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Student Perspectives on First Year Experience Initiatives Designed for Pre-service Teachers in their First Weeks of University Study

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Introduction

Universities throughout Australia are increasingly investing significant amounts of time and money in initiatives designed to improve the quality of what is widely referred to in higher education literature as "the first-year experience" (Brooman & Darwent 2013; Palmer, O'Kane & Owens 2009). Many of these initiatives are informed by stated policies to improve student engagement during their transition into university, and thus their achievement, success and retention: goals that are tied, at least in part, to a close relationship between student enrolment numbers, students' evaluation of the quality of their classes and teachers and university funding levels (Christie, Munro & Fisher 2004).

While there is substantial agreement (in literature and policy) that these broad goals – support, engagement, quality teaching – are, indeed, positively correlated to achievement and retention for students in their first year of university study, there is somewhat less agreement about how students actually understand each of these goals, and how each can best be realised in working daily with large and diverse cohorts of first-years. Research has highlighted the potential significance of any gaps between what students expect from their universities (particularly in terms of their first-year experience) and what they actually experience. Crisp et al. (2009, p.14), for example, argue, "Students' expectations, and their experience during their first year, have a tangible influence on student engagement and retention." They go on to make the important point that

> *[i]nstitutions that are interested in influencing student retention rates need to approach the issue from several directions. One of these is to provide better alignment between student expectations and the reality of the first-year experience. This alignment can be facilitated by either changing students' expectations to better match the reality of the university experience or by the institution changing some of its approaches to student engagement to better match the students' needs.* (2009, p.14)

Implicit in this advice is the need to continually explore what students' expectations actually *are*, and to use this as a basis for evaluating and modifying what universities actually *do*.

This article takes up this challenge through an investigation of how students interpreted and responded to a range of first-year experience initiatives put in place to support them in their transition to university. Drawing on data collected during a pilot research project conducted with students who commenced a Bachelor of Education program at a Queensland University in 2013, the article investigates how students spoke about various initiatives to support them, and the extent to which students valued, devalued or were even actually aware of these initiatives. To explain the specific initiatives that the staff involved in the study worked to implement, this paper introduces the literature relating to the first-year experience in university contexts.

Literature Review: Influences on the First-Year Experience at University

Regardless of whether students commence university directly after Year 12, the transition into higher education presents a range of well-documented challenges (Krause, McEwen & Blinco 2009). There have now been more than four decades of research into the first-year experience on which universities can draw to design and re-design programs specifically focused on meeting the unique needs of first-year students (for a summary, see Nelson 2014). This research has increasingly identified what Nelson describes as the "institutional conditions for student success" (2014, p.8), and provides multiple sources of advice for those working in the area. Key themes in this scholarship that have shaped the writing of this article are reviewed

briefly here.

First, the literature emphasises the need to provide students with institutionally funded and readily available opportunities to develop or enhance their academic skills outside of, and in addition to, the instruction they receive in the actual subjects they are enrolled in. Forms of support recommended in this literature include "formalised learning support, writing and referencing workshops, bridging subjects, courses, programmes and web-based tools to enhance student learning and skill development" (Penn-Edwards & Donnison 2011, p.569).

Second, a significant strand of literature encourages universities to recognise the changing nature of student lives by making greater use of blended and online learning. It is often argued that allowing flexibility in how and when students access core learning materials provides an appropriate response to the contemporary learners' need to juggle the demands on them (Knipe & Edwards 2009), allowing them to manage study and employment. It has also been claimed that blended learning results in higher student satisfaction than either solely face-to-face or solely online modes of delivery (Keengwe & Kang 2013). López-Pérez, Pérez-López and Rodríguez-Ariza (2011) further report that blended learning reduces student attrition and has a positive impact on performance when online activities complement face-to-face teaching.

While the potential associated with technologically mediated education is widely cited, the research literature also suggests that many students have significant concerns regarding blended learning and the technological literacies it demands. Recent studies into the information and communication technology competence of university students largely discredits the popular notion that universities are filled with "digital natives" highly adept with this technology (Kennedy et al. 2010). Variations in the level of technological competencies amongst first-year students reflect not only differences in the ages and educational pathways of commencing students, but also their technological access and socioeconomic background. A resultant variation in attitudes towards online or blending learning is recognised in the literature as a cause for some concern. In addition, the delayed response to questions that is sometimes linked to online study and limited opportunity to build community have also been identified as negative aspects of blended learning (Holley & Oliver 2010).

A third strand of literature encourages university academics working with first-year students to reflect carefully upon their pedagogical choices in pursuit of quality learning and teaching environments, particularly in those that contain online learning components (González 2010). Quality teaching, of course, has multiple meanings, and it is beyond the scope of this article to outline all the ways in which the concept is understood. Nevertheless, academics working with first-years are widely encouraged to be clear and explicit about how they will go about implementing a "transition pedagogy" (Nelson 2012): one that builds support for learning into a formal or disciplinary curriculum, and also seeks actively to respond to and build on students' prior knowledge; make links between university study and future employment; and ensure that students feel inspired, motivated, intellectually challenged and engaged, given that engagement is a key theme identified in the literature (Aspland 2009).

Pedagogical efforts to foster a sense of engagement are, of course, closely tied to assessment: a further theme that features prominently in discussions about the first-year experience. Both assessment and feedback have been identified as key factors in student success and retention (Barnard, de Luca & Li 2014; Coutts, Gilleard & Baglin 2011). The "U-Curve Theory of Adjustment" by Risquez, Moore and Morley (2008) describes the transition to university experience in four stages: honeymoon, culture shock, adjustment and mastery. Penn-Edwards and Donnison (2011) suggest that the honeymoon period is characterised by interest in the new environment that is not threatened by assessment deadlines; and that culture shock, which includes disillusionment and dejection, can occur when academic requirements become urgent. This, of course, is a key challenge for those working with first-year students, as assessment is generally required early in a semester, and often expected to be completed as

early as week 3 or 4. Literature focusing on assessment for first-year students emphasises its importance as a vehicle for learning: a perspective that variously emphasises the benefits of early and low-stakes assessment tasks; quality, personalised feedback (including informally from peers) (Thomas, Martin & Pleasants 2011); and institutionally supported opportunities for intervention and remediation.

This leads to a fourth key theme within the literature: the importance of creating an overall environment within which students feel academically and socially supported and connected. Lizzio suggests that a combination of the "five senses of success" – connectedness, capability, resourcefulness, purpose and culture – have a significant positive impact on first-year students (Lizzio 2006). Student feedback on this theme consistently highlights the importance of relationship-building, and it appears that academic interventions may be less effective where there is an accompanying lack of emphasis on the critical first-semester component of *social* connectedness (Masters & Donnison 2010) and on the development of positive relationships between staff, students and peers.

To summarise, then, the literature reviewed here reveals several issues that university staff may find useful to consider when seeking to create what students will likely describe as a supportive, positive first-year experience. Delivery mode, pedagogical approaches, staff-student interactions, assessment and an overall sense of connectedness and belonging have all been linked to student engagement and retention.

This same literature, however, also highlights other findings from analyses of research into the first-year experience that have shaped the writing this article. First, as noted in the introduction, there is a widespread and growing awareness of the potential for students and staff to read university-mandated student-success initiatives quite differently. In this context, it is important not to read the long history of research and policy developments as evidence that we have solved the problem of first-year transition, and are now simply implementing what we have learnt and documenting our successes. Rather, we argue that, in a time of rapid social and technological change, if we seek to move first-year scholarship forward we must be willing to document *what actually happens* when different cohorts of students are offered particular forms of support and how they make sense of, or value, what they experience.

Asking the question "where to from here?" with regard to the first-year experience, Nelson (2014) argues:

> *Our endeavours should not be based on what we would like to do, or have been doing, or are comfortable doing. They must be based on the evidence of what works. Critically, we need to suspend our own beliefs about what success at university looks like and attend to what success means to students.* (p.11)

The research reported in this paper reflects the efforts of four Australian academics to "suspend our own beliefs" about what a successful first-year experience involves, and instead explore diverse forms of feedback from our commencing students about the initiatives they experienced in their first months at university. Some brief details about the research project are useful here.

The Research Project: Context and Aims of the Study

In 2013, students enrolled in the first year of a Bachelor of Education program at one campus of a Queensland university experienced a wide range of first-year initiatives designed to support their transition to university, improve satisfaction, generate success and increase retention. Some of these originated from central university policies relating to the first-year experience; some from planning within the School of Education; and others were the decisions of the individual staff members who were teaching the students. Each specific strategy reflected the advice identified in the literature outlined earlier.

First, there was ongoing and extended investment (at university and school level) in academic and social support systems that exceeded those offered within individual classes or programs. This included a weekly one-hour support session independent of, and in addition to, the contact hours associated with their four compulsory subjects. Sessions focused on skills such as referencing and understanding assessment criteria, and facilitated access to a mix of first-year advisors (academic staff members), learning advisors (non-academic staff) and peer mentors (third- and fourth-year education students).

Second, there was an expanded investment (at the school level) in flexible and mixed-mode course deliveries and significant variety in the delivery modes for the students' four courses.

- Subject A offered weekly 90-minute, face-to-face lectures and 90-minute face-to-face tutorials supplemented by online resources (e.g. lecture notes and FAQs);
- Subject B had a two-hour face-to-face lecture and two-hour face-to-face tutorials every second week: thus students alternated between online and face-to-face classes;
- Subject C featured a weekly, one-hour online lecture, with two-hour tutorials offered online or face-to-face in alternating weeks. In some weeks, students had three hours of online delivery, and in the alternating weeks one hour of online content was supplemented by two hours of face-to-face; and
- Subject D began with a two-hour face-to-face lecture and a one-hour face-too-face tutorial for weeks 1 and 2; weeks 3-12 involved a one-hour pre-recorded lecture, a one-hour face-to-face workshop and a one-hour face-to-face tutorial.

This combination meant that, in some weeks students had four to six hours – the equivalent of 33-50% of their weekly contact time – online.

Third, 2013 saw the introduction of a new approach to assessment for first-year students. The approach was based on existing research (see Krause, McEwen & Blinco 2009; Thomas, Martin & Pleasants 2011) that argued that first-year students need to receive early, timely but relatively low-stakes assessment and feedback on their progress. This meant that, in the first four weeks of their study, students were required to complete:

- Two diagnostic tasks
    - An online, generic skills test consisting of 21 multiple-choice questions concerning academic skills such as correct referencing and locating resources.
    - An online "early readiness" test consisting of a 15-minute, non-graded diagnostic quiz of their literacy level.
- One assessment task (worth 15%) in each of their four compulsory courses to be completed by week 4 of the semester.

These initiatives were accompanied by the day-to-day practices of the individual academics teaching these students. All staff members expressed a desire to reflect what is known about transition pedagogy, particularly through the creation of a student-centred, supportive environment, characterised by respectful relationships and genuine and sustained opportunities for interaction between staff and students. They were similarly committed to the use of interactive, engaging and diverse pedagogical strategies, and were aware of how challenging this can be when working with such a diverse range of students.

Therefore, students commencing this program entered an environment that could easily be read as reflecting many of the recommendations from the first-year experience literature reviewed above. But, as the start of semester drew closer and closer, the staff most directly involved in working with these students became increasingly concerned about how students would respond to all their individual (and collective) efforts to support them. This concern

was linked initially to a growing awareness of just how many forms of support students would receive and a concern that, despite an enormous investment in time and effort, these may not necessarily offer students the experience they were expecting.

To explore this further, the staff members designed a small-scale, pilot research project with two related goals:

- To explore students' reactions to various first-year initiatives
- To assess the need for ongoing research into how students recognise and respond to the various elements that constitute a first-year experience program in this university context.

Methodology

The research team consisted of four academic staff: three who were working directly with the students and a fourth with no involvement in the undergraduate program. For ethical reasons, this fourth person became the designated project leader and led recruitment and interactions with the students who participated.

All students enrolled in the first year of the Bachelor of Education program at one particular campus were invited, through a face-to-face interaction, to take part in the research. Those who were interested were invited to join focus groups led by research assistants who were not involved in teaching these first-year students. Our initial goal was to recruit approximately 20 students for the pilot project. Sixteen students volunteered to participate and, significantly, nine of these were over the age of 21 and had experienced a sustained break between completing school and returning to their study. This immediately raised the possibility that this cohort could be different to the rest of the study body (a point we revisit later). These students participated in three rounds of focus groups: in week 4, week 8 and week 12 or 13. They were asked open questions such as:

- How are you/how are things going?
- What is helping you?
- Looking back, what was most helpful in helping you get to this point?

As these questions indicate, the researchers were seeking responses about students' overall first-semester experience without asking them to respond directly to a prepared list of the initiatives that had been put in place to support them. Rather, we left it up to the students themselves to identify the factors that they recognised and to name them as supportive and helpful, or detrimental, to their success.

The focus-group data was supplemented by a thematic analysis of data collected across the entire student cohort through an anonymous online student evaluations of courses (SEC) survey. The SEC survey is typical of the end-of-semester of semester evaluations used by most Australian universities. The voluntary survey includes a number of generic statements (for example "this course was well organised"; "the assessment was clear and fair") rated on a five-point Likert scale, and two open-ended questions: "What did you find particularly good about this course?" and "How could this course be improved?" Students had the option to complete an SEC for each of the four completed courses.

The research included this second set of data for two reasons. First, the focus groups were composed largely of students from a particular demographic: nine of the 16 participants were students returning to, or commencing, university study after a sustained break from formal education. While these students' insights were valuable in their own right, we were also interested in testing whether the themes that emerged from the small focus groups were consistent with findings evident in a larger body of data and, as a result, whether further research into students' reactions to this particular combination of first-year initiatives might be warranted. Second, we wanted to combine "point in time" responses collected during the focus-group discussions with the feedback students provided at the end of their first 13 weeks at university.

As a result, in addition to analysing the focus-group material, we also undertook a thematic analysis of 395 responses to the SEC's open-ended questions, drawn from a possible 653 candidates across first-semester courses. One hundred ninety-one students responded to the first open-ended question and 145 responded to the second. Themes were derived inductively from the data through a process of coding and recoding the data. The combined analysis showed that although only a few students, all of whom came a particular demographic, participated in the focus groups, many of their opinions were reflected in the much larger data set collected from the more diverse demographic. Both groups expressed similar, and firm, opinions about what had worked and what had *not* worked during their first-year experience.

Results: Student Perspectives on their First-Year Experience

In the focus group, and in the SEC data, students identified a number of factors as having a positive impact on their attitude towards, and success at, university during their first semester. Many of these resonate with the literature outlined above.

Theme 1: Access to diverse forms of support and advice

First, student comments strongly endorsed the previous literature emphasising the benefit of access to multiple forms of support both within and beyond their formal, enrolled classes. There were clear indications from the students that the opportunity for discussion with staff members (academics and tutors) and their peers was critical to their success.

They were grateful for the wide range of university support systems:

> *I've got a few personal issues. I met up with someone up in the student centre, a lovely lady there in the disability area and they just set a plan in place for me.... That's been really good, like I've known that I haven't had to freak out about that sort of stuff.* (Focus-group comment)

They valued easy access to academic staff and compassion in their responses:

> *I had a big meltdown before one assignment was due, and about a week before I just said to my lecturer, "I may not be able to get it on time, can I have a couple of extra days?" She gave them to me.* (Focus-group comment)

And whether facilitated by the university or arranged by students themselves, peer-support structures were identified as having a valuable role in managing their early university experience:

> *I think support of other students [is] like forming a little network of friends. There are six of us now that hang out all the time and we've got a little chat on Facebook. We just all bounce things off each other and support each other and do that, which has been really, really good.* (Focus-group comment).

Theme 2: "Quality learning": engaging, interactive pedagogies

Comments from focus groups and survey data endorsed the significance of a second theme in the first-year literature: the positive impact of interactive pedagogies and engaging, informative, student-centred teaching and communication styles. Clearly each of these terms can be defined in multiple ways. Within this project, comments about the best or highly rated features of students' study experiences made repeated reference to staff who were seen to be inspirational, enthusiastic, energetic, passionate, empathetic and knowledgeable. Students' comments clustered around three ideas. First, they appreciated teaching and learning strategies that they regarded as inspiring, motivating and relevant to their future careers. Students in the focus groups spoke particularly positively about learning environments that melded their

teachers' enthusiasm with interesting and relevant content in a way that engaged and inspired the cohort. Describing one context, a group of students made the following observations about why a particular staff member was regarded as effective:

> *She engages the students, puts a little bit of humour, she shows and highlights what's serious, she highlights literally what is needed and what is expected in exam time. I don't know, she's just…very clear.* (Focus-group comment)

This same theme was echoed across student evaluation comments:

> *Brilliant! Engaging, enthusiastic, and entertaining, was easy to stay focused with this style of teaching*. (SEC comment)

> *The energy and passion that the lecturer and the tutor used towards the content really showed that they promoted what the course was about. This helped in engaging the content and it is easy understand the information given.* (SEC comment)

Second, students expressed their appreciation of subject matter and classroom activities that they felt to be intellectually and emotionally demanding and that fostered personal growth. This was seen in early comments in the focus groups:

> *[Study has] changed me as a person. Wow, well academically I look at how I was writing in week 1 and how I'm writing now and it's a totally different person, just achieved a level of confidence, I suppose.* (Focus-group comment)

> *It was just awesome, it was really good, really empowering.* (Focus-group comment)

This theme was particularly strong in SEC student comments:

> *This course opened my eyes to the situations and topics I had never noticed before. It gave me a greater understanding and acceptance to others. I really enjoyed this course and found it has made me look deeper into the particular topics covered in the courses.* (SEC comment)

> *It gave me a greater understanding and acceptance of others…it has made me look deeper into my thoughts and challenged thoughts that I had never challenged before.* (SEC comment)

> *I believe that it changed my way I think about teaching and it gave you whole different perspectives on the world and people.* (SEC comment)

Finally, in the context of courses that they regarded as inspiring and motivating, students also highly valued the feeling that the staff teaching their core courses were genuinely interested in their well-being and progress. Again, this generated a wide range of comments. Students commented positively when they felt their lecturers and tutors were friendly and empathetic:

> *We've been so lucky in our first semester that everyone has been so engaging and really good. If you do have a question, I think they make you feel like you can ask it, even if it's off the wrong thing and completely at the wrong end.* (Focus-group comment)

> *There is also an excellent level of student/teacher relationship in which it feels like the staff actually care about you on a personal level and not just [as] a student* (Focus group-comment)

The positive comments associated with ease of access to teaching staff and a sense that they had built a relationship with their students contrasts sharply with the comments linked to a third key theme to emerge from the data: attitudes towards "flexible" learning environments.

Theme 3: Perspectives on delivery modes

The literature reviewed earlier in this article (coupled with common representations of university students as "digital natives") suggests that flexible learning environments (offering students the opportunity to study at their own time, at their own location and/or at their own pace facilitated by access to online resources) would be highly valued by first-year students. However, feedback during the focus groups, and from the online survey, painted a dramatically different picture.

Focus-group students, for example, largely believed that unless they were enrolled in something explicitly badged as an "online" course, their courses should be delivered in at least some version of what might be described as the traditional face-to-face mode.

> *It's a bit disappointing when you've enrolled to come to do an in-person, on-campus degree and then you get completely online subjects.* (Focus-group comment)

This appears to have had a major impact on their overall sense of satisfaction early in the semester:

> *We don't have contact, we have once a fortnight for two hours if people turn up – and we don't even have that though – and I think collectively, from who I speak, to everyone feels a bit jaded and ripped off. If we wanted to do an online subject we would have done it online.* (Focus-group comment)

It is important to again acknowledge that many of the participants in these focus groups were not recent school leavers and had little prior experience with technology in teaching and learning environments. One focus-group participant made this point explicitly:

> *We're not experts to do online stuff. We need to be tutored one on one, person to person for the first year in order to get the hang of it. And second year, third year, yeah what the hell, but first year it's crucial. We need to know what to do, how to do it and how to do better.* (Focus-group comment)

It would clearly be possible to read this comment as evidence that this particular sub-group of students perhaps needed further one-on-one coaching to help them transition into online university study. However, the anonymous feedback on flexible learning environments collected from across the cohort contained very similar sentiments. Students were negative about their online learning if it appeared to exceed "reasonable limits" or deny them opportunities to interact with staff, and positive about opportunities for regular, scheduled contact. The factors linked to these positive or negative attitudes were diverse.

Some felt that online learning was not engaging:

> *When online lectures for this course commenced, I became less engaged with this course.* (SEC comment)

> *I wasn't engaged by the online lectures and for a first year student it is difficult to stay on top of them week by week and they don't help students learn.* (SEC comment)

Others believed that the online environment was not able to cater for a diverse range of learning styles:

> *If someone just talks at me I don't take it in but if I'm sitting here listening to practical, real world experience I definitely pick up on that better or if you get the chance to actually sit down and physically do it yourself, like you do in a lot of the [subject] tutorials and those sorts of things, then I pick that up a lot easier.* (SEC comment)

Students also raised concerns about the ratio of time that they got to spend with their tutors or lecturers face to face, and the lack of weekly contact:

> *Definitely don't like having classes every second week. It should be every week, I think. I can handle the lectures online, but I don't like having tutorials every second [week]. The whole point of having tutorials is to be able to interact and communicate with the tutors.* (Focus-group comment)

> *Just sitting and doing the lectures was fine, but not getting it and then only having a tutorial every fortnight for it as well – and it just ended up being that every tutorial was talking about assessments. It was never really content tutorials, so there was no time really ever to discuss content with anyone.* (Focus-group comment)

Across the focus groups and SEC feedback there was a recurring feeling that, if the balance of face-to-face and online tutorials was too heavily skewed towards online components, students were essentially being left to "teach themselves".

It would be tempting to conclude here that online delivery was not appropriate for this cohort. But this is only part of the story. Some students were very positive about both face-to-face and flexible learning environments, particularly if they believed they had been provided with sufficient opportunities for staff-student interaction:

> *I think this course is particularly well structured with the online/face2face components. We are given the opportunity to view lectures in our own time prior to the workshop which reinforces the newly learned ideas. Followed by regular tutorial times in which we can engage and ask questions re: assessment and understanding of content.* (SEC comment)

Theme 4: Perceptions of assessment

The first-year cohort considered in this article experienced a new combination of assessment activities. Whereas in previous years first-semester cohorts had their initial assessment tasks due between weeks 4 and 6, in this situation all participants were required to complete four initial, formative assessment tasks and two diagnostic tasks by the end of week 4. This was intended to ensure that students received the kind of timely feedback necessary to ensure they could address any issues that were detrimental to their progress. Students had both positive and negative readings of this situation. They commented that the four formative tasks provided a valuable indication of what was to come in each course.

> *It was good to see how they marked and stuff, that was good because it was all unknown at the beginning.* (Focus-group comment)

> *Yes, doing the 15% ones was really helpful in the sense that, like I said, coming straight out of high school, realising what university standards are is a big step into – like I realised that my academic writing wasn't up to scratch with university standards in my vocabulary and stuff, so I've had to adjust that for my next assignments, which has helped and it has improved.* (Focus-group comment)

However, while for some focus-group students the early assessment tasks were a positive element of their initial experiences, this wasn't the experience for the majority. Students expressed considerable anxiety about having multiple assessments due in week 4:

> *I've hated the pressure. I think week 4, we talked before, we had four things due in the one week, which was just like all of us had a breakdown. A lot of people were reconsidering then what they wanted to do and so was I.* (Focus-group comment)

> *I just felt that – when I first started and I had the four due the one week – I just was really overwhelmed trying to work on all four at once. We were overloaded with four assignments and you're like, "Whoa, where do I begin?"* (Focus-group comment)

> *It's certainly been intense, not only the workload because we have so many readings, and all the online courses – you have to find time to do those as well, and that's a lot in itself – but having four assessments starting at the beginning of this week and they're due at…[the same time]…it's just so much to try and deal with.* (Focus-group comment)

> *I've studied before for a couple of years and this has been the most intense four weeks that I've had on campus. Yeah, it's insane.* (Focus-group comment)

> *…just feeling very overwhelmed. Very, very overwhelmed. I have considered pulling out…probably two weeks ago it was, had a bit of a breakdown in week 2 and thought very, very seriously about not continuing. Yeah.* (Focus-group comment)

As these quotes suggest, for some students, at least, the first four weeks of university study felt like a case of "crash or crash through". Students' negative attitude towards this early assessment was exacerbated by feedback that they felt to be generic, rather than personal: a scenario which may be tied to the pressure on staff to return feedback to a cohort of 200 students in a two-week period. Thus, although they appreciated the opportunity to receive any feedback, some felt it did not particularly support their individual learning needs:

> *We didn't really get feedback, like, I didn't get what I did wrong and what I could do better. It was just more...like, how hard they mark as to what I know I was capable of.* (Focus-group comment)

> *[General feedback is] all right, yeah, but still it only gives you a brief idea in order to correct your essay and all that stuff.* (Focus-group comment)

A final finding with regard to students' attitudes towards the assessment initiative actually took the form of an absence of comments about the early diagnostic tasks. SEC feedback and focus-group discussions contained absolutely no mention of the introduction of "study smart" skills or the readiness quizzes early in each course, both of which were intended to build students' sense of capacity and to increase their confidence with assessment. This isn't to say that the diagnostic, early-assessment items didn't achieve their intended goals. However, we argue that the tasks were not at the forefront of student reflection upon their success, as these quizzes were not mentioned either by the focus groups or in the SEC data. This is an example of the kind of mismatch that can occur in terms of how support for students in the first month of university is viewed from an institutional perspective, and what students actually recognise or name as supportive.

To summarise, students throughout this first semester of their first year of university saw some of the initiatives they were offered as helpful in terms of their transition to university – and thus as contributing to a sense of satisfaction – and others as either irrelevant or actively detrimental. At first reading, the most powerful influences on satisfaction were access to multiple forms of support; opportunities to build relationships with staff and peers; participation in engaging, motivating and inspiring educational activities; and regular, consistent, weekly opportunities for face-to-face interaction with the teaching team. By contrast, the most powerful influences on dissatisfaction were a perceived *lack* of opportunities to have regular face-to-face access to staff; reduced opportunities to develop relationships; and an intensive assessment schedule accompanied by generic, non-specific feedback relating to progress. Other initiatives, such as diagnostic assessment tasks, were not mentioned.

Discussion and Implications

All the initiatives discussed above reflect what we have learnt from the first-year literature. Suspending our own beliefs about how students would react to these well-justified support systems has highlighted a number of important points and indicated the need for further research into students' responses to diverse first-year experiences.

First, the research reinforced an increasingly common theme within first-year education literature: the importance of matching student expectations with student experience, and working actively to improve alignment when evidence of a mismatch is revealed. There were two key areas where student expectations did not appear to match the reality of university life: delivery mode and assessment. Several students in this cohort (and not only those who were non-school leavers) appeared surprised and disappointed by the discovery that many of their classes would be offered online, or in flexible and mixed-mode delivery. This emphasises the need for academic staff to think carefully before making assumptions about what a student group will like, and serves as a timely reminder that students are increasingly heterogeneous and thus not easily satisfied by one-size-fits-all innovations. It also highlights the need to ensure that students begin their programs with a clear understanding of what university study will look like in practice; an equally clear understanding of the rationale behind delivery modes; and opportunities to develop the kinds of skills, competencies and dispositions that enable them to engage with all forms of delivery in an optimistic and positive manner.

Attitudes towards assessment were similarly revealing. Although the decision to schedule the due dates of four pieces of assessment in the fourth week of the semester reflected literature relating to the importance of early and timely feedback, the resultant number of tasks generated significant levels of early anxiety for many of the students. From this perspective, staff members teaching in the first semester need to ensure that they work collaboratively to avoid overloading students. Second, the assessment that is offered needs to be scheduled to allow staff to give meaningful and specific feedback. Third, students need to be made aware of the rationale behind all assessment decisions (including those diagnostic tasks that students

in this research appeared generally unaware of) and of the full range of support that is available to them, including support from additional academic and professional staff.

This leads to the second discussion point emerging from this research: the obvious but sometimes overlooked central role that the staff working directly with first-year students play in shaping how the students react to diverse initiatives (including delivery mode and assessment). Feedback from both the focus groups and the SEC data indicates significant concerns about these particular aspects of their first-year experience. This could easily be read as evidence that online delivery and/or early assessment tasks are not appropriate for first-year students. This pilot research project suggests, however, that despite their concerns, students were actually very happy with most aspects of their first semester and linked this directly to the support they received from staff. Particularly powerful were the relationships that students built with academics, and the sense that they had access to people who were genuinely interested in their welfare and success. These relationships played a major role in ameliorating some causes of unhappiness, and were found within diverse delivery modes, not only in face-to-face contexts. What remains to be explored, however, were the specific strategies that staff used to create and sustain these relationships.

This leads to the third and final implication from this research. Nelson (2014) has argued that to advance research into the first-year experience, staff need to demonstrate a willingness to look beyond assumptions about what *will* work (no matter how logical the assumptions may appear and regardless of how closely they reflect what literature has previously argued), and an associated willingness to undertake investigations that seek diverse and richly detailed forms of student feedback on their experiences. This research has reinforced the importance of looking critically at student reactions to first-year initiatives and of ensuring that evidence of end-of-semester satisfaction does not distract from ongoing evaluation of student reactions to initiatives as they unfold. By focusing on students' reactions at key moments throughout the semester, as well as via the usual end-of-semester evaluations, the staff involved were able to increase and focus the support they offered to students to maximise their experience of success as the courses were delivered.

Summary

The research reported on in this article was motivated by an interest in exploring the extent to which a range of initiatives brought together within a first-year experience program were recognised and valued by students in the first year of a Bachelor of Education. It also sought to establish whether there is the need for further research into how students make sense of, and respond to, their first-semester experience. Analysis of two different data sets has shown that what we "think we know" about the first-year experience cannot easily or simply be applied to each new setting with a guarantee of success. The increasing diversity of student cohorts and the complicated range of factors that combine to shape how students react to their first months of university study make it necessary for staff to continue to engage in ongoing evaluation of first-year initiatives. In this context there is the need for ongoing analysis, not only into how different students make sense of their first-year experiences and of the initiatives in place to support them, but also into how they come to understand the multiple, day-to-day ways that staff members use ensure that students believe themselves to be supported. This research, therefore, provides the basis for further, ethnographic investigations into the practices of academic staff, who play a vital role in implementing successful first-year initiatives.

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