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'TALKING AND SHARING': THE ROLE OF PEER SUPPORT IN THE TRANSITION FROM FE TO HE

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Introduction

In Scotland some 46.4 per cent of young people enter higher education before they are 21 (www.scottishexecutive.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics). However, a large factor within this success story is that about a fifth of all HE students are studying Higher National courses in FE colleges (SFC, 2005) and it is the colleges that have the most success in attracting students from a wide range of backgrounds. Transition from FE to HE is not automatic, however, and most students who move from FE into HE enter post-92 universities (Gallacher, 2006). This appears to be due to a combination of students' choice of HE institutions and institutions' admission policies that make it less likely that 'elite' universities will admit students with 'alternative' entry qualifications. This study is unusual in that it is focused on the experience of students who have entered an 'elite' institution directly from FE. The aim of the study is to find out from the students themselves how they fare over their university education. This paper draws on the second phase of the study and reports on the experiences of this group of non-traditional students during their first year at University with a particular focus on the impact of peer support.

Methodology

The sample comprises 45 students who came to the university with HNC and HND qualifications directly from FE colleges and were studying social science or humanities subjects. As can be seen from the table below most were mature students.

Table 1 Age and sex of informants

Age	Female	Male
Under 20	7	4
21-30	6	4
31-40	18	
41-50	4	
50-60	2	
Total	37	8

The study uses in-depth interviews at the end of each semester covering the whole learning environment for students. All interviews are taped, transcribed, and subsequently coded using the N*Vivo qualitative analysis package. This involves drawing out the major themes of the interviews and then assessing the applicability of these themes across the interviews as a whole. These data are used to explore in more depth the relationship with other students and the factors that helped or hindered engagement with their courses. Each student was allocated an identifying number and this is used to attribute quotes to individuals.

Two standardised questionnaires developed by the Enhancing Teaching-Learning Environments in Undergraduate Courses (ETL) project at the University of Edinburgh (www.ed.ac.uk/etl) are also used to examine the students' perceptions of the teaching-learning environment on their courses in their main subject area(s) (see Entwistle, et al (2003). There are also questions about the demands made by their courses, and the knowledge and skills the students feel they have gained from their University studies to date. The questionnaires are coded using SSPS.

In this paper both sets of data are used to examine the students' experiences of teaching and learning and the role that other students played in their ability to learn and be part of the university community.

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Findings

In this section we firstly focus on the students' experiences of their teaching-learning environments and how students made the transition from the familiar methods in FE to new methods of learning in HE. We next look at the role of group work in encouraging learning and the part that peers play in building confidence. Finally we consider the factors that contribute to students developing a sense that they are 'fitting in' and entitled to be at university (see Bamber and Tett, 2001; Christie et al, 2006).

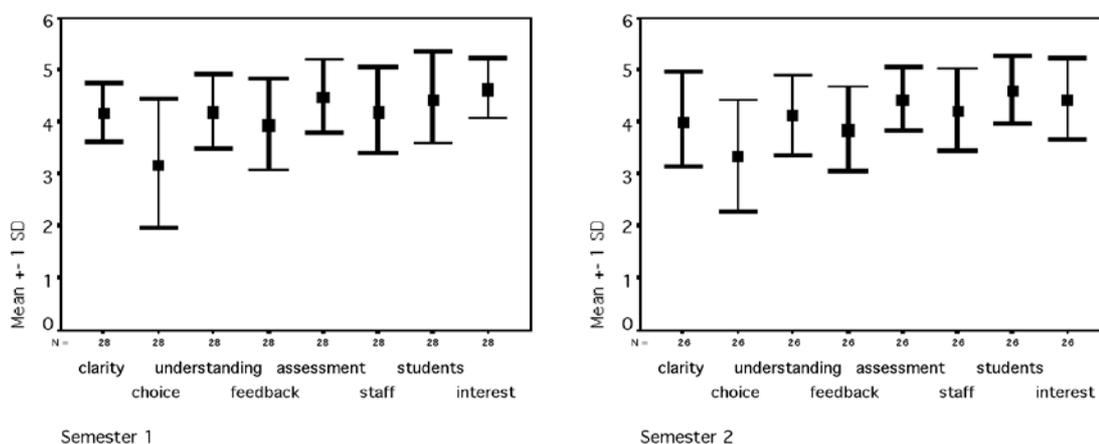
1) Students' experiences of their teaching-learning environments

The cohort of students were asked to complete a questionnaire about their perceptions of their teaching-learning environments, derived from the ETL project as described above, during the first and second semesters. They were asked how far they disagreed or agreed with statements on a scale of 1-5 and these items were grouped into scales to give a picture of how the students perceived:

- the clarity of course aims and how well these fitted with other aspects of the course
- the amount of choice given over what and how to study
- whether the teaching helped to gain understanding of the subject
- the guidance and feedback given on set work
- whether the assessment tasks measured their understanding of the topics
- how enthusiastic and supportive the staff were
- how well they learned from working with other students
- how interesting and enjoyable they found the course

As can be seen in Figure 1, the students were generally positive about their experiences of teaching and learning at the University, with mean scores above the mid-point of the scale for each aspect. The lowest scores were for 'choice': however this is not unusual for first-year courses where introductory course units tend to give little choice over what is to be studied.

Figure 1 Students' experiences of their teaching-learning environments



The scores for working with other students were high (Semester 1 Mean 4.46, SD .87; Semester 2 Mean 4.62, SD .65) and to explore this further the students were asked how far they agreed or disagreed with the following three items:

- Students supported each other and tried to give help when it was needed
- Talking with other students helped me to develop my understanding
- I found I could generally work comfortably with other students on my course

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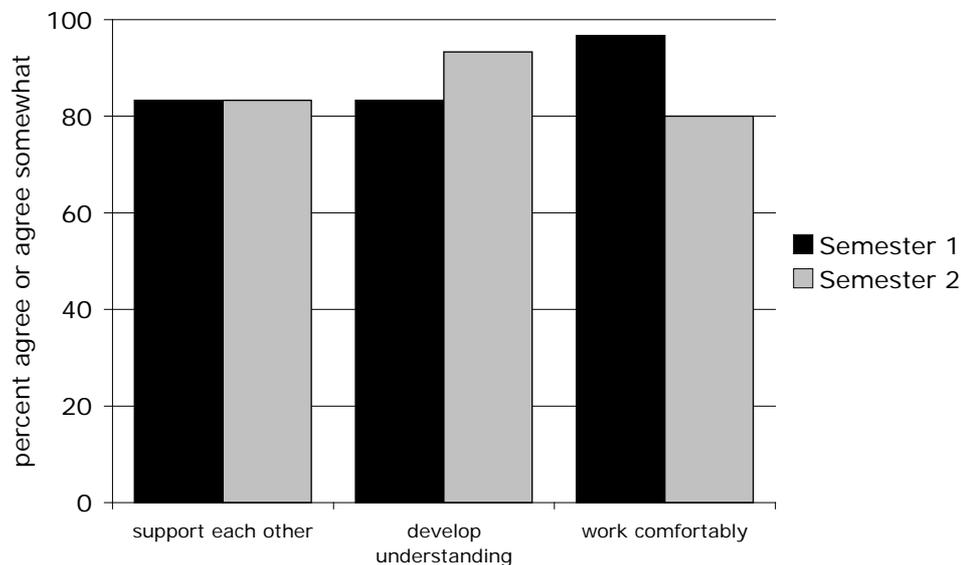
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Most of the students responded positively to these items, with at least 80 per cent agreeing or agreeing somewhat with each of these statements in both Semester 1 and Semester 2 (see Figure 2). In Semester 2 the students tended to be a little more positive about developing understanding by talking with other students and a little less positive about working comfortably with other students than in Semester 1.

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Figure 2 Working with other students

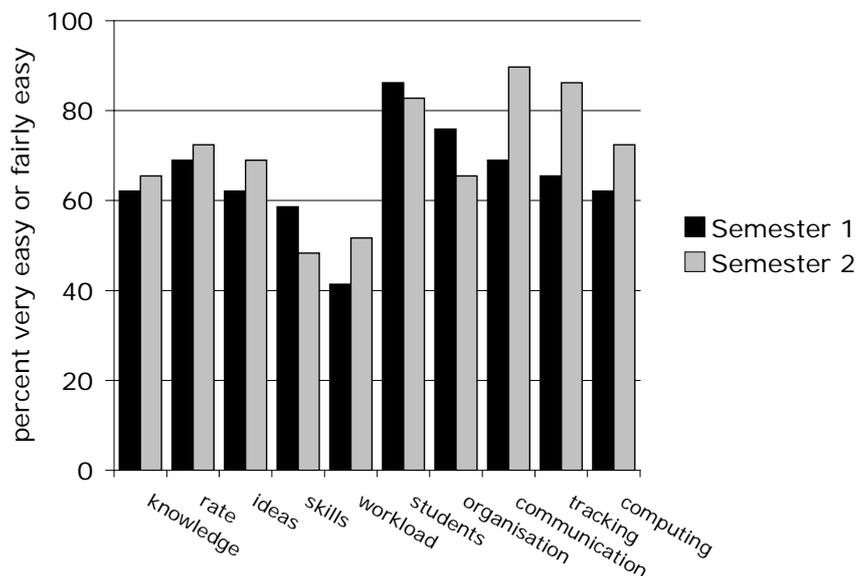


The students were also asked for their perceptions of how much they had learned during their first two semesters, on a scale of 1-5 (1 = very little, 5 = a lot). The students tended to report having learned either 'a lot' or 'quite a lot' for a range of knowledge and skills during both of their first two semesters at university, including understanding of topics, problem-solving, working with other students, organising their learning, communicating ideas and tracking down information. When asked about how easy or demanding they found various aspects of their studies on a scale of 1-5 (1 = very difficult, 5 = very easy), the students tended to report finding communicating knowledge and ideas, tracking down information and information technology and computing skills easier in their second semester than in their first semester (Figure 3). While they found the workload and subject-specific skills and technical procedures quite demanding, the aspect of their courses that proved least demanding for them in the first semester and relatively undemanding in the second semester was the expectation that they should work with other students, which was familiar to them from their FE studies.

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Figure 3 Perceived easiness of demands made by subject area



In order to further examine what and how they learned from working with other students we now turn to the qualitative interview data.

2) Peer Support and Learning

In this section we draw on the interviews, where students were asked to reflect back on their earlier experience, undertaken just after students started at the university, at the end of semester one and at the end of semester 2. From these data it was clear that positive relationships with other students were important in terms of learning and in generating a sense of belonging to the student community. This was particularly helpful in making the transition from the supportive environment of FE where 'the teaching staff were absolutely brilliant...and were always available' (22) and if anything was not clear 'they'd take time to explain it to you' (7). When students were interviewed just after they had started at university they anticipated that 'here you have to be more self-motivated' (5) and suggested that 'you're sort of petted at college' (1). At university they were part of a large cohort and didn't have the individual attention they had been used to, however, in many cases peers provided the support they had previously had from tutors or FE support services. Our respondents reported that they 'enjoyed meeting other students' (07) and spoke about the difference it made when you had someone with whom to share the university experience. 'It's taken the whole of the first semester to realise how important it is to talk to each other and share because...it has really made such a difference' (4) one student suggested. Friendships were particularly important when students were struggling a bit with their work. For example one student said:

Sometimes I feel that I shouldn't be here because I do struggle and I can see that some of the other people are taking it all in, while I am struggling and all the rest of it. But because the people in the class are so nice, it's OK' (35)

Some students spoke about relief at discovering that they were not the only or even the oldest of the mature students. In other cases, students spoke about feeling they did not fit in amongst the 'young ones' who might seem more much confident, especially at first. However, one student (22) talked about how that changed as the year progressed and she started to appreciate that she knew quite a lot of things that the young people didn't and that the young ones looked to her for support particularly 'in the tutorials'.

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Study groups seemed to have been particularly helpful because of the support they provided. They allowed students to 'bounce ideas off each other' (07). They aided understanding and reinforced what students had learned in lectures.

Our study group made a difference [because] when you've got somebody that you can say, 'oh I never took that from that', or 'I never thought they meant that' it helps you to understand' (22)

Group work improved student confidence in what they were doing and generally made the experience of university far more enjoyable.

What a difference [group learning] made because if you thought you were going completely insane and you got stuck, sometimes if you work through it as a group, you thought, 'god, yeah, I get it now. ... In our particular cluster, we have actually become really good friends and we have been able to support each other but sometimes when you are at your wits end you need someone to say that's not wrong what you're saying, you know, that kind of help (40).

Clearly this was dependent on the group working well. One student said she was lucky to have been in 'good groups' with students who were reliable and worked well together where 'everybody put the work in that needed to be done' (13). Another student said, 'the better you get on with people, the more you felt motivated' (09). Tutorials were cited as being important for this as well. 'Sometimes even talking in tutorials helps because you find that often other people have also misunderstood things that have been said' (04). Students also spoke about the importance of sharing ideas, listening to different points of view. 'In my [tutorial]...we have that varied knowledge base and experience base, so you're always learning from each other' (38).

It was through contact and working with others on the course that a student might come to realise that others didn't understand either and this would reduce feelings of isolation.

I think I learned most working in a group and then presenting to the class and then hearing everybody else's as well. ...I mean the one thing I would say is there's not a lot of help [compared to FE]. [Staff] are very approachable but you don't always get the answer you're looking for. So I think that's why I liked working in the groups because you had all those other people to speak to, like your peers within the group that could help each other (13)

Some respondents reported that they were more inclined to speak to other students than to academic staff about their difficulties and this was quite a contrast to their experience in FE. For example, one student spoke about her peers fulfilling a similar role to her tutor at college, drawing attention to the difficulty in getting any one-to-one support in large classes.

If I have a question or [when we are] working together, it's really peers that we work with. In comparison to College last year, it would usually be a tutor I would go to and then I could get guidance and then maybe work with the peers. But this time here, it's straight away to the peers and although my confidence is quite good, just to put a couple of questions up and see who gets back to you or even to email your tutor. It is quite good to have that (13)

However, groups might go off on a tangent or 'backtrack' and one student acknowledged the need for a more structured approach. 'We all have our own knowledge and experience base and we need someone to moderate the discussion' (38). Another student spoke about 'a coven (laughs) of three who hijacked every tutorial' (20). There might be problems with the dynamics of a group although one student said they used the 'inability to gel as a group and

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the problems that this raised as a source for essays for the other course. So that made sense to me' (39).

3) Fitting in

Respondents spoke about the factors that helped them feel part of the student community and overall, this depended on relationships with other students that were on their own programme.

You get to know people and that really helps because obviously if you enjoy it and that, you want to achieve your goals, you want to take part more and that then kind of works back on you, you're wanting to find out more and how to do it better (09).

Meeting other people at the beginning of their university career was helpful as one student pointed out:

I was fortunate that the girls ... that I sort of bonded with, I'd met through the *Moving On* course that was done before I started. That was for people who were in a similar situation to me ... It was people that had maybe a wee insight into real life, sort of thing. I was lucky that they were all in a similar situation and so were able to help each other and sort of felt for each other when you weren't coping with something.' (01)

This student reported later, however, that 'help and support were not on hand' in her own course and she subsequently withdrew. Others suggested that support from peers was best when you work together in projects or are involved in discussions 'because you learn from each other ... and everybody discusses different things' (37). Workplace experience could help in certain subjects and one student spoke about the positive difference that she felt her course work had already made in relation to her work practice.

Some spoke about fitting into the university as a matter of choice or that they were choosing not to exercise choice at this time. They were only there to study and then home, not wanting the social life etc. Age/ class /personal commitments were all relevant in this respect. For example, [I might fit in] 'if I was a bit younger and if I didn't have as many commitments' (27). 'It's pretty middle class [here] and I'm pretty much the working class boy and to be honest I don't really fit in but I'm not bothered, [as I'm] here to work' (27). 'Everyone [else] is rich, loud, over confident, public school boys who have no idea about people who are struggling' (02). 'Quite a lot of people didn't work and that sort of annoyed me, just the fact that I did have to work' (13)

Some students, especially those that were studying part-time, felt they were part of their course but not part of the university.

We come here at 4.30 and everybody else has gone home. I live away from university so I fit in with my class but whether the class fits in the university I don't know. We do feel a bit like an appendage (39)

Others reported that they didn't feel part of the wider student life 'because I'm always busy and as a mature student I have different feelings and different lifestyles (31). 'I haven't embraced the whole lifestyle like I might have if I was younger but I do feel that I fit in' (04). Some suggested that they were 'OK in classes and groups but not outside in the [wider] university life' (13) because they had to work and didn't have time. Some also felt that being part-time meant that 'the staff are friendly enough but don't know me from Adam, but that's no reason to feel that I don't fit in' (34).

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Students might not feel they were part of the wider student community, mainly due to their age, but had found similar people that helped them to fit in. 'I can see I'm certainly not the only mature student around and I have made a lot of friends (20). 'I don't feel left out but wouldn't bother if I did although I might if I was 18' (25). For others fitting in related to what they brought to their courses: 'I feel I am as entitled to be there as anybody else as my life experiences have all contributed to me being here' (04). Managing academically was also crucial in helping students to feel part of the university.

At the beginning it was like muscling in on the kids ... [but] I think once I got more into the swing of how things worked, where I was going, passing my exams, slotting in, [I felt] yeah, you should be here. I had felt overawed but now I've started to get [good] feedback and passing exams and joining in, that made the difference (22).

Conclusion

One of the difficulties in making the transition from FE to HE is getting used to unfamiliar methods of learning and teaching and building on the familiar use of group work gave students a sense of confidence and also helped enhance their skills and social competences. This was particularly valuable in programmes such as social work or child-care where the ability to work cooperatively with others was an important part of their professional development and demonstrates the 'constructive alignment' of the teaching-learning environment (see Biggs, 1996). Other studies (e.g. Rossin and Hyland, 2003) have shown how group participation can bring about both cognitive and social change for students and their wider communities and so this method of working also has wider benefits.

We have shown the impact of supportive peers and the role of group work in helping students who had come from FE adjust to studying at university. Warminton, (2002: 590) in his study of people on an Access to HE course, found that 'support networks constituted [both] personal and academic networking that produced mutual support predicated upon shared experiences'. Our findings are similar and show how shared external commonalities such as being a 'mature' student or having similar work responsibilities can help bind people together. The ability to talk to other students and share difficulties is very useful in helping people make sense of their courses if they are to succeed. Moreover, for students that are time-poor due to their family and work commitments peers offer readily available support that might not be seen as so accessible from staff.

Having a sense of 'entitlement' to participate in HE derives from the interplay between external experience and internalised feelings. As documented extensively in the literature (e.g. Archer et al, 2003; Osborne, 2003; Reay et al, 2001) such experiences can result in students whose families have not previously participated in HE feeling that they do not 'fit in'. The situation can be compounded by negative attitudes on the part of friends and partners. Deep-rooted feelings can therefore set up significant psychological barriers to students engaging fully with a course in HE (Lucy et al, 2003). However, entitlement to participate can become transformed into a 'right' when students are part of supportive networks and feel that they are coping academically. Research (e.g. Bowl, 2001; MacDonald and Stratta, 2001) shows the importance of finding others like yourself in university, and we have also seen that this support needs to be available at the level of the course if students are to be able to succeed and have a sense of 'fitting in'.

There are a number of implications from these findings for the support and retention of students making the transition from FE to HE. Firstly, building on familiar methods of learning and teaching such as working with other students in groups generates confidence and also helps students to communicate ideas. Secondly, encouraging the establishment of study-support groups is likely to lead to more positive learning experiences as students learn from each other and become more reflective in their approaches as they clarify what they do and do not understand. Finally, there needs to be a focus on isolated students who may not have the support from peers that are available for other students locally at the level of the course.

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