CHAPTER 7

THE FIRST-YEAR STUDENT EXPERIENCE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BOTSWANA

MICHAEL GREGORY

Introduction

In 2006, the University of Botswana carried out a research project on the first-year experience (FYE) through a perceptions and expectations study. The results from that survey signalled some issues where new students identified gaps between their expectations and experiences. The perceptions study was followed up in 2007 by focus group research with new first-year students on their early experiences. Concurrently, in 2007, at the time of registration, a survey was carried out among all students returning into the second year of full-time programmes, to ascertain their expectations and level of satisfaction with a holistic range of experiences in their first year.

This chapter outlines the results of these studies and suggests actions necessary to improve student success and deliver institutional improvement. The chapter is divided into three parts:

1. What does the literature tell us?
2. What does our institutional research tell us?
3. What needs to be done for institutional improvement?

What does the literature tell us?

Much of the literature on the student experience, which is extensive and goes back to the early 1970s (McInnis, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1975, 1993), is concerned about student retention levels, as well as providing the right experience to ensure improved student success.

Few students drop out at the University of Botswana (UB). This is because of the way that government funding and allowances operate to support students on full-time undergraduate programmes. Students are inclined to complete their programmes more slowly in order to take advantage of living allowances and/or to extend their

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years of study to make up for earlier failure or to postpone the uncertainty of graduate-level employment. In 2008, 31% of UB undergraduate students on four-year bachelor degree programmes who enrolled in 2002/3 were still enrolled five years later, and 9% remained enrolled six years on. In Law and Engineering, which are five-year programmes, 25% remained in enrolment for a sixth year. The failure rates in the institution are variable in first-year courses. A random sample by the author of 16 Level 100 first-year courses showed that 10.4% of students failed a course in their first year in 2007. Course failure at the university can only be redeemed in subsequent years of study (although strategies to address this, including a winter semester, are to be introduced in 2009).

According to one estimate in the United Kingdom, the cost of student departure to the UK taxpayer was over £100 million annually (Yorke, 1999). This has risen in recent years, with the percentage of students dropping out of undergraduate education steady at 22% each year from 2003 to 2008. At UB, while retention may not be the issue in terms of student persistence, the proxy for it in terms of students failing course assessment and extension of years at the university results in a triple loss. Firstly, this represents a significant cost to the government in the use of public funds to subsidise the extra years of study. Secondly, the failure to progress through the university system within the required timescale results in the use of vital resources and clogging of physical facilities, and leads to restricted intake or barriers to other strategic priorities (e.g. research and increased postgraduate enrolment). Thirdly, their extra year(s) at university mean students themselves lose lifetime earnings; an issue that will become more important over the next decade as the burden of cost of undergraduate education shifts from the state to parents and students themselves.

Designing institutional strategies for first-year experience programmes based purely on attrition rates is reactive, rather than proactive (Krause, 2006; Yorke & Thomas, 2003). This is largely due to the many different influences on the nature of attrition (e.g. financial, family circumstance and health) (Burnett, 2006) or, in the case of UB currently, the impact of low fees, relaxed government subsidy and the tendency of many students to put off the difficulties in finding graduate-level employment in a constrained job market as mentioned above. The nature of this context in Botswana will change in coming years. A tertiary education sector funding methodology will be introduced, with an emphasis on performance. The number of competing institutions will also grow. Students, parents and other stakeholders will become more aware of what they can expect from a university, and will rightly demand it and base their choice of institution on better information about what institutions provide. A good university will always seek to improve what it does, especially in a more competitive environment. It will understand and be proactive in meeting the needs of its students and endeavour to provide an experience grounded in quality delivery that can help students in their transition from secondary to higher education. They will need to provide a basis from which:

the first year of university study remains arguably the most critical time for engaging students with their learning community and [equipping]

them with the requisite skills to not only persist but to be successful and independent in their learning throughout the undergraduate years and beyond. (Krause, 2005)

Yorke and Longden (2008) suggest a number of broad areas of institutional activity through which the chances of student success can be enhanced. These include an emphasis on the first-year student experience as well as a commitment to student learning and engagement, proactive management of student transition, treating the curriculum as one in which social engagement is fostered, and designing it to increase the chances of student success.

There is very little African research on the issue of student persistence, including retention and completion, and so the relevance of Western concepts and models is unknown. These concepts and models might, however, provide useful theoretical constructs that could be tested empirically by research in African universities and that could also be used as possible propositional frameworks through which individual institutions might strategise to improve the experiences of their students.

Two comprehensive models have emerged to guide the study of student persistence. At UB this would involve factors such as attention to study (pass/fail, progression, retention and time to completion). Tinto's Student Integration Model (Tinto, 1975, 1993) advanced the idea that the fit between the student and the institution plays a key role in the likelihood of persistence. Accordingly, the degree of institutional commitment a student feels, as well as the student's subsequent persistence, is shaped by the congruence between student motivation and ability, and the institution's academic and social characteristics (Filkins, Kehoe & McLaughlin, 2001). As Yorke and Longden (2008) have subsequently identified, there are complex factors that influence student persistence and some of these are external to the institution. These are missing from Tinto's proposition (Bean 1983; Nora & Cabrera, 1993). These theoretical constructs have generated numerous studies, many of which have focused on student stratification, such as gender, age and ethnicity. This includes work in New Zealand by Zepke, Leach and Prebble (2003). The 13 propositions on how to improve student outcomes developed by Zepke influenced the methodology for conducting the UB survey on returning second-year students and their perceptions of their first-year experience. Other research, which looks at a range of factors that potentially affect persistence, was also influential in the development of the university's approach to the first-year student experience. These include in particular the importance of student services (Turner & Berry, 2000), the interactions between students and academic staff, and support (Nagda, Gregerman & Jonides, 1998). The roles played by learning communities in and outside the classroom are of key importance in student success (Baker & Pomerantz, 2000).

The UB concept of its First-Year Experience (FYE) and Living and Learning Communities Programme is further influenced by the trend in higher education that reflects a shift in emphasis from the lecturer towards bringing the student to the centre stage of university life. While a lecturer may be excellent, if the student is not ready to learn, not much learning will take place and the success of the university will

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be at risk. Therefore, creating an environment that is conducive to and stimulating for learning has become critical. This embraces the holistic student experience, ranging from what happens in the different physical dimensions of where students learn – whether in lecture halls, student accommodation or informal areas – to the facilities and the quality of the campus and services provided.

Significant elements of learning take place outside the classroom as students interact socially and live and learn with others in their community. This clearly relates to the UB's Living and Learning Communities component in the FYE Programme, the goals of which are:

- ▣ to assist students to adapt to relevant university communities that are conducive for learning and comfortable living;
- ▣ to create an interactive process between staff and students and to provide a learning environment in a community spirit and setting; and
- ▣ to provide an opportunity for students to know each other as members of a community that strives to make their community safe and secure.

What does our institutional research tell us?

First-year and new students' perceptions and expectations survey, 2006

In 2006/7, a survey of new and first-year students' expectations and experiences was administered to the new and first-year full-time student population with a total of 1,102 responses representing 32% of the relevant population. Two general areas for improvement were identified: firstly, entry and early experiences needed to be improved, including the admissions process, and secondly, student expectations of learning in a tertiary environment needed to be adjusted and shaped to improve study motivation and to relieve the over-expectation of reliance on lecturers and spoon-feeding.

Focus group research on new students' early experiences, 2007

In 2007/8 it was decided that rather than repeat a variation of the previous survey, it was necessary to study in more depth the perceptions of new students through semi-structured focus group interviews. The aim was to investigate more thoroughly some of the qualitative issues that had been flagged for improvement in the 2006/7 survey. The pre-identified areas for exploration were:

- ▣ the academic registration process;
- ▣ the accommodation registration process;
- ▣ the orientation programme; and
- ▣ student expectations of tertiary study.

Four focus group interviews were conducted with thirty-one returning second-year students from the six faculties. The interviews were conducted by trained facilitators during the first two weeks of November 2007. The analysis focused exclusively on the four focus areas, namely, systemic matters relevant to students' expectations and experiences of the UB processes and environment during registration, orientation

and transition. The common experiences and views of these thirty-one students are considered indicative of how new students may experience and interpret the service provided by UB and how they may construct their reality from those experiences. The implication is that their persistence in terms of motivation to learn and succeed will be affected in some way by these early experiences.

The research found that the university processes involved in delivering services to students typically involved students in situations they found stressful, frustrating and unhelpful, such as searching for venues, getting lost, queuing for hours, unfriendly staff, lack of correct information and having to make quick and uninformed decisions. They described a service culture in which there is lack of communication between operational units, lack of professionalism and customer focus, a tendency to blame 'the system' for service failure, and a culture of expecting the student to wait for service.

Staff dealing with admissions, for example, were described as 'not very helpful, not very friendly at all'. One student observed that the admissions service provides the student's first impression of the university and that 'they don't give you any reason to come here'. Consequently the student's impression is, 'I don't want to come to this institution where nobody is approachable.'

Many comments illustrated a widespread malaise in the culture of service provision. Change management will clearly be required to address the serious problems identified.

In respect of the academic registration process, the students variously reported the discrepancy between information they expected to receive and that which they received:

I remember asking for the calendar to know what courses I will be doing you know like in specifics like maths and statistics and they just said 'no, we can't give you the calendar, you just get the calendar when you are registered' which is pointless to me ... there is a total lack of transparency, total lack of information. (student in the Faculty of Business)

As a result of the 'confusion, which started during registration' (including not understanding what the course was about), several students ended up enrolling for elective courses that they later considered irrelevant to their programme, such as Zoology for a nursing student. This has clear implications for graduate employability. Students also felt under pressure to make decisions on the spot. They felt ill equipped to make quick decisions that they contemplated should have been based on consideration of information provided in advance and discussed with their parents. Students reported their concerns that they ended up choosing electives because of clashes with cores, and that they had little time to reflect on their options with parents and peers. All the groups commented in some detail on the need for more information prior to registration.

Students were generally very critical of the organisation of the academic registration process, which many described as 'disorganised', 'haphazard', 'confusing' and 'long'. Students did make a number of suggestions about how the registration process could

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be improved, including online registration (which was introduced at the University during 2008), extending the registration period, subdividing student groups and registering them on different days, using larger venues, better signage and improvement of staff through training.

The third area discussed by students in the focus groups was the timing of accommodation registration. They reported that they were not allowed to register for accommodation until the academic registration process was complete. This was of great concern to students from outside Gaborone, where the main campus is located. These students, who may have travelled up to 1,200 kilometres, frequently arrived the day before registration and were distracted during the process by anxiety about their luggage and where they were going to sleep:

People who come far, like Maun. Just imagine those people who had to go around with their luggage. I mean, it was so painful to see those people who had been long here. Some were saying they were even sleeping in some people's garden. They don't even know them, they just asked for accommodation and when they came here again, they thought they will be registered. I mean they had to queue and wait. (student in the Faculty of Social Science)

Like the academic registration process, accommodation registration was characterised by the students as long and tedious. One of the steps in the process was signing up for meals. In respect of this step students complained about unfortunate timing, inability to make informed decisions, incorrect recording of information, failure to reconcile information within the system and inflexibility of the system. When they signed up for meals, they did not have the opportunity to try the food in the refectory, and did not know their timetables or the refectory hours. As a result, some signed up for meal plans, which they later could not take.

Students were critical of residence assistants and to a lesser extent, wardens, who were not as accessible as students would have liked them to be, but felt the cleaning service was delivered by friendly, helpful and supportive (mainly) women. These were characterised as 'like a mother or an aunt', dispensing advice and encouragement to students.

The students reported little experience of orientation. This was surprising, for one of the goals of the UB First-Year Experience was to introduce the First-Year Programme. The aims of the programme are:

- ▣ to assist students to make a successful transition from life at secondary school to life at university;
- ▣ to assist students in acquiring the life skills necessary for their survival on campus and for success in their studies and in life;
- ▣ to help students to prepare for life beyond university;
- ▣ to cultivate a campus culture that values student success; and
- ▣ to make students proud of and identify with UB.

After completing a one-week peer orientation programme, students supposedly enrol for a semester's seminar to continue learning more about UB and its resources, to acquire life skills and to make the transition from secondary to university education. Nevertheless, many of the students either appeared to be unaware of any orientation programme that might have been offered, or knew about it but were unable to participate because they were still busy with registration and accommodation procedures. Some tried to participate but found that the venue had been changed and details of the new location had not been provided. No students reported that they had benefited from orientation although some felt they had been disadvantaged by missing out on the opportunity. Participants spoke at length about things that were confusing, embarrassing or mysterious to them as new students, which suggests that they have little idea of the differences between school and university study. The late realisation of this may account for some of the failures among first-year students. Their comments clustered around:

- ▣ not understanding the expectations of UB;
- ▣ not understanding how to progress through university;
- ▣ difficulty in adapting to a new learning environment; and
- ▣ not knowing how to get books.

The following problem statements are derived from the findings of the focus group activities:

- ▣ *New students are not provided with the information that they need.* This includes obtaining the right information at the right time, being provided with information they can understand and receiving information that is accurate.
- ▣ *The sequencing of steps in the registration/orientation process is problematic.* Accommodation is the first thing students need. Orientation is needed before registration.
- ▣ *Organisation and resourcing of the processes are inefficient.* Online registration, more registration points, a staggered process and reliable technology are required to process large numbers of students efficiently.
- ▣ *Staff are not customer focused.* This includes being responsive to student communications, being helpful and friendly, proactively anticipating new students' needs and designing customer service processes so that students are not inconvenienced.
- ▣ *The transition of high school leavers to university is not effected.* Staff need to be aware of the following with regard to first-year and new students:
  - The jargon, conventions and practices of a university are unfamiliar to high school graduates.
  - Many are away from parents for the first time.
  - Many are unfamiliar with the UB campus and are accustomed to a high level of personalised guidance.
  - Many are not used to making their own decisions and discovering things on their own.

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It is surmised from this research that these gaps or problems cause difficulties in relation to student integration and affect students' persistence. In particular, these gaps or problems contribute to first-year student failure and the number of retakes, and further down the line, the extension of their studies beyond the normal four or five year time-frame to complete an undergraduate degree.

Survey of returning second-year full-time undergraduates on their first-year experience

In addition to the research on the early experiences of new students, the University also wished to gain a more informed perspective on the overall student experience from students who had completed their first year. In the UK, recent work has been done to assess the level of student satisfaction with their first-year experience (Yorke & Longden, 2008). The work was conducted among those students who had left their institutions before completing their studies. In Botswana, tracking students after they have left is difficult, but also, as reported earlier, very few students leave the university. It was therefore considered more important to understand students' levels of expectation of the range of activities that constitute student life and learning, as well as level of their satisfaction. This would then serve as the basis for deeper research to be conducted in 2009 and beyond on how these relate to student retention, achievement, progression and time to completion.

During registration week in August 2007, a survey was conducted on the returning second-year students. The survey was designed to capture student expectations of and levels of satisfaction with their first-year experience and to identify gaps in performance, namely, the difference between expectations and levels of satisfaction. Students were asked to give two ratings to each statement about their university experience – firstly, the importance of aspects of their experience, and secondly, how satisfied they were with their actual experience. The instrument used four-point Likert scales to ensure that students could not 'sit on the fence' and that their responses would provide clear messages to the University about what was important to them and how they rated the performance of the University. Importance and satisfaction scores were each completed on a scale of 1 to 4 (although A to D was used), with 1 (or A) being the highest score (very important/very satisfied) and 4 (or D) the lowest score (not at all important/not at all satisfied). Any gap between what students expected and what they experienced was calculated by subtracting the satisfaction or performance score from the importance or expectation score. A high gap score indicates that student expectations were not being met.

A negative gap score (i.e. positive situation) may indicate that the university is investing resources in an area that is not important to students. (There were in fact no negative gap scores in the survey results.) A gap score indicates areas to which the university needs to devote attention. The work of Zepke et al. (2003), which developed 13 propositions for improving student retention and success, influenced the formulation of 39 questions (see Table 7.1) clustered in university services in the following areas:

- ▣ teaching, learning and assessment;
- ▣ courses;
- ▣ timetable and examinations;
- ▣ campus;
- ▣ facilities;
- ▣ student support; and
- ▣ student diversity.

The target population of the survey was 3,368 full-time second-year undergraduate students. Responses were obtained from 38% of the target population. Table 7.1 summarises the responses and shows the level of student expectations in the high/very high categories and the levels of institutional performance in the satisfied/very satisfied and slightly dissatisfied/very dissatisfied categories. There is no area of the university where students' satisfaction outweighs their expectations, and in some areas the gap between satisfaction and expectation is high. The most striking gap areas are with regard to student support and campus.

Table 7.1 Responses on the level of student expectations

Zepke's 13 propositions	The challenge to UB	Strategy for improvement
1 Institutional behaviours, environment and processes are welcoming and efficient.	Students highlighted the barriers to their assimilation into the institutional culture. There is a discontinuity between the information they need, the advice they are given on courses, timetable clashes and a perceived poor induction process. Accommodation services are below student expectations. Food services are considered poor.	Induction processes should be strengthened. Re-sequence steps that address the issues raised by students in terms of admissions, accommodation registration, orientation and academic registration. Improve physical signage on campus. Assure technology for both on- and off-line registration. Provide refectory information, with flexible meal plans. Improve quality of catering services. Improve warden system.
2 The institution provides opportunities for students to establish social networks.	Students have high expectations for social and sporting facilities and events.	The university has committed itself to expanding its sporting facilities and enhancing social activities and space for students in its new Strategic Plan (UB, 2008b). New student accommodation will integrate social and learning spaces more extensively.

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Table 7.1 Continued

Zepke's 13 propositions	The challenge to UB	Strategy for improvement
3 Academic counselling and pre-enrolment advice are readily available to ensure that students enrol for appropriate programmes and papers.	Students are concerned that they are given inadequate advice on enrolment for courses, and that they sometimes end up on courses inappropriate to their employment needs.	Improved pre-enrolment advice and guidance are necessary.
4 Teachers are approachable and available for academic discussions.	Nearly 40% of first-year students are not satisfied with the availability of lecturers outside class times. There is an over-reliance of students on lecturers to 'spoon-feed'.	Develop strategies for student nurturing by teachers. Integrate resident tutoring into the Living and Learning Communities Strategy. Develop student learning strategies that foster independent learning.
5 Students experience good quality teaching and manageable workloads.	Inadequate feedback, timeliness of lecturers and the quality of instruction are perceived as problematic by students.	The university has adopted a new Learning and Teaching Policy (UB, 2008a). This will require close monitoring and significant investment in change management.
6 Orientation/induction programmes are provided to facilitate both social and academic integration.	Despite a policy that encourages student induction and the delivery of a FYE Programme, few students appear to view this as a means of social and academic integration.	The delivery of induction processes at both the institutional and faculty levels should be reviewed and improved. The impact of the FYE Programme should be researched.
7 Students working in academic learning communities have good outcomes.	Over 70% of students felt that they were able to form social networks with other students and that diverse students were able to become involved in campus life, although this level of satisfaction remained below the expected level.	The university needs to build on this area, which is one of its comparative successes.
8 A comprehensive range of institutional services and facilities is available.	Students have a low satisfaction level with regard to the campus environment and the level of facilities. A low rating accorded to the library and the bookshop was possibly influenced by one-off incidents (e.g. complaints about bag handling at the library and book allowances at the bookshop) that affected the score adversely.	The university library is one of the best in Africa, but more attention needs to be given to student complaints. Improve IT facilities and expand bandwidth. The university is expecting to roll out wireless access, which will provide students with the opportunity to learn in various locations.
9 Supplemental instruction is provided.	This area was not specifically tested in the survey.	

Table 7.1 Continued

Zepke's 13 propositions	The challenge to UB	Strategy for improvement
10 Peer tutoring and mentoring services are provided.	40% of students expressed their dissatisfaction in this regard.	The university should review and enhance this aspect to capitalise on peer mentoring as an important integrating element in the student experience and to effectively build various approaches to learning communities.
11 There is an absence of discrimination on campus, so students feel valued, fairly treated and safe.	Almost 80% of students were satisfied with this aspect.	This is clearly a positive area of activity and is strongly reflected in the cultural values of the university.
12 Institutional processes cater for a diversity of learning preferences.	The university offers over 2,500 undergraduate courses. Many find this confusing, and it frequently leads to clashes in timetables and results in over-interference with personal or work activities.	The university needs to redefine its academic offerings to ensure relevance and a more coherent and tighter set of curricula, and also to provide subject-focused learning communities. Increased blended learning and flexible learning approaches need to be developed.
13 The institutional culture, social and academic, welcomes diverse cultural capital and adapts to the needs of diverse students.	Students feel the university is accepting of students from different and diverse backgrounds. They have high expectations in this regard.	It appears that the university values in this regard are strongly lived up to. This may be one of the reasons for the low withdrawal rate.

Source: *Student Satisfaction Survey Report (2008)*, Institutional Planning Department, University of Botswana

Most institutions would certainly be concerned at satisfaction gaps showing dissatisfaction above expectation. In the USA, the student satisfaction inventory conducted annually on students in over 800 institutions shows that most students have a higher-education experience that either matches or exceeds their expectations (Noel Levitz & Associates, 2008). In the UK, the report of Yorke and Longden (2008) also indicates that overall students are satisfied with their first year of study. At UB, the data show that all the university's activities are viewed unfavourably by a significant proportion of students, in some cases by around half of the student body. These data should be prompting serious intervention strategies in the institution.

What needs to be done for institutional improvement?

This is a case study of one institution in Southern Africa. It is not known whether it is applicable to other universities in Africa, because there is a dearth of research on the first-year student experience in African universities apart from those in South Africa.

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The funding of African universities, the diverse nature of their student populations, staff and institutional outlooks, as well as their stage of development compared to that of Western institutions, mean that care must be taken in the interpretation of comparative results from Europe, North America and Australasia. Different levels of resourcing and cultural and socio-economic reasons, may require different strategies towards student success, as well as different institutional approaches and strategies towards improving the student experience in the African context. Nevertheless, there is an attraction in using the 13 propositions expounded by Zepke in his model. There is a clear congruence between them and the impact students consider important in their experience at UB, and thus the actions that the University may have to take to improve student outcomes (see Table 7.1).

In addition to the strategic changes that must be made and implemented to improve the first-year experience at UB, it is clear that much more sustained institutional research is necessary to identify the causes of issues, problems and gaps so that properly informed actions and interventions can be implemented. From a broader continental perspective, not all African universities have this capacity, but they need to develop it if they are to understand their own unique challenges with regard to how students persist through their institutions and leave with meaningful and valued experiences.

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