

What are the “unwritten rules” of academia that health and social care students wish they knew at the start of their journey?

ARENS, Jack, 3rd year student BSc (Hons) Psychology.
SOMERS, Liam & WILLIAMS, Alan, School of Nursing and Midwifery
College of Health, Psychology and Social Care, University of Derby



1 Background & Context

University students are often taught formally by attending lectures and communicating through feedback of assessment. However, more informal or ‘unwritten’ learning also occurs within higher education, which lecturers may not be assessing to ensure it is not blundering the learner’s performance.

Unwritten rules are defined as aspects of University life that university staff assume students know, but instead potentially are not aware of, creating a barrier to learning for students in their journey throughout the course of their degree.

Limited literature is present on the unwritten rules of university, rather on student expectations and associated satisfaction, which unveils the need for the current research and potentially further research on this topic.

Biles et al (2022) explored student expectations and associated satisfaction using a mixed-methods survey design. They found that the helpfulness of university staff and clarity of teacher communications were viewed as strongly associated with satisfaction with the course in nursing students. The extent to which students felt supported to navigate through university systems was noted as the strongest predictor of satisfaction (Biles et al, 2022). This study however did not include postgraduate students which limits research implications.

Further research on students’ expectations for higher education has been conducted using a systematic review of nine studies including 7287 participants across Australia, Brazil, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and Russia (Tomlinson, 2023). Results presented that students expected independent learning but was uncertain on management strategies. Students also had expectations of having to access too many resources and support from lecturers, which they may find differ between circumstances (Tomlinson, 2023).

Aims and Objectives

- To determine the aspects of university Health and Social Care students wish they knew about university life.
- To explore some concrete implications of the current research study in improving student life.

2 Method

Materials:

- A survey was used to gather data from participants, collecting demographic information, and then subsequently using open questions to discover participants’ thoughts on university life and its unwritten rules.

Participants:

- Participants recruited for the current study by programme announcements
- Convenience sampling adopted
- All participants 18 years or older, recruited from Schools of Nursing & Midwifery and Allied Health & Social Care in the College of Health, Psychology and Social Care at the University of Derby.

Procedure:

Ethical approval granted by CREC (ETH2324-3776) and survey including consent, descriptive data, Likert question on experiences and free text option. All participants were entered to a draw for a £10 shopping vouchers

Data analysis:

- A thematic analysis was conducted on the collected data from the surveys to reveal current themes across the responses given by participants.

Strengths and Limitations

+ The current study could contribute to the development of the targeted programs as it has given insights that could have otherwise persisted without notice.

- There are other data analysis techniques that could investigate themes in more depth, such as discourse analysis (Adger, 2015).

References:

Adger, C. T. (2015). *The handbook of discourse analysis* (D. Tannen, H. E. Hamilton, & D. Schiffrin, Eds.; Second edition.). Wiley Blackwell.

Biles, J., Murphy, K., & Moyo, P. (2022). Undergraduate nursing students’ course expectations, actual experiences, and associated satisfaction levels: A mixed methods survey. *Teaching and Learning in Nursing, 17*(1), 102–108. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.teln.2021.10.005>

Tomlinson, A., Simpson, A., & Killingback, C. (2023). Student expectations of teaching and learning when starting university: a systematic review. *Journal of Further and Higher Education, 47*(8), 1054–1073. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2023.2212242>

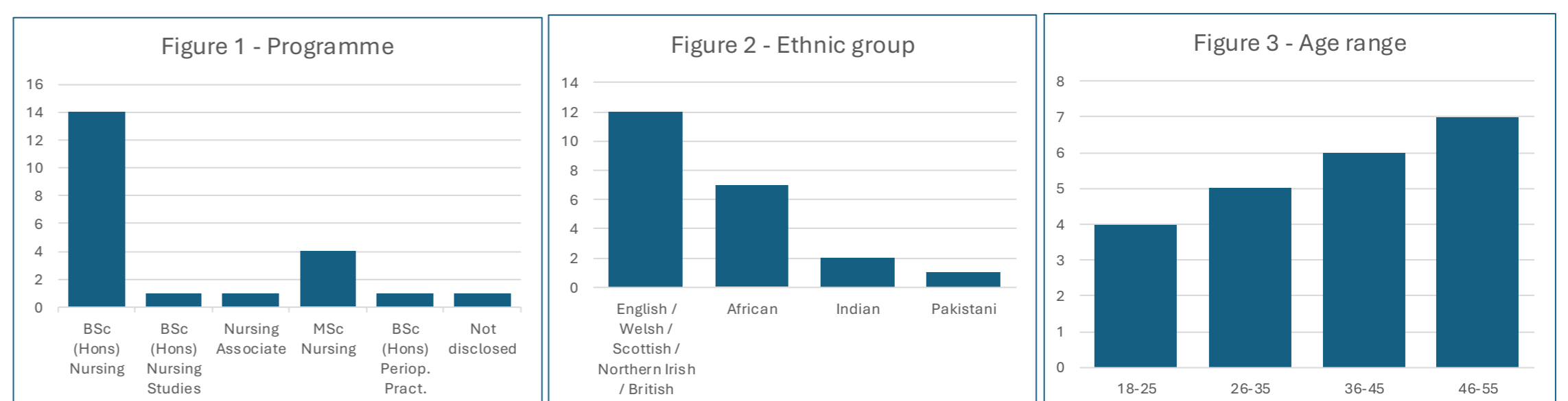
Acknowledgments:

The authors are grateful to academic staff who agreed to publicise the survey, participants who completed the survey and the 23.24 URSS providing this opportunity to undertake a small-scale project presented at the URSS Conference, University of Derby, Wed 6 Nov 2024.

3 Results

Descriptive data:

In total 22 participants from six programmes (Fig. 1) responded to the survey with 21 identifying as female and 1 male, most identified as English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British (Fig. 2) between 18 and 55 (Fig. 3).



Main findings:

Some found University life manageable though others experienced difficulties.

Issues:

- theory and practice
- managing academic work & home life
- demands of placements
- digital capabilities

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Before I started my studies at university, I had a clear understanding what university life would be like	1	11	7	3	0
Now I am a student at university, I have a clear understanding what university life involves.	8	9	3	2	0

4 Discussion

Main themes:

Expectation (course)

- Students found a disconnect between what they expected the course to be like, and the reality of it. The stressful demands of the course were difficult to cope with and manage, especially with home life.

Consistency from academics and variation (approachability, personalities)

- Some students found the support provided across academics was not consistent, which they felt contributed to the amount of stress they had to manage.
- However, rather than an inconsistency in the value of the support given by academics, consistency could also be affected by personality, and differences in the student’s preferences for learning as well as the academic’s preferences for teaching.

Support (staff, university, self)

- Expectations are seen again to play a big role in a students’ stress, as responses revealed aspects such as a late release of timetables, as well as a lack of support in writing styles, played an important role in reducing their ability to manage their work and the stress that came with it.

Implications and future research suggestions:

The implications for this research are expansive, supporting staff gain a better understanding of what students feel they need and are expecting within their years at university. This could contribute to better student-staff relationships, and the development of coherence with what is expected, and the weight of that demand the course inevitably brings with it.

Future research should investigate these main themes individually and in a more in-depth manner, using more complex analysis techniques such as discourse analysis.

5 Conclusion

Learning the rules

Academic and professional staff have responsibilities to ensure students can access support in a meaningful way that enhances their experience as a university student.

The demands of vocational courses needs to be made explicit from the outset before a student commences their programme. Care should be taken to be realistic whilst still promoting the opportunities a career in healthcare can provide.