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Using a social constructivist model for inducting non-traditional students into vocational college based Higher Education. (0032)

Entry to Higher Education (HE) has been acknowledged as a stressful time for undergraduates as they adjust to a new educational environment, social groupings and academic expectations (Edward, 2003). A positive experience during the induction period is perceived as influencing undergraduates' retention and academic achievement during their period of study (Hargreaves, 1998).

University of Plymouth Colleges' (UPC) is a network of 18 partners, offering mainly Foundation Degree (FD) qualifications across cognate disciplines. For students' in these environments developing a sense of belonging and student identity may be difficult given the disparate nature of HE and the diverse profile of the study body who suit various widening participation (WP) descriptors (HEFCE, 2006). Most studies of student induction and identity focus on what are understood as 'traditional' students in 'traditional' HEI settings. However the move to a system of mass higher education (Trow, 1987) and the diversity of the associated mission requires pedagogic focus on 'non traditional' student experiences (Leese, 2010).

The FD is tasked with crossing the divide of vocational and academic study to develop undergraduates with transformative abilities. The vocational slant of the FD was:

"...designed to develop key skills and employability, and offer clear routes into the labour market or further learning" (Blunkett, 2000).

However, recent research undertaken into the graduate destinations of UPC FD students has identified that many do not appreciate the value of the course in relation to career development (Dismore et al, 2010). Hicks et al. (2009) highlighted the need for colleges to enhance support for students in making links between study and employment, including greater interaction with employers.

A wealth of literature refers to the primacy of socialisation as a factor in successful transition to HE (Edward, 2001; Leese, 2010 ; Mackie, 2001 ;Tinto, 1993) and the need for adaptation of induction to support non-traditional students (Leese, 2010). To address this, a structured induction activity was planned in a college. The focus for the activity was raising awareness of employment related skills and establishing student realisation of links between academic study and career aspirations. Essential to this was the involvement of local employers as well as teaching staff. The attitudes and experiences of the students, staff and employers involved in the event were analysed, providing evaluation of it to:

- i) Create a sense of belonging amongst new HE students studying in an FEC;
- ii) Develop awareness of the synergies between student learning in the college environment and employment aspirations.

Methodology

A constructivist approach (Rust et al, 2005) was adopted to engage students in activity that would enable interaction with peers, staff and employers to develop and construct personalised meaning of their new environment and programme of study (Edward, 2001). Based on 'XING', a visual business planning tool requiring students to work as a team to create, develop and pitch a business idea (Working Knowledge, 2011), the day involved new FD students from three diverse programme areas. The largest grouping represented business related programmes, the second grouping was from a public sector programme and the third grouping from the sports science discipline. A two-stage evaluation was undertaken with students, a questionnaire, comprising of both open and closed questions captured event experiences and awareness of skills employed on the day. A reflective questionnaire completed eight to twelve weeks later, required students to consider the wider application of these skills. Employers were also asked to complete a questionnaire and staff were interviewed.

Findings

The results from the first stage demonstrated that the event raised awareness of skills (communication, communication with professionals, team working, making informed decisions and identifying realistic answers) from a majority of the students. Predominantly identifying the event as a positive experience and one that helped with socialisation in a new environment, many also described the experience as 'stressful' and 'challenging'.

Some of the reactions to the content of the day, which was categorised as business/enterprise related provided interesting data. Whilst a number of business students commented on this aspect as being an important element of the event it was seen in mainly negative terms by the sports students. This attitude was confirmed by a tutor who commented that:

"Students perceptions of the day were negative – didn't see the point of it, wasn't really explained to them very well. They couldn't see how it related to college, the course or induction".

In contrast, the public sector student responses in this first stage of data collection were heavily concentrated on social aspects of the day in particular, team work. Staff interviews confirmed that each cohort had undergone different preparation for the day, the business students prepared for a business related task, the public sector students for a socialisation and team building activity. The tutor for the sports students commented that:

“Staff weren’t told much about it – just a dragons den event and all had to be there, that was passed on to students but that was about it”.

This lack of information and purpose was indicated as a possible contributory factor to explain the poor turnout of students in this area at the event (under 50%) contrasting with high turnout from other groups. Negative constructions of the event could also be related to the lack of staff understanding and preparation (affecting interaction with students) contrasting with staff from other disciplines who had attended XING training.

In stage 2 of the data collection there were significant differences identified between understanding, development and application of skills with the public sector students providing reflection on how the skills that they identified from the day had been developed and applied through their programme of study. Whilst this was the case, the business students also showed a heightened awareness of the skills aspect of the day, but less on how this had been applied through their course. These conclusions may be more of a reflection of the limitations of the initial quantitative method employed and data collection on the day happening in a busy atmosphere. Staff interviews confirmed that there had been some ‘missed opportunities” to develop learning from the day for business students, whilst public sector students had used reflections as a basis for skills development activities.

Initial conclusions point to the pivotal role employed by tutors in defining and constructing student expectations. One tutor commented that:

“Its bigger than just the induction – it’s about bringing them into our culture and our faculty”.

Part of that culture encompasses the value of skills and employability as a component of learning in preparation for future careers. The research demonstrates the requirement for reinforcement of these messages in a systematic fashion, even for qualifications and learning environments traditionally portrayed as vocational.

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