

Expectations and engagement: Key touchpoints in online students' experiences of transition

Timothy Moss
Torrens University,
Australia

Sharon Pittaway
Deakin University,
Australia

The first year of study in higher education is a significant time for students, and indeed for institutions. Students are at their most vulnerable in terms of an increased risk of failure, and are at most risk of encountering challenges they have few resources on which to draw in order to overcome. These vulnerabilities, challenges and risks are particularly significant for students who study in the online mode, where a sense of isolation lingers for many students despite the levels of interactivity now available to them. Recent research suggests that institutions have room for improvement in assisting students to navigate their path through this transition. In this paper, we identify five key 'touchpoints' within an online student's transition that play a significant role in positioning them for success. We frame our discussion around two key concepts, expectations and engagement, and explore how institutions might use each touchpoint to position online students for success. Our aim is not to provide solutions, but rather to provoke alternative and out-of-the-box thinking through discussion about how we might better align practices across an institution, and reassess our roles in supporting student transition.

Keywords: Online student experience, transition, student engagement, expectations.

Introduction

There are over 50 years of study into the first-year experience in higher education in Australia (Pittaway & Moss, 2006; Hillman, 2005; McInnis, 2001) and this has shown conclusively that the first year is a significant time for students, and indeed for institutions. This is the year in which students are at greatest risk in terms of academic failure, as well as most vulnerable to a wide range of risk factors, including emotional, financial, and social problems (McInnis, 2001). Further, research highlights that students studying online are particularly vulnerable (Bawa, 2016), with attrition rates 10% to 20% higher than on-campus students (Herbert, 2006).

In this paper, we focus on the online student journey within their first term of study and identify distinct 'touchpoints' that play a key role in influencing a student's chance of success. Student expectations are an important component of their transition experience, and we consider the role of these expectations in positively or negatively influencing their success. Recent literature highlights that engagement is critical for student success and retention (for example Kutieleh & Seidel, 2015), and Pittaway's (2012) Engagement Framework provides the theoretical and practical cornerstone for considering how students can be positioned for success at each 'touchpoint' across the first term. In this paper it is our intention to provoke rather than resolve, to highlight key opportunities for new practices to be developed in order to better support online students' engagement in their first term of study and ultimately their likelihood of staying and succeeding.

The importance of expectations

The need to understand students' expectations, in order to increase the likelihood of their success in transitioning to the university environment, seems almost self-evident. Research highlights that those who commence university with realistic expectations appear less stressed, and adapt more quickly and effectively as a result (Pancer, Hunsberger, Pratt & Alisat, as cited in Scutter et al., 2011). Such expectations are even more important for students studying online, who engage with their studies in environments that 'blur the line' between university and other contexts (i.e. home/workplace), and who often study in relative isolation.

There is a growing body of literature highlighting a 'mismatch' between what students anticipate they will experience at university and the reality that awaits them. This includes expectations regarding how much feedback they will receive, how much access will be provided to teaching staff, how much study they are expected to do, and how much responsibility they will need to take for their engagement and learning (see for example Crisp et al., 2009; Scutter et al., 2011). A recent report (Baik, Naylor, & Arkoudis, 2015) highlighted



This work is made available under
a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) International licence.

that almost half of all first-year students reported that the standard of work was higher than they expected (38%); for these students, there is still a ‘disconnect’ between their expectations and the reality of study. Within the same report (Baik, Naylor, & Arkoudis, 2015), the top reasons for considering withdrawal included that students “thought they might fail” (50%), and the university “wasn’t what I expected” (38%). In another national survey of first-year students who withdrew, the most common reason given was that the course was “not what they had wanted” (Hillman, 2005). Given this, it is clear that expectations play a key role in student success.

Student engagement

There is a substantial body of research that highlights the importance of engagement in positioning students for success in their studies. According to Krause (2005) engagement refers to “the time, energy and resources students devote to activities designed to enhance learning at university” (p. 3), thus emphasising the connection between engagement and learning. However, considering student engagement within the online space poses particular challenges, including to pedagogy and to the social constructivist learning models that underpin many contemporary online learning environments (Moss & Pittaway, 2011; Pittaway & Moss, 2014) and thus to engagement and expectations. The sense of isolation many online students feel at the beginning of their studies does not necessarily sit comfortably with social constructivist unit design and thus students may feel a disconnect as they are encouraged to discuss with others, but these others are strangers and more difficult to get to know in the online space.

To better understand student engagement, and address the question of *how* students engage, Pittaway’s Engagement Framework (Pittaway, 2012) offers five distinctive, non-hierarchical dimensions of engagement that together, contribute to students’ success: personal engagement, academic engagement, intellectual engagement, social engagement, and professional engagement. These dimensions take on different degrees of prominence throughout a student’s transition and subsequent study experience, as engagement is understood to play out “in different ways at different points of the educational cycle” (ACER, 2011, p. 1). This might mean that in the early stages of transition for an online student, social engagement is most prominent, whereas later, intellectual engagement might be front-of-mind. Together, these dimensions provide a framework for understanding and planning for students’ engagement, within and beyond their first term. It is important to note that attending to these dimensions of engagement is not solely the work of students and their teachers; rather, all within the institution play a role in shaping student engagement. A brief description of each of the five dimensions is provided below.

Personal Engagement

This dimension relates to students’ self-efficacy, goal-setting, resilience and persistence. For students to engage and succeed, they must hold a belief that university is valuable and worthwhile, and that they can succeed and have a will to learn (Pittaway & Moss, 2014). Staff must also be personally engaged, and aware of their role in helping students to shape personal aspirations and a positive mindset. This is particularly important for online students, many of whom are ‘non-traditional’ and must add the identity of ‘student’ to already-established roles, and must do so without a network of peers in their immediate environments (Moss & Pittaway, 2013).

Academic Engagement

This dimension relates to students’ identification and management of the interdisciplinary knowledge and skills that underpin success in communicating in an academic environment. Such knowledge and skills include information and computer literacies, academic writing, reading and note-taking, and time management. Academic engagement underpins engagement more broadly; if students are unable to communicate in academic contexts, they are unlikely to be able to engage intellectually with the ideas of their discipline (Pittaway, 2012).

Intellectual Engagement

Intellectual engagement refers to students’ capacity to identify and explore the key concepts and ideas of their chosen discipline, along with an awareness of current debates, a capacity to read widely, and to articulate their own beliefs, values, and attitudes (Pittaway & Moss, 2014). In a sense, this dimension relates to engagement with the ‘what’ of their university study program, as framed by staff in setting out learning outcomes, weekly tasks, and assessments.

Social Engagement

Social engagement refers to students' interactions with their peers and university staff, with a particular focus on students' capacities to build positive learning relationships. Research highlights the importance of social engagement for online students, with a significant correlation noted between students' interactions online and their levels of satisfaction and learning (Leong, 2011). It is important to note that this dimension of engagement is understood to relate to student interactions both within and beyond the formal learning environment.

Professional Engagement

The final dimension of engagement relates to the ways in which students are engaged in experiences and activities that enable them to "apply, consolidate, and extend their knowledge, beliefs and skills as learners and as developing professionals" (Pittaway & Moss, 2014, p. 143). Specific examples of professional engagement may differ by discipline, but may involve internships and work-integrated learning programs, as well as students' involvement with professional bodies or associations.

Previous literature offers insight into how instructors might account for student engagement across multiple dimensions within the online environment, including, for example, the use of social learning environments to build online communities (see for example Krause, 2005). However, much of this literature focuses specifically on the role of the instructor (Pittaway & Moss, 2014). In the following section of this paper, we seek to broaden this conversation, to consider the role of all parties in enhancing students' engagement and increasing the possibilities for successful transition experiences.

The student journey – key touchpoints

'Touchpoints' are key factors that might influence a students' expectations and subsequent engagement. The term is discussed in marketing research, where as many as 13 touchpoints have been identified across a students' university experience (Khanna, Jacob, & Yadav, 2014). In this paper, we adopt this concept within a wider setting, considering touchpoints as they apply to all staff. We apply the concept of touchpoints to refer to specific *moments* of interaction through which a student progresses. With regard to the first term of study, we propose five touchpoints that offer the most potential for making a positive impact to the expectations and engagement of online students. We developed these specific touchpoints through analysis of relevant literature, as well as through our own experiences as online educators and academics with responsibilities for shaping engagement at local and institutional levels. Our framing of these touchpoints identifies moments that involve key staff members from within an institution that incorporate not only teaching staff, but also marketing, sales and recruitment, 'first contact' teams, and wider support staff. In framing these touchpoints in order to explicitly include a range of stakeholders, we perhaps limit our capacity to encompass those touchpoints that might be specific to a subset of stakeholders (such as those important first moments of online contact between students and their teachers). However, we believe that it is only by aligning the work of all staff that we stand to make improvements to students' experience of transition and retention, as each touchpoint is shaped by many hands. We also invite readers to continue this conversation, to include further touchpoints that are influential for particular groups of stakeholders.

Touchpoint 1: Reading and researching

Opportunities to shape students' expectations and engagement commence prior to their enrolment (Khanna, Jacob, & Yadav, 2014). This first touchpoint occurs as a result of the research a student conducts when they first think about studying. They may spend a considerable amount of time doing this: accessing websites, talking to friends about where they are studying, receiving advice from careers counsellors, and so on.

These initial engagements play a role in whether students choose to continue exploring a particular institution as a study option – is the information they are looking for easily found? Do they get a sense of what it's like to study at a particular site, or in a particular mode? It is relevant to consider how these initial contacts help to confirm or challenge students' expectations, and also how they might appeal to particular dimensions of engagement. For example, if a student encounters messaging that emphasises fitting university around family and/or working commitments, this is likely to establish expectations around social engagement (or lack thereof), and the flexibility of the study experience. On the other hand, if messaging emphasises university as a place where 'great minds' are built, this may establish expectations around the significance of intellectual engagement. A third type of messaging might appeal to professional outcomes, to links to the 'real world', and thus establish expectations about what kind of knowledge, and engagement, is both valued and valuable. It is

important for all staff within a university to understand clearly the types of messages and values that students are likely to have encountered within this first touchpoint, and to consider the benefits and risks of these appeals. Interestingly, the most recent large-scale research on students' first year (Baik, Naylor, & Arkoudis, 2015, p. 24) emphasises that intrinsic interest remains the most often-cited reason for choosing to enrol in university (96%), followed by improving job prospects (87%), and developing talents and creative abilities (77%). This would seem to suggest that students are potentially influenced by any or all of the three types of messaging described here.

Touchpoint 2: First contact

The second touchpoint occurs at an unspecified point beyond this initial research, and is when a student lets a particular institution know that they are interested in applying. There are many different ways this might happen – it might be that the student clicks the 'Apply now' button on a website, uses the live chat feature on the institution's website, or attends an Open Day or a webinar session. At this point students will already have expectations about both the courses and the institution more broadly, and also about the kinds of study and social experiences they might have. This first contact will also play a significant role in shaping students' expectations. This will depend on many factors, including who a student speaks to, how knowledgeable that person is, and the role that person plays within the university. If the messages received at this first contact align with the expectations that were established in their researching, students may feel more confident to apply.

As with every other touchpoint, this is both an opportunity and a risk. One particular consideration at this touchpoint is the extent to which studying online is represented as a valid and valuable mode of study: does the institution present a 'traditional' view of what it means to be a student, both in advertising and at events such as Open Days? Are the support structures, course features, and other key aspects of the student experience represented in a manner that applies regardless of mode of study? If applicants intending to study online are presented with a vision of what it means to be a student in these pre-enrolment stages that emphasises campus-based clubs and societies, study facilities that are only available during traditional business hours, and images of study that involve groups of students sitting around desks, this can serve to alienate them and make them feel as though studying online is a 'lesser' choice (Moss & Pittaway, 2013).

Touchpoint 3: Enrolling, orientation, and start of term

The third touchpoint represents the moment when studying at university transitions from being an aspiration, to being a reality: enrolment, orientation, and starting. The experiences a student has at this touchpoint will play a key role in shaping their expectations, and confirming or refuting their initial beliefs about what university will be like and how it will suit them (and them it) that have been foreshadowed through previous touchpoints. Most, if not all, universities offer orientation programs, although these vary in length and mode of delivery. Many of these programs will emphasise raising students' awareness of academic expectations and standards, and the kinds of academic skills needed to succeed (academic engagement). Some will also emphasise the importance of making connections and social engagement, perhaps building on the significant correlation between this and student success (Pittaway & Moss, 2006).

However, recent research suggests that only about 30% of all first year students actively engage with orientation programs, and of these, only 42% believe that the programs helped them get off to a good start (Baik, Naylor, & Arkoudis, 2015). It seems there may be more work to be done here to better align programs with students' reasons for study, and their expectations. Enrolment is also a key aspect of this touchpoint, and it appears that we have room for improvement as a sector, with only 39% of students reporting that they were given helpful advice when choosing subjects (Baik, Naylor, & Arkoudis, 2015). We may also experience tensions here, if online students' expectations of flexibility (shaped through previous touchpoints) do not match the reality of offerings.

Touchpoint 4: First assignment and feedback

The fourth touchpoint occurs in the early stages of term, and is that time when students are reflecting on their experiences so far, and considering whether university is for them, and they for it. Submission and receipt of feedback on an initial assessment task is often a critical moment for students who may be uncertain of their suitability for university study. Ideally, this task needs to reflect assessment 'for transition' (Taylor, 2008), with a focus on providing students with a low-stakes opportunity to apply their skills and knowledge. This initial assessment is important for engagement reasons as well, as it can 'drive' students towards important opportunities to apply their skills and knowledge in appropriate ways and receive feedback. It also allows us to

direct students towards particular dimensions of engagement; particularly academic engagement. Finally, this provides an opportunity to really bring expectations to the fore: staff create an opportunity to see what students think constitutes appropriate work, while students can identify what the standard is (and where they sit in relation to it), and can make some decisions as a result of this submission and feedback process.

There is perhaps a tendency to focus on the role of the teacher in this touchpoint, but it is still just as important as in earlier touchpoints to consider this moment broadly. There is a clear role here for Academic Skills Advisors, for example, in both an individual student and an embedded role, and there are opportunities for peer mentors, success coaches, and others as well. The expectations that students bring to this touchpoint are those that have been established at every prior stage, and the dimensions of engagement are at play in this moment may well go beyond the academic, including a key opportunity to reflect on personal engagement.

Touchpoint 5: Major assignments and end of term

The final touchpoint we consider here is what happens next; how students move beyond this initial experience of assessment, make the decision to stay enrolled, and then manage their engagement across the remainder of the term. As the term unfolds, the requirements and expectations staff have of students shift. For example, in terms of assessment, across the term many units will move from assessment for transition into an increasing focus on assessment for achievement (Taylor, 2008), and the emphasis begins to shift from a focus on academic engagement and academic literacies, into an increasing focus on intellectual engagement and often also professional engagement (such as industry-related tasks) and/or social engagement (group assessments).

The student experience across first-term can be an emotional one; essentially it can be an experience of culture shock, and the process of adapting can look like a ‘W curve’ (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963): students often commence in a position of high-interest, high-engagement, and then this dips as they experience the reality of assessment preparation, balancing study commitments, and so on. They then reach a more comfortable place as they adjust to the requirements, and as their expectations are either realised or replaced, before experiencing another ‘dip’ later in the term as workload expectations ramp up, assessment difficulty increases, and so on.

This process of adaptation and the ‘dips’ involved is reflected in research on the first year experience (Baik, Naylor, & Arkoudis, 2015), where one of the major reasons students consider deferring or withdrawing during semester is “emotional health” (which has disturbingly risen from 46% in 1999 to 72% in 2014). Another relevant statistic in this regard relates to ongoing academic engagement – 36% of students reported difficulty in getting motivated to study, less than half (47%) reported working on their studies consistently throughout term, while an increasing number (but still only 37%) report that they regularly seek the advice and assistance of teaching staff.

This suggests that working towards student success across the whole of first term involves attending to students’ academic engagement and importantly their personal engagement: we ought not assume that students will continue and succeed, purely on the basis of submitting their first assessment. For online students, for whom isolation is common and a sense of belonging often lacking (Moss & Pittaway, 2013), these concerns are particularly significant.

Continuing the discussion: Where to from here?

In this paper, we have argued that students’ transition to university is a complex, challenging process, of continually navigating a journey of shifting expectations, managing complex demands and balancing engagement across multiple dimensions. We have suggested that this is particularly the case for students studying online, for whom university is often providing one set of demands and expectations to be balanced among many others. We offer five key touchpoints, from initial research through to completing first term, that might help to sharpen our efforts to engage students and to shape clear and appropriate expectations by focusing on particular moments. We conclude this paper by suggesting some further questions or provocations, that might provide an opportunity to move from imagining a student’s first term journey to improving it, within each touchpoint. Specifically, for each touchpoint, we pose the following questions: *Who is involved in this touchpoint, and who contributes to students’ experience of it? How does each person/role shape students’ expectations? What dimensions of engagement are ‘front of mind’ for students as they engage at this touchpoint? Are these appropriate/sufficient? How do we know the expectations we communicate are appropriate and accurate, and consistent across all parties? What is the student’s role at this touchpoint? What should they be doing, thinking about, valuing? How can/might we use new technologies, in order to monitor this touchpoint and the impact of each contributor? How can/might we use new technologies in order to better*

support students as they move in and through this touchpoint?

We invite others to enter into this discussion, considering their responses to these questions, and sharing practices as a result.

References

- ACER. (2011). Dropout DNA, and the genetics of effective support. Research briefing, *Australasian Survey of Student Engagement*, 11, 1-18. Retrieved from <http://www.acer.edu.au>
- Baik, C., Naylor, R., & Arkoudis, S. (2015). *The first year experience in Australian universities: Findings from two decades, 1994-2014*. Melbourne, VIC: Melbourne Centre for the Study of Higher Education.
- Bawa, P. (2016). Retention in online courses: Exploring issues and solutions – a literature review. *SAGE Open*, January-March 2016, 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244015621777>
- Crisp, G., Palmer, E., Turnbull, D., Nettelbeck, T., Ward, L., & LeCouteur, A. (2009). First year student expectations: Results from a university-wide student survey. *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*, 6(1), 11-26. <https://doi.org/10.53761/1.6.1.3>
- Gullahorn, J., & Gullahorn, J. (1963). An extension of the U-Curve hypothesis. *Journal of Social Issues*, 19(3), 33-47. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.1963.tb00447.x>
- Hillman, K. (2005). *The first year experience: The transition from secondary school to University and TAFE in Australia*. Camberwell, VIC: Australian Council for Educational Research.
- Khanna, M., Jacob, I., & Yadav, N. (2014). Identifying and analysing touchpoints for building a higher education brand. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 24(1), 122-143.
- Krause, K. (2005). *Understanding and promoting student engagement in university learning communities*. Melbourne, VIC: Centre for the Study of Higher Education.
- Kutieleh, S., & Seidel, E. (2015). Helping students to persist with and succeed in their first year of higher education. *STARS Conference, July 2015, Melbourne*.
- Leong, P. (2011). Role of social presence and cognitive absorption in online learning environments. *Distance Education*, 32(1), 5-28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2011.565495>
- McInnis, C. (2001). Researching the first year experience: Where to from here? *Higher Education Research and Development*, 20(2), 105-114. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360125188>
- Moss, T., & Pittaway, S. (2013). Student identity construction in online teacher education: A narrative life history approach. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 26(8), 1004-1018.
- Moss, T., & Pittaway, S. (2011). Moving online: Troubling (and transforming?) the pedagogy of teacher education. Paper presented at the AARE Conference, Hobart, Tasmania.
- Pittaway, S. (2012). Student and staff engagement: Developing an Engagement Framework in a Faculty of Education. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 37(4), 1-10.
- Pittaway, S., & Moss, T. (2014). “Initially, we were just names on a computer screen”: Designing engagement in online teacher education. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 39(7).
- Pittaway, S., & Moss, T. (2006). Contextualising student engagement: Orientation and beyond in teacher education. *Proceedings of the FYHE Conference*. Gold Coast, QLD.
- Scutter, S., Palmer, E., Luzeckyj, A., da Silva, K., & Brinkworth, R. (2011). What do commencing undergraduates expect from first year university? *The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education*, 2(1), 8-20. <https://doi.org/10.5204/intjfyhe.v2i1.54>
- Taylor, J. (2008). Assessment in first year university: A model to manage transition. *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*, 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.53761/1.5.1.3>

Please cite as: Moss, T. & Pittaway, S. (2018). Expectations and engagement: Key touchpoints in online students' experiences of transition. In M. Campbell, J. Willems, C. Adachi, D. Blake, I. Doherty, S. Krishnan, S. Macfarlane, L. Ngo, M. O'Donnell, S. Palmer, L. Riddell, I. Story, H. Suri & J. Tai (Eds.), *Open Oceans: Learning without borders*. Proceedings ASCILITE 2018 Geelong (pp. 460-465).

<https://doi.org/10.14742/apubs.2018.1948>