Closing the Gap: an exploration of first-year students’ expectations and experiences of learning

MORAG WILLIAMSON, PHYLLIS LAYBOURN, JANIS DEANE & HILARY TAIT
Edinburgh Napier University, United Kingdom

In line with Edinburgh Napier University’s commitment to enhancing undergraduates’ first-year experience (FYE), the aim of this qualitative research project was to examine the development of expectations, learning experiences and study attitudes of new psychology students over their first semester, with a view to informing the design of an intervention to support this transitional process. Support already existed in various forms, but departmental staff wished to establish a more targeted, consistent approach across programmes. Using an action research approach, data collected took the form of students’ written reflections, elicited by means of open-ended questionnaires as part of normal induction activities at the start of both first and second semesters. Responses were obtained from two cohorts of first-year psychology students: the 2008-2009 cohort completed the Semester 2 questionnaire only, while the 2009-2010 cohort completed both Semester 1 and Semester 2 questionnaires. Responses were subjected to thematic analysis. Building on the common FYE theme of ‘mismatch’ between student and staff expectations, in this study the ‘psychological contract’ was applied as a theoretical framework for interpretation of findings. The Semester 1 questionnaire data showed realistic expectations but lacked in-depth reflection. The Semester 2 questionnaire responses on ‘experiences’ of the first semester showed a predominant concern with time- and self-management. However, evidence of good study habits, and metacognitive awareness of learning, were scarce, suggesting disparity between student and staff expectations. Interpretation of the data provided a rationale for a first-year intervention, implemented with the 2010-2011 cohort, aimed at ‘closing the gap’ by means of developing appropriate student psychological contracts.

Introduction

The Policy Context and First-Year Experience Literature

Since the 1990s the United Kingdom ‘widening participation’ policy agenda has directed much attention to student retention, such that first-year experience (FYE) literature is now extensive, and has identified many and varied factors associated with student transition, success, and retention. Emphasis has shifted away from a focus on quantitative analyses of demographic variables to predict who is likely to ‘stay the course’, towards study of the interaction of both individual experiential factors and institutional factors in influencing outcomes. The traditional assumption that continuation was a precondition of success has more recently given way to the view that ‘good learning’ leads to ‘success’ which leads to ‘retention’ (Yorke & Longden, 2008), or as Tinto (2006) succinctly puts it: ‘Students who learn are students who stay’ (p. 6). Much of the Scotland-based FYE research is now conducted under the auspices of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Scotland, within its ‘enhancement theme’ of ‘the first year experience’. Recent FYE research topics include curriculum design, assessment and feedback, peer support, personal development planning, personalisation, and transition.
A recurring theme in the FYE literature is that of a ‘match’ or ‘mismatch’: between student and course (e.g., Jones, 2008; Yorke & Longden, 2008), between expectations and reality (e.g., Lewis & Castley, 2008), or between student attributes and institutional characteristics (Tinto, 2006). It is generally agreed that the better the match, the better the outcomes – academic, social, well-being (e.g., Banning, 1989, cited in Carney, 2005) – for the student, therefore the theme of ‘closing the gap’ is common in the literature. For example, perceived differences between expectations and experiences represented one of the four key areas of investigation in Johnston and Kochanowska’s (2009) extensive study of the FYE in 16 Scottish higher education institutions (HEIs).

The (mis)match in question in the current research is one that exists between staff and student expectations. The extent to which such expectations match has been characterised as a ‘deal’ struck between institution and students (Smith, 2008), and either party may be satisfied with it, or otherwise. In response to evidence of inappropriate student behaviours, Krause (2003) claims that basic expectations of staff generally include the notion that:

[Students should have a] clear understanding of expectations regarding such matters as class attendance, class preparation and participation, time allocation for study, and protocols for use and provision of online resources. (Krause, 2003, p. 6)

Many tutors of undergraduates would add, inter alia, the need for realistic perception of the level of academic demand, the importance of adhering to assessment deadlines, the value of a reflective approach, the nature of staff-student relationships, and the need to adapt to working in groups of ‘strangers’. In the large post-1992 university where the current research was carried out, as in many others, such expectations are routinely conveyed during induction for new students, and in programme and module handbooks, as well as informal interactions. Most HEIs provide a ‘student charter’ or similar document setting out formal terms of this relationship, and it is likely that such measures increase crossinstitutional consistency in staff expectations. However, the extent to which this kind of document is actively embedded in everyday practice is hard to determine and probably varies a great deal.

As far as psychological interpretation of student transition is concerned, various theories and perspectives have been applied, such as individual differences (e.g., personality, self-esteem, locus of control; see Rotter, 1966); intrapersonal processes of cognition and motivation (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2000; Dweck, 1986); self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1997; Pajares, 1996); attributional style; maturational processes such as dualistic and multiplistic perceptions of knowledge (Perry, 1970), and Baxter Magolda’s epistemological reflection (2004); and social psychological explanations such as norm formation and maintenance, group membership and social identity processes (e.g., Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000; Iyer, Jetten, Tsvirikos, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009). Such interpretations provide in-depth insights but tend to have a narrow focus, either on the individual or on interpersonal and intergroup processes.

In light of the emphasis on interaction of influences in the FYE literature, the notion of a ‘deal’ amongst staff and students in everyday practice, and the need for more coherent psychological interpretation of transition processes, psychological contract theory has been adopted as an overarching theoretical framework in the current research. Its central concept is the exchange between two parties in a relationship, and insofar as all the psychological processes described above can influence the individual’s perception of the exchange, they can be embraced by psychological contract theory.

The Psychological Contract

Psychological contract theory has theoretical roots in both social psychology and political philosophy. Social exchange theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), and its variant, equity theory (Adams, 1965), have been applied to various social situations including employment and interpersonal relationships. Any relationship involves costs and rewards for both parties, and according to equity theory the relationship is likely to continue only if outcomes for both parties are perceived as fair and just. The organisational psychologist Argyris (1960) drew upon the
political-philosophical notion of a ‘social contract’, to devise the ‘psychological contract’ as an explanation of employer-employee relations. Since the 1990s, Denise Rousseau has developed the concept and has defined the psychological contract as:

individual beliefs ... regarding the terms of an exchange between individuals and their organisation ... the individual voluntarily asserts to make and accept certain promises as he or she understands them. (Rousseau, 1995, pp. 9-10)

Performance and retention of employees is adversely affected by poor psychological contracts, and by contract violation, according to Rousseau (1995).

Although research has taken place mainly in employment settings, Rousseau claims that the scope of psychological contract theory is not limited to that context but can apply to a person’s relationship with any other interdependent party (1995). Indeed, educational settings would appear to offer fruitful territory for application of psychological contract theory, however only a small number of studies in education have drawn upon the theory.

Charlton, Barrow, and Hornby-Atkinson (2006) identified the psychological contract as a predictor of student retention. In a survey of first-year undergraduates at a large American university, Knapp (2009) found that students held multiple psychological contracts, each with a different focus, and that the dynamics of each contract varied. He claims that the psychological contract has ‘theoretical flexibility’ and deserves more exploration in academic research. Another rare example is that of Wade-Benzoni, Rousseau, and Li (2006), who studied the psychological contracts of 170 doctoral students and identified four types which had differential effects on the quality of faculty-doctoral collaborations. It should be noted that Wade-Benzoni et al. apply a conceptual distinction that pertains in most of the organisational research; that is, that there are two versions of the ‘contract’ concept, unilateral and bilateral. The latter term refers to the ‘contract’ itself, whereas the former refers to the perception of an agreement held by one of the two parties, and it is this version that predominates in the research literature. Contract violation, or mismatch, occurs if the exchange is perceived differently by the two parties.

A strong theme in the education literature is that the student’s psychological contract is formed and nurtured within student-tutor interpersonal relationships; a felt obligation may develop towards individual tutor(s) rather than to the institution. Hixenbaugh (2006) emphasises the importance of these personal relationships for success and retention, as they can ‘form the platform on which relationships with the institution are built’ (p. 23). Thomas (2002) similarly found that institutional ‘habitus’, in particular staff-student relations, were an important influence on student retention. This point was made by a participant in Clegg and Bufton’s study (2008):

If you build a relationship with a tutor I think you’d feel a greater sense of obligation to go to their lectures and seminars ... whereas if you haven’t got any relationship with them you don’t feel like you owe them anything. (p. 441)

Findings of one intervention study suggest that students’ psychological contracts can be ‘managed’ and ‘erroneous’ contracts avoided (Hornby-Atkinson, Sumner, Connors, Putwain, Larkin, Yale, & Symes, 2008). Much evidence from the organisational context has also found that contracts can be deliberately influenced and nurtured, with positive effects on performance, and Wade-Benzoni et al. (2006) suggest that the application of psychological contract theory can help improve the student experience.

Institutional Context

In the university where the current research was conducted, first-year student success and retention are key elements of policy, and are highlighted in strategies for learning, teaching and assessment (LTA) and personal and professional development planning (PDP). Across faculties a range of transition projects exist, some of which feature in various FYE Enhancement Theme publications (Brown, 2008; Smith, 2008).

In this context, enhancement of the FYE was the aim of an internal qualitative investigation of the 2007-2008 first-year cohort of students on social sciences programmes. Its findings showed a variety of factors influencing withdrawal among noncontinuing students (Williamson & School of
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Health and Social Sciences, Edinburgh Napier University, 2009). However, the sample was small \( (n = 5) \), as it was difficult to access withdrawn students, and authenticity of data was hard to determine, due to possible participant biases in the form of social desirability effects or self-protecting attributions. In addition to this empirical evidence, experienced teaching staff had identified, amongst their students, wide variations in attitudinal and behavioural norms in relation to learning and studying; in particular, rapid development of such attitudinal and behavioural norms was commonly observed during the first semester. The importance of social integration for student learning had also been noted, in line with numerous research findings (e.g., Harvey, Drew, & Smith, 2006; Tinto, 1993). It was also recognised that staff expectations may be implicit and inconsistent rather than explicit and consistent; for example, students often showed poor understanding of assessment regulations, suggesting that there was a need for more effective communication of this kind of information to students.

At institution level, during 2008-2009 a university-wide strategy of enhanced induction was implemented, including a new emphasis on the start of the second semester for all continuing students. Psychology staff took advantage of this initiative to conduct a reflective activity amongst psychology students, on their first semester experiences, at the start of the second half of their first year. This activity mirrored the first-semester induction activity of eliciting expectations of new students in their first week – a long-established element of transition support – and gave the students the opportunity to compare their original expectations with their actual experiences.

**Rationale and Aims of the Current Research**

Whereas the emphasis of the earlier study with the 2007-2008 cohort was on factors influencing withdrawal, in the current study it has shifted onto identifying the expectations and experiences associated with successful completion of the first semester in the 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 cohorts. The focus was on new entrants who are school leavers, who account for the majority of new entrants to psychology courses, rather than direct entrants or other specific student groups.

The new second-semester induction strategy in 2008-2009 facilitated the current action research project, as it provided the researchers with an opportunity to gather qualitative reflective accounts of first-semester experiences from ‘successful’ students (i.e., those who had achieved their first-semester modules and progressed to the second semester). Reflective accounts were then obtained from the new cohort in 2009-2010, at the start of both the first and second semesters, to provide further data on expectations and experiences of the first semester.

These accounts have been interpreted with reference to psychological contract theory; researchers were particularly interested to discover if and how student expectations become ‘tuned’, that is, more closely aligned with staff expectations. It was anticipated that the findings would inform the design of an intervention of extended induction for first-year students, which would form part of the school’s ongoing strategy of transition support.

**Method**

Two related semistructured questionnaires were used to obtain written reflections of first-year students taking psychology from the three degree programmes (BA Hons. Psychology, BA Psychology and Sociology, BA Social Sciences). Questionnaire 1 was administered at induction in September 2009, and elicited ‘expectations’ of new entrants. It asked students to consider what they expected to learn in their first semester, what they might find challenging, how they felt they might meet such challenges, and what advice they would give to new first-year students. Questionnaire 2 was used with both the 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 cohorts; it was administered at the start of the second semester and elicited first-semester ‘experiences’, by means of items that were similar to those in Questionnaire 1, but phrased in terms of experiences of the past semester rather than expectations of the semester to come. These open-ended questionnaires allowed considerable freedom of response, resembling Beard, Clegg, and Smith’s (2007) ‘blank sheet’ technique. Thus data were collected from first-year students at three points in time (see Table 1). The 2008-2009 cohort was sampled only for Questionnaire 2, whereas samples from the 2009-2010 cohort
completed both Questionnaires 1 and 2. However, composition of the two 2009-2010 samples was not identical, due to nonparticipation by some participants at the start of the second semester.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First-year cohort</th>
<th>Sample (n)</th>
<th>Instrument</th>
<th>Time administered</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2008-09 cohort</td>
<td>86 (79% of cohort)</td>
<td>Questionnaire 2, on first semester experiences</td>
<td>Start of second semester, February 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009-10 cohort (1)</td>
<td>62 (78% of cohort)</td>
<td>Questionnaire 1, on first semester expectations</td>
<td>Start of first semester, September 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009-10 cohort (2)</td>
<td>43 (54% of cohort)</td>
<td>Questionnaire 2, on first semester experiences</td>
<td>Start of second semester, February 2010</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At every data collection point, responses were obtained within a classroom setting (two rooms), each subdivided into informal, small groups of four to six, led by two or three academic staff per room as part of the normal induction activities. Responses were written individually, however discussion with peers was also encouraged.

**Analysis**

A ‘thematic analysis’ approach was applied to interpret the data. Braun and Clarke (2006) provide a useful overview of this approach. The analysis comprised the following steps:

- Reading the data;
- Rereading the data;
- Coding of data items;
- Identification of items that might collate into a theme;
- Assessing prevalence of themes;
- Identification of subthemes/sub-subthemes; and
- Reviewing/refining themes.

As questions were open-ended and responses often disorganised, analyses involved searching across each data set for repeated patterns or issues of concern, rather than attempting to match up responses to specific questions.

A coding verification procedure was adopted: two researchers independently carried out preliminary coding of all three sets of data, then compared and synthesised analyses. Both researchers found similarity of themes between the two samples responding to Questionnaire 2 (2008-2009 and 2009-2010), therefore these two data sets were combined to form one Questionnaire 2 data set for the purpose of analysis. There was also substantial agreement between researchers on the themes emerging from each of the Questionnaire 1 and Questionnaire 2 data sets, therefore a thorough thematic analysis of both data sets was carried out collaboratively.

A thematic map was constructed for each data set, to organise themes both hierarchically and relationally; each was refined and rerefined using Inspiration 9 software. Judgements regarding ‘main themes’, ‘subthemes’ and ‘sub-subthemes’ were based on ‘prevalence’, which took into account the number of respondents expressing a data item, as well as the number of data items (statements); it was not unusual for a participant to make the same or similar statements more than once.

**Results**

Across the data set from Questionnaire 1 the following four main ‘expectation’ themes emerged: self-organisation and time-management; emotional self-regulation; personal and social development and social support; attitudes to learning and studying and skills development.
The two most prevalent themes, self-organisation and emotional self-regulation, arose mainly in response to the prompts, ‘How do you think you will meet this challenge?’ and ‘What advice would you give someone coming into first year?’ They featured rarely amongst responses to ‘things you expect to learn’ and ‘what do you expect to be the biggest challenge?’ Participants set great store by social development, both for its own sake and as a means of support in addressing challenges. Emotional self-regulation commonly included exhortations such as ‘be enthusiastic’, and ‘don’t stress’. These themes and related subthemes are shown in a thematic map (Figure 1). Although responses to Questionnaire 1 were wide ranging, and the themes, taken together, demonstrated implicit awareness of transition and the need to adapt, they were mainly brief and nonreflective.

In contrast, the Questionnaire 2 data set (2008-2009 and 2009-2010 cohorts combined) yielded rich data: students again reported a wide range of experiences and concerns, but often expressed these in greater depth in response to their changed learning environment and changed nature of demands made upon them. There was strong awareness of these processes of transition and adaptation. Four clusters of main themes were identified (Figure 2).

1. By far the most dominant theme was ‘time- and self-management’, including a strong preoccupation with time management of studies, e.g., ‘Preparation for each day is vital’ (Participant 19, 2008-2009 cohort, second semester); ‘Don’t leave assignments to the last minute’ (Participant 14, 2008-2009 cohort, second semester). There were also some concerns over balancing study with work, family, and leisure.

2. Awareness of academic ‘expectations’ was much in evidence, and was often referred to in the context of comparison (e.g., between school and university, or between different teaching styles), and ‘transition’ - for example: ‘the pace of work is a lot faster than school’ (Participant 45, 2008-2009 cohort, second semester). The expectation of academic performance in English was a source of concern for a number of students for whom English is their second language.

3. There was a strong focus on ‘practical’ academic skills. A wide range of skills was referred to, with a pronounced emphasis on the importance of reading for learning; for example: ‘You need to read all your materials so you know what to expect for your next class’ (Participant 5, 2009-2010 cohort, second semester). Participants often showed realistic assessment of their skills, such as essay writing and note taking. Some subject-specific skill areas were identified, either as a matter of concern or as enjoyable (e.g., statistics). A small number of comments showed metacognitive awareness, for example: ‘[I know] how to pick out important points’
4. The need for independent learning was prevalent; there was recognition of the importance of attendance, effort and commitment. For some this was expressed in terms of knowledge and awareness rather than a reflection on their actions, and was often accompanied by concern over their own motivation. In spite of this expectation of ‘independence’, many participants had sought help and support, and valued it as a way of coping with challenges, whether in the form of academic help from tutors, informal collaborative study groups, or emotional support from peers. Others reflected that they should have sought advice. Some were clearly finding the challenges and responsibilities of independent learning difficult to manage.

There are complex interrelationships between these clusters: for example, in making comparisons between school and university ‘expectations’, students highlighted different levels of ‘independent learning’, and also gave examples of relevant ‘academic skills’.

Figure 2. Four clusters of main themes from Questionnaire 2 data on experiences of the first semester. Prevalence is represented by font size.

Discussion

There were clear qualitative differences between Questionnaire 1 and Questionnaire 2 data sets, indicating that substantial development had taken place in terms of study attitudes and behaviours. At the start of the first semester there was evident awareness of the need for adaptation to a new environment and new learning demands. However, responses lacked in-depth reflection, and certain elements of university study that tend to feature strongly in staff expectations were conspicuous by their absence or low prevalence.

As was found by Hornby-Atkinson et al. (2008), expectations were not necessarily unrealistic, but the means of meeting the expected challenges were barely addressed. For example, although adaptation to ‘new ways of learning’ was often referred to, no comments suggested metacognitive awareness; ‘attending lectures’ was mentioned only twice. Similarly, ‘time management’ was often stated as a way of meeting challenges, but no participants attempted to estimate the amount of study time required. In spite of frequent references to ‘independent learning’, in a number of cases
‘get help from a tutor’ was the only response to meeting challenges. Emotional self-regulation was the most prevalent means envisaged for meeting challenges, at the expense of practical strategies.

Data from the start of the second semester showed that students’ norms of study attitudes and behaviour, as well as a degree of insight into their learning, had developed rapidly during their own first semester, and had already become fairly well aligned with staff and institution expectations; the evidence suggested at least a partial closing of the ‘gap’, amongst those students who had successfully progressed to the second semester. There was recognition of growing academic skills and knowledge, but metacognitive awareness of learning processes, though present in some cases, still lacked prominence, and appeared to be eclipsed by a preoccupation with the mundane day-to-day issue of time management, reflecting findings of Clegg and Bufton (2008).

Related to this limited metacognition was the lack of reflection on the relationship between current learning experiences and future development. Participants’ responses showed a strong focus on the present time, and to some extent the past, but not the future; none foresaw any benefits of first-year learning for later years of study. Again this supports a finding from Clegg and Bufton (2008) that third-year students retrospectively felt they had not appreciated the value of their first-year studies as being ‘foundational’ building blocks for subsequent years of learning. A more adaptive theme was apparent in the emphasis on social interaction generally, given its importance for learning (Harvey et al., 2006; Thomas, 2002).

As always with self-report data, it is unclear to what extent the expressed attitudes towards learning were internalised, or to what extent they were translated into behaviour. Many students appeared to express intentions rather than actual strategies, especially when describing how they coped with challenges. Implicit meanings were evident in certain responses; for example, maladaptive student norms are betrayed in the statements: ‘[You should] attend class as often as possible’ (Participant 12, 2008-2009 cohort, second semester); ‘Don’t treat gaps between class as spare time’ (Participant 9, 2008-2009 cohort, second semester). Similarly, there is barely concealed surprise in: ‘attend classes ... it makes it easier when doing assessments’ (Participant 39, 2009-2010 cohort, second semester).

The expression ‘free time’ was sometimes used to refer to time outside of class time, suggesting an inappropriate conception of time management. Further research may be needed to probe such attitudes towards time management more deeply, and thus improve the validity of measures of expectations and experiences.

The data were vulnerable to social desirability effects, given that responses were written within the academic context of a teaching room, in the presence of teaching staff. In addition, the amount of time allocated for the questionnaires, and the extent of individual versus discussion activity, were not consistently implemented across the various student groups. On the other hand, the use of written reflections in the context of small informal groups reflects some of the beneficial features of Johnston and Kochanowska’s (2009) ‘evaluative dialogue’ approach, which they claim encourages student confidence, ‘[enhancing] feedback, engagement and empowerment’ (p. 55). It is also possible that Questionnaire 1 on ‘expectations’ primed students so that they reflected more fruitfully upon their experiences during the first semester than they might otherwise have done; however, as no control group was used, this cannot be determined. Finally, as data were collected only at the start of each semester, the rapid development of social norms of study attitudes and behaviour over the four-month period was not monitored on an ongoing basis. Our understanding of these processes and their effect on developing psychological contracts therefore remains limited.

**Rationale for Intervention to Promote Development of Effective Psychological Contracts**

Questionnaire 1 responses, whilst suggesting quite realistic expectations of university life and study, were brief and nonreflective. Questionnaire 2 data gave concrete evidence of mainly appropriate and detailed expectations or psychological contracts, which appeared to be associated with the students’ successful progression to the second semester. So although positive development had taken place during the first semester, halfway through the first year student contracts still showed...
some unstable or inappropriate features, thus highlighting the need to promote and accelerate more effective contracts.

The planned intervention (Table 2) aims to raise new undergraduates’ awareness of ‘contract-making mechanisms’, as advocated by Wade-Benzoni et al. (2006). It will support first-year students by promoting appropriate expectations from the outset, making implicit expectations explicit. As Tinto succinctly noted: ‘Students ... need to understand the road map to completion’ (2006, p. 2). The programme will be longitudinal, addressing specific needs at relevant points in time; such ‘staged induction’ is recommended by Carney (2005), and Campbell (2008) has implemented this principle at the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) Millennium Institute, in her ‘drip-feed’ approach to induction.

To increase student-student and student-staff interaction and relationship-building, activities will be mainly located in the social context of the classroom, and will thus facilitate the student voice, since students are ‘active co-producers’ of their university experience (Whittaker, 2008). Three modes of staff-student contact and contexts are planned: extended induction with teaching staff, personal development tutor groups, and activities embedded in module delivery. The intervention will constitute an important element of the department’s personal development planning (PDP) strategy.

### Table 2. Structure of intervention to promote development of effective psychological contracts in Year 1, semester 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intervention times</th>
<th>Time-specific aims</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Week 1</td>
<td>Transition to HE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on psychological contract &amp; metacognition</td>
<td>Social engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 3-4</td>
<td>Staff/student expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on time structuring &amp; metacognition</td>
<td>Learning to learn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 6-7</td>
<td>Review patterns of study so far</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on reflection on performance /metacognition</td>
<td>Effective planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Review experience of first assignment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Link personal actions and quality of learning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Further Research into Student Psychological Contracts

Findings of the current research leave certain questions unanswered. The dynamic nature of psychological contracts has been recognised in organisational literature in terms of change over time and in response to events (e.g., Brewerton, 2007), but is barely explored in the HE context. In the FYE literature, first-year development in general has rarely been systematically tracked over a number of points in time. A notable exception is Beard et al. (2007), who focused on affective development, mapping students’ ‘emotional journeys’ over their first year.

In addition, rapid developments in social identity, group membership and concomitant norms have been observed in students making the transition to HE; interaction of such processes with student psychological contracts merits investigation. Theories of social and self-categorisation (Hogg, 2000; Turner, 1985; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), or models of ingroup identity and identity change (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000; Iyer et al., 2009) may provide a theoretical framework for understanding these processes.

As a unilateral view of the psychological contract was adopted in this study, staff and institutional expectations were not investigated, but there is concern in the literature over lack of consistency in how staff expectations are conveyed to, or perceived by, students; a systems approach might provide a useful theoretical perspective for investigating the interdependent influences of students and institution. Investigation of this issue may consequently be incorporated into evaluation of the planned intervention arising from the current research.
Conclusions

As a result of their experiences, first-year students’ expectations, by the start of the second semester, appeared to have become better ‘tuned’ or aligned with staff expectations, at least to some extent. Student psychological contracts appeared to have developed, which were in the main adaptive. Coping strategies were being formed. These positive findings should not surprise us, given that the Questionnaire 2 data came from ‘successful’ students. However, self and time management were seen as very challenging. Although good time management has always been encouraged by staff, perhaps they underestimate the difficulties students experience. The paucity of metacognitive awareness, and the focus on the present and immediate past at the expense of valuing first-year learning for future development, indicate a need for deeper reflection to improve quality of learning. These lingering areas of mismatch in student contracts have the potential to undermine performance, but may be amenable to improvement through intervention in the form of enhanced longitudinal transition support.

References


MORAG WILLIAMSON* is a lecturer in psychology at Edinburgh Napier University. Her research interests include teaching and learning in psychology, the first-year undergraduate experience in psychology, and pre-tertiary psychology education. She is a committee member of the British Psychological Society’s Scotland branch, and Secretary of the Association for the Teaching of Psychology (UK). Correspondence: Morag Williamson, School of Life, Sport and Social Sciences, Edinburgh Napier University, Sighthill Campus, Edinburgh EH11 4BN, United Kingdom (m.williamson@napier.ac.uk).

PHYLLIS LAYBOURN is a senior lecturer and subject group leader for psychology. She also holds a teaching fellowship. Her research interests are in cognitive psychology (decision making and visual perception) and a broad range of issues relating to the student experience and learning. Correspondence: Phyllis Laybourn, School of Life, Sport and Social Sciences, Edinburgh Napier University, Edinburgh EH11 4BN, United Kingdom.

JANIS DEANE has been in Higher Education for 27 years, firstly in nurse teaching and then in health promotion and public health. She has been part of Edinburgh Napier University from 1996, and before that was a ward manager in the NHS. She is a senior lecturer with a role focus on the student experience in her school. In addition, she is a teaching fellow and Academic Conduct Officer. Her teaching interests centre on health promotion and education, including mental health, employability and career development, lay health beliefs, men’s health, poverty, equity and inequalities. Her pedagogical interests include assessment and feedback, student support and graduate attributes, and recently in researching plagiarism avoidance in the context of academic literacy, and also in exploring the role of academic conduct officers.

HILARY TAIT is a lecturer in psychology and a teaching fellow at Edinburgh Napier University. She teaches social psychology and individual differences. Her research interests are in the first-year student experience, particularly approaches to studying and perceptions of the learning environment. Correspondence: Hilary Tait, School of Life, Sport and Social Sciences, Edinburgh Napier University, Edinburgh EH11 4BN, United Kingdom.

*Contact author

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