Articulating student experience: Empowering students to "articulate" what matters to them during the transition from college to university.

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ABSTRACT (150 words max)

As part of Edinburgh Napier University's commitment to delivering a high quality transition experience to articulating students, we are undertaking a longitudinal study of the journey from further to higher education. Taking a different approach to existing research, which tends to focus more on institutional priorities, we are attempting to further our understanding of the phenomenon from the perspective of the student. Rather than ask whether the articulation journey works toward institutional goals, we are interested in whether the assumptions underlying the articulation journey actually correspond with students' experiences. The findings of this study will be used to inform the design and delivery of articulation-based activity going forward. This paper outlines the theoretical background and methodological approach underpinning this research.

1. Background:

The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) initially developed an articulation policy in 2004 and remains committed to the principle of articulation, recently expressing an ambition to increase the number of students articulating from college to second or third year of university from 3,000 in year 2011/12 to 4,100 in year 2016/17 (Scottish Funding Council, 2014). Whilst the mechanism to enable students to enter higher education at an advanced stage is firmly established within the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework, it is widely acknowledged that the transition from college to university presents substantial challenges for those involved (Briggs, Clark, Hall, 2012). As a result, both colleges and universities provide articulation focused interventions to help facilitate this transition. This support is largely driven by institutional assumptions about the nature of 'successful outcomes', typically defined across existing research as university graduation, retention rates, or the receipt of an exit award. Whilst this represents a legitimate and, indeed, entirely rational means of quantifying success at the institutional level, it fails to attend to the students' perspective of what constitutes a successful transition. A recent study of Open University students who entered with HN qualifications reported that one third of respondents cited 'personal interest' as their main motivation to study (Macintyre & Thomson, 2010), highlighting the potential for discrepant views of the purpose university study between the individual and the institution. Furthermore, it could be argued that relying primarily upon achievement and retention as markers of a successful transition is somewhat incongruent with the common understanding of transition, with the focus being somewhat distant from the period of transition itself. This raises the fundamental issue of how we conceptualise articulation as a form of transition as the design of initiatives to support articulation should not only consider the students perspective, but should also be guided by a clear conception of articulation.

Gale and Parker (2014) propose three broad conceptions of transition within higher education; transition as induction, transition as development and transition as becoming. Transition as induction is concerned with the "sequentially defined periods of adjustment…from one institutional context to another" (Gale and Parker, 2014, p737). Importantly, this definition does not delineate transition as being an acute event, and proponents of the transition as induction

approach increasingly refer to a 'period' of transition. Nevertheless, this conception of transition tends to focus predominantly upon the first year experience, being based around orientation and familiarisation with the institution and its procedures. Transition as induction appears to underpin many of the articulation support initiatives implemented by colleges and universities. Certainly, Edinburgh Napier University, which has a long-standing commitment to articulation, allocates substantial resources towards the orientation of students within the first two weeks of study, delivering a total of 33 orientation workshops to over 600 students annually. The University's 'Getting Started' workshop is specifically designed to provide articulating students with an overview of the support services that are available to them and give them the opportunity to interact with their peers. In house evaluations suggest that these workshops are very positively received, although students attribute greater importance to meeting other students than to learning about institutional norms and support. The most common answer to the open question "what did you find most useful about the workshop" related to having the opportunity to meet new students (29% of all responses). Ignoring the fact that social support, in the form of peer friendships, may indirectly influence retention and achievement through psychological processes (Allen, McManus & Russell, 1999), this points towards the fact that students' perception of what matters during transition may not align with the institutional emphasis on the long term measures of success. However, the possibility of confirmation bias cannot be ruled out here, given the aims of the workshop, and it is also important to view these responses in the context of the time point at which they were provided. That is to say that students reflections on their experience of transition during this particular acute phase of articulation should not be assumed to be apply to the transition journey in its entirety.

Although debate continues as to whether the acute period of moving from one institution to another should be deemed a "crisis point" (Brook *et al.,* 2014 p25), this period undoubtedly represents an important stage in the journey of articulation and it is therefore appropriate that significant efforts are undertaken to ensure students are given the support they require at this point. Furthermore, in many cases these orientation sessions provide the higher education institution with their first opportunity to engage with these students in any meaningful way. However, if the concept of transition as induction being a long term process is accepted, then efforts should be made to provide support in a way that reflects this. Accordingly, Edinburgh Napier University is increasingly moving away from single-event transition to an approach that embeds support throughout the entire articulation journey where practicable. Ongoing support and contact is now being initiated during the HNC year at college in order to raise familiarity with key staff, demystify university and begin to develop key academic skills. As this is partly

delivered through input to Learning Development Tutor sessions, the cooperation and active involvement of college staff is fundamental to this activity. Additionally, collaborative work is being undertaken through ELRAH (Edinburgh, Lothians, Fife and Borders Regional Articulation Hub) to produce a series of academic skills workshops which can be delivered in the colleges by either college or university staff. Following transition into the University, all articulating students have access to a named school specific learning adviser at any time. The learning advisers also proactively contact all students at possible crunch times, e.g. the start of each trimester, post initial assessment hand in, pre exams to remind them of the support that is available to them. These interventions appear to be valued by students with around 10% responding to this email contact. Although allowing a greater degree of individualism, this approach is still, to a certain extent, predicated upon assumptions about the nature of successful transitions and guided by the conception of transition as induction.

In a departure from the notion that transition primarily involves the process of navigating through a change in institutional norms, 'transition as development' is conceptualised by Gale and Parker (2014) as a process of identity change. Within the context of articulation this most obviously relates to students changing their identity from that of college student to university student. There are two theoretical differences between the induction and development approaches which raise important practical considerations for the design of articulation support activities; the locus of change, and level of perspective. Identity is fundamentally an internal construct, albeit one which can be influenced by external factors, and exists at an individual level, which clearly differs from the external, institution level that transition as induction operates at. To explain why this matters, if the institution and the student differ in their conception of transition there exists potential for the two to conflict with each other. That is to say that there is a very real possibility that by conceiving of articulation as induction, institutions could unwittingly foster a new identity as an 'articulating student', reinforced either through articulation specific support activities which promote an institutional agenda or through terminology. Indeed, these students may variously be referred to as articulating, college leavers, direct entrants, advanced standing, advanced progression; whereas those coming to university straight from school tend to be referred to simply as students, possibly prefaced by "traditional" with all of the nuances of solidity and normalcy inherent within that term. The disparity in nomenclature applied to these groups may certainly pose a threat to the identity of these students. It seems, therefore, that there is a genuine need to explore the process of articulating from college to university from the students' perspective to ensure that the institutional and student perspectives are aligned as far as possible.

Of all the stakeholders involved in the transition from college to university, the students who actually live the experience are irrefutably the best placed to help further our understanding of what the phenomenon involves, and how best to facilitate it. Therefore, the student perspective now needs to be investigated, to allow institutions to work more closely with students as partners (SPARQS, 2014), to identify where our objectives overlap and to work toward shared goals, while questioning the value of those goals that are not shared. Rather than ask whether the articulation journey works toward the Further and Higher Education sector's goals, we should be asking whether the assumptions underlying the articulation journey actually correspond with students' experiences and aspirations. To that end Edinburgh Napier University are undertaking a longitudinal investigation of student's lived experience of the articulation journey to better understand their conception of transition and their perception of their identity throughout the process. It is anticipated that this will better allow for support to be designed to meet the students' needs and the expectation is that students will ultimately become active as partners in the design and delivery of articulation focused activities to subsequent cohorts of students.

2. Methodology

2.1 Design

A mixed methods approach is being employed in order to maximise the opportunities for data collection and analysis, and this section will provide an overview of these methods as well as a more detailed description of the approach and methodology to be used within the first phase of the study. At the time of writing the initial interviews had been performed but no data analysis undertaken. A 4-year longitudinal design was deemed appropriate to reflect the conception of the college to university transition as being a process that spans the entire period of further and higher education. Within the last two years of the study, students will be encouraged to become active as co-creators of transition support and will have the opportunity to engage with the delivery and evaluation of this. Therefore, in addition to following a single cohort throughout the entire transition, cross-sectional data will also be collected from other groups of students during various stages.

2.2. Sampling

The primary consideration for the selection of participants within phenomenographic research is simply that the participants have experience of the phenomenon itself. As a result, purposive sampling is a commonly used method within this type of inquiry (Yates *et al.,* 2012). In the present study, the nature of the phenomenon under investigation dictates that participants must have lived experience of the process of transitioning from further to higher education. Coupled with the longitudinal approach being used this poses the obvious challenge of how to recruit participants from further education who may ultimately progress onto higher education; despite sharing a degree of commonality, the two systems are fundamentally distinct. Edinburgh Napier's associate student scheme, which provides guaranteed individual named places to students on specific HNQ programmes, as part of the SFC funded additional places scheme (SFC, 2013) presents a useful opportunity for recruiting. However, as the experience of an associate student may be markedly different from non-associate students, a cohort of non-associate students was also included in the study. To define this later group, institutional data was firstly analysed to identify specific college programmes with formal articulation agreements. Five years' worth of data was then reviewed to establish which of these programmes traditionally provide a large number of students each year. As approximately 50 students from Edinburgh College are recruited into the university's suite of Sport and Exercise Science programmes annually these students were selected for inclusion. Whilst there is no prescriptive guideline for the optimal number of participants within phenomenographic research, it has been suggested that between 15 and 20 people is sufficient to adequately capture variation in experience without being unmanageable (Trigwell, 2000). To increase the likelihood of still having a sufficiently sized sample in the later stages of the project invitations were initially extended to approximately 40 students.

2.3 Data collection and analysis

The main methods of data collection and analysis are detailed within this section. Due to the nature of the study it is likely that initial findings will be used to inform subsequent data collection methods, which cannot presently be detailed here.

2.3.1 Initial phase Interviews

Interviews during the initial phase of data collection were conducted by two researchers, lasted for approximately 30 minutes and were audio recorded. The interviews followed a semi-structured format. In this phase of the research all participants were studying towards their HNQ. However, as stated previously, our working conception of articulation is broadly of a

process spanning the entire period of further and higher education study rather than being an acute event. Naturally the participants' experiences of the phenomenon can be expected to shift and alter during this timeframe, which may understandably result in substantial intra-individual variation in reports of the lived experience. However, it is important to avoid influencing the conversational narrative in advance by defining the participants' experiences as being bound by time relative to the specific stage of the process. That is to say that the anticipatory experience of an as yet unexperienced event which forms part of the overall process is entirely worthy of investigation here. The interview transcripts will be analysed in accordance with the common principles outlined by Akerlind (2002), which require that: 1) predetermined views about the nature of categories are set aside; 2) that a focus in collective experience be maintained and; 3) that there is a search for variation in experiences across interviews.

2.3.2 Focus groups

Focus groups will be held following the initial interviews in order to investigate the themes that emerge in greater depth. Additionally, analysis will be undertaken to specifically investigate differences between the collective and individual student voices as this may provide valuable information relating to the effectiveness of engaging with articulating students in different ways, i.e. in groups and individually

2.3.3 Online Space

An online space will be created to allow students to reflect upon their experiences at specific times as well as to ask any questions about the process of articulation. It is anticipated that by year 3, the students who have progressed to university will become active partners in moderating this online space in some way, so that they are able to engage with cohorts following them through the process.

2.3.4 Evaluation of existing provision

Students are currently required to provide written feedback following delivery of any articulation based activity by the learning advisers. This feedback will be evaluated to capture the student voice relating to the information and support that they are receiving and the way this is being delivered. A longitudinal analysis will seek to identify whether the students' views change throughout the articulation journey.

2.3.5 Students as co-creators/co-evaluators

One benefit of adopting a longitudinal approach is that it not only allows for an investigation of the potential changing nature of articulating students' perceptions, experiences and support needs, it also provides the opportunity to involve them in the development/delivery and evaluation of articulation activity to students at an early stage of the journey. Students who become involved as co-creators will be expected to evaluate this process, but additionally the students who are receiving the co-created support will be invited to evaluate this support.

3. Summary

Although articulation is a firmly established route into higher education it may not be a process without significant inherent challenges. In order to determine how students can best be supported through this process it is fundamental that the experience is understood from the students' perspective. Through a longitudinal research study Edinburgh Napier University are aiming to gain a better understanding of the lived experience of the process of articulation into higher education. Using a mixed methods approach to data collection the aim is to capture the student voice and additionally to enable them to engage with the process as active partners in co-creation and delivery of support going forward.

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