



## Organizational Behavior: Short Changed

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### Abstract

There is a growing voice from concerned teachers and education researchers that ‘one of the worrying facts for schools is the potentially high drop-out rate from university’, (Marland, 2003, p. 202). 75% of students who drop-out of university state reasons associated with the first year of study (Tinto, 1995, cited in Dalziel & Peat, 1998). Power, Robertson, and Baker, (1987) suggests universities should devote ‘much attention in the early part of the first year’. The method of data collection was mixed methods. Quantitative data was collected from 45 students using a questionnaire distributed to both School A students (25) and University B students (20), the latter were School A alumni. For a majority of questions a Likert scale was used with a few questions being left open for a brief response. Some questions were rephrased or withdrawn for the University B questionnaire due to not pertaining to the data required. Qualitative data was collected from three respondents (a grade 12 student at School A, a member of the administration, and a lecturer at University B) via personnel correspondence. The research would appear to indicate, students at School A perceive their school experience will facilitate their university experience to a greater extent than students at University B perceive. The research would also appear to indicate University B students feel there is a difference in skill requirement and a lower levels of support, expectation and social activity. They also indicate that if School A were to develop more extended writing and prepared students for a university experience by developing reading and lecture expectation, this would be to the betterment of transition and would possibly decrease drop-out rates. The conclusions drawn are specific to the data gathered from participating respondents. Further research would be required to justify any wider statements.

*Key Words:* Student Perceptions, Organizational Behavior, Mixed Methods



## Introduction

Tuition fees have tripled ([www.ucas.com](http://www.ucas.com)) in the United Kingdom under the current government, despite previous party promises during an era of economic down-turn which is now forcing many students to, either take a year out or seriously reconsider their tertiary aspirations and future earning potential. For those who make it to university, it is heart breaking for a number of students to realize they have been short changed by their secondary education and are not equipped with the skills or knowledge to survive in the academic or social minefield of their initial year at university. Sweden has the highest university attrition rates of 19.1%, closely followed by the US with 14.6%. The UAE is treading water in the middle of the pack with 8.3% of students not completing their university education (<http://www.spre.com.au>). In a country which holds qualifications as paramount, almost a tenth of its students achieving nothing in tertiary education is a major issue that needs attention. These statistics do not account for those who do not drop-out but instead, due to family pressure or a lack of guidance coast through university only attaining mediocrity.

Schools pass the blame to the university and make little effort to track students once they feel their part of the job is done. Universities are quick a blame the schools for producing a poor caliber of students, leaving the student caught in a dearth of support from both sides. The governments' have increased education budgets with little to no academic improvement and the current trend would only seem to worsen. Universities have taken some measures to support students who may find themselves in crisis and research has pointed to phenomena of females having fewer problems than males and older students being more able to cope (Yorke, 1998); however being a mature female does not help the plight of many students.

Educators on the borders between the two types of institutions are aware there is a gap, but what could schools be doing to better facilitate the transition of students from secondary to tertiary education? The Regional Director of School A claims the school's systems is so effective that it places students on the doorstep of top universities, but what do students on both sides of the equation perceive, when transparency and accountability appear



to be at the bottom of the list and the reality of the situation may not be good for business. And international private schools are more often than not a for-profit business.

### Literature Review

There is a growing voice from concerned teachers and education researchers that ‘one of the worrying facts for schools is the potentially high drop-out rate from university’, (Marland, 2003, p. 202). 75% of students who drop-out of university state reasons associated with the first year of study (Tinto, 1995, cited in Dalziel & Peat, 1998). Power et al, (1987) suggests universities should devote ‘much attention in the early part of the first year’. Marland (2003) goes on to suggest this may be a result of ‘poor preparation’ and ‘weak pastoral care’ as contributing factors affecting drop-out rates. Lowe & Cook (2003, p. 53) concluded ‘students are not bridging the gap between school and university quickly and effectively’, due to ‘the abrupt shift from the controlled environment... undermining their normal coping mechanisms’, resulting in ‘drop-out and under-achievement’. Other research has shown drop-out and transition issues may stem from ‘a lack of prerequisite knowledge’ (West, Hore, Bennie, Browne, and Kermond, 1896), ‘lack of preparation and necessary study skills’ (Higher Education Funding Council of England, 1997) and Ramsden (1991) states that ‘studying and learning approaches at tertiary level appear to be strongly influenced by practices at secondary school’. The plethora of research builds on the reasons why students are having major issues with transition. Smith (2004) states 33% of students felt they were poorly prepared for the amount of reading required. This may be due to the switch in reading style from the ‘limited, intensive reading’ in school to ‘wide-ranging, extensive, contextualized reading’ of university. Cook & Leckey, (1999) found A-level students felt they did not feel ready for: formal lecture, private reading, note taking, time management, asking questions in large groups, study skills, team/project work, or being IT competent; A significant myriad of issues.

Part of the reason may be A-levels are not broad enough to develop independence or teamwork (Roberts & Higgins, 1992). A lack of skill in critical evaluation and analysis was also suggested by Harris & Palmer, 1995) as an obstacle to transition. Tinto (1993) found out-of-class contact with academic staff is a ‘significant predictor of persistence’. Clark & Ramsay (1990) concur with this idea expressing the ‘need for more staff-student interaction’.



Once at in a tertiary environment the consequences bear home. Upcraft & Gardener, 1989) state students have ‘little idea of what to expect’ from the university environment. Research conducted at the University of Ulster (Lowe & Cook, 2003) found student perceptions change rapidly over the first two months of university showing around a 20% decrease in satisfaction in facilities and standard of study; further indication students misperceive the realities of university life. Lowe & Cook (2003) also noted a number of issues relating to student’s preparedness. They are:

1. 57% unaware of what courses entail.
2. 39% not prepared for the extent of note-taking required.
3. 39% struggling with their workload.
4. 21% experiencing difficulty with self-directed study.
5. 45% experiencing financial problems.
6. 68% expected smaller class sizes.
7. 20% at risk of failure.

Lowe & Cook (2003) also noted students ‘required more support than expected in giving verbal presentations’. Cook & Leckey (1999) highlight the preconception of some students that ‘learning would not differ too much from that experienced in secondary school’. School size may also be a contributing factor to transition as Lindsay (1982) suggests ‘school size affects student participation and satisfaction’ with dwindling participation in athletics, liberal arts and student government. All would have an effect on students being able to cope with the social aspects of university life and experience the delights of a tertiary environment beyond the lecture hall. Tinto (1975) suggests a lack of integration into academic or social spheres could result in drop-out. This lack of participation is further compounded because ‘universities receive little information from schools about students’ (Marland, 2003, p. 202). It would appear schools are behind in passing the baton of readiness to universities by producing students who are unable to express themselves in an academic arena and are not engaged as social and creative members of university society. Clark & Ramsey (1990) infer this is possibly due to a ‘lack of understanding on the part of academic staff’.

Juxtaposed to a narrative of dystopia, there are steps being taken by educators to address the transfer issue. Tinto (1975) advises student profiling to ascertain educational predisposition; matching the student to the right university to avoid ‘academic and social



malintegration'. The idea of alignment continues as schools who reciprocate the organizational behavior of university enable their students to find 'the transition into higher education relatively easy (Lowe & Cook, 2003, p. 54). Smith (2004) explains over the last 40 years there has been a shift away from memorization towards 'debate and discussion' and continues to assert 50% of students 'learnt more from seminar discussion than any other method'. However, a positive effect of current schooling has resulted in 54% of students feeling they are adequately prepared for essay writing. Evans (2000) lists the strategies that have been employed in the US to improve: selection, orientation, mentoring, academic and social transition, early contact, counselling and advising. Tinto (1975) infers that integration will increase 'commitment' and 'college completion', a further incentive for tertiary education to continue to develop appropriate transfer programs. Rickinson & Rutherford (1995) advise students may benefit from 'early academic and personal support', which would infer that schools should have deeper involvement in university preparation instead of just passing the issue to the next level. Marland (2003) recommends an effective measure would be to introduce 'participation teams' and develop a 'complementary approach' between schools to universities. A slice of that can be seen at Keel University, where lectures are also engaged in 'pastoral matters' (Marland, 2003, p. 202). Ozga and Sukhanandan (1998) adds 'the retention of students is not just a problem that can be solved in tertiary institutions'. Some steps have been taken by various universities such as 'three-day summer school', 'preparation classes' and 'study buddy' programs (Marland, 2003, p. 203) study groups, Dalziel & Peat (1998), and to assist teachers and students in making the transition less arduous. Lowe & Cook (2003) advocates that educators think that 'induction should be seen as a process instead of as an event'

### Research Questions

1. Do students at University B perceive they were prepared by School A for university?
2. What policy could School A and University B develop to facilitate transition between the two institutions?

### School A

School A is a large international K-13 school with 4,500 students currently on roll. A majority of students are bilingual Arab and Sub-continental co-eds from middle and upper



class backgrounds. The school population functions as a pyramid with circa 2,000 students in grades K-2 and circa 120 students in Grade 12. The current reasons for student attrition or school demographic are not the remit of this research.

English, mathematics and physics, for science students, is obligatory from Grade 10 onward, however, students may choose to engage in specialized advanced courses from grade 11-13. These courses prepare students for UK advanced subsidiary, advanced level and US advanced placement tests at the end of grade 12 and 13. They also prepare students for SAT and TOEFL assessments during grade 11 and 12. The students and teachers use the same textbooks throughout the school and the method of instruction is the same at all levels. The pedagogical method is mandatory and encourages teachers to lead student through the textbooks in a logical and linear manner. The textbooks are often used as the sole impetus of the curriculum. Classroom discussions are secondary to rote learning, note-taking. Independent reading is subordinate to set answers and directed memorization facilitated by a web-based support system.

Participation in the school's students led organization is optional, as is participation in extracurricular activities. Once students are in grade 11 and 12 their academic timetable is so dense that little time is left for other activities. Since a majority of student's time is spent in class, an exam or preparing for one of them, Liberal Arts are non-existent after Grade 10.

## **University B**

University B is a large American university catering to local and international students. It has taken students from School A for the last three decades. A majority of the students attending math and science orientated degrees.

### **Method**

The method of data collection was mixed methods. Quantitative data was collected from 45 students using a questionnaire distributed to both School A students (25) and University B students (20), the latter were School A alumni. For a majority of questions a Likert scale was used with a few questions being left open for a brief response. Some questions were rephrased or withdrawn for the University B questionnaire due to not pertaining to the data required. Qualitative data was collected from three respondents (a grade



12 student at School A, a member of the administration, and a lecturer at University B) via personnel correspondence.

Respondents from School A were students in grade 11 and 12. The purpose of the research was stated as, an ‘investigation into the organizational behavior of education’. Participation was optional with the only condition being respondents were intending to study in the UAE. There was no time limit and respondents were allowed to seek clarity on questions. For the University B questionnaire, snowball sampling was used. Two separate alumni were emailed the questionnaire and asked to have 10 completed by School A alumni. The same instructions were given, as with the school group, with the addition of respondents being asked if they had already participated. All questionnaires were delivered to the researcher on the same day and the results analyzed.

### **Results and Analysis**

The results section will only serve to highlight a number of phenomena and is by no means an exhaustive analysis of the data collected.

What follows is an analysis of the qualitative data collected via personal correspondence. The first is from a Grade 12 student from School A. The key points are discussed. The respondent felt the school was highly organized; however, its ethos had changed over recent years ‘we have become robots at this school programmed to process questions and answers. Our entire learning has become based on a question-answer format rather than conceptual learning and through understanding of concepts’. She continues to state ‘students are de-motivated to learn’ (Student X, 2010, pers. Comm., 14<sup>th</sup> December). This may, in part, explain why 40% of University B respondents answered ‘no’ when asked ‘would you send your child to that high school?’ This compared with the 20% who answered ‘no’ for the school group. It could be an isolated feeling only held by the respondents of this research, or it may be a result of reflection after facing a period of time in tertiary education. Further research would be needed with a larger sample size to conclude this question. She later states ‘we are no longer able to develop our skills and minds to infer, interpret, or think outside the box’. She concludes by writing ‘I am not confident anymore as to whether I will actually be able to make it at university’, ‘I certainly do hold the school responsible’ (Student X, 2010, pers. Comm., 14<sup>th</sup> December).



A lecturer from University B responded to the emailed questions by expressing his exacerbation with the current trend. When asked about student enrolment he responded 'They let in 50 more students than usual' (Lecturer Y, 2010, pers. Comm., 18<sup>th</sup> December). The student intake for this academic year is 194; however, the university has not expanded the 2<sup>nd</sup> year. '...about 100 students will get cut'. He concluded by stating the results are 'faculty burnout', 'students not getting as good an education' and 'instead of rewarding innovation they will reward conventional thinking which they need to break free from to succeed in [subject]' (Lecturer Y, 2010, pers. Comm., 18<sup>th</sup> December).

The final email was from a key administrator at University B. When asked to comment on attrition and transition he declined to offer any data regarding attrition, which is concurrent with other members of the faculty. He did; however, list the measures the university has taken to integrate students into tertiary culture. The university runs a 'orientation and guidance program', introductory sessions by each academic department', lectures on time management, study skills, and how to use university resources' , presentation on the university catalogue study plans, and academic rules and regulations'. The student affairs office also conducts 'orientation activities...organized and carried out by seniors'. He finished by stating students are also encouraged to engage in 'community service', 'governance practices', 'leadership programs' and 'sports competitions' (Administrator Z, 2010, pers. Comm., 17<sup>th</sup> December).

The quantitative data collected from 45 questionnaires (25 from School A, 20 from University B) showed more trends in perception and student experience.

When asked to indicate the degree to which the school respondents felt they were learning on a scale of 1 to 10 most indicated positively, 6 or above. University respondents also indicated a positive response. This can be seen in table 3 with a marginal difference in the degree to which school and university respondent feel they will or are going to or are using knowledge learnt in school at university. However, there is a greater difference when it comes to skill, with university respondents indicating a lower average of 6.8 to the amount they feel they use skills learnt at school. Questions regarding student-teacher contact, cooperation and high expectation with a slightly lower average were in line between school and university respondents. University respondents felt that active learning was encouraged less than those at school. This may reflect two possibilities: 1) due to larger class sizes, students have fewer



opportunities to engage in active learning and; thus learning becomes passive, 2) respondents are unaware of the concept of active learning and; therefore, answer almost neutrally. University B students also indicated a lower level of high expectations, which may be an effect of the first year. It would be difficult for faculty to push for high expectation knowing, in some courses, drop-out is almost 50%.

Table 1

*School and university comparison out of 20 respondents*

Question asked	School response (average out of 10)	University response (average out of 10)
School knowledge used at university	8.4	7.9
School skills used at university	8.0	6.8
Student-teacher contact encouraged	7.7	7.1
Cooperation encouraged	7.8	7.4
Active learning encouraged	7.6	6.8
High expectations	8.1	7.5

The perception of School A respondents and University B respondents are in line regarding learning at university; indicating that they have some understanding of university life, which contradicts Upcraft & Gardener (1989). Respondents at University B felt their learning needs are less supported than School A respondents. This may be a contributing factor to drop-out if students cannot access a course due to a lack of learning support. Both groups felt a lack of being engaged in social activities. This may be due to a heavy academic timetable or a general feeling of students, that they would like more social activities. Further research would be required to investigate this aspect of the research. Students at School A also perceive their school experience will facilitate their university experience to a greater extent than students at University B perceive.

According to table two, students in School A need to engage in more extended writing opportunities, as only 15% of university respondents indicated they did not engage in extended writing often. This would suggest that a large number of students in School A are not being prepared by School A to engage in extended writing at University B and possibly other universities. Further research would be needed to investigate the extent of this



phenomenon. 70% of University B respondents indicated they did not engage in discussion of debate often. Smith (2004) stated 50% of students 'learnt more from seminar discussion than any other method', therefore, if students feel they are not learning from lectures, drop-out would be an understandable conclusion. Again, further research would be required.

Table 2

*School and university comparison in percent*

Question asked	School response (%)	University response (%)
University learning different from school	80	85
	different/ very different	different/ very different
Institution supports learning needs	96	80
	Yes	Yes
Encouraged to engage in social activity	40	50
	Agree/strongly agree	Agree/strongly agree
Engage in extended writing (1000 words)	88	15
	Not often	Not often
Engage in discussion of debate	40	70
	Not often	Not often

School A respondents responded positively when asked questions regarding university advice, guidance and external exams. The school could be doing more to communicate with parents to improve positive response to this question. Research has shown that parental involvement has a positive effect on decreasing drop-out rates.

Table 3

*School specific data*

Question asked	School A response (%)
Advice regarding university	92, Yes
School discusses university with parents	60, Yes
Encouraged to take external exams	92, Yes
Students given university guidance	92, Yes



Just over half of the university respondents felt that the university encourages them to engage in social activities which Tinto (1975) defines as an important factor in university in avoiding drop-out. The University B administrator indicated that there was a range of social activities students were encouraged to engage in. Further research would be required to ascertain the reason for this disparity. University B respondents also felt a significant number were not prepared for lectures by school A and 55% felt they were not prepared for the amount of reading required at tertiary level. It is not clear from the research why this is and further research would be required to explain this issue.

Table 4

*University specific data*

Question asked	University B response (%)
University encourages students to engage in social activities	55, Yes
Prepared by school for amount of reading required for course	55, Yes
Prepared by school for lecture style of learning	30, Yes

### Discussion

Attempting to get data from University B's faculty was met with little response. Out of the fifteen professors emailed with questions requiring a short response only two responded. One was a chain of emails between two staff, part of which discussed his reluctance to divulge attrition rates to an external source, which is understandable.

40% responded that they would not send their child to School A may be an indication that they hold the school responsible in some aspect for a lack of preparation for university. Greater synergy between institutions could improve that statistic.

It would appear that School A would benefit from greater communication with universities to fully ascertain the requirements at tertiary level. University B would also benefit from engaging students in more active learning and may reduce passive attitudes towards learning and decrease levels of apathy and drop-out. University B and School A should support learning needs by sharing special needs data and catering to specific learning needs.



The administration of University B needs to conduct research into the reasons why students do not feel encouraged to engage in social activities; even though a range of activities are supported by both the administration and the student affairs office, in order to better balance academic and social activities. More extended writing in School A would help to better prepare students for tertiary study. This could easily be integrated into various courses. It should not be the sole responsibility of one academic department and the practice of extended writing should be permeated throughout the school with its roots in the primary classes. Greater communication with parents regarding going to university and the positive aspects of learning should be developed. The same stated by Lowe & Cook (2003) is also true for school that 'induction should be seen as a process instead of as an event'. Therefore, communication with parents regarding universities should be an ongoing activity. This would either require integration into a current school administrator's position or a dedicated university liaison officer employed to manage the required alignment with university culture. This liaison officer, in partnership with academic staff, would also make recommendations and policy on how School A can encourage more course reading and lecture style of learning to prepare students for university.

From Maslowski's (2006) analysis of a model to assess school culture could be interpreted in the context that school culture must be understood to affect a successful paradigm shift towards positive transition from secondary to tertiary education in an attempt to decrease the number of students dropping-out of university in their droves. Survival of the fittest is not beneficial to the productive functioning of a society, when that survival is based on a lack of preparation and misperception.

## Conclusion

The above research would appear to indicate University B students feel there is a difference in skill requirement and a lower levels of support, expectation and social activity. They also indicate that if School A were to develop more extended writing and prepared students for a university experience by developing reading and lecture expectation, this would be to the betterment of transition and would possibly decrease drop-out rates. The conclusions drawn are specific to the data gathered from participating respondents. Further research would be required to justify any wider statements.



## Recommendations

1. School A employ a university liaison officer to assist in developing programs, curriculum and student social participation.
2. School A develop a culture in upper secondary which more closely reflects that of tertiary education in terms of social and academic style.
3. School A develops policy to integrate the needs of universities to aid in fluid transfer of students.

## Further research

Research based on more quantitative data would help in ascertaining a wider source of faculty and student opinions. Also a greater questionnaire sample size and longitudinal research is recommended to develop depth in this area of research.



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