‘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. Expectationrelated 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: Independent study

The level of independent study required, and the seeming lack of assistance to make the transition into more independent study at university, was another theme. One survey respondent made a comparison with the type of learning expected before coming to university: ‘different compared to school, a lot more independent work – not always knowing exactly what is required in your work’. One of the interviewees, Emily, was somewhat surprised that they were being left so much to study without specific guidance. The lack of direction left her uncertain. She wondered whether this related to a particular teaching style at the university: ‘I just thought you’d spend more time within the university being taught rather than so much left to yourself’. One survey respondent seemed to appreciate that they had to be independent learners, but also pointed out that first-years have particular needs: ‘for first year students it’s important to be integrated into self-teaching slowly, instead of just left to try and attempt it with no advice guidelines’. This respondent seemed to suggest that there was nothing wrong with a different way of doing things, but that first-year students needed to be assisted in making sense of how things at university worked. Brad, however,

did not seem to expect the university to play a role. Although he himself struggled to get clarity on how much to study, and how to approach his study, he thought that it was up to each student: 'I thought well maybe it's sort of down to your own personal beliefs on what you should do and what you shouldn't do, due to the fact that you're at university and it's, you know you're there to learn, if you want to learn you learn and if you don't you don't'.

Workload expectations

Students also experienced more specific challenges related to workload expectations. Students' awareness that they had to do a lot of work did not necessarily translate into knowing how to approach the study load. Linda, for example, had appreciated that there was going to be a lot of work, but did not know what that meant in practice: 'at the end of the semester we all panic, freak out … it's during those times that when you look back you said ahh how I wished I did this, or that or that, but just no one really tells you how to do it'. She did not try to suggest that there had been a lack of information on workload: 'Like they will say there's going to be lots of work etc, and you just have to start from day one, but nobody really gives you the idea of what is expected of you'. She seems to suggest that being told about the quantity of work does not translate into workable knowledge on what this means, and how to translate this into planning her time. It is interesting to note that this was a mature student in her mid-twenties who had already completed a bachelor's degree in Australia. Linda's experience was echoed by some other students doing a similar course. They had heard that it was going to be a lot of work, but found it surprising that they were asked to do so little. They had expected that they would be given weekly work, or assignments to be done at home. They did not count the weekly exit tests in laboratories as 'real' assignments, because they were in the laboratory anyway, and did not have to take the assignment home. One health-science student, Candy, 'sort of' knew that she probably had to do more than she did, but was not sure how to go about organising her self-study: 'some Tuesdays I have nothing from 9 till 3, so it's kind of like the whole day I'm doing nothing, and it feels like I've got no work to do but I guess we're just supposed to read through our text books, it kind of freaks me out'. She had thought that '[course A] would be like a lot of work you know, like they give you a lot of work like you have to do a lot of assignments or whatever, and they haven't like'. Candy's comments, and those of other students, could suggest that only take-home assignments were equated with study expectations. Revising and studying towards examinations were not necessarily considered as something they should be doing throughout the semester. Evelyn's remarks about ongoing study also seemed a good illustration of this: 'A lot of people, my friends have a lot of work that they're doing but it's just it is optional at university, like they're not going to tell you off if you haven't done your homework, it's just a good idea to do work'. Evelyn's idea was that study at home was optional, unless it was an assignment. It was not obvious to all students, then, how they were supposed to conceive of the time that was not spent on assignments or in classes.

Teachers' expectations

Participants in this research reported variable attitudes of teachers in communicating course expectations. Kate commented that teachers in one course had been very clear about the time required for a particular assignment: 'they told us it would be about 30 hours outside of class. They told us about two, three weeks before, and they reminded us every time they saw us'. When another interviewee, Harriett, contemplated what had been helpful for her, she remarked that: 'I find it helpful where they've basically just said like you know we've got four hours of lectures, but I expect you to be doing another four hours out of lectures … give you sort of mainly just a timeframe'. Although the University of Otago equates each course with a particular weekly workload, including both class time and self-study, there were few indications that students had an understanding of this.

Although few participants mentioned specific time expectations, some students were given 'broad' indications that they had to do some study outside of classes. However, these indications were at times a source of confusion. Teachers referred, for example, to 'extra' readings, or exercises that were 'optional' or 'recommended'. Sometimes doing something 'extra' was offered as a suggestion rather than requirement, such as Evelyn's account of what one of her teachers said: 'when you have a spare bit of time you can look through the notes, or there's an extra website here you can have a look at if you've got some extra time'. Rita commented on one of her lecturers who did remind them every now and then of what they could 'study up' about: 'Like every now and then the lecturer might say "you guys should be looking at this, studying up on this"'. Sometimes teachers were perceived to be saying one thing, but meaning something else. For example, Sandy, who studied one of the modern languages, found it difficult to establish how much studying was expected from her: 'she [the teacher] said, you know, we can choose to do as much as we want, we would like. But really she does actually expect you to do it'. In this case Sandy perceived a mismatch between the articulated expectation (there is a choice), and what was 'really' expected (do it all). Emily hinted at a similar mismatch between what they were told and what it meant. In one of her courses, she said, they had told students: 'we recommend you do this, we recommend you do that, and nothing's actually told you should do this. And when it comes to the exams you should have done it, but they've never really said so and so that's kind of a big issue'. These examples, too, suggest that teachers' intentions were not always clear to students. In summary, what comes through the data is that some teachers seemed to understand that first-year students need more guidance (e.g. regular reminding of upcoming assignments) and others did not. In other words, the issue is not about 'contradictory evidence' with respect to students' challenges, but about variability in teachers' awareness of the needs of first-year students (as reported by students).

Similar to the Otago interview findings, many students at the University of Groningen experienced a distinct difference between high school and university time management. One student, for example, emphasised that: 'Different from high school [when] we are reminded what to do … that doesn't happen here … you have to do it all yourself'. Another student mentioned that 'The biggest difference is the level of independence in managing your studies, your time planning, sorting out time tables, what you have to read etc'. Consequently, one student identified that '[the important skill to develop is] is independent study skills, that is very important, otherwise you won't make it I think'. However, some experienced a degree of support from their teachers: 'I find that in medicine they do seem to guide you. They are keen to point out what to learn, and when to do it by, just like at high school … I find it really clear, I hadn't expected that, I thought you would be left to your own devices'.

Another task that students seemed to have little comprehension of was allowing and planning time for ongoing revision towards the examination period. The many blocks of unscheduled time between scheduled class times were a new experience for many students. Some interviewees, for example, reported that they felt they should do work all the time, but did not seem sure how to organise a routine; and some ended up not doing much at all. One interviewee blamed herself towards the end of the semester for not having started revision of material earlier. In some of her courses the assessment was heavily weighted toward the final examinations. Another interviewee had mentioned that she was surprised early in the semester that there was so little work to do; she had expected it to be more difficult. These experiences suggest that it was not obvious to all students that things were done differently at university. For some students, realisation happened as the semester progressed. Students' report of the manner in which some teachers communicated may have contributed to students not being clear on how to make sense of study expectations. The seemingly 'optional' nature of some activities, such as 'extra' readings, was experienced as confusing.

Advice from staff at times seemed too tentative or indirect for students to apprehend their importance. Where first-year students had to come to terms with a range of demands on their time, seemingly discretionary activities may, therefore, not have been appreciated as important. Amongst these apparently discretionary activities in some courses 'readings' figured prominently. Another reported difference with high school was the lesser emphasis on reminding students about forthcoming tasks and deadlines. Some students, for example, mentioned that this had a particular impact on assignments and examination revision. This often resulted in last-minute work. A comment from one interviewee suggested that students had had assessments sprung on them. At the University of Otago, all courses are obliged to inform students at the beginning of the semester how and when they will be assessed. It would, therefore, be unlikely that assessments were completely sprung on students. A number of students mentioned that they probably had been told of assessments, but they assumed this was at the beginning of the year. This could suggest that at that moment the student had not realised that they had to take note of that as being relevant and important. One particular interviewee, for example, started to put assessment dates on her wall planner after she had some earlier experiences of being surprised by upcoming assessments. This student also commented that she had realised that at university students were not told. This seemed to be something she had come to realise over time, rather than something she knew at the start of the year. Students' experiences in some courses suggest that some teachers may have been aware of first-year students' needs in respect of time management and study organisation. In some tutorials and laboratories, for example, students were given weekly Blackboard tests or weekly homework. Whether this was done intentionally in recognition of students' needs could not be established. However, these weekly routines gave students a sense of being on track. Practices of this kind were found helpful by students, and would be worthy of consideration by other teachers.