

Returning to Learn: the study experiences of part time foundation degree students

Mary Haynes

Sheffield Hallam University

Department of Education, Childhood and Inclusion

I developed an interest in the experience of non traditional students making the transition into higher education whilst teaching a range of vocational awards in early years at a college of further education. My commitment to enhance the learning experience of non-traditional students at university grew since I began teaching in higher education and became involved in development work within the life long learning network. A desire to explore and understand the study support experiences of part time foundation students to help them make a successful transition and benefit from positive learning experiences led to the inception of this small scale study. The study was carried out between February and June 2009 and supported by a multidisciplinary team from Sheffield Hallam University comprising academic staff, the Learning Hub (information and support) and the Information Advisory Service who were all interested in the development of effective support strategies for part time students.

Background

Originally a polytechnic, Sheffield Hallam University has an emphasis on applied and vocational courses. It is one of the UK's largest universities with over 30,000 students, 32% of whom are part time. The university has a commitment to the enhancement of the part time student experience and supports initiatives to do so. This study was a small piece of evaluative work to explore the study support experiences of a group of work based foundation degree students who were 'returning to learn' at the university. Early years foundation degree provision was chosen for the study because it is an area of growth due to generous government funding. The Foundation Degree in Early Years is delivered by the university and partner colleges on a part time basis, to work based students both on and off campus in response to local needs and in support of widening participation. All of the students in the cohort selected for the study worked in the same large metropolitan borough where university staff travelled to deliver the foundation degree in a small community centre just over ten miles from the university. The learning environment was different both culturally and socially from that of the university campus with no direct access to university learning resources and limited IT facilities. The focus group who volunteered to take part in the study comprised eleven students all of whom were all female, white British ranging in age from mid twenties to mid fifties. They were all experiencing higher education for the first time; for some their prior educational experience had not been positive. All had followed a vocational route to achieve a level three qualification; most had not been engaged in formal learning for a number of years and were the first in their family to access higher education. Their motivation was initially extrinsic having been directly targeted by their early years workforce development officer to enrol onto the foundation degree with the incentive of full course funding amongst other benefits as part of the national drive to up skill the early years workforce. They had therefore found themselves unexpectedly returning to formal education

after a gap of several years and although in the middle of the foundation degree expressed low levels of confidence in the academic dimension of the course.

The landscape of higher education is steadily changing as the agenda for life long learning and widening participation becomes increasingly prominent (DfES, 2003). Foundation degrees were introduced in 2000 as part of the government agenda to increase provision and enhance access to higher education, close skills gaps and help to boost the economy (DfES, 2003). Within the early years sector they are recognised as a key route to encourage the workforce to develop relevant skills, knowledge and understanding to support the growth of a more highly trained workforce. Foundation degrees were designed to meet the needs of both the student and workforce by integrating academic study with work based learning. Part time work based students can however become worried as they are positioned into the 'alien culture' of academic study in higher education which can have a negative impact learning (Askham, 2008, p90), the significance of which should not be underestimated. Despite anxieties about academic study, students on foundation degrees do not always find sufficient or suitable levels of study support (Tierney and Slack 2005). The need therefore to adapt institutional habitus to meet the diverse needs of non traditional students and accommodate the increasingly wide range of provision which includes foundation degrees has led to debate around the changing nature of the teaching and learning experience in higher education (DfES, 2003). To cultivate success among non-traditional learners Bamber and Tett (2000) suggest their learning should be underpinned with adequate and appropriate support that will enable them to develop confidence and experience success. It is therefore critical that as non-traditional learners start their journey into higher education they experience a milieu where they are encouraged and supported to develop strong study skills that will help them to build confidence and experience success (Tait and Entwistle, 1996). Krause et al (2005) highlight the role that tutors and associated support staff have to play in the creation of a nurturing learning environment and Kift, (2008) suggests that integration of both academic and other support services has the potential to enhance and transform the learning experience for non-traditional students. This work was drawn upon during the evaluative study seeking to improve part time student experience of study support.

Methodology

Data was gathered from the focus group at the beginning of the project in February 2009 and again four months later to measure confidence, levels of digital fluency and evaluate the impact of interventions. A self audit of digital fluency was collected at both data gathering points. Qualitative data was collected through focus group conversations to evaluate student perceptions of the development of their study skills, challenges faced, strategies used to resolve challenges and approaches that the university could employ to overcome challenges encountered. All participants were given information concerning the nature of the evaluation project and all gave written consent to use information collected.

Baseline data was collected when the students began their final level four module. On completion of digital fluency surveys the focus group were split into three small groups to make the process less intimidating, merging at the end of the session to establish and record on flip charts a mutual understanding of emerging points from smaller group discussion. The main purpose of the focus group discussion was to establish an evidence base through the exploration of the students' perceptions of their development of study skills, challenges that

they have faced and strategies that they have employed to resolve challenges identified. The final data collection point was four months later to evaluate the impact of study support interventions, identified from baseline data that had been implemented during the module. The purpose of the second focus group was to explore students' perceptions of their development of study skills, challenges faced in preparation and completion of their last assignment and strategies that they or the university could employ to resolve challenges identified. The focus group participants were invited to reflect upon interventions in response to data collected from the first focus group by noting the level of helpfulness using a simple traffic light sticker system on large charts. They then split into two small groups for initial discussion eventually amalgamating to determine and record on flip charts communal agreement of emerging points from the smaller group discussions. All participants retook the digital fluency survey. Data collected over the four month period was analysed after the each data gathering point and emerging themes identified. Data from the digital fluency survey was put into chart form; pictorial representation helped interpretation of data. All data from the first focus group was revisited during the evaluation and analysis of data from the second focus group.

Findings

Base line data from the digital fluency survey highlighted the lack of confidence that the majority of the group had in the use and application of IT. Analysis of data from the focus group relating to challenges encountered by the students fell into four key themes which were: course organisation, IT skills, study support, and tutor support. Specific issues agreed by all students in the focus group included lack of confidence when using Blackboard, (the virtual learning environment), problems with referencing, timing of assignment deadlines and the need for formative early tutorials to help them to understand how to improve academic achievement. Some students drew attention to difficulties such as understanding terminology in module handbooks, lack of clarity about the standard of work and the level that they should be working to, getting out and returning books from the learning centre and lack of software on their own computers. There was a clear message from the group as to how the challenges could be met by the university identifying specifically better organisation and information, consistency and further personal support from tutors and more IT support. Students attempted to meet the challenges by working together with family, friends, peers and mentors in the work place.

Some of the issues uncovered could not be resolved in the short term or within the study period and called for a full appraisal of the foundation degree to consider the embedding of study skills within the infrastructure. Interventions to support the development study skills and competencies identified from the analysis of base line data that would be most useful to help the students fill skills gaps, gain confidence and start to manage their learning more effectively were provided. These included support with development of IT skills and competencies, conventions of academic writing and library skills including accessing electronic sources of information. Due to the lack of IT in the community centre an IT room in the local further education college was used for study support interventions. Co-delivery with academic staff and relevant specialists was adopted to create a supportive learning environment to scaffold learning and build levels of confidence. The specialists designed and created a 'toolbox' of related support materials to help students practice and reinforce their skills independently, a study skills handbook was developed by the course leader and

'drop in sessions' were offered by the Learning Hub for further support. Practicalities of accessing university resource for this group who were learning at a distance from the university were also considered. The learning centre extended the book loan period from one week to three to ease access to book stock and an online study support service from the central student support service was provided for further guidance with academic writing and assessment. This approach drew heavily on staff resource but, as Bamber and Tett (2000, p73) point out, working effectively with non-traditional students is 'teacher intensive'

Data collected four months later, after identified interventions had been put in place, proved contradictory in places. Results from the digital fluency survey suggested increased confidence in the use and application of IT, with the majority of the focus group perceiving themselves as very confident in handling basic IT functions and Blackboard. However, this self reported increase in confidence was not necessarily borne out in focus group discussions. Issues emerging from the discussion groups mostly related to confident and effective use of e-learning resources and technologies necessary to support and enhance achievement. The students indicated that the university could have done more prior to the start of the course to explain the significant role of digital technologies as part of the learning process. As many of the students had no recent experience of formal education they were surprised by the way technology has changed the learning experience and many saw adapting to this as the largest obstacle to success. They believed that ongoing interactive IT sessions were necessary to support study. Even after the interactive library skills session using IT, some students reported difficulty finding and accessing sources of information online, although they had been given paper support materials for supplementary guidance. Uptake of the online study support service was poor; some students described how they had attempted to use the service but were unable to because they did not know how to send an attachment. They found the newly developed study skills handbook, support materials and module readers helpful although their preferred method of support was face to face. The key messages emerging from the focus group were that steps should be taken by the university to ensure that students are better prepared before embarking on the foundation degree, services and support for study skills should be embedded early in the programme and ongoing support should be timely and accessible.

Discussion

The findings from this work suggested that the majority of part time students in the study had low levels of digital confidence at the beginning of the course and that information concerning the significance digital technologies to experience success during the foundation degree should be highlighted prior to the start of the course. Although the students appreciated the paper based study support materials developed by specialists, take up of online central services study support was hampered by student's lack of confidence with technology. None of the students accessed the drop-in study support service offered by the learning Hub on campus. Clegg, Bradley and Smith, (2006) found that the association of support services with failure tended to make students reluctant to access them. This, alongside difficulties and practicalities of access to both online and on campus support, may have been a factor that further compounded the extremely low take up of study support offered. Clegg, Bradley and Smith, (2006) go on to suggest that the integration of study support into course design would be a more effective approach; analysis of data collected suggested that the students in the focus group may have found this beneficial in the

development of digital fluency and academic writing skills. Knox (2005) calls for reconstruction of content, delivery and assessment structure and design to support non traditional students to experience success; the students in the study suggested that services and support for study skills should be embedded early in the programme with accessible ongoing support. This aligns with the work that Krause et al (2005) conducted with first year students, suggesting that the embedding of opportune support at the beginning of a course would help them to make a more positive transition into higher education. Kift (2008) also recommends the integration of both academic and other support services to enhance and improve the learning experience for part time non-traditional students. Within this infrastructure, student learning needs to be carefully scaffolded (Krause et al 2005) highlighting the influence and significance of tutors and associated support staff in the learning environment. All members of the focus group stressed the benefit of support from peers, family and friends is highly valued, a finding consistent with those of other studies involving part time students (Askham, 2008).

This study provided valuable insight into perceptions of the study support experiences of vocational, work based 'returning to learn' foundation degree students studying off campus. The project highlighted their anxieties in relation to study support and its impact on learning. It suggests that institutional change is needed in relation to perceptions and understanding of the needs of part time students returning to learn. The project findings strongly indicate that more effective models of support need to be established to offer a more positive experience of study support for part time non traditional students in higher education. Two key areas of development to be considered to improve study support of part time 'returning to learn' students emerged from the study. Firstly, before enrolment clear expectations about the significance and central role of digital fluency to the foundation degree should be made. Secondly, an alternative model for study support should be seriously considered and firmly embedded in course structure and design.

Postscript

Initially the range of short term interventions to boost confidences and competencies of the foundation degree students had a positive impact on their progress but more recent behaviours and attitudes of the group demonstrate expectations of and dependency on a high level of support which has hindered the development of autonomy and is a potential threat to further success. Frustration and lack of aspiration with little evidence of any intrinsic desire or perception of individual responsibility to take control of learning is beginning to surface. This observation has been the catalyst a larger piece of work aiming to improve the process of transition into higher education for part time work based students that nurtures an autonomous approach to their learning to help them realise their potential. The need to adapt the prior pedagogical approach informed by the study of experiences of foundation degree students described in this chapter has lead to the construction of a new infrastructure for the early years foundation degree that has embedded appropriate and purposeful study support designed to nurture autonomy and create a more positive learning environment.

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