Second-year success: offering differentiated support to high achieving students

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Presentation abstract

Transition to university has long been identified as a key issue for institutions; however, much of the research focuses on the transition from level 3 to university and progression into employment. What is less commonly addressed is the transition through university, helping students to understand and navigate the different challenges, expectations, and opportunities associated with starting levels 5 and 6 (Gahagan and Hunter, 2006; Hill and Tinker, 2018). Additionally, there is often a focus on provision for learners who are struggling academically and much less consideration for those who are doing well and achieving high marks. Informed by the University of Surrey's STARS programme, we, in collaboration with students, worked to identify issues and challenges faced by high achieving students when they entered their second year. Along with further work-related opportunities, a multi-disciplinary network for high achieving students was identified as a useful approach. We are looking to the hive mind of ALDCon24 for practical examples of how student-led academic networks and other innovative initiatives can enhance transition through university for high-achieving students.

• (How) Does your institution/LD team support high achievers?
• (How) Should we be offering differentiated support?
• Can you share examples of any initiatives that may support this project?

Keywords: transitions; second-year; higher achievers; co-creation; differentiation.

Community response

Chenée's presentation highlighted that whilst LD provides valuable support to learners who may be struggling academically, higher achievers may be overlooked as potential LD patrons. As such, there is much less literature on LD support for higher achievers, underscoring this often overlooked and under-researched group. A contributor provided the following feedback on Chenée's presentation:

> This was such an informative session. The list of skills of the high achievers was thought provoking. The idea of differentiated support is important, and this group has not been targeted at Abertay University, yet. Although, I did reflect that the Academic Librarians are creating a 'going beyond your reading list guide' which might suit this group. This is an area for us to explore further particularly in relation to the students being risk averse and wanting to be a part of the community.

Next steps and additional questions

A useful next step for further exploration would be how do we encourage differentiation whilst also creating a sense of belonging, without excluding different groups of students. In response to the 'going beyond your reading list guide' example above, it would be useful to compile different approaches that LDers already adopt to support differentiation in embedded and extra-curricular support.

Author's reflection

The majority of the students I work with are high achievers, but unlike the student cohorts at other Russell Group universities, students at the university in which I work are often from underrepresented backgrounds and the first in their family to go to university. Talking to these students about their challenges gave me a new appreciation of the kinds of pressures they face. Despite these challenges, they reach their goals and do incredibly well but can often feel neglected by their lecturers and the university. Many of the students I spoke to identified all kinds of feedback as a barrier to improving their learning. They were often told that their work was good and that they did well but they did not often get told how to improve or develop themselves.

One of the challenges I faced when initiating the project was colleagues' resistance. Many working in student support services were worried about the equity of providing specific interventions to high achieving students because they felt it was exclusionary. I had to combat these ideas by explaining that by offering differentiated support we were meeting students where they are, rather than creating a hierarchy within LD provision. I was apprehensive that I might have to convince a group of LDers at the conference too. Fortunately, I was pleasantly surprised and almost everyone in the discussion groups at the conference was supportive. I think those challenging conversations I had with colleagues allowed me to anticipate questions the LD community might have had. A learning curve for me was understanding that how we present what we do can influence those we work with to either work with or against your goals. I was relieved that LDers understood my perspective.

One of the comments that surprised me in the discussion groups at the conference was when someone mentioned that we, as LDers, could not offer differentiated support to students yet because as a discipline we have not been fully embedded in every course at every university yet. I strongly challenged this as I truly believe that we should innovate and provide creative solutions for all students. It made me realise that although embedding academic literacies is the gold standard, we may be limiting ourselves and not exploring creative ways of LD provision because we are waiting for something that seems unlikely for all UK institutions in the near future.

Following the conference, I was invigorated and came away with lots of ideas. The one idea that I am looking to develop is to employ high achieving students to create online resources for other students. I think this will work well because high achieving students will have to reflect on their learning and articulate to others how they do well. It will also give them an opportunity to learn new skills. What I am most excited about is learning about how I can adapt my practice to ensure that I support students the best way that I can.

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The author and contributors did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

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Author details

Chenée Psaros is a learning developer, an artist, and a walker. She uses creative approaches in her teaching and is always looking to innovate her practice. Her primary interests lie in learning beyond the campus and exploring how walking fosters creativity. She has an MSc in Digital Education from the University of Edinburgh. She is currently a member of the ALDinHE Mentoring Working Group. She is a Senior Fellow of Advance HE and a reviewer for the Collaborative Award in Teaching Excellence for Advance HE.

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