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Money, J, Tracy, FE, Hennessy, C, Nixon, S and Ball, E (2016) Student Expectations: what is university really about? Innovations in Practice, 10 (2). ISSN 1757-921X

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Student expectations: what is university really about?

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Abstract

Students spend twelve to fourteen years in school learning in a carefully controlled and structured system. It appears that many students enter university with unrealistic conceptions of what is expected of them in many aspects of teaching and learning, including assessment. Hence, when they reach university they are faced with the challenge of adjusting to radically different styles of teaching, learning and assessment. It follows that this lack of preparedness is key reason why students drop out or take longer to complete their studies. To compound the issue, university teachers may not fully appreciate students' expectations and are unable to anticipate and address these in curriculum development and delivery. Therefore, developing a better understanding of students' perceptions, expectations and experiences is crucial to being able to deliver programmes of study that support students in the transition from school to university and as they move through their university life. This paper explores the perceptions of Level 5 and Level 6 students on two LJMU programmes in the Faculty of Education, Health and Community with the overarching aim to investigate key aspects of the student experience relating to induction, support and transition. By exploring students' ideas around key areas we hope to be able to better understand what the student expectation is and identify strategies to bridge any gap that exists between staff and student beliefs.

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Keywords

Transition, student expectations, student support, student relationships, directed and non-directed time

Please cite this paper as:

Money, J., Tracy, F., Hennessy, C., Nixon, S. and Ball, E. (2016) 'Student expectations: what is university really about?' in *Innovations in Practice*, 10 (2): xx-xx



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Student expectations

Over the past two years we have been working together as a group of staff who are interested in student expectations of university before they arrive and in the early stages of their life at university. As a group we have many years of experience of teaching undergraduate students on a variety of programmes. We felt that 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. This paper follows on from a presentation given at the annual LJMU Teaching and Learning Conference this year where we discussed the findings from our research so far.

According to Phinney et al (2006) there are a number of reasons why a student chooses to attend university and this may affect their academic engagement. Some of the influences on the choice to attend university were found to be related to social aspects, career prospects, the chance to move away from home, or extend their learning. According to Balloo et al (2015), improving career prospects was found to be the most important reason for attending university but this is affected by students' gender, age group, caring responsibilities and application route, fee status and whether English is their first language. Motivations to attend university were also investigated by Phinney et al (2006) who found that making friends was low on the priority list of students involved in their study. Nevertheless, university was seen for those under 21 to be a place for social contact. We can anticipate the students' expectation of what will happen at university will differ depending on the demographic status of the student. 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, their

likelihood to drop out and overall satisfaction (Lobo and Gurney 2014).

In order to find out more from the students' perspective on our programmes at LJMU we chose to speak to them in focus groups. As a group of staff we teach across four programmes within the Faculty of Education, Community and Health; therefore we chose to carry out focus groups with Level 5 and Level 6 students on each other's programmes. This meant that students could talk freely without feeling that the comments would have an impact on their standing within the programme. A range of questions were asked in relation to prior learning; expectations; transitions; learning space and their use of IT.

In relation to initial expectations of university life, we found some positive responses from students across the programmes,

I feel like I've had a new start, new life, new course and as new place. (Level 5 Education Studies)

University needs to be welcoming and interesting... familiar faces help you settle in...[peer] mentors help settle students in; you can ask questions that you might not ask a lecturer so you don't feel silly. (Level 6 Education Studies)

It's a chance to build an armoury. It's a chance to better yourself and build new skills. So when you do go into the big world you've got more skills than other people. (Level 6 Sport Development)

These students described their expectations and experiences feeling that they now had an opportunity to make a new start and advance their career. One student focused on their expectations that staff and peer mentors are key in assisting students settle into university.

Further thematic analysis of discussion in focus groups highlighted four areas that were important to our students, these were:

- Directed time
- Non-directed time
- Support
- Relationships

Directed time

All the students involved in the study were on courses 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. It was evident that the 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. There seems to be a relationship, from a student's perspective, between the number of timetabled sessions and value for money. The more face-to-face contact students get then the greater their perception of value for money.

There was a timetabling debate; were classes best together in a concentrated few days or spread over a week? Some students wanted the two days to be together but this then had a knock on effect of students feeling disengaged for the rest of the week. Students explained that this feeling of being 'part time' was compounded by the short academic year and the long summer break. Lack of face to face contact often resulted in feelings of disengagement. Coupled with this, students also began to pick and choose what they attended, which was different to the expectations that they had from sixth form/college. One student reported:

We were told at college that we would need to attend all lectures but some lectures are pretty pointless (Level 6 Sport Development)

It was clear that students did not conceptualise that in the remaining time when they were not at university they were supposed to be studying independently, these two comments highlight this:

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

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

It is clear in looking at these comments that there is a difference between what students expect to do and the expectations that we as staff place on them. We expect that they are going to carry out work in their own time to support their studies and that this expectation is clear from the start. Instead students see that this amount of study is unrealistic, and, with other pressures on them, impossible to carry out. Many of them saw studying for their degree as attending taught sessions and reading for assessed work, perhaps not the immersive experience that we as staff might hope for.

Non-directed time

In the category of non-directed time, we included everything that students experience outside of contact time and programme activities. This related to employment; domestics; travel; learning spaces and finance. Many of our students were balancing paid work with their academic studies, where they needed to have a timetable early on in the academic year as paid work has to fit around this. Students have to work to cover the additional costs over and above their student loan.

Living away from home... I got a coaching job...it taught me how to manage time (Level 5 Sport Development)

Leisure time and voluntary work were seen to be difficult to combine with other activities in non-directed work. Many students commented that voluntary opportunities were hard to fit 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 Development)

Students explained that they were spending around £20 a week to get to campus if there were lectures every day. But, as already discussed, the alternative of the timetable being

condensed into two days was also less appealing as it gave the impression to students of being 'part time' and students would then question the 'value' of the programme. Additionally, a couple of students claimed that 9am lectures were difficult to get up for.

Our students 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 Development)

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 Studies)

We were interested in finding out where our students carry out independent study. They had varying views on the learning spaces that they used. For example some liked working at home, whereas others didn't; some liked quiet, whilst others didn't. The library was found to be popular, although more open spaces and group tables within this facility are required. 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 Development)

Support

We discussed, with the students, where they felt they needed support from the University. Their responses related to: financial; academic; employability; and personalised support. They acknowledged that support was available in different areas such as through their Personal Learning Groups (similar to Tutor Groups), centralised workshops (e.g. 'Use of SPSS') and the use of Academic Skills Tutors. But we also found that students were often unaware of some of the help and support that is 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 [X] for help (Level 6 Education Studies)

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 Studies)

..you get given money but it's not enough to live on. (Level 6 Sport Development)

Students don't 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 I.M. Marsh Campus has to be balanced against perceived 'value for money'.

There was also a requirement for additional academic support based around the assessment period. Students had difficulty with referencing, reading academically and delivering presentations. Exams were a source of anxiety for most students and additional support was required around this period. Most students believed that assessments were bunched in terms of submission timings and support for time management was required. Some students claim that staff are unaware of other assessments outside of their own module. Support is also required at the beginning of each level of study that helps them to regain their pace, motivation and understand the expectation of students for each level.

Another area in which students required support was advice about employment. It was felt that some specific advice needed to be timed carefully to align with external applications, particularly for vocational careers. This support was considered to be a requirement at every level to give a constant message about graduate employability.

Relationships

In the focus groups we discussed which relationships were important for students, and what their expectations had been in comparison to their early experiences. Relationships were built with other students and with the staff and those with peers were highly valued and developed particularly within the Peer Learning Groups (PLGs):

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

However, within the PLG, there was some perception of cliques being developed early on in the year. Mature students often felt isolated in the PLGs as their needs and common interests were different to that of the rest of the cohort. Also within the PLG there was a tendency for perceived comparisons and a competitive element.

Hearing views of studying from students in other year groups is helpful and staff are often seen as 'out of touch'.

It's hearing from students themselves, they know best, lecturers, have a degree....but not the experience fresh in their minds. (Level 5 Education Studies)

However, despite some students concerns, they were 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 Development)

PLGs were used on both programmes and they were very positive, and in some cases the PLG tutor was key in terms of professional relationships. Interestingly, some students hadn't 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 Development)

However, students did acknowledge that some staff did not understand how the students felt and used their own experiences that were not the same as theirs. This sometimes led to the perception that students were patronised, for example,

Occasionally we felt we were treated like kids. (Level 6 Sport Development)

It was accepted that whilst staff did have different styles of teaching, they were adaptable and often made changes upon the requests of students. Often students gravitated towards staff who they knew would help and support them.

In conclusion, we have found this to be an important area to research as our initial findings show some significant disjunctions between student expectations and early experiences and our previous views as members of staff. 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 welcoming and built good relationships with staff and students. However, we should keep in mind that many students will need to balance their commitment to academic work with undertaking paid work to support themselves financially, continuing family commitments and social activities that are integral to university life. The rationale for timetabling of face to face activities needs to be explained early on and expectations of independent work made clear, as these are significantly different from those they will have experienced at school. Students may also be initially unaware of the other support available to them outside of their academic timetable such as student advice and wellbeing services and the students union. These initial findings have helped us to plan and revise our approaches to open days, applicant days, induction and transition activities. In particular, these findings

support the importance of the peer mentorship scheme developed over the last couple of years to help new students with their transition into university life.

The next steps

This research is being developed in the next academic year. From the findings of the focus groups we have designed a large scale questionnaire for implementation in September 2016 with level 4 students across a range of programmes in the Faculty. The questionnaire will provide an opportunity to collect statistical data that will prove, refute or balance with our qualitative findings. A Curriculum Enhancement project on 'Bridging the Gap' between students expectations prior to attending university will also be a feature of future study.

Additionally, a member of the team, has carried out a number of focus groups with both staff and students from sixth form institutions on their 'perceived preparedness for university'.

Many of these findings link to the work on students' expectations.

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