ADAPTING TO HIGHER EDUCATION-ACADEMIC, SOCIAL, AND PERSONAL EXPECTATION OF EDUCATIONAL SCIENCES STUDENTS FOR UNIVERSITY TEACHERS

Kristi Mets-Alunurm
Tallinn University (ESTONIA)

Abstract

Students enter higher education with a set of expectations which influence their behaviour in the new environment. In order to support students in adapting to university studies, this study analysed students' expectations of university teachers. The sample consisted of 170 first-year bachelor students of educational sciences. Thematic analysis was used for exploring students' academic, social and personal expectations.

The results revealed that students' expectations of university teachers were mostly of academic kind: teachers have to be professionals who have good theoretical and practical knowledge in their field. In case of social expectations, the university teachers were expected to treat the students equally, and have good communication skills and a teaching style that supports the learners. Students' personal expectations were about creating a collaborative partnership and taking into account students' personal traits and different educational experiences. For full-time students, academic expectations took priority, whereas for part-time students, social expectations were more important.

Keywords: academic expectations, social expectations, personal expectations, adapting to university studies.

1 INTRODUCTION

The stakeholders in higher education, such as policymakers and labour market representatives see the students as customers waiting for a service ([1]; [2]; [3]; [4]); however, the studies show that students' expectations for and understanding of the quality of higher education is much more changeable ([5]; [4]), as students' expectations for the studies are influenced by their age, gender, ethnicity (including language), regional origin, parents' level of education, mode of study and study habits ([2]; [6]; [4]; [7]). In addition to that, students' expectations depend on external factors, such as cultural context and the type of the higher education institution ([2]; [4]; [7]).

Mapping students' expectations is considered to play an important role in increasing the quality of education ([8]; [9]), because the awareness of students' expectations fosters collaboration between the stakeholders and helps to adapt the expectations to stakeholders' needs. If students' and university teachers' expectations and understanding of a higher education institution are different, then it is recommended to pay attention to and investigate students' expectations because understanding students' expectations helps to maintain the quality of education and provides feedback to the teachers whether their understanding of their actions matches what the students actually expect ([10]). Various studies have pointed out that students' expectations for studies are influenced by personal factors on the one hand ([1]) and general context, such as the specific institution and chosen mode of study, on the other ([4]). The conflict between expectations and reality brings along low motivation, disengagement and exhaustion ([11]; [3]), which in turn impacts academic involvement, study results ([12]), performance, and attendance rate ([4]). If such conflict between the reality and the expectations arises, then the students are not able to meet the expectations of a higher education institution and will not succeed in their studies.

Students with different backgrounds have different study needs, academic capability, aspirations, motivation and expectations ([4]; [14])—such a diversity requires that the educational institution and the teacher take into account students' characteristics and peculiarities. In order to support students adapting to studies in higher education institutions, this study aims to analyse the expectations that first-year students of educational sciences have for university teachers. The study seeks to answer two research questions: (1) How do the first year students describe their expectations of academic staff? (2) How do the expectations or full-time and part-time students differ?
In the context of education, Lobo & Gurney ([3]) define 'expectation' as a combination of 'want' and 'desire', at the same time emphasising that the term can be interpreted in many ways. Expectations can be understood as something that can turn into reality, but at the same time, it cannot be assumed that they actually do realise. Expectations form on the basis of experience and information available at the given moment, and information collected beforehand. In this article, it is assumed that the content of expectations and values determines how people progress towards the desired results: how they behave, what they intend and desire ([13]).

When entering higher education, students' primary expectations are related to personal achievements and general environment, but first and foremost, the expectations for university studies are influenced by personal characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity (including language), regional origin, parents' level of education and mode of study (including study habits) ([2]; [4]). However, various studies have shown that more often than not, students' expectations differ from their actual experience of university studies ([15]; [16]). Although the researchers have not found direct links between expectations for routine activities in a higher education institution and previous educational experiences, research confirms that expectations have direct impact on students' performance, engagement, academic achievement and general satisfaction with the studies ([3]). Alauddin et al. ([1]) analysed students' expectations based on similar classification; they pointed out two categories: (1) individual and (2) academic expectations. The category of individual expectations covers factors such as the adaptation to university environment, previous educational experiences, motivation, interest in the chosen field, sensing one's role in a particular university, and self-efficacy in the beginning of studies. The category of academic expectations covers factors such as workload, understanding the content of programmes and courses, communication with academic staff and other students, time spent studying and feedback to studies ([1]).

Lobo and Gurney ([3]) also used two categories to describe students' expectations: academic and social expectations. As to academic expectations, (1) discipline-specific, (2) university-focused and (3) learner-centred expectations can be distinguished. Students' social expectations of university teachers include helpfulness, readiness to support students in every way and provide individual and practical help ([3]). A study by Smith and Wertlieb ([14]) confirmed that academic achievement of first-year students who had unrealistic or idealistic academic expectations was much lower compared to students who entered the university with lower expectations. Based on these results, Smith and Wertlieb ([14]) formed an additional category, that of emotional expectations, for studying expectations, and focused on three categories—academic, social, and emotional—in their examination of students' expectations and experiences. Individual approach and open analysis of question-and-answer patterns allowed the researchers to highlight differences between social and personal expectations ([14]).

On the basis of completed studies and theoretical viewpoints used in those, three categories of expectations are designed, which are used for analyzing the empirical data of this study. Academic expectations ([14]; [1]) are characterized by the specialized knowledge of the lecturers, expertise in the field taught, teaching style used, general level of education, delivery of the specific specialty and the assignments given by the lecturer; social expectations ([14]; [3]) are characterized by any kind of feedback to the studies and social network, active participation in university life and general involvement; personal expectations ([17]; [1]) are characterized by the perception of different attitude coming from academic staff, specific character traits of both lecturers as well as students, different study needs (differently perceived study needs, special education needs), academic performance, strivings of the student.

2 METHODOLOGY

This is a descriptive qualitative study. For data analysis, a combined approach was selected, as it enabled the researcher to analyse empirical data step-by-step, but provide a comprehensive description of the results ([18]; [19]; [20]).

The sample consisted of two groups: 91 students (83 women and 8 men) entered full-time studies and 79 students (64 women and 15 men) entered part-time studies. Different modes of study allowed the researcher to answer the second research question and describe the differences between the expectations of full-time and part-time students. The average age of the participants was 26.2 years. The age distribution differed by study programme and by mode of study. In case of full-time study programmes (four programmes), the average age was between 21.5 and 23.8 years. There was also one study programme in which both part-time and full-time mode were allowed. In 2017, the average
age of students in the full-time mode of this programme was 22.1 years and in the part-time mode, 30.1 years. In four of the part-time study programmes, the average age of the students was 22.1 years; in other part-time programmes, the same indicator was 30.1 years, 32.4 years and 35.3 years. The data was collected in form of short essays written by the students. The course 'Studying at University' included an assignment, in which the students were asked to write a short essay on their expectations of the university, university teachers and student's role. The instructions for the assignment were comprised of guiding questions.

The students answered the question 'What are your expectations of university teachers?'. The instructions of the essay required that all the guiding questions are answered and limited the length of the essay to maximum three A4 pages.

The students gave their permission for using their answers and analysing their data.

Thematic analysis ([18]; [19]) was used to determine students’ expectations of university teachers. The chosen method supported using combined approach and thus, open coding and targeted coding were used in parallel ([21]). In case of targeted coding, the analysis relied on the three main categories of expectations and the researcher looked for important meanings from the perspective of these three categories (sensitizing concepts) ([21]) from the students’ descriptions of their expectations of university teachers. Such combined approach and thematic analysis enabled the researcher to combine the frequencies of meaningful units, which were based on categories of expectations, with sensitizing concepts related to expectations that emerged from empirical data ([21]; [19]; [20]).

In the first stage of the data analysis, preliminary codes for expectations were created on the basis of students' responses by using open coding; these codes in turn formed meaningful units. Then, the frequencies of 17 of these meaningful units were determined.

Meaningful units which emerged in analysis were sorted into subcategories and used to describe the scope of three main categories of expectations. The frequency analysis of meaningful units in the first stage of the analysis was conducted in the Microsoft Excel spreadsheet software.

The first stage of the data analysis showed that the empirical data (students' answers) can be interpreted in many ways. The diversity of meaningful units in students’ answers necessitated the second stage of data analysis, in which students’ answers were analysed on the basis of main categories and subcategories. In this stage, the researcher used sensitizing concepts, that is, directed codes that characterise expectations ([21]) and are important in the categories academic, social and personal expectations.

3 RESULTS

Academic expectations were most frequently described in students’ answers and therefore, this category is discussed first. This is followed by the discussion of social expectations and after that, the category of personal expectations is described. Finally, the differences in the expectations of full-time and part-time students are highlighted.

3.1 Academic expectations

The analysis of academic expectations showed that first and foremost, the students expected the teachers to have subject-specific knowledge and to give practical, real-life examples based on the experience in the field. In addition, the students had specific expectations about teaching methods, teacher's presentation skills and explanation skills. Most often, the students mentioned teaching methods such as lecture, group work and various practice activities. High expectations of teachers’ knowledge and the content studied confirmed that the students expected the university teachers to be professional and competent. Even though students’ expectations about the content taught were very general, they were convinced that teaching at a university presupposes in-depth knowledge of the discipline and subject-area taught. In addition, it was assumed that university teachers are good learners and that they constantly develop their teaching skills and professional knowledge. Students considered gaining knowledge and teaching as a two-way process—the teachers pass on knowledge and introduce disciplines in which they are professionals:

First of all, I expect the university teachers to be professionals in their field, who know something that we can learn from them. (Full-time student)
I expect that the university teachers are fanatics of their field, so that they would be interesting to listen to and the lectures would be gripping. (Full-time student)

Students' expectations implied the attitude that competency in the discipline and practical knowledge create a situation where the students also develop enthusiasm and passion towards the discipline. Therefore, it was important to the students that in addition to academic knowledge of the discipline, the teacher would be emotionally engaged and involved in the development of the subject area and the discipline.

Expectations about teaching methods and teachers' teaching skills were somewhat controversial: in their answers, students mentioned teaching methods and approaches that they mainly associated with higher education, and they expected the teachers to know these methods and use them in the teaching process. Many first-year students had a vague expectation that lectures in the university are interesting and exciting. In quite a few cases, the students gave reasons why the teachers should use the teaching methods that the students prefer:

I expect the university teachers to give interesting lectures and real-life examples which make the things even more logical for me. (Full-time student)

Lecture as a typical teaching method was repeatedly mentioned in students' answers; in parallel to lecture, also active learning methods, first and foremost pair work, group work or teamwork were listed:

I expect that the lecturers to give innovative and interesting homework assignments, which would pose challenges and include collaboration with other students. (Full-time student)

I hope that we can do a lot of group work and learn collaboration, as this is also one of the most important skills when working as a teacher. (Full-time student)

Differences in the expectations about teaching methods imply different study habits and educational experiences; however, clarity in forwarding information about the organisation of studies as well as about discipline-specific knowledge was considered a top priority:

The main point of the lectures is to listen to and work on the material that the teacher presents. (Full-time student)

The students expected the teachers to be skilled in connecting academic knowledge with real-life examples and in asking relevant questions. On the one hand, the students expected satisfactory answers to their questions and clear, relevant explanations; on the other hand, the teacher was expected to be able to ask questions that would help the students to understand the topic.

The students expected that the teacher manages and plans students' time of formal study. As to the organisational side of studies, the students mostly highlighted aspects such as keeping to the time schedule of face-to-face classes, planning for breaks and leaving sufficient time for homework. The expectations related to time, face-to-face classes and homework imply an expectation that study-related time schedule should be discussed and clarified between the teacher and the students. At the same time, the students wished the teacher to plan and knowingly direct the way how studies proceed in time. In sum, although the students expected to be actively engaged in planning their studies and learning process, they also expected the teachers to use familiar and well-known methods, clear forms of study and clear agreements:

I hope that the teachers leave sufficient time for completing the homework assignments. Learning as a process takes time and care, everyone has different capacity for acquiring information. (Full-time student)

In the category of academic expectations, the expectations about the content taught and teacher's teaching skills were tightly connected. The students expected the university teachers to be creative, integrate different topics and use diverse teaching strategies. As the students' answers did not show clearly how much they knew and had experience of contemporary teaching strategies and methods, then it can be said that students' expectations about teaching methods remained rather limited. Characteristic to students' academic expectations were lecture-centred methods, expected to be interesting, exciting, and provide clear information. However, general and ambiguous answers about teaching methods and skills indicated that in the beginning of studies, the students did not have an idea and an overview how practical activities take place at the university and how to manage their studies.
3.2 Social expectations

There were less meaningful units in the category of social expectations than in the categories of academic and personal expectations, as the students described social expectations more explicitly and unambiguously. Students’ answers contained meaningful units concerning communication (such as sympathetic and open communication), collaboration skills, helpfulness and supportive attitude. Surprisingly, what repeatedly emerged from the students’ answers was a clearly expressed expectation that the university teacher behaves ethically and treats the students equally. The students described in their answers specific ways of communication, reflecting the way they thought the communication between the student and the teacher looks like. First of all, the student expected sympathetic and open attitude, and collaboration based on such attitude:

I expect gripping lectures, a lot of real-life examples and open communication with the students. (Full-time student)

What I expect of the teachers are sympathetic attitude and open communication with the students. Most of the students in distant learning programmes are not straight out of secondary school and they all have their life experience and considerable knowledge. (Part-time student)

In many cases, the students assumed that there will be problems, misunderstandings or difficulties in understanding the topic or attending the courses. In this kind of situations, most students expected a sympathetic and supportive attitude. They emphasised that solving problems and conflicts requires the both sides, the students and the teacher, to be ready for communication:

And the most important thing is that they (teachers) should take it easy and not get angry, if there is something that we don’t understand, and calmly explain, why things are as they are. (Full-time student)

I hope that the teachers are sympathetic towards the students and open to compromises. (Full-time student)

The fact that students expressed their expectations by describing problematic situations and solving conflicts may indicate insecurity and lack of experience in academic communication and conduct. First and foremost, the students of educational sciences expected collaboration based on equal partnership, something they associated with being an adult learner:

I expect the university teachers to treat me as an equal and acknowledge my previous knowledge. (Part-time student)

Students’ social expectations stressed the importance of teachers’ support; guidance was expected in everything concerning the relations and behaviour of different stakeholders at university and organisation of studies. In their answers, the students often expressed readiness and will to study at the university, at the same time indicating that in the beginning, they may not have enough skills and experience to cope in the academic environment, as most first-year students do not have any university-experience and they do not know yet how to communicate with teachers in academic environment.

3.3 Personal expectations

Meaningful units classified into the category of personal expectations described the expectations concerning students’ personality traits, for example age and cultural background, as well as previous educational experiences and knowledge. Meaningful units concerning personal expectations revealed specific roles that the students expected the teachers to fulfil. Moreover, the students highlighted personality traits that they associated with university teachers. Large number of meaningful units concerning human nature as such show that students took studies personally and assumed an emotional attitude towards their studies.

The main expectation that students expressed was that the teacher would take into consideration their personality traits in areas where the student feels insecure or knows that a certain characteristic or skill can hinder learning:

To be honest, I don’t have special expectations of the university teachers, but I would like the people to understand that I don’t know Estonian very well and that they would react less sharply to it. I hope that I find people who are ready to help me in speaking Estonian a little bit better. (Full-time student)
The students wished that university teachers took into account that people who are fresh out of school may adapt more easily to the university environment than people who have been away from formal education for a long time. Many students who had studied at university before made comparisons with their existing experience. While they hoped that the new study experience will be more positive, many students also expected the university teacher to take into account their prior educational experiences. Starting university studies was often described as a beginning of a journey:

As I have already been on the journey of university studies, even though I did not complete it, then I have a relatively good idea about how the next three to five years in my life will look like. Therefore, I don’t have any great expectations of the university teachers, as I have encountered the worst already, according to my standards; but I hope that in my home country, things are different, things are better. (Full-time student)

The students pointed out specific roles that characterise the ways how the teacher can influence or guide the student. University teachers were described as motivators, supporters, role models, leaders, initiators and the ones who engage students:

I hope that the teachers whom I meet in the next five years will be my guides and role models. (Full-time student)

In the expectations of many students, university teachers were described as ordinary people and seen first and foremost as cooperation partners. In fact, the expectations of first-year students went even more personal at that point: they clearly expressed in their answers that they expect the teachers to be humane and emotionally close to the students, and take into consideration students’ individuality and creativity. Quite large number of students’ answers reflected the view that university studies are stressful, but also that the studies they are about to begin will be interesting, broadening and bring them forward. In general, a respectful attitude was assumed towards university teachers. Presenting positive personal views about expectations of university teachers demonstrates that the student was open to collaboration and development. Nevertheless, generalised personal expectations can also indicate that the student did not have a clear understanding how creativity and individuality can be expressed and achieved in academic context. This is a clear message to university teachers that they are expected to lead and support students in adapting to a new, academic environment:

What I expect of university teachers is openness and understanding. Firstly, the university teachers should be open to new ideas and grow with the university and the students. Secondly, they should understand that people learn their whole life and making mistakes is just a necessary precondition for that. Here, the teachers should partly be the ones who help to find right answers by giving gripping lectures and sharing important knowledge. (Full-time student)

Many students pointed out specific personality traits that they associate with university teachers. Above all, these positive traits emphasise communication and collaboration. That is, a university teacher should be cheerful, positive, friendly, helpful, flexible and open-minded. In addition, a large number of students stressed good sense of humour, used skilfully.

3.4 Differences in the expectations of full-time and part-time students

The results of the analysis showed that academic expectations dominated in the answers of full-time students. Although discipline-specific knowledge of university teachers was equally important for the students in both modes of study, full-time students were more specific in their answers about the expectations for teaching methods used at university. Many students who entered part-time studies may already have had experience of university studies and knowledge of academic context and teaching methods; thus, teaching methods may have been of secondary importance for them. However, a considerable number of first-time students emphasised that they do not have any specific expectations about academic side of studies, because they do not have experience of university studies. At the same time, the part-time students who had previous university experience were open to everything new. Part-time students emphasised more than full-time students that they expect the teacher to know how to direct the learning process. The students in both modes of study expected professional and practical knowledge from inspiring and motivating teachers, whereas the students in part-time mode laid special emphasis on interesting and engaging assignments.

Even though the number of students in the two subgroups of the sample were different (full-time studies 91 and part-time studies 79), the analysis revealed that the greatest difference was in the category of social expectations. If the full-time students expected the university teachers to be understanding and humane, then part-time students assumed a collaboration with the teachers on
equal terms, as for the part-time students, learning was a mutual and egalitarian activity which presupposed communication.

As to personal expectations, the full-time students expected most frequently humane attitude and communication, whereas the expectations of part-time students were dominated by specific roles associated with university teachers. The analysis of the role expectations of the students in the two modes of study revealed that full-time students expect university teachers to be above all role models, while part-time students assumed that the teachers should be first and foremost motivators.

Nevertheless, the students in both modes of study had similar expectations about teachers' personality traits: they wanted the university teachers to be open-minded, cheerful, accommodating, helpful and with a good sense of humour. Still, full-time students mentioned more often traits such as humanity, benevolence, friendliness, common sense, willingness to cooperate, and fairness. Part-time students, on the other hand, expected the teachers to be motivating, flexible, supportive, positive and able to engage students.

It is clear that changes in society and education system are reflected in students' backgrounds; student body has diversified and students' expectations about university studies depend on cultural background, gender, age, university, and study habits ([2];[4]). Based on the results of the present study, it can be concluded that students' expectations for the learning process depend also on the mode of study (full-time or part-time studies) and subject area (for instance, humanities versus sciences). Moreover, this study confirmed the findings of previous studies which argued that students' expectations are dependent on specific context (linguistic background, learners' age differences) and prior learning and university experience ([1]; [17]).

4 CONCLUSIONS

Academic performance depends on the environment and being aware of students' expectations enables the university staff to support students in adapting to university studies. Also several other studies have stressed the importance of collaboration and discussion between students and university teachers for students' adaptation to studies and their study motivation ([14]). The salience of personal and social expectations in the university context, indicated by prior studies and confirmed also by the present study, demonstrates the importance of qualitative research.

In addition, these results highlight a more general contradiction in how education is organised. Universities continue to reduce the number of face-to-face classes, adopt e-learning and implement resource-intensive e-learning systems. However, the findings of this study show that the students, on the contrary to changes introduced, expect teachers' verbal support during the studies and an approach to learning process which is based on immediate communication. Although the sample consisted of first-year students whose adaptation period and need for support has to be taken into account, the results suggest that the students preferred communication, face-to-face classes and personal and emotional collaboration. Moreover, students' explicit wishes for communication express the expectation that the teacher would give immediate feedback to their studies. The results of the analysis, and differences in the types of universities and samples confirm that students' expectations for the learning process are influenced both by the type of university as well as the mode of study ([4]). In addition, based on these findings, it can be claimed that students' expectations are influenced by the subject-area, as the samples of the two studies conducted in Estonia consisted of students of different subject-areas.

One of the limitations of the present study is its sample, in particular the subject-area studied by the participants (educational sciences), and uneven distribution of participants by gender (86,5% being female students ja 13,5% being male students). Therefore, the results cannot be generalised to the students of all subject-areas and this study aims to be descriptive.

The large proportion of female students can be explained by the characteristics of the sample: the sample consisted of the students of educational sciences and in Estonia, mostly women prefer to study this subject-area. In this respect, the results of the study are also valuable for popularising educational sciences, as they may provide a basis for generating ideas on how to develop and introduce study programmes of educational sciences. The focus of further research on students' expectations and adaptation to university studies could be on the students of different subject-areas: it should be analysed separately what the students of humanities, sciences, social sciences, digital technologies and education expect and how they adapt to university studies. Moreover, focusing on
the expectations of students of one particular subject-area or study programme could give additional input for curriculum development and course programmes.

The changeable nature of students' expectations provides a good reason to conduct longitudinal studies, in which the expectations of students in one or the other study programme or subject-area is analysed in a longer period of time. Another relevant research direction is investigating the expectations and attitudes of students in different countries (different educational systems), as such studies would provide a point of comparison and give feedback to local as well as international educational policy decision. International studies and their results would also be relevant to international joint study programmes.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author expresses her gratitude to all the students who entered the Tallinn University School of Educational Sciences in 2017 and gave the permission to use their inspiring essays.

REFERENCES


