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Bridging the gap: supporting student transitions into higher education

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This research focused on the early experience of students entering an undergraduate course in a post-1992 university that is committed to widening participation. Using Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital and habitus as a theoretical framework, data were collected from students using an online questionnaire and small-group discussions during the critical first days and weeks when they need to fit in to their new environment. The research was designed to consider whether there is a 'new student' in higher education (HE) and to consider the possible influence of cultural capital and habitus on a student's transition. Data were collected using an online questionnaire with a response rate of 52% (n=180), and this was followed up with five small-group discussions with 25 of the respondents. Participants self-selected to take part in the small-group discussions but the sample did reflect the cohort in relation to ethnicity, age and gender. The data collected from the questionnaire provided a snapshot of the students' early experience within the university, and data from the small-group discussions were used to triangulate this and allow emerging themes to be explored in greater depth. The results showed that the majority of the students (70%) were combining work with study and most students spent a minimal amount of time on campus, perhaps supporting the concept that there is a 'new student' in HE. Perceptions about their transition varied, but most of the students expressed concern about the perceived need to be an independent learner. Students stated that they needed more structured activities on campus to encourage them to fit in, and more support from academic staff, with clear instructions about what was expected.

Keywords: transition; higher education; new student

Introduction

It is proposed that there has been a 'repurposing' of higher education (HE), especially within post-1992 institutions, including the massification of provision (Scott 1995; Hockings, Cooke, and Bowl 2007), potentially resulting in less attention being paid to the needs of the students within what has become a marketised environment (Pritchard 2006). These changes require a re-examination of the support offered to students especially in the early days

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and weeks at university because issues relating to transition can have an impact on learning (Ramsay, Raven, and Hall 2005). In response to this, the research was designed to question whether there is a 'new student' in HE and to consider the possible influence of cultural capital and habitus on a student's transition into university. The focus of the data collection was the students' prior knowledge of HE, their early experience at university and, finally, the support needs that they were identifying at this early stage. This study was designed to explore the student's transition into HE (Naido 2004) and to consider whether a lack of 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Modood 2004; Robbins 2004) can impact on a student's transition.

This area of research is important because a number of students who enter university do not have a positive experience when they start (Lowe and Cook 2003). This could be because there is a 'gap' between student expectations and their initial experiences (Parkinson and Forrester 2004), and this needs to be explored in order to identify the reason for this disjuncture. Levels of stress can be high, and therefore more research focusing on the first semester is needed (Porter and Swing 2006), as the cost of failure can result in loss of confidence and self-esteem (Longden 2004; Haggis 2006). This work also builds on research carried out by Darmody, Smyth, and Unger (2008) by considering the student workload in relation to time spent on campus and the impact of paid work on their identity as a 'student'. This case study, although limited in size, illuminates some issues for teaching and support staff who are interested in the student experience during the 'critical' first semester.

The widening participation agenda

New Labour stresses the importance of widening participation as beneficial to both individuals and the wider society (Leathwood and O'Connell 2003), but widening participation does not come without its difficulties for both the students and the universities. As Reay et al. (2002) proposed, it is important that there is action beyond the rhetoric of widening participation to ensure that it does not just reproduce social inequalities. The government has set targets of achieving 50% participation of 18–30-year-olds in HE by 2010 (Leathwood and O'Connell 2003; Longden 2004), with the potential that more students from working-class backgrounds are to succeed at university; however this requires a shift in a range of practices within institutions.

If students from a wide range of backgrounds enter HE (Archer 2007), they must be supported, and this requires institutions to consider the needs of a diverse student body (Archer 2007) who are often combining work with study (Darmody and Fleming 2009). This is more of an issue for post-1992 institutions, because when students from working-class backgrounds do access HE, they tend to apply to the post-1992 institutions (Smith 2007) because of reluctance to move from their family home and a belief they think that they will 'fit in' (Leathwood and O'Connell 2003). This has led to what Haggis (2006)

suggests is the 'new student' who spends much shorter periods of time on campus (Longden 2004), often only attending for taught sessions (Hazel, Munro, and Wagner 2005). These points raise the question as to whether, if HE is being repurposed especially within newer universities, the needs of the 'new student' are changing, and if so, in what way the learning environment can be changed to meet their individual needs (Haggis 2006; Hockings, Cooke, and Bowl 2007).

The 'new' student

With the changing identity of students in HE, it is crucial that institutions move away from the one-dimensional view focusing on either the needs of the student or the needs of the university, to an environment that has much greater uncertainty (Leathwood and O'Connell 2003). Taking this further, they suggest that the 'new students' construct their own identity in relation to dominant discourses, and these constructions are reinforced by discourses of 'widening participation' and 'dumbing down'. The 'new students' are being constructed with a clear emphasis on them taking responsibility for their own learning (Haggis 2006), but the ability of students to do this initially is questioned (Pokorny and Pokorny 2005). This links to an area of contention, because there is a tension between supporting students and encouraging a dependency. In a research study, Bingham and O'Hara (2007) found that students struggle to become 'autonomous' learners, and argued that therefore they should not be 'spoon fed'. Lawrence (2005) takes this issue further, suggesting that teaching staff might be disassociating themselves from any 'blame' for student failure or withdrawal by locating the problem within the student. The desire to support student transition is coupled with tensions around institutional targets for 'bums on seats' and the ongoing move to increase participation in HE (Smith 2007), leaving academic staff feeling ill equipped to support the proposed 'new student'.

Cultural capital and habitus

The research was designed to explore whether the difficulties that the proposed 'new student' experiences in making the transition into HE are related to a lack of cultural capital, possibly leading to a disjunction between the home environment and that of the university (Longden 2004), resulting in feelings of isolation. Cultural capital relates to social class, family background and commitment to education (Bourdieu 1992; Longden 2004) and can also be linked to the amount of resources available to students. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) make a clear link between cultural capital and the expectations of the student, and it is crucial that these expectations, together with the expectations of the teaching staff, are made explicit within the learning process (Carnell 2007).

The impact of cultural capital can be seen even before the student arrives at university because working-class parents often have less knowledge about how educational systems work, and are at times less confident supporting their children in matters relating to choice of university (Vryonides 2007). Cultural capital is not necessarily always linked to social class (Reay 1998), but if a student lacks the appropriate capital this can impact on their experience when entering the new environments (Reay et al. 2002). Taking the issue further, Bourdieu (1990) discusses cultural capital and its transmission across generations, suggesting that it can lead to an unfair education system that is biased in favour of students who possess inherited cultural capital.

The habitus, a set of dispositions that are acquired at an early age (Bourdieu 1990), can directly impact on students' ability to assimilate and make sense of their new environment within the university. Habitus is described as a set of dispositions that 'generate and organise practice' (Johnson 1993, 5), and there is thought to be a link between habitus and a person's use of language (Bourdieu 1992). Individuals, or agents, have the freedom to behave in a range of different ways, but their habitus acquired during their early experiences does predispose them to behave in certain ways (Reay 2004). This should be considered alongside the concept of 'institutional habitus' (Thomas 2002) in questioning whether the actions of the individual and practices within the often rigid structures of the university (Reay, David, and Ball 2005; Hatt, Baxter, and Tate 2008) are biased in favour of certain social groups, making transition for some more difficult.

Students' transition into higher education

Students' initial transition into HE can be experienced as entering an 'alien environment' (Askham 2008), and it is proposed that this experience can be different depending on a student's social class (Reay 2002; Becker and Hecken 2009) and what can be experienced as a middle-class environment (Reay, David, and Ball 2005). This process should start with appropriate and stimulating induction (Hultberg et al. 2008) and should include opportunities to develop social cohesion (Parkinson and Forrester 2004) and key skills (Marland 2003). Induction should be a process rather than a one-off event to ensure that students are supported to 'fit in' (Reay 2002; Holdsworth 2006; Porter and Swing 2006), especially during their first semester at university.

A crucial period for any student is the transition into the university, and the success of this is likely to have an impact on the future achievements of the student (Haggis 2006; Hultberg et al. 2008). This clearly points to the importance of supported transition for students to ensure that they fit in, and Young, Glogowska, and Lockyer (2007) state that when a student's cultural capital is valued by the university staff, the student will make the transition more readily.

It is proposed that 'new students' in HE are at times unable to draw upon social networks of support, making their transition more difficult. Studies

suggest that in post-1992 universities there was less social engagement (Yorke and Longden 2007) and a lack of social integration (Wingate 2007), resulting in a negative experience for some students. This lack of integration can be intensified if the students' socio-cultural, linguistic, and economical capital does not fit with the dominant discourse within the university (Lawrence 2005). The transition into HE can be made more difficult because of a range of differences, including ethnicity, gender and socio-economic class or background (Reay et al. 2002), and all these factors need to be considered.

The dominant discourse within HE promotes the independent learner, but this denies the need for student–staff communication (Smith 2007), which can facilitate support in response to individual need. When considering students' ability to engage with practices within the institution, it is crucial to remember that students might not have the cultural capital to support their transition (Iannelli 2007). This affirms Ridley's (2004) supposition that 'conversations' are the key to student success, and other research suggests the need for 'transition tutorials' within the first semester (Crosling 2003; Keup and Barefoot 2005).

Data collection

The case study adopted a mainly qualitative approach but did collect some quantitative data using an online questionnaire (Surveyor) that was sent to all level 1 students through an electronic link embedded within an email. This complementary method (Kelle and Erzberger 2004) of data collection was used to ensure the initial data collection happened within the students' first six weeks on the course, with the intention of capturing a snapshot from a wide range of students. The response rate was 52% (n=180), and the results were subjected to thematic analysis looking for broad themes. As part of the questionnaire, students were asked whether they would be prepared to take part in focus group discussions, and 28 students agreed. The focus group included a total of 25 respondents (three students indicated that they had decided not to take part), with the aim of gathering rich data about the students' transition by encouraging a dialogue (Sarantakos 2005) exploring the themes that had emerged from the questionnaire. The timing of the group discussions was important because although the study was considering their early transitional experiences, it was important to allow enough time to elapse to ensure that the students had started to feel confident to discuss issues in front of their peers.

Sample

The questionnaire was sent to all first-year students who were studying full-time on an early childhood studies course, and although the cohort were predominantly female and under 21 years old, there were also a number of male students and a group of mature students ranging in age from 21 to

approximately 45. The small-group discussions included 23 female and 2 male students with an age range of 18 to mid 40s, and over 34% of this sample identified themselves as mature students.

Findings and analysis

Questionnaires were sent out to 180 students, resulting in a 52% response rate, and they collected data about students' early experiences within the university. The data were subjected to thematic analysis using cultural capital as a theoretical framework, and emergent themes were explored within small-group discussions.

It was interesting to note that over 70% of the students were doing some paid work to support themselves whilst at university, and less than 30% of students were spending more than 15 hours per week on campus. This could be linked to what Laing, Robinson, and Johnston (2005) suggested is the 'new student' – one who has to juggle work commitments with full-time study. When the students were asked what challenges they faced, nearly 27% said that they have difficulty finding time to study, and nearly 18% identified that understanding the academic language was a challenge. This links with the suggestion by Lawrence (2005) that transition is a process that happens over a period of time, rather than being a one-off event. Students were also asked who they spent their free time with, and nearly 53% stated that they still spend most of their time with friends from outside the university.

The students' expectations

The students who completed the questionnaire stated that they had mixed feelings about coming to university, and this was because they expected it to be 'different' to what they had experienced so far in education. One student commented that she expected it to be 'slightly different to college … university being more independent study', while another suggested that they thought there would be 'higher expectations, a lot of work, more independent learning'. Overall, students perceived that there would be an increased workload and a need for them to become more independent learners, and this links to the suggestion by Haggis (2006) that teaching staff construct the 'new student' as able to take responsibility for their own learning.

Both within the questionnaire and in the small-group discussions students commented on their concern about not having the appropriate language needed to succeed at university, and this supports the proposal by Bourdieu (1992) that there is a link between a person's habitus and their use of language. Furthermore, students added that at times they did not understand the language used by both academic and support staff. Interestingly, during the group discussions it was clear that the language difficulties often related to processes within the university, including enrolling and timetables, rather than being

concerned with subject-specific language within lectures. This could be attributed to the timing of the research, coming, as it did, very early in their experience of HE.

When students were asked about their expectations of teaching and learning at university, opinions varied, with one student stating, 'I expected university to be a lot like college – however, with even more of a laid-back approach to teaching and learning', and another expecting it to be 'hard with strict tutors'. Students also had a range of views on the knowledge that they expected their tutors to have, with some considering them to be 'very knowledgeable' or describing staff as 'well organised and skilled', while others expected lecturers and lectures to be 'dull'. During the group discussions the students were asked why they wanted to come to university if they thought that it would be 'dull', and they commented that it was 'worth putting up with it to get a degree'. These comments would suggest that some students did lack cultural capital, drawing on very limited resources to predict what going to university would be like.

The students' early experience at university

Students were asked how their expectation compared with their experience during the first few weeks at university. A number of students commented that university had been different to what they expected. One student stated that she had expected 'chalk and talk, not a lot of help and very scary' and her experience had been very different: 'tutors are friendly and I've begun to enjoy university now I am settling in'. In the group discussion most of the students agreed that some of their fears had not been realised, but some students were still feeling, as one student described, 'like a fish out of water'. This links to the suggestion by Askham (2008) that students can experience HE as an alien environment.

When asked about teaching and learning, students had on the whole been pleasantly surprised. One student stated:

> The one thing I found different was that I thought the lectures would be where you sit and listen; however, I found that students were more involved with the lectures, just the same as sixth form really, just without the lecture theatre.

Following on from this, students discussed their changing perception about the support they would get from both students and staff within taught sessions. A mature student stated that she 'expected it to be harder than it is, as I wasn't expecting lecturers and other students to be so helpful and understanding'. In response to this, another student stated that she had been dreading coming to university, but said that '[I now] feel welcome … I didn't think I would adjust as quickly as I have'. It is clear from a number of the comments made by the students that they had little or no knowledge of what

was expected at university, resulting in a number of concerns and pressures on students making the transition into HE.

Supporting students to make the transition into higher education

A number of students highlighted that they needed support using computers because they felt there was an 'assumption' that they would be confident technology users. One student stated that they felt there was a tendency by teaching staff to 'presume that everyone has good computer skills', while a number of students said they rarely use a computer and some had never had an email address. One student commented that this had caused her to feel she had been 'thrown very much in the deep end … it seems you are expected to be quite competent on computers and Internet and I am not … I felt quite disheartened to the point of quitting.'

The feedback from this study highlights the way processes within an institution can put students who lack certain skills at a disadvantage straight away. This links to what Young, Glogowska, and Lockyer (2007) proposed is the need for the institution to 'adapt' to meet the requirements of the diverse student cohort. When planning for admission and transition, it is crucial that teaching and support staff consider how disciplinary discourses can in themselves be 'implicated' in a student's failure (Haggis 2006).

Students commented on how important it was to be supported during the early days and weeks at university. Some students felt they were supported, commenting that 'the tutors are more approachable than what you expect, and you can ask questions'. In both the questionnaire and the small-group discussions, the issue of feeling able to 'ask questions' was discussed frequently. Where students had felt able to ask questions they suggested they were able to 'settle in', but in situations where they were unable to, anxiety was at its highest.

Conversely, some students felt unsupported, with one commenting that 'it's very confusing, I'm still not sure I'm doing things right as there has been no feedback from lecturers yet'. Other students felt that although they had not been supported, they viewed this as part of their journey to becoming 'independent'. This links to the research carried out by Bingham and O'Hara (2007) where academics suggested that students struggle to become 'autonomous' learners.

Although students commented on the need to become independent learners, they also suggested they would like more structured activity on campus to help them 'settle', especially in the first semester. Students were often surprised that they were only expected to be in a teaching group four times a week, and although most enjoyed the online activities, they still wanted the opportunity to speak to teaching staff face to face.

The idea that you need ongoing support also featured within the discussions, with one student stating, 'I was a little lost at first, it was a case of finding out things for yourself unless you went to student support about 30 times.'

Students commented that in the first week more support was available, but said that this was not available once teaching had started. The size of teaching groups was also commented on by a number of students, with one male student stating, 'No, I do not feel supported – I expected it to be more personal, smaller groups and more meetings with personal tutor.' It could be suggested that this student is drawing on his previous experience of education to inform his expectations.

Conclusions

It is suggested that the results from this case study highlight some important considerations for institutions when offering HE courses to a more diverse student body. The findings show that some of the students expected university to be different in a number of ways, including having an increased workload, higher expectations and an emphasis on independent learning. In contrast to this, some students were surprised by the level of independence, and this could be linked to what Modood (2004) described as a lack of cultural capital. If students come from a family where nobody has attended university, the student will have very little experience to draw upon. The findings support previous research, but they also illuminate the importance of a well-planned and supported transitional period for students, especially during their early weeks and months at university. The need for an extended period of support presents universities with a challenge because of the changing role of university staff, with an increased workload and large student cohorts.

From the findings it is clear to see that the experience of starting university is very individual, with some students feeling supported while other students felt that they did not receive the level of support that they required. One theme that did come from the questionnaires was that the students expected to spend more time on campus either in lectures or working with other students.

With the repurposing of HE it is proposed that it is crucial to move away from the approaches which locate the problem in individual students' circumstances or abilities and towards an approach which argues for more fundamental adaptation of HE to meet the needs of a very different student body (Young, Glogowska, and Lockyer 2007). If the cause of the problem is located in the academic processes, then focusing on the deficit model, which views the problem as located within the student, will not bring about the desired change.

It is vital to move from questioning what is wrong with the 'new student' to a system that questions what needs to change either with the curriculum or with the processes of interaction that can potentially prevent students from learning (Haggis 2006).

This requires a cultural change and a move away from an expectation that the student needs to 'adapt' in order to 'fit in' to HE, and it requires more analysis of the needs of the proposed 'new student'. This requires teaching and

admission staff to view induction as a process (Laing, Robinson, and Johnston 2005) rather than as a one-off event that happens during welcome week. Making these changes is in no way without its difficulties, as many teaching staff feel that little can be done to support students in their transition because of large cohorts and a very diverse student body (Young, Glogowska, and Lockyer 2007).

Taking the notion that some students lack the cultural capital needed to access teaching and learning within HE, it is proposed that what is required is a shift in perception about 'appropriate student support' in the early period of transition. Teaching staff need to be open and honest about their expectations of students as soon as possible (Lawrence 2005) to ensure that students feel empowered to succeed.

Where necessary it is possible to provide compensatory experiences to bring students' cultural capital to an equitable position with other students, and this could be done during the transition period. As stated earlier, the use of language can exclude students who lack the specialist vocabulary within institutional systems and possibly subject areas. It is therefore important to consider the barriers to learning, reframing them within the context of HE today. Teaching staff need an awareness of how more subtle aspects within teaching and learning may in fact be creating conditions that make it difficult or in fact impossible for some students to learn.

Notes on contributor

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