PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACTS BETWEEN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS AND LECTURERS: A CASE OF ACCRA TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY'S DEPARTMENT OF MANAGEMENT AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

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ABSTRACT

The literature on psychological contracts in organisational contexts is quite large and keeps growing. However, when it comes to higher educational settings, there seems to be very little work done. A psychological contract is a set of unwritten mutual expectations, perceptions, and informal obligations between two parties. The study investigated the psychological contract between lecturers and students of the Department of Management and Public Administration of Accra Technical University, Ghana. Lecturers and Two groups of students, comprising first-year students, who had freshly been admitted into the university, and second-year students, who represented continuing students and five lecturers were used for the study. An exploratory study was used to provide qualitative empirical evidence on the ways in which these groups of students perceived their psychological contract. The results showed that students' learning enthusiasm was promoted by lecturers performing their desired behaviour, while students' learning initiative and efficiency is damaged when lecturers' desired behaviour is unfavourable. Also, the findings show that students' psychological contracts are quite different from that of employees in an organisation and a breach in their psychological contract may not necessarily affect performance negatively but may affect their propensity to make referrals for new admissions into the university and again, they may refuse to do voluntary work or lose interest in giving back to the school. The study concluded that most students tend to manage breaches in their psychological contract quite well due to their aspirations in securing good jobs after their time in the university. However, steps must be taken to meet them from time to time for discussions about some these pertinent issues.

Keywords: Psychological contract, Lecturers and Students, University, Social Exchange

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INTRODUCTION

Students enrol in various universities with high expectations of furthering their education and becoming important personalities in future. Those at the Department of Management and Public Administration of Accra Technical University are no exception. This, notwithstanding, they do encounter a number of exchanges during their stay on campus. While some of these expectations may be met, a lot remain unfulfilled.

Although it goes without saying that students have come into the university to study, and the university has the obligation to attain learning outcomes, there still remain those unwritten expectations from both sides which are unvoiced and yet play a big role in influencing the students' studies and the academics' propensity to teach. This is what is termed the psychological contract. As purported by Belcourt, Sherman, Bohlander, and Snell (2010), while the psychological contract is not a legal mandate, and, therefore, may not be strictly enforceable, depending on the underlying relationship between the two parties, one may hold the other to it as required by common law.

The current study seeks to find out if the findings of these previous studies can be generalised to students in this department or whether our students have differing ideas on their psychological contracts. The paper therefore determined that students have important education-related psychological contracts with various parties such as their fellow students, their lecturers and the university as a whole. The fact that one is a student should mean that that person is prepared to learn. However, the behaviour and failure rate of some students indicate that they either do not set their priorities right or something else may be the cause and, therefore, this study seeks to find out what mitigates students learning responsibilities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cao (2007) firstly described the definition, content and action mechanism of psychological contract between teachers and students and characteristics based on a series of empirical research during the teaching process of high school (Cao & Zhao, 2007; Cao, Dua, & Wang, 2007a).

Psychological contract between teachers and students refers to part of their expectations is recognized psychologically by each other the identity by means of communication and came into a series of consensus about the relevant rights, obligations and agreed between the two sides of the contact protocol. As the significant difference of relationship between teacher-student and employer-employee, Cao (2007) believed that the psychological contract between teachers and students had its own special characteristics such as mutually non-economic benefit, periodic formation-performance of agreement, adjusting contents on different stage and stretches of after graduation.

Cao and Zhao (2007) reported that student satisfaction was positively related to teachers' performance the degree of responsibility of psychological contract between teachers and students, which indicated that the subjects in the teaching to fulfill obligations and rights might intent both students and teachers (Cao, Dua, & Wang, 2007b).

There have been previous studies on student-related psychological contracts by Koskina (2013), Knapp (2017) among others. Another area of interest to the researchers is the methodology previously used by most researchers. Conway and Briner (2002) have opined that there is very little qualitative research in the field of psychological contract. Moreover, Coyle-Shapiro and Shore (2013) have also purported that the most appropriate methodology to examine the psychological contract is qualitative. This therefore is one of the gaps that

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this study seeks to fill. The psychological contract can be used as a powerful explanatory concept (Guest, 1988, p. 649) and it is no wonder that it has recently been used to understand and manage relationships in the education sector.

The main objective of this study is how the psychological contract (PC) of students and their lecturers can affect the teaching and learning experience.

In order to achieve this main objective, the following specific research objectives (ROs) were generated:

(1) RO1: To explore the expectations of first-year students of the Department of Management and Public Administration (DMPA) of their lecturers within the pedagogic relationship.
(2) RO2: To compare how these expectations differed from those of the second years.
(3) RO3: To explore the implications of differences between the PC of students and that of lecturers.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The research method used in the study was purely qualitative. Rousseau (2015) states that a "more descriptive qualitative assessment of individual psychological contracts is needed to better understand the potentially distinct perspectives". This study was conducted in Accra Technical University for the purpose of convenience.

The total number of elements in the population for this study is 30 respondents, including students and academics from the rank of lecturer upward. Given the qualitative nature of the study, a non-probability sampling approach was used. The sample was purposefully arrived at based on the following criteria:

(1) Fifteen (15) first-year students to get their expectations as fresh students in the university.
(2) Ten (10) second-year students to get their expectations as continuing students who have had some experience the university life.
(3) Five (5) academics from lecturer and above who are more experienced in academic work in the university.

The researcher believed that using these two groups of students would be useful as it enabled the comparison of their responses after they had experienced university for a number of months, at least and the lecturers would provide important experiences and observations they had made of various students over the years.

Validity and Reliability

All the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcribed interviews were not treated as text, but as reflections of realities of those being studied. Trustworthiness of the data was achieved through sampling the pilot interview schedule. Rich and thick descriptions of the interview data were created. This allows for readers to decide on the scientific merit of the data collected (Creswell, 2014). Another strategy to achieve validity was the use of member checking to determine the accuracy of the findings. The major findings were taken back to respondents to see how they felt about the work and whether they had further comments.

Thematic analysis was used as the focal data analysis method to examine the data obtained through in-depth interviews. This is a well-established and accepted way of analysing qualitative data (McCormack, 2000). Even though thematic analysis is open to a range of

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interpretations in the literature, this study adopted Braun and Clarke's (2006) typology of thematic analysis to structure the analysis and interpretation of the interviews. The interviews needed to tap into the various dimensions of psychosocial contract and psychological contract breach. With this in mind, the interviews were semi structured, with questions designed to elicit responses on how psychological contracts between students and academics had changed over time. Interview questions were linked to the research objectives for the study.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

What does it mean to be a student?

When first-year students were asked what it means to be a student, some of the responses were, "that they have to take their studies seriously and listen to every instruction by their lecturers and university authorities". Other students also indicated that "as students they have to do independent work by researching and making references from journals, articles etc." Some of the students also acknowledged that "*attendance and punctuality were important*" although there was an impression that first years may not have 100% attendance due to late admissions and getting acclimatised to their new environment.

On the part of the second years, the perceptions were a little different. The study discovered that over the period of one academic year, the psychological contract of continuing students differed remarkably as compared to their previous year. The role had grown in size and complexity. Something more was required to be a successful student, as illustrated in this quote from a second-year student: "*They must show more interest, have their own ideas and thoughts that they can build opinions off what they've learnt, be able to essentially argue the point a little bit more, and show that they're actually keen to learn*".

Diversity of the student body

When the researchers sought to identify the individual differences of students in terms of diversity, the study revealed that all the respondents were aware that as individuals, they had differences in their strengths and weaknesses. Insecurity was common across the first-year students and they expected their lecturers to understand them and how fast or slow they are at grasping a concept. "Not everyone is at the same level when they come to university; we've all got different knowledge and stuff". This recognition, that all students were not the same, brought about an expectation from some students that academics are obliged to acknowledge this and act accordingly.

Pre-Entry Expectations

Most students came into the university with the expectation that things were going to continue as they were in the secondary schools. The interviews revealed that they needed to be constantly reminded of deadlines in submitting assignments and other university activities but they realised that the relationship was very 'hands off,' and required that they be more independent.

Entry Experiences

Among the first years who were interviewed on their pre-entry experiences in the university, accessibility to lecturers was key, and so was the expectation to be "spoon-fed". Some of the respondents indicated that, "*they expect their role to be similar or better than that of our previous teachers who were more accessible*". However, some students commented on

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experiences they have had from some of their lecturers which suggested that "it's totally different".

In the interviews with the second-year students, there were more negative responses regarding the role of academics. For example, a second-year student described his lecturers as follows: "*They don't explain anything, they just say, 'check the answers', 'go to the library or internet' and expect you to go through fully, as, like, if you didn't understand the question, I'd expect them to, like, show you every single bit, as in the secondary school they would. Now they don't*".

Experiences of Learning

The main reason why students want a university degree is to learn in order to better their lives: "*I want to learn, I'm here to learn*" so that "*I can get a good degree*". On the part of the second years, all the respondents believed, learning could not be done without someone assisting them to understand it "*who should actually teach me something that I didn't know and they should have a greater knowledge in it so that I can benefit*".

The academics also indicated that learning is done in several forms and ways. According to them, students are usually grouped to do assignments because they want the weaker ones to learn from the experienced ones. For example, a lecturer stated that "*I give my students group assignments to enable a blend of ideas from them*"

Post-Entry Experiences

As students become accustomed to university and their new environment, the sense-making process helps them to further understand, interpret and respond to the pedagogical relationship. This process can help the new students bring their expectations in line with their experiences (Louis, 1980). It is during this period of sense-making and socialisation that students redefine what they expect from their academics in terms of the pedagogic relationship. Thus, students dynamically make sense of their psychological contract based upon their lived experiences (De Vos, De Stobbeleir, & Meganck, 2003).

The academics had the view that fresh students were green and always asked so many questions during lectures. "*I see most fresh students as not taking their studies serious in the first years*", said one lecturer. Another stated that "*most of the fresh students still approach learning like they were in the senior high schools*".

Also, lecturers saw fresh students as having very little experience about the teaching approach in the university: "*We expect students at this level to do their own research in the library before and after lectures*"

Differences in Students

Students also became aware of their relationships with other students as a means to improve their learning, "getting their [other students] opinions on something, it can broaden your mind" and how "we kind of teach each other". However, many of the student participants had been disappointed and annoyed with the learning relationships which had developed with other students especially during group assignments and saw their lack of effort as something which could ultimately impact upon their results.

The triad suggests that students also have implicit expectations of other students, as team members, just like they have of their academics, and feel obligated to them, reflecting a multiplicity of psychological contracts within the pedagogic relationship as depicted in Figure 1.

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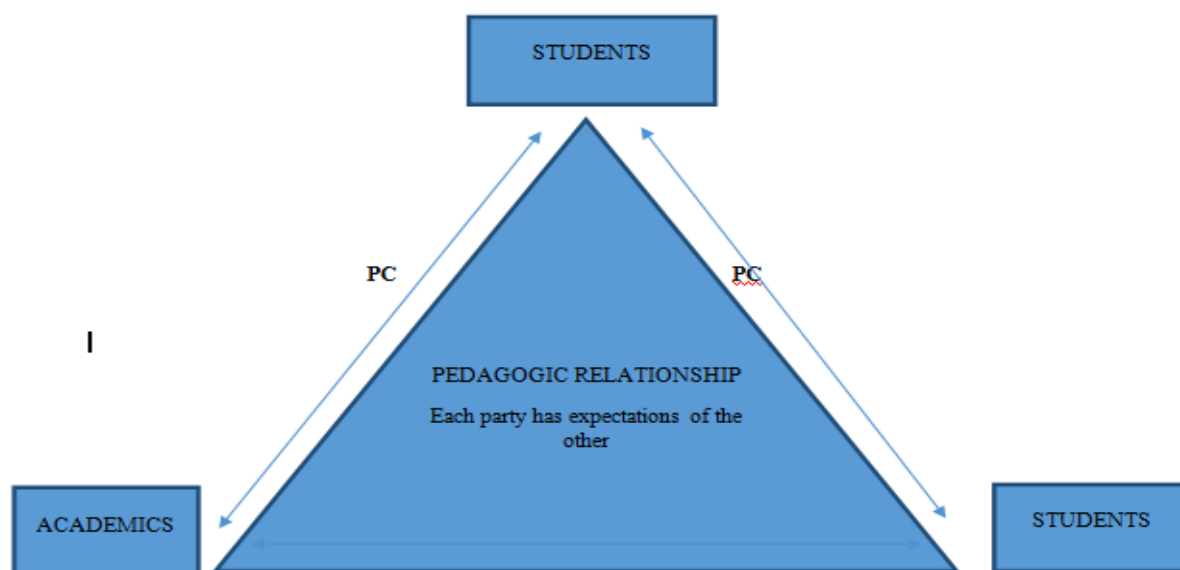of Management and Public Administration

Figure 1: Student-Academic Triad Psychological Contracts

Size

One theme which was mentioned extensively as a barrier to an effective pedagogic relationship was the size of the faculty and the numbers of students on a programme. Mass lectures made students feel "pretty lost" and reduced the opportunity for relationships to develop between the lecturer and the student. In the interview, other challenges like the inadequacy of lecture room furniture and lack of microphones were mentioned. Future research in this area is highly recommended.

Lecturers' expectations of students

Lecturers expressed frustrations about students' poor performance. In spite of all efforts to get them to do well, some still fail because they do not set their priorities right. They hardly find time to read their lecture notes during the course of the semester and were only interested in lecturers giving them areas that would possibly be in their examinations. Another issue raised by lecturers was students' absenteeism. "They must know that this is tertiary and therefore, nobody will 'spoon-feed' them on anything", said one lecturer. Some of them will make an appearance for the first few weeks and then disappear. They hardly submit assignments nor do they take part in group presentations. According to another lecturer, "Some students pass through these walls for three good years without as much as reading notices or even knowing the location of the university library".

Concerns for the Future

One of the reasons why a supportive and proactive lecturer was so important to students was because of their concerns for the future. Most of these students had high aspirations and expected to be top-notch in their fields. As such they are similar to those students that S. Bordia, Hobman, Restubog, and Bordia (2010) refer to as high in "conscientiousness" and have higher performance expectancies, requiring from others at least as much as they are willing to give to a process.

Students revealed that their successful completion of a good degree depends upon a lot of factors which make them want to work harder, knowing that they will need to get good jobs

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afterwards. However, they also expected academics to provide the toolkit to help them achieve.

Breach

The main antecedents cited by the participants for not meeting their expectations can be seen in Table 1. There is much consistency in the reasons across both the first and second-year students. It would appear that there are three main causes of breach; those occurring when students do not feel supported in their role by their lecturers, those when students do not feel that lecturers are performing as their role obligates them to. i.e. to be able to teach effectively, and those that occur when the student compares their deal unfavourably with that of other students elsewhere and perceive inequity.

Table 1: Causes and Outcomes of Breach

Causes of Breach	
First year	**Second year**
Incompetence as a teaching professional (including materials and engagement) Poor attendance (and punctuality) Lack of support/guidance Lack of feedback Lack of respect Lack of preparation	Not professional and make mistakes (linked to exams and assessment) Inconsistency in marking Lack of support/guidance (linked to assessment) Lack of feedback Lack of commitment and effort and being there When I have tried and you do not give support Other students' actions
Causes of Breach	
First year	**Second year**
Outcomes	
Behavioural Outcomes Do not Attend Less Effort	Do not Attend Less Effort
Emotional Outcomes Anxiety/Worry/Stress Annoyance Lost and Confused Frustration Disappointment What about the money?	Annoyance Zoned Out Frustration Disappointment Irritation Becomes a personal issue

Some students clearly had explicit expectations that support and guidance would be given due to the messages of "open door policy" they had received during orientation. There does appear also to be a discrepancy in what students perceived as being given support and what academics see as providing support. Students want things "explained", they want their "work checked" and want "formative feedback" and they "want the opportunity to discuss" their dilemmas.

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DISCUSSION

First year management and public administration students' expectations of their lecturers (RO1)

One of the outcomes of this study is that both students and lecturers have high and positive psychological contracts towards each other. However, the line of departure occurs because expectations are mostly unvoiced and, therefore, as Guest and Conway (2002) puts it; it is like two blindfolded people groping in the dark, trying to find each other. The students are, however, of the opinion that if they are offered more support and guidance, they would be motivated to put extra effort into their work.

How student expectations of the relationship change over the first year (RO2)

This study has also shown that students' and lecturers' expectations can, and do change. Students' perceptions of lecturers' obligations changed mainly due to the acquisition of socialisation knowledge, which influenced their perceptions of academics' obligations; this supports findings from employment PC literature (Jephcote, Salisbury, & Rees, 2008).

However, a remarkable discovery was that of the impact of assessment on student expectations and their subsequent experience. All of the students interviewed complained of how stressful examination periods were so it would help if lecturers could take steps to lessen their anxiety in preparation for assessment. This is something which develops as a concern over a period of time and can have a negative impact upon their experience. For example, when students were first asked what their expectations were, "general reading of drafts" had not been expected but preferred focused reading where they will be given specific areas to read for assessment.

The implications of differences between academics' and students' expectations (RO3)

The findings also presented some evidence to suggest that, for some students, when they first arrived at the university they become trapped in a luminal space (Land & Rattray, 2014), where they are met with new demands, such as the need to be more independent in their learning, to which they struggle to adapt. This is perhaps because academics and students perceive independent learning in different ways. with students seeing it as simply the need to be more organised and work unsupervised whilst academics perceive the need for students to be more proactive and in control of their learning responsibilities.

Breach and feelings of violation do occur for both academics and students with emotional and behavioural consequences. The consequences of breach on the academic's PC was mitigated by their ideological commitments to their professional status and mainly resulted in dissatisfaction and disappointment, supporting Rolfe's (2002) findings.

Students were aware of, and took into consideration, mitigating factors which perhaps prevented academics from meeting their expectations, for example. the size of lectures and the number of students in group presentations. This notwithstanding, all students clearly implied that it was their relationship with the academics which impacted upon their university experiences the most. This is in agreement with Koskina (2013), who found that students regarded academics as the key party in the exchange relationship.

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CONCLUSION

It is concluded that some students perceived they had few expectations when they first got admitted into the university concerning their relationship with lecturers; however, they had implicit expectations, as demonstrated in their responses in the interviews, for example, about the quality of their lecture halls, washrooms, general ambiance and other logistics which will make their studies more comfortable than what they experienced in secondary school. As fresh students, their experiences inform their expectations of the new pedagogic relationship and it is through this cognitive schema that some expectations are met and/or unmet. The array of these met/unmet expectations may be wide depending on their significance (intensity) to the student. However, continuing students are able to assess and reflect upon whether their expectations have been met or breached. Breach of their expectations can lead to negative emotional reactions and a negative experience, although the extent of the negative experience depends upon how the academic subsequently reacts and the state of the relationship which existed between them. Also, the findings show that students' psychological contracts are quite different from that of employees in an organisation. A breach in their psychological contract may not necessarily affect their academic performance negatively but may affect their propensity to make referrals for new admissions into the university. Some of them even expressed that they "have had enough" and would like to do their "top-up" elsewhere. Again, they may refuse to do voluntary work as in doing their national service in the university or, altogether, lose interest in giving back to the university. The overarching implication of these findings is that most students tend to manage their psychological contract based on the understanding that it is their life and they must make the best of it in order to get a good job after their studies at the university. Finally, this study concludes that concerning the student-lecturer relationship, regardless of their geographical locations, students have similar expectations of their academics and this is consistent with previous research by Koskina (2013).

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is important to understand what students expect from the university as a whole, and this provides useful evidence for informing institutional policies, procedures and curriculum planning.

It is recommended that academics extend more support and guidance to students by providing them with knowledge and information to help them improve on their academic performance.

This is also consistent with the findings of Koskina (2013), who recommended that existing outreach programmes within the university be informed by the result of the study to provide students with experience and information about guidance, assessment and the level of support to be anticipated.

The findings suggest that, as the content of the exchange with the academic becomes more known to students, expectations change and there is a need, therefore, for further activities where expectations of students and academics at these different time periods can be shared so that implicit expectations can become more explicit.

Another recommendation is to have Teaching Assistants in the department, who would relate more closely to the students in the event that lecturers may be unavailable.
Since students' PC is bound to change as they progress, it is recommended that academics be more flexible to understand such occurrences.

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It would be very necessary to provide opportunities for students and academics to meet from time to time and discuss their development needs in delivering their respective curricula so that students are able to make a smooth transition into the university and gain the most of their learning experiences.

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