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The first year experience: Perceptions of students at a new campus

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This study was conducted in a bid to better understand the student cohort at the new campus of the University of Southern Queensland. The project was designed to follow on from the findings of a recent nation-wide review of first year students conducted by the Centre for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Melbourne (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005). Studies focusing on the experiences and perceptions of vulnerable student cohorts provide valuable information to academic and support staff at universities and enable institutions to better meet student needs. The cohort in this context differed in several respects from those of previous studies, specifically in terms of the much greater proportion of students who were of a low to middle socio-economic status, as well as a larger proportion of mature-age students. The findings are relevant in terms of providing meaningful student experiences, assisting students to connect theoretical frameworks with their home experiences, engaging students, developing innovative teaching and learning practices within this context and improving students' perceptions of quality assurance. The demographics of the current sample indicate a cohort of students in previously marginalised groups and as such the current research constitutes a unique contribution to the investigation of first year experiences.

Keywords: first-year experience, new campus, student perceptions

Introduction

At both a national and institutional level there has been recognition of the need to accurately profile higher education students, in order to gauge and respond to the impact of diverse student demographics within a rapidly changing mass higher education system (James, Baldwin & McInnis, 1999). Such research can provide data which contributes meaningfully to university policy, planning, and course enhancement. It is acknowledged that the first year experience, in particular, is instrumental in determining student attitudes and approaches to learning (Krause, 2006). By exploring this area, it is possible to improve retention and student success - highly valued outcomes in an increasingly results-based sector (Krause, 2006; McInnis, James, & Hartley, 2000).

This paper reports on the initial findings from a project exploring students' perceptions of their experiences in their first year at a new campus of the University of Southern Queensland at Springfield. Springfield campus is located in the Western Corridor of Brisbane, an area undergoing significant growth and change. The campus was opened in March 2006, and by

the second semester of that year serviced 267 undergraduate students enrolled in the areas of Education, Business and Psychology. The Springfield campus of USQ has attracted a student body of unique characteristics when compared with Australian universities surveyed in previous student experience research (i.e. Krause *et. al.*, 2005). For example, preliminary student enrolment information indicated a substantially higher percentage of students from low socio-economic status (SES) postcode regions when compared with the national average at other universities. Additionally, a higher proportion of mature age students, students who are working part-time, parents who are studying and raising a young family, and students who are the first member of their family to attend university were present in the Springfield student body.

By investigating the first year experiences of students, with a specific focus on the sub-groups identified above, this research is uniquely able to capture the transition experiences of these demographic sub-groups. For this reason, the current research findings will have the potential to add a distinctive perspective to research on first year experiences, and enable the University of Southern Queensland Springfield to profile its student body and subsequently identify and respond to their first year students' needs. The findings from this research might also be useful to other regional universities or satellite campuses of larger universities.

Methodology

This project utilised multiple methods to address the following research questions:

1. What perceptions do students have of their first year experience at Springfield campus?
2. To what extent does background appear to influence student perceptions of their first year experience at the Springfield Campus?
3. What attitudes towards learning do students in their first year have?
4. What impact does the first year experience have on student attitudes towards learning?
5. What recommendations are appropriate in terms of student learning and course development?

The research methodology chosen incorporates a web-based questionnaire and quantitative analyses, combined with qualitative data collection (through focus groups), in order to address issues raised by Krause *et. al.* (2005) associated with low response rates to paper surveys and depth of response in quantitative studies.

This paper reports on the first stage of data collection, which involved an online survey of all first-year students at the University of Southern Queensland's Springfield campus (focussing on research questions 1, 2 and 3). The questionnaire was administered online to all students enrolled at the University of Southern Queensland (Springfield). Categories used in the questionnaire were based both on the questions of most relevance in the current study's research proposal and those established by multivariate analyses of a related questionnaire used by Krause *et. al.* (2005). In its final format, the current questionnaire included eleven general categories termed - *Sense of Purpose, Participation, Perceptions of Teaching, Perception of courses, Managing Commitments/Work, Previous Learning Experiences/Skills, Expectations of FYE, Reasons for Enrolling, Engagement with Learning, Student Identity, Access of Resources, and Other*. Overall, quantitative evaluation of instrument reliability, based on questions two to seventy-eight in the current sample, indicated a Cronbach's alpha of $r = 0.782$ ($n = 126$; 77 items).

Research indicates that for populations with high access to and familiarity with the Internet, on-line survey methods are likely to yield higher-quality data, with lower non-response rates and for this reason an on-line format was chosen for the current research (Dillman, 2000). Overall the First Year Experience Questionnaire (FYEQ) developed for the current study was completed by 159 undergraduate students; a response rate of 60% from a total pool of 267 first year students. This is favourable comparable with Krause *et. al.*'s study (2005) which cites response rates for mail-out surveys of 28%; to Krause *et. al.* (1999), which cites a response rate of 37%; and to Krause *et. al.* (1994), citing a response rate of 57%. Given the general decline in response rate across this longitudinal study of first year students and a similar decline shown in the research literature (i.e. Baruch, 1999; Caetano, 2001; Dillman, 2000) the response rate of the current study presents a definite strength. Overall the current response rate indicates adequate sampling of the available population, substantially increasing the generalisability of results.

Given the uniqueness of several demographic characteristics of the current sample, detailed demographic analyses are presented in Table 1 below. The sample included students from all three faculties currently running undergraduate programs at the campus - Psychology, Business and Education. The distribution of students over faculties is similar to that present in the enrolled population. As indicated in Table 1 below, a large proportion of the sample were female, approximately two thirds of the sample were aged 24 or under, and approximately a third of the sample were aged 25 or over. Interestingly, just over half of respondents were the first in their family to attend university, and just under half of students had parents who had not completed senior high school, while only twenty-seven percent of the sample had parents who had participated in university-level studies. This presents a considerably higher percentage of first generation tertiary students than enrolled at most universities in Australia and contributes a unique perspective to the current study.

Just under a third of students had children of their own, and fourteen percent of students had one or more children who were very young (i.e. preschool age or younger). Adding to this challenge, the majority of students were engaged in work whilst studying (i.e. 5% were employed full-time, and 64% were employed part-time). In fact, almost two thirds of the sample (i.e. 63%) were employed for over eight hours per week, the majority (31.5%) working between 9 and 16 hours per week, and just under a third (i.e. 29%) working over 17 hours per week. While a small number of participants worked to pay for luxuries (i.e. social expenses and leisure travel) and a few worked in their own or family owned businesses, the overwhelming majority stated the need to work to cover basic costs such as fuel, travel expenses, uni fees, books and rent. Additionally, several students reported working to gain experience in their area of study, or as part of a professional development programme.

All students lived in Brisbane, or the surrounding area (they were locals); 31.13% were from a low SES, and 41.72% were from a middle SES (i.e. see Table 1). It should be noted that if we had used the same definitions as James, Baldwin and McInnis (1999), this study would show that over a third of participants were from a low SES, which again is a substantially higher proportion than the usual spread in university student cohorts.

Table 1: Demographics of respondents

Variable	Number Valid	Percentage of Overall Sample
Program	154	Psychology = 13% Business = 25% Education = 62%
Sex	152	Male = 20% Female = 80%
Mature Age (+25)	157	Students 24 and Under = 61% Students 25 and Over = 39%
First in Family to Go to University	155	No = 46% Yes = 54%
Parental Year of Education	156	Post-Graduate Degree = 8% Tafe = 13% Year 11 = 14% Apprenticeship = 16% Bachelor's Degree = 19% Year 10 = 30%
No Children/Older Children/Younger Children	151	No = 71% Older Children = 15% Preschool Age Children = 14%
No Work/Part-time/Full-Time	153	No = 31% Part-Time = 64% Full-Time = 5%
Average Hours Worked	151	0 hours/week = 31% 3-8 hours/week = 6% 9-16 hours/week = 34% 17-24 hours/week = 16% 25-32 hours/week = 8% Full Time = 5% (35-57.5 hrs)
Work Hours 10 (≤ 10 ; +10)	151	≤ 10 = 38% +10 = 62%
Work Hours 15 (≤ 15 ; +15)	151	≤ 15 = 60% +15 = 40%
Postcode	151	Students all live in Brisbane or close by.
SES	151	Low (1) = 31% Medium (2) = 42% High (3) = 27%

Non-response poses difficulties to the generalisability of results, if results fail to represent the population as a whole (Schalm & Kelloway, 2001). The potential that non-respondents differed in some systematic way from respondents could be a potential criticism of the current study, however, a response rate of 60% is recommended as sufficient by several authorities (i.e. an average response rate seems to be approximately 60% or less; Baruch, 1999; Asch, Jedrzejewski & Christakis, 1997) and some authorities consider 50% to be adequate (Babbie, 1990). In the current study, it is considered that the potential for non-response bias is no greater than that risked by other similar studies and in fact constitutes a marked improvement over several recently cited first year studies (i.e. Krause *et. al.* 2005).

Simple descriptive statistics (i.e. mean, median and percentage) were calculated for all questionnaire responses. Additionally, significance tests were used to evaluate differences in item responses between groups which were based on the demographic characteristics outlined above. Based on the results of data screening, which indicated substantial negative skew in item distributions, and the use of a Likert type response scale in the questionnaire, non-

parametric analyses (i.e. Mann-Whitney, Wilcoxon and chi-square tests) were used to conduct the statistical comparisons. The most meaningful and complete data was provided by Mann-Whitney U tests (i.e. for comparisons between two groups) and Kruskal-Wallis significance tests (i.e. for comparisons between more than two groups) both of which were used to evaluate the likelihood that compared groups were sampled from the same population based on ranking of data, rather than data summary scores (i.e. means, standard deviations or frequencies). It is noted that while parametric analysis (i.e. t tests and analysis of variance) constitute the norm in much published research, violation of the assumptions of similarity of distribution, random sampling, independence of samples and ordinal measurement invalidate use of parametric tests in many instances (Howell, 1997). Data distributions within the current sample were evaluated and found to fully satisfy the assumptions of non-parametric significance tests which provided the more robust, stable and accurate tests of group-differences for the current data and improve the generalisability of subsequent results.

Results

Overall, results indicated that the majority of students in their first year of study at USQ Springfield were positive about their university experience (i.e. 84.8% enjoyed their courses; 82.2% enjoyed being a university student, and 81.5% were satisfied with their university experience; see Table 1). As indicated in Table 1, students were very clear about why they wanted to study at university, their choice of course was very closely related to their choice of career, and they seemed focussed on their employment possibilities after graduation. The majority of students were also positive about their relationships with academic staff.

Table 1: Perceptions of courses, university and university lecturers

<i>Item</i>	<i>Question Wording</i>	<i>NA%</i>	<i>SD%</i>	<i>D%</i>	<i>N%</i>	<i>A%</i>	<i>SA%</i>	<i>missing</i>
2	"Overall I am enjoying my courses"	0	0	3.8	10.8	56.1	28.7	0.6
3	"Overall I am satisfied with the university experience"	0	0.6	4.5	13.4	50.3	31.2	0
4	"I like being a university student"	0	1.8	0.6	15.3	40.8	41.4	0
5	"I am clear about the reasons I came to university"	0	0	1.3	10.2	21.0	67.5	0
6	"I know the type of occupation I want to be involved in"	0	0	3.8	7.6	25.5	63.1	0
7	"I am just at university until I have made a decision about my ideal future"	16.6	50.3	20.4	3.8	7.0	1.9	0
9	"This university degree was my first preference"	2.5	2.5	9.6	4.5	17.8	63.1	0
10	"I enjoy the intellectual challenge of the courses I am in"	0	1.9	1.9	16.6	53.5	25.5	0.6
11	"Academic staff are approachable"	0	0	1.9	10.2	46.5	40.8	0.6
12	"I feel confidence that at least one of my teachers knows my name"	0	3.2	1.3	5.1	32.5	57.5	0.6
13	"Academic staff are available to discuss my work"	0	0	2.5	7.6	51.6	36.3	1.9
14	"Academic staff make a real effort to understand difficulties I may be having with my work"	1.3	0.6	6.4	15.9	45.9	29.3	0.6

Results indicated that students placed a high value on studying in a personally interesting topic, developing skills relevant to an intended profession or career and improving their job prospects through their studies. As indicated in Table 2, personal interest was rated as 'very important' by a large majority of students (i.e. 77%), and as at least 'important' by almost all

students (i.e. 96%). Developing skills, improving job prospects and getting training in a specific job were also rated as at least ‘important’ by a vast majority of students (i.e. approximately 90%, 92% and 88% respectively). While 47% of students considered meeting parental and family expectations as of little importance, 43% considered this as at least ‘important’ (i.e. with 19% rating meeting parental expectations as ‘very important’).

These results indicate that universities may need to broaden their dialogue with the first year cohort by including parents and partners in orientation programs. At the University of Southern Queensland’s Springfield Campus this extended dialogue has been initiated in 2007 in response to these findings. Attendees were introduced to a range of ways that they could support their children or partners throughout the first year at university.

Table 2 – Reason for studying at university

Item	Question Wording	NAA%	N%	UC%	I%	VI%	Missing
41	<i>(how important is)</i> “Studying in a field that really interests me”	0	0	3.2	19.1	77.1	0.6
42	<i>(how important is)</i> “Developing my talents and creative abilities”	0.6	2.5	5.7	37.6	52.9	0.6
43	<i>(how important is)</i> “Improving my job prospects”	1.3	2.5	3.8	31.8	59.9	0.6
44	<i>(how important is)</i> “Getting training for a specific job”	0	2.5	7.0	27.4	61.1	1.9
45	<i>(how important is)</i> “Meeting the expectations of parents or family”	22.3	24.2	9.6	24.8	18.5	0.6

NAA = Not at all important; N = Not important UC = Uncertain; I = Important; VI = Very important.

Results indicated that a majority of students felt confidence in their capacity to achieve at tertiary study (i.e. see Appendix 1) and very few reported lacking the skills necessary to meet academic requirements. However, a small group of students (i.e. 14%) believed they did not possess academic writing skills, research skills (i.e. 12.1%), or mathematical skills (12.1%). Larger numbers of students were uncertain about their skills in these three areas (i.e. 21.7%, 23.6%, and 22.9% respectively). This suggests that the issue of self-efficacy may need to be addressed for more discrete academic skills, and strategies put in place to enhance student confidence. Alternatively these numeracy, literacy and communication skills may need to be developmentally embedded into first year courses, or academic support provided by other means.

In terms of their confidence in completing course requirements, well over three quarters of students were confident or very confident in their estimation of English, computer, participation and interpersonal skills. This may be due to the fact that an overwhelming majority of students reported frequent, weekly access of course material and web-based resources (i.e. approximately 71% accessed web-based resources weekly; approximately 89% accessed course study materials weekly). A majority accessed online discussion groups and lecturers/tutors at least once a month or more frequently (i.e. approximately 72% and 85% respectively) and most (i.e. 44% sometimes and 54% frequently) were active in class participation.

By contrast, a majority of students rarely, if ever, accessed online learning and teaching support (i.e. approximately 85% once or never), student services staff (i.e. approximately 84%) and learning and teaching support services (i.e. approximately 81%). Despite this, however, the percentage of students accessing these support services on a regular basis (i.e.

approximately 10% of the sampled students accessed learning and teaching support services on a weekly basis) represents a substantially large workload for student services, perhaps greater than that commonly carried by university support staff.

Students were overall highly positive about online services, admission procedures, and course specifications reporting in a majority of cases that these were somewhat useful or extremely useful. Students were particularly positive about USQ Connect (a space for on-line learning) and web-based course resources (i.e. over 73% and 56% respectively considered these extremely useful).

The results of significance tests indicated that several demographic factors impacted significantly on student's reports of their first year experience. The demographic factors most likely to significantly impact upon students' opinions, attitudes and self-reports of their experience were:

1. Age (Very Important)
2. Parental status (Very Important)
3. School Leavers (Very Important)
4. Program (Very Important)

Of moderate and mild importance to students' perceptions of their first year experience was:

5. Having Dropped a Course (Moderately Important)
6. Working 10 Hours (Moderately Important)
7. Socio-economic Status (SES) (Moderately Important)
8. Reason for Dropping Courses (Moderately Important)
9. Residential Status (Mildly Important)
10. Reason for Working (Mildly Important).
11. Sex (Mildly Important).
12. First In Family to Attend University (Mildly Important)

It is notable that there are differences in opinions between those students who have children and those who don't, school leavers and non-school leavers and mature age and non-mature age students – it is highly likely that results for all these of these are related to the age of students. This is consistent with Krause's (2006) paper, which highlights age as a significant factor impacting on student perceptions. The significant categories were investigated in greater detail in order to ascertain what influenced first-year student's perceptions of their experience.

Age

Results indicated that mature age students reported significantly different perceptions of their first year experience when compared with younger students. In the current study, age impacted significantly on students' sense of purpose, their motivation, their enjoyment and their confidence. Specifically, mature aged students:

- reported a significantly stronger sense of purpose indicating that they felt they were 'learning' more and were very able to get motivated (i.e. $Z=-2.068$; $p=0.039$)
- were significantly more likely to enjoy being a university student and the intellectual challenge associated with this (i.e. $Z=-3.488$; $p=0.000$);
- were significantly less likely to have chosen to study based on the expectations of their family (i.e. $\chi^2(2)=15.417$; $p=0.004$); and

- felt more confident in terms of their mathematics skills (i.e. $Z=-2.067$; $p=0.039$), and less confident about their computer skills (i.e. $Z=-2.062$; $p=0.039$).

By contrast, however, age did not seem to impact upon student's perceptions of teaching quality and suitability, management of commitments and ratings of how useful enrolment and orientation processes were or the usefulness of university administrative processes or student's access of online systems, web-based resources or online discussion groups.

The results of this study show many similarities with Krause et. al.'s (2005) study across multiple universities in Australia. As suggested by such previous studies, mature age students were typically more positive about their experience, and are more likely to seek assistance from staff. Similarly, a greater proportion of young students were strongly positive in their interest in extracurricular activities when compared with mature age students.

In seeking to more fully cater for these age-related differences it might be necessary to consider whether different aged groups require different orientation programs. For example, in engaging younger learners, orientation programs may need to emphasise the rewards of intellectual challenge and fulfilling individual, rather than family expectations. In contrast, mature age learners might welcome an orientation program that sought to increase their confidence upon entry by addressing issues such as how to balance their study and non-campus commitments, online technologies and how to independently develop their computer skills, and how to transfer known skills to their campus studies.

Parental Status

Whether students did or did not have children impacted significantly on a large proportion of the self-report questions. Such results suggest that having children may fundamentally change perceptions of the first year experience. For example:

- A significantly greater number of students with children reported enjoying their courses overall (i.e. $\chi^2(1)=7.35$; $p=0.007$; 94%, compared with 85% of those without children). Additionally, students with children were more definite in their opinion (i.e. double the number strongly agreed).
- When reporting on their satisfaction with their university experience, students without children were less definite in their opinion and a smaller proportion agreed to being satisfied with the university experience so far (i.e. 78%, compared with 92% of students with children).
- A substantially greater number of students with children identified with and enjoyed being a university student (i.e. $Z=-2.786$; $p=0.005$; 98%, compared with 78%), when compared with students without children.
- All of the students with children are clear about why they came to university, with a vast majority being very certain, when compared to child-less students (i.e. $\chi^2(2)= 8.088$; $p=0.018$) .
- A greater proportion of students with children were in no doubt about their chosen occupation, compared to students without children, they were more confident in their decisions (i.e. $Z=-2.506$; $p=0.012$).
- Interestingly, a majority of students with children reported USQ Springfield being their first preference, compared with students without children (i.e. $Z=-3.480$; $p=0.001$).
- Twice as many students with children, as those without children, never skipped their classes (i.e. $Z=-2.540$; $p=0.011$) .
- While similar proportions of students accessed support services once a semester (i.e. 24% of students without children and 21% of those with), a much greater

proportion of students without children had never accessed LTSU support services (i.e. 63%, compared with only 45% of students with children). Most students with children accessed support services on a regular basis.

Overall, results indicated that students who had children were more definite in their decision making; they were much more likely to provide emphatic self-reports indicating strongly held opinions. Their results indicated that they had also experienced a somewhat easier transition into university life, when compared with other first year student. Evidently, these students were more likely to access support services on a regular basis and rarely skipped classes. Such perceptions may suggest that students with children were more engaged in the 'learning' aspects of their university experience, and (as seen with 'age' above), were more confident in their decision to study at university.

Despite their apparent satisfaction with their first year experience, further research is needed to explore how academically successful these students are. Their particular life circumstances may mean that they have to juggle a wide range of non-study commitments, alongside their regular coursework, and it may well be that they require greater flexibility from tertiary institutions. Flexibility of study options are likely to also benefit the large number of students who are juggling their studies alongside part-time work commitments.

School leavers

School leavers were much more likely to be "uncertain" which, while it may indicate a reticence to give "critical" feedback, may equally indicate reticence to give "positive" feedback. For example:

- Meeting the expectations of parents and family was considered 'important' by over half of school leavers (i.e. 53%), compared with just over a third of non-school leavers (i.e. 39%); a difference found to be statistically significant (i.e. $Z=-2.354$; $p=0.019$).
- A larger proportion of non-school leavers were confident in their academic writing skills (i.e. $Z=-2.230$; $p=0.026$; 73%, compared with 53%).
- Over seven times the number of non-school leavers stated that they never attended class without completing readings (i.e. 22%), compared with school leavers (i.e. 3%), which was also a statistically significant group distinction (i.e. $\chi^2(2)= 6.765$; $p=0.034$)

Perhaps most notably, overall response patterns indicated generally higher percentages of school leavers as 'uncertain' about choices, as compared to non-school leavers. For example, non-school leavers seemed much more likely to choose responses such as "neutral" or "I don't know", rather than provide emphatic opinions. While anecdotal, if the 'uncertainty' indicated by younger students in these questionnaire responses generalises to a similar unwillingness to express opinions during class or online discussions in their courses, it may be a significant contributor to the first year experience. Specifically, this may mean that younger students appear less engaged with their courses, which may impact on the way they are treated by staff and students. It is important that first year retention programs address this uncertainty in younger students, particularly at a campus where these students are not in the clear majority. This might entail a pedagogical attempt to nurture and develop the school leavers' student voice by incorporating more group and pair-work tasks during lessons. Alternatively the differences between university culture and that of a secondary school could be the focus of a targeted orientation for school leavers. A final possibility would be to demystify university culture by strategically engaging with Year 12 students in their final

year at secondary school, and so discuss transition issues in advance of their arrival on campus.

Program

The program in which students were enrolled impacted significantly on their reports of the first year student experience. In response to “overall I am enjoying my courses” significant differences were found between students from the three programmes run at USQ Springfield (i.e. $\chi^2 = 8.845$, $df = 2$, $p = 0.012$). Specifically, 2% of education students, 8% of business students, and 5% of psychology students disagreed, 12.6% of education students, 10% of business students, and 5% of psychology students were uncertain, 55% of education students, 72% of business students, and 35% of psychology students agreed and 31% of education students, 10% of business students, and 50% of psychology students strongly agreed. Similar percentages of students agreed to enjoying their courses (education = 86%; business = 82%; psychology 85%), however, business students were less confident in their agreement and psychology students were overall more confident (i.e. most likely to strongly agree).

Most psychology students and a large majority of education students felt very confident that they received personal attention from at least one of their teachers (i.e. $\chi^2 = 13.782$, $df = 2$, $p = 0.001$). A similar majority of business students feel somewhat confident, however, business students tended to be the least positive in their confidence. Psychology students were, again, overwhelmingly confident in their rapport with teachers.

Although James, Baldwin and McInnis (1999) note that differences are noted in terms of field of study, the present study seems to reveal greater differences between students’ perceptions regarding the teaching they received. This is likely to be due to the different teaching approaches taken between courses at this university, although this area deserves future consideration in follow-up studies. It may be beneficial for the different faculties to create a forum whereby faculty-specific approaches to the first year of study are shared with students and academics alike. This would serve to raise awareness of differences and commonalities concerning pedagogy, and lead to reflection on how to best deliver first year courses.

Socioeconomic Status

It was expected (as indicated by previous studies) that socioeconomic status (SES) would have a highly significant impact on student attitudes to their university experience. This, however, only held moderate significance in the current study and had less impact than age or program enrolment. However, SES was found to influence students’ reports of the approachability of academic staff (i.e. $\chi^2 = 6.204$, $df = 2$, $p = 0.045$) and student reports regarding problems relating to different learning styles required in their university study (i.e. $\chi^2(4) = 11.701$; $p = 0.020$).

In response to the question “most of the academic staff are approachable” 2% of students from a lower socioeconomic background disagreed, 19% were uncertain, 45% agreed and 34% strongly agreed; of students from a middle socioeconomic background 54% agreed and 38% strongly agreed; from a higher socioeconomic background 39% agreed and 54% strongly agreed. As indicated above, results indicated that students from a lower SES were slightly less likely to consider academic staff to be approachable; a finding with considerable relevance to the provision of accessible and equitable tertiary education.

In response to the question “the different styles of learning required at university have caused me difficulty” 17% of students from low SES, 8% from a medium SES and 5% strongly

disagreed; 17% of low SES students, 40% of medium SES students and 15% of high SES students disagreed; 27-28% were uncertain from all SES levels; 23% of low SES students agreed, as did 21% of middle SES students and 32% of high SES students. Of perhaps most relevance, however, is the finding that while 13% of lower SES students strongly agreed to facing difficulties with the learning styles required of tertiary education, a significantly greater proportion of higher SES students reported similar problems (i.e. 20%), while a minimum of middle SES students were substantially worried by tertiary learning styles (i.e. 2%).

Overall, students from a low SES disagreed more strongly with having experienced difficulties, while a greater majority of students from a middle SES either disagreed or strongly disagreed with having problems (i.e. 32% low SES; 48% medium SES; 20% high SES). Overall, a much greater majority of students from a high SES felt they experienced difficulty adjusting to the different styles of learning required at university (i.e. 36% low SES; 23% medium SES; 52% high SES).

Certain results from this study appear to be in direct contrast to previous findings in the area of the first year student experience (Krause *et. al.*, 2005). Specifically, the current study indicated that students from lower SES were less likely to feel that they experienced difficulties in their study, whereas students from high SES did experience and report difficulties with several aspects of the first year experience. The implications of this are perhaps most relevant to USQ Springfield, but may also be of interest to other 'new' campuses in Australia particularly in terms of planning of specific support for first year students.

Conclusion

This paper has presented a quantitative analysis of students attending the University of Southern Queensland's Springfield campus in its first year of operation. The picture provided by this study is one of a university that has students who experience hardships, but are still remarkably positive about their university experience. Given that over half of the respondents were the first in their family to attend university, almost half had parents who did not complete high school, almost a third were managing the care of small children with their study and a majority were engaged in at least ten hours and up to 24 hours of work per week, the high retention rate and positive attitude of study respondents is unexpected.

Although the demographics of students at this university were different to those at most universities, many similarities in perceptions were found between this study and the studies conducted by Krause *et. al.* (2005) - in particular students' age was seen to be the greatest predictor of attitude towards study. The differences that were found may be due to the fact that this cohort of students was the *only* cohort at the campus. They therefore (out of necessity) took on leadership roles early on, perhaps lending themselves a greater sense of purpose than typical 1st year students at an established campus. Whatever the reason, being the only cohort at the campus seems to have had the most benefit for those students from low SES areas, as these students did not report finding difficulties in their studies (in contrast to other studies). Further and ongoing research into this area is warranted at USQ Springfield.

This study has been directed towards ascertaining the specific needs of first year students in and out of the classroom in their first year at university. It was designed to influence the development of a first year experience program for this unique cohort of students that is

context-specific (as recommended by Krause, 2006), and therefore appropriate to their needs. These initial findings influenced the second stage of the data collection (not reported here), which asked students to comment freely on their perceptions of their experience. Ongoing study of these students as they enter their 2nd year of university and a comparison with the new 1st year students at this campus will continue to provide a platform from which USQ can better understand and cater for its students.

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Appendix 1 – Descriptive statistics

NA = Not applicable; SD = Strongly Disagree; D = Disagree; N = Neutral; A = Agree; SA = Strongly Agree.

<i>Item</i>	<i>Question Wording</i>	<i>NA%</i>	<i>SD%</i>	<i>D%</i>	<i>N%</i>	<i>A%</i>	<i>SA%</i>	<i>missing</i>
2	“Overall I am enjoying my courses”	0	0	3.8	10.8	56.1	28.7	0.6
3	“Overall I am satisfied with the university experience”	0	0.6	4.5	13.4	50.3	31.2	0
4	“I like being a university student”	0	1.8	0.6	15.3	40.8	41.4	0
5	“I am clear about the reasons I came to university”	0	0	1.3	10.2	21.0	67.5	0
6	“I know the type of occupation I want to be involved in”	0	0	3.8	7.6	25.5	63.1	0
7	“I am just at university until I have made a decision about my ideal future”	16.6	50.3	20.4	3.8	7.0	1.9	0
8	“I am enrolled in the program that best suits me at this time”	1.9	2.5	4.5	7.0	33.8	50.3	0
9	“This university degree was my first preference”	2.5	2.5	9.6	4.5	17.8	63.1	0
10	“I enjoy the intellectual challenge of the courses I am in”	0	1.9	1.9	16.6	53.5	25.5	0.6
11	“Academic staff are approachable”	0	0	1.9	10.2	46.5	40.8	0.6
12	“I feel confidence that at least one of my teachers knows my name”	0	3.2	1.3	5.1	32.5	57.5	0.6
13	“Academic staff are available to discuss my work”	0	0	2.5	7.6	51.6	36.3	1.9
14	“Academic staff make a real effort to understand difficulties I may be having with my work”	1.3	0.6	6.4	15.9	45.9	29.3	0.6
15	“Academic staff in my subjects take an interest in my progress”	0.6	0	8.3	25.5	44.6	20.4	0.6
16	“The different styles of learning required at university have caused me difficulties”	0.6	9.6	27.4	26.8	24.4	9.6	1.9

17	“I am comfortable with how learning material is presented (i.e. lectures, tutorials, online).”	0	3.8	12.1	21.0	47.8	13.4	1.9
17a	“Variations in teaching style have caused me difficulties”	0.6	3.8	12.1	21.0	48.4	12.1	1.9
18	“I feel that I am learning within my courses”	0	0	1.9	10.2	51.6	34.4	1.9
19	“I have found it easy to get myself motivated to study”	0	6.4	21.7	28.7	33.1	8.9	1.3
20	“Teaching staff give me helpful feedback when I approach them with a question”	0.6	0	3.2	15.9	52.9	25.5	1.9
21	“Teaching staff give me helpful feedback on my assignments”	0.6	0	3.2	21.7	54.1	19.7	0.6
22	“The quality of teaching in my courses is good”	0	0	3.8	10.2	57.3	28.0	0.6
23	“Teaching staff clearly explain what they expect from students”	0	0.6	7.0	20.4	51.0	20.4	0.6
24	“I have no clear idea about where the majority of my courses are heading”	1.9	25.5	40.1	17.8	8.9	4.5	1.3
25	“The workload in my course is at a level I can manage”	0	0	16.6	30.6	42.0	8.9	1.9
26	“I find it difficult to complete the volume of work required for each course”	1.3	7.0	30.6	29.9	22.9	7.6	0.6
27	“I understand what is required of me in my assessments”	0	0.6	5.7	22.3	63.1	7.6	0.6
28	“Course assessments allowed me to accurately gauge my progress during semester”	0	0.6	5.7	26.1	56.1	10.2	1.3
29	“Assignment feedback allowed me to improve throughout the semester”	1.3	0.6	7.0	21.7	55.4	13.4	0.6
30	“I completed all my assignments whether optional or compulsory throughout the semester”	3.8	1.3	1.9	9.6	34.4	48.8	0.6

31	“I have difficulty juggling part-time work and classes”	12.7	3.8	19.1	25.5	23.6	15.3	0
32	“I do not need to attend lectures and tutorials because I can get all the course information I need from the Study Desk”	1.3	35.0	37.6	15.9	8.3	1.9	0
33	“I am interested in the social or sporting activities or facilities provided”	2.5	3.2	14.0	34.4	32.5	12.7	0.6
34	“I benefited from participating in Orientation week”	9.6	2.5	7.0	22.3	38.9	19.7	0
35	“I like the atmosphere at USQ Springfield”	0	1.9	3.2	10.8	47.1	36.9	0
36	“I feel like I belong to the University Community”	0	1.9	8.3	20.4	42.0	27.4	0
37	“I generally keep to myself at university”	1.9	16.6	31.2	21.0	20.4	8.9	0
38	“I have not made close friends at university”	3.2	31.8	29.8	14.0	14.6	7.0	0
39	“I enjoy mixing with people who are very different from me”	0	0.6	6.4	24.8	50.3	17.2	0.6
40	“University hasn’t lived up to my expectations”	4.5	33.1	37.6	14.0	7.6	3.2	0

NAA = Not at all important; N = Not important;; UC = Uncertain; I = Important; VI = Very important.

<i>Item</i>	<i>Question Wording</i>	<i>NAA%</i>	<i>N%</i>	<i>UC%</i>	<i>I%</i>	<i>VI%</i>	<i>Missing</i>
41	<i>(how important is)</i> “Studying in a field that really interests me”	0	0	3.2	19.1	77.1	0.6
42	<i>(how important is)</i> “Developing my talents and creative abilities”	0.6	2.5	5.7	37.6	52.9	0.6
43	<i>(how important is)</i> “Improving my job prospects”	1.3	2.5	3.8	31.8	59.9	0.6
44	<i>(how important is)</i> “Getting training for a specific job”	0	2.5	7.0	27.4	61.1	1.9
45	<i>(how important is)</i> “Meeting the expectations of parents or family”	22..3	24.2	9.6	24.8	18.5	0.6

Note// NAA = Not at all; N = No; UC = Uncertain; Y =Yes; YA =Yes Absolutely.

<i>Item</i>	<i>Question Wording</i>	<i>NAA%</i>	<i>N%</i>	<i>UC%</i>	<i>Y%</i>	<i>YA%</i>	<i>missing</i>
46	<i>(do you possess)</i> “Mathematical Skills”	5.7	6.4	22.9	44.6	19.7	0.6
47	<i>(do you possess)</i> “Academic writing skills”	3.2	10.8	21.7	49.7	14.0	0.6
48	<i>(do you possess)</i> “English Skills”	1.9	5.7	11.5	59.2	20.4	1.3
49	<i>(do you possess)</i> “Computer Skills”	1.9	8.9	9.6	49.7	29.3	0.6
50	<i>(do you possess)</i> “Participation Skills”	1.3	0.6	12.7	59.2	25.5	0.6
51	<i>(do you possess)</i> “Interpersonal Skills”	0.6	1.3	11.5	58.6	26.8	1.3
52	<i>(do you possess)</i> “Research Skills”	0	12.1	23.6	48.4	15.3	0.6

<i>Item</i>	<i>Question Wording</i>	<i>Once a Week</i>	<i>Once a Month</i>	<i>Once a Semester</i>	<i>Never</i>
53	<i>(do You Access)</i> “ALSONline”	5.1	7.6	16.6	68.8
54	<i>(do You Access)</i> “Student services staff or study skills workshops”	5.1	10.2	28.7	54.8
55	<i>(do You Access)</i> “LTSU support services (e.g. The Learning Centre)”	9.6	6.4	22.3	58.6
56	<i>(do You Access)</i> “Library staff or library skills workshops	15.3	26.8	29.9	27.4
57	<i>(do You Access)</i> “Lecturers and tutors	59.9	24.2	12.7	3.2
58	<i>(do You Access)</i> “Online discussion groups”	47.8	24.2	14.0	12.7
59	<i>(do You Access)</i> “Web-based Resources and information designed specifically for the course”	71.3	18.5	7.6	2.5
60	<i>(do You Access)</i> “Course study materials”	89.2	7.0	1.9	1.3

<i>Item</i>	<i>Question Wording</i> <i>(frequency with which you have)</i>	<i>Never</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Frequently</i>
61	“Considered dropping out from university”	59.9	35.7	4.5
62	“Doubted my ability to pass the course assessment”	17.2	60.5	21.7
63	“Asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions”	1.9	43.9	54.1
64	“Came to class without completing readings or assignments”	16.6	70.7	12.7
65	“Skipped classes”	28.0	63.7	7.6
66	“Worked with classmates outside of class on group assignments”	10.2	48.8	41.4
67	“Worked with classmates outside of class on course areas with which you had problems”	24.8	53.5	21.0
68	“Worked with other students on projects during class”	6.4	59.2	34.4
69	“Studied with other students”	31.8	47.1	21.0
70	“Borrowed course notes and materials from friends in the same courses”	36.9	52.9	10.2

<i>Item</i>	<i>Question Wording</i> <i>(how useful were)</i>	<i>Not at all</i>	<i>Not Very</i>	<i>Uncertain</i>	<i>Somewhat</i>	<i>Extremely</i>
71	“The program advice I received”	0	2.5	19.1	54.8	23.6
72	“The university enrollment processes”	0	2.5	16.6	53.5	27.4
73	“The course specification”	0	1.9	11.5	49.0	36.9
74	“The university administrative processes”	0	3.2	18.5	53.5	24.8
75	“Online system access”	0	2.5	9.6	45.9	42.0
76	“USQ Connect”	0	0	3.8	22.3	73.9
77	“Access to web-based course resources”	0	0.6	10.2	32.5	56.7
78	“Online discussion groups”	1.9	8.3	15.9	38.9	34.4