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Amy Tomlinson, Andrew Simpson & Clare Killingback

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# Student expectations of teaching and learning when starting university: a systematic review

Amy Tomlinson, Andrew Simpson and Clare Killingback

Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Hull, Hull, UK

## ABSTRACT

Student expectations are complex constructs that can influence adaptability, engagement, achievement, satisfaction and retention. A number of individual studies have been published on the expectations of students when starting university, however none that synthesise student expectations of teaching and learning. Therefore, the aim of this systematic review was to understand student expectations of teaching and learning when starting university. A systematic search strategy identified 2950 studies, of which nine met all eligibility criteria. Relevant data was extracted and a narrative synthesis conducted, revealing four key themes: additional study, self-managing learning, teaching and learning activities, and accessibility. Students expect to complete additional study and take responsibility for their own learning, but may be unsure how to manage this. They expect to have to attend all sessions and commonly expect lectures, but thoughts on other methods of teaching and learning vary. Students also have high expectations of teaching staff, particularly with regards to access and resources. This knowledge is important in enabling teaching staff to better align preconceived ideas of university teaching and learning with reality, support a positive university experience, and improve satisfaction and retention. Future research should further investigate student expectations of teaching and learning independently, perhaps from a qualitative perspective, as well as exploring interventions to help manage these expectations when necessary.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

Student expectations;  
teaching and learning;  
first year; higher education;  
university

## Introduction

Student transition to university is a considerable period of change, in which expectations have been identified as a key issue affecting adaptability and success (Briggs, Clark, and Hall 2012; Hassel and Ridout 2018; Keup 2007; Money et al. 2017; Smith and Wertlieb 2005). For many students this is likely to be their first experience of living away from home, and they will simultaneously be required to adjust to new academic and social responsibilities (Holmstrom, Karp, and Gray 2002; Lowe and Cook 2003; Smith and Wertlieb 2005). Whilst frameworks to support student transition have been developed, it has been noted that transition in higher education (HE) remains under theorised (Gale and Parker 2014; O'Donnell, Kean, and Stevens 2016). The transition support employed by institutions varies greatly and literature conceptualises the period of transition differently, making success hard to evaluate (O'Donnell, Kean, and Stevens 2016). Universities often attempt to bridge the gap between further and higher education through communication and collaboration with key feeder

**CONTACT** Amy Tomlinson  Amy.Tomlinson@hull.ac.uk  Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Hull, Cottingham Road, Hull HU6 7RX, UK

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institutions, however it is not possible to reach every prospective student of a given university. In addition, further education institutions often devise their own transition support, however differences in views between further and HE teaching staff may cause inaccurate student expectations to form (Smith and Wertlieb 2005).

Student expectations are complex constructs with many contributing factors. As well as the aforementioned transition support, previous experiences, friends and family, media portrayal, and communications from institutions can all help to form student expectations. However with limited understanding of the realities of HE, students may struggle to make accurate predictions (Balloo 2018; Bates and Kaye 2014; Borghi et al. 2016; Briggs, Clark, and Hall 2012; Lowe and Cook 2003; Ramsden 2008). Similarly, a mismatch between student expectations and experiences, and student and lecturer expectations has been noted, which can impact both student transition and retention (Borghi, Mainardes, and Silva 2016; Brinkworth et al. 2009; Crisp et al. 2009; Maloshonok and Terentev 2017). Retention rates are an important issue during and following first year and subsequent attrition is a costly for both students and universities, making any impacting factors significant (Brinkworth et al. 2009; McInnis 2001).

A relationship exists between student expectations, performance (reality), and satisfaction, which has been previously described in the literature using the Expectancy-Disconfirmation Model (Appleton-Knapp and Krentler 2006). The model suggests that negative disconfirmation (dissatisfaction) will occur when there are discrepancies between expectations and reality, which has the potential to negatively impact student engagement, achievement and retention (Byrne et al. 2012; Lowe and Cook 2003; Money et al. 2017; Pather and Booi 2019; Pather and Dorasamy 2018). In the context of the United Kingdom (UK), the link between student expectations, reality, and satisfaction, is of paramount importance in relation to the National Student Survey (NSS). The NSS is an annual survey completed by graduating students from all publicly funded universities in the UK (Lenton 2015). It assesses various aspects of university life, specifically teaching, learning opportunities, assessment and feedback, academic support, organisation and management, resources, community, student voice, and also asks for a final rating of overall course quality. This is a vital instrument for both prospective students and institutions, as higher NSS scores are thought to signal teaching quality, and are associated with higher application numbers and greater retention (Lenton 2015; Temizer and Turkyilmaz 2012). In addition, the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) was introduced in the UK in 2017 to improve teaching status and quality. It aimed to allow students to make informed choices about their study based on facts rather than reputation, and to address the balance between research and teaching (Ashwin 2017; Gunn 2018). TEF ratings are significantly influenced by the teaching and learning specific sections of the NSS, further highlighting the importance of factors such as student expectations on the wider HE landscape.

Understanding student expectations of teaching and learning is undoubtedly important for HE institutions, as awareness is essential in informing any necessary actions. However, consideration should be given to whether the subsequent action should involve meeting, or managing these expectations. Meeting expectations may seem important, as it has been suggested that when student expectations are not met, engagement, success, satisfaction and retention may suffer (Byrne et al. 2012; Jones 2010; Lobo and Gurney 2014). An outside-in, customer-centric approach in which companies focus on giving the customer what they want, is a successful form of meeting expectations commonly described in business literature (Baboolal-Frank 2021; Day and Moorman 2013; Moormann and Palvölgyi 2013). This has also been described in education literature when likening lecturers to service providers, which is logical, as HE is a business, and students are effectively customers (Sander et al. 2000; Tricker 2005). Nonetheless, meeting expectations may have negative effects on staff by increasing workload and decreasing job satisfaction (Jones 2010). The notion that lecturers should employ this approach also shows disregard for pedagogic knowledge and evidence, and places high value on student expectations that may be ill-informed and unrealistic. Alternatively, managing expectations is a collaborative process centring around open communication to promote acceptance and the creation of new realistic expectations (Wick 2013). In

relation to teaching and learning, this may involve establishing student and lecturer roles, explaining module plans, and justifying teaching methods based on pedagogic literature. This should be addressed during student induction and also before transition if possible and where appropriate, to ensure their expectations are well informed (Appleton-Knapp and Krentler 2006; Jones 2010).

A number of individual studies have been published on the expectations of students when starting university, however to the authors knowledge, no review articles have been published which synthesise student expectations of teaching and learning. Thus, the aim of this systematic review was to understand student expectations of teaching and learning when starting university.

## Methodology

The updated Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidance was used to prepare, complete and report this systematic review (Page et al. 2021).

### Information sources and search strategy

A systematic search was conducted on the following electronic bibliographic databases to identify relevant primary studies: Academic Search Premier, Education Research Complete, ERIC, and APA PsychInfo. A Boolean search strategy was developed following background reading and consultation with a university librarian experienced in systematic searching (Table 1). The search was limited to peer reviewed journal articles published in English since the year 2000. This date limit was chosen to coincide with the first generation Y students entering HE, being the first generation to be considered technology savvy (Cilliers 2017; Eckleberry-Hunt and Tucciarone 2011). Technology is an essential part of modern teaching and learning; therefore, student usage was deemed vital to ensure the expectations gathered in this review were applicable to current practice. The final search was carried out in July 2021. Once eligible articles had been identified, snowballing search methods were implemented (Greenhalgh and Peacock 2005). Reference lists of eligible studies were hand searched and authors of eligible papers were also contacted for knowledge of unidentified relevant publications or ongoing work. Forward citation tracking of all eligible studies was completed using Web of Science.

### Eligibility criteria and study selection

The aim of this review was to gain an overall understanding of student expectations of teaching and learning when starting university. Expectations can be a complex concept to define as there may be perceived overlap between expectations, hopes, and desires. For clarity, this study chose to focus on forecast expectations, also known as predictive expectations, rather than ideal expectations. Forecast expectations refer to what an individual thinks will occur, rather than what they would like to occur. This distinction in terms is important because it has been argued that only forecast expectations are true expectations, and these should be distinguished from desires (Higgs, Polonsky, and Hollick 2005; Spreng, MacKenzie, and Olshavsky 1996). This review included quantitative data only, due to uncovering an insufficient amount of relevant qualitative research to complete a meaningful analysis. Full inclusion and exclusion criteria can be found in Table 2.

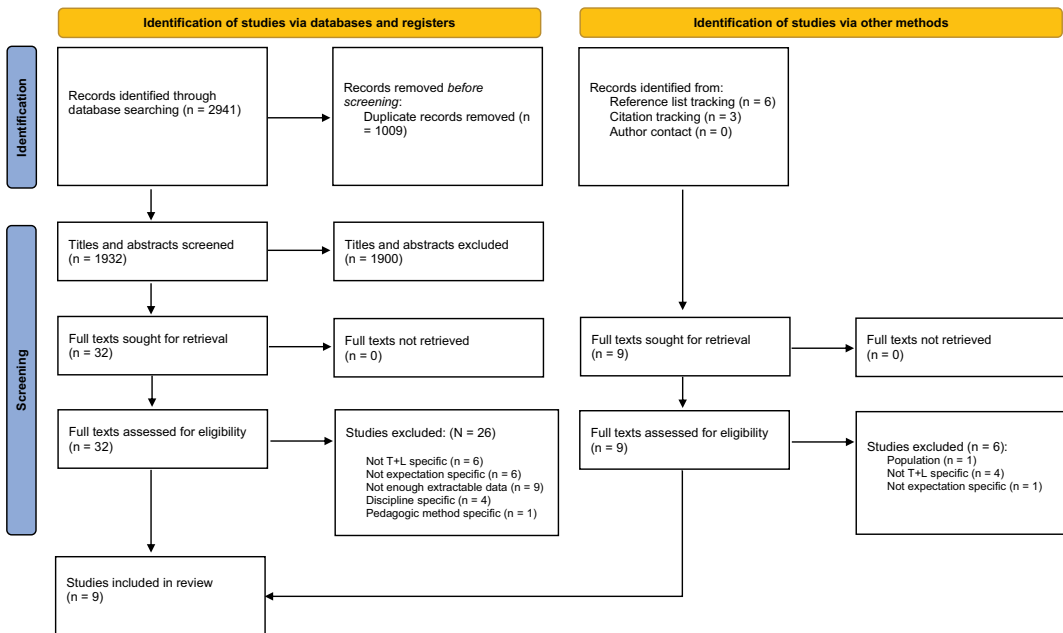
Database search results were initially screened by the first author using their title and abstract. Where it was difficult to assess whether articles met the inclusion criteria based on the title and

**Table 1.** Boolean search strategy.

TITLE (expect* OR attitude* OR perception* OR view* OR thought* OR assumption* OR transition*)	AND	TITLE student*	AND	('higher education' OR college* OR universit*)	AND	('first year*' OR freshm*)
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**Table 2.** Inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Inclusion	Exclusion
First year university students or students about to start their first year of university	Postgraduate student expectations
Focus on the predictive expectations of students on teaching and learning	Expectations of teaching and learning during the covid-19 pandemic
Primary quantitative data	Discipline specific expectations e.g. expectations of a mathematics programme
English language studies published in a peer-reviewed journal	Expectations of a specific pedagogic method e.g. problem-based learning
	Expectations of assessment methods
	Qualitative research

**Figure 1.** PRISMA flow diagram (Page et al. 2021).

abstract, they underwent full text screening. An excel spreadsheet was used to facilitate an audit trail and article screening. Full text articles were independently reviewed by the first and third authors. Discrepancies regarding eligibility for inclusion were discussed and resolved with the second author. The process of study selection can be seen in the PRISMA flow diagram (Page et al. 2021) in [Figure 1](#).

### Data extraction and synthesis

Data extraction was performed by the first author using a customised data extraction form. These forms included the following items: aims, setting and participants, study design and analysis, measures and outcome data specifically relating to expectations of teaching and learning. An overview of included studies can be seen in [Table 3](#).

Due to the heterogeneity of outcome data it was not possible to carry out a meta-analysis. Instead, a narrative synthesis analytical approach was employed (Popay et al. 2006). This method involves collating findings to form a cohesive textual narrative, and is common when statistical synthesis is not feasible (Campbell et al. 2018; Popay et al. 2006).

Table 3. Study characteristics.

Study	Aims	Setting and Participants	Study Design	Measures
Borgh, Mainardes, and Silva (2016)	Investigate the difference between the services expectations of students entering higher education and the expectations perceived by the institution's professors	Setting – HE institution in Espírito Santo, Brazil Participants – 237 students entering HE – 61.5% female, 38.5% male No generational information	Quantitative exploratory study Survey	30 item survey on academic and non-academic expectations. 5- point Likert. Questionnaire wording adapted for professors to ask what they think students' expectations would be.
Crisp et al. (2009)	Provide an insight into the expectations of students arriving at a research-intensive Australian university before they had experienced any formal classes	Setting – Australian University Participants – n = 2753 first year students: 2006 – 979 – 51.9% male, 48.1% female 2007 – 1774 – 47.9% male, 52.1% female No generational information	Mixed methods exploratory study but only quantitative section (surveys) used Survey and focus group	19 item survey on expectations – 5-point Likert and open ended: Demographic information – 7 items Expectations – 10 items Open ended – 2 items 2 consecutive academic years of first year students completed the survey during orientation week. 5 staff focus groups to discuss reactions to student responses. When reporting results, authors have combined 'agree' and 'strongly agree' responses. They have also combined 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree' responses. Students completed 45 item survey assessing academic and social expectations of university: Reasons for attending university – 15 items Academic aptitude – 15 items Teaching expectation – 15 items Lecturers completed the Approaches to Teaching Inventory. Both 5-point Likert. First wave of survey (expectations) conducted in first two weeks of university. Second wave (experiences) approximately 7 months later. Survey information lacking.
Hassel and Ridout (2018)	Determine the expectations of incoming first year students and the academic staff who teach them and to establish the relative match – or mismatch in the expectations of these two groups	Setting – Aston university, Birmingham, UK Participants – 77 first year students – 15 male 62 female No generational information	Quantitative exploratory study Survey	Students completed 45 item survey assessing academic and social expectations of university: Reasons for attending university – 15 items Academic aptitude – 15 items Teaching expectation – 15 items Lecturers completed the Approaches to Teaching Inventory. Both 5-point Likert. First wave of survey (expectations) conducted in first two weeks of university. Second wave (experiences) approximately 7 months later. Survey information lacking.
Maloshonok and Terentev (2017)	Examine how mismatches between educational expectations and estimates of real experience at an institution of higher education are linked with entrants' background characteristics and how these mismatches influence their academic performance during the first year of study	Setting – Moscow campus, Higher Education School of Economics Participants – 283 first year students initially – 42% male and 58% female 257 in second wave No generational information	Quantitative, exploratory longitudinal study Survey	First phase was a pre-entry expectations survey prior to starting. Second phase was a first-year experience survey completed towards the end of the academic year. Both 35 item, 5-point Likert scale.
Pather and Booii (2019)	Investigate the gap between first year students' prior university expectations with their actual university experience	Setting – University in Western Cape Participants – 187 first year students. 66% female 34% male 61% first generation students	Quantitative exploratory study Survey	First phase was a pre-entry expectations survey prior to starting. Second phase was a first-year experience survey completed towards the end of the academic year. Both 35 item, 5-point Likert scale.

(Continued)

Table 3. (Continued).

Study	Aims	Setting and Participants	Study Design	Measures
Pathe and Dorasamy (2018)	Gain a better understanding of the size of the gap between student expectation and experience in relation to its impact on access and success	Setting – University of technology in South Africa Participants – 95 first year students 77% female 23% male 83% first generation students	Quantitative exploratory study Survey	First phase was a pre-entry expectations survey prior to starting. Second phase was a first-year experience survey completed towards the end of the academic year. Both 35 item, 4-point Likert scale plus demographic questions.
Rowley, Hartley, and Larkin (2008)	Compare the expectations and experiences of first-year psychology students with and without an A-level in psychology.	Setting – Russel Group university in England, UK Participants – 169 first year students No gender or generational information	Quantitative exploratory study Survey	Stage 1 = expectations survey during third week of semester 1. Stage 2 = experiences survey during final week of first year. Both surveys 13 item, 6-point Likert plus two open ended.
Sander et al. (2000)	Establish how effective the University Students Expectations of Teaching (USET) questionnaire is at eliciting student expectations of teaching, and secondly, to consider the value of the expectations data that the students provide	Setting – Three British Universities Participants – 395 first year students No gender information No generational information	Quantitative exploratory study Survey	USET questionnaire completed between first day of induction and fourth day of teaching. Questionnaire asked students to rank their top 3 teaching and learning styles as expected and hoped for. They were also asked to identify their most disliked teaching and learning style, identify preferred split of coursework and examination and rank teacher qualities. Students were asked in each section to explain the choices they had made.
Scutter et al. (2011)	Investigate the expectations of students entering all of the universities in one state in Australia	Setting – All three universities in South Australia: Flinders University, University of Adelaide, University of South Australia Participants – 3091 first year students No gender information 42% first generation students	Quantitative Survey	Survey distributed one month prior to orientation week. Mix of 5-point Likert, ranking and 3 open ended questions.

The four-element narrative framework described by Popay et al. (2006) was used to guide the narrative synthesis, with adaptations made to fit the exploratory nature of the review. Element one is concerned with developing a theoretical model of how the intervention works, why, and for whom, however this element of the guidance was not applied as the study did not involve an intervention. Element two of the narrative synthesis analytical approach constitutes developing a preliminary synthesis, which involved the organisation of tabulated data into themes. This can be seen in Table 4. The third element involves exploring relationships between the studies beyond tabulation, which was achieved by synthesising the study characteristics in Table 3 and themes identified in Table 4. These were reported narratively to aid understanding. The final element consists of assessing the robustness of the synthesis by addressing the methodological quality of the primary studies included. This was carried out using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) version 2018 (Hong et al. 2018).

### *Quality appraisal*

The methodological quality of each study was assessed independently by the first author using the MMAT. The MMAT has been specifically developed for use within systematic reviews and allows for reliable and efficient assessment of five different study designs (Hong et al. 2018; Pace et al. 2012). It was chosen due to its section specifically assessing quantitative descriptive studies, making it appropriate for the survey-based studies within this review. Uncertainties were discussed with the third author until agreement was reached. The authors of the MMAT discourage calculating an overall score for each paper and instead suggest presenting detailed criterion ratings to allow for more informed understanding of the quality appraisal. This can be seen in Table 5.

## **Results**

### *Study selection*

A total of 2950 studies were identified through the search strategy, with 32 undergoing full text screening. A total of nine studies met the eligibility criteria. The number of studies remaining at each stage of study selection can be seen in Figure 1.

### *Quality appraisal*

No studies were excluded from this review following quality appraisal using the MMAT, however it is acknowledged that five out of the nine included studies lack sample recruitment information, and all studies lack non-response bias information.

### *Study characteristics*

A total of 7287 students were surveyed across Brazil, Australia, the United Kingdom, Russia and South Africa. Gender and first-generation university student status were not consistently reported. All nine included studies assessed student expectations using surveys as the main data collection method. Likert scale questions were most common (Borghi, Mainardes, and Silva 2016; Crisp et al. 2009; Hassel and Ridout 2018; Pather and Booi 2019; Pather and Dorasamy 2018; Rowley, Hartley, and Larkin 2008; Scutter et al. 2011), however simple selection list questions, ranking exercises and open-ended questions were also used (Crisp et al. 2009; Maloshonok and Terentev 2017; Sander et al. 2000; Scutter et al. 2011). Two studies explicitly focused on investigating student expectations (Crisp et al. 2009; Scutter et al. 2011), four studies compared expectations with experiences (Maloshonok and Terentev 2017; Pather and Booi 2019; Pather and Dorasamy 2018; Rowley, Hartley, and Larkin 2008), one study compared expectations with hopes (Sander et al. 2000), one study analysed the





Table 4. Extracted data in themes.

Paper and Data Type	Additional Study	Self-Managing Learning	Teaching and Learning Activities	Access to Staff and Resources
Borghji, Mainardes, and Silva (2016) 5-point Likert 5 = high expectation Mean responses			Pleasant and interesting lessons – 4.72/5 The professor will use all available resources for the planning and execution of the course lessons – 4.59/5 The negotiation of teaching, learning and assessment methods between students and professors – 4.47/5 Courses with more practical classes rather than theoretical ones 4.13/5	Access to all academic and non-academic course information through online tools – 4.30/5
Crisp et al. (2009) 5-point Likert Strongly agree – strongly disagree Percentage responses (highest reported here) Some open responses	How much time per week do you expect to spend in study outside of scheduled class times? • 2006–11 – 15 hours = 32% (highest response) • 2007–11 – 15 hours = 33% (highest response)	Please comment on what you think will be important in making your university experience successful: • Responsibility is self (highest response, around 600) I expect to be able to combine study with paid work – remove • 2006–71% agree/strongly agree • 2007–68% agree/strongly agree	Interactive sessions with other students will be important to my learning • 2006–85% agree/strongly agree • other students in class time will be important to my learning • 2007–81% agree/strongly agree • important for me to attend most lectures • 2006–81% disagree/strongly disagree will be important for me to attend most lectures • 2007–96% agree/strongly agree	Having 'ready' access to my lecturers and tutors outside of face-to-face teaching will be important to my success • 2006–87% agree/strongly agree • 2007–87% agree/strongly agree
Hassel and Ridout (2018) 5-point Likert Strongly agree – strongly disagree Percentage responses (highest reported here)	I will have to do a lot of independent learning – 97.4% agree/strongly agree I will do fine as long as I do all required reading – 59.8% agree/strongly agree	It will be difficult to balance study and work commitments – 44.2% agree/strongly agree I will have to take care of my own notes – 97.4% agree/strongly agree	There will be a lot of group work – 67.5% agree/strongly agree Lecturers give extensive written notes – 46.6% disagree/strongly disagree Lecturers will dictate their notes – 45.5% agree/strongly agree I will have to attend all classes – 75.4% agree/strongly agree I will do fine even if I do not go to class – 87.1% disagree/strongly disagree I will do fine if I just pay attention in class – 28.6% agree/strongly agree 99.2% of students expected to be attending lectures 99.6% expected to be attending seminars Mean expected percentage of time that would be spent on curricular activities = 61.2%	
Maloshonok and Terentev (2017) Percentage responses	89.5% expected to be doing reading according to instructor's requirements 98.4% expected to be doing homework assignments 64.2% expected to do additional study relating to their learning courses			

(Continued)

Table 4. (Continued).

Paper and Data Type	Additional Study	Self-Managing Learning	Teaching and Learning Activities	Access to Staff and Resources
Pather and Booi (2019) 5-point Likert 5 = high expectation Mean responses	Spend most of time at the library after lectures – 2.46/5	Able to manage and take responsibility for own learning at university – 2.95/5 Able to balance my first-year university study with other university study with other responsibility – 2.72/5 Able to cope with in-class and out-of-class workload – 2.73/5	Involved in academic discussions with my peers outside of formal lectures which helped me in my learning – 2.81/5	Had easy access to internet, computers and other resources to enhance my first-year learning – 2.82/5
Pather and Dorasamy (2018) 4 point Likert 4 = high expectation Mean responses	A lot of time spent on preparing for lectures – 3.31/4 A lot of time spent at the library – 3.9/4	Seek assistance from peers and friends with academic work – 2.30/4 Seek assistance from senior students and tutors with academic work – 2.30/4 Seek assistance and advice from lecturers out of class time – 2.07/4 I expect to have no problem organising my workload – 3.97/6	Seek assistance from peers and friends with academic work – 2.30/4	Social media contact with lecturers – 2.62/4 Conversations with lecturers out of class – 2.76/4
Rowley, Hartley, and Larkin (2008) 6-point Likert 6 = strongly agree Mean responses Sander, Stevenson, King and Coates (2000) Top 3 expected teaching and learning methods ranking Mean ranking 0–3	I will need to carry out a large amount of independent reading – 5.56/6			I will have less contact with lecturing staff than when I did my A-levels – 5.48/6
Scutter et al. (2011) Percentage responses and open responses	80% of students felt they would be able to combine study with paid work 68% of students felt that university teachers would provide all materials required for their learning		Formal lecture – 1.69 Interactive lecture – 1.30 Tutorial – 0.75 Teaching session based around group work – 0.66 Private study – 0.63 Student-centred teaching – 0.45 Group work – 0.37 Student presentations – 0.13 Student role play – 0.02 94% felt that it would be important to attend most lectures How many hours per course (module) do you expect to study per week? 6–10 hours = 25% (highest response)	87% felt that having easy and convenient access to lecturers outside of face to face teaching would be important to learning

Table 5. Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) version 2018 (Hong et al. 2018) – Quality of included studies.

Study	Methodological Quality Criteria						
	All Types	Quantitative Descriptive Studies					
	S1Are there clear research questions?	4.1Is the sampling strategy relevant to address the research questions?	4.2Is the sample representative of the population?	4.3Are the measurements appropriate?	4.4Is the risk of nonresponse bias low?	4.5Is the statistical analysis appropriate to answer the research question?	
Borgh, Mainardes, and Silva (2016)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Not reported	Yes	
Crisp et al. (2009)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Not reported	Yes	
Hassel and Ridout (2018)	Yes	Not reported	Yes	Yes	Not reported	Yes	
Maloshonok and Terentev (2017)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Not reported	Yes	
Pather and Booi (2019)	Yes	Not reported	Yes	Yes	Not reported	Yes	
Pather and Dorasamy (2018)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Not reported	Yes	
Rowley, Hartley, and Larkin (2008)	Yes	Not reported	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Sander, Stevenson, King and Coates (2000)	Yes	Not reported	Yes	Yes	Not reported	Yes	
Scutter et al. (2011)	Yes	Not reported	Yes	Yes	Not reported	Yes	

differences in expectations between students and academic staff (Hassel and Ridout 2018) and one study compared student expectations with the expectations academic staff perceive students to have (Borgh, Mainardes, and Silva 2016).

### *Narrative synthesis*

Following the Popay et al. (2006) method of narrative synthesis, four natural groupings emerged within the data that informed the presentation of the following narrative synthesis. These included: additional study, self-managing learning, teaching and learning activities, and accessibility. These groupings can be seen in Table 4.

### *Additional study*

Eight studies reported on student expectations around additional study. Specifically, the number of hours spent on additional study, how they might spend these hours, the value assigned to various aspects of additional study and the guidance expected. Additional study was defined by the authors as study taking place outside of scheduled teaching sessions.

Most students expected to complete additional study outside of scheduled classes, with 11–15 hours per week identified as the most commonly expected time (Crisp et al. 2009; Hassel and Ridout 2018; Maloshonok and Terentev 2017). Spending time preparing for lectures and completing homework assignments were both highly expected, (Maloshonok and Terentev 2017; Pather and Dorasamy 2018) as was additional reading, which presented high expectation rates in two studies (Maloshonok and Terentev 2017; Rowley, Hartley, and Larkin 2008). Students seem to place some value on this additional reading, with almost half of students in the study by Hassel and Ridout (2018) agreeing that they ‘expect to do fine’ if all required reading is completed. Library study provided different levels of expectation in two studies, with less than half of students surveyed by Pather and Booi (2019) to nearly all students surveyed by Pather and Dorasamy (2018) expecting to spend a lot of time at the library after lectures. Despite the seemingly high expectations around additional study overall, private study, was only ranked the fifth most expected teaching and learning method by surveyed students in the Sander et al. (2000) study. In this study, private study was described as students being given readings, exercises and activities and ‘left to get on with it’. It is unclear whether this was within or outside of scheduled sessions.

### *Self-managing learning*

Six studies presented data relating to self-management. Self-management was defined by authors as the ability of students to take ownership and control of their learning, particularly in relation to workload management and responsibilities.

Students seem to understand that they will have to take some responsibility for their own learning. When students were asked what they thought would be important in making their university experience successful by Crisp et al. (2009), the most common answer was that the responsibility is oneself. Despite this, students present some reservations with regards to their ability to manage their own learning and workload (Pather and Booi 2019; Rowley, Hartley, and Larkin 2008). There was also uncertainty with regards to combining study and work commitments. Between 68–80% of students across two studies were confident that they would be able to combine study with paid work (Crisp et al. 2009; Scutter et al. 2011), however 44.2% of students surveyed by Hassel and Ridout (2018) expected to find this difficult to balance.

Almost all students surveyed by Hassel and Ridout (2018) expected that they would have to take care of their own notes, and most understood that these will not be provided by lecturers. However this sense of responsibility around notes may not transfer to other resources, as 68% of students

surveyed by Scutter et al. (2011) felt that it would be university lecturers providing all materials required for their learning.

### *Teaching and learning activities*

Expectations around teaching and learning activities were reported in seven studies. Teaching and learning activities were defined by the authors as lecturer facilitated methods to help students develop skills and understanding. This specifically related to study time, session attendance and specific teaching and learning methods.

Students surveyed by Maloshonok and Terentev (2017) expected to spend around 60% of their time on curricular activities at university. Expectations varied regarding how much time would be spent studying per module, with 3–6 hours and 6–10 hours both receiving a similar amount of responses in the Scutter et al. (2011) study.

Statements regarding attendance at scheduled teaching and learning sessions were posed in both positive and negative formats, and findings were synonymous. Across three studies, between 75.4% and 96% of students agreed that it would be important and necessary to attend classes (Crisp et al. 2009; Hassel and Ridout 2018; Scutter et al. 2011). Strong disagreement was reported in two studies when similar statements were posed in negative formats (Crisp et al. 2009; Hassel and Ridout 2018). Students appreciate that success will require more than attending and listening, with less than one third of students in the Hassel and Ridout (2018) study agreeing that they would 'do fine' if they pay attention in class.

Formal lectures were ranked as the most expected teaching and learning method by Sander et al. (2000), and were expected by almost all students surveyed by Maloshonok and Terentev (2017). It seems this is the only method that students are sure they will experience, as other results varied. Interactive lectures whereby questions and activities are included was ranked close second by students in the Sander et al. (2000) study, with tutorials coming third. The absence of practical learning within these top three methods is interesting, as Borghi, Mainardes, and Silva (2016) reported that students expect more practical classes than theoretical ones. Clarification as to what was meant by 'practical classes' was not provided; however practical classes are generally hands on sessions conducted in specialist spaces such as laboratories. Despite being ranked only the fourth expected teaching and learning method as described by Sander et al. (2000), group work received relatively high expectation scores regarding both participation and importance across five studies (Crisp et al. 2009; Hassel and Ridout 2018; Pather and Booi 2019; Pather and Dorasamy 2018; Scutter et al. 2011). Although not specifically termed 'group work', seminars traditionally involve group interaction and were expected by almost all students surveyed by Maloshonok and Terentev (2017). Aside from specific group work peers still seem to hold importance, as academic discussions with peers outside of lectures and seeking assistance from peers with academic work were both somewhat expected by students across two studies (Pather and Booi 2019; Pather and Dorasamy 2018).

Irrespective of the session type, almost all students surveyed by Borghi, Mainardes, and Silva (2016) expected lessons to be pleasant and interesting, and also expected some negotiation between students and lecturers as to the teaching and learning methods employed.

### *Access to staff and resources*

Expectations relating to staff and resource access were presented in six studies. Access was defined by the authors as the ability to be obtained or reached.

Students expect access to resources, but to varying degrees. Resources were not specified in any of the included papers, however it is generally accepted that this refers to any materials that will assist learning. Students in the Borghi, Mainardes, and Silva (2016) study strongly expected access to all academic and non-academic course information through online tools. However Pather and Booi

(2019) reported expectations that were just above neutral when students were asked about easy access to resources, computers, and the internet.

Students have high expectations with regards to accessing teaching staff. Of the students surveyed by both Crisp et al. (2009) and Scutter et al. (2011), 87% agreed that having access to lecturers outside of face-to-face teaching would be important for learning. More specifically, students surveyed in the Pather and Dorasamy (2018) study expect both conversations and social media contact with lecturing staff outside of class. Students may expect this to be staff led, as when students in the same study were asked if they expect seek assistance and advice from lecturers outside of class time, the response was neutral (Pather and Dorasamy 2018). Students surveyed by Rowley et al. (2008) expected to have more access to teaching staff than when they did their pre-university qualifications, which is interesting, given the larger student numbers and less contact time in comparison to further education.

## Discussion

The aim of this review was to understand student expectations of teaching and learning when starting university. Whilst some expectations uncovered in this review are appropriate, there is still an overall sense of uncertainty, misalignment, and unrealism that requires further discussion. Findings indicate that students expect to complete additional study and take responsibility for their own learning, but may have reservations with regards to managing this. They expect to have to attend all sessions and expect lectures to be used as the main teaching and learning method, but thoughts on other methods vary. Students also have high expectations of teaching staff with regards to providing all resources and being able to access staff outside of scheduled teaching sessions, including via social media. With extensive contributing factors to formation, student expectations of teaching and learning when starting university are impossible to control. However, attempting to understand the potential uncertain, misaligned and unrealistic expectations that students may present with, allows for early intervention that may enhance the overall student experience.

This study has four main contributions to make that will aid understanding of student expectations of teaching and learning when starting university.

Firstly, the positive expectations of students presented in this review may not always be aligned with student actions. Two key areas in which students presented high expectations were additional study and attendance. Multiple studies comparing expectations with reality highlight that the actual amount of additional study completed within first year is less than expected before starting (Maloshonok and Terentev 2017; Pather and Dorasamy 2018; Rowley et al. 2008). From a lecturer's perspective, studies also highlight an unwillingness of students to complete work outside of scheduled sessions, which is surprising given this high initial expectation around additional study (Barlow and Antoniou 2007). In relation to additional reading, Stokes and Martin (2008) suggest that students are more likely to engage if there is perceived assessment benefit, rather than simply valuing the benefit to the wider learning process. Perhaps clarity is needed around the term 'additional', as this may imply that the work is optional, whereas teaching staff may actually be referring to 'independent' study that is completed in addition to face to face sessions but is still essential. Perceiving additional study to be optional may make it easy for students to prioritise family, social, and work commitments, particularly as the rising cost of living now forces many students to find regular employment in order to support their time at university. Despite high expectations of attendance, absenteeism is an ongoing issue in universities (Kelly 2012). This is particularly problematic for teaching and learning methods such as problem-based learning, where attendance is essential in order to actively participate and construct knowledge (Bijmans and Schakel 2018). Lectures are also problematic, with students reporting selective attendance, seemingly treating them as optional rather than compulsory (Money et al. 2017). Various reasons have been identified for absenteeism, including lack of motivation, non-compulsory attendance,

and session tedium (Moores, Birdi, and Higson 2019; Triado-Ivern et al. 2020). Many sessions are now also recorded and available online, removing the necessity to attend in order to engage with the content. As well as being identified as potential areas for decline, completion of additional study and attendance have both been identified as factors influencing success, therefore the initial high expectations in these areas should be reinforced and facilitated by both module leaders and academic tutors (Bijsmans and Schakel 2018; Credé, Roch, and Kieszczyńska 2010; Trotter and Roberts 2006; van der Zanden et al. 2018). James (2002) highlights that early experiences on campus shape new student expectations, which may indicate that institutions are unintentionally contributing to the misalignment between high initial expectations and subsequent actions. For example, unintentionally enabling non-attendance through the availability of online resources, or decreasing the value of additional study tasks due to a weak or unclear rationale. Maloshonok and Terentev (2017) suggest tracking student interest to determine possible reasons for decline, but further research is needed to fully investigate the reasoning behind expectation and action misalignment.

Secondly, the findings of this review highlight that students mainly expect lectures. There could be many reasons for this, including media portrayal of universities, experiences of family and friends, information provided at school or college, and use of the title 'lecturer' for teaching staff. This is an accurate expectation regardless of the reason, as lecturing is said to be the most utilised method of teaching in HE (Schmidt et al. 2015). However, this does not align with best teaching practice. The notion that students will effectively understand and store information following simple verbal transmission is an archaic way of thinking; students must actually use the information to aid memory (Green 2005; Schmidt et al. 2015). There are some positives to lectures from a staff perspective, including time efficiency for large numbers and ease of delivery, however many negatives have been identified for students, including poor engagement, attendance and critical thinking (Schmidt et al. 2015). From a student's perspective, there may be a misconception that they are being provided with comprehensive knowledge about a topic in a lecture, which may seem like an easy way to acquire information and may contribute to the lack of additional study (Sajjad 2010). Teaching and learning in HE has progressed significantly from this teacher-centred, didactic approach, and a student-centred approach using constructivist methods such as flipped learning is now promoted (Biggs and Tang 2011). Encouragingly, this review identified that students also have strong expectations around group work, which may indicate willingness to engage in active teaching and learning methods alongside the expected passive lectures. The continued use of traditional lectures in HE, despite the lack of supporting evidence for their effectiveness, is part of a wider challenge that requires addressing. It is acknowledged that balancing management imperatives with quality teaching and learning for large cohorts is a challenge for teaching staff, and development of when and how lectures are used and delivered may be a good way to begin addressing their usage, rather than replacing them altogether. Lecture recordings could be used as pre-session work to provide a superficial understanding of a topic before an interactive face-to-face session (flipped approach), or Schmidt et al. (2015) suggest alternating short bursts of information transmission with active learning tasks, and incorporating problem-based tasks, discussion and feedback. It is important to note that if most students expect traditional lectures, there may be a lack of understanding and potentially resistance towards more contemporary, constructivist teaching and learning approaches. Interventions to provide basic pedagogic reasoning for teaching and learning methods during module introduction may help to minimise resistance, promote engagement, and better align expectations with the realities of the module they are about to study.

Thirdly, it is accurate for students to expect to take responsibility for their own learning, as independent learning is a key graduate attribute. The fact that students have reservations with regards to managing their learning is a common concern, and is understandable as they transition away from the familiarity of compulsory education (Christie, Barron, and D'Annunzio-Green 2013). In relation to teaching and learning, the term 'self-management' is said to focus on the external environment and activities affecting the learning process, specifically managing time, resources, and support (Zhu and Doo 2022). Self-management has been highlighted as a key employability skill

in numerous models (Bridgstock 2009; National Union of Students [NUS] 2011; CBI & Universities UK [UUK] 2009) but has also been identified as one of the most common skills lacking among workforce by UK employers, highlighting the need for student support and guidance to encourage development (Winterbotham et al. 2020). University libraries often run additional sessions to help develop areas such as self-management, however their extra-curricular nature that separates study skills from subject content has proven ineffective (Wingate 2006). The Higher Education Academy (HEA) produced guidance and an accompanying framework to assist universities in embedding employability, which highlights the need for consistent and comprehensive inclusion at both institution and programme level (Cole and Tibby 2013; HEA 2015). Module embedded study skills have the potential to benefit a larger number of students, particularly those struggling to engage that are unlikely to seek additional help (Durkin and Main 2002). They may also result in improved perceived importance and therefore engagement due to being lecturer led, and reduce potential 'deficit' stigma associated with accessing study skills support (Minogue, Murphy, and Salmons 2018). Modules specifically developed to combine subject content with study skills have been successfully implemented and should serve as guidance for other HE programmes (Minogue, Murphy, and Salmons 2018). The term self-management appropriately summarises a group of data within this review and therefore informed a theme title and subsequent discussion point, however consideration should be given to the term 'self-regulation', as this may be an equally valuable student development area. Self-regulated learning focuses on the achievement of learning goals through the initiation and maintenance of cognitive activities (Zhu and Doo 2022). Whilst self-management does have an impact on self-regulation in relation to teaching and learning, it does not consider the self-adaptation of student thoughts, feelings and actions that impact goal achievement (Zu, Au and Yates 2016). Facilitating student development in both areas is recommended in order to address the self-management concerns uncovered within this review and develop lifelong skills that promote goal achievement. Aside from embedding study skills with subject content, other development methods may include encouraging feedback, reflection, and choosing engaging teaching techniques such as presentations, peer tutoring, and debates (Biggs and Tang 2011; Kornelakis and Petrakaki 2020).

Finally, this study found that student expectations of teaching staff may be inaccurate and/or unrealistic, particularly with regards to social media contact outside of scheduled sessions and providing all resources required for learning. It would not be possible for teaching staff to provide all learning resources, and this further highlights the reservations students may have in regards to managing their own learning. Further understanding of what students mean by social media contact is necessary in order to thoroughly explore this expectation, as it largely depends on the context. We are living in a digital era where technology is a large part of both everyday life and teaching and learning, and it is now assumed that all students have a smartphone and computer access (Cilliers 2017). Social media is no longer used solely for social interaction and is now regularly used for educational and work purposes (Penni 2015). Most universities will have multiple social media platforms, as do some specific programmes, and these are used heavily for advertising and student recruitment. Twitter is a key platform used to share and keep up to date with research, YouTube provides many educational videos, and LinkedIn is used for professional networking (Mohammadi et al. 2018; Snelson 2011; Utz and Breuer 2019). Therefore, from a student's perspective, it may be reasonable to assume that social media contact with lecturers is likely and appropriate. Times Higher Education reported on a survey suggesting that one in four students use social media to contact lecturers, however platforms were not identified and the specific study could not be located (Parr 2015). Lecturers have identified that they believe Facebook should largely remain for private, rather than professional matters, however should be treated on a case-by-case basis (Linek and Ostermaier-Grabow 2018). Email remains the main and most appropriate and preferred communication method between lecturers and students at university (Judd 2010; Merdian and Warrior 2015). It is suggested that clarification around the use of social media for lecturer contact purposes is addressed upon starting university to align with lecturer preferences and university policies. Transparent discussion around the role of teaching staff and resource provision may also be useful in shaping realistic expectations.



## Strengths and limitations

This review is the first to synthesise student expectations of teaching and learning when starting university. The findings are based on the expectations of over 7,000 students from five different countries, offering an international perspective. For the purposes of this review, the term 'expectations' referred to forecast expectations, which were concerned with what students thought was likely to happen. A lack of clear distinction between forecast and ideal or desired expectations has been identified as limitation in previous literature (Balloo 2018), but is something that this review has successfully addressed. Whilst care was taken to include all relevant key words within the search strategy, it is accepted that the term may have different interpretations, and therefore may have additional associated words that were not included in the search. The heterogeneity of individual study designs made the extraction and synthesis of data challenging, as the surveys used in each study differed in terms of questions asked, measurement method and analysis. No studies included in this review focused specifically on student expectations of teaching and learning. Teaching and learning elements were embedded within wider expectation surveys and therefore relevant questions were limited. All included studies used surveys as their form of data collection, and whilst surveys are useful in screening large numbers, it is appreciated that they are not sufficient to inform major changes or decisions. The papers within this review originate from a variety of countries with different academic cultures, it is therefore recognised that this may have influenced student responses and readers should consider the transferability of findings to their own location. It is also recognised that despite the exclusion of studies investigating expectations of specific programmes, student expectations will inevitably be influenced by the programme they are applying to study.

## Conclusion

This systematic review sought to understand student expectations of teaching and learning when starting university. Overall, the findings suggest that whilst some student expectations of teaching and learning are appropriate, others involve uncertainty with regards to managing learning, misalignment with current best teaching and learning practices, and unrealistic expectations of staff. The teaching and learning specific findings uncovered in this review may be useful for lecturing staff who can address expectations as part of module introduction, compared to general expectations of the university experience that may be more appropriate at an institutional level. This is important as expectations that are unrealistic or misaligned with best teaching and learning practices may affect engagement, retention, satisfaction, and the overall student experience.

Future research should investigate student expectations specifically around teaching and learning at university. Qualitative methodologies such as semi-structured interviews or focus groups would be beneficial in gaining a deeper and more authentic understanding of teaching and learning expectations. It would also be interesting to assess synonymy between qualitative findings and the key findings identified in this systematic review, particularly in a UK based sample. Future research could investigate interventions to help better align expectations with reality and best teaching practices in the event of disparity. This may help to mitigate against potential negative effects on the overall student experience. Given the complexity of understanding student expectations, study designs which co-create interventions with students to support expectations of teaching and learning may be beneficial. Action research is a methodology that has been employed by educators to improve practice, and may be a good way to develop and monitor student expectation interventions.

## Disclosure statement

The authors declare that this review was conducted in the absence of any relationships that could be considered conflict of interest.

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