



First Year University Life: Expectations Versus Reality

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First-year university students face challenges during their transition to higher education, which can impact their academic success and well-being. This paper reports the views of 88 first-year undergraduate students from Slovak Universities regarding their expectations upon entering university and their experiences during the initial months of study. Purposive sampling technique was utilized. Students' perspectives have been gathered through asynchronous e-interviews to explore the gap between student expectations and the reality of university life. An exploratory qualitative research design, which included inductive reasoning and an e-interview, was applied. The data were analysed using content analysis with recurrent themes identified and coded. The answers shed light on how students perceive their academic aspirations, social integration, and the support provided by their institutions. The results highlight the influence of factors such as academic demands, institutional support, and personal development on students' experiences. The analysis reveals students' priorities in knowledge acquisition, career preparation, and supportive teaching environments, as well as their surprise at the pace and volume of academic work. The conclusions refer to the importance of considering student perspectives in developing orientation programs and support services, due to the crucial role of the first year in promoting student success and retention. Future research should explore changes in student perceptions and the effectiveness of related interventions. The findings show that while students enter university with high aspirations for academic growth, career development and social integration, they often face challenges that test their resilience and adaptability.

Keywords: first-year students, study preferences, student experiences, adaptation process, transition period, higher education

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INTRODUCTION

The transformation from a supervised secondary school environment to university-level independent study demands considerable cognitive and behavioural adaptation and represents a significant developmental milestone that presents first-year undergraduates with multifaceted challenges (Smith & Johnson, 2023). Making decisions about higher education is a multi-phase process (Kumarage & Silva, 2024). Students must develop sophisticated academic literacy skills, including critical thinking, self-directed learning, and effective time management (Brown, 2023). However, the assumption that incoming students will acquire these capabilities without structured support often proves problematic, particularly given their previous exposure to more directive educational approaches characterised by regular assessment and continuous guidance. This adaptation period requires substantial adjustments in academic, social, and personal domains as students navigate the shift from structured secondary education to the autonomous learning in higher education. Research indicates that student expectations, formed through prior educational experiences and socio-cultural backgrounds, significantly influence their initial university experience and subsequent academic performance (Williams et al., 2022).

Multiple factors impede a successful transition, including excessive academic workload, complex assessment requirements, and occasionally insufficient faculty-student communication. These challenges frequently contribute to elevated attrition rates during the initial two years of undergraduate study (Lei & Yin, 2020). Students face challenges navigating new environments, managing finances, and maintaining well-being, while building new social networks and support systems (Ramírez-Velásquez et al., 2025). Although much research exists on first-year student experiences, several gaps remain in the literature. While previous studies have extensively documented the challenges of transitioning to university (Smith & Johnson, 2023; Williams et al., 2022), there is limited research on the specific disconnects between student expectations and their real experiences. While researchers like McLean et al. (2022) have explored social support mechanisms, few studies have investigated how students' pre-university expectations about social integration align with their lived experiences. Most research focuses on either academic or social aspects of transition, with limited attention to their interplay. Some studies have identified various support needs (Bannigan et al., 2022), but there is insufficient research on how these needs evolve throughout the first semester as students adjust to university life. This study addresses these gaps by a comprehensive examination of both pre-entry expectations and actual experiences of first-year students in Slovak universities, considering both academic and social dimensions of university life, and exploring the evolving student needs and challenges during the first months of study. This research provides insights from a Central European perspective, adding to the predominantly Western-focused literature on university transition experiences. Worsley et al. (2021) posited that entering university is associated with increased psychological distress and decreased student well-being. McLean et al. (2022) described factors that may contribute to stress, including large group teaching environments, residential environments, and the pressure of balancing academic performance with stereotypical student life and a lower level of social support. The available evidence

indicates that a significant proportion of students anticipate an increase in the level of support, didactic teaching, personal changes, learning freedom and occupation-specific assessments that they will receive at university (Sidwell, 2020). In the context of medical education, first-year students have been found to express a preference for interactive teaching methods, followed by didactic lectures. These studies highlight the significance of student feedback in meeting their expectations and enhancing the teaching-learning process (Samuel & Kamenetsky, 2022). Amanvermez et al. (2020) emphasised the importance of mental health services on campus for students, while McLean et al. (2022) highlighted the role of supportive peers and family members in reducing stress levels. However, there is limited knowledge about the specific stressors they face and the measures that could support their well-being during this critical transition (Selesho, 2012). To address these challenges, higher education institutions must adopt evidence-based approaches to student support. This includes fostering faculty awareness of student needs, implementing comprehensive orientation programmes, and developing targeted interventions for at-risk students (Bannigan et al., 2022). Understanding the expectations and experiences of first-year undergraduates is crucial for institutions seeking to enhance student retention and academic success through informed policy development and support service provision.

Context and Review of Literature

Recent studies are focusing mainly on academic transition, social integration, institutional support, and student well-being. Academic Transition and Expectations studies highlight significant challenges for students during the transition period. Brown (2023) emphasizes that students must rapidly develop sophisticated academic literacy skills while adapting to new learning environments. This is challenging as students move from structured secondary education to more autonomous university learning (Smith & Johnson, 2023). Williams et al. (2022) found that misaligned expectations about academic workload and teaching methods impact first-year performance and retention rates. Lei and Yin (2020) identify obstacles as excessive academic workload, complex assessment requirements, and insufficient faculty-student communication, which contribute to elevated attrition rates. Social Integration and Support Networks and The importance of social connections in first-year success has been well-documented. McLean et al. (2022) emphasize peer relationships and social support networks influence on student adaptation and academic performance. Bannigan et al. (2022) prove that effective social integration during the first year strongly predicts both academic achievement and student retention. However, flexible schedules and diverse course combinations can hinder social connection formation (Maymon et al., 2019). Teaching Quality and Pedagogical Approaches studies highlight the role of teaching quality in student success. Medeiros et al. (2018) found that effective first-year teaching requires both subject expertise and pedagogical skills tailored to transitioning students. Stiburek and Kafka (2023) reveal a relationship between research expertise and teaching effectiveness, suggesting that teaching quality impacts student engagement and learning outcomes. Yamanaka and Wu (2014) emphasize appropriate lesson planning leading to a higher-quality teaching. Mental Health, Well-being and The psychological aspects of university transition have gained attention in recent research. Worsley et al.

(2021) found linkage between university entry and increased psychological distress and decreased well-being. Barbayannis et al. (2022) identified specific stressors including academic pressure, social adjustments, and the challenge of maintaining work-life balance. Amanvermez et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of mental health services on campus, while McLean et al. (2022) highlight supportive peer and family relationships helping mitigate transition-related stress. Institutional Support Systems research indicates importance of the comprehensive institutional support. Harrison et al. (2024) argue that effective support must be proactive rather than reactive, addressing potential challenges before they become significant obstacles. Hammoudi Halat et al. (2023) suggest layered institutional support with different types of assistance throughout the first year, encompassing orientation programs, academic support services, and ongoing guidance (Bannigan et al., 2022).

Theoretical framework

The Self-Determination Theory (SDT), a macro theory of human motivation and personality developed by Ryan and Deci (2017), was applied to analyse qualitative data. SDT submits that individuals have three innate psychological needs that must be satisfied: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Ryan et al. (2016) state that the provision of support in the social context, whether developmental or situational, has been demonstrated to facilitate growth, engagement, effectiveness, and well-being. Conversely, contexts that impede or thwart the satisfaction of these needs have been shown to engender defensive, inflexible behaviours, and a range of forms of ill-being and psychopathology. Social environments (including higher education institutions) that contribute to supporting the psychological needs of their users promote capacities for self-regulation, social relationships, and well-being. In a context such as higher education, thwarting these needs can result in students experiencing diminished motivation and well-being. SDT provides a valuable lens through which to examine first-year university students' expectations, preferences, and experiences.

- (1) **Autonomy:** First-year students are transitioning to an environment where they have more control over their learning and daily lives. Their expectations and preferences may reflect a desire for this increased autonomy.
- (2) **Competence:** Students enter university with expectations about their ability to meet academic challenges. Their preferences may be influenced by their desire to feel capable and effective in their new environment.
- (3) **Relatedness:** The transition to university involves forming new social connections. Students' expectations and preferences may be shaped by their need to feel connected to peers and the faculty.

By applying SDT to this study, we can understand how the expectations and preferences of students relate to these fundamental psychological needs, and how their experiences either support or hinder the satisfaction of these needs. This framework will guide our analysis of the data and inform our interpretations of students' responses. Furthermore, SDT's emphasis on the social-contextual conditions that facilitate the natural processes of self-motivation and healthy psychological development aligns well with our aim to

identify measures that universities can implement to support students' well-being during the transition period.

Worsley et al. (2021) advocate for universities to prioritise the creation of a supportive environment, the promotion of social connections and the provision of comprehensive mental health support services throughout the students' time at university. Palomino et al. (2024) suggest dialogic learning in university teaching as a student-centred approach emphasizing social diversity and fostering active student participation, communication, and autonomy. Spurna et al. (2024) concluded that long-term, individualised and career-oriented student support, which reflects and respects the mutually distinct disciplinary identities of future teachers, is necessary. A comprehension of expectations and preferences, and the incorporation of support into the adaptation process and subsequently into educational practices, can enhance student satisfaction and success in their first year of study. Nevertheless, there is a paucity of knowledge and research concerning the stressors that first-year students encounter in university settings and the measures that could be taken, based on their actual needs, to better support their well-being during the transition period. By exploring and addressing the expectations and realities of first-year university students, this research will contribute valuable knowledge to the field of higher education administration. Understanding the gap between expectations and experiences can help universities improve their support systems, orientation programmes, and overall student satisfaction. The objective of this study is to explore the expectations and the preferences of first-year university students in comparison to their experiences. The research is guided by the main question: *What are the expectations and preferences of first-year students upon entering the university, and how do these align with their actual experiences?*

METHOD

Design

An exploratory qualitative research design, which included inductive reasoning and an e-interview, was applied (see Table 1). According to Kalu & Bwalya (2017), qualitative research is conducted to deepen the comprehension of the cultural, ideological and value systems of individuals, as well as understanding the human experiences and circumstances that shape their lives. Brinkmann (2020, p. 3) added that the objective of a qualitative interview is to facilitate the participant's ability to articulate their personal narrative in their own terms, while simultaneously providing opportunities for the occurrence of 'gifts of chance'. Inductive reasoning, also called inductive logic or bottom-up reasoning (Table 1) is a method of concluding by going from the specific to the general, and also a logical approach to making inferences (Bhandari, 2023).

Table 1

Inductive reasoning

Stage	The Research Process
Specific observation (online interviews)	Distribution of online interviews to university students.
Pattern recognition (categorising)	An analysis of the data, creating categories of the answers, picking-up on repeated themes.
General conclusion (generalisation)	Based on the findings, a conclusion with generalisation containing recommendations for future research.

Participants

Two public universities in Slovakia (Europe), one located in the west and the other in the centre of the country took part in this study. The research took place between September 2023 and December 2023 involving 88 university students. Participants had to meet the following main criteria: (1) They were first-year students at bachelor level of study. (2) They were between 18 and 35 years old. (3) They were fluent in the Slovak language. (4) Their participation was voluntary. All potential participants received written information about the study before agreeing to take part. The sample consisted of students from diverse geographical areas within Slovakia. The mean age of the participants was 20 years old. Students were recruited from ten different study programmes across the two universities. This variety of study programmes ensures a broad representation of academic disciplines, allowing for potential comparisons across different fields of study. The participants consisted of sixty-five (74%) female students and twenty-three (26%) male students. The distribution of participants across the different study programmes and universities is presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Distribution of participants

Field of Study	N	%
<i>Public University One</i>		
Psychology	12	13.63
Education	4	4.54
Foreign Language Studies	8	9.09
Philosophy	1	1.13
Ethnology	1	1.13
<i>Public University Two</i>		
Finance, Banking and Investments	9	10.23
Tourism	19	21.61
Public Economics and Management	9	10.23
Economics and Small and Medium Business Management	25	28.41
Total	88	100 %

This sample provides a comprehensive view of students' experiences and preferences across various academic disciplines and geographical locations within Slovakia.

Strategies

Asynchronous semi-structured E-interviews through an academic information system (AIS) were conducted. The majority of E-interviews (called also remote interviews) provide the opportunity for greater anonymity, which may enhance confidentiality through the additional factor of physical distance (Opara et al., 2023; Taherdoost, 2022).

Procedure

The researchers elected to collect the data via e-interview created by the authors within a pre-established time frame (the first semester) at two universities; the benefits of this procedure included the lower costs and convenience of online interviews in comparison

with face-to-face interviews, the ease of rapid information storage, and the opportunity to eliminate the impact of the interviewer's physical presence. Confidentiality and well-being of the participants were paramount at all times.

However, the researchers were aware of the limitations of this method of data collection, such as lack of access to non-verbal expressions, the possibility of technical failure, a chance that the questions would not be fully understood, the possibility of the participants having reduced concentration and more distractions when answering the questions, and the instability of the internet connection when recording the answers (Parvaresh-Masoud & Varaei, 2018). Furthermore, irrespective of ethical considerations, one of the key challenges is ensuring the validity of the data and the findings gathered through asynchronous interviews. Students were informed through the academic information system (AIS) that the interviews would be voluntary, contain four open questions (What is important to you during the university studies? What the first three months at university should look like according to you? What was the most positive experience at university? What surprised you the most when arriving at university?) and would take approximately 30 minutes. The interview's validity was assured through a thorough review of its format and content by university researchers, complemented by a pilot test involving 10 students not included in the main study. It was therefore important that the topic chosen would generate data of sufficient depth and complexity to meet the objectives of the study. The collection of textual data in an asynchronous format in written form eliminates the necessity for transcription, thus enhancing the accuracy of the transcripts and eliminating the potential for error. Furthermore, this approach may facilitate more nuanced interpretation for researchers (Bauman, 2015; James & Busher, 2016). The study procedures were conducted following the Helsinki Declaration, and official ethical approval was obtained from Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Trnava, Slovakia (reference number FF-EK-3-2023).

Data Analysis

All the data collected from the e-interviews was translated into English. The subsequent stage of the data analysis was the undertaking of a content analysis. This entailed each researcher separately analysing the three sets of translated interviews (two sets of 30 and one set of 28). In this context, content analysis refers to the process of analysing the transcripts to identify and code the major themes and significant meanings within the narrative material. This interpretation aligns with the latent level described by Krippendorff (2019). The final stage of the analysis involved a comparison of the categories and themes to identify any similarities and differences generated from the three sets of data. The researchers engaged in a lengthy and rigorous process of debate and discussion until a consensus was reached on the categories presented in this study.

FINDINGS

The data collected is organised by a total of 28 codes, 14 sub-categories (SC), and six generic categories (GC) within these two main categories (MC): (1) Students' expectations upon entering university. (2) Students' experiences during their first months at university (Table 3).

The first main category, ‘Students’ expectations upon entering university’, comprises two generic categories: Academic expectations, and Social aspects. These are further divided into six sub-categories: Knowledge acquisition, Career prospects, Quality of teaching, Learning resources, Relationships, and Adaptation. The second main category, ‘Students’ experiences during their first months at university’, consists of two generic categories: Academic experiences, and Institutional support. These are further divided into eight sub-categories: Workload and pace, Teaching methods, Forming connections, Campus life, Information and guidance, Facilities and services, Independence, and Stress management. This structure provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the multifaceted nature of first-year students’ expectations and experiences as they transition into university life. The categories and sub-categories reflect the key themes that emerged from the students’ responses, highlighting both the academic and social dimensions of their university experience.

Table 3

The process of data abstraction contained in the students’ e-interview

Main Categories	Generic Categories	Sub-Categories	Codes (Frequency of Statements)
(1) Students’ expectations upon entering university	Academic expectations	Knowledge acquisition	Gaining sufficient information and knowledge (25) Developing practical skills (18)
		Career prospects	Preparation for future job (20) Applying knowledge in future career (15)
		Teaching Methods	Importance of teacher-student communication (22)
		Teacher - Student Interaction	Engaging teaching methods (17)
	Social integration	Learning resources	Modern information and materials (10) Access to study resources (8)
		Relationships	Building new friendships (28) Inclusion in student community (15)
		Adaptation	Successful transition from secondary school (12) Balancing personal life and studies (10)
(2) Students’ experiences during first months at university	Academic experiences	Workload and pace	Surprise at number of assignments (23) Fast-paced curriculum (19)
		Pedagogical Approaches	Different teaching styles (15) Length of lessons and breaks (10)
	Social experiences	Forming connections	Meeting new people (30) Making friends (25)
		Campus life	Exploring new environment (18) Participating in student activities (12)
	Institutional support	Information and guidance	Helpful older students and staff (20) Lack of clear information (15)
		Facilities and services	Orientation in school buildings (10) Access to student services (8)
	Adaptation Process	Independence	Managing own schedule (22) Taking responsibility for learning (18)
		Stress management	Dealing with academic pressure (25) Balancing multiple responsibilities (20)

The online interviews revealed themes about students' expectations, preferences, and experiences. The following sections include quotations to illustrate the identified categories.

(1) Expectations and Preferences

Academic Development and Knowledge Acquisition

Students consistently expressed aspirations for comprehensive academic growth, emphasising their desire to acquire both theoretical knowledge and practical expertise in their chosen fields. Their responses reflected a strong motivation to achieve expertise and gain a thorough understanding of their subjects, demonstrating a clear focus on educational development. Students expressed a strong desire to gain knowledge and develop practical skills. For instance, one participant stated: "... [it is important to have] ... *education in the field, gradually up to the level of an expert within my approbation*"(P2). Other students emphasised that they needed: "... *to have enough information and overview in the subjects*" (P47). "... *to enjoy my studies and field of study, and to get as much information as possible*" (P60).

Career Prospects

The responses revealed that students view their university education as a crucial stepping stone to their professional future. They emphasised the importance of acquiring knowledge and skills that directly translate to their future careers, showing a pragmatic approach to their education. Many students viewed their university education as a pathway to future employment. One respondent noted that they wanted: "... *to learn and apply my knowledge in the future. To find a good future job*" (P23). Another participant explained that: "...*knowledge, skills and also finding a job in my field are definitely important for me*" (P44).

Quality of Teaching and Learning Environment

Students demonstrated a clear preference for interactive and supportive learning environments. They particularly valued effective communication with professors, engaging teaching methods, and comprehensive study materials. The responses highlighted the importance of dynamic classroom interactions and personalised academic support, with students expressing preferences for supportive and engaging teaching methods. One participant mentioned that: "*The key point for me is the communication between teacher and student. Also, during my first months at school I found that the key point is the motivation from the teacher, which I have had in every single subject so far*" (P9). Others expressed their opinion that a quality teaching and learning environment required: "...*proper assessment and help from professors*" (P13), "... *good study materials, personal contact with professors and classmates, active lessons through discussions, etc., not just passive ones where the teacher just talks for the whole lesson*" (P39).

Social Integration and Adaptation

The social aspect of university life emerged as a significant expectation among first-year students. They emphasised the importance of building supportive peer networks

and creating a collaborative learning environment, recognising the value of mutual support in navigating their academic journey. Building relationships and adapting to the new environment were significant expectations of the students, who felt that: *"We should fit into a new group and help each other navigate the chaotic first semester together"* (P11). They also highlighted that successful integration was aided by: *"...helpful teachers, good classmates, and a pleasant school environment"* (P79).

(2) Experiences

Academic Challenges and Adjustments

Students faced various challenges in adapting to university-level academic requirements. Their experiences highlight the significant adjustment needed to cope with the increased workload, diverse teaching methods, and different assessment approaches compared to their previous educational experiences. Many students were surprised by the pace and volume of work. Some of the participants noted that there are: *"... lots of assignments and ongoing responsibilities, [and we were] quick to jump into the material"* (P21). *"... different teaching styles, [different] length of lessons and breaks [compared to school], and the fact that each lecturer tested knowledge in different ways"* (P52).

Social Connections and Relationships

The formation of new social connections emerged as a particularly positive aspect of the first-year experience. Students frequently highlighted the value and enjoyment they found in building new friendships and developing their social networks within the university environment. The following exemplificative comments typify their positive experiences: *"... [I enjoyed] meeting new people, making friends"* (P56). *"So far my most enjoyable experience has been meeting new people, making new contacts and spending time with these people outside of school and in class ..."* (P66).

Institutional Support and Communication

While some students found the university environment welcoming and supportive, others experienced challenges in accessing information and understanding institutional processes. These mixed experiences highlight the importance of clear communication and comprehensive support systems. One student mentioned: *"I was positively surprised that even the older students are willing to help younger ones when they don't know something or even when they are looking for a classroom. I didn't meet anyone who didn't want to help"* (P7). Another stated: *"The most enjoyable thing for me was getting to know the teachers and finding out that they were not as strict as I thought"* (P19). One student reported that: *"It was very stressful at first because I couldn't imagine being able to navigate the corridors at all without using some sort of map. However, on the second day that initial stress changed, we walked around the corridors with my classmates looking for classrooms and the stress completely disappeared, and it was fun, and we also gradually learned where each classroom was located ... even if we didn't happen to know and we asked other students, janitors, teachers etc. where to find a particular classroom, they were willing to answer us with a smile on their face and no comments like 'you should know that the school schedule is on the web' etc."* (P74).

However, not students had a pleasant experience; one recounted their problems at the beginning of term: "[One] *Negative* [thing was] *that I never knew when and what to do*" (P37). Other students had a similar start: "*At first I had chaos in the teaching system and orientation in the school building, but I think that's normal*" (P40). "*Nobody told us what was where (I still have no idea where the canteen is)*" (P55).

Adapting to University Life and Teaching Methods

The transition to university teaching methods and lifestyle presented a complex mix of challenges and opportunities. Students' experiences revealed positive aspects, such as increased autonomy and a friendly faculty, and challenges related to the pace of learning and teaching styles. A student reflected: "*I was surprised positively by the attitude of the teachers, making friends and being able to make my own schedule. Negatively, I was surprised by the pace. I was expecting it to be a bit more moderate for first few months, but I am slowly getting used to this pace*" (P43). Another student described their own experience: "*The approach of some teachers sometimes seems to me so uninterested, as if the teacher just wants to 'do what he has to do' no matter who he teaches, whether [or not] someone listens to him, whether he teaches in an interesting way and so on ... I know that there are a lot of us, but sometimes I miss a little more personal approach*" (P86).

DISCUSSION

Results revealed distinct patterns in students' expectations and experiences, supported by current research in higher education transition. Studies by Thompson & Chen (2023) and McLean et al. (2022) confirm our findings regarding the significant impact of academic workload and pace on first-year students. The academic expectations align with Brown's (2023) research on academic literacy development in first-year students, particularly regarding knowledge acquisition and practical skills development. In terms of teaching methods and faculty interaction, our findings echo Bannigan et al.'s (2022) research on the crucial role of faculty engagement in student success. The variation in students' experiences with teaching methods aligns with Stiburek and Kafka's (2023) findings on the relationship between pedagogical approaches and student engagement. Identified social integration aspects are supported by Wilson & Park's (2023) research, which demonstrates that successful peer relationships significantly predict both academic achievement and retention. The importance of institutional support aligns with Harrison et al. (2024), who emphasize proactive support strategies.

Academic Expectations vs. Reality

The significant disparity between students' academic expectations and their actual experiences emerges as a crucial finding. Students' surprise at the pace and volume of work aligns with Brown's (2023) findings on academic literacy development in first-year students. This misalignment between expectations and reality often creates considerable stress, supporting the research performed by Barbayannis et al. (2022) on academic adjustment challenges. Williams et al. (2022) similarly found that unrealistic academic expectations can significantly impact first-year performance and retention rates. The rapid transition from structured secondary education to university-level

independence requires substantial adjustment, particularly in study habits and time management (Thompson & Chen, 2023). This adjustment period often proves more challenging than students anticipate, potentially affecting their academic performance and psychological well-being.

Career-Oriented Expectations

The strong focus on career prospects in students' expectations reflects the increasingly career-oriented nature of higher education. Students consistently expressed clear vocational goals, as evidenced in some of their statements. These findings strongly align with studies by Samuel and Kamenetsky (2022), which emphasise the critical role of universities in career preparation. Furthermore, research by Sampaio, Faria, and Silva (2023) reinforces the idea that young people's pursuit of higher education is fundamentally predicated on the assumption that it will afford them greater opportunities for their future life. This career-centric orientation among first-year students has several implications and suggests that students enter university with a pragmatic approach to their education, viewing their studies as a direct pathway to professional success. Recent research by Williams et al. (2022) indicates that such career-focused motivation can positively influence student engagement and persistence in their studies. However, Lei and Yin (2020) caution that exclusively career-focused expectations might lead students to undervalue broader academic development opportunities. The prevalence of career-oriented expectations also raises important considerations for curriculum design and delivery. Universities face the challenge of balancing practical skill development with theoretical knowledge, ensuring that programmes meet both immediate career preparation needs and longer-term professional development requirements (Bannigan et al., 2022). This balance is particularly crucial in the first year of university courses; establishing clear connections between academic content and future professional applications, while at the same time maintaining rigorous academic standards, can enhance student engagement and motivation.

Teaching Quality and Faculty-Student Interaction

The quality of teaching and faculty-student communication emerged as crucial factors in student satisfaction. This finding supports the research by Bannigan et al. (2022) on the importance of faculty engagement in student success. The students' varying experiences with teaching quality align with Stiburek and Kafka's (2023) findings regarding the complex relationship between research expertise and teaching effectiveness. Moreover, the appropriate preparation of university teachers and their lesson planning leads to higher quality and more efficient teaching (Yamanaka & Wu, 2014; Metruk & Kováčová, 2025). This variation in teaching quality raises important questions about pedagogical development in higher education. While some students reported positive experiences praising the active lessons and discussions, others noted a more passive approach, exemplified by the comment that " ... the teacher just talks for the whole lesson" (P14). These contrasting experiences echo findings by Medeiros et al. (2018), who state that effective teaching in first-year courses requires both subject expertise and pedagogical skills to be specifically tailored to support transitioning

students. Their observation that 'there is not always a correlation between the quality of a lecturer's content knowledge, scientific activities and the quality of their teaching' highlights a crucial area for institutional attention and development.

Social Integration and Peer Support

Social connections proved vital for student adaptation and satisfaction, extending beyond mere friendship formation to create supportive learning communities. Students demonstrate the critical role of peer relationships in academic adjustment (Lei & Yin, (2020). Findings support the work of McLean et al. (2022) on the importance of social integration and perceived social support in the first-year experience. The challenge of forming connections in flexible course schedules, evidenced by comments such as the previous one, highlights a significant institutional issue. Recent research by Wilson and Park (2023) suggests that successful social integration in the first year at university significantly predicts both academic success and retention in subsequent years. This is particularly relevant given our findings, where students mentioned that " ... [they valued] *helpful teachers, good classmates, and a pleasant school environment*" (P79). The social dimension of learning appears to be crucial, with students appreciating opportunities for collaborative learning and peer support. However, the modern university structure, with its flexible schedules and diverse course combinations, can inadvertently create barriers to social connections that institutions must actively work to overcome.

Institutional Support System

Mixed experiences with institutional support suggest areas for improvement in university systems. This variance aligns with recent research by Bannigan et al. (2022) and Maymon et al. (2019) on the importance of comprehensive support systems for first-year student retention. Harrison et al. (2024) argue that effective institutional support must be proactive rather than reactive, identifying and addressing potential challenges before they become significant obstacles to student success. The findings reveal a particular need for clearer orientation systems and ongoing support structures. Comments about navigation difficulties and administrative challenges highlight the importance of comprehensive orientation programmes that extend beyond the first week of classes. Hammoudi Halat et al. (2023) suggest that successful institutional support should be layered, providing different types of assistance at various points throughout the first year.

Adaptation to University Life

The varied experiences in adapting to university life and teaching methods highlight the multifaceted nature of the transition to higher education. This supports the findings of Barbayannis et al. (2022) on the complex challenges faced by first-year students, particularly concerning academic stress and mental well-being. An emerging theme from the findings relates to students' psychological adjustment to university life. Comments about stress and anxiety, particularly regarding workload and pace, align with Rodriguez and Kim's (2024) research on first-year student mental health. The transition period appears particularly challenging, with students navigating multiple

adjustments simultaneously. The pressure of academic demands, combined with social adjustments and independence requirements, can significantly impact student well-being. This finding suggests that universities must integrate mental health support into their standard first-year support services, recognising that psychological well-being is fundamental to academic success.

Limitations of the Analysis Method

Asynchronous e-interviews, while offering broader reach and participant convenience, may have limited response depth compared to face-to-face interviews. The absence of real-time interaction prevented immediate follow-up questions. The content analysis approach, though systematic, relies heavily on researcher interpretation, which may introduce potential bias. The coding process, while conducted independently by multiple researchers, could be influenced by preconceived notions about student experiences and transitions. Additionally, the cross-sectional data provides a snapshot of student experiences at a single point, potentially missing temporal variations. A longitudinal approach would have better captured the evolution of student adaptation. Finally, the uneven distribution of participants across study programs may limit the generalizability of findings and it could have influenced the themes identified in the analysis.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals the complex landscape of the first-year experience, highlighting a significant gap between student expectations and reality. While students enter university with high aspirations, they often encounter challenges that test their resilience and adaptability. The results prove that the transition to university involves multiple dimensions of adjustment, with students' expectations and actual experiences diverging most notably in academic demands, social integration processes, and institutional support needs. Students anticipated structured support, encountering instead a more autonomous learning environment with a heavier workload. This misalignment, particularly evident in academic pace and diverse assessments, fostered independent learning. The social dimension of university life emerged as both more challenging and crucial to successful transition than students initially expected. While some students entered university hoping to build new friendships, social integration proved crucial to their overall adaptation. Participants highlighted, the formation of peer support networks was crucial for navigating both academic and institutional challenges.

This study offers some recommendations for higher education institutions. Administrators and policymakers should develop comprehensive transition programs encompassing pre-entry to the first year, integrating academic and social support with regular assessments and clear communication channels. Faculty should design first-year courses with gradual skill-building, regular feedback, diverse methodologies, and real-world connections. Student support services should provide targeted academic and psychological support with extended orientation and proactive outreach. These findings are relevant to other European universities, emerging systems, and non-traditional settings like online and hybrid learning environments. Implementation success depends mainly on: local educational culture, resource availability, student demographics, and

alignment with institutional objectives. To maximize impact, institutions should establish regular assessment protocols, international collaboration for sharing best practices, and develop flexible frameworks that allow for contextual adaptation. By implementing these recommendations, institutions can work toward improving the first-year experience and supporting student success across diverse educational settings.

This research highlights the critical role of institutional support in student success. Findings reveal that success extends beyond academics, encompassing clear communication, supportive teaching, and social connections. The mismatch between expectations and experiences, particularly regarding workload and navigating the institution, suggests areas for improvement. By acknowledging individual student needs, universities can develop targeted support strategies, combining academic and social support with clear communication. This approach can reduce attrition and promote successful transitions.

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