

# Strengthening the transition to university by confronting the expectation–reality gap in psychology undergraduates

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*In negotiating the transition to Higher Education, students bring core expectations from their A-level study that are likely to be different to the lived reality of university study. Bridging the transition to university requires an in-depth understanding of the differences between the imagined and the reality; the expectations and the experience. Psychology students' perspectives of their first-year experiences were collected through activity-oriented focus groups (Colucci, 2007). Discrepancies between expectations and reality were expressed in terms of the degree of autonomy required, the nature of 'the lecture', and achievement. In many cases, students displayed contradictory perspectives, desiring autonomy but also wanting the security of the more dependent approach to learning they have been socialised into. It is suggested that first-year students are passing through a key period of transition, and during this period of 'liminality' they are attempting to leave one identity behind and instead inhabit a new, more autonomous identity.*

**Keywords:** *First-year experience; transition; expectations and experiences; liminality; psychology.*

THE LANDSCAPE of Higher Education (HE) in the UK has changed markedly in the past decade (Thomas, 2012). In particular, marketisation of HE has strengthened shifts towards a model of student-as-consumer (Staddon & Standish, 2012), with implications for teaching and student support. Modularisation of A-level qualifications and the frequent opportunity to resit exams at A-level have also had an impact on the HE sector. Many Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have expressed concern over the lack of opportunity A-level students are given to take control of their own learning and develop independent learning skills, leading them to expect a similar level of direction and guidance when they begin their university career (Higton et al., 2012).

These changes have resulted in a greater sensitivity to ensuring student retention and success, and enhancing the student experience. These issues are particularly pertinent to the first year of degree programmes; a report by the UK Higher Education Academy (Thomas, 2012) showed that whilst around one-in-12 students in UK HE leave during their first year of study, as many as

one-in-three students consider withdrawing from their course during this period. Thus, many research endeavours have explored the transition to HE and the nature of the expectations that students bring with them (e.g. Andrews, Clark & Thomas, 2012; Tate & Swords, 2013). These two lines of research are inextricable; it is not possible to manage the transition effectively without being aware of the expectations students have about the nature of a university education and experience, and how their perceived reality differs from these expectations.

Whilst it is possible to hold expectations in the absence of relevant experience, reality is always interpreted within a framework of expectation; expectations cannot be disconfirmed until an alternative reality is experienced. Students enter HE with specific expectations, but no experience to show them that their expectations may be inappropriate. It is often the case that students appear motivated and content with the demands of HE during induction periods. Thus, staff do not feel a need to be concerned, until students have experienced a different reality and are perhaps too bewil-

dered to seek advice. It is only by confronting head on the potential expectation-reality gap that we can avoid the situation where discrepancies arise too late, and be proactive rather than reactive in aligning student expectations with what they will experience, rather than what they think they will experience.

### ***The transition to HE***

Supporting students in their transition to university is important in ensuring student retention and success. A poor transition to university can result in student drop-out (Lowe & Cook, 2003), but can also be responsible for underachievement in those who have struggled with the transition but choose to continue with their course (Johnston, 1994). Drop-out and poor engagement can result where students do not feel they have the necessary skills and knowledge to adapt their study processes to fit the new environment. From a psychological perspective, schemas are structures of knowledge that are used to interpret and guide behaviour in future situations (e.g. Bensimon, 2005). Following a period of transition, an inappropriate schema based on past experience can be used in a new situation where it no longer leads to adaptive behaviour. Why would a student not expect a strategy that has led to excellent performance at school to work equally well at university? As Biggs (1996, p.348) states, students bring 'an accumulation of assumptions, motives, intentions, and previous knowledge that envelopes every teaching/learning situation and determines the course and quality of learning that may take place'. This is supported by findings that students continue to use the study strategies formed at school for the first semester at university (Cook & Leckey, 1999), and that many students expect teaching methods at university to be similar to those experienced at school (Lowe & Cook, 2003). A key concern reported by university teachers is the difference between teaching methods in schools and universities, particularly in terms of the degree of

student independence that is required (Smith, 2012). With the student perhaps bringing an inaccurate set of expectations to learning environments in HE, revision of schemas is needed if the student is to make a successful transition, and 'make sense of the changes and resolve the ambiguity, anxiety, and conflict inherent in the situation' (Weber & Manning, 2001, p.229). Expectations are important for the student in terms of becoming assimilated into the conventions of their discipline and developing an identity as a scholar of that subject (Booth, 1997). Academics need to be sensitive to student expectations for these reasons.

### ***Student expectations of the university experience***

Where a student's expectations of university are not matched by the reality of their lived experience, the resulting confusion can limit commitment to academic study (Lowe & Cook, 2003). Whilst addressing student expectations can improve retention and long-term student outcomes, a 'mismatch between expectations and actual experiences can lead to disengagement with the academic process' (Rowley, Hartley & Larkin, 2008, p.399). Where expectations are not aligned with experiences, this can have a large influence on non-completion rates (Baxter & Hatt, 2000); thus, particularly in the current climate, lecturers must have a sensitivity to these differences in expectations at the start of the degree (Ridley, 2004).

There have been parallel research endeavours exploring the nature of student expectations across disciplines. Such research has demonstrated that students hold inaccurate expectations surrounding diverse aspects of the university experience, from teaching methods and modes of assessment, to the subject content of their course and requirements for independent study.

With regard to teaching and learning methods at university, it is quite reasonable for students to hold inaccurate expectations as their education to date will have mostly been based on traditional 'lesson' formats.

For example, a survey conducted by Cook and Leckey (1999) explored the expectations that first-year students had about the nature of university study, and revealed that students held inaccurate perceptions of time spent in lectures and private study, and held a belief that modes of learning would be similar to those in school. In the context of degree-level English, Smith and Hopkins (2005) found that students expected a similar amount of contact time with staff to that experienced during their A-level studies. A further study by Lowe and Cook (2003) compared student expectations of university study with their experiences at the end of the first term. Around one third of the students they surveyed expected the style of teaching on their degree course to be similar to what they had experienced at school or college, and hence found that they had to take far more notes in lectures than they had expected to. Furthermore, the survey revealed a lack of knowledge of what to expect; 18 per cent of students surveyed did not know how they would be assessed at university, and 57 per cent did not know how many contact hours to expect on their degree course. Students held an expectation that the classes in which they would be taught would be smaller than they were in reality, and about 21 per cent of students reported that they experienced greater difficulty with self-directed study than they had expected to.

In the context of students' expectations about teaching methods at university, Sander et al. (2000) make the important distinction between ideal expectations (what students would *like* to experience) and predictive expectations (what students assume will *probably* occur). Through a questionnaire study of medicine, business studies and psychology students, Sander et al. found that students expected to be taught through formal and interactive lectures but preferred interactive lectures and group activities. Thus, the formal lecture was high in terms of predictive expectations but low in terms of ideal expectations. However, whilst students

may expect that they will be taught through lectures at university, we need to better understand how the nature of the lecture experience fits with their pre-existing assumptions surrounding what this method of teaching entails. In particular, knowledge of the aspects of lecture-based teaching that students find particularly engaging can be used to strengthen their transition to this new method of teaching. For example, Booth (1997) found that students liked a variety of teaching methods within the lecture context, such as visual aids and video clips.

Furthermore, managing the transition to university study may require a particular sensitivity to supporting students in learning tasks that may not have been frequently experienced at school or college. For example, Booth (1997) found that first-year students expressed little confidence in their ability to contribute in class, knowing how much they should be reading independently, and how to search for further sources. In fact, managing expectations around the required amount of independent study in HE seems to be one of the most problematic areas within the transition (e.g. Leese, 2010; Smith & Hopkins, 2005). Byrne and Flood (2005) found that accounting students underestimated the amount of time they would be required to spend on private study. Students were also unprepared for the more independent learning environment of HE; instead, they continued to adopt learning strategies employed at school and expected to receive a lot more specific guidance from lecturers.

These findings were echoed by those reported by Cook and Leckey (1999). In this survey, students also underestimated the amount of time that would be spent in independent study, the amount of class contact time, and the size of class group, leading the authors to conclude: 'It is clear that students arrive at the university with unrealistic views about the amount of work expected and the size of classes in which they will be taught' (p.168). Students seem to bring with them an expectation that they will receive quite

specific instructions about what to read, what to write, and how to study. Booth (1997) reports how students found the concept of 'independent reading' difficult to grasp: 'At A-level (we) tended to be very spoon-fed with dictated notes, and if we were told to do any background reading (which was rare) we were told exactly which pages to read out of which book' (Booth, 1997, p.208). Similarly, the psychology students participating in a study by Rowley et al. (2008) expressed how they were not prepared for the autonomous nature of learning in higher education: 'the most difficult thing was the massive decrease in help and guidance – plus not being pushed as much to do the work' (Rowley et al., 2008, p.407). This is perhaps not surprising; historically, educators have expressed concern over the implications of 'spoon-feeding' students (e.g. Edwards & Smith, 2005; McKay & Kember, 1997), and this debate continues in more recent literature (e.g. McQueen & Webber, 2012).

Together with general expectations about the nature of learning and teaching at university, if students have studied their degree subject at A-level they can arrive with subject-specific expectations which can be oversimplified. In the context of the discipline of psychology, a BSc course has a heavy scientific basis, with compulsory modules in biological psychology, quantitative research methods and statistical analysis techniques. Some students may not have realised from their prior experience of studying the subject that degree-level psychology has this emphasis. Rowley et al. (2008) explored the expectations of psychology students and found evidence of just this kind of conflict between the expectations and reality of course content: 'I was not aware how much emphasis there would be on maths/biology and also on research' (p.408). Whilst module titles are published in course prospectuses, it is likely that students' prior expectations of the content that a subject comprises can override this kind of explicit information.

### ***Exploring the expectation-reality gap in psychology undergraduates***

The aim of the present study was to explore in depth the experiences of first-year psychology undergraduates and how this experienced reality differed from their pre-existing expectations. Whilst the literature contains a plethora of quantitative surveys of students' expectations and experiences, the present study took a more in-depth approach to understanding student expectations through activity-oriented focus groups (Colucci, 2007). This study formed part of a long-term project to strengthen the transition to degree-level study of psychology through more effective support and scaffolding. The aim was to more fully understand the expectations students bring so that they can be more effectively managed from the outset, and to develop a greater sensitivity to these expectations.

### ***Theoretical framework***

The theory of met expectations (e.g. Porter & Steers, 1973) has most commonly been applied in organisational contexts. According to the theory of met expectations, where an individual's expectations are matched with experienced reality, individuals are more likely to be satisfied with their experience, and are better able to adjust to the change in circumstances. In the organisational psychology literature, the theory of met expectations is used to understand an employee's transition to a new job, and the congruence between the employee's expectations of the job and their perceived reality, focusing on the most important aspects of the job (Caliguri et al., 2001). The theory of met expectations can also be easily applied to educational contexts; an individual's adjustment and satisfaction during a period of educational transition can be influenced by the degree of congruence between expectations of the new context and their lived experience of this new context. Within organisational contexts, research demonstrates that where expectations are met, individuals experience greater adjustment to,

and satisfaction with, the new context (e.g. Caliguri et al., 2001). In addition, where individuals do not have sufficient information about the new context to be able to generate expectations, they can rely on mental 'short cuts' (Caliguri et al., 2001) such as stereotypical perceptions of elements of the new context as a basis for their expectations.

Thus, just as facilitating easy adjustment to a new work context is of interest to organisational psychologists wishing to minimise employee turnover, so is the facilitation of a positive adjustment to university of interest to psychologists and practitioners within HE wishing to maximise the retention and success of new undergraduates. The theory of met expectations tells us that being aware of expectations that are brought to the new context, as well as the degree of overlap between expectation and reality, can support this adjustment that is so crucial to minimising student drop-out. Thus, the primary aim of the present study was to explore the relationship between students' expectations and experiences in the transition to degree-level study in psychology.

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

As part of an ongoing project to develop strategies to support the transition to degree-level psychology at the University of Surrey, all first-year psychology students completed a series of questionnaires, at the end of which was an invitation to take part in a focus group to express their perspectives of their experiences. From those that responded, four first-year psychology undergraduates (all female) were available to take part in a focus group session. To protect the anonymity of participants, hereafter they are referred to using the pseudonyms of Liz, Carly, Wendy and Vanessa. The focus group took place in the middle of their second semester at university, to ensure that they had sufficient experience of university study. Institutional guidelines for the conduct of pedagogical research were followed.

### ***Procedure***

The main emphasis of the focus group was on students' experiences. We were interested in whether a mismatch between expectations and experience arose as a key part of the dialogue. The focus group was facilitated by a research assistant, not a member of academic staff, to enable students to feel more comfortable in expressing their perspectives. The focus group was run according to a rough topic guide, but the facilitator allowed the discussion to naturally develop around these general areas: motivation for work; areas of interest on the course; the exam process in the first year; use of lecture notes; and the tutorials designed to support the transition to university.

The focus group also incorporated two activity-oriented components (Colucci, 2007). The first activity involved participants being given a series of statements representing different teaching and learning methods (see Table 1), and a rating scale on a large piece of paper, ranging from 'teaching method least likely to help me to learn' at one end, to 'teaching method most likely to help me to learn' at the other. Participants had to agree as a group where on the rating scale to place each statement, with the dialogue that this process generated as the primary focus of interest.

The second activity was a sentence completion task; participants were given two open-ended sentences ('The thing that most interests me about studying psychology is...'; and 'One thing that could be improved about first-year psychology is...'), and had to discuss as a group how to complete each sentence. As described by Colucci (2007), activities can be incorporated into focus groups to elicit richer discussion. In this way, the dialogue elicited through completion of the activities is of primary interest, rather than the outcomes of the activities. Thus, the responses of the participants to the activities are not discussed further; the purpose of asking participants to agree on their responses within the activities was to surface their perspectives through discussion. The

**Table 1: Statements used in the rating scale activity.**

Lectures/tutorials based on applying a theory to a real-life problem	PowerPoint presentations with the lecture slides printed for you to follow the lecturer as they speak
A lecture with no Powerpoint presentation – taking your own notes as the lecturer speaks	A small tutorial encouraging discussion and debate among students
Videos on the subject matter being taught	Giving students questions/short tests on the previous lecture
Getting students to give short presentations on academic topics during tutorials	Giving students further reading to do, which may not be covered in the examination, and asking them to keep a small record/diary of their own opinions and reflections based on the topic
Having lectures only for each module (with all students on the course) and no small tutorials	

**Table 2: Main themes and subthemes.**

Theme	Subthemes
Autonomy and structure	Expectations about 'spoon feeding'
	Expectations about writing to a formula
	Expectations about course structure
The lecture as a teaching method	
Achievement	

dialogue that emerged whilst the activities were carried out formed part of the transcript that was analysed thematically.

**Analysis**

The focus group recording was transcribed verbatim and subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method was selected for its flexibility and due to the fact that it allows for the consideration of descriptive as well as interpretative themes. The analysis involved exploration of the transcript for themes relating to expectations and experienced reality.

**Findings**

When discussing their experience, students made frequent reference to the expectations they had brought with them and their experienced reality. Three broad themes emerged (see Table 2) which are explored in turn.

***Expectations surrounding autonomy and course structure***

Through their discussion, participants revealed a mismatch between their expectations and perceived reality in terms of the degree of autonomy required and expected

of an undergraduate student. Firstly, students expressed an expectation that they would receive more specific guidance, more akin to a 'spoon-feeding' approach, from lecturers. Students frequently used language that suggested they perceived there to be only one 'correct' way of doing things and that lecturers should tell them what this is:

*Carly: 'I find him really interesting though to listen to but... I do not understand what we're supposed to be writing for this lab report at all.'*

*Wendy: 'I don't think he's told us yet.'*

*Carly: 'How are we supposed to come up with it on our own?'*

These perspectives contrast sharply with an experience of the spoon-feeding approach to teaching that was perhaps more akin to what they had been used to:

*Carly: 'I found the tutorial really useful; he basically told us what to write!'*

Students also seemed to feel uncomfortable with autonomy, particularly with regard to independent study and reading:

*Carly: '...and the book they gave us to read as well, I was like, I don't understand what I'm supposed to be taking notes on.'*

*Wendy: 'It's hard to pick up on what you should be reading.'*

*Liz: '...my problem is knowing how much detail you need to know, like I make notes and I make loads of notes so it takes me hours and then I realise I don't really need to know it all.'*

These illustrative quotes all portray an expectation that greater guidance would be given in terms of reading and study; the use of terms such as 'should' and 'supposed' all imply that students perceive lecturers to have specific expectations, and that these would have been communicated more explicitly. The independent approach to learning required at university also seems to create problems in terms of student motivation:

*Liz: 'I find it hard to get motivation cos like at school you have to do the work cos you have a deadline whereas you don't really have a deadline with reading. It's really easy to just not.'*

However, there was considerable evidence of dissonance in students' dialogue. Whilst they discussed difficulties with knowing what they

'should' be reading, they also spoke of the enjoyment of experiencing autonomy in their studies:

*Carly: '...like if we're doing an essay I do all the like reading around and find my own articles and stuff like that and I find that interesting but sometimes the lecture reading I'm kind of like ergh...'*

*Liz: 'Yeah.'*

*Vanessa: '...cos it's like you've been handed it on a plate.'*

Thus, students are on the one hand expressing a desire for explicit guidance, but also finding this guidance to be somewhat stifling. Students also spoke of expectations surrounding how to write in psychology, and showed an awareness that strategies they had previously used to strong effect were no longer working:

*Vanessa: '...like at college they gave you the points and said if you write all of these you will get a good mark, like a magic formula sort of thing whereas here its more about being individual and opinions. So that's very different.'*

*Liz: 'I just found for A-level I basically just reworded the textbook and that was it whereas now you can't do that.'*

In their previous status as an A-level learner, writing to a specific formula had resulted in success; thus they may have expected, on the basis of this schema, for this strategy to lead to similar levels of success in their new status as a degree-level learner. Out-of-date expectations built up during A-level study also surfaced in discussion of course structure and difficulty level:

*Liz: 'I was told that erm the first year was basically A-level but you just go over everything so I came here thinking it would be really easy and you don't have to do any work.'*

*Carly: 'No it's not A-level.'*

Students also discussed how they had expected the course structure to involve presentations as a method of assessment, and revealed that they would find this beneficial even if it is not something they would particularly like to do:

Vanessa: 'I know lots of other subjects do presentations and things and well we haven't done any it's sort of...I expected to do them when I came to uni...'

Liz: '...yeah, even though I don't like doing them I thought we would have to and I'm surprised we haven't...'

Carly: 'It probably would be quite helpful even if we don't really want to.'

### Summary

**Students expect: Explicit direction in learning activities.**

**Students experience: The requirement for self-regulation.**

### *Expectations surrounding 'the lecture'*

Students naturally come to university with an expectation that they will be taught through lectures, but may not have a clear perception of what lecture-based teaching involves. The participants spoke at length about their experience of lecture-based teaching, and clearly expressed how their experience did not match their expectation, but had difficulty articulating exactly why this was the case:

Liz: '...[going from a classroom setting to a lecture theatre] wasn't really what I expected at all, uni, the whole thing is just completely different to what I thought.'

Carly: 'I obviously knew it was going to be lectures and stuff like that I just didn't, it just wasn't really what I expected, I can't even put into words what I expected and how it was different but it was just completely like over the top of what I expected.'

Other comments made by students indicated that one source of discrepancy between the expectation and reality of lectures related to issues of concentration:

Wendy: 'I get really tired, especially sitting at the front I have to try hard not to fall asleep!'

Liz: 'I didn't think it would be so hard to concentrate, I thought it would be really easy to listen and it would be really interesting but it's really hard to keep attention the whole time.'

In addition, students spoke of how this concentration issue can be minimised through the use of teaching strategies that support engagement and participation:

Vanessa: 'I think the things that help sometimes, like the voting handsets cos they actually make you focus and... cos I thought [lecturers] would just stand at the front and talk to you and you'd have to listen but they do try and get you involved like asking you questions although no one really wants to answer them.'

Here Vanessa explains how her perception of a 'lecture' was a one-way delivery of information, but that her lived experience showed how lectures can be more interactive. She shows insight into the benefit of this alongside a general reluctance to be involved in this way.

### Summary

**Students expect: To be taught in 'lectures'.**

**Students experience: That concentration in lectures can be difficult.**

### *Expectations surrounding achievement*

Perhaps one of the hardest aspects of the transition to HE is the recalibration required of students in terms of their own indicators of achievement. In the context of A-level study, 'excellent' grades might be perceived as those in the region of 90 to 100 per cent; thus, a first class grade at university, from 70 per cent upwards, might seem to some students comparatively low. Participants discussed this expectation-reality discrepancy as a significant source of anxiety in the early stages of the course:

Carly: 'I found it really difficult going from aiming for 80 to 90 per cent to now I'm getting sort of 60 or 70.'

This recalibration of expectations is not only required of the students themselves, but also their families who can exert further pressure during this period of transition:

Wendy: '...my first essay I got 72 per cent and I rang my dad and he was like that's rubbish.'

### Summary

**Students expect: To automatically be achieving marks in the region to which they have become accustomed.**

**Students experience: The need to recalibrate their expectations of what 'good' work represents.**

### Discussion and recommendations

The primary aim of the present study was to explore the potential discrepancies between the expectations students bring to HE and the nature of their first-year experiences. Whilst representing a small-scale exploratory study conducted at a single institution, the findings have nevertheless provided insight into some of the factors contributing to difficulties in the transition to university that can be explored in more depth through further research. In discussing their first year of a BSc psychology degree, students revealed both the nature of the expectations they had before beginning their programme of study, and how these expectations differed to their perceived reality. It was clear that students' expectations were influenced by pre-existing schemas of teaching, learning and education. In the discussion that follows, each of the emergent areas of discrepancy between expectations and experiences will be explored through consideration of students' existing schemas, discussion of possible reasons for discrepancies, and recommendations for how to support students' transition in these areas.

The first area of discrepancy between students' expectations and experience related to their perceived level of autonomy. Their pre-existing schema seemed to represent the learning process as being directed explicitly by a 'teacher', with very clear guidance provided over what tasks need to be completed in order to achieve the learning outcomes. This is evident in students' use of language; students referred to what they 'should' or are 'supposed to' be doing. They do not seem to have an awareness that the reading they are recommended to do is merely illustrative of the reading that they

'could' be doing. Thus, there seems to be no awareness of the multiplicity of equally appropriate strategies that are associated with being an autonomous learner. Whilst high levels of support are often provided in the early stages of a degree course, the nature of this support differs to that often provided in a school or college context. Rather than telling students what they need to do and what they need to know, educators in HE are more likely to direct students to the resources they need to find the answers to their own questions.

The expectation that teaching in HE will be similarly directive to school education reflects previous studies of the transition to university; both Booth (1997) and Byrne and Flood (2005) reported how students expected explicit guidance, directed reading, and were anxious about the requirements for independent learning. A university education is often seen as the primary vehicle through which educators can support the transition from a dependent learner to an independent, autonomous learner, yet students cannot engage fully with this process unless they possess some reflexive awareness of the benefits of making this transition. Students not only need to be given guidance in how to become an autonomous learner, but they also need to be able to understand why self-constructed understanding is the most long-lasting. As revealed by Carly in this study, learning events where students are given very explicit guidance are perceived as 'useful'. This is the perspective that needs to be changed; moving students towards seeing that what is 'useful' in terms of learning experiences is much less directed by others and much more directed by the self.

Complexity in students' perspectives was evidenced through dissonance in the dialogue. Whilst students expressed difficulty in their work when they were not given explicit guidance, they also expressed a desire to be more independent in their work, finding directed reading limiting in terms of engagement and motivation. Thus,

it appears that students desire autonomy but express a limited ability to engage in this process. What might be the possible reasons underlying this dissonance?

When an individual is involved in a transition between a previously held identity and a new identity, this period can be represented by the concept of liminality. This concept could illuminate the difficulties faced by students as they make the transition to HE. The student is aiming to move beyond their previous status as an A-level student, and wishes to inhabit a new identity as an undergraduate student (Briggs, Clark & Hall, 2012). The participants in this study seemed to be saying that they want to be a university learner, but are not quite sure how to get there, and regression to the previously held identity can be the simplest option to take when faced with a new learning situation. If it is the case that during this period of transition students are striving for an undergraduate identity, then academic staff can take advantage of this aspiration and support students in adopting this status as their core learner identity. It seems important to provide learning environments that do not reinforce the previously held identity of dependent learning, thus forcing students to move towards inhabiting a new identity as an independent learner. Indeed, the process of becoming an autonomous learner can be impeded by HE practices that encourage the 'spoon-feeding' approach (e.g. Bingham & O'Hara, 2007). Exploring the interplay between the nature of learning environments and the emerging undergraduate identity in the current HE climate represents an important direction for future research.

The second area of discrepancy between students' expectations and experiences related to lecture-based teaching. The schema held here that guides expectations of what a lecture entails is unlikely to be based on past experience, but more likely on popularised notions and representations of lectures. This is evidenced by students' difficulties in articulating how their expectations differ to reality. Similarly, in previous surveys

of student expectations of HE (e.g. Byrne & Flood, 2005; Cook & Leckey, 1999), students underestimated class sizes and the time spent in lectures, but did not so clearly express inaccurate expectations of the nature of the lecture; if one has no relevant experience to guide expectations, it is difficult to know what to expect.

In line with the discussion above, being taught in lectures is a chance to promote the undergraduate learner identity. However, it is clear that in adjusting to lecture-based teaching, students need to be supported through active engagement and participation, perhaps at a higher level than might be used in later years of the course, once students have adjusted their perceptions, expectations and learning strategies to align with the undergraduate learner identity. For example, the purpose of incorporating student activity within lectures might change as students move through the years of the degree course. For new students, activities might serve the purpose of promoting a deeper level of engagement with the material. At an intermediate level, active participation might serve to promote a critical synthesis of material, whereas at an advanced level, student activity might promote an independent contribution to the topic through reflection on prior experience and consideration of the practical applications of the material. Through this framework, the degree of lecturer input to the activity is gradually reduced, so that in the early stages of the course student participation is guided; the expectation shifts to independent contributions by the later stages of the course.

The third area of discrepancy between student expectations and experiences related to representations of achievement. At least for the students participating in the present study, the pre-existing schema seems to represent the self as a high achiever, with a threshold of somewhere around 80 per cent as representing a 'good' grade. It is clear that in the transition to university, this schema is going to take time to recalibrate. It is possible that the transition can be

managed more smoothly through effectively recalibrating student expectations and emphasising the wording in grade descriptors that show that a mark of 60, or 70 at university is represented as work that is 'very good' and 'excellent'. Teaching staff also need to be aware that the self-concept established through the student's previous status as an A-level student can be threatened through the 'reality shock' that can be experienced when students first receive marks at university (Brinkworth et al., 2009). Teaching staff, and particularly personal tutors, can then support students in reconstructing a strong self-identity as a university student, which is a key component of the transition process (Kralik, Visentin & van Loon, 2006). Similarly, just because a mark is not unexpected does not necessarily mean that students will understand *why* they have received that mark, so staff need to be mindful of the need to scaffold students' understanding of academic expectations at university (Krause, 2001).

Being aware of the discrepancies between expectations and reality that are specific to the psychology student experience is important in supporting a smooth transition and to maximising retention and success. If, according to the theory of met expectations, individuals are more likely to be satisfied with a new context if expectations and reality are congruent, we can both manage the expectations that students do hold and minimise the incongruence that they experience. The theory of met expectations is a useful way of framing educational transitions, and future work to more systematically explore the impact of congruence between expectations and reality on adjustment can build on the findings reported here. Furthermore, it is also important to examine the expectations that teaching staff hold about the nature of the transition that students make. It is possible that the expectations surrounding the skills that students bring, and their ability to manage the transition, are not congruent with reality. In this way, the issue is not simply that students'

expectations do not meet reality, but that there is also an incongruence between student and staff perceptions of the transition (e.g. Hagan & Macdonald, 2000).

Exploration of students' schematic expectations is crucial if we are to better assimilate students into the style of learning and teaching in HE. The general recommendations made above are not based on just telling students how they are expected to work at university, but explaining *how* this differs to past experiences, and more importantly, explaining *why* this change is necessary and important for their long-term approaches to learning. Indeed, the research literature on transition informs us that the construction of a new reality and a new identity that must be created during a period of transition cannot begin until the individual is aware of the changes that are necessary. Furthermore, the higher the individual's awareness of the requirements of a transition, the higher their level of engagement with the process (Kralik et al., 2006). It is not possible to set up learning environments that immediately enable students to construct and adopt an undergraduate learner identity. Indeed, realising that pre-existing schemas are no longer appropriate is an important part of working towards a new learner identity. To a certain extent, expectations have to be either disconfirmed or corroborated by experience. The important endeavour is supporting this integration process so that where expectations are disconfirmed, students are quickly socialised into the reality of university study, by bridging the gap between expectation and reality.

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