What do commencing undergraduate students expect from first year university?

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Abstract

The expectations of students entering their first year of undergraduate study in South Australia were investigated. Responses from 3,091 students allowed a comprehensive understanding of students' expectations. Most respondents (70%) were entering university directly from secondary school and most (78%) were studying in their program of first choice. The major factor in program choice was interest in the topic, followed by career prospects. The need to understand the expectations of students commencing university is becoming even more important with many universities aiming to increase participation from previously under-represented groups. Only 30% of students had realistic expectations about the amount of study required to succeed at university. Most students felt that feedback on submitted work, and on drafts of work, would be important for their learning. Having easy and convenient access to teaching staff outside of face-to-face teaching was seen as an important factor in success. Ninety-one percent of students felt that having friends studying at the same university would provide support, but 25% did not know anyone studying at the same university.

Introduction

It is generally acknowledged that an educated population leads to economic, social and political stability. In response to this, many countries are setting higher targets for university participation (Nzimande & Metcalfe, 2009; Osborne, 2003), a trend that has been going on for quite some time with the famous example of a target of 50% of under 30s in the United Kingdom participating in higher education (Thomson, 1999) as well as earlier examples of increasing the representation of minority groups in American colleges (Cross, 1981; Freeman, 1997; Vasquez, 1982). The Council of Australian Governments has proposed a target of 40% of Australians aged 25-34 years to have at least a bachelor qualification by 2020 (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008). To achieve this target, greater participation in the university sector will be required, and this is most likely to be achieved through a greater representation of those groups in society who are currently under-represented in higher education, "in particular those disadvantaged by the circumstances of their birth: Indigenous people, people with low socio-economic status, and those from regional and remote areas" (p. xi)

More specifically, the *Reform beyond the crisis* report (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2008-09) indicated that by 2020, 20% of undergraduate enrolments in higher education in Australia should be students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, increasing the urgency to provide programs that aid in the transition of students from school to university.

It has been reported that over one quarter of students in Australian higher education are considering deferring study or discontinuing (Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis, 2005). Without understanding the reasons behind such high numbers of disaffected students, higher education institutions run the risk of losing even more students, particularly those from non-traditional backgrounds who may not have the support systems available to students entering directly from school. Evidence that this could occur is provided by James (2002), who found that students who enter university through non-traditional pathways, or who come from a background of low participation, tend to perform less successfully at university (Bamber & Tett, 2000). Studies from the United States of America have also analysed the academic motivations and attrition rates of various demographic groups, such as those from low socioeconomic backgrounds and ethnic minority groups (Seidman et al., 1995; Tierney, Corwin & Colyar, 2005) and shown that these groups are less likely to successfully complete university.

It has been shown that students who had more realistic expectations of university life appeared to have reduced stress, which in turn resulted in improved adaptation to the university environment (Pancer, Hunsberger, Pratt & Alisat, 2000). Thus a clear understanding of what the university experience will be like could allow students to be better prepared for university and also enable the universities to provide more appropriate support during the difficult early weeks.

The transition to university is critical as it is related to student retention and satisfaction. This in turn has a major influence on universities, which are required to report on student retention, and which have a financial interest in the successful progress of students as well as a

responsibility to provide graduates for the future.

Student expectations of receiving high levels of feedback, regular access to lecturers, the amount of study they expect to do and the responsibility for learning have been identified as areas where expectations do not match experiences (Brinkworth, McCann, Matthews & Nordström, 2009; Crisp et al., 2009; Thalluri & King, 2009). Previous studies have all focused on a single university, making their results less generalisable. The current study aimed to investigate the expectations of students entering all of the universities in one state in Australia, allowing for more meaningful comparisons to be made. In addition, the computing skills with which students enter university has recently become an area of interest, with assumptions that students will be "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001). Therefore this study also asked students several questions about IT skills.

This paper reports on the first stage of a larger project to examine the expectations of commencing first year students, secondary school teachers and university academic staff about the experiences of students entering first year university in South Australia. The experiences of students will also be compared to the expectations they identified prior to commencing. Only by having a clear understanding of the expectations of all involved can we provide an environment where the match between the expectations of students and universities is as close as possible.

Methodology

The data were obtained from surveys distributed to students commencing study at each of the three universities in South Australia, in the month prior to Orientation Week in 2010. The surveys were scheduled so as to capture the expectations of students before they had undertaken any on-campus orientation or familiarization activities. They consisted of Likert-style questions, ranking questions and three open-ended questions about why students were attending university, what their expectations were and what had influenced their expectations. Students were also asked whether they felt anything was missing in their preparation for university. Recruitment was via the student portals, where a link was provided from the students' institution to the online survey. Posters placed around the universities also encouraged students to participate in the study and a prize was offered as an incentive to participate. The study had ethics approval from each of the universities participating.

The three South Australian universities each belong to one of the three major university alliances in Australia. The University of Adelaide belongs to the Group of Eight (Go8), Flinders University is an Innovative Research University (IRU) and the University of South Australia is part of the Australian Technology Network (ATN). In 2010, 11,240 students commenced at the University of South Australia (UniSA), 5,229 at the University of Adelaide and 3,918 at Flinders University. Together, these universities make up almost all commencing tertiary students in the state of South Australia.

Data were analysed by SPSS v17 for descriptive and comparative analysis using Chi-square or ANOVA according to the nature of the data. Responses to open-ended questions were thematically analysed manually and frequency of themes counted.

Results

From a total commencing cohort of 20,387 students, 3,091 completed responses to the survey were received, corresponding to a response rate of approximately 15%. Of the responses, 27% of students were attending Flinders University, 52% the University of Adelaide and 21% were enrolled at the University of South Australia. The gender breakdown of responses was 35% male and 65% female. Forty-two percent of students were the first in their immediate family (parents and siblings) to attend university.

When asked what had informed their expectations of what university would be like, students who did not have family experience (were the first in their family to attend university) based their expectations of university on school counsellors, school teachers, university recruiting material and websites significantly more than students who were not the first in their family to attend university. Students who were not first in family relied significantly more on parents, friends and siblings for informing

their expectations (parents: t=2.3, *df*=3,082, *p*<.01; siblings: *t*=11.0, *df*=3,082, *p*<.001; friends: *t*=3.3, *df*=3,082, *p*<.001).

Schooling and pathways

Most students (78%) had completed secondary schooling in South Australia, 9% were from other Australian states and 13% were from overseas. The majority of students (76%) had attended a metropolitan school whereas 24% had attended a school in a rural area.

Most students (70%) had entered university based on year 12 or 13 secondary schooling results. Four percent had completed the International Baccalaureate and 8% had entered based on Technical and Further Education (TAFE) qualifications. Six percent had entered university by pre-entry courses and 12% of students had entered by "other" pathways, including transferring from other programs or special entry paths. Table 1 shows that the number of students who had attended each secondary school category closely matched the

Table 1   *Percentage of respondents who attended the various school types and the breakdown of all secondary school students in South Australia*

School type	Survey sample (%)	State sample (%)
Catholic	20	20
Independent	25	22
Public	55	58
Total	100	100

Table 2   *Reasons given by students for being in their program*

Why are you enrolled in this course?	N (%)
Interest	2,326 (75)
Improve job prospects	1,167 (38)
To get specific job training	865 (28)
To develop talent and creativity	744 (24)
To gain entry to another degree program	391 (13)
Recommendations of teachers and counselors	328 (11)
Did not get first preference	279 (9)
Expectations of family and friends	248 (8)

Note: The total equals more than 100% as students could select more than one reason

percentage of school students in each sector in South Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009). Compared with the other universities, the University of Adelaide had a lower percentage of students entering from TAFE and a higher percentage of students completing the International Baccalaureate (ChiSq=139.0, *df*=8, p<.001).

Study arrangements and expectations

The percentage of students studying in their first preference degree was high (77%). The vast majority of students (95%) were studying in internal mode and most (80%) were studying a full load of four courses per semester.

Students were asked about the reasons they chose the course in which they were enrolled. The majority of students (75%) indicated that they chose their course because of interest in the area (Table 2). Acquiring specific training for a job and improving job prospects were also frequent responses.

As shown in Table 3, the amount of study that students expected to do for each course varied quite widely. It should be noted that one course per semester is 25% of a full time load, so the 12% of students who indicated 20+ hours per week were really indicating a total of over 80 hours of study for a full-time student. The majority

Table 3   *How many hours per course do you expect to study per week?*

Hours	N (%)
0–1	11 (1)
1–3	214 (7)
3–6	695 (23)
6-10	763 (25)
10–15	604 (20)
15-20	366 (12)
20+	378 (12)
Total	**3,091 (100)**

of students (80%) felt that they would be able to combine study with paid work.

Student expectations of university staff

Most students (60%) felt that two weeks was a reasonable time in which to expect an assignment to be returned, and 19% felt that one week was reasonable. Interestingly, 49% of students thought that university teaching staff would spend 60-80% of their working time preparing, teaching and assessing classes.

With respect to teaching and learning arrangements, feedback on assignments was felt to be very important for learning. Ninety-five percent of students either agreed or strongly agreed that feedback on drafts of their work would be important for their learning. Similarly, 98% of students agreed that feedback on submitted assignments would be important for their learning.

Student expectations of the university experience

Most students agreed (54%) or strongly agreed (37%) that having a close group of friends at university would be important to provide support at university. However, 25% of students did not have any friends who were attending the same university.

There was an expectation by the majority of students (68%) that university teachers would provide all of the materials required for their learning. Furthermore, 87% of students either agreed or strongly agreed that *Having easy and convenient access to my lecturers and tutors outside of face-to-face teaching will be important to my learning*.

Most students (94%) felt that it would be important for them to attend most lectures. Group work was seen as important, with 76% agreeing or strongly agreeing with the

Table 4   *Student responses to whether they had proficiency in computer applications*

I am sufficiently proficient in:	Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)
databases	17	37	29	14	4
email	60	36	3	0.2	0.2
html	9	19	38	24	10
social networks	42	38	15	4	1
spreadsheets	28	46	18	7	2
web browsing	55	38	6	1	0.3
word processing	61	34	5	1	0.1
statistical software	7	23	42	22	7

statement *Participating in group work during class time will assist my learning*.

Students reported their proficiency in using computer applications as shown in Table 4. Perhaps not surprisingly, students felt more proficient in social networks, word processing and web browsing than in more specific applications such as statistics packages and html.

There was some ambivalence about how well students felt they would perform at university. Only 35% of students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement *I am a capable student and expect to do well at university,* with 33% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing.

Comparisons between universities

Responses from students attending the three universities were compared and showed no significant differences between the reasons students gave for choosing their program.

Students at the University of Adelaide were more likely to be studying full-time (ChiSq=35.3, *df*=6, *p*<.001) and also expected to spend significantly more time studying per course than did students at the UniSA. This may be related to the finding that students at UniSA were more likely to have commitments to work or family that they expected might impact on their ability to study (ChiSq=37.3, *df*=2, *p*<.001). The mean ages of students at Flinders University and UniSA (23.0 and 22.9 respectively) were significantly higher than those at University of Adelaide (20.4: F=43.2, *df*=2, *p*<.001).

Although most students at each university agreed that having a group of close friends would be important for support at

Table 5   *Having a group of close friends will be important for support at university*

University	Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)
Flinders	37	54	9	0.2	0.1
Adelaide	38	54	8	0.4	0
UniSA	35	56	8	0.3	0

Table 6   *Are any of your friends attending the same university?*

	Yes (%)		No (%)
	same program	different program	
Flinders	18	51	31
Adelaide	30	52	19
UniSA	26	44	29

university (Table 5), students at University of Adelaide were more likely already to have friends attending the same university, either in the same or a different program (Table 6) (ChiSq=34.4, *df*=2, *p*<.01).

Analysis of qualitative responses

Qualitative responses were analysed by identifying key themes in student responses. Thirty eight percent of students responded to the question that asked students what they thought would be important for making their university experience successful.

The majority of responses (73%) indicated that students believed attending lectures and developing relationships with lecturers and other university staff were the most important considerations for making their university experience successful. Students also indicated that their own ability to be organised or manage their time well was an important factor (31%). Of the 55% of students who responded to the question about whether there was something missing from their preparations for university, approximately

two-thirds believed there was nothing missing from their preparations for university. A small number (7%) of responses clarified their answer by indicating that they were not certain if they were adequately prepared as they had not yet started university. Those who indicated that they felt something was missing from their preparations identified enrolment issues as the most important factor. Additional information students sought included access to course information and booklists, the timing of information sessions and tours, and general information about the university. These responses were consistent concerns across all age groups. Students also wanted more general information about university, but indicated a preference for some material not to be presented online. Students suggested that understanding basic university terminology was a barrier to their preparation as well as the need to receive more one-to-one advice on enrolment and course selection. One particular finding which could have a bearing on expanding the demographic of intakes at various universities is the importance ascribed to meeting existing students, finding friends or having support from family and/or friends as preparation.

In response to the question that asked students to elaborate on why they wanted to undertake study at university, the reasons given were dominated by future career or job aspirations. Fifty-nine percent of students responded to this question and nearly half (46%) felt that finding a career or job was their main motivator. Gaining knowledge or an education (12%) and interest (10%) were secondary considerations.

Discussion

This study used a survey that was distributed to students prior to their attendance at university. This was a deliberate decision to allow investigation of the expectations of students before they had attended orientation activities, so as not to influence their expectations of university, such as the amount of study they would need to do in order to succeed, the class sizes, and the way in which courses would be taught. A subsequent stage of the study will survey commencing students shortly after orientation activities, to determine whether expectations change as a result of participation in orientation activities provided at universities.

A response rate of 15% of students commencing university is lower than desired, but is considered acceptable, particularly as the demographic data of those responding is quite similar to the entire commencing cohort. Thus students from different school sectors were proportionally represented, and the percentage of males and females reflected commencing students. The higher participation of female students (65%) compared to males (35%) is not surprising given that the commencing cohort at Flinders University was 65% female, at University of Adelaide was approximately 50% male and female and at UniSA was 67% female and 33% male.

Interestingly, we found that the majority of students choose to go to university for career and/or job aspirations, not necessarily because of interest, thereby suggesting that most students believe university is a good way of improving employment opportunities. However, when asked why they chose a particular course, students specified interest (75%) rather than job prospects (32%). This

suggests that students decided to go to university to improve job prospects but selected a degree based on interest. This could have ramifications for those institutions considering general undergraduate degrees as opposed to the named degrees that many universities now have. In a generic undergraduate degree, it is not immediately apparent which career path will be followed.

This study has provided some information on the nature of student expectations before they attend university and as such can provide insight into how universities can respond. It is useful to understand that many students are choosing to go to university for career reasons. This makes it essential for universities to ensure their courses are put into a career context. This may mean that significant changes need to be made to content, but it will be important to ensure that students understand the relevance of what they are learning with respect to a future career. The integration of graduate attributes into curriculum and assessment will become increasingly important (Treleaven & Voola, 2008). Notably, we have evidence that students choose their courses predominantly on interest. This is something lecturers can utilise by ensuring that this interest is not buried under course content and assessment but is nurtured as an intrinsic motivator.

The Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) pages on each of the three university's websites indicates the recommended amount of study per course per week is between 10 and 15 hours. It is interesting that only 20% of students nominated this time as their expectation. A full load in first year is 4 courses per semester. This means that students who indicated they would study more than 20 hours per course (12%) would be studying more than 80 hours per week. It should be noted that

30% of students felt that less than six hours was sufficient. This expectation is something that needs to be addressed at the earliest opportunity by universities.

The expectation of an assignment return time of 2-3 weeks is something that many academics would attempt to satisfy, but this can be difficult depending on the number of students and the complexity of the marking task. Of particular interest is the expectation of many students that university academic staff would spend 60-80% of their time in teaching-related duties. Jenkins, Blackman, Lindsay and Paton-Saltzberg (1998) investigated student attitudes to staff research and found that students perceived the credibility of the staff and the university to be related to the research profile of the academic staff. However, students also felt that when staff were active researchers they were less available to students. Much has been written about the relationship between staff research and student learning (Breen & Lindsay, 1999; Zamorski, 2002) but what is clear from the current study is that students are not initially anticipating that their teachers will also be active researchers.

The importance of appropriate and timely feedback to student learning is commonly accepted (Cook & Leckey, 1999; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006) and students indicated that feedback on submitted work would be important to their learning. However, the importance that students attributed to feedback on drafts of their work was probably unrealistic in the current environment in Australia, with class size, especially for first year courses, becoming ever larger. As discussed by Weaver (2006), the nature of feedback is also important. Students may not recognise feedback for what it is, and may need assistance in how to use and understand it

(Rust, Price & O'Donovan, 2003). Additionally, students prefer feedback that is specific to their work, provides guidance and is related to assessment criteria, so general feedback provided to classes may not be perceived as useful by students (Weaver, 2006).

When students enrol at university, there is an expectation from the staff that students will make the adjustment from high school, or their current working situation, to their higher education institution. There is recognition that this transition is not easy for some students, and many institutions now have transition units to assist in this process. It is possible that the number of students who are at risk could be reduced if this type of structure were implemented more thoroughly across universities and students had improved understanding of the expectations of them by universities. Pancer et al. (2000) examined student expectations about university and subsequent adjustment in the first year in a longitudinal study of the transition to university. Two hundred and twenty-six students (158 females and 68 males) completed a pre-university questionnaire, and another questionnaire near the end of their first year. They found that students with more complex expectations about university tended to adjust better to stressful circumstances than did students who had simpler expectations.

The importance attributed to friendships with other students was clearly demonstrated in this study (Table 5). Thomas (2002) found that having social networks at university was an important factor in success and retention. Although students at each university had similar perceptions of the importance of social support and friendships, those at UniSA were less likely to know other students who would be attending the same university. This may reflect the more diverse student body at UniSA, or the fact that the multiple campuses of this university make it less likely that students will know someone unless they are studying in a related program. In cases like this, innovative measures may be required to enable friendship groups to form.

Institutions can find many issues to address from this study and make fundamental changes with minimal costs. Many of the concerns students raised about preparing for university relate to basic communication issues around critical items such as enrolment, the understanding of university terms and obtaining basic course and institution information. These are not unreasonable issues for students to be concerned with and neither are they particularly difficult for institutions to resolve if the need is perceived and the will to act is present. Students should be able to arrive at university on their first day with a clear understanding of what the university experience will be like and the transition they will have to make to enjoy it fully. The days when universities were mysterious places where the intellectual elite resided passed long ago (Palmer, 2010, personal communication).

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