

THE CHANGING EXPECTATIONS OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a preliminary exploration of a contemporary issue of growing significance in Australian universities: the influence on the character of the teaching and learning process of new student expectations. The paper examines the changing nature of student expectations within a consumer/market-oriented higher education system and the tensions created by these expectations, before sketching three research agendas for understanding the consequences for student motivation, persistence and learning.

KEYWORDS

Higher education, teaching and learning, student expectations, market in higher education

NEW RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES

For the past decade the Australian government has encouraged the development of a market-oriented higher education system within which universities actively recruit prospective students. These policy settings are based on the assumption that a competitive market in higher education will create efficiencies, greater course diversity and improved quality of provision. During this period, the Centre for the Study of Higher Education (CSHE) has conducted research into the changing character of the relationship between students and universities, including research into the decision-making of prospective students, the transition to university, and the quality of the student experience, especially in the first year. These studies show that at least two major changes are taking place. First, there are strong signs of piecemeal curriculum change in response to short-term priorities as institutions strive to use curricula as marketable products (Middlehurst & Barnett, 1994). The undergraduate curriculum in Australia, as elsewhere, is under intense pressure to meet the demands of a

‘supercomplex world’ (Barnett, 2000:265). Students are expected to master a growing body of specialised knowledge, develop generic/transferable skills for a global workplace, and benefit from a foundation of general education. The curricula to achieve these objectives have adjusted to market expectations for customisation to student preferences and needs, including flexible and online delivery, modularisation, and accelerated completion options.

Second, student expectations of higher education are clearly changing. Students are not only more diverse following the massification of higher education (James & Beckett, 2000) but seemingly more consumer-minded. Engagement with university life has become a matter for negotiation. CSHE studies (McInnis & James, 1995; McInnis, James & Hartley, 2000) of first year students across a five-year period (1994 to 1999) have revealed a nine per cent increase in the proportion of full-time students working part-time and sizeable increases in the hours worked. Compared with 1994, fewer students in 1999 reported spending five days a week at university. Findings such as these corroborate the experiences of academic staff who feel growing pressure to accommodate student preferences for a more relaxed engagement with the university (McInnis, 2001). Students increasingly seek choice — in the subjects to be studied, in delivery modes, in assessment, and in the time spent on campus. In new research for the Australian Universities Teaching Committee (James & McInnis, 2001) we have interviewed many academic staff who are convinced a consumerist pattern of thinking, attributed to the requirement that students contribute a greater proportion of the cost of their education, has emerged during their day-to-day teaching. Staff offer reports of students expecting to play a more passive role in their learning and making direct references to the cost to them of particular course components. Our research also shows that many academic staff believe a growing proportion of students are predominantly instrumental in their outlook, avoiding intellectual challenge and adopting narrowly reproductive approaches to assessment.

While academic staff are frustrated (and sometimes pessimistic) there are intriguing inconsistencies between staff impressions of student attitudes and how students’ see themselves. CSHE first year research suggests students continue to be highly motivated to learn in their chosen field of study (James, Baldwin & McInnis, 1999; McInnis et al., 2000). Contrary to the narrow vocationalism that is often assumed, students consistently express a strong commitment to an area of personal interest. There are few indications, at least in student self-reports, of a greater instrumentalism or narrowness in student expectations. Inconsistencies such as these in the perceptions of staff and students highlight the complexity of the environment for universities and suggest sophisticated explanations of the nature and origins of student expectations are needed if universities are to develop appropriate responses.

EXPECTATIONS, MISMATCHES, CONSEQUENCES: 3 RESEARCH AGENDAS

The relationships between student preferences and expectations and institutional expectations and priorities are exceedingly complex to analyse. The complexity is caused in the main part by the highly participatory nature of the higher education enterprise and the two-way interaction between the actions of students and those of universities — the higher education process not only *shapes* student expectations, but is itself *influenced by* the character of student expectations. Students’ expectations are as much of their own roles, responsibilities and commitment as they are of universities. Students may develop unrealistically high expectations (for their own levels of achievement, or of university services) or equally may

hold narrow or even low expectations (again, of their own capacities and required level of commitment, or of what participating in higher education can offer). Students' expectations pertain to both quality ('am I getting value for money?') and personal relevance ('is this course really for me?') and are thus highly individual in character. Complicating the matter further, the matching of student expectations against the realities of university is played out over both short- and long-term horizons — from satisfaction with the day-to-day experience, such as services, facilities and the in-class experience, through to anticipated career outcomes.

In the absence of a theoretical framework to adequately conceptualise these relationships, we would like to propose three research areas that may assist in making sense of the influences and impact of changing student expectations, possible mismatches of expectations, and the possible ways in which universities might respond to a new social context.

1. What are the Effects of Competitive Admissions Processes on Student Expectations?

While rising personal tuition costs may be a powerful influence on the relationships between teachers and learners, the effects of selective entry processes should also be considered. There has been extensive research into college choice in the USA (see, for example, Paulsen, 1990), but little similar research in Australia. However, a recent CSHE national study (James et al., 1999) has begun to shed light on the way competitive selection processes are shaping student expectations. This research suggests many applicants are in a poor position to judge the personal appropriateness of courses. Many prospective students base their planning on quite limited, subjective information, many do not rigorously seek information and most have modest information-seeking skills. University applicants' rely heavily on a superficial set of ideas about curricula, questionable sources, and are highly influenced by word-of-mouth.

This situation has resulted because required university entrance scores within a highly competitive entry system have come to serve as a proxy for both quality and personal relevance. Student faith in the appropriateness of particular courses is tied closely to the selectivity of entry. Prospective students trust the market; thus the attractiveness of a course at a university increases with the selectiveness admissions. School-leavers act to maximise the 'earnings' from their school results in a largely reputable market. The irony of this situation is that faith in competitive admissions acts against the development of complex or sophisticated expectations of university, while at the same time raising the level of expectations. Faith in the market diminishes involvement in vigorous information-seeking while potentially establishing unrealistic expectations of quality and relevance linked to selectivity of entry. This sets up the possibility for significant mismatches between vague 'quality and relevance' expectations and the reality of courses: the relationship between selectivity of admissions and course quality is of course not linear. The available evidence bears out the difficulties of achieving a suitable personal 'fit'. CSHE studies (McInnis & James, 1995; McInnis et al., 2000) have found that one third of first year school-leavers believe, with hindsight, they were not ready to choose a university course during their final school year. Similarly, Yorke (2000) identified 'wrong choice of programme' as the first among seven factors in undergraduate non-completion in the UK. Beyond such broad findings, retention patterns in relation to student expectations are not well understood. Are students who are idealistic about pursuing knowledge for its own sake the most vulnerable? These students may be quickly disillusioned if their academic success at school is rewarded with a course they find to be uninteresting or

unchallenging. Equally, do highly instrumental students (Biggs, 1982) disregard short-term discontent in favour of longer term goals? Research into these issues would be valuable.

2. In What Ways do the Early Experiences of University Reshape Student Expectations?

If competitive selection processes remove the obligation for prospective students to become well-informed, it is not surprising if many students commence higher education with unsophisticated expectations. As a consequence, the early experiences on campus are not only a testing period for expectations but also *shape* new expectations. However, the role of the transition period in re-shaping student expectations, especially in regard to the extent and nature of their involvement and commitment, has not been studied in a systematic way. The decision to withdraw is the most obvious consequence of students believing their expectations are not being met. A less obvious consequence, and the outcome of a more passive response on the part of students, is simply less active involvement in university life. Universities may need to examine the possibility that the detachment of many students is related to more impersonal staff-student relationships: the reality of university for many first year students is large class sizes and limited access to staff. Tutorial-type teaching has been reduced in some universities. It would be unsurprising if contemporary university life appeared more impersonal, less embracing and requiring less personal commitment than it did for students of the past. The consequences are speculative, but the possibility that universities are not capturing student engagement during the formative period must be considered. If indeed first year students drift away from a full engagement with university life if the academic and social networks allow them to, then there is the significant possibility that university practices and structures in the first year are partially responsible for growing student detachment.

3. What are the Relationships Between Student Expectations, Motivation and Satisfaction?

It is not possible in a short paper to present a thorough analysis of the relationship between students' expectations and their motivation and satisfaction. A starting point, however, is Herzberg's (1993) theory of motivation to work, sometimes known as the hygiene or two-factor theory. Herzberg proposes two sets of factors that affect people's satisfaction and motivation. *Hygiene factors*, such as the quality of working spaces and amenities, are associated with the level of personal comfort in the workplace. Herzberg argues that the absence of appropriate hygiene factors may cause dissatisfaction, but their presence does not in itself generate a strong commitment. In contrast, *motivation factors* are those that can inspire a high level of involvement and raise achievement beyond expectations. Inspiring leadership and intellectually stimulating work are typically thought to be such factors. The absence of these does not in itself lead to dissatisfaction, but personal involvement will not be raised above mundane levels. If Herzberg's ideas are applicable to students and their higher education involvement, then inadequate hygiene factors, such as facilities and services, are likely to generate student dissatisfaction, yet the presence of these factors will not in itself lead to satisfaction. Motivation requires something of a different order altogether, such as challenging and inspirational experiences. The motivational factors associated with higher education are generally unobservable from the outside and are only experienced through sustained involvement. As a consequence, student expectations on commencement are necessarily limited to hygiene factors — prospective students are known to make decisions on hygiene factors in the main part, the observable, tangible qualities, such as ease of access from home and the ambience of campus and surrounds (James et al., 1999). They have limited

access to the less tangible course features that are likely to provide motivation, such as inspirational teaching and a thriving peer group, yet these qualities are those that capture imagination, spur a continuing commitment, and are the key to persistence and success.

Adequately meeting the need for hygiene factors may reduce potential dissatisfaction. However, there are compelling reasons for giving special attention to motivational factors. Ironically, this requires creating a 'clash' of expectations. Higher education requires challenge to existing thinking and a state of uncertainty — effective student motivation probably requires the deliberate confrontation of student expectations, with all the tension that might accompany this. Mismatches in expectations are therefore not always harmful in education; indeed, they are part of the educative process of exposing students to challenge and difference. This is an important reminder, if it were needed, of avoiding a narrow focus on amenity dimensions of the student experience, which, though necessary, are ultimately minor elements in the overall quality of the university experience.

RESPONDING: RENEWAL OF THE UNDERGRADUATE CURRICULUM

A major question facing universities is the extent to which new student expectations or preferences are aligned with the goals of higher education and the consensus on the teaching and learning conditions that generate high quality higher education. Students are well-equipped to judge the quality of certain aspects of higher education. Generally speaking, students are in a reasonable position to judge the tangible, short-term components of their experience. Students can be expected to report informed judgements on the availability of computers, the quality of teaching spaces, staff teaching skills, and so on. Their expectations correspond with what experts argue generates an effective higher education environment. But students are not able to judge all aspects of higher education. The dimensions of higher education quality which are less tangible, less intuitive, such as overall curriculum coherence, require an expert, broader perspective. Thus student expectations alone are not a robust basis for planning. However, the tensions between educational objectives and student expectations are being played out in a number of curriculum areas and are the source of day-to-day dilemmas for staff. The issues range from the 'macro' to the mundane: on the large scale, meeting the new expectations for choice, flexibility and modularity is threatening the careful curriculum sequencing known to produce the best academic outcomes (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998). Staff notice students questioning the value of the curriculum and their new expectations are impinging on day-to-day decision-making. While some points of tension between staff and students may border on the trifling, overall they amount to an unplanned re-negotiation of the higher education curriculum, driven by new student preferences and the willingness of students to exert these preferences.

Arguably, university responses to new student expectations and new pressures on the curriculum have thus far been inadequate. What is needed is a systematic analysis of assumptions about the nature of the undergraduate curriculum. Universities need to forge a new model for the undergraduate curriculum on sound educative principles and a recognition of the new social context for higher education. In doing so, universities are obliged to balance new student expectations with the goal of a coherent overall educational experience. The main educative tension, as always, lies in balancing support with challenge, and avoiding a misguided reactivity to student expectations under the guise of student-centredness.

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