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The Student Services Organisation

Exploring students' motivations for engaging with student funding services

Short paper based upon research conducted as part of the AMOSSHE 20th birthday celebrations, 2013.

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Abstract

The objective of this study was to better understand the motivations behind students engaging with the University of Dundee Student Funding Unit, and the subjective impact they place these stimuli having on their academic performance. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs social theory was used as a scale and comparator. A two-prong approach was implemented in the form of interview-style focus groups and an e-Poll. Results obtained suggest students feel their financial situation may impact them being able to reach their fullest academic potential. These findings and approaches have helped develop an "off the shelf" tool-kit resource adaptable for Student Services to uncover motivations for student engagement.

Introduction/Background

Students' motivations for engaging with student funding services can, at first glance, be self-evident. Students have a need of support whether it is a simple query regarding funding regulations or when in crisis. However, as the recent economic climate has presented additional pressures to students in that the opportunity to obtain 'traditional' part-time employment is less accessible, many students seen at the Student Funding Unit, University of Dundee demonstrate that they are more regularly fending off crisis situations as opposed to requesting assistance for a single issue.

The professional ethos of the Student Funding Unit is based within that of Community Learning and Development (CLD) where we endeavour to support and empower students, and use the disbursement of the discretionary funds in this way, rather than offering a 'sticking plaster' solution. Embedded in our ethos is the use of a person-centred and solution focussed approach. A key theory utilised within CLD is Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Motivation and Personality, 1970), as this provides a framework from which professionals and individuals are able to gauge the extent to which fundamental human elements of life are being met and the impact this may have on their capacity to seek a solution to their issue. Over the past couple of years, this theory has been utilised more regularly when meeting with students approaching or in crisis. It is recognised that there are other theories of motivation such as the "content theory" of motivation proposed by Herzberg (The Motivation to Work, 2nd Ed. 1959) that suggests a two-step model to understanding motivation and satisfaction. This model has limited applications, with focus being on staff and managerial roles. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs offers a much broader application and, therefore, was used in this research study. A graphic representation of Maslow's theory is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Graphical representation of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.
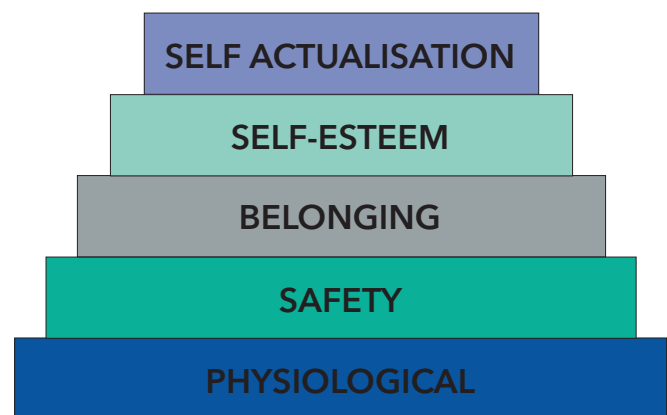
By utilising Maslow's theory, our motivation to conduct this research was two-fold: (i), to endeavour to learn more about our students' situations and the impact it could have on their ability to complete their education, and, (ii), to utilise the findings in improving our service delivery.

Methodology

Conscious of the sensitive nature of the research, ie, encouraging students to share their personal feelings and experiences, it was agreed that it would be conducted in conjunction with the annual departmental review process and using a two-prong approach: conducting focus groups and conducting an e-poll. An ethics form was generated for both methods and only students granting their consent for information to be used in this research.

Focus Groups

Students, who had indicated a willingness to be involved in focus groups, as identified within our generic feed-back form, were invited to attend. Three sessions were provided on different days of the week and at different times with a view to providing maximum opportunity for attendance. The focus groups were conducted in an informal session and the questions asked were constructed based on Maslow's theory per stratum and in correlation to the main themes of issues brought by students to the department, whilst ensuring questions were open enough to take into account individual situations. It was acknowledged that some participants may have felt more comfortable speaking in a small group, for example the sense of peer support, than they might responding to an electronic survey and vice-versa. However, responses to research of this structure can be subjective to the individual and this is accepted. Responses from the focus group have been summarised as a case-study.

e-Poll

Poll Everywhere e-polling facilities were used to conduct the online feedback. Students using the Student Funding Unit who had indicated their agreement to participate in annual feedback reviews were contacted to participate, along with an open invitation for any student who had interacted with Student Funding in the current academic year. Questions used in the focus groups were used in the e-Poll.
http://www.polleverywhere.com/survey/DRimmtWJc

Results

Focus group

A total of five students participated in the focus group sessions. All participants were female and represented a range of degree courses and different years of study. This was beneficial to the research as there was sufficient variety in the participants to provide a balance to the responses. Responses have, with the permission of the participants, been compiled as a case study, and summarised thus:

Case-study summary

Within stratum 1, the student indicated that significant compromise had to be given to their choice of food purchases and was without utility provision to provide sufficient heat and light; within the safety needs of stratum 2, the student indicated a greater sense of security living in student accommodation as opposed to general private accommodation; sense of belonging, stratum 3, was significant for the student in that their financial situation could not sustain sports clubs and social elements of her network, however concluded that as academic requirements increase, there is less peer pressure to socialise as there is a change of peer motivation; with regards to stratum 4, self-esteem, the student indicated that there was a sense of embarrassment about needing to use the student finance service and was something that they felt uncomfortable sharing with friends, although once they shared their problem they did feel better; and, within the final stratum of self-actualisation, stratum 5, the student felt that it was a difficult balance between finance, study and social activity and that obtaining a degree is largely influenced by an individual's ability to focus their energies to obtain the balance best suited to their individual needs.

e-Poll

A total of 55 students gave consent for the results of their survey to be used in this research. However, not every student answered each question; therefore n values have been included to indicate the number of responses per stratum. Respondents were only allowed to provide one answer per question. The frequencies of answers per question were observed and graphed. Answers to questions relating to each of the five strata were pooled per stratum and graphed.

Stratum 1: Physiological needs

Figure 2: Pooled responses for questions relating to stratum one physiological needs, (n=206).
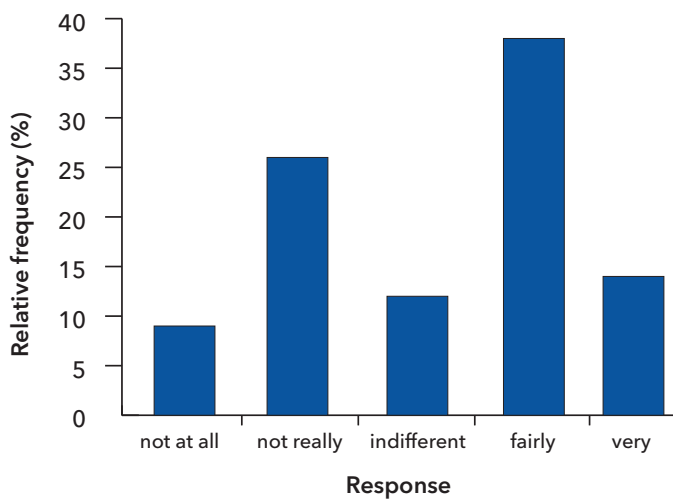

Figure 2 relates to physiological needs. This is the first level of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (see Figure 1) and includes needs such as food, water, shelter and warmth. This level of needs is concerned with the basic needs that the body requires to keep alive. It was referred to in our survey by asking participants how confident they were in having enough food, enough heat and how confident they were in their accommodation. Figure 2 is an amalgamation of the questions which related to this level of needs. Of the answers received referring to this level of need, the majority were decisive in that they were fairly or very confident in meeting these needs.

This would suggest that the majority of students who took part in this study were either fairly or very confident meeting their physiological needs. This supports our use of relating Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to students, as it would be expected that students would have to be able to meet these needs before meeting their needs at a higher level of the Hierarchy. It also suggests that most of the students that took part in this study were meeting their physiological needs (answering fairly or very); however, a significant proportion was struggling to meet basic needs.

Stratum 2: Safety needs

Figure 3 relates to the second stratum of needs according to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, known as safety needs. This level of need refers to the need an individual has for security, stability and freedom from fear. This level of need was referred to in our survey by asking participants how confident they were with their income. Participants were also asked how secure they felt about keeping themselves safe, the stability of their financial situation and the stability of their overall situation. Figure 3 is an amalgamation of all the answers relating to safety needs.

Of the answers we received related to this level of need, the majority of decisive responses were that they were fairly or very confident in meeting these needs. However, it is noted that a large number of responses indicated that they were not at all or not really confident in meeting these needs.

Figure 3: Pooled responses for questions relating to stratum two safety needs, (n=157).
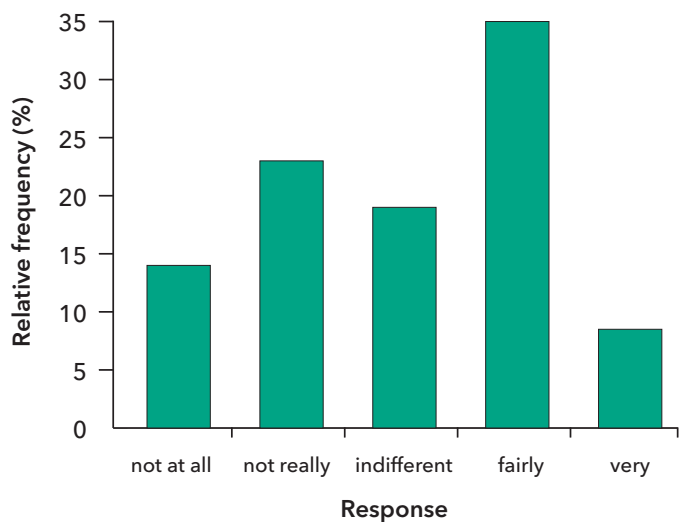
Stratum 3: Sense of belonging needs

Figure 4: Pooled responses for questions relating to stratum three sense of belonging needs, (n=53).
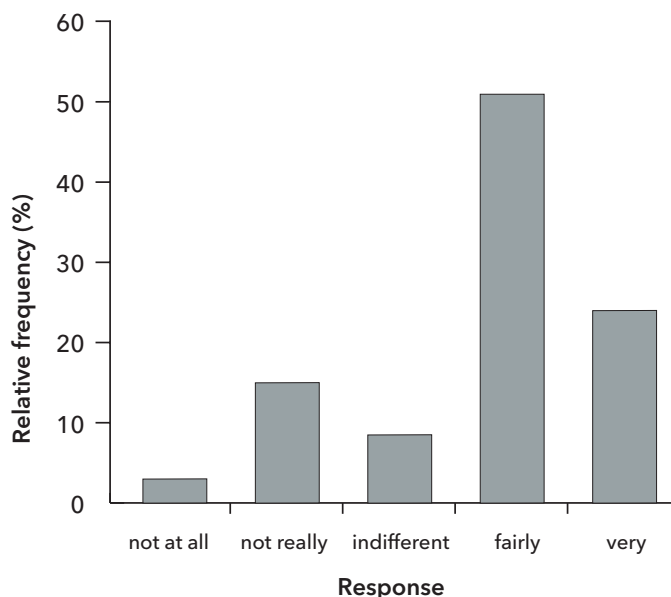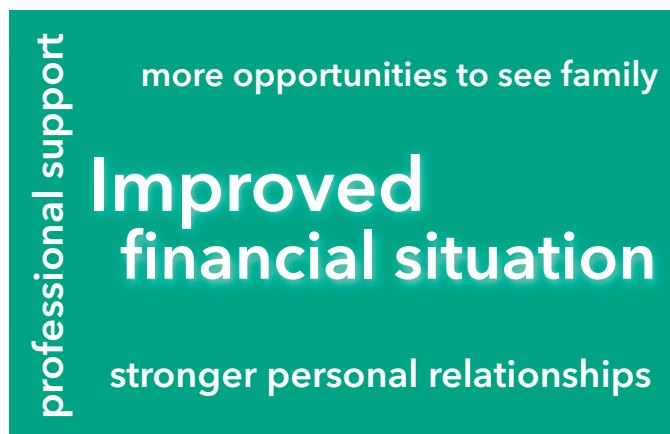

Figure 4 relates to the third stratum of needs, known as love and belonging needs. These were referred to in our survey by asking participants how secure they felt about their support network. We also asked participants an open question, by exploring what could improve their support network.

Of the decisive responses received regarding sense of belonging needs, it is suggestive that the majority of respondents were fairly or very confident in this stratum. This would suggest that students were more confident in meeting their love and belonging needs than their security needs or physiological needs.

Included in the questioning of this stratum, an open text box response was available to respondents to enable them to provide their thoughts or feelings on the general issue. These responses were grouped in themes as represented in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Word cloud representation of the key themes observed from the open text box answers.

professional support
more opportunities to see family
Improved financial situation
stronger personal relationships

However, those that felt that their needs were not met in this area explicitly mentioned finance or student funding as a concern. This could be interpreted to mean that finance is having an impact in these students being able to fully realise these needs.

Stratum 4: Self-esteem needs

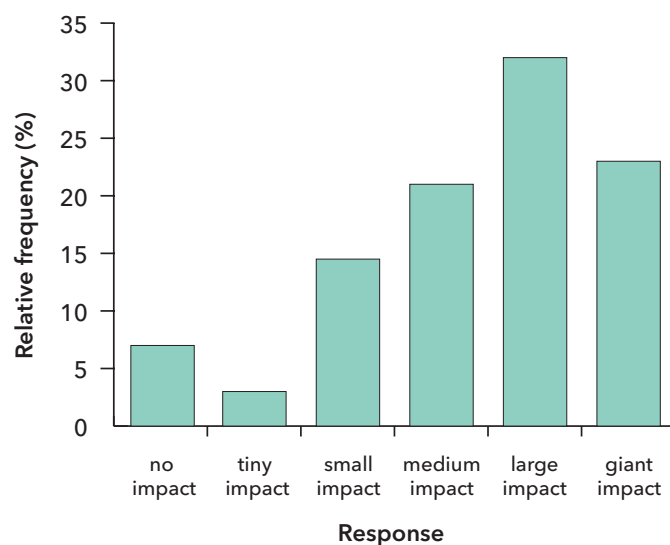Figure 6: Pooled responses for questions relating to stratum four self-esteem needs, (n=104).

Figure 6 refers to the next level according to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, know as the Esteem Needs. These needs centre on an individual's need for mastery, achievement, recognition and respect. This was referred to in our survey by asking participants how much of an impact their finances have on them being able to achieve good academic results. These needs were also being referred to when asking participants the question how much of an impact does it have on being thought of as a "good student."

Of the answers received relating to esteem needs, the vast majority of answers indicated that finance would have an impact on meeting these needs. This would suggest that students who took part in the research felt that meeting their esteem needs will be heavily influenced by their financial situation.

Stratum 5: Self-actualisation needs

Figure 7: Pooled responses for questions relating to stratum five self-actualisation needs, (n=53).
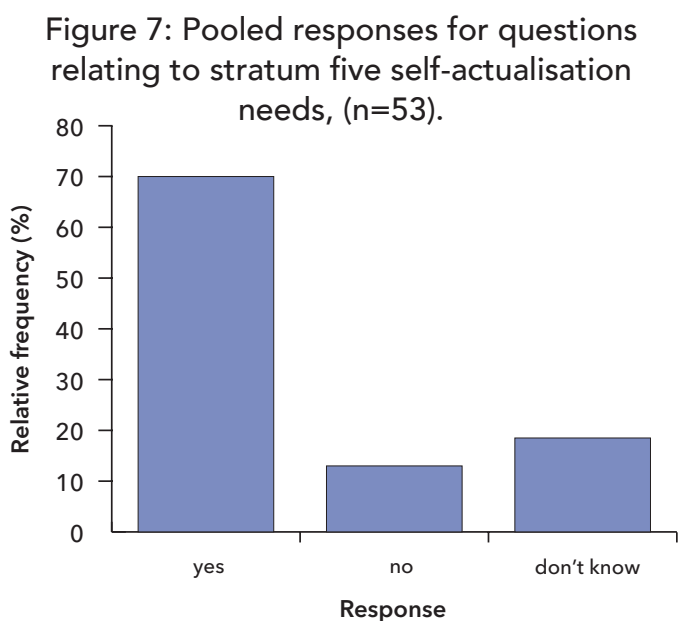

Figure 7 represents the highest level of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, known as "self-actualisation." Self-actualisation refers to an individual recognising their potential to their fullest extent. This was referred to in our survey by asking participants if they thought finances would have an impact on achieving the

level of degree to which they are able. The majority of respondents indicated that their current financial situation would have an impact upon obtaining the degree to which they consider themselves able. However, the question was limited in that it does not give an opportunity to determine whether this impact would be positive or negative. This would suggest that, according to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, financial circumstances will affect these students' ability to achieve self-actualisation.

Reflection on the research process

The research process has been positive for the department as it has provided an opportunity to capture a depth of data never achieved previously. E-poll software was embraced for the first time which proved to be very user-friendly. This software can enable engagement via text and social media which is something that will be utilised during the pre-arrival and arrival period for 2013 entrants/returners.

By using the focus groups and e-polls, this enabled us to extend our reach of engagement for feedback, as compared to previous years' attempts, and provided a supportive platform for individuals choosing to engage to make their choice of what met their personal preference.

Furthermore, engaging in research for a professional association has developed the skills of the team and provided an additional opportunity for reflection on our service delivery.

Critical Reflection and Conclusion

The intention of this research was to capture a 'snap-shot' of students' motivations for engaging with the student funding service at the University of Dundee. Therefore, whilst the questions generated were specific to Maslow's theory (1970), there was a heavy bias towards the subjectivity of responses as students were encouraged to provide responses based on their individual situation. Given the complexity of life in general and specifically finances, the responses would have been influenced by a large number of variables including the level of study, the type of course, climate, temperature, the frame of mind of the student at the time of responding, and any extrinsic factors which may have altered their motivation to respond.

Therefore, the generality of the research has limitations for extracting more specific information, however, the research results provide a depth of qualitative data on a general level which can serve as a platform for future research, for example comparing data per School or College, year of study, demographics and the widening participation agenda, eg, SMD40/SMD20.

In conclusion, the research findings correlated well with the experience of the team and served as an excellent opportunity to re-affirm the value of Maslow's theory (1970) within the context of student funding services.

Bibliography

http://www.businessballs.com/images/maslow_hierarchy.htm

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http://www.polleverywhere.com/survey/DRimmtWJc

Celebrating 20 years

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