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Personal development, resilience theory and transition to university for 1st year students

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Abstract

The study aimed to determine whether an outdoor orientation programme (OOP) could increase personal development, develop resilience and aid transition and adaptation in 1st year university students. OOPs are thought to aid transition through adventure experience. Based on student development theory, outdoor orientation programmes accelerate psychological growth (Vlamiš et al., 2011). Semi structured interviews were conducted with 14 students who attended an outdoor orientation programme to investigate the experience of attending an OOP and transition to university. The data was analysed following Braun and Clarke (2006) Six phase approach to thematic analysis. Thematic areas discovered included 'Personal development – Building more than a raft'. This theme described the way in which students developed self-worth and self-efficacy through the OOP experience. 'The fine line between challenge and fear' describes how delivery of an intervention such as an OOP needs to be carefully delivered to enhance the benefits and limit any possible detrimental experiences. These first year students developed in terms of self-worth and self-efficacy through overcoming challenge. This development was also linked to the students surprising themselves about their capacities for handling adversity.

Keywords: Adaptation; transition; 1st year students; outdoor orientation program; resilience; personal development.

1. Introduction

Poor adaptation and transition to university can lead to poor student experience and ultimately dropout. Universities are judged on their ability to retain students and student satisfaction. Transition and adaptation for 1st year students is a difficult issue to unravel due to the multitude of variables that can influence this experience. Interventions which enhance psychological resilience may help students through this potentially challenging time.

Transition and adaptation to university for first year students involves change to an individual's sense of self at a time when the role of identity and interaction are particularly important. A lack of confidence, personal difficulties can lead to poor adaptation to university (Leary & DeRosier, 2012). The emotional, social and academic adjustments that accompany this transition can cause individuals to question their self-worth (Carr, Colthurst, Coyle & Elliott, 2013).

Strategies which could help the transition and adaptation for 1st year students are important to universities, where 'success', linked to student satisfaction, is now assessed through the National Student Survey (NSS). The results of the NSS can have a lasting significant impact on student recruitment students, which brings important financial and reputational implications for the university.

One potential approach to helping students transition and adapt to university is to provide Outdoor Orientation Programmes (OOP). Usually OOP is delivered in small groups of 15 or less and involve camping or staying over for at least one night (Bell, Holmes, & Williams 2010). Based on student development theory, these programmes aim to accelerate psychological growth (Vlamiš et al., 2011); this psychological growth is thought to aid transition to university.

Incoming 1st year university students face an array of potential challenges and problematic scenarios causing academic and interpersonal stress. For example, many students who move away from home may have lost social support networks at a time when pressure to succeed in a new environment is intensified (Conley, Travers & Bryant (2013). In this period well developed individual coping resources will support success (Davidson, Feldman & Margalit, 2012).

Outdoor orientation programmes are thought enhance coping resources by building resilience (Ewert & Yoshino, 2011). Resilience can be understood as 'the capacity for maintenance, recovery or improvement in mental health following life challenges' (Ryff, Singer, Dienberg Love & Essex, 1998). Therefore, to build resilience OOP needs to offer challenges; physical and emotional. With many interconnected dimensions affecting restoration, resilience can also be enhanced by supplementing the direct OOP experience

with social support, self-confidence, mastery, competence and coping strategies (Allen, McKenna & Hind, 2012).

Therefore the use of OOP has potential as a retention intervention for universities. Qualitative research is required to explore whether - and how, if appropriate - personal challenge can build resilience in 1st year students and how this can influence adaptation and transition to university.

1.1 Research question

To determine whether OOP can increase personal development, develop resilience and aid transition and adaptation in 1st year university for students.

2. Method

2.1 Context for the current research

The OOP was selected by the University as a strategy to aid student adaptation, three student degree programmes were included on the OOP. The OOP was a three-day residential experience based in rural England. It was scheduled to run in the first week of teaching of the 1st year students first term. It was fully funded by the University. The OOP was being used directly to maximise its impact in a critical period of the student's higher education experience.

The accommodation was a large hostel. Students took part in five activities including team building, gorge scrambling and raft building with evenings nominated as free time; the hostel had a bar, a games room and other social spaces. Students were allocated roommates and activity groups.

2.2 Research strategy and participants

Semi structured interviews were conducted with 14 students who attended the outdoor orientation programme to investigate the experience of attending an OOP and transition to university. The semi structured interview is the appropriate method of eliciting experience (Langdridge, 2007; Smith et al., 2009). Interviews were conducted within a month of the OOP and analysed following Braun and Clarke (2006) Six phase approach to thematic analysis.

Thematic analysis is a method of data analysis, rather than being an approach to conducting qualitative research. This is a strength because it ensures the accessibility and flexibility of the approach. The themes are identified at a semantic explicit level rather than a latent level due to the requirements of the research project and the direct nature of the questions.

Full ethical approval was granted for the research project via the institutions research ethics panel.

3. Analysis

3.1 Personal development – Building more than a raft

Some students entered the OOP experience with low levels of self-efficacy and self-confidence this can manifest as feelings of stress and being scared. The nature of such adventure experience dictates that for some it will pose higher levels of challenge. This element of challenge could be perceived as a negative by individuals at the time, yet is one of the OOP's main strengths. It gives individuals opportunity to overcome resistance and therefore aids in personal growth and increases resilience.

I was scared because I'm not an outdoors person, I've never really liked outdoors, never liked heights, I can't really swim that well so when it said about swimming I was like oh my god I don't know what to do, erm I was really stressed about it, my parents were like oh it'll be fine and you'll enjoy it. I was like no I would literally rather do anything else than go on this residential so I was panicking quite a lot about it (Alison).

This is in stark contrast to other students with a distinct amount of self-confidence. The quote below demonstrates this confidence but it also shows a high level of familiarity with this type of scenario, this in itself would reduce feelings of apprehension and unease. Some individuals already possess a level of self-efficacy which allows the approach of experiences like OOP to almost seem incidental.

It was in the lake district so I go there every year anyway to do like a walking holiday type of thing so I kind of knew the place and the surrounding area and I was looking forward to it because I like that sort of stuff, I like just getting involved, I'd rather do that than be in a classroom all the time or something like that so I found it really good, when I got the letter I was like yeah I'm up for it so yeah it was good (Jack).

3.2 Building Self efficacy and self confidence

A key element of outdoor orientation programs is to be both physically and emotionally challenging. By overcoming these challenges students improve self-confidence, mastery and competence and strengthen coping strategies and therefore as a result resilience.

I was on gorge scrambling and I was scared, I didn't want to do it at all because I don't climb and I didn't want to fall and get hurt so I didn't really want to do that at first but as we did it I started to like it and I can climb apparently so yeah it was good after (Carrie).

I was hoping to surprise myself more than anything because I was stressed that much about it I was hoping I might surprise myself and do more than I think I can do. I sat under a waterfall for 5 seconds so I think I definitely surprised myself (Alison).

It was better than I thought it could be, a lot better. It's made me more confident in my own ability to do things and not to doubt myself as much (Alison).

These improvements to self-esteem, concept and efficacy as demonstrated above are attributed to the success of OOP's influence on adaptation to university. The OOP is aiding student's personal growth by providing a platform of carefully selected activities in the correct environment. This is a clear example of the strengths of OOP having a clear influence on the participating students.

3.3 Building self-confidence and self-efficacy through shared experience

The activities on OOP programmes look to develop social skills such as leadership and self-esteem. The quote below demonstrates a clear message of developing self-efficacy through overcoming challenges as well as the additional benefit of increasing social confidence through the opportunity to meet peers.

Yeah they were a great experience socially and other things like being able to get over things that you weren't so sure about at the start. I feel like it gave you the confidence to be able to accomplish more if you get what I mean. Yeah I'd say it enhanced my confidence socially

*and with the work as well and that's the sort of thing we need to learn
as well for PE the OAA stuff (Claire).*

Self-efficacy is demonstrated clearly in the quote below with students acknowledging their strengths and weaknesses and allocating tasks based on these attributes.

*I just think we divided roles, we all knew what we were doing. We
identified strengths and weaknesses before we started so like some
people knew what they were doing with knots and some knew how
they were going to organise the raft so we divided up roles and did it
that way (Michael).*

While others who were self-confident in certain tasks and activities actively looked out for other team members and guide them through difficult situations. This can provide increased self-confidence for the person helping whilst also providing the person that required help a level of support to achieve group goals.

*They were pretty easy. I found it really easy, it was nice to be able to
help people who haven't done it before, do you know jack the little
Indian lad, we went on the first day where there was really rough
water and he kept getting dragged away so I obviously knew how to
do it so I helped telling people to 'Go there then go there, and cross
here' which worked even better because I was team leader, it was all
right (Toby).*

3.4 Challenge building resilience

Overcoming difficult challenges may build resilience. The quote below shows a slightly more apprehensive narrative, yet this is underlined by a clear level of determination that could be termed resilience.

*I might panic a bit during the residential but I'll kick myself if I don't
go because I've got to look at it on the aspect that its uni, it's an
experience that because I want to be a teacher is going to be
something that is part of the curriculum that I will have to teach OAA
at some point (Alison).*

Some students harboured negative feelings towards the residential trip. The process of transition is not always one which is smooth yet these feelings of resistance once overcome may help enhance the individual's resilience therefore adding to the effectiveness of the OOP before it as even begun.

Erm I don't like that kind of stuff in all honesty. Mainly because when I was back in high school that was the last time I did it and even back then I was dreading it, I guess nothing really changed so when I initially got the letter I thought why are we doing this and what's the point erm I guess I overlooked the fact of getting to know people and meeting people and stuff like that. It was one of those things that I thought I'd got out of. So that's how I thought when I initially received it (Steve).

3.5 The fine line between challenge and fear

The below quote that highlights sometimes challenges can be too tough for some people. Yet failure can play a key role in teaching that sometimes sustained effort is required and also how to turn failure into success, the key is to have the difficulty at an achievable level not a debilitating level.

I cried all the way through the cave, I didn't know we were going in it until we got outside it, they also didn't tell us that we would be climbing, and you fell over didn't you (Toby).

Whereas for others they embraced the challenge even when it came to a situation when someone who could not swim engaged in a water based activity. This is an example of a well-constructed activity that has involved water but not required swimming ability, it is therefore an inclusive activity that has allowed certain individuals to embrace fears and achieve. Overcoming such challenges aids in personal growth through self-efficacy and self-worth.

I had to jump in with John and he couldn't swim, he just clung on to me and I was like 'get off', we had life jackets on so it's not like we were going to die. There was a few people who weren't confident doing stuff but as soon as they did they were, like, I don't know why I was worried (Michael).

4. Discussion

The research projected aimed to determine whether OOP can increase personal development, develop resilience and aid transition and adaptation in 1st year university students. Initial feelings of apprehension were described by students regarding the OOP experience. These feelings mirror the feelings of many incoming 1st year university students (Leary & DeRosier, 2012). Overcoming this apprehension and challenges to self-confidence and self-worth are therefore important in this transitional period.

The theme ‘personal development, building more than a raft’ highlights in vivid detail how the OOP process provides personal physical challenges. The activities were challenging and in some instances described as worrying. This level of challenge is widely advocated e.g. (Ewert & Yoshino, 2011) to encourage feelings of achievement and success. A number of the students provided example of how they ‘surprised themselves’ with what they achieved. This indicates the activities provided a challenge appropriate experience. These findings align with previous research findings (Allen, McKenna & Hind, 2012)

Therefore it could be said that personal growth was achieved through the platform provided by the OOP to challenge themselves and succeed. By overcoming the challenges the achievement can provide development of self-efficacy and self-worth. Self-worth and self-efficacy are thought to be important factors in developing resilience (Grant & Kinman, 2012). The OOP could enhance resilience in 1st year university students. This is especially important given that research into student adjustment found one of the main problems facing transitioning students is challenges to their self-worth (Carr, Colthurst, Coyle & Elliott, 2013). This resilience could be essential in overcoming such challenges.

One aspect of challenge which was an unexpected research finding was ‘social challenge’. The students spoke of the pressures of developing friendships, this provided a challenge to self-confidence. The activities were set up in such a way to require team building, trust and communication with others. Such an environment and activities aid social group development. Student relationships were solidified through other activities and enhanced by sharing living space and free time periods. The environment the students have been placed in encourages certain behaviours based on the shared goals and common interests therefore completing common challenges in a physical sense facilitates interactions, as does the common goal of making friends. Peer support, support from activity staff and university staff helped in both social and personal terms.

Not all findings were entirely positive. The theme ‘The fine line between challenge and fear’ highlighted that for some people challenge can go too far and in some instances be debilitating. Some students required assistance from other students to complete the activities. The value in being helped depends on how this is understood by the recipient. Therefore requiring assistance may challenge self-efficacy and self-worth when a positive

outcome cannot be achieved. Similarly this may enhance self-worth and self-confidence through being valued, understood and aided by their peers. The students who provided assistance to their peers could further enhance their self-confidence and self-worth through this altruistic behaviour.

One potential limitation is the application of the research findings explored in the thematic areas. The participant sample was from a small university in the north of England. This limitation could be countered by research evidence from universities across the world which evidences similar stress and challenges facing students (Conley, Travers & Bryant, 2013; Thomas, 2012). Therefore the themes such as 'Building self-confidence and self-efficacy through shared experience' and 'Challenge building resilience' may resonate with many 1st year students.

The research findings could have potential implications for incoming 1st year students. Intervention activities that enhance student resilience can provide students with the personal 'tools' to succeed in this difficult transitional period. The OOP experience has provided this enhancement in the participants interviewed for this study.

In conclusion the OOP has seemingly enhanced self-efficacy and self-worth for this group of 1st year students. This was achieved through providing a platform which encourages personal growth through overcoming challenges such as the physical and social challenges of OOP. Improving self-worth and self-efficacy through a retention intervention such as OOP can potentially build resilience. This resilience could be useful for 1st year students in this potentially difficult transitional period.

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