

Partnership and preparation: A new model of transition from college to university

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Abstract

Widening participation in higher education continues to be a key focus for Scottish government and the 2013 Post-16 Education (Scotland) Act places obligations upon Universities to achieve progress towards that objective. The Act also makes provision for Additional Funded Places enabling more college students to transfer into higher education with advance standing (Scottish Funding Council, 2013). This paper provides an overview of the Associate Student project to date and examines how rethinking traditional articulation can increase attainment for all. This model of articulation has created opportunities for partnership working between colleges and universities, designed to enhance student progression and attainment and better to prepare students as they negotiate the transition between college HN study and university. The paper describes 'building bridges' (Fisher and Atkinson-Grosjean, 2002) through partnership working between college and university, and the interventions to improve preparation of students for progression to university.

The paper deploys theoretical conceptions of academic transitions as 'boundary crossing' (Akkerman and Bakker, 2011) and explores how the effectiveness of a range of practical measures and theoretical conceptions may be understood by reference to their potential as boundary objects (Star, 2010).

The paper concludes that although Associate Student status of itself is not sufficient to enable effective transition, but that a programme of targeted learning opportunities and experiences is likely to improve confidence and motivation for university study, ensuring that students are well positioned to negotiate the transition to undergraduate programmes in their third year of study.

Introduction

Edinburgh Napier is a post-92 University with a funding imperative to expand its provision for college students to progress to university with advance standing and no loss of time. This paper describes research and practice relating to the Associate Student project and specifically to the process of articulation from college to university. We provide an overview of the project to date and examine how rethinking traditional approaches to articulation and to partnership can increase attainment and progression for students taking this non-traditional route to university.

The paper describes 'building bridges' (Fisher and Atkinson-Grosjean, 2002) through partnership working between college and university and outlines the interventions informed by focus groups and staff working in college and university. We deploy theoretical conceptions of academic transitions as 'boundary crossing' (Akkerman and Bakker, 2011)

and explore how the effectiveness of a range of practical measures and theoretical conceptions may be understood by reference to their potential as boundary workers, boundary objects (Star, 2010) and brokers (Wenger, 1989).

The paper concludes that Associate Student status itself is not sufficient to enable effective transitions, but that a programme of targeted learning opportunities and experiences is likely to improve confidence and motivation for university study, helping to ensure that students are well positioned to negotiate the transition to university programmes in their third year of study.

Context

In 2013, in order to foster growth in articulation activity, the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) introduced funding and set ambitious targets for universities to support additional places for students to progress from college to university with no loss of time, by way of 'guaranteed articulation' (Scottish Funding Council, 2013). There are variations in articulation routes which this scheme supports, but in the context of our study at Edinburgh Napier University, students begin their HN qualification at Further Education (FE) College in the knowledge that subject to their satisfying the requirements of their HN course and reaching a specified level of pass in the graded unit, they have a guaranteed place on a named degree at university, starting with advanced standing in 3rd year. This shared model of delivery is known as a '2+2' model (Scottish Funding Council, 2013) and it enables students to enrol not only on their College programme, but also to enrol as an Associate Student of the university to which they will eventually progress in 3rd year.

For the academic year 2013/14 Edinburgh Napier University was awarded funding from the SFC for an additional 107 places for students starting their programmes in college and articulating to university for third and fourth year. The students, known as 'Associate Students' were dually matriculated in both college and university, and as college students were immediately able to gain access to a range of benefits, resources and facilities offered by the university. These benefits include access to resources such as the library, journals and e-books, sports and student union facilities, guest lectures from university staff, access to the student portal, intranet and online learning environment. Additionally, Edinburgh Napier Associate students are able to access tutorial support across a range of topics including specific subject support, library advice and study skills guidance. These student focused, targeted learning opportunities are designed to enhance student progression and attainment by creating opportunities for students to develop their confidence and academic skills which will help them to succeed in the very different HE environment.

Theoretical Concepts

The unique challenges faced by students making the transition from college to university can be understood by exploring a number of theoretical concepts inherent in establishing identity and developing competence in a new context. The notion of 'transition' itself is a key concept for our study since in this context it delineates the period of change experienced by students as they progress from college to university. The Associate Students discussed in this paper are making this transition in the third year of their studies when they join the University campus and the existing 3rd year student group. These students, who come to university with 'Advanced Standing', benefit from continued academic progression in the level of their study, i.e. Students who have achieved an HND (Level 8) can gain advanced entry into 3rd year of the degree programme (Level 9) with no loss of time.

As students make the transition from college to university concepts such as 'boundary crossing' become significant. 'Boundary' is a complex term denoting simultaneously inclusion and exclusion. Akkerman and Bakker (2011) provide a sufficiently pragmatic interpretation of the notion of a 'boundary' as 'sociocultural differences leading to a discontinuity of action or interaction' (p133). In our study, the boundaries we refer to are those that are embedded in the divergent delivery systems represented by partner colleges and University (Edinburgh Napier University). The Associate Student Project explores student transitions through various forms of boundary crossing: for example, from further to higher education, from college to university campus, or from a content-led to research-led curriculum. We conceptualise our work with college students making the transition from college to university as helping them effectively to negotiate these boundaries and to integrate both academically and socially. What follows is a short discussion of the relevant boundaries which delineates our approach.

Fisher & Atkinson-Grosjean (2002) describe an effective strategy facilitating collaboration between differing modes of working. This research looks at the question of whether or not the introduction of 'technology managers', as boundary workers, can consolidate the partnership of academia, industry and the State. In the context of the Associate Student Project this function is fulfilled in one of the Schools by a Lecturer, who has been fundamental to the development of the project by acting as college liaison and helping to bridge the gap between college and university. Working on the boundary, this University lecturer's knowledge and understanding of both academic environments has enabled true collaboration to develop between staff at the institutions. The introduction of a Lecturer acting as a 'broker' (Wenger, 1998) between college and university, has enabled the establishment of new connections across the two different communities of practice (college and university in our case). Furthermore she has enabled quite complex co-ordination and has facilitated a range of transactions (Wenger, 1998) that would have otherwise have been unlikely to develop.

It is clear that notions such as 'transition' and 'boundary' are useful when trying to understand the nature of the challenges faced by college students articulating to university, while theoretical concepts including 'building bridges', boundary workers and brokers will inform strategies to help students to address these challenges (Akkerman and Bakker; Fisher & Atkinson-Grosjean (2002); Star and Griesemer, 1989).

Methodology

The research and associated practice that we describe in this project is very much a preliminary investigation for a more formalised research project in which we will adopt a case study methodology. Since the Associate Student Project began in September 2013, we have adopted a range of qualitative approaches to data collection. Focus groups were used to obtain rich qualitative data from students about their experiences of being Associate students and their views on partnership working between FE college and university. The focus group interviews were recorded and transcribed. For the purposes of this preliminary stage of our research, a priori data codes have been applied to meaningful segments of the transcription texts (Bryman, 2012) for the purposes of data analysis. However, the data will be revisited and a more rigorous coding and data analysis sequence undertaken once the main research project is underway.

The perceptions of staff members have also been sought through informal feedback and discussions. Monthly meetings between college and university representatives of the Associate Students Project have formed the main formal channel of communication across

all institutions in the partnership and have provided valuable data for our study. Ethical approval for this research and for the more extensive study which will follow has been granted from the Edinburgh Napier Faculty Research Integrity Committee. At all times ethical considerations and the privacy of all participants has been prioritised, obtaining informed consent from individuals and anonymising contributions from all students and staff.

Partnership and Preparation Model

Our model has been informed by transition studies in the literature, theoretical perspectives (described above), focus group findings and partnership meetings with key staff members, and informal communication with staff and students. Our model addresses the practical concerns and preconceptions amongst staff and students associated with making the transition from college to university. The innovation of our approach to partnership, which is practice-based rather than policy-based is in its reliance upon relationship building between both staff and students at college and at university levels. The model is not a 'top-down' one, but instead it is more practice based, democratic and emergent, allowing staff and students to collaborate on best practice in the field of articulation and to influence changes to practice.

Initiatives

A number of initiatives have been implemented in college to support our approach to enabling student articulation and these interventions can be divided into two distinct, but interrelated, strands: partnership and preparation. Tackling both of these concepts in conjunction was considered essential to ensure an optimal but sustainable articulation route from college to university. Enhancing communication and understanding through partnership is fundamental to establishing a longstanding collaborative relationship between the University and its partner colleges. Effective partnership working means that pathways between college and university can be as open and inclusive as possible in the long-term. With the emphasis on student preparation, both socially and in terms of the academic curriculum, our Associate Students are ready to negotiate the altering landscape of their learning, so that they can achieve their potential in their new university context. Focus group interviews in College revealed that Associate Students understand the need to develop their skills in order to prepare for University:

'I didn't do that great at school in 6th year so thought I'd have to go to college and get the requirements to get into University. And at college I can take time to develop my skills'.

A bilateral approach to best practice in articulation which is centred on these two interconnected concepts, partnership and preparation, can protect and enhance the integrity of articulation as a route to HE.

Preparation - Social Engagement and Integration

According to Willms (2009), most recent studies of student engagement treat a sense of belonging and participation as a predictor of academic achievement. Central to our model of articulation, therefore, is the notion that social engagement and academic performance are not independent issues but rather are inextricably linked. This premise is manifested in our use of social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, to engage with Associate Students,

direct entrants and partner colleges and endorsed in some transition studies in the literature (Jenkins et al. 2012). A focus group with third year direct entrants revealed the value of this method in creating a sense of community in what would otherwise be a disparate group where continuing and articulating students can be predisposed to segregation, finding it difficult to blend in with the existing student cohort. Likewise, this focus group determined that access to the online learning environment (Moodle), with a dedicated page for the Associate Students, has been an invaluable resource.

Our focus groups with 3rd year direct entrants revealed that they felt strongly about the issue of student identity.

‘Last year if I was saying I was a student it didn’t feel good saying I was a College student. This year it feels good to say I’m at Uni. It makes me feel proud’.

Along with the altering landscape of their learning, articulating students must adapt to an altering perception of their identity: from that of college student to university student. To encourage the formation of the Associate Student identity our model incorporates branded marketing activity, specifically posters, leaflets and website content to ensure students, staff and importantly parents are aware of the importance and significance of the project and of the benefits that await those who make the transition to university (Martin et al, 2014). All Associate Students have matriculated at University and consequently are regarded as HE students from their first day at college. This approach not only increases the visibility of Associate Students and allows them the opportunity to integrate with other university students on campus in libraries, students unions and through other facilities, but also helps in the formation of the University student identity. Our focus groups revealed that students value these opportunities, even though they are not always used consistently amongst the group:

‘I feel privileged – as an Associate you get to use the facilities, we had the matriculation event, extra resources, Moodle’.

The formation of university identity is vital for direct entrants (Christie et al, 2013) and our model takes account of this prerequisite prior to articulation by implementing a range of interventions which include visits from Edinburgh Napier programme teams to meet with staff and students at partner colleges; communicating basic logistical information about university life (timetable details, travel, parking, assessment methods); staff sharing their knowledge of the differing environments with one another and with students and shared working between staff teams on material development for delivery in colleges.

Feedback from college students who had attended an Open Day for Associate Engineering Students indicates that students valued looking around the Merchiston Campus:

‘really good to get the feel of the place before we start’.

They identified that they appreciated opportunities to meet the programme team, and in future events they wanted to attend lectures and spend more informal time meeting other first year students:

‘I want to take part in something with the first years, rather than just be visitors’.

Motivation and confidence building

Studies have shown that students’ belief in their ability to succeed, combined with their motivation to complete the task, determines the student performance. For example, Eccles et al’s ‘Expectancy-Value Model of Achievement Motivation’ theoretical framework (2000)

states that 'an individual's choice, persistence, and performance can be explained by their beliefs about how well they will do on the activity and the extent to which they value the activity' (2000: 68). This principle informed the basis for a number of interventions introduced to support Associate Students such as drop-in lectures, guest lectures and Open Days which have all been very positively evaluated.

These measures have allowed college staff and their students to experience some aspects of university life. Additionally, focus groups with Associate Students and college staff have provided an effective forum for 'myth-busting' many preconceptions about the differences and changes that are necessary to succeed at university.

Partnership

The importance of developing a strong partnership between University and its partner colleges has been highlighted in FE to HE transitions studies (Pike and Harrison, 2011, Gallacher, 2009). Our experience is consistent with this research and we have identified that strong partnership is fundamental to the success of the Associate Student Project. We have sought to move away from a traditional college-university partnership that is primarily expressed in terms of formal documents and instead, we have worked to ensure that our partnership with colleges is one which is dynamic, responsive and emergent and which works well in the flatter organisational structures which prevail in colleges. University committee structures impose a degree of formality which we have found to be less well aligned with college culture where business is transacted on a more relational basis. Through the appointment of a lecturer with specific responsibilities for college liaison, informal engagement with staff has been enabled, allowing a different sort of dialogue to emerge which is open and transparent. Team teaching with college lecturers and the college liaison has been implemented as a means of embedding academic literacy skills likely to be required at university. These opportunities expose staff and students to the different delivery methods and to the research focus that they are likely to encounter at university. In recognition of the facts that subject areas are more specialised at HE level, and that frequently universities have access to enhanced equipment and facilities, the Associate Student project has allowed Edinburgh Napier to offer staff development opportunities to college lecturers who wish to gain a more advanced qualification relevant to their teaching area.

Conclusion

In line with guidelines set out by the SFC (2013), Edinburgh Napier University has developed a strong collaborative relationship with its college partners. Analysis of focus groups with students has informed the direction in which the Associate Student Project has moved forward. Informal meetings and discussions with students and staff have been instrumental in the production of this model of partnership and preparation. The appointment of an academic lecturer as college liaison in one of the Schools has promoted cohesion across all college campuses and allowed for discussion, fundamental to students and staff, regarding curriculum development, course alignment and academic literacy.

Much of the previous work around articulation has focused on highlighting the fundamental differences between study at college and university. Our model has turned this approach on its head, rethinking traditional articulation by working in partnership with key members of staff to focus on collaboration and targeted interventions that can be used to enhance the experiences of Associate Students. Our primary research findings have shown that the status of being an Associate Student is not, in itself, beneficial and may potentially decrease the students' likelihood to articulate if they are deterred by the lack of University support or appropriate bridging and transition activities. Interventions must be co-ordinated,

academically appropriate, subject specific and most significantly have buy-in from college partners' staff and students. Associate student status is the starting point for a series of interventions and the beginning for partnership and preparation.

Future and Ongoing Research

A study is planned which explores the experience of a group of Associate students in college, following them as they articulate to university the following year. We expect this study to lend insights into the student experience of boundary crossing, and of the interventions which enable and inhibit successful articulation. Further studies exploring aggregated quantitative data obtained from the student record systems, tracking the progress of direct entrants in comparison to their 1st year entry counterparts are also underway.

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