

## **“Don’t ask me what I think of you I might not give the answer that you want me to”<sup>1</sup>: An exploration of 1<sup>st</sup> year university students’ expectations and experiences from the students’ and the teachers’ perspectives.**

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### **Abstract**

*Students are likely to approach their first days at University with a mixture of excitement and trepidation. They may be enthusiastic about their independence and learning new skills and knowledge, but may also be nervous about the many unknowns facing them. These feelings and expectations may have greater ramifications than immediate student happiness and comfort and may impact on student retention and motivation. It is therefore important that potential sources of dissatisfaction are known so where possible they can be addressed, resulting in better matches between experience and expectations and improved outcomes for all.*

*This session will introduce a research project that explores the mismatch between experience and expectations of commencing students across the three universities in South Australia. It will provide an opportunity for participants to learn about the research, discuss its potential value and consider any possible risks associated with research which compares expectations with experience.*

### **Background**

There is little doubt that the transition to university is complex and often fraught with confusion and difficulty. The importance of improving student retention rates and the student experience during their first year at university is well researched in Australia and elsewhere (Harvey, Drew, & Smith, 2006; Kift, 2004; Krause & Coates, 2008; McInnis, 2001; Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001; Tinto, 1999, 2002). In their review of 146 studies on how institutional support may influence student outcomes Zepke & Leach (2005) identify two discourses, which they call the integration and the adaptation discourses. The dominant of these is the integration discourse which suggests that “students should adapt to the institution where they enrol, learning to do things ‘as they are done around here’ in order to succeed” (p. 52). The adaptation discourse suggests that rather than the student changing, the institution becomes more accommodating of student requirement. Zepke & Leach (2005) describe the adaptation discourse as one where,

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<sup>1</sup> “oh Well” written by Harris, James Samuel III, Lewis, Terry & Morris, Nathan B – recorded by Fleetwood Mac

students should maintain their identity in their culture of origin, retain their social networks outside the institution, have their cultural capital valued by the institution and experience learning that fits with their preferences. (p. 54)

Despite their differences both types of discourse, and the solutions they propose, predominantly focus on the student experience once they have begun their course of study. Crisp et. al. (2009) indicate that there is little literature that explores the expectations of commencing students, or indeed students who are in the process of enrolling at university. Crisp et. al. (2009) argue that,

[u]niversity teachers and service providers may make erroneous assumptions about students' needs, as universities tend to provide information to students based on the institutions' expectations, not those of the student (p. 13).

In order to determine a more realistic view of students expectations (rather than continue to make assumptions about what they expect) Crisp et. al. (2009) surveyed commencing students at the University of Adelaide during orientation week. They also conducted focus groups with lecturing staff as "it was considered important to determine the reaction of university lecturers to the students' expectations" (p. 15). One of the intriguing findings from the work was that while students strongly agreed that university would be different from high school they did not in fact expect any differences. Another finding was that students consistently expected to receive higher levels of assistance and direction than the University provided.

Brinkworth et. al. (2009) continued this work by conducting follow-up surveys with students and staff from the Humanities and Science faculties at the University of Adelaide. Their intention was to determine the extent to which the expectations of commencing students were met. In addition to finding very little difference in expectations or experiences between the students of the two Faculties they showed that,

[a] successful transition is not solely due to academic ability, but depends also on an ability to make a rapid adjustment to a learning environment that requires greater autonomy and individual responsibility than students expect upon commencement. (p. 12)

This nuts and bolts session intends to report on a recently funded ALTC competitive projects grant: A Collaborative Multi-faceted Approach to Address the Gaps Between student Expectation and Experience at University which specifically builds on the work conducted by Crisp et. al. (2009) and Brinkworth et. al. (2009).

### **The ALTC funded research project**

This ALTC funded research will be conducted across three universities and a number of secondary schools in South Australia that cater to different cohorts of students. The researchers believe that identifying the gaps between student expectations and their experiences at university will help determine ways in which the gaps may be addressed. The South Australian universities fit within the three main alliances of Australian universities with the University of Adelaide belonging to the Group of Eight; Flinders University belonging to the Innovative Research Universities and the University of South Australia belonging to the Australian Technology Network. These three types of universities represent all students in South Australia and approximately 62% of all Australian university students (DEST, 2002). One aspect of the

research that is of interest across the three universities is whether the data will reflect differences across these groupings.

The project is unique in that it will also investigate the perceptions and expectations of high school teachers so they can be directly compared to those of commencing university students and university lecturers. Determining what the expectations of high school teachers are, and how their expectations reflect those reported by commencing university students, is an important step toward smoothing high school to university transition. The researchers of the project suspect that for many high-school teachers their last experience of university, at least at the undergraduate level, occurred when they were graduating from university. This experience is likely to be at least 4-5 years old, and for most teachers much older than that. Universities have changed a lot in this relatively short period, with increased use of social technologies by staff and students, greater diversity of the university student population and the introduction of voluntary student unionism, which has altered the services available to commencing university students.

By comparing responses from students, high school teachers and lecturers of first year students, various perspectives will be explored leading to potential improvements in student satisfaction and retention levels. Tracking students' progression and comparing this with their university entrance scores and considering these in relation to student expectations, experiences and university grades will help develop a full picture of student progress. The research will therefore be the most comprehensive investigation of its type. It is particularly timely in light of the Deputy Prime Minister's response to Bradley Review that "by 2025, 40% of Australian 25 – 34 year olds will have a Bachelor level or above education" and that "by 2020, 20% of higher education enrolments at undergraduate level should be from low socio-economic backgrounds" (DEEWR, 2009). The project is also closely linked to and builds on other ALTC projects, specifically the research conducted by Professor Sally Kift which developed a 'transition pedagogy' as one of its outcomes (Kift, 2008, 2009).

The surveys include questions about student age, whether students are first generation students at university, when they completed high school, the type of school they attended (Catholic, independent, public or other) and the qualification they gained in order to enter university. In this way information regarding their expectations may be matched to their preparation experience, whether it was acquired at high school or elsewhere. A follow up survey of both 1<sup>st</sup> year students (to get feedback from students during their transition year) and 2<sup>nd</sup> year students (so they can reflect upon their transition) will be conducted during Semester 2 to ascertain student experience. The results of these surveys may then be used to determine gaps in expectations and experience and whether these differences are impacting on student success. It is also possible that by asking students about their expectations and later comparing these with their experiences that the study may traverse both the aforementioned integration and adaptation discourses identified by Zepke and Leach (2005).

### **The FYHE session**

The intention of the nuts and bolts session is to make staff aware of the work that is occurring across the three South Australian universities. Other intended outcomes of the session are to:

- gather possible further information on the potential value of the research project;

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- consider the risks the researchers may be taking in asking what expectations are brought to the first year by staff and students, especially if we are not in a position to address these expectations; and
- discuss the value of considering how results that surprise us help us review the stereotypes we might hold

## Conclusion

The researchers are aware that universities currently provide resources and services to students based on what the university believes the students wants and needs. It is highly likely that in asking students what they believe they want and need, there will be a number of mismatches as previous research suggests (Crisp et. al., 2009). While this project is based on some previous research and there are a number of anticipated outcomes that are informed by those studies, it is still possible that expanding the research across three universities, and considering a wider range of pathways will result in more diverse results. As indicated by the poignant words in the chorus from the song Oh well, “Don’t ask me what I think of you I might not give the answer that you want me to” we run the risk of being surprised and challenged by the responses. However, the advantages students, high school teachers and higher education staff will reap from being better informed about expectations of higher education are likely to outweigh the difficulties the sector may have in responding.

## Session outline

**Facilitators** (10 minutes): Outline of research and its anticipated value to the 1<sup>st</sup> year in higher education community within Australia

**Whole group discussion** (5 mins): Example questions from the survey asked from different perspectives

**Whole group discussion** (5 mins): Ask participants to consider anything we may have missed regarding the value of the research and/or the approach that is being taken

**Facilitators** (5 mins): Consider what may surprise us - problematising the research from the perspective that we are taking a risk in asking students what they expect from us because they may not give the answers we want or expect of them

**Whole group discussion** (5 mins): Ask participants to consider how they might utilise the information collected (especially responses we cannot at this stage anticipate, or those that may be specifically confronting). The following suggestion may be provided to help prompt participant participation: How else can the information be used: in high schools; at an individual lecture level; at a (university) school level; within a faculty; by other areas of the university (e.g. the library, student services etc.); state policy level or national policy level.

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