

## What Helps You Get Started and Enables Your Success?

One hundred and twenty-five students provided 247 individual comments in the third NZUSA Learner Advisory Panel.

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### Three Things

First, students were asked to provide three things that, if available up front, would best enable them to succeed.

#### Materials

Students overwhelmingly identified having a good course outline that sets out a timetable, including of tutorial/workshop options if they exist, a list of assigned (and recommended) readings, a roadmap of assessments, all the key dates, and the course topics and how assignments are related to them. This should be available before the course begins and be supported by a first lecture.

A large proportion of students also said they wanted to have materials, lecture notes, and printable slides available before the class they related to; pod casts and recordings post class; examples of past essays, tests and assignments including answers or model answers; and that access to the library, online-journals, lab space and specialist software needed to be sorted out before the course began.

Students said that they wanted to know if the textbook was actually required, that it should be available in sufficient numbers in the library, some that they preferred a printed course reader to online material, and others that if there were online resources that they needed to be properly organised not just “provided in one great lump”.

## **Expectations**

Students said that they needed to have it set out for each course, since it often varies, the rules about late submission, how feedback worked, the time expectations, and the weighting for assessments – including the time expectations for these. As one put it, “is this a course about complexity or immensity”.

They also said that knowing essay and assignment guidelines, and knowing that both these and the course outline would be stuck to eased the transition into the course.

Students also said that they would like to know how the course fitted into the (degree/ diploma/ major) programme as a whole was helpful, as is being upfront at the beginning of the course where the students were expected to get to by the end.

## **Systems**

A large number of students noted that knowing that systems were in place to deal with issues that might arise, such as the class representative system or knowing where the students’ association advocate was, made the start of the course smoother – even if they expected not to have to access these systems.

A few noted that establishing networks were valuable and that support from the institution with study groups, a Facebook page, or Moodle/BlackBoard discussion forums were very helpful.

Students said they wanted to know how communication would take place, especially if there were going to be changes to matters of significance such as assignment deadlines. They needed to know how material would be distributed or made available throughout the course.

## **Course structure**

Students said that they wanted tutorials that built on lectures – if that was the course structure – practice worksheets, regular assignments and a test or similar early on so they had an idea how they were going.

A significant number identified that they wanted to know that the lecturer was engaging and responsive.

## **Miscellaneous**

A few students said that they would like to have access to past students from the course, a course mentor, and targeted support for those who had no background in the subject.

A few identified things from outside of the course itself: that their personal life was set up for study, with budgeting, childcare, and transport for example all arranged. They needed study spaces available when they needed them.

## Getting stated

Students were asked how the beginning of the year had gone for them and accordingly, how much of what they identified that they would have wanted to be in place was.

## Smooth

Mostly student identified that their start to the year had been “smooth” although this came with some caveats. It had been smooth because: they were a returning student, they were in a Hall and they had second year students around to help, they had been motivated to participate in the tours and essay writing/ referencing classes, they had been able to set it all up in advance, they already knew where to go for help with problems.

There were students for whom this was not true: a new programme with teething problems, a big step up between years – including between undergraduate and postgraduate, the resources available were not identified until six weeks into the programme, and the identification that students who do not start at the beginning of the year, or who have not travelled through the traditional path find it more difficult than those who have, and for whom the support is targeted.

## Information

Primarily concerns were raised around information that students were given and how they were given it.

- There was too much information, it amounted to overload, and what was actually important was not identified.
- Of the compulsory orientation, only 5% was new to a returning student.
- Course advisers had no access to anything that was not already online, and that they were “recruiting, not advising”.
- Helpdesks are staffed by people with little actual knowledge, who just read off helpsheets that the students say they have already read.
- There is an expectation that students should know quite a lot, in particular their way around, and that they can be made to feel “like idiots” if they ask for help.
- Some students said they felt that they were being encouraged or had been encouraged to do things that were not necessarily right for them or their futures, but were convenient for the institution.

## Frustrations

Students expressed some particular frustrations.

- The failure to record classes, identified as useful for people who were sick, or had clashes, as well as for revision.
- There was a difficulty with the annual timetable, complementary courses were not spread throughout the year, so there were not enough options to fill up the second trimester.
- Having to go department to department to get in-person signatures was tedious and seemed to serve little purpose.
- Major projects that came later in the year could not be signed off until first semester papers had been passed which made them hard to set up.

## **It Would Be Good to Have Known**

In general the students' responses when asked what they knew now but would have been helpful to know earlier reflected the discussion about what enabled their success that we had already had.

### **Basic Information**

Students identified as basic that they would have liked to have known more about optional papers so they could make better choices, different pathways to the qualification they sought, workload expectations, how much was actually expected in each paper since it varied and was not made clear, whether or not the textbook would be available or was actually required.

### **Course Assessments**

Students said that they would have liked to have known more about their assessments, how they were spaced out, the marking criteria and expectations, more specificity in terms of what was expected from them. They would have liked to have known more about how to write essays, not just the technical elements. They would have liked to have known this before the course began rather than being drip-fed as the course progressed.

### **Support Structures**

Students identified that they would have liked to have known about the students' association earlier, about other support groups such as parents and mature students' groups, and also that they can simply go and ask the teacher directly.

Students reiterated that they would like to have been able to engage with previous students, that they found out late about facilities available to help them to navigate the library, get tailored support from learning support services, and that, in general, the institution's websites were difficult to navigate.

### **Specific but Miscellaneous Points Raised**

Students said that they would have liked to have known:

- That some of their work would be marked overseas
- Where everything was, as they kept getting lost when rooms changed
- That they would no longer have access to the files from last year, and when they were told "you learnt that last year", that they wouldn't be able to review the material
- The process – and time involved – in seeking ethics approval