

“Widening Participation”? An analysis of a short University based programme

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Abstract

This short report outlines small scale research undertaken within the context of current Widening Participation (WP) practice at Staffordshire University. The focus of this work investigated the effectiveness of a specific approach designed to enable learner opportunities within Higher Education (HE). The data obtained allowed insight into the level of preparation for Undergraduate (UG) level study being provided within this type of programme. The findings of this study have directly informed aspects of current practice particularly in terms of developing problem solving skills.

Background

Current government changes to HE funding requires Universities to demonstrate approaches to WP through Strategic Assessment and Access Agreements (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2011). One definition of WP that has relevance to this research area is provided by HEFCE (2007) as meaning “learners with a potential to benefit from higher education who come from under represented communities” (Nelson and Wilkinson, 2010). Step Up to HE is a well established, short programme at Staffordshire University (SU) with recruitment from a diverse learner population. The focus of this provision is to build learner self belief, in the potential for UG study, through the development of a range of academic study skills and experiences. In promoting learner progression a significant indicator of course success is measured through retention rates at Level 4 (Yorke and Longden, 2008; Baseman, 1996 in Bowl, 2010). It was through consideration of this latter point that the direction of this research emerged.

Investigation aim

To analyse the effectiveness of the Step Up to HE Certificate programme in preparing learners for Level 4 study.

Literature Review

According to Bowl (2010) preparation for UG study is subject to interacting internal and external factors. This author also refers to the "safe space" provided by HE based preparation courses in particularly supporting transition through the development of self confidence, independence and "acculturation". This source however, was based on teacher viewpoints only and it is learner recognition of the "potential" to study at UG level that is at the heart of the Step Up to HE programme (Yorke and Longden, 2004; Nelson and Wilkinson, 2010; Hoare and Johnston, 2011). Existing literature also indicated that confidence alone is not a sufficient foundation to manage and/or problem solve throughout study (Henderson and Dweck, 1990; Hong et al., 1998 in Dweck, 2000). Bamber (2008) suggested that short study skills courses may be limited in supporting the deeper learning processes required in the preparation for HE study. This work also stated that within the non-traditional learner population "HE can seem like an alien environment". Step up to HE aims to promote rapid learning processes and these experiences can be anxiety provoking in an often unconfident population. Therefore, in attempting to move in the direction of independent learning there can be the potential to negatively impact upon the intricate processes involved at this initial stage of HE experience (Rogers, 2002).

Investigative approach

This small scale research was addressed within Post-positivist paradigms using interpretive approaches. Although recognition was given to the potential for the researcher to move into existing theories, the process of developing grounded theory evolved through the interpretation of participant experiences into meanings (Knowles, 1996; Glaser and Strauss, 1976, Glaser, 1996, Strauss and Corbin, 1997 in Cohen et al., 2007). Research methods were qualitative using a semi-structured questionnaire (10 participants) and interview (2 participants). Purposive sampling was applied consisting of current level 4 and 5 learners who had directly accessed HE through Step up to HE (Drever, 2003; Blaxter et al., 2006).

Analysis

The results indicated that Step Up to HE enabled learners to experience some aspects of HE level study. The use of library resources, essay writing and presentation work were the most frequently reported experiences that provided effective preparation for higher levels of study. A significant theme identified in all responses were increases in learner self belief and/or confidence in the ability for HE study (Yorke and Longden, 2004; Nelson and Wilkinson, 2010; Hoare and Johnston, 2011). One participant reported that Step Up to HE had been effective preparation as it enabled "learning without being judged" (Interview 2). When considered in relation to existing literature the latter point raised potential areas for further research in this context (Bamber, 2008; Bowl, 2010). The results obtained also

supported research which stated that in similar contexts preparation for HE may occur through a combination of developing knowledge, skills and self confidence (Bowl, 2010).

There are currently key gaps in this programme that may reduce the effectiveness of the overall preparation acquired and/or required at UG level. All participants reported that the programme did not fully prepare them for the independent learning and workload management involved within UG study. The findings do suggest that acquiring study based skills does offer some preparation but that the deeper learning required for more genuine transition had to be further considered (Henderson and Dweck, 1990; Hong et al., 1998 in Dweck, 2000; Bamber, 2008; Bowl, 2010)

Implications for practice

Although some specific HE experiences and skills are acquired, preparation for UG level study is limited due to the short duration of Step Up to HE. In the current format this programme may be providing practical study skills, rather than focusing on the development of the deeper processes required to become an independent learner (Bamber, 2008). The programme length is currently under development.

The inclusion of problem solving activities to increasingly build independent learning has now been introduced during first module content. The high levels of tutor support are also slowly decreased during such activities in order to limit the effects on learner anxiety levels (Rogers, 2002). Existing reflection activities have also been extended to further promote metacognition and identification of strategies for the development of independent learning (Hiemstra, 2001; Boyd and Fales, 1983 in Mackeracher, 2002; Jacobson, nd; Selfe and Arbabi, 1986; Cowan, 1998b in Moon, 2006).

Conclusion

This small scale research considered the degree of preparation, being provided by the Step up to HE programme, for learners progressing onto Level 4 study. The interpretive methodology applied in this context enabled important data to emerge through an analysis of the learner experience. Step Up to HE does prepare learners for some aspects of UG study particularly in terms of enabling the development of practical study skills. However key gaps were also identified and the programme was limited in terms of enabling the independent, deeper learning required in HE. Although the increases in confidence levels reported did indicate that learners are enabled to recognise their potential for higher levels of study, the clear differences between preparation and transition had to be addressed. It is the latter that programmes of this nature must respond to accordingly if learners are to more effectively move into and through Level 4 study.

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