Understanding students' cynicism and engagement in a Ghanaian university

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Abstract
Students' expectations about university life and the impact of their unmet expectations on the university experience are exceedingly complex phenomena in much of today's higher education enterprise. Given the enormous challenges universities face as the number of students increases, university management and administrators require information to shape students' expectations about various aspects of their university's education experience. This study explored Student Cynicism (SC) and its relationship with Student Engagement (SE) at the University for Development Studies (UDS). We collected valid data from 435 undergraduate students enrolled in health science and non-health science programmes and analysed them using non-parametric test techniques. The results indicate that SC and SE are inversely related. Also, students studying health science-related programmes were found to be more cynical than their non-health science counterparts. Furthermore, overall cynicism was higher among students in Level 300 than in other year groups. The practical implications of the study, its limitations, and directions for future research are discussed.

Keywords: Student Cynicism, Student Engagement, Relation, Correlate

Introduction

It is self-evident in the higher education enterprise that students form a perspective and expectations of the university's environment from the start. Students' high expectations about the quality of university life experience may have been influenced by the rising expense of higher education, which demands students to pay more, institutional bragging and hyperbolic publicity, and competition for dominance among universities. Thus, the impact of these expectations on students and how universities respond to and shape them have become increasingly important for the future well-being of both students and universities (Coaldrake, 2001). For some researchers, the impact of these expectations can have dire consequences, such as attrition, burnout, and low academic performance (Wei et al., 2015a; Tinto, 1987). In furtherance of our understanding of the impact and consequences of students' unmet expectations, we examined the dimensions of Student Cynicism (SC) and its relationship with Student Engagement (SE) at the University for Development Studies (UDS) in Tamale, Ghana. The application and research on SC and SE behaviour have broadened beyond the scope of traditional industrial and organisational milieu to include a wide range of groups, actors and situations (Schaufeli et al., 2002a; Wei et al., 2015b; Schaufeli et al., 2016).

Literature Review

Generally, approaches to the study of cynicism vary across researchers and disciplines. The work of Cook and Medley (1954), Abraham (2000), and Hochwarter et al., (2004), for example, conceptualised cynicism as an innate personality trait and a general human behavioural outlook. Alternatively, other researchers (Anderson, 1996; Anderson and Bateman, 1997; Bedeian, 2007; Mirvis & Kanter, 1991) have conceptualised cynicism as a situationally-determined characteristic of human behaviour aimed at organisational leaders and other workplace objects. Besides, Niederhoffer (1967) conceived cynicism as an end-product of anomie in the occupational structure of the police service in the United States of America, while Dean et al. (1998) introduced the tripartite notion, in which cynicism is conceived to transcend a specific occupation and target. It comprises three (3) dimensions: cognitive, affective, and behavioural. Therefore, whether it is an innate personality trait or a situationally-determined behavioural factor, there is no universal approach to the study of cynicism in the literature. However, researchers have agreed that cynical behaviour is characterised by emotional resentment, feelings of contempt, disappointment, and frustrations, as well as tendencies to exhibit negative behavioural outcomes (Anderson and Bateman, 1997; Dean et al., 1998; Bedeian, 2007; Hochwarter et al., 2004; Kanter & Mirvis, 1989; Abraham, 2000). It is worth mentioning that, although cynicism is generally conceived as a "monster" with negative effects on individuals and organisations, it can also serve as a defence mechanism against undesirable and adverse conditions and a cover for the powerless and voiceless in both organisations and society (Naus et al., 2007; Kanter & Mirvis, 1989). Thus, students can resort to cynicism in response to adverse situations and unexpected university experiences.

Student Cynicism

Student Cynicism originated from a perceived mismatch of expectations and reality: students' expectations of the university educational experience against the starring reality of the status quo (Brockway et al., 2002; Wei et al., 2015a). Brockway et al. (2002) conceptualised SC as an attitude characterised by frustration and negative beliefs of students, targeted at their college experience in general or a specific facet of their college environment, which is a consequence of an unmet expectation of real college experiences. As important 'citizens' and 'customers' in the school system, students have broad relationships with the university in implicit and explicit exchange fashion (Dunkin, 2002). Generally, university students at all levels maintained a certain level of expectations and judgement about many aspects of their university study experiences and environment.

Similarly, students at all levels have high expectations of the university education experience, including quality social amenities and services; access to quality teaching and learning support; academic justice and fairness; and the value and impact of programmes of study on future lives (Coaldrake, 2002; Brockway et al., 2002; James, 2002). Therefore, students may feel a sense of a psychological contract breach if they perceive one or more of their expectations and wishes about their university's environment and study experiences. Since violating the psychological contract is cognitive, reflecting a mental judgement of what one has received against what is expected, such students may experience psychological distress, frustration and disillusion, and a sense of injustice and deception (Morrison &Robinson, 1997).

The importance of the concept of SC is derived from the notion that the outcome of the mismatch of students' expectations of their university experience (whether negative or positive) is fundamental in shaping and defining many aspects of their physical and psychological development, involvement, and retention (Tinto, 1987; Coaldrake, 2001; Brockway et al., 2002). Becker and Geer (1958) are among the early scholars to have studied SC. They observed the development of cynicism among medical students, arguing that first-year entrance to medical schools will likely form an idealistic impression of the medical profession —the notion of learning to cure diseases and save lives. However, this notion begins to fade out and is replaced by cynicism as they begin to face the realities of the medical profession, contrary to their expectations (Brockway et al., 2002; Becker & Geer, 1958).

Further, Baker et al. (1985) provide significant insight into the mythology of first-year students by examining differences in the expectations and realities of new entrants' adjustment to college. Similarly, Brockway et al. (2002) advanced the analysis of SC with the development of the Cynical Attitudes Towards College Scale (CATCS) to measure SC. Their work provides a theoretical basis and academic trajectory for the study of SC in recent times by introducing more dimensions to previous studies (Long,1977; Tinto, 1987) on SC.

Consequently, the four targets of CATCS are related to the academic curriculum of students and the courses they study (intellectual or academic cynicism), the opportunity and availability of social activities and services on campus (social cynicism), cynicism towards universities' management, their leadership styles, rules and regulations, and decisions regarding the institution (policy cynicism), and cynicism towards the university as a whole (institutional cynicism) (Brockway et al., 2002; Wei et al., 2015a).

The relationship between SC and their engagement has been extensively studied. For example, Herr (1971) found a significant positive correlation between college student expectations and the subsequent perception of college realities in the United States of America. Using 276 Chinese undergraduate students, Wei et al. (2015b) examined the relationship between SC and student burnout. They found that the four dimensions of SC jointly explained significant variance in student burnout. Again, Kasalak and BİLgİN Aksu (2014) found a negative relationship between SC and the life satisfaction of high school students in Turkey. Similarly, Olwage and Mostert (2014) also found self-efficacy, conflicting information, and lack of parental support as significant predictors of dimensions of burnout (exhaustion and cynicism) and engagement (dedication and vigour) among university students.

Student Engagement

Students' responses to unmet university education expectations and their impact on their university education experiences is an ongoing dialogue in the literature. Even though the terms SC and engagement appear to oppose each other, the relationship between the two is worthy of scientific investigation. This is because SE reflects a specific understanding of the relationship between students and their institutions (Krause & Coates, 2008). The interactive relationship between the student, the university, and the community as mutually beneficial partners has been well established in much of today's higher education enterprise (Dunkin, 2002).

As key stakeholders in higher education enterprises, universities must provide a conducive environment and atmosphere for better teaching, learning, and SE involvement. Student cynical behaviour, therefore, is a complex phenomenon developed from the interplay of students' expectations of life at universities and its environmental conditions (Krause & Coates, 2008). While cynical students may be frustrated, disillusioned and discontent with facets of their university educational experiences, engaged students may express a sense of energy and effective connectivity with their study environment, leading to deeper satisfaction and more self-fulfilling academic and educational hopes and aspirations. In this study, the SE definition is operationalised from Utrecht's work engagement (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003) as "a positive, fulfilling academic-related state of mind that is characterised by vigour, dedication, and absorption". Accordingly, "vigour is characterised by a high level of energy and mental resilience whiles studying, the willingness to invest effort in one's studies, and persistence even in the face of difficulties." Dedication refers to being strongly involved in one's studies and experiencing a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge. "Absorption is characterised by being fully concentrated and happily engrossed in one's studies, whereby time passes quickly, and one has difficulty detaching oneself from studies" (Schaufeli et al., 2002b).

To the best of our knowledge, the literature on multi-dimensional studies of SC and SE relationship has not been adequately explored, much less in the context of Ghanaian higher education. This study deepens our understanding of the SC and SE relationship using samples of undergraduate students with different training orientations. Based on the foregoing, the study postulates that:

1. There are no significant variations in overall cynicism among students of the different year groups in the UDS
2. There are no significant variations in cynicism among health science and non-health science students in the UDS
3. Dimensions of student cynicism will negatively correlate with that of student engagement in UDS

Methods

Population and Sample

The study was conducted at the Tamale Campus of the UDS, Tamale, Ghana. Two groups of undergraduate students–health science and non-health science students were selected for the study. Specifically, we selected students pursuing the Doctor of Medical Laboratory Science programme (DMLS) at the School of Allied Health Sciences (SAHS) and students pursuing a Bachelor of Arts (BA) in Development Education programme at the Faculty of Education (FoE) who were within our reach and were available and willing to participate in our study (convenient sampling). Thus, using the convenient sampling approach, we obtained 435 valid responses: 260 representing 59.8% from FoE and 175 representing 40% from SAHS. The sample was made up of 64.6% males and 35.4% females. Also, 1.1% were below 18, 60.7 % (18 –23 years), 37.9% (24 –28 years), and .2% were in the 34 –38 years range. Students at level 100 constituted 34.5% of the sample, 34.3% for level 200, 6.4% for level 300, and the rest (24.8%) were level 400 students.

Measurement Design

Student cynicism was measured using the Brockway et al. (2002) CAT CS. The CATCS is a scale of four dimensions (Policy, Academic, Institutional, and Social, each measuring different aspects of students' university experiences. Brockway et al. (2002) describe the CACTS as a validated scale with acceptable reliabilities in policy (=.75), academic (=.70), social (=.75), and institutional (=.84). The policy dimension consists of four statements, with one sample as "What the school administration does is different from what they say they're going to do." The policy dimension consists of four statements, with one sample as "What the school administration does is different from what they say they're going to do." The academic dimension consists of six statements, with one sample as "My grades here accurately reflect my abilities"; social dimension also consists of four statements, with a sample such as "It takes a great deal of effort to find fun things to do here", and the institutional dimension also consists of four statements, with a sample such as "I am proud to say I am a student of this institution". However, one item (I am cynical about this university) was removed to enhance the reliability of the subscale. The scale is measured on a five-point Likert scale, with anchors of (1) strongly disagree, (2) disagree, (3) somewhat agree, (4) agree (5) strongly agree.

Student engagement was measured using the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale for Students (UWES-S) (Schaufeli, Martinez, Pinto, et al., 2002a). The UWS-S measures three dimensions of student engagement: vigour, dedication, and absorption. The vigour dimension consists of five questions, with a sample like "When I am studying, I feel mentally strong." The dedication also consists of five statements and a sample, such as "I am enthusiastic about my studies." In comparison, the absorption dimension contains four statements, with a sample "I feel happy when I am studying intensively." The scale was measured on a five-point Likert scale, with descriptive anchors of (1) strongly disagree, (2) disagree, (3) somewhat agree, (4) agree, and (5) strongly agree. All the subscales produced acceptable reliabilities for this study (Table 2.0).

Data collection Procedure and analysis strategy

Primary data was collected using a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire was categorised into three sections. Section one covered basic information about respondents (demographics); section two assessed the opinion of the respondents on the cynicism dimension, and section three assessed the opinion of the respondents on the engagement dimension. The questionnaire was designed and hosted on Google, using Google Forms. Respondents were first informed about the essence of the survey and asked for their voluntary participation.

Afterwards, a web link to the questionnaire was circulated to students' WhatsApp group platforms at the various student-year groups. This was seen as a convenient strategy for ensuring a higher response rate. In all, 435 responses were returned as usable. As part of ethical considerations and in line with the university research policy, permission was sought from the Registrar of UDS for the study to be conducted at the university. The introductory part of the questionnaire briefed the respondents on the essence of the survey, and their voluntary participation was sought.

A Pearson correlation was computed to determine the statistical relationships between the dimensions of CATCS and UWES-S. Since the data did not meet the parametric assumption of a normal distribution, a Kruskal–Wallis test was computed to determine the variations in SC among four student academic year groups (levels 100, 200, 300, and 400), while the Mann–Whitney U test was also used to determine the variations in SC by discipline (health science students and non-health science students). The extent of variation in SC was assessed based on the magnitude of the mean rank score. A higher mean rank score indicates a highly cynical disposition and vice versa.

H1: dimensions of SC will negatively correlate with dimensions of SE

Table 2.0 Cronbach Alpha and Correlation Matrix of study variables

		Cronbach (α)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	Policy Cynicism	.711	1						
2	Academic Cynicism	.747	.57**	1					
3	Social Cynicism	.757	.51**	.40**	1				
4	Institutional Cynicism	.822	.56**	,59**	.43**	1			
5	Vigour	.725	-.39**	-.43**	-.35**	-.42**	1		
6	Dedication	.723	-.29**	-.37**	-.23**	-.45**	.62**	1	
7	Absorption	.659	-.19**	-.24**	-.18**	-.23**	.56	.53**	1

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 2.0 shows the Pearson correlation matrix, representing the relationship between the CATCS and UWES-S dimensions. The results showed that all the dimensions (subscales) produced acceptable reliabilities. The results further indicate that the dimensions of the CATCS are significantly and negatively related to the dimensions of UWES-S, so we accept the null hypothesis. Additionally, the results show a moderate (r = -.45, p< .01) association between institutional cynicism and dedication; academic cynicism and vigour (r = -.43, p< .01); and policy cynicism and vigour (r = -.39, p < .01). The results also indicated a low, albeit significant association (r = -.18, p< .01), between social cynicism and absorption, between institutional cynicism and absorption (r = - .23, p < .01), between social cynicism and dedication (r = -.23, p<.01) between academic cynicism and absorption (r = -.24, p<.01), between policy cynicism and absorption (r = -.19, p<.01), between social cynicism and vigour (r= -.35, P<.01) and between academic cynicism and dedication (r = -.37, p< .01).

4.3: there will be significant variations in SC among students at different academic levels

Table 3.0   Variation in Student Cynicism by Academic Level

Academic Levels	N	Mean Rank
Level 100	150	174.93
Level 200	149	248.43
Level 300	28	283.73
Level 400	108	218.80
Total	435	

Table 3.0 shows the results of the Kruskal–Wallis test. It shows variations in SC in UDS according to the academic level. The results indicate that level 300 students recorded the highest (284) mean rank, followed by level 200 students (248), and 219 for level 400 students, while students at level 100 (first-year students) recorded the lowest (175) score. Because the test statistic revealed a significant variation, X-2. = 34.012 (3), p.001, we reject the null hypothesis (H2).

4.4 H: there will be significant variations in cynicism among health science students and education students

Table 4.0 Variation in Student Cynicism by Discipline

Type of Discipline	N	Mean Rank
Non-health science students	260	170.70
Health science students	175	288.28
Total	435	

Table 4.0 shows the results of the Mann–Whitney U test. The results indicate that the students studying non-health science-related programmes recorded a mean score of 170.70, whilst students studying the health science-related programme recorded a mean score of 288.28. We reject the null hypothesis (H3) because the difference in cynical disposition between the two groups was statistically significant (U = 10451.500, p.001).
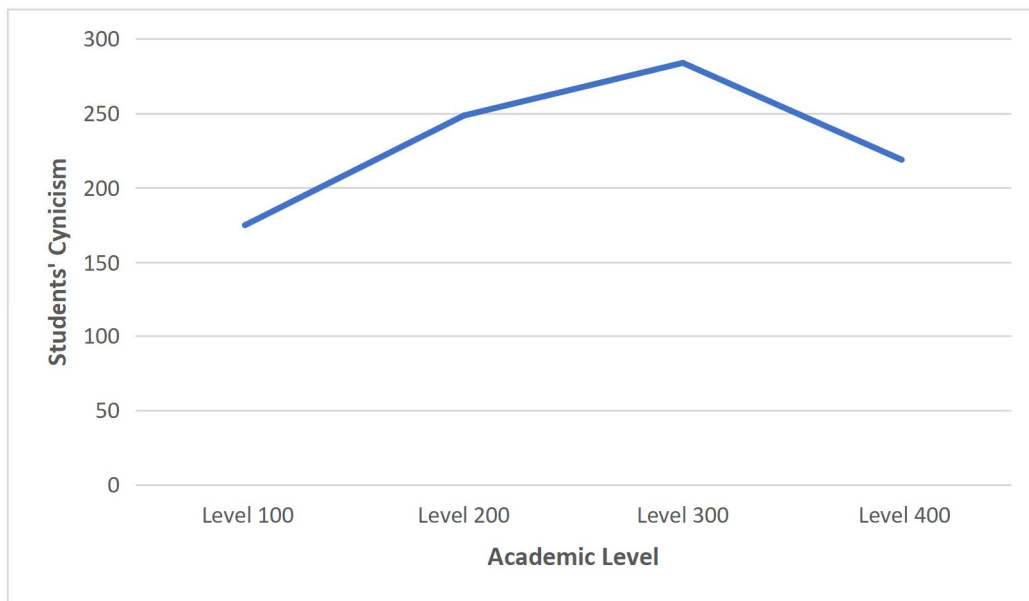

Figure 1.0 Graphical representation of student cynicism by academic levels

Figure 1.0 revealed that cynicism was less prevalent among first-year students, as they recorded the lowest mean score. The cynical disposition slowly increases during the second year and peaks during the third year of their university experience before falling in the fourth year.

Discussion

The study's main objective was to understand student cynicism and engagement in a Ghanaian university, its relationship, and variation. The results of the study support the notion that SC and SE are two opposite and contrasting terms, in which cynicism is expected to result in negative outcomes for students, such as low life satisfaction (Kasalak, 2019), burnout (Wei et al., 2015b), and student engagement is expected to yield positive outcomes such as academic success (De Villiers & Werner, 2016). Generally, student engagement encompasses

a broad range of relationships between students and universities – whereby universities are mandated to create an enabling environment for healthy staff-student interaction and improve learning outcomes (Krause & Coates, 2008; Carini et al., 2006). When the university environment lacks opportunities necessary for an ideal study experience as expected by the student, it can result in general dissatisfaction and disengagement at all levels. This assertion is supported by the current study since all dimensions of SC correlated significantly and negatively with the dimensions of students' engagement. Academic cynicism (unmet expectations on academic curriculum) and student engagement dimension (vigour) had the strongest relationship (r = 0.43). This implies that students who do not find their academic curriculum (general academic and programme expectations) fulfilling enough are less likely to find the morale, energy, and resilience for effective engagement with scholarly work in the university. All the other dimensions of SC correlated significantly but negatively with the dimensions of SE, although they were weak and moderate in strength.

The findings further support the pattern of behaviour of a typical first-year student in the cultural context of Ghana's high education institutions, as they often arrive at campuses excessively subservient and thus accept hook, line and sinker whatever is presented to them. Therefore, first-year students may be less cynical because they may have fewer opportunities to make informed assessments and judgments about their experiences and realities. The cynical disposition may rise as they begin to acclimatise and make judgments about their study experiences at the University. For example, Dunham et al. (2017) found a declining perception of medical students towards their school learning environment, with the worst perception recorded during the third year. However, the results deviate from Baker et al.'s (1985) finding that a cynical disposition is more prevalent among first-year students.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that students studying health science-related programmes tend to be more cynical than their non-health science-related counterparts. Given that cynicism is viewed as a learned response to unexpected adverse situations, the euphoria surrounding the study of health science programmes (learning to save lives and for therapeutic purposes) tends to fade and is replaced with cynical feelings when expectations fail to meet reality about study and training experiences (Becker & Geer, 1958; Naus et al., 2007). The study also supports the notion that students studying health science programmes with intense practical training are likely to become more cynical during their training because of the training demands than students in non-practical oriented disciplines.

Conclusion and implication
Since the 1950s, there has been a proliferation of literature on employee cynicism as a counterproductive work attitude in organisations (Dean et al., 1998; Naus et al., 2007). However, the work of Long (1977) and Brockway et al. (2002) extended our understanding of cynicism in the context of an educational institution by studying different targets of SC in colleges. Further, Wei et al. (2015a) examined the relationship between SC and student burnout using Chinese undergraduate students. This study examined SC and its relationship with SE, using HSSs and NHSSs from UDS, Tamale, Ghana.

Theoretically, the study contributes to the literature on cynicism by broadening our understanding of SC and its relationship with SE in Ghanaian public universities. The evidence of the analysed data presents a contrasting and inverse relationship between SC and SE. By this understanding, a student's cynical disposition as a negative attitudinal factor is expected to relate/impact negatively with SE as a positive student attitudinal factor in UDS. The study's findings further support the thesis that HSSs are more susceptible to cynicism than students in the non-health science disciplines. The study provides empirical evidence that students' cynical tendencies increase as they progress through the academic levels to a maximum point during their third year at university before falling during the fourth year of their training.

Based on the empirical evidence proffered, management, counsellors, student affairs staff, and other university stakeholders are presented with cues and directions on targets of SC, as well as students' perception of facets of their university education experience. Therefore, this provides an opportunity for retrospection and review of the modus operandi of effort in managing student needs and expectations in the university and improving student experiences.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

This study used a cross-sectional design. However, as a human behavioural and psychological phenomenon, SC would have been better explored with a longitudinal study. Furthermore, the correlational study was primarily intended to establish a relationship between SC and SE. This method did not allow causal inferences to be drawn. Therefore, the causal relationship between SC and SE is worthy of further investigation.

Conflict of Interest

We declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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