A Comparison of The Nature of Pre-Entry Assessment in FE Feeder Colleges with those of The First Year Degree Programme

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Background and Rationale

The aim of this research was to gain an understanding of the styles and content of assessment our students were used to receiving in their feeder Further Education (FE) institutions and hence the students' probable strengths and weaknesses with regard to assessment. Differences between the assessments they have been used to and those they encounter during the first year of their undergraduate programme in The School of Computing and Information Technology (SCIT) were analysed with the intention of identifying potential areas of difficulty experienced by our students.

The increase in partcipation in Higher Education (HE) has led to an increase in the problem of first year failure and withdrawal, largely due to poor preparation for HE. Zeegers and Martin (2001) found that poorly prepared incoming students were often not willing to persist when they encountered difficulties. Ozga and Sukhanandan (1998) noted an absence of university preparation and appropriate guidance in schools and colleges that contributed significantly to the problem that is commonly only associated with tertiary education.

SCIT is currently conducting a three-year longitudinal case study using action research (Bassey, 1990) to identify students at risk of failure early in their course through an investigation of learning styles, entrance qualification, previous institution and personal details. Students are being tracked from the year prior to entry in six local feeder colleges, through levels one and two in HE. The project is in its third year and results so far have produced interesting patterns indicating, for instance, that students with Advanced Vocational Certificate of Education (AVCE)[1] entrance qualifications are disadvantaged by certain types of assessment regime at university. On the basis of all the findings it was considered important to research more fully the perception of pre-entry students as to what learning actually is.

Today's students come to university with diverse educational backgrounds, different expectations, prior knowledge and starting points. However, some university teachers are unaware of these differences and may be ignorant of the outcomes of modern FE courses that many students have taken. Through the medium of the SCIT FE Liaison Committee, SCIT staff are working with colleagues in FE to prepare students and overcome these prospective difficulties. This should improve student transition from FE to HE and thereby improve first year student retention. Taking account of assessment practices in FE will make assessment more relevant to our students and should improve its effectiveness, hence enhancing the quality of student learning. Insights gained from this research additionally will be useful in the development of foundation degrees.

As part of the longitudinal study, assignments at level one have been examined to ascertain the tasks or concepts with which the students have most difficulty. The research presented here, which is outside the scope of the longitudinal study, complements that investigation and further illuminates the issue. This report documents the findings of an initial survey of FE tutors, then outlines further work done using focus groups driven by the survey findings.

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[1] For more information on AVCE see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/AVCE

The Research

Opinions of FE staff teaching on courses preparing students for HE entry were gathered by means of an online questionnaire. Survey questions were intended to elicit the following information.

- What assessment methods are being used, formatively and summatively, individually and in groupwork.
- What the timescales and size of assignments are.
- How much support the students get with assessments.
- What deadline policies are in place.
- What coursework resubmission policies exist.
- To what extent there is a problem with plagiarism, collusion and cheating.
- Do FE tutors think their assessment strategies prepare students well for HE.

This information provided the basis for the focus group discussion questions. Two focus groups, both consisting of a mixture of representatives from FE and HE, were held during a one-day liaison workshop. The first concentrated on "The Language of Assessment", which had been identified as a problem area during the initial survey. The second concentrated on an "Assessment Review" in which participants were supplied with a range of assessment material from FE and from level 1 of the Computing Degree Scheme. The aims of this session were to make tutors aware of the types of assessment students encounter and to try to identify both good practice and potential areas of difficulty.

Survey Outcomes

The survey on FE assessment uncovered the following:

- There appears to be twice as much formative assessment as summative assessment being used.
- The language of assessment appears to be an issue for concern.
- It is usual to allow work to be resubmitted.
- Portfolios and oral presentations are common.
- Assignments are, more often than not, large tasks.
- FE teaching staff are able to comment on whether they think students' experience in FE will, or will not, prepare them for HE.

The ratio between formative and summative assessment was unexpected. There were several potential explanations for this. Firstly, staff from HE have underestimated the level to which students previously experienced formative assessment. Secondly, the FE tutors who participated in the survey had different interpretations of what was meant by summative and formative.

A group of FE tutors identified a problem with the language used in assessment. For example they believed that their students did not understand assessments that were specified in traditional academic language. An important discussion topic for the proposed focus groups was to see how FE tutors could address this problem and to construct a set of guidelines that will be the starting point to develop this further within SCIT.

It is now common practice for students in FE to be allowed to resubmit work after it has been marked and feedback given. This is something that students do not encounter at University of Wolverhampton as it contravenes policy.

It has been identified that portfolios and oral presentations are common in FE. If similarities exist between these assessment methods and the portfolios and oral presentations experienced by undergraduates (i.e. if an FE portfolio is comparable to a HE one), students' success rates of portfolios and oral presentations could be compared with the success of undergraduate assessments that use techniques uncommon in FE.

Assignments used in FE are often large tasks. A misconception held within SCIT is that students who struggle to work independently on large tasks are inexperienced with them, and have common problems related to planning and time management. It was important to ascertain how large assessment tasks are successfully managed in FE and the level to which students are required to work independently. This would be a valuable contribution to developing independent learners.

The survey asked the FE tutors open-ended questions relating to whether they thought students' experience in FE would, or would not, prepare them for HE. All survey participants were able to supply substantial answers to this question. No participants admitted that they knew little of HE practice. This question was asked again, before and after the focus groups to see if perceptions had changed as a result of the work. This provided an indication of the existing levels of cross-sector awareness.

Focus Groups Outcomes

The following observations were made with respect to FE assessments:

- Assessments were issued right at the start of modules before any material had been delivered.
- Assessment criteria were very prescribed, in some cases running to three pages of bullet points.
- FE tended to use formative assessment leading up to summative assessment.
- Depending on the institution there were different policies regarding when coursework should be attempted. In some cases coursework should be done mainly outside taught sessions. At other institutions coursework should be completed entirely in tutor-supported sessions.
- Cheating was kept under control by the close, personal contact between students and tutors. Groups were small, consisting of 16 to 20 students and their contact with the same tutor was frequent, around three times per week, spanned across multiple modules.
- Predefined milestones were commonly used to help manage time. This effectively breaks large tasks down into multiple small ones, thus easing planning and control.
- At first sight, the volume and level of work is comparable to level 1 HND modules. Examples of students' work were not available at the discussion, thus this could not be fully confirmed. Similarly, the questions raised earlier about the content of portfolios and oral presentations were left unanswered.

The following observations were made with respect to HE assessments:

- A broad range of assessment methods were used.
- HE used formative assessment separately, with feedback given after summative assessment.
- The formalism and presentation of modules could be daunting. For example, module guides appeared to be written to satisfy quality assurance procedures as opposed to being written to satisfy the needs of students.
- Students did not appear to get much time to digest material before encountering assessment on it.

The Language of Assessment focus group acknowledged that there were cross-sector boundaries with language. The theory suggested earlier, relating to different tutors having different interpretations of key terminology, was found to be correct. For example, the group was asked what was meant by summative and formative and this started a debate. The same generally used words imposed different expectations on students across the sectors. For example, the expected responses to questions centred on the words 'explain', 'describe' and 'discuss', differ significantly in length. Guidelines exist for some FE assessments that indicate a *discuss* question should be answered with a 3 sentence response, whereas in HE a similarly worded question may require a substantial piece of work. This served as evidence to support the need for more cross-sector collaboration.

The following were proposed to address the problems:

- A common glossary needs to be developed.
- FE and HE need to be aware of differences in "real" exam papers.
- HE students need guidance on assessment and should be made aware of the differing expectations from FE to HE. For example, students could be told to analyse the ratio between the marks tariff and the time allowed for assessment to gauge the required level of answer.
- Use of cross-institutional on-line resources, via the Wolf Virtual Learning Environment may ease the transition.
- First year HE tutors could make more visits to FE to give "realism" talks.
- Staff could make informal visits to observe each other "in action".

Throughout the liaison day tutors from both sectors were informally asked about the level of knowledge they perceived themselves to have about the other sector. There appeared to be a consensus view that before the event they thought they knew more about the other sector than they actually did, and by learning more about the other sector through the course of the event they began to appreciate the actual differences and understand why students from FE respond to their assessments as they do.

Benefits and Evaluation

The research commenced under the premise that cross-sector awareness was low. This was substantiated both from the results of the survey but more so from the discussions arising from the focus groups. As well as being a vehicle for this research, the focus groups served as a starting point for engendering the required awareness to the extent of making direct immediate impact in practice. This should hopefully impact on the first year student experience.

Future Developments

There was a common agreement that there is a need for further collaboration and that an annual or bi-annual event would be desirable. Work will continue in the University-driven FE/HE liaison group. Opportunities to build on this work, particularly in the areas recommended by the focus groups, will be actively sought.

References

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