



Student Transitions: Example of transitions practice

Title:

Psychology Community Hubs: Supporting informal, informative and inspirational communities of learners

Transition(s) the practice supports:

These Hubs provide Open University in Scotland Psychology students with a discipline-related peer support mechanism to improve retention and aid transition through and out of study.

Abstract:

OUIs Psychology Hubs provide part-time and distance learners with a point of focus and connection where subject knowledge, confidence, a sense of belonging and study/career direction can be fostered and developed through staff directed engagement activities centered on promoting peer-support and informal networking. The Hubs had four simple objectives, all aimed at improving the student experience of transition through and out of study and increasing retention. Specifically, the Hubs sought to provide and widen access to discipline-specific peer-support opportunities at a local level; provide opportunities for further learning skills development; and to further develop knowledge and understanding of contemporary debates in psychology.

Description:

OUIs Psychology Hubs provide part-time and distance learners with a point of focus and connection where subject knowledge, confidence, a sense of belonging and study/career direction can be fostered and developed through staff directed engagement activities centered on peer-support and informal networking.

The idea for the Hubs emerged from an OUIs project which investigated issues around barriers to study and motivation in a distance-learning context. The findings of this project suggested that many part-time and distance learners place a great deal of value in face-to-face interactions with peers. Like full-time, campus-based learners, they often want the opportunity to share stories with and learn from others negotiating the same 'everyday transitions' as them. The hubs addressed this issue by serving as a locally-based, discipline-related networking mechanism for students, where the subject matter of their studies could be discussed and the demands and potential of further study and possible careers could be explored. A Hub pilot was set up in the North East of Scotland in 2013 to meet these student-identified needs.

Each two-hour hub event was managed by a part-time OU Associate Lecturer and open to all OU psychology students within the target area, whatever their level or stage of study. The Associate Lecturer organised the content of the events (including inviting speakers and facilitators), publicised the programme among the relevant groups, and ensured a good supply of tea and biscuits for those attending. Speakers and facilitators invited to contribute to the sessions include former students, OU tutors, practitioners including a clinical psychologist, a psychotherapist, a psychiatric nurse and a forensic psychologist, and researchers and lecturers from outside the OU.

The hubs had four simple aims, which resonate with OUIS strategy around improving the student experience of 'everyday' transitions through and out of study and increasing retention. They are:

1. To provide discipline specific peer support to enhance existing retention strategies at a local level across all levels of study in psychology;
2. To widen access to face-to-face peer support for those unable to travel to tutorial venues;
3. To provide opportunities for further skill development (e.g. inviting 2nd or 3rd level students to offer presentations on their student experiences);
4. And to further develop knowledge and understanding of contemporary psychology (and the OU) beyond the student population (i.e. engage the public's interest in current psychological issues).

The evaluation of this pilot project, which has since been extended to Glasgow and will now be rolled-out in other locations and within other OU subject areas in the next year, suggests that simply being invited to these hub events appears to have had a positive impact on student retention and attainment. The cohort who received an invitation to the Psychology Community Hub events had lower levels of withdrawal (3% lower), higher pass rates (15% more passes) and fewer failing students (6% lower) than learners on the same modules who were not invited to the events.

This initial analysis shows that the provision of such informal, informative and inspirational Hub events, with an emphasis on the fostering of community and networks of peer-support, has the potential to positively impact upon student engagement, retention and attainment in the part-time and distance learning context. In sum, then, our analysis shows that the Hubs met the objectives set at the beginning of the project. They represent a new way of supporting online and distance learning students in their 'everyday' transitions through and beyond study, by focusing on improving their sense of connectedness and belonging, which in turn fostered and developed their motivation and determination to engage creatively with their studies.

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