

Bridging the transition gap

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Presentation abstract

Issues around transition to university have been widely discussed, with the recent pandemic highlighting issues such as students' lack of confidence in engaging in higher education and lack of knowledge around some of the expectations and skills required (Advance HE, 2020), but one aspect which has been somewhat under researched is the link between academic skills required by 6th form students and stage 1 undergraduate students (Baker, 2016). The Bridging the Gap project is a collaboration between students, the Academic Skills team and the Education Outreach team at Newcastle University. Our project co-created accessible, engaging, interactive resources based on feedback from both 6th form students and (undergraduate (UG) students with the student voice at the heart of the project. We worked with paid interns to not only use the information gathered from focus groups to inform resource development but also to consider how our message was communicated to students. To date, several resources have been developed around topics such as time management and evaluation of sources. Although still in the development phase, the project team has been able to gather some formative feedback from UG students, 6th form students as well as teachers. Further, the impact of the project has been highlighted by gaining additional funding for a two-year project coordinator. This session outlined what we have learned about working collaboratively with students to provide resources to help develop core academic and research skills to build confidence and support the transition from secondary to higher education. We highlighted the project phases, how we were able to work collaboratively and how we were able to ensure that the student input and evaluation were central to the project in order to provide a good practice framework.

Keywords: transition; student-led; digital resources

Community response

This session generated a lot of interest from delegates, with every seat in the room filled despite the heat. As well as speaking to the significance for delegates on the nature and management of the transition into university, the teaming of this issue with genuine student co-creation on both sides of the transition added a unique element of inspiration for those who would like to produce something similar. Indeed, as one participant said, 'My institution has been considering the development of 6th form academic skills materials, so I was really interested in finding out how this has been approached by Newcastle. I found the session very engaging and I will most certainly get in touch with Liv at some point to further the conversation.'

This was such an interesting project. It highlighted for one delegate the importance of student participation in creating study skills resources. So often we do not have the time or means to enter into this dialogue with students, but it is evident here that it is key to making sure the materials are relevant, accessible, interesting and pedagogically sound. Having students take such meaningful co-creator roles ensures that the resources are created by them, for them. The look and feel of student resources is so important to get right, and so easy to get wrong, particularly when dealing with the gap between sixth formers and new university students. These two groups, despite their closeness in age, have distinct needs and sensibilities, and both need to be treated respectfully. This came through in the way the school-focussed site was developed in direct response to the feedback from the sixth formers, who found the original version too babyish, and in the collegiate way the UG students were involved in the project; they were treated as the experts in terms of understanding what was needed and how it should be presented, and the project was exemplary from that perspective.

The variety in the types of resources created also suggested a firm steer towards student engagement, with a mix of videos, text and games, all designed to be appealing and interesting, without talking down to the users or making assumptions. The overall effect is to successfully reduce the distance between school and university by tailoring and contextualising the information well.

It's great that the project is continuing and it will be good to see what comes next, undoubtedly engaging more students along the way.

Next steps and additional questions

One of the key issues, increasingly prominent in interventions of this nature is, how do we know that the intervention has 'worked'? Did it achieve what it set out to? Often this is quantified and labelled 'impact' but those of us working directly with students know that impact can take many forms. So, with that proviso in mind, it is worth asking how a project of this nature will be evaluated. While it is true that the number of visits to the websites can be counted, are there other ways in which you intend to measure the impact of this project?

Author's reflection

I was delighted that the delegates found value in the Bridging the Gap project. Throughout the project we were all very clear that we wanted the student voice to be at the heart of the resources we created, to reflect that they are the experts in their own learning and the comments reflect this was achieved. We are beginning the next phase of the project, and we have been able to recruit more students to work on the project, continuing the legacy of the pilot. The resources have attracted interest across the university, and we aim to embed them in stage 1 UG provision from next year.

Acknowledgments

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References

Baker, S. (2018) 'Shifts in the treatment of knowledge in academic reading and writing: Adding complexity to students' transitions between A-levels and university in the UK', *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*. 17 (4) pp. 388-409.

Further Reading

Morgan, M. (2020) *An exceptional transition to higher education: induction of new and returning students during the new normal year*. Advance HE report. Available at: <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/exceptional-transition-higher-education-induction-new-and-returning-students-during> (Accessed: 17 February 2023).

Author details

Liv Jonassen is the Academic Skills Team Manager at Newcastle University where she leads the academic skills team delivering a wide range of provision across all faculties. She has previously worked leading pre-sessional and in-sessional courses and has worked as a learning developer for over 15 years. Her research interests include transitions into higher education from diverse backgrounds and digital technologies in learning development.

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