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Supporting students' transition into higher education: Motivation enhancement strategies

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we explore first-year students' transition into higher education (HE), focusing on the motivational factors that enhance their engagement. We argue that Student Support Professionals (SSPs) can play a pivotal role in heightening student motivation, given the broad range of academic, administrative, and pastoral responsibilities that this role entails. Against this background, we ask two questions: Firstly, how should we understand student motivation with specific regard to its antecedents, manifestations, and consequences? Secondly, what motivation-enhancement strategies can SSPs integrate into their practice to build a productive relationship with students? Drawing on self-determination theory (SDT) insights, we provide a taxonomy of student motivation, arguing that: Motivation exists in a continuum of self-regulation, motivation is contextual, motivation is multidimensional, and motivation is causally significant. Building on this taxonomy we offer practical guidance to SSPs who are looking to catalyse students' intrinsic motivation, identifying three specific motivational enhancement strategies, namely: Fostering competence by establishing realistic expectations between oneself and students; fostering relatedness by providing resources for holistic student engagement; and fostering autonomy by empowering students in their decision-making. We argue that central to SSPs' ability to foster engagement is possessing a conceptual and experiential understanding of student motivation, which can heighten their ability to respond to students' needs. SSPs should approach this process of motivation enhancement as collaborative—working with students to discover both motivational impediments and motivation-enhancing resources to better engage with their HE experience.

KEYWORDS

Motivation; transition; engagement; self-determination; student supports

Introduction

Transitioning into higher education (HE) is a critically important experience for first-year students (Krause, 2006). During this time, their ability to embrace a more reflective and self-regulated learning approach is tested (Valle et al., 2009). Alongside this, they must address existential questions of

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themselves, centred on their decision to pursue HE, what they hope to accomplish personally and professionally, and how they will endeavour to achieve their goals. Their response to these initial challenges influences their approach to and enthusiasm for their chosen programme, and their subsequent susceptibility to retention issues (Burnett, 2007). In this context, higher education institutions (HEIs) must foster students' motivation to engage with these tasks by providing them with appropriate personal and environmental resources. Achieving this goal entails ensuring that student support professionals (SSPs), i.e., HEI staff who provide academic and personal supports to students, can integrate motivation-enhancement strategies into their student relationships.

In this article, we explore first-year students' transition into HE, focusing on the motivational factors that enhance their engagement, with Kuh (2009) defining engagement as 'the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities' (p. 683).[1] We argue that SSPs can be pivotal in heightening students' motivation (Ferris et al., 2011), broadly defined as a psychological state characterised by the arousal and adoption of goal-directed behaviours (Valle et al., 2009). Specifically, we detail how student motivation is a complex, contextual, and relational phenomenon that SSPs should approach as existing within, and influenced by, the resources and constraints that students navigate daily. In this context, SSPs' pivotal contribution is rooted in the broad range of academic, administrative, and pastoral responsibilities encompassed within their role—and the opportunities for motivation enhancement this provides.

Against this background, the primary goal of this article is to address two questions: Firstly, how should we understand student motivation with specific regard to its antecedents, manifestations, and consequences? Secondly, what motivation-enhancement strategies can SSPs integrate into their practice to build productive student relationships that can foster their engagement? Underpinning our analysis of student motivation is self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2002), which identifies three inherent psychosocial needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Attentiveness to these needs helps SSPs understand the psychosocial foundations of intrinsic motivation and offers a framework to design and deliver strategies to strengthen students' motivation to engage.

In section one, we discuss the concept of 'transition', which we frame as a process of psychosocial maturation, the success of which is predicated on not just the quantity of students' programme engagement, but its quality. In section two, we provide a taxonomy of motivation that draws on the principles of SDT. In section three, we examine SSPs' distinctive role and responsibilities regarding engagement enhancement, contextualising this discussion within the University College Dublin (UCD) Student Advisory model. In the fourth section, we offer practical guidance to SSPs looking to catalyse students' intrinsic motivation. Specifically, we identify three motivational enhancement strategies: Fostering competence by establishing realistic expectations between oneself and students; fostering relatedness by providing resources for holistic student engagement within different social domains; and fostering autonomy by empowering students in their decision-making. In concluding, we argue that SSPs should approach motivation enhancement as collaborative, i.e., working with students to discover and deploy environmental and personal resources that spark healthy engagement.

Transitioning into higher education: Challenges and opportunities

Entering HE is a time of significant change for first-year students, with personal and professional aspirations examined, capabilities tested, and approaches to learning altered. The challenges confronting students are multifaceted and can encompass external obstacles centred on logistical, organisational and cultural aspects of this environment, and internal obstacles centred on one's psychosocial capacity to navigate it healthily (Chipchase et al., 2017; Cole, 2017; Denny, 2015; Kahu & Nelson, 2018). It is noted in University College Dublin (UCD, 2015), for example, that 'Entering

university…brings very significant challenges for first-year students who need to become used to an educational environment where they are expected to function as independent and self-motivated learners' (pp. 12-13).

Entering HE involves both the conclusion of students' secondary education journey and the commencement of a wholly new and, in many ways, more challenging journey. Engaging with the tasks this transition entails is important because, as Glynn et al. (2005) note, failure to overcome the differences between secondary and higher education can undermine students' motivation to pursue new forms of learning. Even though these two environments are distinct, they are not incommensurable; they entail a maturation of students' psychosocial competencies rather than the need to manufacture them *ex nihilo*. A 'transition jump' (Coertjens et al., 2016) is required to bridge this difference—involving a shift in students' approach to autonomous learning, including how they access, internalise, and evaluate new knowledge. In this regard, Valle et al. (2009) discuss the importance of Self-Regulated Learning (SRL), whereby students need to partake in a more reflective and self-reliant approach to education and take greater ownership over setting, monitoring, and achieving their learning goals.

A successful transition is predicated on students' healthy psychological engagement with their programme, defined as when 'Students make a psychological investment in learning…They take pride not simply in earning the formal indicators of success (grades), but in understanding the material and incorporating or internalising it in their lives' (Newman, 1992, p. 3). Thus, engagement is necessary to acquire knowledge and skills, and enable meaningful learning underpinning academic success (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Trowler & Trowler, 2010). Here, numerous skills help students engage, including time management, personal responsibility, and working alongside others (Denny, 2015; Goldfinch & Hughes, 2007; Nelson & Nelson, 2003; Zuwairiyah, 2019). However, also bearing on students' ability and willingness to advance and apply their abilities are the various 'social ecologies' within which they operate (Lawson & Lawson, 2013). Therefore, as a psycho*social* undertaking, Kahu (2013) and Fredricks et al. (2004) argue that engagement is influenced by students' social context alongside student-centred and institutional factors. It is thus an embedded phenomenon, the outcome of an active interplay between students' internal self and their external environment (Ecclestone et al., 2009) across numerous domains within their 'educational interface' (Kahu & Nelson, 2018).

Student engagement can be considered multidimensional—consisting of distinct, yet interrelated, capacities that when positively fostered and expressed, can create a healthy learning experience. We describe five such engagement components based on literature (Blumenfeld et al., 2005; Bowden, 2013; Bowden et al., 2019; Christenson et al., 2012; Eldegwy et al., 2018; Fredricks et al., 2004; Fried & Konza, 2013; Kahu et al., 2015; Khademi Ashkzari et al., 2018; Klem & Connell, 2004; Krause & Coates, 2008; Kuh, 2006; Mahatmya et al., 2012; National Center on Effective Secondary Schools, 1992; Nguyen et al., 2016; Reeve, 2012, 2013; Reeve & Shin, 2020; Reeve & Tseng, 2011; Reschly & Christenson, 2012; Schaufeli et al., 2002; Vivek et al., 2014; Wentzel, 2012; Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012):

i. Cognitive Engagement: Students' active and attentive psychological investment in their HE learning. This engagement is demonstrated when students self-regulate their learning process, exerting themselves to acquire, internalise and comprehend the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in their HE journey.
ii. Behavioural Engagement: Students' active and external participation in their HE learning and personal development activities. This engagement is demonstrated through productive membership in their HEI across academic and extracurricular pursuits, and performing in assessments.
iii. Social Engagement: Students' healthy interaction and identification with significant others across different domains of their HE experience. This engagement is expressed through

becoming socially embedded within and developing a sense of belonging with their HE social context.

iv. Affective Engagement: Students' emotional connection with and attachment to their HE experience. This engagement is expressed by valuing and cultivating the role that their HE experience plays in their life, and being enthusiastic and confident in its worth and outcomes.

v. Agentic Engagement: Students' intentional and constructive efforts to shape their HE teaching and learning experience. This engagement is accomplished by participating in reciprocal transactions across relevant HE domains and cooperating in education design and delivery.

Gunnarsson (2009) argues that people's decisions are often implicit attempts to address the existential question of "who am I?" First-year students are, in many ways, a testament to this impetus towards self-understanding. For example, the act of choosing one's institution, programme, elective modules, extracurricular activities, and social groups are all expressions of curiosity about one's characteristics and capabilities, and a desire to engage in a range of formative pursuits. Thus, students face having to discover and define not merely what they can do but also who they are (Briggs & Clark, 2012; MacFarlane, 2018). For this transition to be successful, it entails discovering, deploying, and developing one's psychosocial characteristics and capacities amidst new experiences that continually cultivate an evolving sense of personal identity.

By understanding successful transition as a relational and multidimensional process of personal maturation, we can reframe student supports as being development-orientated rather than simply task-orientated; i.e., supports can be more attentive to nurturing specific facets of students' psychosocial growth, rather than just resolving *ad hoc* issues. For example, in helping students adhere to behavioural engagement benchmarks such as attendance and assessments, SSPs may elicit motivation from aligned forms of engagement to bolster students' efforts. These can include highlighting the interpersonal value and utility of integrating into one's class (social engagement), clarifying the vocational significance of their course (affective engagement), and conveying their teaching & learning (T&L) needs and wants (agentic engagement).

A taxonomy of student motivation

Valle et al. (2009) define motivation as a psychological state characterised by the arousal and adoption of behaviours that are goal-directed; against the background of the HE experience, Brophy (1988) views motivation as 'a student tendency to find academic activities meaningful and worthwhile and to try to derive the intended academic benefits from them' (p. 14). Our goal is to elucidate some of the primary components and determinants of student motivation and identify ways to navigate and nurture it within educational settings. Here, we argue that it is a complex, contextual, and relational phenomenon that SSPs should approach as existing within and influenced by the resources and constraints students encounter daily—both inside and beyond their HEI environment. Drawing most prominently on self-determination theory (SDT)—an approach to cognition and behaviour whose proponents argue that motivation underpins people's psychological health and their capacity to engage in constructive behaviours within a given context (Ryan & Deci, 2002)—we identify four of the primary characteristics of motivation.

i. Motivation exists in a continuum of self-regulation.

ii. Motivation is contextual and operates within different domains of a person's life.

iii. Motivation is multidimensional, and one's experience of autonomy, competency, and relatedness influence it.

iv. Motivation is causally significant and has repercussions throughout a person's life.

A motivational continuum

The first characteristic of motivation is that it exists along a continuum of self-regulation, comprised of amotivation, external motivation, introjected motivation, identified motivation and intrinsic motivation (Brooks & Young, 2011; Trenshaw et al., 2016; Vansteenkiste et al., 2004).

i. Amotivation is when one lacks the impetus to formulate or achieve goals within a given context.

ii. External motivation is when one's regulation derives from external and contingent forces, such as enhancing positive outcomes or mitigating adverse outcomes.

iii. Introjected motivation is when drives that are not fully internalised regulate one's behaviours; instead, these drives remain outcome-centred, such as the desire to avoid negative emotions or enhance positive emotions.

iv. Identified motivation is when one's behaviours are regulated by personally significant values that underpin free choice, i.e., propelling oneself towards a particular action through internally-emanating motivations rather than a sense of external compulsion.

v. Intrinsic motivation is a progression of this stage. It represents when a person's behaviours are wholly self-initiated and self-regulated (Hill, 2013). As the most autonomous form of motivation, intrinsic activities are engaged in for their own sake rather than to serve contingent needs (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Many factors predicate where students are placed on this continuum, including their attitude towards the situation/task they are engaged in, the type of learning approaches/instruments employed within their programme, and the types of resources available. Here, Bowles et al. (2011) differentiate between intrinsic and extrinsic transition resources, with intrinsic resources emanating from students and extrinsic resources deriving from their institution. However, given that every student responds to tasks, situations, and contexts differently, an explicit dichotomy between intrinsic and extrinsic resources is challenging, and it is difficult to articulate where specific motivational strategies and techniques operate along this continuum.

In this context, the task for SSPs and academic staff is twofold. Firstly, to recognise the latent discrepancies in students' resources that may enhance or impede their capacity to participate in their programme meaningfully. Here, Brookes (2006) and Lawson and Lawson (2013) argue that students' personal lives and relationships significantly affect the amount of capital they can invest in their educational experience. A way SSPs can respond to discrepancies, e.g., financial and social deprivation (Lawson & Lawson, 2013), is by utilising their HEI's network of supports and linking students in with catered resources, such as academic advisers, chaplains, doctors and counsellors who can address difficulties influencing motivation and performance in personalised ways.

Secondly, when staff do implement extrinsic motivators, they must be mindful of how these can be 'internally' interpreted, processed and adopted by students, i.e., to uncover and harness the student-centeredness in the motivational resources that one provides (Trenshaw et al., 2016). For example, when faced with a socially isolated student, SSPs may encourage them to maintain regular attendance and participate in extracurricular activities. While the student may initially perceive external pressure, the goal is that participation in new and challenging experiences will enable them to confront expectation biases from past experiences and encourage them to reformulate their approach to social tasks, unlocking a dormant motivation to engage.[2] Leading students away from being motivated solely by extrinsic goals, e.g. attendance and assessment benchmarks, may present challenges in reframing approaches to learning developed during second-level education. Nonetheless, finding a way to reframe these as cohering with or complementing their inherent motivations can help initiate, maintain, and enhance engagement. This approach can take the form

of, for example, discussing and clarifying their initial reasons for enrolling in their course and what they hope to achieve personally and professionally from their participation.

Motivation is contextual

The second characteristic of motivation is that it is contextual. It operates across different spheres of life, varying in quality and quantity depending on the particular context.[3] Once again, these spheres exist on a continuum, beginning with situation-specific motivations and expanding to incorporate broader areas of one's life. Local motivation refers to people's drive at a specific moment, the extent they are willing to channel their energies into achieving a particular outcome, e.g., homework assignments and class presentations. Regional motivation refers to people's drive to engage with more significant roles and responsibilities across different domains of their life, e.g., being an attentive and punctual student. Global motivation describes a person's holistic disposition and drives to engage with life in a broader sense: their being rather than their doing, e.g., having a deep understanding of one's personal and professional aspirations. Much like the concept of 'global autonomy' (MacKenzie, 2014), global motivation requires the person to adopt a self-reflective stance towards themselves, including their goals and purpose. This experience can be encapsulated in a self-statement, such as 'I am a veterinary medicine student who wishes to become a professional vet'.[4] Here, undermined global motivation can be felt as lacking in direction, experiencing apathy towards one's programme, or being deeply uncertain of its longer-term vocational merit.

It is difficult for SSPs to adhere to one singular interpretation of how motivation (or amotivation) expresses itself for students. In Payne's (2019) discussion, students can be disengaged from a programme as a whole, disengaged from the content of modules, and disengaged from the teaching process. Each of these will have different ramifications, varying in severity. Pintrich (2004) also states that students' motivational goals and strategies may be programme-specific, which means that a student who appears highly unmotivated in one academic context may be very motivated in another, depending on how personally or professionally invested they are with the subject or learning approach. Despite local motivation being critical to completing specific academic tasks, without a sense of global motivation around which to orientate one's longer-term education goals and strategies, a student's impetus to complete specific tasks may eventually begin to erode. Therefore, a lack of global motivation does not mean that students cannot exhibit situation-specific motivation; they may still submit their assignments and conform to the traits of an 'engaged' student. Often, however, this path may not be sustainable.

Conceptualising motivation in this way allows us to understand the numerous ways it may manifest itself (or not) in students' lives and, therefore, more effectively target and attend to their specific needs. It is vital to recognise these signs as interrelated and, therefore, to look for the potentially deeper causes of motivational impairment. For example, lacking the drive to perform in exams may not always be because one's 'local' exam-centred motivation is damaged due to work/life imbalances. It may instead indicate a broader sense of discontentment with and estrangement from one's programme. Likewise, a student may lack the motivation to attend early morning classes due to more prevalent demands in their family life, rather than just an unwillingness to attend at an inconvenient time. Therefore, identifying the potential pervasiveness of students' motivational impairment is critical to ensuring that interventions are appropriate and proportionate. Similarly, it is helpful to dialogue with students to identify personalised 'keys' to help unlock the door to motivation, such as specific interests, aptitudes, and needs that can be explored and addressed. These processes are aided by recognising motivation as contextual.

Motivation is multidimensional

The third characteristic of motivation is that it is multidimensional and underpinned by three inherent psychological needs: Autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2017). When

a person engages with a task or situation that helps meet their needs, their motivation will correspondingly progress through their continuum of self-regulation (Trenshaw et al., 2016). One of the central claims that SDT proponents make is that although psychologically healthy people possess intrinsic motivation toward personal growth and integrated functioning, this is not activated spontaneously. Instead, it is catalysed through nurturing from one's social environment (Ryan & Deci, 2002). Within educational environments, applying the principles of SDT can ensure that staff are attentive to these psychological needs, therefore enabling students to be intrinsically motivated (Black & Deci, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2008).

Autonomy involves the experience of meaningfully self-endorsing and exercising control over one's behaviours, competence is the experience of possessing knowledge and skills that are necessary to succeed in desired or intended outcomes, and relatedness is the experience of fulfilling one's ongoing need for meaningful relationships with others, and the sense of belonging and being securely connected that this imbues (Lynch & Salikhova, 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2017; Trenshaw et al., 2016).

Strategies to foster autonomy in HEIs centre on creating an environment where students can use their deliberative and decisional abilities to take ownership of their educational journey. Here, instructors should ask themselves, 'Am I providing students with sufficient opportunities to contribute towards their module's teaching & learning approaches?' Some principle suggestions include: Providing choice, minimising a sense of control and coercion, including students in deliberations, and providing a rationale for making decisions (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Reeve & Halusic, 2009; Reeve & Jang, 2006). Strategies to foster competence in educational settings include optimally challenging students in a way that necessitates applying and developing their various competencies, such as through 'flipped classrooms', practical work, and applying different forms of assessment. Here, instructors should ask themselves, 'Am I providing students with the resources to fully engage with their module's learning requirements and develop their capabilities?' Finally, strategies for enhancing relatedness ensure that the relationship between students and staff is underpinned by a tone that fosters students' sense of respect and value for their teacher (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). Here, instructors should ask themselves, 'Am I providing students with the means to connect with their module class productively and meaningfully?'

Motivation is causally significant

The fourth characteristic of motivation is that it is causally significant. As 'the best predictor of student retention' (Anderson, 2006), it is vitally important in students' ability to generate and accomplish goals and successfully engage with their educational environment. A student's impetus to undertake their programme is distinct. HE represents the culmination of years of dedication and hard work for many students, a gateway to achieving their personal and professional aspirations. For other students, it may be more transactional, a means to an end for which they do not yet have a roadmap.[5] Regardless of their initial underlining reasons for enrolment, possessing a set of relevant, realistic and sustainable goals is an important means of addressing and overcoming demotivation, should it occur. Here, students should be offered the space to discuss and uncover the potential causes and consequences of demotivation, from which potential discrepancies between current behaviours and goals, and aligned needs for change, are established.

Focusing on one component of intrinsic motivation—autonomy—we see that personal agency is associated with many developmentally positive student results, such as enhanced learning outcomes and academic performance, wellbeing, and a higher value for educational settings (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Reis et al., 2000; Ryan & Grolnick, 1986; Vansteenkiste et al., 2005). Conversely, amotivation is associated with feelings of incompetence and helplessness (Vallerand et al., 1992), which can precipitate disengagement. Therefore, it is crucial to help students pay attention to the status of their motivation, highlighting its influence on the trajectory of their educational experiences.

In order to take advantage of the opportunities presented by HE and realise their potential, students must be motivated. As a consequence, they can take ownership of their education by accessing, evaluating, and applying new learning to enrich their HE experience. Nevertheless, a motivated student cohort is not guaranteed; real efforts must be made to foster it through the activities and relationships incorporated into their modules. Consequently, being aware of motivation's dynamism is an essential criterion for implementing targeted strategies and communications to counter instances of demotivation. These four characteristics tell us something distinct; contextualised together within students' experiences, they offer a conceptual foundation for engagement enhancement—painting a picture of the potential determinants and indicators of students' motivation during their transition to HE. On this basis, SSPs can ask themselves questions such as: 'Is this student experiencing undermined motivation, and in what sense?'; 'What are the possible causes of this?'; 'How is this expressing itself?'; and 'How can this be remedied?'

Delivering student supports

Student advisory supports are ubiquitous within HEIs; generally, they comprise academic staff who provide personalised educational assistance, delivered in conjunction with lecturing and research duties. This resource, known as academic advising, aims to augment the teaching and learning experience, deliver personalised oversight and assistance, and facilitate meaningful student-HEI engagement to enhance academic achievement and support retention (Edwards & Person, 1997; Kuh, 2006; Tinto, 2006; Young-Jones et al., 2013). Academic advisers fulfil dual roles, acting as a student information resource and providing encouragement if needed (Crockett, 1985). Achieving this necessitates familiarity with institutional issues within their HEI, such as academic policies and procedures, and an understanding of psychosocial issues that may affect the student population (Coll, 2008; Grites & Gordon, 2000The demands of this task are compounded by the ongoing transformation of HEI environments, including issues such as 'students' changing and complex needs, increasing student numbers, the growing diversity of the student body, and the continued societal challenges that face the student community' (Last et al., 2018, p. 64).

Academic advisers help students address issues relating to their specific programme or module; however, motivation can be affected by matters that extend beyond this arena. Within HEI strategic documents that place students' holistic development at their core (see, for example, University College Dublin, 2020), the experiences of their student population are not viewed as homogenous. Instead, recognition is given to the unique opportunities and challenges framing and shaping their HE experience and associated success. Students are seen as possessing differing forms of 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1986)—the resources they bring into their programme, as well as the resources that they are expected to utilise to progress. The capital students can invest in and derive from their programme varies depending on their personal circumstances and the nature of their programme. In fostering more equitable educational environments for students, it is important to recognise discrepancies that may impede students' ability to engage, so that supports can be provided accordingly. This calls for support resources that address students' personalised needs, including academic, e.g., writing centres, maths centres, academic advisers; financial, e.g., student support funds; social, e.g., clubs and societies, peer mentoring; and personal, e.g., health, counselling, chaplaincy, careers services.

Thus, while academic advisers help students address issues relating to their specific programme or module, students' engagement can be affected by matters beyond this arena. HEIs recognise the need for institutional-level supports operating at community and individual levels, and across various identified areas of need. In light of this need for a support resource that addresses students' holistic needs, the Student Adviser (SA) model developed within UCD differentiates itself through advisers' distinctive role for both students and the institution. Particularly around issues pertaining successful students transition and retention, this resource is an essential UCD support service, e.g. fostering students' academic and social integration into their programme, which are key

success indicators (Fergy et al., 2011; Tinto, 1987). This service emerged in response to UCD's need for a targeted support infrastructure to resolve student-identified concerns from within their local context. SAs are, therefore, embedded within specific programmes, ensuring that they understand the culture and procedures, thus enabling more nuanced supports.[6]

This approach operates across three domains, implicitly recognising the 'contextual' nature of motivation: Individual, programme, and university. At the individual level, advisers provide support ranging from day-to-day practical issues to more complex and severe concerns, in a non-judgemental and confidential manner. A student-led ethos underpins this process, encouraging and empowering students to initiate dialogue with their SA. This approach goes beyond solely addressing the problems that students may present with, and instead engages with and advocates for the person. SAs coordinate a positive and productive learning environment at a programme level through a range of student engagement strategies and initiatives. For example, UCD offers a Peer Mentoring programme which invites existing students to support new students through sharing their experiences and insights, offering guidance and advice, and providing practical information.

SAs' engagement extends further outwards at a university level, including participating in cross-campus policy, procedure, and strategy development (Last et al., 2018) in response to ongoing changes in students' engagement, preferences and needs. SAs are uniquely positioned at the heart of the student-institution interface to act as an intermediary and referral resource between students and a range of support professions, including academic mentoring, health services, careers development, chaplaincy and counselling. The dynamic ways that SAs' presence is felt within the university allows them to transcend the substructures of different Schools, interact with students at an inter-personal level, and advocate for students at an institutional level.

In discussing student supports, it is important to recognise the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the nature of staff-student relations, and the ramifications this may have for HEI interpersonal supports moving forward. Many institutions continued to deliver core academic, administrative, and advisory services to their students throughout widespread campus closures, using technological solutions.[7] Paradoxically, HEIs are now, themselves, faced with the prospect of transitioning into a new and unknown environment of increased reliance on technological mediation. This transition has challenged them to raise questions of how to safeguard their current and prospective capacity to maintain services with minimal disruption, secure future enrolments, mitigate against ongoing risks, and manage continued financial ramifications (Moody's Investors Service, 2020; Poliakoff, 2020).

HEIs contain many spheres of activity, spanning academic and social spaces. Students' homes have become an implicit extended part of this network with increased reliance on digital mediation. However, it is not easy to ensure that students' home working environment is conducive to meaningful engagement. Alongside this, many students have lost out on the motivational supports that in-person engagement can provide amid an already unstable and uncertain period. Consequently, it is more necessary than ever that SSPs' presence is felt within the traditional spaces comprising the university environment, and that students are provided with the mental health and emotional supports to address imbalances in 'capital'. While it may be difficult for SSPs to directly address the difficulties that students encounter in their lives outside of their HEI, they can create an environment that may address how these manifest themselves in students' willingness and ability to participate. As Goldthorpe (2007) notes, the cultural capital HEIs invest in their students can enhance their experience and opportunities and help overcome specific pre-existing motivational impediments. Achieving this goal often requires engagement across digital and analytic resources; nevertheless, SSPs should remain cognisant of the indispensable role that interpersonal engagement plays in motivating student engagement.

Motivation enhancement within higher education institutions

In this section, we present three motivation enhancement recommendations that can be implemented as part of comprehensive student supports strategies—each relating to a motivational underpinning outlined within SDT. There are numerous ways to provide motivational supports proactively (Simpson, 2013). As discussed, we can broadly differentiate between internal supports focused on developing students' capacities, and external supports focused on promoting environmental resources (Glynn et al., 2005). While the following recommendations pivot around fostering the psychosocial determinants of motivation (autonomy, competence, and relatedness), these needs are inherently relational. They require a supportive environment within which to grow. The three motivation-enhancement strategies are:

i. Fostering students' competency by working to establish realistic expectations.

ii. Fostering students' relatedness by providing resources for holistic engagement.

iii. Fostering students' autonomy by empowering them to make their own decisions.

Firstly, SSPs can foster students' sense of competency by establishing realistic expectations. Expectations emerge from people's prior experiences and anticipated outcomes (Olson et al., 1996). They can be very influential; Konings et al. (2008) note that 'Expectations affect students' motivation, engagement, and investment of effort in learning' (p. 536). Entering HE with appropriate expectations enables successful transition (Denny, 2015); likewise, discrepancies between expectations and reality can cause difficulties adapting to this environment (Smith & Hopkins, 2005). Discussions between SSPs and students can centre on exploring both interpersonal expectations (e.g., each other's role and responsibilities, students' understanding of their programme, beliefs regarding future challenges and opportunities), and personal expectations (e.g., students' personal and professional aspirations, their perceived personal strengths and weaknesses).

Regarding interpersonal expectations, transition entails a dual process of moving away from the familiarity of one's old environment and moving towards an educational setting that is new and mostly unknown. Cole et al. (2009) note that 'Students do not enter college *tabula rasa*. They come with a variety of high school academic experiences, exposure to college information, and family socioeconomic and educational influences' (p. 55). Students can more realistically and constructively engage with this new environment by asking themselves what preconceptions or biases about it they may hold and being willing to challenge these where appropriate.

Staff-student communications can influence students' perception of themselves and their aligned motivation for better or worse (Glynn et al., 2005; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2008). This impact is apparent, for example, in students' sense of self-efficacy, which—as distinct from the possession of skills themselves—is the belief that one possesses the ability to accomplish tasks and achieve specific results (Bandura, 1997). High self-efficacy has a bearing on students' cognitive engagement and positively affects their willingness to create and pursue academic goals (Glynn et al., 2005). Here, SSPs hold a privileged position, with Yardbrough (2011) arguing that 'the brief exchanges between adviser and advisee may have the greatest impact on the student's sense of self-efficacy in completing his or her degree requirements' (p. 63). SSPs should, thus, collaborate with students in challenging, clarifying and fostering students' expectations of themselves—providing a foundation on which to identify and implement tangible goals.

Secondly, SSPs can foster relatedness by enabling students to participate in their HE environment, both within the context of their one-to-one services and within the broader community. University life is inherently relational (Sung & Yang, 2008); engagement is, therefore, a vital aspect of the student experience and a central component of successful transition (Credé et al., 2010). For example, Yorke and Longden (2008) note that making friends in the first year of HE is an important factor in student retention, advising that universities employ teaching approaches that facilitate peer socialisations. Consequently, while it is crucial to impress on students the importance of independence, it is also critical to highlight the role that strong and stable relationships have in

achieving this goal. Given healthy communications between staff and students can lead to higher student satisfaction and willingness to persist (Edwards & Person, 1997; Lucas & Murry Jr., 2011), support relationships should be attentive to and facilitate student-centred dialogue.[8]

SSPs' responsibilities towards fostering students' engagement encompass both one-to-one components and community-outreach components. Both approaches tackle a range of student issues across logistical, administrative, and pastoral fields, if in different ways. Regularly, personal services act as a conduit to more holistic community engagement. Students can discuss and work through potential hindrances to engagement to find a resolution that enables them to participate in their community more fully. For example, a student may engage with their SSP after hearing that there will be a field trip for one of their modules that requires an extra expense that they cannot afford. The SSP can support the student to apply for some funding available within the university for such scenarios, enabling them to participate in the engagement opportunity.

Facilitating community engagement is thus a vital component of the SSP's role, encompassed in activities such as orientation and induction, peer mentoring, and social occasions. In Last et al. (2018), it is stated that Student Advisers 'Foster a sense of belonging…encouraging student engagement and connection with their programme and with the UCD community' (p. 67). Students may present with issues that fall outside the remit of SSPs' responsibilities and competence, which can necessitate a referral to other services within the community, e.g., student health and counselling. Therefore, delivering holistic engagement is a multidisciplinary endeavour, highlighting that student support/advisory services operate within and provide a distinctive contribution to a more comprehensive range of student resources.

Thirdly, SSPs can foster students' autonomy by empowering them to make their own decisions on significant issues in their higher education journey. Empowerment and motivation are conceptually and experientially related; Conger and Kanungo (1988) describe empowerment as a set of motivational psychological processes that increase personal initiation, persistence to complete tasks, and sense of self-efficacy. Staff can empower students through different means, such as policies and practices that enable students to feel a sense of ownership over their education journey. Likewise, SSPs' interaction style can emphasise students' capacity for choice and control over their academic career and their responsibility to use this choice to good effect. When individuals feel controlled, they experience pressure to think, feel, or behave in particular ways (Ryan & Deci, 2008); this can jeopardise their intrinsic motivation to engage. Therefore, empowerment-enhancing interactions should strike a balance between being directive and providing space for deliberation in, for example, formulating, implementing, and reviewing engagement goals.

Hocine and Zhang (2014) discuss the importance of 'giving people the room they need to succeed on their own, but also remaining hands-on enough to provide support when it is needed' (p. 419). On the one hand, directive interventions implicitly recognise staff-student differentials. In terms of their professional competencies, experience, familiarity with policies and procedures, and membership of professional networks, staff may occupy a position of greater authority and influence. Given that students often seek support when they feel lost, confused, or disempowered, the expectation that SSPs are capable of guiding them through this terrain and providing tangible solutions to their concerns is justifiable. On the other hand, healthy dialogue entails appreciating and accommodating students' ability to be directive, ensuring that their perspective is the fulcrum upon which decisions rest. This view highlights the risks of veering into overly prescriptive communications, particularly when discussing issues around students' global motivation. For example, upon hearing that a student wishes to deregister from their programme, a SSP's initial inclination may be to dissuade them and defend the merits of continuing in the programme. However, through deliberation, it may transpire that the student wishes to pursue opportunities along another professional path; their drive to pursue another programme they feel more vocationally drawn to supersedes their motivation to continue their current programme. Giving

students room to vocalise their reasoning helps to ensure that they recognise their agency as someone who can co-direct the advisory relationship.

While SSPs must be available to students in need of assistance, their readiness should not undercut students' scope to resolve issues independently. Last et al. (2018) state that 'Student advisers support students in identifying and achieving their academic goals by empowering them to manage the various life challenges they may encounter' (p. 66). This goal is accomplished by being mindful that, paradoxically, students are offered a network of support services and activities with the longer-term goal in mind of promoting self-regulation and self-management (Krause, 2006; Pintrich, 2004). One way to help achieve this is by presenting supports that bolster students' self-perceptions as a valued decision maker, in turn enhancing their capacity for self-determination, e.g., undertaking self-assessment exercises such as Decisional Balances and DARN (Desire, Ability, Reasons, and Need), helping identify their wish for, the importance, and consequences of specific changes to their engagement approach.

Conclusion

A central mission of HEIs is to prepare students for professional practice by providing dynamic, practical and formational educational experiences (Bowden et al., 2019; Kahu, 2013; Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Kahu et al., 2015). Engagement is at the heart of this mission. It enables students to integrate into their new environment, meet the psychosocial demands of their programme, and work towards becoming self-determined participants of their HEI. One of SSPs' roles is to foster students' intrinsic motivation to engage with these tasks, collaborating with them on identifying engagement issues and tailoring resources accordingly through, e.g., information, consultations, referrals and student-led activities. SSPs place themselves in the best position to fulfil this role when they recognise transition as a process of psychosocial maturation, the success of which is predicated on the quality of students' engagement.

In drawing upon the central precepts of SDT, we depict motivation as a multidimensional, contextual, and relational experience that influences student attainment and outcomes. On this basis, SDT provides significant contributions to contemporary discussions on HE motivation-enhancement, such as highlighting different drivers and impediments of student transition and engagement, supporting the motivational merits of staff-student relationships, conveying the importance of harnessing intrinsic motivation, and emphasising the need for developing strategic approaches to motivation enhancement. Here, we have put forward three motivational enhancement strategies that SSPs can employ to help foster students' engagement: Addressing competency needs by establishing realistic expectations between students and themselves; addressing relatedness needs by providing holistic engagement resources; and addressing autonomy needs by empowering students' decision-making capacities. Alongside fostering students' intrinsic motivation to engage, these strategies also help ensure that the student support relationship is informed, egalitarian, and constructive.

Given that SSPs are an established element of many HEIs, these recommendations need not create motivation supports *ab initio*. Instead, they can provide greater clarity and direction to existing motivation supports, augmenting the contribution SSPs already make to fostering students' transition into HE. As motivation is a personal experience exercised in degrees, HE staff should approach this process as working with students, firstly, to uncover attributes of their motivational substructure that warrant exploration and intervention, and secondly, to discover motivation-enhancing resources they can avail of, both personal and environmental. Central to achieving this goal is ensuring that SSPs possess a robust conceptual and experiential understanding of motivation, heightening their ability to recognise and respond to students' needs.

Notes

1. 'First-year' student refers primarily to students coming directly from second-level environments; however, it can also include students from other educational backgrounds, such as graduate entry and mature entry students.
2. This perspective primarily builds on Trenshaw et al.'s (2016) tripartite model of motivation in which motivation exists within 'situational', 'contextual' and 'global' spheres, and Kinsella's (2019). We use Kinsella's (2019) terms here.
3. A statement such as this conveys two different types of 'knowing', i.e., propositional knowing 'that I am' and existential knowing 'why I am'.
4. Hill (2013) outlines three broad motivational groupings that students occupy, namely autonomous motivation, controlled motivation, and amotivation.
5. UCD is currently undertaking the Higher Education Authority (HEA) funded 'Live Engagement and Attendance Project' (UCD LEAP) within the School of Veterinary Medicine. This project examines the feasibility of a Motivation Support Toolkit combining digital and interpersonal supports, used to assist staff in anticipating, identifying and responding to difficulties that students may experience during their transition into higher-level education.
6. This includes first-year and second-year students in the UCD School of Veterinary Medicine who are participating in UCD LEAP's research.
7. This point mirrors an argument in (Kinsella, 2017).

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