Widening Participation Transition Support at Three Scottish Universities.

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The study

This research explored students' awareness, use and opinion of the formal and informal support available to them in their first year of university study. It was primarily concerned with students from Widening Participation (WP) backgrounds but also included non-WP students to enable a comparison of their experience, perceptions and use of available support.

The WP groups in the study were:

- HN qualified entrants who had articulated into year 2 or 3 of degree study;
- students living in SIMD20/40 postcodes;
- those who had attended a school in the Schools for Higher Education Programme (SHEP).

It was commissioned as part of the Scottish Funding Council's Impact for Access programme. The project was led by Heriot-Watt University in collaboration with Edinburgh Napier University and Queen Margaret University.

There were two main elements to the research:

- an on-line survey of WP and non- WP students in their first year of study at each of the three Universities (473 respondents);
- in-depth interviews with 34 respondents across the three Universities: .
    - 19 HN qualified: one first year; 11 second year; seven 3rd year
    - five who had attended a SHEP school
    - three who been on a Scottish Wider Access Programme course (SWAP)
    - seven with standard entry qualifications.

Nine of the interviewees were from SIMD 20/40 backgrounds (mainly SIMD 20).

Key findings and issues [1]

The experience of widening participation students

The experience of widening participation students and how they are supported in their transition was the central question for the research. The study shows that this varied markedly across the different WP groups: HN qualified direct entrants generally experienced greater difficulties. The research also found considerable similarities between WP groups and standard entry students.

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[1] The full report is available at https/www.ces.ed.ac.uk/

Students from disadvantaged backgrounds (SIMD 20/40) did find certain aspects of degree study more difficult than others from more affluent areas but they were no more likely to report difficulties with integration into university life. In respect of support provision, there were no apparent differences in the awareness, experience and opinion of students from SIMD 20/40 postcodes and those from other areas. Students who had attended a SHEP school gave a very similar account of their first year of degree study to their peers from non- SHEP schools. They seemed as well integrated into university life and there was no difference in their experience of support provision.

HN qualified students, especially those who were direct entrants to second or third year of degree study experienced the greatest challenges. They were also the group who in some respects were least well served by the personal tutor system.

Although most students had some difficulty with various aspect of academic learning, these were more of a problem for those with HN qualifications who were direct entrants. Part of the reason is the different content, pedagogy and assessment of HN courses and extent of curricular match but it is also because they simply faced greater challenges. Rather than start in first year - designed as something of a transitional year - these students had gone straight into the second or third year of a degree programme when it was generally expected that students were familiar with the university environment and had been able in earlier year(s) to develop the necessary academic skills and understanding. Direct entrants also had to try to integrate into an already well-established year group and most found social integration difficult. These challenges were particularly acute for direct entrants to third year, yet, in this pressurised year, they were the students with the least time and space to think about accessing support provision.

Mature students were not identified in the research brief as a specific group of interest. Nevertheless, it was apparent that they encountered particular challenges compared with younger students, especially in respect of integration (whether or not they were direct entrants).

The role of academic staff in supporting students' transitions

The research set out primarily to examine the formal support provision available to students but a key conclusion is the need for a wider view that takes account of how students conceptualise support and who provides it. It was very clear that when students think about support, they perceive their lecturers and tutors as the providers of support rather than their personal tutors or other designated support services; these were regarded as a second level of support.

While induction was seen as helpful, many students wanted more support in the early weeks of the first semester from academic teaching staff as part of their classes rather than as separate provision. This was especially important to direct entrants to help them 'get them up to speed' on their degree and begin to integrate with existing students.

Several direct entrant interviewees spoke positively about 'catch-up' sessions run by teaching staff at the start of the academic year which went over some of the key content covered in the previous year(s). These also functioned as revision sessions for existing students and provided a natural opportunity for new and existing students to get to know each other. These sessions had been at the initiative of individual members of staff.

As students in their first year of degree study, all of the interviewees faced the challenge of making the transition to academic study. They suggested various ways in which teaching staff could support them in their learning, for example, by being more explicit about expectations; providing clarity about standards including examples of students' work; and through comprehensive and timely feedback.

Supporting students' integration and their informal support network

A second aspect of a wider view of support is the need to take account of the crucial role of students' informal support network, that is, their fellow students. Support from other students was critical to their academic progress as well as to their social life and in helping them cope with personal issues. Universities have been developing formal peer mentoring schemes and around a fifth of the students surveyed had taken part in peer mentoring. Undoubtedly, formal peer mentoring schemes are important but universities should also consider how best to support students in developing their own informal networks. The extent to which students are able to make friends and integrate into their course and university is clearly vital to doing so but the study identified this as a problem for direct entrants and also mature students.

Earlier and more specific support wanted

Overall most students were positive about their contacts with the Universities at the pre-entry stage through, for example, Open Days and Applicant Days. Students were especially positive about pre-entry preparatory programmes such as summer schools. Nevertheless, most thought that provision could be developed and their suggestions focused on earlier and more specific, preparatory support so that they would arrive better prepared. In particular, direct entrants thought that universities should help them address any knowledge gaps before they started university.

Most students had found their induction useful but thought that provision could be enhanced by making induction activities more specific to their particular degree course, providing more course

specific information and advice and the opportunity to get to know others taking the same degree (not just studying in the same general area) and who were starting in the same year.

Issues facing the personal tutor system

The personal tutor system has been a central element of student support at universities for a number of years but the evidence from both elements of this study indicates that it is not working well in practice. As a group, HN direct entrants were least well served by the personal tutor system: the survey found that less than half of them had met with their personal tutor and almost a fifth did not know that they had one. HN and non HN students' experience of the personal tutor system varied significantly across the Universities.

The interviews told a similar story. Around half of the students interviewed did not know or were unsure whether they had a personal tutor. Most of those who did know they had a personal tutor were nevertheless unclear about their role or the purpose of regular meetings or thought that they should only see their personal tutor if they had major difficulties. Feeling that their personal tutor did not know them discouraged some from approaching her/him.

For several of the interviewees, their personal tutor was also their academic tutor with whom they had weekly meetings; these students were more prepared to consult her/him since s/he knew them and their work.

Positive opinions but barriers to accessing support

Students who had used provision such as disability services and academic learning support were very positive in their opinions. Although some had no need to make use of the support provision, there were barriers that prevented others from doing so:

1. awareness of available services, in particular, knowing specifically what they can help with;
2. the ability to recognise if and when they needed support;
3. willingness to seek support.

Barriers 2 and 3 are the more fundamental ones. In some respects this is not surprising. Students have gone through a competitive application process to secure their place at university and show they are capable of degree study. This may well have been a particular challenge for some of the WP students. It is therefore understandable that some are nervous or embarrassed to ask for help and fear they will be judged as 'failures' or 'stupid'. Several students suggested that Universities need to market or present support provision differently to students to take account of how they interpret asking for help. This relates to the concept of 'emotional health and well being' and how students understand and deal with negative experiences.

Implications for institutions

There are profound implications for institutional practice in the research findings. In particular the idea that WP is not solely an admissions question, but one of the longer term student experience, and one which impacts on retention, progression and achievement. Nor are the implications solely for support or professional services staff, but go to the heart of academic practice and how the traditional institutional support systems of personal tutoring can respond in a meaningful way to new challenges. It is important to avoid attributing a deficit model of WP students, they are integral to an increasingly diverse student population which is enriching the university experience.

Articulating students

The articulation of former HNQ students from Scottish colleges has been a key element of the Scottish Government's WP agenda for nearly a decade, it is therefore striking that the transition of these students continues to be problematic and issues highlighted in earlier research (e.g. for ELRAH) still dominate the experience, particularly of HND entrants to year 3. There is a clear need for greater institutional cooperation on curriculum matching between colleges and universities and a development of cross institutional transition activities. Much of this work lacks the glamour (and income) of other institutional priorities (e.g. international partnerships, RUK articulation etc.) it also can slip down the priorities of hard pressed college staff. College and University liaison is not the sole preserve of university admissions staff.

Academic staff

The challenge for academic staff is to respond to the needs of particular students in a constructive way and the research shows that staff can actively manage the academic transition, although this would seem to be ad hoc, or subject specific, rather than institutional practice. Academic staff can build cohesive tutorial groups by ensuring everyone knows each other through simple icebreaker exercises, they should also avoid the assumptions that all their students entered in year 1. To expect all students to arrive at University with a fully formed understanding of what is expected of them is unrealistic. Early formative assessments and prompt feedback are ways in which lecturers can help students grasp what is expected of them in subject knowledge and academic skills.

New student induction

The traditional model of information overload coupled with addresses from the great and the good is inadequate. The expectation that all students will bond in traditional – perhaps alcohol heavy – student union "Freshers Week" activities is misplaced, indeed the latter can alienate and exclude mature students, those with family or work commitments, or those unable to identify with the "fresher" archetype. A high quality induction benefits all students, it is a mainstream support

activity that Universities need to take seriously and, within the context of induction, attention should be paid to those entering year 2 and 3. Dedicated sessions, including opportunities for current direct entrants to share their experiences with new ones would be desirable. Unlike students entering first year, direct entrants are joining an already established cohort and should have opportunities to build social networks with those they will be studying with. Cohort integration activities in the first weeks of teaching can help with this, although these should be part of timetabled classes rather than be as separate social events which not all new students may feel comfortable, or have the time, to participate in. Similarly with peer mentoring; there is scope for building social solidarity among students and creating an environment for peer assisted social learning through everyday learning and teaching practice. It may be productive for peer mentoring to become more of a mainstream activity but this would require it to be integrated into the curriculum rather than a stand-alone phenomenon outside it.

Induction activities designed to equip students with the skills and knowledge to be a successful student can continue beyond Welcome Week with material being introduced at times when it will have most relevance, e.g. revision strategies and exam technique in the run up to major assessments. However, students who are time poor due to work, travel or caring commitments may not be able to commit to additional classes on campus, and the optional nature of much additional provision, such as study skills sessions, may downgrade its importance in students' perceptions and discourage participation. To be effective a longitudinal induction has to be embedded in the curriculum and part of the timetable.

Pre-entry support

All students, particularly those entering year 2 and 3, could benefit from information on their programme and its content prior to entry. Unfortunately this is not always forthcoming from institutions who perceive communication with offer holders as primarily marketing the institution for "conversion" purposes. Pre-entry communications can foster preparedness and engagement and communication need not just be one way. Many universities establish E-Mentoring, social media groups and personalized messages from staff, such as an invitation from the personal tutor to a meeting during Welcome Week etc..

Personal tutoring

Shortcomings in personal tutoring have been identified in the research. Notably, students not understanding the role of, and their entitlement to support from, the personal tutor and not knowing who their personal tutor was. Former HN students particularly miss out on personal tutoring support, perhaps because of institution assumptions that personal tutoring effort should be

skewed towards first years, rather than all new students regardless of point of entry. Entering year 2 or 3 does not eliminate the pressures and vulnerabilities of being a new student negotiating an unfamiliar learning environment, indeed the study has demonstrated particular pressures and support needs of year 2and 3 entrants.

The extent to which universities can guarantee a consistent minimum entitlement from personal tutors is a vexed one across the sector. The pressures on academic staff, particularly the demands of research and publication, can squeeze time allotted to duties such as personal tutoring which are arguably less valued by universities and less central to career progression. Students and staff can see good quality personal tutoring as due to the efforts "heroic individuals" rather than a systematic and consistent support system. Personal tutors can lack training, guidance and support yet are still expected to fulfil the role.

There is scope for institutions to recalibrate their approaches to and assumptions about personal tutoring and explore different approaches. These can include mandatory training; the concentration of personal tutoring responsibilities among a team of individual academics, rather than among all academics; professional services staff taking on the advice and guidance role of the personal tutor; more proactive personal tutoring, including effective follow up of students not engaging with their personal tutor; greater institutional recognition of the workload and commitment required for personal tutoring, and greater support for and accountability of personal tutors.

The research evidence indicates that where the personal tutor is also teaching the student, this may encourage students to approach them for advice and guidance as the personal tutor knows them and their work. However, a detachment of academic from advice and guidance responsibilities may also be an advantage as students may feel adversely judged by their lecturers if they approach them with challenging issues.

Barriers to accessing support

The research illustrates that students may perceive accessing university support services as reflecting negatively on them and this acts as a barrier to seeking advice, guidance or support in a timely manner. Two related issues arise from this; firstly, although universities rely on student to refer themselves to support services, there are instances where a student's unwillingness to seek help outweighs their need for it and self-referral may occur too late or not at all. Universities need to develop indicators that a student is may be in difficultly and organize an active intervention to offer support. Such indicators may be non-attendance, non-submission of coursework, non-responsiveness to emails or indeed the pattern of their digital footprint, such as VLE log ins or swipe card usage. Secondly, how can universities disassociate support services from negative self-

perceptions of those who might access them? One approach might be to involve student service users sharing their experiences of accessing support as the student voice has a resonance with other students that official marketing does not. Universities should also consider how to promote a supportive culture of wellbeing and self-reflection and how to destigmatize seeking help when things go wrong.