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ABSTRACT:

This study focuses on a “2+2” agreement between Robert Gordon University and several Scottish Further Education providers and tracks the progress of undergraduate students studying Events Management. The main aim of the study has been to analyse the assessment performance of the direct entry (FE-HE) students in comparison with that of continuing (HE) students. The chosen methodology was a quantitative analysis of the students’ final summative results. Analysis showed that direct entry students did not achieve as highly as their HE colleagues in majority of assessments. The actual type of assessment was seen to be a factor in this disparity, with exams and reports showing widest disparity. The research highlights the importance of recognizing the differences between FE and HE experience, and recommends steps which can be taken to addresses these differences at key stages of transition.

1. Introduction

The transition from college to university at advanced entry level is undertaken by thousands of students in Scotland every year, with this “2+2” route becoming an increasingly common pathway due to formal articulation agreements between Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and Further Education Institutions (FEIs). The appropriateness of this arrangement, the readiness of the student and their eventual progress can be overlooked in an effort to engage with the “2+2” route gaining momentum and acceptance as part of a government-led widening participation agenda (Scottish Office, 1999)

This study focuses on a “2+2” agreement between Robert Gordon University (RGU) and several Scottish Further Education providers and tracks the progress of undergraduate students studying BA(Hons) Events Management. The main aim of the study has been to analyse the final summative assessment performance of the direct entry (FE-HE) students in comparison with that of continuing (HE) students and identify any disparity in relation to final performance, type of assessment and grade trajectory. Following this discussion a number of recommendations are made for RGU in relation to these articulating students that may have wider application across HE for similar arrangements in other institutions.

2. Review of Literature

The move to bring Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE) closer together, within the UK as a whole, (Christie, et al, 2013; Winter & Dismore, 2010) and also more recently as part of Scottish Government strategy, has been part of practice and academic discussion for a number of years now. (Gallacher, 2006; Scottish Office, 1999). Among a number of drivers of this, the most common thread is a desire for some “wider participation” within tertiary education. FE (whether within the English or Scottish) education system is now regarded as a valid and valuable stepping stone towards HE for a number of sections of the community for whom HE is not seen as a viable option on leaving secondary education. Although simplifying a complex picture, adult education returners, those with non HE focused family

backgrounds, and those who did not achieve academically in secondary education are mentioned in literature as among those who can benefit from links between further and higher education. (Tait & Godfrey, 2001; Gallagher, 2006)

There have been a variety of initiatives put in place to accommodate this move towards enhanced relationships between FE and HE. It has to be recognised that some of these initiatives have been dependent on the wider education strategy and conditions of the time, and specifically of the differences between the Scottish and English education systems (Christie et al, 2013). Pike & Harrison (2010) highlight the delivery of a foundation degree within English FE institutions, which then allowed students to move to an HE institution for the final year of a degree programme. A more common system within Scotland is the “direct entry” route whereby students are entitled to enter a degree course at a later stage on completion of an appropriate Higher National Certificate (HNC) or Higher National Diploma (HND) at an FE institution (Gallacher, 2006). There is some variance in the structure, with “2+2” (two year HND then direct entry into stage three of a four year Honours degree) being a standard route – and the one used in the course which forms the basis of this study. There do exist some formal relationships, such as the one between NEScol and Robert Gordon University, whereby a matching exercise has taken place to ensure potential direct entry students have covered similar or equivalent work as their counterparts who have studied at RGU since stage one. This formal agreement also requires that potential transitioning students must achieve at least a “B” grade in a core FE module. This goes some way towards ensuring an appropriate academic ability for these particular students. There are also a number of informal routes available where the relevant HE course leader can make a decision on a potential student not coming through a recognised formal arrangement.

The main conceit of such direct entry routes is that potential students can enter directly into stage three, and should have the necessary skills and experience required to achieve the relevant HE qualification (Christie et al, 2013) – although these skills and experience may differ from those who have followed the HE route from stage one. However this viewpoint tends to ignore (or at least downplay) the reality that FE and HE are very much different beasts, which in the main have different cultures; learning styles; aims; and students. (Briggs et al, 2012; Morgan, 2013). The increased drive for progression routes perhaps downplays the importance of FE experience and qualification in its own right. Smith & Boccock (1999) argue that successful progression cannot be assumed, as the type of students which enter HE can be very different from those who enter FE from secondary education. As Knox (2005) states, the ease of articulation from FE to HE does not necessarily mean these students will succeed at HE. Christie et al (2013) finds and clearly states that there is a significant gap between the perception and reality of how the Scottish articulation framework sees the parity between direct entry and continuing students when they converge (usually at start of stage three). Simply put, it is not a level playing field. Putwain & Sander (2014) make the perhaps obvious point that students who have “academic confidence” perform better and enjoy their studies more.

In recent years there has been a growth of literature that highlights these differences and identifies how these can impact on retention, achievement and the learning experience of direct entry transitioning students. Although based on a small sample, Greenbank (2007), found that direct entry students joining from an FE delivered foundation degree to the final year of a HE delivered BSc (Hons) performed less well than continuing students both in terms of grade average and in the number higher degree classifications. Round et al (2011) point to a wider amount of statistical data which highlights worse degree classifications for transitioning students as well as higher withdrawal rates.

Greenbank (2007) also notes that such direct entry students were inadequately prepared for the developed levels of academic writing, which was expected at this final year stage of the BSc. The transitioning students themselves are often aware of the challenges they face and may start their HE experience with feelings of inadequacy, fear and worry, (Stone, 2004;

Christie et al, 2006) while Thomas, (2012) emphasises the link between good transition practisespractices and student retention. Christie et al (2013) highlight the link between a direct entry students' ability to adapt and accept the more independent learning requirements of HE and the success or otherwise of transitioning students at HE. One of the points raised by Christie et al (2006) was the part that a smooth transitional process played in overall success. Harrison & Pike (2010) refer to work by the Learning and skills Development Agency which suggests closer engagement and liaison between the specific FE and HE institutions makes for smoother and more successful transition, with Briggs et al (2012) also stating the case for a clear, coherent preparation programme of transition while providing a proposed model of transition. This seems a sensible suggestion which should be a pre-requisite for any formal agreement. However, in reality perhaps goes no further than brief matching exercises – and this does not address the growth of informal transitions.

Yorke (2005) notes the greater level of attention given to practical skills and knowledge at FE institutions. Pike & Harrison (2010) also note the predominance of practical focus in FE but highlight the views of some HE lecturers which question the parity of two years of FE and the first two years of HE.

Another issue noted by Harrison & Pike (2010) is that direct entry students have little time to settle into HE, and such acclimatisation can be up to a year. (Winter & Dismore, 2013). Christie et al (2013) also raise the issue of a settling in period, similar to that required from students entering HE directly from secondary education. The greater challenge for direct entry students is the shorter period between entry and final classification year, whereas continuing students have a more gradual journey through HE. This seems a particular problem in England where the expectation is that such students will enter at the third year of a HE degree – which is the final year. Within Scotland, most degrees have a four year framework, with the common direct entry stage being at start of year three. A hypothesis of this study was that direct entry students may show improved grading profile as they became used to the differences between FE and HE. This hypothesis was based on the observation of the researchers over a number of years and on anecdotal evidence from students themselves.

In his research Greenbank (2007) discussed the possibility with both FE and HE lecturers that changes could be made to either, or both, the foundation degree or the degree in what to make transition smoother. All these options appear to run the risk of damaging the successful elements of both HE degrees and FE foundation degrees (or HNDs).

One suggestion raised by the work of Greenbank (2007) was that students should transition into the 2nd year (rather than the third of a three year degree as this would provide more time to adjust to many elements of HE life. Pike & Harrison (2010) question whether this would be appealing to students, and the growing financial implications of longer term tertiary study add to misgivings of this proposal. Another suggestion was that only the highest achieving FE students are accepted into the HE degree.

Almost fifteen years ago Tait & Godfrey (2001) highlighted the importance of on-going induction programmes rather than short pre-course sessions. They focused mainly on the needs of students transitioning from secondary to HE, but also link to the FE to HE transition. Similar points are made by Briggs et al, (2012).The case study used by Tait & Godfrey, focuses on a credit bearing compulsory bridging module for transitioning students. This module focused on non course specific elements including approaches to study, HE learning environment, and academic writing. They point out the need for such a module as it is *“unreasonable to expect all schools to prepare their pupils for HE in these ways.”* This was a recognition that secondary education and HE are very different in nature and should be recognised and accepted as such. In an earlier work, Knox (2005) refers to the use of such bridging modules between FE and HE – although the ones mentioned were voluntary only. Knox found that students undertaking a specific module to help them through the FE-HE

transition performed better in terms of retention and Honours classification when compared to direct entry students who did not take this transition module. The caveat that it was the more dedicated students who may have taken up this offer perhaps questions the validity of this study; but also indicates the potential need for such a module to be compulsory.

3. Methodology

Having identified some of the issues with the current transition experience, a study was undertaken to identify the comparative achievement of direct entry (FE-HE) and existing University (HE) students in years three (degree) and four (honours) of an Undergraduate taught provision. Due to the authors' combined knowledge of, and access, to Robert Gordon University (RGU) BA(Hons) Events Management students, this group were selected as the sample for this preliminary quantitative study.

This investigation is based on the existing summative grade performance data set for all current and completed third and fourth year students RGU BA(Hons) Events Management students. As the programme is still in its early phases with only one complete graduated cohort (2014) at this stage, the authors acknowledge a key limitations of this preliminary study being the size of the sample (158), with only 30 having completed four full semesters at the relevant stages. However as a) this data set will continue to grow and b) there are still a number variables that can be investigated effectively, investigation in this area can offer keen insight into the transition process and the issues FE-HE students face.

The research is largely inductive in its design, due to its exploratory nature, i.e. the various ideas and constructs developed flow from the data rather than from a pre-defined theory that the research then aimed to prove/disprove (Bryman, 2012), however there were key areas we wished to investigate. Given the saturation sample identified, all RGU Events management third and fourth year students (past and present) were part of the sample, this resulted in a heavily gender skewed data set and an unequal weighting of FE-HE to HE students, however as these represent the entirety of the potential population, it was deemed that this was the most appropriate sampling method. The result of this led to a largely non-parametric set of results, which in turn influenced the statistical analysis techniques. Through the use of the statistical software package SPSS, the quantitative data can be analysed. SPSS enables the user to conduct a wide variety of statistical tests to help analyse the data and transform it into meaningful information. Initial tests were run to identify frequencies and percentages of answers followed by cross-tabulation to help show relationships between certain variables. Having reviewed these results, further decisions were made as to the types of statistical testing that should be used, namely Mann-Whitney and Kruskal Wallis tests for the comparison of independent mean rank variables (Field, 2013).

4. Results & Analysis

Four independent variables (Gender; Nationality; Graduating year; and Entry Route) were coded for each individual respondent, before their grade band achievements were coded. The analysis largely focused on whether these independent variables had an impact on the achievement of the students, with the focus being on the influence of entry route. The following is a brief overview of the initial results before exploring the influence of entry route in greater depth.

These variables were tested against the grade profiles to identify if there were any statistically significant findings; although some were identified at significant levels: females performed better in some modules and certain year groups performed more strongly than others overall, none of these were of direct relation or interest to the main focus of the study;

entry route. At is worth pointing out that of the potential population, 37% were direct entry students (FE-HE) and 63% were existing students (HE).

4.1 Comparison of results

The results become complicated due to subtle changes to the programme's structure and the fact that only one semester (semester one, third year) can be tested across all three cohorts due to completion of the relevant modules. To complete their third and fourth year, each individual student must complete 240 credits; RGU works on a 15 credit model and as such eight modules per year are required, however in their fourth year they sit two 30 credit modules, a dissertation and a live project: The Main Event, as such each student's performance is measured against 14 modules, some of which have multiple components, in addition in their fourth year the students are given one elective module (from which they make their decision from three modules). With all of these factors in mind, the database has both modules and individual assessments. Despite these issues, by using the Mann-Whitney and Kruskal Wallis tests which focus on the difference between the mean rank of the variables (Field 2009: 540) and due to the missing variables being excluded, the results below demonstrate the disparity of results between the two groups.¹

Module	Mean Rank	U value	Z value	Significance
BS3136a Ethics and the Consumer (C1) <i>FE-HE</i> <i>HE</i>	82.35 72.79	1929.500	-3.207	.001*
BS3921 Public Relations Strategy & Specialisms <i>FE-HE</i> <i>HE</i>	74.21 53.35	1213.000	-3.384	.001*
BS3960 Event Sponsorship and Fundraising <i>FE-HE</i> <i>HE</i>	91.40 68.45	1915.000	-3.250	.001*
BS3920 Event Tourism: Legacy and Impact <i>FE-HE</i> <i>HE</i>	52.19 39.24	618.000	-1.403	.014**
BS3917 Industry Experience Portfolio 3 <i>FE-HE</i> <i>HE</i>	41.26 32.30	418.500	-2.047	.041**
BS4294 Lifestyle, Consumption & Experience Economies <i>FE-HE</i> <i>HE</i>	43.39 31.07	332.50	-2.768	.006*
BS4135 Applied Consumer Psychology^ (C1) <i>FE-HE</i> <i>HE</i>	10.00 6.11	10.000	-1.787	.075***

¹ Due to the method of coding, the higher the mean rank score, the lower the overall grade the students achieved.

BS4145 Heritage Management [^] FE-HE HE	13.00 7.75	15.000	-2.258	.024**
BS4209 Corporate Ethics [^] FE-HE HE	4.67 2.33	1.000	-1.650	.099***
BS4302 Research Methods FE-HE HE	46.77 29.49	258.000	-3.590	.000*
BS4292 Dissertation FE-HE HE	20.25 14.52	58.000	-1.656	.098***

*Significance at 99% confidence level

*Significance at 95% confidence level

***Significance at 90% confidence level

[^] Elective module

C = one component within a multi -component module

These results clearly show that there is a great disparity between the HE vs. FE-HE students, with those coming from the direct entry route not achieving as highly as their HE only counterparts in 11 of their potential 21 assessments. Although in some of the other assessments the FE-HE students did equal or surpass their HE counterparts, this was never to a statistically significant level. This supports the work of Greenbank (2007) who demonstrated that direct entry students performed less well in terms of grade average and honours classifications. and calls into question why this disparity exists. Upon further investigation it becomes clear that the *type* of assessment has a large impact on this divergence of grades.

4.2 Type of assessment

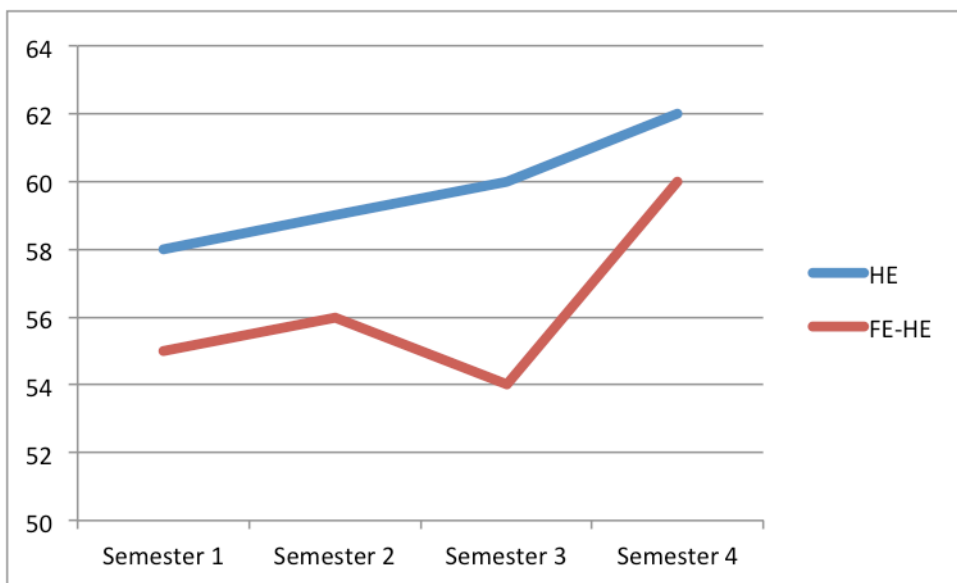
From the table above (section 4.1) it is clear that there is a disparity in achievement between FE-HE and HE students, however it is only once the *nature* of these assessments are revealed that a pattern begins to emerge; all bar two of these assessments are individual critical reports / essays, with the remaining modules (Public Relations and Corporate Ethics) being individual exams. At degree and honours level these forms of assessment are standard fare (Pike and Harrison, 2011), however given the vocational nature of the degree and the industry within which the students aim to work, many assessments across the course are practical in nature, both in the HE provision at RGU and the FE provision articulated students will be used to. Of the remaining five modules and ten assessments that are not presented above and as such those where there is not a statistically significant difference between the FE-HE and HE students; five are group work, six are practical only four are traditional “academic” assessments (individual reports / exams).

When we look at one of the most practical modules within the course, Live Music Management, we see a very different picture. The module’s assessment structure is as follows: a group “pitch” of their event concept followed by the event itself and a reflection piece. In the first two elements there is no discernibly negative difference between FE-HE and HE students. In fact, the FE-HE students perform better in the “pitch” and although the highest attainment in the class for the actual events tends to be from HE students, there is a greater dispersion of grades for HE students, with many getting lower grades, however the FE-HE students have yet to achieve lower than a “B” for this element. From experience of marking the FE-HE students often demonstrate a higher level of practical skills “on the

night". The final assessment, where the students now focus on individual reflection of their performance, the FE-HE students once again do not do as well as their HE counterparts. This module act as a microcosm of the disparity between cohorts as a whole; group and practical assignments the FE-HE students are as, if not more, capable than their HE counterparts, but in traditional "academic" assignments they perform less well, which supports the earlier work of Greenbank (2007).

4.3 Trajectory

The final area we wished to investigate was that of grade trajectory and whether FE-HE students, as we suspected and identified by struggle due to the overall transition in their first semester, but improve over time as identified by Putwain and Sander (2014). By converting the means for the two groups back into an average grade, for each semester a simple plot was constructed to demonstrate the achievement between the groups.²



From the graph above it is evident that the authors' initial assumptions do not hold true. The expectation was that semester one would be the biggest "jump" for the FE-HE students and that over the remainder of the course they would "catch-up" with their HE counterparts. However it is clear that semester three (or the beginning of honours year) provides the greatest challenge. Although more subtle, a slight halt to the upward trajectory of the HE students is also noted at this stage, however in general their marks steadily improve as they work towards their honours classifications, the FE-HE students however improve at the same rate as HE over the third year, dip significantly at the beginning of fourth year, before dramatically improving (and generally attaining "Bs" in the final semester. With only one fully graduated cohort at this stage the final semester discussion is somewhat moot at this stage and will be more accurate in following years.

Upon further investigation it becomes clear that an issue previously identified is at play here; both semester one and three have a greater number of traditionally "academic" modules and specifically assessment type than semester two and four. The live event assessments (Live Music Management and The Main Event) both take place in the second semester of third and fourth year respectively and make up a large proportion (60%) of the assessments the students undertake during this timeframe.³

² At RGU, 50-59% = C; 60-69% = B

³ This is in terms of quantity of assessments, not value of credits

5. Discussion

The findings above show a clear attainment gap between the FE-HE and HE students, importantly the gap does not significantly alter (as the authors hypothesized) by the end of the programme; although the FE-HE grades do improve by the end of their studies the gap between their profile and that of the HE students is still the same. Crucially, it was found that the type of assessment was an important factor when comparing achievement of direct entry students with their cohorts who had entered HE at stage one. The FE-HE students perform at a higher level within practical assessments than they do at assessment types such as reports and essays which require a greater level of academic writing skills. This could reflect the greater level of practical experience which these students are exposed to during their two years at FE, as discussed by Yorke (2005). This finding that this particular sample seem to perform better in a sphere where they already have existing experience but not so strongly in unfamiliar assessment forms adds some weight to the idea of “academic confidence” and the need for familiarity to succeed as expressed by Putwain & Sander (2014) and Greenbank (2007). It takes us back to some of the views outlined previously that the skills and experience which form a key part of FE are valuable in their own right, but also different from what is expected in many aspects of HE – a case of different beasts. Perhaps the discussion should be about recognizing what both FE and HE offer in their own right, and accepting that progression is not always necessary – or beneficial.

Other studies have suggested that the academic performance of FEHE students may improve over a period of time as they acclimatise (Harrison & Pike, 2010), Greenbank, 2007). This was an initial hypothesis of this study, but the results do not allow such a conclusion to be reached. However the researchers feel that this is still an area which requires wider and deeper analysis.

6. Recommendations

With the combination of these findings and the authors’ own experiences of FEHE students within this provision a number of recommendations for our own institution have been formulated, it is believed that these will have a wide applicability across other provisions within the institution and may be of benefit to others.

The main finding is that FEHE students enter stage three with a different level and type of experience from their time at FE. Currently within RGU (and very likely in other HE institutions) not enough is known nor acknowledged regarding these differences which in turn leaves the FEHE students inappropriate, rather than insufficient, support to succeed. In support of Briggs et al (2012) and Knox (2006) there appears to be a need for a “bridging module”. Although there remain questions as to the exact form this should take, and to what degree such a module should be compulsory or voluntary, it is clear that the purpose and scope of the module should address aspects such as academic writing, study skills, general orientation, and confidence building. These recommendations support similar thoughts from previous work including Knox (2006) and Thomas (2012).

A second, although related, recommendation is that any support for transitioning FEHE students should be a multi step process taking in the latter stages of their FE, pre HE entry and also key points as students progress through HE. Currently NEScol and RGU are running a pilot scheme with students transitioning from HND Travel & Tourism to BA (Hons) International Tourism Management. The transition process includes pre-transition formal “taster” days, pre-enrollment sessions on study skills and academic writing, and reflection periods during semester one at HE. It is however too early to reach any conclusions on the effectiveness of this pilot scheme.

Finally, greater attention should be paid to the valuable skills and experience that FE students bring with them to HE; in particular their more extensive practical experiences. There is an opportunity here to use this different (not inferior) experience in ways that can help the FE students integrate with their new colleagues.

7. Conclusion

With the ever-increasing links between HE and FE, particularly post '92 and due to the widening participation framework, the assumption made by many both in and outwith the sector has been that of parity between the two at HNC & HND. Although from a qualifications qualifications framework (e.g. SCQF and FEHQ) perspective this is the case, the nature of the pedagogical approaches, the intended outcomes and students themselves still offer great differences. To expect students from FE to seamlessly integrate to HE and have the same levels of academic confidence and educational experience is clearly folly; where formulated articulation agreements exist between institutions there is an opportunity for a clearly stipulated "preparing for university" style offering, where in less structured routes the HE provider should aim to have preparatory offerings in advance of induction to year 3.

The historic differences in approach and purpose of HEIs and FEIs may indeed be decreasing, particularly in vocationally based provisions, however there are still significant differences between the two. Rather than attempt to homogenize, these differences should be embraced and acknowledged, with both providing unique and necessary functions. The differences between the sending FEI and receiving HEI should be investigated and where gaps existing during this matching process, direct entry students should be made aware of them and given the opportunity to experience the requirements in advance of induction, as such where articulation and advanced entry are offered the institutions should attempt to provide a bridge rather than a chasm.

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