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Making sense of academic life in the UK: the voice of the direct entry student at UWE

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ABSTRACT

The academic experiences of a small group of direct entry international students were recorded by a cross-service/faculty project group at the University of the West of England. Findings showed that more could be done to inform prospective students about their course and the different academic culture they would experience. In response to the student interviews, the project team compiled recommendations and a toolkit for staff which focused on transition, teaching and learning, and academic support. Progress has included the introduction of pre-arrival tasks across all faculties and the formation of a cross-service International Student Experience Group.

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Background

This article outlines a collaborative learning and teaching project at the University of the West of England (UWE) to investigate the academic study experiences of direct entry undergraduate international students. UWE recruits international students through entry agreements which bring students to the university directly into the second or third year of their programme. The project team included staff from the Library, which included the English Language and Academic Skills Unit; the International Office; and two faculty academics. A small group of south-east Asian students (11 in total) were interviewed about their experiences pre-arrival at UWE; about the study environment, and the support they had sought and received. Interviewees were asked to offer advice, based on their experiences, to prospective direct entry students, and to UWE staff. The project outcomes were a series of recommendations to UWE and a toolkit for teaching staff.

In 2013, UWE received nearly 700 undergraduate direct entry students from 47 different countries who joined their programme in either the second or third year, having started their university life in their home countries. Ninety-five of these students had attended a UWE pre-session course (UWE Data Requests, 2014). Although direct entry students have similar

transition experiences to all students entering university, they have less time to adapt to the academic culture than if they had entered at level one. These students then require additional support (Quan, Smailes and Fraser, 2013). At UWE, academic staff, in-sessional EAP tutors and library staff had expressed concern that direct entrants were struggling to adapt to their academic studies. The following sections outline the key findings from the student interviews.

Student Interviews

Literature provides evidence of the value of offering pre-arrival summer courses or online modules to assist with familiarisation (Rienties and Tempelaar, 2013; Webster, 2011; Godfrey and Tait, 2001). However, the majority of interviewees had not attended a pre-sessional course and began their UWE programmes knowing very little about their programme or the study environment. Those who had attended a pre-sessional course had benefitted by having time to familiarise themselves with the university and the process of completing a written assignment, but still knew very little about their specific degree modules.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eleven students from three different faculties. South-East Asian students were selected, having responded to an invitation sent out on flyers via PAL (Peer Assisted Learning) Leaders. Pilots and main interviews were conducted by members of the Learning Services Team in the library and were recorded by digital voice recorder. Consent was obtained and confidentiality ensured. The themes below, which emerged from the data, were identified for analysis from the transcriptions.

Pre-arrival information and expectations

Ramachandran (2011) argues that “pre-departure briefings, information from websites, and books and brochures from the university, are not sufficient to provide an understanding of the academic practices...in the UK’ (p.215). Information which respondents had received from UWE, from Regional Offices and from agents seemed to focus on the practicalities of signing up for the course.

'...before I came here I just know the course, the name, the name of the course... I just know the module, how many module I have to study this year ... just a simple view of the subject but not very detailed'. Chinese student

This response, similar to those from other respondents, suggests that direct entry students arrive unprepared for their course of study and would benefit from much clearer and more detailed information about their degree programme.

The study experience

Interviewees were largely positive regarding the induction and welcome experience for new students at UWE. There was also much praise for tutors who were responsive to requests for help. However, understanding lectures, seminars and what was expected from assignments were a challenge for the interviewees, even when they had attended a pre-session course. These challenges focused on understanding language and accents; different academic teaching formats and academic cultural differences:

'...it takes a few weeks before we get used to the accents...in the first week or the second week, we don't know actually what the lecturer is talking about'. Malaysian student

Even when students have attended pre-session courses, these do not always equip students to understand multicultural groups with different accents, or lecturers with different accents. Pre-session courses at UWE have tended to be populated by south-east Asian students in recent years (Chinese and Vietnamese) and, despite efforts to offer students live lectures in their subject, this has proved hard to arrange due to lecturer availability in the summer.

Students on pre-session courses are not exposed to the variety of teaching styles and formats which they may encounter on their degree courses.

'...in China, there is no seminars and no tutorials, so, since I come here, I have tutorials and seminars and it is hard for me to get used to the teaching style'. Chinese student

'...you need to put more effort on those assignments...here you have to finding a resource by yourself. In Malaysia you can depend on your lecturer...they will tell you how to do the assignment and give you the clear answer'. Malaysian student

'...the way we understand it [assignment] is maybe different from how the local students may understand it'. Malaysian student

From the lecturer's perspective, student cohorts comprise diverse, highly differentiated students, including direct entrants who may be perceived as joining a course 'late.' Those students who have not attended a pre-session may be less aware of the academic cultural differences than those who have attended. This discrepancy can create challenges for both students and teaching staff.

Awareness of support available

The interviewees mostly preferred to request support from their subject lecturers. In the past, it was generally accepted that in many Asian cultures, the teacher's role was to impart deep knowledge to students and to develop them individual morally and intellectually (Cotazzi and Jin, 2001; Gao and Watkins, 2002). However, some interviewees in this study had accessed some generic academic support, including the Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) scheme which operates at UWE.

The first person I will ask is my lecturer or tutor...they teach me this subject...they are willing to help me. Chinese student

I attended the academic writing skills workshop...and PAL...it actually help with our work. Chinese student

This indicates a willingness to see others as able to facilitate learning. However, the project team believes that the availability and usefulness of the generic support available to these students should be better promoted.

Advice

Students were asked to offer advice, both to prospective students and to lecturing staff at UWE. Themes for fellow students included developing language skills and practising writing in the style expected for the programme they were entering.

'Try to write essays in English and try using the correct format for the referencing before they come to the UK'. Chinese student

For lecturers, advice included utilising lecture capture and video to record lectures and assignment briefings.

'In the first few weeks, we don't know actually what the lecturer is talking about...we have to get used to it. Videoing lectures would help'. Malaysian student

One interviewee was critical of the content of her pre-session class, arguing that the level had been too low for her and, although students were provided with sample lectures, they would also benefit from learning about how seminars are conducted.

‘The pre-session could provide seminars for us to get used to it, to practise’.
Chinese student

There was a heavy emphasis on language difficulty. This could be due to the normal anxiety experienced when studying in a foreign language, especially with regard to listening skills, but it may also indicate that UWE is not making clear to students that their use of English only becomes an issue when it impedes lecturer comprehension. In other words, the marking criteria for degree modules does not directly penalise grammatical or lexical errors.

Recommendations and toolkit

In response to the student interviews, the project team compiled a series of recommendations and a toolkit for UWE staff. The recommendations focused on three areas: transition; teaching and learning and academic support.

Firstly, with regard to transition, UWE needs to raise awareness of UK academic culture through communications with prospective students, at partnership institutions and regional offices. These communications need to be supplemented through pre-session course content and online tutorials in advance of the degree programme beginning, as explored by Watson (2013) and Webster (2011). UWE also needs to encourage students to arrive early and to take advantage of at least the free two week pre-session course before induction week.

Teaching and learning development at UWE should include the improvement of lecturer awareness activities so that teaching staff understand the needs of international students. UWE should also enable students to review, check and revise teaching materials by effective use of lecture and screen capture technologies. Video-based feedback on assessment could also be considered (Henderson and Phillips, 2015) All students should be offered academic personal tutors who have some understanding of the cultural and academic needs of their students.

The third group of recommendations targeted the academic support available to students, including direct entrants, and staff. Both students and staff need clear sign-posting to the range of study support offered, including workshops, one-to-one support and online tutorials.

These recommendations were disseminated through faculty executive meetings, staff training and a poster at the UWE Learning and Teaching conference. Further dissemination took place through UWE learning and teaching events in different faculties.

Toolkit

A web ‘toolkit’ of advice for teaching staff was created and hosted on the Staff Intranet. The toolkit, based on the areas highlighted in the recommendations, focuses on measures aimed to help direct entry students to adapt to their new study environment. Examples include providing clearly written instructions and explaining expectations in terms of learning and assessment, especially in podcast format, along with information about the support available.

Progress

To date, there has been progress in implementing some of the recommendations. For example, in August 2015, all faculties set a pre-arrival task to improve new students’ understanding of academic culture and their expectations of their programmes. As expected, however, there is variation with regard to the engagement level between faculties. This appears to depend on the existence of a pro-active member of senior staff. Ultimately, such support is more likely to result in an equitable experience for students.

This project has also resulted in the formation of the International Student Experience Group (ISEG) at UWE. Chaired by the **Pro Vice-Chancellor for Student Experience**, this group may provide the institutional drive which is necessary. ISEG has brought together members of the various teams involved in the journey that all international students undertake, both before arriving at UWE and while they are progressing with their studies here in the UK.

Future

At UWE, progress has been made by listening to the student voice. This is an important and challenging facet of researching the experience of our international students and its value should not be underestimated (Maunder et al, 2013). However, despite some progress, the project has highlighted a need for *closer* links between teams across the institution with regard to preparing international students to work within a different academic culture. In particular, subject staff who teach direct entry students need to engage with the recommendations and toolkit. This is more likely to occur if it is first recognised that

difficulties with transition may affect students at *all* levels of study, and that direct entry students in particular may struggle with transition to UK academic culture.

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