Collaborative relationships and sustainable processes: a critical review of the development of a transitions programme in a small, highly selective institution

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collaborate, *v.*

Co-operation	*Co-ordination*	*Collaboration*	*Co-adunation*
Shared information and mutual support	Common tasks and compatible goals	Integrated strategies and collective purpose	Unified structure and combined resources

← low ----------------------------- formal integration ----------------------------high →

'with collaboration, the personal is as important as the procedural'

Rebecca Gajda (2004)

'... the context specificity of collaborative practice creates difficulties for developing more generalized understandings across and within different disciplinary contexts'

Mark Elliot, in Lorraine Walsh and Peter Kahn (2010)

'... collaborations in higher education are ... inherently open in their scope to realize unanticipated outcomes beyond that which was originally envisaged...'

Walsh and Kahn

context: a small, highly selective institution – an autonomous part of a University

some salient features:

- the University: 12,000 undergraduates; 7,000 graduates; 1,600 academic staff; 3,100 research staff;
- the College: c. 450 undergraduates, c. 300 graduates, c. 50 teaching and research staff;
- average offer for undergraduate study: A*AA / A*A*A;
- a college: a multi-generational, multi-disciplinary centre of learning (and living);
- strong conventions of academic exchange and individuality.

e.g. first-year Medicine students: programme for term 1

Pre-arrival: subject mentors' letter to new first years

Freshers' Week:

- *'Teaching and learning at Queens' (plenary lecture, all first years);*
- *Subject-group discussions – first years and subject mentors;*
- Individual meetings with Director of Studies (*subject contacts bring first years to meetings and accompany you afterwards to collect your skeletons*);
- College Library subject inductions;
- Faculty inductions

Week 1: Introduction to Medicine (Director of Studies)

Week 3: tea with subject mentors: getting to know each other, experience of the term so far;

Week 4: Making the Most of Supervisions (MT, subject mentors)

Week 5: review and reflection on essay writing (Director of Studies)

Week 9: tea with subject mentors: reflection on the first term, looking ahead to second term

starting points for transitions programme

'the programme contributes to first-years' settling into their academic lives as students and to their realising their own potential while studying at University'

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'…transition support should not be extraneous to the mainstream activity of the institution, but integral to the learning experience …'

(Whittaker, 2008)

iterative design of the programme

- short, recurrent surveys (open questions): students' experiences, perceptions, preferences – grounded theory analyses;

- teaching staff: analyses, interpretations, semi-structured interviews;

- co-design, co-investigation, co-interpretation: increasing opportunities for students' and staff's involvement.

formative evaluation: some developments

First-years: pre-arrival online survey – response rates

2011	2012	2013
60%	64%	77%

First-years: reflection on first-year survey – response rates

2012	2013	2014
24%	n / a	65%

Student-led interviews and analyses: completion

2013	2014
3 out of 12	10 out of 10

A first-year reflects (May 2014) on subject discussions with mentors in Freshers' Week:

'... it was one of my favourite parts of the Week, as it encouraged me to be part of a subject-specific community and therefore created relationships right at the start'

Another first-year, on subject mentors:

'... very strong moral support all year; ... very helpful and we saw them for dinner once in each term ... lots of advice and often planned events so that those in other years doing the same subject came along and pitched in, too'

Finally: some observations on 'collaborative relationships' and 'sustainable processes'

- invisible and relational work: credibility, 'convenor legitimacy' and trust;

- working across boundaries and working with field specialists: complexity – and 'over-complexity';

- theories of action research, organisational and individual learning: 'transformation', 'agendas for change' – and taking an 'appreciative' approach.

Rebecca Gajda, 'Utilizing Collaboration Theory to Evaluate Strategic Alliances', *American Journal of Evaluation* (2004), vol. 25, no. 1 (65-77)

Mary R Lea and Brian V Street, 'Student Writing in Higher Education: An academic literacies approach', *Studies in Higher Education* (1998), vol. 23, issue 2, 157-174

Wendy Ranade and Bob Hudson, 'Conceptual Issues in Inter-Agency Collaboration', *Local Government Studies* (2003), vo. 29, issue 3, 32-50

Lorraine Walsh and Peter Kahn (eds), *Collaborative Working in Higher Education: The Social Academy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010)

Ruth Whittaker, 'Quality Enhancement Theme First Year Experience, Supporting Transition to and during the First Year Project, Final Report' (QAA 2008)