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Article

Mind the gap! Students' expectations and early experiences of higher education

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Abstract

This paper presents outcomes of a research project which explored the correlation between Level 4 students' expectations of what higher education might be like, and their early experiences of it. A focus group of students enrolled on different programmes in the School of Art and Design at LJMU revealed that there was generally close alignment between their expectations and experiences appertaining to the subject matter of their programme; however, disparities existed in several other areas. Some of these related to their course, such as pace of learning and personal tutoring, but most were associated with the wider higher education experience. The paper discusses these in the context of wider research on retention, and concludes with recommendations for addressing the disparities.

Keywords

student expectations; student experience; retention; student belonging; student transition; creative arts; first year experience

Introduction

Over recent years, issues around student retention have come under significant scrutiny – both within individual institutions and across the wider context of the higher education sector. This attention is to be welcomed given, for example, Thomas (2012) found that around 40 per cent of students in the UK think about withdrawing during their first year.

This project sought to glean an understanding of the experiences of students during the early stages of their first year, and to identify issues, which might prompt them to consider leaving during the first weeks in, what, is for many students, a very new and unfamiliar environment. The project researched both how Level 4 students established expectations of what their course and the wider higher education environment might be like, and how closely – or otherwise – their early experiences of university aligned with those expectations. The aim was to identify where discrepancies occurred, and propose strategies to close any such gaps.

Funding was secured to recruit two student interns. Their role was to facilitate focus groups with Level 4 students in the School of Art and Design at LJMU. The focus groups were to be held halfway through the first semester, a point at which it was considered students would have had sufficient experience of their course to make initial judgements about it, and a point by when some may be re-evaluating their decision to study that programme, or even to enter higher education in the first place. The ambition was to include the four principle programmes: Architecture, Fashion, Fine Art and Graphic Design and Illustration.

Significantly, there was close alignment between students' expectations and experiences of the subject matter of their programme. However, whilst some

disparities existed which related to their course, such as pace of learning and personal tutoring, most were associated with the wider higher education experience, such as clarity of communication, identifying with their teachers, and other support networks. Therefore, whilst the research focused on art, architecture and design programmes, the outcomes and recommendations are also applicable to students across other disciplines and faculties.

Background

Research literature identifies some correlations between students' expectations and experiences in higher education. Harrison (2006) reports on a survey of students who withdrew during their first year of study, focusing in part on the negative experiences they reported during their time at the university; "course not as expected" was the most frequently cited. In 2016, the annual *Student Academic Experience Survey* by HEPI-HEA (Neves and Hillman, 2016) found that the strongest correlation to student satisfaction was whether student expectations were met or exceeded. However, the results also showed that students' experiences rarely matched their expectations exactly, indicating the challenge for undergraduates to obtain fully formed and realistic expectations of what university would be like.

Lobo and Gurney (2014) suggest that as well as their overall satisfaction and engagement, students' unmet expectations – some of which develop long before commencing their studies – can negatively affect retention. They identify such expectations as concerning: course content, workload, interactions with teachers and with other students, study time and feedback arrangements.

In a study looking at students who left university early, Christie et al. (2004) argue that in addition to considering what

information decisions over where and what to study are based on is the need to look at the experiences of students once enrolled, due to a gap between students' knowledge of higher education and their experiences of it. Reinforcing this point, the UCAS (2016) survey of undergraduate applicants revealed that 85 percent admitted that transition, of which early experiences form a fundamental part, was a significant challenge.

The *UK Engagement Survey* (Neaves, 2016) investigated different aspects of student engagement, and found that one of the main drivers behind lower engagement among first years was a lack of interaction with staff. Of particular relevance to this study, however, was that higher levels of interaction with staff were evident in creative arts and architecture programmes.

In one of the most significant projects on retention in recent years, Thomas (2012) concludes that students' sense of belonging in higher education is critical to improving retention. She claims that this sense of belonging depends upon: supportive peer relations, meaningful interaction with staff, and developing their knowledge, confidence and identity in an experience that is relevant to their interests and future goals. Furthermore the second phase of this project, which sought to develop an understanding of how to implement change, recognises that there is no panacea for interventions to improve student retention and success; and that greater effectiveness is achieved through understanding the context at a discipline, cohort and module level as well as that of the institution (Thomas et al., 2017).

Universities UK (2016) also highlight that interventions to increase the sense of student belonging (Thomas 2012) are significant at the local level and require academics to deliver more inclusive and engaging experiences, but stress that the exact type of intervention matters less than

the way in which it is offered and what it aims to achieve. Although aimed more specifically at the role universities can play in reducing inequality, a recent University Alliance report (Hooper, 2016) recommends that universities identify and track the strategies and actions which work to improve the impact of retention activities. This study sought to contribute to that understanding, and to focus this at the local context of disciplines and cohorts.

Methodology

Of the different qualitative research methods, focus groups are particularly appropriate for ascertaining people's views and perceptions (Litosseliti, 2003), facilitating an understanding about why they feel the way they do (Bryman, 2012). They can generate ideas (Krueger and Casey, 2000), for the purposes of devising improvements to students' learning (Breen, 2006). Whilst focus groups have potential weaknesses, such as perceptions being created within the group and analysis misinterpreting emphasis (Flemming, 1986; Litosseliti, 2003; Svensson and Theman, 1983), on balance it was considered the most appropriate research method. They were favoured over questionnaires and one-to-one interviews as participants can share and compare experiences, and for the potential to stimulate debate; furthermore, the cohorts are already surveyed extensively through questionnaires, and it was considered advantageous to use an alternative method.

The project was submitted to, and approved by, the University's Ethics Committee. Students were then invited to participate via an email sent to each of the cohorts. Random selection was considered, but it was thought that students attending of their own volition would be more likely to freely express their views. The email outlined the aims of the project, and what would be

involved in participating. The Participant Information Sheet was attached, confirming: the purpose of the study, that participation was voluntary and that participants could leave at any time, what participants would do, any risks and benefits of being involved, that participation and contributions would be confidential, and what would happen to the results of the study.

The emails did not elicit much response, so the Principal Investigator (PI) visited each of the cohorts during a studio teaching session to canvass for participants. The original proposal was to hold four focus groups – one for each of the programmes involved; however, due to the small number of volunteers (despite the offer of a £10 Amazon voucher each) it was decided to hold one focus group with a mix of students from the different programmes. In the end this transpired to be a positive outcome. Although less volume of qualitative data were obtained, it meant that participants from each programme shared and compared their expectations and experiences; consequently, the dialogue was very rich.

The focus group was facilitated by two student interns, recruited from the Level 5 Architecture cohort. Merton et al. (1990) found that people revealed sensitive information when they felt they were in a comfortable environment. Students have described feeling more empathy when talking with other students (Smith, 2013), and having student facilitators meant that any academic power dynamic was removed from the discussion. The PI met with the interns ahead of the focus group to go through the structured questioning route (devised during the ethics application), discuss the aims and objectives of the session, and outline the protocols of focus group discussions – such as confidentiality and the participants' right to withdraw.

The group met during Directed Study Week – the seventh week of the students' first semester. On a practical level this enabled a slot to be found when students from different programmes could all attend as there was no timetabled teaching. Significantly, it also came at a time when students should have formed sufficient early impressions of their course and, crucially, Thomas (2012) found that students are particularly likely to consider leaving during their first semester. The PI was in attendance when the group met to outline the objectives of the session, distribute the reward vouchers and collect the signed Participant Consent forms. He then left until the session finished and the group had dispersed.

The focus group was composed of eight students from three programmes: Architecture (four), Fashion (one) and Graphics (three); there were no volunteers from the Fine Art programme. The gender mix was four female and four male. The intern facilitators reported that it was a lively discussion, which lasted for approximately one hour and fifteen minutes. The interns were provided with a copy of the recording, from which they transcribed the discussion; they also wrote a synoptic analysis of their own perceptions of the discussion in the context of the project's objectives.

After an in-depth reading and repeated re-reading of the transcript, key themes emerging from the dialogue were identified (Breen, 2006). In accordance with the principles of grounded theory analysis (Bryman, 2012) each of these themes was ascribed a code. The transcript was then interrogated by applying these codes to individual sections of the discussion. This process of coding enabled related sections of the discussion occurring at various points throughout the transcript to be collated, so that all parts of the discussion relating to each key theme could be analysed collectively. Furthermore, after identifying the themes, the author compared them with the key points raised in the two (until then,

unread) synopses written independently by each of the interns. This triangulation revealed a high degree of correlation between the themes identified by the author and by the interns, giving confidence that they were accurate and comprehensive.

Findings and discussion

There was a notable degree of alignment between the participants' expectations of what the subject matter of their programmes would be like and their early experiences of them. Significantly, where there were disparities these tended to relate to issues such as: the pace of learning, varying levels of engagement across the cohort, managing the transition to independent learning, support networks, and how they would be assessed. The following summary of the findings is structured under the themes established by the coded analysis, starting with how the participants constructed expectations about their programme and the context of higher education. Questions and comments by the intern facilitators are in italics.

Gleaning expectations

A recent UCAS (2016) survey of undergraduate applicants in the 2015 admissions cycle revealed that 91 per cent reported visiting at least one university before applying to or starting a course, and two-thirds had made between two and five visits; irrespective of the number visited, the majority of applicants said they would have found more useful – the two main barriers to this being time and cost. This emphasises the significant importance of open days in helping applicants discover more about their future place of study.

The participants were generally very positive about their engagement with LJMU during the application process. Those who had been to an Applicant Day at LJMU were very positive about them, and compared them favourably with their experiences at other universities.

> [Q] "Did any of you come to any… erm LJMU organised applicant days; they're normally like February or March time?"
>
> *Every one of them.*
>
> *Yeah, very welcoming, very welcoming.*
>
> *I went to the [institution redacted] one as well… pff. Snobs.*
>
> *Mine, it was my insurance as well, but I think the interview process, and like the way that went, and it was a really positive experience, made me wanna come here more.*

Interestingly, it was highlighted that their experiences of contact with universities during the application process had a significant influence on their perceptions of that institution – in both a positive and negative light. Factors ranged from being kept on hold during telephone calls, to whether or not they were communicating with a member of the course team they were applying to. Again, LJMU compared favourably with other institutions in this respect:

> *I'm not from U.K. and erm, I only emailed uni, actually a lot of unis and from Liverpool John Moores, they were most like friendliest people I met over emails, so that's what made me choose … 'cause it feels like you're talking to like someone who is actually from your course.*

The quality of university websites was raised in the context of gleaning information but interestingly this was only mentioned very briefly, and by just one participant. It did not generate any significant discussion from which observations or conclusions can be drawn.

The participants also discussed the value of a student who used to attend their college, and who was studying the course that they were interested in, coming back to the college to give a talk; they highlighted that this was a valuable way for prospective

students to learn about their programmes. The fact that it was a student increased their trust in what they had to say, as opposed to a teacher who they felt might be biased:

> *I feel like they should push for that more, like even just for local colleges or whatever 'cause it is really beneficial.*

This suggests a potential recruitment opportunity, and a strategy to manage prospective students' expectations of both specific programmes and their wider understanding of the context of higher education. In a case study undertaken for the QAA, teachers from Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) engaged with one of their local feeder colleges (Prowse, 2016). In the project's first phase MMU staff visited the college, to better understand the educational experiences of the students before university; in the second phase college students visited MMU, with the aim being to learn about their perceptions of the learning and teaching practices. Similarly, a recent University Alliance report (Hooper, 2016) recommended that universities develop partnerships with schools to nurture access. Significantly, however, the participants suggested that involving current students in this process might be more meaningful than having teachers do it.

Early experiences

Discussion around participants' early experiences included comments about their course being largely what they expected, that it was interesting and enjoyable, and that they were generally coping quite well. However, there were some respects in which they voiced discrepancies with what they expected. Interestingly, these generally did not refer to the content or subjects that they were working on in relation to their programme, suggesting a high degree of alignment between what they expected to be learning and what was being taught. There

was only one instance where a participant expressed concern that their lectures appeared to have nothing to do with the essay they had been set.

A number of participants expressed the view that the pace of their course was slower than they expected, much slower in one case. One participant described their experience as being very controlled; others described being bored for the first four weeks because the ground being covered was already well known to them:

> *My course isn't what I expected it to be like at all, it's a lot slower than I anticipated it to being.*

During the discussion participants insightfully reasoned that issues over pace were due to bringing their peers from different backgrounds to the same level, and introducing key skills that some had not acquired. This was particularly evident where cohorts contained students from both foundation courses and A-Levels; participants considered those from foundation courses as having a stronger skill set. More extensive use of induction courses was suggested, to help students coming from a broad range of backgrounds learn requisite key skills. There was discussion amongst the participants about teaching sessions on basic skills being voluntary, but they recognised that attendance would likely be a problem, compounding things later when these basic skills were required to be built on.

> *So there is like two sides of it, so I understand why like – why my course is really slow but at the same time I just wish it wasn't.*

Work ethic was another strong discussion point. Participants felt that when students are vocalising that they cannot be bothered to do their work or attend teaching sessions it has a detrimental effect on all the students, causing some to suggest that stronger action should be taken on those

who do not do work or who have poor attendance.

Whilst several participants expressed boredom and frustration at the slow pace of their course, conversely others on a different programme talked about finding it hard and being stressed. One participant described feeling like they had been "thrown in the fire on our first project", but noting that teacher support enabled them to manage. Another thought that after a slow start their course was becoming more fast-paced but that their teachers had not talked about that; there was an expectation that students would keep up, and the participant felt that some on the course were not.

A suggestion made by more than one participant was that they be shown examples of work produced by previous cohorts, so they could better understand what was required of them. Another suggested that students should be encouraged to look at each other's work more through peer reviews, which although had been done they felt more would be beneficial.

> *I'd find it useful to like see examples of… other peoples' work from the same… like last year's submissions for this project kinda so you can get an idea.*

> *Like I would love that.*

One participant said they felt that they were being asked to do things but were not being told what it was for; in one instance this led to having to redo work when they moved to the next stage of the project. This sentiment encapsulates an issue that related to several facets of the discussion about the participants' initial experiences – that there was a perceived lack of communication and explanation.

> *Yeah that – that is one thing I think communication sometimes is a little bit lacking… especially with like oh we're gonna do this but then it's like what's it for?*

Other issues raised as being challenging during their early weeks included homesickness and financial problems. Participants expressed relief that there was less written work than they had expected, such as reports and essays. However, there were participants struggling with essay writing where they had been set it; this is expanded upon below.

Although the focus group took place halfway through the first term, participants felt that they knew very little about the assessment processes on their course, and expressed the desire to understand that. This was more than just wanting to know how to get a good mark; significantly, that was not even mentioned. Whilst they knew their submission date, they did not know how their work was assessed. Although assessment criteria are made clear in Module Guides, the participants said they had not seen any assessment objectives, and that they did not know what they got marked on.

> *They haven't really talked about any like assessments and stuff with my course they've just said like what the date is.*

> *Yeah they don't talk about any of this on our course.*

> [Q] "Do you reckon that'd make you feel like… more comfortable as a first year student as in, you know what's going on?"

> *Yeah! Like – I would like to know like, who is gonna mark my work, how it's marked, like what I get marks for.*

Thinking of leaving?

The focus group was timed, in part, because it was felt that by the mid-point of the first term some students may be considering leaving their course. When asked, none of the participants said that they have thought about doing so. This does not mean that was the case for certain, as despite the discussion being facilitated by student

interns the participants may not have felt in a sufficiently comfortable environment to reveal that.

Furthermore, it is worth considering that this focus group was recruited through volunteers. This was done to increase engagement and put participants at greater ease. However, it could be reasonably argued that students who volunteer are the ones more likely to be engaged and confident with their course and the wider university environment, and therefore less likely to have considered leaving.

However, it is particularly worthy of note that some participants described knowing people who had thought about leaving, or who they considered looked like they might drop out because of their lack of engagement, by the seventh week.

The transition to higher education

Experiences of the transition to university have a major impact on retention (Wingate 2007); the UCAS (2016) survey of undergraduate applicants revealed that 85 percent admitted that the transition was a significant challenge. Interestingly, the participants considered it to be students from an A-Level background who struggled to adjust in comparison with those from an art foundation background. They identified that higher education was an environment which placed increased emphasis on learning independently, and that not adopting – or being able to adopt – that responsibility could have consequences on students' ability to progress. They also recognised the importance of attendance, in terms of not falling behind with their learning.

> *Like they don't understand that those tutors aren't gonna push you for the work, because either, you're gonna fail, and drop out of the course, and they're not gonna have to deal with*

you, or you're gonna resit the year and they're gonna get paid for it, again, so [laughs]

> *Yeah, I feel like our tutors very much have the opinion of like they can sort of leave us to our own devices – and not push us for work, and then Christmas when everyone gets marked and stuff it's gonna be a massive wake-up call.*

But at the same time, participants placed at least some of the responsibility for this on their teachers.

> *Because, the tutors, it's almost like they've forgotten that… some of us can work independently but like a lot of people are used to being really babied.*

The significance of independent study in contributing to students' engagement is identified by the *UK Engagement Survey* (Neaves, 2016), and therefore these are important skills to be nurtured. Notably, in the *Student Academic Experience Survey* (Neves and Hillman, 2016) one of the specific reasons for students' expectations being met is over support provided to study independently.

In supporting student transition, Wingate (2007) highlights the importance that teachers engage with students in explicit discussion about the learning approaches expected in their discipline. Similarly, Thomas (2012) suggests that students who do not consider leaving are those who have a better understanding of the university processes and are more likely to have a positive relationship with staff and students. Interestingly, the *UK Engagement Survey* (Neaves, 2016) found that one of the main drivers behind lower levels of engagement observed among first year students was the lack of interaction with staff, which suggests this as a potential area for development. However, it is noteworthy that the same report finds higher levels of interaction with staff in Creative Arts and Architecture, which are the programmes in this study, than other courses.

Personal tutoring

Students' engagement with their Personal Tutor varied considerably between participants from different programmes. Some had met their Personal Tutor very early on, others had a short meeting with them during that Directed Study Week, and some had yet to meet them.

No I had a ten minute meeting with my personal tutor yesterday and that was the first time I've spoken to her.

We should have had contact with our personal tutors in the first week!

There was an underlying view held by the majority of the participants that they did not meet their Personal Tutors early enough. The reasoning behind this included situations where problems had arisen but the student concerned had not been able to receive the support and direction that a Personal Tutor might have provided:

Yeah like obviously if like I'd met my personal tutor before… like when all this was going on, then I would have gone to him and been like hey [name omitted] do you know like, who I can go to to speak about this? But I didn't meet him until this week. Didn't know who he was until like two weeks ago so [laughing]

Several participants indicated significant interest in knowing what their teachers had done in terms of work in practice within their discipline, but having not been told this. A variety of reasons were given, including: general interest, to see what they might be doing at the end of their course, and to know who best to ask regarding different aspects of coursework support. Bain (2004) talks about the value of inspiring a fascination in the subject within students by teachers showing their own passions and interests; clearly there is an opportunity here for doing just this.

I would like to know more about the practice of my staff members as well because obviously they've all worked in industry and stuff."

Or they're like 'I've worked in this place' and I'm like show me your work I wanna see it.

Some of the participants suggested that this could be used as a means to assign Personal Tutors, with tutees being assigned to the teachers who most interested them in terms of what they did, as opposed what they perceived as a random allocation. Whilst this might have some merits – and indeed problems – it also suggests that the participants did not comprehend the distinction between the role of the Personal Tutor (providing pastoral support) and that of the academic teacher (providing learning support).

Other support networks

Some areas that the participants felt that they did not receive the support, included time management skills and essay writing.

Yeah, they don't really give you any tips on time management either, I've noticed. They just sort of expect you to know how to do it.

Like our essay, no structure, no nothing, just… there you go there's two random people.

This point raises the issue of support provision that is run outside of programmes. The facilitators, who were Level 5 students, pointed out that the University provides workshops on essay writing; however, although some participants knew of them, it was clear that some had not engaged with them despite an awareness that they lacked essay writing skills. Wingate (2007) argues that the learning to learn aspect of the transition to university is most effective when it is subject specific as opposed to generic, cross-programme support classes which students tend to avoid because they regard them as irrelevant. Furthermore, she argues that to write their essays students need to understand the academic discourse

of their discipline, as well as general conventions.

The participants also raised significant issues they had experienced outside of their course that would be likely to have an influence on retention. Accommodation was one example, which included disagreements over financial responsibilities, problems with landlords or management companies, and conflict between flatmates. Crucially, some participants were not aware that support was provided by the University for this; such lack of awareness about support provision is perhaps not unusual, being echoed in a similar study of student expectations and experiences by Money et al (2016):

> *Yeah… like I wish that there was more support about things like that… like people who're having trouble with their flatmates or something.*

> *There's not, like they don't make it like expressly obvious or they haven't on my course, they haven't said like you can have help with the people who you're living with if you're having issues at home.*

Inevitably, informal support networks existed through social media groups between members of the cohort. In some cases these group chats had started during the summer as a way for people to get to know each other. In many respects these were seen positively, with people being able to seek clarification over assignment and submission requirements, for example. Less positive was that they were being used as an opportunity to moan, or by serial non-attenders to ask what they had missed. This latter point appeared to be a significant issue, raising a lot of discussion within the group; however there appeared to be a degree of self-policing on this issue, where members of the group would stop responding to people doing this on a regular basis.

> *We've had a group chat before the course started, like it got started in summer when people was*

> *getting to know each other kind of thing… and it doesn't have everyone in, but it has most of the group. But a lot of it is just like, did I miss anything important today? 'cause like, as I said, like sometimes half of the course will stay off.*

Also, not all of the cohort were members of the group chat; this may foster a sense of exclusion for those not part of it, and the perception that they are missing out on the conversation. This highlights potential issues where social media groups are established independently by students, as there is no control from a programme or institutional perspective.

Induction icebreakers
The participants talked about a range of events that had been run by their programme during the early part of the term, including a group quiz with free food, a treasure hunt, walking tours of the city, a trip to the beach, and to the park. Some expressed a degree of scepticism over these.

> *Yeah we did a treasure hunt and that was painful!*

> *Yeah, we went- I don't know wh-, and it was like we went to a few places in Liverpool and we were just like walking around and it was- I- I- it just felt… useless. [laughs].*

Thomas (2012) suggests that induction activities should, in particular, facilitate building social relationships with both current students as well as new ones, and also with members of staff. Although the participants' experiences were discussed with good-humoured cynicism, some strategies to encourage a sense of belonging were seen positively.

> *With mine we all had to take a Polaroid and stick them all on the wall so there's like a line of Polaroids of everyone on the course with their names on the bottom.*

Wingate (2007) cautions that poor induction can be reason for decreased retention, such

as students feeling overloaded with information and disorientated by an impersonal environment; she suggests benefit in moving induction sessions out of large lecture spaces toward small group activities hosted by Personal Tutors.

The participants talked about different ways that the cohort could be split into smaller groups. One suggested that it be done based on ability, as opposed to alphabetically, to address the varying skill levels between students from different backgrounds which, as discussed above, led to several them feeling that the pace of the course was too slow. Another participant described how their cohort has been subdivided based on where students were from, so that students from the same college were split between different groups. A participant described how their cohort had been split into four groups, of around twenty students per group; they felt this had a positive impact in terms of their knowing all of the students within their group, however they also wondered if it might have the effect of isolating them from the other three-quarters of the cohort.

There were mixed feelings amongst the participants about group coursework during the first weeks of the term. Some were relieved that they had not been required to work in groups, and others resented being placed in a group where their peers were less willing than them to contribute, feeling that this might have a detrimental impact on their grade. However, participants also recognised the value of early group work, to encourage interaction between peers. One option suggested was that early group work be a structured as a social exercise, as opposed to an assessed element of coursework.

Do you do group work at the start of the course then? You know meeting people and… it would be good to get to know-

Yeah I'd rather not have to rely on people I don't know to do a good grade [laughing] to be honest!

Working whilst at the University

Some participants felt it was not adequately recognised that they had to have employment outside of university. For example, although they acknowledged that studies should take priority, participants expressed the importance of having timetable information sufficiently in advance to enable them to arrange shifts around university commitments, but that this did not happen. This view is supported in a similar study into student expectations and experiences in other disciplines (Money et al 2016). Again, this highlights the need for timely communication.

The only negative thing I – I got which is uhh… just from when a session was gonna be finishing, 'cos uhh I meant be at work on Wednesdays but uh… they were like you shouldn't be working when you're at uni.

Yeah, there's people on my course who skip classes… or won't come in for a day because they've been booked in to work instead. I'm like no it should be the other way round.

Another view expressed was of a lack of appreciation of how hard they worked when both university commitments and employment were combined.

Yeah you get the weekends off and I could be in uni on a Friday until like five o'clock and then have to go to work at nine and do a night shift until six in the morning. So [laughs] it's like no you don't understand how much work I do.

Concluding remarks and recommendations

Concerning the limitations of this study, it must be recognised that the sample size was very small. Although the participants came from three of the key programmes in the

School of Art and Design there were only eight students involved, and one programme was not represented as there were no volunteers from that cohort. However, the outcomes are echoed by strikingly similar findings in other research, across different disciplines (Money et al, 2016), giving confidence to their robustness. Also, identification of the main themes within the transcript was achieved through manual re-reading as opposed to the use of qualitative research software. Whilst triangulation of the PI's analysis with that of the two interns gave confidence in the themes identified, the use of such software might give a more nuanced understanding of the transcript.

Informing expectations

In terms of gleaning an understanding of their course and what university would be like, the participants highlighted the value of Applicant Days. Whilst LJMU's were considered to be a positive experience, and compared favourably with those at other institutions, their impact on students' perceptions should not be underestimated. Participants also talked very positively about a student who used to attend their college, and who was enrolled on the course they wanted to study, coming back to their college to talk to them.

> *Recommendations:*
>
> o Maintain, and consider strengthening, the Applicant Day experience.
> o Consider engagement with feeder schools and colleges, potentially with participation involving current students.

Talking with our students

One of the main perceptions that emerged during the discussion was of a lack of communication between staff and students; this manifested in several different ways.

For example, some participants felt detached from their work, as either it was not what they had expected or wanted to do or, perhaps more significantly, they did not know why they were being asked to do it. Some said that they had not received a brief, or clear instructions of what is expected from them. One felt that their lectures did not relate to essay questions. Also highlighted was not having timetable information to enable them to arrange shifts with employers.

Participants also felt that they should know more about assessment procedures, particularly how their worked is marked. Rather than relying on students reading Module Guides, explanations about this could form part of a studio session, and be structured around examples of work by previous cohorts – which participants also expressed interest in seeing.

Work ethic and ability was also another strong discussion point. Participants from two programmes felt their courses were paced slower than they had anticipated, in contrast to participants from a different programme who felt they were "thrown in fire" on their first project. The former felt some teaching sessions were not relevant to students who had completed a foundation, and as though they were wasting class time on things they could already do; they discerned a divide between students from different entry routes both in ability and how they worked. These points reiterated communication issues that the participants feel exists between students and staff.

> *Recommendations:*
>
> o Consider active sessions that discuss assignment requirements and their assessment procedures.
> o Show examples of previous work to improve understanding of requirements, which could also be linked to discussion about assessment.

o Consider how best to discuss and/or manage different ability levels in the early weeks.

Personal tutoring

One aspect most participants agreed on was a lack of early contact and communication with their Personal Tutors, and student circumstances not being known by Personal Tutors. It could be inferred that greater emphasis on Personal Tutors and welfare could help students settle in quicker, and being able to put a name to a staff member's face would mean they would know where to go if they had problems. This could be facilitated through induction events in the first week.

Recommendations:

o Create an early and strong link between students and Personal Tutors, to make them feel more settled and that there is someone they can speak to.

Wider support networks

Participants said that guidance should be provided on skills such as time management and essay writing; crucially, the university already does this but the participants were not aware it existed or had not engaged with it, even though that support had already been needed. Some participants talked about non-academic problems they had experienced in their first few weeks; when the facilitators told them about Student Advice and Wellbeing, they said that they did not know those support services were available. Of course, this does not mean that such information had not been communicated to students, but it is significant that they did not recall being told it. If such information has been disseminated, then the issue might lie more with the sheer volume of information that students try to absorb during their early

weeks whilst adjusting to a very new environment.

Recommendations:

o Consider discipline-specific support within programmes for skills such as critical reading and essay writing.
o Evaluate the clarity of information being disseminated to new students, and the pace at which it is delivered.
o Ensure that new students are aware of the presence and range of wider support networks across the University.

Induction and building belonging

Although induction events were discussed with some good-humoured cynicism, some strategies to encourage a sense of belonging within the cohort were seen positively, and it was generally recognised that these played an important role. Some participants felt that an assessed group project was detrimental to their experience in the first few weeks, and suggested that unassessed projects be used to introduce them to fellow students.

The participants wanted to learn about what their teachers specialise in and see examples of work they have done related to their discipline. Not only would this motivate them and provide insights into what they could be doing in the future, they would also know who to approach during studio sessions depending on what sort of problem or idea they have. This would be an ideal opportunity to help students identify more with their teachers.

Recommendations:

o Evaluate induction events and non-assessed group work as ways to foster intra-cohort and inter-cohort engagement.
o Consider a 'show and tell' session, possibly during induction week, for

teachers to talk about their own
work.

In terms of their overall early experiences, most of the participants seemed satisfied with the subject matter of their programme, and felt that the university has good, friendly and welcoming staff. However, although none of the participants admitted thinking about leaving their course, they knew other students that had thought about it. As identified above, Thomas (2012) concludes that students' sense of belonging in higher education – critical to improving retention – depends upon: supportive peer relations, meaningful interaction with staff, and developing their knowledge, confidence and identity in an experience that is relevant to their interests and future goals. Clearly, each of the recommendations above can play a role in nurturing students' early experiences of higher education in each of those four dimensions.

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