

How do First-Year, First-Time Regional University Students Respond to Expectation-Experience Mismatches?

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Abstract

First-year, first-time (FYFT) students enter university with expectations shaped by institutional recruitment communications, social media, and broader media narratives. During transition, lived experiences may diverge from these expectations, creating expectation-experience mismatch. While student expectations and satisfaction are well researched, less is known about how students respond to expectation-experience mismatch and how these responses influence satisfaction. Drawing on cognitive dissonance and coping response literature, this study examines FYFT students in regional Australian universities. Data were collected through a national survey of 405 students and analysed using structural equation modelling. Findings show that expectations were associated with both positive and negative emotional response outcomes, and that these outcomes influenced satisfaction. Positive emotional response outcomes had a stronger relationship with satisfaction than negative emotional response outcomes. The study reframes expectation-experience mismatch as a common feature of transition and highlights the value of student-driven strategies that strengthen constructive action and student agency during the first year.

Keywords: Expectation-experience mismatch; first-year transition; regional university students

Introduction

Student expectations are central to the university experience, particularly during the first year. During the transition to university, it is common that students' lived experiences may diverge from their pre-commencement expectations, creating expectation-experience mismatch. Existing research tends to focus on whether expectations are met, offering limited insight into how students interpret and respond to expectation-experience mismatch as it occurs, and how these responses shape their overall satisfaction (Tomlinson et al., 2023).

This issue is particularly important in regional university contexts, where first-year, first-time (FYFT) students may be navigating transition alongside employment, caregiving, financial pressures, relocation, transport constraints, and uneven access to informal university knowledge (O'Shea, 2021). For these students, expectation-experience mismatch may reflect not only inaccurate expectations, but also the complexity of learning how university works while managing competing demands. Understanding how students respond to mismatch in these settings is important for student success because it highlights the adaptive work students undertake during transition.

When students' expectations do not align with their experiences, they can encounter cognitive dissonance, a form of psychological discomfort arising from inconsistencies between beliefs and reality (Festinger, 1957; Harmon-Jones & Mills,



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2019). While cognitive dissonance has been applied in service contexts to explain behavioural responses and satisfaction outcomes (Cancino-Montecinos et al., 2020; Oliver, 1989), recent student success research foregrounds transition, belonging, equity, and agency as central to how students navigate higher education (James, 2025; Naylor et al., 2025). These perspectives highlight the psychological impact of mismatch while locating student mismatch responses within the broader educational conditions that shape transition and satisfaction.

Students are not passive recipients of mismatch but actively attempt to reconcile dissonance through coping responses. These may take the form of action, such as restructuring expectations, seeking information, or modifying behaviours, or inaction, including avoidance, disengagement, or self-justification (Cancino-Montecinos et al., 2020). Action-based responses are associated with more positive emotions, such as happiness, relief, and confidence, whereas inaction-based responses are associated with more negative emotions, including sadness, frustration, and regret (Cancino-Montecinos et al., 2018; Oliver, 1989). However, despite the recognised importance of coping responses and emotional outcomes (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2023), limited research has examined how student-driven coping responses shape satisfaction during transition.

This study addresses this gap by examining how FYFT university students in regional settings respond to expectation-experience mismatch and how these responses shape satisfaction. It proposes that satisfaction is not determined by mismatch itself, but by the coping responses that arise as students manage dissonance. Using structural equation modelling, the proposed conceptual model examines relationships between expectations, positive and negative emotional responses to mismatch, and student satisfaction. Drawing on data from a national sample ($N = 405$), the research provides empirical insight into how students respond to mismatch during transition into higher education. The study extends student satisfaction research by incorporating coping responses and associated emotional outcomes and highlights the practical value of supporting students to engage constructively with mismatch, rather than trying to eliminate mismatch altogether.

Literature Review

Student Expectations and Transition to Higher Education

Student expectations are well established as an influence on engagement, satisfaction, belonging, and success in the first year of university. During transition, expectations shape how students interpret academic workload, teaching practices, support systems, social connection, and their own capacity to succeed (James, 2025; Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Kahu et al., 2022; Tomlinson et al., 2023). Yet transition is also characterised by uncertainty. Students are required to learn unfamiliar academic conventions, navigate new institutional systems, and make sense of what university requires of them, often while managing work, care, finance, travel, relocation, and place-based constraints (Carlton et al., 2025; O'Shea, 2021).

These dynamics are especially important for students in regional and underrepresented cohorts, who may have less direct access to prior university knowledge and fewer informal networks through which to test assumptions about university life. Their expectations may therefore be shaped through indirect sources, including institutional communications, university events, social media, news media, family advice, school-based guidance, and broader cultural narratives about higher education (Tomlinson et al., 2023). These sources can be useful, but they may also leave students with expectations that are plausible, but incomplete. As students encounter the lived realities of university, differences between anticipated and actual experiences are likely to emerge. This study treats expectation-experience mismatch not as evidence of student misunderstanding or institutional failure, but as a common feature of transition. From this perspective, the key issue is not whether mismatch occurs, but how students interpret and respond to it.

Expectation-Experience Mismatch and Cognitive Dissonance

Cognitive dissonance theory provides a useful explanation for why this interpretive work matters. Expectation-experience mismatch may create psychological discomfort as students attempt to reconcile differences between anticipated and actual experiences. Cognitive dissonance theory posits that individuals seek consistency between beliefs, feelings, and experience, with inconsistencies generating discomfort that motivates efforts to restore congruence (Festinger, 1957; Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019).

Within higher education, dissonance may arise when students encounter experiences that differ from their pre-commencement expectations (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). These differences can challenge assumptions about university life and prompt students

to adjust attitudes, modify expectations, or reject aspects of their experiences (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019). When expectations are not effectively managed, transition can become more challenging and stressful (O'Shea, 2021).

Expectation-experience mismatch is pervasive during the first year, with many students entering higher education without a clear understanding of what university life will be like (Tomlinson et al., 2023). Building on cognitive dissonance theory in higher education, Mao and Oppewal (2010) highlight the influence of expectations and perceptions on behavioural outcomes. This literature suggests that mismatch is more than a divergence between anticipated and actual experiences. It is a dissonance process that requires consideration of how students respond when confronted with these inconsistencies.

Response Strategies to Expectation-Experience Mismatch

When confronted with expectation-experience mismatch, students often seek to reduce the psychological discomfort associated with cognitive dissonance through coping responses (Cancino-Montecinos et al., 2020). These responses represent mechanisms through which individuals restore consistency when faced with discrepancies between expectations and lived experiences (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Cancino-Montecinos et al. (2018, 2020) broadly characterise responses to mismatch as action-based and inaction-based strategies.

Action-based strategies involve active engagement with mismatch, such as seeking information, adjusting expectations, or modifying actions to better align with the university environment. In higher education, these responses may include contacting teaching staff, using learning support, seeking peer advice, changing study routines, or recalibrating assumptions about workload and independence. These strategies reflect constructive engagement, adaptation, and active reflection (Cancino-Montecinos et al., 2018; Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2023). In contrast, inaction-based strategies involve attempts to minimise or avoid mismatch through disengagement, avoidance, denial, or self-justification (Cancino-Montecinos et al., 2018). In students' lives, inaction may appear as delaying help-seeking, withdrawing from learning interactions, avoiding feedback, or normalising confusion as personal failure (Naylor et al., 2025). Although these approaches may temporarily reduce discomfort, they do not directly address the underlying source of inconsistency.

Within higher education, these strategies are important because students actively interpret and negotiate their experiences in ways that either support or constrain adjustment during transition. Understanding the first-year experience therefore requires attention not only to whether mismatch occurs, but to how students seek to reconcile dissonance and the emotional consequences that follow.

Emotional Responses and Satisfaction

Satisfaction is central to how individuals evaluate their experiences (Oliver, 1980, 1989). Rather than treating satisfaction as a singular overall judgement, Oliver (1989) proposes that satisfaction is characterised by different modes of cognitive processing and associated emotional responses. From this perspective, satisfaction extends beyond a simple binary distinction between satisfaction and dissatisfaction.

Positive emotional responses, such as happiness, pleasure, relief, excitement, and confidence, are associated with more favourable experiences, whereas negative emotional responses, including sadness, frustration, anger, anxiety, and regret, signal less favourable outcomes (Oliver, 1980, 1989). In the present study, these responses were operationalised using the dominant positive emotions of happiness, gladness, and relief, and the dominant negative emotions of frustration, irritation, and annoyance. These six emotion items were selected because they represent commonly reported positive and negative emotional responses within the literature examining expectation-experience mismatch and student satisfaction. Collectively they provide representative indicators of the emotional response outcome constructs.

Within expectation-experience mismatch, emotional responses form a critical link between coping strategies and satisfaction outcomes. This study posits that FYFT students who engage in constructive, action-based responses may experience more positive emotional outcomes, whereas those who disengage through inaction-based responses may experience more negative emotional responses. Accordingly, satisfaction depends not only on whether expectations align with experiences, but also on how students respond to mismatch. However, limited research has examined how FYFT students respond to expectation-experience mismatch during transition, or how these responses shape satisfaction. These relationships provide the theoretical foundation for the proposed conceptual model.

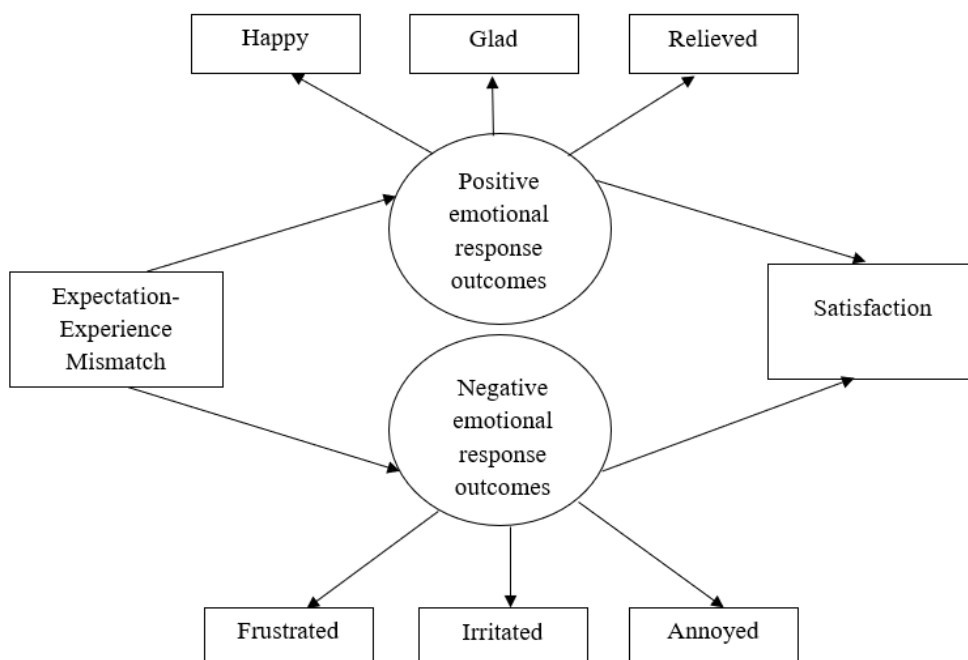
Conceptual Model

Drawing on cognitive dissonance theory and coping response frameworks, the conceptual model (Figure 1) positions mismatch as a common feature of transition that may generate dissonance and motivate students to restore consistency between expectations and lived experiences. The model proposes that action-based and inaction-based responses are theoretically derived mechanisms through which students may interpret and manage mismatch, with different emotional outcomes influencing satisfaction. In the model, action-based and inaction-based responses provide the theoretical basis for understanding students' emotional evaluations of mismatch. Specifically, positive emotional response outcomes are happiness, gladness, and relief, while negative emotional response outcomes are frustration, irritation, and annoyance.

Positive and negative emotional response outcomes represent students' emotional evaluations associated with expectation-experience mismatch. The study intentionally focused on three broadly positive emotional outcomes (happy, glad, and relieved) and three broadly negative emotional outcomes (frustrated, irritated, and annoyed), as outlined by Oliver (1989). These items were selected because they provide representative indicators of general positive and negative affective evaluations while ensuring conceptual clarity and measurement parsimony.

Figure 1

Conceptual Model of Student Responses to Expectation-Experience Mismatch and Satisfaction Outcomes



Note. Authors' own work.

Accordingly, this study formally asks: *How do first-year, first-time (FYFT) university students respond to expectation-experience mismatch, and how do these responses influence satisfaction outcomes?*

Approach/Methods

Survey Design and Instrument Development

A structured, self-administered online survey was developed and distributed using Qualtrics to examine how FYFT students respond to expectation-experience mismatch. The survey comprised 43 items across seven thematic sections aligned with the conceptual model, measuring expectation-experience mismatch, action-based and inaction-based response strategies, associated emotional response outcomes, and overall satisfaction.

Survey items were adapted from validated scales in the marketing, cognitive dissonance, coping strategy, affective response, and satisfaction literature, supplemented by construct development informed by prior qualitative work. Measures included disconfirmation (Wallace et al., 2004), coping strategy and behavioural tendencies (Duhachek, 2005; Menon & Khan, 1995), affective responses (Kim et al., 1996), and satisfaction measures developed by Oliver (1989) and applied within services marketing (Mägi, 2003). Importantly, the action-based and inaction-based emotional response outcomes do not measure the behavioural response itself. Rather the items capture students' emotional evaluations following action or inaction in response to expectation-experience mismatch. The instrument development process followed recommendations for questionnaire design and validation, including construct specification, adaptation of validated measures, expert review, and pilot testing (Radhakrishna, 2007).

Content validity was established through peer review by five academics with expertise in higher education, marketing, and student experience. The survey was then pilot tested with 35 FYFT students to assess item clarity, wording, and functionality, with feedback used to refine the instrument before full deployment.

Sample

The target population comprised FYFT students aged over 18 years and enrolled in their first year of undergraduate study at Australian universities in regional settings. Regional universities provide an important context because they play a key role in widening participation and often enrol higher proportions of students from underrepresented backgrounds (Carlton et al., 2025; King & Stone, 2024). Students from these cohorts may also be managing relocation, financial pressures, limited support networks, and work or family responsibilities (O'Shea, 2021).

Full data collection occurred over three weeks at the end of first semester, ensuring students had sufficient experience to evaluate the alignment between expectations and lived experiences while remaining within the first-year transition period (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). Ethics approval was obtained from the University of the Sunshine Coast Human Research Ethics Committee and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participants were recruited through Qualtrics and professional network engagement, enabling access to a geographically diverse student cohort across multiple universities, disciplines, and student backgrounds.

A total of 438 responses were received. After removing incomplete or low-quality responses, including straight-lining, substantial missing data, and inconsistent response patterns, 405 usable responses were retained. The final sample exceeded recommended thresholds for structural equation modelling and provided adequate statistical power for testing the conceptual model (Hair et al., 2019; Kline, 2024).

Participants were drawn from 19 Australian universities and represented a broad range of disciplines. Most were aged 18 to 24 years (61%), with a balanced gender distribution (50.9% female, 46.9% male). Almost half worked more than 16 hours per week (48.9%); nearly one third reported caregiving responsibilities (29.1%); and participants studied on campus (47.4%), online (20%), or in hybrid mode (32.6%). These characteristics reflect the multiple demands often associated with student success (Kahu et al., 2022; O'Shea, 2021).

Analysis and Interpretation

Data were analysed using SPSS (Version 29) and AMOS (Version 30). Following data screening, the final dataset was assessed for normality, outliers, and multicollinearity to confirm suitability for multivariate analysis. Exploratory factor analysis examined the underlying factor structure, confirmatory factor analysis evaluated the measurement model, and structural

equation modelling tested the hypothesised relationships between expectations, responses to mismatch, and satisfaction. Model fit was assessed against established benchmarks, with results presented below.

Results

Preliminary Analysis

Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses supported the retained construct structure. Items loaded onto the intended dimensions, no substantial cross-loadings were observed, and all factor loadings were significant ($p < .001$) and exceeded recommended thresholds.

The expectation construct retained four indicators capturing externally shaped pre-commencement information sources. The positive and negative emotional response outcomes captured students' emotional evaluations of resolved and unresolved mismatch, respectively. Measurement properties are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Measurement Properties of Retained Constructs

Construct	Indicators retained	Loading range	CR	AVE
Expectations	University marketing University events Social media News	0.68 to 0.72	0.80	0.49
Positive emotional response outcomes	Happy Glad Relieved	0.70 to 0.81	0.79	0.56
Negative emotional response outcomes	Frustrated Irritated Annoyed	0.78 to 0.83	0.85	0.66

Fornell and Larcker (1981) support convergent validity when AVE is below 0.50 but composite reliability exceeds 0.60; accordingly, the Expectations construct's AVE of 0.49 is acceptable. Retention was further supported by consistently moderate standardised loadings (0.68–0.72) and the theoretical importance of the indicators to the expectation–experience mismatch model. Removing an item solely to increase AVE would have weakened content coverage for negligible empirical gain. Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell–Larcker criterion (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). For every latent construct, the square root of AVE exceeded the corresponding inter-construct correlations, indicating that each construct shared more variance with its own indicators than with other constructs. Satisfaction was operationalised as a single observed global measure and therefore AVE was not calculated; however, its correlations with the latent constructs were examined to assess potential overlap. Collectively, the findings support the convergent and discriminant validity of the retained constructs.

Structural Model

Structural equation modelling examined relationships between expectations, responses to mismatch, and satisfaction. Table 2 presents the structural relationships. Expectations significantly predicted both positive emotional response outcomes ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < .001$) and negative emotional response outcomes ($\beta = 0.20$, $p < .001$), with the stronger association observed for action-based responses.

Positive emotional response outcomes were positively associated with satisfaction ($\beta = 0.40$, $p < .001$), while negative emotional response outcomes were negatively associated with satisfaction ($\beta = -0.17$, $p < .001$). The positive pathway was more than twice the magnitude of the negative pathway, suggesting that positive emotional responses play a stronger role in shaping satisfaction.

The structural model demonstrated acceptable fit against established SEM benchmarks: $\chi^2/df = 3.37$, CFI = 0.96, TLI = 0.94, and RMSEA = 0.08 (Hair et al., 2019; Kline, 2024). Hair et al. (2019) identify RMSEA values of .08 or below as indicating

acceptable model fit; accordingly, the RMSEA of .08 was acceptable when considered alongside the remaining fit indices. The model explained 17.8% of the variance in student satisfaction, indicating modest but meaningful explanatory power.

Table 2

Structural Relationships Between Expectations, Emotional Response Outcomes, and Satisfaction

Path	β	p	Interpretation
Expectations → Positive emotional response outcomes	0.41	< .001	Positive association
Expectations → Negative emotional response outcomes	0.20	< .001	Positive association
Positive emotional response outcomes → Satisfaction	0.40	< .001	Positive association
Negative emotional response outcomes → Satisfaction	-0.17	< .001	Negative association

Overall, the results indicate that expectations influence both positive and negative emotional response outcomes, which, in turn, shape satisfaction.

Discussion

Summary of Findings

In response to the research question, the findings show that FYFT students respond to expectation-experience mismatch through both positive and negative emotional response pathways, and that these pathways have different implications for satisfaction. Mismatch did not independently determine satisfaction; rather, satisfaction was shaped by how students interpreted, emotionally evaluated, and responded to mismatch during transition. This reframes mismatch as a dynamic feature of the first-year experience, rather than a negative outcome.

Viewed through the lens of cognitive dissonance theory, these findings suggest expectation-experience mismatch generates psychological discomfort that motivates students to reconcile inconsistencies between their expectations and lived experiences (Festinger, 1957). Students who reported more positive emotional response outcomes following action also reported higher levels of satisfaction, suggesting that successfully resolving this dissonance is associated with more positive emotional evaluations and greater satisfaction. Although this relationship supports the proposed conceptual model, both constructs reflect positive emotional evaluations and may therefore share some common variance.

The sample profile provides important context. Many participants were managing employment, caregiving responsibilities, and financial pressures alongside transition, potentially limiting the time, flexibility, and emotional resources available to adapt. In this context, the stronger association between positive emotional response outcomes and satisfaction is important. Although the model's explanatory power was modest ($R^2 = 0.18$), this is unsurprising given the multifaceted nature of transition and student satisfaction. The findings suggest that emotional responses to mismatch may represent one mechanism through which transition experiences are interpreted and evaluated, aligning with student success literature that emphasises agency and proactive engagement (e.g., Kahu & Nelson, 2018).

The findings also position expectation-experience mismatch beyond a simple negative event or institutional failure. Most students reported experiences that were broadly aligned with, or exceeded, their expectations (84.2%; $n = 341$), and almost two thirds ($n = 275$) expected some difference between expectations and subsequent experiences. This suggests that students do not necessarily enter university expecting perfect alignment between expectation and reality. Instead, mismatch can be understood as an inherent feature of transition, with consequences depending less on whether mismatch occurs and more on how students respond.

Theoretical Contributions

Theoretically, the study extends understanding of how expectation-experience mismatch influences student satisfaction by showing that the relationship is not direct but shaped through students' emotional response outcomes. In doing so, the study addresses the gap identified in the literature by showing that response pathways are central to how mismatch becomes

meaningful for student satisfaction. Existing research has often treated mismatch as a static deficit associated with dissatisfaction or disengagement (Tomlinson et al., 2023). The present findings support a more dynamic interpretation in which mismatch is a common feature of transition and its consequences depend on the individual's coping response. These insights advance applications of cognitive dissonance theory by linking mismatch, action-based and inaction-based responses, emotional outcomes, and satisfaction (Cancino-Montecinos et al., 2020). The stronger relationship between positive emotional response outcomes and satisfaction suggests that satisfaction may be shaped through constructive adaptation processes, rather than determined exclusively by mismatch or institutional performance. This link to cognitive dissonance shifts attention from preventing mismatch towards understanding the processes through which students restore cognitive consistency during their transition.

These insights also advance transition scholarship by connecting expectations, engagement, belonging, and agency (James, 2025; Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Kahu et al., 2022) with cognitive dissonance and coping theory (Festinger, 1957; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019). Satisfaction is therefore theorised as an outcome of students' situated efforts to make sense of, and act on, mismatch during transition, rather than only as a retrospective evaluation of whether expectations were met.

Practical Contributions

Practically, the study suggests that transition support should move beyond information provision alone and help students respond constructively when expectations and experiences diverge. Orientation programs, first-year programs, advising models, and engagement strategies may benefit from timely interventions such as help-seeking skill development, support for navigating online environments, and peer connection opportunities. For students managing employment, caregiving, financial pressures, and commitments, inclusive, flexible, and well-timed support may be especially important. Supporting constructive responses to mismatch creates practical opportunities for improving satisfaction and strengthening student agency.

This means transition support should not only tell students what to expect but also provide structured opportunities to practise what to do when expectations and experiences diverge. First-year programs could explicitly name common mismatch moments, such as unexpected assessment demands, uncertainty about academic standards, difficulty forming peer connections, or hesitation to seek help. Normalising these moments may reduce the likelihood that students interpret mismatches as personal failure and instead encourage earlier, positive emotion-based responses.

The findings also reinforce the need for realistic recruitment, outreach, and onboarding communications. Because expectations are shaped before commencement through institutional messaging, events, social media, peer and family advice, and broader public narratives, universities should prepare students for the realities of adjustment while empowering them to recognise mismatch and choose action-based responses (James, 2025; Naylor et al., 2025).

Limitations and Future Research

This study is limited by its cross-sectional design, which restricts causal inference. Longitudinal research would provide stronger insight into how responses to mismatch develop across the student lifecycle. In addition, the use of self-reported survey data may introduce bias or social desirability effects. Future research could combine surveys with interviews, diary methods, or behavioural indicators. Although the sample included students from multiple Australian universities, the regional focus may limit transferability to metropolitan or international contexts.

Emotional response outcomes were measured using self-report items, which assume participants interpret and describe emotions in broadly similar ways. However, emotional processing may differ across individuals, meaning the selected emotion items may not fully capture the diversity of emotional responses to expectation-experience mismatch. Furthermore, the study focused on students' emotional response outcomes following action or inaction rather than directly modelling behavioural responses. Future research could strengthen the proposed conceptual model by incorporating more inclusive measures of emotional experience together with behavioural indicators across diverse student populations.

Finally, the model demonstrated modest explanatory power, indicating that additional determinants of satisfaction remain outside the current framework. Further research could examine belonging, self-efficacy, institutional support, financial stress, and mental wellbeing alongside the mismatch response process. These directions would extend understanding of how mismatch responses develop over time and across different higher education contexts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research examined how FYFT university students respond to expectation-experience mismatch during their transition into higher education and how these responses shape satisfaction outcomes. The findings show that students respond to mismatch through both positive and negative emotional response pathways, with each pathway carrying different implications for satisfaction. Positive emotional response outcomes were positively associated with satisfaction, while negative emotional response outcomes were negatively associated with satisfaction. Importantly, positive emotional response outcomes were more strongly associated with satisfaction than negative emotional response outcomes, highlighting the importance of student agency in navigating the first-year experience. By reframing mismatch as a common feature of transition rather than a deficit, this research offers a constructive contribution to higher education and provides practical direction for institutions seeking to improve student transition, engagement, and satisfaction. The practical message is that universities should treat mismatch as a predictable part of transition and design support that helps students respond before uncertainty becomes disengagement.

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