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A first year course co-ordinators network: a targeted approach to academic development

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Abstract

In this paper we present the background, aims and rationale for establishing a First Year Course Co-ordinators' Network (FYCCN) at the University of Glasgow. This is followed by an explanation of how themes that emerged from discussions with network members were used to inform the content of subsequent meetings. We present evaluation findings of the impact of the FYCCN, where feedback highlighted the value of the network to first year co-ordinators in terms of meeting others with a similar role and sharing practice. Feedback also identified that some co-ordinators' need more administrative support in their role. Discussion focuses on the benefits of the FYCCN as a form of academic development that targets participants on the basis of shared academic tasks rather than their level of experience or discipline.

Introduction

The first year at university is considered to be a crucial time within which to engage students with learning at university. The University of Glasgow's First Year Course Co-ordinators' Network (FYCCN) is an attempt to bring together academic staff from across the university who share this common challenge of engaging first year students, enhancing their experience of university and therefore improving the likelihood that they will be retained in the institution.

In this paper, we first outline relevant literature relating to engagement and retention of first year students. We then present the background rationale for setting up a FYCCN at the University of Glasgow and explain how the network was implemented. We include details of the content and processes of the first three meetings, followed by evaluation outcomes from these meetings. We then explore how this form of targeted support of academic staff focused on a shared specific role has the potential to be an effective model of academic development and institutional enhancement.

Student retention/ the first year

Student retention has been a focus of research in higher education for many years, particularly in North America, based primarily upon institutional concern for funding and reputation. In focusing on the first year student, it appears that 'persistence' is a key factor in positive student experiences and success, whilst recognising that student success may be measured in various ways. There have been many studies and reviews of the factors involved in student persistence and attrition, particularly in the first year of university, for example Yorke and Longden's (2008) project for the UK's Higher Education Academy. Having surveyed students who have withdrawn from their studies the authors conclude that the issues are complex and multi-

factorial. While there are no simple solutions the authors note that many of the issues thought to contribute to the decision to withdraw can be influenced by institutional action, for example, information prior to entry and student expectations, quality of teaching, opportunities for social integration and interaction with academic staff.

Despite its critics, Tinto's seminal model has been the dominant theory of student retention over the past few decades (1975; 1993 cited by Yorke & Longden, 2004) and the model has been refined and developed by Tinto and others, see for example Braxton (2000). The key points of Tinto's sociological theory are the interaction between the student and the institutional environment that lead to academic and social integration and result in commitment to both the institution and the goal of graduating.

Many models of student retention are based around the common view that "engagement, matters and it matters most during the critical first year" (Tinto, 2006, 4). Despite decades of research, the first year at university remains a priority and was recently chosen as one of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Scotland's 'enhancement themes' (QAA Scotland, 2011). This theme brought together representatives from institutions across Scotland to focus on student engagement and empowerment in the first year. The QAA provided small grants to run a series of projects that investigated different aspects of the first year. Each project team produced a report to disseminate their findings and the QAA organised a range of events focused on the first year experience. Two of the authors were involved in two of these projects: Peer support in the first year (Black and MacKenzie, 2008) and Curriculum design for the first year (Bovill, Morss and Bulley, 2008).

The University of Glasgow context

Early in 2006 the University of Glasgow (UoG) established a working group on student retention to identify and enhance student experiences at this research-intensive institution. The group has representation from across academic units and student services, as well as the student body. The group has taken a strategic institutional approach to collate and review knowledge and good practice from around the institution and from elsewhere. The first task of the group was to develop the reporting systems for reliable and timely statistics on student continuation and completion of studies. Annual analysis of cohorts of undergraduate students grouped by their degree award revealed the majority of students who withdraw from the UoG do so in their first year of attendance, which is consistent with findings across the sector.

Most students accepted for study at the UoG are admitted into one of several large colleges (previously faculties) rather than into a specific programme of study. This entry system allows flexibility for students to have greater choice in their programme of study but institutional research has shown that these students are particularly vulnerable. On the one hand, the flexible college entry system at the UoG was found to be beneficial to students who take three subjects in first year, any of which can be continued to Honours level study. On the other hand, this system can also result in problems arising from, for example: large class sizes of students with diverse academic backgrounds; lack of departmental 'belonging' until Honours years (years 3 and 4 of the standard four year Scottish Honours degree); and the challenge of taking three sometimes very different subjects. The vulnerability of first year students entering the university into one of the colleges, contrasts with students who enter directly into a specific programme of study and strongly identify with their subject

from very early in their degree, such as students accepted into professional degree programmes such as medicine, dentistry and law.

The UoG senior managers continue to focus strategically on retention of first year students and they are committed to improving student progression, particularly the progression of students from first year into second year, as evidenced in the latest University Strategic Plan (University of Glasgow, 2010). This 'top-down' approach to addressing student retention has been reinforced by the University through providing small grants to staff across the institution in the form of Learning and Teaching Development Fund (LTDF) awards (University of Glasgow, undated a). This fund enables staff to be creative and to pilot new practices to enhance the student experience on a local level. Funding is available for learning and teaching projects that relate directly to institutional strategic priorities, including retention of first year students. Sharing good practice from these 'bottom-up' initiatives has informed and expanded retention activity around the institution. LTDF projects have piloted retention activities such as creating community through First Year Interest Groups, attendance monitoring for early identification of students who might be at risk of dropping out, implementing formative assessment in first year, and developing students' skills. The UoG views student withdrawal as the outcome of one end of a spectrum of student satisfaction and therefore the University is keen to ensure that there is also a focus on positive efforts to improve the first year student experience for all students, not just those students who are 'at risk'.

The work of the Retention Working Group (RWG) led to the realisation that the individual academic staff responsible for the running and administration of first year courses were crucial agents in the development of a positive first year student experience. Therefore these staff were an important target group for academic development and support. It has been argued that working with course co-ordinators

can be an effective way to provide academic development leading to meaningful and sustainable developments related to strategic and institutional priorities (Goos, Hughes, and Webster-Wright, 2009).

Implementation of the FYCCN

The Academic Development Unit of the UoG's Learning and Teaching Centre was asked to offer support to the institution's cohort of first year course co-ordinators. Initial discussions focused on the Faculty Learning Community model (FLC) (Cox 2004) which had been successfully implemented previously at the institution (MacKenzie et al., 2010). However since the number of individuals who can be supported through an FLC is limited, the decision was made to offer all first year course co-ordinators support through a First Year Course Co-ordinators 'Network.' The network was facilitated collaboratively by the three authors: JM is based in the ADU, is a member of the RWG and had been co-director of a QAA first year enhancement theme project; CB is based in the ADU and had been a project director for a different first year enhancement theme project; and AB is the RWG's researcher.

Our initial task involved identifying academic staff responsible for the administration of first year courses who we describe here as first year course co-ordinators (FYCCs). This was not straightforward, because the institution had not previously identified these individuals as a specific grouping and the approximately 180 co-ordinators were referred to by a variety of different titles across the University, including: co-ordinators, convenors, managers and year heads. Once the FYCCs had been identified they were invited by email to attend an inaugural meeting. The aims of this meeting were to find out what types of support and development FYCCs would find useful and to launch new web pages that had been designed to support their first

year work (University of Glasgow, undated b), in response to a request from the RWG. These web pages identified current first year research and useful resources.

This inaugural meeting took place in May 2009. In addition to informing participants about the web pages, we used most of this meeting to facilitate interactive workshop activities. These activities were aimed at encouraging participants to identify the challenges they faced in their FYCC role as well as ideas for improving the experience of their first year students. Common concerns included: the challenge of inducting students into the University - helping them make the transition from school, further education or work to university, both academically and socially; building a sense of community amongst students; and dealing with large classes both in terms of student engagement and monitoring attendance. However, by far the most commonly voiced concern was balancing the multi-faceted work of being an academic with the heavy administrative load of being an FYCC, often with no administrative support. This is echoed in the work of Goos, Hughes and Webster-Wright (2009, 3) who found that a major concern of course co-ordinators was “coping with workload pressures and burdensome administrative and quality assurance requirements”. Co-ordinators at the inaugural meeting also stated that they would value the opportunity to meet with other FYCCs face-to-face rather than in an online network.

In order to address this desire for further support, following the inaugural meeting we have provided a programme of regular FYCCN meetings and workshops: two each academic year. These regular meetings are timed to avoid interference with busy teaching or assessment periods. In the academic year 2009-2010, in response to concerns raised at the inaugural meeting, the first full meeting focused on streamlining administrative processes through the development of an electronic task management tool that we termed the FYCC ‘handbook.’ This is an editable Excel

calendar which identifies common administrative tasks related to course management, delivery and assessment

(http://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_187075_en.xls).

The second full meeting focused on induction and offered participants opportunities to learn about each others' induction practices. The meeting included a presentation by an Associate Dean for Learning and Teaching in the Arts, who reported on evaluation research undertaken at a recent induction event with the aim of identifying what students expect to learn from an induction event. Participants also critically evaluated their own induction practices using the University of Ulster's STAR project induction audit resources (University of Ulster, 2006). In the following section we present the evaluation outcomes from these first two full meetings of the FYCCN.

Evaluation results

At the inaugural meeting of the FYCCN there were 34 co-ordinators present (out of a possible 180 first year course co-ordinators at the University). At the first full meeting of the FYCCN, 25 co-ordinators attended, while 23 co-ordinators attended the second full meeting. Including the inaugural meeting, 40 co-ordinators attended one meeting, 15 co-ordinators attended two meetings and four co-ordinators attended all three of these meetings.

At the inaugural meeting the feedback we collected was in the form of suggestions for the topics of future meetings. The data presented here does not include this feedback from the inaugural meeting, but focuses on the evaluation of the first two full meetings using a questionnaire with a combination of Likert scale questions (questions one to four) and open ended comment questions (questions five to eight). The Likert scale questions asked participants about their level of confidence to carry

out their FYCC role and how useful, relevant and supportive they considered each FYCCN meeting to have been. In the open ended questions we asked co-ordinators what they found most useful about each meeting, how they could be better supported in their role, what the University could do to improve the first year experience and whether they would like to make any other general comments.

Responses to the first four questions are presented in Table 1. The table presents data from the first and second full meetings. The Likert scale ranged from one to five, where one represented 'very confident', 'very useful', 'very relevant' or 'very supportive' and where five represented 'not confident at all', 'not useful at all', 'not relevant at all' or 'not supportive at all'.

Table 1 Mean scores for questions 1 to 4 for the first two full FYCCN meetings

	Meeting 1	Meeting 2	Meeting 1	Meeting 2
Question	Mean	Mean	Non-response	Non-response
1. How confident do you feel in your role as first year course co-ordinator?	2	1.9	1	2
2. How useful did you find the network event today?	2.6	1.9	0	0
3. How relevant to your work was the content and discussion at the network event today?	2.5	1.9	1	0

4. How supportive to your role as a first year course co-ordinator did you find this event?	2.5	1.9	1	0
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The table presents the results from questions one to four in the form of mean scores for the Likert scale responses from both meeting one and meeting two. The scores illustrate that the FYCCs were relatively confident in their role with mean scores of 2 and 1.9 for meetings one and two respectively. The responses to question two, three and four are very similar. They suggest that co-ordinators found both meetings useful, relevant and supportive, but the scores for meeting one suggest that co-ordinators were more neutral in their response. All of these scores improved to a mean rating of 1.9 for the second meeting suggesting that co-ordinators found the second meeting more useful, relevant and supportive.

The first of the open questions asked participants ‘what was the most useful aspect of the network meeting today?’ Feedback from both meetings focused on how useful participants found it to be able to meet face-to-face with other people in same role. There was a preference for face-to-face meetings rather than networking online or provision of resources online, with a strong steer that they receive too much online information that they struggle to find the time to keep up with. Another key aspect of the meetings that co-ordinators found useful was having the space to share practice and learn from others with similar responsibilities. The following quotes are typical of the responses at both meetings regarding what they found useful: “meeting staff from across the university and seeing the range of how things are done elsewhere”, and “discussion with other first year course co-ordinators”.

The FYCCs were asked how they could be supported more effectively in their role. Responses from both meetings focused on co-ordinators arguing that they needed

better administrative support. It became apparent in meeting one that the range of experience of administrative support was vast. Some co-ordinators of large first year programmes had no administrative support whilst other co-ordinators, sometimes leading smaller programmes had their own administrator specifically to administer first year programmes. Feedback from meeting two also had a common theme that co-ordinators would like the FYCCN to continue meeting as they found it very supportive to their role. One co-ordinator explicitly stated that they needed support “from inside the department - support from outside is excellent”. This echoed a range of other comments about the need for more assistance and more staff to be allocated to first year work within departments.

Co-ordinators were asked what they would like to see the University doing to improve the first year student experience. There was some agreement about the need to better prepare first year students in terms of academic skills as well as emphasise the importance of independent learning, the following comment is typical: “greater emphasis on student obligations, more study skills training”. Several comments suggested the University should consider creating better social spaces within subject areas, to enable first year students to create communities with their peers and with staff to enhance their sense of belonging. Several comments were made about the need to offer induction and mentorship for first year course co-ordinators, and related to this, the need to ensure that a high quality of staff are assigned to first year work. There were also concerns to enhance communication within University systems relating to students being admitted to the UoG through the general college entry system outlined earlier, as this comment illustrates: “more co-ordination between departments so that students have a more coherent experience”.

Finally, co-ordinators were asked for any further comments they would like to make. These commonly passed on thanks for running the FYCCN events, but other

comments included: “generally a lot of academics do not recognise first year as an issue and don't recognise efforts to help this group” and “the cross-faculty nature of these events is great – we hear what's happening elsewhere - good for ideas”.

In reflecting on our own experiences of the FYCCN, at the inaugural meeting where co-ordinators were asked about their ideas for future meetings, we realised that we had more novice co-ordinators in attendance than at the subsequent meetings. This led us to focus in the first full meeting on designing a helpful handbook for managing first year tasks – a request from the novice co-ordinators at the inaugural meeting. However, at the first full meeting, we had in attendance co-ordinators who were more experienced and as evidenced by our data, were quite confident in their role. It became clear at this first meeting that co-ordinators with relatively little experience of the role wished to focus on very different aspects of being an FYCC and different aspects of the first year experience than their more experienced colleagues. This led us to focus the second meeting on induction: a topic that had been suggested at the inaugural meeting, but which we considered to be relevant to all FYCCs. This appeared to be more successful in responding to the needs of a larger range of FYCCs, as evidenced in the change in mean scores between meeting one and two. Overall, the mean scores suggest that co-ordinators viewed the second meeting as more useful, relevant and supportive than the first meeting.

Discussion: FYCCN as a targeted form of academic development

The process of implementing an FYCCN at the University of Glasgow, led us to realise that this initiative was different from many of the other projects in which we are involved. Academic (faculty) development in the UK is most often characterised by supporting the development of a generic set of learning, teaching and assessment

skills in mixed disciplinary groups (Young, 2010) although there is increasing debate that such development must be cognisant of, or grounded in, individual academics' disciplines. In addition, whilst advice and continuing professional development provision is offered to experienced staff, the vast majority of academic development work in universities focuses on the development of new academic staff and graduate teaching assistants (Stes et al, 2007). In contrast the FYCCN brings together staff with a range of experience within a multi-disciplinary setting. Indeed co-ordinators commented on the value of hearing what other FYCCs were doing in their subjects, and while it was challenging to target meeting agendas to suit different levels of experience, there were some comments made about the value of learning from more experienced staff.

What we realised was that the FYCCN, focused on a common role and set of tasks, brings together people across disciplines and across experience levels in order for us to target specific staff with relevant academic development. While the institution does support multi-disciplinary groups from across the institution these are commonly committees and working groups populated by senior and experienced academics; similar opportunities for less experienced colleagues to focus on aspects of learning and teaching are rare. This led us to consider some of the other possible areas of practice where this same targeted form of academic development might bring together groups of staff in the University who might otherwise rarely come together. For example, PhD research supervisors, external examiners or teachers of large classes could be possible groups who might benefit from a similar targeted academic development approach.

Using these examples, helps us to realise that depending on the size of the institution, the specific nature of groupings will need to vary. In our own University the FYCCN has approximately 180 potential members. A PhD research supervisor group

could be enormous and potentially unwieldy, where in another university this might be a reasonably sized grouping. In contrast a smaller university might want to have a programme co-ordinators' group with a focus that is wider than first year because there may be fewer first year course co-ordinators.

It is interesting to note that examples of academic development for course co-ordinators and programme leaders, are difficult to find in the learning and teaching literature. FYCCNs appear to be rare, although some examples do exist, including the 'First Year Experience Network' at Queensland University of Technology (Creagh et al, 2010; Goos, M., Hughes, C. and Webster-Wright, 2009). However, some of the difficulty in finding FYCCNs in different settings relates to the varied terminology used to describe the role as well as the hidden nature of much of this practice, where details of networks are available at a local level and have not been evaluated or disseminated widely.

The FYCC network is now in its second full year and is evolving to shift the focus and responsibility away from academic development staff and to give ownership over to the FYCCs themselves. Future meetings will be organised and chaired by volunteer FYCCs with academic development staff support. Our aim is that the FYCCN becomes a valued and sustainable support for this group of academic staff.

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