

Expectations of Vietnamese students entering an international university

Linda Nguyen

School of Communication and Design, RMIT University Vietnam

Andrea Chester & Anne Herbert

School of Education, College of Design and Social Context, RMIT University, Melbourne

Abstract

While the number of locally-based international universities and branches of foreign universities grows in Vietnam, the literature has failed to keep pace with an understanding of students' academic expectations about studying in these institutions. This paper presents findings of a qualitative case study that explored the academic expectations of ten Vietnamese undergraduate business students in transition to a locally-based international university in Vietnam. Expectations were examined in three areas: expectations of lecturers, of university study and of the university experience. While these categories of expectations replicate those in the existing literature, findings in the present study suggest some unique expectations particularly around relationships with lecturers and the challenges inherent in the language of instruction. Implications for how these results can be used to better prepare these types of students for university study are discussed.

Introduction

The globalisation and internationalisation of education has led to tendencies for Vietnamese students to study abroad and opt for locally-based Western transnational education (Tran, Marginson, & Nguyen, 2014). Like students in other countries, where the provision of higher education is insufficient and the reputation of foreign providers is highly regarded, many Vietnamese families believe that international standard English-medium education “improves their chances of participating in the global economy” (Smith, 2010, p. 794). The establishment and operation of international universities in Vietnam attracts Vietnamese students who want to experience an international environment and high standard of teaching and learning.

Exploring the student experience, the transnational education literature has focused on overseas study, with relatively little attention paid to students at locally-based international universities. One might expect the well-documented challenges of first year transition (Harvey, Drew & Smith, 2006; Tinto, 2006-2007) are even more challenging for those studying in a language other than their mother tongue and in a different culture. Although some research has examined the first year transition of students from Confucian-heritage cultures (CHC), less work has focused on the influence of these students' expectations on their transition. Understanding student expectations lays a strong foundation for the development of better support for students during transition and to boost their academic success.

Expectations of first year students

Expectations of Vietnamese students entering an international university, refereed paper

Expectations have an impact on how we experience an event and respond to it (Kahu, Nelson & Picton, 2016). While several studies report realistic expectations amongst students (e.g. Hassel & Ridout, 2018) expectations are not always aligned with experience (Smith & Wertlieb, 2005) and unmet expectations can predict attrition (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994). Expectations have been noted to influence students' coping strategies, sense of belonging and their overall experience (Draper, 2014, Kahu et al., 2016). Consequently, expectations are a crucial element in shaping academic performance, persistence and student success in the first year and beyond (Kuh, Gonyea & Williams, 2005).

Student expectations can be described under three broad headings: *ideal expectations* - what students believe should happen; *predictive expectations* - what students believe realistically might happen; and *counter-ideal expectations* - what students definitely do not want to happen (Sander, Stevenson, King, & Coates, 2000). In a study of almost 400 British first year students enrolled in Business, Medicine and Psychology, ideal, predictive and counter-ideal expectations were explored in relation to learning and teaching modes (Sander et al., 2000). Interesting areas of discrepancy emerged. For example, while interactive classes were the most hoped for learning mode, formal lectures were not only believed to be most common and were also one of the highest counter-ideal expectations.

Other research has explored first year expectations across a range of domains beyond learning and teaching modes. For example, a survey of more than 3,000 first year Australian students conducted prior to orientation identified expectations in three key areas: expectations of study arrangements, of lecturers and of the university experience (Scutter, Palmer, Luzeckyj, da Silva, & Brinkworth, 2011). *Student expectations of study arrangements* included reasons for choosing their program, with most selecting the program out of interest and/or with a view to employment prospects. Anticipated workload was covered under this theme, with most students unable to accurately anticipate the amount of study required. Students also expressed widely held confidence about combining paid work with study. *Student expectations of lecturers*, which really focused on assessment, included expecting a two-week turn around for return of assessments and expectations they would receive feedback on drafts. *Student expectations of the university experience* included expectations that a close friendship group would be important for success and that having access to lecturers outside class time, attending most classes and participating in group work would all assist learning.

The research on first year expectations as outlined above has identified a range of themes that characterise first year transition. What is not clear to date is whether these themes accurately describe the expectations of students transitioning to international universities, preparing to study in a foreign language.

First year experience of Vietnamese students at international universities

Students for whom English is a foreign language can face many challenges when transitioning to an English-medium learning environment. Nguyen (2013) examined the experience of four Vietnamese exchange students studying at an Australian university. She found that students needed to adapt to different learning approaches, student autonomy, and formats of assessment. In addition they needed to learn skills to make the most use of available resources. It is likely that Vietnamese students studying at international universities based in Vietnam face similar challenges.

The experience of students transitioning to higher education with English as their second or foreign language has been researched mainly in English-dominant contexts (e.g., Nguyen, 2013). Little has been written about that transition in countries where English is a foreign language (Evans & Morrison, 2011). Vietnam provides an interesting site for research. English is taught as a foreign language and there is often a disconnect between the language used in class and that used outside class (Evans & Morrison, 2011). The transition of Vietnamese students learning in English-medium international universities in Vietnam has certain characteristics that may be different from the transition of students learning in English speaking contexts.

This research sought to examine the predicted and ideal expectations of Vietnamese students learning at an English-medium university. The aim was to explore the extent to which expectations commonly reported in English-speaking contexts apply to this unique group of students. The context of this study was a satellite campus of an Australian university, established in Vietnam for nearly 14 years. In a model common to transnational education (Wilkins & Huisman, 2012), students receive face-to-face instruction by a combination of local, expatriate and fly-in academic staff from the parent university and graduate with the qualification issued by the parent university.

Method

Ten participants (six women, four men), out of 33 eligible students, voluntarily agreed to take part in this study after all receiving an invitation email and follow-up phone call. All were full-time, first year Vietnamese students, enrolled in the School of Business and Management. A purposive sampling strategy (Oliver, 2006) was used to maximise rich data relevant to the research question. The participants were selected based on their pathways into university: all eligible participants had transitioned either directly from high school or from the English programme of the university.

A qualitative, intrinsic case study approach (Berg & Lune, 2012) was used, with semi-structured telephone interviews approximately 60 minutes in duration, conducted by the first author to generate rich, in-depth data. Open-ended interview questions invited participants to share their predictive and ideal expectations of studying in an international university environment. Participants were encouraged to reflect on their experience studying in high school and what they expected to be different at university. All interviews were conducted in Vietnamese language, audio-recorded and transcribed.

Interviews were conducted in the period between having received an offer to enrol and before the deadline for students to finalise their enrolments i.e. within the first two weeks of the semester. Before commencement, the project was granted approval to proceed by the university-based ethics committee as a low-risk study. None of the research team members were working in the School of Business and Management.

A deductive thematic analysis approach was utilised whereby the researcher used a number of concepts and ideas about expectations from the literature to code and interpret the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Expectations were coded under the three categories of expectations identified by Sander et al. (2000) - ideal, predictive, and counter-ideal expectations. In addition, the data was explored for the themes outlined by Scutter et al. (2011) – expectations of study arrangements, of lecturers and of the university experience. To ensure consistency in the application of the coding framework and provide alternative interpretations as outlined by

Barbour (2001) the first author checked her coding against the codes used by an independent second coder. A high level of agreement was noted. Areas of discrepancy were discussed and the first author completed the coding for the remaining interviews.

Findings

The three themes identified by Scutter et al. (2011) – expectations of study arrangements, of lecturers and of the university experience – emerged in the data. The strongest theme to arise was expectations about lecturers, followed by expectations about study arrangements. Expectations about the university experience was less frequently mentioned, but the theme of language of instruction emerged clearly.

Expectations of lecturers

Three sub-themes emerged from the participants' predictive expectations of lecturers, namely the relationship between lecturers and students compared to the relationship they had with their high school teachers, teaching style and lecturers' nationalities. The students had mixed expectations of relationships with their lecturers. Four participants anticipated that in comparison with their high school teachers, they would not have close relationships with their lecturers. Nga commented:

University lecturers can't pay as much attention to us like high school teachers... [High school teachers] care in great deal about how we study, who study well, who don't and who have to make more effort. As for university lecturers, I think that when all of us are grown-ups and with a large number of students, it will be hard for them to care about who is currently at what level. Unless that student actively communicates with the lecture about his or her issue, the lecturers won't be able to know how well that student understands the lessons. (Nga)

Like Nga, other participants, emphasised the maturity and autonomy of learners at university, which shaped their expectations of a more distant relationship with their lecturers.

The lecturers will not constantly remind us, it's up to our autonomy, whether we study or not is up to us. In high school, our teachers kept a closer watch and gave more feedback to us. (Mi)

Of course, in high school, the teachers are more dedicated because we have to take university entrance exams. But now, university lecturers are not really sure about what we do. If we don't do homework, they won't make a problem out of it. Of course, we understand that we're now adults and have to be responsible for our own work but I still wish lecturers would pay more attention to students. (Thu)

Ha explained how fewer contact hours with each lecturer would result in less emotional connection with staff.

At university... each course is in a different class, even the relationship between me and my classmates won't be as close, let alone between me and my lecturers. At high school, the whole class might share the cost to organise a birthday party for our head teacher. At university, each course is in a different class, there won't be as much connection between people. (Ha)

In contrast, two participants expected that they would have closer contact with their lecturers. Hai anticipated that the class size at the international university would be smaller than at high school and the type of work would require frequent feedback from lecturers:

In high school there are more students in a class. At university when we do our assignments and projects we will need a lot help from the lecturers so we will have a closer relationship. (Hai)

Tung also believed that the relationship between lecturers and students would be different from at high school, but for another reason.

And teachers at high school are not as open-minded as university lecturers. High school teachers impose on students what high school teachers think is right. (Tung)

Eight participants anticipated that they would have to improve their autonomy as learners expecting the learning approach to be more independent than high school. Participants predicted they would have to take an active role in class discussions instead of transcribing everything the teacher said as they did in high school.

At university, lecturers will explain and students will listen and take notes, so we must self-study. At high school, whatever teachers said, students had to listen and copy. Studying like that is not effective. (Tung)

It will be different from high school. (At university) the whole class will discuss instead of transcribing everything the teacher says. (Lien)

The first thing is we have to self-study and explore a large amount of materials, and our study method has to be more active instead of being passive like in secondary or high school...I think that regarding teaching and learning, the main difference between high school and university is about how active students are. Because my high school is a private school so they really care about the output, so they control students more strictly compared to university. And also because at university, we are more mature so people will not try to control how we study in class. (Nam)

Even though most participants said that the nationality of the lecturers and the ratio of expatriate and Vietnamese lecturers were not important to them, some still believed foreign academic staff would be more likely to have a more engaging teaching style, better English language skills and be more knowledgeable about international standards and requirements.

Native lecturers are familiar with internationally accredited programme, they have studied in such programme and will be able to deliver same quality teaching to Vietnamese students. Vietnamese lecturers were probably also trained as such, but I still feel that they're not as competent as those coming from foreign universities (Thu).

Foreign lecturers may have the upper hand in term of English language, and their personality or their teaching method, maybe, I do not want to say all of them, but it may be more interesting, and the way they communicate with students may be different from traditional methods that we have seen at high school (Nga).

Three students acknowledged the strengths of Vietnamese lecturers in understanding the local context, for example:

As for Vietnamese lecturers, they may not stray far from traditional way, but Vietnamese lecturers have a strong point that they already had work experience, so they will be practical, they understand the market and how it works, and for business students like me, their understanding about business market in Vietnam would be beneficial. (Nga)

Expectations of study arrangements

Seven participants said that they consulted their family members such as parents, siblings and cousins when choosing their university program. As Van commented:

...because my sister studied Business Management in Singapore and now works for a Japanese export and import company. My sister said that studying Business is very flexible, meaning that I can work in various fields. Actually, I don't know much about my programme, so I think I will

just give it a shot and if I want to, I can change it later. I am not so sure about my choice of program. (Van)

Only three students chose their program based on their interest and compatibility of the major with their strengths. Three others, such as Thu, researched future employability prospects.

Initially I planned to study Fashion Management, but I thought I didn't have sufficient aptitude to study and contribute to that industry. Logistics, on the other hand, is not common in Vietnam, so I want to develop that industry; it also has more career opportunities. (Thu)

Three participants said that they had little understanding of their program, Mi even reported that her high school peers were in the same situation.

When we had to sign up for our university entrance exam, they gave us a form with many options, and most of my peers didn't know which one to choose first, and some ticked too many alternatives not knowing what they really wanted. When they received the exam result, they started to go back to see for which major their result would be enough to register. I often felt confused and didn't have a clear direction. (Mi)

Study load was a common concern with half of the participants anticipating that they would have to spend more time on their study at university than in high school.

I think that the amount of work at university will surely be more than high school.... I think that at university, there will be more projects to work in team and presentations, and the amount of assignments as well as work needed to be done will increase.... With a high school project, the degree of interaction was little because the amount of work itself was not much, so there might be people who worked and those who didn't. But at university all students will have to work, and everybody will have to brainstorm and have meetings with each other. (Nga)

I will also need to spend more time self-study and read books in the library since I have less classes per week than in high school, which is something I've rarely done before. (Vu)

Two participants were already working part-time and were confident they could balance study and work. Two participants were clear that they did not expect to take paid employment during their university study. One had a negative experience in her previous part-time employment and the other wanted to focus on study and other extra-curricular activities at university.

Actually, I used to work part time before entering university. I wanted to know how I can get used to the job and would stop working if the workload at university was too heavy. But I found that the work I did was very hard, even though it was only part time, because arduous tasks were usually assigned to part-timers, such as mopping the floor, cleaning and emptying the garbage bin... At the interview, they said the payment rate was 15,000 VND/hour but they kept telling me that I was still in probation and did not say when the probation ended. When I received the salary, I was so shocked that I just quit.... I have no intention of working part time again. If I do, then I'd rather find an internship that is relevant to my major because it seems more beneficial that way than working part time. (Thu)

The remaining participants anticipated working, but wanted to familiarise themselves with university before looking for paid work.

Expectations of the university experience

A prominent theme that emerged in the students' expectations of the university experience was their anticipation of studying English-medium environment. Nine out of ten participants

mentioned that they would have to use English for communication when studying at university. For example, Nga predicted:

All lessons and discussion between lecturers and students will be 100% in English, even if the lecturer is Vietnamese.... [It] is an environment that encourages English speaking, so you should use English 100%. (Nga)

Several students anticipated this would be a challenge, particularly in areas such as group work or understanding lectures.

I think I will have some troubles following lecturers' explanations, or because I am accustomed to communicating in Vietnamese, communicating in English may be a bit awkward for me. (Tung)

I guess everyone will communicate with each other in English. At first I feel quite awkward because I'm not used to communicating with my peers in English like that.... This is a common problem among students, we still do not feel confident to study in English. (Thu)

Our English speaking skills may not be so good, like, at first, we struggle to express ourselves in teamwork, but gradually, we will get used to it. (Van)

Participants expected to feel "awkward" in this context. Even though some participants viewed the English-medium learning environment as a challenge, they still expected that they would be able to adapt to it over time. Others viewed it as an opportunity to improve communication skills, essay writing or vocabulary, for example, Ha commented:

I think as people here use English all the time, they must speak English very well.... I think it will be an advantage because it will help me improve my English skills so that in the future, I can use English fluently, hence have more job opportunities.... I don't think English is a big problem. It takes about one to two months to get used to a language and be able to use it well. I think so. (Ha)

Discussion

Although participants were aware that university lecturers would be different from high school teachers and they too were different now from when they were in high school, their predictive expectations were mixed, with some anticipating closer relationships and other anticipating less connection. Consistent with Nguyen's (2013) work with Vietnamese exchange students in Australia, students in the present study anticipated a shift to more independent learning. In terms of ideal expectations students spoke about their hopes for support from their lecturers. This is consistent with previous research which suggests students from CHC and other Asia-Pacific traditions prefer collaborative learning and maintain a respect-and-care relationship with their teachers (Kember, 2000; Webster & Yang, 2012).

Ideal expectations also focused on expatriate staff who were anticipated to have more engaging teaching approaches and strong English skills. Expectations about Vietnamese staff suggest some negative stereotyping, which may need to be addressed to facilitate positive learning experiences.

Almost all participants in this study had consulted family members about their choice of program. Some chose their program with some understanding of the field and labour market demand, while others were confused about this aspect. A more thorough career orientation scheme is needed in high school to better help students select a suitable undergraduate major.

Most of the participants were willing and expected to work part time but at the same time were uncertain of their ability to balance study and work. This finding is consistent with Expectations of Vietnamese students entering an international university, refereed paper

Scutter et al. (2005) who noted that students did not have clear ideas of the amount of work required at university. In their study, estimates of the amount of work required for each course per week varied from one hour to 20+. As Scutter et al. note simply providing accurate information on websites is not enough; this needs to be addressed early and explicitly with students.

Language of instruction emerged as a theme across all but one of the interviews. For obvious reasons this is not a theme in the first year expectation literature. Although anticipated to be a challenge, most participants believed they were capable of studying in English at undergraduate level. The literature, however, has shown that students who meet IELTS entry requirements into English medium universities often struggle to negotiate the demands because the IELTS result only indicates the students' overall language skills, not the suitability of their academic abilities for university (Murray, 2010; Ashton-Hay, Wignell & Evans, 2015). Academic support, with a focus on language skills, should be made available to students in these international university environments. Whether participants viewed the English-medium learning environment as a challenge or opportunity may turn out to predict success in this area and would be worth exploring.

Conclusion

The findings of this in-depth case study of Vietnamese students show that students realistically expect university to be different to high school. Consistent with previous research on first year expectations, these Vietnamese students expressed expectations of their lecturers, of study arrangements and of their university experience.

Counter-ideal expectations were not addressed in the interviews. While these might be assumed as the obverse of the ideal expectations that emerged, future research might benefit from a more explicit exploration of these. For example, in work by Sander et al (2000) students rated role plays, formal lectures and presentations as the least wanted forms of study. Better understanding counter-ideal expectations may help us better understand and address fears.

Some studies of student expectation have surveyed students before orientation to enable expectations to be tracked before any experience of first year (e.g., Scutter et al., 2005). While this approach is ideal, it is of note that in the present study contacting all the eligible students prior to the start of semester proved to be a challenge. Data was therefore collected before the third week of the semester, just before students finalised their enrolments. Telephone interviewing maintained a distance between the interviewer and interviewees that may have limited openness and fullness of communication, but telephoning allowed convenient location and timing of the interviews so more students volunteered to participate in this study. The telephone helped maintain some anonymity which might have allowed respondents to talk more easily about topics that they found sensitive (Novick, 2008).

This study contributes to the existing knowledge of the first year experience of CHC students particularly those studying in English-medium universities, enabling us to identify issues that might benefit transition. Given the unique nature of this specific type of student transitioning to a locally-based international university and studying in a foreign language, generalisation of the results beyond the Vietnamese context should be made with caution. Future research might triangulate student expectations with those of staff, as has been done by Hassel and Ridout (2018). Other opportunities exist to add information about the actual experiences of

this unique student group, examining alignment and discrepancies between expectations and experiences in order to better prepare students for the reality of university study.

References

- Ashton-Hay, S., Wignell, P., & Evans, K. (2015). International Student Transition Experience Project Report: Southern Cross University.
- Barbour, R. S. (2001). Checklists for improving rigour in qualitative research: a case of the tail wagging the dog? *BMJ*, *322*(7294), 1115. doi:10.1136/bmj.322.7294.1115
- Berg, B. L., & Lune, H. (2012). *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Science* (8th ed.). Boston: Pearson Education.
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2012) Thematic analysis. In H. Cooper, P. M. Camic, D. L. Long, A. T. Panter, D. Rindskopf, & K. J. Sher (Eds), *APA handbook of research methods in psychology, Vol. 2: Research designs: Quantitative, qualitative, neuropsychological, and biological* (pp. 57-71). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Draper, A. (2014). *It's not what I expected! Exploring the impact of expectations on the actual experience of students who are mothers in their first year at university*. Paper presented at the Students Transitions Achievement Retention and Success (STARS) Conference, Darwin, Australia.
- Evans, S., & Morrison, B. (2011). Meeting the challenges of English-medium higher education: The first-year experience in Hong Kong. *English for Specific Purposes*, *30*(3), 198-208.
- Gerdes, H., & Mallinckrodt, B. (1994). Emotional, social, and academic adjustment of college students: A longitudinal study of retention. *Journal of Counseling & Development* *72*(3), 281-288.
- Harvey, L., Drew, S., & Smith, M. (2006). *The first-year experience: a review of literature for the Higher Education Academy*. Retrieved from https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/first_year_experience_full_report.pdf
- Hassel, S., & Ridout, N. (2018). An investigation of first-year students' and lecturers' expectations of university education. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *8*, 1-13 doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2017.02218
- Kahu, E. R., Nelson, K., & Picton, C. (2016). *'I'm excited!' Student expectations prior to starting their first year at university*. Paper presented at the Students Transitions Achievement Retention and Success (STARS) Conference, Perth, Australia.
- Kember, D. (2000). Misconceptions about the learning approaches, motivation and study practices of Asian students. *Higher Education*, *40*(1), 99-121.
- Kuh, G. D., Gonyea, R. M., & Williams, J. M. (2005). What students expect from college and what they get *Promoting Reasonable Expectations: Aligning Student and Institutional Views of the College Experience* (pp. 34-64). San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass.
- Murray, N. (2010). Conceptualising the English language needs of first year university students. *The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education*, *1*(1), 55-64.

- Nguyen, H. P. C. (2013). Absorbing Australian Culture Through the Exchange Program at RMIT International University in Vietnam. *Journal of International Education and Leadership*, 3(1), 1-9.
- Novick, G. (2008). Is There a Bias Against Telephone Interviews In Qualitative Research? *Research in Nursing & Health*, 31(4), 391–398.
- Oliver, P. (2006). Purposive Sampling. In V. Jupp (Ed.), *The SAGE Dictionary of Social Research Methods* (pp. 224-225). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Sander, P., Stevenson, K., King, M., & Coates, D. (2000). University students' expectations of teaching. *Studies in Higher Education*, 25(3), 309-323.
- Scutter, S. D., Palmer, E., Luzecky, A., da Silva, K. B., & Brinkworth, R. (2011). What do commencing undergraduate students expect from first year university? *The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education*, 2(1), 8.
- Smith, J. S., & Wertlieb, E. C. (2005). Do first-year college students' expectations align with their first-year experiences? *NASPA Journal*, 42(2), 153-174.
- Smith, K. (2010). Assuring Quality in Transnational Higher Education: A Matter of Collaboration or Control? *Studies in Higher Education*, 35(7), 793-806. doi: 10.1080/03075070903340559
- Tinto, V. (2006-2007). Research and Practice of Student Retention: What Next? *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 8(1), 1-19. doi:10.2190/4YNU-4TMB-22DJ-AN4W
- Tran, T. L., Marginson, S., & Nguyen, T. N. (2014). Internationalization. In T. L. Tran, S. Marginson, M. H. Do, T. N. Q. Do, T. T. T. Le, T. N. Nguyen, T. P. T. Vu, N. T. Pham, T. L. H. Nguyen & T. H. T. Ho (Eds.), *Higher Education in Vietnam: Flexibility, Mobility and Practicality in the Global Knowledge Economy* (pp. 127-151). New York, United States: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Webster, B. J., & Yang, M. (2012). Transition, induction and goal achievement: first-year experiences of Hong Kong undergraduates. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 13(2), 359-368.
- Wilkins, S., & Huisman, J. (2012). The international branch campus as transnational strategy in higher education. *Higher Education*, 64(5), 627-645.