

## What Works? Student Retention & Success



### Great Expectations: Gaps in Students' Pre-expectations of Higher Education:

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#### Rationale for the case study

Both the Disparities in Student Attainment programme (Cousin & Cureton, 2012) and the early stages of University of Wolverhampton's contribution to the *WhatWorks?* programme have suggested that students' pre-expectations of higher education may differ from those of the organisation in which they study. This has a number of potentially negative consequences which include a lack of preparedness for higher education (Layer, 2007) and a negative influence on students' wellbeing and their satisfaction (Kreig, 2013). Moreover, if higher education does not meet the expectations of its students, this can have a disruptive effect on their psychological contract (their unspoken rules of engagement) with the University, which can negatively impact on their engagement and productivity, and in severe cases can lead to withdrawal from their study (Cureton, 2012; Clinton 2009). Therefore, as a continuing contribution to the *WhatWorks?* programme the University of Wolverhampton set out to explore the true nature of its new students' expectations of higher education.

#### Description/discussion of the intervention or change initiative and successful aspects

To explore undergraduate students' pre-expectations of higher education at the University of Wolverhampton, a Students' University Expectation Survey (SUES) was developed and completed by 346 new University of Wolverhampton starters, prior to attending a University pre-induction session. The SUES questionnaire was designed around themes collected from an exercise carried out in the previous years' pre-induction, where attendees were asked to write down three things they expected University life to be like. A thematic analysis of the responses to this question highlighted that students expected University to be:

- transformative (educationally and personally).
- challenging to them (personally and educationally).
- a different educational experience to what they had experienced before.
- career enhancing.
- costly (financially, emotionally and in time spent studying).
- a new adventure (educationally and socially).
- a friendly, encouraging and safe place to be.

The SUES aimed to verify that these areas are important and explored these areas further and gain deeper insight into how students expected being at University would help them meet these expectations. Consequently, the SUES comprised of 14 short response questions that took two forms: open questions such as 'What do you anticipate Higher Education to be like?' and half statements that students were expected to complete, for example 'I expect my course to....' Some additional demographic data was also collected.

The outcomes from the students' responses to the SUES have been compared with the findings of 25 questionnaires completed by University of Wolverhampton lecturing staff of varying levels of experience, length of services with the University, seniority and Faculty affiliation. A summary of main findings of this study are detailed below, however as this work generated copious amounts of data, it not possible to detail all the findings below. Firstly, an overview of the main themes from the students' responses will be outlined, after which the themes from the staff data that differ from students' expectation will be discussed. As the main finding of this work is that there are expectations gaps between new students and the lecturing staff who teach them, these expectation gaps will also be defined.

#### Students' Expectations of Higher Education:

A thematic analysis of the students' responses to SUES revealed that they expect that a University level education to provide a way of meeting their personal aspirations, *'it's been a life-long ambition to go to university and here I am'* (Female Mature Student), *'I will be able to get the job I want to do'* (Male Student) *'It will open the door to my desired career in education'* (Male, Mature Student). This theme was defined in three ways. Firstly, the expectations that students hold in relation to their aspirations related to higher education helping them meet their career goals *'I have worked in the voluntary sector; now I want to use this experience in social work; this course will get me there'* (Female Mature Student), or *'I've always wanted to be a nurse'* (Female Student). A second definition in this area is the expectation that entering higher education will provide students with *'a better life'* (Male and female students from all age groups), *'provide better opportunities'* (Male and female students from all age groups) and will *'change my life'* (Male and female students from all age groups). For a few students their expectations relating to aspirations focused on study goals, which provided a third definition *'I wanted to do an English degree when I was at school'* (Female Student), or *'I love history and now I have the opportunity to study it at a high level'* (Male Student).

Students also disclosed that they entered higher education because they expected it to prepare them for their career goals *'I will be a good chemist'* (Male Student) or *'University will give me the skills I need for the job I want to do'* (Male Student). This expectation was defined in a number of ways. Firstly, a degree level education was required to meet career goals *'I need a degree to be a.....'* (Male and female students from all age groups), *'the course will give me the higher knowledge of engineering I need for the career I want'* (Male student), or *'the course will develop the career skills I need'* (Female Student). A second definition for this expectation is that a degree will enhance students' future career prospects *'it means I will get a better job'* (Male Student), *'it's a stepping stone to graduate job'* (Female Student) or *'I will get a better paid job at the end'* (Male Mature Student). Additionally, students expect that having a degree will lead to enhanced skills and knowledge *'it will give me high level skills'* (Female Student) and *'I will develop skills and more knowledge for my career'* (Female Mature Student).

A further theme to arise from the student expectations data is that they expect higher education to be a life transforming experience *'it's going to change my life'* (Male and female students from all age groups), *'uni will make me more employable'* (Male Mature student), and *'I will be a better person'* (Male Student). This theme was defined as an expectation that University was a pathway to a better life *'I will be able to get a good job and provide a better life for me and my family'* (Female, Mature Student). Students also expected that by going to University it would provide an opportunity to transform themselves *'this is going to change me; turn everything around'* (Female

Student), *'this is a chance be a confident person in my future'* (Female Student) or *'because of this I will get me respect'* (Male Student).

There were several other interesting themes that also arose and that should be noted. Firstly a lot of students expect their higher education experience to mirror their secondary or further education experience. This includes the expectation that students will receive personal attention from the lecturers during lectures *'[I expect] lectures to be delivered in a way that meets my learning needs;* (Female Student), and *'lecturer will notice when I am falling behind and tell me what I need to do to get good marks'* (Male Student). There is also an expectation of personal coaching for success *'[I expect] lecturers to read my work and tell me how to improve it before I submit it'* (Female Student). Students believe that they can expect an education that will adapt to meet their needs *'lecturers will provide help when I need it and lectures will meet my learning style'* (Female Student). As in their previous educational experiences, many students expect that their University lecturers will be readily available provide support when it is needed *'if I need help they [lecturers] will be there and will help me'* (Female Student). This is a concept that links to another expectation that students hold about their lecturers being invitational (Cousin & Cureton, 2012) *'[lecturers and tutors] will be friendly, open and willing to help me'* (Female Student) and *'they will be encouraging and supportive'* (Male Student).

Further areas were identified where expectations of higher education linked to students' beliefs about learning and teaching styles. Students reported that they expect that the *'lectures will be well structured so that I can understand them and get the most out of them'* (Male Mature Student). Students also expect lectures to *'provide me with all the information about the topic I need'* (Male Student). Additionally, students expect that *'learning the course materials will be made easy for me so that success is easily achievable'* (Female Student). More importantly students expect higher education to be *'a quality product'* (Male and female students of all ages). The majority of students discussed their expectations of higher education in relation to their future careers. They suggest that being at University will *'help me develop the skills and knowledge to reach my intended career goal.'* (Female Student – but a sentiment shared by male and female students of all ages). Consequently, it appears that students expect higher education to focus on *'the mastery of knowledge and skills to be successful'* (Male Student).

Students' pre-expectations of higher education also focus on its social aspects. Student expect the University to be socially attractive and a place where they expect to *'have fun'* (Male Student), *'make new friends'* (Female Student) and *'be able to relax'* (Female Mature Student). For a lot of younger students this expectation was encapsulated by *'having the real University experience'* (Male and female students). For mature students the social aspect of University concentrates on expectations around having *'support groups'* (Female Mature Student), *'people to bounce ideas off'* (Female Mature Student) and *'widening social networks to meet people from different cultures/countries'* (Female Mature Student).

Students' understanding of higher education leads to expectations relating to the teaching style. There is an expectations that lectures will be *'fun'* (Female Student) *'interactive'* (Male Student), and *'will build on my experience'* (Female Mature Student). Students expect that higher education *'will be different to further or higher education'* (Male and female students of all ages), but they do not know how it will differ and they are unable to articulate the activities, skills, behaviours and

attitudes required to be successful. It appears that students know the language of higher education but not its definition. For example they are unable to define independent learning and describe it as *'doing homework set in class'* (Male Student), *'reading the things you're told to read'* (Female Mature Student), or *'doing the assignments'* (Female Students) only a few students expected to *'be researching and reading around the wider topic area'* (Female Mature Student). Students are also aware of the ramification of mass education; that they will be in large lecture groups, but still expect to receive a personalised education (see quotes above).

As they transition into higher education, students' expectations and focus is centred around their career goals and the skills that they will leave university with. Students enter University with keen eye on their career and see their University education as the means to this end goal *'University will give me the skills and knowledge to get the job I want'* (Female Student) and *'because of coming to University I will get to be psychologist'* (Female Student). Only a few students were focused on the educational journey they were about to embark on *'I'm looking forward to the opportunity to study something I love for the next 3 years'* (Female Student).

Students also seemed to believe that University education is a passive process; that it is something that is done to them. Students discuss lectures and seminars as forums where information is delivered to them *'I will have all the information I need to complete assignment from going to the lectures'* (Male Student), *'my course will give me all I need to pass the assignments'* (Female Student) and *'the lecturers and tutor will support me so I pass'* (Female Student). These quotes suggest that students' expectations are located in an external locus of control and that learning relationships are one sided, where lecturers are responsible for students learning success.

#### Staff expectations of new students

The main themes that arose from the analysis of the lecturers' responses, suggest their expectations focus on the belief that students view higher education as a learning journey. Moreover, this learning journey will provide students with solid knowledge of their chosen subject *'University provides the opportunity to learn and grow; for students to learn more about a specified discipline area and to grow in their confidence in that knowledge'* (Male Lecturer). Other lecturers held expectations about students' growth being both academic and personal *'University is about students' developing their discipline or subject experience and knowledge while they explore who they are and who they are going to be'* (Female Senior Lecturer). Lecturers expect students to leave university as useful and employable individuals. As a result, lecturers discuss how they ensure that their lectures and seminars provide the opportunity for students to gain transferable skills and knowledge for employment *'students will leave University as capable and employable human beings'* (Female Lecturer) and *'lectures and seminars will engage students in the main areas of debate [for the topic] and offer the opportunity to expand their knowledge for future application'* (Female Lecturer). Moreover, lecturers have an expectation that students are motivated by the opportunity to learn more about their chosen subject *'Students come to university and expect to gain an in-depth education in their chosen subject area'* (Male Lecturer), *'although I suspect that some students are here because they don't feel they have other options, most students make the choice because they have an interest in a subject and they want to learn more'* (Male Lecturer) or *'because of their [students'] interest in the area'* (Female Lecturer). As a consequence most lecturers believed students expect to leave university with a good degree *'students expect to do well and to leave with a degree classification that they are pleased with'* (Male Principal Lecturer), or *'they [students]*

*expect to leave having done well in their degrees and with the opportunity to do well in their future lives'* (Female Senior Lecture).

In relation to the learning and teaching experience in higher education, lecturers expect students to understand that there is a 'step up' between further education and University and they will provide support to help students as they negotiate this transition, *'University is different to previous educational experience – in depth and breadth of study but also in the way they [students] are expected to study'* (Female Senior Lecturer), *'there is a step up [between FE & HE] which students will be aware of from induction if not before'* (Male Lecturer) and *'of course students know HE and FE are different and we help them make that transition. This starts with induction activities and additional support is interwoven into lecture and assignment activities'* (Female Lecturer). Part of the difference between further education and higher education is that learning and teaching approaches are different. Lecturers expect students to understand how learning activities operate, *'lecture and seminars provide a topic overview and the opportunity to discuss the information raised; this also happens in FE but in smaller classes and as an integrative process. Students will know before they come here that there are lectures and seminars that cover this. The FE approach is more personal but personalised educational experiences are available through appointments with lecturers'* (Male Lecture). This further suggests that lecturers expect students to understand rules of academic engagement (Cousin & Cureton, 2012) and know how to be successful at University *'it's simple, student know they should attend lectures, seminars, meetings with personal tutors and meetings they make to discuss work with lecturers; some choose not to do this for a number reasons'* (Female Lecture) or *'outside of University students will expect to independently research and read around the area to gain a deeper understanding of the information delivered in lectures and the topic in general'* (Female Senior Lecture). These expectations highlight that lecturers expect students to know that higher education is a proactive experience in which students are responsible for their learning *'students are in control of their learning, we give them a steer but expect them to be proactive'* (Female Lecturer).

#### Gaps in expectation between students and lecturers

There are lots of areas where lectures and students have similar expectations; however the need for brevity prevents these from including in this case study. When comparing the data about student expectations from students' and lecturers' perspectives, it is evident that there are expectation gaps between the two groups which relate to expectations about the higher education journey, process and outcomes. These gaps outlined in the bullet points below:

1. Students come to university to get a good job, whereas lectures expect that students come to university to learn more about their chosen subject.
2. Students are end focused at the beginning of their undergraduate degrees and are focused on gaining employment. Their higher education is viewed as their route to gaining a good job. However lecturers think that students are focused on gaining a good understanding their chosen discipline and gaining a good degree to provide them with the future opportunities.
  - a. To this end, it may be that students expect the knowledge and skills they require to be explicit and the main focus of their degrees, however, lectures suggest that students' employability skills should be an integrated part of education the educational experience and students are given in the opportunity to develop transferable skills for employment from within materials delivered in lectures and seminars.

3. Students seem to expect that higher education to be a passive process, which it is something that is done to them, while lecturers expect students to be proactive in their learning experience. This could be explained in the terms of locus of control, where students demonstrate an external locus of control in their learning experience. However lecturers expect students to be proactive and therefore to have an internal locus of control.
4. Student expect lectures and seminars to provide all the information that is needed to be successful in assessments, however lecturers believe students expect these sessions to provide a steer to help them focus their independent learning.
5. Students appear to not understand the learning activities that are crucial to success in higher education. However, lecturers expect students to understand these activities and be able to demonstrate them. For example:
  - a. Students expect to engage in independent learning but define this in terms of doing set homework, write essays, read their lecture notes, whereas lecturers define independent learning as engaging in research and further reading to gain a deeper understanding of the areas covered in lectures.
  - b. Students are aware that they will be engaging mass educational activities such as lectures but still expect lecturers to provide personalised education experience, such as delivering a lecture to meet their learning needs. Lecturers however expect to deliver a generalised learning experience in lectures and a personalised learning experience in one to one tutorials.
6. Students appear to expect learning relationships to be one sided relationship and that lecturers provide all the information students will need in order to successfully complete set assessment. Conversely, lecturers believe that higher education is an interactive process where they support students to explore their chosen discipline in more depth. This is very different from the findings of the Disparities in Student Attainment Programme.
7. Students expect that university is a place to learn and a place to have fun, whereas lecturers expect university to a place where student embark on learning journey and develop both academically and personally.
8. Students expect lectures will be fun, however lecturers believe the lectures they provide should be informative and will underpin students' independent learning.
9. Students expect a further education experience in the higher education setting, such as coaching to pass assignments and access to support whenever needed. In comparison lecturers expect students to understand what is required of them in higher education and to be independent and proactive learners.
10. Both students and lecturers expect University to be transformative, however students expect that being at University will change their life. Lecturers however expect that students' engagement within their educational experiences will help them grow and develop as individuals.

#### Evidence of impact and Sustainability

This research, and the ten areas where expectation gaps are evident, have been disseminated through the What Works and SU Attainment Summits. Some of these ideas have been included in the pledged work from the Attainment Summits. The expectation gaps have also been discussed with the Head of Student Experience in the Offices of the Dean of Students and the ideas have been integrated into the Pre-Induction Programme for new students.

## References

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