What Students Want? Exploring the Role of the Institution in Supporting Successful Learning Journeys

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There have been numerous initiatives to increase access to higher education for those residing in marginalised locales in Wales; however, entrance in itself does not guarantee success and it is important for educators and policy makers to explore issues of retention. Classed and relational positionings often conflict with non-traditional students' education trajectory; and sometimes contribute to their withdrawal from academia. In response to this challenge the current paper focuses on the accounts of non-traditional students in Communities First[1] areas who took an undergraduate social science module with the Open University in Wales. Importantly, rather than reading these barriers to progression as students' individual difficulties, the paper considers how educational cultures can create and perpetuate disadvantage. Exploring students' accounts of pedagogy and administration, the paper focuses on online provision and offers a range of strategies that could potentially improve the delivery of the module; and students' experiences in future presentations.

Overview Paper

Higher education is positioned as a gateway to opportunities; however, entrance to the academy and success within its institutions is highly differentiated. In Wales, the Anatomy of Economic Inequality (2011) provides quantitative evidence for the pervasive nature of class-based inequalities in education, demonstrating that an individual in social housing is approximately 10 times less likely to be a graduate compared to those in other types of accommodation. As Jenkins (2004, p.23) argues, for some organisations 'people production is at the core of their business' and; therefore, universities are crucial sites of identity work where some will feel in place while others will be as a fish out of water.

Non-traditional students face complex psychological and structural barriers to accessing and completing higher education, which are well versed within the social sciences (Lucey et al, 2003; Mannay and Morgan, 2013; Mannay and O'Connell, 2013; Reay et al, 2010; Rose-Adams, 2013). Academics and practitioners have charted the difficulties

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experienced by marginalised higher education students; employing theoretical models of hybridity (Lucey et al, 2003), habitus (Skeggs, 2010); pedagogic identities (Reay, 2010) and psychological splitting (Mannay, 2013). This body of work has demonstrated the costs of divided learner identities along the lines of social class; however, such knowledge needs to be accompanied by action.

The current, Higher Education Academy funded, project took a broadly interpretivist approach as it was interested in the subjective views of students, but rather than being a purely academic exercise, there was an aim of identifying good practice and issues for improvement; aligning with action research. The approach engendered a move away from discourses of individual failure and a step towards an acknowledgement of the need for structural change within institutions. In particular, it was concerned with exploring the views of students from Communities First areas who had taken the Open University undergraduate, 30 credit module 'DD131 Introduction to the Social Sciences'. The project was designed to offer an opportunity to reflect on and improve the delivery of the module: to make 'an existing situation more efficient and effective' (Cohen et al, 2001).

'DD131 Introduction to the Social Sciences' offers a blended form of learning in that it supplies hard copy materials, written, visual and audio, and face-to-face tutorials alongside online activities, a discussion forum and Elluminate tutorials. Elluminate is an online system that offers an audio conferencing facility used to support small group tutorials online where talk is in real time through the internet. Elluminate offers participants the opportunity to communicate asynchronously using audio, written messages, on-screen whiteboard and share software applications. In order to explore student's experience of blended learning on 'DD131 Introduction to the Social Sciences' four students were interviewed face-to-face and 13 students were interviewed over the telephone.

As Kemmis (2006, p.459) contends, action research must be capable of 'telling unwelcome truths'; and working collaboratively engenders an opportunity for multiple perspectives to be considered and for points of improvement to be actioned. Interviewing students about their subjective experience, face-to-face and on the telephone, facilitated an appraisal of strengths and areas for improvement in current practice. The interviews raised a number of themes but in this paper we specifically focus on forms on interactive online provision; as these have been presented as a way of eliminating barriers to participation (Andresen, 2009).

Across the interview data was a consensus that '*Student home was really easy to navigate*' and it would appear that this element of online provision, representing their home page and access point to further resources, has a well designed, accessible and user friendly interface. In terms of the Forum, one student was unable to access this support system despite phoning the technical helpline, '*it was really difficult and I couldn't get on. I phoned the computer helpline and still couldn't get on*'. Another student could not find any Forum for her cohort, although she had actively engaged with the Forum on other Open University courses.

This is problematic as although some students did not feel they needed to use the Forum, for other students it formed part of an integral support

system. For example, there were comments such as '*I made friend through the Open University buddy system by talking to people on the Forum*' and '*If you have a Forum you can say 'what does that word mean?' and your tutor or other students will post up an answer and you are not so isolated*'. Therefore, it is important that tutors ensure that they are using the Forum and providing adequate signposting for students to access this platform. The Forum can also offer a route to informal social networking, which the data suggests can be an essential support system. Students expressed the significant part that Facebook played in their learning journeys and beyond their involvement with the Open University;

> 'Facebook groups really helped me to get through the assignments, I felt as though I was struggling and I was the only one; but the Facebook group reassured me that I wasn't the only one and other people were having the same problems. Facebook helped me to get through the course'

Facebook presents some difficulties for the Open University because it cannot be moderated in the same way as the Forum. However, as demonstrated in the present study and in previous research (Jackson 2012), Facebook can also play an important supporting role in building friendships and networks. Therefore, arguably, students should be made aware of this provision; even if this information is given with the proviso that this is not an official or internally monitored social networking site.

Of all the online provision, Elluminate presented the greatest difficulties to students, which were sometimes overcome with technical support but in other cases students were unable to access this provision throughout the course. As Elluminate was developed to make tutorials accessible to all students and overcome barriers such as transport, child care and disability, this is problematic and more needs to be done in order to make the system accessible.

Overall, this research has drawn directly from the experiences of students and highlighted a number of difficulties that need to be addressed not at the level of the individual but by the delivering institution. In response a number of initiatives are in development with Student Support in the Open University in Wales; which will assist not only students residing in Communities First areas but all future students entering the social sciences. These developments include the production of a 'Before you start' leaflet for students that tutors can send as part of their initial welcome message; which specifically offers advice to negate the particular problems reported with online forums and Elluminate: and offers a balanced overview of Facebook social networking opportunities. Furthermore, the project has been instrumental in informing and delivering staff development sessions for tutors and the project findings have been disseminated to the Open University Students' Association and key internal stakeholders, such as the Open University in Wales' Teaching and Learning Group and the Open University in Wales' Directorate Team.

Notes

Communities First areas correspond to the 100 most deprived electoral divisions according to the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation.

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