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transitions



enhancement
themes

Transition Skills and Strategies

Key Transition Skills

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Introduction

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The development of a range of skills is essential for successful student transitions. This report will identify and present eight key transition skills and the relevant strategies which are considered important in enhancing and developing these skills. These skills and strategies are based on findings in published research studies. The literature review draws on existing research on student transitions and considers examples of good practice within higher education institutions as well as in published reports by external agencies investigating the student transition experience.

The main skills resulting from these searches are: self-efficacy, critical self-reflection, independent learning, managing expectations, social skills, dealing with stress, critical thinking, and academic and information literacy. These skills, as well as strategies which strengthen and develop these, will be examined in the remainder of this report.

Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is defined as the belief in ones' ability to achieve desired results from behaviour (Bandura 1997). Research suggests that self-efficacy can help students cope with stress (Torres and Solberg 2001), which is identified in all transition models as an unavoidable aspect of the transition experience (for example Bridges' Transition Model; the U-Curve Theory of Adjustment; Student Adjustment Model; the Student Experience Model and the Psychological Model of Student Retention). As Karademas and Kalantzi-Azizi (2004) explain, greater self-efficacy in the ability to handle a stressful encounter is associated with appraising the event as a 'challenge' rather than a 'threat', thus making it easier to overcome.

The research literature makes a distinction between the aforementioned generalised self-efficacy and *academic* self-efficacy. Whereas general self-efficacy can support students to successfully deal with stress in aspects of university and social life, academic self-efficacy can support students so that they successfully complete their academic tasks (Zimmerman 1995). As Schunk (1984) suggests, students with high levels of academic self-efficacy will display greater persistence, effort, and intrinsic interest in their academic learning and performance.

Strategies to enhance self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is increased as students note progress, attain goals, and set new challenges (Schunk 1990, page 81). Setting realistic goals is important in this regard, as students will be able to monitor progress and decide on a different approach to a given task if their present approach is ineffective. In addition, successful strategies for enhancing self-efficacy, in particular academic self-efficacy, include peer modeling and teaching students to attribute success to controllable factors such as effort and persistence (Margolis and McCabe 2003; Schunk 2003). Combining personally important goals with the belief that with reasonable effort, they are achievable, can be highly motivating (Pintrich and Schunk 2002). Nevertheless, caution is needed, as not every goal will improve low self-efficacy. For goals to positively influence self-efficacy and motivation, they need to be personally important to struggling learners as well as short-term, specific, and achievable (Bandura 1997).

Critical self-reflection

It is argued that in order to transcend past habits and understandings, students need to be able to reflect critically upon themselves and the nature of their chosen discipline (Barnett, 1997; Brockbank and McGill 1998 - cited in Booth 2001, page 490). Critical self-reflection refers to the process of questioning one's own assumptions, presuppositions, and meaning perspectives (Mezirow 2006). Through engaging in a critical exploration, students become more sophisticated learners of their subject and the skills it involves, and more self-aware and confident learners generally. According to Booth (2001), self-reflection encourages students to not only recognise the resources they already have, but also increases their capacity in becoming more receptive to theoretical perspectives and new ideas, thus improving their academic performance.

Strategies to enhance self-reflection

Critical reflection is widely perceived as a key component in the learning processes of individuals (Brookfield 2009 and Leijen et al 2011). Since the transition stage is where learning habits are acquired, regardless of whether they are effective or ineffective, it is important to encourage students to think about how they learn, so that positive habits are acquired early on. A study commissioned by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) highlighted that personal development planning can play an important role in supporting transition to university-level learning (Whittaker 2008). Through its focus on developing reflective and metacognitive skills, personal development planning can enhance awareness of oneself as a learner (Whittaker 2008).

Booth (2001) proposes that learning journals, self-assessment and peer assessment can be used as tools to facilitate critical reflection. He also suggests that students in the transition stage may lack experience in such methods, so peer assessment is probably best introduced as a formative, rather than summative device. In addition, a learning journal may be more likely to gain acceptance once students have become more comfortable with the notion of active and reflective learning (page 501). This suggests that it is important for university and academic staff to provide varying levels of support to students dependent on where they are in the transition process.

Independent learning

A key characteristic of UK higher education is the emphasis placed on the responsibility of students for their own learning (QAA 2015). Nevertheless, in a study by Crabtree (2006), many students in transition appeared to be unaware that independent learning was a key requirement for success in higher education. Furthermore, many lacked the skills necessary for effective independent study. In addition, even when students are realistic about planning their work independently and spending a good amount of their time on self-study, they still appear to have difficulties in organising their self-study time and planning their academic assignments (van der Meer et al 2010). A possible explanation for this phenomenon refers to the misalignment between exit standards of secondary education and the requirements for entry-level success in universities (RP Group 2010). As Cook and Leckey (1999) explain, the study skills developed in secondary education are often inappropriate to the more independent styles of learning expected in higher education.

A recent report commissioned by QAA and the Higher Education Academy (2015) discusses in great detail the benefits of directed independent learning. Some of these include developing a deeper understanding of the subject matter, promoting life-long learning, developing a sense of belongingness to the academic community and the institution, as well as enhancing graduate capabilities and employability skills (HEA 2015). Given these

benefits, it is important to consider how they can be achieved, and the following presents some strategies which can enhance independent learning.

Strategies to enhance independent learning

According to Briggs et al (2012), autonomous learning is a difficult but important goal because university assignments will demand more self-directed and independent approaches to academic work (Krause and Coates 2008). Good time management and confidence in the ability to prioritise and to plan well in advance appear to be two extremely important strategies in promoting self-directed learning (Christie et al 2013). In addition, recognising the need to adapt to the new intellectual environment, coupled with an active awareness that time at university will be different from previous educational experiences at college also appear to be central to ensuring a successful transition to autonomous learning (Christie et al 2013).

Self-management of expectations

Students transitioning to university should be able to access information to develop their own pathways for growth. They need to understand the university environment and their role in it, yet research suggests that many students have many incorrect perceptions, resulting in poorly developed notions of what to expect when they enter university (The Center for Student Success 2009). Many new students are either not overly familiar or have completely ill-informed preconceptions about what they may encounter in the course of their choice (James 2001). In turn, these factors may impact on their academic success, or may ultimately influence their decision to drop out (Pargetter et al 1999). For example, a study by Moores and Popadiuk (2011) showed that non-native English speakers with very high expectations of their English skills often felt insecure, frustrated, stressed, excluded, unhappy and uncomfortable when they perceived their intercultural communication to be unsuccessful. Managing expectations appropriately is therefore of utmost importance for a successful transition.

Strategies for the self-management of expectations

Some strategies for managing expectations are: adjusting preconceptions, becoming familiar with the new requirements and setting realistic goals. For non-native English speakers, in order to prevent negative consequences, students need to be able to modify highly ambitious language objectives to goals that are more realistically attainable (Moores and Popadiuk, 2011). This type of flexibility in terms of expectations and the ability to switch focus from weaknesses to strengths can be instrumental in their transition (Kitsantas 2004). Furthermore, a report by the University of Oxford (2014) suggests that students often have very rigid expectations as a way of coping with unknown and uncertain situations. However, such rigid expectations can mean that if the reality does not meet prior expectations, students can experience a given situation as a major problem or failure. In order to cope with this, students need to foster a greater degree of flexibility in their expectations.

Universities themselves are also able to address any misconceptions by communicating timely and accurate information to students in terms of expected knowledge, performance standards, and attitudes and behaviors that students will need in order to be successful in university (RP Group 2010). Contact with students prior to entry should convey a realistic view of the student experience, especially when it comes to students whose needs are different from the main cohort (for example students with disabilities or specific learning difficulties).

Social skills for embracing diversity

Social transition, that is the change in students' social group and relations, is highlighted in the literature and featured in the discussions with practitioners as an important dimension of student retention and progression (Whittaker 2008). Establishing friendship groups, as well as a sense of belonging to the university programme and peer group, is viewed as essential in aiding personal and social adjustment to university life (Katanis 2000).

Strategies for embracing diversity

Forming friendships helps students adjust to their new surroundings more readily by allowing them to improve their language skills as well as develop an understanding of the host culture. These friendships may also act as a protective factor against mental health and well-being issues (Moore and Popadiuk 2011). For international students in particular, befriending local students has a greater protective effect according to Hendrickson et al (2011), compared to forming friendships only with other international students. Initially forming friendships with other international students can be highly beneficial as there is a sense of camaraderie and empathy (Sherry et al 2010). However, without the connection with local students, international students can still feel isolated from the rest of the student population (McLachlan and Justice 2009). What is interesting is that although English skills are important, actual language ability seems to have a lesser impact on student transition compared to other factors such as self-confidence and feeling at ease around peers (Moore and Popadiuk 2011). This indicates that lack of self-confidence and anxiety about communicating in another language may be greater obstacles than lack of English skills per se for international students.

In assisting new students through the vital transition phase of university, peer mentoring also represents a valuable tool which institutions could use to simultaneously address issues of attrition and enhance the student experience. According to Andrews and Clark (2011), transitional peer mentoring works by providing the means by which new students can quickly gain a sense of 'belonging'. Group projects requiring collaboration and the development of teamwork skills can also help to foster the development of peer support networks, as well as problem-solving and lateral thinking skills (Yorke and Longden, 2007 - cited in Whittaker, 2008, page 36).

Dealing with stress

The transition and subsequent adjustment to the university environment typically involves positive aspects, such as opportunities for personal growth and for meeting new people; nevertheless, it is also a period of great change that can be perceived as stressful (Fisher 1994 - cited in Denovan and Macaskill 2013, page 1003). Students must leave their established routines and support networks and develop new ones as well as take on new responsibilities such as independent living, and adapt to new academic challenges, all of which can have an impact on their well-being (Denovan and Macaskill 2013).

Strategies for dealing with stress

Establishing a support network can be one of the strategies to help reduce stress. Loss and lack of social support have been found to lead to negative psychological experiences such as tension, confusion and depression (Pederson 1991 - cited in Owens and Loomes 2010, page 279). In contrast, students who have good levels of social support tend to produce the most desirable outcomes in the areas of academic, social, and emotional adjustment, including a lower likelihood to report depressive symptoms (Pratt et al 2000; Zea et al 1995).

In addition, being proactive and attempting to solve problems as they arise represents another strategy for coping with stressors. A recent study by Richardson et al (2012) investigated the strategies for coping with stress in students who were 'thriving' in their transitions to higher education and those who were 'just surviving'. What they discovered was that 'thriving' students were much more focused on taking action related to the stressor (for example focusing on studies and asking for help) compared to 'just surviving' students who used passive or avoidance strategies for dealing with the stressful event (for example ignoring tasks or putting them on hold).

Critical thinking

The transition from a highly supported guidance system at school to a self-regulated learning approach at university requires students to develop a high level of intellectual skills such as the ability to select and synthesise large amounts of information (Booth 2001). They also need to be able to adopt systematic, critical approaches to evidence, create their own insights and interpretations on the basis of rigorous comparison of different kinds of evidence, as well as develop an appreciation of the contextual and therefore contingent nature of the subject knowledge (Booth 2001). While independent learning emphasises the need for students to take responsibility for their own learning, critical thinking is more about developing the cognitive abilities to support this type of independence.

Strategies for enhancing critical thinking

In order to develop learners' critical thinking, learning experiences need to be designed so that they encourage students to construct responses or answers to a question, problem, or challenge rather than merely to memorise, recognise, and select correct answers from among provided possible responses (Tsui 1999). For instance, assignments such as conducting an independent research project, working on a group project, giving a presentation, and writing essay exams are all associated with self-reported growth in critical thinking, unlike taking multiple-choice exams. Learning to think about the subject matter, collaborating with others and being active and involved during class discussion are, therefore, appropriate strategies for enhancing critical thinking.

Academic and information literacy

Elements of academic literacy (including critical thinking, but also reading, writing and use of technology), along with the elements of information literacy such as finding, evaluating and using information, are expected of first year students across all disciplines, particularly at universities in the UK where achievement is predominantly assessed through students' written work. Academic literacy can be viewed as a useful tool to enhance autonomous learning and higher order thinking.

Strategies for enhancing academic literacy

In the past, academic literacy practices were not normally taught explicitly; rather, students were expected to independently acquire the accepted norms and conventions (Wingate 2007). Nevertheless, Hirst (2002) suggests that learners need to be supported in their engagement with literacy practices. Acknowledging this, many universities (for example the University of Bristol and the University of Essex) now offer courses designed to help students with specific aspects of academic literacies, such as writing assignments, structuring arguments, thinking critically, and giving presentations. Nonetheless, Wingate (2007) advises that in order to take full advantage of these extra-curricular courses, students need to be able to think about how to apply these skills to the specific context of their subject disciplines.

Conclusion

To conclude, this report has presented an overview of the research base for a number of transition skills. The evidence presented in this report suggests that students would benefit from developing skills in: self-efficacy, critical self-reflection, independent learning, self-management of expectations, social skills for embracing diversity, dealing with stress, critical thinking and academic and information literacy. A number of strategies for enhancing and developing these skills were also put forward, discussing the specific approaches that students as well as staff (to allow for evidence informed practice) can undertake to enhance the transition experience of students.

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