Transition Skills and Strategies

Key Transition Skills at the Different Transition Points

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Introduction

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The purpose of this report is to identify if certain transition skills are needed at various transition points.

A number of key transition points arise for students into and through higher education. Transition points typically reflect particularly challenging moments, for example a step change in academic tasks or personal and social life may take place. For example, entry to the first year, to the second year, to honours year are often recognised as key transition points (Whittaker 2008).

In this report, key transition points are based on the stages identified as common to the various transition models (see report titled, 'Transition Models and How Students Experience Change' for an overview of a number of student transition models). This report will summarise transition points as four key transition stages: pre-transition, shock, adjustment and progression. A list of the key skills which may be particularly beneficial for students will be identified at each of these transition points.

Stage 1: The pre-transition stage

Before coming to university, students usually have mixed feelings of excitement, for example they have received an offer of a place on a chosen course but at the same time, there may be a fear of the unknown, as they have yet to have direct contact with the university (Burnett 2007). Some of the most important psychological factors during this stage are self-efficacy assessments, that is the level of confidence a student feels, in particular the feeling that they can perform well in the university environment (Bean and Eaton 2002). Another transition skill paramount at this early stage is that of managing expectations (Lowe and Cook 2003).

Self-efficacy

According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), personal beliefs such as self-efficacy are central in evaluating demands from the environment. External demands will usually be evaluated as 'threats' or 'challenges', and it is argued that people with high self-efficacy beliefs (those who feel confident about their competence to handle a given situation) are more likely to evaluate the demands as challenges rather than threats (Chemers et al 2001; Pintrich and de Groot 1990). In turn, when a task is appraised as a challenge, one is more likely to select an effective coping strategy and to persist at managing the task. In the university context, the difference between appraising a demand as a challenge or a threat can result in different coping behaviors (such as studying harder versus procrastinating) and correspondingly different academic outcomes (Zajacova et al 2005).

Self-management of expectations

Many students enter the higher education environment with little preparation and with little idea of what to expect and little understanding of how the university environment can affect their lives. Perceptions of higher education tend to revolve around stereotypical assumptions such as moderate academic demands, freedom from parental control and an exciting social life (Ozga and Sukhnandan 1998). Moreover, students often underestimate the time spent in lectures and study and tend to believe that the nature of learning will not differ too much from

that experienced in secondary school (Cook and Leckey 1999). Mismatches between expectations and reality, however, can result in an inability to make the necessary academic, social and personal adjustments to life at university (Lowe and Cook 2003).

In light of this evidence, it could be argued that the ability to manage expectations is of critical importance during the pre-transition stage. This can be achieved by becoming familiar with the new requirements while still in pre-transition and setting realistic goals (Moores and Popadiuk 2011; Kitsantas 2004). Moreover, universities themselves need to take charge to address misconceptions by communicating timely and accurate information to students and families in terms of expected knowledge, performance standards, and attitudes and behaviors that students will need in order to be successful (RP Group 2010). When universities do not help incoming students form realistic expectations of themselves and of their institution, the demands of the new environment can be overwhelming (Levitz and Noel 1989).

Stage 2: The shock stage

As the newness of university begins to wear off, students begin to deal with the reality of the many adjustments they are experiencing. During this stage, the student may experience a high level of anxiety associated with academic demands, feelings of isolation, emptiness, detachment and even boredom (Risquez et al 2008). Awareness of the new demands and self-reflection are two important skills that support the transition process during this particular stage.

It is claimed that in order to go beyond past habits and understandings, students need to be able to reflect critically upon themselves and the nature of their chosen discipline (Booth 2001, page 490). Reflection refers to a mental process that incorporates critical thought about an experience and demonstrates learning that can be taken forward (Quinton and Smallbone 2010, page 126). A reflective student will practice and demonstrate transferable self-knowledge, based on a questioning approach to themselves, their situation and the roles of others, in order to create a new and different frame of reference (idem).

Universities can take a number of actions to encourage students to engage in critical self-reflection. For example, there is evidence in the literature that feedback can prompt reflection and deeper learning (Higgins et al 2002). Formative assessment in particular should provide students with the tools to enable them to improve their performance, but the quality of the formative feedback is also critical (Black and Wiliam 1998). That is, good quality feedback must be accurate, timely, comprehensive, and appropriate but also accessible to the learner, have coaching value, and inspire confidence and hope (Gibbs and Simpson 2004; Sadler 1998; Weaver 2006). Thereafter, gradual increases of time lapses between feedback and/or an increase of complexity of tasks could further enhance self-reflection.

Stage 3: The adjustment stage

The adjustment stage represents the transition point where students have now become familiarised with their new environment and begin to develop skills, which can allow them to cope with the many new demands. These skills comprise mastering academic skills specifically critical thinking as well as skills in self-efficacy. Social skills are also seen as important for adjustment to the university, for example for developing friendship groups as well as a sense of belonging.

Critical thinking and academic self-efficacy

The literature on student transitions suggests that the study skills developed in secondary education are often inappropriate to the more independent styles of learning expected in higher education (Cook and Leckey 1999). There is a concern that A-levels are too narrow a preparation for the demands of higher education, with little or no emphasis on teamwork or independence of approach (Roberts and Higgins 1992 - cited in Lowe and Cook 2003, page 54).

In terms of academic skills, the capacity to adapt to an independent learning style and demonstrate critical thinking seem to be some of the most desirable qualities. 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 (critical thinking) skills, such as the ability to select and synthesise large amounts of information (Booth, 2001). Students also need to be able to adopt systematic, critical approaches to evidence, create their own insights and interpretations on the basis of a rigorous comparison of different kinds of evidence and opinion as well as develop an appreciation of the contextual and therefore contingent nature of subject knowledge (Booth 2001).

As Christie et al (2013, page 628) further propose, becoming a successful independent learner is bound up with perceptions of one's ability to cope with, and succeed in, module assessments. It is suggested that these academic self-efficacy beliefs (as opposed to generalised self-efficacy, which may not have an equally important impact on study skills) can affect academic outcomes, first of all by increasing students' motivation to master challenging academic tasks (Zajacova et al 2005, page 679). In addition, academic self-efficacy can also foster the efficient use of acquired knowledge and skills, thus further increasing students' confidence in their abilities.

Social skills

Lowe and Cook (2003, page 68) report that the majority of those living away from home, experience problems with missing family and friends and that this can affect their ability to adjust to the new environment. 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). Loss and lack of social support have been found to lead not only to lower academic achievement, but also to negative psychological experiences such as tension, confusion and depression (Pederson 1991, Owens and Loomes 2010, page 279). Since 'interconnectedness' and a 'sense of belonging' increases a student's chances of completing their programme (Severiens and Wolff 2008), opportunities to establish these peer-connections are valuable both within the university setting and in personal lives.

For students who are studying abroad, awareness of cross-cultural differences and setting realistic goals (for instance related to their language abilities) represents the first step towards a successful transition. In addition, establishing contact with both co-national students and students from the host country are equally important. Interaction with co-national networks in the host country can provide a less stressful adjustment experience. However, contact with host nationals can also help international students in developing local networks as well as in understanding the local culture and acquiring the necessary social skills (Li and Gasser 2005, page 571).

Stage 4: The progression stage

Towards the end of the transition period, students will have in essence developed a set of skills, which can enable them to progress either into further education (such as in the case of pursuing a master's or a doctoral degree) or into the job market. In both cases, the most important quality at this point is again self-reflection. That is, students need to be able to identify and articulate their discipline skills as well as broader graduate attributes for ultimately setting goals for continuing and extending their personal, professional and career development. By this point, students should be able to demonstrate a certain level of self-awareness and think about the next transition that they will face. Nevertheless, Burnett (2007) has suggested that the final year student experience is worthy of greater research in relation to mapping institution specific graduate attributes and employment outcomes.

Conclusion

This report has examined the research evidence for the need for particular skills at key transition points for effective student transitions. A number of transition skills were identified at each stage. During pre-transition, students may benefit by developing skills in self-efficacy and self-management of expectations. At the shock stages, skills in critical self-reflection may be particularly beneficial. During periods of adjustment, critical thinking, academic self-efficacy as well as social skills may well all facilitate effective transitions. Finally in the stage of progression, critical self-reflection is likely to be a useful transition skill.

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