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They give us homework! Transition to higher education: the case of initial teacher training

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This article examines some issues surrounding transition to higher education. It is based on the case study of a cohort of Year 1 students in a modern university in England. The purpose of the study was to ascertain any potential transitional issues and therefore any areas for development in our Year 1 programmes to aid student progress. Data were gathered via semi-structured questionnaires distributed to Year 1 initial teacher training students and their lecturers and through focused conversations with a group of students. The main findings of the study indicate that independent study and assessment processes pose challenges for students in their first year at university, and it is hoped that the outcomes of this research will contribute to a more informed transition from school to university through developing a clearer understanding of prior educational experiences that inform first-year undergraduate expectations and needs.

Keywords: independent learning; assessment; transition; initial teacher training; case study

Introduction

Drawing on empirical research, this article examines the significance of ‘preparedness’ with specific reference to assessment, given that, as Boud (2006, xvii) notes, ‘[a]ssessment probably provokes more anxiety among students and irritation among staff than any other feature of higher education’. Evidence from regular degree programme consultations with students and staff indicated that a key issue for our Year 1 undergraduate students seemed to be associated with expectations of teaching, learning and, fundamentally, assessment.

Using a case study of a new university, focusing in particular on the BA (Honours) Primary Education with Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) part-time programme, the Transition Project examined some of the issues surrounding students’ prior experiences of assessment with a view to enhancing retention in higher education (HE). At the time of gathering the data, the economic climate in the UK was turbulent, and thus the institution was concerned with both retention and recruitment of students to its programmes.

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Furthermore, we were concerned that much research in the field of student retention indicates that a substantial proportion of those students not completing degree programmes withdraw during, or at the end of, the first year in HE, arguably because in the first year students are faced with considerable changes (Yorke 1999).

In addition, with a particular emphasis on assessment, Ecclestone (2007, 41) notes that staff in universities need to understand more about the ways in which students' prior experiences of assessment mould their expectations, attitudes and effectiveness in engaging with new methods and approaches, the rationale being that in doing so this may 'illuminate some challenges in fostering sustainable learning'.

The research context

Making the transition from school to university is a challenging obstacle for many students, with research revealing that for first-year university students it is a time of substantial change and adjustment. For some, the transition from a 'controlled' environment of school or college to one in which they take responsibility for their own academic and social needs is stressful and a source of anxiety (Lowe and Cook 2003). Our HE programmes are designed with a significant emphasis on independent learning and learner autonomy. Learner autonomy is primarily concerned with decision making on the part of the learner, with the locus of control and responsibility lying in their hands (Pierson 1996). However, research intimates that the pre-HE experiences of first-year undergraduate students are hindered by lack of preparation (Clark and Ramsey 1990; Cook and Leckey 1999). Many students enter HE with little idea of what to expect and little understanding of how the university environment can affect their lives. Rowley, Hartley, and Larkin (2008) suggest that the academic experiences of students prior to attending university can contribute to a mismatch between student expectations and actual experiences in HE, and this can lead to disengagement with the academic process, supporting the views of Lowe and Cooke (2003, 75), who state: 'The roots of many unrealistic expectations lie in the inappropriate preparation students receive before coming to university.' And there is concern that, for example, A levels provide insufficient grounding for the demands of HE, given that there is little or no emphasis on teamwork or independent learning (Roberts and Higgins 1992; Smith and Hopkins 2005).

In academic circles it is widely acknowledged that assessment is a fundamental component of the academic process, and arguably, since the publication of the review conducted by Black and Wiliam (1998), the profile of formative assessment has been significantly raised (Tierney 2006). The theoretical framework of formative assessment, as outlined by Black and Wiliam, prioritises the role of students in the teaching and learning process, moving them from a more passive role to a more interactive role (Dann 2002).

Claims for the educational value and effectiveness of formative assessment in the mainstream compulsory school system, Torrance (2007) states, have been made for a number of years, both in the UK and elsewhere; however, such a paradigm shift poses complexities for higher education institutes where, in such settings, more emphasis is placed on summative assessment (Irons 2008).

Since the 1990s, many higher education institutions have moved to modularisation of programmes, the rationale being that this aids students' progress since it allows for 'credits' to be accumulated. However, a pitfall associated with such a model is very much evident in assessment, where students are, by the nature of the structure of the programme, assessed at the end of a module. By implication, Irons (2008) argues, students are driven by summative assessment and there is little time available for tutors and students to engage in formative assessment.

Such an approach is described by Murtagh and Baker (2009) as 'linear', whereby the role of students in the assessment process is minimal and the role of the tutor is prioritised. However, such a transmission model (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006) seems to contrast with the prior experiences of many students, most of whom progress to university from general academic or general vocational qualifications, where:

[general vocational] [s]tudents work closely to the official assessment specifications, submitting formative drafts, and are coached closely by teachers to achieve the grade criteria ... [and for general academic students,] [f]ormative assessment emphasises the practising of typical examination questions with classroom discussion and feedback. (Ecclestone 2007, 42)

Acknowledgement of the diverse prior experiences of our students, and a desire to ensure that they develop as lifelong learners, led us to consider the notion of 'preparedness'. How are our students prepared for study and, with particular reference to this article, for assessment in HE? And similarly, how prepared are we as lecturers and as assessors of our student body?

The study

The Transition Project set out to investigate the perceptions of part-time Year 1 undergraduate students and their lecturers regarding their experiences of teaching, learning and assessment in their pre- and current HE study.

The research study, which is still in progress, was small scale and exploratory, and adopted a case-study approach because of its appropriateness in exploring the complexity of transition to HE and because case-study research facilitates the opportunity to explore a phenomenon through the use of multiple sources of data. However, it is important to note that the notion of generalisability with regard to case-study approaches to research design is one of contention, with many arguing that one cannot generalise from case studies. Yin (1994, 9), for example, recognises that within the academic community

there is opposition to case study on the grounds of ‘little basis for generalisation’. However, Flyvbjerg (2004, 420) asserts that this ‘conventional wisdom’ is misleading and states: ‘One can often generalise on the basis of a single case ... But formal generalisation is overvalued as a source of scientific development, whereas “the force of example” is underestimated’ (2004, 425).

The study used three modes of data collection:

- open-ended questionnaires distributed to 12 staff;
- open-ended questionnaires distributed to 50 students; and
- focused conversations (Nutbrown 2002) with five students.

This offered the opportunity for data triangulation (Denzin 1997); however, it was not anticipated that these data sources would necessarily provide a consistent portrait of teaching, learning and assessment perceptions; rather, it was thought that the data would reveal differing perceptions. Such differences, Patton (1980) acknowledges, should not be ignored; indeed, efforts should be made to understand and interpret them.

The research findings

Data gathered from the questionnaires and focus-group interviews indicate a number of key findings. A total of 12 staff questionnaires were distributed, and they yielded 10 responses; similarly, 50 student questionnaires were distributed and yielded 38 responses.

The questionnaires distributed to staff were designed to investigate their perceptions of students’ prior experiences of teaching, learning and assessment, with a view to unravelling how they perceived this to impact on teaching, learning and assessment in the early stages of HE.

Using a Likert-scale questionnaire, staff were invited to rank a series of statements and provide supporting qualitative comments. The statements were as follows:

- How well prepared do you think our Year 1 students are for their move to HE study?
- How well prepared do you think our Year 1 students are for undertaking Level 4 assessments?
- To what extent do you think Year 1 students engage with teaching and learning activities?
- To what extent do you think Year 1 students engage with assessment tasks?

In addition, staff were asked to identify whether they believed that Year 1 students could be better prepared for HE study.

The questionnaires distributed to the students invited them, as they came to the end of their first year in HE, to share their thoughts about their experiences

to date. The purpose of this was for us to develop a greater understanding of students' thoughts about their first year in HE and the notion of 'preparedness'. The questionnaire was open ended and qualitative in nature, and included the following questions:

- In what ways do you think your A-level/other courses were useful in preparing you for work at degree level?
- What sort of assessment methods were used most at your sixth form/college?
- In what ways do you think your A-level/other courses were useful in preparing you for assessments at degree level?
- What differences do you feel there are between teaching and learning at A level/other courses and at university?
- What differences do you feel there are between assessment at A level/other courses and at university?

The follow-up focus-group interviews were semi-structured (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2007).

The three data-collection modes provided much information, and a content analysis was conducted in order to ascertain any key themes. Those which are used in this article illustrate the complexity of transition to HE study from the viewpoint of students and their lecturers, and the following discussion is framed around the issues of independent learning and assessment.

Independent learning

Evidence from the study highlights that a change in teaching and learning styles is challenging for students. In particular, they find the aspect of independent learning, which is deeply embedded in our degree programme, a challenge. For example:

When I started my degree, even though I knew that I'd have to do some work at home, I hadn't realised what it meant. There's a huge expectation that you organise yourself ... set your own targets ... this has been hard to do ... I've never done this before, and it can be quite challenging to work independently. (Becca)

This supports lecturers' concerns that students typically use the phrase 'home-work' to describe independent study. For instance, the degree programme is structured into 15- and 30-credit modules. A 15-credit module is equivalent to 150 notional learning hours, and likewise, a 30-credit module relates to 300 notional learning hours. A key 30-credit module at Level 4 of the Programme is 'Personal and Professional Development' (PPD). The PPD module is allocated 72 face-to-face teaching sessions, with the remaining 228 hours being identified for independent study. Independent study may be directed study (whereby lecturers provide students with specific independent tasks), or it

may be self-directed (whereby students engage in self-study to meet their own specific needs).

The findings from the staff questionnaires indicate strongly that staff perceive students to be 'poorly' prepared for the transition to HE study, and a key factor associated with this relates to the notion of independent learning:

They are ready to move (to HE) but aren't really prepared for the independent nature. (Tutor 1)

There is a strong culture of dependency; wanting to be told how and what to write. (Tutor 3)

Mature students tend to have a better grasp of what HE will entail, be better motivated and prepared to engage with independent study. Younger entrants tend to be heavily dependent and have difficulty in being self-motivated. (Tutor 7)

They expect you to tell them and lack independent study skills and frequently forget to start it [independent work] until you nag! (Tutor 9)

The prior experiences of many of the students who responded indicated that they were insufficiently prepared for HE study, and in particular for independent learning. This, they explained, was because much of their pre-HE study was very tutor-directed. For example:

The teachers mostly helped us by telling us what to study and look in where as the emphasis at uni is on you choosing the books. (Jane)

I thought that my A levels would prepare me for uni. They did a little and prepared me for meeting deadlines which is vital. But I think it would have been useful to have had more guidance on how to work independently and how much time it takes. Most of the work we did at A level was structured for us and our lecturers gave us the things we would need. The workload can be huge at uni. (Lizzy)

The focused conversation also provided data that revealed that in pre-HE settings, students are 'hand held' (their words) and that, for example, they view the following as applicable:

They [college tutors] tell you what to write, more or less. (Amy)

Spoon fed! (Amy)

Yeah! You got given all the information. (Becca)

And the students indicated that this process hindered their ability to work independently whilst at university. For example:

Moving to uni has been hard for me. I struggle knowing how to do things on my own. Tutors are helpful and we do get given some directed tasks, but I know I need to do more reading and things. I've never done this before, I've always been given everything, and so it's difficult to think about what I need for myself. (Katy)

Yeah, I find it hard sometimes. I try to manage my time and get organised – it's taken me ages though to get used to it [independent study] though, I've been so used to just doing what teachers tell me to do. (Amy)

And they made it explicit that preparation for HE study should be a responsibility of pre-HE settings:

College could provide more structured independent learning so that when you get to uni, it is almost second nature to you but explain the importance of it and link it to uni life and work life too. (Katy)

It's not really you I don't think. I think it's college really, I think college should prepare you more for coming to university. It's different studying at college to university ... (Cerrie)

Assessment

The second key finding relates to the notion of the purpose of assessment. Lecturers have described the idea that the assessments are designed to do the following:

Ensure the students have made connections and understood the links between the theory and practice. (Tutor 10)

Enable the students to personally consider the theory of teaching and link this to practice. (Tutor 1)

Begin to articulate their own beliefs and views about the subject. (Tutor 7)

However, they feel that this perception is not shared by the students, who, staff believe, see the assessments as a 'box ticking exercise' (Tutor 3).

Nevertheless, data from the questionnaires and focused conversations illustrate that the students share the perception of their lecturers, and have a clear notion that the assignments are designed to encourage them to link theory and practice and articulate their own beliefs. Notably, however, it is their ability to actually do this which they perceive to be problematic:

I didn't think [assignments would] be as challenging as they were – I think myself quite good with words, it was completely different to what I was expecting. (Amy)

The programme, as described earlier, fits with an arguably typical model, given that it is modular in nature, and students are assessed at the end of such modules by and large through a formal piece of written work in the form of a 'traditional' assignment (Murtagh and Baker 2009).

Lecturers have indicated that they believe that Year 1 students find the process of composing 'traditional' assignments difficult for a number of reasons. For example, staff have explained that they believe that students need significant amounts of guidance and support with regard to 'structuring' such an assignment, and that many students lack confidence in composing an assignment:

They do not seem to have any idea as to how to structure an assignment answer. It is a real problem because committed students have their confidence dented when they receive their assignments back. (Tutor 4)

They can become VERY anxious when completing their assignments in Year 1. They need a great deal of guidance and structure. (Tutor 1)

Many lack confidence in tackling anything without an incredible amount of guidance and interpretation. (Tutor 7)

There was evidence that, at times, some felt overwhelmed. (Tutor 10)

On analysis of data gathered from the student questionnaires and interviews, several key themes related to the above concerns emerged – namely: the students identified that they would welcome pre-HE opportunities to become familiar with the 'style' of an academic assignment. First, the students expressed how they found it challenging to engage in non-polemic writing, and to use reading material to inform their work:

It was a challenge writing it in the correct style – the style of writing was new to me. (Amy)

It was like so you have your point and then you have something to back it up and then you have something to say 'although ...' and you have to use all those words. (Becca)

Yes, coz I'm just used to giving one side of the argument – I did A-level English language – but backing it up – I've never done references in such depth, it's always been like all one reference within it. (Amy)

You can't just say something. You need someone to back it up, but someone who says something different – that's what gets the higher marks, and that's what I've found difficult – to say what I think, and then think 'Oh gosh I have to say what someone else thinks!' – and someone else! That was new to me and that's what I found difficult. (Becca)

In addition, the students discussed the quality of their written work in HE, highlighting that HE requires them to engage in 'deeper' study, engaging in reflecting on both theory and practice, and for some this was a challenge:

It's different writing an assignment in college to writing it in university ... (Cerie)

Yeah, it's completely different ... (Deb)

At college you don't need to go in depth about anything ... (Cerie)

I didn't do any referencing at college ... (Deb)

I did, but not as much referencing as you do now – I didn't realise the step up would be so hmm different. (Becca)

Mine was 'stick a quote in' and it was like a whole quote and it didn't matter how many words – it was just like stick a quote in, stick one in there and you were done then. (Erin)

And this echoes the concerns of tutors who indicated that Year 1 students find it difficult to make effective use of sources to support their assignments:

Little consideration is given to reading as a way to increase their knowledge and to write in an informed, considered way. (Tutor 3)

The final element which emerged from the study relates to the technicalities associated with academic writing – namely, the accurate use of a referencing system. What is of interest is that this concern was raised very clearly by the students, and not at all by their tutors. The students seemed very concerned about their ability, or lack of, to use an accurate referencing system in academic writing:

College needs to make the essay structure more like uni, with a grading criteria, referencing and use of quotes. (Katie)

Although A-level English briefly touched on referencing, I feel that academic writing was not covered in anywhere near the depth that it should have been. I feel it would have been useful to have been introduced to academic writing and use of references before starting university. (Katy)

And these views were endorsed in the focused conversations:

Harvard referencing – I STILL don't think I've got it – not perfectly. (Deb)

I did that at college and I'm glad we did that – it wasn't as difficult, but I can understand how some people really would find it hard. (Becca)

We didn't even do it at college – we just got given a booklet. (Erin)

Discussion

This study sought to investigate the perceptions of lecturers and students with regard to the transition from pre-HE study to Year 1 of an undergraduate

degree programme, and it became apparent that the group of students under investigation experienced similar challenges as described by Smith and Hopkins (2005) with regard to the nature of their study. For example, their pre-HE experiences did not, it seems, prepare them sufficiently for independent study and, for these first-year students, student-led learning, as opposed to more directed teacher-led learning, was something of a surprise. For many, the first year at university was based on very little experience of working independently, and on a lack of understanding of what it actually involves; indeed, as outlined earlier, students perceive independent learning as 'home-work' – that is, they see it as something additional to their study, not part of it. Such concerns are shared by their lecturers, who acknowledge that many Year 1 students expect to receive much more guidance and support. Thus, although social factors have been identified by, for example, Trotter and Roberts (2006) as being associated with high achievement and retention as they may influence student self-concept and self-confidence, Hodgkinson and Bloomer (2000) have suggested that assimilation into the institutional learning culture also has a significant effect on dispositions to learning and learning behaviours. In line with the findings of Rowley, Hartley, and Larkin (2008), our students had to experience university study before they could appreciate how different it was from their earlier learning experiences. The evidence from the data therefore indicates that in seeking to support our students, and thus possibly retain them for the duration of a programme, consideration needs to be given to the notion of independent learning. For example, there is perhaps a need for university lecturers to clarify the curriculum of their programmes such that requirements are made explicit and the teaching, learning and assessment strategies are used to build independent learning as students progress from Level 4 to Level 6. Furthermore, there is evidently a need for students to have a clear notion of what independent learning is and how they can manage this themselves prior to entry to programmes. As indicated by the students, there is arguably an opportunity for developing the transition from pre-HE study in colleges in order that their students are prepared and ready to embark on Level 4 work at the commencement of their degree programme.

A significant finding of this study relates to academic writing, and in particular to the difficulties students experience with regard to assessments in terms of support, 'style' and technicalities of referencing. Torrance (2007, 285) notes that in pre-HE settings, there is an:

overall orientation towards the pursuit of achievement, and the structural properties of awards such as modularization which can facilitate this, there is a significant, even overwhelming, culture of support for learners/candidates at every level and across every sub-sector of the LSS [Learning and Skills Sector]. Even in A-level teaching, beyond modularization, support is provided by tutors through the breaking down and interpreting of assessment criteria and the involvement of tutors in formal examining and moderating roles for awarding bodies.

Indeed, opportunities in pre-HE settings are available for students to draft and re-draft assignments, receiving feedback on strengths and weaknesses and what needs to be done to improve the grade (Torrance 2007, 286). Our degree programmes are designed on the premise of Assessment for Learning, as outlined by Black and Wiliam (1998), which has established that teachers need to:

- share learning intentions with students
- involve students in self-evaluation
- provide feedback which leads students to recognise the next steps, and how to take them
- be confident that every student can improve and consider student self-esteem. (Black and Wiliam 1998)

However, such high levels of support with regard to drafting and re-drafting of assignments are not mirrored in our undergraduate programmes, where students are expected to engage in independent investigation of theory and practice, and whilst the students acknowledge that this is a 'step up' (their phrase), they find the transition a challenge. The evidence from the data therefore indicates that in seeking to provide students with the skills to approach assessment independently, and thus retain them for the duration of a programme, consideration needs to be given to the clarity of assessment expectations.

In addition to the mismatch between levels of support with regard to assessment in pre- and current HE settings for our students, there are also challenges surrounding the style of the assessment. Evidence from the data gathered indicates that the students find it difficult to compose a 'traditional' academic piece of work which reflects on theory and practice from a range of standpoints, as demanded by the programme. These concerns are echoed by university lecturers. Students involved in the study claim that their difficulties stem from lack of experiences in pre-HE settings, where assessment demands vary greatly. Indeed, for many of our students, their prior experiences of assessment do not allow for the transition to HE study to be 'smooth'. Many of the students believe that having been 'spoon fed' (their words) the assignments and having had limited engagement with theory, they find it difficult to access relevant sources independently, critique literature and theory or use their reading to analyse their practice. Whilst some may argue that 'higher education is outdated, abstract, elitist and rife with academic self-interest and indulgence with regard to what will be taught' (Ecclestone 1999), it is, on the basis of the data acquired in this study, important to question how students engage in assessment in pre-HE contexts and how they can be prepared for the transition.

Arguably, as Rust (2002) notes, if the assessment system is to be as unthreatening as possible, not to mention fair, then the process and criteria

should be explicit and transparent to the students. In the context of this article, the notion of transparency possibly needs to be considered in advance of entry to the programmes to allow students the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the processes and thus equip themselves for the transition to HE study. Notably, Lowe and Cook (2003, 75) point out that '[i]nstitutions of higher education need to provide appropriate academic, attitudinal and social preparation for their new students. In this context induction should be seen as a process instead of as an event ...'

The evidence from the data therefore indicates that in seeking to provide students with the skills to approach assessment competently, and thus ensure retention across the programme, consideration needs to be given to the transparency of assessment processes at the pre-programme stage.

Conclusions and implications

Tinto (1993, 2) notes the following: 'Knowing that attrition is greatest in first year does not, in itself, tell us what institutions can do during that year to enhance the likelihood of persistence and degree completion. For that we have to know about the different types of learning which arise at the university and the forces which shape those learnings.'

This article has presented data from a case study of a modern university and in doing so has highlighted a number of transitional issues that, whilst particular to our institution, may be of relevance to a broader HE community. Although the scope of this study imposes limitations with regard to its generalisable value, it serves to highlight some of the issues confronting Year 1 undergraduate students as they embark upon their HE studies.

Rowley, Hartley, and Larkin (2008) note that students arrive at university having been processed through a results-oriented pre-university system and, in such a context, support is often directed towards helping them to meet specific assessment requirements. This contrasts sharply with the first-year experience in HE, where support is more likely to be focused on developing the student as an independent learner (Wingate 2006). The discussion above highlighted a number of key themes associated with transition to HE, and on the basis of the findings of this study, there are some things that the institution can do to help students come to terms with the demands of their new environment, with a particular focus on teaching, learning and assessment.

First, the data highlight that students find the transition a 'step up', and many had not anticipated the work to be as challenging as it was. This implies an emphasis on clear expectations at induction and pre-programme events such as open days.

Second, much emphasis in our programmes is on independent learning, and there is potential for the institute to design and deliver its curricula in such a way that students are inducted into the process of independent and autonomous learning.

Finally, students' assessment experiences pre-HE vary widely, and for many the transition to Level 4 academic work is challenging. There is potential for a richer induction for those moving to HE study to ensure that they are prepared for the academic expectations.

In retrospect, the questionnaire and interview questions were not capable of ascertaining fully the extent of the students' preparedness for transition to HE, and this is a limitation of the study. Although the data revealed that the students experienced a number of challenges, it did not become clear to what extent additional external factors impacted upon students. Nevertheless, our intentions in conducting the study have, by and large, been met and the outcomes in the first year have been promising. We have made a good start on the task of understanding the perceptions of transition to HE study and we hope to build on the findings.

Notes on contributor

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