

Fiona Tolmie

Kingston University, United Kingdom

Transition into Higher Education: the Staff Perspective (0136)

Programme number: E10

Research Domain: Learning and Teaching

This piece of research has identified in a college, a school and a university some of the staff perceptions of the process of transition into higher education. There appears to be a shared view that the main problems relate to learning and teaching, socialisation and financial matters with the main difference experienced by students being the much greater degree of independence required of them. There are some differences between views of staff working on either side of the transition and the research suggests that the successful transition of students to university may be being adversely affected by inappropriate performance measures set for schools and colleges which are guiding the behaviour of pre-transition staff in a way that leads to a failure to prepare students appropriately to make the transition.

Transition into Higher Education: the Staff Perspective

Outline

The aim of this exploratory piece of research was to investigate how staff on both sides of the transition understand the challenges facing students as they make the transition to university. A review of the literature shows that a fair proportion of the writing on transition has a poor empirical research base (Gorard et al., 2006, p. 18). The data collection that has taken place has largely investigated students in higher education rather than staff at either stage

The theoretical framework

The theoretical frameworks for investigating this area are, as recognised by Yorke and Longden (2004, p. 75), multiple but with a primary focus on sociological and psychological considerations. Tinto's model of the issue as a sociological one of transition between cultures has been particularly influential (Tinto, 1993). Those who adopt a psychological perspective tend to look more at the intentions, motivations and commitment of students. Yorke and Longden (2004, p. 77) suggest linking the two frameworks by considering how the institution might change the psychological context. There has also been discussion in the literature of the part which pedagogical and epistemological thinking might play in relation to successful transition. Gamache (2002), Atherton (2006), Hockings et al (2007) and Wingate (2007) all focus on epistemological issues of what knowledge is and how it is acquired. Staff attitudes and behaviour clearly have the potential to impact on all these aspects of transition.

Research Methodology

Data collection consisted of (a) three individual semi-structured interviews with members of staff heavily involved in the transition process at a large tertiary college which sends around 1,000 students to university every year (b) a joint semi-structured interview with the Heads of Sixth Form at a comprehensive school whose students have submitted around 180 university applications this year and (c) a semi-structured questionnaire completed by 42 participants at a learning and teaching event at a post-92 university to which both college and school send students.

Discussion of findings

The research demonstrated considerable commonality between pre- and post-transition staff perceptions of the problems which they thought students were likely to experience. A difference did emerge in the prominence given by the two groups to socialisation and learning problems. All the university staff saw issues of learning and teaching as being problematic whereas the school and college staff emphasised social difficulties to a greater extent. It is possible that this might reflect staff's own experiences with the pre-transition staff aware of the differences in approaches to learning but not having personally found it difficult. It is also likely that the school and college staff may receive feed-back mainly from students who actually leave their first university and return to the school or college for assistance with a new application and it is possible that for these students, difficulty in social adjustment may be the greatest problem.

The perceptions of the university staff who participated in the research are likely to reflect their own pre-occupation with issues of learning and teaching. This suggestion is supported by the fact that their suggestions for ways of easing transition focus almost entirely on learning and teaching issues with very little in the way of suggestions about addressing the social and financial difficulties of which many of them had said they were aware.

These staff perceptions of student problems tally with recent research into student experience of transition. Yorke and Longden found that first year students generally felt that they had a good experience but that there is scope to provide greater pre-entry guidance, pay attention to the quality of teaching in the first year, provide assistance with social integration and manage expectations (Yorke, Longden and Society for Research into Higher Education, 2004, p. 50).

The university staff saw the greater independence at university as being the main difference encountered by students and amongst the suggestions for easing transition were measures which should or could happen before enrolment at university. These findings are consistent with the accounts given by pre-transition staff of the concentration on getting results, possibly at the expense of development of students' learning skills. These pre-transition accounts support the view of Atherton who suggests that secondary teachers are viewed in the literature as contributing to transition difficulties in that school league tables force them to drill students to meet the assessment objectives rather than encourage deeper approaches to learning. "If they are lucky, they may at least be offered

some sympathy: that their teaching is cribbed and confined by Government intervention is not, after all, their fault”(Atherton, 2006, p. 66).

A further main finding from the interviews with the pre-transition staff was the priority given by the school and college to the application process compared to that given to preparation of students for successful transition to higher education. When asked about what could be done to improve support for students, the answers were generally in terms of improving the application process rather than in terms of preparation of students to cope with university life. More general preparation for university did not appear to be seen as an obvious issue and the only support which was mentioned unprompted related to preparing students for managing their finances. This predominance of the applications process as a cause for concern together with the fact that neither school nor college had a tracking mechanism for former students suggest that performance measures incentivise behaviour which leads to the best A level grades and offers of places at university rather than to the optimum transition into and success of students in higher education.

Next steps in the research

The findings are of limited generalisability given that only two pre-transition institutions and one university were involved in the research and, as explained above, the participants cannot be seen as representative of staff generally within those institutions. The interview data can probably be taken reliably to represent the management view in the school and college. The questionnaire data is likely to be representative of the views of staff at the university with a particular interest in learning and teaching. A further stage of the research will be to investigate to what extent the views of these groups are reflected amongst the wider staff body in each of the institutions.

Future work will also probe with the pre-transition staff whether they felt that their own sixth form experience had differed from that of current students in preparing them for higher education and investigate more closely the basis for the views which staff were expressing about the problems experienced by students.

Atherton, C. (2006), 'A-Level English Literature and the Problem of Transition'. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 5, 65-76.

Gamache, P. (2002), 'University students as creators of personal knowledge: an alternative epistemological view'. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 7 (3), 277-293.

Gorard, S., Smith, E., May, H., Thomas, L., Adnett, N. and Slack, K. (2006), *Review of Widening Participation Research: addressing the barriers to participation in higher education*. Bristol.

Hockings, C., Cooke, S. and Bowl, M. (2007), 'Academic Engagement' within a widening participation context - a 3D analysis'. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 12 (5-6), 721-733.

Taylor, J. and Bedford, T. (2004), 'Staff perceptions of factors related to non-completion in higher education'. *Studies in Higher Education*, 29 (3), 375-394.

- Tinto, V. (1993), *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition*. (2nd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wingate, U. (2007), 'A Framework for Transition: Supporting 'Learning to Learn' in Higher Education'. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 61 (3), 391-405.
- Yorke, M., Longden, B. and Society for Research into Higher Education. (2004), *Retention and student success in higher education*. Maidenhead: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open UP.