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The House system: Evaluating its role in the experience of business students

Marilena Antoniadou

Faculty of Business & Law, department of Management, Manchester Metropolitan university, Manchester, uK

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a case study of students' experiences of the House system, an innovative scheme introduced for business students, aiming to enhance student experience. The findings are based on a survey of 350 students and 4 group interviews. Analysis of the findings, both statistical and qualitative, indicated perceived clear benefits for the House system, including making friendships, being mentored by supportive staff and skills development. However, they also perceived disadvantages, particularly with regard to unawareness of the system, and limited extra-curriculum and employability activities. The paper concludes that active participation in the House system has a potentially useful role in creating a meaningful and collaborative environment amongst students and staff.

KEYWORDS

student experience; social support; higher education; house system

Introduction

Universities are increasingly seen as a component in a consumer society, and degrees as products to be consumed (Constanti & Gibbs, 2004; Ritzer, 1999). In the light of a move to mass higher education (HE), a consequential need to enhance the support that undergraduate students receive in their overall experience is essential (Buultjens & Robinson, 2011; King, Morison, Reed, & Stachow, 1999; Oldfield & Baron, 2000).

Student experience appears as a wide-ranging term in the literature, which makes it difficult to define it as simply one *thing*. It is largely agreed that the academic aspects of teaching, learning and assessment, together with the perceived emotional and developmental aspects of student life are parts of it (Benckendorff, Ruhanen, & Scott, 2009; Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell, & McCune, 2008; Palmer, O’Kane, & Owens, 2009). The 1994 Group of Universities (2007) suggested that key areas of the student experience are namely teaching, support and facilities and employability which are developed both inside the academic curriculum and through engagement in extra-curricular activities. In seeking to develop an inventory of the determinants influencing student experience based on themes from the literature, Jones (2010) outlined seven priority areas:

(1) Student expectations

Communicating with students effectively about university and student life, from first contact through to becoming alumni, is essential in assisting them with settling in and meeting their expectations. Good service provision and the devotion of attention to students ascertain their expectations, without adopting a marketing approach, in which the customer is always right (Scott, 1999).

CONTACT Marilena antoniadou ✉ m.antoniadou@mmu.ac.uk

(2) Transition

The development of networks from pre-entry to joining the course and beyond has more far-reaching implications than merely that of making friends (Kantanis, 2000). Creating a sense of belonging on campus, as a feeling of fit in and inclusion within the wider educational environment is vital for all periods of the student journey (Hockings, Cooke, & Bowl, 2007; Ramsden, 2008).

(3) Peers

Socialisation with more experienced peers can serve as a source of support, which enhances newcomers’ sense of belonging and involvement (Allen, McManus, & Russell, 1999). Peer networks contribute to enhanced academic achievement and self-motivation, as well as to greater enjoyment of university life (Menzies & Baron, 2014; Peat, dalziel, & Grant, 2001).

(4) Other Stakeholders

The influence of family, culture and the media is important in influencing students’ perceptions about careers, which shows significant potential application to the university commitment in careers counselling and to the employability skills curriculum. Aspirations of employability can be a product of societal expectations, which establishes that students with a higher level of social capital expect better employment after graduation (Rothwell, Herbert, & Rothwell, 2008).

(5) The Programme

Embedded in this category is the role of academics, as the facilitators of learning and teaching (Thomas, 2002). Students present higher levels of engagement and learning when academics use active and collaborative learning techniques, interact with students, support them in personal and academic issues, and challenge them academically (Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005).

(6) Extracurricular activity

Out-of-class events act as a mechanism for students’ learning and development (Kuh, 1995). They also result to beneficial outcomes, such as critical thinking, relational and organisational skills, with implications on their academic, social and intellectual performance (Terenzini, Pascarella, & Blimling, 1996).

(7) Employability

In the light of the introduction of tuition fees in England, predictions show a shift in student choice towards employability-focused programmes (Foskett, Roberts, & Maringe, 2006). Universities, then, have a major role in influencing students' impressions about their careers by seeking to provide them with a realistic portrayal of their type of profession (Byrne & Willis, 2005).

The House system

Based on the need to enhance the students experience and to provide a sense of belonging to its students, the Manchester Metropolitan University introduced the *House system* in 2012 within its biggest programme, Business Management. The rationale for this social-support system derived from the programme's considerable and continuously growing size. The increasingly competitive market amongst institutions has generated issues of student experience, satisfaction and retention (King et al., 1999; Oldfield & Baron, 2000), which the Manchester Metropolitan University aimed to address, as one of the Universities that has seen a rapid growth in its student numbers, becoming one of the UK's most popular university - based on its UCAS applications. In the context of rapid expansion, five Manchester-themed Houses, Acresfield, Addy, Castlefield, Petersfield and Turing act as social groups within the Business degree aimed at placing their students at the social epicentre of university life and creating the conditions for enhancing their sense-of-belonging within the programme (Figure 1). Students enjoy themed-identification symbols, social and academic activities, whilst the House tutors are committed to ensure that the programme provides the broadest possible range of in-class and out-of-class services to their designated cohort of students (Table 1).



Figure 1. the house system.

Table 1. house/house tutors' aims.

Student experience area	House tutor responsibilities
student expectations	day-to-day responsibility for the management of a student cohort Provides information on rights, treatment, obligations, regulations and procedures Ensures that student timetables are clearly communicated to students. Each house differs in colours and themes to give a sense of identity/belonging
transition	Leads induction organises workshops to develop friendships and team bonding Personal tutors support
the programme	Ensures the programme runs smoothly and handles problems and conflicts Works with the coordinator on the further development of the programme conveys news, changes and other information about the programme Maintains frequent communication with students, including feedback on actions taken Monitors student progress
other stakeholders	organises visit lectures inviting parents and the media allows opportunities for parents/media to meet the Programme team
Peers	recruits/liases with student representatives allows contacts with alumni organises house events to allow meetings with students from other Years
Extracurricular activities	organises events and business competitions outside teaching hours
Employability and skills development	Each house has an alumnus, who visits and mentors the students creates opportunities for students to develop their employability/academic skills

Two years after the system's launch, there was no attempt to assess its impact on the student experience. To address this, the current study aimed to evaluate the House system in relation to student experience, from the students' perspective. The specific objectives were: (i) to explore students' levels of awareness of the House system, (ii) to explore students' views in relation to student experience aspects and (iii) to identify benefits and limitations within the House system.

Phase 1

A web questionnaire, utilising Qualtrics, was designed and circulated via email with a hyperlink to the actual questionnaire. The target population, defined as the total group of people from whom the researcher can obtain information that would meet the research objectives (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007), comprised all the first and second-year students registered in the Business Management Programme (N=775). First and second-year students were exclusively chosen for the study, because they have had the opportunity to engage with the House system since the very start of their studies (2012 onwards), whilst in the final year the system was not applied. The questionnaire consisted of 14 questions

Table 2. respondents demographic mix.

Year of study	First Year	58.7%
	second Year	41.3%
gender	Male	49.3%
	Female	50.7%
nationality	uK	82.7%
	Eu (non-uK0	14.7%
	International (non-Eu)	2.7%
Mode of studies	Full-time	60%
	Placement ^a	38.7%
	Exchange	1.3%

^astudents whose programme of study includes a year in industry.

including multiple choice, matrix and close-ended. The questions were influenced by the dimensions of the student experience as identified in the literature (e.g. Group 1994, 2007; Jones, 2010). Examples of these dimensions involved students' awareness of the House system, perceptions about transition from college/school, learning and teaching, opportunities for employability enhancement, academic and personal support, best practices and limitations of the system. The questions on awareness of the House system were preceded by a series of demographic questions that would allow the population to be segmented. The invitation email highlighted the voluntary participation in the survey, as well as the anonymity and confidentiality of the respondents. Prospective respondents were informed about the study's purpose in the invitation email, which explained that the results would be used in a project aiming at improving the student experience within the Programme. The survey results were recorded in Excel and transferred to SPSS for statistical analysis. The development, administration of the survey and data analysis took place from June to december 2014.

Results and commentary

Of the 775 students who received the invitation, 350 responded, representing a 45% response rate (Table 2).

When students were asked whether they were familiar with the House system, nearly half of the students (48%) stated that they were familiar, with 41.33% being unfamiliar or highly unfamiliar (Figure 2).

High familiarity was not evident, indicating that although students may know the House system, they were not acquainted with what it actually does. In terms of whether their House had given them a sense of belonging during their studies, 44% disagreed with the statement, with 30.67% of them stating their agreement (Figure 3).

Considering that, nearly half of the respondents stated that they were familiar with the system, the fact that only 31% felt that their House gave them a sense of belonging, and 25.3% were undecided, early indicates concerns about the students' levels of familiarity and belongingness.

The most helpful aspects (list of the top-five aspects with the highest average mean value) were those associated with the Programme, such as academic skills development, active and challenging teaching and the contribution of the House tutors on issues that students raised (Table 3).

These aspects come in alignment with the Government's White Paper (Higher Education Funding Council for England [HEFCE], 2003) and with the recent Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) findings (Buckley, Soilemetzidis, & Hillman, 2015) that the most important aspect of the academic service is the teaching ability of staff and their subject expertise. The aspects that students found the least helpful (list of the five aspects with the lowest average mean value), were associated with extracurricular activities, employability and networking.

With regard to students' perceptions of whether their House had contributed to them being happy at university, 36% seemed undecided, in comparison to 32% who stated an agreement (13.33% agree and 18.67% tend to agree) (Figure 4).

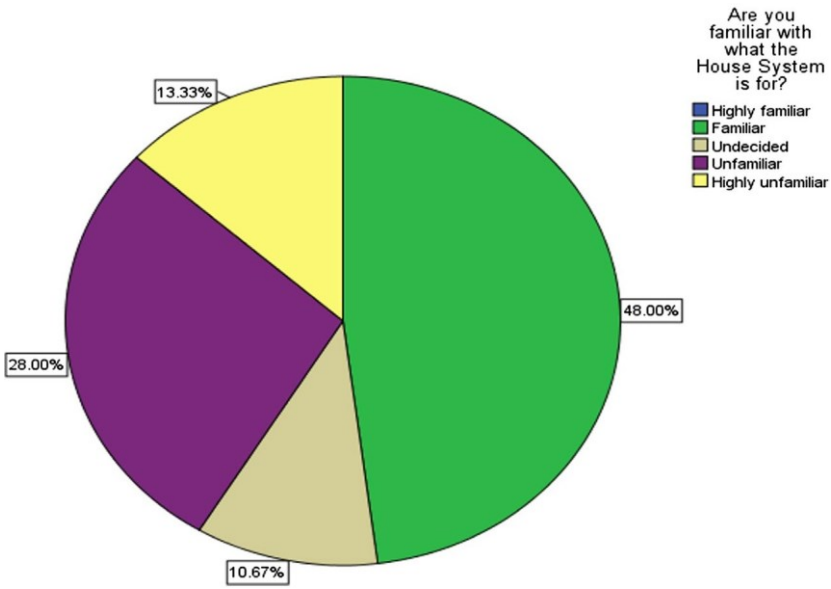


Figure 2. students' familiarity with the house system.

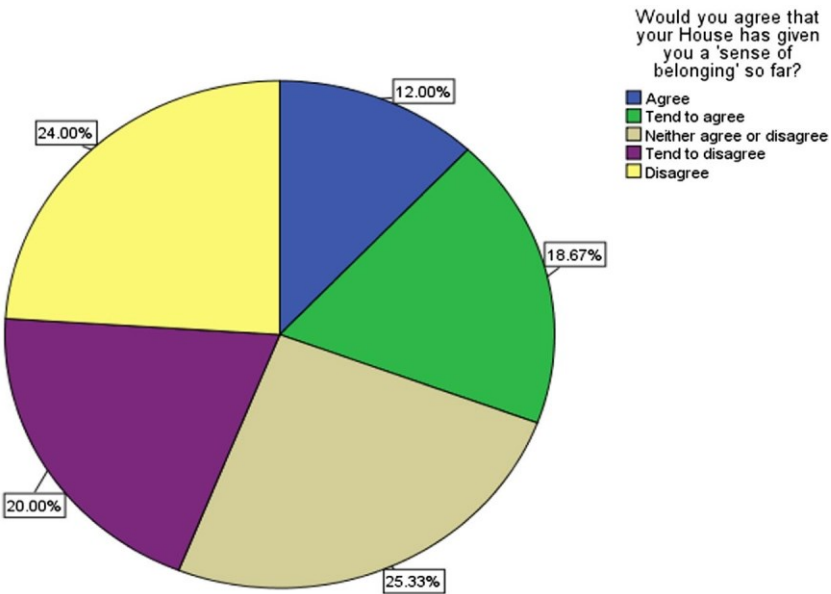


Figure 3. student's views on their house's sense of belonging'.

Table 3. Most and least helpful aspects of the house system.

Ranking	Most helpful	least helpful
1	academic skills development	Extracurricular activities
2	active and challenging teaching	Employability/career development
3	action taken by house tutor on issues that were raised	develop peer-networks
4	Programme information advice	support on transition from school/college
5	Induction	Meeting expectations as a student

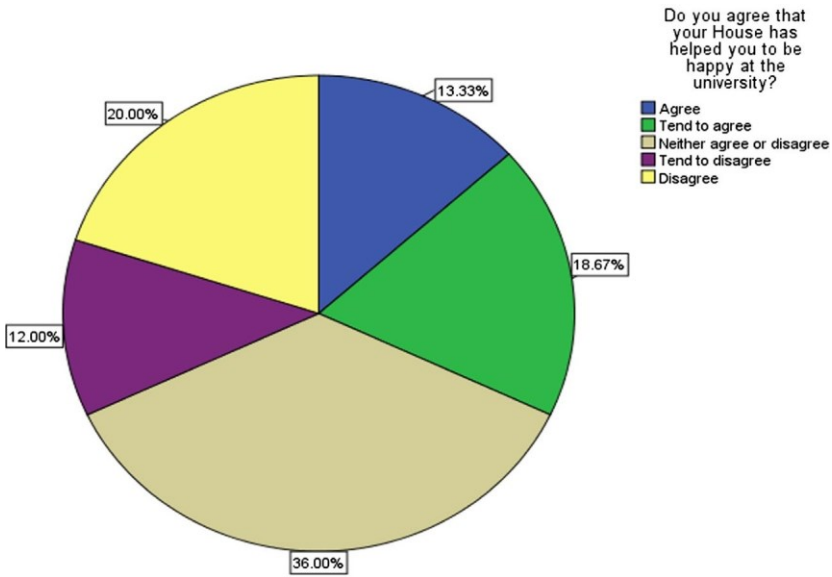


Figure 4. students' views on their house's help in being happy at university.

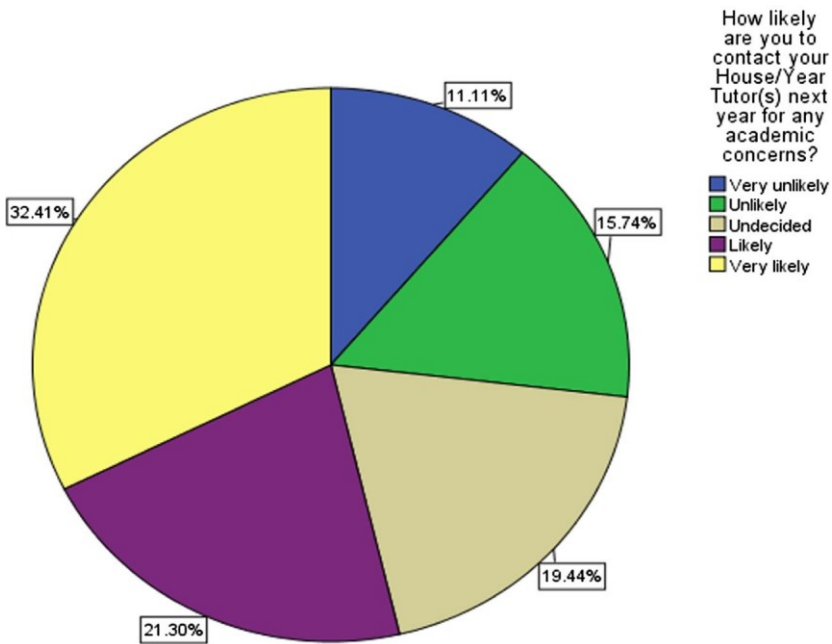


Figure 5. Likelihood of contacting house tutors for personal concerns.

The students showed strong likeliness (53.71%) to contact their House tutors for personal concerns and academic concerns (56%) in the future, confirming research on the emphasis students give in having frequent meetings with their tutors as a factor that helps them be satisfied at university (Malik, 2000; Owen, 2002) (Figures 5 and 6).

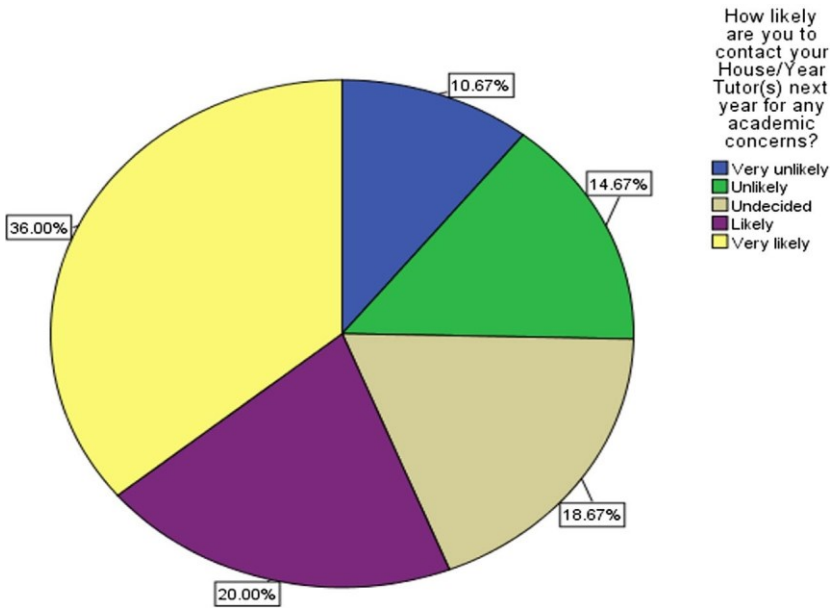


Figure 6. Likelihood of contacting house tutors for academic concerns.

Table 4. Best and worst aspects of the house system.

Ranking	Best	Worst
1	Making friends with other Business students	networking
2	support on personal/academic issues from my house tutor(s)	out-of-class events
3	Induction	opportunities for employability enhancement
4	opportunities for skill boosting sessions	Feeling that I had someone to contact for advice
5	Expectations, problems and concerns were managed appropriately	Expectations, problems and conflict were appropriately managed

This also comes in alignment with the Higher Education Quality Council for England (Higher Education Quality Council [HEQC], 1996) that stressed the importance of a strong student support system.

The best things about the House system were those associated with making friends, the support they receive from their House tutors on personal and academic issues, and induction (Table 4).

Students confirmed that establishing friendships and the quality of relationships with their tutors are two of the most important aspects that students value as central for their overall experience (Thomas, 2002; Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). The aspects that the students rated as being the worst were again the out-of-class events, networking and opportunities for employability.

A further analysis was undertaken to identify different segments of the respondent population. With regard to the students' views studying at different levels, the first-year students appeared slightly more familiar with the House system, and more likely to agree that their House had given them a sense of belonging (compared to mean between the levels of studies). Whilst acknowledging that the majority of the respondents were first-year students, results revealed differences in the things students found as helpful. Although first-year students ranked 'active and challenging teaching' as the most helpful aspect, it dropped to sixth in the helpfulness rankings of second-year students (Table 5).

Moreover, 'academic advice and support', was ranked second by first-year students, but it was the seventh most helpful aspect for second-year students. Clearly, the helpfulness of the tutors on academic matters was evaluated differently, confirming that first-year students rely more on the quality of teaching for their personal success and that an academic advisor who interacts with them and tells them

Table 5. Most helpful aspects for First and second Year.

Ranking	Year 1	Year 2
1	active and challenging teaching	academic skills development
2	academic advice and support	action taken by house tutor
3	academic skills development	Programme information advice
4	action taken by house tutor	Employability/career development
5	Programme information advice	Induction
6	Induction	active and challenging teaching
7	support on transition from school/college	academic advice and support
8	develop peer-networks	Extracurricular activities
9	Employability and career development	develop peer-networks
10	Extracurricular activities	support on transition from school/college

Table 6. Best aspects for First and second Year students.

Ranking	Year 1	Year 2
1	Making friends with other Business students	Making friends with other Business students
2	support on personal and academic issues from house tutor(s)	support on personal/academic issues from house tutor(s)
3	Induction	opportunities for skill-boosting sessions
4	opportunities for skill-boosting sessions	Induction
5	Expectations, problems and concerns were managed appropriately	opportunities for employability enhancement
6	security feeling of having someone to contact for advice	networking
7	opportunities for employability enhancement	Expectations, problems and concerns were managed appropriately
8	active and collaborative learning	security feeling of having someone to contact for advice
9	networking	active and collaborative learning
10	out-of-class events	out-of-class events

exactly what to do is more important (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Another inconsistency occurred in the 'employability and career development' aspect, which was ranked as the fourth most helpful aspect for second-year students, but was ranked as the ninth most helpful area for first-years. This could perhaps be explained by the fact that second-year students seek for employability support more rigorously as they are closer to a placement year or to employment. Contrary, academic-skills development, the actions taken by House tutors, and programme advice appeared as being helpful in both years. Again, areas of concern appeared the extracurricular activities and peer-networks development, as these were low ranked as being helpful. In terms of the best and worst things of the House system, both years agreed on almost all categories (Table 6).

With regards to mode of study, analysis did not show significant differences in the levels of awareness and perceptions. The rankings of the most helpful aspects showed that although the full-time students ranked 'Induction' as the fourth most helpful aspect, it was ranked seventh for the Placement students, indicating that Placement students, whose academic life lasts longer, have more expectations from orientation on campus life. In consistent with the overall population, Placement students also stated that developing friendships is the best thing of the House system, and poor networking the worst.

differences were not found between students' genders. The data were next segmented based on student nationality. Whilst recognising that the majority of the respondents were UK students, the levels of familiarity and rankings were analogous to the rankings for EU and international students.

Phase 2

From the survey, a number of inconsistencies were identified, which required further clarifications. In particular, first-year students ranked 'active and challenging teaching' as the most helpful aspect of the system, whilst second-years ranked it sixth. Moreover, second-years considered 'employability and career development' as more helpful than first-years, although it was pointed by both levels that employability

opportunities were poor. The inconsistent responses on the areas of teaching and employability gave cause for qualitative research to clarify the students' perspectives.

Four focus group interviews, two from each year informed the study. Emails were sent to all business students, inviting them to attend a voluntary discussion about their perceptions of the House system. Ultimately, 24 students agreed to attend the interviews, 10 from first year and 14 from second year. Each group from first year comprised of five students, and each group from second year comprised of seven students. Unstructured open-ended questions were used providing with an opportunity to follow up the comments of and to hear issues from individuals with similar experiences in an interactive manner, which could not emerge from the questionnaire (Liamputtong, 2011). Participants were given the option to withdraw and the results were made available for their further scrutiny to ensure the meanings of the discussions were commonly understood. A qualitative descriptive analysis was used to find common themes that appeared within the focus groups (Goodyear, Barela, Jewiss, & Usinger, 2014).

Results from focus groups

The interviews focused on asking the students to explain the role that their House had on each of the student experience categories examined in the survey, to clarify inconsistencies and to provide recommendations of improvement. In terms of familiarity with the House system, students gave examples of experiences they had encountered about lack of awareness of which House they belong. A first-year student commented: 'I know who my House tutor is but it should be clearer as to what exactly is here for'. Similarly, a second-year student argued that 'we would like to understand why it's introduced and what it offers. It should be more like Hogwarts sense of belonging and making our house the best!'

There was consensus amongst participants about the decisive role of their House tutor in signposting, supporting and in facilitating transition. They also appreciated the degree of contact with them, commenting their enthusiastic and supportive nature. Most students thought that their House created a friendly environment, where it is easier to make friends and to feel that they have someone to rely on.

The interviews attempted to clarify the inconsistencies in relation to teaching. First-year students commented that they enjoyed their in-class experience, which allowed them to interact during stimulating activities, due to being mentored by enthusiastic staff. However, second-years referred to particular academics whose quality of teaching was not perceived as engaging. They agreed that lectures without the opportunity for interaction were disliked, something that did not occur in their first year. One second-year student said that 'I now appreciate how helpful my tutors were last year. It's ridiculous to have a second lecture in my tutorials. It's a complete waste of my time'. The specific student argued that he had to turn to his House tutor and request to be removed to another tutorial group for a particular unit, with a more enthusiastic-perceived tutor. Other second-year students shared the perception that their House tutors' intervention in ensuring they receive challenging teaching was significant in their studies.

In responding to the recommendations they would suggest to improve the House system, all students referred to the improvement of employability and of extra-curricular activities that would help them develop their academic and personal skills. Particularly, a second-year student commented 'more house vs house activities would give more opportunities to network'.

Taking the house system forward

The study successfully fulfilled its objectives, namely to explore students' familiarity of the House system and perceptions in relation to student experience factors. The results gave an exceptionally strong basis for further monitoring the progress of this initiative, which helps in generating improvements for the next student cohorts.

Whilst evaluations of the experiences were generally positive, findings showed inadequate levels of awareness and familiarity of the House system, indicating the urgent need to communicate its role. The aspects considered as the most helpful were related to the areas of skill development, House tutors' support, induction and programme information. The students' engagement with their House tutors in

critical times was also evidenced by their willingness to contact them again for any concerns, showing the respondents were essentially happy with the support they received. These findings are encouraging considering that teaching and learning, relationships with staff and university support services are key factors that influence student satisfaction and retention (Buckley et al., 2015; Thomas, 2002; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). In an increasingly consumerist educational culture, where universities prioritise customer care for students (Scott, 1999), the House system appears as an effective means of ensuring that students are well-guided and supported.

noteworthy was the consistency amongst all respondents to rank the creation of friendships with other students as the best thing about their House, confirming the importance of developing social lives at university and creating course relationships in the student experience (Allen et al., 1999; Menzies & Baron, 2014; Titus, 2004; Willcoxson, Cotter, & Joy, 2011).

The aspects of concern were those related to employability, extracurricular activities, and students' expectations about university life, which were rated as the least helpful in the House system. In line with predictions that employability is increasingly important for students in preparing for the world of work (Foskett et al., 2006), students' recommendations were solely around out-of-class events, in-House competitions, and more help from their tutors on employability development.

The antithetic views in the two years' responses on the quality of teaching has practical implications for making better use of sharing best practice and using people from strongly performing subject areas to support others. Focusing on the quality of the educational experience, as well as ensuring the possession of teaching qualifications amongst all lecturers - as per recent calls (Buckley et al., 2015), are priority action points that could improve the consistency of teaching in all levels and ensure the active engagement of students in the classroom.

Conclusions

This paper focused on the evaluation of a scheme aiming to enhance the student experience, based on the perceptions of students from business studies. nevertheless, the study recognises that further research comparing the experiences and perceptions of a broader sample of undergraduate students, who were not involved in the House system, and exploring the views of other stakeholders (e.g. senior management, House tutors), can provide a more holistic evaluation of the system.

This study's contribution lies to the evaluation of innovative strategies in large courses, aiming to create the conditions for improving the student experience and are rare in the educational literature. It is argued that such strategies can have the potential to influence the students' feelings of identity and belonging, which can later be reflected via the national Student Survey. Given that now Universities compete for students both nationally and internationally, the retention and satisfaction of the students appears more urgent than ever. This can be achieved if all the aspects included in the student experience are delivered to a suitable standard. The students, as the sole judges of whether this has been achieved, should be encouraged to participate in feedback surveys on a regular basis to allow Universities to adapt accordingly.

Disclosure statement

no potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Marilena Antoniadou is a senior lecturer in Management, at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) Faculty of Business and Law. She studied her MA, MRes and PhD in Organisational Behaviour at MMU and specialises in the role of discrete emotions and emotional events in the workplace and particularly in the context of academia. Her research interests are also within the field of Higher Education. She is a Fellow of Higher Education Academy and an Academic Member of the CIPd.

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