

## The Essay as a Lens on Transition to the University: Student and Staff Perceptions of Essay Writing

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The interplay between student and teacher expectations about the requirements for successful learning in higher education (HE) can impact on successful student outcomes. This study aims to identify and understand the expectations that first year university students have towards essay production during their acculturation to HE. By examining the expectations their teachers have towards essay production, the extent of the alignment between the teacher and student expectations can be investigated. Furthermore, this study tentatively explores the impact that diverse educational backgrounds have on the formation of expectations for essay production between students and teachers in UK HE. This study identifies that although there are some areas of alignment between expectations of students and teachers, there are important differences related to plagiarism, interpreting essay questions, understanding marking criteria, and the availability of writing support. The greatest differences appear not so much related to different educational backgrounds, but instead with time spent in higher education.

Transition into higher education is a challenging time for many students, and the early experiences of higher education (HE) during the transition period can impact on the academic outcomes of students well into their program of studies. Such experiences include not only new approaches to learning and teaching, but also increased independence, self-regulation and considerable amounts of assessment. Assessment, whether high or low stakes, formative or summative, therefore forms a significant and challenging element of HE for students, and such challenges can be confounded when combined with transition.

There are many factors, both on an institutional and individual student level, that may influence student success during transition into HE. For example, socio-cultural background, socio-economic background, prior educational experiences, academic background, and pre-arrival expectations have all recently been linked with the success, or otherwise, of student transitions to higher education (Bowles, Dodson, Fisher, & McPhail, 2011; Harvey, Drew & Smith, 2006; Katanis, 2000). Universities are becoming considerably more diverse through initiatives of internationalization and widening participation. Consequently, students' pre-arrival expectations of HE are also diversifying. These broadening expectations serve to make the transition to HE more challenging for students and academic staff as there is unlikely to be a "one size fits all" approach that will help universities and their teaching and support staff manage a successful student transition to HE (Whittaker, 2008). Accordingly, it is increasingly important to understand and manage student expectations of higher education in order to enable a more successful transition to tertiary study.

However, understanding and management of student expectations alone is not sufficient to improve the experience of transition to university study. It is the

interplay between student expectations and staff perceptions of the requirements of successful HE participation which, together, need better understanding. Academic cultures within HE embody staff perceptions of HE and of learning, teaching, and assessment that, in turn, influence the expectations that teachers and lecturers have towards their students and the work their students produce. Ultimately, therefore, an alignment between student and staff expectations is a critical factor in successful HE transition.

### **A Theoretical Framework for Transition**

For the majority of students entering first year at university, the transition to tertiary study represents a new educational context distinct from previous experiences. Ramsden's (1992, p. 83) model of student learning in context theorizes that students' expectations of the requirements of HE are informed by their prior educational experiences (at school, college, the workplace, etc.) and the context of the learning environment (influenced by academic staff through expectations, course design, etc.). Moreover, Tinto's (1975) theory of student integration and his later reflections (Tinto, 1987) suggest that student integration to university is a three phase process involving separation, transition, and integration, and this process takes time. A student's prior educational experiences lead to the formation of expectations about HE, but a separation from any disillusioned expectations and transition to more aligned expectations is critical to the process of integration (Tinto, 1975). The level of congruence between the expected and actual learning experience can affect the success of the transition phase and ultimately will impact on student retention (Tinto, 1975) and attainment (Smith & Werlieb, 2005). Accordingly, the level of congruence

between the student and staff expectations has an impact on student outcomes, but underlying factors of educational background and transition also play a part.

Students' past educational experiences are further influenced by the social and academic culture in which those experiences took place. Therefore, students' expectations of studying and learning and any difference in the requirements of specific tasks in HE are further confounded when academic and socio-cultural differences exist between a students' native culture and the hosts' institutional academic culture. For example, differences in academic cultures may exist between secondary and tertiary education or between home and host educational systems for international (or transnational) students. Hofstede (1986) and Hofstede and Bond (1988) describe culture using a framework of cultural dimensions, and these notions of culture can be applied to describe learning and teaching cultures and the collective academic culture of a classroom, institution, or discipline. Accordingly, Hofstede's model of cultural dimensions and differences forms a contributory aspect of "the context of learning" in Ramsden's (1992) framework underpinning this study.

Together these arguments form a theoretical framework of transition to higher education: students' prior educational experiences, the context of the learning environment, and academic and socio-cultural influences. They are interdependent in influencing the success of student transition to HE in terms of student outcomes, retention, and attainment (see Figure 1). Central to student transition is Ramsden's (1992, p. 83) model of student learning in context, influenced by previous educational experiences, student, and teacher expectations (setting the context). Tinto's (1975) theory of student integration lengthens this process, ensuring it takes time for true adjustment and integration to occur, during which time it is more critical that student and staff expectations are aligned and understood. Hofstede's (1986) model of cultural dimensions provides a framework which acts to broaden the scope of students' previous educational experiences based on academic and socio-cultural differences.

This combined framework is recognized in more recent studies related to transition, in particular in Australia. Nelson and Kift (2005) and subsequently Kift (2009) argue that a "transition pedagogy," considerate not only of learning, teaching, and assessment, but also of diversity (e.g., the social or academic backgrounds), social integration, and generation of a sense of belonging, is required to successfully support the student transition to HE. This transition pedagogy affirms the concepts with Ramsden, Tinto, and Hofstede that transition is a complex and difficult time with many influencing factors. While Kift (2009) argues that transition should be tackled on an institutional basis,

there is still scope for small-scale understanding for the enhancement of individuals' practice.

### Student Expectations

The expectations that students have towards university education are informed by their prior educational experiences (Cook & Rushton, 2008; Ramsden, 1992, p.83;). The influence of prior educational experiences forms a basis for the *academic* expectations that students have relating to teaching and learning (Dalglish & Chan, 2005), assessment (Ramsden, 1992, p.84), academic support (Crisp et al, 2009; Yorke, 2000), academic interactions with staff (Crisp et al, 2009), class sizes (Cook & Leckey, 1999; Lowe & Cook, 2003) and the level of cultural diversity amongst teaching staff and students in the HE environment. This is summarized by Biggs (1996): "The learner brings an accumulation of assumptions, motives, intentions, and previous knowledge that envelops every teaching/learning situation and determines the course and quality of the learning that may take place" (p. 348).

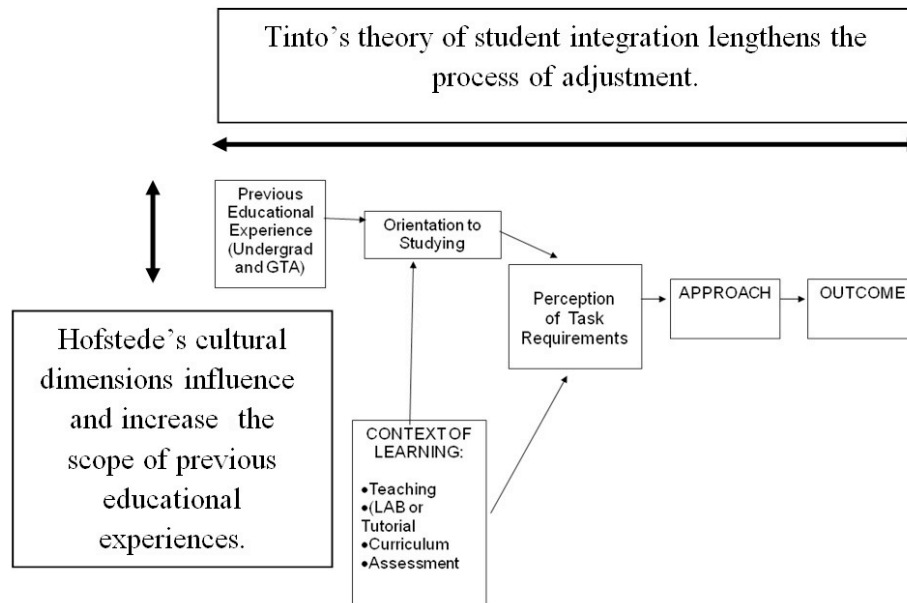
Student outcomes in terms of attainment and retention are, in part, dependent on good agreement between the expectations of students and the realities of the HE learning experience (see, for example, Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005): the 'academic integration' aspect of Tinto's (1975) theory of student integration. Consequently, students need to adapt to the academic and social cultures and practices of the HE environment in order to be successful (Tinto, 1975). Longden (2006), Kuh (2007) and Kift (2009) all argue that universities should *strategically* support students through this period of transition and adaptation.

### Staff Expectations

The expectations of academic staff play a significant role in creating the student learning experience through the design of learning and teaching activities, the utilization of certain pedagogies, and the modes of assessment adopted. For example, Killen (1994) noted that university lecturers place a lot of responsibility on students to manage their learning independently. Teaching staff expect students to carry out significant private study (Kuh, 2003), and it has been argued that students should minimize any commitments outside of study as they impact negatively on student outcomes (Brinkworth, McCann, Matthews, & Nordstrom, 2009). It is possible that such perceptions may be intrinsically enforced by university teaching staff as an institutional culture of HE.

Institutional cultures are known to play a role in the success of student transition to HE. For example, Hatt and Baxter (2003) noted that learning institutions which

Figure 1  
Interdependency of Student and Staff Expectations, Student Transition and Cultural Influences (adapted from Ramsden, 1992, p. 83).



had a focus on entry into HE often fostered a culture of increased confidence and independence in learning, both of which are attributes that are highly valued in HE (Barrie, Hughes & Smith, 2009; QAA, 2001 & 2008). On the contrary, institutions which did not place emphasis on the cultural values of HE learning and assessment led to significantly lower student attainment outcomes (Hatt & Baxter, 2003). Accordingly, institutional cultures (i.e. the values imposed, imparted and expected by teaching staff) may impact on students' expectations of learning and assessment and, ultimately, may impact on the outcomes of transition to HE.

### Alignment of Expectations

A fuller understanding of transition to HE requires further information about student expectations and the expectations of teachers and lecturers who, in part, define the learning experience. However, it is not simply student expectations, nor staff expectations individually, but their level of alignment that can impact student transition to HE. Smith and Werleib (2005) showed that a mismatch between students' prior expectations and their first year learning experience resulted in poorer academic attainment: students with high, unrealistic expectations of HE achieved poorly throughout the first year of study. Lowe and Cook (2003) highlighted that any difference between student expectations

and actual learning experience becomes more and more difficult to manage as the first year progresses. Correspondingly, understanding of student and teaching staff expectations and their perceptions of tasks are vital factors in supporting successful transitions to HE.

Many studies have focused on either improving the understanding of students' prior expectations of studying in HE (e.g. Cook & Leckey, 1999; Leese, 2010; Lowe and Cook, 2003) or have focused on analyzing any gaps which exist between student and university teaching staff expectations (e.g. Brinkworth et al, 2009; Crisp et al, 2009). In particular, Killen (1994) noted that students and teachers had a very different view regarding who was responsible for student learning: lecturers placed the responsibility for learning on the students whereas students placed the majority of the responsibility on their lecturers. Accordingly, it can be argued that inaccurate prior expectations of students regarding their HE study, or a misalignment between student and staff expectations and the realities of HE, are significant factors in the success of student transition to HE (Kuh, 2007).

### Diverse Backgrounds and Expectations

Factors influencing the success of transition to HE are complicated when considering diverse prior

academic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. The potential distance between native and new contexts of learning ensures that many students have difficulty forming realistic expectations of HE. As White (2013) argues:

Students who have experienced different life paths come with different expectations, different needs, different learning styles, and different ambitions (oral presentation).

Academically, a diverse body of university entrants have great diversity in pre-arrival expectations and prior educational experiences (e.g., Crisp et al, 2009; Dalglish & Chan, 2005; White, 2013), resulting in a set of expectations that is very difficult to predict, understand or manage. Ramsey, Barker, and Jones (1999) suggest that international students in particular have greater requirements for academic adjustment in order to adapt to the new HE environment, and Krause and colleagues (2005) highlight that international sojourners are typically less satisfied regarding expectations being met. Linguistically (Wu & Hammond, 2011) and culturally (Ryan & Carroll, 2005), international students have to adjust to a new environment. This adjustment can take many months or even years (Carroll, 2014), and the process is not necessarily smooth: students experience “cultural bumps” (Wu & Hammond, 2011). Accordingly, adjustment and acculturation to HE study is complex, and for students from diverse backgrounds the success of transition comprises an increased number of influencing factors.

It is not only expectations of students that impact on the success of transition to HE; there is also an argument that an increasingly diverse body of academic staff with varied backgrounds also impacts on the context of learning (Jones, 2014). For example, international lecturers and university teachers arrive with expectations based on their previous educational experiences, and they too undergo a period of transition that takes time (Maunder et al, 2009). Academics develop expectations and perceptions of students over time, and these expectations are influenced by institutional cultures of both the native and new contexts. Understandably, this period of institutional acculturation for staff with significant experience in HE teaching and learning is shorter than for staff who are new to the HE environment (or indeed new to the particular institution or discipline). Therefore, the developing nature of staff expectations based on HE experience can result in further challenges to the alignment between student and staff expectations, regardless of student background.

### Narrowing the Scope: The Essay

Notably, Bartholomae (1986) states:

Every time a student sits down to write for us, he has to invent the university [...]. He has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding and arguing that define the discourse of our community (p. 4).

However, the student’s “invention” is reliant on accurate expectations of what is desired by the teacher. It is reliant on an understanding of what is required and good communication. It is reliant on the teacher understanding what is required and also having consistent, defined expectations. Given this breadth of contexts that “expectations” refers to, it is necessary to narrow the scope to a more readily definable aspect of learning and teaching: assessment and, in particular, essays. Assessments through essays in this context are important learning experiences that can be used as a lens to explore alignment between student and staff expectations.

As Race (2009) notes, ‘ . . . [I]n some subjects, assessment is dominated by essay writing.’ Not only are essays a dominant assessment format in some subjects, essays are also an area of assessment where student expectations and interpretation of the rules and criteria often do not match those of the teacher (Norton, Dickens, & McLaughlin, 1996). The plethora of essay writing guides available for students is indicative of the challenge which writing an effective essay represents. Hounsell (1997) argues that essay writing is a skill requiring both knowledge and experience, and novice essay writers often lack sufficient experience to write effective essays. Norton and colleagues (1996) noted that students create a dynamic ‘folklore’ surrounding essay requirements that develops as students become more experienced in academia. As Ramsden (1992, p. 83) illustrates in Figure 1, the formation of such folklore depends on previous educational experience and impacts on the expectations and outcomes of the task.

The idea of a novice essay writer brings the debate into the domain of first year university students who are novices in HE. Branthwaite et al (1980), cited in Hounsell (1997), suggest that students’ essay writing skills develop throughout the first year as students become more aware of the expectations of their teachers and their own essay writing skills. In order to explore this, this study examines the extent to which expectations of essay production are shared between students and their teachers. Potential factors (such as previous education experiences) are explored in order to understand their potential influence on expectations. By researching the expectations of

students regarding essay production early on in the university experience and by understanding the expectations of teachers and lecturers regarding their students' approach to essay production it is hoped that the level of alignment between student and teacher expectations regarding essay writing can be better understood. In order to address these objectives the following research question was developed: "In the context of a large, urban, research intensive university in the UK, what are students' expectations and teaching staff perceptions of essay production and how much alignment exists between each?"

### Method

A questionnaire (Appendix 1) was developed to examine expectations and perceptions of essay writing across the two participant sample groups: (1) first year undergraduate students and (2) teachers in their subject area. The questionnaire was developed in light of findings from an earlier qualitative phase of research (McEwan, 2014) that focused on developing a participant-led understanding of the research question, through focus groups and observations, in order to develop a questionnaire that was less biased in terms of researcher-led lines of enquiry. The questionnaire involved a combination of different question types: open-ended qualitative, four point Likert-scale, closed multiple choice, and demographic. The questions were developed based on themes which emerged from the earlier study. These general themes included student concerns regarding essay writing, perceived understanding of essay-based assessment, and expectations of required essay writing skills.

All participants in this study were teachers or undergraduate students in the business school at a large, urban research-intensive university in the UK. Student participants were recruited from a first year undergraduate business and management course (B&M1B) to ensure a population of novice, transitioning university students (B&M1B had an enrollment of 298 mostly first year students with a fairly significant proportion of students from diverse academic and national backgrounds). A pre-requisite course for studying B&M1B is B&M1A, which involves a critical essay as coursework and essay-based examinations, so all students had early experience in preparing essays at the university and had time to develop approaches and expectations of essay production. Moreover, essay support and assignment preparation tuition are provided in both B&M1A and B&M1B in the form of taught classes. Students are provided access to the University's generic marking rubric and some specific marking guidance that is also provided to teachers. Teacher participants (including Graduate Teaching Assistants) were recruited from

across the whole business school. This group also comprised a significant proportion of novice and international participants.

The questionnaire was hosted online and distributed to participants via email announcements. In total, 37 students (12% response) and 14 staff (12% response) completed the questionnaire. Although each sample is relatively small, there was sufficient response to explore expectations and concerns regarding essay writing across the sample groups and to attempt to elicit any potential factors or explanatory aspects of student and teacher expectations that may impact on student outcomes. Larger samples would undoubtedly be required for a definitive study, but the aims here are more exploratory, hence, though disappointing, a smaller sample suffices.

McEwan's (2014) qualitative study identified several possible factors that may affect participants' expectations of essays in HE. Accordingly, measures of years of experience in studying or teaching in HE, in English fluency and usage, in country of background or origin and in academic backgrounds (both level of educational background and location of influential backgrounds) were sampled in the present study through demographic questions (survey item 5 in Appendix 1). Following from McEwan (2014), twenty Likert-type questionnaire items were developed to examine participants' expectations and perceptions of structures of essays (items 1.9, 1.15, 1.18), their perceptions of necessary essay writing skills (items 1.1, 1.5, 1.10, 1.11, 1.12, 1.13, 1.16, 1.17), their understanding and expectations of support (item 1.3), their understanding of assessment rules and criteria (items 1.2, 1.4, 1.14, 1.19, 1.20), and their concerns regarding essay writing (items 1.6, 1.7, 1.8). The themes of "purpose" and "structure" were further interrogated through two multiple choice questions (items 3 and 4), and a further theme—How do students approach reading essay questions?—was interrogated by asking respondents to identify the words they focused on in sample texts (items 2.1 – 2.2). Respondents were also given an opportunity to provide open responses to questions designed to further gauge participants' concerns (item 6).

### Findings and Discussion

Given the argument that demographic factors such as background (academic, social, cultural, etc.) may impact on the alignment between student and teacher expectations, it is initially important to compare all student and staff responses to survey items 1–4 against responses to demographic factors (survey item 5). Strong correlations ( $r > 0.7$ ) were observed between student responses to survey items related the demographic questions of nationality, country of

previous education, and English as a first language. Consequently, student demographic data can be condensed into a single variable: “home” or “international” background. On examining staff responses to demographic questions, similar patterns were apparent, e.g., strong links between years of teaching experience and years of teaching experience at the current university. Moderate correlations exist between the factors of English as a first language, lack of foreign teaching experience, and UK nationality suggesting staff can also be grouped into “home” or “international” backgrounds.

### Comparison between Students and Staff

Student and staff responses to the first 20 Likert-type questions were analyzed to determine an overview of expectations to set the scene, but also to determine the extent to which expectations were shared or distinct. Due to the small samples involved, it would not be prudent to infer generalizations from the dataset, but instead an exploratory, descriptive study was employed and the findings reported here show some significance within the dataset by means of the Mann-Whitney U test, but they are in no way generalizable.

Apparent differences between student expectations and staff perceptions were observed in only six of the twenty Likert-type items. Regarding plagiarism, 100% of students believe that they understood plagiarism but only 36% of staff agreed that students understood plagiarism ( $p < 0.001$ ). In addition, 84% of students were not concerned about plagiarism, compared to 43% of staff who thought students were concerned about plagiarism ( $p = 0.012$ ). Interestingly, 97% of students believe that they focus on answering the essay question; but only 21% of staff agreed ( $p < 0.001$ ). Only 25% of students report critiquing their essay sources compared to an expectation among staff (71%) that sources should be critiqued ( $p = 0.010$ ). Teaching staff suggest that students do not use topic sentences very well in their writing ( $p = 0.001$ ). Furthermore, 62% of students suggest the lecturer is not the audience compared to 64% of staff who say the lecturer is the audience for an essay ( $p = 0.009$ ). Overall, these findings suggest some important differences in the approach to essay writing between students and staff and are potentially suggestive of a different understanding of certain terms (e.g., students’ conception of critique versus staff views on critique), and this is particularly relevant in this case as students have already prepared critical essays in B&M1A yet are still unsure regarding “critique.” Such mismatches may be indicative of implicit assumptions about what constitutes good practice from the perspectives of tutors and students (Lea & Street, 1998). Such academic literacies should be brought into mainstream communication in teaching in HE to enable

better integration of students into their new, and varied, disciplinary cultures.

### Years of Experience as a Factor?

The demographic data highlighted one key relationship between Likert-type responses and potential influencing factors, namely years of experience in HE. For example, first year students feel less supported in essay writing compared to more experienced students and students with prior HE experience who were more likely to view the purpose of essays as demonstrating knowledge. In terms of staff responses, the more experience a teacher had the more likely they expressed feelings that their students didn’t understand the marking criteria, were concerned about plagiarism, and didn’t really know what to do to get a good essay grade. Moreover, teachers with more years of experience had a greater desire to see a critique of sources in essays and had less trust that university courses actually supported students’ essay writing skills.

Accordingly, experience of higher education does seem to play a role in determining expectations and, therefore, impacts on alignment. In particular, staff expectations are heavily influenced by experience (as well as international background). Indeed, it could be suggested that experienced staff undergo “creep” in expectations, moving towards less confidence in their students’ independent ability to produce good work, a greater expectation that plagiarism will occur and an increased demand for a critical approach to essay writing. Importantly, and key to this research, is the fact that differences in expectations do exist between teachers and students, and the most apparent factor in determining different expectations of essay writing is whether someone is a novice (student) or experienced (teacher) participant in HE. On the surface this may seem obvious, but implications are more subtle: all students are novices, and although some demographics (e.g., international or home) might seem more novice, it is the lack of experience of essay writing for all students in HE is key.

### Approach to Reading and Interpreting Essay Questions

Participants’ approach to reading and interpreting an essay question was also explored. In order to assess this aspect, two sample essay questions were created to analyse respondents’ approaches to interpreting them. The questions (survey items 2.1 and 2.2) are shown here:

Item 2.1: Discuss and evaluate the most influential factors on the development of the English language between the years 1400 and 1800.

Table 1  
*Percentage of Students and Teachers Focusing on Active Verbs, Topics  
 or Context in Sample Essay Questions*

	Active Verb		Topic		Context	
	Student	Staff	Student	Staff	Student	Staff
Full Match	79%	42%	35%	42%	35%	42%
Partial Match	15%	19%	37%	58%	37%	58%
No Match	6%	38%	28%	0%	28%	0%

Item 2.2: Identify the main political actors and analyse their role in the 37 days prior to the start of the First World War.

These two questions contain elements that were qualitatively categorized as active verbs (discuss, evaluate and identify, analyze), topic (influential factors, English language development and political actors, causes of war) and context (years 1400 – 1800 and 37 days prior, First World War). Participants were asked to identify the words they immediately focused on. This approach gives some indication of whether students are more or less likely to focus on the active verb, topic, or context, compared to their teachers.

In order to eliminate the essay questions themselves as contributing factors, the data for each sample essay question were combined. Students and staff responses were recorded as a Full Match if all words in a category were present in a participant's response, a Partial Match if one or more (but not all) words in a category were present in participant's response, and as No Match when no words in a category were present in participant's response. The frequency of each coded response was then calculated for students and teachers and the data were analysed using Pearson's  $\chi^2$  test to determine whether there was any association between the two populations (students and teachers) and the three qualitative response variables (Full, Partial or No Match). In each case a significance level of  $p < 0.01$  was chosen, implying a confidence level of 99%. These results are summarized in Table 1.

There was a strong association between a participant's status as student or teacher and their focus on either active verbs ( $p < 0.001$ ) or the topic ( $p = 0.009$ ) of an essay question. There was no association between status as student or teacher and a focus on context. Students (79%) pay more attention to the active verbs as compared to staff (42%), and students (28%) fail to focus on the topic of an essay question, whereas teachers always focus on the topic to some extent (42% entirely, 58% partially). Accordingly, students and teachers approach the interpretation of essay questions differently.

Notably, differing approaches to reading and interpreting essay questions are most apparent across novice (student) and experienced (teacher) essay writing demographics. From the student perspective, essay questions are best approached by examining the active verbs in essay questions, whereas teachers focus on the topic of an essay question and value essays which explicitly address the topic. This further highlights the earlier finding regarding experience in HE as a defining factor in determining expectations: could this result be indicative of the common teacher complaint that students have not answered the question? Interestingly, a similar analysis, but with students split into home or international backgrounds, provided more detail to this finding. In particular, home students were significantly more likely to have some focus on the context of an essay question (75% of home students compared to only 53% of international students), which, although only a minor finding, is suggestive that international students are marginally more likely to ignore the limiting scope of an essay question, valuing the active verbs as providing more guidance in terms of their essay response.

### Purpose and Structure

Students and staff were also asked to provide insight into their understanding of the purpose of an essay and what constitutes structure in essay writing. Students (46%) and staff (62%) both agreed that the purpose of an essay was to "demonstrate knowledge." This shared understanding is a key finding. However, it is interesting to note that 23% of staff suggested essays should present a balanced viewpoint, and 17% of staff linked essays with argument. By comparison, 34% of students linked essays with an argument, and only 17% suggested essays were an instrument to provide a balanced viewpoint. In general, students and staff views on the purpose of essays are reasonably well aligned, and this similarity was further supported as Pearson's  $\chi^2$  test did not confirm any association of responses with being a teacher or a student.

Students (54%) and staff (85%) also share similar, though not identical, beliefs about the structure of an essay: that structure is about building an argument. A minority of staff (15%) but nearly half of students (46%) suggested that structure was about flow between paragraphs and the more functional aspect of separating writing into appropriate sections. This suggests that although the majority of student and staff views on the meaning of structure of essays are also reasonably well aligned (also supported by Pearson's  $\chi^2$  test), a significant proportion of students view structure distinctly. It can be argued, therefore, that students and staff share similar beliefs about the purpose of essays but that interpretation of structure is at least partially dependent on demographic: student or teacher.

### Thematic Analysis of Open Response Items

Respondents were also given an opportunity to comment on what they perceived to be required for a good essay and what they felt needs greatest improvement. A simple frequency analysis showed that teachers reward most a strong argument (45% of teacher responses). Overall, the most common themes mentioned by teachers were developing an argument, demonstration of knowledge (in agreement with the purpose of an essay item analysed earlier), and answering the question. The most common themes mentioned by students were structure, developing an argument, and answering the question (each mentioned in 35% of student responses). Although these two viewpoints do present quite a unified opinion between students and staff regarding good essay writing, especially when combined with the analysis on the purpose and structure of an essay, there are some vital differences. Teachers prioritize argument (as noted in Hounsell, 1984), whereas students focus relatively equally on structure, argument, and answering the question (i.e., the arrangement of the essay; Hounsell, 1984).

Furthermore, there is evidence that while there is alignment in the intentions of students regarding producing a good essay, there is, in practice, a distinction between the product of student work and teachers' requirements for good work. For example, student responses clearly indicate that answering the question is required for a good essay, and earlier results indicate that students also believe they actually focus on answering the question (97%). However, this does not correlate with the opinion of staff: earlier results show that only 21% of staff feel that students answer the question. Similarly, students indicate that good structure is also a requirement for a good essay, but one finding in McEwan (2014) highlighted that staff do not rate the structures of first year essays very highly, nor is structure mentioned with any weight in staff responses to requirements for a good essay. Consequently, there are some key distinctions between students and staff in

terms of requirements for a good essay: the intentions of students are aligned with some aspects of teacher expectations, but in practice they are often misaligned.

### Conclusions

The aim of this study was to develop a deeper understanding of one aspect of the student acculturation to higher education by examining the alignment between students' expectations and their teachers' perceptions of essay production. From the student perspective, essays are viewed as a mixture of argument and arrangement: structure is built, section by section, contributing towards an overall argument, a finding consistent with Hounsell's (1984) work. Students believe essays should demonstrate knowledge and that a focus on answering the question is vital. Essays are best approached by examining the active verbs in essay questions. Students had concerns about essay writing, especially related to their interpretation of structure as compared to their teachers', similar to the misunderstanding of essay features discussed by Norton and colleagues (1996). Students had an awareness of plagiarism but felt they understood and avoided plagiarism well. In contrast, students do not understand the marking criteria very well, and they often do not feel that they know what their marker wants despite receiving support in this area. This finding raises important follow up questions: is the support valid but misinterpreted or are the perceptions of "what makes a good essay" relatively fixed in first year students due to factors such as lack of experience? Interestingly, there was very little difference between the expectations of home and international students in this study, although small sample sizes preclude any generalizations. This appears in contrast to the combined theses of Ramsden (1992) and Hofstede (1986) who suggest that diverse cultural and social educational backgrounds impact on expectations and outcomes. Accordingly, there is also a need to conduct a more significant study that focuses directly on the potential impact of international backgrounds. However, a major finding of the present study is that an over-riding factor impacting on the alignment between student and teacher expectations is relative experience in higher education.

Teaching staff felt that students did not focus on answering essay questions, nor did students understand structure and argument building very well. Moreover, staff felt that students did not understand plagiarism, nor did students appropriately critique the sources they use. Teachers focus on the topic of an essay question and value essays which explicitly address the topic, in contrast to the majority of students who focus on the active verbs. Teachers perceive essays as a tool to demonstrate knowledge and understanding, similar to student expectations, and teachers believe that structure



is almost exclusively about building an argument, supportive of the findings of Hounsell (1984) and Norton (1990), who both noted that teachers view essays as “argument” in contrast to the student view. Interestingly, the amount of teaching experience and the educational background (home or international) of a teacher were important factors in determining teacher perceptions of essays and of their students, which again is consistent with the combined arguments of Ramsden (1992) and Hofstede (1986).

Throughout this study, several themes were identified that are correlated with student outcomes. There is clearly a potential impact on student outcomes due to some misalignments in expectations; however, the amount and nature of the impact is unclear through the methods of this study and therefore needs further investigation.

In conclusion, there are several areas of alignment between student and teacher expectations of essay writing in HE, but there are many significant and important differences. Students have the intentions to produce essays which are aligned to teacher expectations; however, the actual result of their work often is not aligned. When applied to Ramsden’s (1992) model of student learning in context, it is clear that first year students do not have a full grasp of their new HE context; they are novices in a new context (c.f. Branthwaite et al., 1980) with a limited understanding of the “rules of the game.” This inexperience of students relates to time spent in higher education; it cannot easily be attributed to different educational or cultural backgrounds before HE. All the demographics of first year students shared similar difficulties when facing essays (however, the international background and experience of teachers also plays a role). It is clear that the student participants in this study are still attempting to align their interpretation of the “rules of the game” with their teachers’ expectations, even towards the end of their first year and even with targeted support. Accordingly, Tinto’s (1975) theory of student integration holds true at least in part: transition takes time, and it is still developing towards the end of first year.

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## Appendix 1

## Student Facing Questionnaire

1. To what extent are the following statements true Please tick (✓) the relevant box: VT = very true, MT = mostly true, ST = somewhat true, NT = not true at all	VT	MT	ST	NT
1. Quantity of references is important in essay writing				
2. I understand what plagiarism is				
3. I feel my current courses are good at supporting my academic writing skills				
4. I understand the marking criteria for essays				
5. It is important that I use good sources for essays				
6. My previous education has prepared me well for essay writing assessments				
7. If I know the topic well, I am confident I will write a good essay				
8. I am concerned my work will be considered plagiarism				
9. I include topic sentences in my writing				
10. Practical or applied examples of theory are important in essays				
11. I argue that the sources I use are sometimes flawed				
12. I use some sources to counter the points made in others				
13. I back up my opinions with literature				
14. I know what I have to do to get a good essay grade				
15. I include a thesis statement in my essays				
16. I use very complex, technical terms in my writing				
17. I focus on answering the question				
18. The question dictates the type and structure of essay I write				
19. The lecturer is the audience for my essay				
20. I have difficulties understanding what the markers want in essays				

2. Please read the following <i>sample</i> essay questions and circle (or underline) the word or words (not more than 5 words) which you immediately focus on:
1. Discuss and evaluate the most influential factors on the development of the English language between the years 1400 and 1800.
2. Identify the main political actors and analyse their role in the 37 days prior to the outbreak of the First World War.

3. Which of the following four statements do you <i>most</i> agree with?	Please tick (✓) the ONE statement which you most agree with.
1. The purpose of essays is to demonstrate my knowledge	
2. The purpose of essays is to convince the reader of my argument	
3. The purpose of essays is to provide a balanced viewpoint	
4. The purpose of essays is to get a grade	

<b>4. Which of the following four statements do you <i>most</i> agree with?</b>	Please tick (✓) the ONE statement which you most agree with.
1. Structure is about what sections I have in my writing	
2. Structure is about how the essay flows between paragraphs	
3. Structure is about building an argument	
5. Structure is about increasingly complex ideas	

#### Student Demographics

<b>5. About You (please fill in the blanks or circle the relevant response on the right hand side)</b>					
1. What is your gender	Female		Male		
2. Have you studied at any university before this year?	Yes		No		
3. Is English your first language?	Yes		No		
4. Have you studied at any university before?	Yes		No		
5. Are you in your first year at Glasgow University?	Yes		No		
6. What is your nationality? If you have more than one nationality, which one would you tell someone first?					
7. In what country was your previous education on entry to the University of Glasgow? If there was more than one, then please write the most influential one. If it was in the UK, please write UK.					
8. What level was your previous education when you applied to study at Glasgow University? If 'other' please specify.	High School	FE	6 <sup>th</sup> Form College	Other HE	Out of Education for a number of years

#### Staff Demographics

<b>5. About You (please fill in the blanks or circle the relevant response on the right hand side)</b>		
1. What is your gender	Female	Male
2. Is English your first language?	Yes	No
3. Have you taught at any university before?	Yes	No
4. Are you in your first year at Glasgow University?	Yes	No
5. In years, approximately how long have you taught at the University of Glasgow?		
6. Roughly how many years have you taught in universities in the UK (including Glasgow)?		
7. Roughly how many years have you taught in universities anywhere (including Glasgow)?		
8. What is your nationality? If you have more than one nationality, which one would you tell someone first?		
9. In what country was your university education? If there was more than one, then please write the most influential one.		

#### 6. Please answer the following questions about essays:

1. What do you think is most required to get a good grade in an essay assessment?
2. What aspect of essay writing do you think you need to improve the most?