Equality and diversity in learning and teaching in higher education

Section C: Supporting student groups

How can lecturers and students in higher education improve their intercultural awareness, and in the process create a more inclusive international teaching and learning environment?

Jane Bell and Nicole Kipar, Heriot-Watt University

Correspondence: Jane Bell (Assistant Professor, School of Management and Languages)/Nicole Kipar (Academic Programme Leader, HRD), Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh, EH14 4AS, Scotland. Email: Jane.g.bell@hw.ac.uk / N.Kipar@hw.ac.uk

Key words: equal participation; diversity; intercultural competence

Abstract

Members of an academic culture are not always aware of the tacit assumptions that they hold about the ‘right’ way to study. Consequently, some important aspects of UK academic culture are not always made explicit to incomers, such as expectations and perceptions related to assessment or methods of accessing information. Moreover, lecturers and students may sometimes be unaware of cultural differences which can impair the ability of international students to participate equally in UK academic life. These include cultural variation in expectations regarding gender roles, classroom participation and power relationships or communication conventions between staff and students. Other aspects of intercultural communication which may result in misunderstanding include linguistic features such as differing turn-taking norms, modes of expressing emotions or modes of managing disagreement. Further, ‘treating all students equally’ may involve inadvertent discrimination, if those in a position of power are unaware of cross-cultural variation in expectations and behavioural norms.

This paper presents a discussion of a workshop that aimed to draw on the knowledge and expertise of participants to identify the key areas in which international students may, at least initially, be disadvantaged for cultural reasons. It reports on a variety of practical recommendations for higher education, raised and discussed during the workshop, which would increase staff and students’ intercultural sensitivity, inclusivity and reduce the sometimes invisible barriers to equal participation.
Introduction

This paper presents a discussion of the results of a workshop exploring the question of how lecturers and students in higher education can improve their intercultural awareness, and in the process create a more inclusive international teaching and learning environment. The workshop was attended by 16 academic staff from various disciplines and universities. The term ‘international students’ (IS) refers here to all students in UK higher education for whom English is a second language. The aims of the workshop were:

- to provide a forum in which the professional experience and expertise of participants could be shared regarding barriers to equality
- to produce practical suggestions regarding ways in which barriers to equal participation in higher education by IS could be reduced

Unsurprisingly, the workshop produced more questions than answers.

IS contribute over £7bn to the UK economy, and constituted 13 per cent of students at UK universities in 2012/2013 (UUK 2014: 1). However, some studies suggest that IS at UK universities achieve lower marks overall than students whose first language is English, referred to here as native speaker (NS) students (Morrison et al 2005; Broecke and Nicholls 2007: 19; De Vita 2002). This may be related to the challenges of studying in a second language or to demotivation due to the difficulty of quickly adapting to teaching and learning approaches very different from those experienced in the students’ previous educational cultures.

It is possible that some lecturers may, by treating all students equally, inadvertently perpetuate unequal participation or discriminatory practices that reduce equal participation in UK higher education, if they are unaware of the diverse needs and expectations of their students. Blasco found that:

’a major source of confusion [for IS] has to do with the tacit logics and expectations that shape how the formal steps of the learning cycle are understood and enacted locally.’

Blasco 2015: 85
Moreover, the meritocratic system employed in UK higher education to combat inequality may also conceal perpetuation of systemic inequality since it places all responsibility for success or failure on the individual (Johansson and Sliwa 2014: 22).

**Do IS receive adequate support?**

There was strong agreement among the workshop participants that UK HEIs do not provide IS with adequate linguistic or cultural support. It was felt that IS, and Erasmus students in particular, face a triple challenge: language learning, subject mastery and critical engagement. Overall, it was agreed that IS often need more support than NS students. For example, students may have erroneous expectations about participation, assessment or other UK academic conventions due to the influence of their previous educational cultures. Moreover, it was agreed that dwelling on students’ ‘deficiencies’ is unhelpful: we should be aware that we are privileged.

Participants argued that a two-way dialogue is required: being open and receptive to others. It was also agreed that changes need to be made at an institutional level to provide IS with more support. UK universities appear to be aware of the need for change, in that much time has been devoted to discussion of internationalisation. However, it was agreed that internationalisation is a ‘fuzzy, ideologically laden’ term (Green and Whitsed 2012: 150), not clearly understood by many of the teaching staff who are expected to help their institutions to achieve it.

Leask (2013: 111) considers that in order to achieve internationalisation in the curriculum, the teaching staff in each discipline need to work together to challenge dominant paradigms, investigate emerging paradigms and imagine new possibilities. Leask and Bridge (2013) devised an Internationalisation of Curriculum (IoC) structural framework to this end. Through this, a facilitator, who is an ‘outsider’, can enable the critical reassessment of embedded assumptions to develop further by ‘asking seemingly innocent, yet difficult questions... such as “So what is universal knowledge in the field of science?”’ (Leask and Bridge, 2013: 111).
Participants raised the question of how international staff in higher education could play a more significant role in the internationalisation process. It is possible that recently arrived, non-NS academic staff, who are less steeped in local academic culture and the dominant Western paradigms of their discipline, may be better equipped to bring fresh perspectives to the IoC process.

Following Leask and Bridge (2013), Breit et al (2013) embarked on an IoC programme of ‘critical de-Westernization’ of the curriculum of a journalism degree programme. This did not entail rejection of ‘Western ideas, practices, and values’ but instead aimed to develop ‘awareness of the diversity of approaches and understandings of journalism’ (Breit et al 2013: 131). Students were required to reflect on the assumptions that they brought to their academic discipline, an approach that could also be fruitful in other disciplines.

**Graduate attributes**

Many of the graduate attributes listed by UK universities refer to intercultural competence or communication skills, but a clear policy of how to facilitate development of these skills is often lacking. There may be an underlying assumption that simply being immersed in another culture will automatically result in the development of these skills. It has been argued, however, that ‘monolingual local students rarely mix with international students who are not fully proficient in English’ (Bennett et al 2013: 533).

Leask (2013: 111) argues that all members of an academic team need to work together to agree ‘what students will be expected to be able to do as graduates’ and what part each staff member should play in order to achieve these goals. She further advocates that ‘development of skills such as language capability and intercultural competence may need to be embedded in a number of courses at different levels.’

**Issues with students’ writing**

Issues with students’ writing included informal writing style and use of translation software. One lecturer commented that in her assignment instructions she now includes a ban on text language. All workshop participants agreed that IS need more language support and that some would benefit from access
to support throughout their entire degrees. In particular, it was agreed that students studying in the UK for one semester or less can often need more intensive language support as they have less time to adapt.

Swales (1990) and others (for example, Flowerdew 2015; Johns 2015) have demonstrated the crucial importance of students’ understanding of the concepts of writing genre and discourse community, and the notion of communicative purpose. Helping students to analyse well-written models of writing genres in their discipline can be an effective way to achieve this.

Cross-cultural comparison of academic writing conventions and their underlying values is a key aspect of an intercultural approach. For example, use of hedging or tentative language in Western academic writing increases a writer’s credibility since it displays awareness of other perspectives and of the uncertainty considered in the West to be intrinsic to scientific discovery (Yang 2013). In contrast, Chinese researchers may be more likely to ‘assume a tone of certainty so as to convey authority and credibility’ (Hu and Cao 2011, cited in Yang 2013: 32). If we expect a critical approach from students, we cannot expect them to discard previous learning habits unless they understand the rationale for doing so.

Some students may plagiarise because the stakes are high but their level of English proficiency is low. Participants agreed that students’ understanding of the concepts of criticality and academic integrity are affected by their previous academic cultures (eg Russikoff et al 2003). One issue raised by participants is that lecturers’ understanding of criticality varies and their explanations and instructions to students are often unclear (see, for example, Vandermensbrugghhe 2004). A key aspect of academic skills courses for Heriot-Watt MSc students is discussions of ways in which students can take a more critical approach. These classes are also open to NS students, although fewer attend.

Participants agreed that students needed stress-free opportunities to practise using Turnitin. One lecturer allowed students who submitted a 1000-word piece of writing to Turnitin to incorporate a revised draft of the work in their upcoming assessed assignment. The lecturer promised students who did this that in assessed
Learning environments

Issues with group work/classroom management

Participants agreed that cultural or linguistic factors may lead to unequal participation or hinder effective communication and result in cultural misunderstandings between students (see for example Qin, 2014; Spencer-Rodgers, 2002). For example, during pairwork or group work, it was reported that students are sometimes reluctant to work with peers whose first language is different from their own. In cases where previous cultural norms regarding student participation differ, students may complain that peers of a different nationality either ‘don’t contribute enough in class’ or conversely ‘talk too much’.

Participants stressed the importance of enabling students to have conversations that can build their confidence and criticality, in an environment where they need not worry about academic conventions. Participants also noted the difficulty of designing group work that enables every student to participate. To accommodate students who have had little prior experience of group work, participants recommended provision of very explicit task criteria and specific roles.

Rientes et al (2014: 78) argue that ‘instructional design can have a substantially strong impact on how students develop cross-cultural learning relations’. They found that students who were allowed to choose their own groups tended to form monocultural...
cliques. However, students whose groups were randomly selected were found to be more successful in overcoming cultural barriers and appeared to continue learning activities with group members outside the classroom to a greater extent than self-selecting groups.

**Culturally inclusive teaching**

Participants agreed that lecturers need to be sensitive to students’ previous academic and cultural backgrounds, adding that ‘if our teaching is not culturally inclusive, then the assessment won’t be.’ Some, however, were unsure what ‘culturally inclusive teaching’ might entail. It could be defined as a pedagogical approach that employs a range of teaching methods in an attempt to encompass some of the diverse learning preferences that IS may have and hence reduce the cognitive dissonance or mismatches between teaching approaches and learning preferences that are thought to inhibit learning (Blasco 2015: 86). Clearly, lecture content should also be culturally inclusive: Eurocentric materials or cultural-laden language such as idioms may reduce accessibility for IS. It is worth noting here that nationality may not be the most reliable indication of cultural traits; ‘every person is an amalgam of many “cultures”’, for example the culture of a particular academic discipline (Kealey, 2015:15).

Three distinct approaches emerged regarding the issue of students’ differing cultural expectations about aspects of learning such as classroom participation and the roles of teachers and students. One approach could be summarised as provision of clear guidance and instructions. For example, ‘setting clear ground rules at the beginning’, modelling and scaffolding. Others recommended ‘carrots and bricks [sic]’: attempts to motivate students using rewards and penalties.

A third approach concerned awareness raising and managing students’ and teachers’ expectations, for example, through discussion of the ways in which students’ previous experience and expectations may differ from UK conventions. These expectations may influence academic performance. Hence, UK requirements and the rationale for these should be made very explicit.

Heriot-Watt pre-sessional and foundation English students begin each course with a questionnaire which enables them to compare
Section C: Supporting student groups

assumptions and expectations with classmates and teachers regarding aspects of learning such as assessment, participation in class, and the roles of students and teachers. However, one questionnaire at the beginning of a course may be insufficient as newly arrived students often experience information overload. IS might benefit more from a series of short questionnaires throughout the course which make not only requirements but also underlying assumptions and values more transparent.

Culturally inclusive assessment

Some studies (e.g. De Vita 2002; Morrison et al. 2005; Broecke and Nicholls 2007: 19) suggest that students writing in a second language generally require more time to compose an essay than NS, which seems likely to place IS at a disadvantage in timed examinations. Hence, De Vita (2002) argues that culturally equitable assessment should entail a variety of assessment types rather than only end-of-semester examinations.

It was agreed that, crucially, students do not have ‘space to fail’; in other words, students would benefit from more feedback on work that does not count towards their final course mark. It was also argued, however, that many IS do not take up opportunities to do non-assessed writing tasks. This may be because they are already struggling to keep up with lectures and assessed coursework.

Alternatively, students’ reluctance may stem from the influence of a previous academic culture in which only assessed tasks were considered worth devoting time and effort to. Students may need to be persuaded of the value of expending more time and effort on non-assessed formative writing assignments in order to develop their academic writing skills without the stress of being assessed. It was also noted that overstretched lecturers often do not have time to offer the amount of formative assessment and feedback that IS need (Shaw 2014).

At Blasco’s university, IS are offered an induction course that enables students to compare tacit aspects of learning with their previous academic cultures (Blasco 2015: 100–102). A seminar entitled ‘What nobody tells you about how to write a research paper in the Danish system’ was also well attended. Blasco (2015: 102) suggests it might be even more effective if run by students.
Section C: Supporting student groups

**Interculturality**

Participants were concerned that IS may have a sense of inferiority and colonisation, or may find UK higher education 'suffocating'. Marginson (2014: 8), among others, has commented on ‘the sense of cultural superiority that [...] is rife in English language education systems’, disputing that IS necessarily wish to ‘become like us’. He calls for a paradigm shift from insisting that IS adjust to the new culture to viewing their transformation as a process of ‘self-formation’ (Marginson 2014: 9).

Conversely, the features that make each institution or host country unique may be part of the attraction to IS, and that making the values underlying local practices explicit to students can enrich their intercultural awareness (Blasco 2015).

**Cultural identity**

Participants generally agreed that cultural or linguistic factors can hinder effective communication between students and university staff, whether face to face or by email. IS are sometimes unaware of UK politeness conventions or email etiquette when requesting help or feedback from lecturers and may use an inappropriate level of informality or send a draft for feedback without an accompanying message (Scollon et al 2012).

Most participants sometimes felt it necessary to adapt their teaching approach according to the cultural composition of a class; various studies suggest that students’ previous academic cultures can affect learning preferences (Woodrow and Sham 2001; Joy and Kolb 2009; Heffernan et al 2010; Bowden et al 2015; Zhou and Li 2015).

It was agreed that lecturers need to be ‘culturally proactive’ and anticipate cultural issues: for example, the use of Tumblr on the Heriot-Watt Dubai campus was particularly ill-advised in a Muslim context since Tumblr has no ban on pornography. Participants argued that lecturers need to develop knowledge and awareness of cultural variation in student expectations and of UK higher education requirements, and to develop a better understanding of the ‘specific challenges faced by specific groups of international students’.

**Communication**

Participants generally agreed that cultural or linguistic factors can hinder effective communication between students and university staff, whether face to face or by email. IS are sometimes unaware of UK politeness conventions or email etiquette when requesting help or feedback from lecturers and may use an inappropriate level of informality or send a draft for feedback without an accompanying message (Scollon et al 2012).

Most participants sometimes felt it necessary to adapt their teaching approach according to the cultural composition of a class; various studies suggest that students’ previous academic cultures can affect learning preferences (Woodrow and Sham 2001; Joy and Kolb 2009; Heffernan et al 2010; Bowden et al 2015; Zhou and Li 2015).

It was agreed that lecturers need to be ‘culturally proactive’ and anticipate cultural issues: for example, the use of Tumblr on the Heriot-Watt Dubai campus was particularly ill-advised in a Muslim context since Tumblr has no ban on pornography. Participants argued that lecturers need to develop knowledge and awareness of cultural variation in student expectations and of UK higher education requirements, and to develop a better understanding of the ‘specific challenges faced by specific groups of international students’.
One method of facilitating the integration of IS could be to initiate a ‘buddy system’ (Campbell 2012), in which new arrivals are paired with a ‘home’ student. It was further suggested that higher education could benefit from following the example of further education regarding cultural inclusivity since equality and diversity training has been mandatory in colleges for some time. In higher education, however, this type of training is often optional.

Some participants argued that unless intercultural competence is embedded in all degree programmes, it is unlikely that lecturers or students will treat it as a priority. Bodycott advocates:

‘the inclusion of intercultural outcomes for all students (Campbell 2010; Leask 2004), and the development of mandatory intercultural mediation and social integration practices (Owens and Loomes 2010) for all students, both domestic and international... [together with cultural] mentoring, intercultural mediation programmes and the sharing of cultural knowledge.’

Bodycott 2012: 361

Bennett et al favour:

‘the provision of formal and informal intercultural learning opportunities for students, who may have limited intercultural experience, and strategically designed intercultural pairs, groups, discussions, and assessments on diverse campuses.’

Bennett et al 2013: 548

They further argue that:

‘there is a role for institutional leadership in providing opportunities for such relationships to be extended [beyond the campus], through, for example, partnered work experience, volunteering, or internship programs.’

Bennett et al 2013: 549

At Heriot-Watt, I am involved in a project in which Chinese students volunteer to teach Mandarin to local primary school children. This has yielded very positive feedback from students, teaching staff and children.
Conclusions

There was strong consensus among workshop participants that IS tend not to receive sufficient support during their transition either at an institutional level or in the classroom. Institutions were perceived as being enthusiastic about the income that IS bring, but vague regarding ways in which staff could contribute to the internationalisation process. Particular issues concerned:

- students’ understanding of culturally laden concepts such as intellectual property and criticality
- lack of language support
- lack of time to provide additional formative assessment and feedback

Advocates of more culturally inclusive pedagogy might argue that employing a more diverse range of teaching approaches is likely to be enriching to students and teachers alike. On the other hand, students may be able and willing to adapt provided the tacit aspects of the new teaching and learning environment are made sufficiently explicit; what Blasco (2015: 103) dubs the ‘making explicit’ approach.

As discussed, student expectations could be managed by:

- instigating a buddy system
- providing clear task and assessment guidelines
- awareness-raising questionnaires and seminars which enable staff and students to compare tacit aspects of learning in UK higher education with conventions and values in other educational contexts

Language and writing issues could be addressed by:

- greater use of guided peer feedback on first drafts of coursework
- use of generic feedback on VLEs
- analysis of the structure and language of discipline-specific writing genres
- use of a variety of assessment methods
Finally, there is much that could be done at an institutional level, such as funding more language support for IS and requiring that intercultural skills development be incorporated into staff training and development, curricula and assessment. It seems clear that until intercultural competence and the principles of equality and diversity are embedded in curricula and assessment, these are unlikely to become a priority for all higher education staff and students.
Section C: Supporting student groups

References


Partnership and preparation: a new model of transition from college to university

Julia Fotheringham and Debbie Meharg, Edinburgh Napier University

Correspondence: Julia Fotheringham, Senior Lecturer and Senior Teaching Fellow, DLTE, Edinburgh Napier University, Sighthill campus, Sighthill Court, Edinburgh, EH11 4BN, Scotland. Debbie Meharg, Lecturer, School of Computing, Edinburgh Napier University, Merchiston campus, 10 Colinton Road, Edinburgh, EH10 5DT, Scotland. Email: J.Fotheringham@napier.ac.uk / D.Meharg@napier.ac.uk

Key words: boundary; broker; partnership; preparation; support

Abstract

Widening participation in higher education continues to be a key focus for Scottish government. The 2013 Post-16 Education (Scotland) Act provides for additional funded places, enabling more college students to transfer into higher education with advanced standing. This article provides an overview of the associate student project at Edinburgh Napier University and examines how rethinking partnership between colleges and universities has the potential to better prepare students for transition between the two sectors.

Deploying theoretical conceptions of academic transitions, we outline our findings from a preliminary study which explores a range of support initiatives, discussing the value of student contribution and the importance of the full participation of all partners.

The paper concludes that although associate student status of itself is not sufficient to enable effective transition, targeted support activities are likely to improve confidence and motivation for university study, better enabling articulation students to negotiate the transition to university.

Introduction

Edinburgh Napier is a post-92 university with a funding imperative to expand its provision for college students to progress to university with advanced standing and no loss of time. This article describes research and practice relating to the associate student project, providing an overview of the project to date and examining how rethinking traditional approaches to college–university partnership can alter the transition space for students taking this route to university.
We deploy theoretical conceptions of academic transitions as ‘boundary crossing’ (Akkerman and Bakker 2011), and explore how the effectiveness of a range of practical measures and theoretical conceptions may be understood by reference to their potential as boundary workers and brokers (Wenger 2000).

The paper concludes that close collaborative partnership working between college and university partners, together with a programme of targeted learning opportunities and experiences, is likely to improve confidence and motivation for university study with both of these factors helping to ensure that students are better positioned to negotiate the transition to university programmes in their third year of study.

Context

In 2013, in order to foster growth in articulation activity, the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) introduced funding and set ambitious targets for universities to support additional places for students to progress from college to university with no loss of time, by way of ‘guaranteed articulation’ (SFC 2013). The scheme supports variations in articulation routes. However, in the context of our study at Edinburgh Napier University, students begin their higher national (HN) qualification at a further education college in the knowledge that – subject to them satisfying the requirements of their HN course and reaching a specified level of pass in the graded unit – they have a guaranteed place on a named degree at university. These students enter with advanced standing into third year. This shared model of delivery is known as a 2+2 model (SFC 2013). It enables students to enrol not only on their college programme, but also to enrol as an associate student of the university to which they will eventually progress.

For the academic year 2013/2014, Edinburgh Napier University was awarded funding from the SFC for an additional 107 places for students starting their programmes in college and articulating to university for their third and fourth year. The associate students were dually matriculated in both college and university which meant that they were immediately able to gain access to a range of benefits, resources and facilities offered by the university. These benefits include access to resources such as the library, sports and student association facilities, guest lectures from university staff, as well as access to the student portal and virtual learning environment. Additionally, Edinburgh Napier associate
students are able to access tutorial support across a range of topics including specific subject support, library advice and academic skills guidance. These student-focused, targeted learning opportunities were designed to enhance student progression and attainment by creating opportunities for students to develop their confidence and academic skills in order to prepare them for the higher education environment.

**Partnership and preparation model**

Our model of partnership has been informed by transition studies in the literature (Kift 2009; Pike and Harrison 2011), theoretical perspectives (Wenger 2000; Tuomi-Gröhn and Engeström 2003), focus group findings, partnership meetings with key staff members, and informal communication with staff and students. Our model addresses the practical concerns and preconceptions among staff and students associated with making the transition from college to university. The defining characteristic of our approach to partnership, which is practice-based rather than policy-based, is in its reliance upon relationship building between both staff and students at college and at university levels. The model is not a top-down one, but rather is more democratic and emergent, allowing staff and students to collaborate on best practice in the field of articulation and to influence changes to practice.

**Theoretical concepts**

The challenges faced by students making the transition from college to university can be understood by exploring a number of theoretical concepts inherent in establishing identity and developing competence in a new context. The notion of transition itself is a key concept for our study since in this context it delineates the period of change experienced by students as they progress from college to university. Beach (1999) proposes the concept of consequential transitions which explains how active construction of new knowledge involves the transformation of something that has been learnt elsewhere. This results in the development of identities, new ways of knowing and a repositioning of one’s self in the world (Tuomi-Gröhn and Engeström 2003). Beach’s perspectives on transitions may be helpful in understanding the transformation from college learner into undergraduate student.
As students make the transition from college to university, concepts such as boundary crossing become significant. Boundary is a complex term denoting simultaneously inclusion and exclusion. Akkerman and Bakker (2011: 133) provide a sufficiently pragmatic interpretation of the notion of a boundary as being ‘sociocultural differences leading to a discontinuity of action or interaction’. In our study, the boundaries we refer to are those that are embedded in the divergent educational systems represented by higher and further education. The associate student project explores student transitions through various forms of boundary crossing: for example, from further to higher education, from college to university campus, or from a content-led to research-led curriculum. We conceptualise our work with college students making the transition from college to university as helping them to effectively negotiate these boundaries and to integrate both academically and socially.

Wenger’s (2000) description of social learning systems provides a way of thinking about learning and its social dimensions. Social learning systems draw on the concept of brokering, describing how certain individuals play significant roles in generating cross-boundary connections and generating the infrastructure to enable productive boundary interactions (Wenger 2000). A boundary worker can also be seen as an intermediary, assisting members in one community to gain knowledge from another. In the context of the associate student project, in one of Edinburgh Napier’s schools, a lecturer with a specific remit as an associate student college liaison fulfils this brokering function. Working on the boundary, this university lecturer’s knowledge and experience of working in both social learning systems has enabled active collaboration and the establishment of new connections across the two different social learning systems (ie the college and university).

It is clear that concepts such as transition, boundary and broker are useful when trying to understand the nature of the challenges faced by college students articulating to university, since they are underpinned by a view of learning which is situative, relational and negotiated. This is distinct from an individualistic perspective of learning in which the focus for understanding formal learning transfer from one context to another is on the cognitive skills which reside in the head of the individual student (Bransford and Schwartz 1999).
**Initiatives**

The range of initiatives implemented in college to support our approach to enabling student articulation can be divided into two distinct, but interrelated, strands: partnership and preparation. Tackling both of these areas of practice simultaneously was essential in order to ensure an optimal, sustainable articulation route.

Partnership development activities are based on embedding regular and ongoing opportunities for open, inclusive communication. We see this as the cornerstone of any long-standing collaborative relationship between the partners. An important aspect of the partnership approach relates to Edinburgh Napier University’s offer of staff development opportunities for college lecturers who wish to gain a more advanced qualification relevant to their teaching area.

Central to our preparation activities is the notion that social engagement and academic performance are not independent issues, but rather inextricably linked. So, although we provide associate students with a range of academic skills workshops, guest lectures and opportunities to attend seminars and labs, as well as shared working between staff teams on material development for delivery in colleges, we also make use of social media, such as Facebook and Twitter (Selwyn 2009). In attempting to engage more informally with associate students, we seek to open up opportunities for social interaction between those studying at college and those at university (Jenkins et al 2012).

To encourage the formation of the associate student identity as a specific group of college students, our partnership model incorporates branded marketing activity. This comprises posters, leaflets and website content to ensure students, staff and, importantly, parents are aware of the importance and significance of the project and of the benefits that await those who make the transition to university (Martin et al 2014).

**Methodology**

The research and associated practice that we describe in this paper was part of preliminary investigation (now underway) for a longitudinal project which is framed by cultural historical activity theory (Engeström 2000).
Ethical approval for this research and for the more extensive study which will follow has been granted from the Edinburgh Napier faculty research integrity committee. At all times, ethical considerations and the privacy of all participants have been prioritised, obtaining informed consent from individuals and anonymising contributions from all students and staff.

Between the start of the associate student project in September 2013 and April 2014, we adopted a range of qualitative approaches to data collection. Focus groups were used to obtain rich qualitative data from participants in four partner colleges about their experiences of being associate students and to seek their views about the partnership working that was apparent between their college and Edinburgh Napier University. Further focus groups were undertaken with third-year direct entrants to university, who, although not part of the associate student project, had themselves followed the same pathway to university. The focus group interviews were recorded and transcribed. For the purposes of data analysis in this preliminary stage of our research, a priori data codes were applied to meaningful segments of the transcription texts (Bryman 2012).

Staff views on partnership working and the associate student project were also sought through informal discussions with the associate student college liaison. Monthly partnership meetings between college and university representatives of the associate student project constitute the formal channel of communication across all institutions in the partnership. Notes taken during these meetings provided further valuable data which we have analysed thematically for use in the study.

**Findings**

Focus group interviews in college revealed that associate students identify the need to develop their academic skills in order to prepare for university:

‘I didn’t do that great at school in sixth year so thought I’d have to go to college and get the requirements to get into university. And at college I can take time to develop my skills.’

Associate student focus group participant
A bilateral approach to good practice in articulation which is centred on these two interconnected concepts – partnership and preparation – can protect and enhance the integrity of articulation as a route to higher education.

Our focus group data also suggested that students coming to university value the opportunities that social media create to develop contact with their counterparts at university (Selwyn 2009). Students recognise that, as direct entrants, they can find themselves confined to a group of former college students, finding it difficult to blend in with the existing student cohort. Likewise, this focus group determined that access to the online learning environment, with a dedicated page for the associate students had been an invaluable resource.

Our focus groups with third-year direct entrants revealed that they felt strongly about the issue of student identity:

‘Last year if I was saying I was a student it didn't feel good saying I was a college student. This year it feels good to say I’m at uni. It makes me feel proud.’

Third-year direct entry focus group participant

University student status gives associate students the opportunity to integrate with other university students on campus in libraries, students associations and through other facilities. Focus groups revealed that students value these opportunities, even though they are not always used consistently among the group:

‘I feel privileged – as an associate you get to use the facilities, we had the matriculation event, extra resources, Moodle.’

Associate student focus group participant

As can be seen, Tuomi-Gröhn and Engeström’s (2003) perspectives on consequential transition involving the development of identities are certainly reflected in our focus group discussions.

Feedback from college students who had attended an open day for associate engineering students indicates that students also value the opportunity to explore the university campus:

‘really good to get the feel of the place before we start.’

Associate engineering students open-day attendee
They particularly appreciated opportunities to meet the programme team. In future events, they wanted to attend lectures and spend more informal time meeting other first-year students:

‘I want to take part in something with the first years, rather than just be visitors.’

Associate engineering students open-day attendee

We see evidence here that students perceive the boundaries expressed as differences between college and university, and that they recognise their role as visitors and look forward to belonging as undergraduates at university.

Conclusions

The importance of developing a strong partnership between university and partner colleges has been highlighted in many further to higher education transition studies (Gallacher 2009; Pike and Harrison 2011). Our experience is consistent with this research, and we have identified that strong active partnership is fundamental to the future success of the associate student project. We have sought to move away from a traditional college–university partnership that is primarily expressed in terms of formal documents and historical agreements. Instead, we have worked to ensure that our partnership with colleges is one which is dynamic, responsive and emergent, and which works well in the flatter organisational structures that prevail in colleges. University committee structures impose a degree of formality that we have found to be less well aligned with college culture where business is transacted on a more relational basis.

Through the appointment of a lecturer with specific responsibilities for college liaison, informal engagement with staff has been enabled. This has allowed for a different sort of dialogue to emerge which is open, transparent and collegial. Team teaching with university and college staff has also created opportunities for staff to appreciate each other’s expertise and to ‘open windows onto each other’s practices’ (Wenger 2000: 235).

The uptake by students of the various support initiatives has been variable over the year. Aligning student expressions of interest for certain initiatives with their actual participation at arranged events has sometimes been challenging. We have come to recognise that, although students would like to attend
university events, guest lectures and other off-campus events, often their part-time work commitments or travel arrangements from their partner college to university make attendance more difficult than we had originally anticipated. This preliminary research has greatly assisted our understanding of the challenges that face students as they move across the boundaries between college and university and has ensured that our support interventions for the future are informed by student perspectives as well as those of experienced practitioners.

Informal meetings and discussions with students and staff have been instrumental in the production of this model of partnership and preparation. Listening to students and involving them in decision-making in relation to future support initiatives will continue to be a priority. Our findings have reminded us that the status of being an associate student is not, in itself, beneficial and may potentially decrease the students’ likelihood to make the transition to university if they are deterred by a lack of visible university support. Interventions must be coordinated, academically appropriate, subject specific and be supported by college partners and students. Associate student status is just the starting point for a series of interventions and the beginning for partnership and preparation.

Future research

A longitudinal study is underway which explores the experience of a group of associate students in college, following them as they articulate to university the following year. We expect this study to offer insights into the student experience of boundary crossing, and of the interventions which enable and inhibit successful articulation. Further studies exploring aggregated quantitative data obtained from the student record systems, tracking the progression and attainment of direct entrants in comparison with their first-year entry counterparts, are also underway.
References


Kift, S (2009) *Articulating a transition pedagogy to scaffold and to enhance the first year student learning experience in Australian higher education. Final report for ALTC senior fellowship program*. Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane.


Section C: Supporting student groups

