Understanding Student Transition to University: the expectations of essay writing for students and staff

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ABSTRACT: This paper outlines findings of a survey which aimed to identify and understand the expectations that first year university students, including a significant proportion of international students with diverse backgrounds, and their teachers have towards essay production during their acculturation to HE study. In particular, the paper focuses on examining the differing approaches that 37 students and 14 teachers on a first year business course take when interpreting essay questions. The findings are directly relevant to university teachers of students in transition to HE. This work can be used to better understand why the essay you are marking might look the way it does and this understanding can be used to develop more effective, targeted student (and staff) support so that student assessments are more likely to match the expectations of their teachers, thus enhancing teaching and the student learning experience.

Introduction

Culture, academic and socio-economic background and prior educational experiences are all factors that can affect students’ pre-arrival expectations of higher education (HE) and potentially influence the success of student transition into HE (Bowles et al, 2011; Katanis, 2000; Harvey, Drew & Smith, 2006). As the student body entering HE becomes more diverse then so do the pre-arrival expectations of students surrounding learning, teaching and assessment in HE. It is, therefore, increasingly important to understand and manage student expectations of HE in order to enable a more successful transition to tertiary study.

This paper argues that a greater knowledge of student expectations alone is not sufficient to enhance the transition experience. Arguably it is the interplay between student expectations and staff perceptions of the requirements of successful HE participation which, together, need better understanding. Higher education has certain conventions that influence the expectations that teachers and lecturers have towards their students and the work these students produce. These academic conventions embody staff perceptions of HE within which the students participate. Ultimately, therefore, an alignment between student and staff expectations is a critical factor in successful HE transition.

This paper examines one aspect of student transition to HE through the lens of essays. By researching the expectations of students regarding essay production early on in the university experience and by understanding the expectations of teachers and lecturers regarding their
students approach to essay production it is hoped that the level of alignment between student and teacher expectations regarding essay writing can be better understood. This understanding can then be used to produce effective, targeted, evidence-based support for students (and staff) in terms of essay-based assessments. This paper begins with a literature review examining the role that expectations play in learning, teaching and assessment before moving on to a presentation and discussion of the findings of the study.

**Student Expectations**

The expectations which students have of higher education are influenced by their prior educational experiences (Ramsden, 1992, p.82; Tinto, 2005; Cook & Rushton, 2008). These experiences form a basis for the academic expectations which students have relating to learning and teaching (Dalglish & Chan, 2005), assessment (Ramsden, 1992, p.84), academic support (Yorke, 2000; Crisp et al, 2009), and academic interactions with staff (Crisp et al, 2009). This is summarized by Biggs (1996, p. 348):

‘The learner brings an accumulation of assumptions, motives, intentions, and previous knowledge that envelopes every teaching/learning situation and determines the course and quality of the learning that may take place.’

Student outcomes are, in part, dependent on good agreement between the expectations of students and the realities of the learning environment. Tinto (1975) discusses the need for students to adapt to the academic cultures and practices of the HE environment in order to be successful, and this period of adaptation, or transition, takes time (Tinto, 1987). More recently, universities have taken more strategic approaches to support students through this period of transition, an evolution of responsibility argued by Longden (2006) and Kuh (2007).

**Staff Expectations**

The expectations that lecturers and university teachers have towards their students, the learning environments and the learning and teaching activities which they design all play a significant role in setting the reality of the student learning experience. Killen (1994) noted that university lecturers place a lot of responsibility on students to manage their learning, and Kuh (2003) noted that academic staff expected their students to be independent and self-directed learners, carrying out significant private study. It is possible that such expectations of students by university teaching staff may be intrinsically enforced as an institutional ‘culture’ of HE. Such institutional cultures (i.e. the values imposed, imparted and expected by teaching staff) play a role in the success of transition to HE. For example, Hatt and Baxter (2003) noted that learning institutions which had a focus on entry into HE often fostered a culture of increased confidence and independence in learning. Hence institutional academic cultures may ultimately influence the development of students’ expectations of learning and assessment and, ultimately, may also impact on student outcomes.

**Alignment of Expectations**

A fuller understanding of transition to HE requires an understanding of student expectations and the expectations of teachers and lecturers who, in part, define the learning experience. However, it is not simply student expectations, nor staff expectations individually, but the level of alignment of expectations which can impact on student transition to HE. Smith & Werleib (2005) showed that a mismatch between students’ prior expectations and their first year learning experience resulted in poorer academic attainment; students with high, unrealistic expectations of HE achieved poorly throughout the first year of study. Lowe and Cooke (2003) highlighted that any difference between student expectations and the actual learning experience becomes increasingly difficult to manage as the first year progresses.
Correspondingly, understanding and development of student and teaching staff expectations and perceptions of tasks are vital factors in supporting a successful transition to the HE environment and enhancing student outcomes.

Many studies have focussed on either improving the understanding of students’ prior expectations of studying in HE (e.g. Cook & Leckey, 1999; Lowe & Cook, 2003; and Leese, 2010) or have focussed on analysing any gaps which exist between the students’ expectations and those that university teachers and lecturers have towards their students (e.g. Brinkworth et al, 2009; and Crisp et al, 2009). In particular, Killen (1994) noted that students and teachers had a very different view regarding who was more responsible for learning; lecturers placed the responsibility on the students, and students placed the majority of the responsibility on the lecturers. Furthermore, Fisher, Alder and Avasalu (1998) found significant differences between the mutual role perceptions of students and teaching staff in an Australian university. In any case, it can be argued that inaccurate prior expectations of students regarding their HE study, or a misalignment between student and staff expectations and the realities of HE are factors in the success of student transition to HE.

**Distinct Experiences: students and staff**

The factors which influence the success of transition to HE are potentially of more significance for many students based on diverse academic, linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The potential distance between native and new contexts of learning ensures that many students have difficulty forming realistic expectations of UK HE. White (2013) argues:

‘Students who have experienced different life paths come with different expectations, different needs, different learning styles, and different ambitions.’

Academically, a diverse body of international university entrants have even greater diversity in pre-arrival expectations and prior educational experiences when compared to home students’ (e.g. Dalglish & Chan, 2005; Crisp et al, 2009; White, 2013) resulting in a period of transition which can be more challenging with greater requirements for academic adjustment (Ramsey, Barker & Jones, 1999). For example, international students often need to make significant cultural (Ryan & Carroll, 2005) and linguistic (Wu & Hammond, 2011) adjustments and which takes time; perhaps many months or even years (Carroll, 2014). Therefore adjustment and acculturation can be significantly more challenging for international students coming to study in UK HE when compared to home students, and the success of the transition comprises an increased number of influencing factors.

There is also an argument that an increasingly diverse body of international academic staff impacts on the context of learning (Jones, 2014) and this further impacts on the learning experience of all students. International lecturers and university teachers arrive in UK HE with expectations based on their previous educational experience, and they too undergo a period of transition which takes time (Maunder et al, 2009). Arguably, the developing nature of staff expectations of UK HE can result in further challenges to the alignment between student and staff expectations, regardless of student background.

**Narrowing the Scope: The Essay**

The expectations of teaching and learning refer to a broad spectrum of contexts ranging from lectures, reading, engagement, grading, support, contact time, and much more. Given the breadth of contexts it is necessary to narrow the scope to a more readily definable aspect of learning and teaching: assessment and, in particular, essays. Assessment, whether formative or summative, is an important part of the learning experience which can be used as a lens to
explore any alignment between student and staff expectations, as well as being an instrument for measuring student outcomes and learning.

Not only are essays a dominant assessment format in some subjects (Race, 2009), essays are also an area of assessment where student expectations and interpretation of the rules and criteria do not match those of the teacher (Norton et al, 1996). The plethora of essay writing guides available for students is indicative of the challenge which writing an effective essay represents. Hounsell (1997) argues that essay writing is a skill requiring both knowledge and experience and novice essay writers often lack sufficient experience to write effective essays. Norton et al (1996) noted that students created a dynamic ‘folklore’ surrounding essay requirements which develops as students became more experienced in academia. As Ramsden (1992, p. 83) illustrates, the formation of such folklore depends on previous educational experience and impacts on the expectations and outcomes of the task.

The idea of a novice essay writer brings the debate into the domain of first year university students; novices in HE. Branthwaite et al (1980) cited in Hounsell (1997) suggest that students’ essay writing skills develop throughout their first year as they become more aware of the expectations of their teachers and their own essay writing skills. In order to explore this, this study examines the extent to which expectations of essay production are shared between students and their teachers, and also examines both the student and teacher approach to interpreting essay questions. Potential factors (such as previous education experiences) are examined to determine their influence on expectations. By researching the expectations of students regarding essay production early on in the university experience and by understanding the expectations of teachers and lecturers regarding their students approach to essay production it is hoped that the level of alignment between student and teacher expectations regarding essay writing can be better understood.

**Methodology**

The research presented here forms part of a much wider mixed methods, multi-stage study. Consequently the methodology described here is a subset of a larger methodological design; more information on the larger design can be found in McEwan (2014).

A questionnaire was designed to determine an overview of the extent to which expectations and perceptions regarding essay writing are shared or distinct within and across the participant sample groups: first year undergraduate students and teachers in their university ‘School’. A combination of open-ended qualitative, closed multiple choice (utilising a four or five-point Likert Scale) and demographic questions were developed based on themes which emerged from an earlier qualitative study (McEwan, 2014). These general themes included student concerns regarding essay writing, perceived understanding of essay-based assessment and expectations of required essay writing skills. The questionnaire items reported in this paper are given in the Appendix.

A further theme, the main focus of this article, was interrogated: how do students and teachers approach the interpretation of essay questions? The wider work of McEwan (2014) highlighted evidence of distinct approaches to interpreting essay questions: content or task focused interpretation. In order to assess this aspect, two sample essay questions were created which contained elements qualitatively coded as ‘active verbs’, ‘context’ and ‘topic’. Participants were asked to identify the words they immediately focused on (indicative of their approach to interpreting the question). These questions are shown below:

1. Discuss and evaluate the most influential factors on the development of the English language between the years 1400 and 1800.
2. Identify the main political actors and analyse their role in the 37 days prior to the outbreak of the First World War.

Participants

All participants in this study are teachers or undergraduate students in the business school (BS) at a large, urban, research-intensive university. Student participants were recruited from a first year, undergraduate course (B&M1B) to ensure a substantial cohort of novice, transitioning university students (B&M1B has an enrolment of 298, mostly first year students) with a fairly significant proportion of students from international backgrounds (B&M1B has a relatively large cohort of international students). A pre-requisite course for studying B&M1B is B&M1A which involves a coursework essay and essay-based examinations, so all students have early experience in preparing essays at university and have had time to develop approaches and expectations of essay production. Teacher participants (including Graduate Teaching Assistants) were recruited from across the whole BS. This group also comprised a significant proportion of novice and international participants. The sample groups were categorized into ‘home’ or ‘international’ status in terms of their previous education experience (learning or teaching). This allowed for some comparison to be drawn across demographic groups. Overall, the students associated with B&M1B and the teaching staff within the BS represent an appropriately diverse, large and experienced body of potential research participants with enough ‘assessment capital’ to contribute towards answering the research questions.

Findings and Discussion

51 questionnaire responses were collected in total; 37 from student participants and 14 from teaching staff. Although each sample is relatively small, there was sufficient response to meet the objectives of the questionnaire: to understand the expectations of students regarding assessment and essay production early on in the university experience and to understand the expectation of teachers and lecturers regarding their students approach to essay production.

An Overview of Different Expectations to Set the Scene

In the questionnaire (see Appendix), there were two instances of student and staff responses which were markedly opposed, namely:

‘I understand what plagiarism is’ and
‘I focus on answering the question’.

There were other instances where student and staff responses appeared to differ by smaller margins, namely:

‘I argue that the sources I use are sometimes flawed’
‘I include a thesis statement in my essays’
‘The question dictates the type and structure of the essay I write’ and
‘The lecturer is the audience for my essay’.

Qualitatively, 100% of students believe that they understand plagiarism but only 36% of staff thought students understood plagiarism. 97% of students believe that they focus on answering the essay question; but only 21% of staff thought that students actually did this. Only 25% of students suggest they critique their essay sources compared to an expectation amongst staff that sources should be critiqued (71%). 57% of students claimed to use thesis statements in essay writing whereas only 36% of staff suggested this was necessary. 78% of students report that the essay question dictates the structure compared to only 43% of staff. Interestingly,
62% of students suggest the lecturer is not the audience compared to 64% of staff who say the lecturer is the audience for an essay. Together, these findings suggest some difference in approach to essay writing between teachers and students.

The questionnaire responses were also analysed quantitatively using the two sample student's t-test for small samples and a significance level of p < 0.01. In the majority of cases, no significant quantitative differences (despite qualitative differences) were found. However, some significant differences were identified including a difference in opinion between teachers and students over whether students understand the meaning of plagiarism (p = 0.000); students self-report that they understand and are confident that their work is not plagiarised, but staff suggest otherwise. Teaching staff suggest also that students do not use topic sentences very well in their writing (p ≈ 0.000) and students are less confident at critiquing the sources they use (p ≈ 0.010), compared to the expectations their teachers have regarding critique. Very significantly, students believe they focus on answering the question, but teachers suggest very strongly that students do not (p = 0.000). There is some disagreement between students and staff regarding lecturers as the intended audience (p ≈ 0.004) for an essay and there is some disagreement regarding the beliefs surrounding the amount which students have been taught to write essays (p = 0.010).

The questionnaire responses were also analysed demographically across home or international status. Interestingly, little difference was measured between home or international respondents across both student and teacher groups. International students self-reported to be more likely to include a thesis statement in their essays (p = 0.001), however no other items showed any reasonable level of statistical significance. In summary, a respondents' international status has little effect on their broad expectations of essay-based assessments in this survey; instead any differences in expectations is more likely to be experience based – whether the respondent is a novice essay writer in HE; students being novices.

Sample Essay Questions

Two questionnaire items comprised the following sample essay questions:

1. Discuss and evaluate the most influential factors on the development of the English language between the years 1400 and 1800.
2. Identify the main political actors and analyse their role in the 37 days prior to the start of the First World War.

These questions were developed to represent generic, realistic essay questions, unrelated to the learning outcomes of B&M1B thus limiting any bias which may be introduced due to greater subject-based understanding. Each question was designed to contain certain grammatical constructions: two active verbs of instruction, a specific topic and a limiting context (see Table 1 for details of this categorisation).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Active Verbs</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Discuss, Evaluate</td>
<td>Influential factors, English language development</td>
<td>Years 1400 - 1800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Identify, Analyse</td>
<td>Political actors/causes of war</td>
<td>37 days prior, First World War</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students and staff were asked to read each question and to indicate the word or words which they immediately focused on. Their responses were coded accordingly:
1. Full Match = all words in a category present in participant response;
2. Partial Match = one or more (but not all) words in a category present in participant response; and
3. No Match = no words in a category present in participant response.

The frequency of each coded response was then calculated for students and teachers the data was analysed using Pearson’s $\chi^2$ test to determine whether there is any association between the two populations (students and teachers) and the three qualitative response variables (Full, Partial or No Match). This analysis gives some indication of whether students are more or less likely to focus on some areas (Active Verb, Topic or Context) compared to their teachers. In each case a significance level of $p < 0.01$ was chosen, implying a confidence level of 99%.

The first sample essay question highlighted that there is a significant association between a focus on active verbs of instruction and whether the respondent is a student or a teacher ($p = 0.004$), however there is no association between responses and the international status of respondents. In particular, 94% of students included one or both active verbs of instruction as key words in the first essay question, compared to 46% of teachers who did not suggest either verb. Indeed, ‘Active Verbs of Instruction’ and ‘Topic’ show some level of statistical significance for both sample essay questions even though the analyses did not yield fully significant outcomes for the second ($p < 0.1$ in each case). Together, this represents some evidence that students and teaching staff approach the analysis of an essay question in different ways: topic focused or focused on the active verb of instruction. A focus on ‘Context’ did not show any relationship regarding whether the respondent was a student or teacher, however the results related to ‘Context’ should be considered with appropriate caution as the data did not fully satisfy a reliability characteristic of the $\chi^2$ test: that all expected frequencies should be greater than unity (Moore & McCabe, 2006, p. 600).

In order to eliminate the essay questions themselves as contributing factors, the data for each essay question was combined and re-analysed using a second Pearson’s $\chi^2$ test to determine any association between students or staff mentioning active verbs, topic or context, regardless of the sample essay question. Again, a significance of $p < 0.01$ was chosen. This analysis cemented the previous findings for each individual sample question: there is a strong association between a participant’s status as student or teacher and their focus on either active verbs or the topic of an essay question; however, there is no associated between responses and the international status of the respondent. Similarly, there is no association between group membership and a focus on context. Students (79%) pay more attention to the active verb compared to staff (42%) and students (28%) fail to focus on the topic of an essay question whereas teachers always focus on the topic to some extent (42% entirely, 58% partially). This is summarised in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Active Verb</th>
<th>Topic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full Match</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partial Match</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Match</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2:** percentage of students and teachers focusing on active verbs or topics in sample essay questions.

**Conclusions**
The main aim of this study was to develop a deeper understanding of one aspect of the student transition to HE by examining the alignment between expectations of students and their teachers in relation to essay production. A secondary aim was to determine whether the previous international educational experience influenced these expectations. This study highlighted that students and teachers do have different expectations regarding essay-based assessment, they do approach the interpretation of essay questions differently, but that these differences are not distinct across home of international demographics. Instead, these differences are apparent across novice (student) and experienced (teacher) essay writing demographics.

From the student perspective, essay questions are best approached by examining the active verbs in essay questions whereas teachers focus on the topic of an essay question, and value essays which explicitly address the topic. Moreover, students felt confident about their analysis of essay questions and reported that they focused on answering the question in their written work. Additionally, students felt they had a strong awareness of plagiarism, felt they understood the concept of plagiarism very well, and that they had the skills to avoid plagiarism. On the contrary, teaching staff felt that students did not generally answer the questions set as essays and students did not understand plagiarism nor did students appropriately critique the sources they use.

These findings highlight some significant differences in the fundamental approach to essay writing and there are implications in terms of student outcomes from assessment and in terms of teaching practice and assessment support. Although the knowledge of such differences in expectation is important, it is the practical impact and need for explicitness surrounding the dialogue between students and teachers regarding essay-based assessments that is key. In practice, teachers in HE should highlight the various elements of an essay question with their students in terms of (for example) topic, context and verb. Teachers should consider adopting such words in, for example, assessment criteria to illustrate what is most valued and these different elements of essay questions should be discussed with students to raise awareness. Throughout this research it was noted that teachers often did do this (e.g. in other phases of the wider McEwan (2014) study where observed teachers told students to focus on the active verb) however they were not explicitly aware that their own focus was on different elements (i.e. topic) of the essay question.

Moreover, it may prove useful to demonstrate essay responses which both do and do not address the set question effectively (perhaps asking students to assess this themselves) as this is a key area where the understanding of students and teachers differs greatly despite similar intentions. Finally, despite students claiming to understand plagiarism it is clear from this study that both the student and teacher interpretation of plagiarism is distinct. Accordingly, a dialogue about academic integrity or perhaps even an exercise such as one based on that in Carroll (2007, p.53: ‘where do you draw the line?’) which explicitly illustrates paraphrasing and plagiarism as interpreted by the self would prove a useful activity to share openly with students in any discipline.

References


Appendix: questionnaire items reported in this article

1. Quantity of references is important in essay writing
2. I understand what plagiarism is
3. I feel my current courses are good at supporting my academic writing skills
4. I understand the marking criteria for essays
5. It is important that I use good sources for essays
6. My previous education has prepared me well for essay writing assessments
7. If I know the topic well, I am confident I will write a good essay
8. I am concerned my work will be considered plagiarism
9. I include topic sentences in my writing
10. Practical or applied examples of theory are important in essays
11. I argue that the sources I use are sometimes flawed
12. I use some sources to counter the points made in others
13. I back up my opinions with literature
14. I know what I have to do to get a good essay grade
15. I include a thesis statement in my essays
16. I use very complex, technical terms in my writing
17. I focus on answering the question
18. The question dictates the type and structure of essay I write
19. The lecturer is the audience for my essay
20. I have difficulties understanding what the markers want in essays