



First year students' expectations of university study

Executive summary

August 2006

The School of Psychology in collaboration with the
Centre for Learning and Professional Development

CENTRE FOR LEARNING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

LEVEL 2, SCHULZ BUILDING
NORTH TERRACE CAMPUS
THE UNIVERSITY OF ADELAIDE SA 5005
AUSTRALIA
TEL +61 8 8303 5771
FAX +61 8 8303 3553
clpd@adelaide.edu.au
www.adelaide.edu.au/clpd/

SCHOOL OF PSYCHOLOGY

LEVEL 4, HUGHES BUILDING
NORTH TERRACE CAMPUS
THE UNIVERSITY OF ADELAIDE SA 5005
AUSTRALIA
TEL +61 8 8303 5693
FAX +61 8 8303 3770
thedepartment@psychology.adelaide.edu.au
www.adelaide.edu.au/psychology/

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Publication design and layout by Peter Murdoch., CLPD

Executive summary: First year students' expectations of University study.

Investigators

Deborah Turnbull, Ted Nettelbeck, Lynn Ward, Amanda LeCouteur, Aspa Sarris, Peter Strelan, Geoffrey Crisp, Edward Palmer, Luke Schneider.

Abstract

First year students attending introductory lectures in 2006 were surveyed on their expectations of study at the University of Adelaide. This report highlights areas where there appear to be mismatches between the current facilities, resources or practices at the University and student expectations. Recommendations to assist in better aligning resources and practices with student expectations are presented.

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Executive Summary

First year students' expectations of studying at the University of Adelaide were investigated during Orientation Week 2006 utilising the "First Year Expectations Survey". The purpose of the study was to identify areas in which there were any mismatches between student expectations, and the facilities, resources and practices currently available at the University.

The results, from the 979 students sampled, suggest that the main areas in which the University is not meeting students' expectations are related to staff. The majority of students reported expecting ready access to lecturers and tutors, and they expected staff members to read drafts of their work. Over 30% of students also reported expecting their assessment pieces to be marked and returned within one week of submission.

The results also indicated that many students may underestimate the time that they will need to commit to private study. This is important in the context that over 70% of students expect to be able to combine study with paid employment.

The students were also surveyed on a number of other issues relating to university life such as their attitude towards lecture attendance and the potential for outside activities to affect their ability to study. Over 30% of students reported undertaking outside activities that may affect their ability to study, with a further 30% unsure whether they did or not. The vast majority of students believed that attending most lectures would be important.

Based on the above findings, the following recommendations are proposed to assist in bringing current resources, practices and student expectations into closer alignment –

- Staff could utilise *MyUni* more efficiently to deal with student queries, and to encourage student-student interaction through academic discussion.
- Staff could discuss with commencing students the differences between secondary school and university with a focus on the notion of adult-learning, the importance of attending lectures, and being able to edit and evaluate one's own work when appropriate exemplars are provided.
- Staff could introduce students to the Centre for Learning and Professional Development (CLPD) assignment writing services early in their university career <<http://www.adelaide.edu.au/clpd/lis/>>.
- Staff could inform all students about CLPD respective support services.
- Staff could inform students about the typical turn-around time for assessments to be marked and returned in their particular program at the beginning of their university career.
- Where group assessment is used for summative purposes, staff should

familiarise themselves with the group assessment section of the *Good Practice Guidelines on Assessment for Staff and Students*
<<http://www.adelaide.edu.au/policies/700/>>

- Staff could discuss with new students the realistic time commitment that university study will require. Students can then make informed choices regarding time commitments to all their activities.

Further Discussion

During orientation week classes, students' attention should be drawn to the differences between secondary school education and university study. In particular, the principles underpinning adult-learning should be discussed with students. This concept should be discussed particularly in the context of assignment editing and evaluating.

- The assignment writing services and literature available through the Centre for Learning and Professional Development (CLPD) should be introduced to all commencing students. English as a Second Language (ESL) students, and students with learning difficulties, should be informed of these support services, including language and learning support and maths support.
- Students should be made aware of the usual turn-around time for assessment pieces to be marked and returned. As the timeframe will vary across programs, the standard practice for individual programs should be explicitly stated.
- Email communication between students and staff should be formalised in a similar way to the consultation-hour system. Staff should discuss with students when they will view class emails and what might be a typical time for a response.
- Email queries forwarded to staff could be edited for inclusion on *MyUni* noticeboards. Students would then be advised that standard practice is to access *MyUni* before contacting lecturers. This would reduce the occurrence of staff responding to many similar emails.
- Interaction on *MyUni* should be encouraged. Discussion boards can be set up readily in *MyUni*, and lecturers and/or tutors could post relevant discussion points for students to consider. This enables those who are not confident to speak out in class, or ESL students who are unable to articulate responses quickly in the classroom setting, to contribute to academic discussions.
- Where group assignments will be used for summative assessment staff can assist students, in making the transition from secondary school to university, through the setting of group assignments early in the first year. This provides

students with the opportunity to form relationships with their peers, and provides a support network for students embarking on their first university assignment.

- Tutors might, where possible, employ group-learning activities and encourage group discussions. This is in line with student expectations, as well as being an effective learning method.
- Students should be informed of the approximate time that they are expected to commit to private study per week for each course in which they are enrolled. This allows students to plan outside activities and employment accordingly. It is likely that staff will perceive that more time should be allocated to private study, and that many students may not be able, or willing, to allocate this amount of time to private study.
- For courses where attendance at lectures is considered to be necessary, the importance of attending all lectures should be conveyed to students in orientation week classes.
- The purpose and value of tutorials should be also discussed with students. Students should understand the fundamental differences between lectures and tutorials and understand how the two are related.

Introduction

This report provides fresh insight into the expectations of students new to university study arriving at the University of Adelaide. In particular, it highlights areas in which student expectations may not match the facilities, resources or practices currently available at the University. It also provides an opportunity for staff to acknowledge which student expectations can be reasonably met. Recommendations aimed at addressing the identified imbalances are also made.

Method

Participants

979 students (509 males & 468 females) attending the 2006 Orientation Week introductory lectures were surveyed on their expectations of studying at the University of Adelaide. 719 participants were under 20 years of age, 169 were between 20 and 24 years of age, and 85 were 25 years or over. 689 of the students had lived in South Australia for the majority of the previous five years, 68 students had resided interstate, and 215 reported having lived overseas for the majority of the past five years. Of the students surveyed, 937 were enrolled on a full-time basis, and 35 were enrolled part-time. 880 students reported that 2006 was their first year studying at university.

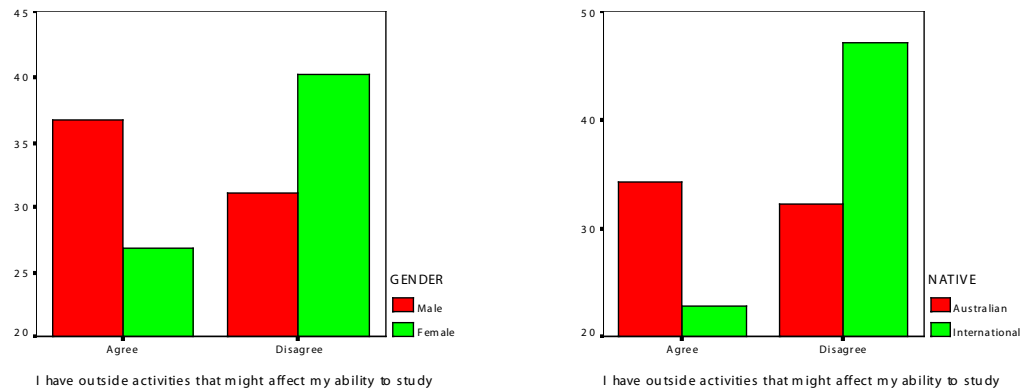
Survey

The “First Year Expectations” survey comprised 19 items. Seven items gathered demographic information, 10 items measured the students’ expectations of university study using Likert scales, and two open-ended items requested that students comment on their understanding of the terms ‘adult learners or self-directed learners’, and the factors that they believed would be important to making their university experience successful.

Results

Activities outside of university that may affect study

31.7% of all students surveyed agreed that they had activities outside of the University that might affect their ability to study. 32.2% of students were unsure whether their activities outside of the University would affect their ability to study. Males were more likely to report having outside activities that might affect their ability to study, as were domestic Australian students.



Attendance at lectures

81.6% of the students surveyed agreed that it would be important for them to attend most lectures. Males were more likely to disagree with this statement than females, as were students under 25 years of age. Those students who thought that it would not be important for them to attend most lectures were also more likely to report having outside activities that they believed might impact on their ability to study.

Combining study with paid work

71.6% of students reported expecting to be able to combine study with paid work. The students who reported that they would have difficulty combining their study with paid work, also reported expecting to spend more time in private/independent study than those who agreed. There appeared to be an age effect, with students over the age of 25 more likely to disagree with combining paid work with study. Students under 20 years of age were more likely to agree with combining study with paid work.



Access to lecturers and tutors outside of class

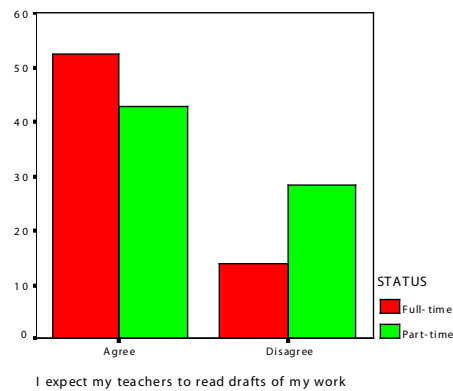
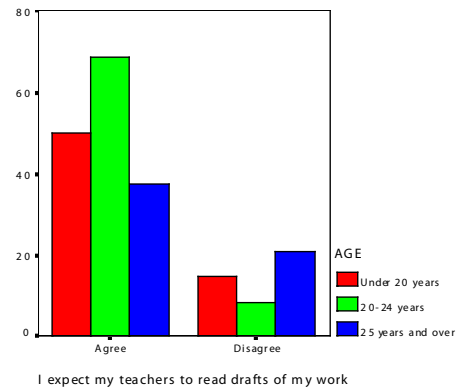
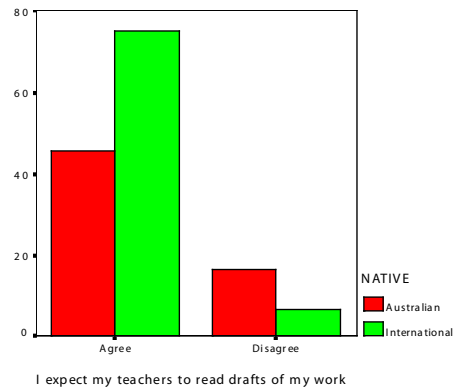
86.9% of students agreed that having 'ready' access to their lecturers and tutors outside of face-to-face teaching sessions would be important to their success. More females than males agreed with this statement, with no difference between international and domestic students.

Interactive/group work

84.8% of students agreed that interactive sessions with other students would be important to their learning. International students were more likely to agree with this statement than domestic students, as were females. The data also suggested that students over the age of 20 were more likely to agree that they would benefit from interactive learning sessions with other students.

Expectation that teachers will read drafts

51.9% of all students surveyed expected that their teachers would read drafts of their work. Males and females were equally represented in this item. International students were more likely to expect their drafts to be read, as were those in the 20-24 year age bracket. A greater percentage of full-time students expected teachers to read drafts of their work when compared with part-time students.

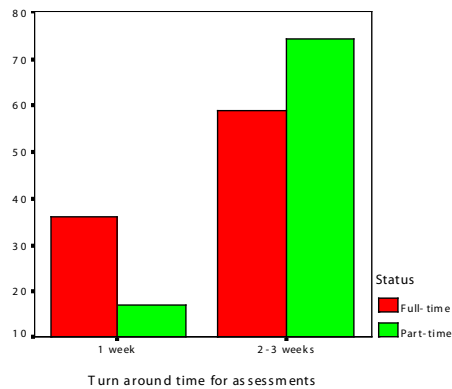
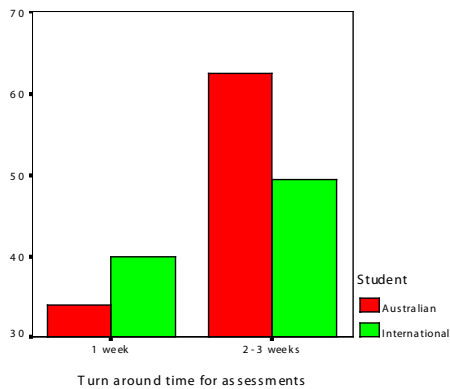


Private/independent study

94.5% of all students expected that their university study would involve independent/private study. 69.0% of all students surveyed reported expecting to spend at least 11 hours in private/independent study per week, with 36.9% expecting to spend more than 16 hours per week. However, these expectations varied significantly across programs. The time that students expected to spend in private/independent study was not influenced by gender or age, nor by whether the student was an international or domestic student. There was also no significant difference between the time that full-time and part-time students expected to spend in private study.

Turn around time for assessments

57.1% of all students agreed that two to three weeks was an acceptable time for assessments to be graded and returned. 34% of students believed one week to be an acceptable turn-around time. Only 5.1% of all students reported that four weeks or more would be an acceptable time to have their assessments marked and returned. International students were more likely to expect assignments to be returned within one week; Australian students were more likely to expect assignments to be returned within two to three weeks. Full-time students generally expected a more rapid turn around time than did part-time students.



Discussion

The results suggest that there is some discrepancy between the expectations of new students to the University, and the resources available at the University. Over half of the students surveyed expected teachers to read drafts of their work. This is an expectation that is not likely to be able to be met by the majority of teachers, and the reasons for this needs to be communicated to students early in their university experience. New students might also benefit from being made aware of the concept of adult learning/self-directed learning, and the importance of being able to evaluate and edit their own work. In order to assist students' understanding in these areas, staff should provide students with access to exemplars of student work at different levels, for example pass, credit and distinction. For students with learning difficulties, or in those cases where English is the student's second language, the support services that currently exist within the University need to be better utilised. Indeed, the results indicate that international students were more likely to expect to have drafts of their work read, highlighting the importance of the University's support services for these students. Domestic students should also be made aware of the Centre for Learning and Professional Development's (CLPD) assignment writing services. Students between the ages of 20-24 were more likely to expect their drafts to be read, perhaps reflecting some level of insecurity or anxiousness at returning to study after a break. The assignment writing literature available at the CLPD may be useful to these students.

The majority of students expected to have 'ready' access to their lecturers and tutors outside of face-to-face sessions. This finding reinforces the importance of staff making themselves accessible and open to their students. The consultation-hour system currently in place throughout the University is obviously an important service, and should remain in place. Given that email is increasingly becoming the primary medium of contact between students and teachers, conveying to staff the importance of checking their accounts regularly, and replying promptly to student queries, should also benefit students. Formalising email as a means of communication may also become necessary as the number of students visiting their teachers declines, and the volume of email received by staff increases.

In order to limit the number of emails being received by individual lecturers and tutors, pragmatic use of *MyUni* is advisable. New students should be made aware that any email correspondence received by lecturers and tutors within a particular course will be made available to all students enrolled in that course via the *MyUni* noticeboard. Obviously the content of the emails would be edited for public posting and made anonymous. This practice would reduce the incidence of tutors and lecturers replying to several similar queries. Standard practice would then be for students to refer to *MyUni* before emailing their teachers. This also standardises the dissemination of information, and guarantees that all students receive the same instruction.

Not only does the consistent use of *MyUni* reduce the current workload of staff responding to emails, it also facilitates greater interaction between students and staff, as well as between students and their peers. Through *MyUni* discussion boards, students can engage in their courses through academic conversation with peers based on the content of their lectures and tutorials. This potentially anonymous mode of communication may also encourage contributions and involvement in academic discussion from students who may not be sufficiently confident to voice their opinions in class. In particular, English as a second language students who may sometimes have difficulty formulating responses quickly in the classroom setting may benefit from this practice.

This recommendation is also consistent with the findings of the present study. The majority of participants agreed that interaction with other students would be important to their learning, with international students being more likely to agree with this notion. In addition to addressing this expectation through the utilisation of *MyUni*, teachers might consider employing group-learning exercises where possible. Similarly, there are programs in which group assignments that are assessed summatively are routinely given in first year. This practice might be adopted more widely. Not only would this be beneficial to students with respect to learning the skills required for group work, it would also facilitate the formation of relationships with other students, possibly making the transition to university easier and more enjoyable.

Students were also surveyed on the timeframe that they believed was acceptable for assessments to be marked and returned to them. 34% of students reported that one week was an acceptable turn-around time for assessments. This is unlikely to be feasible given the number of students in most programs. However, over half of the students reported that two to three weeks was an acceptable turn-around time. This timeframe is generally the University's practice, and is therefore aligned with majority of students' expectations. New students should be made aware of the normal turn-around time for assessments in their particular program, as some variation will occur.

Students were also surveyed on their expectations of issues relating to university life. The majority of students reported that it would be important for them to attend most lectures. Continued reinforcement of this point in early classes and during Orientation Week is recommended. Nearly 40% of students reported that they had outside activities that might affect their ability to study. A further 30% reported being unsure whether they did or not. In this case, students need to be reminded that the success of their University experience is typically dependent on the time they commit to their studies. Likewise, when asked about the time they expected to spend studying independently, students gave varied responses. This suggests that students may not be well informed about the workload that university study typically carries. Recommendations concerning staff expectations about the study time involved in each course might be communicated to students early in their university career. Ideally, course guides could include

an approximate study time per week for each particular subject, based on the typical reading requirements and the number of assignments in that subject. This is an important consideration based on the finding that over 70% of students reported that they expect to be able to combine their studies with paid work. Communicating to students the time commitment required outside of class for successful university study would enable them to make better informed decisions regarding combining study with paid employment.

The findings of the present study suggest that, in most cases, the University of Adelaide is meeting the expectations of new students. Discrepancies are primarily related to demands on staff time. However, in each of these cases of discrepancy between student expectations and current practices, alternative suggestions have been put forward. Additionally, recommendations intended to address other expectations reported by new students regarding University facilities and resources have been made. These recommendations generally comprise standardising and/or increasing the use of services that are already available within the University.