

## When the rubber hits the road: First-year students' (in)accurate expectations of University life

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### **Biography**

*Broadly, Valerie seeks to conduct applied research that contributes positively to youth in society. Her research interests focus on motivation and stress management in young people.*

*She is particularly interested in:*

- a) identifying diverse settings in which young people experience stress and anxiety;*
- b) evaluating how these experiences affect the attitudes, self-perceptions, and well-being of young people; and*
- c) designing evidence-based coping strategies to help young people effectively manage stress and anxiety.*

*Valerie considers herself a multidisciplinary researcher. Her formal training is in educational psychology, but she also extended her scholarship to other disciplines such as sociology, law, geography, philosophy, and public policy. She adopts a wide range of methodological approaches, including mixed-method studies.*

### **ABSTRACT**

In this study, I sought to gain clarity on the power of incoming first-year students' expectations of university life. Rather than focus on the strength of students' expectations, I took an exploratory approach by examining the accuracy of students' expectations (AoE). In the current research, AoEs were examined through quantitative estimations; that is, (a) how much a student *expects* a future event to occur in relation to (b) how much a student actually *experiences* that event. This exchange was used to approximate the accurate estimations, underestimations, and overestimations that first-year students make when they transition to university. In the current research, the following questions were examined:

How accurate are students' expectations across eight domains of university life?

1. Are AoEs sensitive to one's learner background?
2. To what extent can AoEs and relevant learner background predict academic self-efficacy (ASE), university adjustment (ADJ), and GPA?

Participants were 1,028 first-year university students in Aotearoa New Zealand. After their first term of academic study, I asked the degree to which individuals had underestimated, overestimated, or accurately estimated what university life would be like. Overall, the study presents initial evidence that students are inaccurate in their expectations of university life across most domains. AoEs appear sensitive to social capital and, therefore, rooted in students' knowledge and experiences with academia, local culture, and institution. AoEs can—to a limited degree—predict ASE, ADJ, and GPA. These trends, however, take place in surprising ways: students in this sample were more successful when they had (a) accurately estimated domains related to learning and study and (b) *underestimated* domains related to interpersonal relationships—namely, the friendliness of peers and hospitality of teaching staff. These findings may be used to help researchers and institutions to better appreciate the exchange between students' expectations and the realities of university life.