

Being and Becoming: Student transitions into and within higher education (0183)

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This paper discusses the results and analysis of a three year study of the student transition from secondary education to university at a 1994 Group Institution in London. The focus of the research is the transition in learning and teaching that the students encounter, including their previous learning and teaching experience, their expectations of their future study, their learning preferences and the match or mismatch present in their consequent experience of tertiary education. This work took place within a climate of increasing recent focus on the student experience, in particular that of first year students (Harvey et al, 2006 and Yorke and Longden 2007 and 2008 for the Higher Education Academy), as well as theoretical reflections on student trajectories (e.g. Barnett, 2007). The project had three main parts: background visits to local sixth-form colleges and schools involving observations and interviews, an annual survey of new entrants to the university shortly before they arrived to start their undergraduate course, and multiple interviews with a set of students following their progress over the first two years of their study.

The survey ran each year in the period between the confirmation of results and the start of the academic year in order to capture the views of the new entrants to the institution, but before their university experiences had an impact. Sections of questions on their school experience, their perceptions of their preparation for university, their reasons for the choices they made in terms of university study, course, and institution, their expectations and knowledge of aspects of university study, their preferences, and demographic information. In total 1296 students completed the survey, either in paper form or online.

During the first year of the study a set of volunteer students were interviewed at multiple points during the year about their learning and teaching experience so far; the differences, challenges, and what had helped them with their study. Further interviews were conducted a year later at the end of their second year of study looking back on their experience. The interviews were all semi-structured and approximately 30mins on average (though ranging up to an hour for a few cases). In total just under 70 interviews or focus groups were conducted over the course of the project.

Five local sixth-form colleges and schools were visited as part of the study in order that the team gained more up-to-date background information on the secondary school environment. A range of lessons were observed and views were gathered via informal class surveys, individual staff interviews and focus groups of students. The information gathered was fed back into the other phases of the project and vice-versa, as ideas from the undergraduate interviews were used to explore issues in the school environment.

This paper is a reflection of the study as a whole, pulling out the themes which the project team have found to run throughout the research for discussion as to their effect on the

students' transition and where universities themselves could have an impact on this process via either their practice, policies or interventions. The research looked at ways in which the transition is characterised by the students themselves and we argue that this transition is a more lengthy process than some have suggested which has important implication for how universities address issues or challenges that their students encounter. In particular there is a need to consider and differentiate the concepts of 'being' and 'becoming' a student.

Of particular interest is the theme of knowledge. Questions arise from the research concerning both our knowledge within higher education of our ever more diverse population of students and the students' knowledge of university life and study. We note that many students do not understand how university actually works in practice or structure and what it is actually like to study and learn at university, as opposed to attending one off events such as open days and special lectures. We view the process by which they adapt to their new educational environment and learn the skills of how to study in higher education, as an extended process of 'becoming' a student. This extended 'rite of passage' warns against the background assumption that new entrants are and behave like students of higher education immediately. Other themes emerge from the student experience such as managing expectations, which is increasingly important for the sector and individual institutions, and the ever present focus on feedback. These themes, in addition to the need to knowledge in both directions, emphasises the importance and utility of communication.

The transition to 'being' a successful student at university is a key part of successful student learning at university and in turn important for the overall student experience. This latter topic is one which will only grow in importance as the competition and financial sacrifice both through and after university increase. With the increasing diversity both in background and motivations present in the sector and in individual departments, knowledge of one's own students and their expectations and experience will be vital for investments in time, energy and money aimed at improving this experience to be both evidence based and effectual.

References

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