Overcoming barriers – widening access for all students

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Introduction

Government targets for widening participation in Higher Education are to some extent responsible for greater diversity within the student population. However, changes in British society over the last half century have also had an impact on the type of student we see in our universities.

Racial diversity within our society is now taken for granted and this is reflected in the students entering university. Lack of career stability has led to a demand for re-training and as a result more people are choosing to enter or return to university as mature students. Preece (1998:p.1) notes that the trend for a more diverse student population “has generally been stimulated by the upskilling needs of a fast changing world and demographic age population shifts.” This is also reflected in the fact that, for some, university education may be an opportunity which arises following retirement.

An improved welfare state has meant that disabled people may be better supported during their early education. As a result, more young people with special needs are achieving the entry requirements for university. In addition, increased material wealth has led to higher aspirations in terms of education. Parents have high expectations of their children and perceive university degrees as an essential to entering the jobs-market.

Students come to us having had many different experiences, with different expectations and with very different educational backgrounds. We, therefore, as university staff, can no longer assume that there is a common foundation for study within our student population. If our universities are to provide a stimulating educational experience, we need to be aware of the diverse nature of those backgrounds and to develop ways of working which will enable us to ensure that all students can gain from the university experience.
Providing access for students with disabilities

Students with disabilities have for many years been singled out as students who need very specific support. As a result, processes have been developed which enable support needs to be identified. All home students with disabilities are entitled to apply for Disabled Students’ Allowances (DSA). These allowances are administered by the Local Education Authority and provide funding for necessary Study Aids. In order to determine the appropriate aids, all students applying for DSA must undergo an assessment of their needs at a recognized assessment centre. (Skill, 1998) Assessments are conducted as a fact-finding exercise and identify not only supportive aids but also strategies which can be applied to enhance the student’s learning experience. In a booklet aimed at students, Skill (2001: 34) describes the process as an “investigation of what you will need in higher education to study effectively.” Recommended strategies for both teaching and learning are identified during the assessment. The assessment of need process is a time consuming process and it would be unrealistic to imagine that it could be applied to every individual student. However, the principles which underpin the process may provide a model for developing teaching and learning strategies which can be used to ensure student success.

The first stage of an assessment of need process is to gather as much detail as possible about the individual student. In particular, details of the student’s disability and its effect on learning are considered first. Some of these details will be gathered from the student but an experienced assessor will also gather information from other expert sources such as voluntary agencies and internet databanks as well as medical or psychological reports. Information will also be elicited regarding the student’s approach to study and previous support which the student has been given to enable effective study. The student’s expectations may also be discussed.

Information is also gathered about the course which the student is undertaking. The means and methods of course delivery will be identified. Attendance requirements are taken into account and assessment methods are considered. By considering this information in conjunction with the student’s background an assessor then identifies possible barriers to learning and discusses the extent to which the student perceives a need for additional support in order to overcome these barriers. The assessor will then make suggestions for appropriate study aids and strategies which could be used to enable the student to develop as an independent learner. It is by identifying the possible barriers that the assessor can offer access to the course. However, it is the student who will decide whether to use the suggested strategies. (Skill, 1997)

Diversity of background

With widening participation, there is a need to become more aware of student background. Students present a variety of entry qualifications and the learning skills developed when attaining these qualifications vary considerably. (Evans and Abbott, 1998) The skills expected at AS and A level for example are very different from those expected at NVQ or HND. Similarly, the teaching methods to which students have been exposed will also have varied greatly. The teaching methods which are familiar to young
people in today’s schools are very different from those which mature students and, indeed, most university lecturers, will have been familiar with. For many students returning to study the use of technology in learning is unfamiliar and confusing while others find word-processing easier than writing.

In addition, the cultural background of the student may have an impact on the approach to learning. Communication may be hampered by the need to use a second language. Students who are fluent in conversational English may not be so conversant with more technical or academic vocabulary. De Vita (2000: 170) identifies that “language-related factors, especially verbal, can be a major source of misunderstandings in communicating with international students.” Students’ commitment to non-academic work also has an impact on student progression. Students from particular cultural backgrounds may be expected to continue supporting a family business. Many students will need to take paid work in order to support themselves financially. Others may well be caring for young families as single parents while undertaking study.

If student learning needs are to be identified and addressed, such issues have to be considered early in the course. Cohort profiles could be identified from application onwards with an emphasis on identifying pre-entry qualifications and types of feeder institutions. Further investigations could be conducted in interviews with year or personal tutors within the first half term. These could raise issues of language skills, disability and family commitments. At the same time, student expectations of the course could be explored. Johnston and Croft (1998) emphasise a need to ensure that “non-traditional students are ……not given false hopes as to their ability to progress within HE.” Many students entering Higher Education are not aware of the demands of the system and expect to achieve a high level of success.

Identifying barriers

Having gained an insight into the pre-university experience, university staff may then consider programme design and delivery, particularly for first year students. Course content may have been established on the basis that students are expected to have a common starting point for study. As a wider range of pre-university qualifications become available this may become a less realistic expectation. Academic staff can ensure that barriers are not created in the first few weeks by familiarising themselves with the content of pre-university courses and developing a syllabus which can dove-tail with students’ prior knowledge.

The academic language which underpins a subject is often taken for granted in the university environment. The delivery of taught sessions is often dependent on the student having an understanding of the appropriate vocabulary. This can often form a barrier for those for whom English is a second language or those who have had a break from education. The production of a glossary of academic terminology pertaining to the subject may provide an appropriate starting point for many such students.

Means of assessment can often cause a great deal of anxiety. If the criteria for the assessment are clear then it is easier for students to determine what is expected of them.
Many students will require modifications to their assessments due to disability. Clear assessment criteria enable support staff such as disability advisers to make the most appropriate recommendations. Similarly, if procedures for obtaining modifications are available and easily understood, appropriate arrangements can be made in good time. While the development of such procedures is expected under the Disability Discrimination Act, it can also prove useful in circumstances where students experience particular family problems.

Language problems also become evident in assessment as students may have difficulty in grasping the exact meaning of a question. Where assessment is formative, students may find the feedback confusing. Channock (2000) identified issues surrounding the interpretation of written feedback. Students misunderstand common marking comments and, as a result, comments which were intended to be constructive may be perceived as critical.

Many of the factors which appear to raise barriers to student achievement are in themselves the result of widening participation. As the diversity of our student population has increased, universities have also been teaching greater numbers of students. For many students the teaching methods which they encounter at university are intimidating and may not be perceived as conducive to learning. Courses are often delivered in large impersonal lecture sessions. Seminars may assume student participation but students who do not speak English as a first language may lack confidence in speaking to a relatively large groups of their peers. (De Vita, 2000) It is also very difficult for students to arrange individual appointments with tutors if they wish to discuss drafts of written work. For many students this would have been common practice in their previous courses and they lack the ability to be self-critical.

Often the provision of additional study skills support can enable students to develop the techniques they require to adjust successfully to university teaching situations. However this needs to be tailored to the demands of the course if it is to provide maximum benefit. Pre-sessional courses might be made available to students who appear to have particular needs such as the development of English language skills. Workshops for establishing skills such as note-taking or library research might take place in student induction while exam revision workshops can be delivered later in the course. Similarly introductory courses for the development of skills such as critical thinking may be beneficial. (Bamber et al, 2000) For some students, online support may prove appropriate while others may appreciate a print based booklet. If students are to gain maximum benefit from study support however, it needs to be integral to the course. There is often a danger that study support is perceived as remedial. As a result a student with low self-esteem may be even further demoralised. (Harvey and Watt, 1996)

**Conclusion**

If widening participation is to ensure wider access to higher education, a range of factors must be taken into account. We, as university staff must become more aware of the diversity within the student body. We must also look critically at the assumptions we make when designing and delivering courses. By considering student background in
conjunction with course design and delivery we can identify the barriers which students may encounter. If we find that the majority of our students find access to the course difficult it may be appropriate to rethink the current approach of providing additional support. As Maggie Woodrow (2000) noted

“While most institutions recognise that students from under-represented groups need to change to survive in an HE environment, fewer are prepared to accept that institutions also need to change. Change to meet the learning needs of access entrants is still resisted on the grounds of defending academic standards.”

By getting to know our students we can identify how course delivery might be developed to ensure a more inclusive approach to learning. We can then move from a model of additional support to one in which the student truly becomes an independent learner.

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References


