

"HOW WILL I MANAGE?" STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS BEFORE AN EXAM

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Abstract

This study explores university students' self-perception regarding their preparation and expectations for grades compared to the results obtained in an exam. Involving 134 freshmen from a bachelor's degree program, the survey compared students' predictions about their grades with those they actually achieved. The results highlighted a significant discrepancy between expectations and performance, with many students tending to overestimate their own preparation, especially those with unsatisfactory results. The analysis also revealed a relationship between the type of secondary school attended and grade expectations, with students from technical and vocational schools often having higher expectations compared to those from high schools. The study suggests that a lack of familiarity with university evaluation methods and the effects of previous school socialization could influence students' perceptions.

Keywords: *Self-assessment, grade expectations, school-university transition.*

1. Introduction

This contribution focuses on students' self-perception as they approach a university exam, comparing it to the results they ultimately achieve. The aim is to assess their awareness of their level of preparation and the resulting expectation of achieving a certain grade, examining the students' self-assessment capabilities based on the effort they believe they have put into studying, the method they adopted, and the time dedicated. Therefore, it also involves assessing the students' ability to adequately interpret the expected performance standards within the higher education system. This aspect is particularly relevant for freshmen, who face evaluation practices and reference standards that are often very different from those encountered in secondary education.

In order to improve our understanding of this issue, an exploratory study was conducted on the self-assessment abilities of first-year students in a specific mandatory course within the curriculum of a bachelor's degree program. The study took place at the University of Turin (Italy), a large institution where enrolments are steadily increasing (+5% in bachelor's degrees and +20% in master's degrees for the 2023-2024 academic year). However, the university also experiences a higher-than-average drop-out rate, with 18% of students leaving the University of Turin during their first year, compared to the national average of 10%.

2. Framework

The transition from high school to university is not only an educational shift but also a milestone in the maturation and development process of young people. With the gradual decline of the manufacturing sector, which previously encouraged more vocationally oriented high school paths, tertiary education has been increasingly excluded (with the exception of ITS programs) (Ballarino, 2013; Valero and Van Reenen, 2019; Almalaurea, 2023) or limited to certain categories of students with an academic inclination from the end of lower secondary school. Currently, post-diploma educational choices are increasingly motivated not only by professional placement, but also by the status associated with academic degrees, personal satisfaction, and interest in specific fields of study. The impact of this transformation is visible in the rising number of freshmen in all degree programs at Italian universities, with a steady trend since 2015 (Anvur, 2023). University admission for bachelor's programs is not subject to entrance selection processes, and any type of high school diploma allows students to enroll in any academic path.

The Academic success is influenced not only by cognitive factors but also by satisfaction, perseverance, the activation of motivational processes, and the ability to engage in critical self-assessment (York et al., 2015). Within this process, academic adaptation becomes essential, defined as the ability to adjust to academic challenges, understand and critically reflect on study methods, adopt effective time management, actively participate in classes, and properly decode the expectations of instructors (Floris et al., 2023). Another crucial aspect is the students’ sense of self-efficacy, where a good self-assessment of one’s abilities increases the likelihood of achieving good results and reduces the risk of dropout. For an individual to possess such self-assessment ability, awareness and control over one’s cognitive processes—i.e., metacognition—are necessary. This manifests in the ability to select appropriate strategies for preparation and study in general, engage in evaluating one’s understanding of the content provided by instructors, and assess one’s level of knowledge. The development of a self-assessment literacy regarding academic performance thus becomes a fundamental part of the broader learning process (Galliani, 2015; Serbati, Grion & Fanti, 2019).

3. This study

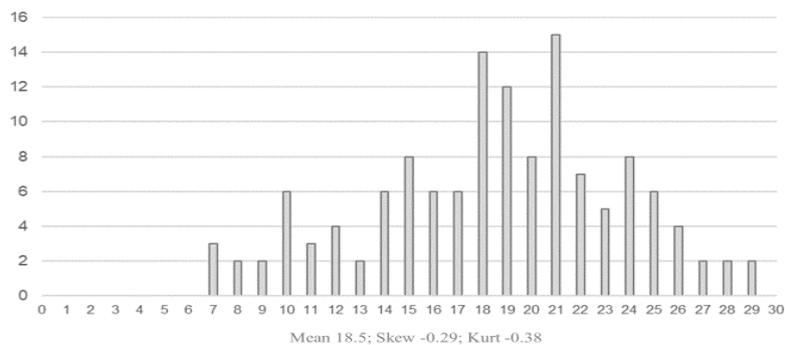
In order to better understand the perception that students have of their level of preparation and, consequently, their expectations regarding the grades they will achieve in the exams, the present study involved 134 students (with a similar gender composition). The participants were freshmen enrolled in the first year of a bachelor’s degree program, attending the “General Sociology” course.

Before the start of the exam, which took place in December 2024, students present in the classroom were asked to answer the question, “What grade do you think you will get on this exam?” in order to compare this self-assessment with the grade they ultimately achieved. This simple question was accompanied by a recommendation to answer only after careful and honest consideration of several aspects that characterized their preparation for the exam, which could contribute to making the self-assessment valid. These aspects included: attention during lectures, effort put into studying and its organization, feedback received from the instructor during exercises, and so on.

The exam consisted of a written test with 30 multiple-choice questions. The grading criteria for the exam involved awarding one point for each correct answer and penalizing half a point for each incorrect answer. A perfect score of 30/30 could be achieved by answering all the questions correctly. The Italian grading system has specific features that significantly differ from those in many English-speaking countries. It uses a numerical scale up to 30, with 30 representing excellent performance (with the possibility of adding “lode” for exceptional performances), and 18 being the minimum passing grade. Unlike many systems where grades are determined cumulatively through courses, quizzes, and tests throughout the semester, the Italian university grading system often relies on a single final exam, either oral or written. This exam usually covers all the material taught during the course, making exam preparation crucial for success.

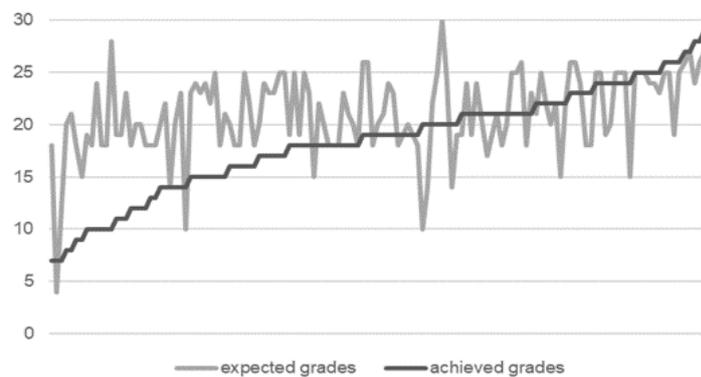
The result of the exam on which this study is based was generally unsatisfactory, with a significant portion of students (about 35%) failing to reach the minimum passing grade of 18, and no student achieving the highest score. The following figure (Figure 1) shows the distribution of scores. The lowest score was 7, awarded to 3 students, while the highest score was 29, awarded to 2 students.

Figure 1. Achieved grades, scores from 0 to 30 (N 134).



The following figure compares each student’s predicted grade with the grade they actually achieved (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Expected grades vs. achieved grades, scores from 0 to 30 (N 134).



As can be seen, there are very few cases of perfect alignment between the predicted grade and the grade actually achieved (specifically, 7 cases). However, many students predict a grade that is close to the actual result, with a discrepancy of only a few points. Nonetheless, a significant number of students seem to lack awareness of their performance in terms of university grading. In particular, there is a noticeable tendency for students with unsatisfactory results—and thus inadequate preparation—to overestimate their performance. On the other hand, students with the best results appear to have underestimated their preparation predicting outcomes lower than those they ultimately achieved.

Let's now examine the relationship between grade expectations and some characteristics of the students' previous educational background that we consider relevant. Specifically, we focus on the type of secondary school attended (which has been categorized into two tracks for simplicity: lyceum and technical-vocational school) and the final high school grade obtained (Table 1). High expectations are those expressed by students who predict a grade higher than the one they ultimately achieved, while low expectations are those expressed by students who predict a grade lower than the one they actually obtained. The few cases of exact predictions were not considered.

Table 1. Expectations based on the type of secondary school attended and the diploma grade.

Type of secondary school		Diploma grade	
		Medium-low	High
Lyceum	High expectations	56%	76.9%
	Low expectations	44%	23.1%
	Total	100%	100%
Technical-vocational school	High expectations	70.6%	58.8%
	Low expectations	29.4%	41.2%
	Total	100%	100%

The observation of the data shows that the type of secondary school attended appears to be significant in shaping students' expectations and, by extension, their self-assessment abilities. Specifically, students with a lyceum diploma tend to have a lower tendency to overestimate their abilities, especially when they completed their secondary education with a medium-low grade, compared to students from a technical-vocational school. On the other hand, students from a technical-vocational school, when they completed their secondary education with a high grade, seem to be insecure about their preparation and display lower expectations compared to students with a high diploma grade from a lyceum track.

This distribution suggests that freshmen from technical and vocational tracks, which have lower social prestige and where teachers have lower expectations compared to those teaching in lyceums, may be less equipped in terms of self-assessment skills. It is worth noting, however, that regardless of the track attended, freshmen generally have relatively high final grades on their high school diploma exams, with only 16% having obtained a sufficient or slightly higher diploma grade. Nearly 30% of students achieved the highest possible score. This could be attributed to a structural characteristic of the Italian educational system, namely the tendency to assign high grades. This aspect is of interest because it may contribute to a socialization into a self-assessment culture that is somewhat unrealistic.

Therefore, it is already in high school that students acquire, alongside knowledge, the necessary skills to manage the transition to the next level of education, to self-assess adequately, and to approach university exam preparation with confidence.

4. Limitations of this study and future research

This study has several limitations: a small sample size, lack of representativeness, and self-selection of participants, as it was up to the individuals whether to respond. It is, in fact, an exploratory study aimed at better understanding the expectations of freshmen regarding their success in a university exam.

These limitations are expected to be addressed through a deepening and expansion of the study, to be conducted in the next academic year 2025-2026, with the following objectives: increasing the sample size, adding questions on study motivation, differentiating between degree programs and disciplines (with a distinction between Humanities and STEM programs), and involving other Italian universities with their respective degree programs and courses.

The expansion of the study in terms of sample size and the variety of information collected is hoped to allow for a broader understanding of students' expectations through the use of more sophisticated statistical analyses and the consideration of other influencing factors.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The results of this study highlight the presence of a relationship between previous schooling experiences and the self-assessment of one's performance during the first university exams. The explanations considered in this study pertain to individual factors, but we do not exclude the influence of organizational or institutional reasons.

Among the individual reasons, it can be noted that the students involved in the study are freshmen, and therefore still not very familiar with university evaluation methods. Additionally, they are socialized into evaluation criteria that are not particularly strict in high school, at least for students in technical and vocational tracks. To explain the misperception, the so-called "Dunning-Kruger effect" is also considered, as identified by David Dunning and Justin Kruger (1999). They highlighted how less competent individuals tend to overestimate their abilities, often due to a lack of awareness of their own limitations, while more competent individuals tend to underestimate their abilities due to excessive self-criticism.

Among the institutional/organizational reasons, we can point to the possibility offered to the students at the University of Turin involved in this study to "attempt" the exam in numerous sessions (up to eight per academic year) without any limits on the number of retakes. This large number of attempts might not encourage students to develop and strengthen self-assessment skills which are necessary to decide whether or not to take an exam when the opportunities are more limited.

This study leads to recommendations aimed at strengthening the existing support and orientation actions for freshmen at the University of Turin, such as tutoring for completing formal procedures, initiatives like "A Day as a Freshman" and "Welcome Freshmen". It is hoped that these will be complemented by increasingly individualized support actions for each freshman, as well as real opportunities for bridging the gap between high school and university to facilitate the transition.

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