

The Student Journey Project: Year 1

Executive summary

This research project encompasses the student's university journey, from the start to the end of their studies, with responses gathered annually. 20 first-year students were chosen to take part in the project, stemming from an application process. These students were interviewed individually and asked a range of questions about their university experience so far, from initial motivation to apply to HE, through the application process and support received, and considering future plans.

- **Motivation:** Many interviewees chose to do a degree to pursue a different career path, or because they now had the opportunity to do so. Although most mentioned having supportive family and friends, the decision and drive to apply was in the majority of cases that of the individual. Motivations to study at Falmouth in particular varied, but prominent reasons given were the environment and location, and particular features of the curriculum, especially those that enabled flexibility, were industry-facing, and online provision meaning the degree could fit around existing commitments or health requirements.
- **Application process:** Interviewees' experiences of applying to Falmouth were broadly positive, although on occasion encountered specific issues with the system or with communication. Familiarity with UCAS and other aspects of UK university application was helpful, and international students or those with no prior experience of it found it harder to navigate. Interviewees were extremely positive about the student support team and the availability of advisors. Although the interview was initially daunting for some, in general it was a very positive experience.
- **Support:** Interviewees' sources of support during their first year were particularly course tutors and their course cohort, with many valuing online chat groups as sources of peer support and feedback. The student support team was also valued, although some noted that specific support or ILP adjustments had not materialised.
- **Expectations:** For most the course had met expectations, although there were comments about specific modules. These generally were around the pace of learning, clarity of instruction, and contact time, although variations were not always negative but simply not in line with explicit or implicit assumptions. Many respondents particularly valued the expertise and level of support offered by their tutors. Likewise, the university experience was broadly meeting expectations, though some had hoped for more opportunity to engage in clubs and societies (especially online students).
- **Aspirations:** Interviewees' responses varied on what they hoped to gain from their degree. Many wanted to develop their skills and push themselves academically and personally, others had specific career aims, and others wanted to make connections with peers. While some saw their next step as a

specific job or freelance role, most were weighing up a choice between postgraduate study and freelance work.

1 Background and rationale

Falmouth University wanted to gather qualitative data from students identifying within different APP target groups, to gain a greater understanding of students' experiences throughout their studies at Falmouth. It's recognised that students' expectations, attitudes, behaviours and career aims can change between Year 1 and Year 3 of their studies, therefore it was important that a longitudinal study was conducted across the whole student journey and not just a 'snapshot' in time.

The main aims of this Student Journey research project are to:

- a)** hear from students identifying with a range of widening participation criteria, regarding their student experience and perceptions of HE.
- b)** gather student responses to check if their course choice and the university were meeting their expectations or not, and if not, why not.
- c)** to increase awareness of both best and worst practices happening across the university.
- d)** if required, take immediate action where possible, to improve student retention.

2 Methodology

2.1 Overview of sample

Following a promotion of the project, stating that any applicants needed to meet a selection of widening participation criteria (a list of criteria was provided), applications were sought from students undertaking different modes of study. First year students from both online and on-campus courses were selected to encompass a range of barriers to learning, and invited to participate in this longitudinal study in April 2024. A £25 gift card (from a retailer of their choice) was offered to thank those who had participated for their time. 20 students were interviewed in total: 13 were mature students; 10 were taking their course online; 10 had a disability; 8 were from TUNDRA low HE participation areas; 4 were international students; and others who were from IMD disadvantaged areas, or who had experienced the care system, were Cornish or identified as Gypsy/Roma/Travellers.

2.2 Questions

The interview questions asked participants about their experience on their university journey so far, c The question set is shown in Appendix 1.

2.3 Analysis

Interviews were transcribed, anonymised, and then coded using MaxQDA. Coding was based around the questions but was also done inductively, allowing themes to emerge from participants' responses. The analysis pulls out the most prominent themes and

provides illustrative quotations – a full list of coded themes is provided in Appendix 2. Quotations included have been slightly edited for clarity where necessary, but substantial edits are indicated by square brackets.

3 Results

3.1 Motivations

Degree programme

Respondents were asked what made them want to study a degree. Around half said that the decision was to effect a change in career direction. This desire for change was instigated by a range of factors. For one participant, ‘it was probably the pandemic...that made me think about what I wanted to do – more my creative stuff, less of the boring stuff’ (P3); likewise, another was working in a physically demanding job with long hours and chose a degree after questioning ‘what else can I do?’ (P15). Another was no longer able to do a physically demanding job due to ill health: ‘And so I kind of had to make a decision: well, where do I go from here? What do I do? So I was kind of forced to stop...’ (P7).

For others the choice was also career motivated but with a more specific aim in mind. One respondent wanted to live abroad where you ‘needed a degree to be official’ (P19); another felt that ‘you get a degree and you’re more likely to get like high paying jobs’ (P1), while likewise another ‘needed a degree to kind of get your foot in the door’ (P5).

Several respondents had begun a degree as they had never been able to take the opportunity before. For one, ‘when my youngest [child] went to uni, which was last year, I thought “Right, now it’s my time”’ (P11). Another felt that they were finally taking the leap into a long held ambition: ‘It’s something I’ve thought about over the years. I’ve done professional qualifications in various jobs, I’ve done vocational qualifications, and it was one of those [questions of] “Can I do it? Would I enjoy it?”’ (P17).

Choice of Falmouth University

Around half of respondents mentioned aspects of Falmouth’s physical location as a reason to study here, for various reasons. For some, it was about attachment to the local area, whether due to family connections (e.g. ‘I’ve lived in Cornwall my entire life, so I’ve always known about it’ (P10)) or a more general affinity with the south west (P19). This was the case even when not studying in person: ‘I have family down in Cornwall that we visit all the time and I thought well, even if I don’t go there physically, I have got a connection with the place’ (P14). ‘Others felt that ‘the sea was a big positive’ (P8), and liked the smaller size of Woodlane in that it is ‘not this massive mega campus’ (P5) and the university’s ‘chilled out atmosphere’ (P19).

Another prominent reason for choosing Falmouth was the curriculum. Many appreciated the real-world focus of the learning, e.g. ‘it seems like a very practical degree with a focus on actually getting work out there or work within the [relevant industry]’ rather than ‘learning for the sake of learning’ (P17). Some mentioned the industry links, so that they ‘could just see more how Falmouth would assist me in

transitioning into a career rather than just giving me a degree' (P18); another appreciated the teaching staff's perspective on this, noting that 'our professors have all worked in the industry' (P4). Others appreciated courses with flexibility, 'so there's that opportunity of being able to sort of find a broad range of knowledge, but also wow, being very specific in something you're doing' (P6).

Many respondents had chosen Falmouth because of its online provision. This was felt to be an advantage for various reasons. For some, ill health meant campus was not an option, since 'I don't think I'd be able to do on campus - it would just be too much for me at the moment' (P7) or because they require overnight care (P2). For others, commitments meant regular campus attendance would be impossible (e.g. 'both kids are in school' (P16)). Mature students did not necessarily want the campus experience: 'I did that and I didn't really enjoy it the first time around' (P5)).

Others found the marketing persuasive, whether a website that was 'really friendly' (P3) or a 'really nice ambassador and she just she really sold [it]' (P1).

3.2 Support and encouragement

Answers for questions on 'who influenced you to do a degree' and 'who influenced you to study at Falmouth' have been combined here, since respondents' answers often seemed to conflate the two.

The majority of respondents felt that, by and large, the decision to embark on a degree programme was their own, and that they had not been influenced by any other people: 'it was mostly sort of off my own back really' (P17), or it was 'completely in my own head' (P13). Likewise, many felt this was true of the decision to apply to Falmouth: 'I researched all myself. I've not had any feedback from anyone' (P19); 'I did my own research as well as everything' (P9).

Some also felt that their family had encouraged them. One participant noted they had been encouraged by 'my daughter - my little cheerleader' (P2); another had more direct encouragement from a friend who had 'enjoyed Falmouth, so I had that personal direct recommendation' (P9). Others evoked family more in the sense of role models than as giving specific advice. One participant described how 'my mum did Open University when I was growing up - so that was something [that influenced me], and obviously going to her graduation and all of that' (P5). Another found their role models in society more broadly:

I read stories about people [...] women in particular, who changed their career later on in life, or who were on their second degree [...] I've heard this story about a woman who did a degree [in my subject], and now she was doing talks up and down the UK and she's 60, and she's like "Oh, my life has changed so much". And I thought "Oh, yes, please!". (P11)

In terms of choosing Falmouth, participants also mentioned the influence that attending for an open day or interview had. This may have been due to an excitement

from being here in person, one participant reflecting that ‘I was definitely for sure going to study at Falmouth after the interview’ (P8). For another it was the opportunity to speak in detail to a member of academic staff who could encourage them:

I was still sort of like unsure, like, “Am I going to be able to do this?” I spoke to [the tutor] and said - this is my background, this is my qualifications, is what I've been doing the last five years, do you think I'm sort of gonna make it here? And he was just like “Yeah, that sounds perfect”. (P18)

3.3 Application process, support, and advice

Perceptions of the application process were mixed, with many finding it smooth but some had been held up by specific system or communication issues.

The value of general familiarity with the UK admissions process was clear, with those who were used to it often finding the process easier than those who didn't. The latter was the case for international students, for example, one of whom found that ‘I didn't quite know what all of the terms meant for the things that I had to fill out’ (P15), while another ‘had to think about my grades and like how do I translate them to English’ (P3). However, this need for familiarity was also a factor for home students, with one feeling that they ‘found it quite straightforward’ since they had applied to a different university previously, while another felt that ‘If you've not come from an academic background, all the language used just doesn't make sense. I have no idea what “clearing” means’ (P17).

Responses around the administrative process varied, with some finding it straightforward and others encountering problems. One respondent found themselves frustrated around a lack of clarity on next steps for their application, as ‘Nobody could give me clear answers of what I needed to do. It was like “Oh you'll hear by the end of tomorrow” - then the next day, then it was another week...’ (P2) .

Respondents clearly appreciated the personal support received throughout the process, and particularly valued the responsiveness of the applicant and student support teams:

Just knowing that there were people there, what support is really it's just like, “Yeah, I'm here” - I think it was huge, just like mentally and emotionally. Just going, if something comes up, I can literally go and talk to this person. Like, they're right there. (P9)

Another praised the team as ‘absolutely brilliant, and reply so quickly - and it's lovely having that WhatsApp chat as well’ (P18), another joking that although ‘it was all a bit of a whirlwind’ the team was ‘incredible’ and they ‘half expected to turn over in bed and find him by my side - they were so great’ (P14).

The interview process was by and large a positive experience, despite expectations. For one respondent, the interview was ‘a bit scary’ but they overcame this as they ‘wrote

loads of notes and questions' (P1). Another had not experienced an online interview before 'so that was kind of daunting at first', but became an affirming experience:

Oh my god. [The tutor interviewing me] was amazing. He made me feel so relaxed and we just talked like we were friends. So that that whole process made me feel like, yes, he's invested in his in his time to have a chat with me. He's very open and honest. He's very jovial as well. [...] He's not rigid like I usually think that university is - a bit like Oxford, like stiff and boring, academic - but Falmouth to me just sounded fun. (P19)

This positivity translated for one respondent into a confidence that Falmouth was where they wanted to study: 'The interview was great. It gave me lots and lots of information on the course and the interviews, and was what cemented the idea that I was going to come to Falmouth. I think the interviews are a massive positive' (P8).

3.4 Support for the first year

Around half of respondents mentioned that teaching staff had been key in supporting them through their first year. For some this was general, where 'definitely the teachers, the online tutors, have been amazing' (P3); another felt they had most been supported by 'the academic staff and the fact that no questions are too many, they're just amazing' (P14). Others singled out particular staff, such as

our module leader for the last module [who] was really good and supportive and was just brilliant when I came up to Falmouth - [they] put a whole group on Teams for those of us who hadn't come before and you know, and if we were like not sure where we were going, would literally reply straight away. (P18)

As well as supportive in the context of academic work itself, tutors were also thanked for support with accessibility needs, with one respondent mentioning a tutor helping them to access timetabled classes with minimal movement around campus (P2).

Likewise, the student support team had been key for some respondents, who had found them 'brilliant' (P18) or had 'been incredible in getting support in place for me and just supporting me in general' (P10). However, there were also times that this support did not materialise as hoped. One respondent had been assigned a mentor but 'never really saw him after the first little meeting' (P1); likewise, another who had been in touch with the accessibility team 'didn't hear from them for the entirety of year one' (P7).

Other sources of support included peers, particularly course mates. Frequently online chat groups were a positive source of support and feedback, enabling 'a little core group of maybe 10 to 15 of us that are supporting each other, there to answer each other's questions, and that's really valuable' (P17); another finding that on 'the WhatsApp group we're very supportive with other' (P3).

3.5 Aspirations from doing a degree

Responses to what students hoped to gain from doing a degree varied. A prominent aim was to improve skills, whether directly aimed at a particular career by ‘fill[ing] the gaps and help me to be more of a professional [in my discipline] rather than doing the fake it till you make it kind of thing’ (P7), or likewise ‘taking something that is a hobby and trying to make sure you're doing it to a certain level that is professional’ (P5); or alternatively a more general career by gaining ‘the skills that I will need for any different career options that this course would take me to’ (P15).

Similarly, some respondents spoke of a more general aim of pushing themselves to achieve. One felt that ‘it's so easy, especially when you're isolated on your own to kind of stay at the same level, really not progress’ and so undertook a degree to ‘push my practice’ (P18); another ‘wanted to grow’, recounting

moving into my first [...] accommodation and then visiting the campus on my own and visiting [my department] and walking in the doors for the first time going, “Oh my God, I'm here I'm actually here”. It was really wondrous and wonderful, full of optimism. (P9)

Another valued ‘being able to spend the time from expanding my knowledge and my training and my subject area to be able to go out into the industry and start working’ (P10), while for another ‘this is just a step towards my dream job’ (P4).

Others’ focus was more on the connections and community the degree would enable. For one respondent, they had sought ‘to be in a world of like-minded people because it's one of those things that you just don't find’ (P11). Likewise, another reflected that

I'm not very confident and quite a quiet person, but I want to get from university is a community, which I think I've already found. I've got a select group of people that I chat to and [...] I like how we've not just got the tutors and module leaders, but a cohort. We support each other. This is what I wanted. (P19)

This sense of connection did not seem to be stymied by studying online, since for one respondent ‘I've made so many good connections, I've made great friendships already, even though I haven't actually met any of these people’ (P11). As well as general support and connections, this community could provide ‘that recognition from peers’ that the work is good enough (P19).

For a handful of respondents, the motivation was more personal: one mentioned the gain they would get from ‘living in a new part of the country – I just needed somewhere else. Definitely the meeting new people, making friends’ (P8). For another the personal advantage was more specific, since ‘one of the advantages of Falmouth is I have access to mental health support the Council and the NHS just can't give me’ (P2).

3.6 Expectations

Expectations of the course

Responses were generally positive, although a number of respondents noted particular elements of their course that had not been expected.

For a couple of respondents this was around clarity, both at the module level ('We knew what we signed up for, but for some maybe more description is needed - I didn't exactly know that what's going to be in this module' (P3)) and at the individual task level ('The course is as I expected [but] the instructions are sometimes too ambiguous or unclear' (P17)).

Curriculum

Comments on the curriculum were varied and tended to be specific to a particular course or module. A common theme was the pace of learning. For some, this met expectations: e.g. 'It was a really steady start, which I really appreciated. There was a part of me that was really hungry, but the rest of me really appreciated that' (P9); or 'We had a few two week projects and now that's leading into a bigger project, which is just really nice because everything builds on the last bit' (P18). For others, the pace felt too slow and was 'very slow going at the start and I felt quite frustrated at to begin with' (P6), or the module had not flowed so naturally:

They put so much pressure on the risk assessments and the prep work for one of our projects so much that for weeks and weeks they would drip feed us what we needed to do that next week. And I was like, just give us the whole list of everything that we need to do because every week we would be stressed out about what we're getting next (P8).

While some were positive that 'we're learning a lot of varying things' (P15), for others the content was not as expected (though this was not necessarily a bad thing): 'there's a lot more academic than I thought it was going to be, but that's not negative, I do quite well with the academic side' (P5); another 'didn't realise there would be so much essay writing. I think I was told at the interview that there was no exams, and I just assumed that meant no essays' (P8).

Teaching

Respondents were largely positive about the support and expertise of the teaching staff: 'the tutoring is excellent - so not only being pushed, but being encouraged with kind and constructive feedback' (P18), another feeling that 'a lot of it for me is like the breadth of like the information would be given and like the skills of the lecturers' (P13). At the same time some expectations around contact time were not met, where

especially this term, the contact time is a lot less even than last term, but less than I was anticipating as a whole. I think the tutors are really good that you can reach out to them and they're contactable and they're happy to help and that sort of thing... I just thought I'd be getting a little bit more in terms of in contact and like lectures and seminars and stuff like that (P5)

although this respondent does concede that this ‘could be a bit of a divide from that school mentality to a uni mentality’.

Expectations of university

Some respondents were not interested in what university clubs and societies could offer; however, others – both online and on campus – had been disappointed. For online students, this was often due to the lack of hybrid or explicitly online offers:

there hasn't really been any I can join online, which I think has been a bit of a shame because I'm pretty sure during the pandemic some of them met up online, but they've not continued with that. And I know there's the option for us to create our own societies, but I feel like it [would be] a lot of effort. (P7)

Another had signed up for a society but had subsequently ‘not heard a peep, had any communication. I don't even know if they exist, but they took my fee’, noting also the lack of oversight of this since ‘I don't even know who to chase up with’ (P2).

International students noted cultural differences – for some these were more minor and ‘I'm just going to go in and see what happens’ (P15); for others more profound: ‘there's a there's massive cultural difference. And not only like culture, but food and language. And even though I've spoken English from childhood, [...] it's still a massive difference in language as well.’

A couple of respondents valued the facilities on offer, where ‘access to all of the stuff here is amazing, and the fact that you can go like book stuff out from any stores is great’ (P8) and ‘the wealth of stuff that's there is absolutely brilliant’ (P18).

3.8 Plans after graduation

A few respondents were clear that they were aiming for a specific destination once they graduated e.g. ‘I'm looking to step forward towards my dream job, so anything that will take me towards that line, I would happily accept that role and work into it’ (P4).

However, the majority voiced interest in working freelance, in postgraduate study, or more commonly one or both of the two.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Overall, the majority of the students interviewed seem to have enjoyed their first year at Falmouth University. Their course expectations are being met and they feel supported. There are however some students who have faced difficulties in this first year.

Regarding their course, this appears to be due to lack of accurate or changing course/module/assessment information either at the start of their studies or before

enrolment. For online students, some students were very disappointed with the amount of contact time with tutors, which seemed minimal and the lack of one-to-one tutorials.

For some disabled students or those with a learning difference, they appear to feel supported by the accessibility team, and by the DSA learning mentor, but then find that the reasonable adjustments included in their Individual Learning Plans (ILP's) are being ignored by their tutors.

The majority of online student's responses highlight their need to form a social connection with others on the course, but also with different online students. The students have indicated that they have done this themselves to some extent, setting up course WhatsApp groups. However, they have also indicated that they would like to see the Students' Union organising more online events if possible in the future. It is important to note that most of the online students interviewed were also mature students, and so these students also wanted to join the SU's mature student network if it was offered hybrid.

In terms of the information received before enrolment, to aid the application process, either from the website, applicant services team or online student advisors, the majority of the students responded positively, stating how helpful everyone was.

Main recommendations are as follows:

- To approach the Students' Union with findings from this report and encourage the SU to offer more online student societies and events.
- To establish standardised course/module information packs to be given to students at the start of their course.
- Disabled students need radar keys to be put on disabled toilets so they don't have to wait until an able-bodied student opens the door for them.
- To implement course leader training in ILP's and reasonable adjustments.

Appendix 1: Question set

Year 1 Questions- Decision Making

- 1) Can you tell me why you decided to study for a degree?
- 2) Was there anyone in particular who influenced that decision?
- 3) How did you find the application process? Were there any challenges? Anything that helped?
- 4) What information, advice and guidance did you receive when you were making your application?
- 5) What attracted you to Falmouth University particularly?
- 6) Again, was there anyone who influenced your decision to study at Falmouth University?
- 7) What did you hope to gain from being a student here?

- 8) Would you say your course is meeting your expectations? How so?
- 9) Do you feel the university experience generally has met your expectations? For example, the societies/campus facilities/socialising etc?
- 10) Is there anyone who has supported you particularly? This could be university staff, or perhaps friends or other acquaintances.
- 11) What would you like to progress to after graduating? A particular career? self-employment? Post-graduate study?

Appendix 2: Codebook

This codebook is generated by the MaxQDA coding software, and comprises a list of the emerging themes that are the result of the analysis. Numbers shown next to each indicate how many segments of text were highlighted and coded as belonging to each theme. While these indicate a broad sense of which themes were most prominent in respondents' answers, they should not be taken to indicate any sort of numeric or statistical significance.

1 Why did you choose to study a degree?	
1.1 Current students	1
1.2 General job prospects	1
1.3 Fitting around personal circumstances	3
1.4 Learning	3
1.5 Career change	8
1.6 Chance for education	4
1.7 Financial circumstances	1
2 Who influenced you? (degree)	
2.1 Family	5
2.2 Role models	1
2.3 Social media	1
2.4 No one	11
3 Why did you chose to study at Falmouth?	
3.1 Recommendation	1
3.2 Environment/location	10
3.3 Supportiveness	1
3.4 Personal reasons	2
3.5 Marketing at open day/website	3
3.6 Online provision	6
3.7 Industry links	2
3.8 Organisation	2

3.9 Teaching staff expertise	1
3.10 Facilities	1
3.11 Curriculum	9
4 Who influenced you to study at Falmouth?	
4.1 Teaching staff	1
4.2 Interview	1
4.3 Webinars	1
4.4 Family	7
4.5 No one	6
4.6 Reputation	3
5 How was the application process?	
5.1 General un/familiarity	7
5.2 Process confusion	3
5.3 Student support team	4
5.4 Interview	3
5.5 Web materials	2
5.6 Financial arrangements	1
6 What IAG did you receive?	
6.1 None	1
6.2 Family and friends	2
6.3 Teaching staff	2
6.4 Student support team	4
6.5 Other students	1
6.6 Website	2
6.7 Webinars	2
7 Who has supported you through this first year?	
7.1 Family	1
7.2 Course mates	3
7.3 Teaching staff	10
7.4 Student support teams	5
7.5 Housemates	1
8 What do you hope to gain?	
8.1 Networking/industry	2
8.2 Peers support	2
8.3 Personal development	3
8.4 Improved skills	7

8.5 Like minded people	5
8.6 Push myself	6
8.7 Specific career	5
9 Is your course as expected?	
9.1 Clarity	2
9.2 Student support teams	1
9.3 Curriculum	16
9.4 Teaching	7
10 Is university as expected?	
10.1 Induction	2
10.2 SU/ reps	1
10.3 Clubs and societies	7
10.4 Peer support	3
10.5 Facilities	4
10.6 Cultural differences	2
11 After graduating?	
11.1 Still open	5
11.2 Postgraduate	8
11.3 Self-employment	8
11.4 Specific job	3
12 Other issues	
12.1 Learning tech	1