

'It's almost a mindset that teachers need to change': first-year students' need to be inducted into time management Jacques van der Meera *, Ellen Jansen and Marjolein Torenbeek

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Short Abstract:

One transition challenge for first-year students is related to effective time management and self-study skills for the particular university teaching and learning context. Time management and self-study, for the purpose of this article, will be understood as part of the same set of skills related to organising and keeping up with a range of study tasks. A study by the UK Higher Education Academy (Yorke and Longden 2007) clearly suggested that students experienced challenges in managing their time. Krause and Coates (2008), in considering the results of a student engagement instrument, commented that being able to 'manage one's time, study and strategies for success as a student is foundational to success in the first year' (500). Furthermore, time management skills are important contributors to study success (Macan et al. 1990). Confidence in long-term planning is a particularly important predictor of successful study performance (Trueman and Hartley 1996). Furthermore, students' time allocation skills have been proven to be related to the acquisition of discipline-specific and generic competencies (Meng and Heijke 2005). In this article we will report on research findings from different projects related to first-year students' experiences in two different institutions. The central questions we discuss are: (1) How prepared do students feel in time management and self-study skills before they enrol in university? (2) What do first-year students report as challenges in the area of time management and self-study?

Short Method:

Students were asked to answer a number of categorical questions and a range of questions on a five-point Likert-scale (from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'). These Likert-scale questions related to respondents' expectations of what would happen in the first year at university and their self-perceived readiness for university. The items were composed around several dimensions, including induction and time management. Expectation-related questions included items such as 'I will have to do a lot of independent research tasks'. Preparedness questions included items such as: 'My previous experiences prepared me well to keep up with a lot of readings' and 'I am good at working independently'.

Short findings (Time Management)

The survey also asked students to indicate how much time they anticipated spending on the various activities. Otago students expected to spend on average 19 hours per week on class-related activities, and 20 on independent study; for Groningen these were 18 and 17, respectively. Overall then, it could be suggested that there were no major differences between the first-year students in the two countries with regard to their sense of preparedness and expectations of higher education on the dimensions included in the survey. The data also suggest that, overall, students understood that university would be different from high school, that they would have to do much of their time planning themselves, and that they considered themselves confident that they would be able to manage their time. Lastly, students were reasonably realistic about the amount of time to be spent

on academic activities. Students' responses to the survey questions of the Otago UNI101 survey and the interviews, however, revealed that some students experienced significant challenges.

In the 2004 survey, responses to the question about what respondents would advise future first-year students, it was clear that time management was a considerable element. Table 2 shows the different categories of responses.

Table 2. Comments related to time management.

Nature of comment	Number of comments
Keep up, stay on top of work, don't fall behind	164
Start early	100
Pay attention to time management	22
Revise all the time	19
Work all the time	13
Total number of student comments related to time management	318

The common theme was advising future students to start working from day one, and to work consistently throughout the semester. Some students specifically mentioned the importance of time management. The top category of 'keep up' comprised comments such as: 'keep up with work, don't leave everything to last minute – workload gets too much and catch up gets impossible', 'keep up with readings', 'stay on top of work, do assignments early, go to classes, do the readings before lectures', and 'try not to fall behind, ask questions when you need help'. Survey comments related to the other categories included some of the following comments: 'start working early in the year as otherwise you will drop behind and all of a sudden it will be the exams and you will be wanting to leave', 'revise from day one, SERIOUSLY!! [sic] Otherwise it's really hard', and 'work all the time to make you understand everything at the time'. One respondent mentioned attending a workshop on the issue: 'make sure you go to a time management workshop at the student learning centre'.

There were few indications, however, that students considered the university as having a responsibility in the area of self-study planning and time management. One of the interviewees, Natasha (a pseudonym), for example, commented: 'I don't think anyone really gives you a lot of help with that. It's just you're just expected to figure out a lot of things like that'. Some survey respondents suggested the university could provide some help: 'not a single mention of upcoming essays/assignments. First years need some degree of spoon-feeding after seventh form [final year of high school in New Zealand]' and 'lack of info on how to prepare earlier'. Where the topic of students struggling with their workload came up in interviews, the initial reaction of some students was to blame themselves. The assumption seemed to be that the university as an institution was not expected to play a role in this. It was only when an interview question was phrased in such a way that they were invited to think of other perspectives that interviewees considered alternative explanations. Pamela, for example, initially put the responsibility on students themselves: 'I guess it's easier to say they [university] could do this and do that, but really, most of it's on your shoulders whether you do it or not. I don't know how you can change that'.

Although few students directly suggested that the university had a responsibility in students' time management, some ideas were mentioned of how teachers could be of help. Susan had come to

realise during the semester that she should have started much earlier with some of her work. She felt that 'people need to know that ... realising that'. She implied that it would have been helpful if they were told. As far as she herself was concerned, she had learned a lesson through experience: 'I know next semester will go better because I now know, [to] get on top of my work straight away'. Some students also considered it helpful to be reminded of upcoming assignments. This can be seen, for example, in the following survey comments: 'give notice in lectures [of] upcoming assessments' and 'mention assignment due dates in lectures'. One survey respondent also seemed to suggest that this would be a caring thing to do: 'reminders of important dates etc, helpful, caring, personal'. One interviewee, a school-leaver, very soon realised that university was different from high school. She felt that teachers at university should emphasise a bit more the short time frame for most courses. Sandy commented on one course, where they were reminded by teachers and through Blackboard (a proprietary electronic course management programme): 'generally they do remind you yeah they're pretty good'. Veronique too, had some good experiences of being reminded. She thought it was particularly important to be reminded about the importance of time management in courses where students had to achieve a certain grade point average for admission to their preferred second year course: 'I think they need to keep on reminding people that the first year is what determines you to get into second year and so, rather than the first year being a muck around year, it almost needs to be the year that you work the hardest, so you can get into what you want'. She then added that 'It's like almost a mindset that they [teachers] need to change'. What she seemed to suggest was that first-year students are not used to thinking in terms of regular work if there is no immediate deadline looming. Evelyn provides a good illustration of a student who started to make sense of time management and assessment as the first semester progressed. Her first experience was that she nearly forgot she had a test: 'I didn't really know about the test until the day before but it wasn't a problem ... it was a Tuesday they told us, they reminded us'. She had remembered that they were told at the beginning of the year, but it had escaped her as the weeks passed. She then mused on the issue of having to be responsible for remembering when assessments take place: 'Because they don't sort of tell you at uni. Like remember this, remember that. It's all up to you to realise that you've got to do your own work'. When she came across her course overview, she realised that all the details were in it, and she started her time management by putting all the dates on a time planner: 'At first I didn't really read through any of the stuff but then when you do read through it, you sort of use the information quite well'.