

# **“It’s almost a mindset that teachers need to change”: moving away from blaming the students**

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This paper discusses the findings related to a number of research project investigating students expectations and experiences of the first year in higher education. In particular, findings with regards to first-year students’ expectations and challenges with issues of time management are reported. It was found that many students were realistic about having to plan their work independently, and having to spend a good amount of their time during the week on self study. However, many students found it difficult to regulate their self-study and keep up with the work. They were also not always sure how they were to organise their self-study time. This suggests that blaming students for perceived inadequacies in their time-management skills may not be helpful. Furthermore, recent research findings from the field of social neuroscience related to the certain brain developments in early adulthood, add another dimension to understanding decision-making and planning skills of students in this age group. Implications of the research findings for understanding the transition from secondary to tertiary education will be discussed.

## **Introduction**

Students’ experiences during their first year in higher education are of enormous importance for students’ commitment to return for the second year and completing their degree (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005; Yorke, 1999; Yorke & Longden, 2007).

Although an argument can be made for reconsidering tertiary education pedagogy in general, reconsidering approaches to first-year teaching and learning are of particular importance. One of the central issues is whether universities acknowledge a role in helping students to get used to new learning and teaching environments. Prebble et al. (2004), in discussing student support, distinguish between discourses of assimilation and adaptation: are students expected to assimilate into universities, or should universities adapt to the students who enter universities.

One particular transition challenge for first-year students is management of time and self-study. Time-management and self-study, for the purpose of this paper, will be understood as part of the same set of skills related to organising and keeping up with a range of study tasks. A study by the UK Higher Education Academy (Yorke & Longden, 2007) clearly suggested that students experienced challenges in managing their time. Krause and Coates (2008) in considering the results of a student engagement instrument commented that being able to “...manage one’s time, study and strategies for success as a student is foundational to success in the first year” (2008, p. 500). Furthermore, time-management skills are important contributors to study success

(Meredeen, 1998; Race, 1992 in: Trueman and Hartley, 1996). Especially confidence in long-term planning predicts performance (Trueman and Hartley, 1996). Furthermore, students' time-allocation skills have been proven to be related to the acquisition of discipline-specific and generic competencies (Meng and Heijke, 2005).

In this paper I will briefly discuss the research findings from different projects related to first-year students' experiences. The central questions: 1) how prepared do students feel in time-management and self-study skills before they enrol in university? 2) what do first-year students report as challenges in the area of time management and self-study.

## **Research projects**

Three data sources were used. Data from the first source was collected in the University of Otago (New Zealand) and the University of Groningen (The Netherlands) through a survey of first-year students before they started their studies. This survey, the Readiness and Expectations Questionnaire (REQ) measured expectations and readiness in a range of fields that were derived from the extensive body of research on the first-year experience. Students were asked to answer a number of categorical questions, and a range of 5 point Likert-scale questions related to their expectations of what would happen in the first year at university and their self-perceived readiness for university. The items were composed around several dimensions, including induction and time management. Expectation-related questions included such items as "I will have to do a lot of independent research tasks". Preparedness questions included items such as: "My previous experiences prepared me well to keep up with a lot of readings" and "I am good at working independently (van der Meer & Jansen, 2008). Because this instrument was developed in an international collaborative project, we were keen to find out whether students in two countries with different educational systems differed in their expectations and perceived readiness.

The two other data sources were collected at the University of Otago (New Zealand). The first one from a survey administered in 2004 amongst students enrolled in 100-level courses (the UNI101 survey), the second one from interviews conducted with first-year students in the same year. Close to 1900 students responded to some or all of the open-ended survey questions; 27 first-year students participated in the interviews. A data-mining approach was used to interrogate these two data sources. Data mining in the context of this paper will be understood as the selective use of data sources with particular research questions in mind. For the purpose of this paper data related to time and study management was 'mined'.

## **Results and discussion**

The responses to the survey question about what respondents would advise for prospective first-year students suggested that time management and study-related issues were a concern in the first semester. Interview data confirmed this. Responses to the REQ survey suggested that students had realistic expectations about the time to spend on their study; they also felt ready for more independent study before they arrived at university.

Considering the findings as a whole, I want to suggest that students' struggle with time management had less to do with being unrealistic about university expectations or students' unwillingness to work hard, but more with a lack of understanding how to organise their study at university. This lack of understanding, I argue, cannot necessarily be attributed to lack of high schools preparation, but could also be considered as a lack of appreciation by some tertiary teachers as to the need of first-year students to be appropriately inducted into what is expected of them and how to organise their study in a university environment.

Students in the UNI101 survey and interviews indicated differences in expectations at high school compared to university. Whereas high schools often have set expectations for students about when students have to complete certain tasks, and when particular milestones have to be met along the way, students experienced this as less so at university. This was especially the case with regards to tasks for which there was no direct assessment component. This was, for example, the case where students were given suggestions for reading, or problem-solving exercises.

Another task that students seemed to have little comprehension of was allowing and planning time for ongoing revision towards the examination period. The many blocks of unscheduled time between scheduled class times were a new experience for many students. Some interviewees, for example, reported that they felt they should do work all the time, but did not seem sure how to organise a routine; and some ended up not doing much at all. One interviewee blamed herself towards the end of the semester for not having started revision of material earlier. In some of her courses the assessment was heavily weighted toward the final examinations. Another interviewee had mentioned that she was surprised early in the semester that there was so little work to do; she had expected it to be more difficult. These experiences suggest that it was not obvious to all students that things were done differently at university. For some students, realisation happened as the semester progressed.

Students' report of the manner in which some teachers communicated may have contributed to students not being clear on how to make sense of study expectations. One interviewee commented: "It's like almost a mindset that they [teachers] need to change". What she seems to suggest was that first-year students are not used to thinking in terms of regular work if there is no immediate deadline looming. The seemingly 'optional' nature of some activities, such as 'extra' readings, was experienced as confusing. Advice from staff at times seemed too tentative or indirect for students to apprehend their importance. Where first-year students had to come to terms with a range of demands on their time, seemingly discretionary activities may therefore not have been appreciated as important. Amongst these apparently discretionary activities, in some courses "readings" figured prominently.

Another reported difference with high schools was the lesser emphasis on reminding students about forthcoming tasks and deadlines. Some students, for example, mentioned that this had a particular impact on assignments and examination revision. This often resulted in last-minute work. A comment from one interviewee suggested that students had had assessments sprung on them. At the University of Otago, all courses are obliged to inform students at the beginning of

the semester how and when they will be assessed. It would therefore be unlikely that assessments were completely sprung on students. A number of students mentioned that they probably had been told of assessments, but they assumed this was at the beginning of the year. This could suggest that at that moment the student had not realised that they had to take note of that as being relevant and important. We reported on one particular interviewee, for example, who started to put assessment dates on her wall planner after she had some earlier experiences of being surprised by upcoming assessments. This student also commented that she had realized that at university students were not told. This seemed something she had come to realize over time, rather than something she knew at the start of the year. Students' experiences in some courses suggest that some teachers may have been aware of first-year students' needs in respect of time management and study organisation. In some tutorials and laboratories, for example, students were given weekly Blackboard tests or weekly homework. Whether this was done intentionally in recognition of students' needs, could not be established. However, these weekly routines gave students a sense of being on track. Practices of this kind were found helpful by students, and would be worthy of consideration by other teachers.

Issues of time management and self-study have been highlighted in many other studies on first-year students. For example, Kantanis (2000), in a large study with some 1600 students at Monash University, found that 38 percent had not come to terms with independent learning after the first semester. Other studies have also highlighted first-year students' concerns with time-management and self-study issues (Haigh, 1999; Maguire, 2001; Prescott & Simpson, 2004; Ramsay, Barker, & Jones, 1999; Sidle & McReynolds, 1999; Smith, 2003). Haggis (2006) emphasises that problems with organisation of time and study can affect all types of students. Lowe and Cook (2003) in their study with first-year students at the University of Ulster, reported that 21 percent of the students at the end of two months had experienced greater difficulty with self-directed learning than they expected, whilst a third reported that they were experiencing some difficulties with this. The results of the first-year experience study in the UK (Yorke & Longden, 2007) clearly indicate that time-management was a concern. In both the open questions asking students to mention the worst feature of their experience, and features they thought should be changed, time-management was the leading category. Concerns related to time-management and self-study from first-year students' perspectives, then, were by no means unique to this study.

Furthermore, recent neuroscience research suggests that the maturation of the cognitive control functions in the prefrontal cortex is not complete till early adulthood, ages 20-25 (Blakemore, 2008; Cauffman & Steinberg, 2000; Steinberg, 2007). It has been suggested that this could provide some possible explanations for students' challenges at this time to plan their time effectively. Blakemore and Frith (2005) emphasise that:

... the research on brain development during adolescence shows that secondary and tertiary education are vital. The brain is still developing during this period, the brain is adaptable, and needs to be moulded and shaped. Perhaps the aims of education for adolescents should change to include strengthening of internal control, for example, self-

paced learning, critical evaluation of transmitted knowledge and meta-study skills  
(Blakemore & Frith, 2005, p. 462)

## Conclusion and recommendations

Although students ultimately bear the responsibility for managing their time and self-study organisation, tertiary education institutions bear a responsibility for assisting students in the becoming familiar with the expectations and ways of working at tertiary level. For students who come directly from secondary schools, this is even more important. They may not fully appreciate the differences in studying at secondary and tertiary level.

Secondary school teachers and career counsellors could prepare students for this, and they would do their students a great service if they would be able to do so this, however, tertiary teachers need to reconsider their approaches to teaching and delivering courses in the first year. I propose teachers adopting a “first-year pedagogies” approach.

First-year pedagogies would encompass a range of approaches that recognise that first-year students are unfamiliar with many, if not most, aspects of tertiary teaching and learning environments. At the core of first-year pedagogies would be the notion of “de-familiarisation” (O'Regan, 2005). This would be an intentional approach by staff in relation to course organisation, communication and course delivery. This entails looking at everything staff members do as if they see it for the first time. It would entail a questioning of taken-for-granted ways of doing and communicating things (O'Regan, 2000). Furthermore, it would mean attempting to see the experiences of the first semester through the eyes of first-year students. An important aspect of first-year pedagogies would be the embedding of a range of academic skills, including study organisation and time management.

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