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Happiness in Higher Education

Abstract

This article reviews the higher education literature surrounding happiness and related notions: satisfaction, despair, flourishing and well-being. It finds that there is a real dearth of literature relating to profound happiness in higher education: much of the literature using the terms ‘happiness’ and ‘satisfaction’ interchangeably as if one were tantamount to the other, such conflation being due to the move towards consumerism within higher education and the marketization of the sector. What literature there exists that actually deals with the profound happiness of students in higher education generally argues that in the UK institutions do not currently do enough to promote happiness in higher education. The findings of this review imply that flourishing, contentment and well-being should be regarded as legitimate goals of higher education, alongside satisfaction and related economic outcomes that are currently promoted across academic and policy literature, university rankings, and the National Student Survey.

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Introduction

In its first 12 months in office, the UK's new Conservative Government published no fewer than three policy papers promoting reforms in higher education: a Green Paper, which proposed a Teaching Excellence Framework alongside the Research Excellence Framework; a White Paper, which called for the consolidation of a higher education market; and the Higher Education and Research Bill, proposing measures for competition and choice in higher education. With so much emphasis on structural changes in higher education, one wonders what the impact of these changes will be on students' learning but also on the emotions that accompany learning. And, considering that participation in education is a means to achieve life happiness, one ultimately wonders how these reforms will affect students' happiness.

Lee noted that 'to learn and practice knowledge and wisdom may be a valuable means to enhance the quality of life and an effective way to obtain happiness' (2008). Hence happiness should be a key concern in the mind and writings of policy makers. But a closer look at these policy papers reveals that a concept of happiness is often only superficially assumed. For example in the recent White Paper (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2016) the only reference to students' happiness is as follows: 'switching between institutions is possible in theory, but rare in practice: if students are unhappy with the quality of provision, they are unlikely to take their funding to an alternative institution' (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2016, p. 53). Glaringly, happiness is here linked to the more consumeristic notion of satisfaction from services received, than to the sense of achievement or enjoyment associated with learning.

These policy developments reinforce the positioning of the UK's higher education sector as a marketised system. This move towards the marketization of higher education

in the UK can be traced back through a small number of key reports, which have transformed the landscape and can be held, at least partly, responsible for any shift from universities as places where one could primarily pursue happiness and contentment, to places where instead one seeks satisfaction and economic reward. Three reports in particular stand out: the Robbins Report of 1963, the Dearing Report of 1997 and the present Government's higher education White Paper of 2016. The oldest of these, the Robbins Report, laid out a number of purposes for higher education, including advancing the economy by increasing the skills of the labour force, but also transmitting 'a common culture and common standards of citizenship' (Robbins, 1963, p. 7). Thirty years later, the Dearing Report suggested that higher education should contribute to the development of a learning society, but rather more importantly 'proposed that the block grant to universities should be replaced by a system of funding which follows the student, and put forward proposals for how students should finance their study' – paving the way for the introduction of tuition fees (Bathmaker, 2003, p. 177). The most recent, 2016, paper, meanwhile suggests legislating for the expansion of private provision; the further development of market mechanisms; and the reshaping of the central agencies of administration of quality, research and student interest (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2016).

The lack of consideration of students' happiness that transpires from contemporary policy in the UK indicates the need for a more developed understanding of happiness in higher education. However, this issue is not just limited to the British higher education experience. For example in Australia, the University Experience Survey National Report (2014) mentions satisfaction 53 times, while no mention whatsoever is made of happiness. Similarly, in the US and Canada, an overview of the key results of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2016) mentions satisfaction, but not

happiness. The European StudyPortals *Student Satisfaction Awards* (2016) mentions happiness once, but refers to satisfaction 11 times. Hence, a concern with students' satisfaction at the expenses of their happiness is present in student experiences surveys across the world, in addition to the UK, suggesting that the lack of understanding of happiness in higher education is a global rather than a local concern.

This paper will argue that there are nuances to happiness, that can usefully complement it, for example the variably related concepts of well-being, flourishing and satisfaction. By engaging with both policy and literature critically and constructively, the paper will map out current conceptions of happiness in higher education, and will seek to move beyond an understanding that is purely concerned with economic outcomes. This paper will address how happiness and related notions are framed within current debates in higher education literature, while counterpoising these with our own position which considers cognate notions of happiness as Aristotelian Eudaimonia and capitalistic satisfaction, but also includes despair, flourishing and well-being,

Profound happiness

In a wider education context, Telfer frames the notion of happiness in terms of Aristotelian Eudaimonia, that is, happiness in life is connected with the achievement of one's major goals (1980, p. 2). According to Telfer, a life of enjoyment is not sufficient for happiness because a human being may enjoy life and yet not be really happy; 'true' well-being or eudaimonistic happiness belongs to somebody who possesses 'what is worth desiring and worth having in life' (Telfer, 1980, p. 37).

Barrow adds that happiness depends not on how high up in the [social-economic] scale one is, but on the direction in which one is travelling (1980, p. 75). This way of thinking of happiness as having a 'sense of direction', betrays a concern with judging life as a whole, therefore it can be arguably categorised as pertaining to the Aristotelian view of

eudaimonistic happiness. He also argues that ‘education in itself is not about happiness’ since it is about understanding, however, ‘in itself, enjoyable education is preferable to un-enjoyable education, and an education that incidentally contributes to happiness is superior in itself to one that does not’ (Barrow, 1980, pp. 123-4).

Contrary to the broad understanding of happiness in a general educational context, there is a [real absence of focus on eudaimonic happiness in higher education, which is partly what this paper aims to address. What literature there is on the topic](#) often relates to broader conceptions of individual’s lives, that is, it focusses on whether achieving certain educational levels results in greater lifelong happiness. Ryff’s empirical research, based around eudaimonic understandings of happiness and well-being found that ‘those with higher levels of education report higher levels of well-being’ (2016, p. 41). Ryff emphasised that eudaimonic well-being is not ‘something that people are endowed with at birth’ but is instead brought about through ‘a proactive journey of seeking external inputs to find out who one is and how personal capacities can best be brought to life’ – a journey which higher education can not only support but actually enrich (2016, p. 46). [This limited focus on eudaimonic happiness is in stark contrast to the consistent preoccupation with the concept of ‘satisfaction’ when discussing happiness in higher education.](#)

Satisfaction

Unlike eudaimonic happiness, satisfaction is a limited and limiting concept, typically defining ‘the congruity between a consumer’s expectations and their experiences of a particular product’ in consumer theory (Ramsden & Callender, 2014). And yet, happiness is often overlooked in favour of satisfaction in much of the debate around higher education currently. This is evident for a start in the non-academic pursuits that surround higher education. For example, the Guardian University Guide uses

satisfaction (derived from the National Student Survey) to inform three of its key indicators when ranking UK institutions ('overall course satisfaction', 'teaching satisfaction' and 'feedback satisfaction'), creating their overall rank by 'carefully combining scores for the aspects of university life that matter most to students' (Friedberg, 2016). Meanwhile the Complete University Guide uses 'student satisfaction' as its highest-weighted criteria (again based upon the NSS); although it notes that 'the survey is a measure of students' opinion, not a direct measure of quality so it may be influenced by a variety of biases' (The Complete University Guide, 2016). Student satisfaction, rather than happiness, has become an all-important arbiter of university choice by which institutions are judged, acting as a proxy not only for happiness but also for quality (of courses, teaching, feedback and others). Although they noted that the effects were relatively small, Gibbons et al.'s research found that the NSS had a statistically significant impact on the number of applications received by universities (2015, p. 163); and yet, research by Cheng and Marsh has called into question the usefulness of such student surveys (in particular the NSS) for 'comparing universities as they are presently used by the media and, perhaps, the universities themselves' – owing to the much greater variance of scores within universities (between courses) than between institutions (2010, p. 707).

In the face of such an overwhelming focus on student satisfaction (and the importance that this marker carries) it is worth asking what has driven this pursuit of satisfaction, particularly within higher education institutions, but also within the literature itself. In the UK the introduction of tuition fees has been described as forcing universities to act as service providers and to treat their students as consumers (Williams and Cappuccini-Ansfield, 2007). As a result of the Browne review in England (Browne, 2010), in 2012 fees increased to £9000 per year for many full-time courses and as such, according to

Lenton, ‘students possess more incentive than ever to search for the best value student experience they can find, hence the NSS is potentially a key weapon for universities to deploy in search of market share’ (2015, p. 118). Meanwhile, Lee suggested that universities have headed toward ‘academic capitalism, commercialisation, the entrepreneurial university, and higher education Inc. in order to fulfil labour market demand in a knowledge driven economy and society’ (2011, p. 73). In other words, perhaps partly to meet students’ demand for better value, universities cater towards economic outcomes: preparing students for employability post-study so that their ‘investment’ in tuition will be repaid once they enter the job market. Such a move can be seen within the wider discourse of higher education’s public good being conceptualised purely in terms of economic benefits: ‘much of the contemporary paradigm connects education with a narrower sense of good: the economic good of the individuals who benefit from learning, and the fiscal vitality of the communities in which those individuals are housed’ (Hensley et al., 2013, p. 553). Hence, as Gibbs suggests, in contemporary higher education there is an ‘overpowering discourse’ around economic purpose to the detriment of discussion around happiness (Gibbs, 2014, p. 7). It is no surprise then, that the move towards consumerism within higher education and the marketization of the sector has resulted in the conflation of the concepts of ‘happiness’ and ‘satisfaction’. [In fact, the two terms are often used interchangeably](#) as if one were tantamount to the other. Chan, Miller and Tcha’s 2005 study on student satisfaction is one such example: purporting to investigate ‘happiness in university education’, while focusing entirely on factors which affect satisfaction (for example: environment, teaching, resources).

Addressing the issue directly, Dean and Gibbs lament the conflation of happiness and satisfaction in their empirical work with students from UK universities:

‘Happier’ students were more content with how they engaged with the edifying experiences, while those who were ‘more satisfied’ seemed to be more concerned with external loci, that is, on how things done to and for them were delivered, rather than in their engagement with the process (Dean and Gibbs, 2015, p. 16).

According to Dean and Gibbs, the distinction between satisfaction and happiness is clear enough and it enables us to draw a [line between the two concepts, and particularly between satisfaction and happiness derived from engagement](#) in an edifying experience and philosophical notions of happiness (Ryff, 2016).

[The conflation of happiness with satisfaction does not seem to speak to students directly but could instead be conceived of as a means to target](#) university management and policymakers. For example, Mangelaja and Hirvonen highlight the practical steps that such figures of authority can take toward improving student satisfaction: ‘university policy makers may be able to use the results to further identify the major determinants of student satisfaction, and thus be better positioned to develop a learning environment that will enhance students’ experience of university’ (2007, p. 37). As Gibbs and Dean point out, the current preoccupation in the sector of ‘concentrating on satisfaction, or rather desire satisfaction, publishing results and ranking on these attributes,’ ultimately leads to the loss of an edifying experience for students (2014). Using satisfaction and happiness as like-for-like terms ‘comes perilously close to reducing important human experiences including the profound emotion of happiness to a set of ‘preferences’ as reported on a tick-box questionnaire’ (Collini, 2012, p. 185). The National Student Survey (NSS) in the UK is, it could be contended, is an example of just such a tick-box

exercise (and a flawed one at that – see Bennett and Kane, 2014). As Gibbs notes, it is not ‘that which is recorded in student satisfaction surveys which is best at measuring the pleasing and pleasurable elements of education’ (2014, p. 6), and even less its happiness.

But the tangibility of economic outcomes is much easier to grasp than those of either cultural benefits or of concepts such as happiness and well-being (Hensley, Galilee-Belfer and Lee, 2013, p. 565). Measuring whether a student states that they are satisfied with an aspect of provision at a specific moment in time is much more straightforward than assessing whether they have had an edifying experience leading in the long term to eudaimonic happiness. This measurability makes satisfaction a more desirable pursuit for those that need to demonstrate impact – either to prospective students or to those funding their operation. Instead, Dean and Gibbs argue that the ‘idea of quality in higher education should extend beyond satisfaction and develop a notion of student happiness as one of the attributes by which educational provision should be judged, if not measured’ (2015, p. 7).

The consumerisation of higher education has led, according to Mark, to the acceptance of the philosophy that ‘the customer is always right’ and that the short-term demands of students should be ‘pandered’ to (2013, p. 3). Once again there is a tension between superficial happiness (satisfaction) and the profound happiness that is associated with the longer-term intrinsic process of learning. As Bay and Daniel note, students’ own expectations here fall short of the latter, being more often focused on meeting short-term goals (2001).

Despair

An inherent problem with measuring the satisfaction of students, rather than trying to understand their happiness, is that there are a number of studies which show that

students express satisfaction with those teachers that challenge them least (see Emery, Kramer and Tian, 2003) – this is in direct contrast to the argument that well-being, flourishing and a more meaningful understanding of happiness can only be garnered through some level of unhappiness or discontent. In this view happiness would be the result of greater challenge and difficulty which actually stretches students and pushes their potential; a Vygotskian notion of needing to take students out of their comfort zone (Vygotsky, 1978). To take an example from wider education studies, Vanhuysse and Sabbagh argue that any theory of happiness which implies the avoidance of suffering downplays effort and difficulty (2005, p. 399; also, see Noddings, 2003). That suffering should be a part of education is a view held by Roberts, who argues that the aim of life (or the realisation of one’s potential) is not just happiness but also despair (2013). Advocating an existentialist notion of happiness, Roberts holds that ‘despair needs not be seen as an aberrant state from which we should seek to escape; rather, it is a key element of any well lived human life ... education, I maintain, is meant to create a state of discomfort, and to this extent may also make us un happy’ (Roberts, 2013, p. 464). Indeed, ‘in the possibility of despair we find what is most deeply human about us’ (Kierkegaard cited in Roberts, 2013, p. 470), in other words, [despair as a distinctively human quality is not a condition to be necessarily avoided but instead must be more profoundly understood, ‘to be educated is, in part, to be aware of the despair that is present in many lives’ \(Roberts, 2015, p.3\)](#). In this respect, the purpose of education should not to be to induce happiness (simply conceived as the avoidance of suffering) but to teach us to recognise our own despair as well as the suffering of others and to be ‘able to work productively with it’ (Roberts, 2013, p. 464). [Here, Roberts does not simply advocate despair *per se*, but rather considers it pragmatically as it invites us to understand its inherent potential for learning, hence its profound educational](#)

[importance](#). This educational process would enable students to develop a critical (despaired) consciousness; education is ‘an unsettling, uncomfortable process’ (Roberts, 2013, p. 473) which does not provide an escape from suffering (happiness) but a growing awareness of it.

This importance of despair in terms of one’s pursuit of happiness is openly acknowledged by Gibbs who sees learning as a painful, frustrating and negative process that allows us to think and address that which confronts us (2016, p. 67).

Similarly, although warning against extremes, the Higher Education Academy has published advice around building emotional resilience in students in order to support their well-being, which again can be rooted in unsettling or stressful situations (Grant & Kinman, 2013). Indeed Rodriguez argued that negative emotions were essential for mental health and ultimately key to well-being (2013).

[It is clear that this treatment of happiness and despair](#) in higher education is in stark contrast with the idea of happiness as satisfaction as played out in government policy papers (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2016), academic literature (Tcha, 2005; Mangeloja and Hirvonen, 2007; Kek & Stow, 2009) and in the various university ranking systems and the UK’s National Student Survey.

Flourishing

In the face of a shift in UK higher education policy towards the marketization of the sector, Palfreyman talked about education provision as an apparent contest between: ‘being a process of liberal education ... and delivering vocational education’ (2013, p. 107), contrasting independent or creative thinking with ‘employability’. [A](#) focus on skills for the ‘real world’ was heavily criticised by Collini, who suggested that the imagined ideal of a ‘real world’, to which all students should supposedly aspire, doesn’t

actually exist (2012). Universities have, according to Keyes, left behind the ‘heart and soul of a liberal arts education that focuses on the whole person, the whole student, the whole faculty and staff’ and are no longer ‘fulfilling the mission of helping students to flourish’ (2015, pp. 2-3). Wilson-Strydom and Walker describe flourishing as about more than just happiness or satisfaction, but instead encapsulating the opportunities, competence and confidence ‘needed to be able to participate equally in higher education’: flourishing requires consideration of the well-being and agency of students (2015, p. 317). In other words, flourishing represents a form of self or personal development undertaken on the part of students, but facilitated by universities.

This is not a new position, as long ago as 1988 Kale wrote about the ‘lack of a well-rounded curriculum’ stopping students from being happy: ‘while we overload students with techniques and theories ... little effort is undertaken toward the integration of personality’ (p. 84). His research with one thousand graduating students suggested that they were dissatisfied with an education which gives them ‘at best – a ticket to the job market, and little else’ (Kale, 1988, p. 85). Ironically, this pre-dominant focus on employability is the goal to which many institutions now seem to aim, at the exclusion of all else: many university league tables now use graduate or career ‘prospects’ as one of their key ranking factors. Lee believed that self-actualisation was the main driver for students in terms of learning ‘professional knowledge and special skills through university education’ (2008). The realisation and fulfilment of one’s talents and possibilities could be seen as the ultimate goal of personal development and Lee went on to argue that knowledge and education that led to self-actualisation were ‘necessary conditions and determinants to pursue and to obtain happiness’ (2008), drawing a connection between higher education; personal development leading to self-actualisation; and, ultimately, happiness.

Higher education institutions have a role to play in terms of providing the space for such self-actualisation to occur. Gibbs argued that such institutions should allow students the room in which they might strive for contentment – not the happiness associated with consumerism but instead a ‘state of being content with oneself’; universities should not obsess with ‘the business of service delivery based on pleasure, entertainment and job grooming’ (2014, pp. 3-4) to the exclusion of all else. Collini described the ‘misleading analogy between a university and a commercial company’ as driving much of the economic focus within the sector (2012, p. 134), claiming that the two are not like-for-like and should not be treated as such. He went on to argue for the intrinsic value of education, characterising a focus on supposedly employment-related outcomes, or ‘skills-talk’, as ‘a failure of nerve’ (Collini 2012, p. 144). Collini criticised this justification of higher education as purely a means to enhance employability: he argued that the goal of higher education institutions should be ‘to enable human beings to flourish and to exercise their capacities,’ (2012, p. 138). If we accept this aim for our universities and places of learning then there is no need to question their existence further – by allowing students to flourish, the purpose of higher education is fulfilled. By separating out the functions or goals of higher education institutions from those of the ‘worlds of commerce and industry’ (Collini, 2012, p. 144) it is no longer necessary to prioritise one over the other. Gibbs and Dean make the point that this is not a zero-sum game: the two outcomes are both achievable for higher education institutions: ‘consumer satisfaction can be made tangible and it is worth measuring and competing upon,’ alongside universities’ role in allowing students to ‘grasp their potential and their happiness’ (2014). Equally, Wilson-Strydom and Walker argued for ‘an education which is instrumental in enabling wider economic opportunities but also intrinsic in valuing learning for its own sake’ (2015) and indeed students themselves are not simply

‘in the business of purchasing a degree’ according to Watson (2009, p. 33). As Keyes noted, it is only students who are more able to contribute to the world than when they arrived at university who can be said to be flourishing (2015, p. 3).

One of the issues with this balanced approach towards modern higher education provision is that it may be that the students do not (at least consciously) desire such ‘dual’ outcomes. Koskina’s 2011 research, linked to the psychological contract ([‘individual beliefs in a reciprocal obligation between the individual and the organisation’ \(Rousseau 1989, p. 121\)](#)) students create with the university, suggests students no longer value the requirement for happiness from their studies (beyond simple desire satisfaction). It should be noted that her study only used a small sample size; nonetheless the findings paint a worrying picture for those that believe higher education should prioritise the delivery of a more meaningful experience for students. Koskina’s study showed that although the psychological contract students made with their higher education institution involved both intrinsic and extrinsic outcomes (learning and a degree as certified knowledge), at no point did any of those interviewed suggest that profound happiness was part of their contract (2011, p, 1032).

Well-being

Ultimately, the tension in higher education around happiness, as well as unhappiness, and satisfaction, revolves around the questions: ‘what are universities for?’ as Collini puts in (2012), or as Barker and Martin even more broadly ask ‘what is education for?’ (2009). In the latter’s discussion around actually teaching happiness they highlight the disparity between ‘aiming to impart knowledge and skills, and a different purpose in the study of happiness, learning how to be happy’ (Barker and Martin, 2009, pp, 1-2). They note that ‘the formal goals of a university education and the pursuit of personal happiness are not necessarily in conflict, but there are tensions’ (Barker and Martin,

2009, p. 9). It is in this context that it is worth considering the role of universities in terms of the promotion of student well-being. In a wider education context, approaches advocating emotional well-being (Geddes, 2006; Bailey, 2012; Manning-Norton, 2014) tend to provide qualitative, and mental health-related definitions of happiness. In contrast, Ryff defines what she refers to as ‘psychological well-being’ through six key components: self-acceptance, positive relations with others; personal growth; purpose in life; environmental mastery; and autonomy (2016). It is, hopefully, clear how such a conception could fit well with the overarching goals of a university-education, providing a forum to develop all six of these facets.

Although the benefits of pursuing student satisfaction might be more obviously evident for a university administration, there are nonetheless wide-ranging rewards related to the pursuit of happiness as well-being. McMahon included outcomes such as ‘better health’; ‘greater educational opportunities’; and ‘the creation of lifelong learners’ along with increased levels of happiness for higher education students (2009). Meanwhile, Flynn and Macleod argue that ‘the individual benefits can pale in comparison to the potential societal gains of having a population comprised of such happy and therefore ‘successful’ individuals’ (2015, p. 453). This comparison between a happy population and a successful one is interesting. [In this respect, Durgin’s practical guide to ‘achieving success and happiness in college’ \(referring to the American definition of college\) explicitly links the two: the guide is aimed at students themselves and very much places the emphasis on students taking control of their own success but also their own well-being and happiness alike.](#) Durgin suggests that ‘if you study what you love, pursue what you do well, and follow your passions and interests, you will most likely be heading in the right direction’ (2010, p. 59). Dean’s research with university students suggested that they often defined success through personal indicators such as happiness

(1998, p. 54). Lee also theorised about students' own views on deriving success through study: 'from the viewpoint of an individual, the main purpose of higher education is to achieve self-actualisation and social success mentally and materially' (Lee, 2011, p. 72).

Conclusion

This paper investigates current conceptions of happiness in higher education, and makes plain the problems that exist inculcated within the tension between 'happiness' and related but distinct terms such as 'satisfaction', 'well-being', and 'flourishing'. As shown, the current debate around happiness in higher education is limited at best, comprised in no small part by a focus on student satisfaction at the expenses of student happiness, flourishing and well-being. As such, we would argue that institutions (in the UK at least) do not currently do enough to develop crucial outcomes for students relating to profound happiness.

Eudaimonic happiness, a sense of profound happiness distinct from the pleasure of hedonic happiness, is heavily under-represented in both policy and academic discussion around higher education and yet, perhaps this should be the ultimate aspiration of all higher education institutions – contributing to the life journeys of their students as they seek to find out who they are and how they can flourish. Such aspirations are often obscured, concealed in the conflation of 'happiness' and 'satisfaction'. The marketization of higher education (particularly in the UK) seems to have, at least in part, driven this conflation – as evidenced by the recent series of influential policy papers published by the UK Government. While satisfaction and related economic outcomes, such as employability, are indeed legitimate goals of higher education, they should not be conceived as university's sole legitimate goals. As Gibbs argues, we need to move beyond this unidimensional approach. Indeed 'contentment should be considered as a goal for higher education alongside other goals, to be set against the

needs of the institution in measuring student satisfaction' (Gibbs, 2014, p. 7). There is certainly a role for understanding, measuring and catering for student satisfaction within the UK's higher education sector; however, this should not be at the expense of enabling students to seek profound happiness from their studies. Equally, universities must not shy away from providing challenging, unsettling or at times stressful experiences for their students. A more meaningful understanding of happiness and well-being can only be reached by the experience of some negative emotions, unhappiness or even despair.

However, as universities increasingly grow more and more concerned with economic and employability outcomes, often privileged (or at least emphasised) by league tables and university rankings, there is the danger that they may forget their ability to provide a space in which students might flourish. Self-development and self-actualization are necessarily personal tasks to be pursued by the student as individual but since universities are in unique positions to facilitate and support such development, they should not lose sight of their purpose and role and should aspire to cater towards all kinds of outcomes for their students. Students' aspirations, unlike the measurable 'satisfaction', in fact eschew exhibitionist quantitative displays across university rankings, league tables and the results of student surveys. The need for self-actualisation, contentment and flourishing, are particularly important for the well-being of students more generally, arguably more than contingent satisfaction.

In light of the gap between satisfaction and happiness – a gap in the critical understanding of students' happiness – the marketization of the higher education sector appears rather damaging. In this light it may seem imperative that universities should be given incentives to allow their students to flourish and not merely to be satisfied. Yet, as mentioned above, the Higher Education Bill, frameworked in the 2016 White Paper,

contains inherent threats to universities that could further reduce any potential opportunity for providing students with the space for self-actualisation.

However, there is also a role for universities to play in terms of interpreting their own remit and mission – working within the constraints of legislation to strive for happiness within their student body. Future research might aim to aid higher education institutions to find a balance between the concepts of ‘happiness’ ‘satisfaction’, ‘well-being’, ‘despair’ and ‘flourishing’, particularly as they play out in the overlapping discursive space created by the current policy environment, the imagined ideal of universities’ role and purpose and last but not least, the actual lived existence of university students.

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