

NTU Steps to Success: Research, Present, Reflect

Literature Review:

Recent reports into the progress of students following a BTEC route into university have identified an 'attainment gap', whereby these students are more likely to achieve lower grades than their A-Level counterparts for the duration of their degree (Rouncefield-Swales, 2014). Given that the numbers of students accessing higher education with vocational rather than academic qualifications are set to increase (Shields and Masardo, 2015), moves are being made in higher education institutions to adopt new pedagogies which aim to narrow this gap and ease the transition.

Evidence points to the benefits of interventions taking place at the pre-entry stage, that have a clear academic purpose (Aynsley and Gazeley, 2012). Aynsley and Gazeley note that interventions should aim to: **develop core HE skills; develop of a sense of belonging in HE; and build positive efficacy beliefs around making a successful transition.** The **Steps to Success** programme is an intervention designed with these factors in mind.

Method:

- **Cohort of nine Y13 students** identified to take part in pilot scheme, aimed at easing the transition from sixth form vocational study into university.
- **Occurred as an extension of existing** outreach work between NTU Schools, Colleges and Community Outreach (SCCO) and a local partner school.
- **Steps to Success** combined sessions already facilitated by the Library Learning and Teaching Team (LTT) focusing on academic and information literacy, with those that emerged from SCCO's interest in growth mindset literature (Dweck, 2006; Hochanadel and Finamore, 2015) encouraging the cultivation of new beliefs and habits and led to the adoption of emergent pedagogies focusing on new approaches to learning traits and qualities such as **Purpose, Effort, Positivity, Personal responsibility, Enquiring mind, Resilience** (PEPPER).

Stages

- **Stage 1**, which took place in school introduced participants to PEPPER and effective research skills.
- **Stage 2** took place on campus and adopted a SCALE-UP approach, using technology enhanced and collaborative learning, participants were invited to conduct research into a topic selected from a list of pre-written assignment briefs, with a remit of creating a 5-minute group presentation.
- **Stage 3** took place back in the school and consisted of a individualised writing exercise using PEPPER as a framework for critical self-reflection.
- **An evaluation approach** adapted from the Kirkpatrick model was used to assess the outcomes of the training programme: This follows the steps of: **reaction, learning, behaviour** and **results** (Bates, 2004).

References:

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- Dweck, C.S., 2006. *Mindset: The new psychology of success.* Random House Incorporated.
- Hochanadel, A., and Finamore, D., 2015. Fixed And Growth Mindset In Education And How Grit Helps Students Persist In The Face Of Adversity. *Journal of International Education Research*, 11 (1), 47-50.
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Discussion:

Reaction: (refers to how participants respond to the materials and is recorded through observation)

- Participants engaged with the taught elements of the programme
- All participants produced some work independently between stages
- Suggests they perceived value in the programme
- Varying levels of engagement with self-reflective writing exercise
- Teachers observed 'all students were engaged, and had a positive experience', and benefitted from 'being put out of their comfort zones'

Learning (refers to a quantifiable measure of what has been learnt. It was measured by responses to two open-ended, paper-based questions that asked to describe what they had learnt at the end of the programme; and whether or not they felt more or less confident about going to university and why)

- Eight questionnaires were collected at the end of the programme
- At the end of the programme, respondents reported learning a number of skills and strategies to support transition
- These included: the development of critical analysis of information; presentation skills; and research skills. Respondents also described increased confidence about going to university; and acknowledged the value in developing the PEPPER attributes.

Discussion:

Behaviour and Impact: These elements of the evaluation seek to establish whether the learning from the intervention is being applied in practice, and whether the application of the learning has any impact on learning outcomes. They are measured by focus groups to take place at the end of the first in HE, approximately nine months after the intervention took place).

- Behaviour and impact measures relied on participants taking part in a focus group after they had made the transition to university. To this point, participants have not responded to invitations to form a focus group.
- Conclusions as to expected changes in behavior and resultant impact cannot therefore be drawn.

Conclusion:

- **Universities with growing BTEC intakes** have an interest in addressing the skills gaps (Aynsley and Gazeley 2012) and the resultant attainment gap (Rouncefield-Swales 2014).
- **Clear appetite for interventions** of this nature from 6th forms and colleges delivering BTEC courses.
- **Pilot school requested** a repeat of the programme for a larger cohort.
- **Since the delivery of the pilot** a further two school 6th forms and a 6th form college have expressed interested in taking the programme.
- **Steps to Success: Research, Present, Reflect** develops core skills associated with HE: conducting effective research and presentations.
- **Situating elements of the programme** in a university environment and demonstrating different pedagogies (SCALE-UP, autonomous learning, PEPPER) leads to participants feeling more confident about going to university and develop a sense of belonging.
- **Completing the programme**, receiving feedback, and completing the self-reflection exercise, helped develop positive efficacy beliefs around succeeding at university.
- **Measures to ensure** the continued contact with participants, culminating in focus groups, should be considered in future iterations.
- **Further pilots** should be delivered, and the behaviour and impact elements of the evaluation conducted, before firm conclusions can be drawn as to the effectiveness of the programme in supporting BTEC students to make successful transitions to university.