

Learning Skills

Pre-University Academic Skills Provision Prevents First-Year Drop-Outs. Discuss.

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First year university dropout is becoming an increasing problem in the United Kingdom, as 1 in 12 of students leave higher education in their first year whilst somewhere between 33% and 42% of students think about dropping out of university (Thomas, L. 2012). When students drop out they are not only missing out on higher education but they are also causing financial strain on the university as tuition fees will no longer be paid along with accommodation fees. This problem, however, can be resolved through pre-university academic skills provision. Pre-university skills provision is available to students which will help them with the transition to university and helps the factors which may lead to first year drop-out. In this essay I will discuss how it prevents first year drop outs with factors such as academic issues, isolation and exclusion and also the factors which pre-university skills provision does not cover, such as finance and homesickness.

Academic issues have been noted as being one of the main reasons for first year drop-outs (Thomas, L. 2012). Higher education compared to secondary school is very different in that the teaching and assessment styles in many secondary schools lend themselves to the development of a particular set of study skills and learning strategies. (Cook & Leckey, 1999 cited in Lowe, H. and Cook, A. 2003). University, however, is different because there is a greater emphasis on self study and finding your own resources unlike relying on the teacher like in secondary education. These academic changes are so great that there is a need for preparation prior to higher education so the change is not as great. Studying for an Advanced Higher can be a useful bridge between the class-based learning, typical of Highers, and the more self-motivated and proactive type of study at university (SQA, 2009). Advanced Highers do help to an extent but not enough so that it prepares people for higher education as when many go to university they still look for a teacher figure. Students often see the tutor as the 'expert' who can give them information, like teachers do at school (Booth, A. (2009). Ultimately, they see tutors as the ones who will give them information instead of realising the need for independent study. Pre-university academic skills provision would solve the academic gap between high school and higher education. It would provide students with more of an insight as to what university actually requires such as independent learning and study skills. Skills such as writing essays to express arguments and presentation skills are important at university but not always taught at school. Pre-university academic skills provision can provide students with these skills. Skills provision would also help students understand staff-student relationships in higher education as relationships between staff and students and peers promote and enable student engagement and success in higher education (Thomas, L. (2012). Overall, Advanced Highers do help students in getting a slight understanding of how higher education study is undertaken but pre-university academic skills provision would fully show what is needed for university study and thus it would help prevent so many first year drop-outs.

Another factor contributing to first year drop-outs is the social exclusion and isolation students may feel when they first come to university. Many are leaving home and coming out of their 'comfort zones' to come to university. This may lead to some students feeling isolated as it is not what they are used to. Students' sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others (teacher and peers) are all important in the life and activity of class (Goodenow 1993 p.25 cited by Thomas, L.2012). Without this, students will not effectively integrate into the university environment so then they will not study or engage in tutorials as much. Confidence

within the student will be at a low meaning they will consider to drop out or even drop out. Students must adapt to the new academic discourse and culture associated with university (Whittaker, R. 2008). Pre-university academic skills provision provided by organisations such as LEAPS (Lothian's Equal Access Programme for Schools) helps this as it "aims to promote social inclusion" (Leaps, 2011). As social inclusion is emphasised, it will help students with the integration process which altogether will make the students life at university better as they will go in with more confidence because of the provisions provided by pre-university organisations such as LEAPS. However, LEAPS may help but 'transition does not begin, or indeed end, at the point when students arrive at university' (Booth, A. 2009). It is in fact an ongoing process so pre-university skills provision will help social inclusion but it will not fully address overall integration as it is in some part up to the individual.

Some students may also drop out as they are not aware of the actual workload required for first year university. Students tend to consider themselves ill-prepared for higher education in terms of coping with teaching styles (Lowe, H. and Cook, A. 2003). It could be argued that if students were to undertake pre-university provision then they would be more aware of the workload at university. Organisations such as LEAPS give students a real experience of first year at university. Each class is taken by a university lecturer and work is given in the format as if you were at university. Perceptions of higher education tend to revolve around stereotypical assumptions such as moderate academic demands and an exciting social life (Billington, 1984; Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1998 cited in Lowe, H. and Cook, A. 2003). The attitude of students is also a factor as some may go wanting to achieve a good degree to go into a career whilst others may just want to go as it seems easier than getting a job, reasons have ranged from 'escaping from reality' through 'going to a holiday camp' and 'gaining a place in society' to simply getting away from family and friends (Billington. 1984 cited in Lowe, H. and Cook, A. 2003). Thus, those who genuinely want to get a degree will do so whilst those with false mindsets will more than likely drop-out or fail. Pre-university provision ultimately gives the student a realistic view of university meaning it will cut down the people going to university with un-realistic views of what it is like.

On the other hand, pre-university provision may not help students with first year drop-out as there are outside factors which can contribute to drop-out which pre-university skills provision cannot provide. These are issues like finance and homesickness. In this current economic climate it is hard for students to be able to afford university as the parents of the student may not be able to afford to send them but also the student may not want to accept being in debt. Student financial issues have frequently been identified as a barrier to completion, especially by students from lower socio-economic groups (Yorke, M. & Thomas, L. (2003). Some students may go to university wanting a job to fund their studies. They may or may not get a job but it is up to the individual to find a work/study ratio that suits them. Pre-university skills provision cannot help the individual with personal financial issues which may influence first year drop-out. Homesickness is also a factor which can influence first year drop-out. Some students get over homesickness whilst others find it too hard to handle and so drop-out to go home. Pre-university skills provision under these factors is not helpful in helping first year drop-out as these points are not addressed.

In conclusion, there are a number of different factors which pre-university academic skills provision can help to prevent first year university drop-out. Factors like academic skills will greatly benefit those who think they are not prepared for university. Exclusion and isolation can be addressed through pre-university skills provision and so social inclusion will be easier. These factors that are addressed are seen as the most important factors which may lead to first year drop-out. Ultimately, as these factors are addressed it is helping drop-out but it is the factors which are almost out with the control of pre-university skills provision such as finance and homesickness which are still leading to first year drop-out. If pre-university academic skills provision was to be more extensive and try and assess these issues then it would effectively prevent first year drop-out, more than it is already.

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