

Pre-university academic skills provision prevents first-year drop-outs. Discuss.

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Abstract

This report looks at the reasons behind first year dropout from Higher Education. A survey of the literature identified four key factors that contribute to first year dropout: academic issues; social issues; academic realism and finance and homesickness. The report identifies pre-university academic skills provision as effective at preventing first year drop-out.

Introduction

First year university dropout is becoming an increasing problem in the United Kingdom; 1 in 12 of students leave Higher Education (HE) in their first year, whilst between 33% and 42% of students think about dropping out of university (Thomas, 2012). When students drop out they are not only missing out on HE, 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 could help students with the transition to university and may prevent the factors that could lead to first year drop-out. This paper will discuss how pre-university provision prevents first year drop outs focussing on academic issues, isolation and exclusion. Factors which pre-university skills provision does not cover, such as finance and homesickness will also be considered. Overall, pre-university provision could help to prevent first-year drop-out.

External Changes		Potential Challenges	Strategies
Environment	Location	Homesickness, depression, anxiety, isolation	Develop new supportive relationships
	Culture Shock	Fear of being ignored	Adjustment, adaptation
Financial	Family, friends or bank	Stress, worry of future debt	Seek institutional support, monitor expenditure
	Employment (part or full time)	Stress on establishing priorities, time commitments and responsibilities	Good time management
Social	New friends	Anxiety	Be open and flexible
	Academic staff	Isolation, feeling of not belonging here	Engage in classroom and institutional activities and develop self-efficacy
	Flatmates	Stressed, unsettled, unhappy	Consideration, communication and compromise
Academic	Learning environment	Anxiety, confusion	Interact with peers through student societies and clubs, and institutional activities
	Expectations	Disappointment, stress	Attend induction, self-management or expectations
	Performance	Stress, anxiety	Develop self-efficacy, good time management, and

			develop academic and information literacy
	Presentations and exams	Stress, anxiety, fear of getting embarrassed, lack of confidence	Develop communication and academic study skills, and develop self-efficacy and critical self-reflection

Methods

A literature search was performed using the following keywords: transition, gap, retention, academic OR study skills. A range of online resources were considered, including: databases (Emerald, Web of Science), specific education journals (Studies in Higher Education, Active Learning), and HEI sources (university websites and HEA).

Key findings and discussion

From the literature, four main issues were identified as causing first year dropout and are discussed below.

Academic Issues

Academic issues have been noted as being one of the main reasons for first year drop-outs (Thomas, 2012). 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). However, at university, there is a greater emphasis on self study and finding your own resources unlike relying on the teacher like in secondary education. These academic differences are substantial and there is a need to prepare for HE 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 help to some extent but not enough, 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, 2009). Tutors are seen as the ones who will give students information instead of them realising the need for independent study. Pre-university academic skills provision could solve the academic gap between high school and HE. It could provide students with more insight as to what university requires e.g. independent learning and study skills. Skills such as writing essays, expressing arguments and presentation skills are important for university but not always taught at school. Pre-university academic skills provision can provide students with these skills as well as help students understand staff-student relationships in higher education. These, and peer relationships promote and enable student engagement and success in HE (Thomas, L.

(2012)). Overall, Advanced Highers do help students in getting some understanding of how HE study is undertaken but pre-university academic skills provision could fully show what is needed for university study and thus it may help prevent some first year drop-outs.

Social Issues

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 attend to university. This can 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 important in the life and activity of class (Goodenow 1993 p.25 cited by Thomas, L.2012). Without this, students may not effectively integrate into the university environment so may not study or engage in tutorials as much. Confidence within the student may be low, meaning they could consider, or even drop out. Whittaker (2008) states that students must adapt to the new academic discourse and culture associated with university (Whittaker, R. 2008). Pre-university academic skills provision could help this. Provision by organisations such as Lothian's Equal Access Programme for Schools (LEAPS) "aims to promote social inclusion" (LEAPS, 2011). As social inclusion is emphasised, it should help students with the integration process, making the student's life at university better as they should go with more confidence. 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 an ongoing process so pre-university skills provision should help social inclusion but it will not fully address overall integration as it is also partly the responsibility of the individual.

Academic realism

Some students may also drop out as they are not aware of the workload required for first year university. Lowe and Cook (2003) suggest that students tend to consider themselves ill-prepared for HE in terms of coping with teaching styles. 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 it was at university. Perceptions of HE 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. On one hand some may go wanting to achieve a good degree for a career. On the other hand, 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 may be more likely to drop-out or fail. Pre-university provision ultimately gives the student a realistic view of university meaning it should reduce the people going to university with un-realistic views of what it is like.

Finance and homesickness

However, there are outside factors which can contribute to drop-out which pre-university skills provision cannot counteract e.g. 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.

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 also be addressed through pre-university skills provision and so social inclusion will be easier. These factors are seen as the most important factors which may lead to first year drop-out. Ultimately, as these factors are addressed it is helping to reduce drop-out but it is the factors which are 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 more widespread and comprehensive, issues then it would be more effective at preventing first year drop-out.

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