

Do educational experiences in school prepare students for university? A teachers' perspective.

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Abstract

Entering higher education is a critical moment for many students and one where their educational experiences may change dramatically, but are students academically prepared? From a structured and supported environment, they enter a more autonomous and independent setting and little is known about their preparedness for this transition. This paper explores, through the voices of teachers in schools and colleges, two aspects of preparedness for higher education, independent learning and academic confidence, in order to more closely examine the challenges faced by thousands of new students each year. The findings highlighted differences in both terminology and approach between the two educational layers and contributes new insights to support universities in enhancing practice through a deeper understanding of the prior experiences of their new students through the lens of their teachers. Overall the paper highlights some significant messages about the gap between these two levels of education which cannot simply be left to the student to navigate.

Key words: Preparedness; teachers of students aged 16 - 19; independent learning; academic confidence; transition

Introduction

Transitioning from schools to universities is a challenge for many students (Kyndt et al. 2017) and historically has been described as a linear process. Students move from the familiar environment of school, to uncertain territory whilst awaiting results, to a new beginning as they commence their degree course (Selder 1989). However, this is far

from simple. As preparatory study to enter university have diversified (Noyens et al. 2017) so has the multidimensional nature of the transition into higher education with stratified experiences, entry characteristics, expectations and abilities all affecting the trajectory of each student. The decision around whether to go to university is described in a UK report from the Higher Education Policy Institute as a ‘critical moment’ (HEPI 2017, 3) for individuals.

Transition into university has been a key pedagogic issue for the last few decades, in part as a result of; increased participation and opportunities (Coertjens et al. 2017); widening diversity of the student body entering institutions (Shaw et al. 2007) and student success becoming a performance measure (Kuh et al. 2011). Transition it has been suggested has different levels, induction; development and becoming (Gale and Parker 2014) however this does not include experiences prior to university, which is the focus of this study. There is a wealth of international literature on transition yet this still remains an important topic in HE research today (Noyens et al. 2017). With research suggesting that most students find transition into HE challenging, and those from non-traditional backgrounds even more so (Briggs et al. 2012) with lack of preparedness being a major factor in this (Murtagh 2012).

Given this wide evidence base from a university perspective, there is a lacuna in the literature, on what is delivered in schools and sixth form colleges to prepare and support this transition for students who wish to enter university. The research team have spent many years designing and delivering induction / transition programmes and decided it was time to explore what teachers actually thought about the concept of preparedness to enter university in relation to their students in order to enhance university practices. As we wanted to explore the practices, philosophies and processes in the school environment we chose sixth form teachers as the participants for the study

rather than the students. Their view gives us the structure of the learning opportunities and an overview of what students might experience between the ages of 16 to 19 years old. Thus offering new research in this critical area through documenting the views of teachers who teach students aged 16 – 19 years old (referred to as sixth form students), working in school or sixth-form colleges in the UK (we use the global term ‘school’ to cover both institutions studied), in relation to their student’s preparedness for university.

The school and university educational environments are different, with Christie et al. (2008, 567) suggesting that learning at university involves ‘undoing learning’ at school as students enter a totally new environment of different subjects, as well as learning and teaching approaches. In school, students are immersed in a controlled environment following a highly structured curriculum (Lowe and Cook 2003) with a syllabus of examinations and qualifications in order that students gain the highest award, thus making the potential for attending university a possibility. At this point, they also normally live with their families who have a role to play within their education (Cook and Leckey 1999). University on the other hand is an environment where “...students are expected to accept personal responsibility for both academic and social aspects of their lives” (Lowe and Cook 2003, 53) and possibly move away from their family support structures. How this gap between the two experiences are bridged and the way in which students are prepared for study at university is a critical factor in determining success (Macaro and Wingate 2004) and can lead to future academic attainment, persistence and success (Hughes and Smail 2014).

Preparedness for university is a complex term frequently used in the academic literature, associated with influencing a successful transition into university (Haggis & Pouget 2002). On the one hand it is associated with the process of applying for university, focusing on the procedures, searching websites, visiting universities,

completing applications. On the other, there are other aspects of 'preparedness' for university which focus on key skills that students require to be able to manage their time in university, for example, how learners manage independent learning effectively (Green 2014). Difficulties arise when there is a lack of understanding and preparedness for what learning in university involves (Gamache 2002). The ability to adjust between educational settings is affected by preparedness, how ready do students feel to enter their next educational experience. Research has found that those who come into university with more didactic and reproductive beliefs about learning find this transition even more difficult (Kember 2001) struggling with the higher order skills expected (Wingate 2007).

Research from the Netherlands exploring the fit between school and university found that where the learning environments were not too dissimilar, students needed less adjustment and educational achievement was affected in a positive way (Torenbeek et al. 2010). Alternatively where there is not this fit, and insufficient preparation, problems arise leading on some cases to early withdrawal (Yorke and Longden 2004). What happens pre-university is often ignored in higher education research and the more staff in university know about the school level the better (Torenbeek et al. 2010), this study adds to the body of knowledge in this important area.

Nicholson's (1990) transition model offers four phases, preparation; encounter; adjustment and stabilization, where preparation is key to how people experience a transition such as going to university (Coertjens et al. 2017). Study habits built up over time are carried into the university setting and the ways that students are prepared at school will ultimately have an effect on their expectations at university (Lowe and Cook 2003). Students being clear about what will be expected of them as a learner in higher education is a key aspect of their preparedness (Murtagh 2012). Some university staff

claim that students who do not succeed in the higher education environment are poorly prepared at school for the learning experience at university and consequently often lack motivation and have a lower academic ability (Christie et al 2008). Undergraduate student feedback has suggested that good preparation whilst at school can assist them to settle into university which in turn can have an impact on their success and academic achievement (Hultberg et al. 2008).

The HEPI Report (2017, 5) considers students' preparedness on a 'macro level' as being able to deal with moving away from home, gaining more independence and taking on the challenge of studying for their degree. They suggest that not all students are prepared for these challenges. This report focuses on three aspects of preparedness, that is they have the 'right information', the 'right skills' and finally, they also receive the 'right support'. These aspects, they suggest, make students' adjustment to life at university much easier, particularly if things become a challenge. Whilst a range of research has been carried out on the value of students being prepared for university (Green 2014), there has been very limited work on what actually are the skills and attributes of 'preparedness' for study in university. So it is taking the second of these factors outlined in the HEPI Report (2017), the 'right skills', that this research is based on. We wanted to establish how teachers of 16 – 19 year old students perceive they have prepared their students for university and we approached this through exploring the concepts of independent learning and academic confidence. Whilst these two aspects of 'preparedness' are by no means exhaustive, we consider these the elements that will make a significant contribution to this important area of research and practice.

Independent learning

Students entering higher education expect learning to be different to that of school, with there being a greater emphasis on independent learning (Leese 2010), however sixth

form students may lack the study skills required in higher education and have particular problems working with minimal supervision, i.e. working independently (Lowe and Cook 2003). The fundamental change in the learning styles within degree programmes and the associated independent learning for students, provides a particular challenge for many of them (Murtagh 2012). Independent learning (and similar terms such as autonomous learning, and self-directed learning) is a 'major educational goal' (Lau 2017, 415) across the education sector. Within the school setting, independent study normally takes place over short time periods, with specific tasks related to the content. At University however, modules, courses and programmes are planned around the content that students will cover in face-to-face lectures and seminars, with 'independent study' then making up the rest of the learning. In terms of time allocation, in the UK this is usually 60-80% of the course or module of study. University lecturers assume that students arrive with 'independent learning' skills acquired from school and 'that incoming students should be able to handle such demands' (Green 2014, 4). For the student they are faced with a large amount of allocated time (could be up to 20 hours per week) to learn independently and are expected to understand what they are meant to do and how to organise their learning. To complicate this even further for students they also arrive at university expecting more face to face time than they actually get (Green 2005; HEPI 2017), understanding what the students are transitioning from is therefore crucial to supporting them through this period.

Academic Confidence

How confident students feel in relation to their academic studies is an essential attribute that they require as they enter university as this can affect learning and achievement, with higher levels of academic confidence equating to success (Nicholson et al. 2013). Students' academic confidence is linked directly to their preparedness for university and

when students perceive there is a difference between their preparedness and the university's expectations, there can be a decrease in confidence and lack of motivation (Macaro and Wingate 2004). How students anticipate and respond to the demands of studying both in school and university is related to their academic confidence (Nicholson et al. 2013). Students do not know what is expected of them in relation to assessment as they enter university level education, and often lack confidence in academic writing, this can prove to be extremely stressful as they study at university (Murtagh 2012). Any imbalance can manifest itself, as a student transitions into university, and may result in academic failure or withdrawal (Haggis and Pouget 2002). It is therefore crucial to establish how prepared students are in relation to their academic confidence as they make the transition to university and what schools do to develop this attribute in their pupils.

About this study

We sought to investigate the views and opinions of teaching staff (n= 19) from four educational institutions in the North-West of England (educating 16-19 year olds) about the skills and attributes they developed in their students in preparation for university education. To explore this under-researched area we interviewed 'teaching staff' (all staff who were supporting students' learning in their respective institution) to establish how the educational experiences they offered their students went towards preparing their students for university. At this point it is important to acknowledge that the teachers can only offer their views on their own schools and may have limited experience of university processes. Therefore, a limitation of only utilising the teachers as the sample group may be the misinterpretation, by the nature of their role, the reality of what students might experience. Despite this, the perceptions of the teaching staff are crucial to understanding the delivery of prior learning prior to and the subsequent

preparedness for university. This paper encapsulates the findings in relation to the two core themes of; becoming independent learners and acquiring academic confidence. University educators can use the findings and subsequent recommendations to inform lecturers of what prior experiences their new students may be arriving with, and how they can use this to support the transition and increase academic success.

METHODS

Participants

The participants for this study were teaching staff (n=19) from four educational institutions within a borough council in the north west of England, one being a 16-19 sixth form college (n=6); one being a mixed 'all ability' school (n=4); thirdly, a single sex comprehensive school (n=4) and finally a single sex selective school (n=5). The staff (12 females and 7 males) comprised of teachers, teaching assistants, mentors and careers advisors who had a number of roles as well as teaching experience across the sector. A member of the senior management team had in the first instance, selected the teaching staff. The researchers initially asked the Gatekeeper from each institution to select staff because they were involved in some way with delivering to sixth form students (aged 16 – 19 years within the institution). There were no other inclusion criteria from the researcher's perspective such as length of service, age, gender etc. Consequently, the specific roles identified within the 'teaching staff' banner were varied. A limitation of utilising the gatekeeper in this way was that no information was gathered around inclusion or exclusion criteria from their perspective which in hindsight would have been beneficial and will be included in further research.

Ethics

The teaching staff interviewed did not personally know the authors of this paper, although one author did have links with the educational establishments. The university granted ethical approval for the research. The Gatekeeper (the headteacher or member of the senior management team) received an information sheet signed a consent form. All teaching staff interviewed received participant information sheets, were briefed about the project, including their right to withdraw at any time, and asked to sign consent forms. In accordance with the Data Protection Act, data from the project has been held in secured password protected locations.

Data collection

Data collection took place over the period of eight weeks, between March and May 2016. The number of staff interviewed at each institution was determined by the gatekeeper and related to staff availability in the time allotted. The interviews took place in each respective institution in a quiet room, to ensure that the staff were allowed to disclose their views in a safe space (Bergold and Thomas 2012). The age range and experience of the staff varied from one year to over twenty years in education, where some of the staff had been in other educational institutions and some had worked in other industries prior to their current posts in education.

The semi-structured questions used in the interviews were adapted from the work of Byrne et al. (2012, 139) who compared the preparedness of sixth form students across Europe as they commenced the study of accountancy at university. The semi structured interview questions focused on issues around the teachers' perceptions of their students' becoming independent learners and acquiring academic confidence

aspects, considered in the literature, to be related to sixth form students' preparedness for higher education.

Data analysis

Through a thematic approach all interviews for analysed around the two key categories, independence and confidence, by the three authors separately and the findings then brought together to agree on the emerging themes. The two categories were clear cut due to the structure of the questions and through the analysis the themes emerged and labelled. Where there was cross-over the best-fit was determined based on the overall research questions. The over-arching themes related to the research question can be seen in Figure 1.

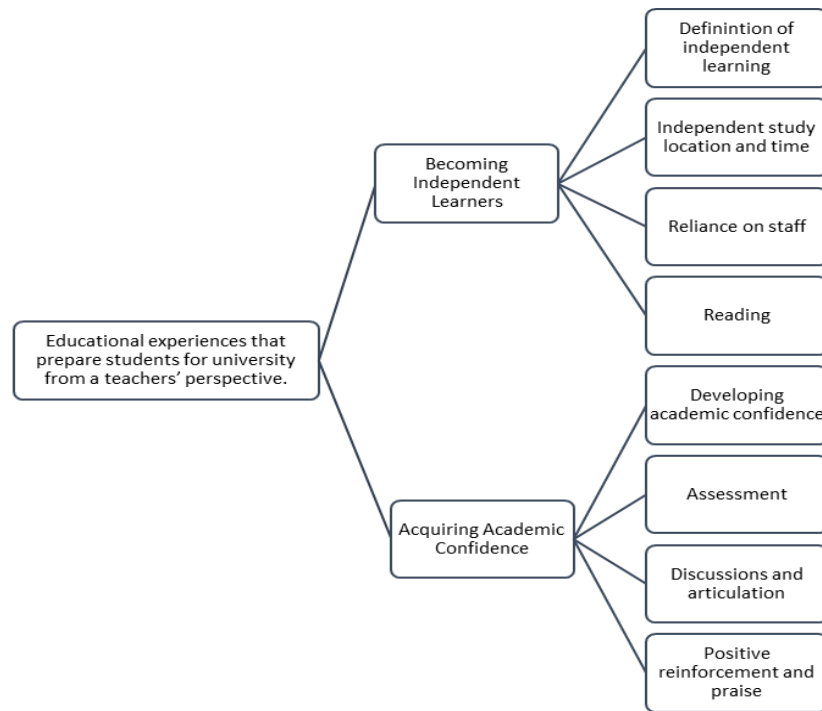


Figure 1: Overall themes related to becoming independent and acquiring academic confidence

FINDINGS

Becoming Independent Learners

Definition of independent learning

All teaching staff referred broadly to ‘independent learning’ and talked about ‘independent research’, ‘independent tasks’ and ‘independent study’ re-enforcing the multiplicity of this as a concept. Activities that fell into this area were; homework, reading over work, practising exam papers and aspects of revision. Independent learning was also linked to problem solving and time management, and was, for example, about being self-reliant, students doing their own research on a specific topic and drafting essays. A valuable definition of an independent learner came from Chloe, who stated that;

“Someone who can identify something they are weak at, a struggle point, and make steps to amend that, seek help, make notes or review things via exams or just practice. Something that’s not my instruction, but something they’ve chosen to do themselves”.

There was a consensus across the interviewees that students are given too much support for them to truly be defined as ‘independent learners’ and as a result may have problems when they enter university if they do not anticipate their next learning environment and prepare for it; a key issues in transition (Coertjens et al. 2017). From the university perspective this highlights the importance of staff/ student relationship, where good relationships have been found to be a contributing factor to a successful transition (Thomas 2013) where conversations (Ridley 2004) and early tutorials (Keup and Barefoot 2005) have been found to support students.

Teaching staff in school acknowledged that independent learning at school is

likely to be different to independent learning at university with the former being more guided than independent. Lowe and Cook (2003), when researching university students, believed that moving from the 'controlled' environment of school to university was a challenge for some. The teachers in this study aligned with this and suggested that the level of support offered in schools was one of the possible challenges for individuals when they moved from sixth form education to university undermining in some ways the concept of preparedness. The first year curriculum has a vital role to play, writing from an Australian perspective, Kift (2009: 41) states that it should be "designed to assist student development and to support their engagement with learning environments through the intentional integration and sequencing of knowledge, skills and attributes". Thus a clearer understanding of the level of preparedness and student expectations should help in the design of the curriculum and associated student experience.

Teaching staff acknowledged that, by their definitions, independent learning required attention much earlier in a students' education and should not be left until the sixth form years in order that the expectations of university education can be addressed;

"Perhaps they need to have more independence lower down [the school] to be prepared for it later on. I can imagine when they do get to University some may struggle with going off researching on their own, when previously they have been given everything and told what to do". [Beth]

The teachers talked about the struggle of supporting the students to do well at this point in their journey, alongside the forward thinking preparation needed for those students wishing to enter higher education. The tension being that these were not necessarily not necessarily the same activities. All staff agreed that they encouraged their students to study independently within the course of their teaching, as well as 'out of school hours'. However, they felt there was a conflict of interest in relation to giving students a 'free rein' in terms of being very independent in their learning due the pressures put on them

by senior management teams in the schools to achieve highly in terms of examination results. The constant challenge, voiced by staff, was the pressure on them to ensure that students achieved the highest grades in their post 16 qualifications. All staff felt they tried to encourage some independence, but this could not be totally free and student orientated. This point was reflected by Harriet who said *“we want to help and be supportive at [name of institution supplied] but maybe we do too much, maybe we need to allow them to make mistakes?”*

Independent study location and time

Independent study time & location was a key feature from all the institutions. The school's expectations were that for every hour of contact time in a lesson, there was at least another hour of independent study time. The teachers opined that the operational arrangements of independent study in school had changed over time, from 'free' to more 'structured' time. Due in part, they felt, to the metrics associated with final examinations marks, which have become particularly prevalent in the UK education system. As a result, independent study was usually a more formalised, timetabled and staffed event where students carried out set tasks to support their contact time, with the removal of elements of choice. Gill sums this up;

“We used to allow them [...] to go wherever, now they have supervised study sessions, where they have to go and they have to study. I think that is improving for some students in terms of their work ethic and making them more independent [...]. [Gill]

In attempt to motivate students for independent learning one institution talked about 'student led' study groups, usually held after school, where staff may be in the vicinity and even provide refreshments, though students were fundamentally motivated and led the independent sessions together.

“I thought that might be a bit more like university, rather than teachers leading it all the time, if they get together in a study group, I thought they are not going to do it on their own, so I set it up for them, and they come and do it”. [Beth]

In terms of the ‘location’ of the independent study, two of the institutions had allowed ‘home study’ as part of this learning time. The students were allowed off the school site if they did not have timetabled sessions. The major concern from these staff was around not being able to monitor the students’ whereabouts and a lack of control over the quality of work.

We had a situation around October half term, where a group of students were under-performing, when we checked the logs they were the ones that were constantly out of the building”. [Gill]

One institution had brought back supervised independent learning arrangements for year 12 (first year of sixth form), as they felt that more structured and formalised sessions reflected in better results for students.

“We didn’t do [formal independent study sessions] one year and we could tell in our results! Next year we are going to make it even more formalised and theme based for study” [Neil].

Reliance on staff

Working independently, assumes that students are able to study without being reliant on staff in school. However, ‘spoon feeding’ and ‘hand holding’ were terms that featured in our findings under the heading of ‘reliance on staff’;

“...it is too easy to go to a member of staff and say can you help, can you do this for me, we need to guide them to do the task themselves, rather than us giving [the answer] to them straight away” [Gill].

“...It is hard to make them mature, as we run round after them at this school because we are very conscious of results, we don’t want them to fail”. [Laura]

Graham, also from the same institution as Laura, stressed to his students that “...we often say, you won’t get spoon-fed at university...” the same view came from Tracey:

“They’re used to having people at their beck and call, it’s to do with pressure to perform at [institution named] and get the results, the more help they get, the better their results” [Tracey].

However, sixth form students who are continuously supported by staff in secondary education, may find that they have not effectively engaged or developed the skills and attributes that learning in university requires (Harris and Palmer 1995). This issue may be more ingrained and go back even further; with this sample, suggesting that students’ reliance on staff begins from an early age hence; students have not necessarily been encouraged to support their own independent learning. They acknowledge that the transition between key stage 4 (ages 14 – 16 years old) & key stage 5 (16 – 18 years old) is a significant one and is often a transition that is underestimated.

“We expect them to come back in September [after GCSEs] as an A level student, but they are not, they are still on the back of Key stage 4 and it does take time for some students.” [Steve]

Karen, from the same institution, likened this to university transition (from key stage 5, 18 years old plus into university) where “*they are expected to be university students as soon as they arrive and they are in fact still year 13 students*”. Students working with minimal supervision is a major issue as many students enter university ‘without having taken responsibility for their own learning’ due the fact that the school environment is one that has strong teacher and parental support by guiding them on how to study and perhaps providing ‘external motivation’ (Cook and Leckey 1999, 169).

This difference in support is a key area that needs to be addressed in both settings if we are to create a more aligned transition for students. However the school

environment comes with its own restrictions and by knowing the students are not prepared in relation to independent learning could support universities to develop process to enable the students to develop the ability to work alone over the first year. This is not a simple proposition as research has suggested, the first year experience is complicated, “from multiple starting points, all students are on a journey to become self-managing or self-directed learners” (Kift 2004: 18). From the UK, the ‘What Works’ research (Thomas 2013; Thomas et al. 2017) suggests a range of approaches, interventions and activities that together offer a comprehensive guide to supporting student retention and success.

Reading

Reading, as part of independent learning, is encouraged in all institutions, though it is usually set as a homework task. Staff ideally wanted students to read around the subject, make notes and to source additional reading in order to extend knowledge.

“.....they have got to do a lot more wider reading; [...] I don’t want to call it spoon feeding [...] but the sense that they want things to be given to them. I don’t know whether you find that when they come to university, they expect things to be given, [there needs to be] more of a shift towards them finding things out for themselves.” [Beth]

This sentiment was mirrored by a member of staff from a different institution where they claimed that they make assumptions that young people can use the internet and source reading material, whereas they are in fact more likely to use Wikipedia.

“They’d never dream of going to [name of city mentioned] library or even their local library and seeing which books they’ve got, or even trying to find articles on line, this is something that we need to work on, they are weak in this area. Generally, as a profession, we need to encourage students to use their research skills and give them the extra scaffolding”. [Jake]

ACQUIRING ACADEMIC CONFIDENCE

Academic confidence is distinct and not the same as self-confidence (Sander and Sanders 2006), and this study certainly did not aim to take on a psychological approach with respect to addressing academic confidence. Within the findings, we defined the term ‘academic confidence’ as the perceived confidence students felt they had in terms of their academic ability; for example, how they acquire skills, such as academic writing and passing examinations (Byrne et al. 2012). It is important that students feel confident about their academic studies in preparation for entering university, as with this they are more likely to be successful (Nicholson et al. 2013). Within our research, the teaching staff in the four institutions were asked, “How do you help student’s build their academic confidence?” Four themes emerged from the analysis.

Developing academic confidence

Mary felt that as her students did not “*have a lot of confidence in their academic ability*” and she tried to focus on constructive feedback, particularly those who were not achieving as well as they should be. However, in a different institution, Kirsty noted that it was high-achieving students who lacked confidence in their academic ability.

“I think the way target grades are [a major focus] puts added pressures on them and stresses them out and they then start to lack confidence that they can’t achieve them.”

Chloe, claimed that the main method of helping students to gain academic confidence is by getting them interested in their subject area, and as result of this, students will take responsibility for their own learning “*[...] in order to succeed, they need to be interested and motivated*”. She then added that as staff they have a responsibility for

developing students' interest in their studies where staff need to,

“Show [them] passion, interest, and demonstrate how the work is relevant....
Incorporate skills that solve problems.....embed it early...teach them to be
resilient. Who does not like to be successful”? [Chloe]

Alex reflected this viewpoint; he too put the focus on the teaching staff, claiming that;

“It's more to do with the teaching staff, where we can give {the students} the tools
to develop academic self-confidence [...] but if you develop their confidence, their
academic results follow...they can see something as a result of the hard work to get
to university...” [Alex]

Assessment

One clear message was the importance of assessment, particularly testing and
examinations, in relation to confidence. The staff felt that students could certainly lose
confidence if preparation for examinations was not handled well. Support for
examination and assessment techniques was a feature discussed by all the teaching staff
interviewed. Steve, in particular, focused on the value of regular assessment to support
his students' academic confidence;

“[...] showing them model answersit is just showing them how to answer,
they know the answerbut don't know the academic terminology. It isn't a
gap in their knowledge it is more about how to answer”. [Steve]

Beth also answered the question about building academic confidence with a major focus
on practising examination papers in order to build academic confidence in students;

“Usually we do one [exam paper] together with them and we look at sample essay
and they go away and do one on their own [...] it gives them confidence in their
academic ability” [Beth].

Laura, although from a different institution, had a similar response to the same question,

stating that her students gain in academic confidence through the process of testing;

“...they are tested regularly, they then feel secure, I would like to think they think they are ready for the exam. I have forty Year 13 students and half will feel confident. I beat the year 12s up as they need training.....I don't give a lot of positive feedback until they have earned it.” [Laura]

Confidence which could have been developed at school needs to be nurtured at university where there is likely to be a different approach to assessment.

Assessments, due to their importance to students, can be a powerful tool in supporting the transition into university (Taylor 2008). Early, low risk assessments with face to face feedback are an example of an intervention to support academic confidence and help the students embed themselves into this new environment. Taylor (2008) suggests this is part of an assessment for transition phase to support students when they are novices to university study.

Discussions and articulation

Another skill that was highlighted as being a pre-requisite to displaying academic confidence, and one that staff felt was important in terms of students feeling confident, was related to being able to be part of a discussion as well as having a general knowledge both locally, nationally and internationally.

“We have discussion on certain things – news or internet findings and we have discussions and link them to the content. I let them talk about it, they are all from different academic backgrounds and raised differently so it is trying to get them to let me about what they think about different issues and it is difficult in year 12 as they wouldn't have had this opportunity before”. [Steve]

Karen reiterated this comment;

“It's very topical teaching in the subject area [...], we ask them to constantly check the news and use it in examples. Students are asked regularly to give their opinions and to contribute to the debate. Some don't get involved, some are shy, some don't read the news, and others are not involved in what's going on in the

world [...] so they may lack academic confidence when they arrive at university?”
[Karen].

In one institution, Jake encouraged his students to buy or source books in order that they could further develop their subject knowledge and thus gain in academic confidence. Gill from the same school, also felt she encouraged students gain academic confidence by setting students the tasks of researching additional information related to the subject they are studying. She also added that her subject department put on ‘master classes’ in order to assist students to feel more secure in their studies.

Positive reinforcement and praise

Many of the sample felt that the crux to students developing in their academic self-confidence was for staff themselves to provide ‘*a lot of praise*’ [Karen]. From the same institution, Mary also stated that students need to ‘*believe in themselves*’, therefore it is important that students receive appropriate praise from staff, this way they have a belief in what they can do, and as a result they “*flourish...it’s amazing to see this happen*”.

However, an approach around reinforcement and praise needs to be managed to ensure that students do not become over-reliant which could result in a loss of independence. Overall, teaching staff felt that sixth form students had become heavily reliant on support from them and they were concerned that as their students arrived at university, the amount of support that many require to maintain this academic confidence may not be there, thus having a negative impact on their studies.

Kirsty made a statement about a first year university student who returned to school after their first semester for the Awards Ceremony, stating that

“.....school did so much for us, but when you get to university, we were expected to do it for ourselves [...]” [Kirsty]

Kirsty then raised the major issue that creates a challenge between what staff feel they ought to do and what they need to do, that as teaching staff;

“ [...] if we didn’t hold your hand [whilst at school] and did expect you to do it for yourselves would you have done it? The first year university student reflected, “Maybe not!” [Kirsty].

CONCLUSIONS

This article set out to explore teachers’ (of 16 – 19 year old pupils) perceptions around student preparedness for HE in relation to independent learning and academic confidence. Beaumont et al. (2014) note a fundamental difference between student support from school and their subsequent experience at university. To date studies have focused on either schools or universities but not on the opinion of the staff in the former in relation to their student’s transition to the latter. It is well documented that the transition into university is an area for potential difficulties and an area of increased importance (Gale and Parker 2014) and therefore the more knowledge we have about the experiences of potential students through their schooling, the better-prepared universities can be to bridge the gap. This study offers an original viewpoint to support higher education staff in seeing this transition through the lens of their school colleagues, in order to develop awareness of the reality of the transition for students. The more we know about the school approaches the more we can support the transition within universities (Torenbeek et al. 2010) with this research highlighting preparedness, or lack of it, in relation to independent learning and academic confidence.

Overall, it appears there is sometimes a mismatch between the terms and language used between sixth form and university staff, particularly so in relation to independent learning. Teachers in schools have a conflict of interest, this study has

shown that they believe that students cannot be left to their own devices, as there is a risk of them failing in their post 16 qualifications. The result of this more structured learning approach is quite different from what these students may experience at university, which results overall in students who do not know how to study on their own being welcomed into a system that expects them to do just that. The findings from this study suggest that preparedness linked to independent learning relates to support; location; time and ability to self-guide rather than be guided and is an area where students are under-prepared. Therefore, if we know in university that students are unlikely to have become independent learners by the time they leave school, then university educators need to address this when we set our first year curriculum and explain and guide the new university students on 'how' to develop independence in their learning. This needs to be a whole curriculum approach as it is this that the students have in common (Kift 2009) irrespective of their background.

In terms of preparedness, academic confidence is crucial to success (Nicholson et al. 2013) and this relates to all students, as we cannot assume the more able students automatically have greater academic confidence. It is of no surprise that support, positive reinforcement and the careful handling of assessments and results were thought by the teachers to be crucial in developing confidence in learning. It is essential however, that staff working with new students in HE are cognisant of the potential differences in experiences and expectations and provide stepping stones and strategies to support and develop. The work of Taylor (2008) offers insights to how assessment can be structured to support the transition and confidence. Teaching staff in schools acknowledge that they are very supportive (often too supportive) of their sixth form learners, so as university teachers we need to work with our first year students to reduce their reliance on staff and support them into becoming independent learners. Staff/

student relationship, communication and support (Thomas 2013) is therefore critical at this stage in the educational journey remembering that independent learning does not come naturally to all students.

While this study does not offer a conclusive answer to the issue of preparedness for university, it does give the sector some significant messages about the gap between these two levels of education which cannot simply be left to the student to navigate. Individuals do not just become independent overnight, who can manage in large lecture halls with hundreds of people with no one guiding them. The university sector needs to work much more closely with its educational colleagues to support schools in helping students to thrive in universities whilst still achieving in the school. It would be fruitful to pursue further research into the sixth-form students' views of their preparedness for university and then triangulate this with the school staff and the university lectures to develop a more common understanding of this critical transition period.

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