

Student Expectations and Worries at the Beginning of the studies

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Abstract

Autumn 2008 a total of 365 new students started their studies on 9 out of 37 degree programs of the Turku University of Applied Sciences. These programs represented five fields of study (engineering, natural sciences, business, culture and healthcare) and educate three different bachelor degrees (Engineering, Business Administration and Healthcare). We were interested in knowing their expectations and worries relating to the education they were about to begin.

The students were asked two questions after a general introduction of the University and its' operations during their first three days at the University. The questions were:

1. What are you expecting of the starting education?
2. What are you worried about relating your starting education at the moment?

The students answered on two separate papers with no other identification except their degree program.

The results show that students have very various expectations and worries relating their studies. Altogether nine categories of expectations and ten categories of worries were identified. Some of the expectations focused on the near future and others had a longer viewpoint. The worries given by the students were very real and they could certainly influence the performance of the students. The results of this study support the results of earlier studies focusing on student withdrawal, retention, attrition and dropouts too.

Our University received important and valuable information on students' expectations and worries. We have used this information in our tutoring, but we will use the results to improve our tutoring processes as well. Furthermore, these results made our personnel rethink the situation of new students and challenge them to improve their own performance.

Introduction

According to a recent OECD publication, about 27 percent of students enrolling to higher education institutes leave without a degree in Finland (OECD 2008). Basically, every fourth new student withdraws in Finnish HEIs and most often this happens during the first year. Especially the first weeks of study (Kerka 1995) and the first semester altogether are crucial to students' persistence until degree completion (Tinto 1988). These students are often called dropouts. OECD (2008) defines dropouts as students who leave the specified level without graduating from a first qualification at that level. In our University, this dropout rate would mean about 500 dropouts out of the 1830 new students enrolling every year. We think that this is quite much and therefore in the autumn of 2008 we wanted to learn what students are thinking at the beginning of their studies: what are they expecting of the education and what are they worrying about relating their starting education. Another motivation for our interest was the study reporting that if institutions want to seriously commit to student success, they pay particular attention to what goes on in the first year and especially, to the nature of the first weeks after enrollment (Yorke 2000).

We hoped that learning to know students better from the beginning might help us to improve our tutoring, guidance and marketing. In addition, we wanted to make the students feel home at our university and at the same time increase their commitment to the studies. Also, by learning the students, we might be able to decrease the risk of student

withdrawals. Tinto (1975) emphasizes exactly the same: one must know the expectational and motivational attributes of students. We might find out some of the typical risk factors affecting student withdrawal such as financial stability, living away from the family home, low motivation, work commitments and having no friends in the class at the start of studies (Smith and Beggs 2003). Other reported risk factors or barriers to academic plans are the difficulty of coursework and role conflicts for example (Fernandez, Trenor et al. 2008). Yet another study identified six main reasons for student withdrawal (Yorke 2000): 1) Poor quality of the student experience, 2) Inability to cope with the demands of the programme, 3) Unhappiness with the social environment, 4) Wrong choice of the programme, 5) Matters related to financial need and 6) Dissatisfaction with aspects of institutional provision. Schuetz (2008) lists three main factors that are typically correlated with student attrition: 1) Poor academic preparation, 2) Excessive work and family responsibilities and 3) Lack of engagement of commitment to educational objectives.

It is unlikely that we will ever be able to eliminate student dropout, because there will always be circumstances outside the control of our University such as the financial concerns of the students (Hall 2001). Still, we need to answer the expectations of the students and we should try to support students with their worries if possible. If after all the dropout rates stay high it might indicate that the education system is not meeting students' needs (OECD 2008). Kerka (1995) noticed the same: one cause for early withdrawal is a gap between learner expectations and reality. All the above makes it interesting to learn what expectations the new students have.

This paper is organized following. In next section different models and concepts relating students' movements (retention and attrition) are discussed. Then in the next section the empirical research is described. After that the results are introduced. Finally, the findings are discussed and conclusions are given.

Models of student movements

There are a number of models and researches over student retention and attrition (Tinto 1975; Bean 1980; Bean 1982; Cabrera, Nora et al. 1993; Forbes 2008). Retention and attrition are opposite concepts of the same phenomenon addressing student withdrawals and dropouts. Tinto's (1975) definition of attrition written by (Rivas, Sauer et al. 2008) is as a direct function of the fit between the student and the academic and social life of the institution. Another definition of attrition is leaving higher education before achieving one's educational objectives (Schuetz 2008). The many concepts that are often used when discussing about the same phenomenon are withdrawal, retention, attrition, dropouts, stopouts and persisters. However, these concepts are not synonyms for each other. Actually, HEIs should define the meaning of these concepts: all students who withdraw should not be classified as dropouts regardless of their reasons for doing so for example (Tinto 1994).

Tinto's model of Student Integration Model focuses on student's motivation, academic performance, academic integration and social integration (Tinto 1975). The Student Integration Model defines that student attrition decreases with student integration into the social activities and academic life of a university. Forbes (2008) introduced a new retention model based on the original Tinto's Student Integration Model. This new model adds new aspects called institutional habitus and environmental factors to the original model. Institutional habitus includes the values of the institute, the quality of teaching, the nature of learning and assessment practices, academic and personal support for the students and general friendliness and approachability of staff. Student's living arrangements, finances and hours of part-time employment belong to environmental factors. (Forbes 2008)

The Student Attrition Model focuses on behavioral intentions and financial factors in attrition (Bean 1980). Cabreda et al. (1993) have combined the elements of the Student Integration Model and the Student Attrition Model. Their model defines that student retention is affected by student background variables and endogenous factors such as academic integration, social integration, institutional commitment and academic performance (Cabrera, Nora et al. 1993). Bean (1982) presented a synthesized causal model of student attrition too. This model identifies four variable categories that have direct or indirect effects on intent to leave and finally to dropping out. The four variable categories in Bean's model were background, environmental, attitudinal and outcome variables (Bean 1982).

According to the Self-Determination Theory three basic needs have to be fulfilled to engage students more. These needs are senses of belonging, competence and autonomy. If these are not met, the engagement is less complete and questions like what and why arises among students. (Ryan and Deci 2000; Schuetz 2008) In another work by Tinto (1988) he uses Van Gennep's study on rites in tribal membership to describe students' stages to a committed degree student. He describes three stages: 1) Separation, 2) Transition and 3) Incorporation. The separation requires the student to disassociate themselves from the membership in the past communities such as the local high school and place of residence. In transition stage new students have to acquire the norms and patterns of behavior appropriate to integrate themselves in the new communities. Finally, in incorporation the student has to find and adopt norms appropriate to the new setting and establish competent membership in the social and intellectual communities of the university. HEIs can assist students in the different stages and decrease dropouts with orientation programs for example. (Tinto 1988) Focusing on intervention strategies may have a great impact on retention and attrition rates in the long-run (Brawer 1996), but intervention strategies must focus on factors that can be manipulated and that have been found to be the strongest predictors for dropout (Cabrera, Nora et al. 1993). Effective retention programs concern the types of educational settings, faculty skills that best promote student learning. These programs pay special attention to involving students actively in the learning process. (Tinto 1994)

The research

This research is a case study describing first year students' expectations and worries at the Turku University of Applied Sciences. The Turku University of Applied Sciences which is one of the largest of its kind in Finland with almost 9000 students and 37 Degree Programs. The basic idea of the Universities of Applied Sciences is to work in close co-operation with one's region and to answer the requirements of the working life. The TUAS is organized in six faculties that promote multidisciplinary learning such as Faculty of Telecommunication and e-Business. The TUAS operates in southwestern Finland and has its' major operations in Turku.

The data was collected with a simple questionnaire in two campuses during the first week of the studies. These campuses had nine different degree programs and altogether 365 new students out of 1830 started their studies there. The sample represented 20 percent of all new students at the Turku University of Applied Sciences.

The students were asked two questions after a general introduction of the University and its' operations. The data was collected within the first three days when the students started their studies at our University. The questions were:

- What are you expecting of the starting education?
- What are you worried about relating your starting studies at the moment?

The students answered on two separate papers with no other identification except their degree program. The answers were not limited with any way; rather students were allowed to write as much they felt for both questions.

The questionnaires were analyzed with content analysis. Based on the content analysis nine categories of student expectations and ten categories of student worries were recognized.

Results

Altogether 365 new students representing nine different Degree Programs answered the questionnaire (Table 1).

Table 1. Number of respondents from different degree programs

Degrees and Degree Programs	Count
Bachelor of Engineering	
- Information Technology	81
- Electronics	59
- Information Technology (English)	38
- Mechanical Engineering	23
Bachelor of Business Administration	
- Business informatics	34
- Business	46
- Library and Information services	21
Bachelor of Healthcare	
- Health Care	48
- Nursing (English)	15
Sample size altogether	365

A total of 555 different expectations were recognized from the students' answers. The distribution of the expectations is shown in the Table 2.

Table 2. Frequencies of student expectations

Expectation category	Count	Percentage of all expectations	Percentage of students
Knowhow and Business Life Competences	137	25 %	38 %
Versatile and interesting teaching	130	23 %	36 %
Friends and study environment	89	16 %	24 %
Future success	71	13 %	19 %
Quality of education	65	12 %	18 %
Practical training	22	4 %	6 %
Internationalization	21	4 %	6 %
Other	15	3 %	4 %
Contacts	5	1 %	1 %

Almost forty percent of students expect to gain knowhow and business life competences from the education. The students expressed this expectation for instance this way:

- To get a Degree Certificate
- To learn new competences
- To get good basic knowhow and competences for business life
- I m here at TUAS to be a network expert.

Almost a high number of students (36 %) expect versatile and interesting teaching. Students expect to have interesting and challenging courses. In addition they expect to have versatile teaching with advanced learning methods.

The importance of friends and study environment was emphasized by every fourth student (24 %). Students expect to make new friends, to have nice teachers and study environment. About every fifth student (19%) expects that through the education they will gain future success. Almost as many students (18 %) clearly expressed their expectation to have high quality teaching/education. The rest of the categories had much lower number of student expectations as the table above shows.

A total of 449 different worries were recognized from the students' answers. The distribution of the expectations is

shown in the Table 3. The most popular worries category was “Will I make this?” category with 38 percent popularity among all students. Every fifth student (20 %) questioned their motivation for studies. A similar number of students (13 %) were worried over time scheduling and their own economy. In addition, there were about 50 students who stated they don’t have any worries relating the starting education. Rest of the worries categories such as language skills, future work, travelling to university, mathematics and physics represent each 3 to 5 percent share of the worries.

Table 3. Frequencies of student worries

Worries category	Count	Percentage of all worries	Percentage of students
Will I make this?	139	31 %	38 %
Motivation	74	16 %	20 %
Time scheduling	57	13 %	16 %
My own economy	49	11 %	13 %
No worries	49	11 %	13 %
Other	21	5 %	6 %
Language skills	20	4 %	5 %
Future work	15	3 %	4 %
Travelling to university	15	3 %	4 %
Mathematics and physics	10	2 %	3 %

Table 4 shows how the expectations are distributed to different bachelor degree students. For engineering students, the Knowhow and business life competences category had the highest share (38 % of engineering students).

Table 4. Expectations of different Bachelor Degree students

Bachelor Degree students of	Versatile and interesting teaching	Quality of education	Knowhow and Business Life Competences	Future success	Friends and study environment	Internationalization	Practical training	Contacts	Miscellaneous
Engineering	64	36	76	34	40	7	9	2	6
	32 %	18 %	38 %	17 %	20 %	3 %	4 %	1 %	3 %
Business	38	16	40	26	22	13	3	3	6
administration	38 %	16 %	40 %	26 %	22 %	13 %	3 %	3 %	6 %
Healthcare	28	13	21	11	27	1	10	0	3
	44 %	21 %	33 %	17 %	43 %	2 %	16 %	0 %	5 %

For business administration students categories Knowhow and business life competences and Versatile and interesting teaching had almost the same share ((40 % and 38 % of business administration students). For healthcare students categories Versatile and interesting teaching and Friends and study environment were the most popular (44 % and 43 % of healthcare students).

In all the degree programs the main worry of the students related to their ability for the studies (Table 5): Will I make this? For engineering students, a big worry was also motivation: 27 % of engineering students worries their motivation. Only engineering students named mathematics and physics as one of their worries. For business administration

students almost half (45 %) worried will they make the education. For healthcare students the worries distributed quite even between categories Will I make this?, Economy and Time Scheduling. However, almost the same number of healthcare students answered that they don't have any worries relating studies at the time of this research.

Table 5. Worries of different Bachelor Degree students

Bachelor Degree students of	Time scheduling	No worries	Language skills	Mathematics and physics	Travelling	Motivation	Miscellaneous	Will I make this?	Economy	Future work
Engineering	23	24	10	10	6	55	13	74	24	10
	11 %	12 %	5 %	5 %	3 %	27 %	6 %	37 %	12 %	5 %
Business	20	12	5	0	4	16	5	45	9	4
administration	20 %	12 %	5 %	0 %	4 %	16 %	5 %	45 %	9 %	4 %
Healthcare	14	13	5	0	5	3	3	20	16	1
	22 %	21 %	8 %	0 %	8 %	5 %	5 %	32 %	25 %	2 %

Discussion

For this research 365 students were selected out of 1830 new students in our University. The sample represented almost 20 percent of all new students in our University. In addition, these students represented three different final degrees, five different fields of study, nine different degree programs including Finnish and English degree programs. Actually 24 % of all degree programs in our University participated in this research. We think that this study covers well the expectations and worries the new students have when they start their education. However, we have to admit that in this research the portion of students studying technology related topics is bigger than their portion of all University students.

The results of this research didn't show big differences in expectations and worries between different student backgrounds (final degree, field of study, degree program). The most mentioned expectations were quite similar independently to the backgrounds. However, among healthcare students friends and study environment had much more expectations than among engineering or business administration degree students (43 % vs. 20 – 22 %).

The worries have some differences among students of different degrees. The most popular worry was the same in all groups, but the second common worry deviates among students of different degrees: Engineering → Motivation, Business Administration → Time Scheduling and Healthcare → Economy. This might have something to do with the differences of the fields of studies. In engineering students realize the challenges of technology related studies and worry how their motivation will last. On the other hand, the bachelor of business administration students usually works often alongside with the studies which might cause the worry about time scheduling. In healthcare, the degree program has a lot of practical placements and the program is more fixed leaving fewer chances for work along the studies. These differences support the ideas that Hall (2001) reported – the reason for students withdrawing may differ between subjects.

Our results show some categories of worries and expectations that are identified as typical risk factors for student withdrawal in earlier studies. We had worries relating motivation and friends for example. Also the commonness of worries category Will I make this? is challenging for us because inability to cope with the demands of the programme

is one of the main reasons for student withdrawal according to Yorke (2000). Fernandez et al. (2008) presented the same idea: the difficulty of coursework is one of the risk factors. Kerka (1995) wrote that another risk factor is the gap between learner's expectations and the reality. Our study reported many different expectations and this challenges us to meet the expectations. However, like Hall (2001) reported there are always circumstances out of university control, but on the other hand there are also many factors that are under our control such as the business life relevance of our education, the quality of education, internationalization opportunities and study environment.

Tinto (1988) wrote that students undergo three stages to a committed degree student. It is necessary in this process that students find themselves important and wanted at the HEI. The HEI must work for this, but the friends are essential part of this as well. As we remember, every fourth students reported friends and study environment as one of their expectations.

Tinto (1988) write that orientation programs are often very short-lived and do not provide necessary extended contacts for the establishment of community membership. In our University, we typically start with a short 3-day orientation and continue to tutor throughout the studies. Still, it seems that the orientation program could be reorganized based on the earlier researches and the survey presented in this paper. Especially the first year tutoring might have something to improve.

In another work Tinto (1994) writes that effective intervention program focus on the learning process. One example of our university's effort in this way is the Faculty of Telecommunication and e-Business. The faculty has systematically introduced new pedagogical methods in the learning process of its' degree programs. At the moment the faculty is a member of CDIO initiative (CDIO 2007) and focuses on continuous improvements with the CDIO framework.

We have to think whether some of the worries could have been avoided. Fernandez et al. (2008) concluded students are not receiving necessary or accurate information from their high schools and colleges. We don't believe that the situation is totally similar to our University. We have already implemented some of the proposed intervention actions such as proactive mentoring (for example Girls and Technology –project). However, our marketing has not been very active and innovative, but it is changing already.

Conclusions

We wanted to know our students' expectations and worries with the education at the beginning of their academic career. Our research reported results that are consistent with studies relating students' withdrawal, dropouts, retention and attrition. The worries reported in this research can be identified in the background of the different models of student movements introduced shortly in this paper. The worries given by the students were very real and they could certainly influence the performance of the students.

Our University received important and valuable information on students' expectations and worries. We have used this information in our tutoring, but we will use the results to improve our tutoring processes as well. Furthermore, these results made our personnel rethink the situation of new students and challenge them to improve their own performance.

We will repeat this study at the beginning of next study year and ask these students to answer the same questions again. It will be interesting to see how the expectations and worries changes in one study year.

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