

Assessment as a Key Mediating Artefact for Students in Transition from College to University.

Julia Fotheringham

Edinburgh Napier University

Abstract

This paper presents research findings from a longitudinal study of students making the transition from colleges to a Scottish university. Data from interviews with staff and students suggest that although students are offered pre-entry transition support while they study at college, they face challenges, particularly in relation to assessment, when arriving at university. Findings indicate that lecturers who take time to make their requirements explicit and create opportunities for students to understand what is valued by the university provide the key to successful transition. Dialogue about the discipline and learning and teaching approaches benefits all students, and not just those coming from college.

Keywords: Assessment, dialogue, direct-entry, transition.

1. Background and Introduction.

Improving access to university for people coming from disadvantaged and under-represented backgrounds is a key ambition for Scottish Government (Scottish Funding Council, 2018). Colleges play an important role in widening access to education because the most socioeconomically disadvantaged people in Scotland are more likely to enter full time higher education from colleges than they are to go directly to university (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2017). Flexible routes between colleges and universities provide access to degree level study for those who would not have previously met academic entry requirements (Gallacher, 2014) and many routes will enable students to progress to degree level study with full credit given for their Higher National (HN) qualifications. But making the transition from college to university in pursuit of degree level study is not without its challenges and students report a number of difficulties (Howieson, 2013) especially with their first university assessments. This short paper based on doctoral

research offers insights into the assessment challenges faced by students who make the transition from HN study in college as direct entrants to third year in University. Students from college believe that their lack of knowledge about assessment practice at university places them at a disadvantage compared to others in their class group. But small changes in teaching practices which create opportunities for lecturers to be explicit about what students are expected to do with any assessment task bring big benefits to all students and especially to those coming from college.

2. Doctoral Research – Students’ Transitions from College to University.

Doctoral research was undertaken in the context of the Associate Student project (funded by the Scottish Funding Council) designed to increase the number of widening participation students progressing from college to University. Associate students spend two years at college gaining an HN qualification and then progress to third year of University, graduating with an Honours degree at the end of fourth year. Students articulating on this route are recognised from their first day at college as ‘Associate students’ of the host University, having access to University facilities, campus visits, and academic skills workshops.

The study is framed by cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) (Engeström, 1987). This positions the students as subjects of a dynamic and evolving activity system which represents the Associate student project and places assessment as a key mediating artefact in the sociocultural context of the system. The rich data set was generated over a two-year period using a range of creative visual methods (Gauntlett & Holzwarth, 2006) in interviews and focus groups with students, lecturers and transition support staff. The first phase of data collection took place in colleges, and the second in University when students had progressed to third year of engineering degree programmes. Although my research focussed on transition support and students’ engagement with the university as direct entrants, another significant finding emerged which positions assessment as a dominant artefact in students’ accounts of their experience of getting to grips with university study. Across all of the student data scripts, there was clear consensus about assessment in two areas; first of all about the level of concern students felt at their lack of higher education assessment literacy and the degree of disadvantage they felt because of that. The second area of consensus was about practices which students found particularly helpful in supporting them to learn about how assessment is conducted in a university

setting. Lecturers who took time to make their assessment requirements explicit, to explain the required layout and to host discussion about their expectations offered a significant advantage to students over those who did not. A further finding suggests that in the absence of lecturer availability, student participants preferred to seek support from their close peers rather than from knowledgeable experts such as academic skills advisors or even those who had been at university since first year.

During interviews and focus groups staff and students acknowledged the differences between assessment in college and in University and students recognised the difficulties that this could cause for them when they arrive at university (Farenga, 2018). For HN qualifications, students would mostly be assessed against learning outcomes in competence-based course work, in-class tests with a pass mark of 80% or 90%, and an end of year graded Unit. A great deal of one to one support is provided by college lecturers and it is not uncommon for a student to make several tutor-guided attempts at an assignment before securing a pass. Submission and resubmission dates generally incorporate a degree of flexibility according to individual circumstances which would be uncommon at University. In recognition of the differences that students would face when they arrive as direct entrants to university, a well-coordinated programme of skills-focussed articulation support (Hallett, 2013) was offered by the Widening Participation team from the University while students were studying at college. But for a range of individual and structural reasons, not all Associate Students accessed these potentially valuable sessions. While the opportunities to meet staff from the University were appreciated by the group, once faced with the onslaught of demands of third year undergraduate study, few could remember the significance or impact of the transition support they had received in their college years.

2.1 Direct entrants' early experiences of assessment at university.

When the students approached their first assessments at University, they found that they were unfamiliar with the referencing requirements, the rigidity of submission dates and the formalities of end of trimester examinations. But Haggis (2006, p.522) reminds us that 'Beginning students, at all levels, no longer necessarily 'know what to do' in response to conventional assessment tasks, essay criteria, or instructions about styles of referencing'. It is not surprising then that students from college without opportunities to develop the knowledge and understanding required to interpret assessment tasks or to understand tutor feedback should describe themselves to be struggling. This sense of academic struggle contradicts the students' previous

experience in college, where college lecturers stated that those who make the transition to higher education are amongst the highest performing in any HN group. Historical tensions exist about the extent to which direct entrants should be able to function in an 'unsupported way' (Haggis, 2006, p. 525) at university in order avoid 'dumbing-down' (Shah and McKay, 2018, p. X, Hallett, 2013, p. 525) academic provision, or whether they should be 'dolloed along' with extra support as one of the academic participants suggested, at least during the first trimester. My research indicates that rather than running the risk of pathologising direct entrants by providing separate support for them (which they may not attend), lecturers who take time during class to explore the tacit assumptions of the discipline and to be explicit about assessment requirements believe that this helps to build the assessment literacies for all students irrespective of their academic background (Sambell, 2013).

Certain practices were unanimously acknowledged by students as being helpful in enabling them to make sense of their new assessment environment and to recover some of their academic confidence lost in transition from college to university. Lecturers who provide advice about how to set up report templates in MS Word, offered guidance on the use of reference citation software, chatted informally about assessment briefs and provided formative feedback on early drafts of course work were cited by student participants as 'going above and beyond' and being particularly supportive. This suggests that such input is not the norm. Although not all lecturers in this study provided the opportunities for dialogue about assessment, others provided assessment briefs which detailed marking criteria and instructions outlining the required format, approximate word counts and marks allocated to different sections. But despite this written guidance and information, without the benefit of discussion with the lecturer, students still found themselves unsure about what was expected of them. This finding aligns with Rust et al. (2003) whose research into criterion-referencing asserted that without opportunities for explanation, exemplars and discussion, even detailed instructions may be of limited use to students. Although one individual in this study accessed academic skills support from the university, the rest relied on their peer group from college for advice and support. Sambell (2013) recognizes the significance of students' individual and collective perceptions about the requirements of an assessment. Students interpret these requirements from their own standpoint which is exactly what the students in this study were doing, working late into the evening struggling to establish the requirements, eventually they acted on the basis of their collective understanding and their own perspectives as direct entry students.

All of the students in the study achieved good outcomes from their third year, with all but one continuing to their fourth and final year of the degree programme. In the Associate Student project activity system, the object of students' activity was the accumulation of academic credit leading to graduation and well-paid employment in the engineering industry. At the end of their third year, the students were well on target for achieving their desired outcomes. The findings presented in this paper suggest that in order for direct entrants to grow in confidence and to continue to progress academically, they need plenty of opportunities to take in what is valued by the university and to practice the new academic literacies.

The success of flexible routes to university depends on lecturers adopting teaching practices which help students to adjust and integrate to the higher education context. Although students in this study were offered pre-entry skills focused support while they were still at college, lecturers at university held the key to providing transition support that students value the most. The opportunity for dialogue about the discipline and about learning, teaching and assessment approaches can benefit all students, and not only those coming from college. There can be no doubt that assessment is a key mediating artefact in this regard.

3. References

- Commissioner for Fair Access (2017). *Laying the Foundations for Fair Access, Annual Report 2018*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government. Available at <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/report/2017/12/laying-foundations-fair-access-annual-report-2017-commissioner-fair-access/documents/00529104-pdf/00529104-pdf/govscot%3Adocument>
- Engeström, Y. (1987). Learning by Expanding. (p. 368). *Helsinki: Orienta-Konsultit Oy*.
- Farenga, S. A. (2018). Early struggles , peer groups and eventual success : an artful inquiry into unpacking transitions into university of widening participation students. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 20(1), 60–78.
- Gallacher, J. (2014). Higher education in Scotland : differentiation and diversion ? The impact of college-university progression links Higher education in Scotland : differentiation and diversion ? The impact of college-university progression links. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 33(1), 96–106.

- Gauntlett, D. & Holzwarth, P. (2006). Creative and visual methods for Exploring identities. *Visual Studies*, 21(1), 82–91.
- Haggis, T. (2006). Pedagogies for diversity: Retaining critical challenge amidst fears of “dumbing down”. *Studies in Higher Education*, 31(5), 521–535.
- Hallett, F. (2013). Study support and the development of academic literacy in higher education: a phenomenographic analysis. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 18(5), 518–530.
- Howieson, C. (2013). *Students' Experience of the Transition from HN to Degree Study 2012-2013: Report to ELRAH*. Edinburgh: Educational Sociology, University of Edinburgh.
- Rust, C., Price, M. & O'Donovan, B. (2003). Improving Students' Learning by Developing their Understanding of Assessment Criteria and Processes. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 28(2), 147–164.
- Sambell, K. (2013). Engaging Students Through Assessment. In E. Dunne & O. Derfel (eds). *The Student Engagement Handbook: Practice in Higher Education*. (pp. 379-396). Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing Limited.
- Scottish Funding Council (2018). *University Outcome Agreements, Summary of Progress and Ambitions Report 2018*. Edinburgh: Scottish Funding Council. Available at http://www.sfc.ac.uk/web/FILES/outcome-agreements-1718/University_Outcome_Agreements_Summary_2016-17.pdf
- Shah, M. & McKay, J. (2018). *Achieving Equity and Quality in Higher Education: Global Perspective in an Era of Widening Participation*. Australia: Palgrave Studies in Excellence and Equity in Global Education.