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Academic preparedness: Student and tutor perceptions of the ‘academic experience’ (0248)

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A fundamental challenge for academic practice is developing an understanding of the range and level of student preparedness for study in Higher Education. The nexus between student and tutor perceptions and expectations of the nature of learning in higher education offers a useful starting point for the improvement of practice. This paper reports on a study carried out in a UK university and is based on a phenomenographically informed exploration of tutor and student perceptions of the academic experience of higher education. It offers a discussion of variation in student and tutor perceptions with particular attention being paid to concepts of what constitutes learning in higher education and more specifically assessment. Research, designed to examine the perceived levels of student preparedness at institutional level, is carried out against the complex backdrop of widening participation, student recruitment and retention where there are tensions between concepts of student deficit and intellectual performance.

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The potential range of student perceptions about learning in higher education and the possibility that some students are better prepared for study than others (McLean, 2006) can provide a challenging environment for tutors and students alike. Considerations of students’ experiences and the extent to which they are prepared for academic study are acknowledged as useful starting points for the enhancement of approaches to learning and teaching at individual and institutional level. This study embraces McLean’s challenge for ‘academics-as-intellectuals...to turn critical eyes towards the possibilities of university pedagogy’ (p108) offering an institutional study into variations of response from tutors and students in respect of the academic experience. Mindful of the sensitivities involved when exploring academic practice at such an intimate level, this research avoids taking a deficit approach. It therefore employs appropriate methodology and mechanisms for sharing findings to promote critical reflection and discussion to inform and enhance academic practice in relation to assessment that positively supports tutors’ and students’ ‘academic experience’.

‘Academic preparedness’ is interpreted here as the extent to which students feel they are ready to study at HE level, and the ways in which the institution provides academic support if it is needed. However, this understanding sits within the context of higher education where universities can be ‘challenged’ by a need to respond to ‘non-traditional’ students (Northedge, 2003). The difficult relationship between student diversity and learner pathology is acknowledged in this study which aimed to ‘unpick’ student and tutor perceptions about learning and potential areas of tension or accord that might have emerged. The University concerned has good performance indicators in terms of

widening participation in terms of increasing student diversity (Shaw et al, 2007) but has concerns regarding students level of engagement with their studies and the retention of students, an evident point of concern for others in the sector (Crosling, et al 2008). This study taking the 'academic experience' as its focus acknowledges that academic factors are only one aspect of the complexity of student withdrawal from study.

A qualitative study, drawing on notions of phenomenography (Marton & Booth, 1997 in Åkerlind, 2005), was developed in order to gain greater understanding of the student 'academic experience', levels of preparedness for study and more particularly the relevance of this to assessment. The role of assessment is identified here as a significant aspect of the student experience and such thinking is echoed by others (e.g. Smith, 2001; Gibbs and Dunbat-Goddet, 2007) who agree that assessment has a profound influence on what students study, how they study, and how effectively they study. Smith (2001) argues that it is of up-most importance that we spend time and our professional expertise in getting assessment right, both in process and content. This is particularly pertinent, she argues, in the context of the challenging nature of the student body and in light of the national widening participation agenda. More recently, Professor Robert Burgess (2008), chair of the board of directors of the HEA, stated that the academy, as part its five-year plan to help deliver 'highest quality learning' will be looking anew at the subject of assessment, which, he believes, has been relatively neglected. Thus, particular attention is paid in this enquiry to the characteristics of assessment environments within the broader context of teaching and learning.

The data collected, via semi-structured interviews with students and tutors, was critically reflected on in respect of preparedness for study as well as retention and withdrawal at the level of the institution. As with all phenomenographic research, the aim was to investigate variation in the underlying meaning of, or ways of experiencing, a phenomenon. The desired outcome as a structured 'space' of variation, represents key aspects of the qualitatively different ways of viewing the 'academic experience' – the assumption being that a hierarchically inclusive distinctiveness exists in relation to a student's academic experience and whether they withdraw or persist with their studies. The focus on critical aspects of the structural relationships between different ways of understanding a phenomenon is seen as having powerful heuristic value in aiding insights into teaching and learning. Highlighting the relationships between different ways of understanding tutors' and students' perspectives on assessment and notions of widening participation and diversity provides a way of looking at phenomena holistically, despite the fact that they may be experienced differently by different individuals and by the same individuals at different points in time and context. The aim is to simultaneously portray the whole as well as the parts in a single outcome space of variation.

Here ways of speaking and thinking about the academic experience are identified with the manner in which students appear to be prepared for study as a result of their considerations of themselves as learners, their perceptions of tutor views of them as learners and tutors perceptions of their students'

as learners and their broader academic experience are examined as degrees of 'readiness' for study. First stage analysis has resulted in discussion of the following dimensions of learning between: 'pupil and peer', 'transmission and transformation', 'isolation and social engagement' and 'pathology and vitality'. The ways in which students might perceive themselves and be perceived of as intellectuals is central to this discussion of student and tutor expectation and the ways in which participation as an active process of engagement in assessment for learning is experienced and promoted offers a useful starting point for future academic development. The extent to which it is possible to meet the needs of diverse students and the extent to which they are active participants in 'knowledge communities' (Northedge, 2003) can be identified in a critical discussion of student and tutor responses and the range of academic preparedness of student and tutor alike provides scope and challenge for the further intellectual development of both groups of learners.

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