A Flying Start: the benefits of changing induction to introduction.   (0390)

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The University of Huddersfield has introduced a specific curriculum development supporting inclusion in the form of a 'Flying Start' approach in transition to Higher Education. The key aims were based on existing research and theory on belonging, retention and success (for example, Dwyer, 2015; Thomas, 2012) and initially directed at courses with students whom our data identifies as potentially being most 'at risk' of underachieving or withdrawing. Detailed examination of retention and progression data indicated particular characteristics that effected attrition and the realisation of academic accomplishment, particularly for students from widening participation groups. Results of an analysis of this University's data showed that the 'at risk' categories were British White and British Pakistani males, 'at home' students and those entering with qualifications other than standard academic qualifications (A-Levels). Following the significant rise in tuition fees in England in 2012, the University has now over 50% (and increasing) of its student body living in the family home whilst they are studying. The conditions that students find themselves in, particularly those who are first generation at University, is one where a sense of belonging may be a challenge. The courses with high counts of students in these areas have reconceptualised the entry experience to University, generating subject-specific activities following compatible key aims.

Aims of developing a strong sense of belonging, enthusiasm for subject specialism, and practice in developing dialogic academic communities of practice were central to the re-formation of the curriculum for the start of the academic year. Catalyst project funding (HEFCE/Office for Students) was significant for the Institution to be able to employ a manager, coordinator and evaluator to stimulate, lead and account for the new initiatives. Coordination across courses was crucial in meeting agreed common aims and stimulating collaborative ideas that could be adapted across subject specialisms. Integration of, for example, academic librarians and personal academic tutors in the co-design and delivery of the activities has stimulated new connections that are continuing across the academic year.

The research-based evaluation of the project was centred on recognising the conceptual difference between induction (fitting in) and introduction (a dialogic two/multi-way process) and the effect on belonging. The newly designed 'Flying Start' introduction follows an inclusive (make room for), rather than integrated (fit-in), model, thereby aiming to avoid 'included-as-excluded' or 'excluded-as-included' identities (Hilt, 2014). The innovative curriculum re-design was undertaken by eight programme pathways: Sport, Exercise and Nutrition; Chemical Sciences; Biological Sciences; Science Extended Degree; Law; Accountancy and Finance; Contemporary Art and Illustration; Computer Games Design for all its students. Applicants for these courses included a significant number of 'at home' students many of whom have studied in sixth form schools or colleges together and have tended to remain in the same friendship and study groups. Local demographics are reflected in the applicants for these courses and show that there are large numbers from widening participation categories, entrants at both foundation level and with non-standard (not A-Level) entry qualifications.

The specific model used, for developing the 'Flying Start' introduction to University life and study, was selected for its flexibility of subject-specific content, but

maintained shared key aims across courses. The use of logic chains (Hill, 2010), to map the purpose of the new sessions, ensured the same objectives were met by the teams and has allowed the evaluator insight to evidence the content, resource, outcomes and feedback for specific activities.

The starting point was an analysis of whole University student data and then, following the Flying Start initiative, by a student survey on relationships, engagement and belonging (Yorke, 2016). The survey was distributed to 1,800 students with a high return of 1,107 students (47% Flying Start and 53% non-Flying Start). The survey and staff feedback through a focus group, suggests that the Flying Start initiative contributed to cementing relationships beyond what usually happens in the first two weeks of the term, strengthened social and academic communities and increased engagement, self-confidence and belongingness, especially for the male students. Of significance, was the level of retention on the two-week Flying Start courses compared to the previous year during the first weeks of term and that levels maintained a positive trend for the HESA data collection taken in December.

The success of a strong sense of academic community was evident for the courses involved, which came from the dialogic and activity-based interactions between peers and tutors with students. Staff noted peer support starting early and a greater sense of belonging to both the University and their subject specialism. Affordance for early identification of risk factors (attendance, commitment, key skills) were effective and the dynamic of active teaching and learning was beneficial to staff and students alike. First years took ownership much quicker than usual and are more likely to contribute in group sessions and lectures that previously. Activities based on careers with alumni were valued and seen as potentially achievable. Group presentations developed a sense of belonging to the subject and courses and ability to recognise the support/challenge of communities of inquiry. Social game-based activities to find out about the University and support orienteering the campus and town were evidenced in 'selfies' of the tasks explored.

The relationships and belonging survey was re-distributed in June 2018 and the final empirical data identifying retention and achievement data for these students will be collected and evaluated in July 2018 after end of year assessments. Results will show whether the initial success of the initiative had a sustainable effect across the academic year. Should informal tutor feedback be accurate, it is expected to reveal the significance of the new design in approach and its sustainability.

It is anticipated that the ongoing research will assess how the project is being embedded in practice and will be ready for sharing findings at the SRHE conference. Current plans for Flying Start 2018 are with a significant opt-in up-scaling of the initiative, from eight courses to 34 pathways.

References

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