

Student voice in ‘the transition to university’ problem

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Introduction

There is a long and ongoing concern for students moving into higher education for the first time. We locate our study in the discussion of perceptions of students as underprepared for university studies. In the context of this discussion our students are highly successful school leavers, who meet stringent entry requirements. Yet at the end of 2009 about 25% of the students were excluded from continuing with their studies for not meeting minimum academic requirements, and indications are that an additional 20-30% of the same cohort is potentially facing exclusion at the end of 2010. The pass rate on the first semester mathematics course in 2010 is 47%, indicating potentially a similar disaster for this year’s intake.

Literature

A number of universities are taking the approach of a discrete “First Year Experience” (FYE) (James &McInnes, 1996; Pikethly & Prosser, 2001; Harvey, Drew & Smith, 2006). The notion of the FYE draws usefully on the transition metaphor for understanding what happens to students entering higher education. There are definite advantages to considering the school-first-year-interface as a transition between contexts. The metaphor provides a useful way to think broadly about issues that contribute to success and failure: a transition implies change, trajectory, and even growth, and these are all important features of the process of moving from secondary school to university. However, it has the potential problem of normalising the higher education experience and positioning students and the secondary schooling system as deficient. Some have cautioned that it obscures the dynamic relationship between students’ pre-higher education experiences and their experiences in higher education (Ashwin, 2010). It also positions higher education as indisputably the place to aspire to. There is little critical engagement with the practices in higher education which might not be ideal.

The danger is that this absolves higher education from blame and in the extreme even the obligation to interrogate students’ difficulties. The emphasis is placed on perceived internal shortcomings of the student (motivation or cognitive ability) or an external weakness linked to the student (socio-economic background or poor schooling). This amounts to a deficit thinking model. International literature confirms this: Harvey et al (2006) suggests that much of the thinking around the FYE centres on student deficiencies and how to provide for them, rather than on individual learning needs and building on their strengths. They point out that there is not a single first year experience, but rather a multiplicity of experiences. Haggis (2006) goes as far as suggesting that attempting to respond to perceived student needs in terms of deficit thinking, is attempting the impossible because of the extent of the diversity of students in the wake of mass higher education. Valencia (1997) argues that deficit thinking applied to educational policies amounts to a neoliberal commitment to help those who cannot help themselves. A radical alternative to this is to seriously consider the university as the underprepared entity in the interface between student and higher education (Smit, 2010). We explore this further in this paper when we consider the implications of the study for higher education institutions.

Methodology

In an effort to keep a critical distance from making assumptions about the student experience, we aim to allow the student voice to speak for itself. In choosing to emphasise a student perspective, we are attempting to foreground the dynamics of the student experience. This is intended to unsettle the dominant assumptions about higher education practices as fixed, stable and unassailable.

This study discusses the results of an open ended survey of first year students, carried out in two engineering departments at a South African research university. Electrical and civil engineering first year students were asked to respond to an open ended questionnaire asking what helped, what hindered and what surprised them about their first semester at university. 232 responses were received.

The two researchers each coded the data separately using a method of constant comparison. Categories were subsequently discussed and agreed upon. This method is consistent with grounded theory approaches (Glaser, 1994); the emergent nature of the analysis is especially important when data is offered as participants’ perspective.

Findings

Students comment on a vast range of topics in response to the questions: workload and the level of work; freedom from supervision; living on or off campus and the different implications; support structures available to them; the sheer size of the university and various language aspects. In this paper we focus on a different set of comments: the difference between school and higher education from the students' perspective, workload and pace of delivery, the realisation that different approaches are needed for success, the construct of the independent student and how students experience this, and some of the strategies adopted by students to cope.

"It's as if I didn't go to high school."

A striking aspect of the data was the many comments expressing bewilderment at the unexpectedness of the differences between high school and university.

"Between high school in South Africa and University, there exists a vacuum where the calibre of thinking, working, exploring, understanding & application required in University far surpasses that required in high school."

Entering engineering students are among the most capable of school leavers; they find the difficulties they encounter disconcerting and quite threatening to their self confidence.

"I felt like I learnt nothing at high school. University was a different world and high school didn't prep us enough to handle the work. The learning curve is STEEP!"

"In high school I didn't need to work as hard to achieve good results and I find myself working even harder but getting worse marks. "

"The difficulty of the maths work at university level is so much more than that at school level. Even though I got 81% for maths in high school, I dropped to 10% at university level. That's a 71% DROP!"

"I was shocked and taken aback that after 12 years of perpetual academic success, I did not perform well at all academically."

"I did not expect to get so little sleep."

Students find the huge workload they were suddenly confronted with, and the pace of lecturing, quite debilitating.

"The puzzling thing was the fact that I found it virtually impossible to keep up in class. I was always trying to catch up because we were not warned about the fast pace and difficulty which we would be introduced to initially."

"The fast pace of lecturing, doing a load of overwhelming work within a short period of time."
[Difficulty]

"Adjusting to ... the way in which we need to work"

Students had to do more more than coping with a bigger volume of work; they commented on a different kind of thinking required; a different approach to work.

"[I] Did not know how to approach certain subjects like maths and physics. I approached these subjects in the wrong way."

"The expectations are different than those in high school. Understanding and application of knowledge are required when it comes to tests and exams"

"The maths at school does not teach you to think."

“I didn't have a clue about Varsity.”

Comments indicate some perplexity about what is valued at university, and how this is different to what was valued at school.

“That's a problem with the school system. We not taught to think for ourselves, what we[re] taught (the content) is not bad, it is how we taught to think (or not to think)”

“At school we were not taught how to think we were taught to take an equation (that was given) and just plug and chug.”

“Being forced to do literally EVERYTHING by/for myself.”

One of the constructs valued in higher education, is that of the so-called autonomous learner. This is an ill-defined concept – it rarely implies true self-direction in studies, but it contains an expectation that students will take full responsibility for their studies, and a vehement aversion to the idea of ‘spoon-feeding’ students. Academics seldom stop and think just how different this is from the high school environment. Students comment on this when asked what they found puzzling:

“I also found it strange that we could just leave without asking if we needed the loo, that we could eat and drink during lectures or not pitch up to the lecture at all.”

“Lecturers are really not concerned (at all) about whether you come to class or not - your progress depends entirely on yourself.”

” Lecturers are not really like teachers and they don't care about your attendance to classes or your dress code.”

“Being away from home.” [Difficulty]

For many of the students the transition to higher education was not just an academic one, but coincided with the life stage change of living by themselves away from home. Many commented on the fact that this impacted on their academic performance, whether it was coping with the new freedom, or having to take responsibility for getting to lectures.

“Adjusting to living alone and having to perform basic functions myself (cooking and laundry).“
[Difficulties]

“Having to stay by myself was a big change, it's hard having to wake yourself up (8 o'clock lectures).”

“More freedom, caused me to be too chilled and not work as hard”

There was evidence in the comments of students of an understanding of the insistence on the need to be independent and responsible for their own learning:

“Academics are also taught differently to school, this is more of a self study, which I actually prefer, but is a bit harder.”

“Self-dependency (everything is up to oneself) including help in the courses.” [Puzzling]

“...the overall initiative which you have to take - independence.” [Difficulty]

“The sudden requirement for self discipline and independence. Most people, I think, don't adjust to this very quickly which leads to failures.”

“How little people care.”

It is interesting to note that many students commented on this expectation of independence in a negative way. The value that higher education places on the independent learner is experienced by students as un-caring of the individual.

“I didn't expect the lecturers to not care about the students' progress.”

“The organisation doesn't evaluate individuals or consider students as individuals. Everything is about the group/if one person has some problems, she/he has to deal with it on his/her own.”

”The sheer lack of caring about the high failure rates of students by the faculty.”

“Studying ahead of a lecture.”

There is also evidence in the comments of how some students adapted over the first six months: they use different strategies and approaches to study and work: study groups, tutors, making use of previous examination papers. The mentors seem to have played a big role in helping students.

“The mentorship program was very helpful to me because my mentor gave me useful advice on how to cope with the new environment and academic advice as well.”

“Working in groups has been very helpful in terms of getting greater knowledge and understanding of a topic.”

“Studying something before it's lectured was quite helpful too.”

“Some of the lectures like the one on 555 Transistor in electronics was hard to understand in class, but after browsing on some electronics website, it was easy to understand.”

Some students had to struggle to come to terms with failure – having made the grade to get access to the engineering programme, they now have to carry the heavy burden of possible failure:

“It was even difficult cos [sic] I had to think how I [could] make my parents proud, as I saw things were not coming alright.”

“First semester basically showed us that the A's we had gotten for mathematics and physics at school meant nothing.”

However, personal growth came for some, and the opportunity to reflect on the process was positive:

“I struggled with maths (at first). I feel more grown up and independent after just a few months. I am more ok with who I am. I have made friends with very different types of people.”

Discussion

The excerpts from the student responses tell a vivid story, sometimes at odds with the perceptions of higher education lecturers. The data speaks to both deficit thinking about entering students, and some of the hidden assumptions of the transition metaphor.

In South Africa we are acutely aware of the high failure rate of incoming students, especially in the light of concerns about the schooling system. The first group of categories all speak about how students feel underprepared for university. This is not unexpected, nor is it particular to South Africa. We tend to see our problems as unique, but the literature confirms that concerns about first year students are widespread. James, Krause & Jennings (2009) report that two thirds of first year Australian students did not believe that their school experience had adequately prepared them for university. Haggis (2006) contend that the level and prior learning experience of incoming student can no longer be assumed: “Beginning students, at all levels, no longer necessarily ‘know what to do’ in response to conventional assessment tasks...” (p. 1). One has to ask whether it is realistic to expect schools to prepare students for higher education in the ways we value in higher education – have they ever really prepared students for this, or has it recently become an impossible task in the light of mass higher education?

There is clear evidence that transition into university includes more than just academic issues. However, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that the first year experience is not a single homogenous experience. It is complex and multi-faceted. It often coincides with the life stage change faced when the adolescent takes up the next life phase of young adulthood. Harvey (2006) suggests that it evolves and changes temporally and culturally. The issues students face at the beginning of the year are not the same they face a little later in the year (early in the year they face issues of induction: culture shock. Later in the year there are issues of assimilation and absorption, academic concerns, etc.). Some students are able to surmount these, others are not. The emergence of strategies for coping attests to this.

The dominant discourse in higher education around the independent learner and learner responsibility needs further interrogation. Our data has shown very clearly that students are confused by this, that the notion itself is far from self-evidently ‘good’ from the student perspective. Haggis (2006) points out that the underlying

principles on which these ideas are based are often only implicit in course outlines and assessment strategies, and students unfamiliar with the discourse find it almost impossible to pick up on it.

Implications for higher education

The study points to several implications for higher education. Keeping in mind that these are some of the strongest students in the country in their pre-higher education experience, the validity of their perceptions should carry weight in discussions about the “gap”.

“Ask most college faculty what's wrong with the first college year, and they will zoom in on the deficiencies of the students themselves. The complaints are legion: new students are disengaged academically, unmotivated, can't write, can't spell, have a ten-minute attention span, expect instant gratification. In a nutshell, they aren't the way students ‘used to be’” (Barefoot, 2000). There would be strong support for this belief that students have changed – various demographic and social studies would confirm the change in the entering student population. Yet, university teaching has not changed much in the last two decades. Universities need to come to terms with the student body they have to teach, not the student body they would like to teach. Perhaps seriously entertaining the notion of the university as the underprepared entity in the interface between student and higher education may open fresh ideas in terms of dealing with transition.

In this we need to be guided by research about entering students rather than commonsense notions about what might be needed. This involves more than just a cursory look at how students' prior knowledge about subject areas has changed. We need to know more about the nature and expectations of entering students to enable appropriate responsiveness. This needs to move into the lecture theatres, not just remain in the FYE. We need to find ways to build on the strengths the new kind of student brings with them (Harvey, 2006).

The data from our study makes it clear that an emphasis on academic orientation (rather than mere physical and social orientation) is needed. Pike (2001) describe academic orientation as a process of induction that stretches from pre-registration, at entry, throughout the first semester, and even throughout the first year. Much of current orientation focuses on a physical and social orientation when students first arrive on campus, but students need explicit information about “the relative invisibility of the complexities of academic and disciplinary processes” (Haggis, 2006, p. 8)

Conclusion

In order for higher education to better “mind the gap” and to possibly even acknowledge our own underpreparedness, we need to better understand our students' strengths and weaknesses. We need to move beyond the ‘defensive cynicism’ (Haggis, 2006, p. 3) that frame first year difficulties in terms of a wearing down of standards and equating wider access with the sacrifice of valued higher education ideals. We believe that our engineering student body, composed of some of the top South African school leaving achievers and a considerable cohort of international students, bring a particular and very relevant perspective to this discussion.

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