

Smoothing the ride:

an exploration of students' experiences and perceptions of the transition from a Level 3 qualification to a higher education programme (Level 4) in a further education Institution

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ABSTRACT

The transition from a Level 3 programme to a higher education (HE) programme (Level 4) can be a bumpy one, which, when accompanied by significant anxieties and worries for many students, may affect retention rates. This small-scale case study explores the experiences and perceptions of students on their first year of HE study in a further education institution. Reflecting on their transition, the purpose was to identify strategies to address specific anxieties. Data collected from 106 questionnaires and one interview identified that students feel ill-prepared for the demands of HE. To overcome this it is suggested that more information be made available before or at the beginning of a programme, by providing opportunities to sit in on lessons, speak to students and access reading lists. Further, the development of academic skills was considered essential for those students who enter with more vocational qualifications.

KEYWORDS

TRANSITION
STUDENT PERCEPTION
HE IN FE
RETENTION
STUDENT ANXIETY

INTRODUCTION

X College, in the south-east of England, is an accredited further education college of a local university. It offers higher education (HE) programmes including foundation degrees, honours degrees and Level 6 Progression (Top-up) awards, in subjects ranging from accounting, early years, education, computing and IT, to music and performing arts, psychology and sports. Every year, a number of students progress from the college's own Level 3 provision; other students enter the HE provision via different routes and institutions (other colleges

or sixth forms). Although retention rates vary between the academic areas, in 2012/13, retention across all higher education within the college, after the first year of study, was 88% (University Centre X 2015). In comparison, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) reported that overall the percentage of entrants no longer in HE had remained steady between 2003/4 and 2009/10 at around 8.4%; however, this figure had decreased to 6.6% in 2011/12 (HEFCE 2015), which suggests a retention rate of 93.4%.

To bring it into line with this national trend, it is clearly of interest to College

X to improve its current retention rate. It has been argued that the first year of study in a university or higher education institution (HEI) is 'a period of considerable cognitive assimilation and development and that some students struggle with making this transition' (Palmer et al. cited in Winter & Dismore 2010: 255). With this in mind, it may not be unrealistic to suggest that students in a further education institution (FEI) experience a similar struggle.

Anecdotal feedback from students enrolled on the first year of a Foundation Degree in Learning

Support programme suggested they suffered from a high level of anxiety, especially with regard to academic writing and time management. Identifying and addressing these kinds of anxieties early is of some importance, as the more positive the learners' experiences are at the early stages of their studies, the more likely they are to reach the last stage (McGivney cited in Burton et al. 2011). The purpose of this small research project was therefore to find out from students enrolled on first-year HE programmes how they perceived the transition to HE, with a view to improving and smoothing that transition, and thus reducing the aforementioned kinds of anxiety.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

FEIs in the UK have provided higher education in a range of forms since the 1950s (Parry & Thompson 2002). The 2003 White Paper *The future of higher education* (DfES 2003) gave this provision further impetus, as it proposed to 'continue to increase participation towards 50 per cent of those aged 18–30, mainly through two-year work-focused foundation degrees' (DfES 2003: 7). It was suggested that these programmes 'will often be delivered in Further Education colleges' (DfES 2003: 57). FEIs already delivered '11 per cent of higher education' (DfES 2003: 62), with the vast majority of this (around 90%) comprising two year work-focused programmes, including foundation degrees. In 2007/8 there were approximately 72,000 students nationally enrolled on foundation degrees and the expectation was that this number would rise to 97,000 by 2010 (HEFCE 2008: 2). Although Parry et al. (2012) warn that there is little evidence of overall growth in college-taught HE, there were 186,455 HE enrolments at FEIs in 2012/13 compared to 180,390 in 2011/12 (HESA 2014). In contrast, the academic year 2012/13 saw a decrease of 6% from 2011/12 in the total number of students (2,340,275) enrolled on HE programmes in HEIs, followed by a further drop of 1.7% in 2013/14 (HESA 2014). It is stated that this reduction in

numbers reflects a general decline across the sector in all modes and levels of study, which coincides with changes to the tuition fee arrangements (HESA 2014).

One of the strengths of FEIs is that they contribute to the 'widening participation' agenda (Winter & Dismore 2010). Compared to HEIs, students in FEIs are generally older (referred to as mature students) and are more likely to be enrolled on a part-time programme (currently 60% of HE students in FEIs (Parry et al. 2012)). Traditionally, these students are more likely to have come from backgrounds where participation in HE is low; and they tend to hold a broader range of entry qualifications with more emphasis on Level 3 vocational qualifications, rather than A-levels (HEFCE 2006: 9, Parry et al. 2012). Arguably, these types of learners may need a supportive environment to achieve, which, as pointed out by Greenbank (2007), is more likely to be experienced in an FE setting. He continues that student support is more commonly associated with FE: as teachers work more traditional school hours, they are more likely to be available during the day to offer that support, whereas teachers in an HEI may have other commitments, affecting their availability (Greenbank 2007). Therefore, it could be argued that FEIs can offer less confident students a more supportive learning environment (Parry et al. 2012). It must be noted, however, that not all students who are enrolled on HE programmes in an FEI fall within this category; some may be attracted to continue their studies at HE level in an FEI, as the institution may already be familiar to them, and often nearer to home (Elliot & Brna 2009). Transition to studying at degree level can be challenging. McInnis et al. (1995) agree that as for some students the transition is a challenging hurdle, others find it an intimidating gulf. As reported by Richardson (nd), students participating in her research found degree-level study significantly different from any previous study they had undertaken. The main differences included fewer hours

of contact time and more emphasis on taking responsibility for their own learning, as degree-level study tends to be less structured than the 16–19 curriculum (Yorke cited in Richardson nd). Many students have little idea what to expect in terms of independent learning (McInnis et al. 1995) and numerous students admitted that they had not appreciated how much self-learning is involved in studying for a degree and how motivated they are required to be (Richardson nd). McInnis (1999) emphasised the importance of a smooth transition period and warned that the effects of negative transitions to tertiary education are easily underestimated since they are often revealed as discontinuation or failure in later years. Arguably, this may be a greater risk for mature learners. Navarre-Cleary (2012) suggests that adults are less likely to persist than younger students and are most likely to drop out in their first year of study. She highlighted that adults returning to study experience higher levels of anxiety about study in general and writing at an academic level in particular. Focusing more specifically on foundation degrees, Duke (2005: 3) argued that the provision is 'plagued by problems of identity, credibility and support'. Student experience was one aspect of a study carried out by Bathmaker & Thomas (2009: 129), which concluded that it was unclear whether students' 'horizons for action are extended or limited by their experience of studying in a "dual sector" institution' and that dual sector institutions appear to have separate cultures that relate to the HE and FE fields, affecting student identity (Bathmaker & Thomas 2009). The National Student Survey in 2008, 2009 and 2010 confirmed a lower overall level of student satisfaction with the quality of courses among students taught in FEIs compared with those in HEIs (Parry et al. 2012). These issues are important when considering that foundation degree students have been identified as particularly vulnerable to withdrawal, especially if they are studying on a part-

time basis and come from communities with limited experience of higher education (Rowley 2005).

METHODOLOGY

The aim of the study was to explore student perceptions and experiences of the transition to HE programmes. A small-scale case study was conducted at a college of further education in the south-east of England, involving four Schools or departments: Applied Health and Sciences, Education and Humanities, the Business School, and Music and Creative Arts. A total of eight year one programmes were considered, including six foundation degree programmes. Data collection was carried out by distributing questionnaires to all students present during one of their classes, as negotiated with the heads of school and individual lecturers, who delivered the session during which the questionnaires were distributed. The questionnaires identified the programme of study the participants were enrolled on but were completed anonymously. The questionnaire consisted of nine questions, six closed and three open-ended. The questions focused on students' experiences entering an HE programme and on whether these experiences met their expectations. Next, it asked for suggestions which might ensure, or contribute to, a smooth transition for future students. Furthermore, students were offered an opportunity to participate in individual semi-structured interviews, to provide more in-depth and rich data; those agreeing to this were invited to leave their contact details on the questionnaire (question ten). The questionnaire was piloted to ensure clarity and unambiguity of the questions posed. Respondent validity was achieved by checking the transcript of the interview with the participant. Reliability, however, is not claimed and generalisations cannot be made.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

A total of 106 questionnaires were distributed to students on their first year

of a (foundation) degree programme, from four Schools (Applied Health and Sciences, Education and Humanities, the Business School, and Media and Creative Arts). All questionnaires were returned, as they were completed during lesson time. Students who were absent on the day of distribution were not contacted. The data collected identified that in contrast to earlier findings (Parry et al. 2012) most students were enrolled onto full-time programmes (85%) with just over two-thirds (67%) enrolled onto a foundation degree; 57% of students were aged 20 years or younger and 40% had entered with A-level qualifications, while others held alternative Level 3 qualifications such as NVQs, Access or BTEC qualifications. With foundation degrees playing such a prominent role, these findings are in line with the Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA 2005) comment that there is evidence that foundation degrees attract people from a broad range of backgrounds, particularly from low-participation areas (HEFCE 2008), who had not previously considered entering HE, providing an alternative route for those without A-levels.

When asked about their experiences entering an HE programme, students agreed that it had been a 'daunting', 'scary', 'overwhelming' or 'terrifying' experience. They found the work 'challenging', 'a shock to the system with regard to workload', 'far more responsibility on student', 'more independence and self-discipline required compared to FE', a 'big jump from Access re workload', a 'bit more intense, 'very different from NVQ and A-levels'. This merely confirms the findings of McInnis et al. (1995) that many students have little idea what to expect in terms of independent learning and had not appreciated how much self-learning is involved in studying for a degree and how motivated they are required to be (Richardson nd). However, despite these anxieties, students also commented that they found their programme of study 'exciting' and 'interesting', 'harder than expected but enjoyable' and 'really good', 'very pleasant' and 'great fun'. For some

students, the opportunity for study meant a 'new beginning in my life'; a 'big step up'; they were 'stressed and excited about new course and meeting new people', 'excited to begin HE' although some found it 'hard to settle in at first due to family commitments, but getting easier as course progresses' and wondered if they were 'too old'. Most students liked to be 'treated like an adult'. Two programmes received some negative comments (BSc (Education and Humanities) and Foundation Degree (Media and Creative Arts)) where a minority of students felt 'disappointed', 'bored', 'misled', thought that the course was 'disorganised' (as timetable clashes went unnoticed) and 'expensive'. Although these comments cannot be ignored, they appear not to be representative of the cohorts. Generally, it appears that all the above can be summarised by the comment of one student who said that the 'anticipation is worse than the doing!'

Interestingly, when asked about their expectations of the programme before they were enrolled onto it, 70% of the students agreed that their experiences met their expectations. This appears to contradict the comments made earlier, that the work involved was harder and more challenging than anticipated. The research took place towards the end of the first term of the academic year, therefore students' memory of their expectations may have been affected while on the programme. It may be of benefit to ask students about their expectations before a programme commences, such as when they come to the college for their interview or during induction. Catching these perceptions at an early stage may ensure a more accurate perspective.

The final part of the questionnaire focused on what suggestions students could make to ease the transition from a Level 3 qualification to the first year of an HE programme. Apart from comments about a reduction in the number of assignments set in the first year of study and less homework to reduce

the workload, the main requirement was for detailed information prior to the start of the programme. Comments included: 'Knowing what will happen in HE'; an 'explanation on what to expect'; 'more information on the workload'; a 'better induction programme'; 'one-to-one interview or tutorial before the course starts'; and learning 'study skills or academic skills first'. Students appeared to be willing to take some responsibility and suggested they be set some 'pre-course work and reading' or even a 'trial assignment' which would not be part of the assessment process, with more opportunities to practise essay-writing. They further considered it may be helpful to 'sit in on lectures' or 'shadow a student' for a day. 'Meeting previous students and asking them questions' or maybe a 'workshop for the subject, meeting students and tutors' was also suggested. All Schools will have an induction programme, as per college strategy; however, it may be of benefit to revisit how these days are organised. Setting students work before the start of a programme may be problematic, as some do not decide to accept their offer of a place until the starting date itself. Students mentioned how difficult it is currently to cope with the workload, so it can be questioned how they would receive extra 'trial assignments and essays'. However, each School may want to consider these suggestions.

The second method of data collection was a semi-structured interview conducted with a student who had self-selected to participate. The intention was to interview two students from each cohort; however, few students agreed to be interviewed. Moreover, some of these were the students who were disappointed with their programme of study for a variety of reasons and saw the interview as an opportunity to 'let off steam', complaining about their experiences rather than focusing on the transition to HE, which was the purpose of the project. Therefore, only one interview with a student on the Foundation Degree

Learning Support was conducted. It must be noted that this was the only part-time programme, therefore views expressed may not be generalised from. The student, referred to as 'T', was one of the younger students on the programme and was in full-time employment. As stated by the QAA (2005), in areas where students are already in employment in the sector, such as education, foundation degrees prove popular. T confirmed that he had found the transition quite easy, easier than some of his peers, and unproblematic. In his A-levels they had focused on academic writing and on what was needed at university. However, he still found it 'a big leap, especially after taking some time out'. He continued by saying:

T: *'I'm my worst enemy as I want to do as well as I can; I want to be the best. I had been worried about the workload but felt that the Programme Manager had prepared me well at interview. I found the reading list helpful, as I could prepare for some of the modules. The college had done very well; the students had felt like being caught in the headlights, coming from different backgrounds and practices and they didn't know what to expect.'*

However, he continued that:

T: *'you cannot prepare for the jump; the college did well calming nerves and made students aware of what going on; I was on the ball all the time, others may have been more anxious.'*

With regard to study skills, T said:

T: *'I felt quite prepared; the study skills module is necessary so all students are brought to the same speed and level. I was confused about the purpose at first as critical writing was covered at A-level, but it's a necessity and for me more of a refresher course.'*

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Even though 70% of students who participated in the research confirmed that their experiences of working at year 1 of an HE programme met their expectations, it appears that they felt overwhelmed by the workload expected of them and the level of independent learning that was required. As mentioned above, HE students in an FEI often come from non-traditional backgrounds with more vocational Level 3 qualifications. They are older than HEI students and, arguably, may experience high levels of anxiety before and at the start of their programme of study.

To ease the transition from a Level 3 qualification to Level 4, or the first year of an HE programme, the college may want to consider supplying new students with detailed, in-depth information about the programmes it offers. Maybe during open days, prospective students can be given the opportunity to sit in on a lesson and to speak to some of the students. Reading lists could be made available prior to commencement of the programme to allow students to prepare for upcoming modules. It appears that a module on academic skills, although a refresher module for some, is essential to those who enter with more vocational qualifications. ■

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