

Preparatory Year Students' Expectations and Real Experiences at Imam Abdurrahman Bin Faisal University

Abdulaziz Alfahaid

*Department of English Language, Imam Abdurrahman Bin Faisal University,
Saudi Arabia*

Abstract:

The transition from high school to university seems to be a tough experience that is likely to result in falling standards and attrition to incoming students. This study seeks to explore preparatory year students' expectations and real experiences at Imam Abdurrahman Bin Faisal University, Saudi Arabia, and to suggest some alternatives to bridge the transition and minimize impediments. A questionnaire of expectations and a questionnaire of experiences were administered to 1955 students and an interview was directed to 245 students. The

findings of the study revealed deep discrepancies between students' expectations and experiences and pinpointed that students' academic, social, and logistic needs should be given due consideration to warrant quality and long-life learning.

Keywords:

preparatory year, expectations, experiences, transition, challenges, needs

المخلص:

يعتبر الانتقال من الثانوية إلى الجامعة تجربة صعبة قد تؤدي في كثير من الأحيان إلى تسرب الطلاب المستجدين وتهدف هذه الدراسة إلى رصد ما يتوقعه طلاب

السنة الأولى بالجامعة عن واقع دراستهم الأكاديمية ومقارنة ذلك مع التجارب الحقيقية التي مر بها هؤلاء الطلاب خلال دراستهم في جامعة الإمام عبدالرحمن بن فيصل بالمملكة العربية السعودية وذلك من أجل تقديم بعض التوصيات لسد الفجوة بين التعليم العام والجامعي وقد تم توزيع استبيان للتوقعات واستبيان آخر للتجارب الحقيقية على ١٩٥٥ طالبًا كما تم إجراء مقابلات مع ٢٤٥ طالبًا وقد بينت نتائج الدراسة عن وجود اختلافات كبيرة بين توقعات الطلاب وتجاربهم، وأوضحت النتائج كذلك أنه ينبغي الاهتمام باحتياجات الطلاب الأكاديمية والاجتماعية واللوجستية من أجل ضمان الجودة في التعليم والتعلم.

الكلمات الدالة:

السنة الأولى الجامعية، التوقعات، التجارب الحقيقية، الانتقال، التحديات الأكاديمية، الاحتياجات

Introduction

The preparatory year programs (PYPs) in Saudi Arabia aim at preparing the newly

admitted students for university life and enhancing their opportunity for success. They strive at developing students' skills in English to enable them to study and communicate during their undergraduate study and to face various challenges. The PYPs are usually confronted with various comments raised by students and parents. The nature of the queries exposes a gap between students' expectations and the reality of university life. This has been the case ever since the PYPs were launched in 2008 at Imam Abdurrahman Bin Faisal University (IAU).

Information on the perceptions of incoming students is extremely significant to identify their challenges and to help them achieve a smooth transition from school to university (McPhail, Fisher & McConachie, 2009);

Nelson, Clarke, Kift & Creagh, 2012). For a long time, as Miller and Reyes (2007, p. 45) acknowledged, students' expectations have always been disregarded or considered of secondary importance by many higher education institutions. The focus was on what the institution expected of them, and students had to adapt themselves to the conditions that differed from what they had anticipated. What is really needed at IAU is to identify students' expectations and to scrutinize their real experiences. Only in this way can we provide real solutions to this conundrum and facilitate the transition during the PYPs period.

Literature Review

The transition from high school to university has become a major global concern (Brinkworth,, McCann, Matthews

& Nordström, 2009). Some of the challenges researchers have identified include the low income of the students (Tierney, 2005), the underlying assumption that senior schooling is meant to train students for university education (Rausch & Hamilton, 2006), low standards at the secondary school level, and the “mismatch between individual learning styles and university methodology” (Ternel, 2000). While the reasons identified by independent research studies range from teachers' feedback to students' financial conditions, the most significant strand of research concerns the gap between expectations and reality: between what students expect from university or college and what is delivered by college or university.

In recent times, there has been much scholarly concern that

students are inadequately prepared for accessing university level courses (Trotter & Roberts, 2006). What negatively impacts high school graduates' perceptions of college-level education is that most of them usually go on to postsecondary education without engaging in the kinds of educational activities that prepare them to do well in college. They are not customarily prepared for college-level academic skills and have not developed the study habits and other behavioral patterns associated with postsecondary success, henceforth arises the gap between expectations and reality. Moreover, Kuh (2005), McPhail et al. (2009) found that students underestimate the balance required between independence and responsibility to gain success at university level.

Students' expectations form the foundation of the relationships students have with college or university (Smith & Wertlieb, 2005). Identifying students' expectations, level of awareness of learning/teaching styles, and the reality at university are often considered decisive factors of success in their PYPs. On the other hand, unfulfilled expectations can create emotional reactions that negatively impact the connection between the student and the institution and may become a cause of student attrition (Smith & Wertlieb, 2005; Tierney, 2005). Therefore, students should be made fully aware of the program of study, the reality of the deliverables within the university, the expected challenges, the requirements for success, and the various interruptive issues. When expectations are not met, many

questions will arise, and dissatisfaction will undoubtedly reign.

Many works have been carried out in this domain. Brinkworth et al. (2009) have shown that there is a gap between commencing students' expectations and university courses. In attempting to accommodate these expectations, Nelson et al. (2012) underlined the importance of identifying them as early as possible in the first year. In a similar study conducted in Australia, Crisp, Palmer, Turnbull, Nettelbeck, & Ward (2009) designed and administered two versions of a survey to elicit responses that provide feedback on students' readiness to "engage meaningfully with university courses" (p. 14). The focus of the questions was on students' demographic information,

students' expectations of university study and any other feedback that students may find important to be shared with. The survey of expectations mainly elicited responses related to students' "combining their study with paid work, having ready access to teaching staff, attending most lectures regularly, interactive sessions with peers, receiving teacher feedback, experiencing a life that is different from their high school and timetable" (pp. 16-17). Most students also reported that their success at university depended on self-responsibility, hard work, study and time management.

While Crisp et al. (2009) aimed at identifying the general expectations of students' joining university, Lobo and Gurney (2014) reported on the expectations of the undergraduate

students of an English Language Enhancement Course (ELEC) in an Australian university. The respondents indicated that they had expected to learn discipline-specific vocabulary that helped them in their 'academic skills'. Interestingly, almost half of the participants mentioned that they had "expected a transmissive model of teaching, in which the lecturer would stand in front of them, talk to them and give them information" (p. 739). Respondents, particularly from business and commerce background, anticipated personalized attention and feedback during the tutorial sessions. The suggestion is that specific expectations such as additional focus on writing and discipline specific vocabulary could help universities and education providers to restructure

their courses and teaching procedures and to ensure overall student satisfaction.

The most prevalent reasons for going to university vary from individual to individual and from culture to culture. Sometimes students consider themselves equivalent to 'consumers' (Levine, 1993) and expect nothing less but the quality products "without all the extras" such as social opportunities. On their part, Brinkworth et al. (2008) called for mechanisms that enable first-year students to bridge the transition from high school to university and to facilitate successful integration into the changed demands of tertiary education. They also called for proactive strategies and specially designed transition programs to meet the new required needs of students and to acquaint

them with the realities of university life.

Purpose of the Study

In the Arab countries, new students' expectations and real-life experiences have not been extensively researched despite their vital importance for both students and institutions. The main aim of this study was to explore the gap between the expectations of the new preparatory year students and their real experiences of studying in the preparatory year at IAU. It sought to discuss the ways to align students' expectations with reality and to come up with some suitable solutions. To do so, students' expectations in health, engineering, science and college community tracks were investigated in the first week of semester one 2015-2016 during the orientation phase of the

academic year with the help of a questionnaire and an interview. At the end of the year, the same set of questions based on students' real-life experiences were asked to gather information about what students had experienced throughout the whole year.

The main question this study was seeking to address is:

To what extent do the PYPs students' expectations match their real experiences as perceived at the end of the PYP?

This question is broken down into the following sub-questions:

- a. What are the PYPs students' expectations when they start their academic year at IAU?
- b. What are the PYPs students' experiences at the end of their academic year at IAU?

Methodology

This study employed mixed methods: surveys and interviews to gather both qualitative and quantitative data. No preconceived themes were imposed for gathering students' opinions in terms of expectations. Nevertheless, the expected responses as grouped into themes were utilized to see the changes that took place in the real-life experiences as reflected in the questionnaire. This was achieved through triangulating the sources of information using questionnaires and interviews and engaging all the preparatory year tracks in this study.

Target Population and Sampling

The population of this study consisted of all male and female first PYPs students at IAU in Saudi Arabia. The students

admitted to the major tracks of the academic study –Science, Health, and Engineering have shared their beliefs and expectations. The total number of the population and sample at the same time in the expectations questionnaire was 1718 and the experience questionnaire was 1955. As for the interview, the total number of the sample from the expectation interview was 254 and the experience interview was 245 from the same population. Since this university is very renowned, students from other provinces too seek to get admission. Therefore, the population was diverse in terms of academic background, social milieu, economic status, and schooling among others. Most students were female and were between 19-21 years of age. The total number of respondents is shown in Table 1:

Table 1: The total number of participants in all four tracks

Instrument	Total Number of Participants	Male Participants	Female Participants
Expectation questionnaire	1718	774	944
Experience questionnaire	1955	953	1002
Expectation Interview	254	104	150
Experience Interview	245	97	148

Instruments and Data Collection Questionnaires

Two open-ended questionnaires were designed by the researcher. The first questionnaire was distributed to all the students during the orientation week focusing on their expectations of their preparatory year experiences, challenges and success. The number of students who answered the questionnaire immediately after the orientation is 1718 students. The second questionnaire focused on students' actual experiences during the preparatory

year, and was distributed to all students at the end of their preparatory year. Eventually, a total of 1955 students responded during the final week of the year. To avoid comprehension-related problems, the questionnaires were translated into Arabic and given to a translator to check the accuracy of translation. Before the questionnaires were administered, they were validated by four experts. The questionnaires were then pilot-tested to establish psychometrics.

Interviews

In addition to the questionnaire, this study used interviews to elicit data from students' responses vis-à-vis their expectations and experiences that could be correlated with the data obtained from the questionnaires. They were conducted in the students' native language, Arabic, to avoid miscommunication. The total number of the sample was 254 students from the same population that answered the questionnaire. The interviewees were audio recorded in the beginning and at the end of the academic year. Data were analyzed, and results were interpreted in a pertaining context.

Data analysis

Responses from the questionnaires and interviews were transcribed verbatim and labeled according to all the tracks. Content analysis techniques were employed to analyze data.

Individual topics as shared by the sample were grouped into themes, and themes then were summarized quantitatively. That is, the expectations of the PYPs experience, such as *excellent*, *positive*, *successful* and *good experience* were grouped together under a theme, and its frequency was tabulated. Different themes were identified, and frequencies were tabulated for all the sets of responses. It should be noted that the open-ended question design made it possible to identify more than one topic from a single student response. In other words, the number of responses for different topics exceeded the number of the sample itself.

Results of the Questionnaire

The results of the surveys revealed two types of incoming students' expectations: *academic* and *non-academic*. The former

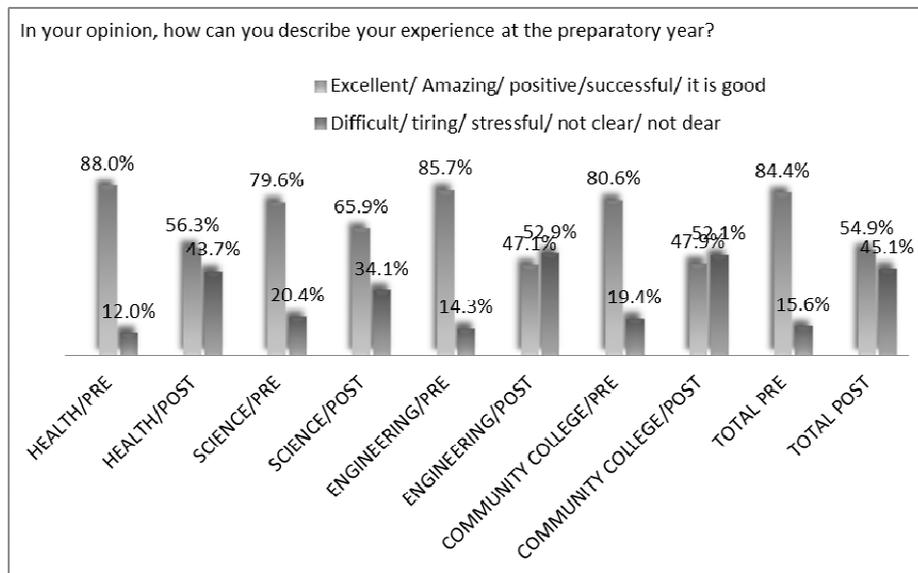
included the activities related to their academic programs such as hard study, homework, assignments, attendance, library, perseverance, workload, blackboard, and teacher feedback. The latter comprised social and logistic issues such as social life, staff, campus facilities, creative arts, sports, services and new relationships. While these expectations varied from one cohort to another according to some variables such as social and economic status, parents' education and students' age, they could be classified into two types: positive expectations and negative expectations. Positive expectations are those that students expect to access with ease and exert little or no impact on the progress in their study programs. However, expectations may turn negative when students expect to face

challenges that keep them from achieving their ends without being able to tackle the issue successfully, or when they expect to do or get more at college than they actually do or get. For instance, 15.6% of the 863 respondents during the orientation week expected that their university experience would be *stressful*, *difficult* and *hard* while 84.4% projected that it would be great and positive.

Expectations may also turn negative when achievements do not match with aspirations. For example, 52% of the students expected that they would benefit from the university library and databases; but by the end of the preparatory year, only 30% of the students said that they had benefited as expected. Such negative expectations may have an impact not only on students'

performance but also on their university experience: 41.5% of results as well. The post and real-life experiences of the students showed some challenges in their university experience: 41.5% of the students rated their real experiences as *difficult, stressful and hard and tiresome*.

Figure 1: Students’ responses of their expectations and experiences in the beginning and at the end of the academic year



Upon examining the pre-semester survey results, it was found that most of the surveyed students expected to do well with the scheduled courses and to achieve good results at the end of the year. For example, most students 96% expected to pass the preparatory year study program with “Excellent” or “Very Good”, and they did so. However, a good percentage of students 78% had negative expectations about the experience they would go through during their PYPs study, such as English learning, time

management, socializing as well as stress and tension. They attributed their worries to the possibility of failing to adjust to the new institution system. assuming they would take time to get accustomed to the new environment and to be able to interact positively with the academic program at the university.

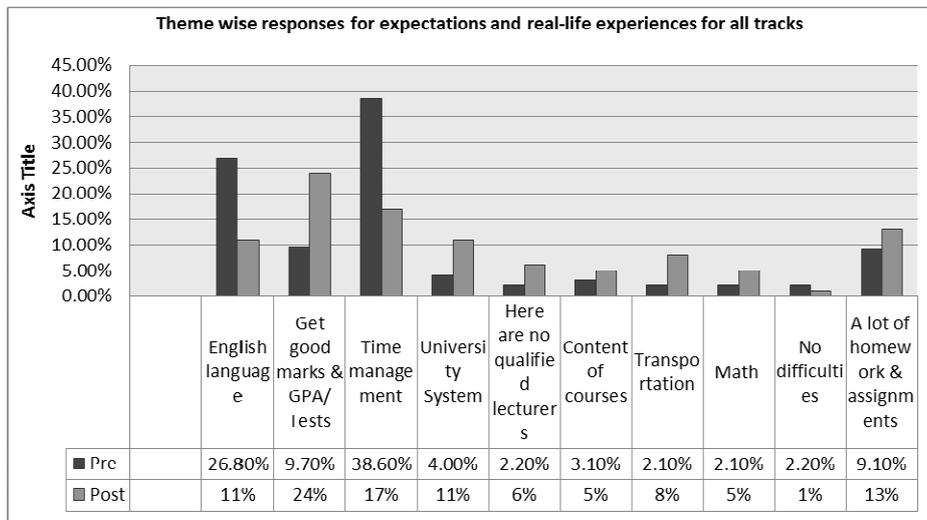
The worries of 45% of the students stemmed from their blurred vision of the social life they would be required to cope with at the campus: socializing with new peers and interacting with their instructors. The students expected to face a multitude of stressors such as the need to build new relationships, changes to existing relationships, adapting to study in an unfamiliar environment, and adapting to life as independent adults. A total of

50% of the surveyed students doubted benefiting from the campus facilities such as the Database, Library, and Blackboard. A similar percentage of respondents expressed their worries about logistic inconveniences arising from transportation: arriving at the class venue as per the scheduled lecture time.

By comparing the results of the pre-questionnaire and the post-questionnaire, an integrated portrait about students' expectations and experiences was obtained. Ahead of all the expectations that occupied most of the new students' thinking and caused worries about their future careers came academic concerns first, and then came non-academic expectations. The overall themes identified from both data sets, those of the questionnaires and

interviews are presented in the following bar charts:

Figure 2: Theme wise responses of expectations and real-life experiences for all tracks' respondents



The bar graph above represents data during the first orientation week and after completing the first year of the preparatory year study. The data obtained was related to the challenges and difficulties the respondents would expect to face during the preparatory year and the challenges they faced during the academic year. The responses of 1718 students during the

orientation week and the responses of 1955 students after the completion of the academic year were analyzed. Their responses rate varied between 1% and 38.6% across all tracks.

The expected challenges for the themes identified (see Figure 2) in the beginning of the academic year were as follows. The most anticipated challenge for the

students was time management 38.6%. It was followed by the English language learning with 26.8% students. These two challenges put together accounted for a total of 65.4% of the total responses of the preparatory year students. The other noteworthy challenges in the order of ranking were securing good grades 9.7%, a lot of homework and assignments 9.1%, the university system 4%, and the content of the courses 3.1% *inter alia*.

Compared with the academic expectations, non-academic ones were of a minor impact on students' general attitude towards university in as much as most of the students had somehow prepared themselves psychologically to live with the possibility of facing such disruptive factors before arriving at university for the first time

assuming that such worries would gradually disappear as they became more acquainted with the new environment. With this view, the emphasis of the research has been re-directed towards the academic expectations of the students for their significance in shaping their perceptions of success at the preparatory year.

The results of the end of the year surveys regarding students' real-life experience at the preparatory year appeared different from what they had anticipated at the outset of the year and astounded both faculty and students at the deanship. On top of the surveyed students' uncomfortable experiences came "getting good grades". A total of 24% of the students stated that their major concern throughout the preparatory year was "to secure good grades". The concern over

how to organize their time to cope with the study programs too emerged as a challenge. This lack in the skill of time management for 17% of the students had a negative impact on their ability to keep up with their lectures and caused them to be outrun in many respects.

English remained to be a major source of worry for 11% of the respondents in the PYPs study. Apart from some minor observations on the teaching methods and time allotment, most surveyed students stated that the English language courses were much to their liking and that with little determination and perseverance they managed to overcome most of the disruptions which many of them described as “transient”. For some students, working on homework and assignments 13%, travelling to the

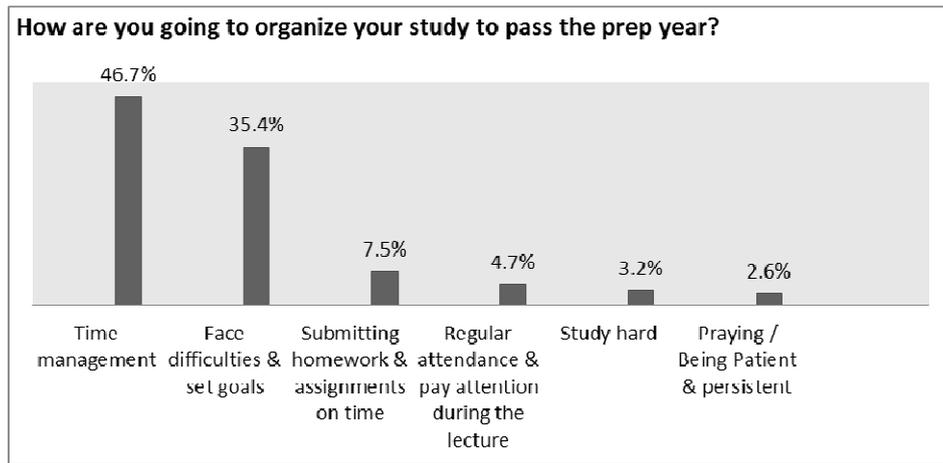
venues of the class or labs 8% and understanding and following the university system 11% turned out to be the challenging real-life experiences.

As for the social and logistic expectations, the pre-semester surveys showed that 50% of the students expected to endure times of stress and tension due to insufficient preparation, inadequate learning strategies used in high school and interacting with a new peer community. However, the end-of-year surveys showed that most of such anticipated worries were found to be misconceptions fostered by stories that the students had heard from others before entering the first year, and therefore, should not be taken for real detriments of success.

The participants thought about a few ways to overcome the

challenges stated above. During the orientation, a total of 46.7% agreed that appropriate time management would contribute to their academic success. Thirty five percent of the respondents believed that facing difficulties and setting goals would ensure their success in the PYPs. Put together, 82.1% of the respondents considered studying and managing as the necessary skills to achieve better results.

Figure 3: Students' preferences to organize their studies to pass the preparatory year



The constant faith in God may be regarded as an essential factor in the success of individuals. In case of the students from the Arab world, this faith in God was a major guiding force. Prior to the commencement of the PYPs, 2.6% of the participants believed that prayers and patience would help them achieve success at the university. This faith in the power of God took over all the other ways of coping with the pressures of university education. A total of

43.5%, as opposed to the 2.6% in the expectations survey, believed in the guarding power of God. Some students found paying attention to lectures 14.7%, submitting work on time 12.5%, facing difficulties 13.1% and managing time 10.9% as the potential prerequisite options to succeed in the preparatory year.

Figure 4: A comparison of students' expectations and real-life experiences

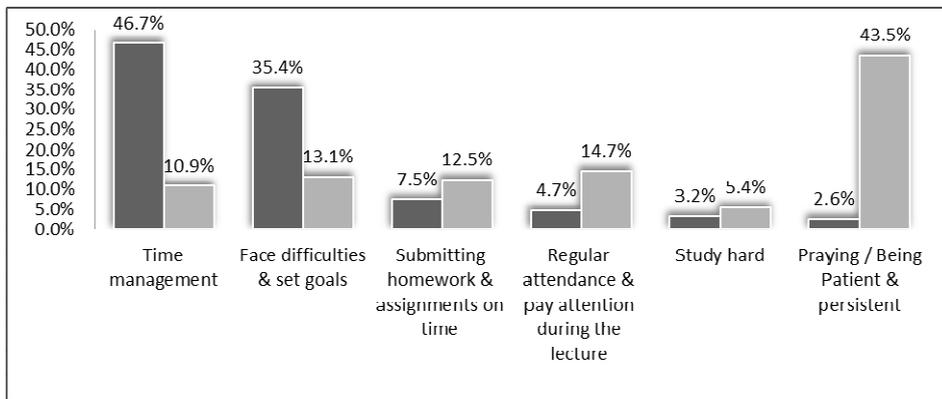


Figure 4 shows an apparent discrepancy in the expectations and experiences. Although the students described their experiences as great and interesting, a hidden fear of university was obvious among them. Most of their expectations were primarily challenges and difficulties such as the content of the courses, English courses, and homework. This hidden fear of university education continued to dominate their conscience. At the end of the year, when they reported about their real-life experiences, they marked out the grades they secured as the most important concern they had.

The Interview

The results of the interview uncovered several critical issues relative to what the students expected from the PYPs and what they really experienced. The following passages diligently translate students' preoccupations that need urgent intervention from the specialized authorities in order to appease students' anxiety and to ensure better learning quality for the future generations in Saudi Arabia.

As far as students' worries over the study at the PYPs, the percentage of the health track students was 76%, the scientific track 79%, and the engineering track 90%. The results indicated that a total of 81.66 expressed their worries because of the information given to them by the previous year students. Yet, 18.34% of the students did not have any idea about the program

and showed high enthusiasm for study and success.

In a similar vein, the students formed positive expectations about the PYPs from the previous year students. The percentage of the students in the health, scientific and engineering tracks were 81%, 73%, 90% consecutively. Overall, these high results suggest students' increased expectations about the program.

Concerning students' expectations about improving their language proficiency in English, 58% of the students in the health track expected to have the required level of the English language. 69% of the students in the scientific track believed that they would be able to use the English language. The engineering track got the highest percentage of 90%. All in all, a total of 72.33% expected to be good at written and spoken

English at the end of the year. The results indicated that the PYPs had a significant impact on improving students' level in the English language.

The rate of the students from the sample study who expected to acquire new personal skills from self-development courses such as physical and health education, communication skills and the basics of design development ranged from 90% for the scientific path. The ratio of the students who did not expect to acquire the same skills was 4% for the scientific track and 6% for the engineering track. The last two results are very low and show that these students did not obtain prior knowledge about the content of the courses in the secondary school. They also point either to their reluctance to any change in their life or to the

lack of time to practice various activities.

As per the question of the benefits of *learning and research skills courses* to dealing with other courses, the results demonstrated that most students expected to get a lot of benefits with 59% for the health track, 94% for the engineering track and 77% for the scientific track. In total, 76.66 of the students who followed the courses not only recommended the teaching of *learning and research skills courses* but also insisted on undertaking it in English to improve their English language proficiency as well.

Another issue debated by students highlighted their expectations about their ability to use the Library and the database available in the university by the end of the academic year. The percentage of the students who

consulted the Library in the health track was 50%, the scientific track 54%, and the engineering track recorded the highest rate 84%. Overall 62.66% of the students favored the use of the Library; however, the rest forming 37,34% of the students preferred to use the electronic library for its easy access and gain of time. The University Library, according to them, did not have enough resources to satisfy their needs, and this was the reason why most female students did not know about the Central University Library and preferred to use the Internet at home.

The rates of the students who got substantial benefits from the Blackboard were the engineering track with 88%. These students noted that the program provided them with precious assets such as easy access to lectures,

presentations, private test scores and instant information about the latest developments on the courses. However, the students in the health and scientific tracks stated that they benefited from the program only moderately with 40% for the former and 44% for the latter. They even considered the program as a demanding burden which required too much work but which did not provide additional information about the lecture. In short, they just preferred teacher-fronted lessons to the use of the Blackboard.

Concerning students' expectations about continuing studying at the PYPs, 98% of the health track students and 92% of both the scientific and engineering tracks showed immense interest in completing their graduation studies and obtaining a certificate. On the other hand, the possibility

of dropping-out is between 2% for the first track and 8% for both the second and third tracks. According to the students' standpoints, the main reasons for the possibility of quitting university lie between two extremes -either in the failure in the attempt of getting the desired major or in the possibility of getting a scholarship. However, other students may leave because of the long distance between their residence and the university, the difficulty of getting transportation means or the incapacity of paying its excessive cost. What is most depressing amongst students is their belief that the diploma certificate does not guarantee any access to a decent job.

Regarding students' optimism to pass the PYPs and achieve either 'excellent' or 'very good' results, the percentages were very high: both the engineering and

health tracks recorded 96% and the scientific track 92%. This high ratio indicates students' determination to achieve good grades and pass the second year successfully.

In the final analysis, the overwhelming majority of the students, 88%, gave comments and recommendations that were recorded and categorized into academic and non-academic issues. The students' problems impressively loomed large around the following points: the strict attendance policy, the distribution of courses, the long contact hours, the necessity of teaching rudimentary English, the affordability of housing and drawing equipment, the stress about some courses, the hard-long program, the profusion of assignments, severe teachers, heterogeneous groups, difficulties

with e-learning services and the use of the Blackboard. However, the students generally expected that they would overcome these challenging issues with patience, perseverance and time management.

Discussion

The university life was undoubtedly different from what students experienced in their high school. Many issues appeared quite complex to the students. Among all these thorny matters arose English as the primary means of instruction, complex grading system, periodic changes in the teaching staff, and autonomous teaching environments -which all required students to redesign their learning styles and strategies. Most of the newly joining students tended to have a blurred image of the academic and social life at

university. The expectations they formed about the university environment did not match with their real experiences. At the end of the academic year, students found themselves restless and even 'hopeless' in terms of expectations.

This study provided evidence to support the dimension that students' expectations could be an unstable variable. Students' real-life university experiences were found to be influenced by several factors. Each instance of expectations and experiences had wider implications for the renewal of curricular and co-curricular activities. As the data showed, experiences such as the transportation to the venue, coping with the English language courses and access to teachers after instructional hours strongly affected the other variables.

Hence, this study was a necessary step towards understanding not only what students expected and experienced but also the cycle of changes that they experienced that could inform the design and implementation of innovative programs.

Along line with the student questionnaire, the data gathered from the interview were studied, analyzed and given due attention. They were practically important not only for understanding the gap between students' expectations and real-life experiences but also for bringing forth appropriate solutions to promote university standards as well. Students' interests reflected common concerns that could be mainly categorized into academic and non-academic issues. Academic issues were mainly related to the English language, contact hours,

the program, and the e-learning service whereas non-academic issues were linked to students' social and logistic problems.

Above all, the issue of teaching English received the great part among students' comments. This is an indication of the role it played at the international arena and in their future career. Students wanted to start afresh with rudimentary knowledge of the English language to keep abreast with smooth, gradual and natural development. The elevated level of English dispensed by teachers did not suit at all both beginners and intermediate students. Moreover, some students complained about the heavy study load of the English course and the problem of catching up with all the activities in the course-books and homework. Furthermore, students demanded to study English in

homogeneous groups to have the same level in this language when they study scientific courses. Some students preferred to study English in the afternoon and scientific courses in the morning. They also emphasized that scientific courses required too much attention and should be taught in the morning while English courses could be acquired through dynamic interaction in the afternoon.

Another issue raised by many students concerns the long contact teaching hours particularly for English and drawing. Students did not expect to study such long hours and insisted on reducing the amount of time allocated to teaching in all the preparatory year courses. Some students avowed that they were shocked by the long study hours and the difficulty of the courses that resulted in

boredom, pressure and severe stress. Students also wanted the university officials to review the schedules to avoid the space between the lectures and to give a full day break per week for each group. Indeed, organizing contact teaching hours seemed to be a prerequisite condition for appeasing students' soreness and ensuring training quality.

Similarly, students expressed some reserves towards the program used in the preparatory year. They found it more difficult than what they expected. They encountered hard difficulties with the courses on the one hand and the considerable number of assignments on the other hand. At the beginning, they thought that the programs were short and easy; but to their surprise, they soon realized that they were long, complicated and too demanding.

What made the situation worse for them was that the university teachers were found to be extremely strict and different from those of the previous stages. They also emphasized the need to be provided with all the textbooks in the beginning of the academic year, the flexibility with assignments and their deadlines and the avoidance of the strict attendance policy. Nonetheless, even though the program was said to be problematic, they acknowledged that it was very useful and that they could overcome these obstacles with arduous work, steady perseverance and time management.

Another issue raised by students resided in their difficulty of using the e-learning system, especially the blackboard. Students wondered how to use this information technology in learning

to improve their level; nonetheless they stressed the need for intensive training in using the blackboard for all the courses right from the beginning of the year. They eventually reported that their experience in using the e-learning system was better than what they had expected and wanted even their grades to be announced on the blackboard. They finally perceived its usefulness for their ultimate success as it responded quickly even during the busiest hours of the day. This positive perception engendered amongst them a considerable amount of satisfaction which led to overall achievement. In fact, the blackboard can make things easier for this generation of students who are incessantly addicted to their mobiles, tablets or laptops. It responds to their needs and corresponds to their learning

styles. To my mind, this service is better than the 'talk and chalk' traditional instruction and 'paper and pen' outmoded method of leaning.

Moreover, the interview enabled students to openly express their non-academic problems in the hope that they would be solved in the short run. First, housing and drawing equipment were regarded very expensive. Second, the temperature was extremely cold in the buildings and affected students' health and success negatively. Third, sound restaurants were required to be immediately installed as the available locations were inappropriate and their prices were very high. In addition, students expressed the necessity to install another bookstore at the university to reduce the prices of books and other stationery articles through

competition and to avoid unnecessary crowdedness.

Most students suffered from the distance between their home and university, absenteeism, and waste of time. Consequently, they wanted the university to provide them with transportation because its cost was very high. This would give them and their families a sense of safety and enable them to come in time to lectures. Other students demanded financial aids to contribute to the transport cost and books expenses. Students also stressed the need for extra-curricular activities and entertainment programs as these were roughly neglected by the administration.

In sum, this study sought to bridge the gap between students' expectations and real-life experiences and to promote training quality in the Preparatory

Year Deanship. To my mind, students' recommendations should never be estranged from pedagogical practice. A great consideration should be afforded to the credibility of the results of the questionnaire and interview because they reflected students' worries and as such should be conducted on a regular basis. A due attention should be given to the following issues raised by students: the English course, the schedule, the program, the e-learning, the teaching staff, the teaching environment and the technical support. It is of vital importance to spread the culture of quality insurance and to reconsider the active participation of students in the university continuous development.

The findings of this study corroborated previous research works on the mismatch between

students' expectations and real-life experiences at university level carried out by many academics such as Brinkworth et al., 2009; Crisp et al., 2009; Lobo and Gurney, 2014; Rausch & Hamilton, 2006; Smith & Wertlieb, 2005; Ternel, 2000; Tierney, 2005; Trotter & Roberts, 2006. There were many common issues pinpointed by these studies and corroborated by the present one such as students' low standards at the secondary school level and university elevated level, low academic skills, poor use of e-learning services, long contact hours, hard schedule, extended program, self-responsibility, hard work, time management, financial problems, hard conditions, dissatisfaction, pressure and attrition.

It is also suggested that unfulfilled expectations engender

severe dissatisfaction and negative emotional attitudes that seriously impact students' academic achievements. Students' fulfilled expectations and teaching styles play decisive factors in the success of the PYPs. Authorities should do their best to provide appropriate mechanisms that enable first-year students to ensure a smooth transition from high school to university and to warrant an effective integration between school and university that results in perceived satisfaction and ultimate successful long-life learning. It is not sufficient to show new students what they must do to succeed in college but to provide them with a battery of support, including counseling and guiding systems, training programs, and ongoing assessment techniques.

What is required in this situation is to narrow the gap between expectations and reality in order to equip students with the right instruments that support their ambitions. This substantiates the calls voiced by many researchers for university officials to elaborate innovative methods to enhance student motivation in the preparatory year. Kuh, Gonyea & Williams (2005), for example, calls for university to align its resources and structures with its educational missions, curricular offerings, student aspirations, innovative programs and services to meet student needs. Proper guidance provides a key factor for making new students feel supported and comfortable within the university environment (Sadler, 1998, cited in Brinkworth et al., 2009). Higher education institutions should design

guidance programs using the insightful penetrations gained from current and previous studies.

A synergy of efforts on the side of the two major players -high school and university reveals to be of utmost significance for both institutions and students. The lack of intrinsic collaboration between education institutions leaves students with misconceptions about college environment (Smith & Wertlieb 2005). By sharing equal responsibility and maintaining close channels of coordination, students will overcome their worries and feel comfortable with the idea of entering post-secondary education. Henceforth comes the significance of the roles of advisory boards and counselors at all educational settings: high schools, colleges and universities.

On their part, high schools should provide students with necessary guidance about the post-secondary phase of their education. In addition to helping students identify colleges, they should introduce them systematically to the practices and procedures of college education. In other words, high schools need to offer foundation courses that introduce students to the nature of the college-style teaching/learning methodology by setting their curricula and co-curricular activities to serve this goal. On their part, students should share responsibility through seeking timely guidance, engagement in all the scheduled curricular and co-curricular activities, and adherence to the directions set up by the advisory boards at the educational institutions (Kuh, Laird & Umbach, 2004).

Indeed, attending university for the first time can represent a hard experience for novice students. The unfamiliarity with the university venue seemed to have exerted pernicious effects on many students' life. First, new coming students encountered great difficulties in coping with the real-life situation and did not adapt themselves easily because of the responsibilities that were incumbent upon them. Second, the unexpected systematic change seemed to have caused stress, pandemonium, and depression among them. Third, in this transitional stage, students underwent some personal, social and academic changes that necessitated special attention and due responsibility on the part of learners. As a solution, comprehensive handbooks that detail university expectations

should be given to the students to guide them, appease their spirits and help them plan their schedules accordingly. Eventually, universities need to organize students' annual plans from the very beginning of the academic year to familiarize students with all the aspects of university life.

The findings of this research article pinpointed several recommendations that helped students overcome their problems and achieve better results. First, the duration of the study hours should be reduced to a maximum to alleviate students' exhaustion and afford them with more time to study on their own homework. Second, to make students profit from a relaxed atmosphere, officials should equip classrooms with proper fresh air ventilation and reduce the class size to heighten interactive activities.

Similarly, other services such as transportation to the venue, issuing student identification cards, providing course specific tools at subsidized price are all factors that are recommended by students to facilitate their academic development.

This study heavily stressed the importance of the classroom context and the social environment in improving students' standards and triggering their motivation, enthusiasm and perseverance. Indeed, many students found the university environment stressful to the whole learning process, so creating a favorable environment seemed to be an urgent priority. In addition, institutions need to set up counseling centers that help students overcome their stress disorders. Eventually, since stress and anxiety affect students' achievement, adequate measures

should be taken to put an end to this conundrum and create a suitable learning environment that promotes students' well-being.

This study also investigated the amount of contact hours that students spent with their teachers in the foreign language classroom. The findings revealed students' dissatisfaction with the long hours they spent at the university. Students strongly expressed indignation towards this thorny issue and claimed a prompt solution to the problem. Undoubtedly, long contact hours could be replaced with frequent but brief sessions. This would certainly reduce students' worries and heighten their freshness to start their classes again. In short, the issue of the contact hours at university level should be assigned considerable attention to ensure students' success.

One of the critical issues dealt with in this research was related to homogeneity and heterogeneity within groups. The students demanded to study English and science subjects in homogeneous groups so as all the students would have the same level of English when they study other scientific courses. In English, students were assigned into homogeneous groups according to a test placement prepared in advance which divided students into beginners, intermediate and advanced. Despite this classification, a diversity in level amongst students has been raised by teachers and students alike. Homogeneity has several beneficial effects. It spawns confidence, broadmindedness and high self-esteem within the group. It also generates easiness of contact, information delivery, swift

understanding, smooth interaction and general satisfaction.

The use of modern technology allowed teachers and students to exchange information in an efficient way. The use of the blackboard helped students to satisfy their needs and to conform to their learning styles. Students got easily acquainted with e-learning and became directly involved in the learning process. Above all else, students were addicted to the use of computers and as such found e-learning very interesting. The blackboard allowed teachers to carry out their work efficiently and helped students to raise their motivation, enthusiasm and self-efficacy.

Indeed, the concerned institutions need to consider the modalities that would effectively implement these recommendations according to their actual resources.

For any system to serve its stakeholders efficiently, it needs to consider what students need rather than what it demands of them. Therefore, determining the dominant reasons for attending university helps decision makers to devise appropriate teaching and testing procedures. As Balloo, Pauli & Worrell (2015) reported, career prospects, quality of life, and personal development were the main reasons for students joining universities in Australia; yet, older students joining university were hardly motivated by the social reasons (pp. 7-9).

Indeed, the findings of this study validated those of the previous researchers like Brinkworth et al. (2009) who found out that there was a disjunction between what students expected from university and what university delivered to students.

This gap should be bridged through a collaboration of efforts on the side of high school and university to align reality with expectations. Encouraging dialogue between high school and higher education institutions could provide solid academic foundations for future college and university students. Other preparatory year deanships in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia should design precollege orientation and socialization programs for encouraging students to engage in curricular activities that prepare them for the university demanding programs and challenging tasks.

Conclusion

The current study was a contribution to the efforts aiming at narrowing the gap between the expectations of IAU new students and their real-life experiences. It strived at fulfilling students' needs

and encouraging them to accomplish their prospective specialties. The findings of this research are of immediate interest to those who teach first-year students in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, to those universities seeking to align their programs with their students' needs, to those high school educators preparing students for admission to higher education institutions, and to all those students and their families who are seeking success. Since these findings were based on a survey information from the representative samples of the preparatory year students of various interests, they can be generalized to other preparatory year students across the country. In order to provide additional support for generalizing the findings, it is recommended that future studies should extend the

representative sample size horizontally to include multiple high schools and universities. It is also suggested that future research on new students' expectations should involve a wider qualitative investigation by asking students at the end of the year to talk extensively about their preparatory year experiences.

The innovative PYPs play a great part in guiding new students not only in their study programs but also in their future career as well. Indeed, commencing students still regard university as a symbol of hope and a key to successful future. Therefore, universities should live up to such hopes and expectations and find out the right means for providing a rich transitional experience that considers students' academic, social, and logistic needs.

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Appendix A

The Questionnaire about Students' Expectations in the Preparatory Year Program

- Q. 1: Generally speaking, what do you think about the orientation program you have attended at the first week of the academic year?
- Q. 2: How do you expect your study experience to be in the preparatory-year program during this academic year?
- Q. 3: In your opinion, what are the major challenges / difficulties that you need to overcome during this preparatory academic year?
- Q. 4: How will you organize your studies to succeed in the preparatory year program?

Appendix B

Survey of Students' Experience in the Preparatory Year Program

- Q. 1 : What type of experience did you have during your study in the Prep year program?
- a. excellent / great / interesting/ successful / positive
 - b. good / fine/ fair
 - c. difficult/ hard/ tiring/ stressful

Q. 2: What was/were your major challenge/s during your study in the Preparatory year program?

- a. English Language
- b. Time management
- c. Exams and quizzes
- d. Course content difficulties
- e. Mathematics
- f. Homework and assignments load
- g. Grades and GPA
- h. The university system
- i. Unqualified teachers
- j. Transportation
- k. No difficulties or challenges
- Others

Q. 3: How did you organize your studies in order to pass the preparatory year?

- a. Time management
- b. Doing homework and assignments on time
- c. Studying seriously and regularly
- d. Diligence and patience
- e. Chasing personal goals and facing challenges
- f. Attending classes and being attentive
- g. Prayers and asking for Allah's help
- Others

Appendix C

The Interview

- Q. 1: Did you have any worries before the start of the study at the Preparatory Year?
- Q. 2: What are your expectations about preparatory year program?
- Q. 3 Do you expect by the end of the school year to be good at written and spoken English?
- Q. 4: Do you expect to gain new personal skills after studying self-development courses?
- Q. 5: Do you expect to get benefits from learning and research skills course in dealing with other courses?
- Q. 6: Do you expect to be able to use the library and the database available in the university by the end of the academic year?
- Q.7: To what extent have you got benefits from using the Blackboard?
- Q. 8: Do you expect to continue studying at the Preparatory Year?
- Q. 9: Do you expect to pass the Preparatory Year with Excellent, very good, good or acceptable grade?
- Q. 10: Do you have any other comments?

At the end of each session, there was an open question for all students to make any comments not mentioned in the previous questions.