

This article is downloaded from



**CRO** CSU Research Output  
*Showcasing CSU Research*

<http://researchoutput.csu.edu.au>

It is the paper published as:

**Author(s):** Pymm, R.A.

**Title:** Get real! New undergraduate library and information management students and their expectations of the workload over their first year of study

**Conference:** ALIA Library and Information Technicians' Conference

**Location:** Adelaide

**Date:** 15-18 September 2009

**Year:** 2009

**Pages:** 1 - 17

**Editor:**

**Publisher:** ALIA

**Place of Publication:** Australia

**Abstract:** This paper reports on the results of a survey completed by over 100 students at the very beginning of their study in the undergraduate LIM degree at Charles Sturt University. Questions related to student expectations, and concerns, as to the time they would need to spend studying, their home environment and how they would manage part-time study, the resources they would require to be successful, their relationship with lecturers etc. A follow up survey of the same students, undertaken at the end of the ...

**URLs:**

**FT:**

**PL:** [http://researchoutput.csu.edu.au/R/-?func=dbin-jump-full&object\\_id=34238&local\\_base=GEN01-CSU01](http://researchoutput.csu.edu.au/R/-?func=dbin-jump-full&object_id=34238&local_base=GEN01-CSU01)

# **Get real! New undergraduate Library and Information Management students and their expectations of the workload over their first year of study**

Dr Bob Pymm, Charles Sturt University  
Email: rpymm@csu.edu.au

## **Abstract**

This paper reports on the results of a survey completed by over 100 students at the very beginning of their study in the undergraduate LIM degree at Charles Sturt University. Questions related to student expectations, and concerns, as to the time they would need to spend studying, their home environment and how they would manage part-time study, the resources they would require to be successful, their relationship with lecturers etc. A follow up survey of the same students, undertaken at the end of their first year of study, sought to ascertain how those initial expectations and concerns had been realised – or not. Results reported here focus on the time aspect, with responses suggesting that initial concerns and estimates as to the time and effort required to manage the course, and everything else in their lives, successfully, were exaggerated and that many found they could do well with a significantly lower commitment of time than they had anticipated.

The Bachelor of Applied Science (Library and Information Management) (BASLIM) degree is a well established program at Charles Sturt University (CSU) with a regular intake of 100 or more students each year. It is a course offered wholly by distance education, attracting a majority of mature age students (the mean age being around 35 years) who generally study a part-time load. The cohort has, over the last decade, comprised around 50% of students upgrading from a TAFE library technicians' qualification, 30% with no previous tertiary education experience at all and the remaining 20% with a range of tertiary study experiences.

At the beginning of their studies, three to four weeks before commencement of the first semester, students are required to attend a compulsory, three day Residential School held on the CSU Wagga Wagga campus. Only in exceptional circumstances are exemptions to attending the Residential School granted and therefore virtually the entire student body for that year attends. This Residential School is the only one in the entire course and thus the only time students actually meet each other, and the faculty, face to face in formal and informal situations, where they may discuss any aspect of the course and their concerns over embarking on university-level study. It is therefore seen as a key component in establishing student confidence and linking students into networks, so important for success in what can be a very long term and challenging commitment. The role of these networks, which hopefully evolve into a form of learning community where students support each other, as well as learn from each other, is seen as one of the major challenges for distance education – how can they be established and maintained over these long time periods (Bower, 2001). Others have emphasized the importance of a residential school for orienting students new to distance education with Linden (1998) noting the critical importance of a residency component to a US MLS program, quoting students' positive comments of the experience and the opportunity it provided to build a sense of community. In the UK, Parkinson and Forrester (2005) also report that students attending study schools gained immensely from the experience (p. 11) and Morgan and Thorpe provide a detailed overview of the practices and perceived benefits of residential schools at the Open University (UK) (in Evans and Nation, 1993). These positive views are echoed by feedback received from CSU students at the 2008 Residential School who overwhelmingly report the School as a very positive experience, often despite their initial reluctance and negative feelings about attendance.

Thank you...meeting with other students makes me feel I am not alone walking this new study journey...

...valuable for networking and gaining tips on DE...

One of the main aims of the CSU Residential School is to try and de-mystify the learning experience students will be embarking upon. From the feedback

received, many students are nervous and unsure about how they will cope with this first semester of study and the workload they will be faced with.

Answered some of my questions and helped reduce my nervousness

It made more clam about the whole experience...

### **Student expectations of study**

In particular, in the early days of the course, before they have become accustomed to their program of study and its demands, students may have little comprehension, or hold unrealistic expectations, as to the amount of work and study involved and the level of service and support which will be provided. Being part of a learning community which hopefully, the residential school experience has helped establish, they may be in a position to discuss these concerns and gain reassurance – or clarification – from fellow students, helping overcome that sense of isolation and providing real benefits in sustaining the motivation and willpower to study (Parkinson and Forrester, p.6).

However, this question of expectations and the possible mismatch with reality is seen as a widespread phenomenon which has been identified in a number of studies as a cause of reduced student satisfaction, misunderstanding, potential conflict and lower retention rates. James (2001, p.4) noted that many students embarking on university studies have “only vague ideas about specific aspects of the experience which lies ahead” and goes on to note the cognitive dissonance that may occur when experience contradicts built-up expectations. He recommends working closely with students in those first few weeks of their first term, noting the impact this can have if not done:

In addition, greater efforts are needed to manage expectations during the early formative period of university enrolment. This is the time during which much of the lasting nature of the student-university transaction will be established and universities have to work extremely hard ....to influence expectations and capture student engagement (p.9).

Parkinson and Forrester (p.2) suggest that the concepts of customer care and satisfaction used in the business world are also relevant in academia, being useful in designing orientation and induction programs that help ensure that the disparity between student expectations and the reality of the service actually delivered are minimized. In their study of distance learning students' expectations and what was delivered in their induction program, Parkinson and Forrester found that gap analysis – assessing expectations against the reality – an effective diagnostic tool that helped identify areas of mismatch and their significance, enabling the design of future induction programs to better target these areas of concern (p.12).

Smith and Wertlieb (2005) found that in general, for on-campus students, their initial expectations across a wide range of variables covering academic work and social interaction, did not align with the actual experience of their first year (p.160), and students with unrealistically high academic or social expectations appeared to do less well on grade point averages. This indicates the potential negative impact of unrealistic expectations on academic motivation and achievement, further emphasizing the need to properly manage such expectations.

The situation may be compounded by the nature of distance education which, if an effective learning network is not in place, can leave a student feeling isolated, reliant upon fairly formal mechanisms of email and other online communication to resolve issues which, in the face-to-face situation, may be approached in a seemingly less formal, more 'friendly' manner, with a better result for both parties. The place of the Residential School in the CSU BASLIM distance program is therefore seen as providing an opportunity to not only establish networks but also try and resolve any 'gaps' in expectations between students and staff in this supportive environment and before they may become major issues. Thus this study sought to identify new students' expectations in a number of areas and compare these with their actual experience one year later. Identifying where the major 'gaps' or misconceptions occurred would then provide useful data to inform future residential school programs in order to better prepare students for the way ahead, reducing their anxiety levels and hopefully making that first semester a more enjoyable and academically productive time.

This paper reports on one aspect of the student expectations survey undertaken during 2007/2008 dealing with their perceptions on the amount of work required of them and the amount they actually did in the course of their first year of study. Further papers focusing on expectations relating to dealing with lecturers, course content and the influence of the home environment are being developed.

## **Method**

In January 2007 118 students (comprising 83% women, 17% men) with a mean age of 35, attended the BASLIM Residential School at CSU Wagga Wagga. On the third day of the Residential, students were given a short introductory lecture explaining the purpose of the survey that would be distributed, encouraging them to complete this, and a follow up survey which would be posted to them one year later. Their anonymity was assured and it was pointed out that if they did not wish to be part of the survey that was fine. Staff would never know who had, or had not, completed the survey.

The 34 question survey comprised mainly Likert-type items with two open-ended questions and was distributed with an associated information note reiterating the purpose behind the questionnaire, emphasizing the confidentiality aspect and

noting how the information would be dealt with and reported. The questions sought to elicit information regarding students' expectations of the amount of time and effort they would need to expend in order to be successful in their studies. It also asked about their expectations of the relationship with their teachers and the university more broadly.

The questionnaire had previously been piloted amongst a small group of on-campus students to assess its intelligibility.

Students were asked to complete the questionnaire in the next 15 minutes and place it into a box at the end of the session. Students sometimes discussed their responses with their neighbours but generally, completion of the survey was done quietly, in a private manner. 111 completed surveys were returned.

In January 2008, a follow up survey was posted to all of the 2007 cohort who had attended Residential School and were still enrolled in the course. This survey was similar to the first, with questions worded slightly differently so that students were not commenting on what they expected from the course, but were answering in accordance with their actual experience over the year. Thus for example, in the first survey they were asked "How likely are you to use the CSU Library service"; the follow up survey asked "How often did you use the CSU Library service during the year" .

A total of 92 surveys were sent out with a covering letter and a stamp addressed envelope for return of the completed questionnaire. With one follow up letter sent out to all of the students, 35 completed surveys were returned.

Note that not all questions on all surveys were completed by every respondent.

Both sets of surveys were entered into Excel and appropriate analysis was undertaken.

## **Results**

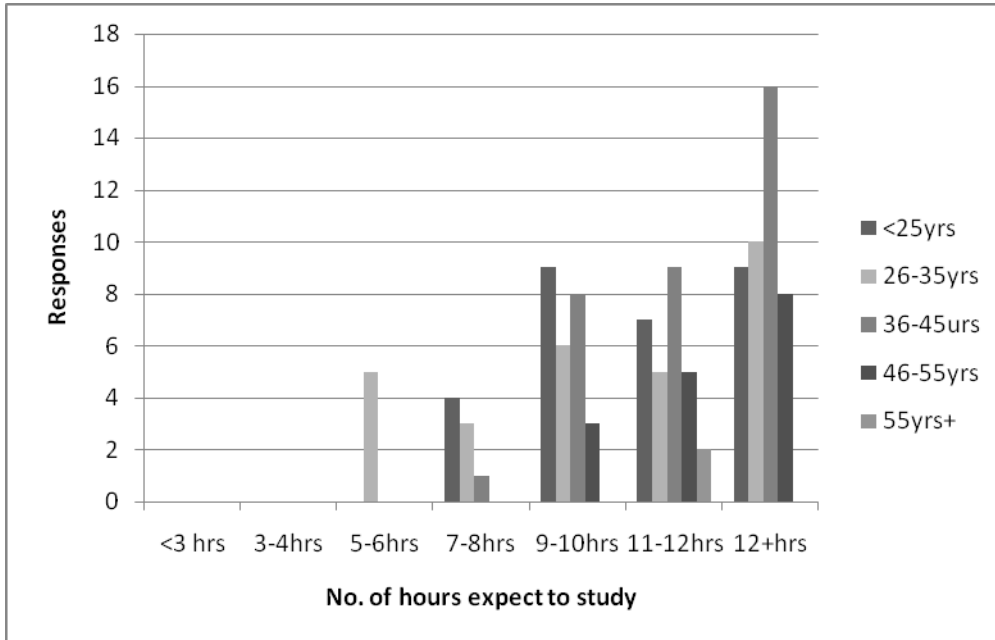
The initial cohort of 111 students responding comprised around 70% who had studied previously (of these, the majority had undertaken the Library Technicians Diploma or Certificate) with the remaining 30% having no previous experience of tertiary study.

Demographically, students were evenly spread across the age spectrum – around half were under 35, with 46% between 35 and 55. This is a fairly standard pattern for LIM undergraduate enrolments at CSU.

The first questions related to the amount of time students expected to spend on their studies. 101 students answered the questions in the initial survey regarding

the number of hours per week they expected to spend on studying each subject, with 60% predicting 11 or more hours. Means were calculated by taking the mid-point within each time range, eg. 3-4hrs – 3.5 hours, and multiplied by the number of occurrences. Responses were grouped by age.

The results indicate an increased expectation of study time required in the older cohorts. See Chart and Table 1 below:

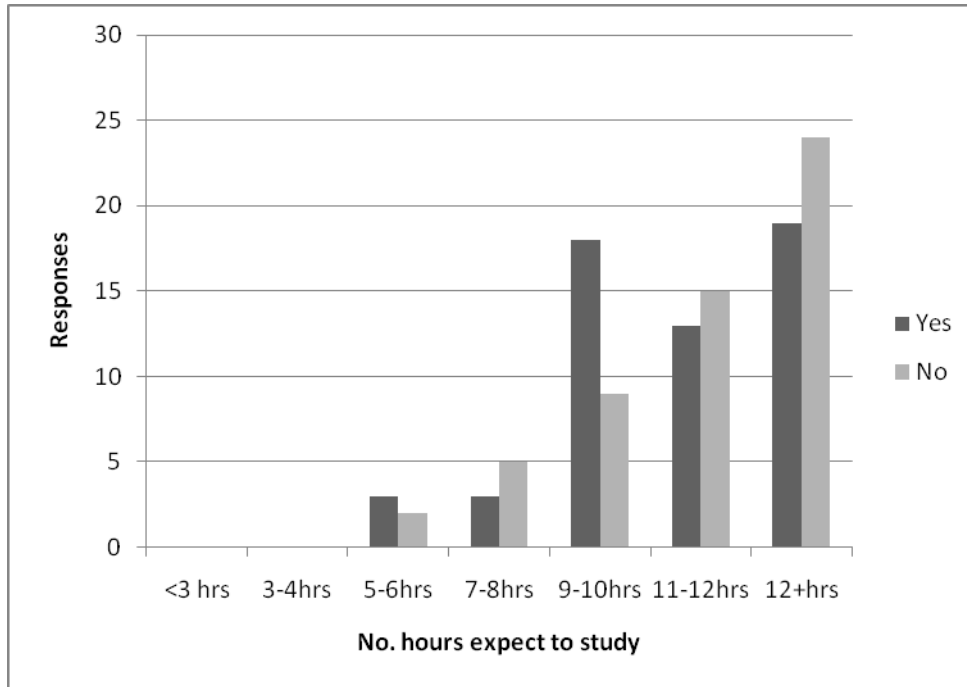


**Chart 1: Number of hours per subject per week students expected to study – by age**

Age group	Mean hours expected to study
<25 yrs	10.6
26-35	10.0
36-45	11.4
46-55	11.6
55+	11.5

**Table 1: Mean number of hours per subject per week students expected to study – by age group**

The responses were also tabulated against previous study experience. Students who had studied at the tertiary level in the previous three years (the “yes” group) reported a slightly lower level of expectation of study time than those with older or no previous experience (the “no” group). See Chart and Table 2 below:



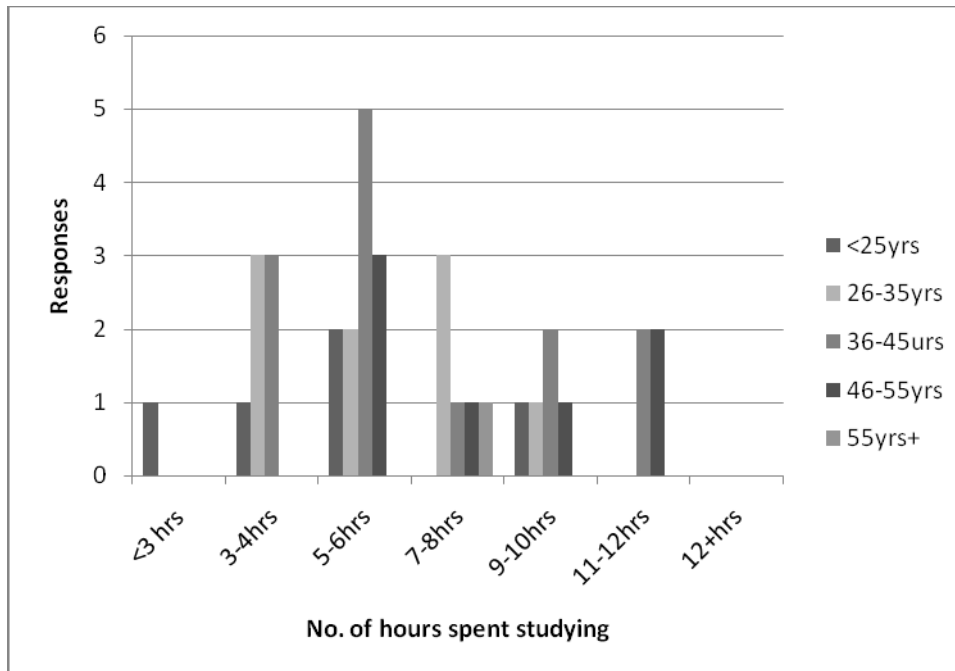
**Chart 2: Number of hours per subject per week students expect to spend studying – Yes=tertiary study in previous three years, No=no study in last three years.**

Previous study	Mean hours expected to study
Yes	10.7
No	11.0

**Table 2: Mean number of hours per subject per week students expected to study – by previous study experience**



In the follow up survey conducted one year later, 35 responded and overall, reported a much lower number of hours were actually spent studying than they had expected, with over 70% of students spending less than eight hours per week on a subject. Again, younger cohorts tended to spend less time studying than older age groups, although with such a small sample this cannot be seen as significant at any level. See Chart and Table 3 below:

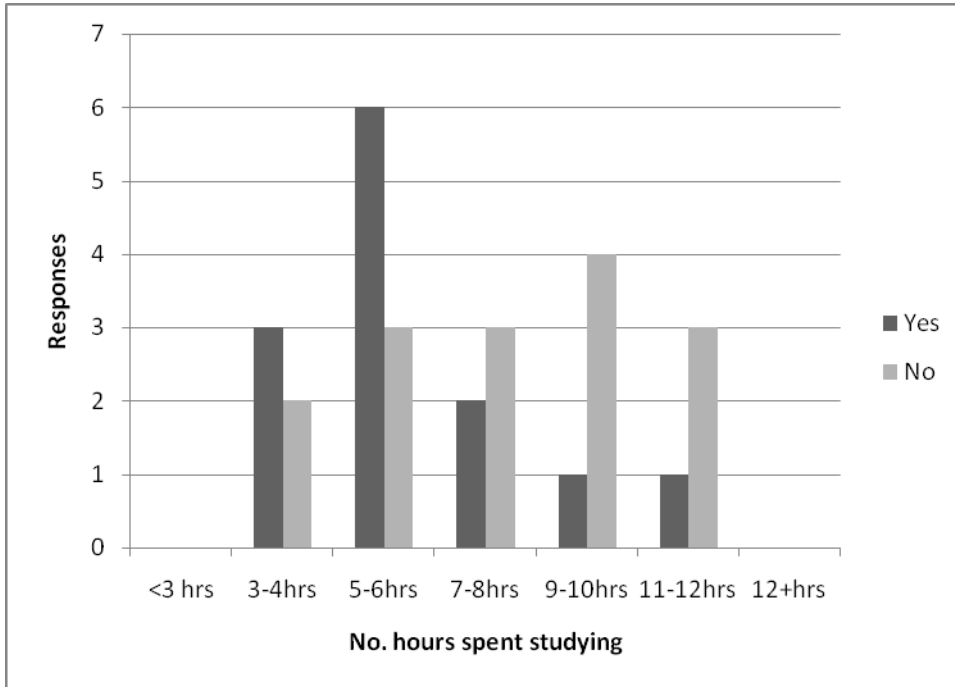


**Chart 3: Number of hours per subject per week students spent studying – by age**

Age group	Mean hours spent studying
<25 yrs	5.4
26-35	6.0
36-45	6.7
46-55	8.0
55+	7.5

**Table 3: Mean number of hours per subject per week students spent studying – by age group**

Similarly, when looked at based upon previous study experience, those with no experience in the last three years appear to have spent considerably longer actually studying than those who did have recent experience. However, the small number of responses again makes this finding unreliable, although of interest. See Chart and Table 4.

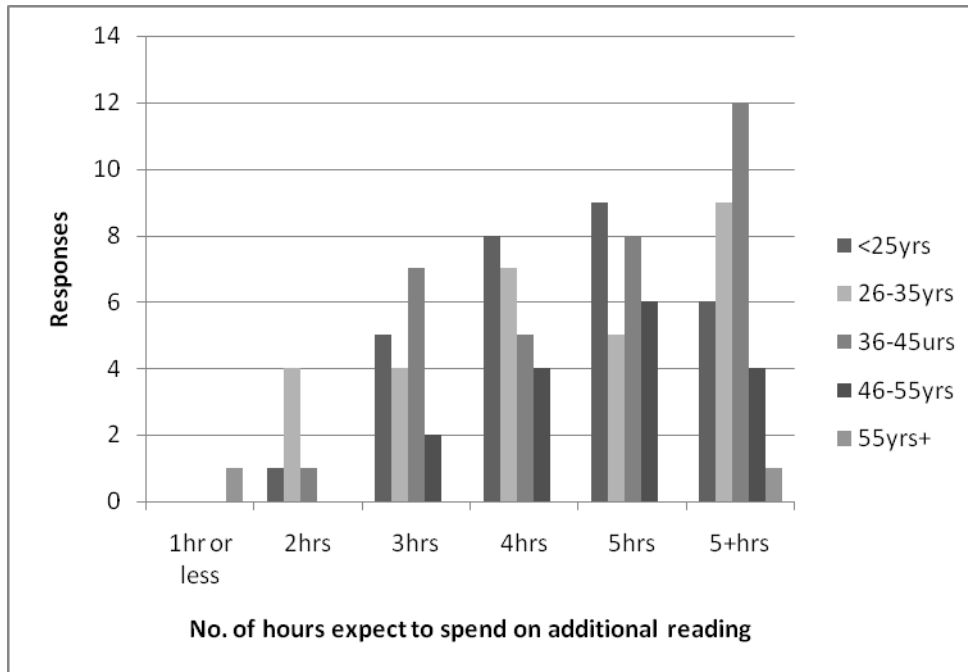


**Chart 4: Number of hours per subject per week students spent studying – Yes=tertiary study in previous three years, No=no study in last three years.**

Previous study	Mean hours spent studying
Yes	5.7
No	7.9

**Table 4: Mean number of hours per subject per week students spent studying – by previous study experience**

A similar result occurred in response to a question relating to the time spent on reading material additional to that supplied with the study package. Over 50% expected that for each subject they would spend five or more additional hours reading, with only a slight difference according to age. Chart and Table 5 shows the spread.

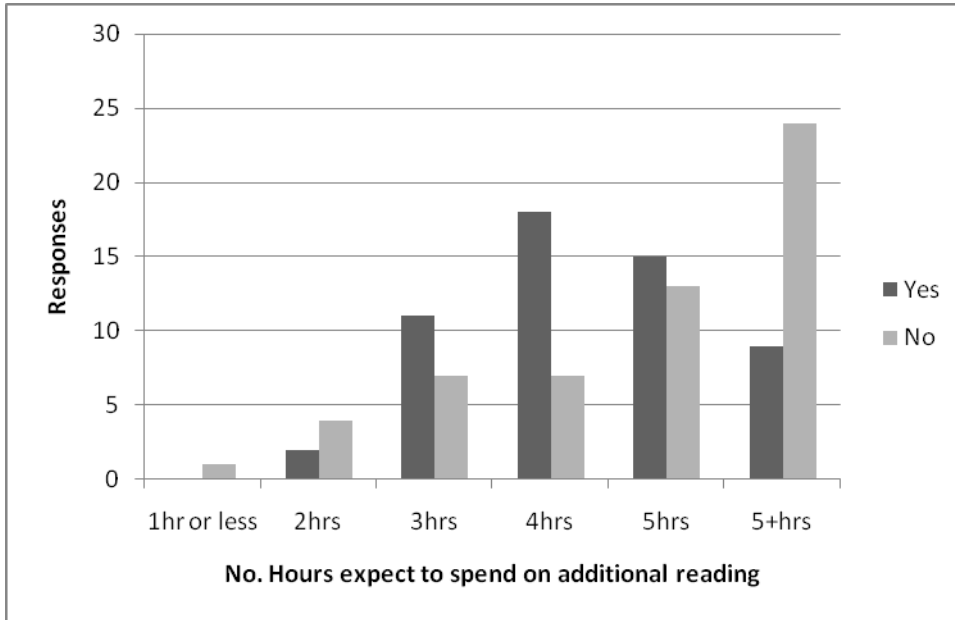


**Chart 5: Number of hours per subject per week students expected to spend on additional reading – by age**

Age group	Mean hours expected to spend on additional reading
<25 yrs	4.5
26-35	4.4
36-45	4.7
46-55	4.8
55+	3.5

**Table 5: Mean number of hours per subject per week students expected to spend on additional reading – by age group**

Broken down by previous study experience, Chart and Table 6 show again that those with no previous study experience in the last three years expected to spend more time than those with such experience.

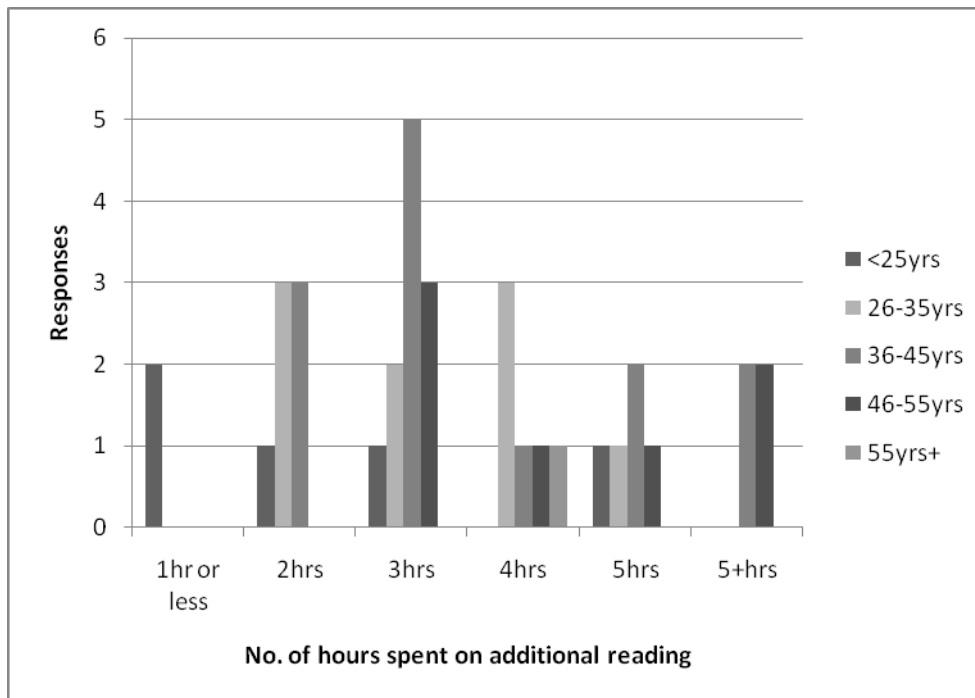


**Chart 6: Number of hours per subject per week students expected to spend on additional reading – by previous study experience**

Previous study	Mean hours expected to spend on additional reading
Yes	4.2
No	4.6

**Table 6: Mean number of hours per subject per week students expected to spend on additional reading – by previous study experience**

Once again, in the follow up survey one year later, the actual time spent on additional reading was generally reported as substantially less than had been expected. However, the older cohorts did spend more time on additional reading and were much closer to what they had anticipated. But again, with small numbers of respondents these results cannot be held as significant. See Chart and Table 7.

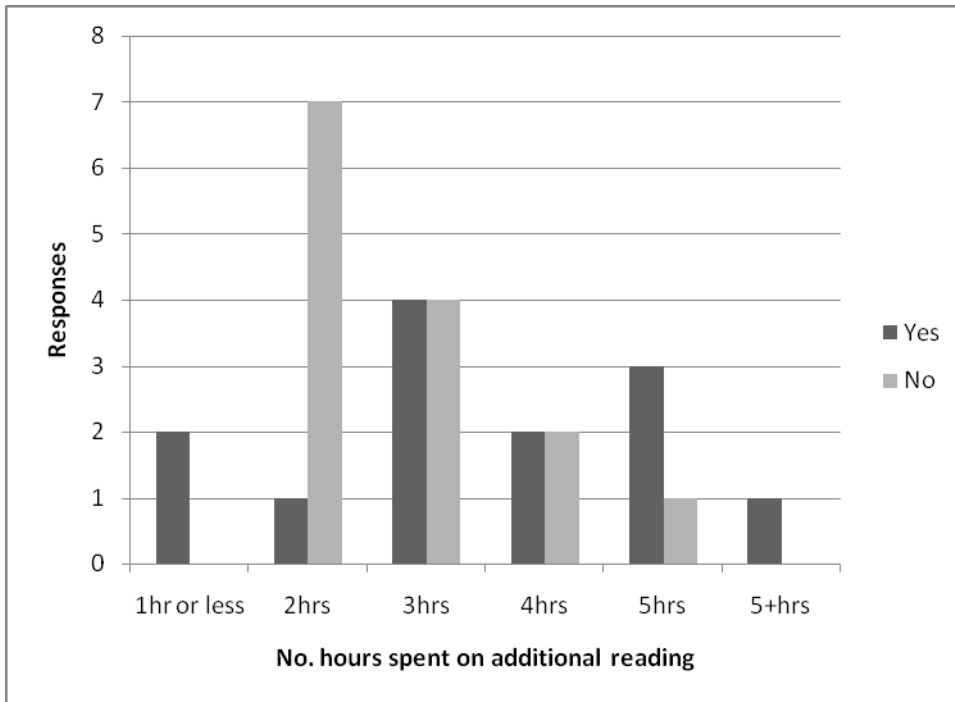


**Chart 7: Number of hours per subject per week students spent on additional reading – by age**

Age group	Mean hours spent on additional reading
<25 yrs	2.4
26-35	3.2
36-45	3.6
46-55	4.3
55+	4.0

**Table 7: Mean number of hours per subject per week students spent studying – by age group**

Looked at by whether students had previous study experience or not, the anomaly here was that those with no previous study appear to have spent less time on additional reading than those with previous experience. Again, the small numbers involved in the follow up survey however, mitigates against interpreting this finding too literally. See Chart and Table 8.



**Chart 8: Number of hours per subject per week students spent on additional reading – by previous study experience**

Previous study	Mean hours spent on additional reading
Yes	3.4
No	2.8

**Table 8: Mean number of hours per subject per week students spent on additional reading – by previous study experience**

## Discussion

These results confirm other findings that in general, new students have exaggerated concerns as to the amount of effort required to undertake their course of study. The widespread expectation that they would need to commit 11 or more hours per subject per week, just to cope with the supplied material, let alone manage additional reading, turned out, after one year of study to have been significantly overstated by all groups. This was true even of those who had previous recent tertiary study experience, although to a lesser degree. The reality appears to be that overall, students across all age ranges actually spent about half, or a little more, of the time they had expected to spend on each subject. It must be noted however, that the relatively small response – 35 – to the follow up questionnaire, while indicative, is not confirming evidence and further research in this area would help clarify these findings.

Understandably, those with no experience of tertiary education in the last three years had a substantially greater expectation of the time commitment required than did those who did have that experience (albeit for the majority, that experience was at the TAFE level). The reality of having already undertaken some form of tertiary study presumably provides some sort of guide to help in assessing expectations for a new course of study. Students without that guide have to somehow guess, based on what they have heard from lecturers, other students or read in course material and university handouts more generally. Such course information for distance students does suggest a time commitment similar to that expected by the majority of students, with the University of New England advising 15 hours/week per subject as a usual load ([http://www.une.edu.au/imp/apply/distance\\_ed.php](http://www.une.edu.au/imp/apply/distance_ed.php)) and the University of Sydney's School of Public Health suggesting 18 hours as reasonable for distance students (<http://www.health.usyd.edu.au/future/whystudy.php>). However, little explanation is provided on these websites as to the basis for these estimates.

This expressed belief that the commitment to study will take up so much time may well act as a disincentive to potential students, many of whom have no way of knowing whether their expectations are based upon reality or not. It may stop them enrolling all together or increase stress and anxiety in that first semester for those who have enrolled. The importance of good time management is emphasized by university literature which, drawing on the example from the CSU website aimed at prospective students, points out that

Research shows that one of the single most important ingredients in success in university study is amount of time on task. That is, simply, the amount of time students are able to devote to their study.

[http://www.csu.edu.au/division/studserv/guide/before\\_you\\_start.htm](http://www.csu.edu.au/division/studserv/guide/before_you_start.htm) .

If a large number of students are under an impression that they will need 11 hours or more per subject per week to keep up with the study materials, plus another four to handle additional reading, and that having sufficient time available

is crucial to success, then they may well experience high levels of stress and concern over their ability to cope.

Thus the importance to the university of making sure that a correct impression of the commitment required is portrayed through its promotional material in order to attract students and provide a realistic picture of what tertiary study does involve. Providing a more accurate picture of what is required should be a major responsibility for those working with first year, first semester students. And for distance students in particular, where opportunities to discuss these issues in an informal environment are limited, the possibilities offered by the residential school are invaluable. It is at this time that a more realistic message as to the work levels and commitment required can be delivered with the potential to reduce anxiety and concern amongst new students.

However, one major mitigating factor to delivering such a message is the belief amongst academics themselves that to do well, students should indeed commit large numbers of hours per week to study. After all, we want students to produce good work and hand in logical, well supported and argued assignments that show evidence of a wide range of reading and thoughtful interpretation. And surely, our subjects contain enough substance to engage an average student for at least a few hours per week. Thus the tendency to possibly exaggerate the time commitment required in order to bolster the academic credibility of a study program.

The breakdown by age suggests that both in expectations, and their actual performance, older students tend to expect to commit more time to their study and actually do put in more time. Thus for the under 25 age group, the actual time spent studying was reported as 5.4 hours per subject per week, for over 45's it was 7.5 hours or more. With regard to additional reading, the under 25's spent 2.4 hours per subject per week, the over 45's 4.0 hours or more. There are obviously many reasons to explain this considerable difference but it does support the widely held belief that mature age students tend to be more highly committed to their studies with clearer reasons for undertaking their particular course (University of Melbourne, 2006). It would be interesting to pursue the research further and compare results and grades received against age groupings in order to better assess whether the additional time committed to their work by older students does in fact result in higher grades .

## **Conclusion**

Students come to further education with a mix of informed and uninformed expectations, with unrealistic expectations being particularly damaging to a students' stress levels and motivation when they are not realized. For those studying by distance it can be especially difficult to validate their expectations against those of other students or in discussion with lecturers and other staff.



This study identified that for first year undergraduate LIM students, studying by distance education, expectations as to workloads and the time needed each week to manage that load were significantly higher than was actually undertaken during the year. This finding, which was general across all age groups, was based upon a modest number of responses (35) and while the strength of the difference is indicative, it would not necessarily apply across all student cohorts. Further research across a number of years is required to confirm these findings.

However, it does suggest that those responsible for promoting and orienting students into the undergraduate BASLIM course at CSU need to closely consider the manner in which the nature of the workload is explained to prospective and enrolled students and the resulting time requirements required of them. In particular, during their orientation at residential school, it is recommended that the time commitment for successful study should be a subject for discussion where students are given the opportunity to voice their expectation, and possibly concern, with staff responding in a supportive manner providing examples of student feedback, research results and related findings that provide a firmer basis upon which students can more accurately assess the time that it will be necessary for them to commit to succeed.

## References

Bower, Beverly (2001). Distance education: facing the faculty challenge. Journal of Distance Learning Administration v4 n2. Available at:  
<http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdl/summer42/bower42.html>

Choy, S, McNickle, C and Clayton, B. (2002). Learner expectations and experiences: an examination of student views of support in online learning. ANTA: South Australia. Available at:  
<http://www.ncver.edu.au/research/proj/nr0F02.pdf>

Evans, Terry and Nation, Daryl (1993). Open and distance education: critical reflections from practice. London: Routledge.

James, Richard (2001). Students' changing expectations of higher education and the consequences of mismatches with reality. Available at:  
[http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/people/staff\\_pages/James/James-OECD\\_IMHE.pdf](http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/people/staff_pages/James/James-OECD_IMHE.pdf)

Linden, Julie (1998). The loneliness of the long distance learner. Available at:  
[http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content\\_storage\\_01/0000019b/80/19/b1/53.pdf](http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/19/b1/53.pdf)

Parkinson, Gillian and Forrester, Gillian. (2005). Mind the 'gap': the perceptions and expectations of students' introduction to distance learning in higher education. Available at: <http://www.aare.edu.au/05pap/par05019.pdf>

Smith, Joshua S and Wertlieb, Ellen C (2005). Do first-year college students' expectations align with their first-year experiences? NASPA Journal v42, n2. Available at:  
<http://publications.naspa.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1470&context=naspajournal>

University of Adelaide. School of Psychology. (2007). First year students' expectations of university study. Available at:  
<http://www.adelaide.edu.au/clpd/resources/reports/FYexpectationsSurvey2006.pdf>

University of Melbourne. (2006). Mature age undergraduate fact sheet. Available at:  
<http://www.services.unimelb.edu.au/transition/downloads/Mature%20Age%20Facts2006.pdf>