"I'm excited!" Student expectations prior to starting their first year at university

Ella R. Kahu, Karen Nelson, & Catherine Picton
Office of the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Students), University of the Sunshine Coast

Abstract

First year student retention is an ongoing challenge in higher education and expectations are an important influence on students' adjustment. Based on interviews with 19 students before they started at a regional Australian university, this research is informed by a framework of student engagement that proposes that the student experience occurs in an educational interface, the dynamic space influenced by student and institutional factors. Four constructs manifest within the interface and influence engagement. This paper therefore explores students' emotions, self-efficacy, well-being, and belonging prior to starting university. Overall, the students have expectations of high engagement driven by two key influences: the alignment between their interests and their courses, and the relationships they expect to make. While some are nervous about what lies ahead, others are naïvely optimistic. Most know what they need from the university but seem less aware of what they need to do in order to succeed.

Introduction

The transition to higher education is without doubt a challenging time in young people's lives. While participation rates have increased dramatically in Australia and other western nations (Trow, 2006), dropout rates remain a concern (Edwards & McMillan, 2015). One factor that influences students' adjustment to university is their expectations prior to commencing (Jackson, Pancer, Pratt, & Hunsberger, 2000). Expectancies influence how we experience an event and our responses to the event. The current study adds to this literature by exploring four key aspects of the students' pre-university experience that theory suggests will impact on their student engagement and therefore their success and retention.

Student engagement in higher education is well researched and there is considerable evidence that it is important for student outcomes of learning and retention (see Trowler & Trowler, 2010 for a review). The meaning of student engagement is however debated. Kahu's (2013) framework of student engagement, which underpins the current study, delineates three dimensions of engagement: Emotional engagement, interest in and enthusiasm for the course content; cognitive engagement, self-regulation and deep learning; and finally behavioural engagement, the effort and activities students direct towards their learning. Further developing the framework, Kahu and Nelson (2016) propose that student engagement occurs in an educational interface – a dynamic space formed at the intersection of the wide range of institutional and student factors known to impact on the student experience. As shown in Figure 1, the framework incorporates four psychosocial variables that are critical elements of the student experience within the interface: self-efficacy, emotion, belonging, and well-being. Each of these variables result from an interaction between student and institution, and each has the potential to impact, positively or negatively, on student engagement and are therefore important to student success.
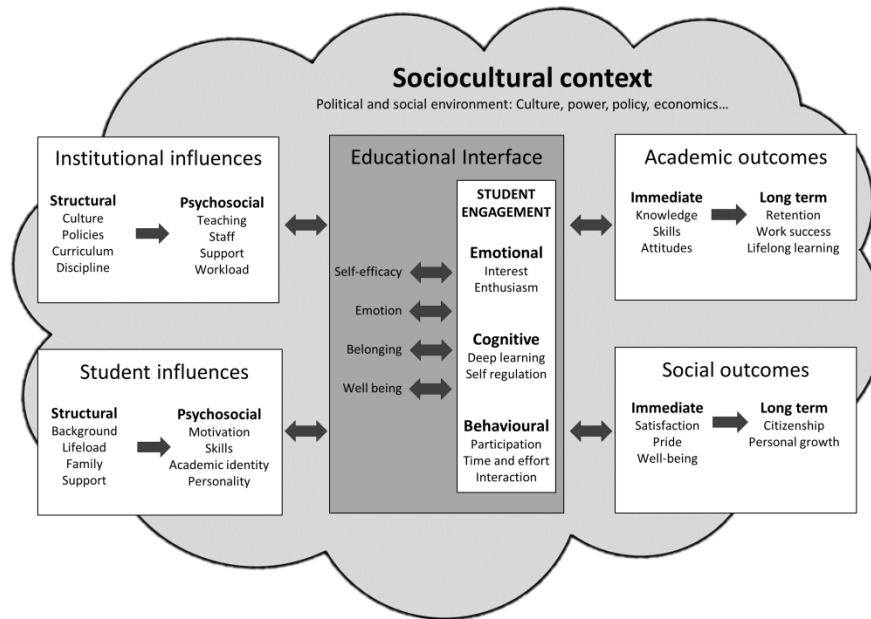
Figure 1. Conceptual framework of student engagement with educational interface

Firstly, self-efficacy, the student's belief in their capability to perform a task, is a function of student factors such as past experiences and skills, and institutional factors such as the task and teaching. Academic self-efficacy influences student engagement and success (Schunk & Mullen, 2012) through its impact on persistence and motivation (van Dinther, Dochy, & Segers, 2011). Secondly, students' emotions, such as enthusiasm for the course content or anxiety over performance, are critical influences on engagement (Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012). Understanding these emotional responses is essential to understanding and theorising student experiences (Linnenbrink, 2006). Thirdly, an extensive body of research highlights the importance of belonging – how connected students feel to the institution, people, and discipline – to student engagement and success (Thomas, 2012). Finally, student well-being is influenced by university factors, by other commitments in a student's life, and by conflicts between the two (Grant, 2002). Stress is common in the first year – according to one Australian study, 19% of students report high stress levels (Stallman, 2010). Stress is also a commonly cited reason for withdrawing from university (Baik, Naylor, & Arkoudis, 2015). These four factors are evidently important for a successful student experience.

This paper is part of a larger project addressing the problem of first year retention by exploring the regional university student experience within the student interface. Before classes start students have little experience of university other than enrolment processes and the institutional website. Their experience of the interface, their emotions, sense of belonging, self-efficacy, and well-being are therefore based on the picture they have of university and of how it will be for them. This paper explores those expectations and examines how students expect these to impact on their engagement.

Method

The interviews reported here form the first phase of a study following a group of students through their first year at university. The nineteen Australian European participants were all 17 or 18 years old; twelve were female. The students were all enrolled full time: most in arts or health disciplines but some in business and IT. Eight students had parents who had

attended university, four had siblings only who had attended, and seven students were the first in their family to attend. The majority, 12, were living with their families, five were in student accommodation, and three were in share house arrangements.

The students volunteered to take part in the study following a letter and email invitation. They were interviewed on campus in the two weeks before university started. Trigger questions asked about their decision to attend university, and their expectations of the coming year. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The data were analysed using an open thematic approach, viewing language as a neutral expression of the participants' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This paper focuses on the core constructs in the educational interface: emotion, well-being, belonging, and self-efficacy and examines how these might impact on their future engagement with their study.

Findings

The findings are structured around each of the four constructs however, as is evident in the analysis, there are many connections and intersections between them.

Emotions

Emotions stem from a subjective appraisal of the situation (Fredrickson & Cohn, 2008), in this case the students' current life and their expectations of university. Almost all participants expected university to be better than school life and their dominant emotion was excitement. Particularly for those who had left home, but also for others, the students saw themselves as moving into a new chapter of life characterised by maturity and independence. For some students, this was a time of self-discovery and a chance to be a better version of themselves:

> Karla: Becoming more independent I guess, getting better social skills <laughs> and just becoming, like sort of knowing who I am and how I learn and just getting better at living, you know.

> Isaac: I guess just like a better me sort of - sort of thing. A lot more mature, having to like undertake all this work and that.

Some of the students, while excited, also felt that it would be a challenge and there was an element of anxiety and doubt as to how they would manage this new independent life. Sarah highlights the contradiction she feels – she is excited but describes herself as a pretend grown up. As she explains, she has her mother to support her, illustrating the potential benefit of continuing to live at home:

> Sarah: I'm excited to feel like I have like my own sort of life outside of my parents finally. Yeah I'm excited to pretend I'm a grown up. I don't think I really will be but this is a chance for me to just break free from everything and I'm really excited. I know I'm going to be overwhelmed and I'm going to cry a lot but that's okay. Mum will help me. That's what Mum's for.

Expectations of maturity and independence extended to the learning environment at university. Many of the students felt the key benefit of university over school was that it would be "free" and they would have control and choice over their actions:

> Melanie: I just think it's going to be completely different because there's no-one saying, like, oh, this is your lunch break or you can only go to the bathroom now or, you know, it's just going to be free <laughs>.

Another aspect students felt would be better at university, and therefore was cause for excitement was the social environment. A number of students talked negatively about school and contrasted this with what they thought university would be like – better because students would be more mature, had chosen to be there, and therefore would be more focussed:

> Luke: Like yeah I like that I don't get ostracised or anything here, it's just good; it's adult it's not stupid high school.

> Sarah: It will be like people are there because they either need to be or want to be and I guess that changes the environment a little…That's exciting for me and it also doesn't mean that they are idiots when they are there being dumb and ruining it for people who are actually trying.

In particular, many of the students were looking forward to meeting and making friends with people who were studying the same subjects as them:

> Felix: I guess I'll be able to meet people who are into, you know, similar things as me because they're doing the same course.

For a few students the social aspects of life were cause for anxiety as well as excitement:

> Sarah: I'm a bit anxious when it comes to going out and meeting people, even people who I do know… I think I'll meet people here who I like a lot more than I did in high school. That's also exciting. Yeah I get anxious meeting new people.

Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is the students' sense of their capability for the task ahead, resulting from their appraisal of personal and environmental factors (Schunk & Pajares, 2004). When asked what kind of learner they were, half the students used positive terms such as focussed and productive, while the other half highlighted weaknesses such as poor time management, procrastination, and low motivation. Many of these students said they would work harder this year. In particular, because they had chosen topics aligned with their interests and goals, study would be more enjoyable and this would make them more motivated and focussed:

> Sienna: I think I'm going to be a bit happier to be honest, because at school I was doing subjects I didn't particularly like and like it just kind of - it was a bit draining. And I feel that if I'm doing something that I'm actually passionate about and I'm excited to do, then I'm going to feel better, I'm going to be a bit more excited to come to uni, because I'm studying something that I really enjoy and yeah, I'm hoping it will be better.

> Karla: I've always been like really good, just bad time management though, like I was really slack with getting assignments in on time and stuff. But I figured since, like learning's more real now, you're actually working towards something and your future, instead of just doing subject because you have to. I feel like I'd be more committed to it and hopefully get things done.

There is a tension here that only a few students recognised: If university is less structured as they expect, then students will need to be more self-disciplined and issues such as time management could be more problematic rather than less. Alexia summarises this when she describes university as simultaneously more chilled out and stricter:

> Alexia: It seems a lot more chilled out than high school, like a lot stricter, but a lot more chilled out at the same time… Like harder work, you've got to be more self-disciplined, like you've got to be more strict on yourself, rather than the teachers being strict on you. And then it's a lot more chilled out because you don't have to actually listen to that. But if you don't, you fail.

One student had a very different view of university. Elisabeth had been home-schooled and she had some experience of university through completing two courses through a Headstart programme. Unlike the other students, Elisabeth felt university was a structured environment with explicit tasks and expectations. She was looking forward to this in contrast to her home-schooling experience. This highlights how students' expectations and responses are highly dependent on their past experiences:

> Elisabeth: You do this now and you have to follow this and I like it to be honest because I've never had it much before university. I love it. I love having set assessments and you got to do this and you're going to get this once it's done. So I love the structure.

Similar to the social expectations, the positive view of university as a place where learning would be enjoyable was shaded by a degree of anxiety for some students. When asked what they thought the challenges would be, a number of the students talked about the level of the work and assessments. In particular, anxiety was triggered by not knowing what to expect in the new environment and in the new discipline:

> Alison: I'm not sure like how crazy assessment times are going to get, and exams; like are they going to be different and - I know it's like a whole new expectation level of the hardness… So I think for the first semester just finding where I actually sit and if I need to work harder or finding out what the expectations are is going to be the challenge for me, because I stress a lot. Like I get anxiety if I don't know what to expect. I don't like not knowing.

> Isaac: The course work of course, because I've never actually - I didn't do business through high school. This is the first time I'm doing it.

Well-being

The students had a strong sense of well-being. Since school ended they had enjoyed a period of leisure and undemanding work, and in some cases they were bored and ready for a new challenge. Those who had left home were enjoying the novelty of their independence; university classes were yet to start and so there were no institutional causes of stress. Despite the slight anxiety discussed earlier, the excitement and anticipation they were feeling contributed to a generally positive sense of well-being.

The students considered their future well-being when deciding where to live and which university to attend. Their choice of university was motivated primarily by location and familiarity, and for a few, the chance to get an early offer of place. Location was important for the eleven students who lived locally and who, for financial and emotional reasons, wanted to live at home. Their aim was to reduce their stress and so make university life easier. As Sienna explains, stress would impact negatively on her study:

> Sienna: And yeah and if I'm stressed and I am just not in the space for learning, how am I going to be getting good grades? Yeah and I know that if I'm not

stressed and I'm really happy and it's just easy, like I will be so motivated to get good grades here, yeah.

Another well-being factor that some students considered was having friends coming to the same university which they felt would make life easier and less stressful:

> Tony: By that stage a lot of my friends were coming here, so I thought "Okay, I might as well come here as well". It's good to have some familiar faces.

Finally, for a few students the opportunity to get an early offer of place at the university was important. Again, reducing stress was a driving force – the early offer of place helped them be more relaxed at the end of the school year and plan their new life in a less rushed manner:

> Peter: I just wanted a guaranteed entry into uni whilst still at school so I could graduate knowing I don't need to worry about my OP [grades] anymore.

Belonging

Although the participants had not yet started at university, early signs of belonging to the institution were evident, as was a keenness to meet people and to connect with their discipline. The students' connection to the institution had started to develop through choosing which university to attend. As well as aiming to reduce stress as discussed earlier, some students chose this university because of its culture. The university was seen as friendlier and more laid back than the city universities and some students felt this was a better fit for them:

> Karla: I liked that it's away from the city. I don't like the city, how busy it is and dirty, and I don't know, I just feel, again, like more safe here I guess because it's more laid back and quiet, because I'm shy.

An early sense of belonging to the institution was also formed through familiarity from school visits, living nearby, or familial connections:

> Sarah: I'd been to the campus before when I was 14. I fell in love with it and I was just like this is where I want to be. It's where I want to go so I had it in my head exactly what I'm doing since year 9 and that's to be here.

When asked what needed to happen for them to feel that they fitted in, the students talked about getting to know other students. As mentioned earlier, nearly all the students, even those who already had friends attending, were keen to meet new people. However their preferences for the type of connection varied as can be seen from John and Elisabeth:

> John: Definitely form a relationship with all the people around me. Just, you know, being comfortable around them. If I see them on campus and if they see me, they come out of the way, have a conversation. Just, like, not just, like, a forced relationship. Just like, you know, common interests. Things like that.

> Elisabeth: So I'm not really looking to go into parties or anything or go into varsity and partying and drinking and things like that. I'm not really looking for that. I'm just looking for a few steady friends that I can have study with and I can talk to. Probably in my degree someone I can – we can bounce of each other and talk to things about topics and things like that.

What is noticeable here is how the students were particularly keen to meet people studying the same courses. When asked why they were going to university, about half the students

talked primarily about their passion or their end career goal – to be a paramedic or a lawyer for instance. Others talked more about how they always knew they would go to university. As Adeline illustrates, for many students, attending university was an expectation:

> Adeline: Well I never really considered not coming to uni, it kind of just was something I guess I always knew I would do and my parents had always said I would and I guess-yeah I just figured I would.

Regardless of their initial motivations, the students were excited to be doing a subject they were interested in and they were keen to meet others doing the same. This can be seen as the first stages of developing a sense of community within their future profession and it highlights that the different types of belonging are not independent – part of belonging to a discipline is connecting with the people in that discipline.

> Rose: But I think the social side will change me a little bit that I will become more wanting to hang out with people because I'll be around people that want to do the same thing as me and are interested in it... So, I think that's what I'm excited for and excited to meet people that are doing the same thing as me and really interested in it and just meeting new people really.

As well as their fellow students, the participants were keen to get to know staff and over half of them talked about how important a good relationship with staff was to their study because it would make class more enjoyable and they would be better students:

> Isaac: It makes it easier just to learn, get - and it just makes classes a lot more enjoyable really.

> Claire: It's good to have a good relationship with your teacher but at the same time if you don't like them, you're not gonna be able to do – you're not gonna want to go to class and stuff.

One concern that was expressed by a few of the students is that the relationship with staff would be less personal because of the large numbers of students, and that this would make it more difficult to form a connection with them and to approach them if needed.

> John: Yeah, so obviously in, like, this it's, like, a lot more people in the class, there's a lot less one on one time, talking personally.

Discussion

These findings highlight the complex links between students' past experiences and motivations, and their expectations of the university environment, lending support to the idea that the student experience occurs within an educational interface: the dynamic space at the intersection of self and institution. While the findings were structured around the four psychosocial constructs, there was considerable overlap and intersection between these ideas. Two overarching themes of what the students consider to be important for their future experiences of university are evident and discussed here: the students' interests and their relationships. These parallel the academic and social integration that Tinto (2000) has long argued are essential to student retention.

One of the most positive drivers for these students is the anticipated alignment between their interests and career plans and their chosen courses. This can be explained by self-determination theory (SDT), which suggests autonomy triggers intrinsic motivation in the

form of curiosity and interest, and leads to higher levels of persistence and performance (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This is what these students are expecting. The link between their interests and the courses has multiple effects. First, it triggers positive emotions; they are excited by the learning ahead. Second, it increases self-efficacy as they believe that being interested in the topics will make them more motivated and able to do the work. Finally, it triggers an expectancy of belonging, that they will meet people who share their interests. The potential flow on effects of this in terms of their expected engagement with their study, as predicted by SDT, are evident. They anticipated being behaviourally engaged, motivated to put in the necessary time and effort; cognitively engaged, they are looking forward to learning; and emotionally engaged, their enthusiasm is considerable. Dewey (1933) describes this as serious play, an ideal mental condition which combines interest and intellectual curiosity with a sense of competency. This ideal learning is what these students are expecting at university and, at this stage they have that necessary sense of self-efficacy. An extensive research project on student success found that a higher education experience that is "relevant to interests and future goals" (p. 15) is critical to student belonging, retention, and success (Thomas, 2012). This suggests that if these students do find the connections they expect with the course content, they are likely to have the positive experience they are anticipating.

The other key theme in the students' talk was the impact of relationships on their plans, choices, and expectations of engagement. Firstly, for many, maintaining a close physical connection to their family by attending a local university was prioritised as a means of sustaining well-being. The validity of this decision is supported by research showing that, in the period before students made new friends, family is a critical source of support (Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). However, there is a risk attached to staying at home: students who do not live in student accommodation tend to make fewer university friends and in the long run can therefore be more socially isolated (Buote et al., 2007; Wilcox et al., 2005).

Secondly, the prospect of new friendships was exciting and was expected to be a key source of belonging for the students – once they knew people and had formed relationships they would feel like they fit in. This is supported by other research: that a lack of social support and in particular difficulties in making friends is a primary reason for students' withdrawing (Wilcox et al., 2005); and that there is a positive association between adjustment to university and the quality of new friendships (Buote et al., 2007).

Finally, good relationships with staff were recognised as important – the participants felt this would make learning easier through the impact on emotional engagement (they would enjoy class more) and behavioural engagement (they would attend and participate more). This expectation is well founded as past research highlights relationships with staff as a critical influence on student engagement (Bryson & Hand, 2007). The students were aware however that the learning environment at university may make building those relationships difficult.

Overall, these findings suggest that these students have relatively accurate insight into what matters – of what they need to successfully engage with their studies. However, there was also a certain degree of naïve optimism about university. Some students expressed anxiety at what was ahead – the challenges of meeting people, the level of work, and the learning environment – suggesting a more realistic view. Others seemed less aware of the risks. The likely effect of this optimism on the first semester experience is unclear as past findings are mixed. For instance, Morton, Mergler, and Boman (2014) found that students with a high level of optimism adapted better to university life, while in another study the students felt that university had not matched their expectations and that this was a source of considerable stress (Wrench, Garrett, & King, 2014). A more fine grained approached was taken by Jackson et

al. (2000). Their survey found that a third of students were 'optimistic'; a further quarter were 'prepared', optimistic but with more realistic expectations and plans of how they would cope; 27% were 'complacent', without clear expectations; and the final 14% were 'fearful'. These expectations predicted adjustment to university with the fearful group in particular scoring lower in measures of depression, stress and adjustment later in the semester. The 'prepared' group were most successful in terms of adjustment. Thomas (2012) found that many students have unrealistic expectations of university. In particular they are unprepared for the autonomy and need to be responsible for structuring one's own study. Similarly, in the current project the students were excited by this aspect of university life, but most did not appreciate what this would require from them as independent learners.

In-depth qualitative work of this nature is essential to understanding the complexity of the student experience. However, as the framework of student engagement highlights, sociocultural context is critically important and therefore students commencing at different universities may have different expectations and understandings of university life. None the less, the picture painted here is likely to resonate for many and it gives institutions an important insight as to what students are hoping for from their university experience.

The findings suggest that students know what they need from the university to be successful: work that is relevant for them and their goals, along with good relationships with fellow students and staff. The findings also show that while some students are aware of the potential challenges ahead, there is generally little understanding of how they will need to adapt their learning practices to meet those challenges. This raises the question of whether universities could do more to provide a more realistic and informed picture of the student role in this new learning environment.

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