https://studentsuccessjournal.org/
Volume **16** (2) 2025 https://doi.org/10.63608/ssj.3782

Intended and Actual Involvement of Commencing First-Year Undergraduate Students in University Activities

Claudia A. Rivera Munoz, Chi Baik, Tracii Ryan and Raoul A. Mulder
The University of Melbourne, Australia

Abstract

Students' involvement in both curricular and extracurricular activities at university can foster a sense of belonging, and support academic persistence and achievement, particularly during the first year. For over a decade, universities have observed diminishing student engagement patterns. These include declining attendance at face-to-face classes and reduced participation in extracurricular activities. We examined first-year undergraduate students' perceptions of university expectations, their initial intentions for involvement, and their engagement after one semester of study at a campus-based university. A questionnaire was administered to 720 students in their first semester and readministered to 180 of these students in their second semester. While most respondents initially expressed strong intentions to attend classes and utilise campus facilities, actual attendance and involvement levels had declined by the second semester. Class scheduling, peer relationships, and the relative convenience of campus accessibility significantly influenced student involvement. This study provides insights for institutions to develop targeted strategies to enhance first-year student involvement.

***Keywords**:* Student involvement; student engagement; first-year experience; university attendance; peer interaction; higher education

Introduction

Many first-year undergraduate students undergo a challenging transition period requiring them to adjust to new academic and social settings (Gale & Parker, 2014). If not overcome, these challenges may lead to disengagement, low achievement, and attrition (Kahu et al., 2020; Tinto, 1993). Considerable research has focused on supporting students' transition to university to boost the quality of their experiences and engagement in the first year (Kift et al., 2010; Lizzio, 2006). One aspect of the student experience known to promote retention and academic success is students' *involvement* at university (Astin, 1999; Tinto, 1993; Webber et al., 2013). Involvement entails the actions and activities that students elect to participate in (or not) at university, including spending time on campus, attending classes, interacting with peers and staff, and taking part in extra- and cocurricular activities (Kuh, 2009; Mulrooney, 2017). Involvement refers to students' participation in educationally related activities in and outside classrooms, including on campus and online (Kuh, 2009). Astin (1999) theorised several decades ago that "the greater the student's involvement in college, the greater will be the amount of student learning and personal development" (pp. 528-529). Research further suggests that greater student involvement at university enhances their overall engagement and sense of belonging to their institution (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Kuh et al., 2010).

Although student involvement can improve educational experiences and outcomes, universities have reported a concerning decline in class attendance both before (James & Seary, 2019; Moores et al., 2019) and after the COVID-19 pandemic (Uekusa,

2023). Media reporting has outlined potential reasons for this decline, including difficulties reacclimatising to face-to-face classes after the pandemic, timetabling concerns, unenticing lectures, and increasing acceptability of recorded lectures (Grove, 2024; Holstead, 2022; Otte, 2024). These reports also identify two other substantial, but associated, factors: a decline in students' psychological wellbeing, and increased employment commitments due to the rising cost of living. While these anecdotal accounts are compelling, there is a need for further rigorous peer-reviewed empirical research to examine how the post-pandemic context continues to influence first-year student involvement at university (Uekusa, 2023).

In addition to reduced class attendance, student involvement in peer interactions outside of class is also a significant post-pandemic issue (e.g., Gretzinger & Hicks, 2024). According to the latest national Student Experience Survey (SES), administered annually at all Australian universities, the proportion of commencing undergraduate students who evaluated positively the item "How frequently have you interacted with students outside study requirements" dropped from 42.5% in 2017 to 31.1% in 2023. Similarly, only 49.3% of commencing undergraduate students indicated that they had a sense of belonging to their institution in 2023 (down from 52.7% in 2017) (Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching [QILT], 2023). The SES report notes that, "undergraduate ratings [of belonging] have not returned to the levels seen prior to the pandemic" (p. 63), which the authors attribute to "differences in the development of students' sense of belonging to their institution where they have less engagement with academic staff, support services and induction activities" (p. vi). Given these trends, there is a growing need to investigate first-year students' involvement at university in the post-pandemic context.

This study examined first-year undergraduate students' initial expectations and intentions regarding their university involvement and compared these with their actual involvement after one semester at a campus-based institution. While several pre-pandemic studies have examined first-year students' expectations of their university experiences (e.g., Balloo, 2018; Pleitz et al., 2015), there is a notable gap regarding students' expectations and intentions concerning their own involvement at university. Also, as argued above, the expectations and intentions of current students may differ significantly from those of earlier cohorts due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. These differences may be due to changes in the social-cultural context since the pandemic (e.g., shifting attitudes towards working and studying at home) and/or due to their pre-university experiences (e.g., the prevalence of online learning in high school).

Literature Review

Astin (1999) posits that the more time and energy students spend on their studies, the more they can understand the academic demands and learn. In support of this, empirical studies of first-year students have shown a positive correlation between the time students spent studying, class attendance, and their grades (Akimov et al., 2024; Summers, 2020). Research suggests that active student involvement at university – through participating in classes, having frequent interactions with peers and teachers, and participating in campus activities – promotes learning, influences students' persistence with their studies (Griffin et al., 2022), leading to academic success (Kuh et at., 2010; Webber et al., 2013).

Pre-pandemic studies in Australia indicate that students recognise the importance of attending in-person classes for learning (e.g., Crisp et al., 2009) but also identify barriers to attendance. Class timetables, including the timing of classes (e.g., early in the morning) and arrangement of classes throughout the week can hinder attendance, though the evidence is mixed (Moores et al., 2019). Also, classes perceived as less relevant to students' field of study or interests can discourage attendance (Lacey et al., 2022; Moores et al., 2019). Students' feelings and experiences in classes and on campus can also hinder attendance and participation. Feeling overwhelmed and stressed about their academic demands influences students' engagement as does their comfort level in a classroom setting (e.g., how safe students feel among their peers and their teacher influences their interest and contribution to the class) (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). These experiences are often reported by students with disabilities, low socio-economic status (SES) students and international students who can find it challenging to contribute in classes and collaborate with their peers (Baik et al., 2015). Individual factors such as work commitments, living far from the university campus, personal health and financial issues are also frequently mentioned as barriers to participation (James & Seary, 2019; Moores et al., 2019; O'Brien & Verma, 2019). These barriers can be more pronounced for regional or relocated students who have moved to study at university (Baik et al., 2015), as well as, first-generation (FG), low SES and mature-aged students (Suleman & Chigeza, 2019).

Recent reporting suggests that the barriers described above may have heightened post-pandemic, largely due to the increasing cost of living which has required students to work part-time and be able to meet their expenses (Grove, 2024; Holstead, 2022; Otte, 2024). A 2023 survey of more than 4,500 undergraduate students in the United States found that over 50% faced difficulties paying tuition fees and covering their living expenses (Wiley, 2023). Students may also experience difficulties adjusting to in-person classes, and remaining engaged and interested in classes (Wiley, 2023), while anecdotal accounts suggest that they have trouble maintaining regular attendance routines (Holstead, 2022; Otte, 2024). Conversely, media also

reports that attendance requirements and opportunities for interacting with students and academic staff can promote class attendance post-pandemic (Holstead, 2022). Research conducted pre-pandemic supports this, as connections with peers and supportive and approachable academic staff have been shown to promote student attendance and class participation (James & Seary, 2019). While these reports provide insights into potential enablers and barriers to class attendance, more rigorous empirical studies are needed to examine the current students' perceptions/intentions for involvement at university and the factors influencing their attendance at classes in a post-pandemic context.

In relation to extracurricular activities, pre-pandemic studies in Australia suggest low involvement among first-year students. For example, Baik et al. (2015) reported that only 23% of first-year students actively participated in extracurricular activities. In terms of the factors influencing participation, the international literature suggests that clear university expectations communicated during orientation week can encourage student involvement in such activities (Gregersen et al., 2021). Also, sociodemographic characteristics such as students' gender, relocation for study, FG status and minority group membership can influence their participation in campus events (Baik et al., 2015; Nadelson et al., 2013). For example, Nadelson et al., (2013) report that FG students tend to be less involved in campus extracurricular events and more focused on academic activities.

Students' Expectations and Intentions for Involvement

Students' involvement at university is influenced by their expectations (Kahu & Nelson, 2018), which constitute the benchmark against what they evaluate their university experience. Commencing students tend to expect that university will differ from high school, requiring greater independence and hard work to achieve academic success (Baik et al., 2015; Balloo, 2018). In Australia, pre-pandemic studies revealed that 38% of first-year students expected university study to be more complex and involve a greater workload than high school (Baik et al., 2015). Students also recognised that developing self-management skills to study and relationships with academic staff was beneficial to their learning and academic success (Crisp et al., 2009; Scutter et al., 2011). Additionally, they expressed interest in their studies and forming peer connections in the first year (Kahu et al., 2016).

Students' expectations can vary based on gender, enrolment status (international/domestic), age and prior educational experiences (Mearman & Payne, 2023; Nadelson et al., 2013). For example, in the UK, Mearman and Payne (2023) found that commuter and mature students tended to prioritise their academic experiences instead of socialising. Some scholars argue that first-year students' expectations can be unrealistic, particularly regarding workload and availability of academic staff (Crisp et al., 2009; Scutter et al., 2011). More importantly, students may have unclear expectations about what they must do to succeed at university and their roles as learners (Benavides et al., 2022; Kahu et al., 2016; Scutter et al., 2011). A mismatch between expectations and reality can diminish students' motivation and lower satisfaction with their course and university (Lacey et al., 2022) and may lead them to consider discontinuing their studies (Pleitz et al., 2015).

Conceptual Framework

This study was guided by Astin's Theory of Student Involvement (1999), which defines involvement as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (p. 518). In Astin's theory, involvement includes attendance and class participation, as well as extracurricular activities outside of the classroom that contribute to student's learning and their personal development. While contemporary conceptualisations of student involvement also include students' participation in online settings (see for example, Krause & Coates, 2008), this study was situated at a campus-based institution that offers limited options for online or hybrid instruction and places high expectations on students to attend in-person classes and participate in on-campus activities. Therefore, this study places emphasis on on-campus involvement over online involvement.

In addition, this study also understands student involvement to be one dimension of the broader concept of student engagement. More specifically, Fredricks et al. (2004) argues that student engagement has three dimensions: cognitive, affective and behavioural. According to Fredricks et al. (2004), behavioural engagement refers to student involvement in academic activities and participation in extracurricular and cocurricular activities. Thus, student involvement can be understood to constitute the behavioural dimension of the multifaceted concept of student engagement, which also includes cognitive and affective dimensions. In this way, student involvement has been widely used in higher education as an indicator of student engagement (e.g., in measures such as the National Survey Student Engagement) (Kuh, 2009). While the cognitive and affective aspects of engagement can be difficult to observe, examining student involvement provides insights into the behavioural dimension of engagement. Fredricks et al. (2004) argue that this behavioural dimension influences, and is influenced by, cognitive and

affective engagement. For instance, regular class participation and interactions with peers and staff can lead to deeper learning at a cognitive level and boost students' interest and enthusiasm for the subject (Kahu et al., 2017).

Research Aims and Questions

Numerous studies have examined students' expectations of the university experience (e.g., Crisp et al., 2009; Scutter et al., 2011). However, limited research has focused on first-year students' intentions for involvement and their perceptions of university expectations, particularly post-pandemic. There also appears to be a lack of research exploring the alignment (or misalignment) between students' initial intentions and subsequent involvement. This is a significant gap, given the well-documented links among student engagement, persistence, and academic success in their first year of university. This study aims to address this gap by investigating first-year students' initial intentions for involvement at a campus-based university, their perceptions of what the university expects from them, and the reality of their involvement after one semester. By examining students' involvement, the research seeks to identify the factors that may explain the decline in participation, offering insights to inform the development of effective interventions to support first-year students. Three research questions guided this research:

> RQ1. *What are first-year students' perceptions of university expectations regarding their participation and involvement, and their own intentions for involvement at university?*
>
> RQ2. *How do students' initial intentions compare with their experiences after one semester at university?*
>
> RQ3. *What factors do students cite as barriers/enablers to involvement in curricular and extracurricular activities on campus?*

Additionally, this study examines the intentions and perspectives of four student groups – student with disabilities, FG students, regional/remote students and international students – who have been identified in previous research as having differing patterns for involvement in curricular and cocurricular activities and who face unique challenges in their transition to university, and experience barriers to their involvement (Baik et al., 2015; Nadelson et al., 2013; Suleman & Chigeza, 2019).

Method

This study was part of a broader mixed-methods semi-longitudinal project examining first-year undergraduate students' involvement at university in a post-pandemic setting. The project was conducted at a large, Australian campus-based metropolitan university and involved data collection from students commencing their studies in 2024 through online questionnaires, interviews, and short written reflections. The present study focused on students' involvement based on questionnaires administered in Semester 1 (SM1) and Semester 2 (SM2). The University had returned to on-campus/ face-to-face classes and activities after a period of supporting online and hybrid options during the COVID-19 pandemic. The University places high expectations on students to attend in-person classes and use campus facilities and offers limited options for online attendance or involvement (e.g., recorded lectures).

The research team developed an online questionnaire to examine first-year students' perceived involvement at university. The questionnaire was based on literature on the first-year experience (FYE) and students' involvement (e.g., Baik et al., 2015; Kuh et al., 2010). In this study, involvement was operationalised as: (1) attendance in lectures and other classes (e.g., tutorials, labs, studios, practicals), (2) attendance and use of campus facilities (e.g., using the library and other student spaces for study, and social interactions with peers), and (3) participation in extracurricular activities. Each questionnaire comprised items designed to measure what students think the university expects from them regarding their involvement, and their intentions for their own involvement. For example, one item designed to assess perceived university expectations asked: "In terms of attending lectures on campus, the University expects that students will …" Response options included: "Attend all scheduled lectures, attend most scheduled lectures, attend at least half of the scheduled lectures, only attend lectures that are not recorded." A parallel item designed to measure students' intentions asked, "In terms of attending lectures on campus ...", with four response options: "I plan to attend all scheduled lectures, most scheduled lectures, at least half of the scheduled lectures, I plan to attend lectures only if they are not recorded."

The project received ethics approval from the University's Human Research Ethics Committee (ID 28652), and students were required to provide informed consent prior to participating. The population of interest included all commencing first-year undergraduate students (N = 9,426) in 2024. The research team employed multiple strategies to recruit students for the online

questionnaire at the beginning of SM1 (weeks 3-5), including displaying physical posters in campus learning and social spaces, posting advertisements on university social media platforms, and asking first-year subject coordinators to post an announcement about the questionnaire on their subject learning management sites. First-year coordinators' response varied across faculties, with coordinators of Bachelor of Arts being one of the most responsive in promoting the survey. Together with the large enrolment in Bachelor of Arts, there was an over-representation of Bachelor of Arts students in the sample (see below Participants' section).

At the end of the SM1 questionnaire, all respondents were asked whether they would provide consent to be recontacted via direct email to participate in the second questionnaire in SM2. The SM2 questionnaire asked students about their experiences of campus attendance and involvement at university, evaluating similar types of involvement at university to those in SM1. Students who completed each questionnaire could choose to participate in a draw to win one of five AU$200 gift cards. Both questionnaires included open and closed-ended (multiple-choice and Likert-type agreement) questions. This study reports only analysis of data from the closed-ended questions. Responses to open-ended questions were not included in this study.

Participants

A total of N = 947 students provided consent and entered the online questionnaire (10% response rate based on first-year students commencing in SM1 N = 9,426). Of the students who entered the questionnaire, 720 (76%) completed at least 75% of the questionnaire items and were included in the analysis. Of these students, 100% were aged between 18-21 years, 69% self-identified as female, and 61% were enrolled in Bachelor of Arts. Of the 519 students invited to complete the questionnaire in SM2, 307 (59%) began the questionnaire, 207 (40%) completed at least 75% of the questionnaire, and 180 (35%) students provided their names and email addresses allowing the research team to match their questionnaire responses with their responses in SM1. This sample (N = 180) was used to analyse and respond to RQ2. Table 1 presents sociodemographic data for the total sample of respondents in SM1 and SM2.

Table 1

Sociodemographic Characteristics of SM1 Sample and the Sample of SM1 and SM2

Variable	Sample of commencing students SM1 N = 720	Sample of students SM1 and SM2 N = 180
	% (n)	*% (n)*
Degree		
Arts	61 (443)	47 (85)
Science	15 (106)	18 (33)
Commerce	12 (86)	16 (28)
Biomedicine	10 (70)	15 (27)
Fine Arts and Music	1 (5)	1 (1)
Design	1 (10)	3 (6)
Gender		
Female	69 (496)	67 (121)
Male	26 (187)	26 (46)
Non-binary	4 (28)	6 (11)
Prefer not to say	1 (8)	1 (2)
Full-time students	97 (702)	98 (177)
International students	24 (175)	21 (37)
First-generation students	19 (134)	14 (25)
Identified as having a disability	10 (73)	12 (22)
Regional/remote*	22 (162)	22 (39)

*Students relocated from interstate or regional area

Data Analysis

To respond to RQ1, we employed descriptive statistical analysis to summarise the sociodemographic characteristics of the 720 participants in SM1 (see Table 1) and their reported perceptions of university expectations and intentions regarding attendance and campus involvement. Additionally, we conducted a series of chi-square tests (χ^2) of independence to assess whether there were statistically significant associations in the perceptions of four student groups: FG students, students with disabilities, regional/remote students and international students, and reported effect sizes using Cramer's V (see Field, 2018). To respond to RQ2, the responses of students who completed both questionnaires ($N = 180$) were analysed. We used descriptive statistics to summarise the categorical responses. We applied non-parametric tests for related samples as suggested for categorical variables that do not follow a normal distribution (see Field, 2018). We employed Wilcoxon signed-rank tests to assess differences in students' responses between SM1 and SM2. For binary variables, such as the decision to attend campus to socialise with peers (Yes/No), we implemented the McNemar test to detect changes in students' intentions and actual experiences. To respond to RQ3, we conducted descriptive statistical analysis to summarise students' responses to the multiple-choice questions of enablers and barriers for attendance at campus.

Results

What are Students' Perceptions of University Expectations and What do Students Intend to do?

Table 2 shows descriptive statistics from questionnaire responses in SM1, presenting students' perceptions of university expectations with their own intentions for involvement. We found generally strong alignment between students' perceptions of university expectations and their own intentions, however, there were a few exceptions. For example, only 5% of respondents believed that the university expected them to only attend unrecorded lectures on campus, but a higher proportion (10%) reported that this was their intended pattern of lecture attendance. Similarly, while 35% of respondents felt that the university expected them to attend campus to study most days of the week, far fewer (18%) intended to do so. In terms of extracurricular activities, 50% of students thought the university expected them to participate in some activities throughout the year, but only 39% intended to do so.

Table 2

Students' SM1 Perceptions of University Expectations and their Intentions for Involvement (N = 720)

Type of involvement at university	Perceptions of university expectations	Intentions for involvement
	% (n)	*% (n)*
Attendance at scheduled lectures on campus		
Attend all	35 (253)	38 (271)
Attend most	54 (388)	43 (309)
Attend at least half	6 (40)	10 (69)
Only attend those that are not recorded	5 (38)	10 (71)
Attendance at tutorials and practicals		
Attend all	84 (605)	90 (645)
Attend most	14 (102)	9 (66)
Attend at least half	6 (4)	1 (4)
Coming to campus to study		
Most days of the week	35 (251)	18 (128)
Only when I have scheduled classes	54 (387)	59 (424)
Only one or two days of the week/ On weekdays where I do not have classes[a]	6 (41)	18 (132)
I do not plan to study on campus	N/A	4 (28)
Participation in extracurricular activities		
Regularly participate in various activities	26 (185)	24 (172)
Participate in some activities throughout the year	50 (357)	39 (280)
Occasionally participate in activities or special events	20 (143)	31 (222)
Only participate if required by the course	5 (35)	6 (46)
Other activities on campus[b]		
Study in libraries and other spaces	92 (664)	80 (575)
Socialise with peers	83 (598)	67 (485)
Use facilities (e.g., gym, student pavilion/precinct)	81 (586)	44 (317)

[a] Wording of item was slightly different for university expectations ("only one or two days of the week) compared to intentions ("on weekdays where I do not have classes").
[b] Items were multiple-choice. Percentages do not equal 100%.

There were several significant associations with a small effect between students' university expectations and their intentions for involvement among FG students, students with disabilities, regional/remote students and international students. Regarding lecture attendance, international students were more likely to believe the university expected them to attend all lectures, χ^2 (3) = 17.645, $p < .001$, Cramer's V = 0.16, and intended to do so, χ^2 (3) = 8.159, $p < .05$, Cramer's V = 0.11. While remote/regional students were likely less to intend to attend non-recorded lectures compared with other students who had not relocated to attend university, χ^2 (6) = 13.284, $p < .05$, Cramer's V = 0.11. No significant associations were found between the other two student groups (FG students, and students with disabilities) and intentions to attend classes.

Regarding campus attendance, significant associations were observed among FG students, international and regional/remote students. FG students were more likely to think they were expected to attend campus daily, χ^2 (3) = 10.893, $p < .05$, Cramer's V = 0.12, and international students were more inclined to believe that the university expected them to attend campus most

days, χ^2 (3) = 36.400, $p < .001$, Cramer's V = 0.22 and intended to do so, χ^2 (4) = 27.706, $p < .001$, Cramer's V = 0.20. A small number of students predominately from regional Victoria did not plan to study on campus, χ^2 (8) = 21.205, $p < .05$, Cramer's V = 0.14.

In terms of participation in extracurricular activities, international students were more likely to intend to participate regularly in various activities, χ^2 (3) = 14.139, $p < .05$, Cramer's V = 0.14. Conversely, students with disabilities were less likely to intend to participate regularly in extracurricular activities, χ^2 (3) = 9.514, $p < .05$, Cramer's V = 0.11. No significant associations were found in the other two groups (FG students and regional/remote students) regarding their intentions for involvement in extracurricular activities.

How do Students' Initial Intentions Compare with their Actual Experiences?

There was a significant mismatch between students' initial intentions for involvement versus their actual involvement after one semester of study. Attendance at lectures and tutorials was lower than initially intended (Table 3). While 44% of students initially intended to attend all lectures (*Mdn* = 2.00), only 11% reported doing so by SM2 (*Mdn* = 2.00) ($p < .001$). Similarly, 91% of students had planned to attend all tutorials and practicals (*Mdn* = 1.00), but only 53% reported attending all these classes during the semester (*Mdn* = 1.00) ($p < .001$). In contrast, there were no significant discrepancies between students' initial intentions to participate in extracurricular activities and come to campus to study, and their actual experiences after one semester. However, there was a notable difference between students' initial intentions and actual experiences of using campus facilities, with 38% of students indicating they intended to use campus facilities in SM1 and 21% reporting that they used campus facilities by the end of SM2 ($p < .001$).

Table 3

Students' Intentions and Experiences of Attendance and Involvement at University (N = 180)

Type of involvement at university	SM1 I plan to attend/ participate	SM2 I have attended/ participated	Z	*p*	*r*
	% (n)	*% (n)*			
Attendance at lectures			-7.633	<.001	-0.40
All scheduled lectures	44 (80)	11 (20)			
Most scheduled lectures	36 (65)	41 (73)			
At least half of the scheduled lectures	9 (17)	30 (54)			
Only lectures that are not recorded	10 (18)	16 (28)			
Not attended lectures this year	-	2 (4)			
Attendance at tutorials and practicals			-7.669	<.001	-0.40
All scheduled classes	91 (164)	53 (96)			
Most scheduled classes	9 (16)	41 (74)			
At least half of the scheduled classes	-	4 (8)			
Participation in extracurricular activities			-1.082	.279	-
Regularly in various activities	27 (49)	19 (34)			
Occasionally in activities	29 (53)	32 (58)			
In some activities throughout the year	34 (62)	24 (43)			
Only if required by the course	9 (16)	7 (13)			
Not participated in activities	-	17 (31)			
Coming to campus to study			1.417	.156	-
Most days of the week	12 (21)	13 (24)			
On some weekdays, when I do not have scheduled classes	19 (35)	22 (39)			
Only on days that I have scheduled classes	62 (112)	57 (102)			
I do not plan/have not come to study on campus	5 (9)	5 (9)			
Other activities on campus[a]					
Study in libraries and other spaces	81 (145)	74 (133)	3.184[b]	.074	-
Socialise with peers	69 (125)	62 (112)	1.961[b]	.161	-
Use facilities (e.g., gym, student pavilion/precinct)	38 (68)	21 (37)	16.981[b]	<.001	-

[a] Items were multiple-choice. Percentages do not equal 100%.
[b] NcNemar test statistics.

Factors Influencing Campus Attendance

Table 4 presents an overview of factors influencing students' attendance on campus, categorised as enablers and barriers. C*ourse and curriculum* factors were the most significant enablers (82%), with class timetables (73%) being the most frequently cited enabler followed by having a manageable study workload (33%) and experiencing engaging and enjoyable classes (32%). However, course-related factors also presented barriers for students with the majority (72%) reporting them as barriers. In particular, a heavy workload deterred many students (46%) from coming to campus. *University campus experiences* encouraged students to come to campus, with 75% of students reporting these experiences as enablers, especially having a

study group or friends (55%). Interestingly, a quarter of respondents (26%) also indicated having few study groups or friends as being a barrier to attendance. *Situational* factors, while an enabler for 52% of respondents was also cited as a barrier for most students (78%). The convenience or inconvenience of coming to campus was the most frequently mentioned factor as both an enabler (52%) and a barrier (58%). Personal commitments outside the university were also a major barrier for many students (47%), as were health-related (19%) and financial factors (19%).

Table 4

Enablers and Barriers to Students' Attendance on Campus (N = 180)

Category	Factor	Enabler (+)	Barrier (-)
		% (n)	*% (n)*
Course and curriculum		82 (148)	72 (130)
	Convenience/ Inconvenience of class timetable	73 (132)	33 (60)
	Manageable/ Heavy study workload	33 (60)	46 (83)
	Engaging/disengaging classes	32 (58)	33 (59)
University campus experiences		75 (135)	30 (54)
	Study groups or friends/Having few study groups or friends	55 (99)	26 (47)
	Other commitments at university (e.g., being part of a club)	36 (64)	-
	How comfortable/uncomfortable students feel on campus	29 (53)	10 (18)
Situation factors		52 (94)	78 (141)
	Convenience/Inconvenience of attending campus	52 (94)	58 (104)
	Personal commitments outside of university	-	47 (84)
	Financial issues	-	19 (34)
	Health-related issues or commitments	-	19 (34)

Note: Students could select more than one factor.

Discussion

While first-year students' perceptions of university expectations were broadly aligned with their initial intentions for participation, their actual involvement after their first semester at university was generally lower than they had intended. Below, we consider these findings in more detail, as well as the interrelating factors that influence student attendance on campus.

Students' perceptions of what the university expects from them aligned closely with their initial intentions. Most intended to attend most or all classes, and a far smaller proportion intended to participate in extracurricular activities. This finding is consistent with pre-pandemic studies in which students considered attending classes to be valuable for learning and interacting with academic staff and peers (Crisp et al., 2009; Kahu et al., 2016). However, there were differences based on class type. A much larger proportion of students intended to attend all tutorials and practical classes compared to lectures, suggesting a strategic approach to attendance based on the perceived value proposition of the class. This may relate to the interactive nature and small class size of tutorials compared to lectures (e.g., Moores et al., 2019). This also likely reflects the increased flexibility to access lecture recordings, which has become more prevalent post-pandemic (Otte, 2024; Uekusa, 2023) and the use of hurdle attendance requirements and awarding of participation marks as part of assessment in some tutorials and practicals (Holstead, 2022). Another possible explanation for this finding is that some students are actively constructing their university involvement to suit their interests, learning preferences and individual circumstances (e.g., Mehta et al., 2024). Given participation and involvement encourage cognitive engagement and deep learning, the findings highlight the need to enhance the perceived value and relevance of all class types, ensuring each class offers unique and valuable learning experiences that cannot be fully replicated through recordings. This is relevant post-pandemic where students increasingly evaluate the value of their classes when deciding to attend or not (Otte, 2024).

Considering the four student groups evaluated (FG students, students with disabilities, international students, regional/remote students), we found small differences in their perceptions of university expectations and intentions for involvement at university. These findings suggest these four student groups might have similar initial perceptions of university expectations and intentions for involvement than most first-year students which provide new nuances to the current literature on these groups (Baik et al., 2015; Nadelson et al., 2013; Suleman & Chigeza, 2019). Notably, among the four student groups, international students tended to report strong intentions of attendance at lectures, at campus and participation in extracurricular

activities that matched what they believed the university expected from them. This finding aligns with pre-pandemic reports that have suggested international students tend to be engaged with their studies, showing resourcefulness and help-seeking behaviours (e.g., Baik et al., 2015).

Another finding is the significant drop in class attendance between initial intentions and their experiences after one semester. This finding, observed for lectures and tutorials and practicals, provides empirical support for the anecdotal accounts and media reports of decreasing in-person attendance post-pandemic (Grove, 2024; Holstead, 2024). Of concern is how early in the first year the decline occurs, from one semester to the next. While this trend of declining attendance has been reported pre-pandemic (e.g., James & Seary, 2019), it seems to have intensified post-pandemic partly due to the growth in online and hybrid delivery modes and the increased availability of digital resources including recorded lectures. The change between initial intentions and experiences also suggests students' strategic adjustment to university and their decisions of involvement considering their individual circumstances (e.g., the need to work to cover their expenses). Notably, our findings reveal an alignment between students' initial intentions and actual experiences regarding participation in extracurricular activities. This limited involvement in extracurricular activities is consistent with pre-pandemic studies in Australia (Baik et al., 2015). Mearman and Payne (2023) suggest that this may be particularly the case for commuter students who tend to prioritise academic commitments over extracurricular experiences.

While multiple barriers to students' involvement were identified, two were highly prevalent among students' responses. First, distance from campus and long commuting times identified in pre-pandemic studies as an obstacle (O'Brien & Verma, 2019; Suleman & Chigeza, 2019), remain significant barriers to campus participation. The post-pandemic context may have exacerbated this issue as students readjust to in-person routines (Holstead, 2022) and the sharp rise in cost of living (Wiley, 2023). Second, external commitments, particularly part-time jobs continue to hinder students' involvement on campus post-pandemic. While this factor has long been recognised as a barrier for commuter students (James & Seary, 2019; O'Brien & Verma, 2019), it has become a more critical issue for students with increasing financial pressures and need to take more paid work to cover their expenses (Wiley, 2023). The increased availability and flexibility of online learning may influence students' decision to prioritise paid work over in-person class attendance.

This study also identified two key enablers of student involvement: convenient class timetables and peer connections including study groups. This finding highlights the significant role of strategic timetabling or scheduling in promoting student attendance and in-person campus engagement (Lacey et al., 2022). Notably, the impact of timetabling has received limited attention in the published research, particularly in the current post-pandemic context. Further scholarly work needs to explore how institutions can optimise class schedules across first-year courses to address the issue of declining attendance and enhance student involvement, considering the life pressures and situational factors contemporary students face.

Our study also revealed that social connections through study groups or having friends to study promote students' campus involvement. This finding is consistent with pre-pandemic studies (James & Seary, 2019; Kahu et al., 2016), and highlights that social experiences remain critical factors encouraging students' campus involvement. Currently, where many students balance their class attendance with external commitments, fostering positive peer interactions and collaborative learning in classrooms have become crucial especially for first-year students. Not only is collaborative learning recognised as a high-impact practice for enhancing learning and academic success (Kuh et al., 2010; Smith & Baik, 2019), our study reveals that it can also facilitate positive social interactions that can boost students' attendance and involvement at university.

While this study contributes to an understanding of the FYE post-pandemic, three limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study was conducted at a single institution, potentially limiting the generalisability of the findings to other institutions in Australia and internationally. Further research in other institutions would enable comparative analyses of commencing first-year students' initial intentions and actual experiences across diverse contexts. Second, the study relied on students' self-reported data regarding class attendance and involvement at university. While self-reported data are commonly used in student experience research, the lack of objective measurements of students' class attendance and participation in extracurricular activities may affect data accuracy. Further empirical studies could include other measures such as attendance records, to provide a more accurate picture of student campus participation. Third, the low response rate in the questionnaire in SM2 limits the interpretation of the results. Further research would benefit from incorporating qualitative approaches to delve deeper into the motivations and barriers to student involvement at university, as well as factors that would promote and facilitate increased student attendance and engagement.

Conclusion

This study offers important insights into the FYE in the post-pandemic era. Our findings reveal the relationship between students' initial intentions to attend classes and get involved at university, and the reality they experience after one semester. The significant discrepancy between intended and actual class attendance highlights current patterns of students' adjustment to university and the ways they are actively constructing their university experiences. Our findings also highlight the need for strategic institutional approaches to address the issue of declining attendance and student involvement. This may involve enhancing the perceived value of in-person experiences, optimising class schedules and leveraging technology to complement rather than replace in-person experiences. Future research should explore these areas further across multiple institutions and employ mixed method approaches to gain a more comprehensive understanding of student involvement and engagement.

References

Akimov, A., Malin, M., Sargsyan, Y., Suyunov, G., & Turdaliev, S. (2024). Student success in a university first-year statistics course: Do students' characteristics affect their academic performance? *Journal of Statistics and Data Science Education*, *32*(1), 24–35. https://doi.org/10.1080/26939169.2023.2184435

Astin, A. (1999). Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher education. *Journal of College Student Development, 40*(5), 518–529. https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1999-01418-006

Baik, C., Naylor, R. & Arkoudis, S. (2015). The first year experience in Australia Universities: Findings from two decades. Melbourne Centre for the Study of Higher Education. https://melbourne-cshe.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/1491744/FYE-2014-FULL-report-FINAL-web.pdf

Balloo, K. (2018). In-depth profiles of the expectations of undergraduate students commencing university: A Q methodological analysis. *Studies in Higher Education, 43*(12), 2251–2262. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2017.1320373

Benavides, C. M., Sidiqi, M., Ruiz-Mesa, K., & Ribera, D. (2022). Supporting first generation Latinx freshmen: The importance of university resources, faculty, and peers. *Journal of Latinos and Education*, *23*(1), 340–355. https://doi.org/10.1080/15348431.2022.2141748

Crisp, G., Palmer, E., Turnbull, D., Nettelbeck, T., Ward, L., LeCouteur, A., ... & Schneider, L. (2009). First year student expectations: Results from a university-wide student survey. *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*, *6*(1), 11–26. https://doi.org/10.53761/1.6.1.3

Field, A. (2018). *Discovering statistics using IBM SPSS Statistics* (5th ed.). SAGE.

Fredricks, J. A., Blumenfeld, P. C., & Paris, A. H. (2004). School engagement: Potential of the concept, state of the evidence. *Review of Educational Research, 74*(1), 59–109. https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543074001059

Gale, T., & Parker, S. (2014). Navigating change: A typology of student transition in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, *39*(5), 734–753. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2012.721351

Gregersen, A. F. M., Holmegaard, H. T., & Ulriksen, L. (2021). Transitioning into higher education: Rituals and implied expectations. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, *45*(10), 1356–1370. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2020.1870942

Gretzinger, E., & Hicks, M. (2024, January 26). Why campus life fell apart. *The Chronicle of Higher Education.* https://www.chronicle.com/article/why-campus-life-fell-apart

Griffin, A., Johnson, K. V., & Jogan, K. (2022). First-year college students' behaviors and characteristics of those who stay and those who go. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice, 23*(4), 815–823. https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025119879414

Grove, J. (2024, March 14). Lectures in question as paid work pushes attendance even lower. *Times Higher Education.* https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/lectures-question-paid-work-pushes-attendance-even-lower

Holstead, C. E. (2022, September 1). Why students are skipping class so often, and how to bring them back. *The Chronicle of Higher Education.* https://www.chronicle.com/article/why-students-are-skipping-class-so-often-and-how-to-bring-them-back

James, T., & Seary, K. (2019). Why aren't they attending class like they are supposed to? A review into students' perception of the value of class attendance. *Student Success, 10*(1), 115–129. https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.v10i1.1111

Kahu, E. R., Nelson, K., & Picton, C. (2016, June 29-July 2*). "I'm excited!" Student expectations prior to starting their first year at university* [Conference presentation]. Student Transitions Achievement Retention and Success (STARS) Conference, Perth, Australia. https://unistars.org/papers/STARS2016/10A.pdf

Kahu, E. R., Nelson, K., & Picton, C. (2017). Student interest as a key driver of engagement for first year students. *Student Success, 8*(2), 55–66. https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.v8i2.379

Kahu, E. R., & Nelson, K. (2018). Student engagement in the educational interface: Understanding the mechanisms of student success. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *37*(1), 58–71. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2017.1344197

Kahu, E. R., Picton, C., & Nelson, K. (2020). Pathways to engagement: A longitudinal study of the first-year student experience in the educational interface. *Higher Education*, *79*(4), 657–673. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-019-00429-w

Kift, S., Nelson, K., & Clarke, J. (2010). Transition pedagogy: A third generation approach to FYE: A case study of policy and practice for the higher education sector. *The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education, 1*(1), 1–20. https://doi.org/10.5204/intjfyhe.v1i1.13

Kuh, G. D. (2009). The national survey of student engagement: Conceptual and empirical foundations. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 2009(141), 5–20. https://doi.org/10.1002/ir.283

Kuh, G. D., Jillian, K., Schuh, J., & Whitt, E. J. (2010). *Student success in college: Creating conditions that matter*. Jossey-Bass.

Krause, K., & Coates, H. (2008). Students' engagement in first-year university. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 33*(5), 493–505. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602930701698892

Lacey, M. M., Shaw, H., Abbott, N., Dalton, C. J., & Smith, D. P. (2022). How students' inspirations and aspirations impact motivation and engagement in the first year of study. *Education Sciences*, *12*(12), 885. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci12120885

Lizzio, A. (2006). Designing an orientation and transition strategy for commencing students: Applying the five senses model. http://fyhe.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Lizzio-TheFivesensesofStudentSuccessSelf-AssessmentFrameworkforplanningandreviewofOT_doc.pdf

Mearman, A., & Payne, R. (2023). Reflections on welcome and induction: Exploring the sources of students' expectations and anticipations about university. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, *47*(7), 980–993. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2023.2208054

Mehta, K. J., Aula-Blasco, J., & Mantaj, J. (2024). University students' preferences of learning modes post COVID-19-associated lockdowns: In-person, online, and blended. *PLoS ONE, 19*(7), e0296670. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0296670

Moores, E., Birdi, G. K., & Higson, H. E. (2019). Determinants of university students' attendance. *Educational Research, 61*(4), 371–387. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2019.1660587

Mulrooney, H. M. (2017). Exploring participation in co-curricular activities among undergraduate students. *New Directions in the Teaching of Physical Sciences*, *12*(1). https://doi.org/10.29311/ndtps.v0i12.566

Nadelson, L. S., Semmelroth, C., Martinez, G., Featherstone, M., Fuhriman, C. A., & Sell, A. (2013). Why did they come here? The influences and expectations of first-year students' college experience. *Higher Education Studies*, *3*(1), 50–62. https://doi.org/10.5539/hes.v3n1p50

O'Brien, M., & Verma, R. (2019). How do first year students utilize different lecture resources? *Higher Education, 77*, 155–172 (2019). https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-018-0250-5

Otte, J. (2024, May 28). "I see little point": UK university students on why attendance has plummeted. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/education/article/2024/may/28/i-see-little-point-uk-university-students-on-why-attendance-has-plummeted?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other

Pleitz, J. D., MacDougall, A. E., Terry, R. A., Buckley, M. R., & Campbell, N. J. (2015). Great expectations: Examining the discrepancy between expectations and experiences on college student retention. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice, 17*(1), 88–104. https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025115571252

Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching [QILT]. (2023). 2023 Student experience survey national report. https://qilt.edu.au/docs/default-source/default-document-library/ses-national-report.pdf?sfvrsn=faa75ef2_0

Scutter, S., Palmer, E., Luzecky, A., Da Silva, K. B., & Brinkworth, R. (2011). What do commencing undergraduate students expect from first year university? *International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education*, *2*(1). 8–20. https://doi.org/10.5204/intjfyhe.v2i1.54

Smith, C., & Baik, C. (2019). High-impact teaching practices in higher education: A best evidence review. *Studies in Higher Education, 46*(8), 1696–1713. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2019.1698539

Suleman, A., & Chigeza, P. (2019). Enhancing participation of first-year education students: Focusing on life circumstances. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, *29*(2), 53–65. https://doi.org/10.47381/aijre.v29i2.204

Summers, R. J., Higson, H. E., & Moores, E. (2020). Measures of engagement in the first three weeks of higher education predict subsequent activity and attainment in first year undergraduate students: A UK case study. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, *46*(5), 821–836. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2020.1822282

Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2nd ed.). University of Chicago Press.

Uekusa, S. (2023). Reflections on post-pandemic university teaching, the corresponding digitalisation of education and the lecture attendance crisis. *New Zealand Geographer*, *79*(1), 33–38. https://doi.org/10.1111/nzg.12351

Webber, K. L., Krylow, R. B., & Zhang, Q. (2013). Does involvement really matter? indicators of college student success and satisfaction. *Journal of College Student Development, 54*(6), 591–611. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2013.0090

Wiley. (2023). *The state of the student 2022*. https://d1y8sb8igg2f8e.cloudfront.net/the-state-of-the-student-2022.pdf

Please cite this article as:
Rivera Munoz, C. A., Baik, C., Ryan, T., & Mulder, R. A. (2025). Intended and actual involvement of commencing first-year undergraduate students in university activities. *Student Success, 16*(2), 1-15. https://doi.org/10.63608/ssj.3782

This article has been peer reviewed and accepted for publication in *Student Success.* Please see the Editorial Policies under the 'About' section of the Journal website for further information.

Student Success: ***A journal exploring the experiences of students in tertiary education.***