

The role of perception in divergent approaches to teaching and learning through the transition from foundation to bachelor degree: a preliminary exploration

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Introduction

Some 100,000 students in England, Wales and Northern Ireland are now studying for a foundation degree, with around 75% of this number being located in further education institutions (FEIs) (HEFCE, 2010). On completion of the short-cycle foundation degree in an FEI, a significant proportion of students will transfer to a different higher education institution (HEI) to complete a final year of bachelor level study. The transitional processes and experiences for such students are often complex and divide into a myriad of component parts, including meeting expectations, social and academic integration and the framing of new identities. Discourses on the roles played by 'perception' and lived 'reality' pervade the literature of student transitions, including the roles that expectations, motivations and task requirements play as key contributory factors leading to student withdrawal (Davies et al., 2004; Tinto, 1993). Such discourses also aid understanding of the impact of different approaches to teaching and to learning during educational transitions. However, for FEI-based foundation degree students, unlike their HEI-based counterparts, these approaches are defined across a dual institution divide.

While there have been a number of recent studies about the student experience of foundation degrees (Burton et al., 2011; Morgan, 2011; Pike & Harrison, 2011; Schofield & Dismore, 2011; Winter & Dismore, 2010), there remains little empirical research that specifically examines the transitional experience of this group of students. This paper identifies the preliminary findings emerging from a longitudinal study examining the student experience of transition from foundation to bachelor degree in one further/higher collaborative partnership.

Transition

Transition has become a fundamental feature of twenty-first century life where factors like economic challenge and globalisation are disturbing traditional patterns of transition and introducing new risks and uncertainties (Field, 2009; Ecclestone et al., 2010). Educational transitions likewise have become increasingly complex, characterised by rapid changes at system and institutional levels as well as power shifts between government and the academy (Bathmaker, 2006; Trow, 2005, 1974; Parry, 2003). Student transitions have correspondingly

assumed a greater degree of complexity and managing these transitions effectively has progressively become a focus for policy, practice and research (Ecclestone et al., 2010; Field, 2009). Educational transitions have a significant impact on student persistence and success rates (Tinto, 1999). The growth of short-cycle awards in dual institution settings increases the importance of understanding the student experience of such embedded transitions.

Over the past thirty years, the international canon on student transitions has focussed heavily on the areas of persistence, retention and success (Tinto, 1999), often portraying deficit models in these areas (Ashwin, 2010; Winter & Dismore, 2010). The literature also privileges transitions into and through the first-year of higher education (Yorke & Longden, 2008). Other student transitions, such as that between first and second year (Stuart Hunter et al., 2010) and undergraduate to post-graduate (Tokuno, 2008) are now beginning to command more attention. However, less prevalent in the literature is the transition between the second and third year of undergraduate study, a transition which is significant in a variety of contexts, from full-time traditional undergraduate students to international students studying on an articulated '2+2' year arrangement or for those transferring from a short-cycle award to complete a bachelor degree.

Earlier studies (Barron & D'Annunzio-Green, 2009; Greenbank, 2007) found that the transition from foundation to bachelor degree created considerable levels of student stress, both academic and psychological, largely attributable to the differing approaches to teaching and learning adopted in further and higher education. The greater emphasis placed on a more academic approach, independent learning, larger class sizes and less tutor support at the HEI was perceived to contribute to this student anxiety (Greenbank, 2007).

Conversely, Peters (2010) and Bathmaker et al. (2007) identify that an over-emphasis placed on intensive face-to-face teaching and 'on-demand' tutor support within FEIs can be counter-productive to the persistence and success rates of foundation degree students located in dual-institution settings. It is against these varying standpoints that the current study was predicated.

Methodology

This paper draws from the preliminary phase of research carried out between 2009 and 2010 as the first part of a longitudinal study inquiring into the student experience of transition from foundation to bachelor degree. The study was located within one regional further/higher education partnership, where foundation degrees are predominantly undertaken in FEIs and students may then transfer to complete a bachelor degree at one HEI. The findings presented here suggest that for three sets of actors involved in this particular transition, the students, the FEI course tutors and the HEI Link Tutors, both the 'perceptions' and lived 'realities' of the dual approaches to teaching and learning play a significant role in determining both barriers to and incentives for student progression, retention and success.

A mixed-methods approach to the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data was employed. Through using electronic surveys coupled with 'elite' interviews (Cousin, 2009:208), the study is engaging with the longitudinal tracking of one cohort of students, this cohort consisting of several strands. Each strand has been drawn from a range of foundation degrees delivered in five FEIs, all linked to one HEI partner. The study has tracked the students through the latter stages of the foundation degree and is following this cohort through the first stages of bachelor level study at the HEI. Student data has been triangulated with data collected both from associated FEI course leaders and HEI staff acting as Link Tutors for the FEI-based courses. The preliminary findings reported here are drawn solely from survey data collected during the preliminary phase.

The survey questions posed were designed to explore a range of different aspects of the students' experience of making the transition from foundation to bachelor degree study. A number of questions related directly to aspects of teaching and learning, and to the students' own engagement with learning. Within the preliminary phase of the study, and where appropriate, questions were duplicated across all three sets of participants, level 5 foundation degree students, FEI course leaders and HEI Link Tutors. Valid responses were received from 112 students, 27 FEI course leaders and 21 HEI Link Tutors. Each of these groups of participants was reporting on events during the same academic year, 2009/10, but from slightly different timeframes within it.

The role of 'perception' in student transitions

Previous studies (e.g. Barron & D'Annunzio-Green, 2009; Davies et al., 2004; Tinto, 1993) identified the importance that 'perceptions' play in navigating student transitions. The first area of this study where perception played a major role was revealed in the question of whether or not the offered route through to bachelor study appeared appropriate and/or desirable. While all foundation degrees are intended to have an articulated progression award, all three sets of participants identified concerns around the proposed level 6 route, calling into question issues of 'curriculum fit' and HEI resource. However, as only two-thirds (66.1%) of the FEI course leaders subsequently reported familiarity with curriculum content of the articulated level 6 progression award or awards, further investigation would be required to determine the basis for this perception. It is also not known what totality of contributory factors influenced the students' responses, apart from them reporting a paucity of detailed information and communication about level 6 study.

The second significant finding in terms of perception, was that of the students' observed perception of 'self' in relation to both current and future learning. Concern was expressed by both FEI and HEI tutors that some level 5 foundation degree students do not consider their learning to be equivalent to, or sufficiently closely linked to, the learning that their HEI peers experience and achieve. This has resonance with other studies (Winter & Dismore, 2010; Greenbank, 2007; HEFCE, 2001) where perceptions of different approaches to teaching and learning across

different institutional boundaries were observed as leading to significant student reactions. Some HEI Link Tutors commented on students' expressed concerns as to their capability of studying on what they perceived as a 'higher' degree course, and of fears of not being able to cope with what were seen as 'university' as opposed to 'college' standards. These findings were not mirrored in responses from students but do perhaps call into question how the level and equivalency of academic standards is communicated to dual-institution students. Two-thirds (66%) of students in the current study held the perception that the standard of work would be higher at university, and commented that they were prepared to deal with this. While a small number of HEI tutors commented that the perception of increased academic demand was felt to be a barrier to transfer to level 6 for some students, this was counterbalanced by the accepted knowledge that students who do transfer and who do persist within the federated system tend to perform well.

A new environment

The change of environment was seen by HEI Link Tutors as a significant barrier to student retention and success, a feeling with which, for very different reasons, the FEI course leaders concurred. The HEI Link Tutors were largely concerned with a perceived academic divide; the FEI tutors with a shift from small classes and a supportive community with good tutor/student contact to an environment of 'isolation' and '*less individual support*'. Conversely, the majority of FEI course leaders considered that the students would find it easy to adjust to the HEI environment, although less than 15% of the HEI Link Tutors agreed this to be the case. The HEI Link Tutors pointed to the various strategies which had been employed to ease the transition into the new environment, including extending the induction process and further integrating study skills into that process. A particular concern, voiced by both HEI and FEI tutors, was that many of the transfer students join an existing cohort which has already been working together for two years. The HEI tutors also identified this as being particularly problematic in terms of organising group work.

Conversely, there was little indication of the change of environment on its own as being perceived as a barrier by the students themselves. For many of them, the change was welcomed and they reported being excited by it. While 90% of students confirmed that they enjoyed being taught in a small class at college, they accepted that life at the HEI would be different and they were prepared to expect large classes and a less personal approach. These changes seemed to concern FEI course leaders rather more than the students themselves, confirming the findings of Bathmaker et al. (2007).

Academic re-orientation

The styles of teaching and learning at the HEI are held to be very different from the approaches adopted in FEIs (Winter & Dismore, 2010; Greenbank, 2007). Both staff at the HEI and FEIs agreed that foundation degree students struggle with adjusting to the independent learning and research aspect of the HEI-based level 6 work, or as one student commented, '*the extremes of self-directed learning*'. However, there was a divergence of opinion as to whether or not FE

teaching and learning styles prepared students sufficiently to make the required adjustment to level 6 study. Over 80% of FEI course leaders believed the foundation degree teaching and learning styles prepared students well. The following extract is typical of responses in this area, *'Feedback from level 6 students is that while they initially find the University environment overwhelming and exciting they ultimately gain great satisfaction at taking greater control over their own learning'* (FEI Course Leader).

Only 42% of HEI Link Tutors concurred with this, typical comments including, *'The independent learning style adopted in HE always shocks [foundation degree] students who transfer, no matter how much preparation is offered'* (HEI Link Tutor).

The development of academic writing to an appropriate standard for level 6 was reported as a major area of challenge by both students and HEI tutors, many of the latter expressing the opinion that they felt foundation degree students had limited opportunity to write academic essays of the type required for level 6 study. A majority of HEI Link Tutors were not convinced of the acquisition of sufficient analytical, critical reading and writing skills by the end of level 5, thus not enabling students to produce written work based on extensive literature reviews; enter into critical discussion; and write in a critical, analytical and evaluative way. However, in this context, HEI Link Tutors did commend the adaptability of the students on the one hand, but equally did feel that significant academic writing challenges were compounded by an observable 'step-change' in 'academic versus vocational practice'.

The transition away from what was termed 'work-centred' to 'academic-centred' assessment was considered a further issue. This seems to present a paradox with the current notion of the role of higher education as one of preparing students for the workplace (e.g. Ashton, 2009; ADM-HEA & NESTA, 2003). An atypically high proportion of students in the current study were full-time. In addition, and exceptionally from participants in national studies on foundation degrees (Yorke, 2010), only just over half (59%) of students in the present study considered their work-based learning components to be the most valuable part of their foundation degree course. While over 90% of HEI tutors considered that students were directly able to apply their workplace knowledge at level 6, this was called into question by both students and FEI tutors. Students, for example, questioned how many HEI tutors knew what had been undertaken during the work-based components of the foundation degree. In previous studies it has been acknowledged that work-based learning projects prepare students well for independent enquiry elements at level 6 (Yorke, 2010; Winter & Dismore, 2010). Almost 80% of FEI course leaders concurred with this view, but fewer than 45% of HEI Link Tutors agreed. A further piece of work is suggested to determine why this might be the case.

Concluding

Students making the transition from FEI-based foundation degree study to HEI-based bachelor level study become caught in the middle of a dual institution divide. They may have already

made the transition into studying higher education in a further education environment with a fixed perception of what life in a university is like (Barron and D'Annunzio-Green, 2009; Hockings et al., 2007) and this perception may in part have contributed to their initial decision to study at an FEI and not at a university, a university not being the option of choice for all students (Bathmaker et al., 2007). These initial perceptions may have been dissipated or reinforced during the two years of foundation degree study. For the students transferring institution to complete a bachelor degree following a foundation degree, a further set of perceptions will come into play. This presents challenges in the way approaches to teaching and learning are perceived and effected within a dual-institution system, identifying a need for better integration of curriculum design between the transitional stages and greater pedagogic interaction between staff from across the dual-institution divide.

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