

Exploring Students' Expectations of the University Course

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Abstract: Internalization of higher education leads to greater choice of universities for prospective university students. Higher education institutions in Ukraine are developing ways and designing tools for evaluating expectations of their students in order to keep enrollment rates high and assist students' retention. This paper focuses on the analysis of the first-year students' expectations of a course "History of Great Britain" with the aim of incorporating these expectations into the course syllabus, introducing possible changes in teaching and learning on the course, enhancing study programs and quality of service for pre-service English teachers. A comparative case study utilizes mixed methods approach, combining a critical analysis of the literature and data collection through student essays, which were triangulated with data from a focus group discussion to explore student perceptions of the course on its completion and offer suggestions to the university and the lecturer. The results show that undergraduate students' expectations of the course are similar to the teachers' assumptions and the aims and learning outcomes of the course as expressed in the syllabus. However, exploring students' expectations and tailoring the course syllabus and content to these expectations is a crucial step in ensuring their satisfaction. A conclusion is made that identifying and meeting realistic students' expectations of each course in the study program will allow the faculty to improve the quality of education.

Keywords: *University students; course expectations; course syllabus; quality of education; pre-service teachers; student satisfaction; study program.*

How to cite: Zadorozhna, I., Datskiv, O., & Shon, O. (2020). Exploring Students' Expectations of the University Course. *Revista Romaneasca pentru Educatie Multidimensionala*, 12(1Sup1), 293-303. <https://doi.org/10.18662/rrem/12.1sup1/236>

1. Introduction

Ukrainian higher education undergoes profound changes caused by its integration into world educational process. Among different important issues to consider by policymakers, university administrators, faculty and students are internationalization and globalization of education. Knight (2015) defines internationalization at the national, sector, and institutional levels as “the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education” (p. 2).

Ukraine launched modernization of national education policy in 2014, when, on the basis of the Bologna Process in creation of the European Higher Education Area, the innovational Law of Ukraine “On Higher Education” was adopted. In 2015, another progressive Ukrainian Law “On Science and Scientific and Technology Activities” continued the process. Ukrainian higher education institutions in recent years received new opportunities associated with increase in international cooperation, their constant openness to innovations, adopting the European vector of development (National Report, 2017).

Prospective university students have a greater choice of universities and often prefer to study abroad because it provides them with the opportunities to see the world and build international careers (Kapera, 2017). With emerging possibilities of life-long education the appeal of higher education diminishes, for a university diploma is not always a passport to a well-paid job. This, together with demographic changes, results in lower enrollment rates at tertiary level both in Ukraine and worldwide.

Many students do not graduate for different reasons, the most important being inability to cope with academic load and inability to find paid work during their undergraduate studies or, if they have a job, to combine employment and study. If the university is to address a retention issue, it has to develop mechanisms to keep student satisfaction levels high. One of those mechanisms is raising the quality of service the university provides by addressing its different dimensions, such as administration support, academic features, faculty credentials, and quality of students (Akareem & Hossain, 2012; Telford & Masson, 2015). Quality assurance is defined by Woodhouse (1998) as ‘systems, procedures, processes and actions intended to lead to the achievement, maintenance, monitoring and enhancement of quality’ (p. 258).

Internationally, higher education institutions are striving to improve the quality of service leading to student satisfaction (Kandiko & Mawer,

2013; Lobo & Gurney, 2014; Byrne et al, 2012). The concept of excellence in reference to higher education is extensively researched (Briukhanov et al., 2010, Ginns et al., 2007, Koslowski, 2006) and connected with expectations students have (Armağan et al., 2016; Borghi et al, 2016). Learning about these expectations and aligning them with institutional policies and regulations has been the subject of research by Voss et al (2007). It has been established that quality of service by higher education institution is inseparably connected with its ability to meet, at least partially, students' expectations regarding the institution itself and the program of study.

Extensive research focused on undergraduate students' transition into higher education. Their personal circumstances and reasons for attending university have been studied together with expectations this group of learners has (Balloo et al., 2015). An intercultural study focused on motivation, expectation and preparedness of undergraduate students in Ireland, the UK, Spain and Greece for higher education (Byrne et al, 2012). Surveys of teacher education programs support the necessity of needs analysis for developing courses and gearing instruction to learners' needs after the course has begun. In light of existing research there is a constant demand for studies addressing students' expectations, which are regarded as a part of their needs analysis.

This study is based on a project aimed to improve the quality of courses offered by the department of English Philology and Methods of Teaching English Language at a Ukrainian university. A department research group has been investigating students' expectations of the courses as a part of internal education quality assurance system. The aim of the research was to survey the first-year student expectations regarding a course "History of Great Britain", which could reveal new information to course and program developers and make recommendations regarding course syllabus and learning content delivery mode to ensure student satisfaction and better quality of education.

The research questions are as follows:

- **What expectations do students have of the course?**
- **Is there a difference between the students' expectations and the course objectives and learning outcomes as expressed in the syllabus?**

The study is different from other studies focusing primarily on transition from secondary into higher education in that it took place in the second semester of the first year, after the students settled into their

program and are aware of the university expectations concerning attendance, participation, tardiness, academic integrity etc. Also, it contributes to the relatively small body of research aimed at improving quality of teacher education programs through involving students in their evaluation.

2. Research site and background on the case

Ternopil Volodymyr Hnatiuk National Pedagogical University (TNPU) is a middle-size university in western Ukraine specializing in teacher education. The university ranks second among pedagogical universities (2019). 5500 full-time and correspondence study students are offered a wide range of study programs.

88 lecturers work in five departments constituting The Faculty of Foreign Languages. Bachelor's and master's programs enroll more than 600 students.

The course "History of Great Britain" is an optional course included in a bachelor's program "Secondary Education. (Language and Literature (English))". Students can choose it in the second semester of the program. The course's hours (90 hours total) include lectures (20 class hours), seminars (16 class hours), independent study (54 hours). The course examines the main events in the life of the British society, material and language culture, history, realia and traditions of the target foreign language country. The course is taught by a lecturer with 23 years of teaching experience. As we mentioned earlier, the students have already made the transition in higher education. This is an important factor in our study, for in the second semester of their program they can concentrate on their expectations of the course rather than of their university study in general. Having outlined research site and background on the case, in the following section we will describe the methodology of this study.

3. Method

The research, which presupposed evaluation and analysis of the first-year students' expectations of a course "History of Great Britain", was carried out in 2017-2018 academic year. The research methods are critical analysis of the literature, data collection involving students' essays, the course syllabus analysis and a focus group discussion in 2 groups on the course completion.

3.1. Participants and data collection

48 Foreign Languages Department students of TNPU enrolled in a bachelor's program, who selected a course "History of Great Britain", became participants of the study. Participants' gender distribution was 25 females and 2 males, participants' age was between 17 and 20 years old.

During the first lecture the students were given the task to write a short in class essay (100-150 words) describing their expectations of the course. This was done before familiarizing the students with the course syllabus to ensure objective and unbiased response.

To address the second research question about the possible difference between the students' expectations, the course objectives and learning outcomes as expressed in the syllabus we analyzed the document. As stated in the syllabus, the purpose of the course is developing the knowledge of the most important stages in historical and cultural development of the country, forming the students' outlook, abilities for solving the problems that modern individual, society and humanity face. Objectives of the course are: to develop the knowledge of the main events and factors that influenced development of the country; to analyze the influence of historic events on the language; to generalize historical experience of Great Britain; defining the social, economic, political, cultural characteristics of the British society; to activate speaking skills; to form critical thinking; to improve research skills (Shon, 2016).

The learning outcomes of the course reflect aims to develop critical thinking and research skills. Upon the completion of the course students will show their skills in selecting and analyzing relevant sources, using appropriate research techniques and terminology, researching and characterizing main processes in British history through historical epochs, defining the key elements of the cultural code of the civilization, observing the connection between historic events and language development, participating in academic discussions (Shon, 2016). Analyzing the syllabus we noticed that in the learning outcomes there is no specific reference to improving students English language skills although the course is delivered in English. However, discussion skills are mentioned as one of the course objectives. Also, the students' professional skills development was not specified. This may be due to a well-recognized lack of professional orientation during the first year of the study program.

Further analysis of the content revealed it as a structure consisting of 3 modules. Module 1, *Great Britain from the Prehistoric Times till the 18th Century*, includes the following topics: *Prehistory, Stone Age, Roman Britain, The Anglo-*

Saxon Invasion, Christianization, Viking Challenge and the Rise of Wessex, The Norman Conquest. 14th-15th Centuries in the History of Great Britain, Tudor England, Elizabethan Era, 17th century England. Studying module 2, *History of Great Britain in the 18-19th Centuries*, students explore 18th century Britain, Birth of the Union, British Empire, Loss of the Thirteen American Colonies, Industrial Revolution, Union with Ireland, Napoleonic Wars, Victorian Era. *History of Great Britain in the 20th - 21st Centuries* in module 3 includes *Edwardian Era, World War I, Post-war Settlement. Irish Independence and Partition, Interwar Era, Great Depression, World War II, Postwar Britain, EU Membership of the UK, The United Kingdom in early 21st Century* (Shon, 2016). The results of the syllabus analysis were compared with the emerging groups of expectations in order to establish differences and/or similarities between what the students expected of the course and what the teacher expected them to learn.

Finally, during the last seminar students worked in 2 researcher-led focus groups discussing their expectations and perceptions of the course. Data was collected within one week, when two focus groups met and a discussion was carried out in each group. The duration of discussion was from 45 min to one hour and the questions aimed at clarifying the expectations the students had when they started the course, singling out their present perceptions of the course, making the suggestions to improve the students' experience on the course. The discussions were recorded on previous agreement with the participants and the findings were documented.

The structure and questions of focus group discussions as well as findings are presented in the next section of the case study.

4. Results and discussion

The data collected from the essays "My expectations of the course "History of Great Britain" revealed the scope of expectations students had. Recurrent expectations were grouped and 4 major groups of expectations emerged: academic, social, personal, professional. We combined social and personal expectations in one group (social/personal) as they were closely connected. A group of academic expectations was further divided into 2 subgroups: course content expectations and course delivery expectations. The results of essays analysis are included in Table 1.

Table 1. Student expectations of the course "History of Great Britain"

Groups of expectations	Column A (f)	Column B (%)
<i>Academic (course content):</i>	48	100
<i>to improve English skills:</i>	46	96

• <i>listening skills</i>	33	67
• <i>speaking skills</i>	40	83
- <i>to learn about British history</i>	48	100
- <i>to learn about British culture</i>	48	100
Academic (course delivery):	46	96
- <i>to study in a new format;</i>	3	6
- <i>to participate in interesting games;</i>	7	15
- <i>to be involved in interesting activities;</i>	10	21
- <i>to work in pairs;</i>	18	38
- <i>to participate in discussions</i>	47	98
- <i>to have material presented creatively.</i>	2	4
Social / Personal:	37	77
- <i>to get to know other students</i>	4	8
- <i>to be wise in society</i>	1	2
- <i>to work with other students</i>	15	31
- <i>to have a good time</i>	10	21
- <i>to broaden outlook</i>	7	15
- <i>to develop as a person</i>	5	0
Professional	7	15
- <i>to use new knowledge in future</i>	2	4
- <i>to become a better teacher</i>	5	10

The results for academic expectations concerning the course content show that all students (100%) expected to learn about British history and culture and majority expected to improve English language skills (96%). 67% of students expected to improve listening skills and 83% of students – speaking skills. Expectations of course delivery ranged from creative presentation of material (4%) and study in a new format (6%) to participation in discussions (98%).

Social/personal expectations of the course were the highest when it came to working with other students (31%). In the group of professional expectations 4% were reported, although the formulation of this expectations were rather vague: *to use new knowledge in the future* (4%), *to become a better teacher* (10%). These findings are in line with the study by Belyaeva (2015), stating that ‘instructors should bear in mind that learners often do not clearly perceive their future professional roles’ (p. 87).

During focus group discussions the students evaluated their satisfaction with the course on a 5-point Likert scale with answers on the scale from “very satisfied” to “very dissatisfied”. After that they were asked to think back to the beginning of the course and say whether their

expectations of it were met. The students then worked in groups arranging cards with expectations prepared by the authors (expectations cards were based on students' essays) into two groups: according to whether they were (more or less) fulfilled and not fulfilled. We asked them to put the expectations they didn't have to one side and took a photo of each arrangement of the cards. Focus group questions and procedure were as follows:

Focus group questions and procedure

— *I'm going to ask you to discuss the expectations you had at the beginning of the course "History of England" and your current perceptions regarding the course. You've already described your expectations in essays, but we need more information from you through this focus group discussion.*

1. Participant information.

— *Fill in a card:*

Name:

— *Are you satisfied with the course "History of England"? Circle your answer.*

Very satisfied.

Satisfied.

Neutral.

Dissatisfied.

Very dissatisfied.

— *Why have you chosen this option?*

(Ensure everyone's participation.)

2. Expectations and perceptions

— *Find and read your essay. Thinking back to the beginning of the course, were your expectations of the course met?*

3. Expectations and suggestions.

(Distribute cards of expectations from essays).

— *In your group, put the expectations you had into two groups, based on whether they were fulfilled and not fulfilled (i.e. Did what you expected [to] happen or not?).*

— *Put the expectations you didn't have to one side.*

— *When you've finished I'll take a photo of your arrangement of the cards.*

(Take photo of final arrangement).

— *What suggestions to improve the student experience would you give to the university, to the lecturer?*

4. Closure.

— *We've talked about the expectations you had when you started the course, your present perceptions of the course, the suggestions to improve the student experience on the course. Is there anything else you'd like to say?*

The focus groups discussions demonstrated the course ability to meet the expectations leading to greater student satisfaction. 94 % of students indicated that they were satisfied with the course. Overall, students were positive about their course experiences. There were no considerable gaps between what students expected of the course and what they subsequently perceived their experience to be related to content and structure of the course, difficulty of work, and degree of independent learning. In this light, recommendations can be made to address expectations regarding teaching and learning on the course. Since academic expectations regarding the course content and delivery had been met, the course developers should address social/personal expectations of students as well as build a foundation for development of their professional expectations. Taking into account student expectations as a part of needs analysis and course evaluation can support developing a partnership approach to quality of higher education. The findings of this study are in line with the research by Balloo et al. (2015), Borghi et al. (2016), Nation (2000) stressing the need of higher educational institutions to take into account student expectations while designing and launching new courses and programs.

Conclusion

The present study is a part of a project investigating learners' needs throughout the Faculty of Foreign Languages at TNPU, Ukraine, aiming to explore the students' expectations and perceptions of their study program. It is hoped that the project will reveal how a particular programme tailored to the learners' needs can contribute to the development of their overall foreign language and professional competences.

This paper aimed to uncover the expectations of the first-year pedagogical university students regarding the course "History of Great Britain" and to capture their perceptions of learning experience and satisfaction with the course. The results suggest that professional expectations have to be included in the course syllabus and communicated to students early in the program. Also, there was no gap between what the students expected from these courses, and what the teacher expected. This proves the attention given by the teacher to the course design and syllabus

development. The faculty can use these tools in conducting needs analysis to explore students' individual characteristics, language level and expectations and improve the quality of the programs offered by the university.

The study we conducted is not without limitations. Firstly, the research took into account only learners' perspective and did not investigate teachers' beliefs and expectations. Secondly, the study looked into one course on the program whereas broadening the scope of courses under investigation might lead to discovering a broader range of students' expectations. Further research should take into account the lecturers' perspectives, their beliefs and practices, include class observations and interviews with both students and teachers which would provide more insights into the problem. The findings may serve as the basis for revising and improving the syllabus and methodology of other courses on the program.

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