The first-year experience in higher education in the UK

Report on Phase 1 of a project funded by the Higher Education Academy

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The Higher Education Academy

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Background and rationale

Previous work by Yorke et al (1997) showed that poor choice of programme, financial stress, and aspects of the student experience were the most frequently cited reasons given for non-completion by students in six varied institutions in the north-west of England. With the funding régime having changed substantially since the time of the Yorke et al study, and about to change further as 'top-up' fees are introduced, there was an opportunity to assess whether there had been any change in the kinds of reason students give for discontinuation of their studies.

The establishment of the Higher Education Academy, whose strong emphasis is on the student experience, offered the prospect of expanding the original methodology used by Yorke et al to give a stronger focus on aspects of the student experience that may be impacting on discontinuation. This would be particularly pertinent in a context of widening participation, since work by Action on Access (2003) had pointed to aspects of the student experience (broadly interpreted) that appear to be assisting some institutions to retain students to a greater extent than their computed benchmarks would lead one to expect. It is also an aspect of the student experience that has been remarkably under-researched in the UK despite the fact that such studies have been conducted in the US and Australia for many years.

The present project is based on first-year full-time students in a number of contrasting institutions, with an original intention (not quite achieved) of having at least two institutions in any sub-group in order to preserve anonymity in reporting. The focus is on first-year students since the first year has, to date, been the most critical for discontinuation. While the sample of institutions spans a variety of types, care was taken to include a number of institutions which have substantial proportions of disadvantaged students, since this would respond to the policy emphasis on widening participation.

The project has two phases:

1. A survey of the first-year full-time students in a number of contrasting subject areas during Term 2 (i.e. around late February or March) regarding their perceptions of their experience as students. At this point in their studies they would be expected to have had feedback on assessments conducted in the first semester of the academic year. The cost is that Phase 1 cannot pick up students who leave their institution early in the academic year.

2. In January 2007, when institutions will have confirmed which students have not re-enrolled in Year 2, a survey of all those who are recorded as not continuing their studies in their original institutions, in order to ascertain their reasons for discontinuing. The opportunity exists to pick up the very early leavers retrospectively in Phase 2. Phase 2 will be essentially an exit survey substantially

similar to the Yorke et al (1997) study, which will allow for some comparison with the findings from the mid-1990s.

This report covers work conducted under Phase 1.

The survey questionnaire

A survey which might purport to give a reasonable depiction of students' experience needed to be both spread across a variety of institutions and to have as low a risk of response bias as could be achieved. The choice was made to use a questionnaire that could be completed in around 20 minutes, and which could be administered in 'class time'. A trial with a web-based approach indicated that the response rate was likely to be low, and for this reason this possibility was discarded. While it was likely that the response to a questionnaire to be completed in students' own time would be higher, experience with other questionnaire surveys suggested that the response rate would not reach an acceptable level.

Following pilot work in two institutions, which led to some amendments, the questionnaire consisted of 77 'tick-box' items, of which 19 related to demographics and aspects of personal experience and 58 Likert items requesting respondents to indicate their level of agreement. The Likert items were divided in orientation: agreement to the majority indicated a positive view of the student experience; to the minority, a negative view. In addition to the 77 items, there were three open response boxes in which students could, if they wished, add their own comments on aspects of their experience that may not have been adequately covered by the closed-response items. The questionnaire is attached at Appendix A.

Some aspects of the student background and experience ideally need more space to elucidate responses than can be accommodated in a relatively short questionnaire, and the limitations of a four-page survey meant that some aspects could not be explored as fully as is desirable (for example, socio-economic status). Here we note, in passing, the greater propensity for students in the US and Australia to complete surveys of greater length than we judged possible in the circumstances of this study.

Sample

25 institutions, spanning a wide range of institutional types from 'Russell Group' universities to institutions specialising in Art and Design, expressed a willingness to participate in the project. Nine broad subject areas were represented, spanning a range of disciplines as listed below:

- Subjects allied to Medicine
- Biological Sciences

- Psychology
- Computer Science
- Engineering and Technology
- Social Studies
- Business and Administration
- Humanities (represented by Historical Studies and English[1])
- Creative Arts and Design.

The sampling frame (Figure 1) was constructed so that no institution was asked to survey more than three of the nine broad subject areas[2]. Smaller and specialist institutions surveyed one or two subject areas, as was appropriate. In all cases, and for reasons of practicality, the sampling focused on subject areas in which the institution concerned had a relatively high density of students.

Some 20,000 questionnaires were distributed to the participating institutions, according to estimates of the numbers of students enrolling in the autumn of 2005. In a small number of instances the numbers proved to be higher than anticipated, and additional questionnaires were supplied.

The institutions were asked to distribute the questionnaires in class sessions and to collect completed questionnaires at the end of them. Pilot studies had suggested that the questionnaire would normally take no more than 20 minutes to complete. The original intention was for questionnaires to be distributed in late February and early March 2006. It turned out that some groups of students in subjects allied to Medicine were on placements at this time, and they completed the questionnaire at the beginning of the Summer Term. It was agreed with one institution that they could administer the questionnaire after the final lecture of appropriate days, since staff were reluctant to use lecturing time for this purpose.

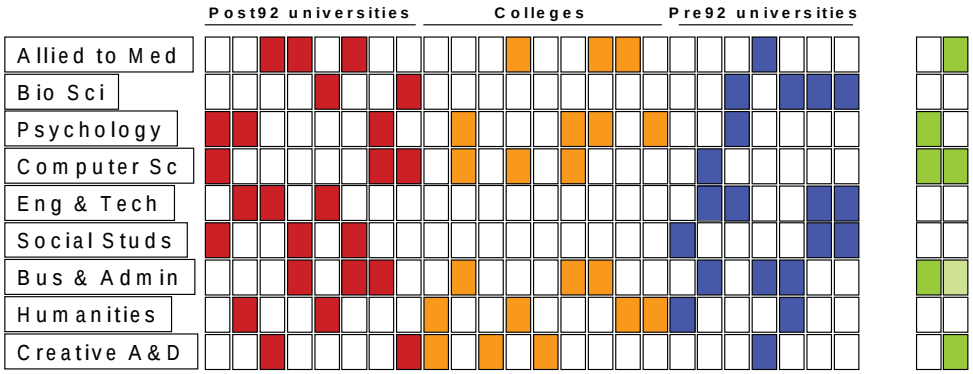

Figure 1: Sampling frame used in the survey

1 These appear in different groupings according to the HESA JACS coding.
2 Two institutions more than the groups set out in the sampling frame took up the invitation to survey, though one of these eventually withdrew.

The institutions are characterised as they existed in early 2005. Subsequently, a number gained the university title. The two columns to the right represent two pre-92 universities that did not actually undertake the survey.

Examination of returned questionnaires showed that some groups of students did not respond to the later items. In part, this may have been due to insufficient time having been allowed for the administration, and one set of incomplete responses was known to be attributable to a fire alarm which disrupted the activity. The consequence is that there are more missing data for items towards the end of the questionnaire.

Institutions were asked to collect up blank forms, sealed in reply envelopes, from students who were unwilling to complete the questionnaire in order that an estimate of non-response could be made. The pattern of responses is as shown in Table 1.

The extent to which participating institutions distributed questionnaires is unclear, but it is probably reasonable to assume that they actually circulated a number close to the 7,442 that were returned: a few blanks may have not been returned. The response rate, *based on returns*, is therefore in the region of 95%.

Questionnaires	**Number**
Sent out to HEIs	**Some 20,000**
Returned	**7,442**
Returned blank	314
Returned with jocular or offensive comment	5
'Yea-sayers' (probably	8
'Middle category raters'	6
Usable responses	**7,109**

Table 1: The responses to the survey

There is no way of determining the extent of any bias attributable to the way in which institutions distributed questionnaires, or to student absence or unwillingness to complete the survey. Table 1 implies that the bias in the case of the last of the possibilities is likely to be low.

As Table 1 shows, a very small number of responses had to be rejected for various reasons. 'Yea-saying', or agreement bias, occurs when respondents record 'strongly agree' or 'agree' responses against all of the items. With some items being expressed in negative, or implicitly negative, terms, 'yea-saying' is probably present when the pattern of responses takes this form (this is something that cannot be

said when all the items are oriented in the same direction of favourability, as is the case with the National Student Survey). On this criterion, the level of 'yea-saying' is very low. Students who are indifferent to the survey might simply tick all the middle response categories. A check on the data showed that, again, the level of such responding was very low. Five responses were rejected because they were annotated with jocular or offensive comments.

Quantitative data analysis

Demographics

A 'broad brush' analysis of all the returns produced the findings shown in Table 2. This Table makes no allowance for the very different numbers of responses from the participating institutions and from the subject areas within them. It thus constitutes an overview which is narrowed down where inspection suggested that there were variations within the data that would need to be borne in mind when interpreting the outcomes from the Likert items.

Variable		
Age	Under 21 21+	75% 25%
Gender	Male Female	39% 61%
Ethnicity	White Black/Black British Asian/Asian British Chinese	81% 7% 7% 2%
Family background	Managerial/professional Other known employment	39% 41%
Previous experience of HE		33%
Considered withdrawing		29%
	Proportion of whom wishing to switch straightaway	52%

Table 2: Overall demographics

Analysis by institutional type

The data were cut into two groups, pre-1992 universities in the first, and post-1992 universities and colleges in the second, for further analyses. The original intention, as is evident from the sampling frame, was to treat the data as three groups, but the gaining of university status by some of the colleges in the sample made a three-way split of doubtful utility.

Age

In the pre-1992 universities, 86% of respondents were aged below 21 (termed 'young', for convenience), whereas in the post-1992 universities and colleges the percentage of young students was only 68. The only subject area to buck this trend was Creative Arts and Design, but the numbers in the pre-1992 universities were very small. It was noticeable that the age-distribution in subjects allied to Medicine was skewed towards the higher end in both groups of institutions: young students made up 68% of those in the pre-1992 university group but only 36% in the post-1992 universities and colleges.

Gender

As would be expected, the gender balance across the subject areas was very varied. Men were predominant in Computer Science and in Engineering & Technology, whereas women predominated in subjects allied to Medicine and in Psychology. Differences between the two groups were most marked in Engineering & Technology (the proportion of women being 34% in pre-1992 universities, against 10% in post-1992 universities and colleges), Social Studies (men 55%, against 36%), and Humanities (women 61%, against 71%).

Ethnicity

The proportion of white students was generally higher in the pre-1992 universities than in the post-1992 universities and colleges, the exception in Social Studies probably being a consequence of the particular institutions involved and hence unlikely to be representative of the sector as a whole. Black and Black British students were noticeably strongly represented in two subject areas in the post-1992 universities and colleges: in subjects allied to Medicine they comprised 25% of respondents, and in Business and Administration, 15%.

Social background

The tendency was for a higher proportion of students in the pre-1992 universities and colleges to come from managerial/professional backgrounds, the difference overall being some 10 percentage points. However, in two subject areas the proportion of students from this kind of background was much lower across both institutional groups: Subjects allied to Medicine and Computer Science. For other social backgrounds, the proportions were at broadly similar levels for the two institutional groups. As would be expected from the respective age-profiles, there was a greater tendency for students in the post-1992 universities and colleges to be responsible for dependants.

Previous experience of higher education
Overall, the proportion of students who had had previous experience of higher education was roughly twice as high in the post-1992 universities and colleges than it was in the pre-1992 universities, approximately 40% compared with 20%. The one subject area evidencing a different proportionality was Subjects allied to Medicine, where the respective percentages were 52 and 40.

Time spent on studying
Across the subject areas, students at pre-1992 universities indicated that they spent more time at their institution than did their peers at the post-1992 universities and colleges. Whereas 74% of the former group indicated that they spent at least four days at their institution, in the latter group of institutions the percentage was only 56. The difference was reflected, albeit relatively weakly, by the proportions indicating that they spent four or more days per week in private study: 32% as against 24, respectively.

Part-time employment
Students in pre-1992 universities were generally less likely to be involved in part-time employment that were their peers in post-1992 universities and colleges, though the pattern was uneven within both institutional group and subject area. The general trend was bucked in Subjects allied to Medicine, where only 28% of the former group undertook no part-time employment compared with 46% in the latter, and in Computer Science, where in each group the proportion was a shade over 40%.

Likert items relating to teaching and learning
The Likert scale items include aspects not only of the students' experience of teaching and learning but also relating to the broader student experience of the first year of full-time higher education.

The questionnaire was not designed to contain psychometrically robust scales. However, exploratory factor analysis (principal components, with varimax rotation) of a subset of the items dealing with aspects of teaching and learning produced a fairly well defined rotated structure. Seven factors accounted for 55.2% of the variance. Five of the seven factors gave rise to Cronbach alpha reliability coefficients of 0.7 and above (Table 3).

Scaled label	Items in scale	Cronbach alpha
Understanding the academic demand	15, 21, 49, 55	0.70
Supportive teaching	18, 19, 23, 24, 30	0.77
Stimulating learning experience	14, 26, 50, 52, 54, 70	0.78
Feedback	31, 32, 63	0.75
Coping with academic work	38r, 53, 59r, 66r, 67	0.70

Table 3: The reliability coefficients for five scales (Items suffixed 'r' were scored 5=SD to 1=SA; others were scored in the opposite direction.)

Item 18 loaded to a noticeable but lesser extent on 'Stimulating learning experience' than on 'Supportive teaching', and Item 52 did the opposite. In each case, if the extra item had been added to the relevant scale, the alpha coefficient would have been raised to 0.81.

Other groups of items lacked adequate statistical reliability, but nevertheless have sufficient conceptual overlap to justify juxtaposition where appropriate in this report. For example, items 33 to 36 all relate to aspects of resourcing, but there is no necessary expectation that levels of resourcing should be highly correlated (e.g. facilities for working on one's own may be very limited whereas computing provision might be substantial).

Overall analyses

The broad picture is of students who in general find their learning experiences stimulating and the teaching supportive. Most understand the academic demand facing them, but the extent to which they are coping is slightly less marked. If there is a weakness in their experiences in the general area of teaching and learning, it lies in the area of feedback on the work they have submitted. The following sequence of bar-charts of grouped item means illustrates these points. The responses have been cut into five equal-interval bands, with higher bands indicating a more positive student experience. The middle band represents, somewhat fuzzily, the mid-point of the five-point scale. The lowest two bands, therefore, suggest the extent to which concern might be particularly justified about the student experience. Figure 2 to Figure 6 illustrate the balance of students' opinion as judged by the five statistically robust factors listed in Table 3.

Stimulating learning experience

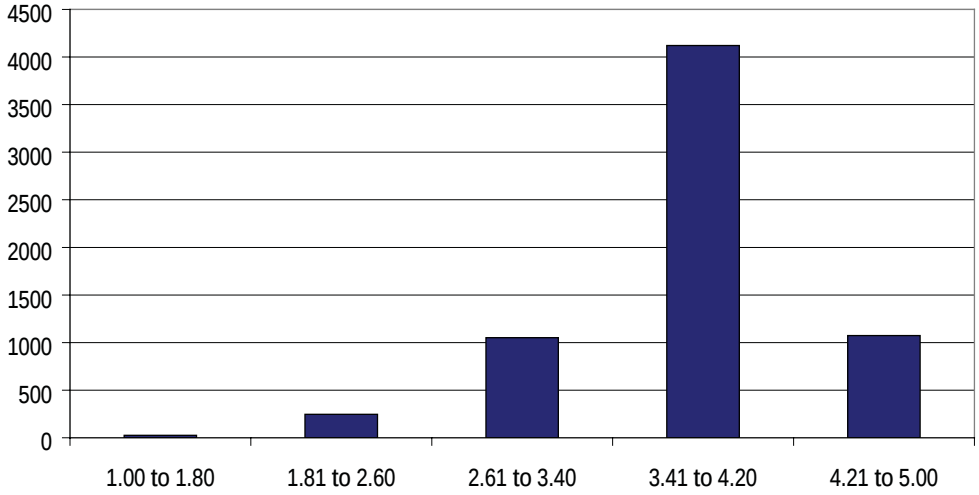

Figure 2: Distribution of responses regarding the stimulation of the learning experience

Supportive teaching

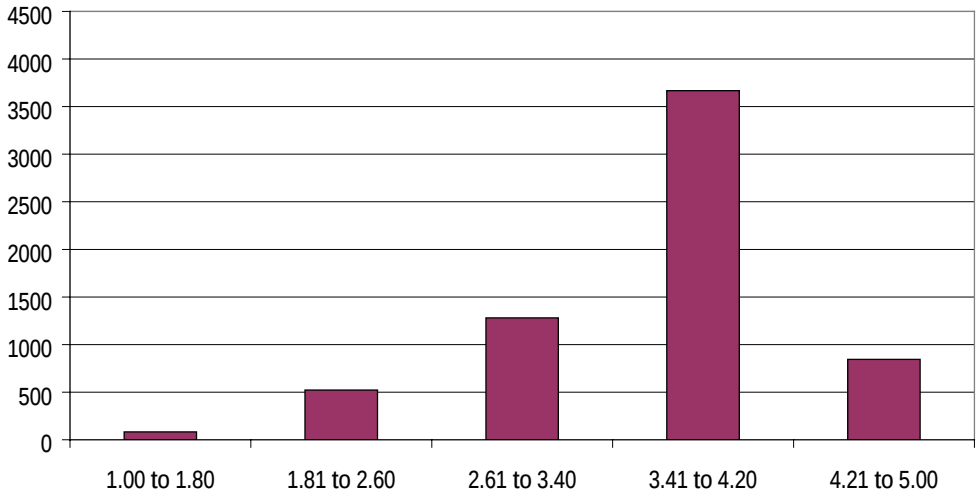

Figure 3: Distribution of responses regarding the supportiveness of the teaching

Understanding academic demand

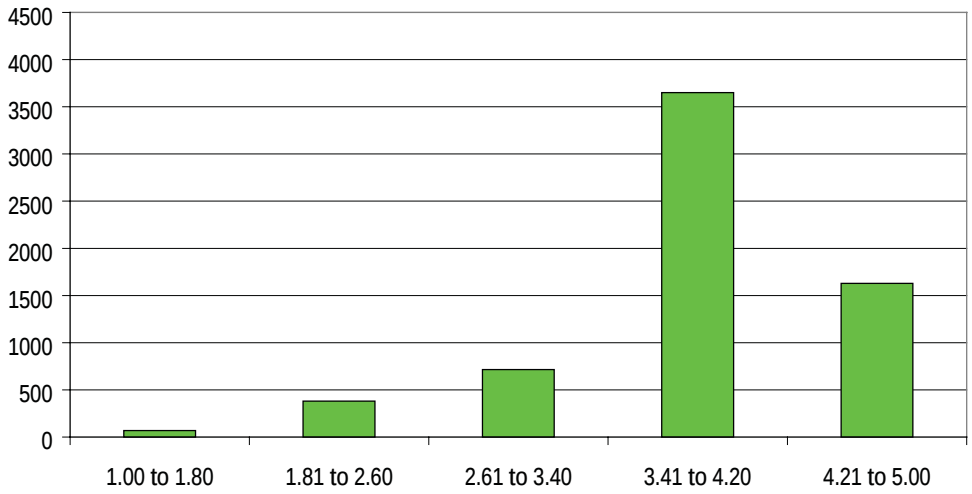

Figure 4: Distribution of responses regarding the extent to which students understood the academic demand

Coping with academic demand

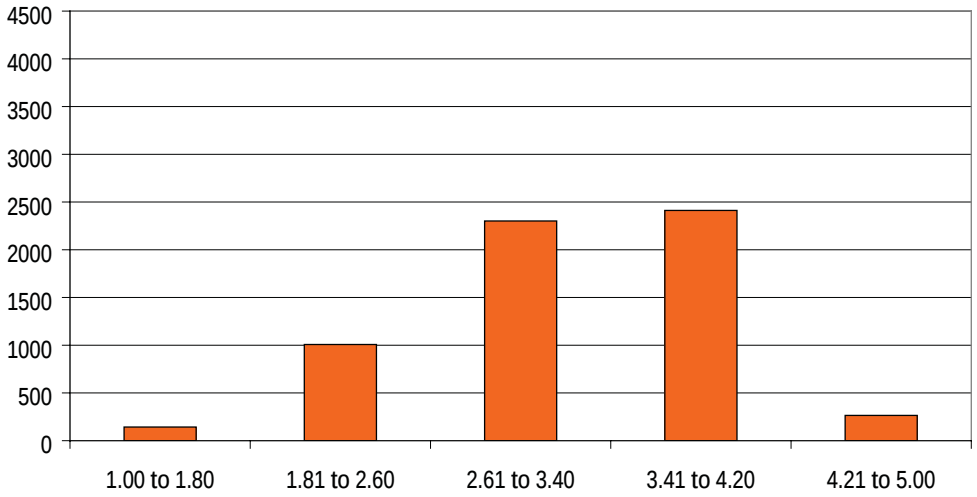

Figure 5: Distribution of responses regarding the extent to which students felt that they were coping with the academic demand

Feedback

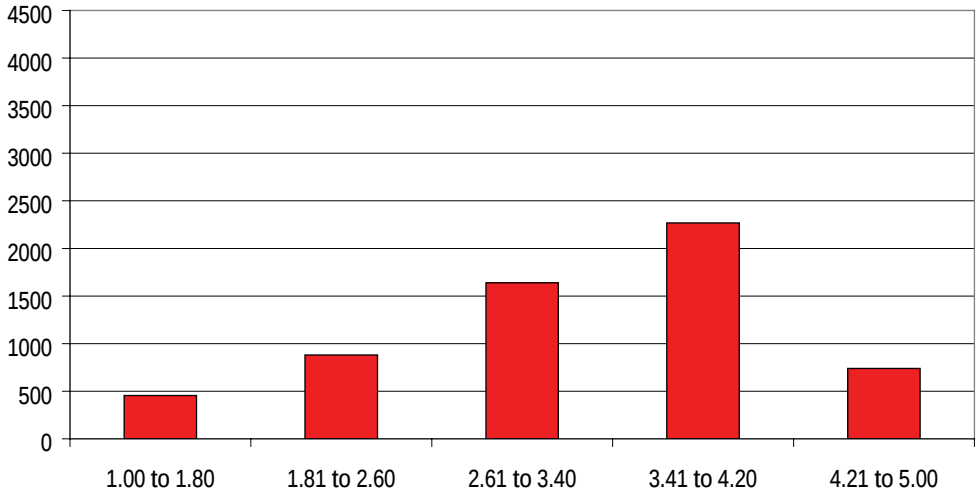

Figure 6: Distribution of responses regarding the feedback that the students had received

The analyses threw up two findings that give clear cause for concern. The first is the not unexpected worry experienced by students regarding the financing of their studies. The bar-chart below is based on a single item asking whether students worried about financing, and hence in this case the bands represent levels of agreement with the item.

Worry about financing through HE

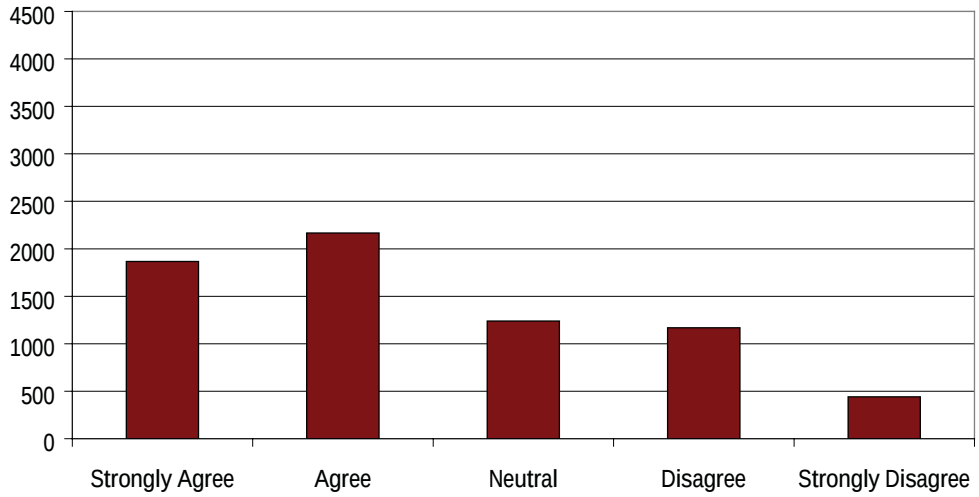

Figure 7: An indication of the extent to which students indicated worry over financing their studies

The second aspect of concern was less predictable – the extent to which students had prior knowledge of the institution and the programme they were joining. The mean score for the two items was used to provide a rough index of prior knowledge, and this shows a substantial number of students who, it can be inferred from their low ratings, were less than adequately informed about the higher education experience they were about to enter.

Prior knowledge of HE/programme

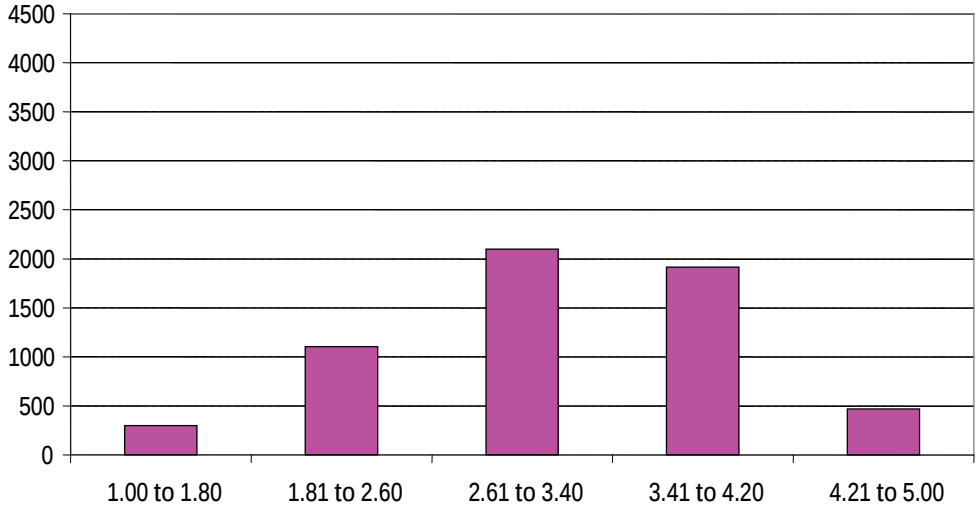

Figure 8: The extent of students' prior knowledge about HEI and programme

Both of these response patterns are particularly likely to have implications for retention and completion.

Perhaps comfortingly for policy-makers, a considerable majority of respondents envisaged that their studies would lead to an appropriate graduate-level job. The responses relate to a single item, and hence the bands in the bar-chart represent levels of agreement.

Confident of getting a graduate level job

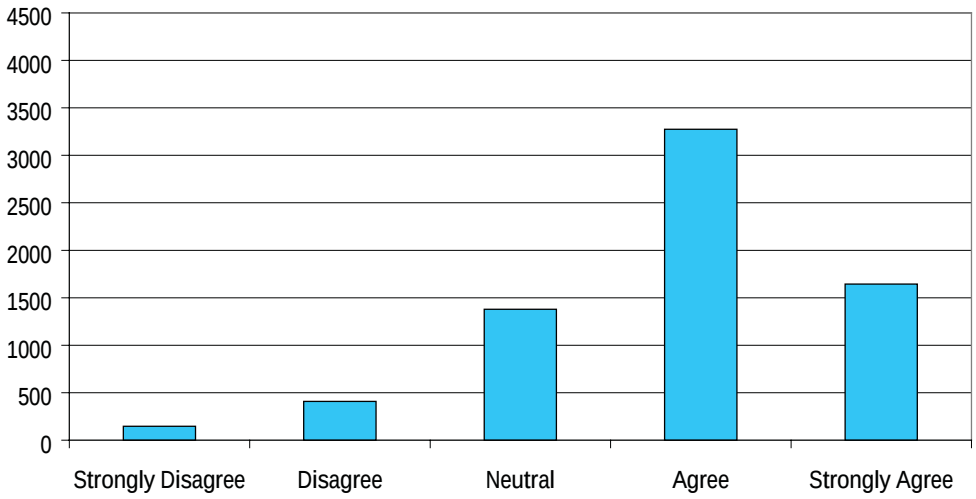

Figure 9: Students' confidence of obtaining a graduate-level job

Analyses by sub-groups

The analyses presented below are not supplemented with tests of statistical significance for any differences. This is because the sampling, while spanning a range of institutions and subject areas, does not approximate sufficiently closely to the required criterion of randomness. For example, the return rate for questionnaires from participating institutions varied widely, between 10 and 68%, and hence the data will reflect this variation.

In the bar-charts that follow, only a section of the rating scale is represented because the purpose is to draw attention to differences. However, it should be noted that such a representation draws attention away from commonalities. Appendix B presents some statistical data relating to comparisons where numbers in sub-groups are large.

Age

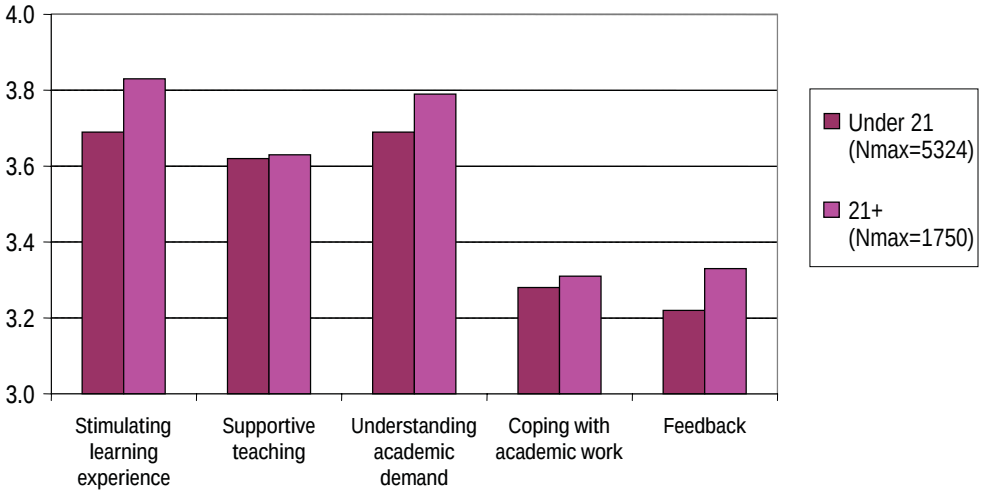

Figure 10: Age-differences regarding the five statistically robust factors

Note: N max represents the largest number of students responding to an item or group of items. In practice, most respondent numbers were close to N max.

31% of respondents from the post-1992 universities and colleges were aged 21 or above ('older' students), compared with 14% of those from the pre-1992 universities.

Older students tended to see their learning experience as being more stimulating compared with their younger peers, and also claimed a higher level of understanding of the academic demand of study in higher education.

Older students felt themselves better informed about their programme and institution than their younger peers, though were marginally more critical about the quality of the information that they received from the institution. They also felt themselves to have been markedly more known by the academic staff, but rated aspects of social engagement in their institution at a markedly lower level than did younger students.

Older students were more in contact with other students on a face-to-face basis than were younger students. However, the situation was reversed when it came to electronic contact.

While funding was an issue for students of all ages, the survey showed that it was more significant for older students than for younger ones. As would be expected, older students indicated a higher level of commitment to the care of dependants.

While this commitment showed up in some loss of attendance at timetabled sessions, in general they reported a higher level of attendance than did their younger counterparts (and a greater propensity to undertake background reading), reflecting a generally higher level of motivation towards their studies.

Gender
Gender seemed not to be a material influence on students' perceptions of learning and teaching at the level of the five factors.

		Male	Female
Factor	**Nmax**	**2755**	**4300**
Stimulating learning experience		3.68	3.75
Supportive teaching		3.64	3.61
Undertanding academic demand		3.72	3.71
Coping with academic work		3.30	3.27
Feedback		3.24	3.25

Table 4: Gender-related differences regarding the five statistically robust factors

When responses to individual items were examined, female students were a little more likely to have done the expected background reading than males, but the mean ratings for each group were around the mid-point of the scale.

Women were marginally more likely than men to express concern about funding their way through higher education, and – as would be expected – tended to have a greater level of commitment to the care of others.

They exhibited a higher level of motivation than did men, and this was reflected in a lower tendency to miss scheduled sessions.

They were more likely than their male peers to be happy with their living accommodation while studying.

Ethnicity and domicile
Neither ethnicity nor domicile seemed to give rise to much difference in students' perceptions at the level of the five factors.

Ethnicity
At the finer level of individual items, a number of differences between ethnic groups were found, but these generally did not fall into any clear-cut pattern. The larger differences that were found are as below:

- White students were less likely to do extra background reading than other ethnic groups
- Chinese students were less likely to find facilities adequate for working on their own
- Ethnic groups other than white were less positive about the social aspect of their experience in higher education …
- … and were more likely to have caring responsibilities for others
- Asian/Asian British and Chinese students were more likely to find problems with the timetabling of their studies
- Chinese students were less happy with their accommodation and travelling
- Black/Black British students were noticeably more positive about obtaining a graduate-level job.

Comparisons by ethnicity

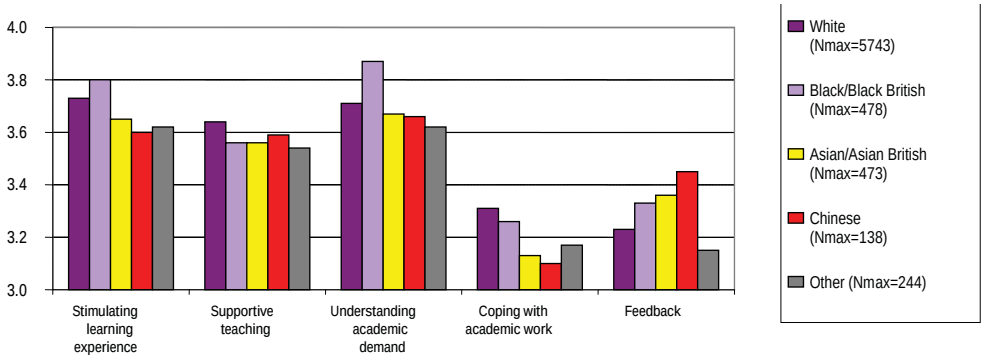

Figure 11: Ethnicity-related differences regarding the five statistically robust factors

Domicile

		England	Scotland	Wales	NI	Other Europe	Outside Europe
Factor	**Nmax**	**4547**	**548**	**221**	**944**	**532**	**284**
Stimulating learning experience		3.75	3.71	3.71	3.66	3.67	3.72
Supportive teaching		3.60	3.70	3.69	3.66	3.60	3.67
Understanding academic demand		3.71	3.75	3.72	3.79	3.61	3.65
Coping with academic work		3.30	3.32	3.27	3.19	3.35	3.24
Feedback		3.27	3.11	3.19	3.25	3.11	3.36

Table 5: Domicile-related differences regarding the five statistically robust factors

Like ethnicity, domicile produced a scattering of mean differences, but generally in no obvious pattern. Some of the scatter may be due to the match or mismatch of UK students' domiciles and institutions, but any finer analyses would be

compromised by the particularity of the subject areas from which responses were obtained, response rates and other variables.

More marked divergences in group means were as follows:

- Students from Europe beyond the UK were inclined to find academic work less hard than they had expected
- Students from beyond Europe, and those from Wales, were more inclined to find feedback on their work detailed and helpful than did other students
- Students from outside the UK were more positive about undertaking reading beyond that which had been prescribed
- Students from England, and those from outside Europe, tended to feel better known by academic staff
- On three of the four items bearing on social engagement, students from outside the UK tended to give less positive reactions
- Set against this, their responses suggested higher levels of motivation and commitment to attending scheduled sessions
- Travelling seems to have been more of a problem for students from Scotland, Northern Ireland and outside Europe
- Accommodation appeared somewhat less satisfactory for students originating from outside the UK.

Socio-economic status [SES]

		Managerial/ professional	Intermediate	Supervisory, technical, manual etc	Long term unemployed/ never worked	Not sure/ other
Factor	**Nmax**	**2681**	**1501**	**1275**	**304**	**1061**
Stimulating learning experience		3.75	3.74	3.74	3.61	3.70
Supportive teaching		3.65	3.63	3.63	3.59	3.58
Understanding academic demand		3.72	3.72	3.74	3.70	3.70
Coping with academic work		3.35	3.29	3.28	3.21	3.19
Feedback		3.20	3.27	3.29	3.27	3.29

Table 6: SES-related differences regarding the five statistically robust factors

Perhaps surprisingly, SES seems to have little influence on students' perceptions of aspects of teaching and learning. There is a hint that SES correlates positively with the ability to cope with academic work, and with social engagement in higher education.

The gradient is steeper when it comes to concerns relating to funding, and

to commitments outside higher education. There is also a gradient where accommodation and travelling are concerned, with students from higher socio-economic status being happier with their lot.

Prior experience of higher education

		Prior experience of HE	No prior experience of HE
Factor	**Nmax**	**2313**	**4725**
Stimulating learning experience		3.76	3.71
Supportive teaching		3.61	3.63
Understanding academic demand		3.76	3.69
Coping with academic work		3.29	3.28
Feedback		3.30	3.22

Table 7: The relationship between prior experience of HE and the five statistically robust factors

A student's prior experience of higher education seems to have little bearing on their perceptions of the five factors.

Those with prior experience evidenced a marginally higher level of commitment to reading beyond the prescribed diet. They also indicated a higher level of being known by academic staff.

On three of the four items covering aspects of social engagement, those with no prior experience showed higher levels of engagement outside the academic. Those with prior experience of higher education evidenced greater concern about funding issues, and tended to have commitments which drew them away from academic work. Despite this, they showed higher motivation and a lower incidence of missing scheduled sessions.

Single-subject v. multi-subject programmes

It seemed to have made little difference to students' perceptions whether they were on a single-subject or multi-subject programme. On the teaching and learning aspects of their experience, students taking a single-subject programme felt that they had made a better choice of subject than those who had taken more than one subject in their programme.

		>1 subject in programme	1 subject in programme
Factor	**Nmax**	**3177**	**3800**
Stimulating learning experience		3.69	3.75
Supportive teaching		3.60	3.64
Understanding academic demand		3.70	3.73
Coping with academic work		3.25	3.32
Feedback		3.26	3.24

Table 8: The relationship between programme structure and the five statistically robust factors

However, when students undertaking multi-subject programmes were asked if they had had differing enjoyment of the components, those who indicated that their enjoyment did differ in their programme components tended to have less positive views of their experience of the teaching and learning aspects subsumed in the five factors. In Table 9, 'Yes' signifies differing enjoyment.

		Yes	No
Factor	**Nmax**	**1816**	**1410**
Stimulating learning experience		3.62	3.79
Supportive teaching		3.56	3.67
Understanding academic demand		3.67	3.74
Coping with academic work		3.19	3.35
Feedback		3.21	3.33

Table 9: The relationship between differential enjoyment of a multi-subject programme and the five statistically robust factors

At the more detailed level of the individual items, students who had perceived differences in their enjoyment of the subjects they had taken felt that their programme was more like what they had expected than did their peers who had not signalled any marked difference. There was a marginal tendency for the former group to be better known by academic staff, and they felt more positive about their induction into their institution and about the guidance that they had received regarding academic choices. Their motivation seemed to be a little greater.

Institutional type

Since some of the participating colleges became universities during Phase 1 of this project, it seemed more sensible to present analyses in terms of two groups rather than the three originally envisaged at the time that the project was being designed (Figure 12).

Comparisons by institutional type

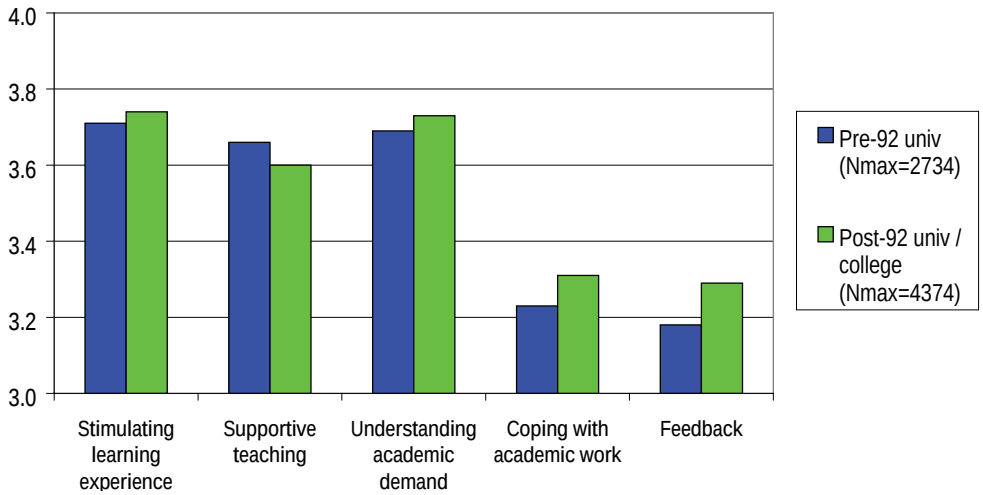

Figure 12: The relationship between institutional type and the five statistically robust factors

Ratings on the five factors differed little between students from pre-1992 universities and those from the post-1992 universities and colleges. However, when the data were analysed at the level of the individual institution, there were some instances of institutions being somewhat out of line (in either direction) compared with others in their group. These differences are not being reported publicly, but the institutions concerned have been informed of them.

Students in pre-1992 universities indicated a higher level of contact with staff, and slightly superior programme organisation, than their peers in post-1992 universities and colleges. This may be a reflection of differences in programme structures between the two groups of institutions: roughly 40% of respondents in pre-1992 universities were following programmes with more than one subject, whereas the proportion in the post-1992 universities and colleges was ten percentage points higher. The pre-1992 university students were more inclined to say that their academic work was harder than they had expected, and less inclined to say that they had done prescribed or unprescribed background reading. They were also less inclined to say that the feedback on their work had been detailed.

They did, however, indicate that they had a higher level of access to computing resources than their counterparts in the post-1992 universities and colleges.

Students in the group of post-1992 universities and colleges were markedly more likely to say that at least two members of academic staff knew them by name, perhaps reflecting that this group contained a number of smaller institutions. They also indicated a marginally higher level of motivation for their studies (which could be a consequence of the demographic profile in such institutions, which tend to enrol older students – a feature of the profile of respondents to the survey, as was noted earlier).

On three of the four items covering social engagement beyond the academic, students from the pre-1992 universities showed higher levels of social engagement. This may reflect a difference in the social background of the respective student bodies, with relatively well-off students (funding was less of a concern for them) having more free time to enjoy the benefits of the social opportunities offered by their particular institutions. This freedom was accentuated by their lower likelihood of having responsibilities for others (again, probably a consequence of the demographic differential between the two groups of institutions). For the students from the pre-1992 universities and colleges, travelling and accommodation were more satisfactory.

Subject area

Differences between some subject areas were quite marked in respect of the five statistically robust factors, as is shown in the following sets of figures. Comparisons *between* the factors (but not those *within* the factors) need to be approached with considerable caution, since the ratings on items reflect the way in which the items were stated. There is no necessary reason to infer that a mean of 3.1 on, say, 'supportive teaching' is necessarily an inferior outcome compared with 3.3 on 'stimulating learning experience'.

English and History, combined here under the heading of Humanities, seem particularly strong across the five factors. Creative Arts and Design are almost as strong, but are rated less highly as regards the supportiveness of the teaching, where the organisation of the programme and the availability of tutorial support tend to be rated lower than in other subject areas (the relatively high proportion of part-time staff may be significant in terms of tutorial support). There is a marked discrepancy between students' understanding of the academic demand in Subjects allied to Medicine and their coping with it: this may reflect the structuring of programmes in this area, where students have to combine demanding ward experience with their academic studies.

Subject comparisons 1

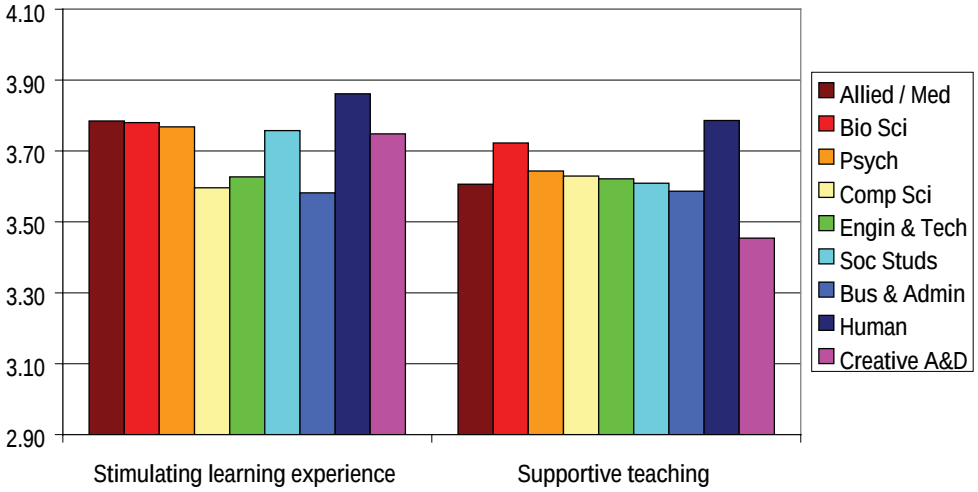

Figure 13: Factor means by broad subject areas (1)

Subject comparisons 2

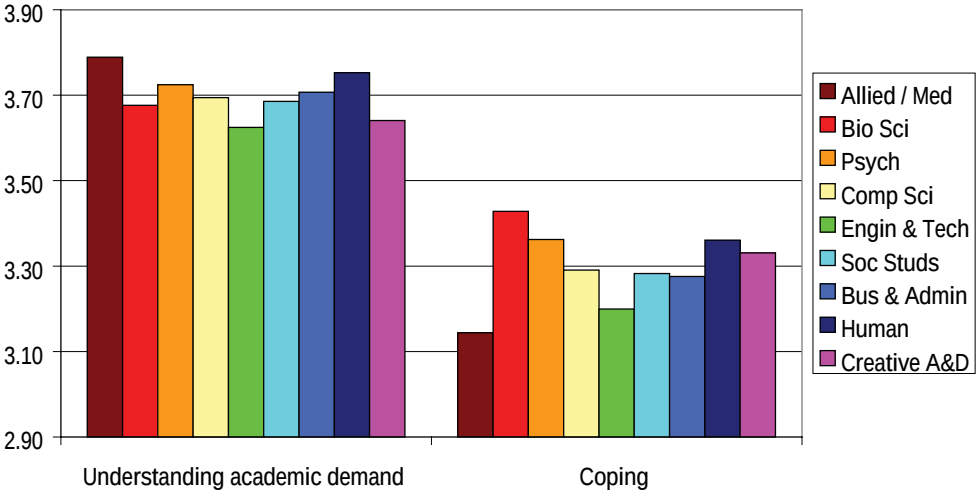

Figure 14: Factor means by broad subject areas (2)

Feedback

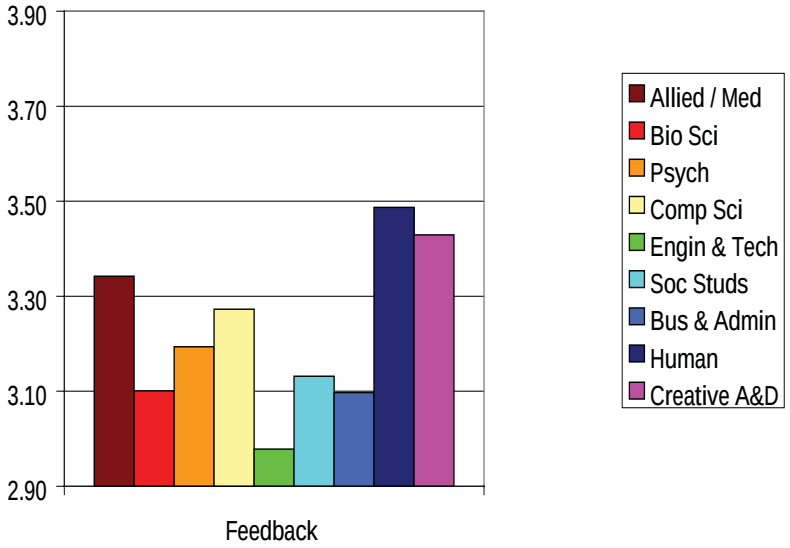

Figure 15: Factor means by broad subject areas (3)

Subdivision of the feedback responses into the three items from which the factor was derived indicated that, while every subject area was rated above 3.00 for the helpfulness of the feedback for learning, there were problems in some areas in respect of the detail that was provided, and the promptness of the feedback.

Feedback

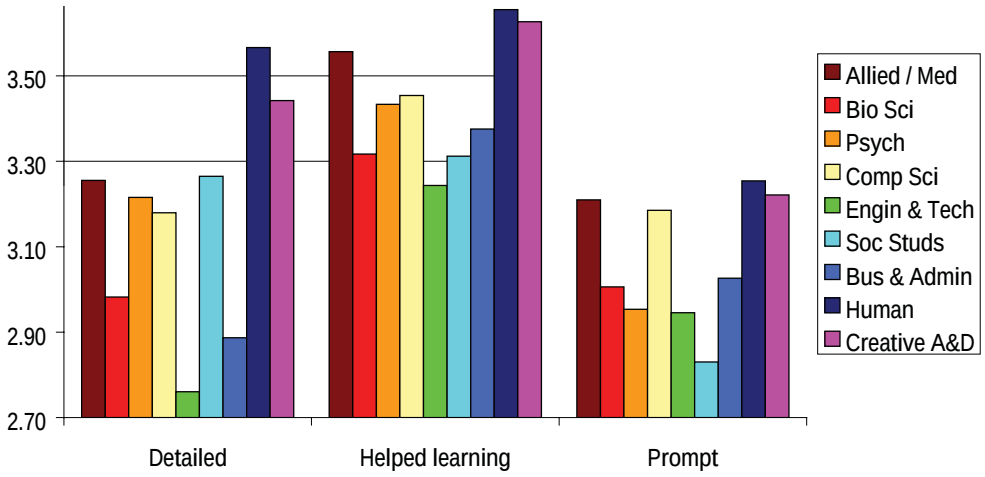

Figure 16: Means, by broad subject area, for the three specific items relating to feedback

Social Studies and Psychology were the subject areas in which students were least likely to say that their programme required them to work collaboratively with others, and these students showed the lowest likelihood of being in contact, electronically or face-to-face, with their peers outside the classroom in relation to academic work. The psychologists, together with students of Business and Administration, had the lowest propensity to undertake the prescribed background reading for their subject.

While students of the Biological Sciences appeared to have had the highest level of prior information about their studies, those in the areas of Computer Science and Business and Administration responded the most weakly to the relevant items.

Students in the Humanities, Art and Design and Computer Science were most likely to say that at least two members of academic staff knew them by name, whereas the likelihood was lowest in Biological Sciences, Psychology and Engineering and Technology.

Biological Sciences attracted the most positive responses regarding the provision of resources. Library and computing resources received uniformly high ratings of around 4.00 from all subject areas.

Levels of engagement in the social side of higher education tended to be highest amongst students of Biological Sciences and lowest amongst those studying Subjects allied to Medicine and Computer Science.

Students of Social Studies and, to a lesser extent, Psychology were least likely to have found that their induction programme encouraged their sense of belonging in the institution, and least likely to have felt that they had received adequate guidance regarding the academic choices available to them.

Concern over funding and commitments to others was highest in Subjects allied to Medicine and lowest in Biological Sciences.

Students in Social Studies and in Business and Administration were most likely to have missed scheduled teaching sessions, and those in Subjects allied to Medicine were least likely. Students of Computer Science were most critical of the timetabling of their programmes and the scheduling of assignments. Students in subjects allied to Medicine shared the computer scientists' critical view regarding the scheduling of assignments.

Across the board, students tended to concur with the proposition that learning at a high level was motivational. The importance of obtaining high grades was most evident in Biological Sciences, Business and Administration and Computer Science, and least evident in Art and Design: however, the differences on this issue were relatively small.

As noted earlier, confidence in obtaining a graduate-level job was generally high. Confidence was at its highest in Subjects allied to Medicine, Engineering and Technology, and Business and Administration. However, the survey was conducted before it began to emerge that jobs in Nursing were being threatened by the financial position of hospital trusts, so perceptions in that area may have subsequently weakened.

Risk factors

The greater the number of student responses indicating that they perceive their experiences as poor or worrying, the greater the chances that they will have considered withdrawal from their studies. This is illustrated in respect of the five statistically robust factors described above and three other issues: prior knowledge of the programme and/or institution; worry about finances; and anticipation of obtaining an appropriate graduate-level job.

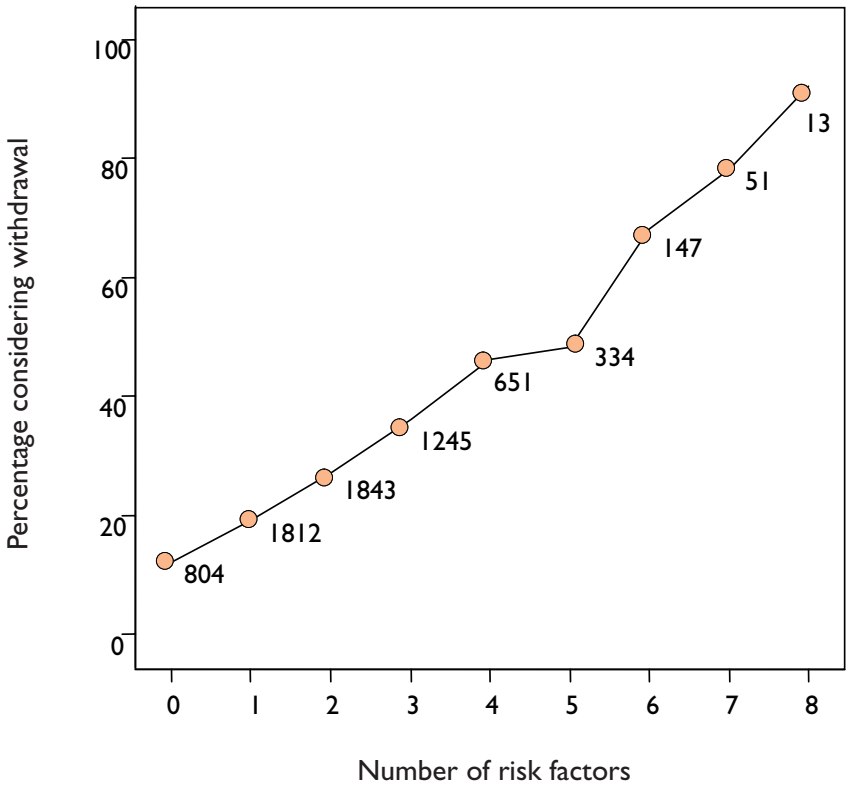

Figure 17: An illustration of the rise in potential for withdrawal with increasing number of risk factors[3]

3 Numbers against data points are the numbers of relevant respondents

Very few students indicated unhappiness with all eight of these aspects of their experience, and it is no surprise that almost all of these students indicated that their continuation was at some risk. Of more practical significance are the 3739 students – more than half of the respondents – who indicated numbers of risk factors in the range 2 – 4, and for whom the likelihood of their considering withdrawal was around one-third. From the perspective of institutional policy, the question is what can be done to mitigate the number of risk factors? Longden (2006) explores the impact of state and institutional policy on retention and poses the question on the responsibility of higher education institutions to adapt to the changing student demands and expectations.

The first-year experience in Australia and the UK[4]

The Centre for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Melbourne (CSHE) has produced a set of valuable reports on the first-year experience in a sample of Australian universities (Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis 2005; McInnis, James & Hartley 2000; McInnis & James with McNaught 1995). This work covers both full-time students and those studying in other modes.

The fine detail of the CSHE studies and the present study differs, and the former has the advantage of trend analyses covering a decade. However, in general some common themes emerge.

Demographics

Participation in higher education in both Australia and the UK is influenced by socio-economic background, and the participation from the less privileged in society has proved resistant to policy interventions (DfES 2003 p. 17, James 2002 p. 6).

In these two countries, as in the US, the gender balance in higher education has reversed over a number of decades, from a male - female ratio of roughly 3:2 to one of roughly 2:3. Whereas Krause et al (2005 p. 70) reported that male students tended to come from higher socio-economic backgrounds, analysis of the UK data showed very little difference in the demographic profiles of male and female students whose domicile was the UK.

Sub-group responses, in general

Krause et al (2005 pp. 70-71) noted a number of differences related to gender, particularly in females' greater motivation and commitment. In the UK study any differences are very muted, the main differences in the two groups' means being around 0.1 on a 5-point scale. Females were marginally more committed to reading related to their studies, and had lower levels of commitment to activities external to higher education.

As Krause et al (2005 pp. 71-72) reported for Australians, older students in

4 This section of the report is extracted from Yorke (2006). In this section the term 'UK study' is used to differentiate the present study from the Australian experience.

the UK study gave generally more positive reactions to their experiences, with differences often being more pronounced when the students were aged 26 and above. In comparison to their younger peers, they had been better informed about the institution and/or programme; perceived the teaching as more stimulating; reported that they better understood the academic demand; undertook more background reading; were more positive about the feedback they had received; and perceived the staff to be more friendly. However, they were less likely to be engaged in the social side of higher education and more likely to have external commitments. As one would expect from the inherent correlation with age, students who had had previous experience in higher education showed a very similar pattern of responses.

The student experience was perceived in much the same way by students irrespective of socio-economic status (SES). In the UK study, and limiting the analysis to UK-domiciled students, those from less privileged backgrounds were slightly less well informed about the institution and/or programme, and slightly less engaged in the social side of the higher education experience.

Again limiting the analysis to UK-domiciled students, ethnicity produced greater divergences in response than gender or SES. Black and black British students were more positive about stimulating teaching and understanding the academic demand, followed by white students and then by Asian, Asian British and Chinese students. However, white students perceived the supportiveness of the teaching to be higher than any other ethnic grouping. Asian and Asian British students reported lower levels of prior information about the institution and/or programme than any other ethnic grouping. White students were more positive about the friendliness of staff, institutional resourcing, and their engagement in the social side of higher education. On the other hand, they were less positive than the other groupings about undertaking reading in respect of their studies.

Students from outside the European Union were, in the UK study, marginally more positive about the feedback they had received and had done marginally more background reading. They were a little less likely to engage in the social aspects of higher education. The differences are much slighter than those reported by Krause et al (2005 pp. 76-77), but may reflect the differing cultural profiles of Australia and the UK, and of the international students that these two countries attract.

Choice of field of study and motivation

Although the relevant items are different in the CSHE and UK studies, there are similar conclusions regarding the high level of students' satisfaction with their choices of studies and with, paradoxically, the appearance of some problems regarding motivation, as evidenced in some reluctance to do background reading

and attend classes. Despite the recent tightening of financial support for students in the UK, there remains a minority of students who find that they have made a poor choice of subject (Davies & Elias 2003, Yorke 1999), and it seems that there is scope to improve decision-making about entry to higher education.

The instrumentalism of higher education is captured in high levels of expectation that academic success would be appropriately rewarded in the labour market. As Krause et al (2005 p. 14) note: "education has in many ways become more focused on career and job outcomes and on preparing students for employment, as is evident in university marketing activities".

Although the category intervals are different from those employed by Krause et al (2005 p. 53), the general patterns of part-time employment[5] by full-time students in the CSHE and UK surveys are similar, with the modal number of hours worked per week being in the region of 6-12.

Experience of the course

According to Krause et al (2005 p. 31), roughly three-quarters of Australian students put in four or five days on campus: the proportion for the UK study is a little lower at close to two-thirds. A substantial minority in both countries found the standard of work in higher education to be higher than expected, with Engineering figuring as a subject area in which the challenge was very marked. Subjects allied to Medicine in the UK proved a little more challenging to the students than did Engineering, perhaps because of the combined demands of academic studies and practical work on wards.

Academic programmes were held by a majority in both countries to be stimulating – by three-quarters in Australia and by two-thirds in the UK study. Further, half of the respondents in each country reported that the teaching was stimulating, with strong majorities indicating that the quality of teaching was good. Students in the UK study had a more positive view of the feedback that they had received, with 57% agreeing that it had been helpful whereas the comparable figure from the Australian students in 2004 was 33% (Krause et al, 2005, p.62). There may be a connection here with students' perceptions regarding coping with academic demand, where the mean of the Australian 'Comprehending and coping' scale was close to the mid-point of the 5-point scale at 3.02. However, the mean for a differently-constituted but broadly similar UK scale was 3.28 (against a high of 5) and for a scale reported in Pargetter et al (1998) was 3.44. Studies of non-completion in the UK (Davies & Elias 2003, Yorke 1999, Yorke et al 1997) have shown that academic difficulties are one of the main causes of withdrawal (voluntary or otherwise).

5 Where it is undertaken: 44% of UK respondents said that they undertook no part-time employment.

Resources

There was, in both countries, a very high level of satisfaction with institutional library and computing facilities. No more than 10% indicated dissatisfaction with either of these aspects of provision.

Social aspects

The more time students spend on campus, the greater their engagement with other students (face-to-face or electronically) regarding academic work; their development of friendships at the institution; their enjoyment of the social side of higher education; and their sense of belonging to an academic community. These findings from the UK study exhibit strong similarities with those reported from Australia by Krause et al (2005 p. 32). The proportions in the UK study indicating that they engaged with other students were 50% for face-to-face meeting and 54% for electronic communication. When the use of either form of communication is the criterion, the percentage comes very close to the 71% reported by Krause et al (2005 p.39). A little over half of the students in both countries said that they felt part of an academic community. Nevertheless, just over a quarter of Australian respondents (though the proportion was much higher for indigenous students) and four in ten of UK respondents tended to keep themselves to themselves at their institution.

Around two-thirds of Australian students claimed to be known personally by at least one of their teachers. In the UK study, a stricter criterion of 'at least two members of academic staff' knowing the student by name was adopted. This was because an assigned personal tutor might well know the student by name, but might in some cases have little to do with the student on a day-to-day basis. Just over half of the UK respondents agreed that the academic staff met this criterion. (What this misses out is the often unsung importance of support staff, who may be in a position to help students to deal with problems, and hence to contribute to their sense of belonging.)

Possible withdrawal

Broadly comparable proportions of students (a little less than 30%) had given some thought to the discontinuation of their studies, either permanently or temporarily.

The student voice – a qualitative analysis

Nature and purpose of questions presented

The questionnaire design allowed students to provide a free form response to three questions asking them what the best and worst aspects of their first-year experience were, and what they would most like to change.

The openness of the questions represented a serious attempt to enable the widest possible response opportunity. It was anticipated that few students would take the trouble or time to comment in any detailed fashion.

	Response rate	
Free response questions	**Numeriacal**	**Percentage**
Response rate to question 1	5346	89.79%
Response rate to question 2	5169	86.82
Response rate to question 3	4383	73.61%
Total number of usable questionnaires	5954	100%

Table 10: Response rate from the free form questions

From Table 10 it is clear that the free form response provided a rich data source with high response rates; maybe it could be expected the final question relating to suggested change would draw fewer responses.

The advantages of a free form response are well documented:

1. potential richness of data
2. avoidance of the constraint of pre-specified questions or items
3. data can be grouped inductively.

However, it must be borne in mind that the responses are necessarily produced rapidly and probably reflect what was uppermost in the respondent's mind at the time (see, for example, Eley 2001).

Analysing a large quantity of qualitative data is demanding. The time taken to

read, interpret and categorise the responses is a challenge. Interpreting the response, often written in a hurry, can require time and effort. There is always an accompanied risk that the interpretation and subsequent code applied misrepresents the original intention. However it was decided to make the process of interpreting the comments as easy as possible by typing each response into Excel, which provided a means of sorting and aggregating grouped data derived from the responses with greater efficiency and ease.

The interpretation of the responses is subjective. To reduce the risk of subjectivity each response was coded independently by two people. This provided a greater degree of consistency and assurance that the codes were being applied appropriately.

Coding student responses

About 15,000 responses were subject to coding.

Where a response carried more than one 'comment category' it was decided to take the first comment. It would have made the analysis extremely difficult had codes been allocated to the combination of multiple comments. It is acknowledged that some loss of data arises from this decision but the benefits from a simpler analysis outweigh the potential loss of data.

The codes were generated directly from the responses themselves – subsequently refined. The same set of codes was used across all three questions. There are strengths and weaknesses with this approach and these are acknowledged.

The benefit, however, was that the codes, and behind the code the range of responses that could be included in the code, could be cross referenced across the three questions to see to what extent the presence of a particular 'best experience' or 'worst experience' can be correlated against the codes for proposed changes to the first-year experience. Such an analysis will be included in the final report.

The fine-grain codes were capable of being clustered together to form a higher level generic coarse-grain code. The advantage provided by this approach rests with the possibility of refining the analysis if necessary.

Knowing and understanding the view of the students is insufficient: it is important for those concerned with the first-year student experience to seek to improve the experience where it is reasonable and sensible to make changes, provided the aims and objectives of the course, degree or institution are not compromised.

The coarse-gain codes reflect the locus of responsibility where change can be

initiated. Some of the coded items are clearly the responsibility of the institution; for example matters relating to the timetable are clearly matters controlled and managed by the university or college.

In contrast, matters relating to 'time management' and 'workload management' must be the responsibility of the student. It is accepted that the distinction is not quite as clear-cut as might appear at first sight. The way in which the institution structures and organises the study programme has a direct impact on the workload placed on the students.

Corse grain code descriptions	Fine grain code descriptions
Dual responsibility	Accommodation related
No response	Nil response
Student responsibility	Finance related Homesickness and illness Independence New friends Part-time employment Personal matters Preparedness and attendance Travel related Workload and time management
Potential progression status	Generally positive
Potential withdraw risk	Change course Change institution Generally negative
Institutional responsibility	Class size Communication Curriculum aspects Feedback and assessment Induction process Organisation and management Resources and facilities Social facilities Teaching quality Teaching related

Table 11: Fine-grain codes used in the free form responses

Analysis of free form student responses

The three questions presented to the students in the questionnaire are capable of an analysis across the institutions and across subjects. It is not currently possible to map the response to the wider range of demographics collected in the questionnaire. It is possible, however, to analyse the responses against institution, institutional type and by subject category.

Best features of the first-year experience

About 75% of the students completing the questionnaire provided a usable response to this question. The two dominant categories that emerged from the coding were related to 'making new friends' and 'aspects of the teaching experienced'. The importance of making new friends comes through strongly in the responses.

Frequency of best aspects of the FYE responses

The following graph (Figure 18) indicates the relative frequency of coded responses to the best aspects of the first-year experience. Making new friends attracted comment from over 45% of the students who responded to this question, with teaching attracting over 25% of the responses.

About 15% of the responses relate to personal aspects of the student – gaining independence, more general aspects of social integration and a catch-all category which reflected personal idiosyncratic comments.

Explicit comments reflecting positive or negative comments about the first-year were balanced, contributing about 1% each to the overall responses.

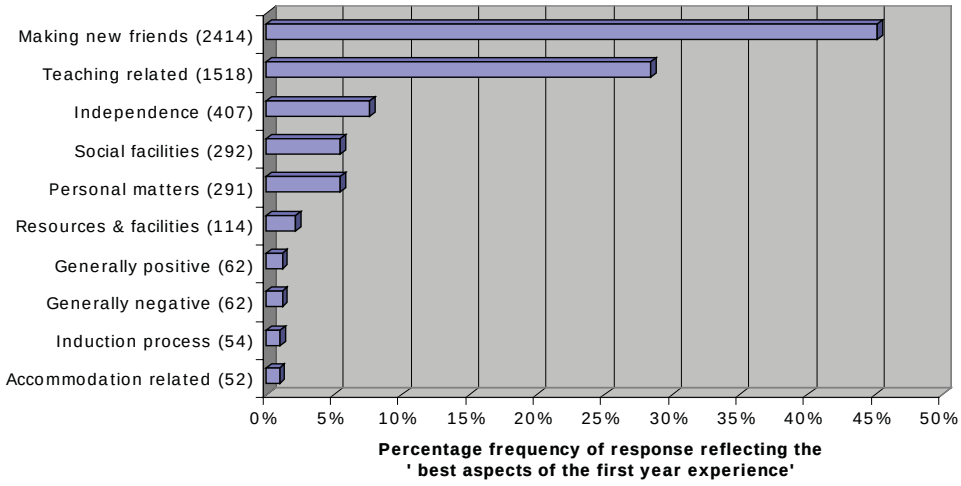

Figure 18: Percentage response rate for 'best aspects of the first-year experience'

Coarse-grain analysis of best features

The coarse-grain analysis provides a high level of analysis which attempts to locate the locus of control and responsibility for the outcome of the coded best features identified by the first-year students. Deriving a coarse-grain code from the fine coding brings a potential difficulty. It is not straightforward to attribute control and responsibility for a fine-grain code to either the student or university. It is never as simple as that in reality. However, acknowledging the consequence of this limitation, the analysis does provide a signpost to the locus of control and responsibility.
The dual responsibility for accommodation reflects the nature of the comments made by students where they comment on the quality, provision and location of university owned accommodation. The category also included comments reflecting the problems associated with living in private accommodation, including home. The responses provided by students included comments explicitly about changing both course and university/college. There are strong comments reflecting dissatisfaction with the overall experience of the first year.

Responsibility & Control	Key Factors	Frequency
Dual responsibility	Accomdation related	52
Consequences	Institutional Student	62 62
Primary responsibility	Institutional Student	2053 3133
	Grand total	5344

Table 12: Coarse-grain analysis of the 'best aspects of the first-year experience'

Table 12 shows the influence that is acknowledged by students of those features of their first year that could be attributed to the university organisation, management, teaching and social support facilities. The influence of meeting and making new friends (noted earlier) contributed to the dominance of the personal aspect of the students' experiences in making a positive contribution to the first-year life.

Selected student voices reflecting best aspects of the first-year experience

The importance of meeting new people is clearly a powerful and important aspect of the first-year experience. Making new friends provides a mechanism to integrate the student into the new higher education experience. While this is identified as an important aspect of the first year it must also be recognised that some students do not make friends straightway, and this may contribute to a weakening of the integration process into higher education.

Making new friends

"Meeting new people and gaining in confidence both academically and personally because of the new level of independence."

"Meeting lots of people of different ages, backgrounds, cultures and realising that I have lots in common with many people whereas before I felt that I was the only one who felt a particular way about particular things."

Teaching related

"Learning new things at a higher level, being able to ask why things happen and being able to discuss rather than being told, 'you don't need to know that'."

Feedback & assessment

"Getting feedback and grades for my assignments gives me confidence that I am working well."

Independence

"Being more independent and using my time successfully to work through my course program."

"Having the freedom I have and the wide range of choices within academic life and social as well."

The change in teaching approach in higher education is captured in the response

provided above. The positive responses acknowledged the change in teaching style offered which when coupled with independence forms a significant and appreciated aspect of higher education provision.

'Independence' attracted over 5% of the responses. The type of response included in this category relates to the student acknowledgement of the responsibility and advantage of working, studying, being independent of influencing factors. A typical response is provided above.

Worst features of the first-year experience

Over 85% of students provided a usable response to the question seeking a comment on the worst aspect of the first-year experience. As there was a wide range of aspects covered in their responses, a more extended list of key factors is provided in Figure 19.

The dominant factor that emerged in the analysis was management of workload and of time management. The rank order includes a small but significant number of students (189) who identified homesickness and associated personal health issues as contributing to the worst features of their first-year experience.

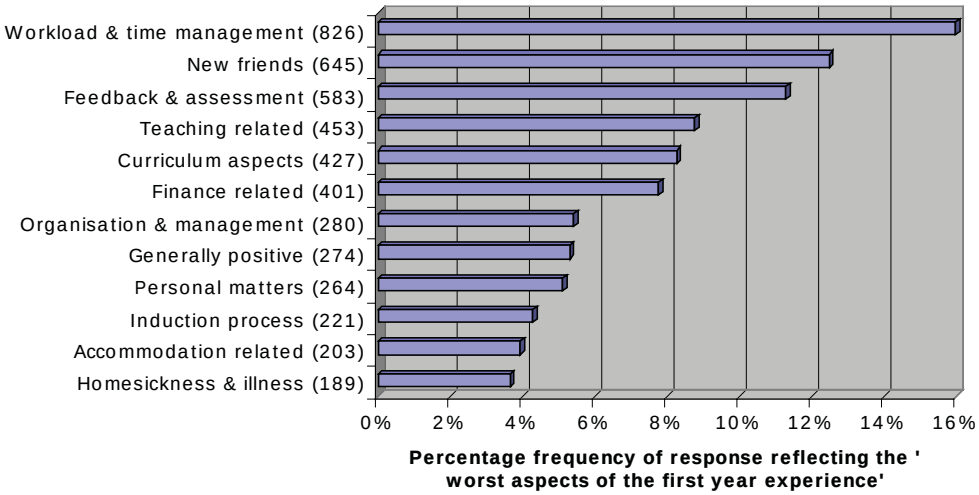

Figure 19: Percentage response rate for 'worst aspects of the first-year experience'

Coarse-grain analysis of worst features

About 40% of the responses identifying worst features of the first-year experience are attributed to those aspects of student life under the control and management of universities and colleges themselves.

Responsibility & Control	Key Factors	Frequency
Dual responsibility	Accomodation related	203
Consequences	Potential withdraw risk Potentail progression status	26 274
Primary responsibility	Institutional Student	2116 2549
	Grand total	5344

Table 13: Coarse-grain analysis of 'worst aspects of the first-year experience'

Selected student comments reflecting the worst aspects of the first-year experience

Workload and time management

"Balancing work and home commitments."

"Workload (maybe more personal time management and motivation). Or perhaps the lecturers (most are dull – the good ones left after first term for better jobs)."

"Attendance at lectures. I find 5 days a week pretty stressful. I work 12 hours a week and [have] a boring social life and if I was attend everyday without fail this would be impossible. Too much pressure to always attend."

Feedback

"Being told by my personal tutor in an informal feedback that my work was considered by them to be 'crap'."

"Handing in our first term work and having a one on one crit. Too much negative feedback to end with."

"Feedback takes too long."

"Confusion with regards [to] assessments caused by poor organisation."

"No or little feedback on assignments essays … this is essential particularly for first-year students to learn from mistakes. Poor teaching provided by particular lecturers. Seminars [are] a gross let down."

Friends (issues related to friendship)

"Not knowing anyone, sitting on my own."

Teaching related

"Having a poor seminar tutor, who never seemed to get to know us, and never listened. Too many tutors for each subject, as they change after the 1st semester."

"Hating the teaching staff as they are unhelpful. Be treated like I am 12 years old."

"Communication with teachers, you can never find them, unless email them, not knowing who to ask help for, not know where or who to get assignment and exam grades."

Features that students thought should be changed

Students were provided with the opportunity to write about any aspect of their first-year experience that they would wish to see changed and that by implication would have improved their first-year experience. The main responses are summarised in Figure 20.

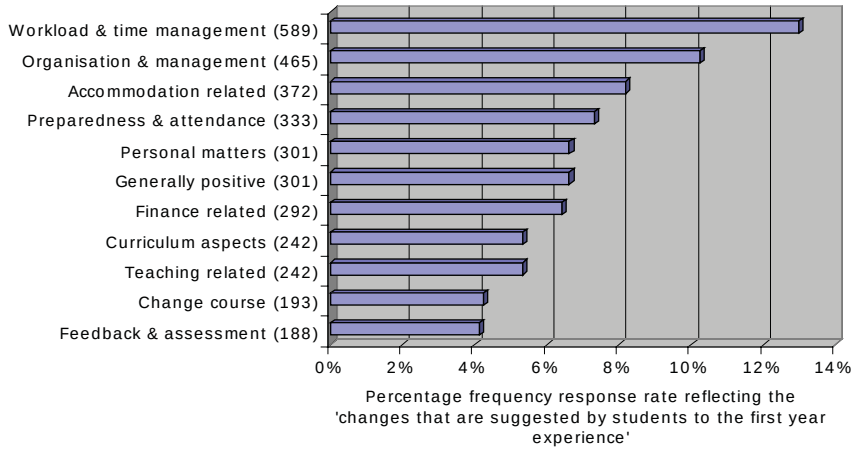

Figure 20: Percentage response rate for 'aspects of the first-year experience that should be changed'

Responsibility & Control	Key Factors	Frequency
Consequence	Potential progression status Potential withdraw risk	301 304
Dual responsibility	Accomodation related	372
Primary responsibility	Institutional Student	1714 1852
	Grand total	4543

Table 14: Coarse-grain analysis of 'aspects of the first-year experience that should be changed'

Selected student voices reflecting aspects of the first-year experience that they thought should be changed

Workload and time management

"I would have to change the fact I didn't realise exactly now much work to put in. I would have liked much tighter guidelines on how much reading and which readings to do and when."

"My time management from day one instead of struggling to manage the work load and feel like I am not doing my academic best to achieve my life long goal."

Organisation and management

"If the timetable could be better organised so that there was not days with only one lecture and other days with huge gaps between classes. This would make it easier to manage childcare."

"Better timetabling. Don't have the same module on the same day every week. Generally miss some day[s] and therefore the whole module."

"I think this would have to be the timetables as this sometimes can be hard at times to attend lessons as you have [a] full day free and then you have to come for the last lectures."

"Wish I could have more time - find coming into university for an hour lecture when it takes me a 3 hours round trip to get here and back, very tiring, draining and time consuming."

Preparedness and attendance

"Lots of prior learning before course commences. The weeks learning could be covered in 2/3 days instead of 3/4 days. Lots of time between sessions wasted."

"To make sure I was really organised and prepared as it is mainly singular study. Having come straight from achieving higher A levels in sixth form, this has been a shock. Sometimes brutal."

Concluding observations

The picture presented by this survey is generally one of a good experience in most aspects of teaching and learning. Some demographic variables, such as gender and socio-economic status, seem not to be associated with any marked variation of perceived experience, whereas others, such as age, do show an association.

When responses from particular subject areas and institutions were examined, there were instances where the experience was markedly superior or inferior to the general run: these have not been identified here for reasons of sensitivity but have been reported back to the relevant institutions for their attention.

The qualitative data point to the importance of the making of friendships in the higher education experience. Institutions can assist in this process through the pedagogic approaches they adopt – for example, by engaging students early on in activities that involve collaboration. The pedagogic aspects of higher education also figure prominently in students' comments on both the 'best' and 'worst' facets of their experience. Pedagogy is an area of the student experience that is likely to become more salient in terms of student satisfaction (and the consequences of its absence), given an increased appreciation by students of the costs of their higher education.

On the evidence of this study, teaching is generally perceived to be at its strongest in the Humanities, though at a finer level of analysis – the institutional – such strength was evident in other subject areas as well. This may reflect a particular type of approach to student engagement which invites consideration of the extent to which its features could be drawn upon to more general benefit.

There is evidence of two potentially strong influences for withdrawal: worry over financing one's studies and lack of good information about the institution and/or programme that students had entered. The first is primarily a policy issue at national level; the second at institutional level. If the cap on 'top-up' fees is raised or removed, both of these issues, in their different ways, are likely to become more salient than they are at present.

The data suggest – probably to no great surprise – that the greater the number of risk factors in a student's experience, the greater the chance that the student will have considered withdrawing from the programme. The 'message' for institutions is to identify from the evidence presented here where they might be able to enhance their provision so as to lower the risk of student withdrawal.

Different institutions will probably identify different features of their provision where they can expect to make the greatest impact on the student experience.

Finally, and looking beyond the shores of the United Kingdom, this report indicates that there are broad similarities with the first-year experience of students in Australia.

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Appendix 1

Higher Education Academy First Year Experience Questionnaire

Please respond to the questions as accurately as you can. If a question doesn't apply to you, or you prefer not to answer it, simply leave it and move on to the next question.

Please use a ballpoint pen to complete the questionnaire. Do not use fountain or felt pens, as the ink may be visible on the other side of the page. The completed questionnaire will be read with the help of a scanner, so please fill it in exactly as described. Please put an 'X' in the appropriate box, keeping within the boundary of the box. For example: [X]. Do not spend too long on each item. If you make a mistake and cross the wrong box, please block out your answer and then cross the correct box. For example: ■ [ ] [ ] [X] [ ]

1. In what age-band were you when you enrolled on your first year at this institution? *(Please cross one box only)*

Under 21 [ ] 21-25 [ ] 26-30 [ ] 31-35 [ ] 36-40 [ ] 40+ [ ]

2. Please indicate your gender?

Male [ ] Female [ ]

3. Which of the following categories most closely describes your ethnicity? *(Please cross one box only)*

White [ ] Black or Black British [ ] Asian or Asian British [ ] Chinese [ ] Other [ ]

4. Which of the following most closely describes your occupational background? (If you are under 25 years of age, please interpret this question in terms of your family background, giving only the higher-level occupation if, say, parents differ in this respect. If you are aged 25 or over, please interpret it with reference to your own situation). *(Please cross one box only)*

Managerial or professional occupation…….. [ ]

Intermediate occupation (e.g. administrative role; running small business; self-employment)……..... [ ]

Relatively routine supervisory, technical, service or manual occupation…….. [ ]

Long-term unemployment **or** Never worked…….. [ ]

Not sure **or** Other, not easily categorised as one of the above……..... [ ]

5. In which country or part of the world were you living when you applied for a place at this institution? *(Please cross one box only)*

England [ ] Scotland [ ] Wales [ ] Northern Ireland [ ] Europe other than the UK [ ] Outside Europe [ ]

6. Are you the first person in your immediate family to attend university?

Yes [ ] No [ ]

7. Have you attended any course in higher education before enrolling on this one?

Yes [ ] No [ ]

8. Do you have dependants (e.g. children or elderly relatives)?

Yes [ ] No [ ]

9. Where are you living whilst you are attending this institution? *(Please cross one box only)*

At home…….. [ ]

In other private accommodation (e.g. flat)…….. [ ]

In university/institution-run accommodation…….. [ ]

10. Roughly how close is your accommodation to the main campus you use? *(Please cross one box only)*

On campus	Within 1 mile	1-5 miles away	5-10 miles away	More than 10 miles away
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

11. How much did you know about the institution before you enrolled? *(Please cross one box only)*

Nothing	Very little	A moderate amount	A lot
☐	☐	☐	☐

12. How much did you know about your programme of study before you enrolled? *(Please cross one box only)*

Nothing	Very little	A moderate amount	A lot
☐	☐	☐	☐

13. Are you studying on a programme containing more than one main subject discipline?

Yes ☐ No ☐

13a. If 'yes' to Q13, is there a ***marked*** difference between your enjoyment of the different subject disciplines?

Yes ☐ No ☐

Please indicate, by crossing the appropriate response category, the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements. The Key is: **Strongly Agree (SA); Agree (A); Neutral (N); Disagree (D); Strongly Disagree (SD)**.

If a statement doesn't apply to your particular circumstances, simply ignore it and move to the next.

The term 'programme' is used for the totality of your first-year studies.

		SA	A	N	D	SD
14.	I made a good choice of subject(s) to study……	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
15.	Staff made it clear from the start what they expected from students……	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
16.	The programme information I received prior to enrolment was poor……	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
17.	The induction programme helped me to feel that I belonged in this institution……	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
18.	The teaching staff are good at explaining things……	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
19.	From the moment I enrolled I was helped to get off to a good start, academically...	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
20.	I have missed some of the formally timetabled sessions……	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
21.	The teaching on my programme has shown me what I need to do to be successful in my studies……	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
22.	If I don't get good grades for my work, higher education will have been a waste of time for me……	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
23.	I have been able to contact staff when I needed to……	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
24.	I am satisfied with the level of tutorial support on my programme……	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
25.	The way in which programme assessments (assignments, etc) are scheduled causes problems for me……	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
26.	The teaching on my programme is stimulating……	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
27.	I need to undertake paid employment in order to help fund my studies in higher education……	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
28.	I haven't done the background reading expected of me……	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
29.	My programme requires me to work collaboratively with other students……	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
30.	My programme is well-organised……	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
31.	Feedback on my work has been prompt……	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
32.	Feedback on my work has helped me in my learning……	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
33.	I am satisfied with the support I have received from student support services (in respect of matters such as student finance, accommodation, welfare issues, etc)..	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
34.	The facilities for working on one's own within this institution are inadequate……	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
35.	The library resources and services are good enough for my needs……	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

		SA	A	N	D	SD
36.	I have been able to access general computing resources when I needed to……..	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
37.	I tend to keep to myself within the institution……	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
38.	I find it hard to keep up with the volume of work in this programme……	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
39.	At least two members of the academic staff know me by name……	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
40.	I am not as motivated towards my studies as I ought to be……	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
41.	I meet up with other students outside the formally timetabled activities in order to discuss academic work……..	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
42.	The institution turned out to be different from what I had expected……..	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
43.	I find it difficult to balance academic and other commitments……	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
44.	I enjoy the social side of higher education……	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
45.	Travelling to the institution takes up more time than I think is reasonable……	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
46.	I do more reading than the programme seems to require of me……	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
47.	I worry about financing my way through higher education……	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
48.	I am in electronic contact with other students regarding academic work……..	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
49.	I understand what the assessments (assignments, examinations) on my programme expect of me……..	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
50.	I am finding my programme intellectually stimulating……	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
51.	The timetabling of my programme doesn't suit my needs……..	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
52.	I am satisfied with the quality of the teaching on my programme……..	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
53.	I know enough about studying to cope with the academic demands of my programme……..	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
54.	The teaching on my programme has suited the way I learn……	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
55.	The criteria used in assessing work were made clear at the beginning of my programme……	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
56.	My programme is not as I had expected it to be……..	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
57.	I have received sufficient guidance regarding the academic choices open to me regarding my programme……..	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
58.	The staff with whom I come into contact are friendly……	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
59.	Academic work at this level is harder than I expected it to be……	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
60.	I am not able to attend some formally timetabled sessions because of other demands on my time……	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
61.	The prospect of learning at a high level is a motivation for my studying……..	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
62.	I have to give time to looking after others (e.g. parents, children, partner, etc)……..	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
63.	I have received detailed comments on my work……..	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
64.	I am not particularly interested in the extra-curricular activities or facilities provided in this institution……	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
65.	I am unhappy with the accommodation I'm living in whilst at this institution……	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
66.	I have had difficulty adjusting to the style of teaching at this institution……	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
67.	I am managing my academic workload well……..	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
68.	I do not feel that I belong to an academic grouping (e.g. department; school) within this institution……	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
69.	I have made at least one close friend at this institution……	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
70.	My programme is helping me to develop skills in working independently……	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
71.	I am confident that my programme will lead to an appropriate graduate-level job….	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Inst and JACS code

72. On how many days per week during term-time do you typically come to this institution to study?
(Please cross one box only)

1 day	2 days	3 days	4 days	5 or more days
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

73. On how many days per week do you typically undertake **private study** for your programme?
(Please cross one box only)

1 day	2 days	3 days	4 days	5 or more days
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

74. Have you considered withdrawing from your programme whilst you have been at this institution?

Yes ☐ No ☐

75. If 'yes', have you thought about switching straightaway to another programme at this or another institution?

Yes ☐ No ☐

76. On average, approximately how many hours do you spend per week during term time on part-time employment?
(Please cross one box only)

None	1-6 hours	7-12 hours	13-18 hours	More than 18 hours
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

77. What to date has been the best aspect of your first year experience in higher education?

78. What to date has been the worst aspect of your first year experience in higher education?

79. If you could make ***one*** significant change to your first year experience, what would you want it to be?

Thank you very much for filling in this questionnaire.

If you are willing for the Project Team to contact you directly, in about a year's time, so that we might get a retrospective view of your first year experience, please give your name (in capitals) and/or your institutional reference (Student ID) number.

Appendix B

Statistical data for comparisons in which sub-group numbers are large

Age		Stimulating learning experience	Supportive teaching	Understanding academic demand	Coping	Feedback
Under 21	Mean	3.670	3.620	3.680	3.280	3.220
	Std Error	0.008	0.009	0.009	0.009	0.012
	N	5162	5145	5157	5084	5121
21 and above	Mean	3.820	3.620	3.790	3.300	3.320
	Std Error	0.015	0.017	0.017	0.017	0.022
	N	1707	1698	1704	1657	1675

Table 15: Comparison by age

		Stimulating learning experience	Supportive teaching	Understanding academic demand	Coping	Feedback
Subject allied to Medicine	Mean	3.780	3.610	3.790	3.140	3.340
	Std Error	0.017	0.020	0.019	0.021	0.026
	N	1177	1169	1175	1121	1145
Biological Sciences	Mean	3.780	3.720	3.680	3.430	3.100
	Std Error	0.028	0.030	0.033	0.033	0.044
	N	345	345	345	343	345
Psychology	Mean	3.770	3.640	3.720	3.360	3.190
	Std Error	0.026	0.030	0.029	0.029	0.045
	N	478	477	477	471	473
Computer Science	Mean	3.600	3.630	3.690	3.290	3.270
	Std Error	0.031	0.036	0.034	0.034	0.045
	N	308	306	308	305	306
Engineering & Technology	Mean	3.630	3.620	3.620	3.200	2.980
	Std Error	0.023	0.024	0.027	0.025	0.035
	N	581	579	579	572	575
Social Studies	Mean	3.760	3.610	3.690	3.280	3.130
	Std Error	0.028	0.031	0.032	0.031	0.038
	N	461	459	460	446	456
Business & Admin	Mean	3.580	3.590	3.710	3.280	3.100
	Std Error	0.014	0.015	0.015	0.015	0.021
	N	1582	1574	1581	1565	1570
Humanities	Mean	3.860	3.790	3.750	3.360	3.490
	Std Error	0.018	0.019	0.020	0.020	0.026
	N	1010	1008	1009	1002	1000
Creative Arts and Design	Mean	3.750	3.450	3.640	3.330	3.430
	Std Error	0.019	0.022	0.022	0.019	0.026
	N	959	957	959	947	957

Table 16: Comparison by broad subject area

Institution type		Stimulating learning experience	Supportive teaching	Understanding academic demand	Coping	Feedback
Pre-1992 universities	**Mean**	3.700	3.660	3.690	3.240	3.180
	Std Error	0.011	0.011	0.012	0.012	0.016
	N	2722	2710	2720	2678	2696
Post-1992 universities and colleges	**Mean**	3.730	3.590	3.720	3.310	3.290
	Std Error	0.009	0.010	0.010	0.010	0.013
	N	4179	4164	4173	4094	4131

Table 17: Comparison by institutional type

The first-year experience of higher education in the UK

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