



## **BSc in Psychology**

### **First Year at University** Students Expectations and Experience

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**February 2020**

**SÁLFRÆÐIDEILD**  
DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY



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Foreword

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the BSc Psychology degree, Reykjavik University, this thesis is presented in the style of an article for submission to a peer-reviewed journal.

### Abstract

The transition from secondary school to university can be challenging. To successfully transit students, need to adapt both academically and socially. The aim of this study was to gain better understanding of students' expectations and experiences when starting university, using a qualitative method. This is the first research in Iceland with this focus. Between February and October 2019, semi-structured interviews and a focus group were conducted with students and faculty at Reykjavik University. The overall findings are that students and faculty feel that there is a gap between high school and university and an even bigger gap than students thought beforehand as most of them mistakenly believed they were well prepared for university. Workload is heavy and studying at university is a full time job. The key to succeed, to fully transit to new environment, is to develop effective study methods and work hard. Students have other responsibilities than school and many of them work alongside their studies. Learning is a collaboration between students and faculty. For students to adjust and feel a sense of belonging within the university environment they need to be more realistic about their competences and that is perhaps something both high school and university can help them to become.

### Útdráttur

Það að hefja háskólanám getur verið töluverð áskorun, umskiptin frá framhaldskóla til háskóla geta verið töluverð og til að þau heppnist sem best þurfa nemendur að finna sig í háskólanum bæði náms- og félagslega. Markmið rannsóknarinnar var að öðlast betri skilning á væntingum og reynslu nemenda sem hefja háskólanám og er þetta fyrsta rannsókn sinnar tegundar í landinu. Eigindleg rannsókn var gerð á meðal fyrsta árs nemenda frá febrúar til október. Tekin voru viðtöl við nemendur og starfsfólk Háskólans í Reykjavík og rýnihópur meðal nemenda. Helstu niðurstöður eru þær að nemendur og starfsfólk segja gjá á milli framhaldskóla og háskóla og að þessi gjá sé jafnvel dýpri en nemendur áttuðu sig á við upphaf náms, því að flestir þeirra töldu sig standa betur að vígi þegar þeir hófu háskólanám sitt en þeir í raun og veru gerðu. Vinnuálag er mikið – háskóli er full vinna. Lykillinn að velgengni, því að tilheyra að fullu nýju umhverfi háskólans, er að þróa lærdómsaðferðir sínar og vera tilbúin til að leggja mikið á sig. Nemendur hafa fleiri skyldum að gegna og margir þeirra vinna með skólanum. Nám er samvinna nemenda og kennara. Rannsóknir er lúta að reynslu nemenda gætu hæglega auðveldað gerð stuðningsnámskeiða sem veita nemendum þann stuðning sem þeir þurfa við upphaf háskólanáms.

### First Year at University: Students' Expectations and Experience

The transition from secondary school to university can be challenging. For students to successfully transit they need to adapt both academically and socially (Astin, 1999; Bean, 1980; Tinto, 1999). Most of the research within the field of higher education has focused on why students fail to persist, and less research has focused on students' expectations and experiences starting university (Shushok & Hulme, 2006). Following up with first year students and paying attention to the challenges they face, and how they adapt to the new environment could be beneficial in providing support or adapting programs for first year students (Alderman et al., 2012).

The most general definition of "transition" is a period of change from one state or condition to another. However, the literature on educational transition is inconsistent, presenting a challenge to researchers, policy makers and practitioners because of how the term „transition“ is used and understood (O'Donnell et al., 2016). In a report published by the Higher Education Academy, based on contemporary higher education research and practice, transition is best conceptualized as a process of development and change, which occurs through complex interactions between students, faculty and institutions over time. Creating a welcoming, caring, nurturing and supportive environment is critical for students to transit into university and to develop a sense of belonging (O'Keeffe, 2013). Once students are familiar with the university environment and what is expected of them during their studies, they are more likely to reach out if they need help and feel like they belong there (O'Brien, Mills & Cohen, 2008). Many students report that the first year is hard, not only because everything is new but also because they have to find out what is expected of them and find their rhythm within the new environment (Holdaway & Kelloway, 1987; Jensdóttir & Jensdóttir, 2014; O'Brien et al., 2008). The problems experienced by students in their first

year are often due to ideas they have about university education, which are inaccurate (Lowe & Cook, 2003).

The focus of previous research has been on strategies of learning and teaching, where the aim is to help students to adapt to university life, to retain students and prevent dropout (Koch & Gardner, 2014; Parker et al., 2006).

Crisp et al. (2009) points out that less studies have focused on how students perceive their transition to the university and how they cope and adapt to the new challenges there. Martinez & Further Education Development Agency (1997) argue that few studies have focused on what students experience when entering the university. Alderman, Towers, & Bannah (2012) expressed the need to gather the students perception of university to gain better understanding of students experience during their first year. According to Alderman et al. (2012) universities have recently paid increased attention to the views of students on their experience of learning and teaching through survey feedback. Alderman et al. (2012) reviewed research in the field and found that even though students feedback is valid and used by all universities, the questionnaires' are lacking validity and reliability, resulting in incorrect use of data, resulting in limited potential cross-sector benchmark. If the student's experience is not taken into account when the organization of the study is decided the universities could equally guessed about how best to help students achieve better learning outcomes. What is suitable for one student is not necessarily suitable for everyone. Part of the problem is that some students do not adapt quickly enough to the new expectations of the university in order to be successful in their studies (Lowe & Cook, 2003).

If schools make decisions based on student experience and expectations, there is a greater chance that students finish their studies (Wilcoxson, 2010). It is therefore important to look at the experience of first year students to see how to help them adapt to the requirements of the university. Shushok and Hulme (2006) emphasized the need to study students that transit

successfully instead of focusing on why student fail the process. Paying attention to student experiences and how they adapt to the new environment during their first year, might assist administrators in designing programs to support the first-year students (Alderman et al., 2012; O'Brien et al., 2008).

In Iceland the main focus has been on preventing drop-out in high school. There is limited data about drop-outs in higher educations as well as about students experience (Blöndal & Aðalbjarnardóttir, 2009). Arnkelsson & Jonsson (1992) findings indicate that high schools vary in quality and the learning processes behind a high school diploma is different, a particular grade point average can mean very different skills and abilities depending on the school. Some students may have taken relatively many introductory courses, with little effort, while others have taken many heavy courses. There may also be differences between schools in terms of the performance of a given grade. A research conducted by Arnkelsson & Jonsson (1992) revealed that students' academic performance during their first year at university was related to the high school they graduated from. That held true for students studying medicine, economics and business. However, as mentioned by Jonasson & Blondal (2005), learning abilities of students obviously also contribute to their success. In a report from Eurostudent (2018) Icelandic university students are vastly different from other students in Europe, with the high average age of 29.7 years, 33% of them being parents and 68% working alongside their studies. That places the Icelandic student in a very special situation regarding workload and other responsibilities outside school.

### **Current study**

The aim of the current study is to qualitatively explore and gain better understanding of student expectations and experience when starting university. To understand student perspectives, it is helpful to take into account faculties experience of first year students.

Few studies of this kind have been carried out in Iceland. This the first research focusing on student expectations and experience starting university with qualitative methods.

- What are the expectations of students when starting university?
- What is the students experience of starting university?
- How well do students think they are prepared for university?
- What is the faculties experience of first year students?

## **Method**

### **Study Design**

This is a qualitative study based on interviews with students and faculty at Reykjavik University, Iceland, in the form of in-depth individual interviews and focus groups.

Qualitative research is a synonym for different research methods used to collect detailed accounts of participants thoughts, beliefs and experiences through different approaches (Willing, 2013). In depth individual interviews range from structured to unstructured, and focus groups are the most common methods used when studying human phenomena (Carter et al., 2014). Qualitative methods were used to get more detailed and in-depth answers about the participant's experience. It also allows more "free-flow", which can result in a new perspective that might otherwise be overlooked in a questionnaire. Combining two or more data collections methods, for instance interviews as well as focus groups (a method called 'data triangulation') enhances the credibility of the study (Lambert & Loiselle, 2008).

### **Participants**

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, where participants were selected according to criteria relevant to the research question (Willing, 2013). Participants were eligible if they were: (1) students at Reykjavik University, (2) had no prior university experience, (3) worked at Reykjavik University. A variety of recruitment methods were used, participants were recruited through social media, e-mail and word of mouth.

The study was divided into two groups, students and faculty. The student participants were first- and second-year students at Reykjavík University (RU) in the spring and fall of 2019. Two interviews were conducted with faculty, one with a student counsellor and another with a teacher with 20 years of teaching experience. For the student group there was held one focus group, consisting of five first-year students. In total there were 11 individual interviews with students in their first and second year. According to the requirements of the Science Ethics Committee, anonymity was used when processing the data, all participants were given pseudonyms. The student counsellor will be referred to as Joanne and the teacher as Christina. The student participants age ranged from 21 to 27. Participants in the focus group are all women in their first year at RU, they will be referred to as Gemma, Kate, Megan, Sylvia and Stephanie. Other participants in their first year were Sarah, Anna, John, Zoe and Keith, but he dropped out after two months. Student participants in their second year at RU are Peter, Brooke, Brad, Maria, Julie and Martin.

### **Procedure**

The interviews and focus groups were held at Reykjavik University between February and October 2019. Before starting the interview participants were given an informed consent form to sign, explaining that participation was completely voluntary, that participants would be welcome to leave at any time without consequences, that confidentiality would be maintained, and that the interview would be audio-recorded and their answers would in no way be traced back to them. The interviews were audio recorded, they lasted between 10 minutes and up to an hour. After each session interviews were transcribed verbatim with a total of 92 pages, all personal information was made unidentifiable. The data collected from the interviews was categorized and screened for themes. The data was divided into two categories, faculty and students, each category was then divided into sub-themes. Faculty was

divided into three sub-themes: transition, experience and collaboration Student category was divided into four sub-themes: expectations, experience, preparedness, adjustment.

### Results

The results of the interviews conducted during the course of the study are reported below starting with the results of the faculty members; transition, experience and collaboration.

Followed by the results from the students; expectations, experience, preparedness and adjustment.

#### Students

**Expectations.** Students had similar expectations about starting Reykjavik University, they expected teaching to be on a more personal level than in other universities, as the university claims to be in personal contact with their students. Some of the students hoped to bond with other students and make new friends and get into a study group and “just pass the exams and learn how to study” said Anna, she had heard from other students that RU was known for great social life. Others did not have any social expectations as their main purpose with starting university was to “just finish the degree” like Peter mentioned.

Some of the students mentioned that they expected a lot of homework and reading and being tested frequently. Peter said that he had full confidence in his ability to handle the workload even if it would be challenging. Sarah expected the study to be challenging “but fun at the same time”.

**Experience.** When asked about their experience starting university students had different experiences. John said that in general it was a great experience, “I love the school and everything about it, I would recommend RU for everyone”, socially he had gotten to know a lot of new people and made “great” new friends, many participants agreed with him. Most participants felt that faculty was easily approachable and that they wanted to help students: Kate said she felt like the teachers “wanted you to succeed”. Participants also

mentioned that the teachers try to get to know their students and some of them even make an effort to know students names and faces even if they have big classes. Not everyone agreed with that and Sarah mentioned that the teachers did not really know their students during her first semester as all their assignments were anonymous. She also mentioned that students were socially divided into groups dependant on what high school they attended. Peter thought university was “more intense” than he had thought it to be, reading materials and assignments “really kept you on your toes”. Other students said that their studies where more fun than they had realized, and that the material was more interesting than they had imagined beforehand. Workload is an issue regarding first year experience: Albeit good intent, students weren't able to come prepared to class (read all the reading material) because the curriculum was too great. Gemma, Sylvia, Brooke and Keith found themselves spending all their time on school and not having time to do anything else.

**Preparedness.** Before starting university, most students thought they were well prepared, but after experiencing the first semester many of them didn't think they were right about that. Zoe didn't feel prepared “at all”, the university environment was “overwhelming” and students didn't know how to structure their learning. Students reported they were aware that there was a gap between high school and university but many of them did not realize that it was so huge. Students agreed that in high school there was more overall management from the school versus in the university there was none, and they felt like they were more on their own. Zoe said that the requirements for students in university were “by no means” comparable to the requirements made for students in high school. She felt it necessary to teach students how to study. Some of the students also talked about a lot of discrepancies between high schools in Iceland and found it unbelievable that everyone can qualify for the same degree. Sarah immediately felt that the student that came from the Commercial College were much better prepared than she was, even though she had graduated with the same

degree but from another school. Others thought they were well prepared and/or good students and that the workload was similar to high school. These students didn't experience a gap between high school and university.

**Adjustment.** Participants adjusted differently to the university environment; many of them adjusted well both to the workload and socially even though it might have taken them a while to discipline themselves. Julie said she adjusted well to both, she spent most of her first semester at the university studying from "eight in the morning to maybe two o'clock after midnight". Others adjusted well academically due to hard work, but struggled with the social part as many of the students already belonged to a group from high school. Keith mentioned that one of the main reasons he dropped out was that he did not belong to any group and sometimes would go through a whole day with classes without speaking to anyone.

Students say that studying at university level is hard work and that it is a "full time job on its own" Sarah mentions. Students are also preoccupied because of other responsibilities than school and have to work because it is expensive to live in Iceland and the school fees are high Sarah mentions. And then there are those who thought it was difficult to adjust to the university environment due to a heavy workload and reported high school had not prepared them well enough to study at university level, these students also mentioned that they did not know what was expected of them when starting at university and had to figure it out as they went along, but socially they adjusted well. It seems that when students realized how to study and cope with the workload they got the hang of it and are adjusted. The girls in the focus group agreed that the first semester was extremely challenging, especially because they did not know what they were getting themselves into. However, on their second semester they felt they knew what to expect and how to study, they said the courses were still challenging but now they had the tools and knowledge to deal with it.

### **Faculty**

**Transition.** Joanne says there are different factors that influence students when starting university. Starting university is a big step for many students, the transition from high school to higher education alone is a “stress factor” says and it depends on how well students are prepared and if they feel that they have made the right choice when choosing a field. If a student starting university enjoys their studies and is comfortable within the university environment the student will learn to how to “cope” and successfully transit. Christina says university doesn't always have to be fun and game, but that there is a “certain excitement”, that students feels that they are in “kind of a comfort zone” and that they are in a place where they think that university is interesting and are willing to learn more. Joanne says that student loans also add pressure. Not everyone can handle this extra pressure and “many students” say that they think studying at university is a lot more work than they thought it would be. This is “often a surprise” for some students who did well in high school, and did not have to put much effort into studying and “just somehow” managed to get through high school without much effort says Joanne. Those students have not developed proper study methods and for them the transition can be challenging. Christina states that students have different strengths and part of her work with first year students is to help students find their strengths, which can mean unwinding some disempowering thoughts they have about themselves as learners.

**Experience.** Joanne says that many students do not have a realistic view of how much effort they have to put into their studies but still have high expectations towards their academic performance. Studying at university is a “full time job” and it is a concern when students do not give themselves the time needed to “enjoy” their studies or do not have the opportunity to do so says Christina. “You will never get me to say that students today are worse than they were 20 years ago – they just live in a different world”, and its maybe even more important [today] for faculty to find out how they can support students learning says Christina. Students often have a part or a full-time job along with their studies, some even

have families and they can't expect to perform 100% in all three places, "and this is tough for many students to realize" says Joanne. However, Joanne continues, we can't judge students for working along their studies because often they don't have a choice and they are just trying to "make it all work" and it can be easier said than done.

**Collaboration.** There has to be respect between faculty and students. The faculty has more power than the student "that's just how it is" and sometimes students feel like the teacher has their "success in their hand" which is actually not true, "we don't fail students, they do it themselves" says Christina. However, there is a certain power difference that lies in the structure of the university, Christina says she looks at it as a collaboration, the students don't "work for me" it's a collaboration between faculty and students. And because faculty have a certain experience and knowledge within a certain field, they lead this collaboration, and that's how she thinks faculty should approach the university education:

You should never talk down to students... It's a collaboration that you [as a teacher] lead... and you need to approach it as such... there wouldn't be any universities if there weren't any students... and to... get annoyed that students are one way and not another is just a little crazy, you choose these people into the workplace and now you just have to find some way to work with them. And to help them to do their best, at any given moment.

If we are going to approach this as collaboration, then everyone has a certain responsibility.

At the same time as faculty is willing to teach students everything that they know and to support them in their learning, it also important that students are independent and disciplined and realize that their education is their responsibility. Christina says that ideally students need to learn to discipline themselves in high school and not a lot of students have done that, but they need to "master it in university". She adds that in reality, university education is nothing but preparation for life, "If you have the right tools in your toolbox you can deal with

everything". Meaning that students have to learn how to use these tools at school to be able to use them in real life later on.

### **Discussion**

The main goal of the present study was to gain better understanding of the students expectations and experience when starting university.

The first research question looked into student expectations when starting university, most students expected teaching to be on a more personal level as RU claims to be in personal contact with their students. A majority of students expected heavy workload and that the studying would be challenging. This is the case and faculty members confirm that. Social importance varied between students, for some students it was the main purpose of going to university, they did not have any academic expectations and focused more on the social gain of starting university and had high expectations towards the social life within the university. Others hoped to enjoy their studies, finish a degree and make new friends. Socially the students that are in a group from high school seem to benefit from that and others seem to struggle a bit on the social level because of that.

The second research question addressed how well students thought they were prepared for university. When starting university the majority of students thought they were well prepared for studying at university level. Faculty members also confirm that belief. However, more than half of the participants reported not being prepared enough or at all when the semester started. Many of the students felt that the gap between high school and university was bigger than they had realized and did not feel that high school had properly prepared them to study at a university level. From the students point of view there is a lot of differences between high schools in Iceland which is consistent with the results reported by Arnkelsson & Jonsson (1992) that academic performance was related to which high school students graduated from.

The third research question looked into students experience of starting university, it was noticeable that the biggest challenge was adjusting to the amount of workload at the university level. Some students mentioned that not knowing what was expected of them was another challenge that was difficult to cope with in the first semester when everything was new. This is consistent with Holdaway & Kelloway (1987) and (O'Brien et al., 2008) who state that students need to know what is expected of them to find their own rhythm in the new environment. A majority of students had a positive experience with faculty and reported that faculty members made an effort to get to know students and wanted them to succeed. O'Keeffe (2013) argues that caring and supportive environment is critical for students transition into university and to develop a sense of belonging. Students reported having other responsibilities outside the university, many students were working part- or full-time jobs and some of them were parents. This is consistent with the Eurostudent report (2018), where 68% of Icelandic students are working part- or full-time jobs and 33% of students are parents. Faculty also talk about this being the case and that they understand why students have to work. Discipline and good study methods seemed to play a large part for students to successfully adjust to university. But for some the social part played a bigger role than the academic one. Overall students enjoyed studying at the university and most students were satisfied with their experience during the first year.

The fourth research question addressed the faculties experience with first year students. There are different factors that affect students and their ability to succeed at university. Starting university alone is a stress factor and their coping skills depend on how well prepared, academically they are. Students often have unrealistic view of what studying at university will be like and for many students it can be overwhelming. They often don't realize that studying at university is a fulltime job and that it takes a great amount of time and work. A lot of students work full or part time jobs while studying and some have families,

even though this is not be ideal situation for a student, this is the reality for many. This is consistent with the Eurostudent report (2018) which reported 68% of Icelandic student that are working alongside their studies and 33% having the responsibility of being a parent. For students to adjust successfully, students and faculty need to be in a collaboration, where everyone has a certain responsibility. O'Brien et al., (2008) stress how important it is that students need to know what is expected of them when starting university. It is important that students develop independence and discipline during their studies and ideally they need to start doing so in high school, to be prepared to master it in university.

The present study had some limitations. Using results based on a qualitative research method cannot be generalized for other students at Reykjavik University or other universities. However, using qualitative methods makes it possible to get more detailed and in-depth answers from participants, which can result in new perspective that might otherwise be overlooked by questionnaires.

Despite some limitations this is the first study of its kind in Iceland that has looked into student expectations and experience when starting university using a qualitative method and adds to the limited research about first year students expectations and experience, not only in Iceland but internationally. This study also adds faculties experience with first year students which adds an important point of view.

Alderman et al. (2012) and Crisp et al. (2009) expressed the importance to listen to students experiences of starting university and the challenges they face, if schools made decisions based on students experience and expectations there is a greater chance that students finish their studies (Wilcoxson, 2010). This underlines the importance of listening to students voices while making decision regarding structure and making decision about the curriculum, and the importance to study the students that adjust into the new environment and complete their studies as is mentioned by Shushok & Hulme (2006).

As a result of this study future research should further look into how the gap between high school and university will be better bridged. To do that it is important to listen to students voices and what they have to say about the subject. One of the factors is without any doubt that students have to become more independent in their studies. This is one part of the twenty-first century skills students need to adapt and teachers need to promote: for students to know how they learn. Further research about the gap between high school and university would in one way or the other deal with the question of how to get students more independent as learners.

The aim of the research was to gain further understanding of student expectations and expectations when entering university. The findings of this study indicate that there is a gap between high school and university and that it is even bigger than students expect on beforehand. Also, that there is a discrepancy between high schools in Iceland, future research is needed to look better into the matter.

For students to adjust and feel a sense of belonging within the university environment they need to be more realistic about their competences and that is perhaps something both high school and university can help them to become. In this way and others, the emphasis on learning being a collaboration between students and teachers is even greater and could help promoting better awareness of student ability to learn and how to study. Included in that is the importance of students adapting disciplined and independent study methods that help them find their right academic field. It is important that students sense a kind of belongingness to the field of study because that will make them work harder and adapt better into their learning. Good relationship between faculty and students helps their transition and sense of belonging in the university environment. Good friends also help and can have a great influence on coping with a huge workload, even so that it makes the difference of staying or dropping out.

It is important to listen to students voices and hear what they have to say and give them some power and responsibility to have influence in their studies. This research shows they both have a lot to say and have some answers worth looking into.

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