

## NAVIGATING UNKNOWN ACADEMIC EXPECTATIONS - SEEN THROUGH FIRST YEAR STUDENTS' LENSES

**Pasi Hellsten, & Mathilde Bredero**

*Information and Knowledge Management Unit, Tampere University (Finland)*

### Abstract

Beginning university studies often brings various mixed feelings of enthusiasm and uncertainty, particularly among first year students navigating unknown academic expectations, uncertain social integration, and sometimes yet-to-be-found self-identity in a new environment and even a whole new location. The paper observes first-year students' anticipatory feelings prior to entering university and contrasts these with their experiences during the first year at the uni. By examining the gap between expectations and reality, the study illuminates how students perceive their transition, and which aspects of university life require more support from educators and institutions. The data draw from thematic reflections collected during a phase of the orientation, where students were asked to articulate their pre-entry concerns and later evaluate how these concerns aligned with their actual experiences. The findings are triangulated through interviews. The work is to be concluded in the next few weeks, before the end of March. The analysis is expected to reveal a recurring set of fears: managing academic workload, feeling insufficiently prepared compared to peers, social isolation, and uncertainty about navigating institutional systems and practices, based on previous notions. Notably, students also occasionally, express doubts regarding self-discipline and balancing autonomy with responsibility, factors closely tied to emerging academic identity. The findings are hopefully able to show that while some fears persisted, many diminished as students encountered supportive learning communities, clearer guidance, and more flexible pedagogical structures. Peer interaction, freely on campus and amongst the 'tutor groups', structured introductory tasks, and transparent communication from teachers are features that are planned to encounter these phenomena. Hopefully they are able to play a key role in reducing anxiety and fostering a sense of belonging. However, whether certain concerns, such as time management and long-term academic self-efficacy, will remain as challenging as it seems to be anticipated, will be deemed at a later stage. Still, these may be seen as suggesting areas where early interventions could be strengthened. The paper contributes to ongoing discussions about student transitions by highlighting the importance of aligning institutional practices with students' emotional and cognitive readiness. Understanding first year students' perceptions offers educators valuable insight into how first-year learning environments can be designed to mitigate fear, promote confidence, and support students' early academic trajectories. The results may encourage universities to develop more explicit transition pedagogies that emphasize clarity, community, and guided autonomy.

**Keywords:** *First-year-students expectations, starting university, student guidance.*

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### 1. Introduction

The transition to higher education (HE), essentially in the case in this paper a university, is a major educational and life-course turning point. For first-year students, entering higher education often means adapting simultaneously to new academic expectations, a new social environment, increased personal responsibility, and, for many, a new city or place of residence (Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Stokoe et al., 2024; Willems et al., 2023). Research has shown that this transition is shaped not only by academic preparedness but also by students' sense of belonging, access to support, and ability to navigate unfamiliar institutional practices (Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Van Der Zanden et al., 2026). Across the first year, experiences of uncertainty, isolation, and self-doubt may coexist with enthusiasm, growing independence, and the development of new identities as university students, and also gathering new social circles and communities. Recent work has further emphasized that these experiences are individual, dynamic, and contextual rather than uniform, highlighting the importance of examining transition as an ongoing process rather than a single point of entry into higher education (Burke et al., 2016; Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Stokoe et al., 2024; Van Der Zanden et al., 2026; Willems et al., 2023). Obviously, the student body carries a

variety of mixed feelings and the HE institutions, in this case the university, is up against a difficult task to cater for them all in planning the support offered.

Within higher education research, the first year has long been recognised as especially consequential for student persistence, engagement, and wellbeing (Jones et al., 2020; Masika & Jones, 2016; Runa et al., 2025). Students must learn how to interpret academic norms and rules, manage workload and time independently, form peer relationships, and position themselves within a new institutional culture. These challenges may be intensified when the transition also involves relocation, separation from existing support networks such as family and friends, and the need to build everyday routines in an unfamiliar environment. Prior studies have pointed to the importance of informational, instrumental, and emotional support during this period, as well as the role of peer interaction, orientation practices, and inclusive teaching in helping students establish confidence and belonging. At the same time, recent studies have called for more nuanced accounts of first-year experience that connect social adjustment with students' engagement in disciplinary learning and with the lived realities of moving into a new university context. (Felby & Ashwin, 2026; Jones et al., 2020; Pedler et al., 2022; Stokoe et al., 2024) These are issues in which the university may have a say in forms of various supportive actions and procedures if acknowledged and addressed correctly. Thus, this is an on-going, joint effort for various levels of academic community; the university-level planning, the study programme reception and orientation planning, but also the student guild's tutor activities planning.

Against this background, this paper examines university students' experiences of entering a new university, a new location, and a new everyday life during their first year of study. The analysis draws on student data that capture both anticipatory concerns and first-year experiences, making it possible to examine how students describe the transition before entry and how they later interpret their academic, social, and personal adjustment. This empirical focus enables the paper to move beyond general discussions of transition by showing which issues students themselves set in the foreground when speaking about the move to university, the challenges of settling into a new environment, and the realities of everyday study life during the first year. Particular attention is paid to the relationship between expectations and lived experiences, as well as to the kinds of support, interactions, and institutional practices that students identify as meaningful during this period.

The paper contributes to education conference discussions on student transition, belonging, and first-year pedagogy by offering an empirically grounded account of how students narrate arrival, adjustment, and early study experiences. Rather than treating transition as a purely conceptual or policy-level issue, the study shows how it is experienced in practice through students' own descriptions of academic expectations, social relationships, relocation, and everyday life. In this way, the paper provides evidence-based insight into the kinds of challenges and supports that shape the first year, while also identifying issues that universities may address through orientation, teaching, and community-building practices. The study therefore contributes to ongoing debates on transition pedagogy and student success by linking students' reported experiences with broader questions of belonging, wellbeing, and inclusion in higher education. (Kift et al., 2010; Stokoe et al., 2024; Thomas, 2012; Van Der Zanden et al., 2026) Overall, the findings support the idea that the students benefit from the support mechanisms. The variety in the support offered is the key, but it needs to be easily accessible. Various actions may enrich the start in the new role learning newer ways of conduct, collaboration, however the students' lived experiences underline that similar everyday issues to be on the foreground before the actual start and the deeper-lying uncertainties emerge as the path proceeds. The paper concludes by commenting on the success of the practical forms of support offered.

## 2. Design

The annual intake for the Knowledge Management (KM) programme is 55. The Knowledge Management programs first year students start their academic path at the end of August. The basics in the beginning of the studies consist rather strongly of natural sciences compulsory for the engineering students and some basic courses of substance of their 'own' study programme. Thus, the reported views are also a bit more of general nature even if they are students of the given programme. Having said that, the study program is rather packed. The curriculum is tightly scheduled and leaves limited room for adding remedial acquisition of skillsets or other deviation from the planned order of courses. The question arises how is this mode and opportunity perceived by the students and also partly commented by the staff.

The students are entitled to support from the university as stated in the university's code of conduct. The support comes in various shapes and sizes. The orientation week in the very beginning with student tutors of senior cohorts is one major form of this. Similarly, yet completely different form is the course *Business and Technology in Context* in which the basics of university as an operational environment and studying therein are shed light upon. Also, the Educational Administrative Experts and study counseling are such supportive entities. As one of the final support mechanisms in the first study year is the conversations with the head of the study programme, i.e. direct 'debriefing' and feedback. The last one and its findings are in the center of this paper.

The study behind this paper is by its nature a case study in the form of interview study of university students. The conversations are kept rather informal one-to-one talks between the student and the faculty member. The themes are set and reinforced by a prior Microsoft (MS) Forms questionnaire survey to be handed over, but the actual discussion is by no means a strict and formal one as one objective of these is make the faculty more approachable for the students. The survey link was sent on through Moodle Learning Environment to students. Students had ample time to answer, and three reminders were sent. Altogether 43 students answered the survey (53 out of 55 students were 'interviewed'). The database table was created to analyze and categorize the survey results. The qualitative responses showed early signs of thematic saturation, providing initial support for the robustness of the observed patterns. The idea behind the analysis was to compare the intended effects and the actions, to the proceedings experienced by the students. The talks are not compulsory nor graded. Altogether 53 talks took place.

The talks took place in March - April 2026 at Tampere University, Finland. The students were offered a rather wide variety of time slots which the head of study programme had allocated for these talks from his schedule. Students were able to book a time slot most suitable for them. In the study the discussions and interviews of students, teachers and other stakeholders involved in this HE programme, are scrutinized. The authors of this paper are responsible teachers and administrators on the KM courses.

The courses typically entail lectures and weekly activities in addition to the various assignments. There is a recommended programme according to which to take the courses planned by the Educational Administrative Experts. In addition, the two instructors responsible for the basic course were interviewed to contextualise the student responses and capture staff views on the arrangement and also to shed light on the overview of the first year of the studies. The scrutiny in this paper observes a first-year students and their viewpoints on teaching, courses, and university students' life in general.

### 3. Background

Tampere University is a result of the Tampere Universities merger, which was completed in 2019 through a major restructuring of higher education in the city. In this process, the former Tampere University of Technology and the University of Tampere merged to create the present Tampere University, while Tampere University of Applied Sciences became closely integrated into the wider university community under the same institutional umbrella. This re-organisation aimed to strengthen multidisciplinary collaboration and to bring together expertise in technology, health, and society within a shared strategic framework. The historical roots of the constituent institutions extend back several decades, which means that the present university community combines relatively recent organisational integration with long-standing academic traditions.

As a multidisciplinary research university, Tampere University represents almost all internationally recognised fields of study through its seven faculties. Its profile is strongly built around the intersection of technology, health, and society. The university operates across three campuses in Tampere City Centre, Hervanta, and Kauppi, and also maintains activities in the university centers in cities Lahti, Pori and Seinäjoki. With more than 32,000 students and approximately 5,000 employees, the Tampere university community forms a large and diverse academic entity in which different disciplinary traditions, pedagogical approaches, and organisational cultures coexist. The diversity is relevant for understanding how teaching and assessment practices may be introduced and interpreted in everyday academic work.

The present paper is situated primarily in the context of the Hervanta campus, which has a particularly strong association with engineering, natural sciences, architecture, and technology-oriented collaboration with external partners. Hervanta is not only a physical campus but also a distinct academic environment shaped by the legacy of the former Tampere University of Technology. Since the 2019 institutional restructuring, the university has made systematic efforts to harmonise practices, services, and degree structures across campuses. The observations presented in this paper are grounded in a specific local setting while also speaking to broader questions of pedagogical development within a multidisciplinary university. Although differences in disciplinary culture continue to matter, the case examined here can reasonably be understood as illustrative of wider changes in university teaching practices.

Within this institutional setting, university teachers at our university typically work at the intersection of teaching, research, and administration, and only rarely can they specialise exclusively in one of these areas. This has implications for pedagogical development, because staff members enter teaching with differing levels of formal pedagogical training, varying experience in course design, and uneven familiarity with digital tools and learning technologies. Some rely mainly on conventional teaching materials and established routines, whereas others actively experiment with platform-based teaching, digital assessment, and AI-supported practices. Such variation forms an important backdrop for the present study, as e.g. the implementation of video-based assignments is shaped not only by student responses but also by the practical capacities, pedagogical orientations, and organisational conditions of the teaching staff. In this sense, the background of the paper is not merely institutional but also pedagogical, highlighting the everyday realities within which new forms of assessment are introduced.

#### 4. Summary

As implied before, the students expressed uncertainty, some regarding their social or technical skills, others the perceived complexity or demanding nature of whole situation, whether they'd be capable of coping with university studies. Despite this initial hesitation, groups quickly developed, and made contacting others easy as the students were allocated into tutor groups by the students' guild under the supervision of University admin. Each group has two to three tutors and preplanned itinerary. This proved to be the most used and valued channel for information and support.

One main objective for the early stage support actions is to build communal spirit and enforce a sense of belonging. A centric point is to see that no one remains alone and that everyone is noticed and acknowledged. The tutor may, at least to a degree, e.g. comment on the housing situation, or at least point out the right direction for further enquiries. Similarly, the campus and all the necessary locations are familiarized with as are the premises where the 'own' faculty is located. Some intel is undoubtedly passed on also about the personnel and the courses that the first-year students are facing in the coming weeks. Thus, dispelling some doubts about what is about to come and also familiarizing the newcomers already with the modus operandi at the university. The light is shed upon the working norms, roles and possible tasks, indicating which are the more laborious courses and how one is advised to distribute one's resources. Collaboration in e.g. course assignments is encouraged, as it is seen to enforce the desired outcomes; peer support, common spirit, sense of belonging, etc. This is from the students' point of view. Similar, or the same, issues are brought up and dealt with from another perspective on the *Business and Technology in Context* course. Seems, however, that there are no major clashes between the students' views and those of the faculty.

The first orientation week is full of various activities. So much so that the reported experiences indicated that there simply was little time to feel homesick at all. A few voices mentioned the tutoring concentrating a bit too heavily on the social aspects instead of handing out purely academic information. This may point to eagerness to start the studies and actual working towards the set goals. As the discussions furthermore revealed, the first-year students were quite satisfied with their experience of the studies, save the fact that the actual KM studies were quite few in their first year. This was explained to be because compulsory natural sciences were seen best to be cleared first and rest will follow. Most seemed to accept this explanation. Some declared to look forward to the development.

As to the support offered by the university in its various forms; starting with the communication of receiving a study place, the tutor groups and tutoring, the educational administrative expert's services, the *Business and Technology in Context* course, study counseling (both student and university's study psychologist) services, the health care, and finally the head of degree programme feedback and 'debriefing' talks, the numbers were fine. Half of the respondents to the questionnaire, when asked whether they had been offered student support, answered not having needed any. A quarter answered 'very well' and almost another quarter 'well'. Two individual answers were marked three (assessment out of five). The discussions underlined strongly the same finding: no one reported missing some or any kind of support. This does not mean that there is no room for improvement. Instead of leaning back, it is advisable to think still more about the communicating about the various means and channels of student support, perhaps including examples of possible situations in which a student may feel like needing support. As to communications, it is similarly advisable to consider delivering the information as soon as possible using multiple channels as the receiving party may not always prefer the same customary channels as the university. More broadly, the new students are ready to adopt new ways of working quite quickly, provided that they are encouraged appropriately and given guidance on how to proceed. The students' responses suggest that the university should provide adequate possibilities and facilities not only to learn but also to apply one's acquired knowledge and learned contents if creative, original, and otherwise high-quality outcomes are expected.

## 5. Conclusion

It seems that despite all prior expectations the staff might have had, students are settling quite nicely into life as students in a university. In observed numbers there are individuals moving into the city from elsewhere, sometimes even hundreds of kilometers away, and individuals in their hometown forming new circles of friends and fitting the pre-university friends to the new set of peers. Generally speaking, the most common answer to the question, how are you, the answer was 'fine'. The later discussion proved it to be so. The striking majority of students were eagerly in the midst of their peers doing their thing, both academically and socially.

The original communication from the university declaring that they were qualified to start at the university launched questions in students' minds: how's everything going to be, contemplations about fitting in, finding like-minded people, making friends, finding one's way so to speak, but the orientation week already started to dispel the doubts. Similarly, the pre-arranged study plan seemed to help at the start. The course where the university as an environment was sorted out and way of working clarified, even if a bit laborious, seemed to do the trick it was supposed to do. It enabled the students slide in to the university environment and studies easier. The communication seemed to be the key, the more information was available the better. Some of it would go amiss, but there the volume and repetition will increase the probability of the message getting through. As does the peer support, i.e. the tutor group activities.

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