PADSHE Project

Case study

A description of the activities and procedures for the personal and academic development of mature students within the Department of Historical and Critical Studies at the University of Northumbria at Newcastle.

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February 1999

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Introduction

This report outlines the findings of a Case Study, which was undertaken as part of the PADSHE project. The purpose of this particular Case Study is to provide a description of the activities and procedures for personal and academic development of mature students within the Department of Historical and Critical Studies at the University of Northumbria at Newcastle.

This document is initially addressed to those individuals involved in the PADSHE project at UNN and ultimately to members of the wider PADSHE team. It ought also to be read in conjunction with those other reports that have been produced at UNN and also those produced as part of the wider project.

Methodology

The data from which the findings are taken was drawn from audiotaped interviews conducted with a small number of students (n=5) undertaking the BA (Hons) English Studies and the BA (Hons) History within the Department of Historical and Critical Studies. All of those interviewed were full-time mature undergraduate students and interviewing took place during late November 1998, being conducted by a research assistant working with the internal evaluator.

Although the interviewing used mainly an open-ended approach to questioning, the use of general areas of interest in relation to the project and its objectives was used to guide the discussions. These areas are as follows:
1. Differences in student needs
2. Pre-entry guidance
3. Use of an appropriate induction programme for the course/students
4. Availability/use of personal tutoring system
5. Guidance on academic progress
6. Overall views on the PAR system
7. Careers guidance
8. Independent learning and reflection on learning.

The audiotapes were later transcribed and subjected to a thematic analysis of the data.

It is acknowledged that only very limited numbers of students were interviewed. The main reasons for this are:
1. The accessibility/ availability of mature students for interviewing purposes.
2. The relatively low numbers of full-time mature students currently undertaking undergraduate degrees within the Department of Historical and Critical Studies.

In view of the small sample size, the findings should not be taken to represent the experience of all mature students but nevertheless they do raise important issues that need to be considered in the development of personal and academic support for students.

Findings

Differences in student needs

All of the mature students interviewed felt that their needs, in many respects, were somewhat different to those of their peers who were accessing the course by more traditional ways. The perceived needs specifically identified by these particular interviewees were largely of a more practical nature, such as:

a) timetabling issues (such as having large gaps during the day with no lectures/seminars etc.)
b) the difficulty of arriving at the university for an early morning start, particularly if the student had children [not just young children]
c) the inability to meet with peers on their course for the purposes of socialisation etc.
d) financial problems
e) problems with travelling

In reality, however, some of these identified needs (such as the need to meet socially with other students) may not be specific only to mature students.

Pre-entry support and information

Opinions regarding pre-entry support and information were, predominantly, favourable. The University offers a variety of methods, which enable students to obtain guidance when selecting courses and applying to the University. Examples include: advice from Departmental Admissions Teams, including specialist admission tutors, Institutional Open Days, including one specifically for those students participating in Access courses together with a student shadowing scheme (for mature students undertaking HEFC (Access) courses).

Some of the students interviewed had used all of the above methods, whilst others had only had guidance from admissions tutors. For those students who had accessed the mature student shadowing scheme, this method was viewed in a very positive manner as it had allowed the students the opportunity to experience, at first hand, university life and the chance to ask other students about the course, assessments etc.

The Open Day was felt to be useful, but not as useful as the student-shadowing scheme. Opinions concerning the information/support provided by departmental admissions tutors was, for the mature students interviewed, seen as being adequate, but not necessarily specifically meeting the needs of mature students.

Use of an appropriate induction programme

Most of the students failed to address this issue in any significant way during the interview process. Two students, however, were quite negative about how they perceived the apparent lack of an appropriate induction programme for their own particular course. The lack of such a programme, they felt, was detrimental to them being able to form appropriate meaningful relationships with their peers on the course. Introduction to fellow students on the course was seen as being very important, especially for them as mature students. The reason for this was

not merely to do with issues of being able to socialise [outside of lectures] etc. There was a more far-reaching but subtle importance attached to the need to be able to get to know other students on the course other than for the purposes of "going to the pub."

"...as freshers we never knew the other people within the group...I walked into one group where I didn't know a single soul...and there was no effort made to introduce anyone..."

Information about the course, assignments, tutoring arrangements (pastoral and academic), library and IT facilities, etc., although of some importance to these mature students, appeared to be secondary to that of the need to "gel" effectively with fellow students.

Availability/use of the personal tutoring system

With the exception of the two students mentioned previously, comments regarding the personal tutoring system available to the mature students [and all students within the University] were very positive. Most respondents felt that their personal tutors were available and approachable. One mature student in particular had experienced major personal problems at an early stage of her course and her tutor had been very helpful and supportive to her during the difficult period. She had greatly appreciated the very sensitive manner in which her problem had been handled by academic staff within her department.

Unfortunately, the experiences of the two aforementioned students had been somewhat different and they were very critical of the apparent lack of approachability of their personal tutors. In considering this, the immediate and obvious explanation would be to say that a personality clash existed between the students and their tutor. Further consideration of the evidence, however, would appear to suggest that relationships [both positive and negative] between students and tutors may tend to be self-reinforcing.

One student, for example, had commented positively:

"It's nice to think that someone has got confidence in you...it does help you, just that encouragement...there's someone on your side..."

adding later on:

"I think that tutors have an attitude towards mature students...they seem to have a lot more time for you...I think that mature students go for it more...I know I do!"

Conversely, negative comments were offered, such as:

"...the tutors just don't want to know your problems. It's as if they are alien. You have to sort it out yourself, if you have children. You are here and you are doing your best, but that's by the by [to them]"

"I actually made a point of going to see the tutor whose assignment I had to hand in, just to ask for help and at least I have the satisfaction of knowing that I went and bothered him and he had to put himself out to speak to me."

Academic guidance

In relation to academic guidance, views appeared to span a continuum from feeling that such guidance was very poor to believing that the support available was exceptional. Once again, factors in the relationships between students and tutors will have an influence on how students perceive this support.

Most of these mature students regarded the academic support that they received as being appropriate. Examples were given of both formal and informal means of obtaining support/ feedback etc. about academic work. In one particular case, an academic tutor had gone to considerable lengths to provide information/support for a final year student undertaking a dissertation – something that this student appreciated very highly. On the other hand, several students felt that they could not/would not access academic support.

Overall views of the PAR folder

When considering the use/appropriateness of the PAR folder to these particular group of interviewees, they felt that the PAR folder (or the "Blue Book" as they have been called within UNN) were not really relevant, in their present form, to mature students.

Most comments ranged from being neutral to openly unfavourable. In particular, the personal part of the folder was regarded as being of little relevance to mature students. Reference was made to the need to list leisure interests in the folder, this was felt to be unnecessary for mature students. Comments regarding the section for the recording of academic results were more favourable. The students did believe that this was a useful resource, but they weren't totally sure of how it could actually be of use to them in the future.

When discussing how the folders were utilised by their personal tutors, views were very mixed. One mature student stated that her tutor spent a lot of time using the folder in the manner intended. Another student was very negative about how her own personal tutor used the folder – she thought that "it was treated as a joke"[by the personal tutor].

Careers guidance

Views concerning careers guidance were varied due to several reasons:

a) The stage of the course that the interviewee had reached (i.e. the earlier the stage in the course the less likely the student was to see the need to access careers guidance).

b) Failure to appreciate the comprehensive role of careers guidance services (there appeared to be a tendency for these particular mature students to see careers guidance as being told about various different jobs).

c) Apathy/disinterest in accessing such information/advice.

Only one of the respondents was aware of the wider role of careers guidance within the university and the need to consider just exactly what skills had been personally acquired as a

result of taking an undergraduate programme of study. This particular student (a third year undergraduate) said that she had been avoiding going to the careers guidance service [for personal advice], although she had looked at written information within the centre.

Reflective learning and independent learning

Interestingly the majority of interviewees saw themselves as independent learners as they had chosen to come into higher education at a later stage in their life. In accessing higher education as mature students, they perceived themselves as having already acquired the skills necessary for lifelong learning, predominantly as a result of past life experiences. Examples such as: by holding down responsible positions of employment, by searching for any information/knowledge that they had needed if they had been interested in a subject [prior to coming to university] were given.

In reality, independent learning to these particular students meant being self-motivated, self-reliant and working on your own (at one extreme, for one interviewee, the idea of independent learning went as far as not collaborating with fellow students, i.e. working totally alone). Most of the students interviewed felt confident in this area perceiving themselves as having to be independent learners both during their quest to access and then pursue undergraduate education. For some students, it did have negative implications in that they felt that the lecturers were not doing their jobs and leaving it all to the students.

In considering the skills element of the PAR some motivated students held a fairly common view (McDowell 1993) that they already had the personal skills and qualities gained as a result of life experience. When considering the adoption of these elements within PAR, this view needs to be taken into account.

"They are more geared towards how you find yourself changing from being a schoolchild to, supposedly, developing into a mature adult and acquiring personal skills along the way. I hope, by now, I have already done lots of that."

In considering the views expressed by this particular group of interviewees, there didn't seem to be any clear picture in relation to the concept of reflection. [In some ways, this was not altogether surprising, as this lack of a clear view of reflection has been expressed at earlier stages during the PADSHE project]. Barnett (1997) has suggested that there are various definitions of the term "self-reflection". There was a certain degree of self-reflective thinking evident in relation to the following:
1. motivation for study
2. skills developed on the course
3. relationships with younger students
4. self-confidence in studying and its development
5. changes in personal views, attitudes etc.

For example, in considering how self-confidence develops over the period of undergraduate study, one student commented:

"You speak in a different way, you use different words. I was talking about this last night. I was having a look at an essay…I was putting in words like "discourse". I just wouldn't dream of doing that three years ago…it does change your attitude, definitely – yes."

There was evidence to suggest that, in actual fact, students did perceive themselves as undergoing a developmental change in relation to the way that they learnt. This developmental process, however, did not appear to be informed or encouraged by the use of the PAR system. One student whom, it appeared, had made a reflective entry in her folder found that it was then completely ignored by the lecturer.

"…I would say that I am a little bit disappointed…I had made a comment on why I was here…how I felt that I had gone [made progress] and I expected the personal tutor to put a comment on it and he didn't, and I thought, "Well" and that's how I didn't think that they were taking it very seriously."

Conclusion

In conclusion, these mature students did perceive themselves as having different needs to those of their younger contemporaries. The needs, however, were predominantly of a more practical nature and it was felt that if the University were to attempt to address these needs then mature students would be more able to cope successfully with all of the demands placed upon them both as individuals and as undergraduates.

Evidence suggested that this particular university did, on the whole, provide high quality pre-entry guidance and support for mature students, a fact that was appreciated by the students interviewed. Views concerning the availability of an appropriate induction programme were less favourable, especially the lack of introductions to fellow students. This was perceived as being a major problem to mature students as they tried to integrate into university life. In addition, the importance of preventing negative reinforcement of student-tutor relationships needs to be addressed if students are to benefit fully from personal and academic tutoring. The personal element of the PAR folder was felt to be of little value to mature students as they already regarded themselves as being lifelong learners with a proven ability to learn independently – a process which they believed was enriched by their life experiences prior to coming to university. The students interviewed did, however, see the value of being able to keep a written record of their marks etc. The opinion of these particular group of mature students was that the PAR folder as used in its present form within the University was not of particular value to them overall and would need to be modified in light of the comments made and the differing needs of mature students.

Appendix

Points for consideration by the Department of Historical and Critical Studies

- Practical arrangements can make a considerable difference in the ability of students (not just mature students) to cope with their course in conjunction with the many competing demands on their time, and financial pressures.

- The value of good pre-entry guidance is confirmed by the experiences of mature students.

- Induction programmes and their follow-ups could usefully include more opportunities for the social integration of the student group.

- Both personal and academic tutoring include a personal relationship. Clearly some individuals may simply not get on together. Ways of avoiding negative reinforcement of the staff-student relationship should be considered as this may possibly seriously affect student performance and retention.

- Reflection on development, motivations, aspirations etc. could be better integrated into the PAR folder and tutorial discussions for all students. Mature students may have some particular views and experience that cause them to react differently to ideas about reflection and development compared to younger students.

References

Barnett, R. (1997) Higher education: a critical business. The Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

McDowell, L. (1993) Enterprise Education and Part-time students. Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education. Vol 18 (3):187-204.