

Expectations and realities for first year students at an Australian university

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Student expectations and their realization are regarded as having a significant effect on the successful transition of students into and their engagement with university. Students from the Faculties of Law (internal and external modes of study) and Information Technology (internal only) provided their expectations (week 1: 918 students) and reported the realities (week 13: 680) in the areas of experiences, challenges and management of their learning during their first semester at the Queensland University of Technology. While their expectations were diverse and the match and mismatch of expectations and reality were complex, and while they expected and reported having an overall rewarding and positive experience, they indicated that their expectations about developing new learning skills were not fulfilled. Implications of this for curricula and the design and management of learning environments are discussed.

Transitions and expectations

Taylor, Millwater and Nash (2007), drawing on the work of Bridges (2003), have conceptualised the sequence of transitions in higher education in terms of the emergence of student identities—pre-enrolment identity, tertiary student identity and professional identity. While these identities tend to overlap and coexist to some extent, the first transition from pre-enrolment to student is crucial because there is considerable agreement not only that “student success [at university] is largely determined by student experiences in the first year” (Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005, p.1) but also that student expectations “impact [on] successful student transitioning” (Alexson & Kemnitz, 2004, p. 20). James (2002) considers that “the transition to university is therefore a particularly significant period for understanding student expectations and their consequences” (p. 76). It is this transition period to university that becomes important in solidifying those initial expectations and in shaping new expectations. Universities therefore need to initiate, support and promote student engagement (both academically and socially) in the early weeks to retain students and stop the drift away from university life.

Student expectations

A significant feature of student expectations is their diversity. James (2002) discusses student expectations in relation to individual roles, responsibilities and commitments, noting that these expectations are highly individualised and diverse. For example, for some students the expectations could relate to quality (value for money) and for others personal significance (is this course the right one for me?). Additionally, expectations as opposed to the realities of higher education can be both about the day-to-day experiences such as facilities and class experiences and the longer term goals of the individual with regard to careers and outcomes (James, 2002, pp.71-72). Byron (2002) claims that these diverse expectations are the “defining characteristic of the student experience” (p. 46), and consequently, it is important in

attempting to accommodate these diverse expectations that they be identified as early as possible in the first year.

Extensive research on transition has indicated that there is a significant mismatch between commencing student expectations and the actual experiences of university life. The Centre for Studies in Higher Education at the University of Melbourne in Australia has conducted three separate studies of the first year experience over a ten year period from 1994 onwards (Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis, 2005). The resulting snapshot of first year experiences indicates that there has been a general increase in the number of students whose expectations have been met through university over this time period. However, while the majority of students had their expectations fulfilled, significant sub-groups such as international students and those undertaking combined degrees, were less satisfied in this regard (Krause et al., 2005, p. 30). Gender has also been shown to be a factor, with female students more satisfied, while the age of the student does not appear to be an important influence (p. 21) except in relation to expectations about grades with older (aged 20 to 24) or mature age (aged 25 and older) students receiving higher marks than they expected (p. 24). Exploring further the expectations-achievement nexus in the Krause et al. data, there is a connection with lower achievers less satisfied that their expectations have been met than those students who do well academically. The lower achievers' perceptions are consistent with Trout's (1997) earlier finding that students "expect satisfaction regardless of effort" (p. 50). With regard to student expectations about academic results, Krause et al. (2005) found that more students are having their grade expectations confirmed and the number of students receiving lower marks than they initially expected has decreased over the ten year period (p. 23).

It is important to note that a mismatch between student expectations and the university experience is not always detrimental. Such a mismatch can in fact be vital, "being part of the educative process of liberating the minds of students through exposing them to challenge and difference" (James, 2002, p.78). It is also possible that student expectations are not necessarily aligned with the widely accepted goals of higher education, and so the degree to which a university meets student expectations may not be an ideal measure for the overall quality of higher education (James, 2002). In fact, seeking to meet such demands at all costs may distort the most fundamental purposes of higher education (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2002, p. 4). That said, meeting student expectations with regards to "hygiene factors" such as the availability of facilities and services, is important to prevent student dissatisfaction and disengagement (James, 2002, p.78).

There is another dimension of institutional response that is of some significance in the current climate and that is considering the institution as a service provider and the student as the client (Sander, Stevenson, King & Coates, 2000). If institutions are regarded as service providers then one way of ensuring quality service provision is to know the expectations of the clients as they enter into a service transaction (Zeithaml, Parasuraman & Berry, 1990).

This study aimed to gather the expectations of students when they arrived at the Queensland University of Technology and to explore the relationships between those expectations and the students' first semester university experiences as reported by them near the end of that semester.

Context of the study

The Queensland University of Technology (QUT) is one of Australia's largest universities, enrolling 40,000 students and offering a broad range of undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. QUT acknowledges the importance of the first year experience and its transitional implications:

In line with QUT's vision and goals . . . a key aim is to support all commencing students to adjust successfully to study at QUT by providing a strong transition experience - academically, socially and administratively - according to their varied needs. . . . QUT is aware of the significant transitional challenges facing first year students and acknowledges the diversity and changing social and educational needs and aspirations of its entering cohorts. (Queensland University of Technology [QUT], 2007, Policy C, para 1.5)

To this end, QUT sponsors a First Year Experience Program, under the auspices of which projects such as "Enhancing Transition at QUT" (ET@QUT) (Kift & Nelson, 2006) have been enacted. The latter is a capacity building initiative to further the work of the First Year Experience Program. It involves a number of sub-projects which work together to enhance the experiences of students in transition with the aim of maximising their opportunities for success in the university environment. Each sub-project is focussed around the development of reusable resources that can be used to address the first year experience across QUT faculties. What is reported here is drawn from The Student Expectations Sub-Project (QUT, 2006)

Methodology

Design and sample

A longitudinal cohort survey design was used in this study where data were collected in weeks 1 and 13 from different convenience samples within the same cohorts. The cohorts and samples are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1 Cohorts and samples

Cohort Name [unit code]	Week 1		Week 13	
	Cohort	Sample (%) ¹	Cohort ²	Sample (%)
Information Technology [ITB002]	272	141 (52)	189	132 (70)
Law Internal [LWB141]	527	490 (93)	419	351 (84)
Law External [LWB141]	119	80 (67)	72	19 (26)
TOTALS	918	711 (77)	680	502 (74)

Data collection instruments

Drawing on a variety of data collection instruments used in both Australian (Darlaston-Jones et al., 2003) and overseas (Byrne & Flood, 2005; Gonyea, 2005; Pancer, Hunsberger, Pratt & Alisat, 2000) studies, one of the authors, Karen Nelson, trialled various survey instruments tapping into student expectations during 2003 and 2004 leading to the development of the

¹ Percentage response rate

²The decrease in cohort sizes is due to the withdrawal of students from the units prior to Week 13.

instruments used in this study. They consist of two equivalent forms: The Week 1 Student Expectations Survey (SES-Wk1) which focuses on students' pre-semester expectations of university; and The Week 13 Student Expectations Survey (SES-Wk13) which focuses on students' experiences of university in the same semester. Both surveys are designed to collect qualitative data and consist of five open-ended questions, three of which are grammatically paired to allow thematic comparisons across time.³ Only those three sets of questions are discussed here. These questions focus on:

Expectations about experiences:

Week 1 - What type of experience do you expect to have this semester?

Week 13 - What type of experience did you have this semester?

Expectations about challenges:

Week 1 - What do you think will be the biggest challenge for you this semester?

Week 13 - What was the biggest challenge you faced this semester?

Expectations about managing learning:

Week 1 - How will you manage your learning this semester?

Week 13 - How did you manage your learning activities this semester?

The SES-Wk1 and SES-Wk13 were administered during class time in weeks 1 and 13 of 2006 respectively for the Faculty of Information Technology and Law Internal students. The Law External students were contacted by email and completed the surveys electronically in weeks 1 and 13. The response rates are shown in Table 1.

Analysis

Responses were transcribed verbatim and labelled according to the cohort (Information Technology, Law Internal, Law External). The data was then analysed using Classic Content Analysis (CCA) (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). During CCA, for a given set of responses, individual topics are grouped into themes and the themes summarised quantitatively. For example, the topics: fulfilling, rewarding, positive, successful and good emerged and were subsequently grouped together as a single theme and its frequency calculated. Themes were identified and frequencies calculated for the sets of responses from the three cohorts. Note that the open-ended question design made it possible for more than one topic and hence theme to emerge from a single student response. Further, it was possible that not only similar but also different themes could emerge from the different cohorts. References to reviews, examples and criticisms of the CCA technique can be found in Ryan and Bernard (2000).

Results

Overview of respondents (Refer to Table 1)

ITB002: One hundred and forty one of a possible 272, or 52% of enrolled students, responded to the SES-Wk1 and 132 out of 189 (70%) responded to the SES-Wk13. Of the 189⁴ students who completed the unit, 178 (94%) were commencing students—they had no prior university-level academic record. Twelve percent of students who completed the unit were studying double degrees.

³ For details of the other two questions and their associated data and analyses, see QUT (2006). 83 students withdrew from the unit prior to week 13.

⁴ 83 students withdrew from the unit prior to week 13.

LWB141 (Int): Four hundred and ninety responses were received for the week 1 survey from a total of 527 enrolled internal students, relating to a response rate of 93%. Three hundred and fifty one responses were received for the week 13 survey from a total of 419⁵ enrolled internal students, relating to a response rate of 84%. Of the 419 students who completed the unit, 370 (88%) were commencing students (i.e. they had no prior university-level academic record). Forty four percent of students who completed the unit were studying double degrees.

LWB141 (Ext): Eighty responses were received for the week 1 survey from a total of 119 enrolled external students, relating to a response rate of 67%. Nineteen responses were received for the week 13 survey from a total of 72⁶ enrolled external students, relating to a response rate of 26%. While many external students have generally undertaken some studies prior to commencement in law, of the 72 students who completed the unit, 59 (82%) were recorded as not having a prior university-level academic record (i.e. were commencing students). One student who completed the unit was studying a double degree (<1%).

All three cohorts (IT, Law Internal, Law External) had high rates of commencing students (94%, 88% and 82% respectively), indicating that the bulk of survey responses are from students with no prior experience of study in a university environment.

Key themes and main trends

The major results are summarised in Tables 2, 3 and 4 which show the frequencies of occurrence of the most common themes as a percentage of the total number of all themes for the three sets of expectations. The week 1 (Wk 1) percentages are the expectations while the week 13 (Wk 13) percentages are the reported actualities. Percentages <5% are not reported.

Table 2 Expectations and realities of experiences

<i>Week 1 - What type of experience do you expect to have this semester?</i>									
<i>Week 13 - What type of experience did you have this semester?</i>									
Theme	ITB002			LWB141(I)			LWB141(E)		
	Wk1	Wk 13	Ch*	Wk1	Wk 13	Ch	Wk1	Wk 13	Ch
A fulfilling, rewarding, positive, successful or good experience	24 [#]	31	7	21	28	7	34	42	8
Teamwork challenges	0	9	9	- [@]	-	-	-	-	-
Experience involving new skills or a learning curve	17	5	(12)	20	7	(13)	11	5	(6)
A fun, diverse or social experience	13	7	(6)	13	3	(10)	-	-	-
A motivational, stimulating, interesting and engaging experience	-	-	-	4	12	8	1	5	4
An experience involving work/life/study balance	-	-	-	-	-	-	8	26	18
Busy, challenging, intense and demanding experience	18	20	2	29	29	0	31	11	(20)

* Change from Wk1 to W13. Decrease indicated by (..)

Frequency of the theme as a percentage of the occurrence of all themes

@ <5%

⁵ 108 students withdrew from the unit prior to week 13.

⁶ 47 students withdrew from the unit prior to week 13.

Table 3 Expectations and realities of challenges

<i>Week 1 - What do you think will be the biggest challenge for you this semester? Week 13 - What was the biggest challenge you faced this semester?</i>									
Theme	ITB002			LWB141(I)			LWB141(E)		
	Wk1	Wk13	Ch	Wk1	Wk13	Ch	Wk1	Wk13	Ch
Time management, goal setting or organising	20	27	7	24	21	(3)	32	18	(14)
Managing the workload or “keeping up”	10	19	9	27	34	7	11	24	11
Teamwork challenges	0	12	12	-	-	-	-	-	-
Managing their life/work/study balance	13	6	(7)	16	10	(6)	31	24	(7)
Motivation, procrastination or commitment	12	1	(11)	-	-	-	-	-	-
Academic skills (such as study, note taking, writing skills)	19	14	(5)	10	15	5	13	12	(1)
Settling in or adjusting to university	7	4	(3)	13	8	(5)	-	-	-
Accessing resources, lack of support or isolation	-	-	-	-	-	-	5	18	13

Table 4 Expectations and realities of managing learning

<i>Week 1 - How will you manage your learning this semester? Week 13 - How did you manage your learning activities this semester?</i>									
Theme	ITB002			LWB141(I)			LWB141(E)		
	Wk1	Wk13	Ch	Wk1	Wk13	Ch	Wk1	Wk13	Ch
A consistent application of effort (“study each day”, “small amounts often”)	20	9	(11)	18	10	(8)	17	0	(17)
Time management and organisational activities (goals, routines, diaries)	23	16	(7)	45	29	(16)	42	14	(28)
Managing the life/work/study balance	6	1	(5)	6	2	(4)	4	19	15
Manage learning well	6	18	12	2	13	11			
Manage learning poorly	6	18	12	2	21	19	1	33	32

With regard to expectations and realities of experiences:

- The most common expectation in all three cohorts was that students would have a fulfilling and rewarding experience, and in all cases, this was reported in week 13 as actually happening.
- Another theme common to all cohorts was the expectations that students would experience a learning curve and acquire new skills. This did not happen.
- There were some significant, and sometimes predictable, differences among the cohorts. The IT students did not expect but had experiences with teaming—an aspect that was a deliberate activity in the presentation of the surveyed unit. Both internal cohorts found their experiences matched their expectations of an intense and demanding experience; on the other hand, the external cohort, while having high expectations, did not in fact have this experience. However, this cohort, as could be predicted, somewhat expected, and actually had, to work really hard at achieving a work/life/study balance. The internal cohorts also expected a fun, social experience but did not report having it while both Law cohorts had low expectations of, but reported having a somewhat stimulating and engaging experience.

With regard to expectations and realities of challenges:

- For all cohorts, there was the expected challenge of managing their workload, and this was in fact a reality. Consistent with this was the expectation of having to manage and organise their time but only for the IT cohort was this a reality.
- All cohorts expected to have to manage a work/life/study balance but this did not remain as a challenge. Nor did the expected challenge of developing basic academic literacies, except for the internal Law cohort.
- Idiosyncratic cohort-specific and often predictable differences were again evident. Teamwork became a challenge for IT but was not expected; the internal cohorts expected adjusting to university life to be somewhat of a challenge but, by and large, it was not; and the external cohort somewhat expected, and in actuality substantially experienced, academic and social isolation.

With regard to expectations and realities of managing learning:

- All cohorts expected to manage their learning by the consistent application of effort and the use of time management and organisational activities but the reality was that they did not do this.
- There was to some extent a bi-modal set of responses to the expectations and realities of students managing their learning well or poorly. While the expectation of managing their study well was low, a number of students in the internal cohorts felt that they managed their learning well. However, a similar pattern occurred across all cohorts with regard to not expecting to manage learning poorly but actually reporting that they did, particularly, and again predictably, for the external cohort.
- The external cohort felt that they managed to balance their work, life and study effectively.

Discussion

The data presented here is consistent with the student expectations literature in that it reflects not only the diverse nature of expectations but also the complex combination of match and mismatch between expectations and reality. There are various ways that the data presented here could be mined. For example, there are some consistencies across the three sets of data:

- The external cohort predictably, saw balancing work, life and study as a challenge, actually experienced that but felt that they managed the issue effectively.
- The IT cohort did not expect but did experience teamwork activities and this was a challenge for them. This cohort also expected motivation to be a challenge, but as they did not experience it, it did not manifest itself as a challenge.
- Managing the workload was expected to be a challenge for all cohorts and it was as all cohorts reported that they did not manage that aspect of their learning very well.

However, probably the key issue that has emerged from the data is that, while the students felt they had a satisfying experience, they had high expectations about wanting to learn but felt that these expectations were not adequately met. This may seem inconsistent with the finding that, for the internal cohorts anyway, their expectations of having a busy, challenging, intense and demanding experience were substantially met but such experiences do not necessarily equate to being learning experiences. What seems to be implied by these outcomes and the importance of student expectations, particularly in responding to the notion of the student as client (Sander et al., 2000), is the need to focus on the development of learning and metacognitive skills. This is consistent with the suggestion by McInnis (2001) who emphasises that universities, in addressing student expectations, should focus on curriculum and the design and management of the learning environment, particularly in the early stages

of engagement—and it is this initial transition to university that is a particularly significant period for understanding student expectations and their consequences. Another consequence may be the need to be more explicit with students, from the very early stages of their new learning, about the aims and objectives and expected learning outcomes of their first year learning experiences.

Conclusion

This study sought to explore the relationships between students' entering expectations and their actual experience of their first semester of study in two quite different discipline contexts, while seeking also to illuminate aspects of an external cohort's experience. Overall, quite remarkable homogeneity in experience was uncovered, while some predictable responses and differences were also clearly evident. The implications of these findings for curricula, and the design and management of learning environments, remain challenging and once again emphasise the desirability of both close management and mediation of our students' entering expectations and our intentional intervention to alleviate predictable concerns and anxieties around their first year experience.

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