological perspectives to explore how university students make sense of self, and in turn affect their motivation in study as well as their evaluation of overall university experience in self-financing

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higher education institutions. Understanding the academic and social aspects of students' experience of higher education from the psychological perspective provides invaluable insights for the management teams of higher education institutions to plan and design programmes and curriculums that help students integrate their academic and social life in higher education. Through enhancing students' university experience, the ultimate goal is to improve student retention.

Specifically, we pose two primary research aims for this study: (1) to map out the interrelationships between self-concept, motivation and students' higher education experience, focusing on how these elements affect each other, with specific regard to Hong Kong students in self-financing institutions, and (2) to discuss the implications and make appropriate suggestions to management teams of self-financing higher education institutions for developing a better learning environment that enhances students' academic and social experience.

Characteristics of the Hong Kong higher education system

Since the Hong Kong government introduced education reform in 2000, which shifted the focus from elite to mass higher education (Kember 2010; Ng and Galbraith 2016), the Hong Kong higher education system can be divided into two types: publicly funded and self-financing higher education institutions (see Wong et al. 2016). Only a limited number of undergraduate places in these publicly funded universities are offered to secondary school graduates. Based on statistics published by the Hong Kong Education Bureau, less than a quarter of the population of secondary school graduates in 2013 and 2014 were offered places to study in publicly funded universities, while approximately 50% of that population furthered their studies in self-financing higher education institutions (Concourse Self-financing Post-secondary Education 2015). This illustrates the two-tier system in the Hong Kong higher education system. Publicly funded universities that belong to the top tier attract better calibre students, while self-financing higher education institutions are regarded as the second tier providing an alternative route to obtaining university degrees for students with less satisfactory results in the public exam.

Theoretical framework

University experience

A university aims at providing a comprehensive environment for students to acquire professional knowledge and to develop other skills such as cultural, social and sporting

skills to enhance their self-esteem (Ryan and Deci 2000). University experience refers to student's tangible and intangible encounters that influence their social and academic experience (Wilcox et al. 2005; Tinto 1993). For example, campus facilities such as equipment, lecture theatres, labs and sports complexes are the tangible components providing an environment that might influence students' university experience positively or negatively. On the school level, the structure of academic programmes, career prospects or internship opportunities, financial aid, academic advising, or even the recognition and reputation of the institution are the intangible components that might affect students' university experience (Hossler et al. 1990). On the interpersonal level, university experience is shaped through the opinions of significant others (e.g. parents), and through interactions with friends, peers and teachers both on and off campus (Tao et al. 2000). Although studies on students' academic experience in higher education institutions are prolific, so far research exploring the interrelationship among the self, motivation and university experience in self-financing higher education is very limited. This paper could, therefore, contribute to and enhance the understanding of students from the second tier of the education system in Hong Kong.

Self-concept and motivation

Self-concept is a psychological construct with multiple dimensions that influence "the very nature of individual experience, including cognition, emotion and motivation" (Markus and Kitayama 1991 p. 224). The content of self-concept refers to two components: firstly the knowledge and secondly the evaluative components. Firstly, the knowledge components (e.g. who/ what am I?) include one's beliefs, attributes and values, whereas the evaluative component is related to how one views oneself (e.g. how do I feel about myself?) as an attitude object, such as self-beliefs and self-esteem (Brewer and Gardner 1996; Schubert and Otten 2002). Students' university experience is strongly linked to their aspects of the self-concept (Osborne and Jones 2011), for example, their independence, belief and aspiration under the concept of the personal/ academic self (Rodriguez 2009), the fear of failure (the negative self), the self they want to become (the ideal self) and the connectedness with others under the concept of the social self (Brewer 1991).

Self-concept is most strongly associated with motivation (Faye and Sharpe 2008). The definition of the self, such as the academic self or the ideal self, drives and motivates students to have certain behaviours. Students' behaviour toward their higher education experience can be linked to different dimensions of motivational goals, for example, individual goal setting, relatedness, interest, career

and university lifestyle (Kember et al. 2011). These motivational goals can be intrinsic, extrinsic and amotivated (Vallerand et al. 1992; Osborne and Jones 2011). Intrinsic motivation seeks enjoyment and fulfilment from one's own involvement (e.g. attending an examination/ performance), whereas extrinsic motivation refers to behavioural changes due to external influences (e.g. being forced by parents or believing that would be the right thing to do). Amotivation means that students might not be able to identify possible academic achievement (e.g. feeling incompetent or outcomes/situations that are out of their control) (Deci and Ryan 1985).

Method

This study has employed interpretive semi-structured interviews which allow in-depth understanding of the interplaying factors constituting the self-concept of students. As asserted by Schouten (1991, p. 413), “because *self-concept* is complex and highly sensitive to social and situational contexts”, the study of self-concept thus requires a method that can delve into the intrinsic thoughts and feelings of the subjects. An interpretive approach emphasises the sympathetic understanding (*‘verstehen’*) of meanings that work behind social behaviour and experience (Duberley et al. 2012; Gill and Johnson 2010). As our research attempts to understand the self and the corresponding motivation in affecting their university experience, an inquisitive methodology that appreciates contextual meanings and emerging themes will yield greater understanding. Qualitative interviewing is also regarded as a desirable approach for generating data from young people (Morrow and Richards 1996). In the context of an interview, they tend to feel relatively comfortable and are more creative in communicating their world views with strangers, especially adults (Highet 2003; Miller and Glassner 1997).

Samples

There are 27 self-financing higher education institutions in Hong Kong. A total of 26 students, 11 males and 15 females, from twelve major self-financing higher education institutions were recruited as friendship pairs for semi-structured interviews. These students range from the age of 21 to 28, with an average age of 22. They came from over 10 disciplines such as management, marketing, psychology, engineering and statistics, covering both natural sciences and humanities. We purposefully recruited students who were in the last 2 years of their first degree, so that their study lives covered more stages and probably more institutions.

In order to ensure a broad enough representation of students while maintaining a balance of acquaintance between

the interviewers and interviewees, as well as among interviewees, the technique of friendship pair was employed. The first participant of each pair was first recruited from among the students of the four interviewers (co-authors). The student was then requested to invite a friend from another self-financing higher education institution. Studies show that ‘friendship pair’ is beneficial to research interviews, especially among young people. For instance, as Highet (2003) asserts, “choosing a friend to take part with them in order to offset the inhibiting potential of the setting created a supportive social context which enables the participants to engage fully in conversation” (109). As respondents are acquainted with each other, their familiarity provides confidence to openly share their history (which might have been known among them), family background, achievements or frustration, as well as to explore and challenge each other (Bayley and Nancarrow 1998). Through friendship pairs, our participants enjoyed greater liberty and a more interactive atmosphere to convey views and feelings towards their academic performance, as well as that of others, towards institutions and even towards overall educational system. Furthermore, the paired recruitment not only doubles the sampling size efficiently, but also attenuates the drop-out rate as two acquaintances commit to the appointment together (Highet 2003).

Interview schedule

Semi-structured interviews, which are informal, open-ended and non-directive, were employed in this study. Such a method allows flexibility and free expression of the respondents, while the pre-set interview framework permits a certain degree of consistency among interviews to facilitate the discovery of similar patterns in the subsequent stage of analysis. The interviews mainly took place in campus so as to help students recall memories of their academic lives. Each interview lasted from 90 to 120 min and was audio-recorded for transcription. As a token of thanks and to achieve a good turn-up rate, each interviewee was given a gift coupon.

Throughout the inquiry process, the key types of questions identified by Kvale (Kvale 1996) were employed from time to time, including probing questions, specifying questions and direct and indirect questions. The interviews were kept as loose as possible to allow “informants the freedom to broach topics in their own ways and at their own paces” (Schouten 1991, p. 415). While flexibility was crucial in interpretive inquiries, an interview guide covering key question areas related to students’ academic experience, self-image and motivation was formulated to ensure basic consistencies among interviews and that the data collected can address the research objectives. The below are some key questions involved:

- Were there any stages of your study path that have greater impact on you?
- What kind of self-image do you have? Is it your own perception or others'?
- Has your image changed over the past few years since your secondary school? How was it? And what made those changes? Are you happy with those changes?
- Do you think your self-image and changes of self-image, if any, have anything to do with your academic life? Has it helped or motivated your study?

At the end of most sub-sections of the interviews, we purposefully probed conclusions by asking questions such as “Do you mean that...?” or “Is it true that...?” in order to seek participants’ affirmation of our initial interpretation of what they had shared. This enhanced the efficiency and validity of our subsequent data analysis.

Coding

All interviews were transcribed and each script was cross-coded by at least two of the four authors. No coding work was contracted out in order to ensure that only analysts with a background in the relevant literature were reading the text for the discovery of relevant emerging themes. Thematic analysis was employed to uncover relationships between concepts (Braun and Clarke 2006). Coded transcripts were further categorised and put under reiterative process of comparing and contrasting. Similarities and disjunctures between texts were identified to gradually give rise to core themes.

The interpretive approach of employing semi-structured interviews has generated rich stories pertaining to the perceived self-image of participants and revealed how different aspects of the self are related to their motivation in study and overall university experience. The friendship pairing arrangement also proved to be valuable in prompting interactive atmosphere that facilitated data analysis. The findings would extend our knowledge beyond publicly funded universities by enriching our understanding on how academic and social lives interact among students in self-financing higher education institutions.

Findings

Data analysis revealed how participants interpreted what constituted their aspects of the self that motivated and influenced their university experience in self-financing higher education institutions. Our findings showed that participants constructed different aspects of the self on two dimensions: the personal and relational dimensions in relation to their university experience. In this section, we examine the actual academic self, possible academic self,

religious self and the extended self on the personal dimension, as well as the familial self and social self on the relational dimension.

The personal dimension of the self in relation to students’ university experience

The actual academic self

The actual academic self refers to how students view themselves in terms of their academic competency, achievement and interest (Bong and Skaalvik 2003). Similarly, Cokley (2000) states the academic self-concept as “attitudes, feelings and perceptions relative to one’s intellectual or academic skills” (149). It is noted that self-financing higher education institutions are regarded as the second tiers for students who fail to obtain a place in publicly funded universities (Wong et al. 2016). Some participants had a low opinion about their academic ability, such as “*not good at anything*”, “*academically pretty so-so*” or “*I wasn’t good enough for university*” and had an approach of amotivation towards their academic life. In the following excerpt, Participant 1 emphasised that success in undergraduate study is not only based on her own ability but also on luck that she cannot control.

“No matter how hardworking you are in your studies, it always involves luck. I always think that I am not lucky... always lack luck in my exam... nothing I can do.” (Participant 1, female, aged 21).

In addition, participants’ actual academic selves revolved around their interest in what they were studying and their achievement in what they could contribute or offer to others. Participants with intrinsic motivation gained a sense of achievement, satisfaction and interest in what they were studying through organising university activities or helping their friends solve problems, as highlighted in the following excerpts:

“I was a bit lost in the beginning and was not sure whether I had made the right choice to study this subject... Then I was recruited as one of the members of the Student Association organising orientation camps for newcomers. I realised how much I enjoyed it and felt very satisfied... a sense of achievement. I thought I might work in the event industry after my graduation.” (Participant 6, female, aged 21)

The possible academic self

The possible academic self represents students’ view of what they would like to become or are afraid of becoming

in the future. As Oyserman et al. (2006, p. 188) stated, “these future or possible selves are positive and negative images of the self already in a future state”. This aspect of self drives the motivation of goal setting. Among our participants, goal setting can be linked to having a better grade point average (GPA), graduating with a better division of Honours degree, pursuing a Master’s degree at a publicly funded university, getting a better job or being promoted in the future. Participants used two strategies to reach their goals: strategies of approach and avoidance. The approach strategy is linked to participants’ positive (desired) image that they would like to become, while the avoidance strategy is related to participants’ negative (or undesired) image that they dislike and try to avoid (Hogg and Banister 2001). Students tend to take action “congruent with attaining desired identity goals and avoiding undesired identities” (Oyserman 2009, p. 252).

In the following excerpts, Participants 12 and 19 used to struggle with their studies. Looking back at their academic experience, they shared how they set a goal to obtain a better GPA—a possible desired self that they want to become, and how they felt after achieving it.

“In the first semester of the Retail and Service Management programme, I started working really hard. After the first semester, my GPA was 3.54. I saw the reward. Working hard pays off.” (Participant 12, male, aged 22)

“My high school belongs to the top tier (Band 1). But I was always among the bottom students in my class according to the academic results. So when I got my first Higher Diploma results, I was over the moon to receive such high marks... (because) I always thought I was a loser. I just cried when I checked my results on the computer in my room... happy tears.” (Participant 19, female, aged 22)

The ideal possible self was revealed in the following excerpts when Participants 21 and 9 explained why they wanted to get a degree. Both of the participants wanted to achieve to a goal to get a better job and wanted to be a person associated with a better status in the society. In comparison to the Western societies, Chinese parents tend to place high value on education (Chao 1996; Li 2001) and link it to the image of success in life either in finding a good job, getting a better social status or earning more money.

“If you don’t have a good degree, you can’t find a good job in Hong Kong. All my friends from the same generation have already got their degree. This has given me unenviable pressure. That means... if you don’t have a degree, people will look down on you... that’s how I feel. Therefore, ever since I was

little, I’ve known I have to get a degree someday. It is a matter of time.” (Participant 21, female, aged 24)
 “My future prospect is better than those who just have a higher diploma. With a degree, I will get promotion faster and have a better career prospect in the retail industry.” (Participant 9, female, aged 21)

In the following excerpt, participants used the approach strategy planning to get a Master’s degree from a publicly funded university in the future to enhance their self-worth and image. At the same time, they tried to avoid being recognised as students from a second-tier self-financing university—the undesired image that they do not want to be associated with.

“When you have a chance to study, do it. At the end of the day, you can get a Master’s degree from a better publicly funded university to brush up your CV.” (Participant 16, female, aged 21)

“My institution is still called “College”, not “University”. My friends and I are planning to get a Master’s degree from PolyU or CityU (publicly funded universities)...to improve our “image”.” (Participant 2, male, aged 22)

The spiritual self

The spiritual self is defined as the construction of sense of self through a personal relationship with the sacred (Kiesling et al. 2006; Wink and Dillon 2002; Sinnott 2002). When facing disappointment or difficulties in life, some of the participants shared their stories about how their strong belief in God helped them survive or change their perspective of self. In the following excerpts, Participant 24 talked about how he became a more optimistic person embracing all sorts of difficulties, while Participant 14 had a leap of faith in God in whatever circumstance. The construction of the self is dynamic and changes over time. People construct the meaning of their life and sense of self through multiple events and get a sense of who they were in the past (i.e. the past self), who they are at the moment (i.e. the present self) and who they want to be in the future (i.e. the possible self). Instead of avoiding difficulties, participants with the spiritual self tended to have an approach motivation of personal development, to take up challenges to become a better person.

“Studying is hard... I think I am better than before. In the past, I tended to be pessimistic. But now... maybe because of my church and religion... I have become more optimistic... more relaxed in dealing with whatever happens to me. Be honest to myself.” (Participant 24, male, aged 21)

“I am a Christian and pray for support with my friends before an exam or a result announcement.” (Participant 14, male, aged 22)

The extended self

The concept of the extended self is derived from James’s “material self”: “The material self refers to tangible objects, people or places that carry the designation my or mine” (Brown 1998, p. 21). In other words, people’s sense of self can be extended to include possessions (my car), other people (my children), abstract ideas (my suggestion), places (my hometown), objects within a person’s reach (a chair in a room) or distant physical environment (the moon) (Wong et al. 2012; Brown 1998; Belk 1988). These things psychologically contribute part of who I am. In the following excerpts, participants revealed their extended self through the self-financing higher education institutions they belong to. Participants (for example, Participant 23) tended to have an inferior view of their institutions as “*embarrassing*”, “*lower level*” or even “*fake*”, while regarding publicly funded universities as “*better*”, “*prestigious*” and “*real*”. Participant 9 stated the importance of being part of a higher education institution as part of her identity. They explained the rationale of choosing a self-financing institution in Hong Kong that is affiliated with its parent publicly funded university. Although it is not a direct link with the publicly funded university, being associated indirectly with a recognised publicly funded university is part of participants’ sense of self enhancing their self-esteem.

“In our society, they might think people studying for a top-up degree in self-financing institutions are not real university students. They are regarded as a “second class”. If I can study in a publicly funded university, I can claim that I am a university student.” (Participant 23, male, aged 22)

“SPEED (the name of self-financing higher education institution) is under PolyU (the publicly funded university). PolyU is a prestigious university. Under the name and reputation of PolyU, it should be better.” (Participant 9, female, aged 21)

The relational dimension of the self in relation to students’ university experience

Apart from the personal dimension of the self, the sense of self can also be constructed through interpersonal relationships with close others (e.g. family members and peers) and academic staff (e.g. lecturers or tutors). Chinese people tend to emphasise their connectedness and togetherness with significant others or in-groups in the construction

of their sense of self. In other words, the construction of self is also influenced by one’s cultural heritage and social background. As Morris (1994, p. 115) noted, “the self was thus constructed within a collectivity of kinship networks... by such cultural ideas as loyalty, filial piety and consideration for others”. In this section, the familial self and social self in relation to students’ university experience will be examined.

The familial self

The themes of “pressure” and “good support” that are linked to the familial self emerged from the findings. The familial self is linked to Chinese values and cultural influences, i.e. Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism. These concepts play important roles in shaping people’s selves and social behaviour (Aaker and Schmitt 2001; Bond and Hwang 1986), even in a westernised city like Hong Kong. The Confucian rules are drawn from the “five cardinal hierarchies”: father–son, husband–wife, elder–young, emperor–subject and friend–friend (Su et al. 1999; Yau 1988). Each person has his or her own role to perform, as well as a set of obligations to fulfil according to his or her position (e.g. a father/mother, son/daughter, a brother/sister, a husband/wife) in this Confucian hierarchy.

Rather than the Judeo-Christian western perspective of the equality of mankind, Chinese people use Confucianism’s five cardinal hierarchies to see people’s lives as an inheritance from their parents (Bedford and Hwang 2003). “Our body, with hair and skin, is derived from our parents. One should not hurt one’s own body in any situation. This is the starting point of filial piety” (Hsiao 2005). This distinctive Chinese concept of “filial piety” is intertwined into participants’ stories. In the following excerpts, some participants talked about why they decided to further their undergraduate studies because of the extrinsic motivation of compliance and familial obligation (e.g. parents asked them to do so). They were obedient and felt obligated to fulfil their family’s demands and to study hard to achieve better academic performance.

“About my study... the pressure is invisible. I know my parents want us to have a university degree. They love comparing us with others.” (Participant 26, female, aged 22)

“I am the oldest of three younger siblings. They all have Master’s degrees... My father said since I have so much free time (not working), I should study for a degree.” (Participant 15, female, aged 28)

Other participants were very grateful for the financial support from their family and were motivated to study hard or to find a better job in the future as a token of their

appreciation to their family members for raising and supporting them.

“Family members... they want me to do this degree from start to finish... study hard to get good grades and graduate. They support me financially. What if I can’t continue in the second year?... that would be a waste of their money... therefore I was motivated to study hard and not to give up.” (Participant 9, female, aged 21)

“Mum has provided all her support to me from primary to now. Studying hard is a token of appreciation, thanking her for her support... then find a better job to support my parents when they get older.” (Participant 22, female, aged 22)

“It is not easy for my family to support me... I am the only child in the family. I know they work hard to get money to support me.... My parents need to give a huge amount of money to support my study. If I don’t do well in my study, I feel like I am not good enough for them.” (Participant 10, female, aged 22)

The social self

Students’ social experiences are mostly shaped by peers and/or lecturers whom they interact with inside and outside the classroom. Students form close-knit groups and develop supportive social networks through academic engagements (e.g. lectures, tutorial discussions, group project presentations) and socialisation (e.g. attending extra-curricular activities or social gatherings). Some participants encountered positive university experiences that enhanced their social self, while other participants confronted unpleasant experiences (e.g. intense competition or conflict among peers) that they chose to avoid or even quit certain groups of peers.

In the following excerpts, participants stressed the importance of a sense of belonging as the foundation of security to build their positive higher education experience. Having a regular group of friends not only helped participants settle in a new academic environment in the beginning, but also facilitated, supported and shared the experience of learning in their academic work.

“My GPA wasn’t that good. My friends always encouraged me to work hard... sharing lecture notes, helping me go through past papers, and teaching me how to revise (a subject) faster.” (Participant 6, female, aged 21)

“Luckily, I joined a good group. They influence me and gave me a lot of motivation to study.” (Participant 11, male, aged 21)

“In the beginning of the semester, we were assigned to fixed groups. The lecturer forced you to form

groups and stick to the same group. That turned out to be a support group for me.” (Participant 3, male, aged 21)

“I have a group of friends with whom I hang out, study and work on projects together... very supportive. We understand each other.” (Participant 1, female, aged 21)

However, peer pressures may induce a positive or negative learning experience. In particular, being with a group of top fellow students would tease out two opposite types of intrinsic motivation, i.e. approach vs. avoidance. With the approach motivation, some participants looked up to their group members with academic success and wanted to be accepted as part of the in-group members. This motivated participants to work hard to get themselves well prepared for group discussion, assignments or exam preparation (like Participant 24). In other words, this approach motivation had a positive spin, driving participants to embrace their academic difficulties. In contrast, other participants (Participants 19 and 2) did not enjoy this kind of competitive environment and chose to avoid the unpleasant experience associated with their negative academic self.

“For the group project discussion... they are really good and well prepared. They know the subject very well and have lots of ideas. I want to be just like them... I prepare... at least I can contribute ideas in the discussion... not just sitting there and saying nothing... always equip myself.” (Participant 24, male, aged 21)

“I was with a group of elites... painful. They are the best of the class, but very demanding. Their aim is to get an A. I was under so much pressure. We worked on our project till mid-night. Then had rehearsals for the presentation... in the middle of the night... through Skype... Skype rehearsal... very horrible. I was under so much pressure and had a lot of pimples. I decided not to join them anymore. I was scared of being in their team. I would rather choose not to get an A.” (Participant 19, female, aged 22)

“It (studying his associate degree at that institution) was too much for me. People were too aggressive and competitive. The atmosphere was like “either you die or I die”. I didn’t like the feeling. I didn’t want to further my top-up degree there... felt suffocated. Therefore, I continued my top-up degree in another institution.” (Participant 2, male, aged 22)

Students’ social self is also constructed through interactions with lecturers. In addition to teaching, lecturers may be involved in different activities that help students improve academic performance, and provide counselling for personal growth or guidance for articulation and job search

upon degree completion. In the following excerpts, participants expressed the impact of lecturer–student relationships that constructed the meaning of the social self. Appraisal support from lecturers is essential for participants’ academic performance.

“The lecturer who taught counselling... he always encouraged me and my classmates to study what we have a passion for. He was very inspiring...” (Participant 23, male, aged 22)

“That teacher... I didn’t like him in the beginning. He seemed quite strict. But apart from the subject, he shared a lot of his personal experience with me.” (Participant 24, male, aged 21)

Discussion and conclusion

Previous research focused only on the relationship between academic motivation and identity formation (Faye and Sharpe 2008) or the motivational orientation among students in higher education institutions (Kember et al. 2008). However, the interrelationships of self, motivation and university experience among students from self-financing higher education institutions, in particular, are under-explored. Addressing to the research gap, this study contributes to understanding the interrelationships between different aspects of self and the corresponding motivation in affecting university experience among students and builds a generic model of self-motivation conceptualisation

emerged from the findings (Fig. 1). With different academic backgrounds and experience, students encountered diverse university experience, which contributed to how they constructed the meanings of their lives, their sense of self and their motivation. This model provides a foundation for future research.

The findings show that different aspects of self, such as the actual/ possible academic self, the spiritual self, the extended self, the familial self and the social self, were intertwined in participants’ narratives. The construction of self is dynamic and projected through constellations of various events in the context of university. As Cross and Madson (1997, p. 6) say, “the self is a dynamic cultural creation; individuals’ self views, emotions, and motivations take shape and form within a framework provided by cultural values, ideals, structures, and practices”. All these selves would drive and motivate participants to have certain behaviours to achieve their personal goals ranging from working hard for a better grade to making their parents proud.

From the psychological perspective, this study provides insightful information on how students formed their sense of self and their motivation in relation to their academic and social experience in self-financing higher education institutions. To improve student retention, the management of higher education institutions need to ensure that areas of academic integration, social integration and personal development are addressed to enhance and motivate students to learn and develop.

Fig. 1 A Model of Self-Motivation Conceptualisation of Students’ University Experience

For academic integration, institutions need to provide good learning environments to help students acquire specific knowledge and skillsets for the job market, and to support the learning experience (Newburger 1999; Young-Jones et al. 2013). The quality of teaching staff, comprehensive or even state-of-the-art facilities, usefulness of programme offerings, sufficient financial aid and scholarships will influence students' university experience (Singell 2004). For example, financial aid will ease students' burden of paying tuition fees, while scholarships will motivate students to strive for excellence. Studies have revealed that students who receive financial aid seem to make consistent progress in their institution (Hossler et al. 1990). Providing learning and financial support as well as academic recognition to students will possibly enhance their sense of academic self and help them identify their motivational goals.

There is a strong positive linkage between students' university experience, in particular, the retention rate and social networks (Wilcox et al. 2005). For social integration, institutions should consider providing an environment to facilitate the development of two types of social relationships: student–staff relationships and peer group relationships. One of our suggestions is that institutions should consider setting up mentorship schemes to cultivate close relationships between academic staff and students. These schemes would offer a channel for students to seek help in the transition period when entering such institutions, or advice on articulation to a master's programme or job search. More notably, different social activities and settings need to be created to help students to build up their social networks. This social and emotional support is one of the cornerstones of students' positive university experience as social connections can be built both inside and outside the classroom. Orientation is the first contact point for students of the same programme to meet up. Students also take advantage of forming different groups when working on group projects, presentations or attending study tours and field trips. In addition, research has shown that extra-curricular activities induce a sense of belonging (Wingate 2007). As the findings show, students in this study expressed their wishes to increase peer engagement through school activities in order to foster social integration and support, such as group formation and friendship (Thomas 2002).

Previous research has focused more on academic and social integration while neglecting the importance of personal growth and development in students' university experience. For personal development, understanding who they are, what they are good at and how they feel about themselves has a huge impact on the perception of students' university experience (Oyserman et al. 2006). Apart from core subjects in a degree programme, institutions should include other general subjects related to personal enhancement as part of the curriculum in degree programmes, thus

providing an all-round education for students. In addition, professional help, such as academic advising, learning assistance and counselling, would support students when they encounter problems and challenges in their university life (Loeb 2014).

Limitations and future agenda

This study has its own limitations, which in turn provide directions for future research. While the use of semi-structured interviews has provided in-depth understanding on the interrelationships between self-concept, motivation and university experience in the context of Hong Kong self-financing higher education institutions, the interpretive research design does not allow a broader generalisation of findings. Thus, one possible future research may take references from the variables found in the model to develop frameworks and constructs that may apply to a wider sample for generalisation. Another limitation stems from the fact that although some of our data revealed differences in students' self-perception between the beginning of the first semester and the last semester of a programme, the snap-shot approach of this study disallows a clear tracking of such changes. As Schouten (1991) asserts, the emergence of a new self is especially salient at rites of passage. Progressing from one stage to another could be a kind of transitions in life. Therefore, conducting a longitudinal investigation of the self-change in relation to university experience and academic achievement would be an interesting topic to pursue in the future.

This study enhances our understanding of current debates concerning the interrelationships of the self, motivation and university experiences among students by extending previous works which concentrate mainly on publicly funded universities only. The outcomes of this research will help management teams of self-financing higher education institutions to provide a better environment and better services to enhance students' university experience.

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