



The first-year experience: a review of literature for the Higher Education Academy

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Executive summary

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I. Introduction

The first-year experience in higher education has been the topic of research and comment in English-language academic publications in the UK and worldwide for more than forty years. The expansion of higher education has led to an increased requirement to support the diverse student population, a possible reason for an increasing concern with the first-year experience.

This literature review aims to consider the research literature and institutional 'grey material' exploring the undergraduate and postgraduate first-year experience and to identify key emerging issues to inform university policy makers, practitioners, researchers and other interested parties.

In this review 'first year' refers to the first-year of study of an undergraduate or postgraduate student in a higher education institution. Almost all the published literature refers to students in their first year of undergraduate study. The available published literature was extensive, around 750 publications were reviewed and there are 545 different citations in the final report. Additionally over 200 institutional grey items were reviewed in an additional close-up study of the first-year material generated by four UK institutions.

II. Methodological approach to the review

For purposes of this review published literature has been defined as anything with an ISBN or ISSN number. Grey literature is that which is in the public domain but does not have an ISBN or ISSN or which has limited distribution.

The review contains two types of literature. First, published literature identified as a result of an extensive search going back twenty years, augmented by significant material prior to 1986 and supplemented by 'accidental' grey literature. Second, a systematic exploration of institutional grey literature produced in-house in a sample of four institutions.

III. Overview of the published research

The range of enquiries into the first-year experience is wide but there are recurrent themes.

1. Performance and retention, including predicting success, assessing performance and withdrawal and retention.
2. Factors impacting on performance and persistence, including institutional, personal and external factors
3. Support for the first-year, including induction, adjustment and skill support.
4. Learning and teaching, including new techniques for first-year groups and first-year learning behaviour.

The majority of the reported research on the first-year experience is based on single institutions studies, often with small samples of students, not uncommonly from a single programme of study. Often, existing data relating to a student cohort, such as registry data, grades and to a lesser extent satisfaction ratings are used to identify significant factors that impact on the first-year experience, in particular decisions whether to persist or withdraw.

Performance and retention

There have been many attempts to predict the success of students in their first year (and beyond). Most of the research tries to identify a simple determining factor of first-year performance.

The literature suggests that secondary school grades and special tests do not closely relate to first-year performance in general. Prior knowledge or expertise in a subject and grades achieved in the early part of the first year are indicators of success but only in combination with other variables. Results of previous assessments at all stages are the best predictor of subsequent results.

Published research evaluating performance suggests that first-year students tend to overrate their knowledge and abilities. Such evaluative studies are designed to identify gaps as a basis for implementing interventions designed to overcome student deficiencies.

Predicting success and evaluating performance overlaps with concerns about retention of students in the first year. The main theory in this area is based on notions of social and academic integration. Students withdraw from the first year if they feel they are not integrated. Models of social and academic integration have been criticised because they tend to reflect a traditional (white middle-class residential) college student experience. Augmentations of the integration model include cultural capital theories. One clear message from the literature is that no model fits all situations.

Factors impacting on performance and persistence

There is a large body of research on the factors that affect first-year performance and persistence in higher education. The research suggests that there is no simple relationship between integration variables and retention. Withdrawal is the result of a complex combination of student characteristics, external pressures and institution-related factors. Students' decisions to leave are often the result of a build-up of factors. In the UK, research seems to suggest that persistence is related to student satisfaction, which is integrally linked with their preparedness for higher education and expectations. Choice of institution and programme of study is often crucial.

Working-class students, it seems, have less peer support to draw on and there is some correlation between class and first-year grades and persistence, especially where family problems intervene for working-class students. Some research suggests that working-class students become integrated and perform better when living in residences in the first year.

There is some suggestion that first generation students make assumptions about higher education, not least the support they will get, which are unmet. Although performing at least as well as younger students, mature students are likely to feel more socially isolated and have financial and family concerns that impact on their first-year performance and persistence. Access to teaching staff and feedback on progress are important motivators for first-year mature students. Males tend to have lower persistence rates than females. Older men are more likely to withdraw for course-, finance- or work-related reasons, whereas older women withdraw for family reasons. Although there are differences in ethnic group performance and persistence, this is not an issue of race *per se*. Within ethnic groups there are differences in male and female success.

Another area of research was to see whether providing support services for students improved first-year performance and persistence. The research suggests that those students who participate in support activities benefit, although it does depend on student characteristics. However, students who most need the support are not always those who make use of it.

Research suggests that finance is not as big a factor in student persistence as is often presumed. It is rarely the only reason for withdrawal. Many students undertake paid work but there is little evidence to suggest that moderate amounts of part-time working adversely affect first-year performance. Furthermore, the impact of paid work during term time is not always negative.

Another area of research has been the impact of student residence. Living on campus is presumed to be an important factor in social integration but there is ambiguous evidence about whether living in residences actually enhances grades. The beneficial effects of residential living seem to be dependent on the context and may be more beneficial in small institutions or where students not only live in residential settings but also study together.

Stress and health of first-years students is also an area explored for its impact on performance and persistence. The limited evidence suggests better health leads to better academic performance and persistence in higher education. There is some evidence that health tends to deteriorate over the first year. The main causes of stress appear to be study factors rather than external factors.

Support for the first-year

There is a sizeable literature on support services for first-year students, much of which outlines good practice and the need for appropriate and integrated interventions.

Induction is important and published material suggests that induction processes should avoid information overload and unnecessary bureaucratic procedures. There seems to be a strong case for a gradual process of induction.

Learning skills development is best contextualised and embedded in the curriculum rather than being supported by stand alone courses or workshops.

Research suggests that students need help in adapting to university life and becoming autonomous learners and that feeling positive and having a friendship group greatly aids social and emotional adjustment to higher education. It is also noted that students shift emphasis from one source of support to another as they progress through the year. Students adjust quicker if they learn the institutional 'discourse' and feel they fit in. Integration, through supportive interaction with teachers, greatly enhances adjustment, as does access to learning resources and facilities. Some research has explored how different types of student adapt. Males and females adjust differently. Mature students often find adjustment difficult, especially when they are a tiny minority. Adjustment is a particular problem for students from local authority care.

External influences, such as family and friendship groups (outside university) can impact significantly on adjustment in the first year. The difference between those who think about leaving but persist and those who leave appear to be motivational factors such as goal orientation and self-efficacy.

Learning and teaching

Research suggests that the first year is a time of considerable cognitive growth and appears to be important in developing learning behaviour. However, rigid prior conceptions about the subject area or approaches to learning can inhibit learning. Research shows that students find conceptual development difficult and staff need to assess whether their teaching styles enable students' conceptual development.

Males and females appear to develop different learning behaviours although there is little correlation between learning behaviour and student achievement in the first year. First-year students tend to adopt surface learning or instrumental approaches. This does not seem to impact greatly on first-year results.

Research suggests that students may accept the principle of autonomous learning but need help in becoming autonomous learners. There is a movement, particularly in the US, promoting the advantages and effectiveness of first-year learning communities.

Research shows that students prefer student-centred, active learning rather than lectures. Problem-based learning, practical projects and team working seem to be effective provided the student is well prepared.

Research on assessment shows a preference by students for coursework assessment, although this is not the case in all settings. Peer assessment appears to be beneficial and, if carefully planned, on-line assessment can be a useful learning aid. However, it is important that students and staff have a shared understanding of the language of assessment.

IV. Conclusions of the review of the published literature

There is no first-year experience; there is a multiplicity of first-year experiences. The research suggests that two things are special about the first-year experience. The first is the process of transition and adjustment and its concomitant high incidence of withdrawal, about which there is much research and advice. The second is the mass experience of being a first-year as opposed to the differentiated experience of later years: as not being seen as individuals, as being taught or instructed rather than as having one's learning facilitated, as being perceived as a (potential) problem. There is much less research on this second aspect.

Modelling and theorising is mainly around the issue of retention. This is dominated, particularly in the US, by social and academic integration theory. In the UK, there is more emphasis on preparedness for higher education, expectation and satisfaction with the quality of the experience.

The key factors in ensuring progression appear to be: personal goal setting and motivation; family and friends; paid work and financial situation; peer support; institutional habitus; cultural capital; prior information and choices; expectations; satisfaction; teaching and learning process and engagement with teachers; assessment and discussion of progress.

It is not easy to identify determining factors for the first-year experience because of the idiosyncratic way students engaged with it. The search for determining factors has, though, suggested good practice. The focus tends to be on first-year students'

deficiencies and how to provide for them rather than on exploring their individual learning needs and building on their strengths. Perhaps the key to improving success and persistence is not to focus just on the first-year experience but to improve the student experience generally.

V. Institutional grey literature

The research team reviewed grey literature in four institutions to see if institutional concerns and approaches related to published literature. The institutions generate and collect information on an annual basis that, at least incidentally, is about the first-year cohort. This information is for internal use only. The close-up study showed that connections did not seem to be routinely made between the different types of information to illuminate the first-year experience.

None of the institutions had grey literature specific to first-year postgraduates. The impression gained was that the institutions did not perceive the postgraduate first-year experience to require specific attention.

Statistical data

All four institutions produced statistical data about the composition of the first-year undergraduate cohort on an annual basis. The information was only available in-house, although summary data was provided in institutional annual reports available on institutional websites. Although there is full information for first-year undergraduates, university publications, such as annual quality reviews, usually presented data by subject area rather than by year of study.

Information given to first-year students

First-year students receive a large amount of information at induction. Welcome packs indicate the areas considered to be of importance to first-year students and include information on: university processes; fees; university facilities and support services; accommodation; useful contacts; sports and recreation; personal safety, drugs, alcohol, health; and the locality.

First-year students also receive information about the programme and individual modules, which covered: aims; learning outcomes; learning, teaching and assessment; assignment guidance and resources.

Evaluations of modules and courses

All the institutions have systems for evaluating modules in all years of study. Institutions had differing views on the confidentiality of module feedback, with some seeing it as for the individual module leader and others collating information across modules. Module evaluations fed into annual quality reviews of courses but these tended not to report by year of study, although issues arising for a particular year may have been highlighted.

Reports on the usage of facilities or services for students

Institutions produced reports on student support services, although only the reports on the counselling services were commonly published on the institutions' web sites.

In most cases, information was collected by year of study but it was not reported in that way, unless a service was for first-years only.

Institutional surveys on the student experience

At the time of the review, two institutions carried out annual institutional surveys that included first-year students and analysed them, *inter alia*, by year of study. Both surveys feed into quality processes. The surveys seem to be the only mechanism in any of the institutions through which information about a range of aspects relating to the first-year experience are pulled together and reported, although only as one aspect of a broader review of the student experience in general.

One-off studies

Staff in institutions conduct one-off studies on an *ad hoc* basis, usually in response to a personal interest and some of which are subsequently published. This provides an insight into the reason for the plethora of small studies in the published literature and suggests that caution might be required in assuming that the findings from such studies are generally applicable to other contexts.

VI. Conclusion of the review of the institutional grey literature

The review of grey literature in four different institutions revealed a high degree of commonality between those institutions in the information they collect and provide about the first-year experience, and in their processes and provision. Generally, it was difficult to pull together information about the first-year experience and this suggested that it has not been seen as important to explore the first-year as such.

Information given to first-year students suggested that institutions perceive the following realms as important: the institution; the course; the environs; the individual. The published literature addresses some but not all of these factors, or gives differing amounts of attention to them. For example, the published literature on the first year places little emphasis on the locality, personal safety, health issues or alcohol and drug abuse. Institutions do not generally seem to monitor or explore many of the areas covered in induction information. The exception is where there is a student satisfaction survey.

Interviews within the four institutions indicated an increasing concern with the first-year experience around two main issues. Widening access to courses means that students may not be familiar with or prepared for traditional university learning, teaching and assessment methods. The financial situation facing students is affecting study modes and impacting on workloads. However, little grey literature was identified in the institutions that dealt with these issues. Although the interviews suggested that postgraduates also have transition issues, there is little identifiable grey literature on the postgraduate first-year.

VII. Implications for policy, practice and research

The first-year experience is not a homogeneous experience but a multiplicity of experiences contingent on type of institution and student characteristics. The published studies have tried to identify key factors that relate, for example, to

retention but it is clear that the first-year experience is complex. Furthermore, the first-year experience evolves and changes both temporally and culturally. Issues facing students when they first arrive are not the same as issues half way through the first year or towards the end: expectations and satisfaction with the experience change. The culture shock of induction becomes replaced by issues of assimilation and absorption of values. Some students become integrated academically and socially and others experience an accumulation of issues and problems.

An in-depth exploration of grey material in four higher education institutions revealed a concern with the immediate move into higher education: uncovering, as it did, the large amount of information given to students at induction.

The legitimate question can be raised: is there a first-year experience, however diverse, or should it be seen as part of a long process of cultural, social and intellectual assimilation? The published evidence seems to suggest that to de-contextualise the first year from the entire student experience deflects from a need to ensure a positive learning experience suited to the evolutionary stage of the student. The institutional grey literature suggests that institutions often do not focus on the first-year experience separately from the experience of other years.

The review raises several implications for researchers. Most of the research is small-scale, usually institutionally-based studies with limited focus (reflecting the funding and status of education research). The result has been an accumulation of piecemeal studies. There is a need for a more systematic attempt to explore and theorise the totality of the first-year experience. This does not just mean larger samples in more than one institution but attempts to synthesise the literature and address substantive issues. What is needed are more studies that explore why, for example, particular practices are effective in integrating students and holistic research that reflects the complexity of the student experience.

There is, therefore, an onus on those who publish research to seek studies that answer substantive questions. What is needed is the encouragement of approaches that go beyond simple answers to safe but insubstantial questions and that adopt approaches other than empiricist reductionism.

A clear implication from the research, then, is that institutions should do more with the data they collect that relates to the first year of study.

However, institutions should treat the first year experience as more than about induction and retention. There is a latent view that retention, keeping students once they are in higher education, is beneficial. This is exacerbated by governments and quality agencies that take retention rates as performance indicators and regard withdrawal from programmes as indicative of poor quality provision, despite the fact that those withdrawing may later return to the same course. The research has shown that integration is a complex business depending on the type of institution and the characteristics and circumstances of the student.

This review does suggest some important areas that institutions might usefully address: providing accurate information to applicants; greater collaboration with schools and colleges; more flexibility in provision to allow for individual difference; more focussed inductions.

The key to success is to work with students, building on their strengths, rather than do things to students on the basis of a deficit model that emphasises inadequacies. This requires an approach that sees the first-year experience as holistic and evolving

and that attempts to match changing student expectations with their experience. It is important to take first-year student perspectives seriously and evaluate the students' satisfaction with their total experience.

In essence, the policy implication of the review requires an approach that sees the first year as an important part of the long process of cultural, social and academic assimilation into the world of higher education.

The full report and bibliography are available from the Higher Education Academy, see www.heacademy.ac.uk/4880.htm