

Supporting widening participation students at university

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It is a central aim of government policy in Scotland to increase the participation of previously under-represented groups of students in university education, but how do these students fare once on their degree course? This Briefing reports on a study which examined the experience of both widening participation (WP) and standard entry students in their first year of university study. It found that certain groups of WP students faced major challenges. The findings go to the heart of academic practice; they also indicate that the HN route to degree study needs development at institutional and national level.

- The experiences of the different WP groups varied but there were also similarities to the experiences of standard entry students.
- Students from disadvantaged backgrounds found certain aspects of degree study more difficult but had no more difficulty with integration into university life and had similar experiences of support provision.
- HN qualified students who were direct entrants to second and especially to third year encountered the greatest challenges. This was partly due to differences between HN and degree courses but also because they simply faced greater demands as direct entrants.
- Direct entrants were 'new' students but staff tended to assume they had the knowledge/skills that other students had acquired in previous years. Integration with existing students and developing an informal support network was difficult for them.
- The HN route to degree study needs further development at institutional and national level, or HN direct entrants will continue to face undue challenges at university.
- Both WP and standard entry students called for more support with their learning from teaching staff, as part of their classes. This was especially important to direct entrants.
- If WP students (and others) are to thrive, universities need to focus more on the role of teaching staff in supporting their learning as part of everyday practice, rather than relying on specialist provision.
- The personal tutor system - central to universities' student support system - was not working well. HN direct entrants were least well served by it, one-fifth did not even know they had a personal tutor. The system should be reviewed, with greater institutional recognition, support and reward for the role.
- Students who had used university support services were very positive, but others did not seek help for fear of being seen as a 'failure' or 'stupid'. Universities should consider more active intervention vs. student self-referral to support services and seek to change the negative perceptions of asking for help.

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Introduction

In Scotland successive governments have pursued a policy of widening access to university education and increasing the number of students from non-traditional groups (CoWA 2016). But widening access is not simply an admissions question, equally important is how these students fare once they have embarked on their degree course. This Briefing reports on a study which examined the experience of both widening participation (WP) and standard entry students in their first year of university study, how they found the demands of their course and their awareness, use and opinion of the formal and informal support available to them.

The study was led by Heriot-Watt University in collaboration with Edinburgh Napier University and Queen Margaret University. It involved an on-line survey of WP and non-WP students (473 respondents) and in-depth interviews with 34 respondents across these three Universities.

The findings have implications for government strategy to widen access and relate not only to the work of support or professional services staff but go to the heart of everyday academic practice. As such, the study is relevant to standard entry students as well as those from widening participation groups.

Strategies for widening access and the students in the study

The selection of students in the study reflects the main strategies for widening access. Articulation from sub-degree Higher National (HN) qualifications to the second or third year of degree study has been a central strategy since the early 2000s. Another is the use of contextual data in HE admissions whereby universities reduce academic entry requirements for disadvantaged applicants: a key contextual measure is coming from the most deprived 20% and 40% areas (SIMD20 and 40) as defined in the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD). A further measure is attendance at a secondary school with low progression rates to higher education (Schools for Higher Education Programme (SHEP)). The three WP groups in the study therefore comprised: HN

qualified entrants who had articulated into second or third year of degree study; students from SIMD20/40 postcodes; and those who had attended a SHEP school. Importantly, the research also included non-WP students to enable us to compare the experiences and views of the two groups.

It should be noted that the research took place in the latter part of students' second semester and so does not include students who had discontinued earlier in the academic year. The students in the study are those who had managed to complete most of their first year at university and so the research is likely to underestimate rather than overestimate issues or difficulties encountered by students.

The experience of widening participation students

The experience of widening participation students and how they are supported in their transition year varied across the different WP groups but there were also considerable similarities between the WP and standard entry students.

Most students in their first year of degree study had some difficulty with various aspect of academic learning but students from disadvantaged backgrounds (SIMD 20/40) found certain aspects of degree study more difficult than others from more affluent areas: the extent of independent study; the type of teaching at university; the type and level of assessments; the large size of lectures and travel. But they were no more likely to report difficulties with integration into university life and 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 direct entrants faced particular challenges

It was very clear, however, that the HN qualified students and especially those who were direct entrants to second or third year of degree study encountered the greatest challenges. Year of entry was critical to HN students' experience. Those who

had started in second year and especially third year identified the type of teaching; type and level of assessment; not knowing about a topic others had done; and expected standard of work as particularly difficult aspects.

Most 'new' students found getting to grips with their academic studies a challenge and it is not surprising that this was more of a problem for HN direct entrants. Part of the reason is the extent of curricular match between their HN and degree programmes and the different content, pedagogy and assessment of HN courses. 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 second or third year, when it was generally expected that students were familiar with the university environment and had developed the necessary academic skills and understanding. Although they were 'new students', they thought this was often not recognised or remembered by their lecturers and tutors, who frequently assumed they had certain knowledge and skills that had been covered in the previous years of the degree programme. This issue of 'assumed knowledge' on the part of staff was a common experience of direct entrants.

HN qualified direct entrants were also joining an already well-established year group and most found getting to know other students and integrating into classes more of a challenge than their non HN qualified peers. Yet, for all students, support from their peers was critical not just to their social life but for their academic progress and helping them cope with personal issues.

Formal peer mentoring schemes are important (and around a fifth of the students had taken part in one) but other inputs to help students develop their own informal networks are also necessary. Where classes in the first weeks of teaching had included activities to help them integrate with existing students, this had been very much appreciated by direct entrants.

Direct entrants, especially third years, faced the greatest challenges but in this pressurised year, they were the students with the least time and space to think about accessing support provision. They were

also the group who were least well served by the personal tutor system.

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. WP students were especially positive about pre-entry preparatory programmes such as summer schools which they thought had been invaluable in improving their confidence as well as covering specific knowledge and skills.

A common theme from all groups, including standard entry students, however, was a call for earlier and more specific, preparatory support such as more detailed information about the curricular content of their degree, advice about relevant academic learning skills so that they would arrive better prepared. These issues were particularly acute for direct entrants.

HN qualified entrants wanted universities to do more to help them address any knowledge and skills gaps before they started, for example, to map the common HNs and degree courses to identify gaps and develop top-up materials that direct entrants could use over the summer – a 'crash course kit' as one student expressed it. Other suggestions included having access to previous year(s)' materials once they had accepted a place and access to examples of previous students' work.

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 and enabling them to get to know others taking the same degree and starting in the same year. Once again, given the challenges faced by HN qualified direct entrants, this was especially important to them.

All students wanted more support from academic staff

In discussing how their university could support them in their studies, the key demand from all students was more support in their first semester from academic teaching staff as they tried to get to grips with degree study. They wanted this as part of their classes, not as separate provision.

It was very clear that students – whether WP or not – perceived their lecturers and tutors as the providers of support rather than their personal tutors or other designated support services.

Help from teaching staff was particularly important to HN qualified direct entrants to help them ‘get up to speed’ on their degree and begin to integrate with existing students. Several direct entrant interviewees spoke positively about early ‘catch-up’ sessions run by individual teaching staff (at their own initiative) which covered key content from the previous year(s) and also provided a natural opportunity for new and existing students to get to know each other.

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. The extent to which students experienced this varied but where this was working well, it made a positive difference to their experience, especially direct entrants.

Problems with the personal tutor system

The personal tutor system is central to the formal support provision offered by universities but the research indicates it is not working well in practice. Students’ awareness of and contact with their personal tutors varied significantly across the three Universities. Around half of the students interviewed did not know or were unsure whether they had a personal tutor and generally students were unclear about their role.

HN qualified 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. It appears that the arrangements the universities made to provide information and contact with personal tutors were not effective for those who went straight into second or third year of their degree.

Feeling that their personal tutor did not know them discouraged some from approaching her/him. In the few instances where students’ personal tutor was also their academic tutor, they felt known and were

more prepared to consult her/him. It is notable that a large majority of the students who did meet their personal tutor found this helpful and this was especially the case for HN students suggesting that efforts to improve the system would be worthwhile.

Positive opinions but barriers to accessing support

Students who had used provision such as disability services and academic learning support were very positive about the help they had received. Of course, some students had no need of this provision but for others there was an issue of awareness, especially of the specifics of what a service could offer. More fundamentally, there were barriers in terms of students’ ability to recognise if, and when, they needed support and then being willing to seek it. Students across the groups spoke of being too embarrassed to seek help and feared they would be judged as ‘failures’ or ‘stupid’ but this was a particular barrier for some of the WP students.

Implications of the research

The [full research report](#) makes a number of recommendations, here we focus on four key issues.

The strategy of HN articulation

The articulation of HN qualified students to the second or third year of degree study has been a key element of the Scottish Government’s WP strategy for nearly a decade, so it is striking that the experience of these students continues to be problematic and issues highlighted in earlier research remain, particularly for HND entrants to year three (e.g. Howieson and Croxford 2011; Howieson 2013, 2016). There is a need for greater attention and development at institutional and national level to the curricular mapping of HN and degree programmes (at least in respect of the more common articulation routes), to cross college and university transition activities as well as to awareness raising and training of university teaching staff. Without this, HN qualified direct entrants will continue to experience undue challenges as they try - as individuals - to make the policy of articulation work despite wider institutional and policy shortcomings.

Central role of academic staff and integrated provision

Universities offer a range of pre-entry activities, including preparatory provision for WP students and have put considerable efforts into developing induction programmes. The study has made specific recommendations about how these can be further developed but there are two more general points.

One is the central role of academic staff in supporting WP and other students to thrive and progress in their studies. Secondly, and relatedly, support needs to be to continue beyond the initial week(s) and to be integrated into the curriculum as part of the timetabled classes.

The research found examples of where staff actively supported students' academic transition and integration but these activities were usually the initiative of individual members of staff rather than standard institutional practice. Equally students' experience of formative assessments and feedback varied within and across institutions. If the policy of widening access is to be successful, a more planned comprehensive approach is needed. This is likely to have implications for the training and support of teaching staff and possibly for staff numbers.

Reviewing the personal tutoring system

Shortcomings and variations in personal tutoring have been identified in the research. HN qualified direct entrants in particular miss out on personal tutoring support, possibly because institutions tend to focus that personal tutoring efforts on first years, rather than all new students regardless of year of entry.

The extent to which universities can provide an effective personal tutor system is a vexed one across the sector where institutions have tried different approaches over the years. But there is clearly a need for further review, for example, should all academics be involved or only selected ones, should training be mandatory, should there be a minimum entitlement for students, how might it link to the teaching role? Whatever approach is adopted, certain prerequisites are essential: greater

institutional recognition of the workload and commitment required for personal tutoring and attention to how the role is supported and rewarded by the institution.

Encouraging the take up of specialist 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 help. Universities rely on student to refer themselves to support services but should they be more proactive, e.g. develop indicators to assess whether a student may be in difficulty followed by active offers of support? How can universities promote a supportive culture of self-reflection that helps students deal with negative experiences and present support provision to students in a way that de-stigmatises seeking help?

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