

Bridging the Gap?

Review of Lowe, H. and Cook, A. (2003) Mind the Gap: are students prepared for higher education, *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 27(1):53 - 76

The issue of student preparedness for higher education is very salient in the light of current concerns about the 'dumbing down' of A-levels and a possible move, in secondary education, to the European style Baccalaureate system. Furthermore, London Metropolitan University like other access institutions attracts students from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds.

Lowe and Cook (2003) present the results of a questionnaire-based study examining change in students' opinion from their expectations prior to enrolling, to that of their experience after two months at the University of Ulster. Their introduction reviews the literature describing current dogma on students' preparedness and suggests that poor student preparation leads to under-achievement and drop-out. The authors discuss the transition from secondary to higher education through the eyes of students and teachers, illustrating a requirement for a form of higher education training. The authors justify this requirement by identifying that A-level teaching has remained constant while methods in higher education have developed. Thus, a problem arises from the misconception that students will develop the learning skills required solely through participation at university. Lowe and Cook highlight the fact that while drop-out is measurable, under-achievement is not as easy to quantify and that this group often goes unnoticed.

The study enrolled 2519 incoming students completing questionnaire one, followed by 1556 students completing questionnaire two after a term at university. The number of students who were subsequently identified as having completed both questionnaires was calculated to be 691; this represented the study cohort. The manuscript is very much a follow-on article from their previous study (1999), which also concentrated on perceived student ideas regarding higher education. In the present study, however, the authors analyse the response to questions by allotting them to three sets of criteria or 'clusters', which they believe most contribute to under-achievement and drop-out. These clusters are intended to examine difficulties perceived, and then experienced, by students with regards to academic demands, social and personal development and practicality of life at university. By this method the authors claim to have identified about 20% of the cohort that will under-achieve or drop-out as a result of negative university experiences. This group is therefore considered to have unsuccessfully undergone transition from secondary to higher education because of students' prior misconceptions. The authors conclude this group requires 'focus' and that students' 'unrealistic expectations' should be addressed both in secondary school and their first months post-enrolment at university.

Although the cohort included students identified from multiple academic disciplines the authors rarely describe any in depth analysis of students broken down into subject. Of course, this manuscript is dealing with students' preparedness in general and could be considered relevant to the teaching of any academic subject in higher education. The implication of this article is that we should address students' expectations. A secondary school approach to modify these expectations but from a higher education perspective these expectations need to be met. So that at some point of compromise between the two, students will be fully prepared for all aspects of life at university.

It is the academic difficulties that, at first, strike the academic reader as being potentially solvable, but there is certainly a part to be played by lecturers in the social and practical domains as well. For example, 28% of students experienced practical difficulties with their studies. Simply being aware of timetabling difficulties, campus distance, and coursework clashes could dramatically affect feasibility and hence capability in struggling students. The study also disclosed that in general 20-25% of the cohort experienced social and personal difficulties more than they were expecting to. Of these, a large percentage of the cohort missed family (35%) and friends (47%) but, while significant, these high figures also suggest that comfort would be found in others students exhibiting similar feelings. More significantly from this data set - and what the authors fail to note - is that 23% lacked confidence in their new setting and that this social difficulty, as opposed to that of family and friends, is something that can be addressed directly in our curriculum practice. This point can be illustrated with reference to the biomedical sciences.

One of the most striking subject-related observations emerging from the study was in the reasoning behind attending university. Those students attending university for vocational courses in health care were less likely to be attending university because of reactive reasoning, thus, implying that students being taught biomedical sciences for health care professions are likely to be there because they want to be and not, for example, because their friends are there. To a lesser extent this was also the case for pure sciences. However, while we as biomedical teachers appear to have the luxury of students who apply themselves to a specific subject through reasoned choice, this is apparently countered by increased academic difficulties. Data collated from this 'cluster' indicated that science students experienced increased problems with pace of study (35%) and lack of support (21%), when compared to other subjects. This simply suggests that more time and effort from tutors is necessary to convey some of the more complex concepts perhaps associated with first year teaching in biomedical subjects. These data, more than most, point to a wider academic 'gap' between A-level sciences and applied sciences taught in the first months of university.

The authors make intelligent use of a wealth of data but they do not focus sufficiently on reducing the problem, by drawing attention to those issues that could be addressed directly in higher education institutes. Rather, they simply discuss the most striking or statistically significant findings. Even here they could have better employed the discussion of significance, not least regarding expected versus experienced problems. In almost every table the difference between expected and experienced was highly significant (i.e. <0.001) indicating that, for better or worse, the students have very little idea of what to expect from university life. This extremely relevant point failed to draw any comment from the authors.

The article alerts the reader to a problem, 'Mind the gap', and poses the question 'are students prepared for higher education?'. The answer from the study is largely 'yes', students are prepared for higher education, and there is no 'gap'. However, the problem is identifying the minority group of around 20% of students for whom there is a 'gap'. The authors should be admired for clarifying what must have been a quagmire of data into a coherent study. However, they say little about what could be done to tackle the issues of a group that is probably much larger in institutions committed to widening participation.

Stephen Butler
Institute of Health Research and Policy
London Metropolitan University

Investigations **in university teaching & learning**

is an in-house academic journal for London Metropolitan University produced by the Centre for Academic Professional Development and devoted to the dissemination of good practice, scholarship and research in learning, teaching and curriculum development.

Draft articles (1 200-1 500 words), review articles (1 000 words) or entries (500 words maximum) on current projects, papers or publications by colleagues and associates should be submitted for consideration to:

The Editor: Investigations
CAPD
Learning Centre
London Metropolitan University
Holloway Road
London N7 6PP

email: CAPDadmin@londonmet.ac.uk

website: <http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/capd/in-house-journal-investigations/home.cfm>