

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24297/jssr.v14i0.8006>

“My First Year in The University”: Students’ Expectations, Perceptions and Experiences

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore students’ first year experience to provide insights that may prove to be useful for institutional policy and practice. A semi-structured interview was conducted on 30 undergraduates from a private university to examine their perceptions, experiences, and attitudes towards first year experience. Themes were derived from the analysis of the transcribed interview transcripts. The results showed that in general students pursue tertiary education as it can guarantee their career prospect and intellectual development. Moreover, classroom engagement and academic staff engagement on students were less crucial in comparison to peer engagement. However, the students’ perceptions of studentship and quality of teaching were positive. Lastly, most students were satisfied with their first year experience in the university. Practical implications, recommendations and limitations for future practice are put forth.

Keywords: Attrition and Retention; Student Engagement; First Year Experience (FYE); Undergraduates; Tertiary Education

Introduction

Various studies have indicated that young people who attend university for the first time experience changes in their lives which prove to be immensely stressful for them (Carter et al., 2006; James et al., 2010; Wintre and Yaffe, 2000; Zepke, 2006). As a result, some students may drop out and discontinue their studies, and this phenomenon seems to put universities under increasing pressure in the efforts of improving their retention rates for students, particularly between the first and second year of programmes. Several studies have suggested the prominence of the first year experience (FYE) and how these formative experiences influence students’ approaches to learning, their attitude as well as the completion rates (Baik et al., 2015; Conner and Colton, 1999; McInnis and James, 1995; Tinto, 1993; Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005).

Malaysia, in particular, has aimed to become an international and regional education hub, and this intent has been particularly highlighted in the recent Malaysia Education Blueprint (2015–2025) for higher education. It seeks to create a higher education system that ranks among the world’s leading education systems. Thus far, little has been done on student engagement at higher education institutions (HEIs) in Malaysia. Although several studies have been conducted, they are based on small scale projects and individual universities (Abdullah et al., 2010; Awang et al., 2014, Kasim et al., 2012; Yusoff, 2013).

The present study examines the experiences of first year undergraduate students in UCSI University for purposes of understanding issues regarding first year undergraduate experiences. The conclusions and recommendations can provide insights on first year students’ engagement and can be used to guide policy-making in UCSI University on ways to enhance the academic and social experiences of first year students and improve educational outcomes in the first year and beyond.

Therefore, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- (1) What are the first year undergraduate students' attitudes, expectations and experiences of university life?
- (2) How do first year undergraduates engage with their learning and with their university communities?

Globally, student attrition is a serious problem for universities and colleges. Rausch & Hamilton (2006) reported that 30% of the 2.2 million students in American universities dropped out after their first year. In a meta-analysis of medical education literature, O'Neill, Wallstedt, Eika, & Hartvigsen (2011) found an average student drop-out rate of 11.1% from the tertiary institutions. A similar trend has been noted in Asia. In the case of Malaysia, in an open and distance learning institution, the student drop-out rate was 21.5% (Latifah & Mansor, 2007). Govindarajo & Kumar (2012) reported that the student drop-out rate for a private university was 14% in just 6 months. According to the Talent Corporation Malaysia Berhad (2012 September 26), the attrition rate for domestic undergraduates was 17000 out of the 100,000 (17%) undergraduate students. Although these studies conclude that the student drop-out rate stays remarkably constant over time, the relatively high drop-out rate is a cause of concern for Malaysian universities and the Ministry of Education.

Several factors have been found to contribute to this phenomenon: academic performance, personal and financial difficulties, ill health, employment, change of institutions, dislike of courses, and lack of family support (Johnston, 1997). Other reasons reported include lack of academic preparation (Veenstra, 2009), insufficient financial aid, increased competition, and the inability to integrate into academic systems (Willcoxson et al., 2011). From the perspective of the Malaysian undergraduates, Normala and Dileep (2012) identified twenty-five factors of attrition which include increased competition, ranking of universities, unattractive scholarship offers, negative perception of home-grown programme awards, inadequate academic standing and stature of Malaysian lecturers, personal financial problems, examination pass rates, insufficient campus entertainment, tuition fees increase, inconvenience of public transportation, and language difficulties. These difficulties reported by Malaysian undergraduates (Normala and Dileep, 2012) would pose a major obstacle to Malaysia's aspiration to become an international and regional education hub.

In their study, Baik, Naylor and Arkoudis (2015) found a larger proportion of students reporting a lack of social and academic connection to their institution of higher learning, with about a third of students not forming close relationships with one or two students. They suggested a possible continuing trend of disengagement arising from advancements in online learning. Buote et al. (2007) scrutinised the relationship between new friendships and the process of adjustment to university life for first year students in six Canadian universities. The findings demonstrated a positive relationship between the two: the more successful the new friendship, the better the process of adjustment to the university environment. Buote et al. (2007) also indicated a statistically significant relationship between the success of new relationships and the students' academic adjustment and attachment to the university. Wintre and Yaffe (2000)'s study corroborated the importance of students' strong affective ties to significant people for their process of adjustment to university life. Awang, Kutty and Ahmad (2014)'s small qualitative exploration of perceived social support and wellbeing for first year students at a Malaysian university found positive relationships between students and their peers and parents and their adjustment to university life.

In their study, Andrews and Wilding (2004) linked financial difficulties to stress as a factor affecting student's academic performance. This factor was also explored by Yorke and Longden (2008) who identified funding as a significant factor affecting student retention and persistence to complete his/her education.

The impact of social media and networking on first year experience is investigated by Nalbone et al. (2015) and West, Moore and Barry (2015). Nalbone et al. (2015) indicated the use of social network sites to assist student transition that students connected to a university-established virtual network and community experienced a smoother transition to university life. West, Moore and Barry (2015) stated that using Twitter as a teaching tool enabled students to feel more connected to their classmates, the professors and to members of the professional community. While Baik, Naylor and Arkoudis (2015) suggested a correlation between the rise of online learning and student dis-engagement, Nalbone et al. (2015)'s and West, Moore and Barry's (2015) studies argued that

the increasing presence of online learning and social media as a stable form of communication within universities could be put to effective use to develop more student engagement by the institutions of higher learning.

In contrast to significant studies conducted in the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia, there are only a few studies that have investigated the first year experience at HEIs in Malaysia. These studies include Awang et al.'s (2014) qualitative study of first year students at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Abdullah et al.'s (2010) investigation into the relationship between coping and university adjustment and academic achievement amongst first year undergraduates at Universiti Putra Malaysia, and Kasim et al.'s (2012) longitudinal study of the "First Year Experience Programme" in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia.

This research study aims to fill the gap in the literature by investigating the attitudes, expectations, experiences and various forms of engagement by first year undergraduate students at UCSI University, a private university in Malaysia. The findings can then be used to improve policy and practice in the university.

Materials and Methods

This was a qualitative study using a phenomenology approach to reveal the meaning of the lived experience from the perspective of the participants (Creswell, 2013). Interviews were conducted with a group of individuals who share the commonality of a lived experience. The participants were selected by maximum variation sampling in faculty and programs of study to ensure a wide variety of participants. Potential participants must meet all of the inclusion criteria including (a) being 18 years of age or older and (b) first year student at university. Each participant was asked to provide basic demographic information: age, gender, nationality, and programs of study. Details are provided in Table 1.

Data collection

All eligible participants were informed about the details of this study and were required to provide written consent. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 English speaking students studying in a private university to explore their experiences and perceptions of first year university life. Face-to-face interviews were carried out in a private room with minimal interruption. The same basic sets of prepared questions, which were developed by the research team, were asked to each participant. Participants were asked to elaborate based on their responses. Some examples of the questions included: please talk about your experience of university life; how satisfied are you with your university; what makes you say you are satisfied with your university life (see Appendix A for the full list of questions). Each interview lasted approximately 1 hour and was audio-taped with participant's permission. Each participant was thanked and debriefed at the end of the interview.

Analysis

The data collected were immediately transcribed verbatim. To ensure transcription equivalence, interview was first transcribed verbatim by the first author and moderated by second and third authors. The participants were assigned pseudonyms to preserve anonymity of the participants. In order to ensure credibility and confirmability of the data, the verbatim transcripts were read several times and compared with the audio record. Constant comparative analysis was done based on Wimmer and Dominick (2014). Through close readings of textual data, the parts of the text that contained elements of phenomenon of interest were extracted as analytical units. Units were, therefore, reassembled into groupings based on relationships between the categories identified in the data. Special attention was given to descriptions of what was experienced at the beginning, middle and end of their first year life in the university. By continually comparing units in the data, the codes which related to one another were clustered together to produce higher-order themes. Some codes were either eliminated or merged during data coding. Tentative themes were made available after discussion amongst the team and a facilitated discussion followed where participants were asked to verify the extracted codes. Repetitions and filler words such as "um," "uh," "like" and "you know" were removed.

Results and Discussion

After a series of refining and re-categorising the themes, three main themes according to stages emerged. They are expectations and considerations towards the first year experience, types of challenges encountered and the anticipation for improvement.

Expectation and Considerations at the Beginning of the First Year Experience

To pursue tertiary education is an utmost crucial stage for students, particularly it determines their future career based upon the field of study they have chosen. Therefore, at the beginning of first year study in tertiary education, various expectations and considerations will be taken into account to ensure a right decision is made that might possibly affect for their future before enrolling into the institution. It is expected that students put forth a few criteria before or at the beginning of pursuing their tertiary education. Students reported that: (1) location and financial factor, (2) recommendations and companionship, (3) course offered and stipulation of internship placement, (4) considerations for future undertakings, and (5) other external reasons are some of their concerns at the initial stage of their first year study.

(1) Location and financial factors

When students were asked about their considerations before entering the university, over half of them stated that they chose the university due to its strategic and convenient location and cheaper tuition fee. These factors have dominated the feedback of most students.

- A2 : 'I picked this university because the location is convenience.'
- A27 : 'I chose to study here mainly because of the cheaper tuition fees. It helps to reduce my parents' burden.'
- A28 : 'I decided to study in this university because of the affordable tuition fees and it is near my house.'

(2) Recommendations and Companionship

Also, there is always a need to gain support from the significant ones for students, particularly in their utmost challenging first year of study in the university. Thus, recommendations from others and companionship from siblings and friends are some internal factors that motivate students to study in this university.

- A3: 'In fact, I had no idea of where to study. My mother recommended this university to me.'
- A 22: 'I chose to study here because two of my sisters are studying here also. It is good to have one's company when you are new.'
- A27: 'I studied my A-Level here. So, I have friends here. I think it's good to have friends around.'

(3) Course Offered and Stipulation of Internship Placement

Likewise, some students who are obviously more practical and realistic considered the course offered by the university and stipulation of internship as their priority. Driven by these motivations, students aim for the university which fulfils their expectation as demonstrated in the statement below.

- A8 : 'It is famous for its Food Science and Nutrition programme. I am interested in the course.'
- A7 : 'I choose to study here because it offers a two months internship programme every year. I think it gives me greater exposure to the real work setting.'
- A 26 : 'I decided to pursue my undergraduate study here because this university is one of the best music institutes in Malaysia. I want to be part of them.'

(4) Considerations for Future Career Prospects

Besides, one of the considerations that was particularly prominent is students' concern about their future career prospect. Completing their undergraduate study and pursue with their desire career are the most common comments from the students interviewed while some aimed to acquire lifelong learning skills which are benefited for them in the future.

- A18: 'I came to study just to get a degree certificate which acknowledged by most of the countries.'
- A26: 'I would like to learn undergraduate basic knowledge, my course has prepared me to continue my graduate studies overseas and to my desired career.'
- A30 : 'Aside from my academic achievement, I also hope that I can acquire lifelong learning skills such as independent learning and adaptability to change that can benefit me for a lifetime.'

(5) Other External Reasons

Lastly, many students expressed other unexpected reasons to pursue their tertiary education such as the liking of the campus, the ease of getting a visa as well as the preference for the variety of local and international students in the university. Surprisingly, some students considered factors that are not entirely relatable to the academic criteria.

- A19: 'I completed my Diploma in International Trade in China. I wanted to continue my degree. My school is collaborating with this university. So, it is easy for me to come here.'
- A20: 'I like that this university consist of both local and international students. I like the variety of people I meet.'
- A23: 'I am from Egypt. I came to study because I liked the campus. I know it because I checked its website. Besides, I can get the visa easily.'

Types of Challenges in the Middle of First Year Experience

Undeniably, various considerations and expectations could be predetermined and screened through in order to choose a desirable university, however, when dealing with the unintended challenges throughout the first year study, particularly, in the middle of the study where students are demanded with more roles and tasks to be accomplished. In fact, they face many unforeseen challenges from the day they step in to the campus due to drastic change of roles and complex responsibilities as an undergraduate in the university. The phenomenon is made worst due to the increased responsibilities and difficulties of their study. A recurrent theme in the interviews was the difficulty in dealing with challenges in the mid of their first year study. The types of challenges identified can be mainly generalised into five types: (1) academic challenges, (2) non-academic commitments, (3) relationship challenges, (4) new environment challenges, and (5) services of the university.

(1) Academic Challenges

Having started to pursue tertiary education, academic challenges are part of the formidable hurdles that first year students need to go through. Many found that coping with the vast varieties of learning tasks such as communication in English, presentations in the class, individual and group assignments, class participation, and examinations are efforts-taking and stressful. Concerns regarding learning difficulties is more widespread.

- A19 : 'I find it difficult during presentation. In China, we did presentation only once a year. To present in English is really hard because we seldom use English in China, even sometimes during lectures, the lecturers explained in Mandarin.'

- A20 :‘I experienced hard time when I was studying my foundation study. I could not speak English fluently as I am a shy person. I find it hard to communicate with people around me, especially in English.’
- A26 :‘I had tough time especially when I just started my first lesson in the class, because everything is so unfamiliar to me.’

(2) Non-academic Commitments

Aside from academic challenges, another reported challenges by the students is their non-academic related commitments. For instance, extra-curricular activities stipulated by the university as part of the fulfilment of the programme, occupies much of students’ time. Also, students are actively committed with other responsibilities like part-time job, voluntary works, religious activities and so forth. In juggling between academic and non-academic commitments, many of the students alluded their life as challenging.

- A1 :‘I need to attend to my family commitment due to responsibility. It is rather hard for me.’
- A9 :‘I feel my life a bit challenging because I have family and personal commitments, and some other areas that I want to explore other than my course work.’
- A17 :‘I have a few part time jobs and I take part in voluntary work as well. I am always busy. I feel tired sometimes.’

(3) Relationship Challenges

Having to seek for the support from a significant one is very common internal urge for student, particularly, a freshman. However, maintaining a relationship is never an easy lesson to student especially when they have to deal with peers and lecturers, the two individuals who are utmost essential during undergraduate’s life.

With Peers

Challenges with peers in the university is unavoidable. Concerned with the attraction of similarity, students at their young age easily withdraw themselves from the peer’s circle if they find it uncomfortable or emotionally detached from them. These phenomena are obviously reflected through their statement below.

- A2 :‘I had problem to get along with my course mates. I feel uncomfortable to work in group.’
- A5 :‘I feel like I don’t belong here. They are not my good friends. I don’t feel attach to them emotionally like how I did to my friends in my country.’
- A21 :‘It was difficult for me to start a conversation as I am quiet person. It’s awkward for me to approach others first. Often, others approach me.’

With Lecturers

In addition, not all teaching and learning experiences in the classrooms are pleasant. Students mentioned their relationship with the lecturers as challenging due to various reasons that they could not seem to bear with.

- A23 :‘I have problem with one lecturer. I could not understand his accent. Not only me, my friends also find it hard to understand him. We discuss together to figure out what he said after class. We barely communicate.’
- A25 :‘I dislike one of the lecturers. Her slides were too simple and contained very less information. She did not explain much and add on more information onto her explanation. I did not learn anything from her class. We had no interaction at all.’

- A30 :‘It would be better if the lecturers can provide more exercises and let us apply what we learnt rather than listening to their lectures solely. They should listen to us more.’

(4) New Environment

Another challenge is the adaptation to the new environment. To be able to adapt to the new environment is effort-taking. Though, to some, first year university life may seem exciting, some of the students interviewed, think and experienced otherwise. Some students shared their rather tough experience at the beginning of their first year life in the university.

- A9 :‘I faced many problems at the beginning. For example, the systems, Learning Management System (LMS) and participations in the clubs. I had no idea on how they work especially in my first semester.’
- A17 :‘My time management is quite bad. I have always not punctual or miss classes, even in submitting my assignments. I am just not used to the new environment, the new life!’
- A28 :‘I had difficulties in adjusting myself to the way things are done in the university, e.g.: timetabling, attending lectures, different lecturers, and course selection. They are so different.’

(5) Services of the University

In adjusting to the new environment, the operation system, policy, facilities, and resources of the university are the core services provided to the students. However, the functionality of all these important criteria may not be always satisfactory, at least, to some students, certain services are under expectation.

- A3 :‘I’m an international student, it took me sometimes to get used to the operational system in the university. It wasn’t easy for me.’
- A9 :‘I would appreciate more subscriptions in the online database to aid research. I could not access to much journals.’
- A23 :‘The internet system is inconsistent and unstable, especially during course selection period, I can’t even log into our student portal. It causes stress to me.’

Anticipations for Improvement and Overcoming Challenges Towards the End of First Year Experience

Although students are combating with various unintended challenges along the journey of their first year study, it is the normalcy of becoming more steady and mature after certain period of time of adaptation, especially towards the end of the first year experience. It is at this juncture of study that students are able to identify their difficulties that need to be overcome and at the same time expecting for a better learning environment. Students interviewed mentioned that after adjusting themselves in the first year university life gradually, especially at the end period of first year study, they anticipated for some improvements, both themselves and the environment where they are surrounded with. Most of them expressed their concerns on the poor internet system of the university, insufficient facilities as well as some underperformed lecturers are some of their wishes for improvement to be observed in their university life. These concerns can be further divided into: (1) facilities, staffs and university policy, (2) academic staffs, and (3) self-improvement which play a crucial role at the end of their first year experience that serves to be the transition period for their second year study.

(1) Facilities, Staffs and University Policy

Self-manage in the university is a must-have surviving skill for all first year students. However, not all matters can be solved instantly or managed smoothly by the students themselves. When students get used to the

university community, they slowly learned that much has to be improved, thus, the most common comments from students are the facilities and the staffs of the university.

- A 4 :‘I hope that the Integrated Information System (IIS) can be upgraded or improved. Sometimes, it takes me quite some time to access to it and that makes me feel anxious.’
- A 10 :‘I find that the facilities here are imperfect and the workers’ efficiency is too low!’
- A23 :‘I hope the university will help us in facilitating the procedures of VISA application. I hope it can be easier and simpler.’

(2) Academic Staffs

On the other hand, some students expressed their ideas based on their observation about some of the academic staffs who did not carrying out their duty properly. Therefore, they hoped that academic staffs should be more professionally.

- A29 :‘I think the university has some really good lecturers but it also has some lecturers that needs improvement.’
- A28 :‘There are some lecturers who just want to complete their assigned tasks and are not truly concerned for students’ progress. Sometimes, they even belittle foreign students for their poor language proficiency which I think is not the right thing to do.’

(3) Self-Improvement

One positive effect of pursuing study in the university is when the students are anticipating for self-improvement after certain period of time. It is clearly reflected in students’ statements below.

- A19 :‘I know my English is weak. I know reading needs rich vocabulary. Now, every day I learn 30 new words by reading English newspaper. I don’t rush for it, I will go step by step. I know I cannot rush.’
- A27 :‘I improve myself by always forcing to myself to come out from my comfort zone .For example, joining as many events as possible or by trying to speak out as much as possible. I want to be a better person.’
- A28 :‘I hope I will learn not to waste my free time. In the university the schedule is so hectic and I really need to improve myself.’

Discussion

This study explores the issues faced by the first year experiences of students in terms of their attitudes, expectations and the ways they cope with the challenges in the various stages of their life in the university. The study found that first year undergraduates have to deal with different challenges in three significant stages in their university life, namely: at the beginning of their university life, middle and towards the end of their first year study. At the beginning of their study, location and financial appear to be the two main concerns of the students in choosing the university to study. A possible explanation for this might be the cost of education is rather expensive in a private university in comparison to a public university in Malaysia. Therefore, having to consider a cheaper tuition fee and strategic location before enrolling to the university may decrease unnecessary stress that may affect their study. This finding is consistent with that of Andrews and Wilding (2004) who hold that financial stress hinders academic performance of the student. This result is also accord with Yorke and Longden (2008) who maintain that financial issue affect student’s retention and urge to in completing their study.

Another important area categorised from the findings is the various challenges faced by students in the middle of the first year study. The challenges are mainly resulted from the academic and non-academic encounters dealt by the students. Relationship management is reported to be one of the greatest challenges that they need to handle with care in a complete different setting which will otherwise affect their adaptation into their new life. Findings reveal that lecturer and peer relationships are two crucial relationships in the university that influence students psychologically. This result may be explained by the fact that human relationship plays a significant role in a person social life, despite the social role held by the student. This is consistent with the literature by Buote et al. (2007) who reveals that a fruitful new friendship will determine a better adjustment of the students into the university environment. This is also in line with Wintre and Yaffe (2000) who argue that students' affection towards the significant one plays an important role in the process of adapting their new life in the university. Likewise, this result is in agreement with Awang, Kutty and Ahmad (2014) who state that relationship between students, peers and parents is positively associated with the process of adjusting themselves in the university life. Moreover, the result reflects those of Baik, Naylor and Arkoudis (2015) who reported that many students expressed their lack of social and academic bond with their university due to the reason of not connecting closely with other students.

Lastly, when students are reaching the end of their first year study, they are becoming more familiar with the university life and therefore, anticipate to witness some improvements from the institution as well as to seek for a better method to overcome various challenges they encounter. They hope for positive improvements especially for these areas: the poor internet system of the university, insufficient facilities as well as some underperformed lecturers. It is unsurprising to note that many students expressed their dissatisfaction about the internet service provided by the university for being inconsistent and lagging. This result is likely to be related to the intensive use of internet among students in searching for information, accessing to course materials, connecting with people using social networking sites, to name a few. This study supports evidence from previous observations (e.g.: Nalbone et al., 2015); West, Moore and Barry, 2015). The former study states that to be connected to the social networking sites aid students in adapting themselves with the community in their first year study better. The latter maintains that the use of social networking sites such as Twitter easily connect them with their peers, professors and member of the professional body. Hence, the students hoped the internet system can be improved due to the importance of being connected with their peers and lecturers.

Conclusions

The first year students in this qualitative study revealed that university life is a life-changing experience. It is fairly certain there will be ups and downs along the way, which strengthen and threaten their identity and sense of efficacy. A variety of academic endeavours and career-related experiences through internships, community service projects, part-time jobs, and extra-curricular activities are the best ways to make the adjustment to university life easier. Students who are involved in both classroom and outside the classroom activities are more engaged in their university experience. While inside the classroom, teaching quality proves effective in facilitating positive perceptions toward higher education quality and the awareness of support available, the learning could also be taken place outside the classroom through an appreciation for a diversity of backgrounds, philosophies, cultures, and customs. This paper identifies the key factors that may lead to better transition and adjustment to university life among students, some of which are not discussed elsewhere in the literature. Therefore, it can be useful to use current findings to develop a survey instrument or design university engagement program that tailors to meet the needs of university students. Several limitations should be noted here. First, all participants were recruited from a single university in Malaysia therefore preventing generalization of the findings to the overall population. In addition, the sample size of this study is relatively small, that is, 30 participants. More qualitative studies are required to examine whether the paper's findings apply to students' university life in other parts of Malaysia, as well as for government universities.

Data Availability (excluding Review articles)

The data shall be accessed by contacting leekf@ucsiuniversity.edu.my. The findings are in excel format.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors of this article declare that there are no conflicts of interest upon this submission.

Funding Statement

This work was supported by UCSI University in Malaysia [grant number: Proj-In-FOSSLA-002].

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