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Transition, Induction and Progression Strategies Exploring Learning, Teaching and Widening Participation in Higher Education

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Abstract

TIPS (Transition, Induction and Progression Strategies) is a European Social Fund (ESF) project based at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU), which through adopting a Participatory Action Research approach (Lewin, 1951), has explored the value of piloting innovative methods to support large numbers of diverse students. Targeting new students and responding to their social, economic and political needs *as new students,* this pedagogy encourages people to draw upon and value personal experience as well as new knowledge about the many positions that they hold within academic systems.

TIPS guided students labelled 'new' and 'at risk' towards developing a *'conscientization'* (Freire, 1972 in Burton & Kagan, 2005) of their own, valuing the adoption of self help strategies facilitated through *'accompaniment'* (Edge, Kagan & Stewart, 2003) and good guidance.

The key objective of this research was to capture and elucidate the processes which contribute to empowerment and well-being whilst providing, *'a robust survival kit for students to avoid academic haemorrhage'* (Duggan & Rice, 2005) when progressing into and through higher education. The research put forward by the TIPS service, is just one example of how an institution is responding to current policy by evaluating the, *'interplay that occurs when prioritising intervention and prevention through collaboration and consultation'* (Duggan & Rice, 2005). In doing this, TIPS explores as well as questions to what extent there is a need for multi-layered 'change' using proactive and responsive approaches to support diverse student communities within the arenas of student retention, achievement and progression?

1. Introduction

Labour's governmental policy on widening participation has led to a greater diversity of students entering higher education (HE). Whilst some educationalists have argued that this has led to a 'dumbing down' of academic rigour, others are increasingly recognising the need for change to meet the demand of students with shifting 'typical' student profiles.

National policy on widening participation has meant that students once considered as a 'minority' within higher education, such as 'non-traditional' students, are increasingly becoming the norm. (Macdonald and Stratta, 2001:250). This has led some to argue that increased participation has caused falling academic standards in higher education. Furthermore, increased participation has been linked to increases in student withdrawal (Thomas, 2002:426).

As Thomas notes,
'…there is a tendency to attribute lower levels of completion to greater student diversity and a lack of 'academic preparedness' of these new student groups' (2002:426).

Whilst there are those who locate blame with the individual student, critical theorists argue that there presents an alternative educational perspective, which promotes the

benefits of adopting '*collective responsibility*' (Duggan & Rice, 2005) to achieve shifts in institutional change which, in turn, considers diversity as much as retention.

As Woodrow notes*,*
'While most institutions recognise that students from under-represented groups need to change to survive the 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' (2002).

Thomas, drawing on the work of Bourdieu, argues that, *'institutional habitus'* plays a part in making students feel whether or not they fit in. If *'institutional habitus'* is inclusive and accepting of difference, celebrating and prizing diversity, then this in turn will promote retention (2002:431).

Thomas highlights,
'staff attitudes and their relationships with students as an important means by which social and academic distance can be minimised, enabling students to feel valued and sufficiently confident to seek guidance when they require it' (2002: 439).

Whilst Thomas focuses on academic staff, those who work within the student support services, may have a quasi-academic role and it can be argued that they have an important responsibility to advise and support students and so promote a feeling of 'fitting in' as well as contributing to the enhancement of emotional and psychological well-being. Yet, the nature of student support services has often meant that students access support when they are experiencing severe problems and are recognised as being reactive rather than pro-active as a result.

It is increasingly being recognised that,
'As the student population diversifies, it is clear that the work of Student Services is becoming more complex, requiring a greater variety of responses' (Universities UK, 2002: 7).

The TIPS project, through exploring and evaluating 'Action Research'(Lewin,1951) methodologies, sought to capture the utility of 'pre-entry guidance' and the impact of additional 'on- course support' as well as trying to respond to the professional perspectives of the community of academic/non-academic staff who support learners within identified contexts.

Action Research can be described as an approach which focuses on working with people to identify problems in practice, implement change and evaluate solutions (Reason and Rowan, 1981).

It can be seen as a,
> *'… way of generating knowledge about a social system while, at the same time, attempting to change it'* (Hart and Bond, 1995: 13)

2. Aims

The central aim of this research was to elucidate the impact and interplay of organisational and cultural practices operating within a complex multileveled widening participation educational change project.

A clear aim of this project was to empower targeted students who had been previously identified by the government as vulnerable people who have little access to social power with knowledge about how to progress into and through university by drawing upon and utilising an innovative service which has adopted a diverse and inclusive, relational approach to targeted student support.

An overarching aim of this research was to stimulate debates around the negative and positive dialogue that such new positions generate within wider society. Minority communities within the education sector have already inherited age-old typologies that situate them in marginalised positions through discourse such as 'non-traditional', 'at risk' or 'vulnerable' students.

A supplementary aim defined at the outset, was to maintain a clear, democratic and responsive practitioner approach towards providing a generic student support service for learners, taking into account the fact that guidance was prescribed by an ESF bid framework.

Central to this work was the fact that support services at MMU are made up of small teams and can often find themselves in a reactive state as a result of supporting a growing pool of 33,000 students. Therefore, a further aim was for TIPS, to add value to the support services by supporting the supporters themselves, where necessary, in order to move student support teams towards a more proactive state so that they can effectively support wider groups of the student population through working together as a *collective*.

This has been achieved through collaboration with both internal and external partners, often drawing on the expertise of others to develop support and guidance networks of good practice. The aim has been to position the student at the 'centre' of the process and respond to needs and concerns which they have highlighted. The team have positioned themselves as 'the learners' rather than 'the experts' and have used insights gleaned from students to develop both written and web-based materials as well as striving to offer timely, appropriate advice and guidance. Over the academic year, this collaborative approach has informed practice and led the team to analyse the success of various strategies. This has been facilitated by not having to 'fit in' to an existing institutional framework, instead, TIPS were able to develop and refine a model taking into account a diverse student population and the local and multiple communities in which MMU, as an institution, is embedded.

3. Data Collection

Due to the project being so complex and multi-layered, a multi-methodological approach to data collection was adopted in order to generate a rich and clear picture of evaluation, focussing on to what extent TIPS support had been effective through capturing differing stories from both student and practitioner perspectives.

Data was collected in many formats:

- Case studies developed from case notes from consenting students who accessed the TIPS one-to-one support service
- Case studies developed from practitioner field diaries
- TIPS student focus groups
- Post-16 practitioner and HE student ambassador evaluation forms
- TIPS student workshop/resource pack evaluation forms
- Overall TIPS service student evaluation- mixed design questionnaires
- Photography (TIPS Pre-entry Events 2003)
- DVD/Video (TIPS Symposium 2004)

4. TIPS Activity

Initial target groups offered support during 2003/04 were:

- 2003 entry UCAS applicants who came from local Excellence Challenge (EC) institutions in Greater Manchester and South Cheshire (identified in ESF bid).
- Students studying in 2003/04 in the targeted post-16 EC institutions in Greater Manchester and South Cheshire in preparation for 2004 HE entry (identified in ESF bid).
- All 2003/04 applicants to the MMU Foundation Year bridging scheme (identified in ESF bid).
- 2003/04 applicants who came from any local Access to HE course in Greater Manchester and South Cheshire (added value)
- All 'other new' students enrolled to Manchester Metropolitan University at 2003/04 entry (added value)

4.1 Pre-entry Events in 2003

TIPS ran two pre-entry guidance events for HE applicants from target institutions in September 2003. An overview of the 13 workshops on offer was sent to applicants in advance. Applicants were asked to select their top five in order to identify what their individual key areas of concern were at the pre-entry stage.

273 applicants booked to attend the two pre-entry events. Support staff delivered the workshops and contributed to a pre-entry resource pack. This meant that applicants received information on all 13 workshops. All those who booked, whether they attended or not, were sent pre-entry resource packs thus splitting levels of guidance.

Data from the MMU student records databases confirmed that of the two hundred and twenty students who registered for the pre-entry event in Manchester and/or received support in the form of the pre-entry workshops alongside materials, one hundred and eighty six (84.5%) of these applicants held live enrolment status and were registered as students on courses at MMU in 2003. With regards to MMU Cheshire, of the 50 students who received similar pre-entry support, 43 or (86%) were registered as holding live enrolment status as MMU students.

4.2 One-to-One Support 2003/04

TIPS offered new MMU students one-to-one support and guidance. This was captured using a case recording system and detailed case notes were further used as part of a case study analysis which enabled scrutiny of the concerns voiced by a diverse body of students. During one academic year, 91 different students accessed the 1-2-1 support service over 164 sessions. Some students paid more visits than others.

A one-to-one MMU student menu for face-to-face sessions was offered in response to direct student feedback. Menus were made available to MMU students so that they could highlight their required support. This was designed to 'unpack' concerns around finance, study skills, C.V. support, general advice and guidance regarding HE issues, specific advice for mature students and support for coping with exams. Students were able to outline their key areas of required support which contributed to the complex profiling of the changing demand and context of HE from students' own perspectives and the further development of resource materials.

Upon scrutiny of this data, 69% of students who accessed the one-to-one service requested one-to-one support only once, yet 6% of the students collectively had 30% of the total individual support sessions delivered. Interestingly, the small number of students who accessed the TIPS service at the highest frequency were those students for whom English was their second language which signifies the need for further targeted support for this student group.

4.3 TIPS Support at Course Level

The TIPS service was offered to students at course level through tutors. This more structured approach demonstrated one way of how a centralised service can be empowering for vocational courses which attract a high number of diverse students from non-academic backgrounds. We offered assignment support to students based on Youth and Community and Social Work programmes. This entailed sitting in on weekly lectures, offering drop-ins directly after lectures, as well as mini-focus group sessions. Through this level of practitioner investment, skills areas, which students felt anxious about, were identified and used to shape further tailored support from TIPS. As a result, basic I.T. workshops were developed from active dialogues surrounding student anxieties about technological inadequacies during focus groups. By liaising with course leaders, TIPS advisers were able to understand the demands on students through immersion in course outlines and assignment briefs. We offered each student the opportunity to be supported through drafts of assignments in terms of style and structure but not content, so that they could transfer knowledge to their future assignments whilst developing their own long-term, self-directed learning frameworks.

4.4 TIPS Support at Faculty Level

TIPS ran faculty workshops on Budgeting Tips, Hardship Fund Applications, CV building, Critical Reading and Writing, Writing For Academia and Presentation Skills.

TIPS, in conjunction with Learning Support, offered Exam Revision workshops at course and faculty level for students entering first exam sitting. Further workshops and drop-ins were also offered for students doing re-sits.

4.5 TIPS Pre-Entry Guidance In Post-16 Institutions In 2004

Pre-entry advice and guidance workshops in post-16 institutions for 2004 applicants were offered as a further TIPS project strand, with a focus on applying to university, careers guidance and study skills in preparation for HE.

TIPS developed a 'H.U.G.' model addressing three key levels of provision:

H = Headstart study skills in preparation for HE
U = U.C.A.S. support
G = General HE information, advice and guidance

In real terms, this meant that in conjunction with the Headstart team of further education tutors, we offered the delivery of 'H' for Headstart study skills in preparation for HE which is available in on-line and paper-based formats. This can be viewed at www.headstart4U.net .

In conjunction with the Education Liaison team at MMU, TIPS offered 'U' for UCAS support to students applying to university by advising and supporting students on how best to complete their UCAS personal statements.

The final support offered was 'G' for general HE advice and guidance and the TIPS teams answered any queries relating to higher education as well as signposting students to other appropriate advice and guidance services and materials.

4.6. Pre-entry Resource Materials for 2004 Applicants

Mature student and postgraduate student pre-entry resource packs were developed as a result of an inundation of requests from practitioners supporting students entering HE in 2004, highlighting that no other specific materials were readily available to support these students from any other single source. In total, 1,698 mature student packs and 2,227 postgraduate student packs were requested and distributed between January 2004 and September 2004.

A Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) Booklet (10,000) was developed to guide new students joining the University in September 2004 and was a response to student queries drawn from the previous academic year and staff requests as how to redress induction procedures.

During 2003/04, TIPS, as a service, supported and tracked 861 students. Data was captured and then entered onto a database. Out of the 861 students tracked, 273 were 2003 applicants from target institutions who booked and/or attended the two pre-entry events held in September 2003. The other 588 students tracked, were supported only at the post-entry level to MMU during 2003/04. These students either received one-to-one support (total of 164 sessions delivered) and/or attended a TIPS workshop (55 student workshops delivered). A further 531 students expecting

to enter HE in 2004, were supported in the post-16 institutions using the H.U.G. model, but we were unable to track these students due to issues surrounding Data Protection Act (1998).

5. Calculating Retention

Retention was explored at two different stages; the pre-entry stage and the post-entry stage. The status of tracked students was checked against the student records system in October 2003 and again in October 2004. Pre-entry stage retention percentages were calculated and included all students. At post-entry stage, statistics were generated from students who had either live or withdrawn status but cancelled status was excluded as this identified that those students who had cancelled, had applied to MMU via UCAS but had never taken up their place. From these deductions, withdrawal rates at both pre-entry and post-entry stages could be calculated. As the post-entry retention rate for young entrants at MMU was 89% (2003/04) and the task of this project was to facilitate the retention of target groups up to the same benchmark as young entrants, TIPS has demonstrated that the post-entry retention of tracked students from target groups, when mapped by their LEA, averaged at 96%, exceeding, rather than matching the retention benchmark of young entrants. From this, it can be concluded that TIPS can be seen to have made a valid contribution to retention and widening participation at MMU.

6. Initial Findings and Recommendations

- Pre-entry guidance needs to generate skills which increase 'preparedness' for HE study
- Support needs to be responsive, timely and readily available
- Study Skills/IT/Library/ Financial literacy is key to success in HE
- New mature/postgraduate students need targeted support and accompanying pastoral resource materials
- Home students for whom English is a second language and academia is perceived as 'a third language', need targeted support and accompanying resource materials in order to increase the student progression and achievement of this group
- Predominately females accessed the one-to-one service (ratio 2:1)
- Twice the amount of females than males have been supported by TIPS from targeted groups (analysed by target LEA) and other methods to target males need further consideration

6.1 Further Findings and Recommendations

- Data Protection can act as a barrier to this collective approach to partnership working
- Wider retention and progression statistics need to be more timely and easily accessible
- More action research in this area over longer periods of time (longitudinal studies) could help to 'unpack' the intricate nature of collaborative and 'holistic' practice

- New learning and teaching communities are always emerging and so research needs to be 'grounded' in their own contexts of historical change
- Further research into staff retention as well as student retention in HE could inform practices concerned with the concept of global well-being

7. Embedding and Sustainability

TIPS collated as well as developed a plethora of study materials and resource packs related to the topics highlighted by students at pre-entry and post-entry stages of higher education. These materials have formed part of the TIPS legacy and are all downloadable at the TIPS on-line resource centre www.mmu.ac.uk/tips .

As a direct result of the TIPS retention research project, Manchester Metropolitan University has recognised the need for additional pastoral support staff and has developed an additional central post in Learning Support as well as several faculty Student Support Officers posts so that there will be a TIPS type of adviser in all of the seven faculties across the institution. Long term, this should contribute to an overall improvement in student retention and progression as well as the well-being of both the students and the staff which support them.

8. Discussion

TIPS, has offered and mapped support strategies to students who are at different stages of their personal journey towards achieving a *'certificate of cultural competence'* (Bourdieu, 1986) in a number of formats and arenas. Whilst this could be considered as taking positive steps towards shaping democratic and representative pathways into the labour market for diverse communities, the intention adhered to was to maintain reflexivity and responsivity to critical periods of student support identified from narratives by both students and practitioners.

TIPS demonstrated a commitment to transparent practice which explored healthy learning frameworks for practitioners as well as clients in the crusade for a more global sense of well-being, simultaneously for both the professionals of today and tomorrow.

Liz Thomas identified from empirical research that universities need:

> *'inclusive teaching and learning strategies which do not assume that the habitus of 'traditional' HE students should be the habitus of new cohorts. This includes an awareness of different previous educational experiences, the language of instruction and implied requirements, alternative learning styles and needs and other assumed norms.'* (2002:439).

Bourdieu (1977) referred to 'institutional habitus' – educational institutions favour knowledge and experience of dominant social groups to the detriment of other groups.

> *'In relation to student retention in HE the notions of habitus and institutional habitus appear to be useful tools. If a student feels that they do not fit in, that their social and cultural practices are inappropriate and that their tacit knowledge*

is undervalued, they may be more inclined to withdraw early.' (Thomas: 2002, 431).

This appears to be in evidence through the work of TIPS, as a service. By valuing the position of each individual student, through listening and responding to each student's individual situation, advisers both built rapport with students and entered into relationship with them over time. This, in turn, helped students to see what they were doing right as well as guiding them on issues where they needed additional support.

Martín-Baró (1986) explained Freire's central idea of *'conscientization'* (1972).This is clearly explored in the work of Burton & Kagan (2005) who highlight that it can be defined as *'the acquiring of a critical consciousness'*.

'*The human being is transformed through changing his or her reality, by means of an active process of dialogue in which there is a gradual decoding of the world, as people grasp the mechanisms of oppression and dehumanization. This opens up new possibilities for action. The new knowledge of the surrounding reality leads to a new self-understanding about the roots of what people are at present and what they can become in the future.' (*Martín-Baró*,* 1986 in Burton & Kagan, 2005)

Burton & Kagan go on to discuss Dussel (1998) who attempts to describe it in more generalised terms.

'*He posits a 'call' (interpellation) from the self-aware (conscientized) victims (oppressed within a system or excluded from it) to those with an ethical conscience within the system. These two groups work together, identifying or denouncing what is wrong and constructing an alternative social reality-that is, on a shared project of liberation. As Martín-Baró and Montero have both stressed, ultimately this implies the liberation of the oppressors too.'* (Burton & Kagan, 2005)

9. Conclusion

As current debates on widening participation and student retention suggest, there is a need for further research and dissemination of inclusive models of good practice in this area. TIPS has demonstrated one example of how an institution has responded to current debates and as such offers practitioners useful insights and strategies for supporting diverse students. As a result of utilising 'Action Research' (Lewin, 1951), TIPS as a demand-led service, contributes to more than a distanced theoretical perspective but rather highlights findings that are based on direct practitioner experiences when working in the field of Student Support.

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