

Student Transitions: Example of transitions practice

Title: Access to Undergraduate Study

Three Key Words: Access, Learning Strategies, Widening Participation

Transition(s) the practice supports: Access into Undergraduate study.

Abstract: The University Stirling part-time Access Programme is aimed at mature students with few or no relevant qualifications for entry to a degree. Throughout the programme there is an emphasis on the transition into studying for an undergraduate degree. An essential part of the programme is the inclusion of two 'Learning Strategies' modules. These modules aim to build confidence and motivation as well as focus on key academic 'skills'. The classes are workshop-based with high levels of student activity, group work and integrated opportunities for self and peer assessment. Alignment of these modules with other aspects of the Access programme is key to their success and feedback on the modules is always highly positive.

Description: The University Stirling Access programme is aimed at mature students who have been out of education for some time and have few or no relevant qualifications for entry to a degree. Run by the School of Education the course provides students with both the academic requirements to get into university and the study skills they need to become a successful university student. The course has compulsory 'Learning Strategies' modules and then a choice of core modules related to the student's intended degree subject. All students who successfully complete the access course with the relevant grades gain entry to a degree at the University of Stirling.

This successful part-time (2 evening a week for 9 months) Access Programme has now been running for a number of years. During its development, it had been noted that Access students often reported feeling underprepared for the academic demands of an undergraduate study and did not have adequate 'learning strategies' to cope with a transition into a full-time undergraduate programme. In response to this, a key component of the University of Stirling Access programme is the inclusion of two 'Learning Strategies' modules.

Module 1 (Learning Strategies, SCQF Level 6) takes place in the first 4 weeks of semester 1, after which the students continue onto their two core disciplinary modules. This module provides an opportunity for students to explore various aspects of learning within a higher education context. Students are encouraged to discuss their expectations of higher education and identify aspects of learning that they anticipate will be most demanding. Considerable time and effort are devoted to the challenges of time management, independent learning, the demands of academic reading and writing, and building confidence and motivation. There are a number of opportunities for formative assessment before a final writing-based assessment.

Module 2 ('Advanced Learning Strategies') then takes place at the start of semester two before another two disciplinary modules are chosen. The module is delivered at a higher level (SCQF Level 7) in order to prepare students for the demands of undergraduate study. In this module there is a greater emphasis on group work and negotiation, evaluation of performance and progress, and critical thinking, reading and analysis. Again, there are a number of formative assessment opportunities including reflective writing and group presentations linked to the final summative assessment.

The two 'Learning Strategies' modules therefore aim to provide a solid foundation to academic life and there is a strong emphasis on building confidence and resilience, and prompting autonomous learning. The modules are interactive with group work and oral presentations with a strong emphasis on self assessment, peer assessment and reflective practice. The work carried out in the 'Learning Strategies' modules is then carried forward into the discipline specific modules to reinforce the learning and provide more feedback opportunities. For example, in the Learning Strategies module students review journal articles, give oral presentations and use Turnitin as a learning tool. These aspects are then embedded and reinforced within their core modules.

Feedback from the students and the external examiner is always very positive and these modules are seen as crucial in the transition into undergraduate study.

External examiner feedback

- *My congratulations to the team and to the students - they are clearly benefitting from your use of very high quality teaching and learning strategies*
- *I continue to be most impressed by the ingenuity of the assessment strategy used for this module (learning incidents and a critical review of learning resources - great stuff!!). This module in particular has considerable value in "reaching across" to other modules and improving assessment performance elsewhere.*

Student Feedback

- *These classes took us out of our comfort zone and helped build confidence.*
- *Hands on approach to tackling new ideas and ways to do things. Quite a lot of discussion, which increases understanding and improves confidence*
- *Intensive but well structured and valuable – feel I will be using new skills for years to come – thanks.*
- *Don't think I could have become an undergraduate with out 'Learning Strategies'*
- *This module is an amazing help, everyone should take this! Very helpful and useful*
- *Fantastic module to prepare for further studies has been a great confidence boost.*

The success of the modules is partly as a result of the interactive nature of the classes, the emphasis on building confidence, and the close alignment between the pedagogical approach, class activities, and the formative and summative assessment. The success is also linked to the fact that the principles of the 'Learning Strategies' modules are followed through into the core modules and closely reflect undergraduate practice. Feedback from Access students who are now undergraduate students demonstrates that having taken this Access course, they feel well prepared for the challenges of undergraduate study and are able to make a successful transition.

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