Academic Development and Induction: The Opportunity of Week One

What is Academic Development?

The primary aim of Academic Development is to increase student academic achievement (and hence academic success as viewed by the student, and as measured by the University) through the promotion and expansion of learning opportunities that foster increased capability through independent enquiry, purposeful and meaningful engagement, community through learning and active participation.

Looking at learning as a journey, where competencies, abilities and behaviours are accrued or developed and rehearsed to increasing levels of nuance and success over time, we can move on from the remedial ‘study skills’ model of provision, to one that is conceived as a degree-long journey that develops the key aims of academic development from pre-arrival through to preparation for graduation. This is a significant departure from the study skills approach, which is often dislocated from the subject discipline, and as such risks becoming a static, abstract and ineffective solution for learning development. A primary objective of academic development should be to engage learners in the process of their learning, as meaningful and purposeful engagement is one of the most convincing ways of enhancing learning and thus achievement, hopefully with the incidental outcome of higher levels of student satisfaction. An HEA Report by Trowler and Trowler (2010) provides a comprehensive review of student engagement literature within higher education including useful definitions of engagement as well as case studies on how to better enhance engagement in a variety of areas spanning the social, curricula and non-curricula domains.

A student journey approach to Academic Development

Overview

Supporting student Academic Development requires the university to take a complete and holistic view of all the ways in which a student needs to adapt to University life and university-level teaching and learning in order to succeed. By taking a student centred approach to designing academic development opportunities and provision we can begin to identify the multitude of stages where students typically need support with their learning, or with making the transition to different styles or higher levels of learning. An understanding of these transition points, e.g. arrival at University, starting year two, support during placement etc., has the potential to give us a good base from which to design an academic development curriculum.

With this in mind, some guiding principles for good practice in academic development can be summarised as: collaborative, holistic, inclusive, reflective, interactive, relevant and timely (Hill and Tinker, 2013). The University therefore needs to support the many
facets of academic development, guided by the overarching principles above, in ways that effectively meet the development needs of all students from wherever their starting point. We need to actively seek opportunities for providing support at the point where it is needed, in such a way that it is incorporated (embedded where relevant) into the mainstream curriculum and not seen as irrelevant to it.

Mapping the Student Journey

The schematic presented in Figure 1 offers a simplified view of the student journey in terms of key academic milestones, transition points and level descriptors (as taken from the Qualification and Credits Framework for Levels 4-6). In addition, the primary facets of academic development are included. Here, the student journey is typified as 3 full-time undergraduate years, however the author recognises that this does not represent the full range of study options available, and is only an illustration of an approach to academic development, which can later be expanded and extrapolated for use with students on longer degrees, studying part time or studying for a postgraduate qualification.

Figure 1. The Student Journey – a conceptual framework for mapping academic milestones against academic development needs.
Whilst the milestones and transition points are generalised, it is hoped that this approach offers a new framework for how to understand academic development in context of ‘the student journey’ relative to the remedial and static study skills approach.

By taking this approach we can see Week One/Induction week in the broader context of the student journey, where it marks the beginning of a student’s academic development needs but does not sit discrete from the rest of their learning. The opportunity for Week One is therefore to lay the ground work for later academic development, and in the next section we will explore approaches to Week One in more detail, including a rationale for creating a new alternative to the current Week One offering.

The challenge of arrival

Introduction

A formative time in the experience of any new student is the moment they arrive on campus, perhaps arriving in a different country, almost always to a new way of life that they will be unfamiliar with. The culture shock is both social and academic, with the need to quickly configure an independent approach to life that they might not have experienced before. No more will they have parents monitoring them and their behaviour, and neither will they experience the school system they have become accustomed to. The support we offer, therefore, needs to be sympathetic to the academic difference they will be facing immediately from Week One, but also the changed social structure that they find themselves in. In short, we have the job of supporting the student’s transition to University.

Supporting transitions is a key job within the broader gamut of Academic Development, and is not restricted to the first semester of the first year. To the contrary, students make gradual and step-wise transitions through the entirety of their degree, with pronounced pinch points at arrival, the beginning of year two, the beginning of year 3, and in the lead up to graduation (Figure 1) with additional, perhaps more subtle, transition points around first assessment, first feedback experience, first exam, and first suite of exams that count beyond the qualifying year etc. At each stage the aim of support may be nuanced and slightly different from the last, and this is most noticeable in the (albeit) generalised switch of focus from predominantly social support and ‘low level’ academic support in the first few weeks of University, to more rigorous academic support as students adapt to the step-up in academic difficulty. Each stage is important to ensure continuing success and there is no evidence to suggest that particular aspects of academic development can be overlooked in favour of focusing attention elsewhere.

The importance of Community and Belonging

Transition support at the point of induction can be viewed as having a distinct ‘flavour’ that is centred on fostering a sense of belonging and community. An HEA Report published in 2012 (Thomas, 2012) provides a comprehensive review of the literature in
this area, as well as case studies of good practice, and highlights the role of belonging with student retention and academic engagement. There is widespread agreement that what will trigger a student to fail rather than succeed, or to leave rather than stay, in the first weeks up until Christmas vacation, is the degree to which they feel they belong; their sense of being part of a community. It has been demonstrated that academic competency (or lack thereof) at the earliest stages of study is not the key problem in retention, but instead is the ability of a student to deal with their academic competency within the community. In short, where students struggle with the level of work, this can be overcome with good peer and staff support, but without that a student will feel cut loose and may feel ‘they don’t belong’ in Higher Education.

Feelings of community and belonging do not result simply from ‘being a student at Nottingham University’ but instead come from a sense of belonging that is forged within smaller sub-groups or learning communities such as those in societies, disciplines, programmes, modules and tutor groups. With this in mind the job of supporting student transition at the point of induction, starting in Week One is not the job of one central service, but should be jointly owned between student services, the Student Union and vitally Schools and Departments, where students will spend most of their time.

The opportunity therefore is to help students make the transition to University not just through social integration into sports clubs and social societies, but also to the communities within their school that will, from the start, help them identify themselves as ‘an engineer’, ‘an historian’, ‘a chemist’ etc. The benefit of schools taking an active and considered approach to transition support is that a sense of social belonging can be created through the provision of meaningful and relevant academic development opportunities; tasks, events and meeting places that speak to the value of peer support, community building, and integration within the disciplinary culture.

How can Schools support community building and foster a sense of belonging?

Week One should be conceived as a chance for schools to help students become part of the academic community through a combination of structured tasks and the creation of informal opportunities that enable students to independently make their own way to a community they feel at home with. Not only will this increase the chance of academic success in the future (by providing a framework of staff and peer support that they can tap into later on) but from the outset they are guided in the value of aligning themselves with the subject they have come to study. The discipline they choose will not be their whole world if they are to become a balanced and rounded graduate, but it will be at the heart of a successful experience.

The benefit of this approach is that it gives an alternative to the sometimes intimidating culture of drinking and partying that can, to some students, feel like the only option for ‘fitting in’. This is particularly the case for international students. Whilst there is no desire to shut down the opportunities offered by social societies, the University should be confident in providing a complementary approach to Week One that is relevant and credible and will ultimately pave the way for future academic development support after
the first few weeks. In recent years, Nottingham Trent University have restyled their Welcome Week in partnership between the University and the Student Union, providing a programme of over 350 academic and social activities that focus on fostering a sense of belonging and support in an inclusive environment. The week is conspicuous for its absence of alcohol.

**Should Week One include teaching?**

In recent years attempts to partition Week One from ‘teaching’ has, on this issue, led to an unhelpful division between Schools and the Student Union. A benchmarking exercise across competitor institutions suggests that practice in the area of Induction/Week One is variable with some universities starting teaching within the first week, and others leaving it as a purely social week. Following the lead of other institutions might be unhelpful as the picture is ever-changing, as is constraining Week One to an either/or scenario.

How universities ‘deal with’ Week One is changing all the time, with students becoming more involved in shaping how the week operates. With this in mind it will be advantageous for students and staff to work in partnership to shape Week One, reclaiming it as a positive week, perhaps allowing the line to be blurred between ‘social’ and ‘teaching’, where activities on either side can have both social and academic-related outcomes.

Whilst, some schools may feel that timetabled teaching is necessary in Week One, a Student Union report suggests that formal teaching remains unpopular, whilst structured teaching-related content is seen as beneficial. Some suggested activities include:

- How to sign up for modules
- Information sessions on any School-run Nottingham Advantage Award modules
- Issue of equipment relevant for programme
- Introduction to study skills
- Interactive lectures on academic integrity
- Introductory sessions for library resources
- Sessions on international exchange opportunities

**What does good Induction support look like?**

The literature is replete with examples of good practice around supporting students in their transition to University (both teaching-related and social), and thus their early academic development. Likewise, there is considerable good practice within the University (some of which is included below). Whilst these ideas are the basis of a good programme for induction at Week One, they are not exclusive to Week One and are likely to be more successful when they continue into the first Semester and beyond (as relevant)

- A **well-structured** and **timetabled** programme
- **Partnership approach** to design and implementation
• Pre-arrival welcome and community building opportunities e.g. use of Facebook groups, engagement with the newly created transition NOOC

• Teaching-related opportunities and events e.g. relevant day trips, programme of induction to work spaces and labs etc.

• Informal opportunities to socialise within discipline with staff and students, at various times of the day e.g. social events based around common themes rather than alcohol, and not all at night.

• Foregrounding a culture which elevates importance of being part of the discipline community e.g. interactive, enjoyable sessions on e.g. ‘becoming a computer scientist’ based around fun opportunities and ice-breaker activities (e.g. Hackathon)

• Opportunities for peer support e.g. Peer Mentoring schemes, PASS

• Early stage academic development that introduces students to common systems they need to get to grips with e.g. tasks that require the use of moodle, visiting the library etc.

• Clear information on systems, processes and people. E.g. handbook information

• Reflective opportunities combined with discipline approach e.g. art history reflective writing in Week One on how they have found it so far. First chance for feedback from staff, first chance to write, chance to offload in a structured, confidential way.

• Meeting with tutors

• Provision of social space for meaningful formal and informal interactions with staff and fellow students.

Whilst meeting with personal tutors and schemes such a peer mentoring are included in the list, these two specific examples are more that initiatives with value in their own right, they are also vehicles for delivering some of the broader aims and objectives of transition support and academic development. A well thought out Tutorial system and Peer Mentoring scheme will provide a good structure for supporting many of the specific tasks and initiatives that a school would like to include in a programme of induction, with the added benefit that both systems take the student beyond their first few weeks at University. For example, a recent internal study exploring contact hour attendance within two schools within the institution reveals that peer mentoring might be helpful in alleviating attendance issues; where mentors act as both peers and role models to students who might otherwise be tempted to skip class.

It should not be forgotten that despite our best will, students will often know their own social needs (and issues) better than we do. We therefore need to not just provide the openings for students to get to know staff that they can trust; they should also be involved in designing their own support for each other and future students. Many universities have been successful in encouraging their own established students to shape what Week One looks like within the discipline context. Handing over the reins is not absolving schools and departments of the responsibility (they will always have a key role in supporting students, and leveraging resource) but it does ensure an approach that is as relevant and inclusive as it can be.
Conclusions – a change to Week One?

As an institution, our challenge is to host a welcoming and useful Induction/Week One experience to all students. To do this schools may require clear and pragmatic guidance on what elements make up a successful, timely and relevant ‘programme’ of support for students when they arrive at University (and indeed, before they arrive). It needs to be achievable within resourcing models, and where there is not enough resource more should be given to support this formative time in the student journey, in order to lay the groundwork for future academic success.

Whilst good practice abounds within the institution, there is currently no agreed ‘position’ on what constitutes an appropriate level of support during induction, meaning that students will currently experience differing degrees of support depending on the discipline they themselves in. Perhaps the largest challenge exists for schools that are large in student number and therefore find it hard to foster a sense of belonging and community with existing resources in such a large cohort. In this respect, offering practical guidance on how to structure a Week One programme might be useful.

The role of meaningful support in the earliest weeks of study should not be underestimated. A programme designed to enable community building and a sense of belonging through academic involvement and engagement will only serve to be beneficial in the long term, and may negate the unfavourable issues of poor engagement further down the line. Engagement with learning is a key indicator of academic success amongst many other positive outcomes (Tross, Harper Osher & Kneidinger 2000; Rush and Balamoutsou, 2006; Lizzio and Wilson 2009 etc.), and how we engage students from day one will set an example of the expectations of engagement as study progresses. A model for Week One that foregrounds a professional approach to studying, alongside social integration, will make it easier for students to understand what is expected of them during their time at Nottingham, and what they can expect from us during their whole period of study in return.