

quality,
adaptability
and sustainability
in times of change

Transitions



University of Brighton

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Learning
and Teaching
Conference 2011

Same time, same place ... or is it?

Enhancing transitions and retention for top-up students

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Abstract

Transition from foundation degree (Fd) to the third year of an undergraduate degree (top-up) can cause apprehension (Greenbank 2007:98; Tierney and Slack 2005:384). Students can find that they appear to be entering a totally different world where they are presumed to know exactly what is expected from them. The Fd students have their own preconceptions and expectations of the third year of study, and they may feel extremely apprehensive or conversely appear over-confident. There is very little literature about the transition from Fd to university and the student experience (Gorard et al 2006:116-119), and with the changes currently taking place in higher education, student satisfaction and achievement will become increasingly important (BIS 2011). This paper focuses on key features of a transitions programme developed by a student support tutor in collaboration with a partner college, which included visits, taught sessions, and a major component of PASS (Peer Assisted Study Sessions¹). The data, case studies and a video were presented at the annual Learning and Teaching Conference, 'Transitions: quality, adaptability and sustainability in times of change', 2011, to analyse the impact of the programme on student achievement and retention, and the satisfaction and views of the students.

Introduction

The academic transitional experiences that students face when entering higher education, particularly after a period of time out, or when arriving from a further education (FE) institution, can often determine their persistence, or have an impact on their academic success (Cook and Rushton 2009; Yorke and Longden 2004). The nature of the student journey demands that institutions plan for, and deliver a range of schemes that will support students to complete their courses and experience a personal transformation during their time in education.

The findings of a focus group carried out with the first cohort of top-up students studying on the BA (Hons) Sport Coaching and Development degree (2008-09), found that students struggled with the transition from Fd to top-up degree, both in

¹ <http://student.brighton.ac.uk/ask/index.php/pass>

terms of their perception of the academic requirements of the top-up degree and in their social transition. Students had difficulty settling into the academic habitus, or as Yorke describes it 'understand[ing] the rules of the game' (2005:16), and their lack of familiarity with the department was considered a barrier to their persistence. We found that most students did not live locally, and spent very little time outside of lectures and seminars in their academic department due to paid work or home responsibilities. Findings also indicated that attendance rates were relatively poor, and internal statistics revealed a high attrition rate and relatively low academic success in terms of degree classification.

Following the focus group, a number of the issues were addressed and (as below), recommendations made for the transition process to the course teams at both Fd and top-up level:

- **Pre-application stage:** allow the Fd students to engage earlier with the university and current top-up cohort
- **Application stage:** trial mentoring sessions that involve existing top-up students or graduates leading group mentoring sessions with the Fd students
- **Offer stage:** enable prospective top-up students to make module choices at the same time as the 'traditional' final year undergraduate cohort
- **Arrival and orientation stage:** pilot a PASS scheme for the new top-up students across semester one, to include orientation, study skills, reflective journals and academic conventions

In order to implement the initiative, facilitative meetings were held with course staff from both Fd and top-up to plan collaboratively, and allow academic tutors to input their views on how and when the initiative could take place.

The transitions programme

This initiative involves approximately 20 graduating Fd students transitioning each year to a one-year top-up degree at the University of Brighton's Chelsea School of Sport, along with two pre-selected graduates who ideally have achieved BA (Hons) via the top-up route, or are themselves engaged in postgraduate study. Staff involved, include the student support tutor, academic members of course teams both at the partner college and top-up programme, with support from the head of school. (This initiative did not initially include students from the other top-up degree (Sport and Fitness) offered in the department.)

Activities

Pre-entry visits

At the beginning of February, (semester four for the Fd students) the pre-entry visits begin. The student support tutor, a current top-up student and a member of academic staff visit the local partner college to meet with the prospective top-up students in their own setting to give information on modules, the necessary

prerequisites and enrolment. Prospective students also have the opportunity to meet with a current top-up student to talk about student life and the final year of the degree, and to discuss any fears or concerns they may have with the student support tutor. The Fd students also complete an anonymous questionnaire about their expectations of the top-up, and the data is used by academic and support staff to assess the needs of the cohort, and implement any further support or advice to address their concerns.

Chelsea Exhibition

Prospective top-up students are invited to attend the annual 'Chelsea Exhibition', a showcase of final year and postgraduate work in May (Lines and Smith 2011). The role of the exhibition is to provide an opportunity for lower year undergraduates to develop awareness of the range and level of the school's postgraduate courses and student work, and to enhance the top-up students' engagement with the academic environment by giving them the opportunity to talk with current final year students and observe the standard of academic work. The aim of the exhibition as a whole, aligns with the work of Zepke and Leach '[to] create educational experiences for students that are challenging, enriching and extend their academic abilities' (2010:169). The students are also taken on a campus tour to support orientation to the site where they will be based for top-up study.



Students visiting the Chelsea Exhibition

Group mentoring session

Whilst attending the student exhibition, the Fd cohort can also attend an informal session held by a current top-up student, where they have the opportunity to ask questions in a non-remedial, confidential environment, about any aspect of the top-up or student life in general. Students have found these sessions invaluable to hear the 'reality' of their chosen course, and to explore the prospective transition through discussion with peers (Boud 2001; Mytton and Rumbold 2011).

Meeting with the course leader

Following the Chelsea Exhibition and group mentoring session, the top-up course team introduce themselves to the cohort and offer informal opportunities for the students to ask questions. The course leader explains the schedule of assignments, approximate timetabling of lectures and seminars and module choices in more detail.

Assignment hand-in

One of the issues that students in the previous top-up cohort made us aware of, was the difficulty of knowing how to go about handing work in, particularly practicalities such as filling in hand-in sheets, adhering to deadlines, and knowing where and who on campus to hand-in to. It was decided that a 'trial' assignment hand-in for the local partner college Fd students in May, could resolve these issues and give them the opportunity to orientate themselves with university protocol before arriving in September.

PASS Scheme (Peer Assisted Study Sessions)

From October, when the new top-up cohort arrives, timetabled PASS sessions take place on campus within working hours. They are usually scheduled straight after timetabled lectures or seminars during semester one, for students on BA (Hons) Top-up Sport Coaching and Development, and Sport and Fitness.

The aims of the PASS scheme are:

- 'To enable students to receive information through an additional 'mode of delivery' from a student perspective, relating to academic conventions, orientation to study at top-up level, from graduate students who have experienced a similar learning journey first hand
- To ensure students are in a position to gain appreciation of the workload, work ethic, academic protocol and University of Brighton systems and regulations – again from a student perspective
- To raise students' awareness and approach towards level-3 undergraduate study
- To improve the feedback loop from students to staff on transitional issues associated with moving from Fd to top-up level study
- To accelerate student orientation and integration to the top-up course, in order to enable students to grasp key academic and subject specific concepts earlier in the programme of study and contribute to student engagement'.

Analysis and feedback

Analysis and feedback on the success or challenges of this initiative have mainly been captured through interviews and focus groups with students, mentors and supervisors of the scheme.

Qualitative feedback

Pre-entry visit

'The transitions programme has given me direct contact with top-up students before they arrive and led to more students seeking my support' (Student support tutor)

PASS

'It's a comfortable environment for interaction' (Student)

'... we've started our own study group as a result of the sessions' (Student)

'You don't feel like you are being watched by lecturers' (Student)

'... getting the group to interact was difficult at the beginning, but as I felt my leadership skills improve so did the cohesion of the group' (PASS leader)

Top-up course leader feedback

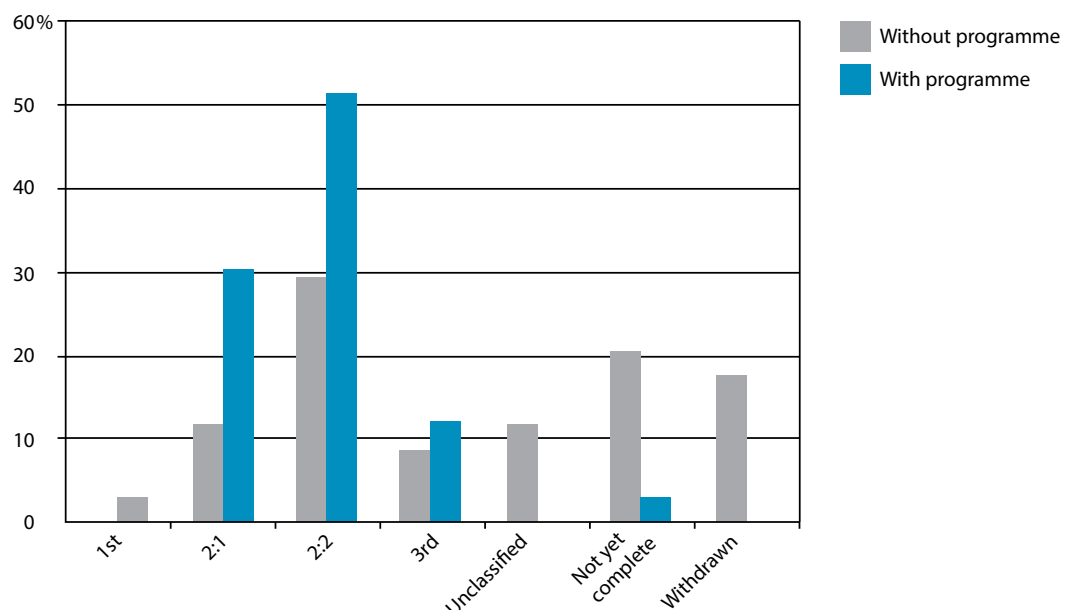
'... some (top-up students) perhaps achieved their level of competence when they've done two years at the FE college and then come here at level-3... they haven't got the study skills – I don't think some have got the energy or the determination or many of them the personal skills to be successful in this environment'

'... the quality, outcomes and esteem/identity of the top-up cohort this year have all seen a considerable upward shift'

Quantitative data

We have also collected quantifiable data such as attendance, retention and achievement grades, to observe any improvements to the cohort average (table 1). However, this may not directly correlate to the scheme's intervention, but could contribute to the students' overall success.

Table 1: Student attainment data for PASS 2009-11



The cost and timeline

An initial pilot for this initiative was funded through a Centre for Learning and Teaching Fellowship over the 12 month period 2009-10. Chelsea School has now embedded the initiative through core funding. Costs involve: staff time for planning, supervision of mentors, monitoring and evaluating impact, hourly payment for trained mentors and training materials.

Table 2: Transitions programme timeline

February	Visit college with a current top-up student Look at module choices
May	Chelsea Exhibition and keynote lecture, meet course leader, group mentoring Campus visit, meet current students and student support tutor, tour of facilities
June	Test hand-in of coursework, join a Facebook group and receive newsletter
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Foundation degree ends	
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Top-up degree starts	
October (Semester 5)	Induction week PASS programme
February (Semester 6)	
July	Graduate

Conclusion

This initiative has seen the top-up cohort achieve better average grades, contributing to the improvement of attendance and retention rates, and improving the student experience of transition and orientation. Based on our findings, gathered through student feedback, we would offer the following guidance to practitioners:

- establish contact with direct entry students as early as possible
- invite students to attend a structured transition programme prior to entry
- involve existing students or graduates in a trained mentoring position
- enable direct entry students to see the academic standards expected of them at the joining institution.

The potential for transferability could include other user groups such as international direct entry to final year honours or intra/inter-institutional transfer students. Elements of the initiative are also being used with other student groups such as the PASS scheme, involving second year mentors and traditional first year mentees.

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