

Direct entrants as route guides to the higher education landscape

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

Students who study for an HND at further education college and then join the university directly into the 3rd year of their honours degree are a valuable segment of our academic community. This route provides opportunities for more people to gain HE degrees, including widening access and increasing social mobility. However, the move into a busy year, in an environment with different learning and teaching strategies, plus potential content and skills gaps, can be challenging. For seven years, the Associate Student Project have been working to support students on this route, through college, into university and onto graduation. Our longitudinal research helps us to understand the students' experience and what works to help them. Here we report, from survey findings, the advice students who have travelled this route feel would be most valuable for students moving forward from their HND at college into the 3rd year of university.

Full paper

Introduction

The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) supports articulation partnerships between further education (FE) colleges and universities (SFC 2013) which enable students to study for two years in FE, gaining a Higher National Diploma (HND), and then progress straight into the third year of university and, all being well, complete an honours degree in

another two years. This is a particularly useful route for less privileged students, as local FE colleges make it easier for students to continue living at home. It is also useful for students who did not meet university entry requirements for first year, including mature students changing career, and students coming from outside the UK. The Commission on Widening Access identify articulation as “a real success story of Scottish higher education and a powerful means of advancing fair access” (COWA 2016, p.32).

The university landscape is challenging for many students, but those from widening access backgrounds are especially likely to find the format difficult at first, especially the style of teaching, with large lectures and extensive of independent study, and the type and level of assessments (Howieson and Minty, 2019). Students entering directly into the second or third year may also need to deal with knowledge gaps and logistical challenges, such as finding their way round campuses and systems (Breeze et al., 2020). Movement through these transitional challenges is usefully smoothed by opportunities to prepare (Fabian et al., 2019). Advice from students who have progressed through this is powerful and appropriate, foregrounding “students’ lived realities” (Gale and Parker, 2014, p.734; Tinto, 2012).

Methodology

The Associate Student Project has been providing support for computing students on this route since 2013. This includes access to university facilities during FE years (e.g., computing laboratory, online and offline libraries), information and pre-induction sessions, plus practical experiences like campus tours and university-style lectures. A programme of research informs support activities and also helps university lecturers understand who their new students are and what challenges they are facing. The project is now expanding to include engineering students. This paper reports findings from the project’s annual online survey (Fabian et al., 2022), focusing on the advice to students about to follow this path. The research questions are:

- What challenges do the students experience in terms of their transition?
- What can students do to help themselves in meeting these

challenges?

The 2021 survey was completed by 238 students, including 62 direct entrants. Of these, 48 were computing students and 14 studied engineering. This short paper draws on free text responses to the question: “What advice would you give to another student planning to come from college to university, if you came by this route?”

Findings

The free text responses were read through to identify broad themes; this level of analysis was sufficient for our purpose of informing our support. In the first theme — *'Prepare in advance, try to fill knowledge gaps'* — students advised incoming students to learn key applications or programming languages before coming to university, the most popular suggestion this year being the scripting language, Python. Other advice was more strategic, such as to be prepared for more reading and writing or to check modules in advance, e.g., “Compare the programs from [college and university], and try to fill the gaps in your knowledge. University students are expected to know certain things that you might not have been taught.”

The other themes concerned studying at university. *'Keep up with the work, be prepared, and organised'* included suggestions like reading around, preparing for classes, and familiarising yourself with the virtual learning environment, or put simply: “Don't fall behind at the start, keep working hard”. *'Ask questions / ask for help'* encouraged students to be proactive, but also assured them that the lecturers would be pleased to help them: “If in doubt ask questions. Tutors or classmates are always keen to help.” The final theme — *'Go for it'* — acknowledged the hard work ahead, but encouraged the students that they could meet this challenge and it would be worth it, e.g. “You will find the change between the two weird, but as time goes on you integrate more and more into university life and its style of learning.” Interestingly, although the students had experienced disruption due to the pandemic, their advice was similar to pre-pandemic years.

Impact

A slide show of this advice plays in the background at pre-induction

events. While our research helps us to understand what information will be useful to support students, the most targeted and influential advice comes from the students themselves.

References

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