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Citation (please note it is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from this work)

**Money, J, Nixon, S, Tracy, FE, Hennessy, C, Ball, E and Dinning, T (2017)
Undergraduate student expectations of university in the United Kingdom:
What really matters to them? Cogent Education, 4. ISSN 2331-186X**

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Received: 26 October 2016
Accepted: 28 February 2017

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CURRICULUM & TEACHING STUDIES | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Undergraduate student expectations of university in the United Kingdom: What really matters to them?

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Abstract: Students spend 12 to 14 years in school settings learning in what could be considered a carefully controlled and structured environment. Higher education may not offer the same landscape to students and it appears that many enter with unrealistic conceptions of what is expected of them and are faced with different approaches to aspects of teaching, learning and assessment. This qualitative study explores the perceptions of second-year and final-year students in relation to their expectations whilst studying at university. Focus groups were used across two programmes in one university faculty to ascertain student expectations and what they perceived as important. From the thematic analysis, four areas were highlighted by the students as key to the transition into university these were directed time, non-directed time, support and relationships. Overall these students were positive about the university experience and the levels of support offered to them, particularly noting that working in peer learning groups (PLGs) was beneficial. Issues were raised around the timetabling of face-to-face contact time and the value of the experience and this is an area that needs further research as is understanding the complexity of the students' lives outside of the institution.

Subjects: Development Studies, Environment, Social Work, Urban Studies; Communication Studies; Education

Keywords: transition; student expectations; student support; student relationships; directed and non-directed time

1. Introduction

Undergraduate students' expectations of university in the United Kingdom may have an impact on the way they learn and their success and satisfaction within higher education. However, these

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

The authors of this paper all work within one Faculty in a UK university and are interested in the pedagogy of teaching and learning and utilising research to develop and enhance the student experience. This paper is part of a larger-scale project which set out to explore the different elements of student perceptions around the Higher Education experience. The overall aim is the enhancement of practice where we as staff, informed by current student thinking, aim to deliver a curriculum and learning experience that is in balance with student expectations whilst also ensuring that we challenge and open up learning possibilities to allow for growth and development.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Understanding the expectations of students in relation to their university experience is crucial if we are to develop and enhance the overall engagement and experience for both staff and students. There is an array of international literature on the first-year experience and this paper utilises the voices of second and final-year students in one UK University to help develop staff's understanding of what students want and need from their time in higher education. Through the exploration of students' ideas around contact and non-contact time in university we hope to offer a viewpoint about their expectations whilst offering potential strategies to close any gaps that might exist.

expectations may not be realistic and if the higher education institutions aren't aware of, nor address students' expectations, they will not be in a position to respond to them accordingly (Voss, Gruber, & Szmigin, 2007). Where these expectations are not met the students may fail, withdraw or not engage fully with their course of study (Byrne et al., 2012). This can be compounded by issues around the differences between student and staff expectations of the first-year university experience (Borghi, Mainardes, & Silva, 2016). There are often differences between students' expectations and their initial experiences in university life and the course they are studying (Leese, 2010), although the literature suggests there appears to be no differences between first and second-year students' expectations of higher education (Kandiko & Mawer, 2013).

The perceived quality of education has been found to be closely aligned with students' expectations and values about their programme of study (Telford & Masson, 2005). Students' expectations of higher education are influenced by the type of university and the course they are studying, as they attempt to align their course with "their perceived abilities, interests and personalities" (Byrne et al., 2012, p. 136). In the UK, post 1992 institutions have an even greater issue of addressing student expectations, as working class students tend towards these types of university and generally stay in the family home as they study, believing they will "fit in" life at university (Leese, 2010), which may result in a different perceived experience.

According to Phinney, Dennis, and Osorio (2006), there are a number of reasons why a student chooses to attend university and these may affect academic engagement in a variety of ways. Influences on the choice to attend university were found to be related to social aspects, career prospects and the chance to move away from home and extension of learning. The Phinney et al. (2006) study found that making friends was low on the priority list of students, nevertheless, university was seen for those under 21 to be a place for social contact. Lowe and Cook (2003) claimed that although incoming students expected to have a varied, exciting and active social lives, it did not appear to be the main reason for them attending university.

In a more recent study, Balloo, Pauli, and Worrell (2015) found that improving career prospects was the most important reason for attending university, with this being affected by the students' gender; age group; caring responsibilities; application route; fee status and whether English was their first language. Moreover, students' expectation of what will happen at university has been found to differ depending on their demographic status. Those who have caring responsibilities saw university as a break from these responsibilities and gave them opportunities for change in the future. Whatever their reasons for attending university, it is likely that students' expectations will affect their performance, attendance as well as their likelihood to drop out and overall satisfaction (Lobo & Gurney, 2014).

This study is based on a two-year project being run in one department in a UK university where a group of staff have been working together to establish student expectations of higher education over the life-cycle of a degree. From experience, the research group believe there have been changes in students' attitudes and engagement in university academic life created by policy changes, such as the introduction of student fees, increase in vocational qualifications and young people staying in education or training until the age of 18. The overarching research objective was to examine second and final-year students' expectations of studying at university. Most of the literature on student expectations is based on the first-year experience and their transition into higher education. This study is therefore unique in the sense that the authors asked second and final-year students about their expectations as the authors considered that they'd had an opportunity, over a year or two, to reflect on their expectations, thus making their views richer and more sophisticated. The study took place at the beginning of the academic year, in order that students could reflect on their own expectations when they were entering higher education and also address the feeling that they had currently as they entered the next level of their programme.

2. Theory and hypothesis

Undertaking in-depth research is crucial in advancing knowledge in higher education (Cleary, Walter, & Jackson, 2014) and this study adopted a qualitative approach, through the use of focus groups, to gather student perceptions of university life and experiences. The focus groups were generally based around Peer Learning Groups (PLGs), who had a common purpose and interest about the degree programme on which they were studying. The students were able to interact with each other, and offered thoughts and feelings based on other people's viewpoints, coming to a consensus about an issue, thus making the researcher more of a facilitator rather than an interviewer. Two separate subject areas from one university faculty were approached to be involved in the study. A purposive sampling methodology was utilised to ensure a spread of groups across the two subjects at second and final year. Both year groups were chosen to ascertain if perceptions changed as the student progressed through the course about the expectations at the start of the university journey.

The sampling strategy aimed to access a range of students from each course. There were eight focus groups carried out in total, where there was a mixed gender in six groups (there were two groups that were female only) and there were between five and ten students in each focus group.

2.1. Ethics

The authors of this paper teach on the courses central to this study. To avoid any issues in relation to power imbalances in those relationships, the focus groups were facilitated across programmes and each researcher ran a focus group on the programme that was not their own. The research was granted full university ethical approval. All students received participant information sheets, were verbally briefed about the project, including their right to withdraw at any time, and asked to sign consent forms.

2.2. Data collection

Data collection took place over the period of four weeks, where two focus groups from the two programmes at each level (making eight focus groups in total) were carried out. Each focus group lasted between 45 min and one hour and the questions were focused on the following areas; prior learning at sixth form; expectations and transition to university as well as being a student and their practices. All focus groups were recorded using a dictaphone in agreement with the individuals with the findings subsequently transcribed.

3. Findings and discussion

3.1. Directed time

Directed time was considered to be the actual face-to-face contact with lecturers in either large lectures, seminars, PLG or one-to-one tutorials. All the students involved in the focus groups were on programmes which had around two days of face-to-face contact per week. However, the idea that students were only in for two days a week was different to their previous experience of education and some expressed that they wanted to operate in hours that were similar to that of the school day.

A mature student stressed the point that:

I would like to have three blocks in the day and feel that I've achieved something and been productive. That's what I like as a learner. (Level 6 education student)

This comment aligns with the findings of Kandiko and Mawer (2013) who found that students in their study wanted more interaction with teaching staff both in the classroom situation and beyond and that "students expected to spend more time on campus either in lectures or working with other students" (Leese, 2010, p. 247).

Within the findings of this research, there was a timetabling debate; were classes best timetabled together in a concentrated few days or spread over a week? The majority of the students from both programmes wanted the two days of contact to be blocked together. However, a minority felt this caused disengagement for the rest of the week. Even within the same degree courses, there was disagreement in the timetabling of directed time.

9–5 pm on a Monday and Tuesday in year 1 was far too long, I prefer to have 2 to 3 h a day, otherwise you are too tired. (Level 6 sport student)

Whereas another argued that:

I'm motivated to attend uni. 2 or 3 times a week and the days of lectures to be longer as this frees up time to do other things on the days you are not in. (Level 6 sport student)

A student explained that this feeling of being “part time” was compounded by the short academic year and the long summer break:

It's a bit of a doss. I mean you are in for 6 months and then off for 6 months. (Level 6 sport student)

Students felt that there should be a greater amount of face-to-face contact and somehow fees were not justified because of the low contact time, and there were comments, such as;

When there are pointless lectures, you think, I spent £4 to get there! (Level 5 sport student)

I was as so surprised by the small amount of contact, £9, 000 and only in two days a week. (Level 6 education student)

Both programmes within the research were based on a campus located five miles out of the city centre and the issue of travel to lectures was raised by all the year groups. The issue of paying £20 (out of a budget of for example; £50) for weekly travel was raised by the level 6 education students:

Why isn't there a free bus available? There are lots of government cuts and they don't appreciate how hard it is for students, and they don't appreciate the struggle. (Level 6 education student)

The findings of Kandiko and Mawer (2013, p. 23) stated that while students “reflected on the relative value of their educational experience in comparison to their financial input through tuition fees”, some still questioned “is it worth it” in light of their financial investment.

A sport student in this research highlighted “pointless lectures”, and the demotivation it may cause.

Pointless lectures are so de-motivating, and then when you miss 4 or 5, then you end up missing one that is very important. (Level 5 sport student)

In the findings, the issue of attendance at lectures was a feature, with students choosing which they attended, which was different to the expectations that they had from their sixth form studies. Sixth form studies in the UK is between the ages of 16–18 years, this can either be in a school or in a sixth form college. One student reported:

We were told at [sixth form] college that we would need to attend all lectures but some lectures are pretty pointless. (Level 6 sport student)

A study by Lowe and Cook (2003, p. 74) highlighted the “rigidity and formality” that first-year students had experienced in their previous schools/colleges set the tone for what they expected, where 57% of their incoming students, on arrival, expected a similar teaching and learning situation to the one they experienced in sixth form education.

I don't think I was prepared for uni. I came from school and the work is nowhere near as demanding at school [...] you're baby fed [...] everything is given to you on a plate[...] here it's independent learning, it's all off your own back[...]the main thing I've learnt from university was responsibility for my own learning. (Level 5 sport student)

3.2. Non-directed time

In the category of non-directed time, the authors included everything that students experience outside of contact time and programmed activities. This related to independent study; paid work; leisure time and voluntary work and domestic arrangements.

3.2.1. Independent study

Managing and learning to manage independent study time has a direct impact on the perceived quality of the students' learning experience in higher education (Green, 2014). It was clear from this study that when students were not in direct contact with their tutors, they did not conceptualise that in the remaining time not a university, they were expected to study independently. For example, the following two comments highlight this:

Lecturers expect you to sack off all your social time and read 40 h a week do work. Lecturers think you've got loads of time to do stuff. (Level 6 sport student)

We were told something ridiculous like we were supposed to be doing 30–40 h per week. As a fresher coming in this was mind-blowing how would you do that? (Level 6 sport student)

It is clear from the focus groups that there is a difference between what students expect to do in relation to workload, depending on their academic experience prior to university, with many students outlining the expectation of an increased workload (Cook & Leckey, 1999; Leese, 2010). Two second-year sports students, who attended Sixth Form College (an institution where students study between the ages of 16–18 years), both felt they made the transition in terms of workload better than their counterparts who came to university straight from school sixth form, claiming that:

I think if I'd come straight from school, rather than sixth form College, I'd have struggled [...] the workload at college was harder than it was at uni. (Level 5 sport student)

Another sport student in the same focus group agreed that the challenges in terms of workload for students straight from school is greater than those who have come to university via Sixth Form College.

I went to college where I just got hammered with the workload [...] coming to uni, the workload probably isn't as daunting. (Level 5 sport student)

Additionally, the authors were also interested in finding out where the students carried out their independent study. They had varying views on the learning spaces that they used. For example, some liked working at home, whereas others did not; some liked quiet, while others did not. The library was found to be popular, although more open spaces and group tables within this facility were cited as preferable. However, the choice of area in which to work may relate to the type of activity that the students were working on, for example,

If it is gritty academic work then you need somewhere quiet. (Level 5 sport student)

3.2.2. *Paid and voluntary work, leisure time and domestic arrangements*

Many of the students were balancing paid work with their academic studies and therefore needed to have their timetable early on in the academic year as paid work had to fit around this. Furthermore, many students have to work to cover the additional costs over and above their student loan. The majority of the students from both programmes, both mature students and younger students, had paid work.

Living away from home [...] I got a coaching job [...] it taught me how to manage time.
(Level 5 sport student)

Another level 5 sport student claimed that it is impossible to put in the number of independent study hours that university expected, where one hour of face-to-face teaching equates to four hours of independent study.

That's impossible with a part time job. (Level 5 sport student)

This view remained the same with a level 6 sport student who recognised that:

The workload is difficult and when you've got to work to live as well, it's hard. Hobbies and volunteer work as well, I was expecting it to be more structured, I knew it wasn't going to be like [sixth form] college, but I didn't expect this. (Level 6 sport student)

Leisure time and voluntary work were seen to be difficult to combine with other activities in non-directed work. Within the sport student focus groups that the issue of voluntary opportunities was raised. Students outlined that it was hard to fit these obligations in if students already had paid employment:

We picked this course because we're interested in sport, yet they expect us to drop everything to get the degree, can't we do the two? (Level 6 sport student)

3.2.3. *Domestic arrangements*

The students in this study have different domestic experiences related to their choice of staying at home or moving away. One student who chose to move away stated that:

I have to manage time, cooking and domestics, then getting to university on time. (Level 5 sport student)

Whereas a student who chose to stay at home explained that the:

Transition to university wasn't difficult as I was living at home. (Level 5 education student)

3.3. *Support*

Discussions with the students focused on the fact that they often felt in need of support from the university, such as academic support; financial support and employability support.

3.3.1. *Academic support*

Students from both programmes acknowledged that support was available in different areas such as through their Personal Learning Groups (similar to Tutor Groups with one member of staff and between 10–15 fellow students from the same programme), centralised workshops (for example, the use of SPSS, NVivo and other appropriate software packages) and the use of Academic Skills Tutors. The authors also found that students were often unaware of some of the help and support that was available to them:

A big thing for me was getting the support that I didn't know that I could have. I had support from Student Advice and Wellbeing, panic attacks in level 5 saw me ready to throw it all in. I was always asking [name provided] for help (Level 6 education student).

From the same group came the following comment:

I need support in managing my time in the independent project. The [hand in date] is April, so I'll need to have support to keep on task throughout that time. Normally assignments last a month in terms of prep, I'll need support in terms of pace, motivation and managing time. (Level 6 education student)

Within this study, students also expressed a desire for additional academic support based around the assessment period, where exams were a source of anxiety for most students and additional support was required around this time.

I'm not good at exams, so I thought this course would be better [...] then they sprung exams on us [...] if things change the following year then it's very misleading, I definitely needed help! (Level 6 sport student)

Students also felt they had difficulty with referencing, reading academically and delivering presentations. Lizzio and Wilson (2013) claim that those students most in need of support at university, are the ones that are least likely to source it.

This was echoed from a level 6 sport student who claimed:

I know loads of students that dropped out in years 1 and 2 because they came for feedback and for some reason didn't get it [...] other staff are better at it though. (Level 6 sport student)

This applies directly to the perception by many students that higher education institutions place a great value on "students' independence" in learning and for those who seek guidance may perceive themselves as "failures" (Lizzio & Wilson, 2013, p. 111).

In this research, most students believed that assessments were clustered in terms of submission timings and therefore support for time management was required. Some students claim that staff are unaware of other assessments outside of their own module. For example, a final-year education student emphasised that:

They don't understand the complexities and what staff have to realise is that [the assessment plan] doesn't always work when you are on the receiving end of it. (Level 6 education student)

A final point regarding academic support, from the view of the education students, was that "Induction" appeared to be only a focus for level 4 students entering university. Such support in terms of "induction" should also be included at the beginning of each academic year as it helps students to regain their pace, motivation and understand the expectation of students for each level.

There's a big jump from first to second year, I asked for feedback and support from [name supplied] he did give it to me, it was so helpful. (Level 6 education student)

3.3.2. Financial support

In terms of financial support some students claimed to be struggling to support themselves with the student loan, where students often ran out of money six weeks after they'd received their loan.

Financially I need support. The allowance doesn't even cover the rent. (Level 5 education student)

You get given money but it's not enough to live on. (Level 6 sport student)

My student finance still hasn't come through at the beginning of the year, I've worked all summer, but I've got to the point where I think, should I put petrol in the car to come over here [to the campus] or should I do an extra day's work? (Level 6 sport student)

Students in this study did not appear to be aware of who to contact or the support that is available if they are experiencing financial difficulty. As mentioned previously, the cost of travel to the Campus (five miles out of the city) had to be balanced against perceived "value for money". The work of Lowe and Cook (2003) also found that the 45% of students were experiencing financial difficulties while studying at university. Arguably the situation is more likely to be greater now, some 13 years later, as university fees have risen and the student loans have reduced.

3.3.3. Employability support

Another area in which students required support was advice about employment. Some students, particularly those who, upon graduation, wanted to enter the teaching profession, believed that specific advice needed to be timed carefully to align with external applications, particularly for vocational careers.

I think now that I want to apply for teacher training. I think there is no support for this. We have only heard about this last Friday and the applications are in next week. I think there should be some more support with next steps. (Level 6 sport student)

This support was considered to be a requirement at every level to give a constant message about graduate employability. According to Kandiko and Mawer (2013, p. 9), the "primary purpose for students entering higher education was to improve their career prospects and as a pathway for career enhancement". While the students in their research did not necessarily focus on financial gains, but more on the interest associated with a graduate job, students addressed the need for additional extracurricular activities, often beyond the degree, to enhance their experiences for future employment.

This fact was echoed by a student in this research who stated that:

We needed a lecture in the second year on employability and what to do if we wanted to become a teacher or other graduate jobs too. (Level 6 education student)

3.4. Relationships

In the focus groups, the authors explored which relationships were important for students, and what their expectations had been in comparison to their early experiences at university. Relationships built with other students and with the staff were both highly valued and developed particularly within the PLG environment:

PLGs are great, my friends at other universities don't have these [...] it's your time to be with the lecturer. (Level 6 sport student)

Research carried out by Hughes and Smail (2014, p. 10) during the induction period of university, found that at this stage the students do not have "academic concerns", but a preoccupation with settling into the social side of their course, this includes both professional relationships with their

fellow students, as well as staff on the programme. First-year students, in their study, believed that being part of a social group and making friends in induction was vital, and that being alone was not at all helpful to their future progress on the course.

You're always nervous on the first day, anyway, but once you get to know everyone, it's fine. (Level 5 sport student)

A level 6 education student summed up the social experience from a more macro level with the comment that:

Student life is a mixture of social and educational experiences...a holistic experience. (Level 6 education student)

A peer mentoring project had been trialled within the programmes in this research and this was found to be a useful source of support. One level 5 sport student stated that:

It's hearing it from the students themselves, they know best [...] lecturers and teachers might have a degree but might not have that experience fresh in their mind. (Level 5 sport student)

A recommendation made by key authors in this field (Kandiko & Mawer, 2013; Lowe & Cook, 2003) was for peer mentoring to be a direct intervention by the HE institution to support new students.

While peer support was identified most positively in this study, there were some students who perceived that cliques had been developed early on in the first year. Mature students often felt isolated in the PLGs as their needs and common interests were different to that of the rest of the often younger cohort.

We found the social side difficult, we stood out as "older students" and the events put on for the mature students were not well attended. Life as a student isn't about being social. (Level 6 education students)

PLGs were used on both programmes in this research and they were very viewed in a positive light, and in some cases the PLG Tutor was key in terms of professional relationships. Interestingly, some students had not expected to have any professional working relationships with staff prior to coming to university.

They are not as strict as expected, and offer more help than expected [...] I hadn't expected a relationship with any staff. (Level 6 sport student)

However, students did acknowledge that some staff did not understand how they felt and emphasised their own experiences that were not the same as theirs.

I feel like some lecturers go off their own experiences. The academic staff forget that we don't understand [...] some will break it down, some won't help just because they're clever and don't understand. (Level 6 sport student)

However, despite these students concerns, they were mostly positive about their relationships with members of staff, particularly personal tutors with whom they felt were essential for support both face-to-face, on the telephone and via email.

Stern, but helpful [...] points us in the right direction. (Level 6 sport student)

In the research carried out by Leese (2010, p. 245), she found that students' expectations of staff varied from "laid back" to "very knowledgeable" to the extreme "dull", although the students according to Leese accepted that they would have to deal with the latter in order to gain a good

degree. Research by Lowe and Cook (2003, p. 72) also found disappointing results, as 35% did not view the staff at their university “helpful or friendly” and 41% did not see the staff as “sympathetic and reassuring”. While there weren’t comments made in this research about students’ expectations of staff, one particular comment was made:

There’s an unfair balance across the board [in terms of the support that staff give to students]. I don’t know where I’d be without [name supplied], she doesn’t ‘baby’ us, but points us in the right direction, that’s helpful. (Level 6 sport student)

5. Conclusion

In the United Kingdom, alignment of both university and student expectations is crucial to overall satisfaction and ultimately success, however, this is a multi-faceted dynamic with conflicting outcomes at times. Understanding what is important and what matters to students is one way of closing the expectation gap and by allowing students to settle into the university and then asking them to reflect back may allow a clearer picture of how these expectations emerge. This study therefore adopted a strategy of exploring with students their expectations of university after they had been in the institution for over a year. The results indicated that there was a whole variety and breadth of expectations from both programmes and these were similar across the two-year groups. It was positive to find that students enter university with the view of having the chance of a new start and the opportunity to build skills and knowledge. On the whole students found the university to be a welcoming environment which built good relationships with staff and each other; both of which were important to them in the early stages.

The issues of how the programme timetable was structured were debated and no common consensus was found, although the majority thought that a blocked timetable allowed them the flexibility to build in their other commitments. The rationale for the timetabling of face-to-face activities is varied and there is much debate on the perceived “value for money” of the students degree programme coupled with the cost of transport to the campus. This issue around the value placed on lectures by students was discussed, this is very problematic area which needs further research. The discussion around non-directed time highlighted the complexity of students’ lives and the different factors they are trying to juggle while also studying. The authors were not surprised to find that many students need to balance their commitment to academic work with undertaking paid work to support themselves financially as well as continuing family commitments and social activities that are integral to university life. Independent work is significantly different from what students will have experienced at school. This could be a key discussion point between staff and students throughout the first year at university to explore ways of managing time to support study.

In terms of student support it seems that at this university, academic staff need to do more about connecting students to what is available to them and signpost more clearly the support services. Students were initially unaware of the other support available to them outside of their academic timetable, such as Student Advice and Wellbeing services. Unsurprisingly relationships with peers and tutors came out as important and highly valued where working in PLGs was seen as a positive support mechanism across all groups.

In the ever-evolving world of Higher Education, it is critical that academic staff constantly appraise and evaluate their practices in-line where possible with student expectations and needs. These initial findings have helped us to plan and revise their approaches to Open Days; Applicant Days; induction and transition activities as well as considering pedagogic approaches and curriculum design.

Funding

The authors received no direct funding for this research.

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Citation information

Cite this article as: Undergraduate student expectations of university in the United Kingdom: What really matters to them?, Julie Money, Sarah Nixon, Fran Tracy, Claire Hennessy, Emma Ball & Track Dinning, *Cogent Education* (2017), 4: 1301855.

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