

The criticality of blended communities in empowering learner transition in Higher Education

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Introduction

This paper reflects upon an initiative called 'Ready for your Management School', which was developed initially in response to the pandemic to assist students in transitioning into Higher Education. The work recognised that students had less than normal experience leading up to their entry into University and aimed to provide support in a way, which enabled and empowered learners to become familiar with and engaged with university life.

The key lessons from this project are the challenges of engaging learners and university colleagues to ensure development and sustained participation in the blended communities.

Discussion

Successful transition is a key factor in enabling students to 'navigate the academic landscape and journey from arrival to graduation at their institution of choice' (Parkin, Brown, 2020). However, the disruption that many students have experienced over the last two years in their educational journey may mean that many students are not prepared (mentally and educationally) for university life as usual and this may lead to feelings of not belonging and/or imposter syndrome (Pownall, Harris & Blundell-Birtill, 2021) which will impact negatively on their initial transition and beyond.

In response to disruption caused by Covid-19 pandemic, the 'Ready for Your Management School' project started in 2020 in an attempt to address issues related to delivery of transition, induction resources and university life information. Experience of induction week was often overwhelming for students pre-pandemic, and structured in such a way that it was difficult to revisit and find relevant information, providing them with little support in later stages of their transition. The need to pivot the delivery of induction to online only in 2020-21 academic year, required a process of rethinking of what transition requires, how and when it needs to be delivered, and how can it deliver the most valuable experience for incoming as well as returning students.

Reviewing the pilot that ran in academic year 2020-21 demonstrated to the authors that early intervention and the engagement of e-technologies is key to creating a community for students who have had a 'less than normal' learning experience.

The first iteration of the project focused mostly on providing students with relevant information but certainly lacked in community building aspect, which became apparent in retrospect. The second iteration of the project where the experience was enhanced by in-person contact with the academic departments; other students and university services created a more rounded student experience. The authors have discovered through the process that application of a blended approach is the most beneficial to both students and academic colleagues.

Through this project, the authors discovered that transition is as an ongoing process where levels of support should be adjusted accordingly (Jindal-Snape, 2010) as learners develop during their student journey. The project also revealed the importance of developing cross-departmental resources suitable for all cohorts to ensure consistent presentation of information across courses and departments ensuring equality to all students.

Engagement online and active forms of interaction (Dahl, 2018) between students, lead not only to a better attainment of information but also create a more long-lasting effect, where students become advocates for supporting others on the same journey for their own and future cohorts.

Contribution

The developed project served both students and colleagues throughout the transition of new cohorts into Higher Education. During transition students often, experience similar feelings as to those in other important life events, such as changing jobs, moving or loss of friends or family members (Schaetti, 1996). These need to be addressed by Higher Education institutions to empower students to make transitions smooth and successful experiences (Cheng, 2015).

Benefits for student cohorts:

- Availability of information in pre-arrival period, with interest from new students starting 5 weeks before academic year start
- Lowered anxiety over accessibility of information post induction period
- Early intervention for nurturing of communities of learning and connecting of incoming and returning students

Benefits for academic colleagues:

- Availability of curated content for programme teams, lowering pressure for delivery of all required details during induction period
- Easy signposting to the resource throughout the academic year
- Benefit of more meaningful in person contact with students during induction

Disadvantages observed:

- Relinquish of control over what information students consume during induction period
- Ensuring consistency and currency of materials, which would be suitable for various programmes of study

Key takeaways and next steps

Through two iterations of the project completed so far, we have learnt that the blended approach to transition is the most beneficial for both students and university colleagues. It is important, however, to recognise that the best outcomes can only be achieved by engagement with the wide community rather than a selected small group of university colleagues (academic and professional services). Involvement with the wider audience will reap the benefits of well-prepared materials, provided in a timely manner. By engaging the entire community, better relationships between all involved will develop, turning students into co-creators of their community of learners.

Next steps would be to explore in a greater detail the challenges identified with the aim of embedding mechanisms to improve the next deliver phase of the project throughout the Faculty and beyond.

References

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