FEATURE

S6@uni: A mixed curriculum for school and university

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Rachel Shanks describes a fruitful liaison between
Aberdeen University and local schools

Formed in November 2002, the S6 Enhancement Unit aims to support the learning of young people studying for Advanced Higher courses by working in partnership with local schools. Where schools were unable to offer S6 students all their choices of subject at this level, it was suggested that studying one subject at the University of Aberdeen might address this need. Students who opted for this route would be able to learn within the familiar surroundings of their own school, usually close to home, while studying a new subject and getting a taste of university life.

All school/university partnerships differ; for example, in terms of the location of the participants, the level of the module, the credit rating of the module, whether it is a skills- and/or knowledge-based course, the institution to which teaching staff belong and whether the partnership is aimed at a particular group of students. Some collaborations between schools, local authorities and universities relate to educational high achievers, others may focus on widening access in higher education and, obviously, some include both.

Located at University of Aberdeen's King's College Campus, the 'S6@uni' initiative is targeted at all students including, but not focusing on, either high achievers and/or those who do not have a family history of attending further or higher education. Students take University level one modules in predominantly knowledge-based, rather than skills-oriented, courses, such as Biology, French, German, History and Philosophy.

So far, this project has been at the micro-level, with five or fewer students taking part each year. There are various reasons which may explain this. Some reasons are organisational. Firstly, the potential number of students is limited to those who cannot study their chosen subject at school. Secondly, timetabling clashes of the school and university programme prevent some interested students taking part. Thirdly, not all schools, subject and/or guidance teachers within schools, and school students are aware of the project sufficiently early in the academic year to allow the partnership to be established. Others are related to students and their families. Students need to have a certain level of independence and confidence to take part. Parents need a certain level of confidence in their children to agree to the partnership. For these reasons, it is unlikely that S6@uni will grow to recruit large numbers.

Despite small numbers, the programme addresses curricular deficits encountered by some school students. The local authority, Aberdeen City Council, has approved the project to continue for another year. At present the authority pays discounted university fees for each student and provides bus passes for travel to university, where necessary. In this article I will show both the benefits and disadvantages of taking part for the students, the schools and the university.

Evaluation

Using semi-structured interviews with the key participants, I set out to establish the value of S6@uni. Following on from previous years, the four students taking part in 2006/7 have been interviewed to establish their views on studying at university whilst still in S6. The students' school teachers (including a depute head teacher, guidance teachers and subject teachers) and university lecturers have also been interviewed.

The purpose of the study has been to explore each stakeholder's opinions on the benefits and disadvantages of a mixed S6 curriculum at school and university. At the same time, I have been able to identify general administrative and logistical improvements for immediate or future use.

With the students, the interviews focused on their motivations on taking part, their attitudes and feelings towards studying at school and university, any barriers they had overcome and any recommendations they had for future years. Interviews with school staff focused on how the project benefited the students and the school, whether they perceived there to be any impact on the students' schoolwork or their attitude towards school. The interviews also covered the best ways to monitor and support the students and also solicited comments on logistics and organisation. Interviews with university staff focused on the benefits and disadvantages involved for the S6 students, other university students, the tutors and for the university.

Key findings

Key benefits for students appear to be: experiencing university life before committing to higher education; reinforcing the desire to participate in higher education; being better prepared when starting a full-time university programme; increased confidence and further study in a favourite subject. Also, students had something different to write about on their UCAS forms and were attaining transferable university credits.

From the school perspective, key benefits appear to be better provision for individual students' needs, retention of students and development of links with another institution, while the university benefits from increased recruitment of students onto degree programmes, improved wider community relations and an increase in part-time student numbers.

Pupils' perspective

At initial interviews the pupils were looking forward to a better understanding of their chosen subject and to experiencing higher education. Two of the four students felt that their attitude to school had changed in that after having been at university they now felt more restricted at school. All the students expressed some fears about embarking on the project; all the students were worried about the travel between school and university; three were concerned about the pressure or level of work. However, two students had already undertaken shared subjects with another school so were already used to travelling between school sites.

The students said that it was a 'different learning experience' and that it would 'prepare me for university so won't be such a shock'. One said 'Lectures better than I expected – not too long and PowerPoint so never boring'.

The perceived benefits were that the student could 'appreciate university life and difference with school; independence, responsibility, it's all up to you to do the work and no one else chases you up'.

One student was looking forward to 'not knowing everyone -- different sorts of people, not just from one area; from all over the world'.

Sometimes a student would have 'no time to change clothes so put different jumper on, take off tie and don't wear blazer'. The image of Superman changing in a telephone kiosk came to mind.

The students made suggestions about how the programme could be improved, for example with an Open Day beforehand and an Induction Day in the September before Freshers' Week and the start of university classes. Other areas that could be improved were the registration and billing process; increased monitoring and reporting of student progress; improved communication between schools and university; improved student advice.

The last cohort of students did not identify any disadvantages in taking part in the programme. For the institutions, one potential problem area is if a student withdraws from school and/or the university. There can also be a slight additional workload to lecturers. If the experience is not a positive one then this could affect a student's confidence.

Schools' perspective

From the schools' point of view the S6@uni programme can be a very good motivational tool. It shows the students what university is like, for example that learning is more independent in contrast to everything being 'packaged at school' for them. Teachers felt that even travelling somewhere else makes the students more independent. One depute head said that it gives the students 'an edge' because their UCAS forms are more likely to stand out. Further comments indicated that the programme made school students more interesting, stretched them academically and widened their choices.

However, schools have had to be flexible, for example, in terms of the school timetable and the structure of school day, to enable students to participate and, at times, they have had to relax certain curricular requirements. School staff did not notice any change in attitudes towards school from the students, either in terms of how they viewed school or in terms of their relationships with peers and teachers; nor did they think it had had a negative impact on their school subjects.

Teachers felt that experiencing the university environment was important so they preferred the course to take place on campus rather than to have distance and/or internet learning. At one school the students involved talked about university and the S6@uni project to S5 students in May/June and were featured in the school's internal magazine. There is already a section in the course choice information booklet on S6@uni.

All the schools involved in 2006/07 were keen to be involved again in the future, but identified aspects for improvement. One improvement would be to have the university timetable earlier. An added benefit would be some form of report to insert with other school reports before Easter and the semester 2

exam results. It was felt that updates from the university every semester would be sufficient. It was also suggested that the school should provide information about participating students in relation to any learning issues they might have, for example, attendance worries or organisational problems.

Lecturers' perspective

One advantage for the lecturer is that with the school student present there is a greater mix of age groups, i.e., those of working age, retired people and S6 pupils and thus a greater range of viewpoints in group discussions.

Tutors felt the advantages for pupils were that they had a taste of what is expected at university such as expectation of working on their own and giving mature answers. Another advantage was that they would be less likely to have transition problems later on. In a way this was a middle stage between school and university and they were treated like adults before their peers back at school. Lecturers said that the S6 students compared very well with other students. The age of the students did provide some extra work for one lecturer in that they had to alter the content of their course slightly as there were under-18s present!

One possible improvement from the lecturers' point of view was more support back at school for the S6 students. Creating a buddy scheme between university and school students as a mechanism to create more informal interaction was advocated. Another suggestion, echoed by the students, was a longer induction covering what a seminar is, how to use the library and on-line journals, and emphasising that this is a fresh start/clean slate for the students. One tutor also requested more information from the school, particularly in relation to any special needs the student might have, for example, dyslexia.

Conclusion

In the last two years four of the six students continued to study modern languages at undergraduate level. Without S6@uni they would not have been able to study a language at Advanced Higher level. Therefore, S6@uni has helped to maintain the students' interest in the language and enabled them to prepare for studying that language at undergraduate level. Given national concern about the (lack of) study of modern languages in the later stages of secondary school and beyond this can be viewed as a very positive outcome.

The students that take part are able to transfer their University of Aberdeen credits towards their undergraduate degree. The main advantage for students remains the chance to 'taste' university before going on to become full-time undergraduates. The opportunity to experience first-hand what studying at university is like before the rest of their cohort may help less confident students by allowing them to adapt gradually to changes. Additionally, the experience enables students to decide whether they wish to continue to study a chosen subject at university level, and may help to reduce the number of unsatisfactory course choices. These have potential implications for widening access and increasing retention of first-year undergraduates.