HND degree 'top-up' students' perceptions of their experience at the University of Worcester: how can future students' experiences be improved?

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Abstract

This study investigated the experiences of students on a top-up degree course in the Institute of Sport and Exercise Science. Two students on the current 'top-up' were interviewed after having completed a HND at a partner college which revealed some useful insights in relation to their experiences on the degree course. For example, these students noted that as well as greater demands being placed on them at University compared with College, feedback was more relaxed on the HND. The students proposed the notion of a 'move-up' day prior to studying the degree top-up in order to settle students quickly onto their degree course and to smooth a successful transition onto the top-up course.

Background

A particular mode of study offered in the Institute of Sport and Exercise Science (ISES) at the University of Worcester is a two-year course at a partner Further Education (FE) College, followed by a one or two year 'top-up' at the University. Students can enter the University 'top-up' in the second or third undergraduate year. The FE course typically leads to a Higher National Diploma (HND) qualification, with the 'top-up' culminating in the award of a BSc or BA degree. The completion rates of HND students joining ISES undergraduate degree courses in both years have declined as a percentage over the past three academic years (see Figure 1). Current key concerns are how such students might be better supported, their University experience enhanced and their completion rates improved.

Aim and rationale of the study

This study took place during semester two of the 2013-2014 academic year at the University of Worcester.+ It aimed to investigate the experiences of HND students within the Institute of Sport and Exercise Science who had 'topped-up' their qualifications by progressing to a degree course. The two key research questions to be investigated were:

1. What are students' perceptions of taking an HND course at a partner College followed by joining a degree programme?
2. In order to improve future 'top-up' students' experiences, what can the Institute of Sport and Exercise Science do to enhance its provision for such students?

Figure 1 – completion rates of ISES students 2010-11 to 2012-13 academic years
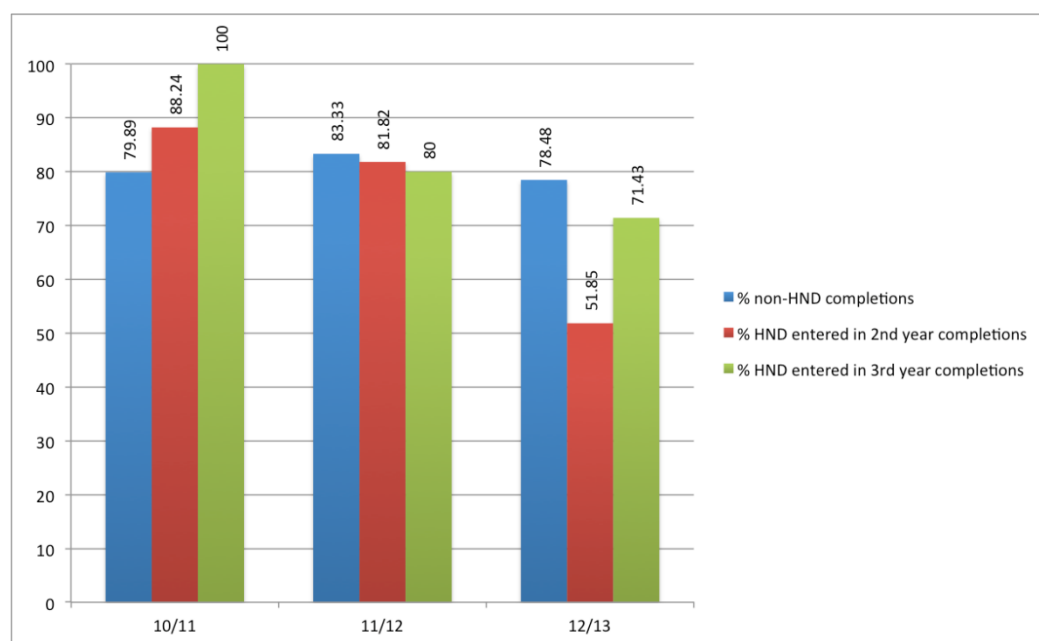
Methodology and methods

The research, undertaken from a social constructivist perspective (Vygotsky, 1978), took the form of a case study (Stake, 1995) with two current Level 5 students from the Institute of Sport and Exercise Science who had come from two different partner Colleges to 'top-up' their HND. Participants were recruited via an email sent to all 'top-up' students, inviting them to participate in interviews that were to be recorded using a tablet computer. The two students were interviewed individually by the Learning and Teaching Research Projects Officer, using semi-structured questions that took place at the University near the end of semester two of the 2013-2014 academic year (see Appendix 1 for the interview questions). The two recordings were uploaded to the on-line Audio Analysis Tool (AAT) for analysis (Breeze, 2013). The AAT allows for sections of recordings to be identified as 'segments' that can then be coded into user-defined categories, or themes. This allows for the emergent participant data to be directly thematically compared. Where appropriate, themes can be grouped together into 'meta-categories', thereby reducing the number of categories overall and providing the ability to focus on those areas that have emerged as more important.

Analysis

As existing theory and research literature in this specific area is limited, and therefore responses to the open interview questions could not be anticipated (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), inductive content analysis was employed, with categories being derived from the raw audio data (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). The AAT allows for the five-stage coding process described by Thomas (2006: 241-242) as: i) preparation of the data, ii) a close listening to the participant data, iii) category creation, iv) reduction of coding overlap (where portions of segments have been coded into two or more categories) and coding redundancy, and v) a refining and revision of categories, aiming to reduce the overall number through a consideration of which categories have emerged as the most important. Furthermore, each stage of this process was continually reviewed by the two researchers with the aim of improving reliability. The overall aim of this process was to: i) code the data into categories from which greater insights could be gained, ii) summarise and make explicit the links between the research questions and the categorised data, iii) and to develop a framework for structuring the students' experiences presented in the data. The nine resulting categories (presented in no particular order of importance) are discussed in the following Results section.

Results

Aspects liked

Overall, the student respondents liked the mix of College and University experience. Positive comments related to the fact that:

- College was more relaxed whereas University was more about 'getting down to the serious detail of the study';
- Although the previous (College) course was good, the University gave the opportunity to make new friends and to benefit from the full use of the facilities.

For one student, the purpose the HND course served in bridging the gap between A-level and degree was fundamental in enabling them to 'keep up'. They did not feel disadvantaged by initially choosing to undertake an HND and considered that having topped up to Level 5 (second year of an undergraduate course), the extra year of study had been good for them. It was noted that their College course had been a good introduction to University life. However, it was also stated that 'it was a massive transition to BSc'.

Aspects not liked

The only comment by one student was that they did not like the length of the day, owing to transport issues necessitated by a course requirement to study off campus for one day a week.

Tutor support

One student noted that as a HND student, tutorial support had always been available at the University on a set day. However, the tutor did not have their own office, which was a concern as they had felt inhibited in what they said in case it influenced the other tutor present, who could possibly be teaching them after they had 'topped-up' to a degree course.

The main difference noted by one student was between tutor feedback at the two institutions, who noted that it was a much more relaxed atmosphere at the College, whereas at the University, it was more serious. One student said that they had not had a tutorial until they had 'topped-up' on to the degree course when they had received an email from their personal tutor inviting them for a tutorial. They had subsequently engaged in many tutorials in the ensuing two years and considered the use of tutorials with a specific personal tutor to be good. It was felt that lecturers at College were very helpful and easier to understand than those at the University who were very busy and had a wider range of students to support. However, they noted that despite the difference, they were still able to get the support they needed.

Transition

Comments in this category related to the transition from College to the University. There were several positive comments e.g. one student noting that the HND co-ordinator had helped, especially with their personal statement. Another positive comment related to the merits of the mixed course (College and University), which had meant that the student knew some of lecturers when they had 'topped-up' so they felt the move had been easier socially.

One student commented that going straight on to the third year of the degree course was a 'massive' transition in terms of the quality of the work and it had taken a month or so to get their 'head around it'. They noted that although this had been quite a jump, it would still have been a big step if they had gone into the second year, as the University expected more in terms of work and it had been more demanding than the HND.

One student identified that they had known exactly what they had had to do to get the grade they wanted on the HND. However on the degree course, there had been so much reading to do, they realised that they needed to 'switch on' to take their study more seriously. The turning point had been after an exam, when the grades had been issued and they had realised that they could actually succeed and the course wasn't beyond them.

One particular aspect of transition that was highlighted was that when 'topping up', they did not really know many people apart from those they had met socialising and playing sport. At College, one became used to walking into a room with the same set of 30 people. However, on the degree course, walking into a room containing 100 people (lecture theatres were not necessarily used on the HND course) and wondering whom to sit next to, was a new phenomenon. Furthermore, it was noted that meeting different groups of students taking modules who were on different courses was initially unsettling.

Feedback and assessment

It was noted that the HND assessments (such as essays, reports and presentations) had been relatively 'simple' to start with, but when they had 'topped-up' they had found the assessments harder, and felt perhaps the HND assessments had not adequately prepared them. In particular, it was noted that there had been a need to be more critical on the degree course to attain the higher grades and this had been 'a bit of a jump'. However, they noted that although they found it hard to begin with, they 'gave it a go' nevertheless.

Differences (between the College and the University)

One observed key difference was that at College, although students were expected to pass everything, when 'topping-up' to the degree course there had been a higher expectation of work, and they perceived the grading had become harsher.

Suggestions for change

One student noted that on their HND course, there had been less of an emphasis on referencing. It was suggested there should be more of a focus on this in the first year of the HND and perhaps a session describing how to find journals in order to 'step up' their writing style. Although advice could have been found on the website, they considered there was a need to give examples of the required change in writing style from Sixth Form to University.

One suggestion for change concerned the relationships with students at the University. One student mentioned that there was a perception that HND 'top-up' students seemed to stay in their own group. A suggested improvement to this was that towards the end of the HND course, students wanting to 'top-up' could be encouraged to attend a lecture relevant to their intended course, which would give them the opportunity to experience studying on the degree course and an opportunity to meet existing degree course students. Another idea put forward to help socialise HND 'top-up' students, was to introduce them to existing degree course students at a meeting or social occasion.

A further suggestion was to introduce new students to the lecturers they may have when they arrive at Worcester. Following module selection near the end of the HND course, the link tutor could arrange meetings with relevant lecturers so that they could introduce them to what they will be doing. This idea was elaborated upon with the idea of a 'move up' day, where students would experience going to a lecture in order to give them a more confidence, and/or an information pack along with an invitation to meet existing students during induction.

Relationships

This category included relationships with both students and staff. One student explained that they had personally got on well with all their lecturers. However, they perceived that some students had not successfully made the move from Sixth Form to HND work. Additionally, there was an earlier issue noted in relation to relationships in the previously discussed category 'suggestions for change'.

The challenge to pass all the modules

This category is related to a comment made by one student who indicated they had liked the challenge of having to pass all the course elements of modules on the HND course to a high standard. They maintained that this challenge had kept them motivated and compared this with the first year undergraduate experience, where they

noted that the grades achieved did not count towards the final degree classification.

Key findings

The key findings from the results can be broadly categorised into three areas: i) the positive aspects of taking an HND course followed by a 'top-up' to a degree, ii) the transition itself, and iii) activities that would aid the transition.

The aspects that the participants liked about the HND/'top-up' mode of study were the differences between the College and University, the way that the HND provided a 'bridge' between A-levels and the degree course and (although the tutor arrangements differed at the two institutions) they had accessed the tutor support that they had needed. Regarding the transition itself, both participants confirmed that it had been a significant change from HND to degree-level study in terms of i) study expectations (including referencing), ii) social aspects, particularly getting to know both new and a wider range of people, and iii) assessment expectations. Both participants suggested the usefulness of transition activities, notably socialisation events in order to get to know both students and lecturers before commencing their new courses.

Concluding remarks

This study provided some useful insights from the students into their experiences. The following observations are drawn from the students' comments:

1.   Participants were all able to be successful in their 'top-up' despite some initial misgivings about the change in the standard expected;

2.   Tutorial support is best provided in a private setting in order that the student can speak freely without the fear of judgement by another tutor;

3.   Tutorials are very worthwhile. There is a need for tutors to be proactive in inviting and encouraging students to attend;

4.   The HND co-ordinator was good and their advice found to be useful;

5.   There is a need for an event to aid the social transition from HND to degree course. Suggestions included attending a lecture and having a special meeting or social event in order to meet existing undergraduates. Also, the consideration of a 'move-up' day similar to the ones organised for school leavers moving on to other modes of study;

6.   An introduction to tutors who might be teaching 'top-up' students would be useful. This could take place near the end of the HND course;

7.   A 'top-up' information pack would be a useful resource for students;

8.   The enabling of a smoother transition from HND assessment expectations to those at the University would help;

9.   It would be useful if referencing formed a greater part of the HND course from the outset.

This study has provided an opportunity to explore two participants' perceptions of the transition from HND to 'top-up' degree. However, some of the findings may be of wider relevance to the University as a whole, particularly in supporting the transition from one course to another. The interfacing of the two courses in terms of academic expectation was shown to be an area of concern, together with bridging the transition and anticipating student concerns through the provision of a form of information pack. Pre-course socialisation was also identified as a key area. This may be worthy of wider consideration, in terms of transitioning students having the opportunity to integrate with new peers and academic staff before the course commences.

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Biographies

Lerverne Barber spent many years as a Physical Education teacher, Adviser and Inspector. She worked for the Youth Sports Trust as a National Trainer for ten years and in that time worked with Baroness Sue Campbell on the Physical Education and School Sport Strategy at the DfE. Lerverne has been at the University of Worcester since 2002, she is now Associate Head of the Institute with a responsibility for Learning and Teaching, Principal Lecturer for Student Selection and Achievement and she continues to lecture on the Physical Education course. In 2011 she was awarded University of Worcester Learning and Teaching Fellow.

Dr Nicholas Breeze is a Learning and Teaching Research Projects Officer in the Institute of Sports and Exercise Science at the University of Worcester, where he supports academic colleagues with research projects. His previous roles have included Teaching Fellow in Education at the University of Bristol, secondary music teacher, composer, performer and conductor. His research interests focus on learning and teaching in Higher Education, the use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in Education and Multimodal Research Methods.

Appendix One

Interview questions

1. Please tell me about your previous course.
2. How did you find the transition from your HND course to your present degree course?
3. Were there any differences in expectations and workloads between the two courses?
4. Did you experience any difficulties?
5. What were your experiences of assessment and feedback on the two courses?
6. How did you find tutorials and other support?
7. What were your relationships with other course members?
8. Overall, how has taking an HND course at a partner College followed by joining a degree course at year two/three (level 5 or 6) worked out for you?
9. What could we have done to improve your experience?