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Academic expectations among university students and staff: addressing the role of psychological contracts and social norms

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Abstract
Student expectations of required workload, behaviour, resource use, role and relationship profoundly shape success in higher education and inform satisfaction with their learning experience. Teachers' expectations of students' behaviour can similarly affect the university learning experience and environment. When expectations between academic staff and students are not aligned, student satisfaction and staff morale are likely to suffer. This study sought to identify areas where the academic expectations of students and staff aligned or diverged and understand responses to any breaches of expectations. Here, we report on qualitative findings from a survey of 259 undergraduate students and 48 staff members and focus group interviews with 10 students and 15 staff members. Although their academic expectations aligned in most areas, students appeared to have broader conceptions of success at university than staff, and a stronger focus on the importance of personal relationships with staff and teaching quality. Academics expressed stronger injunctive norms about prioritisation of study and the importance of identifying as a student. These differences are likely to lead to tension between the two groups, particularly in areas of value for individuals. While clarifying expectations may improve alignment between the groups to some extent, the basis of these differences in individual priorities suggests that merely articulating expectations may not resolve the issue. We therefore argue for staff to adopt a co-creation approach to academic expectations and to 'meet students halfway' where possible.

Keywords Expectations · Psychological contracts · Social norms · Qualitative analysis · Student success

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Introduction

Student satisfaction is of major international interest and appears to be influenced by a student's expectations prior to study (Cheng, Taylor, Williams, & Tong, 2016; Nicholson, Putwain, Connors, & Hornby-Atkinson, 2013). Several studies have observed that students were satisfied when perceived performance matched or exceeded expectations of performance, where 'performance' applies to aspects of university business such as quality of teaching (Appleton-Knapp & Krentler, 2006), satisfaction with doctoral supervision (Cheng et al., 2016), or individual study behaviour and academic attainment (Nicholson et al., 2013).

Despite this strong research focus on student satisfaction and transition expectations, surprisingly little exists that examines the expectations of academic staff for their students, or that directly compares the expectations of academic staff and students (Brinkworth et al. (2009), and Hassel and Ridout (2018) are exceptions). The lack of interrogation of staff expectations of students implies that students require adjustment to the implicit expectations of academics, and therefore the university at large, and any onus for change is on students. The privileged position of staff hence normalises their expectations at the expense of students. This lack of interrogation also allows the expectations of individual staff members, which may be unrealistic or unaligned with institutional priorities, to go undiscovered; although it must be noted that institutional priorities may influence or encourage academics to develop these expectations. Understanding the academic expectations of both parties, and identifying where mismatches occur, is therefore essential to creating a positive teaching/learning relationship and potentially provides a (currently understudied) approach for interventions to improve and support more effective teaching.

In the study reported here, we sought to examine several hypotheses:

(1) Where mismatches in academic expectations occurred, they were likely to promote strong emotional responses due to violations of psychological contracts and social norms.
(2) Where mismatches in aspects of teaching and learning are strongly related to perceptions of value, stronger emotional responses were more likely.
(3) Students would have stronger responses to violations than staff due to the higher personal value of their university experience.

This study makes several theoretical and practical contributions to the literature. At the theoretical level, we propose a detailed theoretical framework for interrogating the relationship between expectations, social norms and psychological schema, which draws on psychological contract theory to explain why breaches of academic expectations lead to strong emotional responses. At a more pragmatic level, we also demonstrate that students appeared to have broader conceptions of success at university (and hence value) and a narrower focus on the teaching-learning relationship than academics. In contrast, staff expressed stronger injunctive norms about prioritisation and identity (a narrow view of success as academic achievement) and had potentially more opportunities for breaches to occur due to exposure to a greater number of students. These differences may explain the stronger sense of violation academics expressed despite obtaining less direct value from their interactions, which identifies important pedagogical and staff-based interventions to support both student satisfaction and staff morale.

Theoretical framework

Expectancy-value theory provides a potential mechanism for understanding the relationship between satisfaction and expectations (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Here, 'expectancy' refers to an individual's expectations and beliefs—often based in previous experiences—about how their behaviour will lead to particular outcomes. In the university context, these may include students' expectations about study habits ('If I study long hours, I will do well on this assignment'), help-seeking behaviour and feedback ('If I ask for help on my assignment, I will get detailed, written feedback like I did at high school') or social relationships ('University teachers will care about my individual wellbeing and learning'), among other expectations. University staff will also have expectancies about their own behaviour ('If I lecture well, students will learn') and of others ('If I organise a lecture, students will attend'). As these examples suggest, although expectations are fed by previous experiences, they may not be appropriate to the contexts in which they are being applied, may not be entirely rational, and once incorporated as an established schema of knowledge, they can be difficult to renegotiate, largely because of the *value* to which that expectation is ascribed (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). In expectancy-value theory, 'values' include intrinsic value, which is related to subjective interest or enjoyment in the activity; utility value, which is determined by how closely the task relates to long-term goals; and attainment value, which the impact completion will have on the individual's self-concept or sense of personal value (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). *Costs* (including opportunity costs, effort, performance anxiety, fear of either success or failure) offset values (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002).

Complimentary to expectancy-value theory is psychological contract theory, which posits an implicit contract of exchange between individuals, or between individuals and organisations, that contains expectations about the reciprocal obligations between them (Dabos & Rousseau, 2004). These contracts make the actions of both parties predictable and allow both to realise their goals (McFarlane Shore & Tetrick, 1994). In this context, the contract is between academic staff and students and concerns their mutual obligations to achieve learning outcomes. A psychological contract is therefore a schema for achieving attainment, intrinsic, and utility value through the relationship, alongside certain expected costs.

It is important to note psychological contracts are founded in *beliefs about* reciprocal obligations, rather than reciprocal obligations per se. As they concern beliefs about appropriate behaviour, psychological contracts may therefore be thought of as an application of social norms (context-dependent understandings of appropriate behaviour) within a framework of organisational obligations. Social norms can be established as descriptive norms (beliefs about what valued others *do* in particular circumstances) and injunctive norms (beliefs about what valued others *approve of* in particular circumstances—Cialdini et al., 1991). Because psychological contracts and social norms both involve at least partially unspoken expectations of behaviour, perceived breaches of obligations may arise unintentionally, leading to an emotional response or sense of violation (Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Rousseau, 1990). Psychological contracts have been shown to be dynamic yet relatively stable over time, and a sense of violation only arises when certain limits are overstepped (Schalk & Roe, 2007).

We propose the following theoretical framework to explain the production of academic expectations and their role in satisfaction with the teaching/learning experience (Fig. 1). Prior learning and teaching experiences fundamentally shape an individual's sense of identity (as a good student or diligent educator, for example), and their understandings of the social norms governing the learning/teaching relationship and what 'counts' as success in

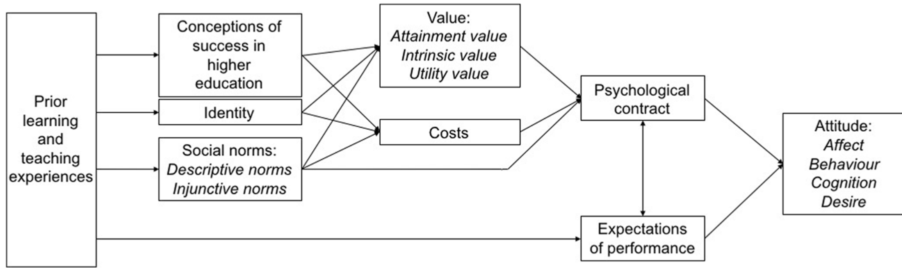

Fig. 1 Theoretical framework

higher education. These components (and potentially others that are not the focus of this study) shape the individual's assessment of values and costs they will accrue from the relationship. These understandings, and their understandings of the social norms governing appropriate behaviour in the interaction, create the mutual obligations and expectations that comprise their psychological contract.

In parallel to the psychological contract, prior experiences also shape the individual's expectations of their performance in the role, which in turn inform the psychological contract. These components interact to allow the individual to understand how their behaviour will lead to particular outcomes, which in turn affects their attitude to the teaching/learning relationship. If expectations of performance or the expectations entailed by the psychological contract are exceeded, the individual's attitude becomes more positive. If expectations are not met, their attitude becomes negative. Attitudes have several components, including affect (feelings and emotional responses), behaviour, cognition (beliefs and thoughts) and desires about the experience (Breckler, 1984).

Methods

Participants

The study reported in this article was part of a larger research project examining academic expectations among students and staff in the School of Life Sciences at a large, campus-based suburban university in Australia. The School of Life Sciences contains the disciplines of anatomy and physiology, microbiology, zoology, botany, agriculture and soil science, ecology and evolution. All undergraduate students undertaking a subject administered by the school (n = 2500 approximately), and all academic staff (n = 77) employed by the school were invited to participate via email. This study had ethics approval from the participating university.

Staff and students were invited to participate in either or both an online survey and a 1-h focus group interview. Email reminders to participate were also sent during the study period, which took place during May and June 2018 at the end of semester 1. The survey and focus groups were in field simultaneously and the data analysed afterwards.

The final sample for analysis consisted of 250 respondents to the student survey (10% response rate) and 10 participants in the student focus groups, and 48 respondents to the staff survey (62% response rate) and 15 participants in staff focus groups. All survey participants in this sample responded to both of the qualitative questions analysed here and

all demographic questions. Demographic data for survey participants is summarised in Table 1. Demographic data for focus group participants was not collected, and participants were not asked if they had also completed the survey, to preserve participant anonymity.

Measures

Research instruments were designed so the student and staff instruments complemented each other. Questions were rephrased slightly to be appropriate for the audience, but were otherwise identical in emphasis for the two groups. The survey consisted of a panel of 10–14 demographic questions, 42 Likert-type questions about expectations of different aspects of the teaching/learning experience (which are not reported on here) and 3 open-ended questions. In the two open-ended survey questions reported here, participants were asked (i) to list three ways in which their experience of university study (or students and their behaviour) had differed from their expectations and (ii) what advice they would give a student starting first year study about the expectations of university study.

In the focus groups, participants were asked about their expectations and experiences of students or staff (as appropriate), the responsibilities of students and staff in managing student learning, and perceptions of the clarity of expectations for class preparation, assessment standards and staff and student roles.

Thematic analysis

Responses to the transcribed focus group interviews and open-ended survey questions were coded by two of the three authors of this study (who had not facilitated focus groups) using an inductive realist approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coders initially identified themes independently from a random sample of 20 survey responses, after which both coders

Table 1 Demographic data of survey participants

Variable	Category	Students	Staff
Age (students)	17–19	74	-
	20–24	108	-
	25+	68	-
Age (staff)	31–40	-	19
	41–50	-	14
	50+	-	15
Gender	Female	174	21
	Male	73	27
	Do not wish to specify	3	0
Year of study/main year taught	First	93	8
	Second	67	17
	Third (final) year	90	23
Years at university of interest (staff)	1–4	-	7
	5–10	-	24
	11–15	-	7
	16+	-	10

met to compare their analysis. Inter-coder reliability was found to be approximately 70% at this stage. After confirmation and consolidation of the identified coding categories, the remaining responses were coded, and the researchers met again to further compare and classify results, including new coding categories. Four iterations of coding comparisons took place to finalise the thematic analysis, which was then analysed alongside a search of the literature.

Microsoft Excel and NVivo (version 11) were used for all data analysis.

Results

Major themes in the data

Six major themes were identified in the data. Each theme included between two and seven sub-themes (Table 2), and the prevalence of themes in staff and students' responses was analysed (Table 3). In both groups, workload management was the most common theme (taking both the survey and focus group responses together). Course design and teaching practices, roles and responsibilities, and study behaviour and academic literacy were also major themes for both groups. Although this was to be expected to some extent, as there were specific questions in the focus groups on these topics, roles and responsibilities was also a major theme for both groups in the survey where the topic was not specifically raised, suggesting this theme was of importance to participants regardless. Course design and teaching practices, and study behaviour and academic literacies were also significantly more common themes for staff than they were for students.

Conversely, affect and culture, and quality, were significantly more prevalent among students' responses than they were among staff. Indeed, the theme of quality was almost entirely absent from staff responses. Examples of comments about quality—particularly quality of teaching and employability—from students included:

> I did not realise lecturers are so friendly and approachable. Course structures are interesting mix between theories and practical skills. Study materials feel up to date and not from 1800 centuries ago (Student 13, survey).
>
> It almost feels like it is leading you into the path of research, not to get out into the private sector, where most people do end up (Student 3, focus group).

Table 2 Coding scheme for respondents' academic expectations and experiences

Theme	Sub-themes
Affect and culture	Confidence, enthusiasm, personal relationships, wellbeing
Course design and teaching practices	Assessment standards, assessment tasks and design, course advice, feedback, response time, subject content, support
Quality	Employability, quality of teaching, subject consistency, university facilities
Roles and responsibilities	Roles, self-managed learning
Study behaviour and academic literacy	Academic literacies, attendance, collaboration, deadlines, preparation, resource usage
Workload management	Flexibility, paid work, time management, workload expectations

Table 3 Theme prevalence (% of coded responses)

Theme	Students			Staff		
	Survey	Focus groups	Overall	Survey	Focus groups	Overall
Affect and culture	16	7	14	12	6	8
Course design and teaching practices	9	37	15	3	30	20
Quality	6	14	8	0	2	1
Roles and responsibilities	21	11	18	23	16	19
Study behaviour and academic literacy	12	15	13	25	19	21
Workload management	28	10	24	36	14	22

In chi-squared analysis of student versus staff theme prevalence
$p < 0.0001$

> Lecturers and teachers do not care enough to give appropriate feedback, majority of the course work is not linked to appropriate learning outcomes and lecturers and demonstrators do not explain much of the coursework appropriately enough to be understood by the majority of students (Student 141, survey).

Among the sub-themes, self-managed learning, workload expectations and time management were the major themes observed in both groups (Table 4). Again, however, differences were seen between the staff and students. Personal relationships, support and overall quality were frequently discussed by students, but not by staff. Attendance, assessment standards and enthusiasm were prevalent among staff but were not raised by students. Staff comments on students' enthusiasm accounted for nearly all of their comments in the 'affect and culture' theme, while comments on attendance comprised nearly half of their comments in the 'study behaviour and academic literacy' theme. The 'attendance' sub-theme accounted entirely for the difference in prevalence between staff and students in the 'study behaviour and academic literacy' theme. No significant differences between genders were observed in the survey data for students or staff; focus group data was not analysed for gender as demographic information was not collected.

Table 4 Rank and prevalence of major sub-themes (% of coded responses)

Students	Staff
Self-managed learning (13%)	Self-managed learning (14%)
Workload expectations (12%)	Workload expectations (10%)
Time management (10%)	Attendance (8%)*
Personal relationships (8%)*	Time management (8%)
Resource usage (5%)	Resource usage (7%)
Support (5%)*	Assessment standards (6%)*
Role (5%)	Enthusiasm (6%)*
Quality of teaching (4%)*	Role (5%)

$^{*}p < 0.05$

Uses of imperatives and injunctive norms

A striking difference between the two groups was the increased prevalence of imperative modal verbs (*should, ought, need to*) and similar phrases directing behaviour (*I expect that students…, I would hope they…*) among staff.

> 11: I expect that they want to be here, they want to learn and develop…
> 12: Commitment, commitment to studies, behaving like an adult because they would like to be treated like an adult. Diligence… That's really the big picture for me. (Academic 11 and 12, single focus group).
> That they do their best, that's what I tell my own kids, and that's what I expect university students to do, is to do their best. (Academic 14, focus group).

These formulations were much less common among students. Staff used these imperative phrases 15 times per thousand words in the surveys, and 8 times per thousand in the focus groups. In contrast, students used them 7 times per thousand words in the survey, and only 3 per thousand in the focus groups. When students used phrases such as 'I expect that…,' they tended not to make strong imperative statements.

> I guess my expectation there is that [teaching staff] will provide that information that I need about the expectations for the subject such that it's clear to me and easy for me to access. (Student 4, focus group).
> I think what I expect from my degree is to support me, just support for us in the degree I guess. (Student 8, focus group).

Students' imperative statements tended to be focused on the themes of course design and teaching practices, and particularly in the sub-themes of support and feedback, and clearly related to (and were sometimes co-coded with) the theme of quality. Even when students expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of teaching (see the quoted data in the previous section), their complaints were largely descriptive rather than injunctive. For example, contrast a student's dissatisfaction with subject organisation, with an academic's dissatisfaction with student attendance and engagement:

> The content is not hard, the workload and spacing of assessments is the hard part. Subjects may not be as well organised as expected and this causes problems. (Student 49, survey).
> I typically get 40 out of 210 students turn up, so that's about a 20% attendance rate… I simply don't think it's good enough… most students don't listen to the majority of lectures, and those that do log in don't listen to the whole lecture, typically. Unless they're listening to it double speed. (Academic 14, focus group).

These responses were typical of the differences in tone between the two groups. The students largely (although not exclusively) presented breached expectations as pragmatic problems, whereas academics more often presented them with a moral aspect that the students did not.

Affect and culture

As shown in Tables 3 and 4, the theme of 'affect and culture' was far more prevalent among student responses, and the sub-themes identified by the two groups were substantially different. Staff expectations on this theme primarily concerned student enthusiasm, while student expectations concerned personal relationships (particularly with staff). Both of these

sub-themes were almost absent from the responses of the contrasting group. Although the two sub-themes are not entirely at odds—being able to identify enthusiasm requires a certain level of personal relationship, for example—the difference in emphasis between cohorts on this theme was notable.

The responses from academics quoted in the previous section demonstrate both the focus staff placed on student enthusiasm, and the imperative character of their statements ('I expect that they want to be here,' 'That they do their best,'). Academics used the word 'engagement' or 'engage' ten times more frequently than students, and five times more when similar concepts such as 'interest' were included.

> Would love to see greater intellectual curiosity and exploration rather than doing enough to get by (Academic 6, survey).
> 1) Many students are content with a passing grade, but I expect all students to do their best. 2) I expect most students to attend most lectures, but most students attend a minority of lectures. 3) I expected students to be curious and engaged, but most are not. (Academic 28, survey).

The prevalence and tone of these imperatives, particularly when talking about how expectations had not been met, indicate the value academics placed on enthusiasm for learning among students and the frustration they felt when their expectations were not met. Several academics linked it to lack of respect for staff.

> Attend lectures, engage in the subject, respect the hard work staff put in (Academic 10, survey).

Despite the importance staff placed on enthusiasm, engagement and attendance (a behavioural indicator of at least some engagement with learning), and the prevalence they gave to the theme of course design and teaching practices, they rarely directly linked the two ideas except through the importance of conveying their own enthusiasm for the material in order to enthuse students, and the emotional labour this required.

> If you're engaged with the material, and try and be enthusiastic about it, you get students along… It's exhausting, but I've learnt that if I'm super enthusiastic in my prac, then students comment, oh it's because you're so enthusiastic I start to get enthusiastic. (Academic 4, focus group).

In contrast, students clearly linked their (lack of) enthusiasm for learning with teaching practices:

> A lot of subjects do not relate to what I want to do, less interesting than I hoped, Amount/difficulty of work was less than expected from school (Student 48, survey).
> I find it very difficult to contact lecturers… you are expected to plan your life around them and there is no consideration that you also have other commitments. The response time to emails etc. is also very poor… There is very little information or assistance provided to students about where the degree can take them… you often have to ask the same question numerous times (Student 70, survey).
> Don't expect lectures to be anything more than reading off lecture slides. (Student 75, survey).

For students, engagement and enthusiasm (and the theme of affect and culture more generally) appeared to be strongly linked to personal relationships with staff and their perception that staff cared about them as individuals. Many made positive statements about staff members who did so, which was again in contrast to most staff, who tended

to talk about students generally and more commonly focused on violations of expectations rather than positive breaches.

> I think engaging with, like, life… So more of a connection with your students because sometimes you'll have a lecturer who's really bland and just talks about the [material], there's no contact with the students (Student 8, focus group).
> [H]e'll enquire about how everyone's going… he generally will change when things are due based on how people are going and how much time he thinks they need. So that's actually really good. (Student 10, focus group).

Students clearly responded strongly (positively and negatively) when expectations for personal but professionally based relationships were breached or exceeded, suggesting they saw value in these relationships for their learning experience. These expectations may be shaped by their previous educational experiences (with school teachers) but may also reflect their understandings of how their learning was best supported.

Prioritisation and identity

Although academic staff frequently referred to themselves as 'teachers', they were often careful to differentiate their roles from those of school teachers, and two focus group participants independently indicated they felt ambiguous about the term 'teacher' instead of 'educator' to better make this distinction.

> I think there's a… subtle distinction between school, where they're all employed to teach to student, whereas… *one of the things* we do is teach… We've got all this other workload as well, all the research and administrative side, we simply don't have the time to be across each individual's performance and learning. (Academic 3, focus group).
> I don't think I'm a teacher. I didn't do a [qualification] in education… I'm basically a researcher who wants to impart knowledge about my discipline and how you do certain things and do research. But I'm not going to step you through how to put data into Excel… and write the formula, that's teaching to me. (Academic 5, focus group).

Both staff and students frequently commented that the other group misunderstood the 'multiple demands on our time' (Academic 14, focus group), whether that was research and service to the university (for staff), paid work (for students), or family, social and well-being commitments (for both groups).

Although teaching was only one responsibility among many, several staff members commented on the professional pride they and their colleagues took in their teaching, which fed their sense of violation when students did not respond to or 'respect' their effort as they anticipated:

> I think most if not all lecturers and teachers are actually good people who want the students to do well. (Academic 13, focus group).
> I think also I genuinely enjoy teaching, there's nothing worse than turning up to a lecture that should have 200 and there's 20. That is, it's soul destroying. (Academic 8, focus group).

Despite this, most staff appeared to conceive of their role relatively narrowly, and primarily focused on imparting information with limited expectation of pastoral care or individual attention (as Academic 3 mentions above), which they explicitly contrasted against the role of school teachers. This clearly contrasts with the expectation from students for individual relationships, as discussed in the last section. It also suggests a narrow sense of success at university as academic achievement (wanting 'students to do well'), which staff further linked to students' identity formation as students:

> I think identifying as a student, and I'm sort of giving away my age here, is more than just performing in your studies. I regard it as a lifestyle… Even my mates who went to the pub at lunch time thought [studying] was their job. (Academic 14, focus group).

While students acknowledged the importance of academic success (their advice to other students consistently mentioned 'giving yourself enough time to study,' 'try hard and keep on top of stuff,' 'treat it like a job,' 'attend all your classes'—statements clearly aligned with the expectations of staff), they also indicated other conceptions of success: making friends, managing commitments, learning what they enjoyed or simply passing subjects rather than 'doing well'. This seemed to suggest their sense of identity as 'students' was different—perhaps less intense or central to their sense of self—than academic staff expected from them.

Discussion

In this study, we sought to examine the academic expectations of staff and students and to test several hypotheses. Overall, we found that the academic expectations of staff and students in our study were relatively aligned for several themes in both prevalence and thematic content of their responses (consistent with Hassel & Ridout, 2018). This positive finding appears to conflict with the lived experiences of the academic staff participating in this study, who expressed considerable dissatisfaction with the behaviour of students. However, expectations influence but are not identical to behaviour, and individuals may not live up to their own expectations for a variety of reasons. Both students and staff reported multiple demands on their time, which may have contributed to behaviour that did not align with expectations of themselves or the other party, even when those expectations were clearly understood and aligned between the two groups. There were also areas of clear misalignment with a relatively greater prevalence for the themes of attendance, assessment standards and enthusiasm in staff responses and a relatively greater prevalence of the themes of personal relationships, support and quality in student responses.

Our major hypotheses focused on what occurred when mismatches arose and why. Drawing on theories of expectancy-value (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002) and psychological contracts (Dabos & Rousseau, 2004; Schalk & Roe, 2007), we hypothesised that where mismatches occurred; they were likely to promote strong emotional responses, particularly in areas strongly related to perceived value. These hypotheses were supported in our data. Because we anticipated students saw higher personal value in their university experiences, we also hypothesised students would show stronger responses to violations than staff. Instead, we found academic staff generally showed stronger emotional responses to violations than students.

Value for students

Although not all students were satisfied with their learning experiences, overall, responses from students were generally more positive than those from staff. This is largely consistent with other research. Nationally, 79% of first- and final-year students report being satisfied with the overall quality of their learning experience (Social Research Centre, 2019). Baik et al. (2015) also found that 50% of first-year students agreed their final school year was very good preparation for university, which may account for students' relatively realistic expectations of university study.

Eccles and Wigfield (2002) identify three main types of value: attainment, intrinsic, and utility value. For students, attainment value is determined by the impact attainment will have on self-concept or personal worth, intrinsic value is related to subjective interest and enjoyment and utility value is determined by alignment between study and long-term goals, which typically would include career goals, but may also involve such goals as maintaining a good work-life balance, managing work commitments or maintaining strong personal relationships with valued others. In our data, we saw strong themes relating to quality, particularly quality of teaching and employability, and the importance of support and feedback among the student responses. These themes, which were the areas in which students tended to make imperative statements, were absent or much less prevalent among staff responses, indicating the centrality of the learning experience to students and their conceptions of value. Again, this is consistent with other research: Baik et al. (2015) found 89% of first year students were clear about their reasons for coming to university and 67% were excited to be there. These findings suggest students see high intrinsic and utility value (particularly) in university education, and that failing to provide expected levels of support for learning led to dissatisfaction. The relative infrequency of students' use of 'engagement' and 'interest' compared with academics may suggest the policy focus on engagement as an indicator of quality may need to be revisited in lieu of more nuanced indicators such as strength of personal learning relationships.

However, it was clear university was only one aspect of students' lives and not always first among the commitments they had to manage. Being a student was therefore not necessarily central to their sense of identity. In contrast, staff expected that study would be their students' main priority and they would identify strongly as students. A lack of identity as a student may suggest some students obtain lower attainment value from studying. Furthermore, if an individual finds utility value in balancing study against other important long-term goals and commitments, the utility value of study is also weakened. Although academic achievement was an important marker of success, success at university was also conceived of more broadly or with more diversity by students than among academics, as has been shown elsewhere (Naylor, 2017; Zepke & Leach, 2010). This finding may indicate that utility value was easier to realise (e.g. if 'success' involves passing subjects, rather than getting high grades). These factors may explain why students did not respond as strongly to breaches of expectations as anticipated.

Value for staff

It is clear many staff obtained intrinsic value from teaching, and attainment value from their students' performance. As discussed above, academic staff appeared to have a narrower conception of student success as academic achievement ('doing well'); attainment

value for staff was therefore strongly related to grade performance. This conception of success is not particularly emphasised by the university, although academics are called upon every semester to examine the grade distributions and pass rates in their subjects, which may contribute. The potentially outdated focus on information transmission and recall as a prime marker of success also highlights the importance for further work from higher education specialists, academic developers and policy makers to lead disciplinary academics to a more modern understanding of teaching and learning.

This view of success may also be necessitated by the limited perspective academic staff were able to adopt, particularly where they had limited personal relationships with students. The broader conceptions of success proposed by students, such as mental wellbeing or doing better than expected given a student's other commitments or background (Naylor, 2017), frequently require deep insight into the personal situation of individual students which is not typically available to academics. This narrower view of success as academic achievement, which is central to an academics' relationship with students, therefore makes sense. For an educator who takes pride in their teaching role, grades may provide a relatively clear indicator of their impact on students, and thus relate strongly to an academic's self-concept and attainment value.

Few staff referred to the utility value of teaching for them, although the importance of student satisfaction in applications for academic promotion was noted in one focus group. However, this sense of the utility value of teaching was notably weaker for staff in this data set than intrinsic and attainment value. Staff also experienced costs from teaching, particularly in terms of demands on their time from some students when they were attempting to manage other academic and personal commitments. These costs, although contributing to the total expected value of the teaching experience for staff and hence their attitude towards teaching, did not fully appear to account for the strong emotional responses expressed by the staff participating in this study.

Psychological contracts and social norms

To explain this finding, we incorporated psychological contract theory into our theoretical model (Fig. 1), and, particularly, focused on the role of social norms in shaping the implicit psychological contracts staff and students expected from each other. Descriptive norms are perceptions of how most people behave in a given circumstance, whereas injunctive norms are perceptions of how valued others would approve of their conduct. In short, descriptive norms tell people what is normal or typical for their context, and injunctive norms tell people what is appropriate or desirable (Cialdini et al., 1991).

It was clear from staff responses that they expected their students to have meaningful self-identification as students and to prioritise study over most other commitments. These expectations were clearly expressed as injunctive norms that students *should* identify and behave in particular ways. This make sense, given that most academic staff were likely to have done so themselves as students (some academics suggested this in their responses). These tendencies may also have been strengthened by their understandings of desirable conduct arising from their careers as academics and conversations with peers about their own teaching experiences. Academic staff therefore held strong injunctive norms about students' behaviour and reacted strongly when those norms were breached.

In contrast, students (particularly those new to higher education) may have weaker understandings of social norms shaping their relationships with staff, and these are likely to be influenced by their prior educational experiences. This may account for their

expectation for personal relationships with academic staff, which may be influenced by injunctive norms about how teachers at university should act, based on how school teachers had acted. Of course, students clearly valued the quality of their learning experiences, and the expectation for personal relationships with staff may have been shaped by their understandings of how a personalised relationship with staff improved their learning, rather than ‘just’ social norms about how teachers should behave. Indeed, the importance of personal relationships with staff has been shown in a number of contexts, including mental wellbeing (Baik et al., 2017), academic integrity (Bretag et al., 2019) and learning outcomes (Zepke & Leach, 2010). Students’ perceived psychological contracts may therefore have been typically narrower than those of academics, which incorporated a wider range of social norms. This may account for the stronger sense of violation among academic staff when those contracts were breached.

A further factor that may have contributed to the stronger emotional response from staff may be opportunity for breaches to arise. Even final year students may have only experienced 20 to 40 different teaching staff (typically 4 to 8 per semester), and perhaps 50 assessment tasks, during their time at university. In contrast, staff may teach hundreds, if not thousands, of students. Out-group homogeneity is the tendency for group members to attend more closely to the differences between groups, and consequently pay less attention to differences between outgroup members (Haslam, Oakes, Turner, & McGarty, 1995). That is, one is aware of the diversity in one’s own group but tends to treat members of another group as homogenous. This may be demonstrated by staff comments about how students act; even when they acknowledged explicitly that some ‘high-achieving’ students were different, they tended to generalise their comments to all students. Dealing with large numbers of students may offer more opportunities for staff expectations to be breached, and out-group homogeneity then leads staff to attribute these breaches to all students, which reinforces both their sense of violation and a descriptive norm that students typically violate expectations.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that must be considered during the interpretation of results. First, this was a cross-sectional study, undertaken in a single school (the School of Life Sciences) at a single suburban, campus-based institution, which may limit the generalisability of these findings. Although, as discussed above, findings around the prevalence of student satisfaction and sense that secondary school was good preparation for university study were broadly consistent with published data, student expectations appear to be understudied in the level of detail undertaken here, which limits our ability to contextualise some of our findings. Furthermore, this study examines the academic expectations of students and staff teaching at the undergraduate level, and this relationship may differ substantially for postgraduate and doctoral students, although previous research has shown a similar mismatch at the doctoral level (Cheng et al., 2016).

The low (10%) response rate among students may also be cause for consideration, as this may suggest our sample is not representative. Students or staff who had strong opinions on academic expectations may have been more motivated to participate, although the high response rate among academics (62%) and the internal consistency of responses observed in both groups may suggest that this is unlikely. We were furthermore unable to link individual survey responses to focus group responses. Although we attempted to mitigate this by asking different questions in the two contexts, this does mean that individuals

who participated in both parts of the study (who are also those most likely to have the strongest opinions) may have had an outsized impact on the research findings.

With these limitations in mind, we recommend that further research is undertaken to extend, validate and contextualise these findings in other disciplines and institutions internationally.

Conclusion

In this study, we have explained differences in the academic expectations of staff and students through expectancy-value theory and psychological contract theory and highlighted the importance of social norms, particularly to staff. The potential outcomes of these breaches are poor student satisfaction and/or low staff morale. We found that academics expressed stronger injunctive norms about prioritisation and identity (a narrow view of success as academic achievement) and had potentially more opportunities for breaches to occur due to exposure to a greater number of students. These differences may explain the stronger sense of violation staff expressed despite obtaining less direct value from their interactions.

A key theme for students was the desire for closer or more individual relationships with teaching staff, and the close relationship between having a personalised relationship with staff, engagement with teaching practices and satisfaction with the quality of teaching. This relationship was not expressed by academics but appeared key to students' conceptions of quality in education. An important pedagogical and policy implication of our research is how prevalent the themes of personal relationships, support and quality of teaching are to students.

In response, academic staff may say they are open to relationships with students, but that students do not engage with them in order to form those relationships, no matter how much they may say they value them. We, alongside Hassel and Ridout (2018), see this as a shared responsibility, particularly given the increasing diversity of the student body, many of whom face structural barriers to their participation in university and may not have the luxury of identifying primarily as students, prioritising their study as academics expect, or have the cultural resources to understand academics' implicit expectations (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Naylor & Mifsud, 2019; Troiano & Elias, 2014). Where differences in expectations arise and those expectations are reasonable and central to the learning/teaching relationship, we do not believe that students should be the only group to change their expectations to acculturate to the university environment. Instead, academics *and* students should meet halfway where possible. A particular policy implication of this finding is that university workload models that frequently impose very high teaching loads and very large class numbers, and relatively little time for opportunistic interactions with students, should be altered to acknowledge the importance of relationship building and interaction (Hassel & Ridout, 2018).

In return, where staff have reasonable academic expectations that some students may breach, staff should be empowered to clearly convey those expectations. Our results suggest these will be particularly influential if students see academics as 'valued others' (highlighting the importance of personal relationships) and if staff can explain their decisions in terms of value for students (while appreciating that students conceive of success in far broader terms than just grades). Cialdini et al. (1991) demonstrated that injunctive norms, once activated, are more likely to lead to beneficial social conduct than descriptive norms, which are beneficial only when most individuals already behave in a socially desirable way. However,

social norms only influence behaviour if they are activated (if individuals attend to them) at the moment of behavioural decision (Stok & de Ridder, 2019). Understanding the relationship between social norms and behaviour, and using norms adroitly to articulate important expectations, may help staff to improve learning outcomes and the student experience.

While clarifying expectations may improve alignment between staff and students to some extent, the basis of these differences in individual priorities suggests merely articulating expectations may not resolve the issue. Being aware of how out-group homogeneity and breaches of expectations affect their own sense of value and satisfaction would be beneficial for academics. For academic leaders and those who coach, support or deliver professional development for teaching staff, understanding how these factors influence both staff morale and student satisfaction is essential.

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Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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