ACADEMIC SELF-CONFIDENCE: STUDENTS PROGRESSING FROM FURTHER TO HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

Since the turn of the century there has been a UK government agenda to widen participation at university [1] with a commitment to doubling the proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds by 2020. One such initiative is encouraging more students to progress from Further Education (FE) to Higher Education (HE) and to enter university as direct entrants. In Scotland, honour degree programmes generally take four years to complete and an increasing number of students undertake 1 or 2 of those years at FE, undertaking a Higher National (HN) qualification, before articulating to HE to complete their degree. Overall, about 47% of HN students in Scotland progress to degree level study in HE [2]. These students are referred to as direct entrants.

When moving from a FE to an HE environment, students often experience multiple transitions including academic, environmental and social change [3]. This is evident from different models which have examined it from varying perspectives [4] [5] [6]. These models highlight the various stages of transition from pre-application through to graduation and identify various levels of emotion. A transition is "rarely a simple, straightforward process" (pp3). In fact, Christie 8 (p573) suggest that student engagement in new learning environments is often tentative and uncertain, and refer to it as being a "real rollercoaster of confidence and emotions" as student's experience feelings of alienation and exclusion, as well as excitement and exhilaration.

Much of the existing research on transition focuses on students entering the first year of university programmes. However, the 2013 joint report by Higher Education Academy and National Union of Students Scotland found that transition issues can often be exacerbated when students are entering at a later stage directly from FE [3]. This can be in terms of preparedness in areas such as independent learning, study skills and learning strategies, but also as a result of them being more socially diverse, coming from families that have little university experience and baring financial difficulties.

This paper assesses the level of, and factors affecting, academic self-confidence of direct entry students progressing from FE to HE within a Scottish HE establishment. Sander and Sanders advocate that measuring confidence is useful for building a better understanding of students and for enhancing teaching [9], while Santigo and Einarson 10 (pp164) suggest that identifying confidence issues may "prove useful in the early identification of students at risk of attrition and for suggesting programmatic interventions". The paper draws on a questionnaire survey which was distributed to a large group of third year direct entry students at the start and the middle of their first year of university study examining their self-rated levels of confidence. The first distribution of the questionnaire survey indicated that, overall, self-rated confidence was higher than expected, whilst a second distribution surprisingly indicated a slight dip. Overall, results indicated slightly higher levels of self-rated confidence at the start of the programme and lower levels as the programme progressed. The high level of confidence at the early stages of the programme is potentially attributed to a mismatch of student expectations. Therefore, the paper argues for strategies to be put in place which will more appropriately manage expectations of direct entry students.

Keywords: direct entrants, academic self-confidence, realistic expectations.

1 INTRODUCTION

The Oxford Dictionary of English [11] defines self-confidence as “a feeling of self-assurance arising from an appreciation of one’s own abilities or qualities”. Sander [12] and Santiago and Einarson [10] agree that it is a measure that works at a person level and is concerned with one’s own view of their competences and talents. Within the academic setting, the term ‘self-confidence’ is related to a multitude of other terms such as self-concept, self-esteem, self-efficacy, optimism and academic behavioural confidence.
Self-concept is considered as a person’s perception of themselves or their sense of identity [13]. This sense of self may be regarded as a continual process which evolves over time but is more concerned with past judgements of competence and is related in some way to self-esteem and self-worth [14]. That said, self-esteem appears to be more focused on a person’s emotional feeling of self-worth, value or appreciation of themselves [15,13].

Craig [16] suggests that a wider definition of confidence is required which is a product of self-efficacy and optimism. Self-efficacy is related to “the belief that you have in your ability to reach your goals”; optimism is related to how hopeful you are that the circumstances and people around you will enable you to achieve this [16 (pp3)].

Within education, self-efficacy can be viewed as an individual’s “expectations of success in relation to the completion of specific academic tasks” [17 (pp349)]. It is referred to as an individual’s belief in their capability to perform a given task or the level of confidence that the individual has in their ability to complete a certain course of action [18]. It is suggested that self-efficacy is more concerned with future-oriented, cognitive judgements of competence [14]. Santiago and Einarson [10] elaborate on this by emphasising that self-efficacy includes some kind of outcome expectations ie individuals have beliefs about the specific consequences related to completing a task [18]. Clearly, self-efficacy is more task-related. It can be developed at different transitional stages of a students’ college and university life eg setting goals, peer mentoring, completing assessments and providing formative and summative feedback.

Nicholson et al [14] focus more on the term ‘academic behavioural confidence’ and regard this as a variant of self-esteem. They use a framework of academic behavioural confidence [19] to examine the cognitive judgements of students on their expectation of competence to do something in relation to future academic-related behaviours eg attend lectures, undertake independent study or achieve particular grades [14]. Furthermore, other authors have employed the term academic self-confidence [10,20]. This expression more specifically relates to one’s confidence in their academic abilities and has ‘generally been operationalised in the UG literature by asking students to rate their academic abilities, separated into discrete scale items’ that is “students’ self-perceptions of their academic abilities” [10 (pp165)].

Therefore, academic self-confidence can be regarded as a broader term than the more focused concept of self-efficacy and academic behavioural confidence. Self-efficacy is one aspect of academic self-confidence (ie the aspect that is concerned with completing tasks/programme requirements) whilst academic behavioural confidence is the other, which is related to academic behaviour. As this study is not purely concerned with the student’s level of confidence in completing specific academic outcomes or tasks, nor is it about judging academic behaviour, it would be limiting to use either concept for guiding this research. Given that this study is based on students’ rating themselves across a range of academic areas including academic skills, competences, ability to complete tasks and their related behaviour, this research will use the broader term of academic self-confidence.

1.1 Factors affecting student’s academic self-confidence

There are a range of factors that affect a student’s academic self-confidence such as parental socioeconomic status, gender, age, past experiences of education; motivation, global self-esteem; academic self-concept and academic stress [13,21,22].

Christie et al [23] found that little research has been carried out on the emotional dimensions of learning “of the difference that confidence, motivation, perseverance and creativity make to the individual’s wider disposition to learning, or of the potential changes in learning identities as students move from one setting to another or one life stage to another” [23 (pp568)]. They state that success in studies is affected by many psychological factors including ‘confidence, ambivalence and hostility’. Within the literature, academic self-confidence relates generally to four main areas: starting university; expectations; independent study and social relations.

1.1.1 Starting University

Starting university can be an anxious and stressful experience for students as they leave the familiar college or school environment and experience fear of the unknown [5]. Christie et al [8] state that “individuals entering higher education, particularly those from non-traditional backgrounds, often have to adapt to changed ways of learning in order to get the greatest benefit from their course” [8 (pp567)]. Bean and Eaton [6] highlight the importance of confidence (including self-efficacy) for students to perform well at this stage of study. Students who feel confident have a more positive outlook as they
are more likely to view demands as challenges rather than threats [24] and so are able to cope better. Christie et al [23] found that students were excited about starting university but described their transition emotionally, as “a rollercoaster of confidence” [23] (p572). They also found students experiencing ‘a crisis of confidence’ as they coped with the cultural and learning identity change and expectations of the new learning environment. Students experience high levels of anxiety and self-reflection is extremely important to understand the adjustments required to meet new demands [25]. Students also highlighted the loss of supportive relationships with staff often found in the college environment [3].

1.1.2 Expectations

Although students may feel excited by starting university, this can quickly change as they feel threatened by their lack of knowledge on university practices and procedures as well as expectations on the amount and standard of work required [23]. “A mismatch in expectations and reality can result in an inability to make the necessary academic, social and personal adjustments to life at university” [26] (pp54). Some students enter with an unrealistic expectation that they will be provided with all relevant information and will not need to engage in independent study [14]. Lowe and Cook (2003) found that many first year students lacked knowledge of subjects on offer. Their research, as well as that of Charlton et al [27], found that students with unrealistic expectations were more likely to withdraw from their programme of study. Therefore, universities must help students develop realistic expectations of the nature of teaching and learning. This could be pre-entry, during induction as well as during their first year of study [14]. Realistic expectations may also be more conducive to better academic performance so strategies should be employed to better manage these expectations [14].

1.1.3 Independent Study

Sander and Sanders [9] state that “autonomy and independence of the student are essential to success” [9] (pp4). Indeed, Lowe and Cook [26] found that some students entered university expecting to be provided with all the information that they required for study and were unprepared for the level of independent study required. Nicolson et al [14] found that students who expected to take responsibility for their learning and held realistic expectations of independent learning, performed better while students who expected teaching staff to be responsible for their learning performed less well. Students often don’t appreciate the differences in the amount of independent learning so they often underestimate the study time required [26,28]. Research by Charlton et al [27], Lowe and Cook [26] and Wilcox et al [29] all highlight erroneous expectations particularly relating to the high degree of independent learning required as a reason for disaffection.

1.1.4 Social Relations

The relational aspect of university life is also important. Establishing friendships, peer support and a sense of belonging increases the chance of adjusting to university and successfully completing studies [30, 29, 26]. Christie et al [8] also highlight the importance of social relationships and peer support from study groups which can help improve confidence and overcome feelings of alienation as well as support students in becoming more active learners. Social self-efficacy is a person’s belief in their ability to maintain and manage social relationships. Students with strong social self-efficacy tend to have a lower level of loneliness and depression, adapt to university life better and are more likely to undertake independent learning. Consequently, they are more successful students [31]. Wilcox et al [29] also highlight the importance of students’ relationships with approachable members of academic staff. If academic staff are aware of the intense fear and anxiety that students can face, then they can help students understand and overcome such feelings. Emotional support which is ‘instrumental, informational and appraisive’ (p720) can increase students’ level of academic self-confidence.

1.1.5 Overconfidence, under-confidence and performance

Research on the level of self-confidence has found that having too much or too little self-confidence has an impact on students. Nicolson et al [14] found that students who displayed higher confidence, “particularly confidence regarding grades, studying and attendance” [14, pp284], often achieved higher marks. On the other hand, Goldfinch and Hughes [33] suggest that when students are over-confident and judge their performance as being higher than their actual performance it often leads to premature termination of study, meagre test results and the students failing. This is why Sander [12] suggests that strategies to “soften the blow of academic confidence reducing” [12] (pp36) could perhaps be used with overconfident students. Sheldrake [32] found that under-confidence can also be detrimental to study as it may result in students lowering their attitudes to their university work as well as
considering, and unnecessarily constraining, their future choices. Students with low confidence are more likely to withdraw even though their marks are not significantly different.

2 METHODOLOGY

The empirical research conducted for this paper is based on a longitudinal study which took place at a post-92 university in Scotland and focused on the level of, and factors affecting academic self-confidence of direct entry students through their first year at university. These students entered directly from college onto the third year of a business-related university degree programme. The research was informed by a questionnaire survey distributed to students at the beginning and halfway through their first year of study.

The design of the questionnaire was shaped by a number of existing questionnaire surveys. Firstly, the Academic Behaviour Confidence (ABC) scale was referred to. This was developed by Sander and Sanders in 2003 specifically for UK psychology students and “seeks to provide a general measure of a student's confidence in undertaking their academic course” and attempts to allow university staff to understand a cohort of students 19 (pp20). Some aspects of the American Freshman Survey (AFS) were also deemed suitable for this survey such as questions surrounding academic preparedness; expectations; interactions with peers and faculty; student values and goals; student demographic characteristics. Finally, the Honey and Mumford’s Learning Style Questionnaire (cited in Goldfinch and Hughes [33]) provided some guidance within this research. This questionnaire contains several categories which relate to how confident students feel in specific areas such as time management, teamwork skills, self-evaluation skills, problem solving, IT skills, numeracy skills, communication skills, study skills and self-reliance. The survey questions were also shaped by relevant literature as well as opinions and experience from the researchers, relevant academic staff such as Programme Leaders and other professionals within the university involved with teaching and support for direct entrants.

The survey was designed and distributed online to all direct entrant students on business-related programmes 2015-2106. In order to maximise the response rate, the number of questions were limited and comprised of 10 background questions and 26 self-rating confidence questions.

3 RESULTS

The survey was initially distributed during induction week in September 2015, then repeated to the same group at the start of the second semester in February 2016 to see how confidence changes as student’s progress through their first year as direct entrants. The data gathered was initially analysed using Excel, then SPSS for further statistical analysis.

3.1 Questionnaire survey results (September 2015)

The first distribution of the survey allowed the researchers to evaluate the confidence levels of students at the very start of their programme of study.

145 out of 221 direct entry students completed the survey (a response rate of 66%). The background demographics of the study sample revealed: 76% under 25 years; 81% stay at home; 60% female; 72% work part-time; 63% first in family; 42% support at home.

Respondents were studying on 6 different business degree programmes; the vast majority came from 9 different colleges and from 6 different college programmes. The study sample included a high proportion of students that had competing commitments in terms of balancing studying, working and family life. The students tended to come from lower socio-economic groups, from the surrounding Glasgow area. They were often facing more diverse health issues and were often the first in their family to go to university. Largely, they had less support at home (than a traditional first year entry student), to help advise and guide them through university. Their main experience of education since leaving school was college where there was a much lower level of expectation for independent learning. These demographics are in many ways typical of direct entry students in Scotland. Christie et al (2013) found that direct entry students were more likely to study close to home which would also suggest that they stay at home, and were often the first in family to attend university.

The 26 self-rated confidence questions asked students to rate their self-confidence on a scale from 1-10, asking 'How well do you think you can do the following?' 1 = Not At All Well; 10 = Exceptionally Well. Results indicated that students were fairly confident with a self-rating mean = 7.52, SD = 1.13.
The levels of confidence evident from the survey results, ranging from 8.50 to 6.49 (out of 10) indicated higher confidence than (anecdotally) expected which is similar to findings of some other studies such as Sander and Sanders [19].

This higher than expected level of confidence may be related to unrealistic expectations of university study. The highest scoring question ‘be able to work on my own’ relates in some way to independent learning which was also found to have erroneous expectation in other studies such as Charlton et al [27], Wilcox et al [29] and Lowe and Cook [26]. This high (over) confidence is worrying as research has related this to poor completion rates [33].

Further statistical tests were conducted to compare the effects of various factors such as age, gender, programme of study, college results and college attended on students’ self-rated confidence. One-way ANOVA tests found that the college students attended before university had the most significant effect on their self-rated level of confidence \[F(8,131)=3.19, \ p=0.002\], with significant differences in 8 individual questions at <0.5 level of confidence.

Students from one college (referred to here as College X) self-rated their confidence highest (mean=8.35) while students from another college (referred to here as College Y) felt least confident (mean=6.28). Students from College X felt most prepared (mean=8.00) while students from College Y felt least prepared (mean=4.7). College X is a college which is in the same vicinity to the university while College Y is in a rural area approximately 20-30 miles from university. The university tends to have much stronger relationship with the more local colleges. There are a greater number of students that come from the local college than the more rural college and these students are involved in more transitional activities before coming to university eg essay writing, group-working, time management. The students from the local college are likely to feel familiar with the university learning and teaching environment before commencing their programme. Some academics and researchers may argue that the students are potentially being provided with too much support before they come to university and that this transition process is actually building up unrealistic expectations within the student of the amount of ‘hand holding’ that will be provided.

In this study, college attended was more statistically significant than other factors that may be more commonly associated with confidence such as students’ college results which indicate students’ education attainment on entry to university, or their university end of year results.

3.2 Questionnaire survey results (February 2016)

When the survey was repeated with the same group of students at the start of the second semester, the response rate was unfortunately lower at 30%, n=65. When compared by t-tests, there was a significant difference in confidence between the September 2015 and February 2016 surveys - \(t(42)=-2.67, \ p<0.011\), as overall confidence decreased between the 2 dates (mean 7.44 to 7.15 = -0.27 change).

This overall decrease in confidence could be a result of a number of factors. For many direct entry students, the difficulties faced in terms of balancing studying, working and family life are even greater than expected. Furthermore, the academic requirements in areas such as independent learning, academic writing and time management are more demanding than ever expected. Students were relatively confident at the start of the academic year. They may not have fully appreciated the level of academic, social and personal adjustments necessary for adapting to university life ie, there has been a mismatch between student expectations and reality [26]. There expectations have possibly not been appropriately managed at college and in some cases, the staff at colleges don’t fully appreciate the extent of the differences. Coupled with this, many of the students have nobody within their family circle to turn to and ask advise, gain reassurance and provide support. Consequently, as the year progressed they found it more difficult than expected and their confidence took a downward dip. These results are similar to other studies such as Sander [19] and Sander and Sanders [9] who also found that students’ judgements of their own confidence decreased over time.

A paired samples t-test was also conducted on individual questions to compare the confidence between the two dates. This revealed a significant drop in confidence in 3 main areas: get good grades and complete my degree; put forward my own ideas and support my opinion with a logical argument; seek feedback on my work. The question indicating the most significant drop in confidence ‘get good grades and complete my degree’ could be tied in some way to the ‘crisis of confidence’ that direct entrant students often face as they grapple with making sense of their academic community,
understanding what standards are expected of them, where to pitch their work, becoming an independent learner and critical thinker [23].

Cheng [34] describes the transition process of direct entrant students as going through four key stages: feeling of excitement and fear; culture shock, adjustment phase; progression. Confidence levels will naturally have peaks and troughs throughout this process. In February, halfway through their first year at university, this cohort of direct entrants may still be in the midst of the culture shock/adjustment phases.

Furthermore, Bandura [35] discusses ‘performance accomplishment’ as having a positive impact on the level of student confidence. Direct entrants articulating onto business programmes at university often face a dip in grades from college to the initial set of results that they receive in February at university. It is highly likely that this would negatively affect the level of student academic self-confidence at this stage.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Although the overall aim of this research was to identify the level and factors affecting academic self-confidence of direct entrant students, the study found that students’ self-rated confidence was higher than expected and a larger issue may actually be related to managing expectations. In many cases, students may be over-confident at the beginning of their programme – perhaps because they do not fully appreciate the path ahead of them and the academic adjustments required for university learning. As these student progress through the programme, their confidence often takes a dip as they start to more fully understand the expectations of the university establishment and begin to feel overwhelmed. These findings have implications for universities, academics and direct entrant students embarking on university as these students can become disillusioned, and anxious. A number of recommendations are suggested. These can be categorised under: Student Information and Support; Academic and Support Staff Roles; Institutional Relationships and Linkages

Student Information and Support: It is important that students are provided with accurate and detailed information as well as experience and insight of university study before they start. This will help them develop more informed and realistic expectations. This could be achieved through provision of relevant, information on the nature and standard of university work such as differences between college and university programmes, the structure and content of programmes, module handbooks, examples of different types of assessments, reading lists, etc. These could be provided through web resources and face-to-face information sessions. Students could also be provided with opportunities to experience university life through visits to university, sample lectures and seminars, workshops and other events.

Mean confidence scores in Table 1 suggest that confidence is lowest in some key aspects of information searching and academic writing such as finding best sources of information, referencing, and writing in an appropriate manner. Students also appeared to lack academic self-confidence in areas such as: the level of independent study; academic writing; critical analysis; and time management. These skills could be developed through an ongoing induction and transition programme, that transcends across college and university, developing appropriate skills in a timely manner.

Academic and Support Staff Roles: There needs to be clear academic and support staff roles put in place for direct entrants such as year tutors, academic advisors, learning development centre etc. To identify how realistic students’ expectations are, they could be asked to complete a survey at the start of their university studies which will provide information to staff on their level of understanding of university and their background. This could support staff in identify students at risk, addressing and managing expectations and designing early interventions.

Institutional Relationships & Linkages: Stronger links and relationships should be built between colleges and universities. This will provide a platform for sharing appropriate information and delivering a joint induction and transition programme which will help ensure direct entry students have more realistic expectations. The level of linkages and relationship may vary from one college to another depending on student expectations and how well-prepared students feel. These linkages would also allow academic staff to share greater information and insight as to the difference between college and universities learning and teaching and variations in academic expectations.
If strategies are put in place to manage expectation better throughout the transition process, the students are work likely to progress successfully through the programme and perform better [14,26].

REFERENCES


