

## **Falling Through the Gaps: A comparison of the study skills used by A2 students and first year undergraduates.**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper suggests that students experience transitional difficulties when moving from level three courses ('A' level or equivalent) to first year undergraduate study. Research was undertaken with a sample of 47 'A' level students and 47 first year undergraduates. Questionnaire results were drawn on to establish the study and academic skills used by students. Analysis of quantitative data revealed differences between the two groups in their strategies to learning. Open questions encouraged students to write freely about their approach to study. Using a thematic analysis the responses revealed qualitative insights into the different approaches and attitudes of sixth form students and those studying in higher education. The overall aim of the research is an improved evidence based understanding of the differences in the academic skills used by students studying for 'A' levels and those required by first year undergraduates.*

*This preliminary study is part of the 'Flying Start' project, which is a multi-centre, two-year project funded by the Higher Education Academy, in which Liverpool Hope University and the University of Derby are the lead institutions. Flying Start involves a range of initiatives all aiming to improve students' learning experiences as they progress from 'A' level or BTEC/AVCE courses to degree programmes at university. Further research is presently being undertaken to learn more about the transitional issues experienced by students moving from one sector to another and this piece of research will form part of a larger study. For more information about Flying Start, see [www.hope.ac.uk/flyingstart](http://www.hope.ac.uk/flyingstart)*

### **Introduction**

As concern grows about the non-completion rates in higher education, academics are researching the reasons why students leave university before completing their degrees. Yorke (2001) points out that about two thirds of withdrawals in UK universities happen within the first year of study. Although the reasons for non-completion are complex the single most important factor highlighted in the research literature is the lack of preparedness for study in higher education, and a failure amongst some students to understand the type of learning required in higher education (Ozga and Sukhnandan, 1998). Reay et al (2005) point out that as higher education in Britain has moved from elite

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to mass education, the sector itself has become increasingly internally stratified, to the point where first generation undergraduates tend to be entering different universities to those students from middle class backgrounds. It is clear that research based universities have more prestige and status, while the newly designated universities are largely seen as teaching only institutions.

As new students enter the higher education sector the definition of what represents a student has shifted and new discourses have emerged. Leathwood and O'Connell (2003), explore the way the concept of the 'student' is constructed to accommodate political and economic changes in higher education. The idea of the independent learner has been constructed in new higher education discourses to articulate what is seen as a desirable student.

The independent learner is of course, essential at a time when the under-resourcing of teaching has meant a shift from 'fat' to 'lean-and-mean' pedagogies, with reduced tutorials, increased tutorial size, and less student centered contact. (Blackmore,1997: P92 cited in Leathwood and O'Connell 2003)

According to Leathwood and O'Connell (2003), the idea of the 'normal student' still exists but is juxtaposed against students who have come into higher education through non traditional routes, like Access, vocational qualifications or lower 'A' level point scores. These students no longer easily fit into the dominant discourse of the independent learner. In research undertaken by Read et al (2003), it was revealed that many students entering university found these dominant discourses 'alien' and 'unsettling' especially if they had no history of higher education in the family or no close friends with similar experiences. Many students found the 'expected' learning styles at university were 'unexpected' and were not prepared to be independent learners; they found it difficult to deal with the reduced level of supervision at university. Mistrano (2008) observed the close contact between students and teachers at 'A' level, which can be contrasted with the growing distance between university lecturers and their students. This shift can be understood as one that sees the learner at the centre of the institutional experience at 'A' level, to higher education where students are expected to be self motivated and independent.

## Literature Review

As 'A' level, Access programmes and vocational qualifications have been modularised the same process has been applied to many degree programmes. Leathwood and O'Connell (2003), point out that at the same time as introducing a modular system on many degrees, there has also been an increase in student numbers, this often means that the subject or course tutors do not always know their students. Most students admitted to wanting more contact with and support from teaching staff. The majority of first year students thought they had been expected to be independent learners too

early, and claimed they had simply been left to sink or swim.

By exploring one type of assessment, in this case essay writing, it helps to illustrate the gap between previous study at level three and academic expectations in higher education. Lea and Street (1998) indicate in their research on essay writing how a gap exists between the expectations of lecturers and the needs of students. They also point to the often conflicting messages about essay writing from different module leaders on the same programme. Issues are raised in this research about the social construction of knowledge and how this is often reduced to a range of 'descriptive tools'. The responses from students indicated a level of confusion about what individual lecturers wanted from them and how best to utilise their previous academic experiences at 'A' level.

I'm really aware of writing for a particular tutor as well as for a particular subject. Everyone seems to want something different. It's different at 'A' levels where we used dictated notes for essay writing. (Lea and Street 1998, p164)

The research emphasised how students felt they have a range of transferable skills from previous study which were not recognised in higher education. Students were looking for something beyond generic descriptors about essay writing. They wanted to know what constituted a good piece of work in the module or subject. Although students thought they had been taught to write correctly they found it had prepared them insufficiently for the demands made on them in higher education. Lea and Street (1998) note how students develop strategies to cope with uncertainty trying to second guess what the lecturer or course requires. Read and Francis (2001) refer to the difficulties students experience in decoding academic language, they point out that the student must mediate a space between their own existing knowledge and intentions, and the knowledge and intentions that exist within the University. This involves a process of decoding what is required because university expectations are not made explicit.

This problem of trying to second guess and decode language creates a vacuum where the learner struggles to work out what is expected of them in higher education. Shepherd (2006) commenting on a survey of 250 university staff from 16 Universities, including Oxbridge, the Russell Group and post 1992 universities, pointed to new students 'lacking independent thought' and 'wanting to be told the answers'.

New students they say, increasingly struggle to cope with independent learning and the self directed style of learning expected by higher education tutors (Shepherd 2006 THES online).

The report goes on to say that students find reading critically and constructing argument difficult. They have poor grammar and are weak at communicating

ideas in writing. Mistrano (2008) examined independent learning amongst sixth form students within eight Bedfordshire schools. He found that the majority of learners just wanted enough knowledge to do well in examinations, rather than extending their understanding of a particular subject. This research also indicated that in order to improve examination results some schools in the study monitored students both in the classroom and in study areas. However, when the close monitoring was removed from study areas, the independence and personal responsibility appears to erode dramatically (Mistrano 2008, p175)

Students develop different approaches to learning. Mistrano describes what is defined as surface learning in his research on sixth forms. Surface learning according to Biggs (1987), involves just doing enough to ensure that failure is avoided. It is motivated by instrumental values. This type of learning strategy may have a long term influence on how undergraduates approach academic work. Students and to some degree lecturers find themselves trying to identify the nature of the gap between level three achievements and the demands of higher education. Students perceive the gap as one in which they are expected to be independent learners too soon, while lecturers explain this gap as a deficit in students.

## **Questionnaire survey**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of the study was to undertake a quantitative analysis to compare the approaches to essay writing taken by students studying for level three qualifications with first year undergraduates.

This research was concerned with the complex components that essay writing involves. Producing written work for assignments requires students to find and read information from a variety of sources, take notes, assimilate information and organise ideas around a question or task. In addition finding somewhere to study without distractions, and a willingness to learn independently are necessary prerequisites.

To compile the questionnaire existing undergraduate study skills audits were considered (these included audits from the University of Salford, the ASSIST questionnaire developed at the University of Edinburgh and the 'First Year Skills' audit from the University of Bristol). Under each heading a number of statements were listed which, represented a particular view to each skill. Responses were organised to move from surface learning to deep learning, building on the work of Biggs (1987) and Tait and Entwistle (1996). The structure of the questionnaire encouraged students to select a response that most closely corresponded with their strategy for learning. The word 'I' was used when asking questions about academic skills so that the respondents felt closer to the issues and were encouraged to select statements which were personal to them. Choices were determined by using a Likert rating scale using semantic differentials. Open questions were included in the questionnaire survey to explore the differences between the two groups. A

thematic analysis was used to explore the narratives provided by the sample.

## **Participants**

Forty seven A2 students aged 17 to 19 years participated in the survey, 83% were female and 17% male. A2 students were drawn from one sixth form college. They were studying for a variety of 'A' levels mainly in sociology, psychology, English language and literature. Students were generally studying for three subjects, although a small number were doing an additional AS subject. 91% were applying to university. The undergraduates were drawn from one post 1992 university, and comprised 47 students, aged 18 to 47, and 91% were female. Students were studying on a range of degree programmes. Overall twelve students had vocational qualifications, eight had Access certificates and 27 had 'A' levels. All but two of the undergraduates were first generation university students.

## **Data collection**

The questionnaires were distributed to A2 students and first year undergraduates during timetabled sessions. Students were asked to rate themselves on academic study skills. The questionnaire was divided into 12 subsections dealing with a particular theme. Students were asked to read all of the statements (generally three) in each subsection before responding. Descriptive statistics were gathered for each response so that differences between the two groups could be measured. The open questions were presented on a separate sheet, participants were asked to complete a sentence and to continue to write until they felt they had given a full account of their experiences and feelings about studying.

## **Results**

Statistical analysis of the data indicated that A2 students were more dependent on the course text and did not read widely. In contrast first year undergraduates used a much wider variety of information including textbooks, journals and on-line resources. However both groups perceived themselves as having a deep approach to reading claiming to seek the underlying meaning behind the text. The majority of A2 students did not take notes whilst reading and were much more dependent on handouts from the teacher. First year undergraduates were much more likely to take notes as they read and use this information in essays and assignments. Of those students who did take notes during reading many tended not to look at them again. It is not clear whether they felt as though they had assimilated the information sufficiently or simply did not return to the information. Undergraduates were more likely to go over difficult concepts and do additional research if required.

More A2 students found writing difficult, claiming to struggle with it and having to work hard at getting it right. Although they perceived themselves as reasonable writers they found it difficult to make their writing understood. Undergraduates experienced a significant drop in confidence in their writing in the first year of study at university. Both groups found it difficult to settle down

somewhere to get on with work; they perceived themselves as having a chaotic approach to studying. The majority of undergraduates found it difficult to organise themselves often leaving things until the last minute. In addition both groups claimed they were unable to approach study methodically. Overall both groups considered themselves to have an instrumental approach to studying, focusing on what was required when assignments were due in, appearing to take a surface or strategic approach to learning. In addition they saw study as a means to an end, focusing on what they eventually sought to get out of their courses. More A2 students wanted lecturers to tell them exactly what they needed to know (A2 62%, UG 40%), while more undergraduates were interested in lecturers helping them to think for themselves (A2 49%, UG 74%).

### **Qualitative - Data collection**

The thematic analysis of the students writing revealed some common themes amongst both groups. Students in both sectors identified problems of motivation:

‘It’s hard for me to actually start studying. Though once I do it’s fine. Also I think I do well under pressure’ (first year undergraduate student).

There was a general concern related to motivation and feeling distracted by other things. These concerns were more often expressed by A2 students.

‘I am easily distracted, and I’m still unsure about what I want to pursue as a career, so in effect studying sometimes feels pointless and I (feel) I’m not actually going to achieve anything at the end of it’ (A2 student).

Undergraduates also reported feeling distracted, but not in such large numbers, and these feelings were expressed in terms of finding studying difficult.

‘I have little self discipline when it comes to subjects I don’t enjoy and (with) some set reading I become disinterested’ (first year undergraduate student)

Part of these concerns about being distracted were related to poor organisational skills and managing the amount of work within the time.

‘Often there is a lot of work that needs to be done to complete assignments, and complete everything in time’  
(first year undergraduate student).

‘There is too much knowledge to take down and learn for future assignments. It is a lot of pressure and I lose concentration and interest’ (first year

undergraduate student).

Strong feelings of powerlessness and lack of control were articulated, along with a sense that there was too much work to organise within the limited time given. Undergraduates appeared to have reduced self efficacy and a lack of confidence. Although 'A' level students also indicated problems with focus, this was more often related to moving from one subject to another. There was also a feeling that students somehow did not have the required skills for study and expressed concerns with the level of difficulty of the academic work required. A2 students tended to allude to their own poor skills and feelings of stress.

'I would not consider myself the academic type and find the majority of work and tests extremely difficult and confusing'  
(A2 student).

Undergraduate concerns tended to focus on what they perceived as a lack of preparation for higher education, and how they did not feel ready to be independent learners. This was a strong theme in the responses.

'The work is much more independent than 'A' level and therefore more tasking. The lecturer doesn't hand it on a plate to you so to then write an essay on what you have learned can be very difficult' (first year undergraduate student).

'It is very different to 'A' levels and it is more independent'  
(first year undergraduate student).

'In higher education you are mainly on your own'  
(first year undergraduate student).

Undergraduate students found it difficult to be independent learners, related to this was their ongoing difficulties with academic skills like referencing and finding resources.

'Finding reasonable resources for assignments can be difficult and therefore I resort to websites. This results in showing not much academic resources. At times with assignments, the worry of plagiarism can hold me back with writing, due to the constant thought in my head' (first year undergraduate student).

'I found referencing quite a challenge also the amount of reading as I am a slow reader' (first year undergraduate student).

Data gathered from the questionnaire and the narratives from the open question illustrate how students find first undergraduate study problematic.

They struggle with being independent learners and appear not to be ready for the demands made on them in their first year at university.

## Discussion

Statistical evidence from this small scale research suggests that A2 students take a shallow approach to learning; this was supported by the thematic analysis on responses to open questions. Although these findings are limited in scope and are based upon a restricted sample, that does not take into account important social variations such as class. A2 students were more likely to see themselves as chaotic learners, experiencing difficulty organising their study time, however, at this level students are mainly taught in small groups sometimes with the same teacher for the duration of their course. Students are much more consciously directed by the teacher or lecturer. If they miss anything or come across something they do not understand they know teachers well enough to approach them and fill the gaps. Teachers in sixth form colleges and schools are simply more accessible. Mistrano (2008) claims that in order to maximise 'A' level point scores, high levels of control and supervision were used by sixth forms. When these controls were removed students simply were not able to work on their own. This highlights the dependency on the teacher at 'A' level and a lack of preparedness for university study (Yorke, 2001). However there does appear to be an implied criticism of the way 'A' level students are taught, which serves ideologically to shift the blame from the university sector. The question still remains about what universities are doing to close some of these gaps. 'A' level teaching provides evidence of good practice where students are at the centre of the learning experience and are prepared well for the level they are working at. Producing independent learners may not be a central requirement to succeed at this level. Is it a realistic expectation that students should arrive in higher education already prepared to participate fully in academic study? How is lack of preparedness linked to student motivation or other dispositional factors? This raises questions about how we manage student expectations. The research indicated that students expressed difficulties studying at both A2 and as undergraduates.

Research findings on undergraduates indicated they have started to develop a deeper approach to learning. Their responses to the questionnaire suggested that they had adapted to the different demands made on them in higher education. However, the thematic analysis of their writing revealed narratives which indicated a loss of confidence in their abilities. They expressed their difficulty in not being ready to be independent learners and indicated that they did not feel prepared enough to be in higher education. These contradictions were often implied by students which suggest a dissonance in their beliefs about their attitudes to study and their actual behavior. Leathwood and O'Connell (2003) claim that the concept of the independent learner is itself a social construct. Students struggle for meaning within what Reay et al (2005) described as the culture of academia. Within the dominant discourse of what is 'a good student', anxieties are expressed about their lack of independence or skill. It is not surprising to find these expressions of anxiety in a social milieu where the ideal student is defined as an

independent learner, but the mechanisms to achieve the academic skills required for study in higher education are not made explicit to the learner. Students measure themselves against some perceived notion of 'the good student' as someone who is able to understand the work they are presented with. They internalise these transitional anxieties and perceive themselves as part of the problem. This obscures questions about the type of academic skills an undergraduate should have and about what sort of academic support universities are providing students within their first year of study.

Students felt that their previous learning had not prepared them to be independent learners. They expressed difficulties about working on their own. Read et al (2003) pointed to the lack of supervision students observed when they went to university, in this research many students expressed a need for more help and thought that the work was much harder than they had anticipated. Students found it difficult to find the resources they needed and struggled with referencing. The situation for undergraduates is more likely to be related to the greater distance between lecturers and students. It also suggests that although the post 1992 universities embrace the practice of widening participation to new groups of students, they have not done enough to provide the type of support students need in order to make the adjustments required to study at a higher level. The organisational structure of many universities now involves mass lectures. Students may not be known by programme teams in the same way as they were previously (for example at 'A' level), so they may not know where to get help. The move from 'fat, to lean and mean' (Blackmore, 1997: P92) provision may signify that lecturers in higher education simply carry on teaching in the same way that they have always done, use the same type of assignments and give very little thought as to how students are moved away from being surface learners to developing deeper learning strategies.

The majority of undergraduates in the sample did not have parents who attended university; this lack of 'cultural capital' places these groups at a significant disadvantage. The present academic debate about the lack of preparedness for study at university creates a discourse around student blame. However, like the students in the present study Leathwood and O'Connell (2003) found that undergraduate students were struggling academically and as a consequence wanted more contact with teaching staff. This problem is likely to increase with funding cuts in higher education.

Although A2 students referred to their lack of motivation, the vast majority had applied for university. 'A' level students and first year undergraduates alluded to a lack of focus, poor understanding and difficulties in keeping on top of their work. However they expressed a strong personal desire to study, as well as a rational instrumental orientation about self improvement, long term aspirations and career goals. In addition undergraduates expressed feelings of anxiety and stress. This was starkly juxtaposed by their attitude to studying. This raises issues about how realistic student aspirations are and indicates a dissonance between their aspirations and how they might achieve them. Undergraduates also expressed a strong personal commitment to study and saw their degree as a way of improving their employment prospects. The

ideological nature of such aspirations are clear in a culture with rising student debt and higher levels of graduate unemployment. In addition the internal stratification of universities is often hidden from view within a widening participation context. Social class background, cultural capital and the university attended by students may have a greater impact on the long term career aspirations of most learners.

## Conclusion

Whilst this study only involved a small sample, it did support many of the findings from other research concerning the lack of preparedness for higher education amongst A2 students who become undergraduates. However, it also raises serious methodological concerns about what is being measured. Dispositional factors, problems of student motivation, social factors all contribute to attrition rates and student success or failure. In addition the ideological nature of the debate serves to blame the student or school, rather than leading to any critical appraisal of university provision for first year undergraduates. It also neglects to assert the view that studying for the vast majority of students should be difficult and demanding.

Research findings indicate two problem areas; the first is the lack of preparedness amongst undergraduates. Sixth forms and sixth form colleges are constrained by the need to meet targets at 'A' level based on the achieved grades of students at GCSE. Universities are constrained by large student numbers. Mistrano (2008) reveals the difficulties of promoting independent learners in a target driven educational culture. Post 1992 universities may require intervention strategies to improve academic skills required by students in higher education, if they are to reduce attrition rates. Secondly how do we move students from surface to deeper learning strategies? Increasingly schools and colleges are expected to add value to previous levels of achievement. In this climate it is difficult to develop deeper strategies to learning. Although many university programmes have compulsory study skills modules evidence suggests that these are not effective (see Durkin and Main, 2002). Skills are not internalised, and do not change how students approach essential areas like reading and essay writing. What is required is for students to learn how to learn. This would enable students to make the transition from what Gamache (2002) calls the 'passive absorption' of knowledge to the type of learning required in higher education which requires higher order cognitive skills, like critical thinking, application and deeper levels of analysis. However, this does not change the wider social context, in which new groups of students coming into the university see it as a mechanism for social mobility and this may be something universities cannot always provide.

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