

1 We Learn From The Transition Process From Undergraduate Year 1 to Year 2?

Introduction

Most research follows student journeys in the transition to University, exploring the emotional (Christie, 2009), identity work (Briggs, Clark & Hall, 2012), and gendered (O'Shea, 2014) factors in the move, just as examples. This is a period of immense change and growth, though this does not stop here. There is limited research that considers the impact of within-degree transitions, especially when the move from year 1 to year 2 has a significant impact on the overall degree classification, and usually entails more critical engagement with academic work.

Some research has considered the impact of attrition on the student experience across the life of their degree (Willcoxson, Cotter & Joy, 2011), where they acknowledge that the latter years of the degree are related to higher levels of stress, and potential withdrawal. More specifically, Willcoxson (2009) identified personal factors as playing a key part in the second year of degree courses – health, finances, and social integration were specifically discussed. Career options and clarity of a direction were also mentioned as factors that related to stress within the second year.

This project will help in identifying the factors that could be at play for second year psychology students at the University of Northampton, feeding into future planning by the department to provide the best student experience for continuing students, whilst being aware of what the specific problems facing this cohort are. Through addressing the problems and giving students guidance on the things that matter to them, we can work in retention levels for this year of the degree course.

Results

Theme: Lack of confidence within academia

Throughout the interviews, it was clear that students were lacking confidence within University. When talking about accessing help within University, Saskia said:

“I feel really scared to go to them”

It also seems that Saskia is not confident with the independent working style that is so important in University. When speaking about lecturers, she says:

“I feel like they like, I've done my lecture now it's up to you to do all the rest of the work”.

Kate also suggested this lack of confidence, suggesting that she is not confident with her work and wants lecturers to look at a draft before she hands the final assignment in:

“you can't submit a draft to them and say is this right, am I along the right lines and stuff like that I think it is just a lot of pressure.”

Although there is a suggested lack of confidence for the participants, this seems to only be within University. Although Saskia suggested that she was not confident seeking support within University, she stated that she had been confident enough to gain help outside of University:

“I went to the doctors and got diagnosed with depression”

Both participants also spoke about getting support from their friends and therefore suggest that they are socially confident outside of University. When speaking about what helps with the work load, Kate says:

“I think if I didn't have the friendship groups that I have I really feel like I definitely would of struggled”

Linking with a lack of confidence is the lack of engagement that the students suggested throughout the interviews. Although the students showed a clear need for support, they failed to engage with lecturers. Saskia repeatedly says throughout the interview that she has never discussed issues with a lecturer or other support systems within the University such as learning support:

“I haven't used them because I'm scared they're gonna be like we can't work miracles”

Kate also suggests a lack of engagement with her lectures:

“my attendance has not been great on a Thursday. One of the main reasons it has not been great is because car parking”

Conclusion

Overall, this project so far can teach us that students may lose confidence within the transition from year 1 to year 2. The project suggests that one reason for this may be the increasing expectations and pressures applied to young people to go to University, causing them to struggle with a learning style and environment that is not made to suit them. The debate must therefore be discussed in terms of whether University should be limited to only students who can deal with demands or a place of inclusion where everyone has the chance to take part in further education. If the latter is the case, this project can teach us that instead of the jump to exclusive independent working through the transition, more support should be put in to place for those students who can not deal with this working style. Another reason given here is the lack of engagement from students which can be improved through student-faculty interactions. This can therefore teach us that during the transition, faculties should find ways to connect with the students as they move in to second year so that they are comfortable and willing to engage. If this is successful, students may engage with learning and therefore gain confidence.

It is important to note that this project is a working progress and the results so far are based on 2 participants. This project should therefore be finished with the use of more participants to increase the reliability and validity of the results and look further in to the transition. Aside from this project, research in to both transitions within University and year 2 of University is very limited. These areas should be focused on by more researchers in order to improve the experience of University for students.

Method

Two University students currently in their second year of a degree studying at the University of Northampton were used in this project. Participants were collected through opportunity sampling. To collect the sample, the project was advertised at the start of a lecture and those interested emailed the researcher directly. They were then sent the information sheet and a time and date was arranged for each participant.

Within the project, each participant took part in a semi-structured interview to collect qualitative data. The interviews were based off of an interview protocol written by the researcher, allowing the data collected to have depth and relevance. The protocol was a list of questions such as “what are the main changes you noticed?” “how did the transition make you feel?” and “what could be done to help you relieve your stress?”. The interviews took place in a meeting room within the University grounds. The only people present were the researcher and participant, measures were taken to ensure that privacy and confidentiality were met.

At the beginning of the interview, the researcher verbally read through the information sheet, taking care to explain procedures such as withdrawal and confidentiality. The participants were then given a chance to ask questions before signing the consent form. Once the consent form was signed, the audio recorder was started and the interview took place. Each interview lasted around an hour.

The audio recordings were transcribed to allow a thematic analysis to be conducted on the data. From this analysis themes were created, the biggest one being ‘Lack of confidence within academia’, which will be the theme focused on within this poster.

The project received full ethical approval.

Discussion

Lacking confidence within University is not uncommon and has been seen in other research, although it is usually when the students are new and the context is alien to them (Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell, & McCune, 2008). This is something that should be solved by second year as students should have adapted to the new style of learning and working. However, as there is little research in to transitions during undergraduate degrees, there is little explanation for the cause of low confidence in second year. This project is the first that can offer some explanations.

The expectations for young people to go to University after school are increasing every year. Within the interview, Saskia explained how she didn't want to come to University but was pushed by her school. Smith and Naylor (2001) explain how University students are increasing and suggests that a lot of students are pressured in to going to University because it is assumed that this is the way to be successful. The authors go on to talk about reasons for drop out rates such as students “not feeling” University or not achieving good enough results. The expectations and push from influences such as parents, teachers and the media could mean that students who are not made for University are having to struggle through anyway. In the case of Saskia, she did not want to go to University but her school pushed her and now she is struggling with the independent work style that is expected at University. It was discussed in the interview that first year was perhaps more successful because they were given more support but when that was taken away and independence was expected, the students began to struggle. There is room for debate here around limiting higher education to only those who are able to deal with the demands or allowing education to be inclusive and open to everyone. If the latter is the case, perhaps Universities need to adapt with the times and change the learning style to support those who perhaps are not able to cope with the demands of things such as independent learning.

Another reason for the lack of confidence may be the lack of engagement from second years. They seem unwilling to engage with lecturers and other systems within the University. Student involvement and engagement is crucial for meaningful learning experiences and can be improved through student-faculty interactions (Smith et al, 2005 as cited in Edwards, Jones, Wapstra, & Richardson, 2012). There was support for this within the interviews, with the participants repeatedly speaking about being worried to speak to the staff and feeling like they are not connected with the staff. While encouraging independent learning, perhaps faculties should find a way of also engaging and connecting with the students. If this is done effectively, the students may engage with the learning more and as a result feel more confident.

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