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From Dunedin to Dunedin: Supporting students in the changing world of higher education

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Abstract

Against the background of the widening access agenda in higher education in Scotland, this article describes the initiatives taken by Napier University to address the issues. The article explores different models of learning support, argues that one of the better means of support is to embed learning skills in the curriculum, provides examples of how this has been achieved, and outlines some of the issues that must be addressed if curriculum integration is to be realised.

Introduction

Since devolution in Scotland in 1999, the Scottish Executive has established "a profusion of consultants, enquiries, reports and targets" (Court, 2004, p. 157). The Cubie Report (1999) promoted access to higher education and an increasing number of students entered universities from non-traditional, under-represented and disadvantaged groups (Court, 2004; Johnston, Knox, & MacLeod, 2005; McNicol, 2004). In 2000 the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC) established the widening access premium (WAP) which rewarded universities that attracted students from non-traditional backgrounds on the basis of numbers. A review of higher education in 2001 supported the view that access to higher education should be expanded, a culture of lifelong learning encouraged, and recognised that research leads to economic success (Forum for the Advancement of Continuing Education (FACE), 2003). Napier University used the WAP to establish a number of projects, internal and external, which would encourage students to take the first steps towards applying for university places.

Wider access projects in the institution

Napier is one of four universities situated in the City of Edinburgh in Scotland. Napier was established as a College of Commerce and Technology in the 1960s, becoming a Polytechnic College in the 1980s. A further development in the higher education sector was the granting of university status to polytechnic colleges. Napier was awarded this status in 1992 whilst continuing its strong links with industry (Johnston et al., 2005).

Within the University, each of the Faculties of Computing and Engineering, Health and Life Sciences, the Business School, and Arts and Social Science appointed Academic Support Advisers (ASAs) to 0.5 posts funded by the WAP. Different arrangements for ASAs were used in other Scottish universities. As a result of funding through the WAP, Napier University was able to expand its activities internally and externally through projects that supported potential and progressing students. Projects supported by Napier include the Lothian Equal Access Programme for Schools (LEAPS) that

targets students who are the first generation in their family to apply for a university place. This project is funded and supported by the four Edinburgh universities. Potential students receive visits in secondary school from university students and tutors, and are offered a summer school as part of their preparation for university. The LEAPS summer school allows students to "demonstrate that they have the potential to succeed on a degree course, even if they don't meet the original conditions set out on their Scottish Qualification Authority (SQA) exams" (Woodrow, 1998, p. 32). The summer school continues to address the needs of an identified group of students and provide opportunities for them to prepare for higher education (Highton, Pacey, & Sowerby, 1998).

Napier has also been involved in developing opportunities for students currently attending courses in community education, and with other agencies with responsibilities for encouraging adult learners to move on to further or higher education (Tunnock, 1999). As an example, the Learning Strategies courses, which commenced in 1997, have been delivered in areas of deprivation in Edinburgh. They help prepare potential adult learners to understand the academic skills required to enable them to study at college or university. Students completing the Learning Strategies courses have successfully progressed to complete further and higher education qualifications (Godfrey & Gruellich, 2000).

Another project was developed because students were concerned about the transition from further education to higher education. A report by the Scottish Funding Council on widening opportunities recognised the skills gap for students moving from further education to higher education (Dundas, Maclennan, & Musselbrook, 2000). In 1997 a generic skills module referred to as the Bridging Course (*Effective Learning and Career Development*) was developed and offered to direct entry students from further education colleges. Students attend the module before the beginning of the first semester. The tutors teaching on this 15-credit module have continued to develop teaching and learning approaches and teaching materials. The module is now offered to all direct-entry students in the Business School, Sports Science and Arts and Social Science, with 120 students completing the course in 2005. Feedback from students suggests that the courses build confidence and provide them with tools and strategies for their studies (Tait & Godfrey, 2001). The University recognises from student feedback and module results that the students taking this module perform as well as other proceeding students and that they feel more confident when beginning their studies.

More recently subject-related orientation programmes have been developed for direct entrants in Computing and Nursing. These programmes aim to ease the transition to higher education and highlight the academic skills that will be needed to complete their studies. The programmes were developed in response to concerns that the students were not confident in their academic skills and unsure what to expect when they started university. Most of these students are adult learners who have been out of the educational system for a few years.

In a discussion of students' progression from further to higher education, authors and practitioners have expressed concern about preparing them for making the transition (Tunnock, 1999. p. 22). Napier has established partnership agreements with many colleges in Scotland, and it works with the colleges to make the transition as smooth as possible. Open Days are held annually for direct entry students with a presentation about the benefits of attending the Bridging Course, *Effective Learning and Career Development*, and academic staff visit the colleges to speak to students. However it is not clear whether it is the agreements with the colleges to offer places to their students or the staff contact with the colleges that have been instrumental in promoting higher education to these students (Tunnock, 1999, p. 3).

Barriers to higher education

A report by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES, 2003) identifies four principal barriers to lower socio-economical groups who apply for university places: attainment, aspiration, application and admission. McNicol (2004) draws attention to the similarities between these barriers and those found in the Oxford Report of 1908, in which factors mentioned as barriers included children from

working class backgrounds leaving school early and the expense of college life. Access to higher education involves the student confronting any barriers presented. Universities have to present information in a way that encourages the non-traditional school leaver and mature applicant who may be the first in the family to apply to go to university. In considering these barriers it is useful to apply them to the Napier University experience.

Attainment

The DfES report (2003, p. 7) states that "the gap in participation between those in higher and lower social classes has grown" and that one of the main causes relates to attainment. Opportunities for students to attain the necessary qualifications and skills prior to applying for university places build confidence and benefit all students. The importance of improving standards at every stage of the educational system has been recognised by Napier and courses that will bridge the gaps in knowledge and skills are provided through, for example, the LEAPS project and TOP-UP courses in specific subject areas (e.g., Maths or Chemistry).

Aspiration

Students from disadvantaged groups who achieve the appropriate academic qualifications are less likely to apply for a place at the most prestigious universities in the Russell Group such as Oxford, Cambridge, Edinburgh, and St Andrews. The DfES report (2003) states that the Russell Group could do more to raise aspirations among students who come from backgrounds where studying at university is not part of the family tradition. Napier has encouraged students to consider university as an option, through involvement in the LEAPS project for schools and links with further education colleges by providing progression pathways and accepting a wider range of qualifications from students, including Higher National Certificates and Access Programme qualifications. The provision of bridging programmes which are either subject related or include generic skills can help to raise the aspiration of students who lack the confidence to apply to university.

Application

Application refers to students' understanding and knowledge of the choices available to them within the universities and particular programmes. Students also need to be aware of the particular requirements regarding qualifications and qualities by a particular institution or programme. The barrier here can be a lack of knowledge about these requirements at the point when students are selecting their courses at school or college. Students need to be proactive in checking information through the universities rather than relying on their school or college as requirements change and schools and colleges do not always keep up with these changes. Napier provides the necessary information through the prospectus which is available on request or from campus receptions. Visits to colleges and schools by the university can also assist students and answer their questions. However there is competition for gaining access to the schools and universities and some students may feel they have information overload as a result of these visits. University open days set the scene for university life, providing both information and the 'flavour' of the programmes on offer. Students from non-traditional backgrounds can be apprehensive about asking questions and may not always know what questions to ask to enable them to make choices.

Admission

Admission policies are often aimed at the traditional school leaver. In order to encompass a wider admissions policy the entrance criteria also need to be adjusted. Napier has a policy of admitting students from further education (FE) colleges who have completed Higher National Certificates or Diplomas to advanced entry levels, using recognition of prior learning (RPL), and equivalent qualifications or work experience. In 2003/04, 866 new students were admitted from FE colleges together with 671 continuing students already studying at Napier (Thomson, 2004).

Post enrolment barriers

Even if the barriers to higher education are addressed this does not mean that widening participation is not a 'risky business' (DfES, 2003; Johnston, 2003; Trotter & Cove, 2005).

Transition

For many students, post-enrolment barriers include financial pressures, cultural adjustment issues, and self-doubt or lack of confidence in their own abilities. According to Johnston, MacLeod, and Small (2003, p. 4) the diversity of background of direct entrants includes a higher proportion from "post-code areas with greater educational disadvantage and from areas with manifest multiple deprivations". Napier provides advice through student support services and students can apply for small bursaries and financial assistance with childcare.

Johnston et al. (2003) highlight the fact that at Napier direct entrants are more likely to finish with an Ordinary degree perhaps for "fear of debt and perception of value of Honours degree in terms of employability" (p. 4). The Napier career advisory service provides workshops and individual appointments for students to discuss their career aspirations, employability skills and individual needs. The bridging course for direct entrants includes discussion and a written assignment involving some research on employability skills and career routes for graduates in a particular area of interest.

Several authors highlight the gulf between college and university (Johnston, 2003; Johnston et al., 2005; Trotter & Cove, 2005). College students entering university may struggle with the lack of familiarity with conventions and the discourse of the specific discipline. Furthermore, discipline staff may not always clearly articulate taught knowledge. For these students there may be a general lack of familiarity of learning at higher education level. Diversity is an additional transitional factor when students with different cultural and educational experiences move into higher education. These issues are addressed at Napier through the provision of bridging and orientation programmes for students and through a staff development programme to create a better understanding of transitional issues.

Retention

Universities in Scotland are funded on the basis of the number of students who complete their studies. Under this model of funding, there are financial penalties for having high drop-out rates. Therefore, retention has become a key issue for universities, and particularly for those with a large number of non-traditional entrants. Trotter and Cove (2005, p. 30) see retention as a "key measure of a university's effectiveness". They also point out that universities must consider the economic implications of non-retention; students are required to sustain economic viability. Lack of retention is a waste of talent and potential.

Napier has a dropout rate of 21% (Scofield, 2005). Reasons for leaving are often related to health, financial, and/or personal situations but there are also some students who find the whole experience of university overwhelming and do not make the adjustment successfully. As a result, Napier has recently appointed a Director of Retention. Initiatives to address retention have included improved induction programmes to orient students both academically and socially, and the provision of a personal tutoring system. In addition, the University has introduced a mentoring scheme in which students are matched with a more advanced student who has been trained and can offer them support with their academic studies by sharing experiences and helping them build confidence in their work and studies. This scheme is run by a wider access project funded by the SHEFC.

As universities participate in the widening access agenda, it is necessary to support students by adopting learning and teaching strategies that are suitable for those who are less familiar with traditional models. This is particularly important at Napier, given the number of students entering directly from colleges of further education.

Models of learning support

The Institute for Access Studies at Staffordshire University conducted a study (2003) into the provision of support for students in the context of widening participation (p. 6). Results indicated that "student services have traditionally been seen as a 'reactive' support department" that adopt a "'fire-fighting' rather than proactive approach" (p. 7). The authors argued that policy on participation and increasing consumer awareness "has resulted in an increased, and changing demand on student support services" (p. 7). Moreover, perceptions of the role of student support services have also changed from a place of "last resort for students with 'problems'" to "a port of first call involved in supporting all students" (p. 7).

In general, three models of learning support have been used, either singly or in combination, in universities: osmosis; generic or 'remedial' programmes; and integrated or embedded approaches (e.g., Skillen, Merten, Trivett, & Percy, 1998).

The osmosis model

The osmosis model assumes that students will enter university with a range of skills that will equip them to cope with their academic studies. Students are expected to gain skills by being exposed to them. This model does not take into consideration the fact that non-traditional entrants may not have the skills necessary for study at university level due to the different types of teaching and learning methods to which they were previously exposed. Several authors (e.g., Chapple & Tolley, 2000; Johnston, 2003; Skillen et al., 1998) argue that new skills are necessary for students and should be actively taught and developed. Many students who enter university are not well equipped, and quite intellectually capable students may struggle. Universities that do not provide training in new skills may be seen as engaging in inequitable practices.

Generic/remedial model

The generic or "remedial model" (see Skillen et al., 1998, p. 3), often characterised by a 'learning centre', was set up in acknowledgement that new students are often not prepared for study. In a learning centre, advisers are available, and there are opportunities for one-to-one consultations, workshops, drop-ins and on-line materials. Although this provision exists, it is harder to provide for large numbers of students and to reach those that actually need help the most. Those that do need help do not always ask for it unless they "are referred by their Lecturer" (Skillen et al., 1998, p. 4). Colleagues may also suggest that individual students need help. With this model, learning development is isolated from the curriculum "by keeping the development of academic skills on the 'fringe' of academic study" (p. 4).

Integrated or embedded model

Many authors (e.g., Chapple & Tolley, 2000; DfES, 2003; Percy & Skillen, 2001; Skillen et al., 1998) argue that learning development is more effective within the discipline-specific contexts. This third model adopts an integrated or embedded approach to academic learning support (Skillen et al., 1998). Such a model may use credit-bearing modules that are generic although they can be linked to a particular subject discipline. An embedded model differs from other models in that the relevant academic skills are taught within the subject discipline and embedded in the curriculum. Embedding requires a change in philosophy from perceiving study skills in the deficit model and reliance on 'skills' modules and generic support, to skills embedded within the programme or module. The overall student experience is enhanced and students are given a direct focus. Students are invited to actively participate in the learning process and can apply this to other learning contexts (Skillen, Percy, Trivett, & James, 2001). Embedding can take the pressure off the lecturer as 'sole deliverer' and having an 'outsider' giving the same message in a slightly different manner can be experienced as helpful for learning.

Each of the three models may be useful for different purposes and are evident at different stages in the development of learning support. Moreover, the positioning and advertising of support may influence the way in which students engage with it.

Developing academic skills at Napier University

ASAs at Napier are currently promoting the benefits of embedded support as well as actually working with subject-lecturer colleagues in embedding support within their programmes. It is expected that learning support will therefore be perceived as contextualised, relevant and discipline-specific. Subject-lecturers help to 'unpack' the discipline for purposes of instruction and support advisers add expertise. This, coupled with team teaching where possible, enables students to perceive the whole process as part of the curriculum. ASAs can help initiate students into the academic community, and model and scaffold for them. This is particularly relevant and useful for direct entrants.

Toolkits (key study skills strategy for first-year students)

Since 1997 all university first-year programmes have been required to include either a stand-alone module or embed a range of key skills in the curriculum. Programmes generally include a skills-based module as the easier option although it was recognised that embedding skills was a more effective approach. Embedding requires a co-operative approach by all teaching staff and initially it was not easy to confidently achieve the level of commitment needed to make it work.

An audit of the toolkit requirement found that some programmes had been more active and successful in fulfilling the requirements than others. Programme Teams re-wrote their courses and many included a module to address the requirement. Tait and Godfrey (1999) found that with an Effective Learning module taught to Social Science students, students failed to transfer the skills to other subject areas. Programmes and modules that claimed to embed skills were frequently found to be inadequate, not fully embedding the key skills as required.

Support networks

Students have a range of support networks available which they are encouraged to use through regular contact with personal development tutors, programme leaders and module tutors. Year tutors have responsibility for ensuring that cohorts of students are progressing and ensuring that students who experience difficulties with their academic studies are identified and offered support. Personal development tutors and module tutors have given academic support to students. Success has been patchy for schools that have not appointed a designated member of staff for that purpose. Academic support is provided in a number of different ways by staff. Staff recognise that ASAs have expertise and there is a willingness to include them in discussions about academic skills development issues at an individual level or at Faculty and University committee levels.

Chapple and Tolley (2000, p. 13) describe departmental leaders as 'change agents', having a number of "personal and positional characteristics that enable them to be effective". Change agents need to be able to build supportive structures, be strategically connected and share the role. Chapple and Tolley's report does not mention the use of an academic support adviser or equivalent but highlights in the strategy document that the lecturer's role would not be easy and that they would need support (p. 14) while Percy and Skillen (2001, p. 1) suggest that "curriculum is the bridge where all groups engage".

Academic Support Advisers

Academic Support Advisers (ASAs) work closely with lecturers and tutors within their Faculty and deliver lectures and workshops to students at the invitation of individual lecturers. The amount of work for ASAs has increased as lecturers and students appreciate the contribution that they can make to the learning experience. However, the benefits are muted if the sessions are just a one-off or a series of lectures within the timetable in isolation from the subject lecturer. This has occurred in the past when ASAs have been called upon to deliver lectures without input from the module subject lecturer or in the absence of the lecturer. Indeed, there have been times where input has been used to

'free up' time for the lecturer to attend other tasks or to cover for an absence. Some may see the ASA as being a resource for them rather than a colleague who can work with them. Chapple and Tolley (2000) highlight the concern of colleagues who may perceive a threat of external control of the curriculum.

Mentoring and skills modules

A mentoring scheme has been in place since 2003 for new students who are matched with students from a higher level, generally from the same subject discipline. Feedback from students confirms that the scheme builds confidence and provides an understanding of what is expected. Mentors receive training and mentees are interviewed to ensure that they understand the boundaries of the mentor-mentee relationship. Professional skills modules are taught in the Business School, Life Sciences and Engineering and Computing. These are stand-alone modules that link to the subject discipline. Feedback from staff and students suggests that although the modules are useful, the skills are not always successfully transferred to other modules. Generic workshops are arranged each semester on topics which include essay writing, critical thinking and referencing. These are popular and well-attended but are dependant on finding suitable times that the majority of students can attend. Students attending come from a variety of subject areas and levels which can make the benefits limited unless they are designed for a particular target group.

A bridging module for direct entrants eased the transition for students but these skills also need to be embedded to reinforce and develop them within the subjects. A policy at Napier now requires all schools to have some form of orientation/bridging programme for direct entrants. This indicates the University's concern and commitment to student support but the programmes are still removed from the context of the subject being studied and may not reflect the subject-specific skills needed.

Trotter and Cove (2005) from Salford University conducted a series of focus group discussions and interviews with students leaving courses, asking how induction/orientation might be improved. Most responded, "have one!" (p. 34).

Paper and online resources

The Napier library has a website which includes useful study skills materials and links to other university websites. Individual modules provide students with subject-specific materials to support them with the various study activities that they will encounter online. Online resources for study skills have been developed for a distance learning programme in computing but the project is in the pilot stage and has only had limited evaluation at this stage. Online support relies on the student being proactive in using the materials provided for them.

Case studies of embedded support at Napier University

In the academic year 2005/06 requests for team teaching and embedding skills in programmes continue and are increasing. Requests include undergraduate and postgraduate level programmes. Two recent projects in the Schools of Computing, and Hospitality Management and Tourism provide examples of embedded support.

Project 1

A Level 3 module in the School of Computing has a high level of direct entrants from both home and overseas. The module leader found that a significant number of students taking this module were submitting poorly written assessments. Following a request from the lecturer, the ASA was invited to team teach in a class that was used for report writing. The class session included discussing models and examples of report writing. A further four workshops were provided on report writing which were extremely well attended. The students' marks were analysed and it was found that the mean mark for the major report was not significantly lower than the mean for the whole class. As a result of tracking

the students it was found that there was evidence of improvement in other modules. However, it was found that the improvement was not evident in the cohort's exam performance, thus indicating a need for an extension of the fully embedded support model to other modules and areas of assessment.

Project 2

At Level 3 in Hospitality Management and Tourism, a significant number of direct entrants join the programme from further education colleges in the UK and from European institutions. Progressing students who had been on placement had not written an essay since their first year and lacked confidence in their essay writing skills. The lecturer and ASA prepared tutorial material using a team teaching method. The lecturer explained the subject content while the ASA linked the academic skills, needed to tackle the question, to the content. Feedback from the lecturer and data from student questionnaires indicated that the tutorial was perceived as valuable and students thought that they were more confident to prepare and write the essay. Students also found the tutorial material useful and felt they were able to apply it to other essays.

Evaluation of Napier University's experience of embedding skills in the curriculum

At Napier we have very dedicated colleagues who demonstrate an understanding of the need for the embedded approach and indeed show a desire for it to be implemented within their modules. The problem, however, is that module/programme leaders change and we often have to start over in convincing a new module leader of the benefits of embedding support. Chapple and Tolley (2000) describe the effects of contract staff leaving from the position of departmental leader, sometimes at short notice. They found it disruptive to the effectiveness of the project and questioned whether short-term staff could have "developed the knowledge of the curriculum" (p. 14). Chapple and Tolley also suggest that without the benefit of "support of the head of department and the co-operation of other colleagues, then they are clearly working from a disadvantaged position from the outset" (p. 14). Support for embedding must be seen to be promoted by senior management.

Past experience suggests that embedding is most effective if it is supported by a seamless series of courses or programmes. For instance, bridging and/or orientation courses help to demystify the discourse of the university and the discipline and introduce students to the subject and expectations of the course. Timely provision of support at key times is needed. A diagnostic input at the start of term and then key input into essays and report writing, group projects and exams and revision can support students in their academic studies. Students can be directly supported at module or programme level through professional skills modules, peer assisted learning (PAL), online and paper resources, workshops, lectures and one-to one provision where possible. On an indirect level, continuing collaboration with subject lecturers, team-teaching and discussing the academic requirements of assessment will benefit all students.

Implementing an embedded model in the curriculum is not an easy task. It relies on the co-operation and good will of lecturers and institutional support when changes to modules or the whole curriculum are required. Experience at Napier (as described in the examples above) supports the view that the embedded model is most effective if the conditions to support the model are present. This view does not discount other models which can complement and provide additional opportunities for students to develop their academic skills, but a fully embedded model provides the opportunity for students to understand and develop their academic skills in an appropriate way for their particular subject discipline.

Conclusions

Scottish policy for higher education has been to widen access, particularly for students from non-traditional backgrounds. The Widening Access Premium, established in 2000 was created to reward universities who were successful in recruiting students. The Department for Education and Skills Report (2003) identified some of the barriers experienced by lower socio-economic groups which

institutions need to address. The models of academic support discussed previously may be seen to assume a developmental sequence. However, in universities, they often exist alongside each other unless a policy is taken at senior level to implement the embedded model within the institution. Data from evaluation of the models may be usefully used to support institutional change.

The literature provides evidence of the effectiveness of the embedded approach to academic support. This view is reinforced by our experience, and feedback received from staff and students at Napier University. Embedding skills in the curriculum requires the commitment of senior management, an institutional cultural change and support from the teaching staff within the subject areas. Additional activities should also ensure that there is a raft of support systems in place to support all students, and in particular wider access students. This additional support can be given through workshops, group sessions and one-to-one meetings. Lecturers can be supported through effective staff development workshops and the provision of opportunities to update and review their teaching skills. Pro-active contact between lecturers and ASAs is likely to encourage further activities in support of embedded skills and also a focus for students at particular pressure points during the semester. The ASA should not replace the lecturer in the discipline area but work with them using a team teaching approach. A 'one off' situation is not as effective as a range of opportunities to see the students at key points, for example in preparation for assignments, revision and exam preparation. Some initiatives have been less successful, particularly when students have not attended classes or staff have been less committed to the embedded skills model. Further work needs to be done to ensure that lessons are learned from both the less successful as well as successful ventures. Research by the authors will now focus on evaluating the potential benefits of using the embedded approach supported by other academic support. If an institutional cultural change takes place supported by senior management, all staff and students will benefit and be enabled to achieve their potential.

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