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Enhancing preparation for higher education

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Abstract

Evidence from national and international studies points to the lack of preparation for Higher Education (HE) as a major factor for student non-completion of courses. This paper reports the findings of a study designed to enhance potential students' understandings of the expectations of independent learning and assessment. It seeks to provide evidence of the ways in which students and their families can be supported in their understanding of the values and practices of a HE institution. Data was drawn from questionnaires distributed to potential pre-entry students and their parents/carers/friends. The findings illustrate that in allowing for opportunities for pre-entry students to develop a transparent understanding of the expectations of HE study, that they can be supported in the transition to HE by parents/carers/friends. It is hoped that the outcomes of this research will contribute to a more informed transition to HE.

Keywords

Transition; assessment; independent learning; cultural capital.

Introduction

Making the transition from school to university can prove to be a challenging obstacle for many students, and research in the field reveals that the first year of university is a time of substantial change and adjustment. For some, the transition from a 'controlled' environment of school or college to one in which they take responsibility for their own academic and social needs, is stressful and a source of anxiety (Lowe and Cook, 2003), and can be experienced as entering an 'alien environment' (Askham 2008).

Research Context

Research, both national and international (McInnis et al., 2000; Yorke, 2000; Harvey and Drew, 2006), reports that students frequently receive poor information prior to entering HE and this can result in students making inappropriate decisions about which institutions to attend and also which courses to embark upon. Institutional choice is a fundamental decision relating to progression to HE, and Thomas (2011; 239) uses the phrase '*Institutional Match*' to describe the extent to which a student 'fits in' or 'belongs' to a particular HE institution. Poor institutional match may lead to students withdrawing from HE, therefore 'correct' choice of institution is seemingly a key facet associated with retention. However, Yorke (2000) notes that HE institutions frequently provide insufficient guidance about their programmes and, given that there is strong self-reliance with regard to gathering information about institutions and the courses that they offer (Baxter, Hatt and Tate 2007), this is concerning, as students are arguably ill-equipped to make informed decisions about their futures.

Student feedback and research on why they withdraw from university has identified that preparation for university and good induction practices can help students to settle quickly and more effectively, and is likely to have an impact on their future achievements (Haggis 2006; Hultberg et al. 2008) thereby reducing the numbers 'at risk' (Yorke 1999, Hammoudeh and Barrett 2002). Ensuring that students are clear about expectations is therefore a fundamental aspect related to preparation for HE.

Reay et al. (2001) note that perceptions and expectations are constructed over time in relation to a myriad of factors- from school friends and teachers' views and advice and learning experiences, and expectations of families. Thus, there is a link between cultural capital and the expectations of students. Cultural capital relates to social class, family background and commitment to education (Bourdieu 1992; Longden 2004). Bourdieu (1976:110) contends that:

‘Each family transmits to its children, indirectly rather than directly, a certain *cultural* capital and a certain *ethos*. The latter is a system of implicit and deeply interiorised values which, among other things, helps to define attitudes towards ... educational institutions.’

With particular regard to the transition to HE, cultural capital can be seen even before a student arrives at university and Reay *et al.* (2002) observe that if a student lacks the relevant capital, then this may impact on his/her experience when entering a new environment. Building on this, Kim and Schneider (2005:1184) coin the phrase *aligned action* by parents, which is goal-specific action through which parents channel information and resources outside of the family and appropriate them to help their children to achieve their own goals. Arguably, such alignment then, facilitates the transmission of cultural capital.

Given that withdrawals from HE incur significant institutional and personal cost and can be devastating for individuals and their families (Rowley, 2003 and HEFCE, 1997) we were keen to explore how we could enhance the pre-programme experiences of potential students to allow for a more-informed choice of degree programme. In considering how to facilitate this, we bore in mind that the cultural capital of individuals is located within a complex matrix of influences (Reay *et al.*, 2001) and that aligned action by parents (and in this paper we refer to this more widely as ‘friends and family’) can support students in achieving their goals, and this paper therefore focuses on the notion of ‘preparedness’ for independent learning and assessment through enhancing open event activities. These activities brought together the opportunity for family, friends and members of the HE institution to engage in an activity-based pre-induction event.

The rationale for focussing on these particular aspects associated with preparedness for HE stemmed from our previous research. The Transition Project (Murtagh, 2010) concluded that students find the transition to HE a ‘step –up’, and findings from the project suggested a need for an emphasis on clear expectations at pre-programme events such as ‘Open Days’ with a focus on independent learning. The dominant discourse within HE promotes the independent learner however, evidence from our previous work illustrated that a change in teaching and learning styles was demanding for students. In particular, they found the aspect of independent learning, which is deeply embedded in our degree Programmes, a challenge.

In addition, the project identified that the pre-HE assessment experiences of our student body varied widely, and for many the academic work at university was taxing. This supported the findings of Murphy and Fleming (2000) and O’Hara, Carter, and Manassee (2007) who concluded that students do not know what is expected of them with regard to assignments and are unsure about how to compose academic writing. The Transition Project (Murtagh, 2010) identified the potential for a richer induction for those moving to HE study to ensure that they are prepared for the academic assessment expectations of HE. This paper therefore also focuses on the significance of ‘preparedness’ with reference to assessment, because as Boud (2007, xvii) notes:

‘Assessment probably provokes more anxiety among students and irritation among staff than any other feature of higher education.’

The Study

Evaluative case studies are, Stenhouse (1985) states, those which facilitate ‘educational actors’ or ‘decision makers’ with information that will help them to judge the merit and worth of policies, programmes or institutions. The study adopted such an approach, chosen for its appropriateness in providing information with regard to the effectiveness of introducing a specific ‘preparation session’ at Open Events.

The typical format of Open Events at our institution, prior to conducting this study, was a lecture to which potential students, together with friends/family were invited. The lecture was, and remains, focused on sharing key information about the institution, the Degree Programmes’ structures and organisation with potential students, and on sharing information regarding the formal application process. However, in efforts to support prospective students, we introduced a ‘Preparation for HE’ session during the events, the focus of which was on the nature of independent study and assessment at HE. We invited current students from our Programmes to attend the sessions, such that they could provide a lens through which the notion of independent study and assessment could be considered and discussed.

At the conclusion of the session, all attendees were asked to complete a questionnaire. Ethical clearance for the distribution of the questionnaires had been approved in advance in line with institutional requirements. The questionnaires were devised to allow for responses from the potential students (Q1) and from their friend/family member (Q2). The questionnaires included the opportunity for quantitative and qualitative responses.

Questionnaire 1

Q1 invited attendees to respond using a likert scale and 'comments' to the following questions and statements

1. This session has helped me to understand the expectations of teaching and learning at university.
2. The expectations are similar to my current/most recent study.
3. This session has helped me to understand the expectations of how I will be assessed at university.
4. The expectations are similar to my current study.
5. I feel better informed about teaching, learning and assessment at university.
6. I feel that I can set myself targets to help my transition to university.
7. I would welcome further opportunities for preparation for HE study.

Questionnaire 2

Q2 invited the friend/family member of the attendee to respond similarly to the following:

1. This session has helped me to understand the expectations of teaching and learning at university.
2. Is it useful for you to understand these expectations?
3. The session has helped me to understand the expectations of how students will be assessed at university.
4. Is it useful for you to understand these expectations?
5. I feel better informed about teaching, learning and assessment at university.
6. Is it useful for you to understand these expectations?
7. Can you briefly describe what role, if any, you believe that you have in supporting your friend/relative as s/he begins to prepare for HE and through the degree programme?

Questionnaire 3

In addition, the students and tutors who were involved in the delivery of the session were invited to share their thoughts about the event through the use of an open-ended questionnaire (Q3). The findings from the questionnaires highlighted some key themes and, for the purpose of discussion, these are framed around the concepts of 'the individual' and 'friends and family'.

'The Individual'

We analysed the questionnaires distributed to 147 attendees at recent open events (Q1). These present us with a picture of a diverse group of potential students, whose academic backgrounds include students who:

- have undertaken a 'traditional' A level pathway
- have undertaken BTEC National diplomas
- are aiming to return to HE study following withdrawal from other undergraduate degree programmes.

If students from such a wide range of academic backgrounds enter HE they must be supported, and, as Laing, Robinson and Johnston (2005) state, this requires institutions to help them to become familiar with the systems and procedures of HE. Of interest, therefore, 97% of the respondents to the questionnaire (Q1) noted that they strongly agreed/agreed, regardless of prior experiences, that the session had helped them to understand the expectations of teaching and learning at within specific degree programmes, and illustrated this stating, for instance:

'The 'course' [open event workshop] has given me an insight into what to expect.'
'I found it really useful and it gave me a good insight into what to expect.'
'I have a better understanding of expectations and requirements.'
'Very helpful in terms of developing understanding of academic skills needed.'
'I understand what the course [degree programme] consists of a lot more now.'

Academic preparedness and, in particular, learning strategies and locus of control, have been identified as important in several other studies (Thomas, 2011, HEFCE 1997). Indeed, the 1997 HEFCE study concluded that one of the five main factors related to student withdrawal was incompatibility between the student and the institution. Whilst academic preparedness seemingly has a fundamental role to play with regard to student retention, a further aspect of this relates specifically to assessment. Research in the field of transition to HE highlights that students typically arrive well equipped for studying at a school with small class size and easy access to teaching staff.

Many entrants to HE may not have been adequately prepared for the types of learning and assessments that they will encounter. Discourses, expectations and responses to assessment practices will have emerged from, and been created in a specific school context and the notion of 'culture' as the:

'...socially constructed and historically derived common base of knowledge, values and norms for action that people grow into and come to take as a natural way of life' (Hodkinson et al., 1996:148)

is therefore of use. The potential HE students will have internalised the assessment practices from their school context and may need, therefore, an opportunity to access and begin to internalise the assessment culture of a new context.

Understanding Assessment

With regard to this study, 97% of the respondents noted that the session had helped them to understand the assessment expectations of the Programmes, with 67% strongly agreeing with this. Respondents further elaborated stating:

'Marking system clearly explained.'
'It's helped me to understand about assessments.'
'The session was clear on how assignments are assessed.'
'It's helped me understand the structure of assignment breakdowns.'
'I now understand the assessment side.'

This therefore reinforced for us the importance of the session, given that research in the field has highlighted that many students often commence HE without knowing what is expected of them with regard to composing academic assignments (Murtagh, 2010, Murphy and Fleming, 2000). Lowe and Cook (2003) note, greater attention needs to be given to the induction process at HE. Indeed this was further reinforced in that 85% of the respondents noted that they would welcome further events and activities to support and develop their understanding of HE expectations, and thus be prepared for the commencement of their HE studies.

Setting targets

Respondents were also asked to note if the session had helped them to set targets for themselves. Seventy agreed/strongly agreed with this, with targets including:

- developing understanding of how to do references
- begin to read academic texts.

This is promising, given that our earlier research (Murtagh, 2010) indicated that trainees on our programmes seemed very concerned about their ability, or lack of, to use an accurate referencing system in academic writing, and targeting this in advance of programme entry may therefore alleviate such worries.

Feedback from current students

The value of the events, in terms of academic preparedness was also referred to by the current students who attended the sessions, and the following comments illustrate their perceptions of their role. For instance Trainee J stated:

I think it is important for potential students to hear from somebody who has experienced it first hand. Although I think the tutors are valuable as they are trained in this area and have the knowledge behind the sessions, I think it is also very beneficial to hear from a student as I feel in some ways the potential students will be able to relate to the current students better.

I think that the sessions that I have been a part of have been a real success. I feel it gives future trainees an insight into the academic side of the course. I also feel if I had attended something like this on an open day before I came to the university, I wouldn't have been so nervous about the first ever assignment and also I think I would have been able to tackle it a bit better. The Harvard referencing section of the sessions, I believe, are particularly helpful as this was something I wasn't too familiar with before coming to university, and it is also full of handy reminders to myself as a trainee now doing the course!

Friends and family*Support with choice*

A total of 138 Questionnaires (Q2) were distributed to the family members/friends who attended the preparation for HE session and, following analysis of the data using the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), the following themes emerged:

- supporting potential student in making the 'right' degree choice
- better equipping the friend/family member to provide academic support for the potential student
- raising awareness of the role of friends/family in providing relevant emotional support to the potential student
- endorsing parents' expectations about HE study.

Analysis of the data revealed that the session had served to aid parents/carers/friends in supporting the potential student in making the 'right' decision in terms of degree choice. One cannot underestimate the importance of 'compatibility of choice', particularly given that research suggests that those students who commence study in their preferred choices are more likely to complete (Thomas, 2011). The friends/carers, commented as follows with regard to the session:

I can now take him through his options

An excellent presentation with real practical use- I am trying to ensure that he chooses the best option for him and that as a result he will see the course through to the end

This will now help her with her university choices

I now understand what is expected and support them in taking an important step in their lives- helping them to make an informed decision

The session will help our son in his application. I feel I can help him now in choosing a university and a course and help and discuss his personal statement, taking an interest in all of his applications.

Our data revealed that through engaging in the enhanced open event, friends/family members feel better equipped in providing academic support during the degree. For example:

I can support my son when he starts university and begins assignments

We now understand what our daughter will be doing and we can support her with her work

I can support her when she is unsure of expectations

I feel I could now proof read a draft piece of work with my daughter now

The hosting of events preparation events is an important means of allowing students' expectations for HE to be explored in context. Students' expectations for HE study are an important factor in persistence, and they are influenced by their perceptions of their parents' attitudes (Reay et al., 2001, HEFCE 1997). The 1997 HEFCE study concluded that one of the most significant factors in the UK related to attrition was lack of commitment to the course, particularly among students who applied to HE because of parental and peer group pressure.

Of further interest with regard to the above parental statements is the use of language which seems to indicate that the session has impacted on friends/parents' 'cultural capital'. The use of the word 'now', for example, evident in many of the statements, perhaps illustrates that some of the attendees had little knowledge and/or confidence about how to support their child/friend in making educational choices and illustrates the importance of providing opportunities for potential students to access the relevant capital such that s/he may enter a new environment in an equitable position (Vryonides 2007) and with aligned goals and actions (Kim and Schneider, 2005). And, for instance, there was evidence to suggest that family/friends are more aware of their role in providing relevant emotional support during the degree:

I want to be able to encourage and support her whenever possible

I want the transition to be stress free for her

I can help her to be confident

Endorsement of expectations

The session, friends/family member revealed, endorsed parents' expectations about HE study:

It's been a reality check! Someone other than parents saying the same! It's assured us that the real reason for attending university is being catered to

It's given me peace of mind

Nowhere else has done anything like this – and it's made sure that they are fully aware of the expectations of university life- it's not just a 3-year long party- they do need to do some hard work!

Student attrition is highest in the first year of university. It frequently involves students who find that their HE expectations, both academic and social, are quite unrealistic (Yorke, 1999, 2000). There is much potential in these sessions to present the institution in more realistic and accurate ways.

Of interest the two students, currently undertaking the BA (Honours) Primary Education with QTS Degree, who attended the sessions endorsed the value of inviting friends/parents and carers to the events:

The exercise is a worthwhile exercise not only for students but for parents too, as they get to find out more about what their son/daughter will be doing and it can put them at ease. (H)

I feel it will benefit parents or friends because they may be able to help the future trainee with their assignments, as they will also be informed and have knowledge in this area.(J)

Conclusion

Our aim, throughout this study, was to seek opportunities to enhance our induction process to meet the needs of potential students. Thomas (2011) states that there is a strong likelihood that pre-entry interventions contribute to improving the retention and success of and there is evidence from this study to illustrate that the pre-induction process can be enhanced, through reconfiguring open events to focus on independent learning and assessment, rather than solely on providing an introduction to 'the institution' per se. By considering open events more widely, opportunities were afforded for pre-HE students to begin to develop a transparent understanding of the expectations of HE study such that they could make an informed choice of degree Programme. In addition, evidence from the study suggests that the involvement of parents/carers/friends is not only innovative but serves as an opportunity for them to gain a clearer understanding of their role in supporting the pre-HE student in their studies.

Strengths and Limitations of the study

The main strength of this study is the impact that it has had on our practice. It allowed us to reflect on changes and identify implications for the future. Being contextualised within our own institution facilitated the opportunity for us to explore and enhance our own induction practice. A further strength of the study is that it allowed us to access the student voice and the 'pre-student' voice. This allowed us to consider improvements to programmes to meet the needs of future students.

It is important to note, however, that although the questionnaires (Q1, Q2 and Q3) and focused conversations provided rich and relevant data, they came at a cost. One, for instance, is generalisability. The approach illustrates what happened in one particular context, but not necessarily what will or must happen. It would be of interest, therefore, in the future to apply the study to another institution, for the purpose of comparison and reflection.

Recommendations and future considerations

For the purpose of this study, we used evidence from our previous research regarding transition to HE to serve to enhance pre-HE induction events. We would argue that such an approach allowed for pre-HE students and their parents/carers/friends to develop a clearer understanding of HE expectations.

Whilst this study is still in its early stages, we feel that we have made good progress in terms of providing prospective students and their friends/family members with a clearer understanding of the teaching, learning and assessment expectations within our particular institution. The enhancement of open events has, we believe, served to ensure that prospective students embark upon their journey to HE with clarity and with the appropriate support from relevant others. There is perhaps, however, scope for us to continue to develop our induction events further.

For example, whilst the events allowed pre-HE students the opportunity, with friends/parents and carers, the opportunity to 'see' some assignments and engage in discussion about them, there is arguably scope for pre-HE students to engage in HE assignment writing prior to entering degree programmes. With particular reference to ITT, it may be fruitful to investigate means of students having the opportunity to compose, and receive feedback on 'reflective' pieces of written work, which are common aspects of our current degree programme assignments, in advance of commencing the degree. Furthermore, whilst 70% of respondents noted that they felt able to set targets as a result of the session, some evidently felt unable to do this and this is perhaps an aspect of the session that could be further enhanced.

Furthermore, a concern associated with the enhanced open events centres around them being an optional 'drop in' session. The current timing of these is challenging given that open events are already rather busy events. There is potential, one could argue, of information overload – can such a one-off slot have any impact on retention and achievement?

In addition, whilst we believe that the event is a positive introduction to our institution, there is debate to be had about the nature of study and assessment in HE. For instance, we are investing time inculcating our potential students into 'how we do things here', when arguably we could be reflecting on our practice – if the experience at HE is so different to prior experiences should we not be investigating how our programmes can diversify to meet the needs of our varied range of students rather than adding additional sessions to support students with the transition?

We acknowledge that such an 'add on' is not in itself the answer to ensuring successful transition and thus retention in HE, however, we do believe that it is a step in the right direction to ensuring that induction is meaningful, appropriate and allows for those aspiring to HE ITT to navigate their own way.

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