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Understanding issues of transition to Higher Education to support students

Lisa Murtagh, Greg Parker

Edge Hill University, Ormskirk, Lancashire, United Kingdom

Background

Research concerning the experiences of first year undergraduates reveals the impact of substantial change and adjustment on retention and attrition. The transition from a 'controlled' environment, such as school or college, to one in which they take responsibility for their own academic and social needs, is often stressful and a source of anxiety (Lowe and Cook 2003), exacerbated by lack of preparation (Cook and Leckey 1999). This paper examines some issues surrounding transition to Higher Education (HE) and reports the findings of a study designed to understand students' expectations of independent learning and assessment practices and an intervention designed to support students prior to their first year of study.

Research Questions

Tinto (1997) stressed that to take *retention* seriously is to take education itself seriously. Therefore the objectives of the study which underpins this paper were to: highlight the importance of: the first year in HE; seeking student perspectives about matters which involve them and about student 'preparedness' for HE. Drawing on empirical research, this paper examines the significance of 'preparedness' with specific reference to independent learning and, in particular, assessment, given that as Boud (2006, xvii) notes:

"Assessment probably provokes more anxiety among students and irritation among staff than any other feature of higher education."

Through developing a socio-cultural approach to preparing potential students for a degree programmes, it was anticipated that an intervention designed to engage them and their friends and family would facilitate the opportunity for them to articulate their thoughts about independent study and assessment, and have a secure comprehension of what this entails in HE, and for family and friends to help them to appreciate their role in supporting the student.

Methods

The study adopted an action research approach (Carr and Kemmis, 1986) whereby an intervention strategy was implemented in response to a perceived 'need'. Data were gathered via semi-structured questionnaires distributed to Year 1 Initial Teacher Training students at the outset of their Degree Programme and through focused conversations with a group of students and their tutors (Nutbrown, 2002). The findings of the data revealed a 'need' relating to how our institute prepares students for the transition to HE study. In response to this, an intervention, which is still in progress, was initiated. This involved the enhancement of open events, to include a focus on the expectations of HE study, and evaluative data regarding the perceived value of this initiative were gathered via semi-structured questionnaires

Frame

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). Making the transition from school to university is a challenging obstacle for many students and research intimates that the pre-HE experiences of first year undergraduate students are hindered by lack of preparation (Cook and Leckey 1999, Clark and Ramsey 1990) and many students enter HE with little idea of what

to expect and little understanding of how the university environment can affect their lives. Murtagh (2010) noted that with particular reference to assessment, students experienced difficulties composing a written academic assignment, indeed, in recent times, student writing in HE has been increasingly seen as a problem, with complaints about students' inability to write in the ways the academy requires (Lillis and Turner, 2007).

Research findings

The main findings of the study indicate that a majority of those involved in the study anticipate that the workload will be demanding and intense in HE, but that they have had little or no preparation for studying independently prior to entry to the Programme. In addition, the data indicates that the assessment experiences of the students not only vary greatly, but that they anticipate much tutor support and guidance with regard to assessments in HE, including frequent feedback during the assessment period. Initial analysis of the data gathered from those trainees who are in the early stages of their degree programme also highlights the role of friends and family in supporting students with their study. The paper therefore discusses some potential opportunities for preparation for HE, including an evaluation of an intervention which facilitated the opportunity for students to discuss independent study and assessment with their peers, family and friends and tutors. As such, this paper seeks to present perceptions of the issues associated with transition, and potential ways forward for our institution. In this way it is hoped that this study will contribute to the growing research in the fields of transition, recruitment and retention in Higher Education.

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