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Reflections on welcome and induction: exploring the sources of students' expectations and anticipations about university

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses different sources of students' expectations of university, beginning with a thematic analysis of 21 semi-structured interviews with a diverse set of students at a UK University. We find that students draw on several different sources to develop their ideas of what university will be like; some of these sources are trusted more than others, and some present a more realistic view. The broader challenge of independence emerges as a contributory factor in students' sense of successful transition to university, mediated by different types of socio-cultural capital. We draw upon Ulriksen's distinction between 'expectations' and 'anticipations', as one that illuminates how much influence universities can realistically have in shaping prospective students' ideas about university life. We show that universities must be open and realistic in the information and support they offer to incoming students, in order to help students form expectations of university life that are accurate and more likely to be met. Universities are also likely to benefit from understanding individual students' expectations better, via personalised support.

Introduction

To achieve their overriding ambition of transformative higher education, universities must understand the nature of students' transition to university, where students learn and adapt to become university students. However, because it often entails moving home and living independently, this transition potentially has many more facets than previous transitions students have experienced. Moreover, transitions are complex and multiply determined, vary tremendously from student to student (Jindal-Snape and Rienties 2016), and may be rhizomatic, non-linear and uncertain, with no pre-determined endpoints or metrics for achievement (Gale and Parker 2014).

One driver of successful transition is individual students' prior beliefs about the university experience. Ulriksen (2009, 520) distinguishes between 'expectations' – things they expect to happen, or be done – and 'anticipations' – what students imagine university will be like and how they will feel. However, successful transition is also affected by universities' own expectations of their students. Where mismatch occurs between student and institutional expectations, for instance about workload or personal tutoring (Walsh, Larsen, and Parry 2009), the student can experience disappointment and demotivation that leads to exit (Tinto 1987; Lowe and Cook 2003), so aligning

expectations of students and universities could be an important determinant of retention; for under-represented students, their socio-cultural capital might affect how they resolve any disappointment.

Much is understood about students' expectations, but less is known about their sources, other than understanding that sources of expectations vary, and that different students use different information channels in different ways (McGrath and Rogers 2021). Thus, in this paper, we use thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) to explore the following research questions:

1) do different sources play different roles in forming expectations?
2) do the dynamics of forming expectations differ for students from different backgrounds?
3) does Ulriksen's distinction between 'expectation' and 'anticipation' illuminate the issue?

The paper begins by outlining the literature on expectations, the moves to explain both the context and details of the study. We then outline the key themes of the *challenge of independence*, the *various sources of expectations*, and the role of *socio-cultural capital*. We go on to consider 'expectations' versus 'anticipations', and finish with a discussion of the consequences of our findings for universities.

Expectations

Student expectations are a crucial factor in student experience and success (Lowe and Cook 2003), and fulfilled expectations of a good experience create a positive feedback loop in which students feel more confident and experience greater belonging, and a successful welcome and induction. But expectations can be unmet or mismatched (Hassel and Ridout 2018) and confounded expectations can lead to feelings of disappointment, demotivation, and exit (Tinto 1987 et passim). Kane, Chalcraft, and Volpe (2014) suggest that expectations-mismatch affects belonging, an effect amplified by peer interactions with other students who also feel disappointed.

Expectations can be mismatched in various ways. Universities might place high expectations of academic literacy on first-year students that do not match those students' prior learning (Scouller et al. 2008). Students might underestimate workload, or might be accustomed to closer direction, where university staff might over-estimate students' time management skills (van der Meer, Jansen, and Torenbeek 2010). Holmegaard, Madsen, and Ulriksen (2016) suggest that a mismatch might reflect the gap between the student and ideas of what the academic subject entails. Williamson et al. (2011) report that expectations of staff and students about the type of learning that is possible at different levels – for instance, that deep learning may only be possible in the final year of under-graduate study – lead to mismatch, disappointment in staff, and feelings of inadequacy among students. These feelings are reinforced by students' experience that behaviours that are routinely rewarded at school are not rewarded at university. Previous studies highlight unmet expectations about personal tutoring, which students regard as crucial (Walsh, Larsen, and Parry 2009; Hamshire et al. 2017), and more broadly the nature and amount of contact with academic staff and peers (Williams, Hin, and Erlina 2019). These unmet expectations can consequently impede identity formation (Baxter 2012).

Consequently, universities ought to ensure students' expectations are accurate (Thurber and Walton 2012). Whilst an organisational culture can create aspirational expectations, this needs to be communicated realistically (Crozier and Reay 2011) and consistently (Goldring et al. 2018). Nonetheless, literature suggests universities often err here, for instance in contribute to the creation of unmet expectations, for example by using open days and campus visits to show students only the most appealing examples of physical spaces, such as Halls of Residence that are modern and close to campus (Dixon and Durrheim 2004.) It might be more constructive to match expectations by adjusting both sides, rather than solely requiring adaptation by students to institutional norms (Gale and Parker 2014).

Crucially, expectations must come from different sources, mostly independent of universities' direct influence. Holmegaard, Madsen, and Ulriksen (2016) note that prior educational

experience grounds student expectations of engineering programmes, with pupils leaving school aware that engineering is practical, useful, problem-based, and authentic (p. 159). Other students' individual expectations are influenced by information they acquire from websites and professional literature (Hamshire et al. 2017) or social media (DeAndrea et al. 2012). Smith (2017) and Yale (2017) both emphasise the role played by pre-entry activities, such as open days, in addressing expectations and easing transition, with sibling or family educational experiences also contributing to expectations (Yale 2017). Indeed, this final influence may be significant, as students from different backgrounds may have qualitatively distinct expectations sources, some which may be more reliable than others. For instance, students who are first in family to attend university may not have ready access to direct family and peer experience of higher education.

Indeed, there are specific examples of mismatched expectations for specific cohorts. Campbell et al. (2019) show a clear mismatch for distance learners who might see tutors as individuals who deliver information, rather than facilitators of learning. Students who have left the site of their compulsory education to attend a new institution (in the UK, 'sixth form colleges') show greater independence and may be better equipped than those from schools, as their expectations and experiences are better formed (Money et al. 2017). According to Cahill, Bowyer, and Murray (2014) half of students surveyed at a mid-ranking UK university found study harder than expected, whereas the clarity of what to expect was considered very important to students at a post-92 UK university (Leese 2010); these universities are currently more likely to offer places to under-represented students. Roberts' (2011) focus groups suggested that non-privileged students' expectations of university differ considerably from the reality, reflecting differences in academic literacy (Gravett and Kinchin 2021).

The above suggests that addressing mismatches between student and institutional expectations is a key aspect of widening student success and closing awarding gaps (Luck 2010). As Pather and Dorasamay (2018, 60) say, 'Student success is a product of an environment that supports students' expectations of university', suggesting considerable benefit could be gained by interrogating and understanding the expectations of students, institutions, and individual members of staff. This is a challenge, given that expectations may be tacit and are unlikely to be homogeneous. Further, despite their role in affecting retention, there is relatively little literature on how students' expectations are derived, and this might be useful exploration in relation to developing belonging and community.

The study

Background

For context, we must explain the origin of the study. The project took place at a research-intensive UK university with over 30,000 students that offers a suite of academic and vocational disciplines via traditional means, well-established experiential learning schemes via industrial placements, and a substantial distance learning offer. Roughly three quarters of the students are UK undergraduates, with the 'average' student being white (77%) and middle class. Most achieved high entry qualifications, usually measured as performance on nationally administered assessments on three or four specialist subjects (called 'A-levels' in the UK). Recently, the University's access and student success strategy has sought to diversify its cohort, including recruiting more students from under-represented groups, including those whose post-compulsory education was vocational, but University data shows gaps in progression and award for under-represented students. Some areas of the university had relatively high rates of non-retention, and the university believed that these outcomes could be symptoms of how students felt on arrival.

The university commissioned the ELIXIR (Exploring Links between Induction, Exit and Retention) project to explore students' experience of current welcome and induction practices, with an explicit

concern that 'traditional' welcome programmes assume all students have near-identical backgrounds, social capital, and social habits, meaning *inter alia* that key aspects of the hidden curriculum (Margolis 2001) or implied student (Ulriksen 2009) remain undisclosed; potentially non-inclusive social activities persist, and assumptions prevail about the standard and nature of students' study skills.

One element of the project was to interview students from diverse backgrounds about their experience of welcome, exploring whether different contexts lead to individual outcomes. To this end, the semi-structured interviews ask a range of questions about students' experience of welcome, rather than solely about expectations; one of our assumptions from the literature, was that expectations play an important role in welcome.

Findings from the ELIXIR project now form the basis of the institution-wide approach at the university (Peasland, Tallontire, and Mearman 2022).

Data collection

The literature on expectations displays considerable methodological variation, including large-scale questionnaires (Williams, Hin, and Erlina 2019; Pather and Dorasamay 2018), qualitative surveys (Goldring et al. 2018), focus groups (Goldring et al. 2018; Yale 2017), and mixed methods approaches (van der Meer, Jansen, and Torenbeek 2010). We follow others that have adopted qualitative interviews (Campbell et al. 2019), specifically semi-structured interviews, because of their potential to uncover hidden or unexpected themes, not least by allowing interviewees to express matters in their own terms.

Participant selection and information

Our interview data sample is informed by the wider objectives of the ELIXIR project. Most study participants had been at [University] for 8–10 weeks, but they were specifically asked to reflect on how they felt when they first arrived. We chose two schools and one faculty within the University that had different retention rates, hoping to identify areas of good practice and scope for improvement. Participant interviews were conducted to gather narratives of what worked well and what did not. The academic units provided student lists and encouraged uptake, but nothing more.

Initial invitations to interview were often not accepted, so we worked down the student list, meaning our sample became one of convenience, and one that might have attracted only the most engaged students. As the project progressed, we also interviewed students from outside the target academic units, enabling us to interview international, commuter and non-traditional access route students, as identified by the university's engagement team. This group was important because students self-identified as belonging to under-represented socio-economic groups less typical of a high-ranking research-intensive University. By diversifying our sample our data became richer, rather than only reflecting the voice of the 'average' student.

A summary of the demographics of our sample is shown in Table 1. All participants are undergraduates, with 16 of them first years, although three had attended a previous year. 12 of 21 participants entered via the traditional UK A level route, three via UK vocational qualifications and six via international qualifications. Three described themselves as mature (over 21), three declared a disability. Three were commuters and the vast majority were residents in local accommodation. 13 were living away from home for the first time, and six were in the first generation of their family to attend university.

Interview schedule and process

The interview questions (see Table 2) reflect the broad objectives of the ELIXIR project, offering insight across various aspects of student experience, and includes a preliminary question about how each participant felt at the time of their interview.

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Participant	Residence	Route into university	Did you know anyone at [University] before you arrived?	Do you declare a disability of any kind?	Are you regarded as a mature student (21 or over)?	Have other members of your family been to university or do you have family members currently on a course at any university?	Is this your first time living away from home?
Olga	Residential	International	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
Cameron	Residential	UKAL	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Rob	Residential	UKAL	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Charlie	Residential	UKAL	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Sofia	Residential	International*	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Sarah	Residential	UKAL	Yes	No	No	No	Yes
Tom	Residential	UKAL	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Olivia	Residential	International	Yes	No	No	No	Yes
Erin	Residential	UKAL	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Becky	Residential	UKAL	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Will	Residential	UKAL	No	No	No	No	Yes
Megan	Commuter	UKAL	Yes	No	No	Yes	Living at home
Harriet	Residential	UKAL*	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Nicole	Residential	International	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
Luke	Residential	UKAL*	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
David	Residential	UKAL	No	No	No	No	No
Marie	Residential	International	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Hannah	Commuter	UKVC	Yes	No	No	No	Living at home
Eva	Residential	International	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No
Mo	Commuter	UKVC	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Patrick	Residential	UKVC	No	Yes	No	No	Yes

UKAL: student took UK A-level* also had foundational year.
UKVC: student took UK Vocational Qualification before coming to university.

Table 2. Interview schedule.

Preliminary question: Can you suggest 5 words that best describe how you feel now you've been at Leeds [University] for [however many] weeks?

(1) **Can you describe what you expected university life to be like before you arrived?**
(2) How would you describe your feelings on Day One?
(3) **Did you know what to expect in relation to teaching sessions such as lectures and seminars?**
(4) Have you changed your study habits/locations since you started at Leeds [University]?
(5) What have you found most challenging since starting at Leeds [University]?
(6) How helpful did you find the topics covered in the Subject Area Inductions in Week One?
(7) **Did you have any concerns about joining us at Leeds [University] before you arrived?**
(8) **Did your friends, family and teachers provide you with guidance and suggestions for joining the university?**
(9) Do you feel you have a sense of shared identity with other Leeds [University] students?
(10) Is there any key support or guidance you feel we could have provided, but didn't?

The literature above suggests that students who experience transition negatively are less likely to continue at university (Tinto 1987). Students' actual experiences (questions 2, 5, 6, 10) confront their expectations (questions 1, 3, 7 and 8) (Hassel and Ridout 2018). These expectations can be confirmed or confounded, creating a reaction in terms of and behaviours (4), and a state of feeling happy or that they belong – or not (9, Preliminary) (Kane, Chalcraft, and Volpe 2014). However, responses to the individual elements reflected in our questions vary between students (Roberts 2011).

For this paper, the most pertinent questions are 1, 3, 7, and 8, which relate directly to expectations. Question 8 is key, being about sources of expectations. Again, we postulated that several factors affect the type and source of expectations, and influence which expectations

subsequently affect students' ability to adapt and to belong, and that these vary across students' backgrounds.

Some methodological notes are pertinent here. Interviews were semi-structured, giving the researchers licence to explore participants' answers, so questions that appear binary were in fact not. Interviews were conducted by the authors, neither of whom teach any of the participants, but the possibility remained that participants might avoid being critical of the university, overstate their disquiet to try to achieve change or – for reasons of social desirability bias – wish to appear more settled. In our data, participants were critical and admitted to feeling – at least initially – lost. We accepted all responses as authentic.

False or rational reconstruction of events may occur, but participants' memories of this time will be reliable because of its substantial emotional content (Cavigioli 2019). The questions are shown in a strict order, but interviewers moved away from this, thereby reducing consistency between interviews but also reducing question order effects.

Data analysis

Our analysis strategy flexibly exploits the advantages of *thematic analysis* as a flexible qualitative 'method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data' (Braun and Clarke 2006, 79). Our work conforms broadly to Braun and Clarke's six-stage process, although for us the data familiarisation stage proved most significant. The researchers took notes at each interview and mapped them against the interview questions, necessary because we were flexible about question order and because participants' responses often referred backwards or forward to other questions. The interview recordings and notes were then cross-checked with the other researcher. From this process emerged strong candidate codes and themes, which were confirmed in the formal coding of AI-generated transcripts verified by the researchers.

Thematic analysis is consistent with several methodological frameworks and approaches to coding (Clarke, Braun, and Hayfield 2015), and we adopted a flexible approach to coding, sometimes using pre-existing terms from the literature, but also employing the language used by participants. For example, references by interviewees to 'independent study' were combined with concerns expressed about life organisation issues such as budgeting and cooking; this generated the single thematic code *independence*. From here, we defined the theme of *the challenge of independence*, as a multi-faceted obstacle faced by all students, albeit in different ways. Similarly, different sources that involved reliability were coded and collated into a theme of trusted sources. References to the benefits of friendship or family groups, and to other network memberships, were coded and grouped into a theme of socio-cultural capital as something that affects how students use information to form and respond to expectations.

Findings

The challenge of independence

Our interviews reaffirmed that new students to university struggle with the challenges of managing their *lives*, often without support that had previously been there. Whilst our participants reported having adapted to these challenges, this had taken time and emotional effort. Several participants spoke of reaching an equilibrium or settling down after a frantic opening period (Cameron, Rob, Charlie, Sofia, Sarah, Olivia and Becky). This initial period is one of experimentation and adaptation, for instance in 'adapt[ing] my ways of studying to the new environment' and is characterised by having less emphasis on learning (Olga).

Participants reported, for instance, trying different libraries (Olga), different workspaces (Olga, Becky), different work patterns via structured work plans (Olga), new note collection strategies (Rob), working out how to use lecture recordings (Tom), sitting at the front of lectures to avoid getting

distracted (Luke) and supplementing PowerPoint notes (Becky). Crucially, this experimentation is not merely academic. Cameron spoke of 'Mixing the responsibilities of financial life, domestic life, cooking for yourself, cleaning for yourself'. Rob now works less at home because they must cook dinner. For Becky, tellingly, what they found most challenging in a less structured environment was managing day to day life:

> I think, like, making a routine. I don't really have a routine right now and everything's a bit [laughs] all over the place. I don't know if it's just that I miss the 9-to-5 school week routine.

An important element of addressing the challenge of independence is disappointed expectations. It may be that participants had formed inaccurate expectations; or they had only partially formed expectations, for instance about the realities of needing to cook dinner. Participants had only weak notions of what independent study really means.

Various sources of expectations, trusted variously

We identified five sources of participants' expectations: universities, previous educational experience, parents and caregivers, siblings, and wider cultural factors. All our participants cited at least two of the five sources we have identified. We consider each in turn.

Universities

Several participants cited open or visit days as helpful in forging expectations, and specifically in giving them a taster of the university academic experience (Smith 2017). Will visited the university three times. Olga had a personal open day arranged for them, sealing their choice. Charlie had attended workshops at the university. These helped the student form a positive view of university and helped reduced 'acculturation stress' (Thurber and Walton 2012).

Terminology used by the university led to confusion, and large group encounters were a common concern. Becky had missed the open days and felt less confident than others about what to expect in a lecture, seminar or workshop; lectures are an unfamiliar environment even to those attending large pre-university colleges.

Some participants (Olga, Will, Patrick) said their choice of university and their expectations had been affected by reputation, sometimes from looking at national rankings, but that the effect of these is double-edged – creating excitement but reinforcing a sense of disappointment if expectations are not met, as demonstrated by Patrick's view that university is:

> actually a lot different than what I [expected] because the videos and everything made it seem like it was all very sunshine. I thought it would be better than . . . what it is." However, they recognised that "with the modules does obviously you have to trump it up because otherwise people wouldn't go for it.

Patrick is highlighting the tension for universities between creating realistic expectations for students and appearing attractive ('trumping up') in the competition for students. Students understand this and somehow discount the information they receive, as Patrick showed, but they could still be disappointed.

Previous educational experiences

Participants were engaged in a continuous evaluation of university, with school or college as a reference point (as in Holmegaard, Madsen, and Ulriksen 2016). For Will, the large, anonymising lecture was quintessential and immutable, something to be adapted to:

> I would say it's very different to like being at school as you're a bit of a nobody . . . I used to sit in a group of like six or seven people for every class. There's now like you sitting in the theatre of 200 . . .

In contrast, Rob commented that university 'felt like school, so felt familiar' and that university teaching staff reminded them of school staff. Tutorials feel comfortable, as they 'are exactly what

I expected. They're the same as school' (Luke). Mo reported being reassured by a tutor that 'you'll have your lectures but then you'll have the seminars, which are more like college'. Similarly, some respondents stated that the academic level is not as high as they expected (Rob, Charlie, Sofia). Sarah said they faced 'some challenging content but felt well supported'. Some participants expressed disappointment about the level of support they receive, feeling it is less easy to get help than at school or college (Olga, Patrick). Some elements of academic life were surprising or disappointing; our participants preferred interactive seminars because they were more like their experience of 16–18 education.

Our participants did not necessarily feel well supported by their prior institutions in terms of expectations about university, and school was not regarded as a reliable source of information (cf. Money et al. 2017). Schools sometimes held university discussion events for parents (Cameron, Tom, Megan, Nicole, Luke), and one participant (Nicole) reported receiving advice on budgeting, but others said they received no help with their transition to university. No one told them how to be an independent learner. Several participants reported that their schools helped with university applications, but nothing more. Starkly, when asked if their school helped them prepare for university, Olivia replied 'I don't think [their school] cared [about their experience at university] to be honest. They just cared about the exam and after the exam, that's it'.

Parents and caregivers

In our interviews, parents are not important *direct* sources of guidance about university except on life skills such as cooking and budgeting, and in providing support. In cases where this was missing (e.g. Sofia) it was noticeable, suggesting parental *encouragement* plays an important role. Will felt comfortable in her choice of the University partly because 'My mum said the same thing because like, "I can really see you being here"'. Olga's mother advised them: 'Don't waste [your] time on things that aren't important'. Tom father dropped out of university and their regrets created a drive for the participant to succeed; while their parents assured them that 'it's the most fun you'll have and you don't want to miss it', Tom said they understood now that university is:

> more serious now than how she portrayed it to be because she said that … I don't know she definitely made it sound like she really didn't do very much during first year specifically …

Thus, parents' direct advice was not cited by our participants as important, a finding that applied across the different participant backgrounds (cf. Ball and Vincent 1998). It remains possible that parental advice is used *indirectly* by students, perhaps in knowledge accumulated from repeated enculturation – something that would advantage students from more privileged backgrounds (McGrath and Rogers 2021) – however, we have no evidence to support that.

Siblings and peers

Siblings and peers – particularly those who have passed through university recently – appear to be trusted much more to give practical advice on study and on negotiating university. As Cameron put it, 'I could see my friends being the Guinea pigs going through it'. Erin arranged arrange to meet older peers at open days and some others felt they would have benefited from talking to older current students (Olga, Rob, Eva), especially about assessment (Harriet). Sofia had consulted friends about studying abroad and reported their expectations were realistic.

Peers are trusted but did not necessarily create accurate expectations. For some participants, peers (Sarah) or graduates (Harriet) reinforced unhelpful clichés of university as 'the best days of your life', which creates a pressure of expectation. As Cameron put it, 'people would kind of big it up as the best time of your life and everything after isn't as good which seems quite unhealthy'. Others had been anxious about party culture and the social pressure to conform (Nicole:) one had heard of a 'party city with lots of drugs' (Rob) and worried about needing to resist this.

Wider cultural influences

Olivia explained that movies and TV shows can affect expectations, influencing students' prior view of what specific things such as lectures are like. This can be productive, for instance by suggesting that taking a laptop into lectures can be helpful for notetaking. Harriet seemed comforted that her expectation of large lectures from watching overseas TV shows was accurate. Luke also said these cultural influences can create concerns, as a recurrent theme is the stereotypical debauchery of the frat party. They expressed an explicit concern about this image and were relieved to find that opportunities for socialising were more diverse. This source of expectations can be captured by Becky's statement that they 'knew what to expect [because they] watch Fresh Meat', a UK TV programme offering a view of student experience that is characterised by hedonism, insecurity, difficulties with relationship-building and workload stress.

Socio-cultural capital

All the sources of expectations being discussed are aspects of students' socio-cultural capital, and one might expect sources of students' expectations to differ according to their backgrounds. Mature students, in particular, are likely to draw information from different places.

McGrath and Rogers (2021) posited that advantaged students would have repeatedly received messages about the university experience and therefore make more use of, particularly, league tables when choosing which university to attend, where less advantaged students resorted to asking their friends. Our data show that participants who appeared to come from advantaged backgrounds – such as family heritage of university, private school, taking gap years – reported using family and contacts when making their choice and forming expectations.

Our data partly support the view that socio-cultural capital affects the quality and authenticity of students' expectations, but this did not run through the channels of prior educational experiences, which our data suggests were unreliable and not linked to type of educational institution. Local sixth form colleges sometimes provided excellent advice (Megan), whereas private schools sometimes did not (Luke).

When seeking input from peers a marked difference emerges between those with differing levels of socio-cultural capital, and participants with better relevant networks (friends or siblings at similar universities) had access to better information. Those with less relevant socio-cultural capital turned to other sources. The participants who reported doing the most research into their choice both reported being less privileged. One (Will) reported they attended three open days – with their mother as supporter. Another (Patrick) researched the universities via their websites.

Importantly, there is interaction between sources of expectations, broader socio-cultural capital and how participants reported responding to their actual experiences of university. Prior experience quickly becomes irrelevant for those who settle, but those who do not, refer to school or college and draw invidious distinctions. In our sample, this happened more for those who self-identified as being from less privileged backgrounds. The two participants who took a 'gap year' felt better prepared, and Eva was older and had some travelling and work experience, so felt more confident; all three expressed concern about suffering a learning gap or having got out of study habits. Participants who were members of a degree apprenticeship scheme seemed to have extra confidence, along with the ability to adapt or try something new.

Participants on a university access scheme that aims to support under-represented groups felt more anxious and lacked confidence, particularly about their academic standard, and expressed doubts about continuing. In terms of expectations and anticipations, the mechanisms are unclear. We suggest these participants might have had doubts about coming, envisaged succeeding nonetheless, and were then disappointed by what they experienced. Their interactions with peers reinforced this feeling, leading to anomie. It was quite telling that Patrick made repeated contrasts with their pre-university college experience but also with peers at lower-ranked universities. This participant did not regard themselves as a typical student, 'one who wears wide leg jean pants and

a turtle neck'. It is worth noting that (as for Yale 2017) Patrick felt misled by the university's marketing in terms of support, suggesting a confoundment of expectations alongside a feeling of being unsupported (as in Crozier and Reay 2011).

However, two exceptions to this general finding are important. First, whilst mature students did express frustration at sometimes finding it hard to relate to younger students (Mo), they also were able to fall back on prior experience and to recognise they had little desire to act like new students. Second, commuter students, drawing on pre-existing socio-cultural capital, were more able to focus on academic matters, as socialising at university was not necessary. As Megan reported:

> Yeah, I feel like I'm fine here. But if I meet more people, I'm not gonna say no to them, happily talk to other people and get to know more people. I feel like I'm fine with the social group I've got right now.

Remaining embedded and interacting regularly in their home social groups, Megan had formed fewer expectations about university social life and could focus on adapting their study habits, apparently more easily than most of the residential students in our dataset.

Discussion

Our evidence so far supports findings in earlier literature that expectations are formed via multiple sources – principally universities and prior educational experiences – but we find these sources are trusted to different extents. Peers were perhaps most trusted as a source of information, but even they could contribute to formation of misleading expectations. We also found that students face a challenge of independence, partly shaped by their expectations of independent life and study, and we suggest that socio-cultural capital affects both students' sources of expectation, and their reaction to disappointment.

Our third research question relates to the analytical distinction between expectation and anticipation, initially made by Lars Ulriksen (2009) and elaborated in private correspondence that took place after our project had ended. The distinction is an interesting one between the *expectation* of something that has been alluded to, or promised, and an *anticipation* that is based on something that has been envisaged, rather than stated. There might, for example, be an expectation of a programme that comes from the programme catalogue, but there might also be an expectation of how a student will perform, given their previous educational achievements. Similarly, there might be some anticipation of the social aspects of university life that is based on a combination of the individual's own imaginings (perhaps akin to 'imagined worlds'; Baker et al. 2021) and any advice or information they have gleaned. This means that an anticipation is not something the individual has simply conjured, more that it is something that is influenced by narratives they encounter. In this distinction, expectations might be regarded as more concrete than anticipations, suggesting that managing a person's anticipations will be a more abstract proposal than managing their expectations.

This distinction feels relevant to the way universities might shape future practice in relation to student experience, in that it provides a clear framework of things universities can directly address and those that are more elusive and likely to differ from student to student. It also helps to explain students' reaction to being at university during the Covid-19 pandemic: students were still provided with teaching, learning and assessment opportunities, often via enhanced digital provision, thus meeting their concrete expectations. Nevertheless, their anticipations of university were substantially disappointed. The lecture is one example of a symbolic aspect of university life that is portrayed in films and TV. Lectures are part of the imagined experience, and lack of in-person teaching during COVID left some students feeling under-prepared or experiencing imposter syndrome (Pownall, Harris, and Birtill 2021).

Non-realisation of expectations and anticipations matters to students and to universities. As in Holmegaard, Madsen, and Ulriksen (2016), mismatched expectations can lead to feelings of disappointment, which can interact negatively with pre-existing senses of belonging and identity. For

some participants, this led to an unhappy transition. Similarly, for a student who already feels a sense of anomie, a welcome and induction period that confirms their worst fears will increase the likelihood of their leaving university or underperforming (Ning, Kruchen, and Cyr 2021). The interaction between pre-existing feelings and new expectations can be positive, as where participants are pleasantly surprised that they can achieve the academic level, make friends, fulfil themselves, and belong.

It makes sense to calibrate student expectations with the reality of university life where possible, either by adjusting their expectations, changing the reality, or both. The extent to which universities can influence expectations is limited, but schools and universities can adjust their own messaging around *expectations*, and they can engage with prospective students in ways that help them accurately envisage university life.

Sources of *anticipations* are of differing proximity to the student, ranging from the immediate influence of parents and peers perpetuating ideas of university as 'the best days of your life', to the more remote effect of wider culture and media. This constitutes a real challenge to universities seeking to minimise mismatch of expectations between them and their students. First, universities will find it difficult to manage student anticipations, because their own messages may be drowned out. Second, in our data, students expressed the most disappointment (and relief) related to anticipations – a feeling of being supported, the level of interaction with teachers and peers, the intellectual stimulation of their studies, the possibilities for making friends, the feeling of living in shared accommodation. Third, a well-intentioned university would sensibly try to understand their students' anticipations, but this is no small task, not least because these anticipations may be highly individual.

We speculate, with caution, on reliable ways in which expectations and anticipations can be better aligned. Promoting university as being like school – as some of our respondents reported – is disingenuous. Whilst prior educational experience can be useful, it also creates an anchor for expectations and anticipations that are often inaccurate and can lead to disappointment (as in Holmegaard, Madsen, and Ulriksen 2016). There are certainly ways this might be addressed. Sample lectures that simulate the experience of walking into a large theatre, finding a seat, settling in, and listening for a sustained period, might help to demystify the lecture, for example, and perhaps universities need to explain the process of the lecture in their welcome activities. It also appears to be crucial that universities, particularly through marketing functions, avoid creating misleading expectations of how much support students are offered.

Our participants trusted their peers more than other sources, but we found the advice participants received from peers was often unhelpful. Universities are limited in how much they can affect these peer interactions, but by creating student ambassador or mentoring schemes, or establishing strong links with feeder schools, universities can attempt to shape the messages students receive. This could also be achieved via early meetings with personal tutors, something that participants in our interviews reported was reassuring. This is particularly important for students from minority groups, who might not find they are comfortable within the educational and social norms of university.

Conclusions

In this paper we explored student expectations via data from semi-structured interviews, analysed thematically. We aimed to answer three research questions: 1) do different sources play different roles in forming expectations; 2) do the dynamics of forming expectations differ for students from different backgrounds; 3) does Ulriksen's distinction between 'expectation' and 'anticipation' illuminate the issue? Our tentative findings are that students do exploit multiple sources of expectation, beyond merely their prior experiences; however, these sources are trusted to varying degrees by students. Anticipations of how university will feel seem to outweigh their expectations of what will

happen. These then play different roles for different students. Hence, socio-cultural capital plays an important mediating role in the process of expectation and reaction to disappointment.

The exploratory nature of the study means we draw conclusions only cautiously; nonetheless, we argue our findings do have implications for university practice. First, they must acknowledge the importance of expectation and anticipation alignment (or mismatch) to students' sense of belonging. Universities must understand the complexity of expectation and anticipation formation, and acknowledge they are but one of many sources students turn to. Universities might then respond to this in terms of helping students achieve a realistic view of what university entails, and they; are encouraged to focus on calibrating student expectations with the reality of university, thereby reducing the mismatch that is known to lead to attrition and under-performance. For example, whilst in marketing terms universities might be tempted to showcase their best accommodation, if this is unrepresentative, students' expectations and anticipations of their experience in this crucial dimension of their transition will be disappointed, reducing belonging and encouraging exit. Treating transition as a longer process (as Briggs, Clark, and Hall 2012 recommend), allows time for expectations to adjust, and universities may consider conforming to the realities of students' lives, rather than expecting students to adjust to institutional norms (Gale and Parker 2014).

More precisely, future research might aim to create a detailed exploration of multiple sources of expectation, so that universities – as far as they can – are able to discuss them with prospective students. It is crucial that universities recognise that individual students have different expectations, and we would suggest that one way to support induction processes is for universities to build deeper personal relationships with students so they can understand individual expectations and counsel students about the diverse reality of university. Importantly, universities would need to be very clear about how to support students if their expectations are disappointed. This close relationship with students would seem to fit the aims of current models of personal tutoring, and these might need to be extended into the weeks before students arrive at university.

This more tailored approach to individual students does of course entail additional resource, but the benefits are likely to outweigh the costs. In this more personalised approach, universities might be able to better understand the imagined experience of university that each student brings with them. Our reading of our participants was that failing to understand and meet these anticipations might be more important to students than any details they receive about modules, programmes, and teaching timetables.

Disclosure statement

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