

A Multi-Disciplinary Approach To Supporting Student Transition into Higher Education: a pilot study

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Introduction

This paper reports on the piloting of a transitions programme that sought to enhance student retention and experience by early intervention embedded in a core first-year curriculum. The transition to university has been identified in the academic literature as being a major component in the success of retention and completion of students, in particular ensuring students are equipped with the appropriate Higher Education (HE) study skills as well as developing a sense of community between staff and students.

Yorke (2001) highlights that roughly two-thirds of all university dropouts happen throughout or by the end of the first year of university. There is also evidence that most students make the decision to leave university within the first few weeks. Phillips (2006) confirms that: *“Most counsellors working within universities will acknowledge that students are especially vulnerable at the start of their courses”* (p15). Research suggests that effective transition and induction in the first six weeks of term are fundamental factors in promoting student success through building confidence with the rigors of academic life and developing a peer community. For instance, Wingate (2007) notes that other researchers, such as Tinto (1993) and Edward (2003), see transitions programmes as a successful way of supporting student achievement and progression:

“Clearly, more interactive and student-centred induction activities that help students to bond with peers, to meet their lecturers and feel accepted by them, and to gain a sense of belonging are needed.....and that learning requirements at university may be different from students' previous learning experience” (p. 391).

A programme of transition and retention interventions to support first-year undergraduate students on the BA Education Studies course was implemented and evaluated in the first half of the academic year 2010/11.

The aims of the transition pilot were as follows:

1. To support all new entrants in the first six weeks of their studies in adapting to university life
2. To support these students in developing appropriate HE study-skills right from the first contact
3. To provide a platform to create a sense of community amongst students and staff
4. To provide an appropriate and effective information and guidance service prior to accessing the university.

The pilot programme consisted of six key strands: social networking, a 'one-stop shop' virtual learning environment (VLE), the integration of Learning Development in the curriculum, personal advisor input, a peer mentoring scheme and cross-curricular planning for core modules. The pilot study identified two distinct cohorts: all fifty-nine new first-year students enrolled on the BA Education Studies course at London Metropolitan University, and six-second year students who were trained as mentors to pilot the project.

Pilot Study

Multiple methods of data collection were used for this pilot study to enable triangulation of results. Focus groups were conducted with first-year students by the peer mentors who were trained by the department researcher in how to facilitate focus groups effectively. These groups sought to have a minimum of eight participants and covered the whole transitions project. To make sure the participants felt free to talk honestly, mentors only facilitated groups that did not include their own mentees and all recordings were transcribed anonymously.

A focus group was also conducted with the mentors themselves by members of the Transitions Pilot team. The questions for both of these focus groups were informed by data collected from prior questionnaires. These focus groups in turn helped to interpret previously obtained quantitative data.

Data from both was used to compare the 2010/11 cohort, who had been part of the transitions pilot, and the control group, the 2009/10 cohort who had no additional support during the early phases of their university experience.

Another source of primary data was the questionnaire issued to the first-year undergraduates on the programme. Other sources included quantitative data on the frequency of online contact between mentors and mentees, analysis of the numbers of students using the mentoring scheme, interviews with staff and quantitative data on academic results, generated (by a colleague in Academic Registry) from the University's student records.

Main Findings and Discussion

Initial findings show that, on the whole, the pilot was successful, with students feeling they had been supported throughout their first six weeks of university. Staff members involved felt they were more of a team and enjoyed working with others.

Social Networking

Pre-entry information and first impressions of the university and course infrastructure can have a significant impact on the smooth transition and induction of students. The social networking site *Facebook* was used as a mechanism to introduce new students to each other and the course and laid the ground for creating a platform for developing a sense of community amongst peers and staff. Results show that only 15 students used the *Facebook* page and this was only really for introductions. Some student comments in the questionnaire indicated that they did not use *Facebook* or even own a computer and that it had little impact on their transition. Feedback will inform better practice next year. A key recommendation to improve the pre-entry strand of the project is to allow the Web 2.0 technologies to be peer-led not staff-led, and encourage engagement throughout introduction, preparation and transition to University.

Positive Transition

To be successful a transitions programme needs to address multiple aspects of integration into the academic and social communities of HE, especially during the crucial first few weeks. This can affect the students' ability to achieve academically as well as inform their decision whether to continue with their studies or to drop-out of education. The findings from the questionnaires highlighted that 78% of the students felt supported during the first six weeks of term. This boosted their sense of confidence. Illustrative responses included the following:

"Coming to this university makes me realise that this is something I really want. I am capable and will succeed in achieving my goals."- Student A

"I was told it is a very scary place and that you have to find your way. But actually it is not like that."- Student B

Peer Mentoring

With reference to peer mentoring, many theorists agree that student voice is central to achievement within HE (Thomas & Crosling 2007) and that mentoring can be an avenue for this. They also argue that good quality peer-mentoring can lead to academic achievement and progression within university.

Solomon and Stuart (2006) discuss how growing research in the field of the learners' voice highlights the need for students' experiences and background before HE to be taken into account:

"if learning is to be successful, it is learners' own voices that need to be heard.If we are to provide appropriate learning experiences in the future, then it is essential that we listen to and learn from learners themselves" (p.2).

The mentoring component of the transitions programme attempted to address this, with mentors regularly informing staff of student experiences, questions and issues.

Initial feedback from the students suggests that the most successful aspect of the transitions programme was the peer mentoring scheme. The matching of the mentor-mentee groups was strategic, taking into account the cohort dynamics and mentor experience. For example, mature students were matched with a mature mentor, joint honours students were grouped together with a joint honours mentor and returning mothers were again paired with mentors that had a similar experience. The mentors had been identified from the second-year cohort of the programme with tutor recommendations. The mentors were identified for their academic ability, enthusiasm for the course, leadership skills and general attitude to university. This matching, particularly of non-traditional students, proved to be effective as mentees reported that they felt they could easily relate to their mentor because they valued their experience and motivation to succeed. Three-fifths (61%) of students indicated in the questionnaire that meetings with their mentor helped them settle into university life. Student comments highlight how the mentoring experience aided their transition:

"Peer mentoring (is) really effective and helps people from all types of background fit in to university life." - Student C

"She knew how we all felt and helped me realise it was not as scary as it seemed." - Student D

"They made me realise it was normal to feel lost and confused." - Student E.

Even though the majority of students noted in the questionnaires and focus groups that they thought the mentors were a valuable resource, some did highlight some areas for improvement. For example, students suggested that a range of topics to talk about could be set each week, and the group sessions could be a little shorter, with an opportunity for more private individual interaction at the end.

The mentors' focus group suggested that transitional mentoring should take place across the different progression and transition points of the student life cycle. A common view was that having these kinds of peer-led mentoring interventions would enhance the learning trajectories of all students at challenging phases of the taught programme.

Impact on attendance and attainment

Attendance during the first six weeks of term was monitored and compared with previous cohort data. Evidence suggests that student attendance has been far better in 2010/11 than 2009/10. The focus groups and questionnaires indicated they enjoyed being part of a community and felt comfortable in the environment interacting with both their peers and members of staff. This in part is believed to be part of the reason for improved attendance.

With regards to attainment, it is evident from the data that the pass rate of number of modules taken is higher in 2011 than 2010: 73% of 2010/11 cohort passed three or more semester one modules compared to 66% in 2009/10. At the time of writing, it is too early to tell if it correlates to improved retention in the first year; however this will be investigated at the end of the academic year.

Pedagogy

The embedded pedagogy has had significant positive outcomes for students developing their academic literacies and supported other core modules.

Thomas and Crosling (2007) remind us that sound pedagogy is also important in shaping students' experiences of the transition to university:

“Development and re-shaping of the learning and teaching programme in new and perhaps innovative ways can assist students with social and academic engagement, and we know that these are important factors in students' decisions to continue with their studies or drop out” (p.2).

BA Education Studies worked closely with the Learning Development Unit (LDU) to embed skills development further into their Academic Literacies Module (Higher Education Orientation, HEO module). Lecturers felt that it was beneficial to the

programme to work with the LDU as they brought specialist knowledge to the classroom with new and exciting ideas to enhance curriculum. The HEO module also made sure that literature from other core first-year modules was used throughout the module for group work and presentations.

Students also commented in the focus groups and questionnaires that they liked the hands-on approach in the HEO module more than the lecturing model in the other core module.

After interviewing the staff involved in the programme, as well as the students participating, it has been noted that there seems to have been a shift in the balance of power in the classroom. Students felt that their voices were being “heard” and reported that they felt that all lecturers on the module were very approachable. In turn, some lecturers noted that the students were speaking up more in class and learning to question and critically appraise. Lecturers have noted that this change has made the feeling of community stronger and the interaction between students and lecturers has strengthened.

The impact on resources

The implementation of this approach is undeniably resource intensive and requires ‘buy-in’ from course staff as well as senior management support. In this case, the programme implementation was led by the Widening Participation team in partnership with the BA Education Studies team.

Interviews with staff indicate that even though programme set up was resource intensive, especially on staff time, once it was running they felt that it was a valuable learning experience for themselves. The mentoring feedback sessions took the most time, however this could be overcome by appointing lead mentors.

All staff within the course team embraced the aims and merits of the programme as it gave them a sense of collective ownership and responsibility for delivering a quality-led student experience. Much of the resource intensive delivery was at the start of the programme and, as a result, much of the practice has now been embedded into course and pedagogical structures.

The students appreciated the intensive and supportive nature of the programme, with many commenting on how approachable and accessible academics seemed to be:

“All the lecturers have been helpful both in and out of class.” – Student F

“..and lots of help from the teacher.” – Student G

“The lecturers and mentors are great. And our group is becoming well interacted.” – Student H

Staff engagement strand

Staff engagement has been a major factor in creating a sense of cohort identity. Senior management support played a crucial role in fostering the participation of other members of staff, and, with everyone aware of the importance of poor retention rates, staff were engaged.

The Associate Dean, the course leader and lecturers, the Widening Participation team, Library, Learning Development and administrative staff and second-year students all played an integral role to the running of the pilot. Staff felt that working as a team from different areas of the university was interesting for their own development and brought new expertise to the table

The course leader felt the pilot programme was an excellent way of building team rapport and a sense of a programme identity. It was also identified by senior management that this style of project management for a programme was new to many academics and it was a good way to enhance their pedagogical skills.

Recommendations

The main recommendations arising from this evaluation are that:

- the *Facebook* site should be peer-led by the mentors, with more information about the course and University posted at more regular intervals;
- lead mentors should be appointed to feed back to course leaders;
- given its positive impact, there is a serious argument for extending the mentoring scheme to other transition phases in the cycle study, and to other courses, allowing provision to be more cost effective.

It is important to stress that the model, although easily replicable, should be determined at a local course level.

Conclusion

The holistic interventions introduced as part of this pilot programme have raised pertinent questions at course level as to the degree of success a multi-disciplinary model can have to aid the integration and transition for all students into the

academic and social communities of Higher Education. Some of the challenges at the start of the programme have meant that academic and professional support staff have ventured into new territory and embraced a new culture of supporting and dealing with students. Feedback has highlighted that the students valued the personalised, 'student-centred' approach. Academics at course level ultimately have the knowledge to support students through the early phases of their student experience, and embedded practices are effective in equipping students with critical thought and study skills to succeed.

The findings of this study have demonstrated that student transition and retention is a highly complex field to tackle, particularly when working with non-traditional groups, as different students will respond to different interventions. The study supports the concept of adopting a multi-disciplinary approach as it provides students with a holistic view of university life, allowing them to manage their transition at their own pace and providing a good grounding in the academic rigor and expectations involved in succeeding in this type of academic environment.

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