

Proposal for 2010 SRHE Conference

Forms part of symposium on student engagement

Title: Identifying and supporting the ‘transition phase’ in the student life-cycle(0212)
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Transitional support at UCL

Identifying and conceptualising a ‘transition phase’ within the context of the first year student experience has received some recent attention in the professional literature, bearing a growing relevance for UCL in that our own experience has developed in this direction mostly through institutional practice (Currant, 09; Keenan, 08). The Transition Programme at UCL was piloted in 2005 as a proposal to embed more effective student support practices, in the context of being a research-led institution with a strong commitment to widening access to less-represented learners in higher education. As a result of the decision to roll out and embed the programme throughout the institution, supporting incoming first year undergraduates from the period leading up to registration and then through the first term has developed into a key aspect of UCL’s strategy for student engagement and support. Evaluating and reflecting on this phase of the student experience is therefore fundamental to UCL practices, a process that has yielded outcomes and data that may well prove useful to other institutions charting similar courses in transitional support. In particular, there are clear resonances here with the work of other institutions in the area of student engagement and how curricula are being shaped by efforts towards early learner engagement (Krause, 09); in the case of UCL this is best reflected in the development of academic skills workshops in term one and the earlier scheduling of opportunities for formative assessment . Whilst various support activities continue throughout the first academic year, the growth and development of the programme at UCL has led to a particular focus on the 4-5 month period either side of initial registration that we have identified for these purposes as the ‘transition phase’ for undergraduate learners. The programme includes various activities that aim to engage all new first year students in some form: this includes mentoring, peer assisted learning, academic and learning skills workshops, information and social sessions, online resources and an academic diary.

Evaluating impact and effectiveness

Our efforts to analyse and evaluate the early experience of first year learners are an integral part of the development of the programme. This is the case both in the particular sense that, in order to maintain quality provision in an innovative practice, it is crucial to feed back how users experience their activities; and in the wider sense, confirmed by other literature in this area, that university students form their identities as learners and institutional participants early on in the life cycle of their degrees, and the early transition phase is therefore a crucial period in which to engage learners positively both individually and in groups (Lawson, 2008). The clearest example of our effort to encourage and evaluate the engagement of students in such ‘communities of practice’ (Wenger, 1998) is the development of peer assisted learning groups at UCL within the first four weeks of term one. In terms of evaluation, our online surveys of first years and mentor/PAL leaders seek to benchmark the early expectations, skills and engagement levels of incoming first years and then to measure any impact that the

formation and work of PAL groups is having on first year learners and mentors. By asking students to self-identify in terms of socio-economic category, and background we have been able to track noteworthy patterns amongst different groups. In addition to this we have been collating and analysing progression data for first years successfully moving into their second year of study, breaking down the departmental cohort profiles by ethnicity, socio-economic category and school type.

Differentiating outcomes

In analysing feedback data from first years and mentors, we have found that the more interesting results shed light on how different cohorts and categories of student are engaged by the institution and the varying degrees to which their personal and academic development is affected by the Transition Programme. By integrating the feedback and progression data by categories, in order to differentiate by social background, our analysis has been able to track patterns in the specific expectations, impacts and developments of different groups of students during the transitional phase we have defined here. What emerges more generally from the data that has been studied is a focus on the key areas linked to the students' transitional experiences prior to, and following on from, the initial registration for their teaching programmes: specifically these cover student expectations of study and university life, personal and academic development, and social aspects of student integration. It has therefore been possible to identify specific trends within the five month 'transition phase' in question that help to illuminate the experiences of different cohorts of learners, allowing us to draw out some useful views about how students are forming their identities as learners and social participants at UCL..

References

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