

The Student Journey Project: Year 2

Executive summary

This research project provides insight into the student's university journey, from the start to the end of their studies, with responses gathered annually. This report is the second of three, with 16 second-year students (of the 20 who took part in Year 1) agreeing to participate. These students were interviewed individually and asked a range of questions about their experiences so far, sources of support, whether expectations are being met, and future aspirations.

- **Continuation of studies:** Most respondents had no doubt that they wished to continue into Year 2; where there was an issue this was often related to personal issues rather than their course or the university. However, for a small number of respondents, specific features of their course had made them hesitant.
- **Expectations:** By and large expectations were being met and the first year had enabled respondents to align their expectations better where these had diverged on starting their studies. Those who said their expectations were not being met generally gave course-specific examples.
- **Support:** The most frequently cited source of support was course tutors, about whom respondents spoke very positively. Some also relied on peer support. Central services were mentioned less often as a source of support than in Year 1, although were still valued, and some noted the availability of resources.
- **Difficulties:** Difficulties were frequently course-specific, but centred around timetabling issues causing practical or emotional/academic challenges, and on confusion or lack of consistency in course content. Other difficulties were health- or finance-related.
- **Social life:** Despite the Year 1 cohort (particularly online students) sometimes finding socialising a challenge, Year 2 respondents studying both on campus and online all said that they had found a core group of peers who they would consider friends. The inclusive and non-judgemental nature of university culture was noted by some, with some particularly mentioning they valued the range of age groups on their course.
- **Preparation for university:** Broadly, respondents felt that the university had prepared them well, with access and foundation courses found to be useful. There were some suggestions for specific 'up to speed' inductions, on expectations at university, and general orientation, or on taken-for-granted skills such as specialist software.
- **Aspirations:** Almost all respondents' career aspirations reflected those they had mentioned in their Year 1 interview, although there was a sense that their studies had enabled them to solidify and refine these into more specific aims.

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

Students who participated in Year 1 interviews were invited to take part in a second interview. A £25 gift card (from a retailer of their choice) was offered to thank those who had participated for their time. 16 students (out of the original 20) students were interviewed in total. Participant ID numbers have been reassigned to support anonymity.

Of Year 2 participants, 12 are mature students, 9 study online, and 10 have declared disabilities. The participants have also met different widening participation criteria, including 9 students from areas of low participation in HE (TUNDRA Quintiles 1/2); 4 students from the most deprived areas in England (IMD Quintile 1 neighbourhoods); and 3 students who have experienced the care system.

The 4 students who haven't been interviewed for the project in Year 2 include 1 student who is re-taking their second year, 2 students who have completed their accelerated course and 1 student who had to withdraw due to financial difficulties.

2.2 Questions

The interview questions asked participants about their experience on their university journey so far. 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. The list of codes is 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 Returning for Year 2

Participants were asked whether they had had any doubts about returning to continue their studies at Falmouth into a second year. Most respondents expressed no hesitation in having returned to continue their studies ('100% happy to be back' (P8)). Some respondents said that while there had been some doubts, these were to do with personal circumstances such as their own or family's ill health or other issues, rather than related to the course or university.

A small number of participants were finding their course not as expected, or not giving them what they had hoped for, which had given them pause in returning (e.g. 'It really didn't feel like I learnt anything, which was quite disappointing because you want to be constantly learning and building on what you've learned' (P12)). Another was hesitant as they had not been receiving the accessibility support they needed:

[My department] knew that I had [accessibility needs] because we spoke about it during my interview. They offered me a place, let me accept my place and start my studies and haven't supported me. I know there's only so much they can do, but holding me to the same expectations as [other] students doesn't always work. (P14)

3.2 Expectations

In general, second year students had become familiar with the nature of university life and their course, and felt that their course and university life were broadly in line with what they had come to expect. For some it was a more relaxed, informal environment than they had expected. Where they described a lack of alignment, as for Year 1 this was often related to a specific issue or confusion that they had encountered.

The issue of clarity remained important, with concerns being specific to each participant's experience. Some related to communication (e.g. 'They haven't re-recorded the lectures, [but they've] updated the assignment brief three or four times since' (P7)), and equally, changes in course content sometimes led to a disappointing divergence to what students had seen at the open day:

There were a few things that we were shown on the open day that we would be doing. And by the time we got round to doing them, they'd been scrapped from the course. (P1)

One respondent had expected more one-to-one time with tutors, and was disappointed in the short slots allocated (P7). Nevertheless, expectations relating to tutors had broadly been well met: 'The tutors are fantastic, they're extremely knowledgeable - they've all been great. And on that front, it has met our expectations' (P1).

3.3 Support and encouragement

In Year 1, interviewees' sources of support 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. In Year 2, there was a similar picture, with course tutors being cited by almost all interviewees as the main source of support, with others being peers and online advice from support departments. In many cases, tutors were highly praised for going the extra mile, or for putting respondents at ease:

The support I've had has been amazing and even just the content, like there's a step up in terms of how difficult everything is, but the support is matching that step up. (P5)

One respondent said they felt increasingly confident in Year 2 to voice issues and proactively seek support:

My course lead and my personal tutor have been fantastic since the end of the first year when I finally, you know, spoke up and was like, look, I'm struggling guys. Because they weren't aware, because I hadn't said anything. I've been a lot more forthcoming this year when I've had issues, and they've also been reaching out. (P1)

Some respondents, as in Year 1, were also finding support from their peers, both academically ('We are very, very helpful and supportive of each other' (P9); 'Of the support I've been getting, I guess, is from a couple of my classmates. We've all just been working together to make sure that it all runs smoothly' (P6)), and personally ('My housemates, when I was in a really bad state, were there to support me' P11).

Where students accessed student services it was generally found to be useful e.g.

I got a lot of support from [mental health support]. I also have a study skills tutor that I have through DSA who's been incredible this year. (P14)

I went to student support, and I love the help there, the people, they're all really helpful. (P10)

3.4 Difficulties encountered

Participants were asked whether they had encountered any difficulties since starting their studies at Falmouth; responses to that question are combined here with other miscellaneous issues encountered that arose in response to other questions.

Some difficulties were chiefly practical. One respondent found the cost of public transport created financial problems ('I have a lot less disposable income because everything's increased in price public transport-wise, which really took me off guard when I did my budget for the start of the year' (P13)). Public transport also posed a problem for other students:

What doesn't help with when lessons are scheduled for certain times is the fact that the bus company keeps changing bus times, making it difficult for me to get to and from uni [...]. My bus only runs once an hour as it is. Sometimes they don't turn up. (P14)

The transport in Cornwall is really, really bad. It has stopped me from doing a lot of project work. It has been a hurdle in lot of my other projects as well. (P11)

Some transport issues related to another challenge noted by participants around course design, particularly timetabling. One interviewee flagged that a short-term shift to a five-day timetable caused practical and physical challenges, both in paying to travel to university and the fatigue that it caused (P1) – this was contrary to what they had expected from the open day. Another timetabling difficulty experienced by two participants was where assignments ran simultaneously. This caused practical difficulties for part-time students:

Let's say it's a two assignment module. Tutors will be very much: "No, no, let's concentrate completely on assignment 1 until we pass the submission date and then we'll look at Assignment 2." But because a lot of us are part-time and we're fitting this round other commitments, sometimes we're working on both at the same time and we need the exemplars for both in Week 1. Tutors are reluctant to discuss assignment 2 until assignment 1's completed. And we can't always work like that. (P7)

Concurrent projects also posed a challenge for focusing on two things at once (P9) and for different working preferences:

I very much like to focus on one project [...] and that'd be my singular focus. But that didn't necessarily work in [the] first year because you have meetings and deadlines and checkups for all of your modules [...] so you have to show progress in all three. So that that's been a difficulty for me. (P3)

Others had found a lack of consistency in various respects, including the provision of transcripts (P8), whether tutors were aware and accommodating of the ILP ('There's just been a couple of tutors that just don't really get it and they don't offer that support' (P5)), and what is expected of students in terms of what assignments are asking for ('one staff member will say, oh, it wants this and then another one will say, oh, it wants this' (P6)).

There was also some concern about accessibility issues getting around campus, with slow repairs to lifts and accessible entrances in one instance causing stress and potential danger, and a timetabling issue requiring students to attend a drop-in session across campus before returning to the department leaving insufficient time to actually attend the session.

3.5 Social life

In Year 1, there was a feeling amongst many interviewees who had hoped for a vibrant social life – particularly in terms of clubs and societies – that their university experience was not what they had hoped. However, asked whether they had made any friends at university, all Year 2 respondents replied that they had – indeed, all spoke positively in this respect. Several respondents spoke of a core group of friends, usually from their course, who would provide peer support and mutual feedback:

There's WhatsApp chats, and meet for an hour after [a lecture] and things like that. So you wonder is it going to be kind of isolating? Are you just going to be like a lone wolf on your own and it's, you know, it's something that we all felt able to start these little pods of support up that's another real positive thing about the friendships. (P5)

Some also noted a particular open-mindedness at Falmouth that they welcomed:

It surprised me how how diverse the groups are in in our department, but also how open everybody is to each other. (P3)

I think it was very much my own perception of how people would view me when actually no one really cares. (P2)

Mature students found the mix of ages to be positive, even when they may have had worries about it initially:

You do have quite a different life to someone who is 10 years younger than you. But that's not a problem. Like it's really great to be around these people and hear about their lives and things. [...] And sometimes they turn to me and go like, what do you think? Because I'm maybe a little bit older and stuff, which I do actually love. (P2)

It's nice as there's such a variety of people of age groups as well, which is really nice. (P8)

One online participant valued the international friendships they had been able to make (P15).

3.6 Preparation for university study

Respondents were asked whether there is anything the university could have done better to prepare them for their studies. Some felt that there was nothing more that could have been done; however, others felt that, given the disparity in experiences of students starting the course, some additional support might have helped to ensure that all the required skills and knowledge were in place. This might involve managing students' expectations around university work, for example:

[The university needs to manage] expectations around tutor feedback, around use of e-mail, around how to communicate in the forums. And yeah, sort of more where to go for advice. Have a webinar with the library team where they introduce themselves, the referencing team, that kind of thing... because we've got international students, people straight out of college, people who've been out of education for decades. It's such a mixed bag. (P7)

I think they need [...] a visual video of the day in the life of an online student, for example.[...] So then they can see the expectations of the course. The information can get a little bit lost when you open up pdf's, all the modules and stuff like that. (P15)

as well as about specific aspects of what to expect from the course:

I feel like they could do better at explaining sort of how much they expect from us and how much content we're gonna get. (P12)

A Q&A session about the course before we start, I think, with some of the lecturers before we join the the course so we can get a clear answer on things. (P11)

Or for others, preparation could have focused more on skills and knowledge:

One of the things that I would say would have been really useful is if they'd had a brief online bring you up to speed [on] things like PowerPoint, Adobe, stuff like that. Because the people that have come straight from college and that have come from A levels already knew how to use all the programmes. [...] So in particular for [...] mature students or even people coming from A levels that don't naturally feed on to the degree they're doing, it would have been good over the summer to be doing that. (P1)

3.7 Career aims

In Year 1, interviewees were asked what they hoped to do once they graduated, and responses varied. 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 in their creative discipline. In Year 2, most interviewees' aspirations had remained broadly unchanged from those they had described in their Year 1 interview, though like Year 1 all envisaged remaining in their chosen discipline (albeit sometimes with a different focus).

However, some had become more refined as a result of their experience between interviews, and there was a sense that trying out new things and continuing to practise in their discipline was enabling a useful exploration of their strengths, weaknesses, and preferences. For one respondent, a vague aspiration to apply for an MA had become more of a specific target:

I'm very focused now on doing a Masters. It's something that I want to do. And I'm currently kind of like exploring options a little bit since I spoke to you last. (P5)

Others, likewise, had been exploring their Masters aspirations or refining their particular niche within their discipline. For others, being exposed to other aspects of their creative discipline had allowed them to realise their specialism may lie elsewhere or have encouraged further exploration:

Year one, because it's more general, you kind of nail down the elements of it that you do like and the things you know [...] and then kind of rule out others. (P2)

It's opened my mind for more things I could do instead. Maybe not like I haven't abandoned what I want to do, but more like "Oh, I could do that." There's so many things I can do and I'm more confident in doing it [...] That's what I love about the whole course. (P9)

Conclusion and Recommendations

Overall, the majority of the students interviewed continued to find their studies at Falmouth broadly enjoyable and fulfilling.

Their course expectations – with specific exceptions – continue to be met and they felt supported, especially by their tutors, relying apparently somewhat less on central support services than the cohort in Year 1. Where difficulties had arisen, as emerged from Year 1 responses, these centre around course-specific issues, with inconsistencies being a key theme: courses deviating from what was presented on open day; courses being updated without the underlying guidance being updated to align; or different tutors' perceptions and advice about what was required. There were also concerns around timetabling not always accommodating part-time working or working preferences, with projects running simultaneously causing a practical and emotional/academic challenge for some, and cascading of information needed for courses later limiting the extent to which students could fit the term's work around outside commitments. Transport and finance also came up as issues for some.

Socially, participants were finding Falmouth an inclusive environment, and had found a core group of peers who they interacted with outside of lectures. Online students were no different to on-campus students, with many having a supportive WhatsApp group with course mates.

All respondents seemed to be finding their courses a valuable means of exploring their career pathways, with most feeling that their aspirations were broadly the same as in the first year but with the added insights of having been able to try out new areas and to refine and build confidence in their creative specialism. Career options, as in Year 1, clustered around Masters study to enable further specialisation, or a freelance career in the relevant creative sector.

Recommendations are as follows:

- The university needs to continue considering different ways to support students facing financial difficulties. On-campus students have stated that additional course costs (materials, equipment and trips) need to be explained more clearly at the start, because some courses additional costs are unaffordable. A small number of Online students have also mentioned how expensive specialist equipment is to buy and have suggested a rental system.
- The online programme planning team need to review and update resources and module information for courses alongside pre-recorded lectures to ensure that they align.
- Online students are suggesting a more in-depth induction* in the future, including videos, an introduction to wellbeing/other support services, and basic software training for mature students.
(*Please note; this recommendation has already been actioned with a proposal for homepage enhancement. This will include the introduction of a “Welcome Tile” on the homepage providing direct access to the welcome pages and “Getting Started Guide” and enables easier navigation; Welcome page improvements e.g addition of a new welcome video featuring Online Student Advisors; The “Getting Started Guide” restructured; Content review and updates including a refresh of existing guidance content, with sections rewritten to better reflect current student priorities and support needs and to ensure clarity, accuracy and relevance.)
- A number of tutors still need to be trained on ILP’s/Reasonable Adjustments processes, so that they understand the learning differences of some of their students.
- The majority of the Online students interviewed have mentioned the collaboration module. Although they found this module to be beneficial to their course, they were disappointed that all students in the project groups received the same assessment grades, irrespective of each students input. The Online team have agreed to discuss this further, to try to implement a fairer grading system in the future.

Appendix 1: Question set

Year 2 Questions: Perceptions of HE

1. You have continued onto Year 2 of your studies: was that an easy decision to make? Or not?
2. Is your course meeting/not meeting your expectations so far?
3. Which teams/individuals have supported you this year?
4. Is being a University student similar to what you expected?
5. Have you encountered any difficulties since starting your studies at Falmouth?
6. Have you made friends at the University? Or are still struggling to find that social connection?
7. Is there anything the University could have done to prepare you better for your studies?
8. Have your ultimate career aims changed at all?

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 (and there may be more than one segment coded for a single interviewee).

2 Year 2	
2.1 Misc: negative	7
2.1.1 Accessing support	2
2.1.2 Timetable	3
2.1.3 Finance	2
2.1.4 Inconsistent information	5
2.2 Misc: positive	10
2.3 Career aims	3
2.3.1 Different	8
2.3.2 Same	11
2.4 Better prep from uni	15
2.4.1 Skills and knowledge	2
2.4.2 Nothing further	4
2.4.3 Academic and course expectations	6
2.4.4 Finance	2
2.4.5 Accessibility and ILP	3
2.5 Social	27
2.5.1 Friends from same course	11
2.5.2 Negative experience	1
2.5.3 Friends from outside course	6
2.5.4 Inclusive environment	6
2.6 Difficulties	12
2.6.1 Support received	2
2.6.2 Timetabling	3
2.6.3 Health issues	4
2.6.4 Transport	3
2.7 Uni expectations	15
2.7.1 Tutors	2

2.7.2 Course content	7
2.7.3 Timetabling	4
2.8 Support given	18
2.8.1 Student support teams	9
2.8.2 Peers	4
2.8.3 Tutors	18
2.9 Course meeting expectations	19
2.9.1 Accessibility and ILP	1
2.9.2 Information and organisation	9
2.9.3 Versus advertised	5
2.9.4 Feedback	2
2.10 Returning for Year 2	2
2.10.1 Course issues	15
2.10.2 No doubt	9
2.10.3 Personal	7