



Student Transitions: Example of transitions practice

Title: Supporting the transition from Higher National Diploma to degree level study.

Transition(s) the practice supports: Transition within HE, in particular from SQA Higher National qualifications to degree level study.

Abstract:

The transition from the competency based SQA Higher National Units to third year degree level study, and then often to Honours, is challenging for many students. They typically consider it to be a major step both in terms of the increased academic demands and the different ethos of teaching and learning. It is therefore essential that students are provided with additional academic support to develop the necessary study and assessment skills as they enter the third year of a degree, as well as ensuring that they are exposed to a wide range of learning, teaching and assessment approaches during the first two years of SRUC's degree programmes (which comprise HNC/D qualifications).

Description:

Students typically consider the transition from SQA Higher National qualifications to degree level teaching as being a major step both in terms of the increased academic demands and the different ethos of teaching and learning.

HNC/HND SQA teaching is competency based. Students at SRUC are normally permitted two attempts at an assessment during term time (with a third attempt available, at a cost, during an assessment week in the summer). SQA Units are prescriptive in terms of the evidence requirements for each learning outcome and students must pass all learning outcomes to pass the Unit. Assessments tend to be restricted response or short answer exams, or short essays/reports (apart from the Graded Units which involve more extensive assessment). (Note that the difficulties around articulation have been recognised by SQA and there is currently a project, Piloting Enhancements to HN Qualifications, being undertaken in four subject areas. SRUC is participating in this.) There is also no expectation to grade assessments, other than pass or fail, the only exception being Graded Units which constitute three credits in a HND (10% of the total credits) where a student can achieve an A, B or C. This contrasts with the ethos of degree level teaching and learning with its greater emphasis on individual learning and on background reading. There are also

more opportunities to use a wide range of assessment instruments at degree level, and all assessments are graded according to the agreed marking scheme.

The difficulties around this 'step up' has been recognised by teaching staff for many years, and has been highlighted by students through various routes including their Advisers of Studies who provide both academic and pastoral support. Some students are anxious that they will not be able to cope with the perceived increased demands of degree study, and occasionally this has prompted a decision not to progress but to graduate with their HN qualification. External Examiners have also noted the change in learning, teaching and assessment practices between years 2 and 3 of SRUC programmes and the difficulties that this transition can place on students. It is also an issue often discussed at subject review and revalidation events.

To support this transition SRUC offers a series of workshops to third year students at its Aberdeen campus during semester 1. This practice has been in place since 2004, with continual updating to reflect the changing needs of students. The workshops are not part of a formal module and they are not assessed. However, they are time-tabled and it is expected that all students attend the sessions.

The workshops include; *What is Degree study?; Improving your Study Skills; Tackling assessments; Writing Skills; Group Work; Referencing and Plagiarism; Revision and Exam Technique; Presenting and Chairing Seminars; and Electronic Literature Searching.*

Teaching staff and library staff present the workshops, with staff then providing an 'open door' policy should students wish to discuss or get further information on any of the material covered. The workshops are designed to be interactive with a range of short exercises used to support the teaching material. For example, students are provided with a piece of coursework to grade according to the marking scheme used for degree level assessments – this helps to clarify what is expected of work which would be judged as first class, upper second etc. There are also activities within a couple of the workshops which focus on feedback on assessments, and the mismatch that often occurs between student and staff perceptions of what constitutes feedback. Feedback is an integral part of the learning process, and it is important to encourage students to read and reflect on the feedback they receive on assessments.

A 'Study Toolkit' has also been produced to support the workshops. The toolkit includes sections on; *What is Degree Study; Assessing and Improving Skills and Study Habits; Taking Notes; Finding and Using Information; Writing Skills; Referencing; Assessing your Numeracy Skills; Giving Presentations and Leading Seminars; Revision and Exams; and Additional Resources.*

Students are also pointed towards appropriate web-based resources such as the *Skills4Study Campus*. This is an interactive e-learning resource hosted on the VLE, Moodle, and there are currently six modules available:

- Getting Ready for Academic Study
- Group Work and Presentations
- Exam Skills
- Referencing and Plagiarism
- Projects, Dissertations and Reports
- Employability and Personal Development

All of these activities are of great benefit to the students in easing the transition and aim to 'demystify' degree level study by providing support and explanation of what is expected. Although, as indicated above, the workshops are not assessed or attendance compulsory it is interesting to note that the attendance is near perfect!

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