

We tell stories : directed explorations of the first year undergraduate experience

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This paper investigates the experiences of students with strong prior educational backgrounds during the 1st year of an undergraduate programme of study. It records and maps the positive and negative influences on them during this period of transition and identifies key areas of good practice and concern.

1. Context and methodology

A wide-ranging literature search of recent work published on student retention in higher education highlights the fact that a significant majority of the qualitative work carried out has been focused on the experiences of students at post-1992 institutions and on students who have entered higher education through a widening participation route. This means that there is a corresponding gap in the research carried out at Russell group institutions and on students who enter higher education with high, traditional qualifications.

In consequence, much of work undertaken at the University into explorations of the student experience and their transition onto an undergraduate degree has been founded on the recommendations and conclusions of studies which, although very valuable, focus on institutions and experiences whose character may diverge to a greater or lesser extent from the context of a large, research-led, HEI. It is our intention in this work to explore the current experience of high-achieving entrants at this University. Such a focus will, we believe, provide valuable insights into the transformation of these students into independent learners and allow us to investigate what significance the influences of background and prior achievement have on the transition and progression the students make. This information will, in turn, enable us to accurately inform the development of policy and strategy.

1.1 Research context

The University is currently undertaking a Review of Undergraduate Education “to ensure the highest standards of excellence.... in the learning environments we create (and) the learning experience we offer..” and specifically recognizes the fundamental importance of the first year experience to student success. The goals of the Manchester2015 agenda specifically commit the University to enhancing the quality of the Manchester student experience and to matching the high expectations of the students we attract. This study provides evidence based, accurate information on the experience of our students which can be used to inform policy and strategy around the development of learning environments, support systems and the first year experience

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1.2 Methodology

The study used a combination of focus groups, semi structured interviews, experience sampling method (ESM)¹ and narrative review² to elicit as much information as possible from participants whilst minimising the intrusiveness of the process of data collection and making it as engaging as possible. By varying the method we intended to maximise the possibilities for collecting data which was accurate, rich and focused. All interactions were recorded and transcribed or summarised. Participant programmes were chosen on the basis of their being representative of University norms³. We chose programmes which are located in a single School, although both cover more than one discipline, as it might be assumed that cross School programmes present students enrolled on these programmes with a particular set of challenges which are not the subject of this report. The participant programmes – Politics, Philosophy and Economics (PPE) and BioChemistry - were chosen with view to their providing data which can be used to focus attention on potential future areas of study. One programme was taken from a humanities sector, the other from a scientific discipline⁴.

Student participants were identified by the relevant admissions teams as meeting or exceeding the programme entrance requirements of AAB at GCE. A deliberate decision was made not to request volunteers as it was felt that such a method would not result in obtaining a representative group and that students who were willing to volunteer might, by virtue of this character trait, have an experience of the processes of induction and transition that was not wholly typical. It was also decided not to include overseas or EU students amongst the participants.

1.3 Participants

15 students initially signed consent forms agreeing to participate in the study, however, one participated minimally and one not at all which left 13 students who engaged fully throughout the project.

The group consisted of eight males and five females. Nine students were enrolled on Politics, Philosophy & Economics (PPE) and four in BioChemistry. All participants were aged under 21 and were living in university accommodation in term time.

1.4 Interactions

The first face to face contact took place shortly after induction in October. At the end of this semester the first two focus groups took place. A second interview took place in February followed by the Experience Sampling Day part way through the semester and a final focus group at the end of the academic year.

¹ The Experience Sampling Method (ESM) was developed as a tool to study the experience of participants engaging in activities in everyday life. In response to a randomly timed signal – in this case a mobile phone text – participants were asked to take a photograph of where they were and to record in notebook what they were doing, who they were with and what they were feeling.

² Participants were asked to keep a record which could be in the form of a paper diary, an electronic blog or similar of their experiences and in particular of any events which they experience as either significantly positive or negative.

³ The programmes each have an all year cohort size between 50 & 150 and have a withdrawal rate which is the same or less than 6% (an average based on published, HESA data)

⁴ The permission of both Unit Leaders, Heads of School Administration and, in the case of BioChemistry, the Senior Tutor were sought and obtained before participants were contacted

2. Results and interpretations

Students in the programme spoke at length and in some detail about many aspects of their first year including, but not limited to, narratives about how and why they had chosen their courses and this university, what happened on their first day and in freshers' week, about revision techniques, about living in halls, about their increasing independence from their families and about their social lives. Such discourses have, and will continue, to inform the work of the Office of Student Support and Services as well as providing material for presentations and discussions elsewhere in this University and more widely at national and international events.

This report, however, is focused on aspects of their academic experience and study which, it is felt, are especially relevant to this institution and to their experience as prior high academic achievers.

2.1 On academic preparedness

In discussions of academic preparedness, which generally occurred in Semester 1 before initial formal assessments had been concluded, differences began to become apparent between the experience of Biochemistry students and those on PPE.

Biochemists, who had a significant amount of formative and summative work to complete from an early point in their studies, tended to feel that their GCE (A) level studies had provided a good, or adequate, grounding for the work at university

*".... No I don't think I'm struggling particularly I'd say that the A levels were about right"
(AFi1BC)*

"I feel pretty good about it... most of its like A level so yeah its alright" (KMi1BC)

"I think that A level was a good preparation for it." (HF1BC)

Although even in Semester 1, there was some concern expressed about the amount of self-directed work and background reading that they were expected to complete and about the level that they would be expected to reach;

"I think that it is at the right level but I still have to do a lot of background reading and stuff, well a lot of your own work.." (RF1BC)

"I didn't know what to expect from the exams either – there was a bit of uncertainty there definitely about how difficult it would be but it was alright I guess. The first exam, although you've done past papers, you're still thinking what am I going to be expected to do?" (KMi2BC)

PPE students, by contrast, completed a minimal amount of formative work – primarily preparations for discussion at tutorial and maths problems for their Economics unit. This meant that, especially in large and very large lecture classes designed, at least in part as introductory to the subject area, and with students from a wider range of prior attainments, they sometimes felt that they were not sufficiently challenged by the material presented;

"it seems like we've gone right down to GCSE, it seems like we've gone down – its really basic and just cos I'm living by myself doesn't seem a reason to make it easier" (MMi1PPE)

"I just don't find it really rigorous..... or too challenging" (GMfg1PPE)

"... I would like it to be harder.... maybe I'll fail and then I'll be proved wrong" (MMi1PPE)

This was not, however, a completely universal view amongst the group and some PPE students did state that they found aspects of work and the learning styles problematic;

"... I struggled initially with my maths... I've not done any of that for years...." (JMi1PPE)

"I find the lectures really difficult actually just cos there's so many people and if, for a minute you just want to take something in and think about it for a second you can't and if you've got a question you just have to write it down" (LFi1PPE)

"I think that it's probably about right..... I'm probably going to have to do more work than I thought I was going to have to" (SMi1PPE)

The issue of PPE students being enrolled in courses at Level 1 that are intended as introductory was one to which students from that programme returned on a number of occasions and one to which they gave a significant amount of thought. It is significant that, although one student in particular expressed a degree of anger about this situation, they all tried to think the reasons and the ramifications through, not only from their own point of view but also from the University's;

"the impression I get is that the first year is maybe not under resourced but it's a year when the university wants to get everybody on the same level and there isn't necessarily space for you to go further ... but then I guess in the second and third years those basic things will be assumed" (GMfg1PPE)

"I didn't think it was demanding enough in any way whatsoever but I think that this term will be more demanding and... I can understand why they might make the first semester less demanding but I just think more essays, more actual work during the semester rather than at the end would be a better idea" (MMfg2PPE)

It seems clear from their experience that one way that they felt that the University might have mitigated against this mismatch between their expectation and the reality of their experience would have been to have provided them with an opportunity to meet together, with an academic member of staff or a peer mentor⁵ to enable them to discuss their subjects from the context of a PPE point of view. It also seems clear that such an opportunity would have been likely to have brought additional benefits in terms of enhancing cohort cohesion and identity and in helping to create a social network based on shared academic passion. This possibility is further discussed below.

2.2 On the programme of study

All the students in the study expressed very positive reactions to their respective courses and these feelings persisted throughout the academic year;

".... like from the first day I had three different lectures and I was thinking yeah this course will be good and that's just carried on..." (AFi1BC)

⁵ In the new academic year (2009 2010) students will have a scheduled meeting in Freshers' Week with their Academic Adviser

"..... it's amazing. I just love the course I'm absolutely loving it...." (DMi1PPE)

"its developing your mindset... so far I love it It's just altering the way I think – everything seems to be done on a more rational basis now..." (JMi1PPE)

"I really love it – I nearly did just politics and economics and I'm so glad that I chose to do PPE" (SMfg1PPE)

That being said, all but one of the PPE students expressed some level of disappointment with the structure of the programme – its perceived emphasis on introductory materials and the sometimes very large lecture class sizes;

"it's a bit like another group of strangers in another lecture" (LFfg1PPE)

"..... my problem with that isn't really a problem with the course per se. I would like to have more opportunity to talk to professors or PhD students, I'd really like to get past the elementary level that we're at so I guess I'm just impatient" (GMfg1PPE)

Some of the students, from both programmes, had also underestimated how little enthusiasm they might have for one of their two/three disciplines;

"I think what's different about PPE ... when you choose to do a course like that you've got to accept that you're going to be studying areas that you're not necessarily interested in so for example I find economics and maths pretty boring but I accept that its vital to know these basic principles to have any real understanding of politics in later life" (GMfg1PPE)

"I quite enjoy the course, I underestimated quite how much I really hated economics. I thought I'd appreciate that it needs to be known but...its just beyond bad but its ok, its ok" (LFfg1PPE)

"but Chemistry, it was our last exam and I haven't understood anything all year so I was just thinking that it was absolutely pointless revising...." (RFi2BC)

PPE students were largely in agreement that one, albeit quite major structural change, would have made a marked improvement in their situation;

"what would be helpful is if you just had for the subject if you just had a PPE lecture just for the course"⁶ (GMfg1PPE)

"I think it is important (to be together) and I think that the university should take more responsibility to help us" (LFfg1PPE)

"at the beginning I thought maybe its good (to be split up) because then we get the different perspectives but the more and more time I've spent .. I think it would help more in an academic way" (DMfg1PPE)

"given that we only have one choice it would make complete sense that as soon as you've made that choice then just to put all PPE people in tutorials together. First of all it would make friendship groups a lot easier, it would make a lot of little things easier just to all be together" (SMfg1PPE)

⁶ Such a class is available at Level 3

2.3 *On friendships*

All of the students expressed the feeling that one of the most crucial aspects of their success and progression at university was the strength of, and support they derived, from the friendships they made.

"my friend's dropped out ...and I think it's because he didn't make friends so he thinks the course is rubbish, he thinks everything's rubbish. He's just gone downhill because he doesn't have a friend group... before we left he was very excited. I mean I haven't seen that much of him because I didn't want to corner myself off with someone who isn't enjoying it that much and is walking around grumpy. Anyway he's going home"
(MMi1PPE)

"I've got nothing in common with any of my flatmates but we still get on really well .."
(RFfg1BC)

"... it's like they say you can choose your friends but not your family it's almost the same thing here because they are your family really cos you live with them. I see them everyday for so much of the day..." (JMi1PPE)

"We're all very different but its fantastic,.... Most of the people in my flat are a bit odd so its quite sane at times at others not..." (AMi1PPE)

"I think it's the most important thing that I've done here – make the friends that I have cos Uni it wouldn't be the same experience without the people that I've met and it is my friends who've made this experience such an amazing one" (RFfg3BC)

2.4 *On becoming an independent learner*

The policy document 'Elaborating the Purposes of a Manchester Undergraduate Education'⁷ does not explicitly list the formation of an 'independent learner' as an aim of the document but the term is widely used by students and staff and the thought is implicit at a number of points;

"Manchester graduates will have been encouraged to develop their intellectual curiosity, will have learned to learn..... acquiring a basic understanding of the processes of inquiry and research..... will be encouraged to value learning for its own sake"⁸

Whilst such values seem entirely appropriate to the aspirations of a research-led HEI of this status and reputation, it is not entirely clear how our students will acquire such skills, especially when set against a backdrop of post-compulsory education which can be seen as having markedly different aims and emphases. As another study noted "... school-leaver students' educational experience involved close scrutiny of work through a drafting process; immediate feedback couched in positive language, objective, criterion-referenced assessment and high grades"⁹.

⁷ Interim report of the Review of Undergraduate Teaching, Learning and the Student Experience - February 2008

⁸ Aims 1, 2 & 3

⁹ Kantanis T, *The role of social transition in students' adjustment to the first year of university*

All the students in the study expressed some level of concern about making this particular transition. Although it was again notable that PPE students with their significantly fewer contact hours – on average just under half that of the Biochemists – expressed the greater level of concern;

"the only problem I have with what D's saying is that yes its great to have independence but its just when you don't have when you can't channel that into your subject, if its just literally for your own enjoyment and your own interest, its nice to have a means of channelling that into an essay for example that's going to be marked and you're going to get feedback on because at the end of the day that's why I'm here and I guess just having that assessment or just having that feedback is probably what's going to take you to the next level rather than what you can do off your own bat" (GMfg1PPE)

".. I wasn't really aware of how much work I should be doing.... I thought that the lecturer would be telling you 'this is your homework for today'..... but my tutor told me, he said you should be reading at least two pieces for each lecture and it should take you, you should spend three hours doing it, taking notes and stuff and I was freaked" (BMi1PPE)

"... I thought that it would be like when you turn up they'd give you a timetable and tell you 'this is where you need to be'" (BMi1PPE)

".. the way in which the learning's done..... it took me up to this week (Week 3) to get used to the principles, there's so much home education where you just teach yourself, you just read books... that was a pretty big reality check" (JMi1PPE)

".... There's no real guide, this is the stepping stone to being a creative, sorry, an independent learner but it's just kind of do or die...." (JMi1PPE)

"I would prefer to have more teaching or like more direct help and I'd like to do more work" (MMfg1PPE)

"I expected a lot more and in a way that's great cos it gives you a lot more time to do reading round and at the same time its meant that there's been a lot of uncertainty as to what I'm required to be doing and I would have preferred it at least if I'd more essays throughout the term that weren't so pressured and so it could be building up for this one to be the main essay You know just practise..." (DMfg1PPE)

"I think..... for A level ...the teaching is a lot more comprehensive ...and so you're a lot..... Better..... kind of prepared for the things that are coming up cos you know exactly everything's that going to come up you do have to work out how to prepare yourself a lot of the time you have to go through it on your own, study it yourself"(AMi2PPE)

"the reading's a means to an end rather than an end in itself – you're reading to be able to write better and I guess there's no way of assessing how well you're reading..." (GMfg1PPE)

"I'm actually really worried I'm a natural worrier anyway but I think at university what I've experienced so far is that its much easier to get behind ... and no one will notice so that's why I'm thinking 'am I on the right track?'" (SFfg1PPE)

"you can easily fall behind and nobody goes 'here's how you need to catch up, do this essay by next week'" (LFfg1PPE)

Biochemistry students tended to focus on the difficulties of managing the time available most efficiently, although they certainly saw the fact of their having a larger number of contact hours and their obtaining credit for tutorial participation as beneficial in terms of guiding them in these new learning styles;

"I don't think that we have any time for extra reading – I couldn't possibly read any more – I think we're supposed to do 4 hours of extra work per lecture and we have well I have 12 lectures a weekand that's not including labs as well" (HFfg1BC)

"I think we have a much higher proportion of contact hours and I think our tutorials work differently like if we don't go ... we'd fail that, tutorials is its own unit" (HFfg1BC)

During the course of the year, however, a majority of the PPE students came to an understanding of what this different experience and set of expectations meant and began to see it as less of a deficit;

"but in a way what do we expect from university its not to ... we've already agreed that it's a different form of education from school, we've come here and a lot of it seems to be about freedom of thinking and your thoughts taking you where you want to take them I'm beginning to see my reading as an end in itself more and more ... there's books now that I've come across that I'm going to hold onto after I've given in this essay just cos I find them so interesting and that's becoming a real part of university life ... and I think that's a huge difference from A level" (DMfg1PPE)

"you've got to expect the gap to increase between someone who's naturally good at their subject and someone who's just tried really hard – you've got to expect that gap" (GMfg1PPE)

"it's very different you can't learn what you learn in a university just like by walking around talking to other people, you have to read" (BMi2PPE)

"I do like that freedom though. I was talking to one girl on my course we were doing the same questions, same topics and we both did totally different research for our things its quite good how you get that much freedom" (SFizPPE)

"the way I was taught in A level was how to pass the exams I wasn't taught to study the subject and find it interesting [yeah, you're right – GM] just do the introduction like this to get 2 marks and then do this... whereas here its up to you .. its different you don't know how to pass the exam" (SFfg1PPE)

3. Conclusions

The purpose of this piece of research was to enable a group of our students to talk at length about their experiences of being undergraduate first years. Clearly all the students are individuals with individual concerns and responses, yet they do have certain reactions in common. Some of these responses are likely to be grounded in the largely universal feelings that any student would have in making the transition to higher education, some though are perhaps borne out of their experience of formal education heretofore and their experience as previously high academic achievers.

Such reactions and expectations need to be understood and incorporated into our structures and, for the most part, as is evidenced by the students' passion for and joy in their courses, this is being done.

In response to a massification in tertiary education, this institution, in common with most others, has responded to meet the needs of a more diverse range of students in acknowledging and providing for such support services as counselling, disability and learning support. Such measures, however, only go some way in meeting the needs of all students in that they are removed from the students' most common, and preferred point of contact, academic staff. Even in today's harsher economic climate and against a backdrop of tuition fee loans, it is clear that one of the main drivers for students in their academic careers is a deep love for and interest in their subject. They come into university wanting and expecting to create significant relationships with academic staff and with their peers in the same discipline area.

With these considerations in mind, it would seem that there are some areas that this project perhaps highlights as worthy of additional investigation and these are

- the frequency and quality of students' interaction with members of staff who can foster and build on their enthusiasm for their subject area,
- the role of the institution in creating and maintaining groups of students within a cohort in order to promote a sense of cohesion and identity and to bring about the possibility of significant social interaction
- the positive effects of being able to submit formative assessment from an early stage in Semester 1

and

- the balance between face to face interactions and online interchanges between staff, students and the institution.

3.1 Frequency and quality of interactions with members of staff

Although it would certainly not be the case that the quality of teaching can be deduced simply by measuring the number of contact hours, it would seem that PPE students at this level would have valued more interactions with academic members of staff and/or with PASS/ peer mentors and, for Biochemistry students, with a larger number of contact hours they saw this greater focus on them as being helpful not only in terms of their learning but also in fostering a sense of cohesion and connection to the discipline and staff within the Faculty. It was clear that even though PPE students were aware that they were able to talk to unit leaders or to their academic adviser, such conversations had been framed in the context of discussing problems and not of talking about and around what they were reading and thinking;

"I could have booked appointments to go and see our course person and my tutors. However, since I didn't really have anything to talk to them about, I would have felt stupid booking an appointment just to say hello. We are the new kids and the first move should come from them" (LFPPE)

What one action could the University have taken to significantly improve your experience?

".... allowed for more interaction between tutors and students to discuss our progress in each subject/ course." (SFPPE)

"I think there should have been more one on one tutorials, or smaller groups" (SMPPE)

3.2 Creating inter-discipline groups

Other studies have clearly shown that social transition underpins a successful academic transition to university.¹⁰ Students in this study were clear themselves that making significant and supportive friendships was crucial to their success and enjoyment at university and the difference between the experience of the two groups was very marked in this respect.

Biochemistry students seemed to coalesce relatively quickly into a coherent group and even when they were placed in the large Level 1 chemistry lecture with students from a variety of programmes they were able to locate each other. Although all the students in this group had some friends who were not studying on the same course they felt that they derived benefit from their interactions with each other and with students in higher years. It is likely that the intensive induction programme, the frequency of contact and the experience of working together all combined to create this positive and productive group dynamic.

In contrast PPE students with their brief induction experience, their undertaking subjects with large and mixed cohorts and their fewer contact hours were much more likely to experience a degree of isolation from each other, the programme and the institution. This was, in part, evidenced by the fact that even at the end of the academic year, they were only able to recognise a small number of people from the same course as themselves and had a very hazy idea of the number of people on their course – estimates varied from 20 in their year to 200.

"there's no kind of lectures or sessions where it's just PPE people" (LFi1PPE)

One piece of advice that was given to the students that they did value was the suggestion that they sign up for tutorial groups together in order to try and get in the same classes. Most had acted on this;

"when we got told to do our tutorial classes together that was the defining moment and I think it should be talked about more and really emphasised just because I think it I feel very fortunate that it happened that way but it so easily could have not"
(DMfg3PPE)

".....organising tutorials for modules which are comprised of more, if not solely, PPE students. I think this would help to create more solidarity between course mates and the opportunity to develop more friendships on a daily basis. At the beginning of the year we were advised to do this ourselves by signing up to the same tutorials, but I think this is too much to ask of first years at the beginning of the year and could be easily organised centrally. I think this would have significantly enhanced my experience and would help to stop students feeling disenfranchised (BMfg3PPE)

The students had also created a group for themselves;

"on a Tuesday we all go to the library (its called PPE day SM) – it started off with us going to the library and there would be a few of us and we'd actually do reading and get

¹⁰ Kantanis, T *The role of social transition in students' adjustment to the first year of university.*

a lot of work done and then it kind of grew, numbers grew and now what we do is we end up getting one of those study group rooms where you're allowed to talk and we just sit in there and then end up going to the pub afterwards" (DMfg1PPE)

3.3 Availability of formative assessment

The issue of formative assessment would seem to be linked to the concept of the independent learner and, where such a facility was available to the students as it was most widely for Biochemists, this appeared to significantly ease the transition they were making to working effectively within new learning styles.

Biochemists reported that they had work to complete each week some of which was formative and others of which contributed a small amount to their overall unit marks;

"we do 5 tests online a week, don't we" (HFfg1BC)

"and essays and stuff as well" (RFfg1BC)

"and we've also had to go to seminars and submit like a summary and that's for part of our mark as well" (HFfg1BC)

Whereas PPE students were not required to submit any work although they did feedback orally in tutorials in answer to questions/topics and they were expected to complete maths exercises to be discussed;

"nothing that gets marked just stuff for tutorials" (MMfg1PPE)

"you've always got to do something, well they always set something but if you don't do it you can normally get away with it andwhen you go they just go through it anyway and it doesn't seem to hamper what we're doing...."

(MMfg1PPE)

3.4 Online interactions with students

One aspect of their university experience that all the students commented on negatively was what they perceived as an over-emphasis on online communications. Whilst they appreciated the online materials available through Blackboard, they retained a desire to have some interactions conducted face to face as part of a process of creating meaningful connections within the Institution;

What one action could the University have taken to significantly improve your experience?

"More contact time, to have a personal relationship with the University rather than everything through the internet." (AFBC)

"learnt our names." (LFPPE)

It is possible that such an aspiration stems from the, for some, stark contrast between their experience within secondary education where their learning was likely to have been more personal and that such a deficit would be likely to be felt by most undergraduates¹¹. It is also possible that their experience as high achievers in their schools and colleges would have marked them out even more than their peers and this distinction meant that they were known, and met, as individuals by all or most of the staff during that time.

¹¹ Wilson, ME *Teaching, learning and millennial students*

Whatever the reason, it would seem that an institution which aspires to the delivery of personalised learning would wish to act to not only 'learn their names' but also 'hear their stories'

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