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Supporting First Year Students: The Role of Adjustment (0407)

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Introduction

Recognising the substantial changes to Higher Education, from the increase in student numbers, the introduction of fees, the changing focus to a market based system and the discussion of 'student as consumer' (Brown & Carasso, 2013; Bunce, Baird, & Jones, 2017; Molesworth, Nixon, & Scullion, 2009), there have also been significant changes to the experience of students as a result. It is clear that the student experience in 2018 is different to that twenty or thirty years ago. Not only are the changes visible in the funding of universities, and the changing position of students within the university, but also the impact marketization has had on the centre support services. Under the umbrella of 'value for money' many non-academic services have been centralised and streamlined at a time when the student body is larger in number, and in diversity. Students themselves have increased expectations, including the requirement for appropriate support services to work alongside the academic aspects of the degree and yet the ability to meet these requirements is significantly reduced.

As part of a research project initially looking at the role of parents on the first year undergraduate student experience, the role of student adjustment and its links to achievement, became clear. Where students were more adjusted to the university, they were also more likely to achieve better marks. Adjustment does not just focus on the academic aspects of the experience, but also other aspects of the student experience, outside of the lecture room. As such consideration needs to be given to those central support services and their role in supporting the adjustment process.

Methodology

The data were collected over two academic years, targeting first year undergraduate students at a number of universities. The Student Adjustment to College Questionnaire (Baker & Siryk, 1986) was used alongside additional questions to gather information on the student's background and supplemented by end of first year achievement data. The data were then analysed using SPSS.

Findings

The key findings of this thesis suggest that there is a clear path relationship between PEHE, TTA, adjustment and achievement. This can be demonstrated as below:

PEHE → TTA → Adjustment → Achievement

Students who come from families with capital (as measured by PEHE) are more likely to live on campus, to report higher levels of adjustment and achieve higher end of first year marks. Students who come from families without capital are more likely to live at home, report lower levels of adjustment and not perform as well. Students who live at home are also more likely to withdraw from their studies than those who live in halls.

However, this is not to say that all students who live at home report lower levels of adjustment, nor that all students on campus report higher levels of adjustment. Indeed, if a student is living at home but reports higher levels of adjustment they also will go on to achieve higher marks. Likewise, if a student lives in halls

but reports lower levels of adjustment they are more likely to achieve less well. Furthermore, when ethnicity is considered with TTA, adjustment and achievement, students from white backgrounds adjust and perform better if they live in halls, but students from BAME backgrounds adjust and perform better if they live at home.

In terms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986), the benefits expected for students who come from families with PEHE was not evidenced in the findings. Whilst a relationship was found between PEHE and TTA, and between PEHE and social adjustment, there were no other direct relationships found. This raises the question of whether capital can be transferred once a student has enrolled on their course. Whilst capital has been shown to benefit students prior to enrolment, once they have left the family home the advantages are not as transferable.

Further, a moderator effect of TTA found in the study is enlightening. Students who live at home show much greater variation in the relationship between adjustment and achievement. A student who lives on campus will report similar levels of adjustment whether they achieve lower or higher marks at the end of their first year. In contrast, students at home have a positive correlation between adjustment and achievement. This suggests that adjustment, especially social adjustment, for students living at home can have a significant effect on achievement, much more so than for students who are living in halls.

The attainment gap between white and BAME students has been a focus of research throughout WP literature for some time (Connor, Tyers, Modood, & Hillage, 2004). The results of this research suggest that TTA is a key variable for BAME students, so this should be considered when looking at the attainment gap and is considered as a possible next step, as it may account for some of the variability in degree outcomes. This is not simply a matter of encouraging more BAME students to live on campus, but of considering what factors contribute to the different experiences on campus, understanding why students from BAME backgrounds do not adjust or achieve as well as those at home. Alongside this, it is important for the institution not just to consider this as an issue with the student, but to also consider its own habitus, and whether structural changes could support students who do choose to live in halls to adjust better, which would then lead to higher achievement.

Universities have little if any control over parental education level of its students, nor of where they choose to live during their studies. There are however many practical interventions that can be put into place to ensure the success of the students by supporting them in their adjustment to the university. Whether the marketization of HE is a positive or not, universities owe it to their students to not treat them as consumers of a product, whether the students identify as customers (Brennan & Shah, 2011; Bunce et al., 2017; Tomlinson, 2014) or not, but as co-creators of an educational experience through which they grow into and develop their full potential. This can only be achieved by linking academic and support activities together in a meaningful and appropriately resourced way.

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