Providing Students with an Easystart to Higher Education: The Emerging Role of Digital Technologies to Facilitate Students’ Transitions

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ABSTRACT

The transition to higher education can be problematic for some students as they adapt to institutional procedures and degree level working at the same time as developing new social networks. To help facilitate these complex transitions institutions are increasingly turning towards digital technologies to provide both flexible access to resources and improved communication. This paper outlines the key issues associated with students’ initial transitions to higher education and explores the challenges faced by academics designing induction procedures and programmes. The emerging role of digital technologies in supporting students’ transitions into Higher Education, against the backdrop of a changing digital landscape in one institution is discussed and an evaluation of the easystart induction programme at Manchester Metropolitan University presented as a case study.

Keywords: Digital Technologies, Higher Education, Induction, Student Transition, Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)

INTRODUCTION

There is a substantial research base on student retention, which suggests that the transition to higher education can be difficult for some students as they struggle with both academic and social integration (Harvey, Drew & Smith, 2006). The transition to Higher Education (HE) is not simply a linear procedure, but a gradual process of ‘becoming’ over time, as new skills are gained and adapted and students are integrated into the HE environment (Holdsworth & Morgan, 2005). Multiple factors influence students’ ongoing development and transformation during the transition and individual transitions are enormously varied (Holdsworth & Morgan, 2005). It can be an emotional journey, as students manage both academic and social transformation during a time of considerable adjustment (Case, Marshall & Linder, 2010). This is particularly true of healthcare students as they have the added transition to becoming a professional practitioner during their studies. Previous research has identified that healthcare programmes can be stressful for some students (Bowden, 2008); and this can ultimately lead

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to attrition (Hamshire, Willgoss, & Wibberley, 2012).

During an average person’s life course there will be many periods of transition. Some authors have suggested that a life-span is ostensibly organised around a series of transitions (Holdsworth & Morgan, 2005) and others that transitions are essential features of social life (Field, 2010). These personal transitions are variously described as a period of change from one way of life to another demarcating a new status and/or new roles (Henderson, Holland, McGrellis, Sharpe & Thomson, 2007) or a ‘movement’ from one social stage or status to another, sometimes with an accompanying physical movement from one place to another (Turner, 1982).

BACKGROUND

Our interest in the challenges associated with student transition into Higher Education evolved from an exploration of the impact of autonomy, motivation and Information Technology (IT) skills on student engagement with online resources provided as part of the Physiotherapy programme at MMU (Hamshire, Cullen, & Wibberley, 2009). The programme attracts a diverse student population with an age range of 18–40 and a predominance of female students (approximately 2:1, female to male). In accord with Thomas (2002) those students who had a previous educational experience that was teacher-led and didactic were unfamiliar with the institutional habitus of independent learning and therefore had some difficulty in adapting. In contrast the mature students on the programme who had previous work or higher education experience had developed relatively high levels of autonomy and motivation and adapted more comfortably to the higher education environment. We recognised that the students’ academic and social needs were diverse and would emerge at different times so a variety of methods of providing ongoing support were required to give all students an opportunity to engage.

In devising our strategy to address these issues in the curriculum we initially focused on facilitating academic integration but as we gathered evidence from student evaluations it became increasingly apparent that social integration was also significant.

Academic integration is a broad term that includes students’ engagement with academic staff, their peers and resources and their attendance at timetabled sessions (Tinto, 1993). Thomas (2002) considers that two factors combine to influence academic integration, an individual student’s level of academic preparedness and the experience of the academic programme that they are studying. Academic preparedness encompasses students’ past educational experiences, their individual expectations, academic capabilities and personal autonomy which combine to give students a ‘state of readiness’ for studying. If there is a ‘match’ between academic preparedness of an individual and the academic experience, the student is more likely to engage with the programme (Thomas, 2002; Tinto, 1998); and the more a student is actively engaged the more likely they are to continue in higher education (Crosling, Thomas & Heagney, 2008).

Social integration occurs when students have developed good relationships and networks with their peers (Tinto, 1998). Those students who fail to develop social networks and do not fit in are more likely to withdraw early (Thomas, 2002) as research demonstrates that friendship, or more importantly lack of it, is one of the key factors that influence students’ decisions to leave.

Whilst there is no simple formula for easing the transition of a diverse student body, research suggests that first impressions can directly influence students (Andrew, McGuiness, Reid, & Corcoran, 2008). A reoccurring theme in our own evaluations of induction has been that students describe the feelings of ‘information overload’, ‘shock’ and ‘loneliness’ during the initial induction week activities (Hamshire et al., 2009). The process of gradual induction and building a relationship with students is therefore important (Harvey et al., 2006); and programmes that aim to gradually build both academic and social relationships support
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