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Making connections between communities: linking the parallel worlds of new staff and student transitions (0076)

Research strand: Management

Abstract

Higher education in England is arguably in a state of notable transition, the implications of which are far-reaching for the future of higher education as we view it in 2011. A sector already grappling with the ongoing challenges of relatively rapid massification, an ever diminishing unit of resource and the latest government austerity measures has been plunged further into a serious state of change. Framed within this contemporary macro transition, this paper considers the increasingly parallel experiences of academic staff with students making the transition into a university and the converging organisational processes and mechanisms that together characterise their 'first-year experience'. The preliminary phase of a longitudinal research study drawn on in this paper builds on a conceptual modelling of the parallel worlds of staff and student transition (Corkill et al., 2011).

Higher education in England in 2011 is arguably in a state of transition. The latest "litany of changes" (Hussey & Smith, 2010, p.101) has implications which are far-reaching for the future of higher education as we now view it. A sector already grappling with the ongoing challenges of relatively rapid massification, an ever diminishing unit of resource and the latest government austerity measures has been plunged further into a serious state of change. Framed within this system transition, this research study considers the increasingly parallel experiences of academic staff and students making the transition into the university.

Viewed through the lens of the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PgCAP), this research considers the management of support, resources and development opportunities afforded to new staff at a post-1992 university. In undertaking the PgCAP, new staff also take on the persona of first-year student, thus compounding the transitional process. The study also considers a second group of 'new' academic staff, who have moved (or been moved) to a new institutional work-role in response to the rapid change culture. For this group, there can also be a significant transition into an alien world (Chappell et al, 2009).

Drawing from the literature surrounding staff development, student experience and transition, this study explores the consonances and dissonances of what we conceptualise as the parallel universes of student and staff transitions (Corkill et al., 2011).

Student transition

Student transitions into and through the first-year of higher education is a much researched area (e.g. Field, 2010; James et al., 2010; Kift, 2009; Tinto, 2008; Yorke & Longden, 2008; Krause, 2007). The growing canon identifies a broad spectrum of factors which influence students' initial experiences of higher education. In our institutional context we have identified four key areas, all prevalent in existing literature, which in combination contribute significantly to the success of our own students: matters of organisation; perception; operation; and institution (Corkill et al., 2011).

Far less has been written about similar staff transitions, and yet a re-reading of the literature on the student experience invokes striking similarities with contemporary staff experiences. For students and staff alike, managing commitments is key, with increasingly complex external scenarios of secondary jobs, family and caring responsibilities, in addition to navigating the varied demands of twenty-first century work and study. Accurate and reliable initial information becomes essential, whether concerning the institution, the academic programme or the support mechanisms available. Without the constructive alignment (Biggs, 1999) of these areas, unintended challenges are laid in the path of transitional students or staff.

Staff in transition

As universities broaden the academic and vocational nature of their offering, so the student population correspondingly widens in its demographic makeup and demands (Coleman & Bekhradnia, 2011). This contributes to challenges which fall heavily onto academic staff who are expected to operate effectively in a culture of continuous change (Kondakci & Van den Broeck, 2009), aggravated by a reduction in the resource-base and increasingly multifaceted roles (Lawrence, 2010). New academic appointments are drawn from a widening variety of employment backgrounds and experiences with many staff making the transition into the working world of a university for the first time. They not only face a variety of demands (Nicholls, 2005) but have to cope with an amalgamation of transitions from diverse previous employment contexts.

We also acknowledge briefly those existing staff changing to a new internal work-role in response to the rapid change culture. Such a move can force a significant transition into an alien world (Macfarlane, 2011; Chappell et al., 2009). The existing academic may, for example, have to adjust to changes in conditions of service, leadership roles or new technologies. Pressure is exacerbated by the increasing expectation of student-centred approaches to learning and non-specialist teaching (Elkington & Lawrence, 2011).

The Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PgCAP)

The Browne Review (2010) proposes that all new academics with teaching responsibilities undertake a Higher Education Academy (HEA) accredited teaching qualification. For academic staff new to higher education, the University of Bedfordshire runs the PgCAP. Staff undertaking programmes like the PgCAP however face an increasingly complex scenario. Kandlbinder and Peseta (2009) pinpoint the pressures and pedagogical challenges faced by participants, including embracing a new discipline (Education) and coping with the discourse of pedagogic development. In addition, for some new staff, the academic demands of being a first-year student proves quite daunting (Lawrence, 2010).

The research

This papers draws from the preliminary phase of work being undertaken during a two-year longitudinal study of new academic staff entrants at one mid-sized post-1992 university. A mixed methods approach to the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data has been employed. The study is engaging with the longitudinal tracking of three cohorts of new staff as they undertake the mandatory components of the PgCAP. The data has been collected by means of electronic survey, group and individual semi-structured interviews.

The data collected has allowed for deeper understanding of the experiences of new academic staff, and existing staff moved internally within the institution into new and unfamiliar roles. The data identifies the consonances and dissonances of the various interfaces between new staff, academic departments and the institution as a whole. It also highlights the challenges faced by new staff and the instutional support they might have required to overcome these. Finally, the data permits a lens on the preliminary interactions between transitional staff and their own new students.

Findings from the preliminary phase of the study have revealed disjuncture between intended organisational intentions and the reality of the staff experience. The study draws a number of important parallels between the transitional experiences of new students entering into an HEI and academic staff entering or moving within the working world of a university.

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