

Becoming a Successful First Year Undergraduate: When Expectations and Reality Collide

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore how expectations of university life, examined through a tertiary studies session, can be better aligned with the reality of tertiary studies so as to increase successful transition for commencing students entering university from secondary school.

Qualitative survey data were collected and analysed using the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test. The results of the study showed that students had similar expectations before the tertiary study session; however these did not match reality. The contrast was mainly in perceptions concerning independent learning and the differences between the learning experiences of school and university. Having completed the tertiary studies session the students altered their expectations. The findings of this study will assist in addressing retention of first year students and provide an innovative program for aligning expectations.

Introduction

The current climate in which universities operate means the retention of students is becoming increasingly important for reasons of funding and reputation. What is currently not well understood is how entering students' expectations can impact upon their transition to university and therefore their retention. This study explores the expectations of first year students prior to attending a one hour tertiary studies session. After the session the students' expectations were again explored to see if their expectations more closely aligned with reality. Being able to create more realistic expectations in first-year students will enable universities to decrease attrition rates and ensure students are prepared for what is a sometimes difficult and challenging transition into tertiary study. Currently student expectations are largely overlooked as an area of need in traditional orientation programs. In order to address

this gap in the literature this paper describes a study which aims to explore how student expectations can be adjusted to ease transition to tertiary study.

Firstly we explore the literature to determine current knowledge and what needs to be understood further. Then we describe the research process and how we designed and implemented it. The results of the data analysis are then presented and discussed the in light of the research question. We conclude with a comment about the contribution this study makes to the literature and propose directions for future research.

Literature Review

Recent research on first year university student experiences indicates that students' perceptions during the transition period in first semester at university may be critical in deciding whether to continue studies (Kantanis, 2000). The importance of students' perceptions of the difficulties in transition to higher education has also been supported by recent research into transition conducted in Kuwait (Al Kandari, 2008). The challenge for universities is how to induct students into the world of higher education in a way that meets the needs of students and institutions (Kantanis, 2000). McInnes, James and Hartley (2000) argue that students often expect university to fit in with their lives, rather than the other way around, leading to the observation that students appear to be less engaged with university life and study than they have been in the past.

Research has suggested (McInnis et al., 2000) that the landscape of higher education is changing. Challenges for educators include pressures arising from the expansion in student numbers, innovations in teaching and learning, as well as due to intense market competition between universities. At the forefront of changes are increased choice and flexibility in course design and modes of delivery together with a range of new institutional strategies to improve transition to university (McInnis et al., 2000). Given the scope and scale of changes in the higher education sector a thorough analysis of the 'first year experience' is required, considering what factors enable transition to university (Tinto, 1993).

Students' expectations have been labelled naïve and mostly unfulfilled, which Stern (1966) and Jackson et al. (2000) term the 'freshman myth', usually experienced during the first few weeks at university. As the final years of secondary schooling become more stressful and competitive for many students, the first year of tertiary education may also be a time to evaluate how prepared they really are, and how they can be supported as they move into tertiary studies (Hillman, 2005). As students make the transition from the support frameworks of schools, they commonly find it difficult to manage the level of autonomy and flexibility that comes as part of the higher education environment. The challenges of transition, especially underestimation of the difficulties that lie ahead, are experienced by all students including high achieving students (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Levitz & Noel, 1989; Rickinson & Rutherford, 1995, 1996; Wintre & Yaffe, 2000)

Research by Hillman (2005) suggests that studying the first year experience is necessary due to the vulnerability of students to external pressures. The effects of external pressures are supported by Parker, Summerfeldt, Hogan and Majes (2003) who suggest that first year students face a variety of new personal and interpersonal challenges. In particular, first year university students entering university directly from school, or after a gap year, face a multitude of stressors such as the need to build new relationships, changes to existing relationships involving parents and family (e.g. moving away from home), and adapting to study in a new environment (Pargetter, 1995) and to life as independent adults in managing time and money themselves (Parker et al., 2003). Consequently, Parker et al., (2003) argue that failure to master these types of tasks appears to represent the main reasons for undergraduate students withdrawing from university.

New student life is now constructed around a dramatically changed context for students following the traditional path from school to university along with mobile mature-aged workers (Mc Innis, 2003). The student mix is increasing in many countries (Krause, 2005) suggesting that reappraisal of the place that university holds in the lives of students is needed (Mc Innis, 2003). McInnis (2003) suggests the first response to the changing context of student lives is for universities to recognise and acknowledge the competing pressures influencing student priorities, including the need for an increased number of hours in paid employment whilst studying. Overall, the research highlights the need for effective facilitation and support from the university to assist first-year student transition (Kantanis, 2000).

Research in Australia on the first year experience by Williams (1982) focused on background characteristics, such as gender, secondary school sector, secondary school achievement, family experience of education, financial support and living arrangements. In other research involving first year students in 15 universities in 1980 (Hillman, 2005), the relationships between family, finance, experiences and satisfaction with university life was conducted. Furthermore, Williams (1982) reported that female students showed higher levels of satisfaction on scales measuring the quality of education, opportunities for social interaction and level of participation in decision-making than male students across all institutions surveyed.

In considering the challenges facing students in making the transition to university, there are also issues that higher education institutions must resolve. These include whether the content and length of programs are appropriate to accommodate student related issues (Hillman, 2005). Recent research suggests that universities need to manage an increasing diverse student demographic profile more effectively (Schafer, 2006; Zepke, Leach & Prebble, 2006). In a study of initiatives to incorporate diversity into the engineering curriculum, Schafer (2006) proposes that raising awareness of diversity to the whole student body through a compulsory lecture would increase understanding of the issues. Zepke et al. (2006) argue that recognising and accepting the diverse goals and cultures of learners should be used to develop and adapt practices that accommodate diversity in a learner-centred way. They further argue that adopting a learner-centred approach where students experience a sense of influence, good teaching and where diverse learning preferences are catered for may improve retention (Zepke et al., 2006, p. 598). Haggis (2006) suggests that the range of diversity facing educators means that meeting learner needs is unrealistic. She goes on

to argue that an approach based on a “path between conventional and radical approaches”, involving changes to pedagogy and assessment, is needed (Haggis, 2006, p. 522).

Mc Innis et al., (2000) argue that the notion of diversity is complex, extending beyond the usual differences in age, gender, place of living, ethnicity and socio-economic background to include diversity in values, attitudes and expectations. In further research McInnis (2003) argues that diversity has existed in classrooms in most Australian universities for many years. Student demographics also vary in terms of issues such as the basis of admission to university, the age of students, the mix of enrolment mode, degree types, and even the mode of delivery within a cohort (McInnis, 2003). This highlights a challenge for Australian universities to recognise diverse needs and to take steps to cater for their changing and diverse student population (Mc Kenzie & Schweitzer, 2001). In order to deliver high quality services to students, universities need to manage all aspects of student's interactions with service offerings, particularly those involving transition (Douglas, Douglas & Barnes, 2003).

Van Gennep (1960) suggests that transition is a process of socialisation that involves ‘rites of passage’. These may be subdivided into rites of separation, transition and incorporation. Glaser and Strauss (1971) describe transition as a passage from one level of status to another (e.g. initiation by persons in a position to which one aspires). Turner (1982) elaborates further on the idea of separation, suggesting that it involves three stages. Firstly, a detachment from the student’s previous social status. Secondly, a move to social limbo, a state where one has moved from a previous social status but has not attained another. Finally, achieving incorporation which is a new status and position in the social group, normally this is an enhanced position. Initiation involves setting boundaries, a change of self and a change in status (LaFontaine, 1985). Experience gained through initiation leads to correct performance. It follows then that accessibility to knowledge is a critical step in the transition process. White and Ewan (1991, p. 29) argue that the socialisation process in a profession such as nursing is different to that of acquiring a degree or qualification. Completion of a degree signifies that a person has the knowledge, skills and attitudes to carry out the duties of a position competently. Socialisation into a profession such as nursing involves understanding culture, symbols, customs and the shared meanings that distinguish the profession from others (White & Ewan, 1991, p.189). The completion of a degree also demonstrates to employers that the candidates has the ability to set and achieve goals, meet deadlines and work under pressure, work autonomously and as required as a team member and or leader, and finally but not exhaustively manage multiple projects with competing demands and commitments.

A review of the literature relating to first-year transition to higher education has identified challenges for students and institutions. This paper examines three issues arising from challenges in transition. Firstly, while the stages of transition have been explored in the literature, what is not well understood is how pre-existing expectations impact upon students and identifying precisely what are those expectations. Secondly, how pre-existing expectations can be adjusted through early exposure to the reality of university life has not been addressed. Finally, how the impact of unmet expectations on student is explored. The research question is: *How accurate are*

entry level student expectations of university life? A supplementary question is: Can students' entry expectations adjust through a tertiary studies session so as to be more closely aligned with reality?

Methodology

Students who were entering university from secondary school who took part in the tertiary studies sessions were asked to participate in this study during orientation. A total of 72 of the 112 first year undergraduate students who took part in the tertiary studies sessions volunteered to take part in the research which required them to rank as a group their expectations of university in comparison to school. They then participated in a one hour tertiary studies session as part of their orientation process. Finally they once again ranked their expectations at the conclusion of the session.

Students participating in the study were asked to draw up a list of what they perceived as the differences between university and school. Staff perused the lists and observed that there were five items that were selected by a high number of students. The most frequently occurring differences involved more flexibility, greater independence, greater responsibility for their own learning, less supervision of students and a different learning experience.

Staff then incorporated the five items identified by students into a questionnaire. The five items were re-formulated into questions (e.g. I believe that university requires me to accept greater responsibility for my own learning). Before commencing orientation students were asked to rate the items using an interval scale (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree). Students were asked to complete another questionnaire containing the same items as the one completed before the commencement of orientation after participating in a tertiary studies session. The ranking of expectations were analysed using Wilcoxon Signed Rank Tests.

The tertiary studies session was one hour in length and included information on topics such as: what academics do, what expectations academics have of students, independent vs. dependent learning, lectures and tutorials and tips for success and how to avoid failure. The main component of the session was to explore what differences exist between school and university life. Students ranked their expectations before and after the session.

Results

Data collected from 72 students were analysed using Wilcoxon Signed Rank Tests (Wilcoxon, 1945) in order to test the difference between student perceptions of the five items before and after tertiary studies orientation into tertiary studies. Wilcoxon's is a nonparametric test which does not depend on the assumption that a population is normally distributed. The test is used to examine the null hypothesis initially to determine that there is no difference between scores, and then to report the magnitude of any differences between the matched groups. The Z score reported in results is a standardised measure of the distance between the rank sum of the negative group (i.e. the difference) and its expected value.

Analysis showed that perceptions of more flexibility did not change significantly as a result of a tertiary studies orientation. Perceptions of greater independence did change significantly as a result of orientation ($Z = -1.897, p < .05$). Students' perceptions of greater responsibility for themselves (e.g. being responsible for their own learning) at university increased significantly ($Z = -2.714, p < .01$) as a result of the tertiary studies orientation. Students' perceptions of the impact of less supervision did not change as a result of the tertiary studies orientation, with no significance noted for this item. The final item, the perception that university offered a different learning experience showed that students' perceptions of the different learning experience between university and school had increased during the tertiary studies orientation ($Z = 2.324, p < 0.5$). These results are discussed in the light of the literature.

Discussion

There was no change in terms of perceptions of flexibility and so it may be that entering students are already looking forward to the freedom of university life in comparison to the more structured environment at school. In discussion, participants reported looking forward to not having to wear a uniform, increased freedom, less rules and no set times for classes. So it may be that the perception of flexibility is already accurate. This links to the other perception which showed no significant change, less supervision. Once again, entering students seemed to be looking forward to having less formal supervision and involvement of teachers at university than they had experienced at school.

The perception of having to take greater responsibility for themselves did increase significantly after the tertiary studies sessions. While students appeared to have accurate perceptions about the increased flexibility and freedom of university life they were not as accurate in their perception of the amount of responsibility they would be required to take responsibility for their own learning.

The perception of greater independence increased after the tertiary studies session. It may be that while students correctly anticipated greater autonomy they underestimated what is required to use this independence to be successful in a tertiary learning environment.

Finally the perception of the different learning environment found in university compared to school also increased as a result of the orientation. Again this may be linked to a more accurate understanding of the roles of academics and students as a result of the tertiary studies orientation session. The finding supports issues raised by Wintre and Yaffe (2000) who noted that the reality of university life is usually much harsher and more stressful than students anticipate and that the main reason for failure is an inability accurately to perceive the differences between the university and school environments. Transition has been shown to be stressful for even high achieving students and the inaccurate perception of the significance of the difference between the university and school environment is one of the major reasons for failure (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Levitz & Noel, 1989; Rickinson & Rutherford, 1995, 1996;

Wintre & Yaffe, 2000). Perceptions can be aligned more accurately with reality through intensively acclimatising students prior to entry.

The questions that the research sought to address were: How accurate are entry level students' expectations of university life. There was also a supplementary question: How can students' entry expectations be adjusted through a tertiary studies session to be more closely aligned with reality? We found that while students did have perceptions of university life at entry level they underestimated the balance required between independence and responsibility to gain success at university level. In addition students did not appear to understand the effect of the difference in the school and university learning environments.

Conclusion

While Hillman (2005) has indicated support for research of this type by stating that information on the perceptions of entering students is important, we have attempted to go one step further in attempting to align these perceptions more accurately with reality. It is hoped that through this alignment and a more realistic perception of their role at university, students will be more successful at transitioning into first year tertiary study. Future research will include a longitudinal study of the commencing cohort after 12 months to explore the long term effectiveness of the tertiary studies session. Preliminary data reveals that the entire commencing cohort has remain enrolled successfully to date at university. Other areas of interest include the ways in which realistic expectations facilitate transition.

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