

0732

Breaking down barriers to progression - the blended way

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Background

Too often points of transition become exit points across the sectors and phases of education. This is particularly true at the point of transition from compulsory to tertiary and Higher Education) There is a breadth of literature identifying the factors that lead to non-progression and, once in HE, to non-completion (Yorke; Childs and Spencer; Crabtree et al) Increasingly, however, more attention is paid to the correlation between effective student preparation pre-entry to stay-on and progression rates once in HE (Yorke; Currant and Keenan).

This preparation relates to generic aspects of information, advice and guidance but also to skills based development of students at pre-entry level. Institutional data on non-progression following the first year points, at least in part, to a skills gap that students experience when transferring into HE. Effective collaboration, therefore, between the pre-entry sector and HE, takes on some significance in terms of preparing students for higher level study.

This is clearly in line with government policy, as articulated through the HEFCE strategic plan, as well as DCSF strategy documentation. The HEFCE strategic plan for 2006 - 11 (revised in 2009) states:

We will also encourage HEIs to develop further their links with target schools and colleges to create structural, sustainable relationships that operate at

the levels of governance, the curriculum and student support. In doing so, HEIs and schools will be able to build upon the achievements of the increasing numbers of people gaining qualifications that will enable them to enter HE by ensuring that they are able to choose the progression pathway that best meets their educational and career aspirations.[1]

As one strategy to address both the issue of a perceived barrier into HE and that of a potential skills gap, the University of Wolverhampton developed and maintains a programme of undergraduate modules which are taught at pre-entry level. The programme is aligned to level 3 programmes taught in schools and colleges and encompasses traditional academic and vocational curriculum areas, as well as qualifications emerging from the 14-19 curriculum reform.

This programme of Higher Education Modules in Schools and Colleges (HEMiS) has been running very successfully for a number of years and provides successfully an opportunity for learners to engage with higher education at a point where decisions about progression beyond the compulsory phase of education are yet to be made.

Research Questions

In discussions with pre-entry partners a need was identified to explore models of delivery that would take account of pre-entry students' learning experiences, particularly with a view to the use of technology increasingly employed in schools and colleges. As a result two modules were adapted, under the guidance of the university's Blended Learning Unit (based at the Institute for Learning Enhancement) as blended modules.

The two modules (Employability Skills and Website Fundamentals) were selected on the basis of these criteria:

- - content relevance in terms of the pre-entry curriculum

- - technical suitability for blended delivery
- - emphasis on skills relevant for transition

This paper focuses on the lessons emerging from the blended HEMiS pilot in relation to students' aspirations for progression to HE, their sense of preparedness for higher level study and any discernible attitudinal changes. Given the blended nature of the delivery of the pilot we also wanted to investigate any potential benefits for the breakdown of generic barriers to transition.

Prior to the pilot, participating schools were recruited employing the criteria above. Given the nature of the pilot we designed both the cohorts and the delivery methods to provide us with two discreet control groups.

Specifically this related to the form of the delivery, learning profile of the cohort and methods of evaluation. The initial differentiation of the cohorts was ensured through choosing two different online formats for the delivery. Whilst one group was demarcated and taught separately from the main body of students who also studied the module through a discreet "topic" being allocated in the university's VLE, the second cohort utilised the university's more reflective e-portfolio as a mechanism for study. The latter group was also not isolated from the larger module cohort. These two different, yet related, approaches were followed for both the delivery set-up and the assessment.

The academic content of the modules vis-à-vis its relationship to the content of the school curriculum also differed, in that one focused on the acquisition of employability and academic skills framed in a personal development context whilst in the other academic skills were embedded in the furthering of subject knowledge. Thus, one might expect different student responses where skills development was a transparent aim of the curriculum as opposed to a by-product of exploring new knowledge in new ways.

Methods

The concept of the 'Independent Learner', key to student success and academic independence in Higher Education, is developed in students through undertaking higher level study outside the confines of standard school support. The extent to which this concept might be partially fulfilled by completion of a HE Module may also be impacted upon by the approach employed in school to support the cohort, in addition to course content and mode of delivery. This is reflected in the discrete pilot cohorts with different models of entirely independent learning and self-motivated learning versus learning in class time supported by specialist school staff.

Whilst the aim of the pilot was not the evaluation of the efficacy, or otherwise, of either model, we aimed to identify as many factors impacting on students' motivation and progression, as identified in the research question.

Our findings will be contextualized within the current literature. The analysis will have a particular focus on the current discourse on skills based approaches to transition.

Our methodology is based on a phenomenological approach, employing a mixed method approach largely based on these methods:

online questionnaires

written questionnaires

student focus group

staff interviews

Research findings

Initial findings indicate that pre-entry students value a high level of support when engaging in HE level study. They also suggest that early engagement in a structured and curriculum focussed way encourages attitudinal changes and a more positive attitude to Higher Education. By tailoring the programme to their level 3 curriculum, with a focus on the skills that they develop and deploy through more autonomous and blended modes of studying. Early indications also point towards a potential mis-match in terms of the use of new technologies in the pre-entry and HE sectors and the need to manage expectations, expertise and experiences for a successful first year experience.

References

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