

Transition to HE: the impact of perceptions of students and staff

Jenny Davies (j.davies2@wlv.ac.uk)
Hilary Bentley (h.e.bentley3@wlv.ac.uk)
School of Computing and Information Technology
Lynda Holland (Lynda.Holland@wlv.ac.uk)
Department of Learning Resources

Background and rationale

The aim of the project was to gain a fuller understanding of the perceptions of students entering undergraduate programmes in the School of Computing and Information Technology (SCIT) in order to improve the students' achievements on their course of study. The results have fed into an ongoing SCIT research programme, begun in 2002, that seeks to relate entrance qualification, feeder institution, learning style and a student's success in their first year in HE. That research had revealed that student perceptions, including their expectations, motivations and their view of task requirements, are a key rather than a contributory factor leading to student withdrawal. The information obtained is forming the basis of collaborative initiatives involving learner support, enhancement of teaching and changes to the induction period.

Tinto,¹ in a fundamental US-based study, drew attention to the importance of self-perception, in terms of social and academic integration, to a student's determination to continue with a higher education course. Tinto's study was built on by Edward², who emphasised the importance of the transition period and, in particular, induction in ensuring student commitment. His model describes perceptions and expectations of the course and profession (engineering) at pre-entry as influencing the degree of persistence exhibited by an individual. At post-entry, commitment to the university, engendered by a sense of belonging and influenced by perceptions of the institution, is highly significant in survival.

Several studies have been undertaken to assess student perceptions. Lizzio and Wilson³ evaluated student self-perceptions of their level of capability using a questionnaire with closed questions and a seven-point scale. Maunder and Harrop⁴, in another quantitative study, examined differences in student and staff perceptions of the teaching process, using open questions to derive key factors, and then a closed questionnaire, where the factors had to be ranked. Hopkins and Smith⁵, in a qualitative study, used focus groups and interviews to identify misconceptions of pre-entry English students about how their time will be apportioned on their course. They found that students grossly overestimate the amount of time they think they will spend with their tutor and in lectures and seminars, and underestimate the amount of time they will spend on personal research and reading.

The study reported herein utilised a narrative reporting process, focus groups and a questionnaire with open questions progressively to isolate significant issues to feed into an intervention programme.

1 Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving College: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition*, 2nd. Ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

2 Edward, N. (2003). First impressions last: An innovative approach to induction. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 4, 3, pp. 226 – 242.

3 Lizzio, A. and Wilson, K. (2004). First year students' perceptions of capability. *Studies in Higher Education*, 29, 1, pp. 109 – 128.

4 Maunder, R.A. and Harrop, A. (2003). Investigating students' perceptions of what contributes to productive seminars and lectures and staff predictions of students' perceptions: How well do staff know their students? *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 27, 4, pp. 443 – 456.

5 Hopkins, C. and Smith, K. (2004). Great expectations: Student expectations/perceptions of what it means to be an English student, *Access, Application and Achievement*. 6th. Annual Learning and Teaching Conference. The Nottingham Trent University (22 April 2004).

The Research

To encourage the first year undergraduates in SCIT to reflect upon their academic performance, in a History of Computing module the students were asked to use an online reflective diary, or 'blog', to comment frankly upon their progress in the module. Since 1999 when blogs or web logs were first used to detail personal information and opinion, they have become established in business as a means of recording narrative knowledge: to gather employee opinion and to gain innovative ideas.^{6,7} The comments harvested from the blogs in semester one were analysed to derive key issues. These issues, coupled with hard data obtained from analyses of student performance linked to type of entrance qualification: A-level, AVCE, GNVQ etc., were utilised to derive a set of questions used in focus group discussions held with first year computing students in semester two. Despite extensive promotion by module leaders in core modules, by email and using posters mounted prominently in MU Block, as well as the offer of a free lunch, the attendance at the sessions was disappointingly low. However, it was sufficient to obtain a response which provided enough qualitative data on student thoughts and perceptions of their transition to HE to lead to the development of a questionnaire, based on open questions, delivered later in semester 2 to the whole first year undergraduate computing cohort, when they were pinned down in test sessions. The questions are as below.

1. What were the most difficult or stressful things during your change from attending school/college to studying at university?
2. What could we have done to make this better or easier?
3. What could have been done in school/college to prepare you better for university life?
4. What is the best thing about studying here?
5. What is the worst thing about studying here?
6. Do you have any sensible suggestions to make about first year issues?

The outcomes

Overall, the students had found the transition to HE difficult. They had been surprised by the intensity of the workload in HE; they had found their first assignment very stressful; they had had difficulty adapting to the change in teaching and learning style; they had found it difficult to organise their workload and to self-study; they had felt lost and reported physically getting lost.

Analysis of the blog comments led to the following groups of selected responses:

Feelings on first day Worried – would they succeed, had they made the right choice of course and place? Excited – eager to get started. Apprehensive – what are the other students and the lecturers like? Overwhelmed – lost in a sea of faces, buildings and instructions. Nervous – a huge university was in front of me.

Memories of the first day Too many pieces of paper to organise. Walking everywhere. Impressive computer facilities. Endless queues. The fire alarm going off. A helpful member of staff taking the time to sort me out.

6 Bradbury, D. (2003). From blogs to k-logs. *Computer Weekly*, pp. 40 – 41, 23 September, 2003.

7 Taylor, P. (2004). Business logs on to blogging. *FT IT Review*, p.1, 3 March 2004.

Feelings now Glad taken the course. Still excited. Illness is a disaster as you get behind. Like hands-on, but not always enough computers, and too many students trying to attract the attention of the lecturer. Encouraged as the tutor said I had done my evaluation well. Evaluation is a good idea as it makes you look back. Teaching material here is well laid out.

Other points Good to know the deadlines and have them set out in first session. Concerned about leaving things until the last minute – causes stress. Filling in questionnaires helps the tutors to help the students.

Here is a selection of focus group observations:

How do our methods of assessment differ from those you used in FE?

Deadlines more difficult. In college we were more prompted and it (the assignment/work) was broken into chunks.

What about class sizes, do they affect how you work?

They are bigger and rowdy; it's difficult to concentrate.

Do you think the way you do your learning has changed in HE?

Definitely, tighter deadlines (mature, A level).

Not really, I take it in, remember it and spit it out for exams (AVCE).

Much harder work here but better than college (overseas).

When you get a module guide, what do you read first?

Weighting of assignments.

What do you **not** bother to read in the guide?

All the rest.

Have you considered dropping out? If so, why?

Yes, when work piled up.

What made you stay?

My parents are proud of me being here.

Two out of six sections of the grouped overall responses from focus groups and the questionnaire, relating to questions 1 and 2, are given below.

What were the most difficult or stressful things during your change from attending school/college to studying at university?
Intensity of workload
Timetable (lack of) and year timetable (terms etc)
Deadlines
First assignment – what was required; report writing
Big jump from 6th form to HE work
Change in teaching and learning style
Tutors having less time
Welcome Week
Lack of information
Getting lost (site and building map needed)
Working environment
Lectures
Learning difficulties (dyslexia)
Finances

Finances
What could we have done or provided to make this better or easier?
Increased use of online notice boards for rooms, times, exams, timetables etc.
Ice breaker activities
Longer and more tutorials
More programming workshops
More direction signs in buildings
Pathway Guide sent out earlier
Slower change from FE to HE teaching
Better relating of workshops to lectures
Personal tutor introduction earlier
Early knowledge of university software used
Crowd control in lectures
Help with first assignment
Spread assignments better
Better explanation of programming and VB.net
More 1-2-1 tutorials

Benefits

This work has fed into the development and implementation of an intervention programme, which includes a student web site, produced by a SCIT student for his final year project. The intervention programme also includes: changes to Welcome Week; changes to the personal tutor system; staff development to promote teaching styles which incorporate more active learning; consideration of changes to level 1 assessment; and methods to make students more aware of the university environment in the year before entry.

The project has led to a richer knowledge of student concerns. The students who participated have reported that they appreciate their opinions being taken on board. It is hoped that the changes will result in improved student retention in SCIT.

Evaluation

These findings were offered for discussion at a workshop at an international conference on student retention and achievement.⁸ They were well received and prompted a constructive debate about the issues.

Future developments

It is intended to evaluate the success of, and refine, the intervention programme. Further results will be published externally, which will provide feedback to the team.

Blogging warrants further investigation as a tool to aid student reflection.

It is hoped that this experience will prompt colleagues in the wider university community to continue to develop student-friendly ways of soliciting student feelings and opinions, which are then considered for incorporation into programmes of study.

⁸ Bentley, H. and Davies, J. (2004). Differing perceptions - their adverse effect on retention. Workshop at "Staying Power" Supporting Student Retention and Success. University of Teesside, Middlesbrough (July 2004).