

## Student and staff expectations of university life – a pilot study

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### Abstract

Student expectations of university lack clarity, yet unmet expectations may reduce satisfaction, attainment and progression. This questionnaire-based pilot study explored student and staff expectations in a large English widening participation university. In all, sixty-five students and thirty-two staff participated. Most notable was the similarity of student responses regardless of demographic characteristics. However, students already in paid work were significantly more likely to agree that they liked the university and found it easy to make friends. Students who were unsure if they would undertake paid work expressed significantly more concern about managing their academic work whilst those not also in paid work had significantly more concerns about exams and self-directed learning. In terms of transferable academic skills, black students were significantly less likely than white students to expect to make detailed class notes for themselves, albeit within this small sample size, while those first-in-family identified more academic skills and future careers support needs than other student groups. Significantly more staff than students considered classroom attendance necessary. This pilot study suggests future research directions, including the effect of paid work and ethnicity on specific academic skills, and underlines the importance of student support.

### Keywords

Expectations; support; academic skills; diversity; attendance

### Introduction

COVID-19 caused unprecedented global changes to higher education delivery and the greatest disruption to education systems in human history (UN, 2020). An immediate shift to online learning in March 2020 was followed by a period of educational flux, resulting in the majority of academic year 2020-1 being taught virtually, with considerable disruption to staff and students (Jisc, 2021). Pilot surveys on the wellbeing of students in higher education – carried out by the Office of National Statistics at three timepoints in late 2020 as part of the Student COVID-19 Insights Survey (SCIS) – found 29% were dissatisfied/very dissatisfied with their academic experience, mostly owing to the method of delivery and perceived quality of learning (Tinsley, 2020). In the week before the final survey, 65% of students had attended no in-person teaching, while approximately half had experienced six or more hours of remote learning (Tinsley, 2020). This represents a significant shift in experience and, potentially, in expectations of higher education, but it also affected student health and wellbeing, with, as the survey found, lower levels of life satisfaction and happiness and higher levels of anxiety than evident in the general public (Tinsley, 2020). While some anxiety may relate to financial,

social and health concerns, some may relate to gaps between what students expect and experience in higher education. The extent to which institutions meet student expectations is debatable and it has been argued that both expectations and experience of university should change (Hillman, 2019). In 2018, of 14,000 students questioned, <1,400 reported that university met their expectations (Neves and Hillman, 2018). Similarly, a recent survey of >10,000 students in February-March 2022 still found a gap; though student satisfaction had improved, it had not yet reached pre-pandemic levels, and wellbeing remained a major concern for students (Neves and Brown, 2022). This was nuanced. Findings revealed a slight improvement in some aspects of wellbeing over time. Feelings that their 'lives were worthwhile' improved from 15% to 16%, while 'happiness' increased from 14% to 16% between 2021 and 2022. Nonetheless anxiety levels remained high and loneliness was an issue, particularly in disadvantaged groups (e.g., students with disability). All indicators for students were below those found in the general public. Why this is the case is unclear; the legacy of the pandemic and the subsequent cost-of-living crisis have both been suggested as contributory factors and the same survey found that students in low-income groups were more likely to take on paid work to supplement their incomes than higher-income students, who did so to gain experience. This suggests that cost-of-living pressures may have differential effects on some student groups. The pandemic itself has significantly affected student mental health, with high levels of anxiety and distress and low levels of flourishing found in a study carried out on British students (n=554) at four timepoints between May 2020 and May 2021 (Allen *et al.*, 2023). The authors also highlighted that not all student groups during the pandemic suffered to the same degree; some were more disadvantaged than others (e.g., international students, those without access to reliable internet or information technology equipment and those with parental or caring responsibilities). Developing a sense of belonging within a diverse community benefits student mental wellbeing (Pedlar *et al.*, 2021). A study of 161 students in England at two timepoints during the pandemic (April-May 2021 and November-December 2021) found that important contributors to their mental wellbeing were social support and group membership (Lemyre *et al.*, 2024). Students themselves have suggested that universities have an important role to play in facilitating the development of relationships between students, staff and the local community (Priestley *et al.*, 2022). If students expect this to be the case but do not experience it, this mismatch could contribute towards student distress, anxiety and dissatisfaction.

Student perceptions of their university experience are mixed: 51% of students in the latest Student Academic Experience Survey said it was better in some ways than expected but worse in others (Neves and Brown, 2022). Dissatisfaction arose from factors such as poor course organisation, fewer in-person contact hours than expected, too little in-person contact with peers and a lack of support for independent study. Where it was better than expected, students cited factors such as good organisation, accessibility of teaching staff, courses representing the right level of challenge, high teaching quality and feedback and good level of in-person interaction with staff (Neves and Brown, 2022). It is unclear whether sociodemographic and other differences between student groups may influence students' feelings of satisfaction (Hassel and Ridout, 2018). Since levels of satisfaction may affect students' attendance, engagement and attainment (Rajabally and Santally, 2021; Strong, 2022), it is important for institutions to identify what expectations students have and to address any that, though common, are unrealistic. University staff expectations of their students are also unclear and, if unrealistic, may need to be managed.

Clearly, meeting student expectations is a major issue, compounded by uncertainty over exactly what those expectations are. This project at Kingston University London aimed to identify what a convenience sample of students at a university with a widening-participation remit expected from their institution, specifically in relation to their academic, social and personal expectations and to their concerns. It also aimed to: identify the expectations that academic staff had of their students; explore whether expectations were met; assess to what extent sociodemographic characteristics influenced responses in both groups. Data were collected in the academic year 2021-22.

## Methods

Data were collected by questionnaires, both in person and online between September 2021 and February 2022. University staff and students at all levels were eligible to participate.

Ethics approval was awarded by the Kingston University Faculty Research Ethics Committee. All participants were given a participant information sheet to read; completion of the questionnaire represented implicit consent.

## Data tools

Bespoke questionnaires were constructed using Microsoft Forms. They included a demographics section with relevant personal information (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity and disability status) and study/work characteristics (e.g., mode of study/work). The student questionnaire included twenty-two questions on expectations and concerns derived from the literature (Lowe and Cook, 2003). Five-point Likert rating scales and multiple-choice questions were used to assess levels of agreement with statements and questions about expectations. The staff questionnaire also included the Approaches to Teaching Inventory, which assesses levels of agreement with sixteen statements using five-point Likert rating scales (Trigwell and Prosser, 2004). Additional questions about staff perceptions and expectations of students included Likert rating-scale questions, multiple choice questions and open text boxes allowing elaboration of responses. In all, ten questions about teaching approaches and eleven about staff expectations of students were included. Questionnaire completion took ten to fifteen minutes.

## Data collection

Students were contacted via module/programme and email distribution lists and provided with a link to the questionnaire. Large modules common to multiple undergraduate pathways were prioritised. Data were also collected in-person from students in common areas, such as the library, using paper copies of the same questionnaire to increase participant numbers. Staff were contacted using school and faculty email contact lists and invited to complete the online questionnaire.

## Participants

A convenience sample of sixty-five students and thirty-two staff completed questionnaires. The majority of student participants were eighteen to twenty-one years old (56.9%), without disability (88.5%), and approximately two-thirds were female, similar to university statistics for 2021/22. Most common ethnicities of student participants were White (39.7%) and Asian (30.2%). These differed slightly from the university statistics (32.0% White and 36.0% Asian). All year groups were represented, although almost half were first-year undergraduates; the majority (98.5%) were studying full-time. The majority of staff participants were  $\geq 40$  years (68.8%), female (59.3%), working full-time (93.7%) and White (65.6%). Just over a fifth reported disability (21.8%).

## Data analysis

Data from individually coded questionnaires were entered into an Excel spreadsheet. Quantitative data comprised demographics, Likert rating scales and responses to closed questions. Impact of demographic characteristics was explored using Kruskal Wallis tests with *post-hoc* Dunn's analysis adjusted for ties and Bonferroni correction. Chi square tests were used to compare similar staff and student responses. All statistical analysis was carried out using IBM SPSS version 27.

## Results

### Students study, background and work characteristics

In line with university demographics, the majority of students were in full-time study (98.5%), and approximately two-thirds commuted a minimum of forty-five minutes (one way) to university at least two or three times a week. Almost half were first-in-family to higher education and 44.6% intended to have paid work while studying, with this being a possibility for a further 23.1%. Undertaking between ten and twenty hours of paid work per week was most common (table 1).

**Table 1. Descriptive statistics of student participants - study, background and work intentions; data expressed as numbers (%)**

<b>Mode of study (n=65)</b>				
	<b>Full time</b>		<b>Part time</b>	
Numbers (%)	64 (98.5)		1 (1.5)	
<b>Commuting distance (n=65)</b>				
	<b>Usually</b>	<b>Often</b>	<b>Seldom</b>	<b>Never</b>
Numbers (%)	20 (30.8)	23 (35.4)	6 (9.2)	16 (24.6)
<b>Residence (n=65)</b>				
	<b>Home</b>	<b>Halls</b>	<b>Private</b>	<b>Other</b>
Numbers (%)	35 (53.8)	11 (16.9)	12 (18.5)	7 (10.8)
<b>First-in-family to university (n=64)*</b>				

	Yes		No	
Numbers (%)	27 (42.2)		37 (56.9)	
<b>Will you work part-time while studying? (n=65)</b>				
	Yes	No	Maybe	
Numbers (%)	29 (44.6)	21 (32.3)	15 (23.1)	
<b>Hours of work per week (n=46)+</b>				
	≤10	>10 ≤ 20	>20 ≤ 30	>30
Numbers (%)	10 (27.8)	30 (83.3)	5 (13.9)	1 (2.8)

*\*Not all students answered all questions; only those answering 'yes' or 'maybe' to the previous question answered this.*

### Staff experience in higher education

Staff respondents were generally very experienced (table 2). Two-thirds had >10 years higher education experience, a third with >20 years' experience. Large group teaching (>150/class) was common.

**Table 2. Descriptive statistics of staff participants, data expressed as numbers (%)**

<b>Years in higher education (n=32)</b>					
	<5	5-10	10-15	15-20	>20
Numbers (%)	6 (18.9)	6 (18.9)	9 (28.1)	2 (6.3)	9 (28.1)
<b>Largest class size (n=32)</b>					
	<20	20-50	50-75	75-150	>150
Numbers (%)	0 (0.0)	4 (12.5)	5 (15.6)	7 (21.8)	16 (50.0)

### Student questionnaire responses

#### Why go to university?

Younger students (18-21 and 22-25 years) compared with ≥30 years were significantly more likely to 'want to enjoy self before starting work' (p=0.02 and p=0.01 respectively). They were also significantly more likely to want to move away from home (p=0.01).

#### Why choose this university?

Commuter students were significantly more likely to report they chose it for its proximity to London compared with non-commuters (p=0.02). Those who worked alongside their studies agreed that they liked the university significantly more than those who might work (p=0.01). They were also significantly more likely to find it easy to make friends compared with those not working (p=0.04).

Those without disability were significantly more likely to agree that the university facilities were good, compared with those who preferred not to state their disability status (p=0.05); they

were also significantly more likely to view the university as sympathetic and reassuring to students ( $p=0.03$ ).

### Expectations of university

There were no significant differences in expectations of university by gender, age, disability, level of study, campus, mode of study, commuter status, accommodation, whether students were in paid work or first-in-family status. However, white respondents were significantly more likely to agree or strongly agree that they expected to take their own class notes than black students ( $p=0.03$ ; 96 vs. 75% respectively).

### Skills needs identified by students

Students were asked to choose from a range of skills to identify those for which they thought they would need support at university, choosing multiple options as appropriate (e.g., giving verbal presentations, planning their future careers, finding important information within texts). There were no differences in skills needs identified by gender, age, disability status, level of study, living circumstances or whether students were in paid work. The most common support needs identified by participants are shown in table 3.

Support with future career planning was significantly different by ethnicity ( $p=0.02$ ), mode of study ( $p=0.001$ ) and first-in-family status ( $p=0.008$ ). Significantly more black students stated they needed some support planning future careers compared with other ethnic groups. In addition to future careers support, those who were first-in-family to university identified greater support needs, including support with verbal presentations ( $p=0.03$ ), finding appropriate information in texts ( $p=0.03$ ), taking good notes ( $p=0.02$ ), explaining ideas clearly ( $p<0.001$ ) and practical skills ( $p=0.04$ ). Both commuter students and those who were first-in-family identified a significantly higher need for essay writing support than other groups ( $p=0.04$  and  $p<0.01$  respectively). Not all students answered all questions; numbers who did are indicated for each skill in table 3.

**Table 3. Most common academic skills students need support with; data are expressed as numbers (%)**

Skill	Extensive support needed	Some support needed	Minimal support needed
Planning future career (n=61)	23 (35.4)	30 (46.2)	8 (12.3)
Writing essays (n=62)	21 (32.3)	25 (38.5)	16 (24.6)
Finding sandwich placement (n=39)	19 (29.2)	16 (24.6)	4 (6.2)
Practical report preparation (n=54)	16 (24.6)	22 (33.8)	16 (24.6)
Verbal presentations (n=59)	15 (23.1)	31 (47.7)	13 (20.0)

### Concerns about university

No significant differences were found by gender, ethnicity, age, level or mode of study, campus, commute, accommodation or first-in-family status. However, whether students were

in paid work or not appeared important. Asked whether or not they would take paid work alongside their studies, students responded either 'yes', 'no' or 'maybe' (table 1). Over a fifth (23.1%) were unsure whether they would work part time. Those in this group were significantly more likely to agree that they might struggle with their academic work ( $p=0.03$ ). Compared with them, those who did not intend to work part time (32.3%, table 1), were significantly more anxious about exams ( $p=0.02$ ) and managing their self-directed learning ( $p=0.02$ ).

In terms of their actual experience, younger students (22-25 ys. vs.  $\geq 30$  ys.) found it more difficult to cope away from home ( $p=0.01$ ) and harder to manage money than older students (18-21 ys. and 22-25 ys. vs.  $\geq 30$  ys;  $p=0.03$  and  $p=0.03$ ). Those living in private accommodation with friends ( $p=0.01$ ) or in halls of residence ( $p=0.002$ ) missed their families significantly more than those living at home with family.

## Comparisons between staff and students

Significantly more staff than students agreed that attendance at most classes was necessary (90.6% vs. 84.6% respectively;  $p=0.03$ ). More staff than students also agreed that students would expect detailed class notes supplied to them (43.8% vs. 36.9% respectively;  $p<0.001$ ).

## Discussion

In this diverse sample of staff and students, despite much similarity in responses, interesting differences were observed. These included how undertaking paid work affected the academic concerns of students, differences in expectations about note-taking and staff: student differences, particularly relating to attendance at classes. These will be discussed in turn.

## Paid work and academic life

There are undoubtedly financial pressures on students. Recently, the Student Academic Experience Survey found that 52% of students expressed concerns about the cost of living, while 23% worried about tuition fees (Neves and Brown, 2022). In January 2023, the Office for National Statistics identified that 92% of higher education students reported that their cost of living had increased and that 49% felt they had financial difficulties, despite the government's freezing tuition fees for two years and providing additional hardship funds (ONS, 2023; Department for Education, 2023).

Although there are benefits to students' undertaking paid work alongside their studies, there may also be an academic cost. In an Australian cohort of 182 first-year nursing students followed up at the end of their studies, an inverse relationship between hours in paid work during term time and academic attainment was found (Salamonson *et al.*, 2012). Data from a sample of 477 students at the University of Canberra suggested that the benefits of work decline after eleven hours of work per week, becoming negative with  $>22$  hours per week (Applegate and Daly, 2006), with a so-called 'Goldilocks' (just right) zone between 10-22 hours per week (Owen *et al.*, 2017). This suggests that there may be a cut-off point, beyond which the advantages of working may be outweighed by the disadvantages. A distinction has been drawn between the impact of paid work on academic experience and on academic grades (McInnes 2001; McInnes and Hartley, 2002). However, the development of relationships with peers and academic staff matters for both since these relationships simultaneously contribute

to developing a sense of belonging within higher education and support students with their academic learning (Ahn and Davis, 2019); belonging in turn enhances student engagement and attainment (Hausman *et al.*, 2009; Freeman *et al.*, 2007). Working exposes students to a wider group of acquaintances, with potential to develop more friendships. However, working long hours, especially if these are off-campus, reduces the time available to meet and develop bonds with other students, as well as to take part in informal peer-learning opportunities. Others have found that working resulted in less time to see friends, which matters because of the importance of establishing social networks at university (McGregor, 2015). In our study, students in paid work found it significantly easier to make friends compared with those not, but they were not asked about whether either the work or the friendships occurred on campus. Since social aspects of learning also influence the degree of satisfaction, there is a risk that long hours working alongside study could lower student metrics like attendance and attainment, but it is also possible that working students develop more social confidence from mixing more with different groups, offsetting some of the potential disadvantages.

In this pilot study, academic concerns were expressed by participants who might or would not be taking on paid work, compared with those who definitely would. It is not clear why, although there is a possibility that those in paid work have to manage their time effectively owing to their multiple commitments. This may boost their confidence and ability to attain academically. The majority of our participants who were in paid work were working up to twenty hours a week, within the 'Goldilocks' zone (Owen *et al.*, 2017), where it is suggested that the benefits of simultaneously working and studying outweigh the downsides. It is also possible that our participants neither currently in paid work nor intending to undertake it had previous educational experiences or other commitments which had harmed their academic confidence. We found no differences in terms of support needs identified by students based on whether or not they were in paid work. Nonetheless, a wide range of support needs was identified and, given the financial realities for students, support to mitigate the potential negative effects of work on academic attainment is needed (McGregor, 2015).

### **Note-taking and other academic skills**

Significantly fewer black than white students expected to take their own class notes in this pilot study: 73% vs. 96% respectively. This may be an artefact, owing to the small number of black students who participated (n=11); however, possible differences in barriers to study by student characteristics including ethnicity have previously been identified (Clement, 2016). Lawrence and White (2010) highlighted that additional study skills support was required by black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) home students surveyed in a United Kingdom (UK) university, although it was unclear which study skills these were. Skills such as note-taking may contribute to the well-documented BAME attainment gap that many higher education institutions rightly seek to narrow (Universities UK and NUS, 2019).

Effective note-taking is skilled, requiring decisions about what and how to record and how notes should be subsequently accessed and used (Kim *et al.*, 2009). Done well, it involves a combination of listening, comprehension, writing/recording, judging what is important, making connections with other learning, organisation and making inferences from implicit information when needed (Al-Musalli, 2015; Mehta and Pitchers, 2018). Note-taking is usually recommended by academic staff (Landrum, 2010) and is a distinguishing feature of higher education (Van Der Meer, 2012). Academic success is enhanced by effective note-taking, which helps students retain information, both at the time they are taken and when they are



reviewed (Kokemuller, 2019; Nye *et al.*, 1984). It was of interest in this study that staff assumed that students would require detailed notes to be provided to them, while the expectation that this would happen was significantly lower in students. It was also evident that those first-in-family to university had a range of support needs for multiple inter-related skills, including identifying important information within texts, taking good notes and explaining ideas clearly, as well as with future careers planning. Of all the groups included in this study, those first-in-family identified more support needs than any others. The necessity of supporting first-in-family students, including with career planning, has been identified by others (Henderson, Shure and Adamecz-Volgyi, 2022; Godin, 2023), since they are more likely to drop out than other student groups (Henderson, Shure and Adamecz-Volgyi, 2022; Coombs, 2022) and have few expectations of higher education (Coombs, 2022). More generally, supporting students to develop key skills has been previously identified (Bonner and Holliday, 2006), including helping students identify which parts of taught sessions should be recorded in their notes (Haynes, 2015). Our study further highlights the importance of supporting students with the skills they need and also of ensuring that those with the greatest need for support are identified early to embed the academic skills they lack confidence in gaining and using.

### **Staff: student differences in expectations**

Significantly more staff than students in this study expected students to attend most classes (90.6% vs. 84.6%). Attendance, retainment and 'academic success' are positively related (Moore *et al.*, 2019; Kassarnig *et al.*, 2017) and bi-directional (Kahu, 2013). Markers of 'academic success' vary between studies, with some using final student grades (Boulton *et al.*, 2018) and others using retention and programme completion (Cambuzzi *et al.*, 2015; de Freitas *et al.*, 2015; Rientes and Toetenel, 2016). 'Attendance' was not defined in our questionnaire, but is usually considered as physical presence at taught sessions (Barlow and Fleischer, 2011). Many factors may affect student attendance, including issues with teaching (e.g., quality, format), university expectations and policies (e.g., mandatory attendance policies), timetabling, whether material is provided online and individual factors, such as employment and demographics) (Moore *et al.*, 2019). 'Engagement' is defined as the active commitment and purposeful activity of students towards their learning (Krause and Coates, 2008) and relates to academic success, whether online or on campus (Kuzilek *et al.*, 2015; Cerezo *et al.*, 2016; Boulton *et al.*, 2018). It is dynamic, it fluctuates and it positively correlates with student wellbeing, although cause and effect are unclear (Boulton *et al.*, 2019).

On-campus attendance affords opportunities for students to develop relationships with their peers as well as academic staff, influencing both engagement and attainment (Thomas, 2012). Students may value on-campus lectures as part of their university experience, for providing opportunities to socialise and learn (Clark *et al.*, 2011; Gysbers *et al.*, 2011), but this will not be true for all student groups. For example, a study of students with physical disability suggested that they invested their time at university on their academic goals, and maintained strong relationships with those outside, rather than within the university (Papasotiriou and Windle, 2012). More recently, mature students were identified as being less concerned about social opportunities on their course than whether there would be other mature students studying (TASO, 2021). In addition, provision of online learning materials blurs the distinction between student presence and absence, since students can access materials when and where they want (Parson *et al.*, 2009). COVID-19 accelerated the trend towards online provision (Tesar, 2020), but has caused the distinction between 'attendance' and

'engagement' to be more fluid. Research (O'Brien and Verma, 2018; Edwards and Clinton, 2018) identifies two student groups in relation to this: traditional – high in-person attendance and low use of recordings – and digital – low in-person attendance and high use of recordings – although Edwards and Clinton also distinguish between recordings being available and actually being used. Lower attendance at in-person sessions has been reported (Williams, 2022). The extent to which this is affecting student belonging, engagement and academic attainment is unclear, as is whether lower in-person attendance is mitigated by higher student engagement with online materials. In this study, data on student attendance (physical and/or online) and attainment were not collected. The disparity between staff and student expectations suggests that this needs clarification. Since it is likely that students who are engaged in their studies will use online resources (if available) both to reinforce sessions they have attended in person, but also to make up for sessions they have missed, measures of engagement should include on-campus attendance as well as online use of resources, and future work should address this.

### Conclusion

This study identified some interesting differences between staff and student expectations in relation to attendance – staff having higher expectations than students that students should attend. The importance of academic skills support for students, aligned with their personal needs, was also highlighted. A need for more support with future career planning was found in both those first-in-family to university and black students; first-in-family students also identified a range of other support needs. Black students were less likely to expect to take their own class notes than other ethnic groups, albeit in a small sample. How paid work affected students' academic confidence was unclear. Further work on these aspects in a larger group is needed.

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