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Navigating Student Progression: Should I stay or should I go? (0116)

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Research Domain: Student Experience

The introduction of the Foundation Degree (FD) to England and Wales in 2001 created a new route for Higher Education study enabling sub-degree level study which was credited with the title of 'degree'. Part of the agenda for this new degree was in the focus that it placed on the creation of programmes offering a terminal award but also articulating to further award at Honours level. This development has been particularly significant for students in Further Education Colleges (FECs) where the FD has been embraced and used as a vehicle for growth of HE. For many students in these environments, opportunities have crystallised as a guaranteed progression route into a level 6 (honours) stage, usually within the environs of the validating Higher Education Institution (HEI). Over 100,000 students accessed FD provision from 2000 – 2010 (Longhurst 2010), clearly demonstrating significant growth in the sub-degree sector, and resulting in a ripe market for potential student progression from the FD.

For students who have experienced their FD within a college environment the transition process can be daunting requiring not only adjustments to the physical and cultural environment but also the pedagogic. Students predominantly join existing cohorts who have built study relationships, networks and an understanding of the explicit and implicit functioning of the HEI. For the progression student this process represents many aspects of the unknown at a range of levels, both social and academic.

The project outlined in this paper was designed to both research and support current practice of progression from college sub-degree to HEI honours degree provision, through strategies of pre-induction integration with the university. Engagement with students at an earlier stage, supporting their personal learning journeys and developing communication networks, was identified as an integral part of enabling engagement with the university's culture and ethos before transition, and as a part of the decision making process. A substantial body of research into Widening Participation (WP) and transition from sub-degree to honours degree supports the perspective that this experience can be stressful and potentially damaging to retention and success at honours. (Bathmaker, 2010; Bathmaker et al., 2008; Clegg, 2011; Greenbank, 2006; Harrison & Hatt, 2010; Keane, 2011; Parry, 2010; Roberts, 2011). This ongoing 18 month project has explored the challenge facing students negotiating boundaries between FECs and HEIs which exhibit profoundly different pedagogy and culture. A core thread throughout this research has been to work

collaboratively with students as active agents engaging them throughout the whole process. Through the identification of current practice and capturing actual experiences along with associated challenges the research team has been allowed a more detailed insight into the transition process. By understanding and navigating these challenges we are developing information, tools and support networks across both college and university environments.

Methods:

A qualitative approach was adopted to collect the data across the 18 month period. This followed on from extensive survey work which had identified key areas of concern for students experiencing progression (Swain 2012). Nine focus groups were conducted with college level 5 students, from a range of colleges and in a variety of disciplines. Additionally, a short open questionnaire was administered with students prior to the focus groups. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with HE college staff (mostly programme leaders) aimed at capturing some of the background information on course programmes and the staff experiences of supporting student progression and working with students to help guide decision making. Three focus groups with university/FEC 'top-up' students who had progressed from college foundation degrees represented the final aspect of data collection, and these were conducted with mixed subject groups from across the HEI.

Findings and Developments:

The data identified a significant need for centralised approaches to communicating information directly to progressing students. Good practice was identified across the institution, yet what became increasingly clear was the need for a university online resource, signposting students to the information in an instant and timely manner. The evidence indicated students wanted more course specific information - including content based information to enable pre-course planning i.e. reading lists, books; and course structure or module guides along with practical information, especially around course arrangements and logistical issues.

The main expectations for progression students about Honours level within the university environment were articulated in terms of challenge. This related to the academic level and standards but also the volume of work expected. Fears and concerns were predominantly in the areas of practical arrangements, academic performance, and personal matters. College and university staff relationships emerged as crucial factors in the management of student concerns. When staff relationships were informed through liaison and collaboration, the transition process seemed more likely to produce positive student experiences. There were clear differences between students who had experienced exposure to the university through college tutors as a part of their college FD. Students for whom there were no

significant fears or concerns about progression tended to come from programmes where there was a strong university staff link or where college staff were well acquainted with university practice.

Students have identified the importance of support within partner colleges, and the more challenging aspects of engaging students in developing university awareness and identity. Subsequently the development of a progression tool and pre-entry social network is underway for progressing students, and a short guide to supporting progression students is being developed which is aimed at university staff. The Learner Access Network was developed with the focus of introducing students to the university and each other. Signposting both specific (ie programme handbooks) and general based information (ie how do I hand in coursework) and guidance, it focusses on experiences drawn from other students and student ambassadors.

This research has raised awareness of the importance of developing a university focussed identity with college students who are often puzzled by the lack of coherence between the university and college partners. The negotiation of boundaries in both pedagogic and more practical aspects of practice has emerged as an area where partnership practice and rhetoric need to become more closely aligned through a social constructivist model.

1000 words

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