The transition to and through university for non-traditional local students: some observations for teachers

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The last ten years have witnessed an unprecedented increase in the number of students attending university. This increase has resulted in many students from families who have not previously attended university (often labelled as 'non-traditional' students) studying at universities in the UK. Many of these non-traditional students are from working-class or lower middle-class backgrounds and have very different motivations, aspirations and expectations about university compared with students who are from university-educated families (often labelled as 'traditional' entrants). Some important considerations for such students include financial considerations, concerns about integration into student life and management of family and peer-group expectations (Christie, 2007, Holdsworth, 2009, Hopkins, 2006). These issues are often heightened when non-traditional students choose to study at elite universities that tend to recruit large numbers of more 'traditional' students, many of whom are from privately-educated and privileged backgrounds. Furthermore, given recent changes to the funding of higher education in the UK, the socio-economic division between such students will be exacerbated as a result of substantially increased fees to attend university.

In this article, we draw upon research about the experiences of non-traditional students studying Geography. We focus specifically upon the experiences of two students from non-traditional backgrounds, Amy and Lauren, both of whom are studying geography at the Newcastle University; a university whose student body tends, in the main, to draw students from more 'traditional' university backgrounds. Amy and Lauren co-authored this article. We were particularly interested in considering what changes could be made for students such as Lauren and Amy to improve the transitions to, and experiences of, university. (See http://www.studenttransitions.org.uk/ for further information about this research)).

From our research, we found a number of factors influenced non-traditional students' decisions to study Geography at Newcastle University. For some, all of their friends were going on to university, or their parents expected them to or they felt personally that it was the taken-for-granted next step for them. Others were influenced by external factors which often included: inspirational teachers encouraging them to study Geography at university; participation in widening participation programmes or summer school programmes; or attending a university Open Day. Once at university, although many students experienced an initial sense of isolation, weekly tutorial groups and participation in a first-year fieldcourse helped them to make friends with other students studying Geography.

Below are the reflections of Amy and Lauren - two third-year undergraduates studying Geography at Newcastle. These personal accounts, plus the experiences of other research participants tell us about the experiences of non-traditional students who choose to study at a local elite university. Here are summaries of the experiences of Amy and Lauren:

I attended a state school and Sixth Form College before going to Newcastle University to study Geography. Although only one of my parents attended university, this was the taken-for-granted next step for me and this was reinforced by my teachers and my parents. I was able to participate in the PARTNERS scheme (http://www.ncl.ac.uk/partners/) because of my postcode, socio-economic background and academic ability, and I participated in the summer school for this, completing an assignment thereby assisting me in being accepted for study at Newcastle University. Whilst at Newcastle, I was motivated to participate in the Aim Higher scheme in order to help students from similar backgrounds to myself. My role as an Aim Higher associate was to facilitate sessions about higher education in schools with year 10 students. From this experience, I can see that these schemes benefit young people in increasing their knowledge and aspirations to go into Higher Education. As a result of these interests, I focused my final year dissertation research on student's perceptions of university and the barriers facing student's transitions to higher education and I have recently been offered a place to pursue a career in teaching after graduating.

I attended a comprehensive school and Sixth form college before taking up a place at Newcastle University to study Geography. I did not question going to university as all of my friends were going and only one person in my sixth form class was leaving education and entering the world of work. Neither of my parents had been to university but they both accepted my decision to study at university. Although I did not initially plan to attend a university near where I went to school, I decided to study at Newcastle as a result of the university's reputation, whilst also moving into halls. By staying close to home, I had a familiarity with the city and the university unlike many of my friends who had travelled long distances to attend university. However, some of my teachers were critical of my decision to study at Newcastle suggesting it would be best to move further away.

These two accounts highlight some of the key factors that influenced Amy and Lauren's decision to study Geography at Newcastle. From these accounts and from the experiences of our other research participants, we now outline some considerations for teachers that students have identified might help facilitate the transition to and through university.

Some considerations for teachers

- Many students suggested that teachers should be careful not to reinforce problematic stereotypes about particular universities or decisions around studying at a local university as this can have a negative impact upon student's self-confidence and self-esteem.

- Students expressed concerns about teachers sharing incorrect or inaccurate information about university life with them. This included issues about attendance, fees and assessment. All students suggested that teachers could usefully ensure that they are informed about different aspects of studying at university so that students receive accurate information and a number of students suggested that universities could usefully help by providing additional information about university life to school teachers.

- Many students mentioned that their peers encouraged them not to apply to an elitist university, yet nearly all participants said that gentle encouragement from teachers helped them to overcome this.

- Summer school programmes or widening participation initiatives are useful for giving students a flavour of life at university and for increasing their familiarity with the university environment. Students were complimentary of teachers who discussed the multiple benefits of university life with students, beyond gaining a qualification and subsequent employment as this helped them to see the diverse experiences and positives of being a student at university.

- Moving out of home can balance the benefits of staying 'local' whilst also experiencing moving out and increased independence. Students who stay local often decide to move out of the family home and into halls or privately-rented accommodation. This offers them the full university experience in a similar way to those students who have moved from further afield, although if students stay local and have long journey distances to university, this often increases their sense of isolation from university life.

- Although maintaining contact with home through regular visits, many students who study at a local university experience increasing independence as they progress through university. At the same time however, having home nearby means that students can easily return home for support when necessary.

- Students often find their own ways to integrate once at university. Some become friends with students from similar socio-economic backgrounds, some become friends with students from very different backgrounds that they otherwise would not have had the opportunity to meet. Geography fieldcourses at university are particularly useful in helping students to get to know other students in their year group. The dropout rate amongst those who do not 'fit in' is also very small.

References

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The teacher observation results revealed that teachers typically focused on the content of the task or assignment, responded to students' signals, communicated the task's procedures, and checked students' work. Through feedback, teachers can become aware of how their classroom functions and thus bring about changes they desire. Rather, the observational feedback was intended to be used as a guide for teachers with which they and their colleagues could reflect about their practices on their own and decide what action to take. Professional services and university courses are some of the possibilities that teachers could choose if they wanted to continue to collaborate with the researchers in order to help them improve their instruction. A nontraditional student is a term originating in North America, that refers to a category of students at colleges and universities. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) notes that there are varying definitions of nontraditional student. Nontraditional students are contrasted with traditional students who "earn a high school diploma, enroll full time immediately after finishing high school, depend on parents for financial support, and either do not work during the school year or work... While some believe that the unplanned and rapid move to online learning â€" with no training, insufficient bandwidth, and little preparation â€" will result in a poor user experience that is unconducive to sustained growth, others believe that a new hybrid model of education will emerge, with significant benefits. It enables me to reach out to my students more efficiently and effectively through chat groups, video meetings, voting and also document sharing, especially during this pandemic. My students also find it is easier to communicate on Lark. The importance of disseminating knowledge is highlighted through COVID-19. Major world events are often an inflection point for rapid innovation â€" a clear example is the rise of e-commerce post-SARS. In some countries children have very strict rules of behavior in other countries they are ___ to almost anything they like. Let, allowed. distance education can be. more flexible in terms of time, can be delivered virtually anywhere. Globally competent students can articulate the significance of their questions and _____. identify credible information, collecting, and analyzing credible information from a variety of local, national and international sources, including those in multiple languages. Education and society are closely_____. Academic mobility refers to students and teachers in higher education moving to another institution inside or outside their own country to study or teach for a_____. limited time, restricted time. Does being a successful kid____ the same as being a happy kid?