

Student Expectations and the Effect of Experience

Bob Pithers

Faculty of Education – University of Technology, Sydney.

&

Tony Holland

Faculty of Education – University of Technology, Sydney.

Abstract

One aspect of empowering students at a university is to take the current view that they are now to be regarded as “clients” or “customers” rather than recipients of education. In this context it is imperative that student demands and expectations of lecturing staff have been given little considered when planning, designing and delivering courses. This of course makes the assumption that university students are an homogenous groups with respect to their expectations. This study surveyed students to find out whether this assumption is tenable or if student expectation change over the course of study. With this objective in mind this study surveyed two students groups: one group fresh from high school and a second group in their last year of study,

The results from the survey showed that students across both had quite congruent expectations of their lecturers. Both groups saw subject matter expertise as the key factor in their expectations of university teachers, while grading assessment fairly, keeping learners interested and showing enthusiasm for subject matter content rated highly with both groups. There were however some differences between the groups mostly concerning issues such as structuring the learning process, supporting learners and directing learners.

The role expectations of students about their university teachers is characterised by a little published research, although by comparison there is a voluminous literature available about student-reaction evaluation and university teaching (eg Wachtel, 1998); probably thousands of papers, according to Marsh and Dunkin (1992). With the current emphasis on quality and quality auditing of universities some workers have argued that student demands and expectations have been given little consideration (Rolfe, 2002) . Rolfe completed a study of student expectations based on the views of their lecturers, who supposed that their students expected more direction and guidance than in the past, wanted increased individual contact, more available resources and were more motivated by assessment.

Some other interesting issues in this area have been raised and it is thought that this field of research needs a fresh examination, primarily because of recent changes in government policy and the effect of this on current students. Another reason, of course, is because the nature of the university student population, at least in the Western World, has changed over recent years. Now, universities are more likely to have a culturally diverse mix of students that hitherto. As students pay more for the “privilege” of attending a university, they see themselves as clients or customers of the institution. These students are becoming aware of their “customer rights’ as Sender, Stevenson, King and Coates (2000) have pointed out. It has also been argued that to deliver a quality service educational institutions must be aware of the needs and expectations of their clients, when involved in a service transaction. They must view their students as “customers”, who demand a service that matches their expectations and perceptions (Ziethaml, W., Parasuraman, A. & Berry (1990).

Role expectations is an area of research that has received attention in psychology and the business field in the area of marketing; not so in higher education. Pithers (1998) has summarised some studies, however, showing that there has been some interest in this field in school education. Role expectations are about how individuals think educational professionals should act, think and judge, rather than role identity, which is about what they actually do in practice. Pithers pointed out that a link has long been seen between being perceived as an “effective” teacher and effective learning. Of course, just what are the salient qualities of an “effective” teacher has been defined and redefined over the years but in part, it is based on the notion that the recipients of the teaching, the clients or customers, will be important judges of “good “ or “effective” teaching and learning.

Researchers, have acknowledged the importance of student expectations and how important it is to be aware and respond to them (Anderson and McCoy 1997; Harmann, 1998), even if some other researchers have evidence to suggest that students often think that their current teachers will be like their previous teachers (Kennedy, 1999), and that student expectations can be influenced by a teachers’ gender (eg Ruzith, 1995). In the area of school education desirable teacher role expectations have included variables such as: excellence in subject matter content, and social relationships, good organisational ability, motivator, evaluator and role model, diagnostic ability, orderliness, as well as provide warmth, enthusiasm, and business-like behaviour (eg Gage, 1971; Grace, 1978; Paulios & Young, 1968; Cruickshank, Bennet & Metcalf, 1995). Some of these factors

have been found to be role expectations in other (than US & UK) cultures (eg Turanli & Yildirium, 1999) and in Web-based virtual learning environments, where computer skills were not perceived to be as important as expectations such as the foregoing more general variables (Terri & Nevgi, 2000).

Despite the greater volume of published research for the topic in the area of school education, there are some interesting published studies of relevance in the tertiary education area. For example, Fisher, Alder and Avasoli (1998) examined the roles and perceptions of tertiary teaching by a group of students and academic staff. Fisher *et al* were also interested in the validity and reliability of reaction evaluation questionnaire use, but of relevance here was their conclusion that the academics placed different importance on perceived student expectations than did the students concerned. In this instance, the academics placed value on a range of roles in the areas of social equity, independent learning and changing the world view. Important role expectations for the students, however, were concerned with factors such as social and effective communications skills (especially the “pace” and public speaking), content merit (especially explanatory skill), dynamism in presentation (especially enthusiasm), social equity (especially inclusivity), logical progression (especially summaries and session development) and some aspects of the instructional environment (especially being a role model). Fisher *et al* also pointed out that the divergence of opinions between academic staff and students, possibly relates to the intrinsically different roles each group possesses within the university system, including the notion that the role of a university student has become in many respects the roles of a consumer. The expectations are more likely to be built around their more immediate and instrumental concerns about university teachers and teaching. Academics appear to see their roles more in the broader, longer term context of the institution and perceive their functions as providers of education and change.

In a different cultural context, Kimber and Wong (2000) interviewed 35 Hong Kong undergraduate students and found that the students’ role expectations of good teaching were biased by the students’ conception of learning. More active learners’ expectations of good teaching involved factors such as active engagement and varied multi-faceted teaching with understanding. More passive students as learners saw good teaching as involving organization, clear information and structure, clear objectives, good pace, clarity of communication and the management of student workload and difficulty. The active learners also valued more highly factors such as the stimulations of interest, enthusiasm and the promotion of classroom interaction. These student expectations are similar to those proposed by Trigwell (2001) in describing perceptions of good university teaching and also those of Ramsden *et al* (1995).

Another study of university students’ expectations of teaching found that teaching skills was ranked by the 395 undergraduate students from a range of disciplines as the most important expectation. Teacher approachability was ranked second, knowledge third and then enthusiasm, followed by organization. However, some other research has shown student expectations of their teachers to be biased by factors such as gender, age,

university type, mode of study and culture (eg Kember & Wong, 2000; Kuther, 2002; Stevenson and Sander, 2002).

One relatively recent large-scale US study (N=912) of interests concerned the perceptions or expectations of a range of undergraduate and post-graduate students about the characteristics of effective college teachers. Witcher, Onwuegbuzi, Collins, Filer, Wiedmaier and Moore (2003) found that the following attributes were perceived by the students as best characterising effective college teaching: (in rank order) student-centred, subject-matter expert, professional, enthusiastic about teaching, effective at communication, accessible, competent instructor, fair and a provider of feedback. This study was a qualitative one and used a phenomenological analysis but added to what these authors also saw as the “scant literature” about what university students think to be the characteristics of “effective” university teachers.

The lack of published information available about the expectations of university students as posited to by the foregoing workers and others (eg Sander *et al* 2000) was taken up in the present study. Here different groups of university students were asked to consider a list of potential role expectations about university teachers and then individually to rank these roles, according to their perceived importance. Unlike the Witcher *et al* (2003) study, however, this study was an empirical/analytic one, which allowed obtained data comparison across student groups. The overall outcomes were later also compared with the findings of other relevant studies, predominantly based on US or UK populations.

Method

Sample

The sample was one of convenience. It was composed of two different groups of students all studying human resource development and training at an Australian University. The total sample was composed of 63 students. There were two sub-groups: a) one was composed of 27 undergraduate students who were predominantly young (late teens) and who had come straight from school to university and were full-time students; b) another group of 36 undergraduate students studying full-time who were in their final year of study; all had completed at least 3 years of undergraduate study

Instrument and Procedure

A short questionnaire was devised based on a list of thirty (30) potential university teacher role expectations. The present authors obtained these by examining those used or found in other relevant research publications as well as from a brain-storming session using experienced university staff. The final list was deemed to be those most likely to be useful and perceived to be relevant by the sample, given the time constraints for completion.

The students were given the questionnaire in groups. Data collection took approximately a period of a month. The questionnaire took only 10-15 minutes to complete and the students were instructed to examine the complete list closely and then place their five “most important” role expectations for university lecturing staff in rank order. The task was completed separately and anonymously by each individual student.

Results:

A frequency tally was obtained for the first five/six choices across the 30 expectation statements for all students. Next, this tally was reassessed to indicate how often a particular expectation appeared among the first five/six choices. These summations were then ranked separately for the total sample and each of the two sub-groups. Each factor emerging from this analysis therefore, was deemed to be very important to the students, because it had appeared relatively more frequently than the other expectations in the students' "top" five/six. The process allowed for interpretation of results on the students' expectations overall as well as an examination of between-group differences.

Table 1: Shows in Column 1 for the results for the First Year Students while Column 2 shows the results for Final Year Students. Column 3 shows the differences between the two groups. total group and the summed over the students' first five ranked choices the most frequent expectation as a percentage (%). Column 2 shows the ranking for the most frequently stated expectation (appearing in the first five choices). Columns 3, 4 & 5 show a similar result separately for Groups a, b, c.

Table 1**Ranks**

I expect that a university lecturer should:	Group 1 (1st year)	Group 2 (final year)	% Difference	Ranking Group 1	Ranking Group 2
1. Be expert in the subject matter/content area being taught	66%	1		1	1
2. Show an interest in individual learners	12%				4
3. Structure the learning process	21%	4e			5
4. Show enthusiasm for the subject matter being delivered	27%	4e			2
5. Show warmth and humour	11%				
6. Keeps learners interested	30%	3		4	
7. Be credible and believable	14%				
8. Set appropriate and relevant assessment	17%				
9. Grades assessment fairly and according to set criteria	27%	4e		3	
10. Marks assignments in an appropriate timeframe	19%				3e

11	Provide quality and timely feedback	25%	5			
12.	Provide critical and sometimes negative feedback	6%				
13.	Be flexible with students	15%				
14.	Exercise control of learning situations	6%				
15.	Be an effective communicator (both verbal and non-verbal)	42%	2		2	
16.	Be responsive to learners	11%				
17.	Support learners where necessary	12%				
18.	Be an effective record keeper and administrator	1%				
19.	Use relevant examples from own experience	11%				
20.	Be able to link theory to workplace practice	21%				
21.	Be professionally dressed	2%				
22.	Be friendly and approachable	17%				3e
23.	Use an effective presentation style	12%				
24.	Have an awareness of time frames	4%				
25.	Know when to finish the session (even when early)	7%				
26.	Know when to encourage the learners to be autonomous	4%				
27.	Provides opportunities for questions and/or classroom discussion	6%				
28.	Gives clear instruction	19%			5e	
29.	Provides linkages between topics and subject	15%				

30. Responds to needs and expectations of students	17%			5e	
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Total N= 63

e = equal rank

Group 1 – 1st year students

Group 2 – Final year students

Table 1 shows for the data overall, that the most frequent ranking for groups of students' first choice) was expectation #1, concerning subject matter expertise(78% both groups). For the 1st year students the next five choices in rank order were being able to link theory to workplace practice, grades assessment fairly and according to set criteria, keeps learners interested, structures the learning process, support learners where necessary, gives clear instructions (last 3 ranked equally).

For the final year students the corresponding choices in rank order were: grades assessment fairly and according to set criteria, shows enthusiasm for subject matter being delivered, keep learners interested, be an effective communicator (both verbal and non-verbal).

Major sources of percent differences in the rankings between the two groups were: be an effective communicator, shows enthusiasm for the subject matter being delivered, grades assessment fairly and according to set criteria, be able to link theory with workplace practice, use an effective presentation style, gives clear instructions.

Conclusions and Discussion

Overall, the students' most important expectations of their university teachers, based on their top five choices among those given in the list, were as follows. They most frequently thought that lecturers should be expert in the subject matter (66%); this result was similar to that obtained by Witcher *et al* (2003), although in that study, this factor was second to “student centred”. Related factors listed in this study’s questionnaire (eg #'s 13, 16 & 17) did not receive strong support, which is somewhat surprising, given students in Groups A & B were all adults studying adult education and/or HRD. This evidence does not support the similar adult education expectations proposed by writers in the adult education literature some 20-30 years ago (eg Knowles, 1980). It was interesting to find that the older adult education students (Group A), rated overall the expectation “gives clear directions” as important for them, although equally ranked was “responds to student needs”, an expectation that has been stressed in the past in the adult education literature.

The second overall ranked factor was about “effective communication” (42%); it was ranked fifth (28%) in the Witcher *et al* (2003) study. This is about effective presentation of subject-matter content to learners and was obviously viewed as an important student expectation overall, although it was not ranked in the “top five” by Group B (the u/g

young students)). They more highly valued a teacher who was friendly and approachable and had an interest in them as people.

The third overall ranked factor was an expectation relevant to “interest” and its maintenance (30%). This expectation was perceived to be more important for the mature age students (Groups A & C) than it was for the young, full-time students. A series of expectations were equally ranked fourth overall. These concerned the expectations about the teachers’ structuring and organisation of the learning process and their ability to show enthusiasm. The grading of assessment fairly, based on set criteria, was also ranked at this level. This expectation was a “top 5” one with Group A. Nevertheless, Group B also had a strong expectation about assessment in an appropriate timeframe. The provision of “quality and timely feedback” filled out the “top five” list of student expectations (25%) overall, although this expectation had only been rated as ninth (5%) in the Witcher *et al* (2003) study. Other expectations for the overall data, scored less than 20%, with eight of these only appearing in less than 10% of the students’ most important list of expectations.

It was interesting to find that the Chinese students ranked their “most important” five expectations with similar frequency to the younger full-time students in two cases (structure and feedback), whilst they appeared to have similar expectations to the older adult education students when it came to expectations such as “interest” and the importance of “effective communication” or presentation skills. One reason for this result, may be that because of the Chinese students’ more formal education and cultural experiences. They value teachers who provide organisation, structure and display enthusiasm (expectations attractive to the younger Australian students). Perhaps, also students in Group B who were less experienced regarded a teacher who was “friendly and approachable” more highly than the students in the other sub-groups, who had more experience elsewhere in learning (*cf.* Group B–post graduate students). No doubt for the Chinese students, the expectation “able to link theory to workplace practice” was seen to be of greater importance than other groups, as they were all engaged in full-time work in the Human Resources field and required a post-graduate degree, that was of value in their professional practice. Nonetheless, overall, between-group cultural differences in this study appeared to be minor and could readily be explained by other non-cultural variables such as ‘stage of course’ (ie. Post graduate) and its purpose (eg. career development and to aid professional practice).

The expectations deemed to be important by the students in this study, appeared to be similar to at least some of those named as “important” by university students in other studies. These concerned effective communication skill, organising and structuring subject-matter content that is of merit, generating and maintaining interest, resolving issues concerned with assessment such as criteria, grading, fairness and the provision of feedback as well as to a lesser degree (at least in this study), giving clear instructions and being friendly and approachable. Nevertheless, some of these expectations were found to be more important to some groups than to others. For example “responds to needs and expectations” was rated of greater importance to mature age, part-time adult education students than it was for inexperienced, younger full time students or for the full-time

Hong Kong Chinese Masters students. These latter students saw the need for their teachers to link theory and professional practice as having greater value to them.

This study has added further evidence about what current students think are important “expectations” about their university teachers. The most valued expectations were found to be fairly traditional ones, concerning the expected teachers’ roles as subject matter expert, effective communicator, motivator, someone who is able to organise and structure the learning experiences, show enthusiasm and is able to assess fairly and validly as well as provide quality and timely feedback. If universities are to provide a quality service to their “clients”, then teachers need to consider and attempt to satisfy these basic student needs. They also need to remember that as well as this, different groups of students at different stages or levels in their study or from different cultures, may have expectations that need to be added to the foregoing factors and acted upon in a balanced way.

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