

STUDENTS' EXPECTATIONS TOWARDS THEIR COURSEMATES IN THE ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT

Lasma Licite, Lana Janmere

Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies, Latvia
lasma.licite@llu.lv

Abstract

The social environment of a university, which is comprised of students, teaching staff and parents, play an essential role in the educational process. Students' decisions, learning and attainment could be considerably affected by relationships with their coursemates in particular. The present research therefore aims to examine students' expectations towards their coursemates in the academic environment in Latvia. The research surveyed 979 students at Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies (2016-2018). The research has found that for students, the study process involves not only learning but also common events with their coursemates as well as informal relationships. Comparing the role of coursemates and the informal influence of parents and teaching staff, the respondents preferred the involvement of their coursemates. Larger differences in opinion were found for the informal role of teaching staff in learning. Of the respondents, 47% expected teaching staff to be friends, while 29% slightly agreed that the teaching staff had to be authorities and knowledgeable specialists, which indicated that it was important for some students to disassociate formal relationships from informal ones between students and teaching staff. The dispersion of opinions that could be observed for some variables might be explained by the specifics of the programmes the students represented. Statistically significant differences in opinion were found between bioscience and engineering students in relation to the attitude of teaching staff to students, parental support and coursemate support in learning ($p < 0.05$) – the bioscience students more often favoured informal relationship aspects.

Key words: coursemates, higher education, students' expectations.

Introduction

In the educational process, an essential role is played by the social environment of a university, which is comprised of students, teaching staff and parents. Even though research investigations into this problem are done (Orska, 2006; Licite *et al.*, 2018), they mainly focus on general education schools rather than universities. However, the social environment of universities considerably affects the ability and opportunities for young individuals to analyse and assess ongoing processes, build up their research skills and master their professional competences, thereby being formed into personalities (Burceva, 2006). The mentioned aspects are largely affected not only by teaching staff but also by coursemates who often become not only friends but also advisers in study matters.

For many years, scientists did research to reveal the influence of coursemates on the life and academic performance of students at universities. According to the research investigations, relationships with coursemates played some role in shaping behaviours, students' lives and educational outcomes or academic achievements (e.g. grades) (Cook *et al.*, 2007; Vaquera & Kao, 2008; Carbonaro & Workman, 2016). In addition, it relates to educational expectations (Hauser *et al.*, 1983). Many researches show the importance of coursemate relationships and contexts that lie between friendship networks and study results (Frank *et al.*, 2008; Payne & Cornwell, 2007). For this reason, universities often introduce mentoring programmes, with mentors being senior students who focus on the wellbeing of students and the integration and retention

of students in the university's life (Etzel *et al.*, 2018). However, as pointed out by T. Brodaty and M. Gurgand (2016), the influence of coursemates on the study process has been little researched. The research investigations mainly focus on the role and influence of teaching staff in the study process (Carrel & West, 2010). The present research therefore **aims** to examine students' expectations towards their coursemates in the academic environment in Latvia. To achieve the aim, the following specific research **tasks** have been set: 1) to give insight into the theoretical aspects of the role of coursemates in the study process; 2) to analyse the roles students assign to their coursemates at Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies.

Materials and Methods

The first part of research paper is built on the analysis and synthesis of scientific literature which, allows describing the theoretical aspects of the role of coursemates in the academic environment. The second part is dedicated to the results of a survey that was organized in Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies to analyse students' expectations towards their coursemates in the academic environment. It is one of the largest universities in Latvia that has introduced a monitoring programme being implemented by senior students. A three-year longitudinal survey (2016-2018) was conducted to identify the opinions of students. The survey involved 979 first-year students from the programmes of bioscience, engineering and social sciences. The survey focused on students' expectations towards their ideal higher education and university environment (Licite & Janmere, 2018; Licite *et al.*,

2017; Licite & Janmere, 2016) and their opinions on the role of their coursemates in the study process.

The survey measured the opinions of students based on a set of variables – each variable represented some different aspect: academic environment boundaries, coursemate status, virtual communication with coursemates, coursemate support in study matters, parental support in study matters, assessment of attainment, support in learning, teaching staff status and teaching staff attitudes to students. Besides, some of the variables revealed a broader context of students' opinions that pertained to the informal involvement of parents and teaching staff. Nine variables, which constituted a reliable scale with high internal consistency ($\alpha=0.71$), were employed to measure the opinions of students.

Each of the variables consisted of two assertions; respondents had to choose one of the two assertions that most fit their values and rate it on a scale from 1 to 7:

- *Academic environment boundaries (V1)*: common events with coursemates vs the academic environment is intended only for learning.
- *Coursemate status (V2)*: coursemates are good friends/acquaintances vs coursemates are competitors.
- *Coursemate support in study matters (V3)*: coursemates provide help and support in study matters vs only teaching staff give advice on study matters or everything is achieved independently.
- *Assessment of attainment (V4)*: coursemate recognition for attainment is important vs everyone has to be aware of his/her assessment of his/her own attainment.
- *Support in learning (V5)*: instruction given by coursemates help in learning a topic covered during a class vs instruction given by teaching staff is sufficient to learn a topic covered during a class.
- *Virtual communication with coursemates (online vs. offline) (V6)*: a shared account is available in social media for fast communication with coursemates vs a shared email account is available for tackling study matters.
- *Teaching staff status (V7)*: teaching staff as friends vs teaching staff as authorities, knowledgeable individuals.
- *Teaching staff attitude to students (V8)*: teaching staff perceive students as colleagues having equivalent knowledge vs teaching staff perceive students as less knowledgeable individuals and seek to teach them everything.
- *Parental support in study matters (V9)*: parental support in study matters vs decisions on study matters are made by students themselves.

If respondents agree with the first assertion in the pair of assertions referring to the importance of informal relationships, they rate it in the range of 1-3 points, whereas if the respondents agree with the second assertion in the pair of assertions referring to the importance of the formal approach to the study process, they rate it in the range of 5-7 points; 4 points indicate a neutral opinion. A value of each variable (from 1 to 7) has no numerical significance in absolute terms, yet it serves as a relative comparison showing a distance towards one or the other assertion.

Results and Discussion

Theoretical aspects of the role of coursemates in the study process. The scientific literature often refers to the essential role played by the social environment in the study process (Rudin *et al.*, 2018) – coursemates in particular. The scientific literature substantiates the positive influence of coursemates by a number of arguments. First, communication and mutual interaction affect the other party effectively. Second, individuals identify one another with similar individuals and can thus influence each other, incl. regarding decision-making, information exchange etc. (Giordano, 2003). It is believed that individuals copy the behaviour of one another during the social learning process (Boyd & Richerson, 2009) and cooperate with one another. It is also stressed that the coursemates who have become friends represent a significant source of social capital. Scientists point to the influence of coursemates on educational attainment (Lomi *et al.*, 2011; Flashman, 2012). At the same time, however, students might perceive their coursemates as competitors (Giordano, 1995) rather than friends because they often struggle for government-funded study places at universities. One can conclude that there is a dilemma: on the one hand, coursemates are perceived as friends and advisors, while on the other hand they represent threats or competitors.

Nevertheless, despite competition among students in universities, relationships with coursemates are very important for modern students. Coursemates often become good friends on the condition that their relationships are based on understanding and mutual respect. Although individuality is essential, "fitting in" is of equal importance to them. They feel very strongly about living up to the expectations of their peers and their communities (Goldgehn, 2004). They mutually exchange their experience and ideas and therefore the experience of the coursemates who are also friends can considerably influence their decisions and daily life, even more than the views of authorities (e.g. teaching staff) do. Nowadays students are particularly concerned with what peers think (Lipkin & Perrymore, 2009). Besides, communication often occurs not face-to-face but virtually (Gardner & Eng, 2005).

Furthermore, young individuals prefer working in a team or group to working individually (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Students prefer to go to a place at the university where to talk with their peers and also to study. According to N. Howe and W. Strauss (2000), nowadays students can better understand one another as well as peers than the generation that was at the university 10 years ago, yet they worse understand teaching staff. This could be explained by the fact that they trust their coursemates more than teaching staff (Manuel, 2002). Students prefer verifying facts and developments to listening and simply trusting what teaching staff say (Gardner & Eng, 2005).

Descriptions of a relationship between modern students and teaching staff indicate that the students expect strong and friendly relationships with the teaching staff, just like with their parents (Epstein & Howe, 2006). Modern students identify themselves with parental values and feel very close to their parents (Gardner & Eng, 2005), which indicates the essential role of their parents not only in their daily lives but also in the study process. Parents are perceived as friends rather than authorities; therefore, students often turn to their parents for advice and appreciate it. In view of the role of parents, the role of an academic advisor includes more of a parental function with regular meetings and personal attention (Eckleberry-Hunt & Tucciarone, 2011). It is important for students that teaching staff perceive them as personalities, as they wish to feel special. Care and attentiveness

what young individuals expect from teaching staff is associated with the role of parents. In childhood, the modern youth received parental care, attentiveness and protection – they were ‘special’; accordingly, they expect the same in the academic environment (Gardner & Eng, 2005). Research investigations point out that nowadays communication with students has to be made in understandable language for them and a focus has to be placed on positive mutual relationships (Goldgehn, 2004). In this situation, of course, a dilemma is faced: whether teaching staff are today perceived as friends and advisers, or they are knowledge givers.

The empirical research results acquired at Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies support an idea about peers’ importance in general. Theoretically, the study process is a formal, organised, systemised and controlled way of learning whereby primary social interaction occurs between students and teaching staff. In practice, however, if analysing a comfortable learning process, students see the boundaries of the study process broader, admitting that it involves not only acquiring knowledge but also common events with coursemates. With different levels of agreement, 76% students saw common events with their coursemates as an integral part of a comfortable academic environment, while 10% saw the academic environment as only a place for learning. This means that for modern students, the boundary between formal and informal is blurred. This is supported by the fact that with the highest level of

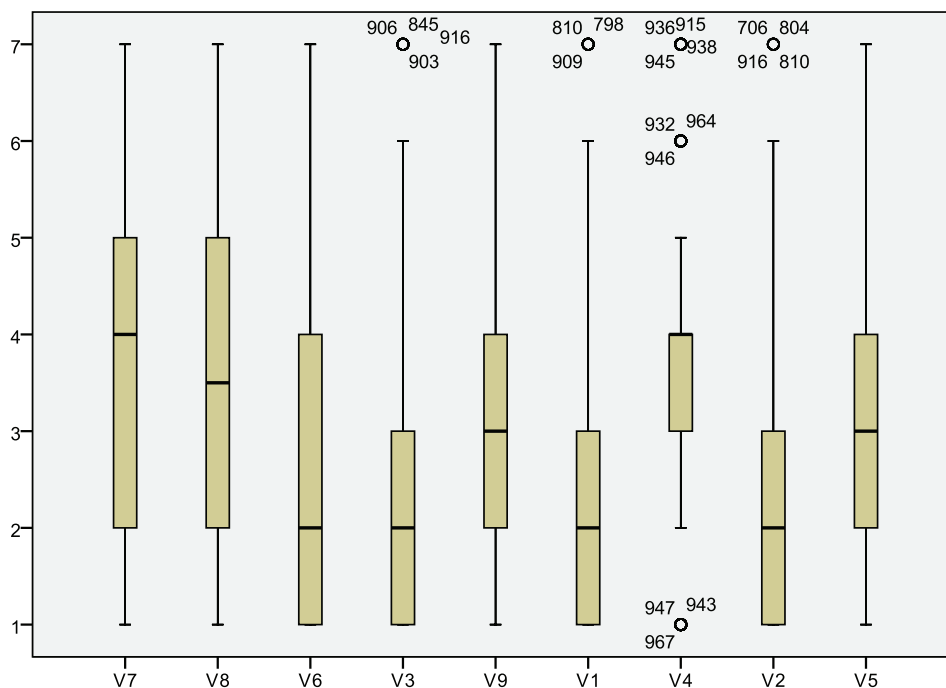


Figure 1. Students’ opinions on the role of coursemates, teaching staff and parents in the study process.

Source: authors’ construction based on data of the research study ‘Students’ expectations towards higher education’ (2016-2018).

agreement ($SD=1.33$), most of the respondents (83%) admitted that they would like to see their coursemates as friends or acquaintances rather than competitors. A similar tendency for coursemate involvement was observed in relation to coursemate support in studies. Most of the respondents shared the opinion that the help given by their coursemates was important for them and that they did not have to rely only on teaching staff or themselves ($M=2.28$; $SD=1.44$).

However, the analysis of the respondents' opinions on the role of their coursemates only in learning activities, and not in the study process as a whole, reveals that the opinions varied, and the level of agreement on the assertions concerning the role of informal relationships was not as high as that for coursemate status and support as well as the boundaries of the study process.

Compared with the findings of the above-mentioned research investigations, the present research found that coursemate recognition was less important for the respondents, as only 41% agreed it was important ($M=3.80$; $SD=1.61$). However, the opposite assertion – everyone has to be aware of his/her assessment of his/her own attainment – was supported to a greater extent: 25% agreed with it, while 34% gave the neutral rating. The results indicate that support for informal relationships was not unambiguous, and slight differences were observed among the variables. It is also evidenced by the respondents' ratings of class topic learning: with different levels of agreement, instruction given by coursemates was important for 53%, while 47% relied only on teaching staff in learning class topics or did not give a particular rating ($M=3.48$; $SD=1.57$).

As regards virtual communication, the dispersion of the respondent opinions was high – 66% favoured the role of online communication in social media and preferred it to offline communication. For the purpose of dealing with study matters, 18% preferred email communication, while 17% had no opinion ($M=2.80$; $SD=1.96$).

A comparison of the role of coursemates and the informal influence of parents and teaching staff revealed that the respondents preferred the involvement of their coursemates. Parental (family) support for study matters, as opposed to their own responsibility, was important for 60% of the respondents ($M=3.08$; $SD=1.74$), while coursemate support was important for 83% (see above).

The dispersion of the respondent opinions for the informal role of teaching staff in studies was found to be higher. An assertion that teaching staff represent friends was supported by 47%, while 29% slightly agreed that the teaching staff had to be authorities and knowledgeable specialists ($M=3.66$; $SD=1.76$). Accordingly, it was important for some students to disassociate formal relationships from informal ones

between students and teaching staff. This, however, does not mean that they unanimously expected authoritative attitude from teaching staff: 50% believed that the teaching staff had to treat students as colleagues, while 29% admitted the teaching staff had to teach everything because the students were less knowledgeable than they were ($M=3.62$; $SD=1.67$).

The dispersion of the respondent opinions that was characteristic of some variables could be explained by the specifics of the study programmes the respondents represented. Statistically significant differences in opinion were found between bioscience and engineering students in relation to the attitude of teaching staff to students, parental support and coursemate support in learning ($p<0.05$) – the bioscience students more often favoured informal relationship aspects. Besides, statistically significant differences in opinion were found also between engineering and social science students, as the engineering students supported informal relationship aspects less. The opinions of social science and bioscience students statistically significant differed only in one variable – coursemate support in study matters ($p<0.05$), which was expected mostly by the social science students.

Conclusions

1. The social environment of a university, which is comprised of students, teaching staff and parents, play an essential role in the educational process. To acquire more knowledge, it becomes increasingly important to make strong informal relationships in the academic environment, incl. the relationships with coursemates, which can affect the academic performance of the students. Friendly relationships, based on trust and mutual understanding, are expected from teaching staff as well. This, to a great extent, is associated with family values and the influence of parents, which is significant in the study process as well.
2. The research revealed the specifics of the role of coursemates in the academic environment where, on the one hand, students seek friends, while, on the other hand, they wish to disassociate the formal aspects of the academic environment (learning, attainment assessment) from the informal ones. Even though the students' ratings of the informal involvement of teaching staff and parents pointed to the priority role played by their coursemates, the students' opinions in some aspects were quite dispersed owing to the different study programmes they represented. Engineering students wished less to rely on their coursemates than social science students did.
3. With different levels of agreement, majority of students saw common events with their

- coursemates as an integral part of a comfortable academic environment, while 10% saw the academic environment as only a place for learning. This means that for modern students, the boundary between formal and informal is blurred.
4. The research showed that coursemate recognition was less important for the respondents (41% agreed it was important). However, the opposite assertion – everyone has to be aware of his/her assessment of his/her own attainment – was supported to a greater extent. The results indicate that support for informal relationships was not unambiguous, and slight differences were observed among the variables.
 5. As regards virtual communication, majority of respondents favoured the role of online communication in social media and preferred it to offline communication. This means that for modern student online communication is important and it strengthens relationships between coursemates in academic environment.
 6. The research results are useful for universities that enhance their academic environments, placing a special focus on the aspects of the social environment that contributes to the integration of students in the life of the university, increase the academic performance of students and hinder the students' decisions on interrupting their studies. Besides, the research reveals the values of modern students, the awareness and analysis of which is important in higher education marketing.

References

1. Boyd, R., & Richerson, P.J. (2009). Culture and the Evolution of Human Cooperation. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B*, 364, 3281–3288. DOI: 10.1098/rstb.2009.0134.
2. Brodaty, T., & Gurgand, M. (2016). Good Peers or Good Teachers? Evidence from a French University. *Economics of Education Review*, 54, 62–78. DOI: 10.1016/j.econedurev.2016.06.005.
3. Burceva, R. (2006). Environment of Education in Higher Education Institution. Educational Institution Learning Environment: Problems and Solutions. Rezekne Higher Education Institution, Faculty of Pedagogy, Personality Socialization Research Institute, 86–91.
4. Carbonaro, W., & Workman, J. (2016). Intermediate Peer Contexts and Educational Outcomes: Do the Friends of Students' Friends Matter? *Social Science Research*, 58, 184–197. DOI: 10.1016/j.ssresearch.2016.02.005.
5. Carrel, S., & West, J. (2010). Does Professor Quality Matter? Evidence from Random Assignment of Students to Professors. *Journal of Political Economy*, 118(3), 409–432. DOI: 10.1086/653808.
6. Cook, T., Deng, Y., & Morgano, E. (2007). Friendship Influences during Early Adolescence: the Special Role of Friends' Grade Point Average. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 17(2), 325–356. DOI: 10.1111/j.1532-7795.2007.00525.x.
7. Eckleberry-Hunt, J., & Tucciarone, J. (2011). The Challenges and Opportunities of Teaching “Generation Y”. *Journal of Graduate Medical Education*, 3(4), 458–461. DOI: 10.4300/JGME-03-04-15.
8. Epstein, M., & Howe, P. (2006). The Millennial Generation: Recruiting, Retaining, and Managing. Today's CPA. September/October, 24–27.
9. Etzel, A.M., Alqifari, F.S., Shields, K.M., Wang, Y., & Bileck, N.B. (2018). Impact of Student to Student Peer Mentoring Program in First Year of Pharmacy Program. *Currents in Pharmacy Teaching and Learning*, 10, 762–770. DOI: 10.1016/j.cptl.2018.03.009.
10. Gardner, S., & Eng, S. (2005). What Students Want: Generation Y and the Changing Function of the Academic Library. *Libraries and the Academy*, 5(3), 405–420.
11. Giordano, P. (1995). The Wider Circle of Friends in Adolescence. *American Journal of Sociology*, 101(3), 661–697. DOI: 0.1086/230756.
12. Giordano, P. (2003). Relationships in Adolescence. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 29, 257–281. DOI: 10.1146/annurev.soc.29.010202.100047.
13. Goldgehn, L.A. (2004). Generation Who, What, Y? What You Need to Know about Generation Y? *International Journal of Educational Advancement*, 5(1), 24–34. DOI: 10.1057/palgrave.ijea.2140202.
14. Hauser, R.M., Tsai, S.L., & Sewell, W.H. (1983). A Model of Stratification with Response Error in Social and Psychological Variables. *Sociology of Education*, 56(1), 20–46. DOI: 10.2307/2112301.
15. Howe, N., & Strauss, W. (2000). *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation*. New York: Vintage Books.
16. Flashman, J. (2012). Academic Achievement and Its Impact on Friend Dynamics. *Sociology of Education*, 85(1), 61–80. DOI: 10.1177/0038040711417014.

17. Kenneth, A.F., Muller, C., Schiller, K.S., Riegle-Crumb, C., Mueller, A.S., & Pearson, J. (2008). The Social Dynamics of Mathematics Coursetaking in High School. *American Journal of Sociology*, 113(6), 1645–1696. DOI: 10.1086/587153.
18. Licite, L., Janmere, L., & Auzina, A. (2017). Challenges for University Teachers in Higher Education in a New Millennial Era. 4th International multidisciplinary scientific conference on social sciences and arts SGEM 2017 conference proceedings, Vol. 4, Education and educational research, Book 3, Science and society, 22-31 August 2017. (pp. 71–78). Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. Albena.
19. Licite, L., Janmere, L., & Auzina, A. (2018). Role of the Social Environment in the Study Process for Millennials. 18th International multidisciplinary scientific GeoConference, SGEM 2018 conference proceedings, Vol. 18, Ecology, economics, education and legislation, Issue 5.4. Education and accreditation in geosciences. Environmental legislation, multilateral relations and funding opportunities, 2-8 July 2018 (pp. 241–247). Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. Sofia.
20. Licite, L., & Janmere, L. (2016). Millennial Student Expectations towards Higher Education in Latvia. 16th International scientific conference Engineering for Rural Development, conference proceedings, Vol. 16, 24-26 May 2016 (pp. 1440–1445). Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies. Faculty of Engineering. Latvian Academy of Agricultural and Forestry Sciences. Jelgava.
21. Licite, L., & Janmere, L. (2018). Student Expectations towards Physical Environment in Higher Education. 17th International scientific conference Engineering for Rural Development, conference proceedings, Vol. 17, 23-25 May 2018 (pp. 1198–1203). Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies. Faculty of Engineering. Latvian Academy of Agricultural and Forestry Sciences. Jelgava.
22. Lipkin, N.A., & Perrymore, A.J. (2009). *Y in the Workplace*. Franklin Lakes, NJ: Career Press.
23. Lomi, A., Snijders, T.A.B., Steglich, C.E., & Torlo, V.J. (2011). Why are Some More Peer than Other? Evidence from a Longitudinal Study of Social Networks and Individual Academic Performance. *Social Science Research*, 40(6), 1506–1520. DOI: 10.1016/j.ssresearch.2011.06.010.
24. Manuel, K. (2002). Teaching Information Literacy to Generation Y. *Journal of Library Administration*, 36(1/2), 195–217. DOI: 10.1300/J111v36n01_12.
25. Orska, R. (2006). Social Environment's Influence to Pupil's Behaviour. Educational Institution Learning Environment: Problems and Solutions. Rezekne Higher Education Institution, Faculty of Pedagogy, Personality Socialization Research Institute, 6–16.
26. Payne, D., & Cornwell, B. (2007). Modelling peer influences on delinquency: Beyond the Direct Contact Hypothesis. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, 23(2), 127–150. DOI: 10.1007/s10940-006-9022-y.
27. Rudin, F.S., Tomkins, J.L., & Simmons, L.W. (2018). The Effects of the Social Environment and Physical Disturbance on Personality Traits. *Animal Behaviour*, 138, 109–121 DOI: 10.1016/j.anbehav.2018.02.013.
28. Vaquera, E., & Kao, G. (2008). Do You Like Me as Much as I Like You? Friendship Reciprocity and Its Effects on School Outcomes among Adolescents. *Social Science Research*, 37(1), 55–72. DOI: 10.1016/j.ssresearch.2006.11.002.