

A Radical Re-modelling of Induction - the staff experience

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Abstract

Much is written about the transition of new students into university but there is a smaller body of knowledge about the staffs' perceptions of the process. How students are inducted into an institution is critical to their level of familiarity and engagement and the development of their knowledge and skills. This paper explores an extended transition process offered to a group of students from the viewpoint of the staff team involved. The findings showed how staff had to move away from their usual roles in transition; for the most part they enjoyed the challenge of delivering the curriculum in this way. Staff did acknowledge the messiness of the programme, and recognised the new transition did impact on other responsibilities they had committed to, but at the same time as this was a new initiative, the problems were quickly put down to a "quick new learning curve" that could be rectified with careful planning.

Introduction

There is a plethora of research in the areas around student induction and transition into university (McInnis, James and McNaught 1995; Laing, Robinson and Johnson, 2005; Cartney and Rouse, 2006; Vinson et al., 2010) but a distinct lack of it in relation to the experiences of the staff. This paper focuses on a re-modelled transition programme, whereby the first year students journeyed through a five week process of getting to know each other; engaging with the subject content and developing the basis of their academic skills. Details of this approach can be found in Vinson, Nixon, Walsh, Walker, Zaitseva, & Mitchell (2010). The staff team (n=11) working with this student group had been together for a number of years, primarily working on the one programme with a bias towards delivering a strong student experience. The approach was taken to ensure best fit with what the team saw as a changing clientele as a result of the widening participation agenda and different student expectations (Select Committee on Widening Participation, 2009).

The five week transition period discussed in this paper was planned around a set of themes related to the programme but followed the thread of 'what sport means to you.' The term transition rather than induction was used, to illustrate the connection between the experiences that students brought with them to university and their new environment. The programme team saw university as a continuation of a learning journey and not the commencement of one. It was vital therefore that staff were able to interact quickly with students to establish rapport so that this interaction could be progressed. Two members of staff per week were allocated the task of planning the activities and contributing to the whole group lectures as well as selecting the activities based on the theme of the week. (Each weekly theme reflected the key routes embedded throughout the programme such as the Business of Sport, Inclusion, Physical Education and Health.) Staff responsible for the routes facilitated some of the theory sessions through the five weeks and three members of staff had particular responsibility for overseeing the delivery, implementation and timetabling of activities and that the students and staff were aware of where they should be and when. The students upon arrival to the University were allocated to personal tutor groups and each member of staff was responsible for a group. There were on

average five tutor group sessions per week (designed and delivered simultaneously by all staff) discussing both the content of the subject and students personal development. Activities such as goal setting, team building, time management and sessions promoting group cohesiveness were integral to this process. The data was collected from the staff team (n=11) during the transition period specifically at week three and week five and by a focus group of six staff at the end of the semester. This paper shows the experiences of the staff team of running an intensive extended transition, and what they felt this meant for both them as individuals and the students.

Philosophical approaches to induction

According to Laing, Robinson and Johnston (2005) helping students to manage the transition into Higher Education (HE) should be a process that inducts the individual into the needs and expectations of higher education. Zepke and Leach (2005) suggest there are two approaches to the issue: one which looks at assimilation, fitting students into the institution, and a newer approach which looks at adaptation where institutions change to accommodate students' diverse needs. The approach taken in this paper was the latter. When students' cultural capital is valued and fits with the institution they are 'fish in water' according to Young (2002). However, when cultural practices are deemed inappropriate or invalidated, students are more likely to experience a culture of stress and consider dropping out. Induction can be resource heavy (Edward 2003) and needs to be supported at institutional level. However, as Johnston (1997) points out, some tutors do not see pastoral work and the retention of students as part of their academic role. This issue may be exacerbated when resource constraints limit the time that academic staff are able to spend with students individually, and when academics are faced with conflicts between their research and their teaching roles (James 1998, Parliamentary Select Committee 2001).

There is a move within some sectors of HE to reject what is seen as a 'therapeutic' approach to education, equating this with an emphasis on emotional damage which is considered to lead to vulnerability and the 'demoralisation of education' (Mackie 2001; Etter, Burmeister and Elder 2001). Tucker (1999) stressed the importance of fostering a sense of belonging with others, while other researchers (Yorke and Longden 2008; Kember 2001; McInnis et al., 1995) note the positive influence of the generation of self reliance and of peer support groups. Retention rates have become increasingly high profile (Edward, 2003) if there is inadequate facilitation of the transition to university from school then attrition may occur. Whilst retention rates were not an issue in this programme, staff recognised the importance of continued diligence in regards this matter for the future. According to Billing (1997) staff have a dilemma at induction, they either do too little to try and give the students some autonomy and responsibility for their own learning, or they do too much because students need support and guidance in order to adjust to the university environment. Rather than 'get it over with' as quickly as possible, Lowe (2003) suggests that induction should be seen as a process instead of an event and should include staff and student interaction, peer group support as well as academic preparation. This was a key principle of the transition process in so far that staff wished to attempt to ensure that students were as enthusiastic, passionate and engaged as possible in both subject content and the institution. If institutions want to enhance their retention they must change their processes so that academic advice is easily available and offered in non-bureaucratic ways (Yorke 1999).

Edwards (2003) conjures up the image of induction of speakers queuing up at the door to deliver their concentrated 20 minute talk on course structure; assessment and computer systems, when what was probably needed by the end of the day was counselling services! Failure to adjust to the environmental demands, rather than

intellectual difficulties, accounts for a high proportion of student departures (Coates 2005). The views of staff are particularly important, as effective implementation of the package of recommendations relies on commitment from all staff to a process of holistic and fundamental change in the culture of Higher Education (Young 2007). This paper explores the opinions of staff who are heavily involved in both the design and the running of a longer and more intensive transition period for students new to university.

Staff and student interaction / effective induction

Many students who withdraw from courses express a desire to stay in HE, indicating that they may have benefited from appropriate, early academic and personal support (Young, Glogowska and Lockyer 2007). Students who do not socialise are more vulnerable (Mackie, 2001) and without individual contact this may go unnoticed. McInnis et al (1995) reported that many students who never socialise with their groups are typically low achievers. Tinto (2002) stresses the importance of helping students believe in their own abilities to meet the demands of their course; however, they also need the necessary skills to survive. Therefore, it is not surprising that staff-student relations are so important as it is through these that the student may find their place within the institution. Thomas (2002) adds that the habits of the institution do much to shape these interactions, as do those of the individuals involved. In this regard institutions should give serious consideration to changing the character of the educational experience (Tinto 2002), and must recognise that frontloading of effort is the wisest course of action.

Pascarelli and Terenzini (1997) identify informal interaction with staff as a major influence on students' social and academic integration whereas a negative perception of academic staff by students is cited as being harmful to students' chances of success (McInnis et al., 1995; Lowe and Cook 2005). Effective induction programmes reach out to make contact with students in order to establish personal bonds among students and between students, faculty and staff members (Tinto, 2002; Yorke, 1999). Programme teams not only provide continuing assistance to students, they also act to ensure the integration of all individuals as equal and competent members of the academic and social communities of the institution (Tinto 2002). The transition model in this case set out as one of its core purposes to do this.

Studies indicate that students identify social contact as a valuable component of their learning (Harvey, Drew and Smith 2006, Laing et al 2005). Furthermore, in the context of widening participation, Longden (2006) argues that a wider definition of social inclusion must involve a 'reconceptualization' of the teaching and learning interface. Coates' (2005) research suggests that viewing retention as an 'educational issue' offers the potential to achieve better academic and social integration for a wider range of students (emotional impact). If students feel that staff believe in them, and care about the outcomes of their studying, they seem to gain both self-confidence and motivation and their work improves (Thomas 2002).

Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie-Gauld (2005) believe academic staffs need to be aware of the intense anxiety and fear that new students experience in relation to the social aspects of transition to university. Personal tutors can play a significant part in conveying to students that these feelings are not unusual. Longden (2006) believes support services should be concentrated most heavily in the early part of the first year so being proactive in reaching new students before they have an opportunity to experience this anxiety, fear and confusion. In contrast Laing et al (2005), indicate that the early part of the first year needs to be devoted to inducting students systematically so they clearly appreciate what is involved in studying at an advanced

level. Consequently the five week programme included: alternate learning environments (e.g. Cartooning, smoothie making, Google mapping), movies, non-traditional physical activities (e.g. free running, Speedminton and Rock-It-Ball), lectures, website construction, mini research projects, guest speakers, debates and daily reading tasks. It was hoped that this innovative interactive programme would engage and inspire students throughout their early experiences at university. But at the same time provide a conduit for the interaction of Staff and students to build a firm foundation for the university journey.

Taking all this into account may help teams to re-conceptualise their position around induction and as importantly for institutions to be clear on their stance in relation to new students becoming part of a community of learning. It is hoped that the views within this paper will start conversations and offer a basis to support the change to a positive transition for students supported with resources and given the status it deserves as critical part of the institution.

Methodology

The rationale for change was founded upon the programme team's anecdotal belief that students are lacking engagement with their subject of study, curiosity, and under- developed study skills. The programme team were concerned that sometimes there was no sense of overall direction/purpose/fit, no passion for their subject area. There was recognition that the level of support required to ensure that students are gaining/acquiring these qualities, skills and dispositions from the very beginning of their University experience would be considerably greater than traditionally provided. However the programme team had a commitment towards student centred delivery, to a core belief of a relevant personal learning journey for students through university. The work of Barnett and Coates (2005) and their Knowledge, Action, Self, model, echoed this ideological positioning and provided a basis for a change of curriculum focus. After discussion the decision was made to radically overhaul the previous approach and to put together a 5 week transition programme to more effectively introduce the new students to the university, each other, the staff and the subject.

The approach to the study was purely qualitative. The programme team (n=11) were given questionnaires containing open ended questions at the end of week three and week 5 targeting their reflections on the process of transition and feelings towards the changes. A focus group of six staff was also utilised to analyse their perceptions and attitudes towards the transition programme at the end of the thirteen week semester. The written reflections and focus group interview were transcribed and coded with the emerging themes discussed below.

Discussion of findings

Yorke and Longden (2008) report that induction is resource hungry with great demands on staff and overall the results from this small scale research project showed this to be true with their being both challenges and benefits to the transition period. Four main themes emerged from the analyses which were the emotional effect; organisational issues; relationship between staff and students and the impact on student learning.

Emotional

In relation to the emotional effect of the transition the findings indicated that this was a problem area for the staff "*I barely slept during Week two.....very tired*"

(questionnaire – week three). Alongside there were comments about how this linked to the student experience;

“although the student experience in level one has probably been fantastic, the induction period has left me personally stressed, tired and feeling totally un-organised”(questionnaire – week five).

At the end of the semester when asked what challenges they faced personally during the induction two members of staff referred to how tiring it was and one to how difficult it had been. One member of staff notes:

“it is amazing how tiring it was. It was not just being busy, there were so many things happening during that transition that you had to keep in your head.”
Whilst another states: *“struggling: doing it to a good quality, doing the job right, and not just the teaching and learning but across everything”*
(questionnaire–week five).

Alongside the negative emotional affect that most staff reported they felt, there was also a more positive view that they enjoyed being involved in the transition process and felt it was worthwhile.

“I have really enjoyed working with my students” “Think it has been great”; “I feel personally that it has been worth it” (questionnaire – week three).

“I am relatively positive about the whole process...,I found the five weeks quite fun, tiring, time consuming, but it would have been no different if we had gone straight into a formal timetable... but fun in a perverse way”
(questionnaire – week five).

There also seemed to be a longer-term view being offered of what might happen in the future and studies by (Wilcox et al 2005; Brookes, 2003) demonstrate that the climate created within an institution impacts on student outcomes.

“I would do it again, it is something worth doing, setting it up is difficult and takes a lot of effort early on but gets the students up to speed and saves on effort later in the year” (focus group week thirteen).

Organisational

In relation to the second theme of organisation there was a consistent message from the staff which included issues around confusion, perceptions of hours and work load and preparation time. Comments from staff whilst in the midst of transition included;

“From a staff point of point it has been confusing. We should have discussed timetabling and clashes before we started” (Questionnaire – week three).

“Staff appear to be overloaded and unable to prepare adequately between sessions or have a minute to breathe” (Questionnaire – week three).

As Billing (1997) suggested, the programme was planned well ahead of time with timetabled sessions and room bookings all in place. However, the finer details were left to the individual staff which was extra work for those particular individuals. It was suggested that the organisational issues may be due to the newness of the experiences and that in future years things may not be as difficult. This was raised as

an action point for the following year to make sure the organisation was more evenly spread. One individual commented that

“uncertainty at times as to what we are supposed to be doing next and lots of confusion- however that would seem inevitable on the first run and you would assume it only needs tweaking next year”(Questionnaire – week five).

Yorke and Longden (2008) advocate a concentration of academic support in the early part of the first year which the transition project aimed to do. From the focus group which was held a few weeks after the end of the transition programme came a more pragmatic view as 50% of the staff reflected back that some of the issues were their own, comments included;

“I am not the most organised of people...”;

“A personal challenge to juggle everything”;

“Time Management was a challenge”

Besides the transition process that was running within the programme there were also external pressure being brought to bear, one individual comments that: *“We have the down side of... saying it is too expensive, all those hours!”* the same individual continues by saying:

“So it is the perception of staff in the faculty, thinking it is expensive because we have all those staff engaged with the students, but in the long run it might be better, better retention, student learning, looking forward to dissertations and stuff have we set the ground rules already for level three.”

This fits in with the work of Tinto (2002) and Billing (1997), who explained that successful education, not retention is the secret to successful induction programmes.

Staff and student relationships

Nearly all staff at each time point placed strong value on the interaction with students and knowing their tutor groups well;

“For me meeting the tutor group a number of times during the week really helps, because we get to know those students really well over those five weeks, they get to know me and how I work” (focus group – week thirteen).

This comment highlights the two-dimensional aspects of this approach it is about the staff as much as the students. Although the benefits of *“Got to know my personal tutor group well”* (questionnaire – week five) are not known as this time, it is assumed that this will be beneficial over the long-term for both parties. According to Tinto (2002) effective programmes reach out to make contact with students in order to establish personal bonds among students and between students and staff.

However a common theme both during and after transition, was that staff felt that they only got to know their tutor group rather than the whole cohort. Although one of the goals of the transition programme was to establish a rapport with tutor groups it was not intended to be at the expense of getting to know more of the cohort as well. Comments included;

"I would like to get to know some of the other students other than just the twelve in my group so maybe even having to feed back to a different tutor for one session and then combining a number of sessions into one might be useful" (questionnaire – week three).

"I don't know the rest of the year group.....It would be nice to hear different views and opinions from the other groups to have a more holistic view of the year group" (focus group – week thirteen).

Despite this, 80% of the staff team were very positive about the transition programme, one individual felt that they *"accepted it was time consuming and there was a lot going on, but none of that affected the students, it affected us"* (focus group – week thirteen). The students were certainly not left waiting around (Billing 1997), their time was used effectively.

At each data collection stage the staff expressed concern about the effect of the first year transition on the other students:

"The level one induction has almost super-seeded everything else and I personally feel all my attention has been focused on them. I don't feel I have really helped the level three students in their dissertation week, as I have consciously been thinking about 'rushing' to the next level one session/meeting".

One member of staff was even stronger in relation to this issue and stated that *"If there is one major negative it would be that we did not do enough with the second and third years..."* (focus group – week thirteen). This point was taken on board for planning the next year.

The respondents at all points referred both positively and negatively in relation to their colleagues and the resulting effect on the transition programme. One individual noted at the end of week three that: *"Not all staff have engaged fully in the processes"* and further commented that *"there were times when some members of staff were doing more than others"*. However, on a more positive note another stated that: *"I feel much more part of the programme, as I normally have very little input at level one"* (Questionnaire – week three). One comment at the end of the programme was that;

"As a whole team we did not work as well... but we have got through it, it's like walking along a cliff path, stumbling two steps from the edge, right yourself and think that could have been nasty, what a lovely day, and think next time we walk past there I will be careful, but we would walk that path again, we know it can trip you up, but we are aware of that now" (focus group – week thirteen).

Impact on student learning

When reflecting back over the approach taken it was felt that a lot of the issues/challenges were as a result of delivering a new initiative. One member of staff said: *"I think that is part and parcel of anything new you do"* (focus group – week thirteen). This reflects on the work of Lowe and Cook (2003), that induction should be seen as a process instead of an event. Excitingly the findings show some real benefits to the students of running a transition programme such as this one and these have come

out very strongly despite in some cases the challenges already discussed. The student voice has been written elsewhere (Vinson et al 2010) and key findings were that students connected with the staff from week one and talked strongly about their enthusiasm; helpfulness and how they had created a sense of belonging. The involvement of staff in facilitating the academic and social integration of new students is seen as a key factor in the successful management of student transition (Coates 2005; Longden 2006).

Some staff at week three alluded to a change in the students, which was very evident at week thirteen, one commented;

“the other major thing for me, because we have talked about feedback, some of the students in my tutor group have already said to me, I have read the feedback, and when I did my next piece I tried to incorporate what that feedback was saying... level three students don't often do that, so to hear a level one student say that is fantastic, so there has been a change about how they think about things” (focus group – week thirteen).

Another member of staff commented that there is;

“generally a greater awareness of all sorts of things, particularly around study skills. Almost from day one they have had a greater sense of thinking about who they are what they are doing and the way they learn” (questionnaire – week five).

Another individual stated that

“I think they are engaging in being students differently. And getting involved in things better... curious is a good word. Attendance at the tutor group was generally quite good, they were questioning things, they weren't just accepting it” (focus group – week thirteen).

According to Tinto (2002) the presence of a strong commitment to students results in an identifiable ethos of caring which permeates the character of institutional life.

Lessons learned

Despite trepidation from some staff and the extra time spent by key colleagues in developing the transition and curriculum change, the project was received well by 80% of the staff team. There was great satisfaction in relation to meeting the initial aims of transition, i.e. better engagement with the subject and the students. Staff had to move away from their usual roles in induction, for the most part they enjoyed the challenge of delivering curriculum in this way. Staff did acknowledge the messiness of the pilot, and recognised the new transition did impact on other responsibilities they had committed to, but at the same time as this was a new initiative, the problems were quickly put down to a “quick new learning curve” that could be rectified with careful planning.

In relation to developing this as a process, there are many lessons to be learnt from the findings of this paper. Organisation seems to be crucial to staff feeling in control of their own work situation, this included having the relevant resources ready and having their days mapped out. More thought needed to be put into the amount that staff are expected to do and whether this can be balanced out more evenly and with less intensity, maybe even reducing the contact day for the students by one hour may enable the staff a little breathing space. The students may need to be rotated

around the staff more in future years so that staff get to know more of the group, and on the flip-side, students get to know more of the staff. This would seem to be relatively easy to do in relation to connecting tutor groups up and rotating sessions.

The transition programme outlined in this paper appears to have effectively put into action many of the elements suggested as good practice by the literature. The integration of intensive, supported activities combining individual, social and academic perspectives of the early weeks of university life, has elicited an encouragingly successful programme. The transition programme has allowed students to have fun, engage with some degree of acquisition of subject knowledge and personal learning strategies, enabled the generation of social networks and varying perceptions of belonging, together with connection to staff.

The experience obtained through this innovative transition model can constitute a point of reference for those who are considering revisiting induction programmes. This programme after a number of transitions is now a standard part of the delivery of the programme.

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